

# The Ontological Core of Political Radicalism. Exploring the role of Antagonist, Dogmatic, and Populist Beliefs in Structuring Radical Ideologies\*

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## Abstract

Over the past decades, scholars have extensively studied the ideological positions of radical individuals. Yet, most research focuses on vote choice and attitudes towards particular policy issues. This paper sets out to identify the abstract and general elements (i.e., antagonism, dogmatism and populism) that constitute the ontological core of radical belief systems and assess their prevalence among the general population. Using data from the 2019 Belgian National Electoral Study, we employ a person-centred approach to classify individuals into ideological profiles. Contrary to the widespread assumption that radical individuals are a more ‘radicalised’ version of mainstream voters, we provide evidence that they have a markedly

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\*We wish to express our gratitude to the audience of the seminar organized by the Institute for Social and Political Opinion Research (KU Leuven) for their helpful feedback on previous drafts of the manuscript. We would also like to thank the participants of the Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism, and Polarization for their comments and conversations. We are also thankful to two anonymous reviewers whose constructive input significantly contributed to the clarity and enhancement of the paper.

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different understanding of politics and society, and that political radicalism is not monolithic as there exists multiple, alternative, and more nuanced, non-mainstream ideologies. We also found that, compared to voters of the radical right, radical left voters are less likely to endorse a black-and-white understanding of politics despite showing high levels of populism and antagonism. Education, perceived social class, and trust in political institutions influence the degree to which individuals subscribe to different belief systems.

The electoral success of radical parties and politicians has stimulated scholars to study polarization and the spread of radical ideas across the ideological spectrum. Most public opinion research conceptualizes political radicalism as the “radicalization of people’s attitudes on single [policy] issues” ([Baldassarri and Gelman 2008, 2](#)). The underlying assumption is that radical individuals organize their political ideas based on explicit preferences toward concrete policy considerations and, thus, their level of radicalism is captured by their position on this set of policies ([Gomez, Morales, and Ramiro 2015; Van Der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2000; Tillie and Fennema 1998](#)).

Although this approach is useful to understand what ‘far-’ left and right voters stand for in terms of concrete policy preferences ([Ezrow, Homola, and Tavits 2014; Ortiz Barquero, Ruiz Jim’enez, and Gonz’alez-Fern’andez 2022](#)), defining political radicalism solely in terms of specific policy issues is not satisfactory ([Joseph, Graham, and Haidt 2009](#)). After all, whether a particular position on a given policy can be considered radical is subject to continuous change, depending on the shifts in the ideological space and the dynamics of the electoral competition. As Sidanius ([1985, 369](#)) argues, “[B]elief in political and social equality of Blacks would most certainly have been a very ‘extreme’ idea in the America of 1776 and is now becoming a very moderate idea” (see also, [Ellis 2012; Jungkunz 2022](#)). Citizens might also become more or less extreme in their policy positions in response to changes in parties’ strategies ([Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2001](#)), an electoral victory ([DiSalvo 2012; Albert and Barney 2018](#)), or extraordinary and shocking events ([Atkeson and Maestas 2012; Gershkoff and Kushner 2005](#)).

The fact that policy issues are consistently moving targets that refers to specific areas of an ideological

space makes them insufficiently robust as a conceptual basis for the study of radical ideologies. To better understand the nature of political radicalism, it is necessary to go beyond “simplistic indicators like left-right self placement” or concrete positional issues such as the “support for racist movements” (Mudde 2010, 1179; Rovny 2013). Hidden beneath concrete policy positions, radical ideologies are based on deeper-level dispositions about politics and society (Mudde 2010; McClosky and Chong 1985; Backes 2007). In this perspective, radical beliefs are formed by two separate, yet interrelated, components. The first one consists of a specific set of values that forms the nucleus of the ideological system. This **ontological** core is shared by different radical belief systems and differentiates radical from non-radical ideologies (Laclau 2005). Second, onto this ontological core, an **ontic** component is grafted. This second dimension is composed of a set of concrete issues that translate the ontological components into issue-specific preferences linked to more traditional dimensions of the electoral competition (e.g., left-right, secular-religious), therefore allowing the differentiation between different types of radicalism (e.g., left- and right-wing radicalism, religious fundamentalism) (Laclau 1990; Ezrow, Homola, and Tavits 2014).

This paper proposes a novel conceptual model that aims at improving both the conceptualization and measurement of the essential core of radical ideologies. We focus on the ontological structure of radical belief systems as a whole and argue that dogmatism, antagonism, and populism constitute its core elements. In order to scrutinize this ontological core empirically, we adopt a person-centred approach—a Latent Profile-Confirmatory Factor Analysis—which classifies individuals into different types of belief systems based on their endorsement of antagonistic, dogmatic and, populist views.

A person-centred approach is a label for a methodological approach that is an alternative to “variable-centred” approaches. Traditional variable-centred approaches focus on the unique effect of separate beliefs on a dependent variable. Consequently, they are not well suited to investigate how individuals combine different beliefs and ideas. In contrast, person-centred approaches focus on how individuals combine several beliefs together enabling different ideological profiles (i.e. belief systems) to

spontaneously emerge (Meeusen et al. 2018). This has been proved to be a useful feature for studying ideological systems (Bertsou and Caramani 2020; Grunow, Begall, and Buchler 2018; Daenekindt, de Koster, and van der Waal 2017; Lancaster 2019; Pew Research Center 2017; Pavlović, Moskalenko, and McCauley 2022). Person-centred approaches enable us to identify distinctive ideological profiles, assess their structure, and quantify their prevalence in the general population. They also allow for the presence of non-linear patterns in the configurations of ideological content, effectively taking into account that individuals might hold contrasting positions (Broockman 2016) or completely disregard certain ideological components (Roberts 2021). Furthermore, by shifting the focus from separate attitudinal dimensions to ideological profiles as specific configurations of interconnected positions on key attitudinal dimensions, person-centred approaches allow us to explore the potential complexities in citizens' different types of radicalism. The proposed model is tested using data from the 2019 Belgian National Election Study given that Belgium is the home of one of the strongest populist radical right parties in Western Europe and has recently experienced the electoral breakthrough of the populist radical left (Pilet 2021).

## Conceptualizing radical belief systems

### Radical beliefs: Ontological vs. ontic components

Much of the literature on political radicalism focuses on its potential behavioural aspects (e.g., why people vote for radical parties) or on its policy implications (e.g., why radical voters endorse certain policies). Based on this premise, scholars often argue that the core features of political radicalism “are to a large extent in line with key tenets of mainstream ideologies” (Mudde 2010, 1175) and that radical individuals deviate, more or less sharply, from a set of concrete issues organized on one (i.e., left-right) or multiple (e.g., cultural and economic) policy dimensions (Tillie and Fennema 1998). According to this view, radical individuals can be (easily) distinguished from moderate citizens simply based their extremity on a set of relevant policy issues (Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017; Simonovits 2017).

The emphasis on concrete policy stances—i.e., the ontic elements of a particular type of radicalism—renders it difficult to uncover the core ideological features that constitute the ontological foundations of radical ideological thinking. Although some previous research acknowledges the significance of general views about politics and society (i.e., the ontological dimension) (Haidt, Graham, and Joseph 2009; Tavits 2007), these essential elements are often overlooked in empirical investigations on radical ideologies. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to delve into the ontological structure of political radicalism, aiming to distinguish radical beliefs from other, more nuanced, configurations of attitudes present in left- and right-wing ideologies.

In our investigation, we integrate recent contributions from sociology, political psychology, and political science (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Moskowitz and Jenkins 2004; Keskintürk 2022) with the work of Ernesto Laclau<sup>1</sup> (2005). We define radical ideologies as multi-dimensional belief systems that encompass an individual’s convictions, attitudes, and dispositions towards various concepts, ideas, or objects. These multilayered ideological systems are composed of both ontological and ontic elements (Laclau 2005; McClosky and Chong 1985; Mudde 2010). The first and most central dimension is composed of a set of ontological elements that define radicalism as opposition to “the established structure of power” and as the antithesis of commonly accepted or mainstream political practices and values (Canovan 1999, 3; Biglieri and Perell’o 2011; Laclau 1990). These ontological elements are shared by different types of radical belief systems (i.e., left- and right-wing), but they do not provide concrete solutions to key social questions such as equality, freedom, justice, or redistribution of resources. Rather, they function as a formative device onto which specific ontic elements (e.g., issue-specific preferences) are grafted. In other words, they inform more concrete beliefs, structure individuals’ general understanding of society, politics, and governance, and provide a way to fulfil political ambitions and goals.

On the other hand, the ontic represents the ‘grounding’ of the ontological elements into a set of already mobilized cultural, religious, and socio-economic cleavages that structure a given national

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<sup>1</sup>To be sure, we do not strictly adhere to Laclau’s own definition of radicalism, ontology, or populism but, rather, we partially borrow from Laclau’s works a series of theoretical intuitions that inform our understanding of how (radical)discursive practices are constantly constructed, contested, and transformed.

political space ([Kriesi 2014](#)). These ontic elements give substance and comprehensiveness to an ideological system and are contingent upon the articulation of the broader ideological and discursive content of a given space of representation ([Laclau 2005](#)). For example, positions toward anti-immigration or racial inequality are not always relevant issues that differentiate what is considered radical from what is mainstream and, sometimes, not even what is left- or right-wing. In other words, the signification of the ontic elements is not fixed in advance. Rather, the extent to which these elements can be considered radical or moderate changes according to the articulation of the ontological content within a particular place and time ([Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009](#)).

## The (ontological) core of radical beliefs

So far, we have argued that, regardless of their ideological collocation on a set of ontic issues, radical belief systems share some ontological similarity in the underlying logic of belief origination and organization that makes them fundamentally distinct from mainstream ideologies. Answering the question of which are the components that compose this ontological core<sup>2</sup>, we conceptualize radicalism as an ideological framework that sees politics as centred around a conflict-seeking antagonism between a superior in-group and a ‘ruling body’ of hegemonic forces that are responsible for frustrating the demands of the former. We operationalize radicalism as an ideological system constituted by three ontological component, namely (a) antagonism, (b) ideological dogmatism (adversity to comprise), and (c) populism.

First, radical thinking can never be fully understood without considering the constitutive importance of **antagonism** towards the established structure of power (for a discussion see, [Hansen 2014](#)). In political terms, antagonism is the tendency to oppose the *status quo* with the objective of inducing radical change not only at the governmental level, or among the ruling elites, but in the established political order as a whole ([Sartori 2005](#)). Radical individuals and parties have been found to hold a

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<sup>2</sup>Our goal is not to provide a comprehensive study of radical ideological thinking nor to account for the complexity of all forms, instances, and variants of radicalism. Similarly to what Mudde ([2010](#)) has done for populist radical right ideology, our purpose is to show that there are sound theoretical reasons to expect that contemporary political radicalism revolves around a few ontological elements that are shared by different types of radical individuals.

sharply antagonistic view of politics and society (McClosky and Chong 1985; Sauer and Ajanovic 2016; Gencoglu Onbasi 2016). Laclau explains antagonism through the existence of *the political* (Laclau 1990). The political represents the “struggle over the very institutionalization of a given set of rules” (Hansen 2014, 7). These rules are not fixed or predetermined but, rather, they emerge from the competition of diverse forces vying for dominance. Mainstream politics try to “empty” and depoliticize this process by installing a “cult of compromise” (Mouffe 2005) that addresses social demands in a way that avoids unsettling the prevailing *status quo*. The political struggle is allowed but carefully confined within a center-ground that upholds the stability of the mainstream groups, discourses, or ideologies. This hegemonic order is continually challenged by radical forces that seek to establish alternative ideas and demands by creating an antagonistic frontier against the very rules and institutions that shape the contours of what is considered mainstream (Laclau 2005). In other words, radicalism rejects the mainstream idea of consensus-building between different interests and societal groups and, instead, endorses ‘unreasonable’ practices to ensure that alternative viewpoints are not marginalized or suppressed (Mouffe 2005; Mudde 2010).

This tendency of being ‘unreasonable’ is linked with the concept of ideological **dogmatism**, which is the second ontological component of radical belief systems (for a review see, Zmigrod 2020). Dogmatism is usually defined as “a relatively closed cognitive organization of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality” (Rokeach 1956, 3) that results in the rejection of competing principles and ideas (Altemeyer 2002). Research shows that (left- and right-wing) radical individuals tend to display dogmatic tendencies such as belief superiority, intolerance of different beliefs, and adversity to political compromise (van Prooijen and Krouwel 2017; McClosky and Chong 1985; Jost, Kruglanski, and Simon 1999; Jessoula, Natili, and Pavolini 2022). This tendency is related to the need of establishing an ideological defence against other beliefs and to justify group-centric and uncompromising political practices (Toner et al. 2013). A certain degree of dogmatism is functional to the creation of the aforementioned antagonistic frontier. It serves to draw a (clear) moral distinction between what is “radical” and what is “mainstream”, “good” or “bad” (Mudde 1995; Gründl and Aichholzer 2020). For radical individuals, the dominant institutions and the mainstream politicians are considered an

impediment to any real and systemic change and, thus, are always erroneous or “untruthful”. The ideas of like-minded (radical) individuals (the in-group) are considered “pure”, good, honest, and virtuous and, thus, impossible to disprove or confute ([van Prooijen et al. 2015](#)).

In challenging the current societal and political, the tendency of considering certain values, goals, and ideas as the only legitimate ones is needed to create a new political subject—“Us, the People”—embedded within the notion of **populism**. Populism is the third ontological component of radical beliefs and, although it is not (always) a synonym of political radicalism ([Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014](#)), it is recognized as an important ideological element in driving radical vote choice and motivating forms of radical antagonism towards the “ruling block” ([Hawkins et al. 2018](#)). This is because the subject of “the People” can function as a counter-hegemonic device. “The People” represents and unites various ‘unsatisfied demands’ and grievances with the ultimate aim of creating a subject capable of achieving a strong change and generating a new political order ([Laclau 2005; Hansen 2014; Biglieri and Perell'o 2011; Tindall 2022](#)). This is made possible by the fact that, within populist politics, the in- and out-group are “floating signifiers” that do not form a stable system of signification. “The people” and those who do not belong to the people are, in principle, “empty” and determined by the *condition of possibilities* of the political competition ([Laclau 1977; Kaltwasser and Hauwaert 2020](#)). In his own definition of populism, Laclau seeks to vindicate the term populism from its negative connotations arguing that it is a vehicle for marginalized groups to have their voices heard and to challenge established elites ([Laclau 2005](#)). This work partially diverges from this understanding. We argue that what unites the people is the dogmatic and “Manichean” dichotomy that explicitly justifies the superiority of the in-group (“We, the People”) at the expense of the out-group(s) (“Them, the enemy of the people”). Examples are the heroic struggle of the proletarians against the bourgeoisie; the nativist protection of the beloved nation from external enemies and parasites such as Muslims or immigrants; or the working-class anger at the millionaires and billionaire and their politics of austerity.

## Towards a typology of belief systems: empirical expectations

Conceptually, the ontology of political radicalism is embedded in a form of constitutive antagonism towards the *status quo*, the rejection of political compromise and competing ideas, and the construction of “the people” and “the others” as nodal points for the articulation of a counter-hegemonic political order. Empirically, the question remains how individuals combine these ontological elements of radicalism into different ideological profiles, how the different profiles are distributed across the general population, and whether individuals subscribing to a radical ideological profile tend to display characteristics that have been previously identified as important determinants of political radicalism. We tentatively formulate three expectations regarding the different ideological profiles potentially present among the Belgian mass public.

First, we expect to find an integrated radical profile consisting of individuals who combine, to a similar extent, higher levels of antagonistic, dogmatic and populist beliefs. We expect these individuals to be less educated, less interested in politics, more likely to perceive themselves as disadvantaged and vote for both radical left and radical right parties ([McClosky and Chong 1985](#); [Faye 1972](#); [Betz 1994](#); [Kaltwasser and Hauwaert 2020](#)). We also expect that individuals who feel relatively deprived or disempowered are more likely to subscribe to the radical profile. The adoption of radical beliefs is functional to challenge the existing social, economic, or political order considered responsible for the injustices and inequalities that individuals or groups believe have left them behind. As previous research have shown ([Cramer 2016](#); [Gest 2016](#); [Hochschild 2018](#)), this is an attempt to reclaim agency and demand recognition for peoples’ concerns, often in opposition to the mainstream political establishment or societal norms.

Second, next to the integrated radical profile, we anticipate the existence of alternative ideological profiles consisting of individuals who adhere to one or more ontological elements of radicalism but do not subscribe to all of them. Similar to mainstream ideologies ([Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014](#)), individuals might combine certain non-mainstream ideas but disregard or reject others effectively creating ideological subtypes that show alternative belief configurations ([Lancaster](#)

2019). Although we do not have clear expectations, we believe some of these profiles share similar attitudes and demographic characteristics with the radical integrated profile depending on their degree of ideological similarity.

Third, we expect to find a ‘Pro-system’ profile that rejects antagonistic, dogmatic, and populist beliefs and represents the antithesis of the proposed model of radicalism. We anticipate individuals belonging to this profile to be more educated, interested in politics, and over-represented among the electorate of mainstream political parties.

## Data, instruments, and modelling approach

### Data

In order to construct a typology of radical belief systems, we use data from the 2019 Belgian National Election Study (BNES) (Meuleman et al. 2020). The 2019 wave employs a two-stage sampling design and is carried out among a register-based random probability sample of Belgians entitled to vote in the 2019 national elections. The data were collected, mostly, face-to-face by means of computer-assisted personal interviewing between December 2019 and October 2020. The total sample size consists of 1659 individuals with a minimum response rate of 37.5% (44.34% in Flanders and 29.68% in Wallonia and Brussels)<sup>3</sup>.

### Instruments

To scrutinize the ontological core of political radicalism, three attitudinal measures were purposefully included in the BNES (Table 1). **Antagonism** is measured by two items that tap into the respondents’ perceived need for an imminent and radical change of the entire system and not only the ruling elites. Ideological **Dogmatism** is assessed using three items referring to the rejection of others’

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<sup>3</sup>Because of the outbreak of the COVID virus in the fall of 2020, the fieldwork was interrupted two times and terminated on October 31<sup>st</sup>, irrespective of the status of the data collection. This has led to a higher non-response rate compared to previous BNES rounds.

ideas, ideological rigidity, and the superiority of one's own opinions ([Shearman and Levine 2006](#)). **Populism** is measured using an adapted version of the scale developed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove ([2014](#)). This measure taps into negative affect towards the establishment (anti-elitism) and the perception of the in-group as a homogeneous body with a uniform will (people centrism) ([Hawkins et al. 2018](#)).

Results from the CFA models indicate that antagonism, ideological dogmatism, and affinity with populism are distinct and independent concepts. Pairwise correlations between the indices are, on average, equal to  $r = 0.40$  leaving plenty of room for testing the presence of different ideological configurations among the general public. Concerning the measurement quality of the used instruments, the model display good fit ( $CFI \geq .95$ ,  $RMSA \leq .06$ ,  $SRMR \leq .08$ ) with standardized factor loadings ranging from .43 to .80. This indicates good reliability and validity of the used scales ([Hu and Bentler 1999](#)).

Table 1: Standardized factor loadings, latent variable correlations, and wordings of the items used to construct the typology of radical belief systems.

Item	Factor: Antagonism	Factor: Dogmatism	Factor: Populism
Only radical change can solve the problems of our society	.79	—	—
Not only the government but the entire system needs to change	.74	—	—
There is a clear line between what is good and what is bad	—	.43	—
There is only one correct way to think about most things	—	.91	—
Those with whom I do not agree are usually wrong	—	.43	—
People and not the politicians should take decisions	—	—	.71
People would be better represented by ordinary citizens	—	—	.74
Power should be returned to the people	—	—	.80

Item	Factor: Antagonism	Factor: Dogmatism	Factor: Populism
Better if politicians just followed the will of the people	—	—	.69
Ordinary people know better than politicians	—	—	.67
Correlation Antagonism	1	—	—
Correlation Dogmatism	.39	1	—
Correlation Populism	.47	.38	1

To validate the typology of radical beliefs we use a large set of social-structural variables that allows us to assess how radical beliefs are stratified among the Belgian population. Sex refers to the sex of the respondent assigned at birth and is a dichotomous variable (male and female). Age is recoded into 6 different categories and treated as continuous. Education is measured as the respondent's highest level of education (1. None – 10. University). Religious denomination is measured by three categories “Christian”, “Free-thinker”, and “Other Religion”. Due to the Belgian linguistic-cultural cleavage, we include a variable that distinguishes Flemish and Francophone Belgians. Subjective social class is measured using three categories: Working class, Low Middle class, and Higher Middle/Upper class. We also use a subjective measure of feeling of powerlessness (i.e., Some people feel disregarded or abandoned by politics, 1. Never - 5. Almost always) to capture a general feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction with the current representation mechanisms. Lastly, respondent's political interest is measured using three questions tapping into interest in politics, the tendency of following political news, and the frequency of discussing politics with friends.

To test how the resulting ideological profiles are related to radical voting, we included a variable measuring respondent's vote in the 2019 national Belgian elections. We recoded vote choice into three categories namely, mainstream, populist radical-right, and populist radical-left voters. Following Rooduijn et al. (2019), we define as populist radical left voters those citizens who voted for the Labour Party of Belgium (PVDA/PTB) and as populist radical right those who voted for Vlaams Belang (VB) and Parti Populaire (PP). An overview of the used instrument and the

corresponding descriptive statistics are given in the Appendix.

## Statistical modelling

To test the proposed theoretical model, we employ Latent Profile-Confirmatory Factor Analysis (LP-CFA) (Clark et al. 2013). LP-CFA belongs to the class of Factor Mixture Models and can be seen as a step forward compared to Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) since it combines the analytical advantages of person-oriented approaches with the increase in reliability and validity of the included constructs obtained from confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Hancock and Samuelsen 2007). CFA corrects for measurement error in the model by assuming that covariance between a set of observed variables (e.g., a set of attitudinal questions) is explained by an unobserved latent variable (e.g., antagonism). After estimating a score for each individual in the sample on the three proposed latent variables (antagonism, populism, and dogmatism), the LP-CFA searches for types of individuals that show similarities in their scores on the latent variables. These unobserved types can be interpreted as different ideological profiles. This enables us to study the ideological heterogeneity of the Belgian population and ensure that the extracted profiles and the different ontological elements can be compared and interpreted meaningfully (Lubke and Muth'en 2005). Additional methodological details on the LP-CFA model are reported in the Appendix.

In a next step, we validate the extracted profiles. Typically, this is done by examining the predictors of profile membership and/or how the extracted profiles relate to theoretically relevant outcomes (Spurk et al. 2020). To this end, we fit two sets of regressions. First, a multinomial logistic regression is used to explain to which ideological profile individuals belong by means of structural predictors. We employ a 3-step approach that takes into account the non-negligible classification error resulting from the LP-CFA (Asparouhov and Muth'en 2014). Second, we carried out a multinomial logistic regression with vote choice as the outcome and profile assignment as the main predictor of interest. As commonly done in voting behaviour literature, we control for political interest, religious denomination, institutional trust, Left-Right self-placement, and a set of relevant

demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, migration background)<sup>4</sup>.

The analyses are carried out using post-stratification weights based on gender, age, and education. For the multinomial regressions predicting vote choice, the post-stratification weights are calculated also including voting behaviour. This accounts for the imbalance in turnout and levels of party support between the 2019 election results and the self-reported vote in the BNES survey. The models are fitted with Mplus 8.4 ([L. K. Muth'en and Muthen 2017](#)) using the package Mplus Automation ([Hallquist and Wiley 2018](#)) and user-written functions in the R 4.0.5 programming language ([R Core Team 2019](#)).

## Results

### Constructing a typology of radical beliefs: LP-CFA

To derive a typology of belief systems, we apply LP-CFA to the items measuring antagonism, dogmatism and populism. The first step of this analysis consists of determining the optimal number of latent profiles. The best fitting model is determined by examining the goodness-of-fit statistic in tandem with substantive considerations ([B. Muth'en 2003](#)). A minimum value in the BIC and AICC fit indices indicates the best-fitting solution ([Nylund, Asparouhov, and Muth'en 2007](#)). Adjacent models should also be compared using the BIC between the  $k - 1$  class model and a  $k$  class ( $\Delta BIC$ ) and the Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test (VLMR, [Lo, Mendell, and Rubin 2001](#)). In this latter case, a statistically significant p-value indicates that the  $k$ -class model should be preferred over the  $k-1$  class model. Entropy is another fit measure that indicates how accurately the model is able to classify the observations into different classes. A value close to 1 indicates that the extracted classes are perfectly defined ([Nylund-Gibson and Choi 2018](#)). Although no clear cut-off criterion exists ([Weller, Bowen, and Faubert 2020](#)), a value close to .80 is considered acceptable ([Wang et al. 2017](#)). Lastly, the number of sampled individuals in each class should be large enough to draw

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<sup>4</sup>In this case, we do not include the place of residence of the respondent (French-speaking Belgium or Flanders) since it would be highly collinear with the vote for either populist right or left.

meaningful inferences and retain numerical stability. Solutions with classes containing less than 50 observations ([B. Muth'en and Muth'en 2000](#)) or 5% of the sample ([Weller, Bowen, and Faubert 2020](#)) should be excluded or carefully examined. Based on the goodness-of-fit statistic reported in Table 2 and substantive considerations, the 6-profile solution is selected as the most exhaustive and adequate model to explore citizens' ideological profiles. More information on the procedure to select the best class solution is reported in the Appendix.

Table 2: Goodness-of-fit statistics for the estimated LP-CFA models

Classes	Parameters	AIC	BIC	Delta BIC	Entropy	VLR <sub>T</sub> p.value	Lowest N
1	20	45,557.77	45,665.55				1,618
2	24	42,694.67	42,824.01	2,841.54	0.82	0.0000	696
3	28	42,182.41	42,333.30	490.70	0.76	0.0001	367
4	32	41,808.78	41,981.23	352.08	0.76	0.2715	382
5	36	41,550.97	41,744.98	236.25	0.75	0.3139	136
6	40	41,291.47	41,507.03	237.95	0.79	0.1114	118
7	44	41,160.63	41,397.74	109.29	0.78	0.2484	37
8	48	41,058.06	41,316.73	81.01	0.78	0.2772	30
9	52	40,952.35	41,232.58	84.15	0.78	0.1630	30

In order to interpret the six latent ideological profiles, we compare their averages on antagonism, dogmatism, and populism. In addition to the interpretation of the class-specific averages, a series of plots (see Figure 1) depict the estimated latent means of antagonism, dogmatism, and populism expressed in standard deviation from the mean of the sample for each extracted class. In the plots, the vertical lines around the dots represent the 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimated latent means. The dashed horizontal zero line represents the sample mean for each ontological component. When the confidence intervals in the plot do not include the dashed horizontal zero line, the estimated means are significantly different from the average of the sample. To ease the interpretation, I categorized the different profiles into 3 groups, namely, Integrated Radical, Alternative Non-mainstream, and Mainstream.

In line with our expectations, we find an integrated radical ideological profile (left plot in Figure 1), multiple non-mainstream ideological profiles that combine several (but not all) radical components (central plot in Figure 1), and two mainstream ideological profiles (right plot in Figure 1). Profile 1 corresponds to an integrated radical ideological profile in which all three proposed ontological components of radical thinking are present strongly and simultaneously (left plot in Figure 1). We label this profile **Radical**. It accounts for 17% of the total sample suggesting that the number of citizens endorsing the core ontological elements of radical ideology is by no means negligible. This indicates that political radicalism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that lies at the intersection of a set of general and abstract ideas that contrasts with mainstream politics.

Next to the integrated radical class, we detect three ideological profiles that contain some but not all ontological elements of radical thinking (central plot in Figure 1). Contrary to the general conceptualization of radicalism as a unidimensional and binary concept, this result shows that individuals may mix radical beliefs with mainstream beliefs. Profile 2 has the highest levels of populism and antagonism but shows a tendency towards accepting different ideas (lower than average on dogmatism). We label this class **Non-dogmatic Radical**. It represents 7% of the total sample and indicates that antagonism can be strongly intertwined with populism but that individuals

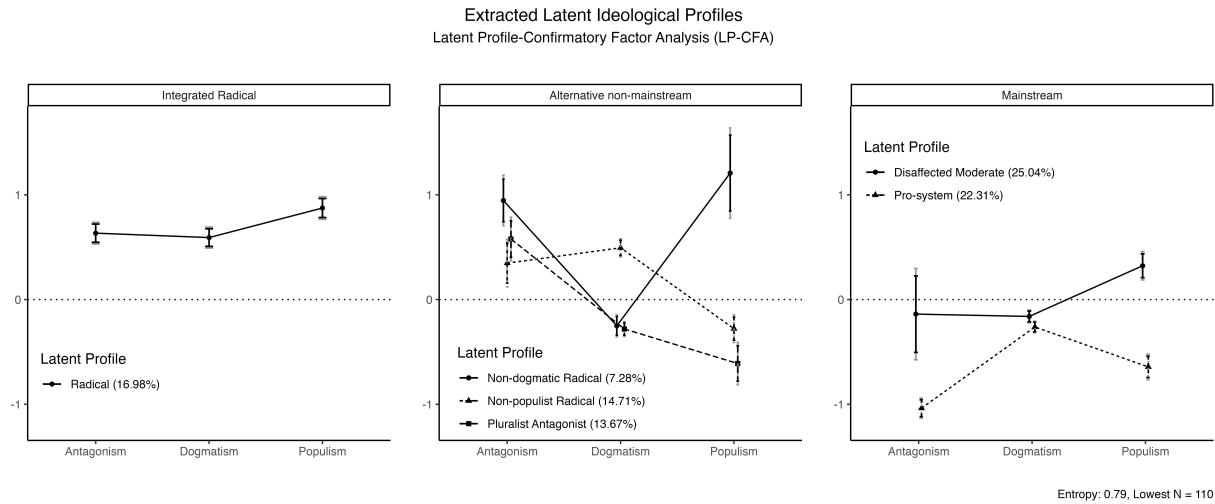


Figure 1: Estimated latent means expressed in standard deviation from the sample mean of each ontological component. Error bars represent 95% (grey) and 90% (black) confidence intervals around the estimated means.

might be willing to compromise on some of their positions in order to achieve the desired social change. In line with previous theoretical work ([Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013](#)), this class might represent a more ‘inclusionary’ version of radical politics characterized by individuals who accept the presence of competing ideas and does not display a strong one-dimensional way of thinking.

Profile 3, **Non-populist Radical**, accounts for 14% of the sample and has below-average levels of populism but displays both antagonist and anti-compromise tendencies. The class represents a group of individuals who reject the *status quo* and traditional representation mechanisms based on the compromise between different groups and interests. However, individuals belonging to this class do not portray the elites as a negative out-group and they don’t think that the “popular will” is the ultimate source of political legitimacy. This class may represent a blend between technocratic governing and antagonist politicking where the interest of the social whole is achieved by rejecting the current system of government but not necessarily by fighting the political elites and empowering the “common people” ([Bertsou and Caramani 2020](#)).

Profile 4, the **Pluralist Antagonist** class, accounts for 14% of the sample. This profile is composed of individuals who show high levels of antagonism but below sample-mean levels of populism

and adversity to comprise. In this case, the need for a deep transformation of the current system might represent a strong but undefined opposition to the way politics and society are organized. The political struggle is decoupled from an “Us versus Them” logic where the empowerment of a specific group of people is contrasted with the imperative need of defeating the political elites.

Lastly, our study also reveals the presence of two more mainstream ideological belief systems that together account for approximately 50% of the surveyed respondents (right plot in Figure 1). Unsurprising, this finding proves that non-radical mainstream ideological thinking is the most prevalent way for citizens to organize ideological beliefs. We label one of these groups as **Pro-systems** as it is formed by individuals showing strong support for the *status quo* and mainstream political practices. Across the entire sample, the Pro-system profile accounts for 22% of the surveyed respondents. It has the lowest score on antagonism, dogmatism, and populism. In line with our expectations, the members belonging to this class reject the ontological components of radical beliefs and represent the antithesis of the Radical class.

We label the last class **Disaffected moderates** as it represents respondents who do not have strong and identifiable ideological positions but score slightly below average on dogmatism and antagonism and slightly above average on populism. In line with previous research on citizens’ ideological profiles (Bertsou and Caramani 2020, 23), the relatively large size (23.6%) of this group suggests that this group is likely to reflect a “general feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration with politics” without being outspoken radical<sup>5</sup>.

## Comparing the different ideological profiles with the Pro-system class

To validate the profile solution, we employ regression analysis to investigate how profile membership is related to theoretically relevant predictors of political radicalism both in terms of background characteristics and general attitudes towards politics (Spurk et al. 2020). This allows us to understand

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<sup>5</sup>The presence of this class of individuals is not only relevant theoretically and in line with previous literature on the topic (for a discussion see, Kinder 2006) . It also improves the validity of our typology by avoiding losing track of these individuals in averaged scores.

how the extracted ideological profiles are stratified in the general population and assess whether certain factors make it more likely for respondents to endorse radical beliefs.

Table 3: 3-step multinomial logistic regression model predicting profile assignment (reference category: Pro-system profile). Standard errors (in parenthesis) and p-values reported on the logit scale.

Predictors	Radical	Non-dogmatic Radical	Non-populist Radical	Pluralist Antagonist	Disaffected moderate					
	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value		
Age	1.64 (0.159)	0.002	0.74 (0.190)	0.114	1.63 (0.172)	0.005	1.24 (0.167)	0.205	1.06 (0.143)	0.689
Education	0.43 (0.169)	0.000	0.83 (0.266)	0.493	0.42 (0.187)	0.000	0.95 (0.215)	0.813	0.65 (0.165)	0.009
Female (Ref: Male)	0.97 (0.266)	0.908	2.29 (0.372)	0.026	1.35 (0.278)	0.275	1.11 (0.283)	0.710	1.40 (0.239)	0.156
Non-native (Ref: Belgian)	1.64 (0.362)	0.174	1.53 (0.531)	0.423	0.96 (0.463)	0.930	0.54 (0.517)	0.239	1.45 (0.345)	0.280
French- speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders)	13.14 (0.321)	0.000	10.52 (0.448)	0.000	17.55 (0.356)	0.000	7.99 (0.341)	0.000	2.84 (0.322)	0.001
PSC: Low Middle (Ref: Working Class)	0.41 (0.377)	0.017	0.51 (0.600)	0.266	0.67 (0.409)	0.320	0.66 (0.478)	0.389	0.74 (0.378)	0.418
PSC: Higher Mid- dle/Upper (Ref: Working Class)	0.29 (0.432)	0.005	0.52 (0.607)	0.275	0.58 (0.444)	0.220	0.63 (0.473)	0.334	0.52 (0.394)	0.100

Predictors	Radical	Non-dogmatic Radical		Non-populist Radical		Pluralist Antagonist		Disaffected moderate		
	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value						
Christian (Ref: None)	1.52 (0.329)	0.200	1.09 (0.445)	0.840	1.35 (0.355)	0.393	0.97 (0.318)	0.921	1.14 (0.273)	0.638
Free- Thinker (Ref: None)	0.68 (0.531)	0.471	1.74 (0.558)	0.321	0.34 (0.631)	0.086	0.83 (0.464)	0.679	0.69 (0.435)	0.400
Other Religion (Ref: None)	2.10 (0.562)	0.187	1.31 (0.741)	0.715	0.51 (0.828)	0.413	0.94 (0.713)	0.936	0.56 (0.666)	0.391
Political interest	0.55 (0.152)	0.000	0.66 (0.217)	0.055	0.64 (0.169)	0.009	1.07 (0.162)	0.654	0.53 (0.140)	0.000
Institutional trust	0.42 (0.161)	0.000	0.26 (0.210)	0.000	0.53 (0.186)	0.001	0.44 (0.177)	0.000	0.45 (0.154)	0.000
Powerless- ness	1.90 (0.139)	0.000	2.38 (0.237)	0.000	1.27 (0.143)	0.095	1.22 (0.152)	0.196	1.59 (0.123)	0.000

First, we focus on the comparison between the **Radical** and **Pro-system** profile. Results from the 3-step regression model presented in Table 3 suggest that respondents' level of education, age, and place of residence are associated with a higher propensity to belong to the Radical profile. In terms of odds, for each point increase in age, the odds of belonging to the Radical profile, instead of the Pro-system one, increase by a factor of 1.6, confirming past research on the topic (Lubbers and Coenders 2017). On the contrary, for each point increase in education, individuals are, in terms of odds, 3.3 times less likely to belong to the Radical profile. This finding is in line with recent research on the general demographic characteristics of radical individuals and voters (Lancaster 2019; Ramiro 2016). We also found that individuals who identify with the working class are over-represented in the Radical class, echoing previous research on working-class radicalism (Lipset 1983). In terms of odds, individuals whose perceived social class is low middle and higher/upper are 2.4 and 3.2 times less likely to subscribe to the Radical profile, respectively. We also found that residing in French-speaking Belgium (versus Flanders) has a strong and positive impact on the likelihood of belonging to the Radical class. The fact that this effect is so strong is mainly driven by the fact that, in Wallonia and Brussels, the Pro-system profile is less prevalent compared to Flanders<sup>6</sup>. These are strong and substantial differences that underlie profound disparities in the dynamics of the political conflict between the Belgian regions that are the result of a gradual divergence in political, cultural, economic, and social factors (Billiet 2009; De Witte and Klandermans 2000).

Turning to respondents' attitudes about politics, we found that radical individuals are less interested in politics as citizens belonging to the Pro-System profile and less likely to trust political institutions (Geurkink et al. 2020). For each standard deviation increase in Institutional Trust and Political Interest, respondents are respectively 3 and 1.7 times less likely to subscribe to the Radical profile compared to the Pro-system one. In line with previous research (Abts and Baute 2022), we also find that people who feel abandoned or disregarded by politics are 1.8 times more likely to subscribe to the

<sup>6</sup>For the sake of clarity, we report raw percentages for the class assignment. Approximately 30% of Flemish respondents belong to the Pro-system profile. On the contrary, only 13% of the French-speaking Belgians are considered pro-System. Concerning the radical profile, approximately 25% of the French-speaking respondents are considered radical while only 11% of the Flemish sample belongs to the radical profile.

Radical profile compared to the Pro-system one. It is also worth noting that religious denomination is not associated with the propensity to subscribe to the Radical profile, confirming the declining importance of religion in structuring ideological beliefs among the Belgian population (Best 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2011).

Next, we contrast the Radical (vs Pro-system) profile with the other three non-mainstream (vs Pro-system) belief systems. This allows us to further validate the selected profile solution by assessing whether individuals belonging to any of these profiles are similar to the individuals belonging to the Radicals profile in terms of background characteristics and attitudes. In general, we notice that the patterns of significance and the magnitude of the coefficients follow, for the most part, the same trend, suggesting the presence of pronounced similarities among individuals subscribing to non-mainstream belief systems. Nonetheless, it is worth noting a few important differences: the Radical profile is the only ideological profile where working-class individuals are over-represented, females are more likely to subscribe to the Non-dogmatic Radical profile, and individuals belonging to the Non-dogmatic Radical and Pluralist Antagonist profiles are slightly younger and more educated.

## **Comparing radical right and left voters with mainstream voters**

To validate the proposed typology, we also test if adhering to a particular ideological profile is predictive of radical vote choice and whether any difference exists between radical left and radical right voters in the propensity to subscribe to different ideological profiles.

Results from multinomial logistic regressions reported in Figure 2 reveal that radical vote choice is associated with the proposed typology of ideological beliefs<sup>7</sup>. Concerning radical right voting, we found that the odds of voting for a populist radical right party are 2.4 times higher for individuals belonging to the Radical profile compared to individuals who subscribe to the Pro-system profile. In line with our expectations, belonging to the Radical profile is one of the strongest predictors of radical right voting, even beyond the commonly investigated effects of political interest, religious

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<sup>7</sup>The complete regression table including the controls is reported in the Appendix.

denomination, gender, and migration background. In contrast with our theoretical expectations, the coefficient predicting vote for Populist Radical Left is small and highly insignificant indicating the people belonging to the Radical profile are not more likely to vote for the radical left when compared to individuals belonging to the Pro-system profile. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that left-wing voters, in this case even those who vote for radical parties, are less likely to fully commit to an integrated radical profile (e.g., [Jost et al. 2003a](#)).

Moving to the three alternative non-mainstream classes, we find that none of the extracted profiles predicts radical vote choice with the notable exception of the **Non-dogmatic Radical** profile. The Non-dogmatic Radical profile is positively associated with voting for both radical right and radical left. In terms of odds ratios, individuals belonging to the Non-dogmatic Radical profile are approximately three times more likely to vote for a populist radical party compared to a mainstream party, controlling for a large set of potentially confounding variables.

This result suggests the existence of different “types” of radical voters. Some voters of radical parties see politics as a conflict-seeking form of antagonism that rejects compromise-based practices, while others are more willing to accept compromise and competing ideas. This means that radical voters—and, specifically, radical right voters—should not be automatically associated with a holistic rejection of political compromise and, more in general, a rigid and dogmatic conception of politics (c.f. [Jost et al. 2003b](#)). At the same time, this finding underlines an important difference between the radical left and radical right electorate. The electorate of the radical left parties in Belgium, namely voters of PTB and PTBA, is formed, for the most part, by individuals with high levels of antagonism and populism who, nonetheless, reject dogmatic and anti-comprising tendencies. On the contrary, the electorate of populist radical right parties is split between radical individuals that are willing to accept political compromise and individuals who, despite being radical, are not. Similarly to what happens for ontic issues positions ([Lancaster 2019](#); [Jessoula, Natili, and Pavolini 2022](#)), this indicates the presence of a certain degree of beliefs heterogeneity among the radical electorate.

It is worth noting that individuals belonging to the **Disaffected moderate** profile are slightly more

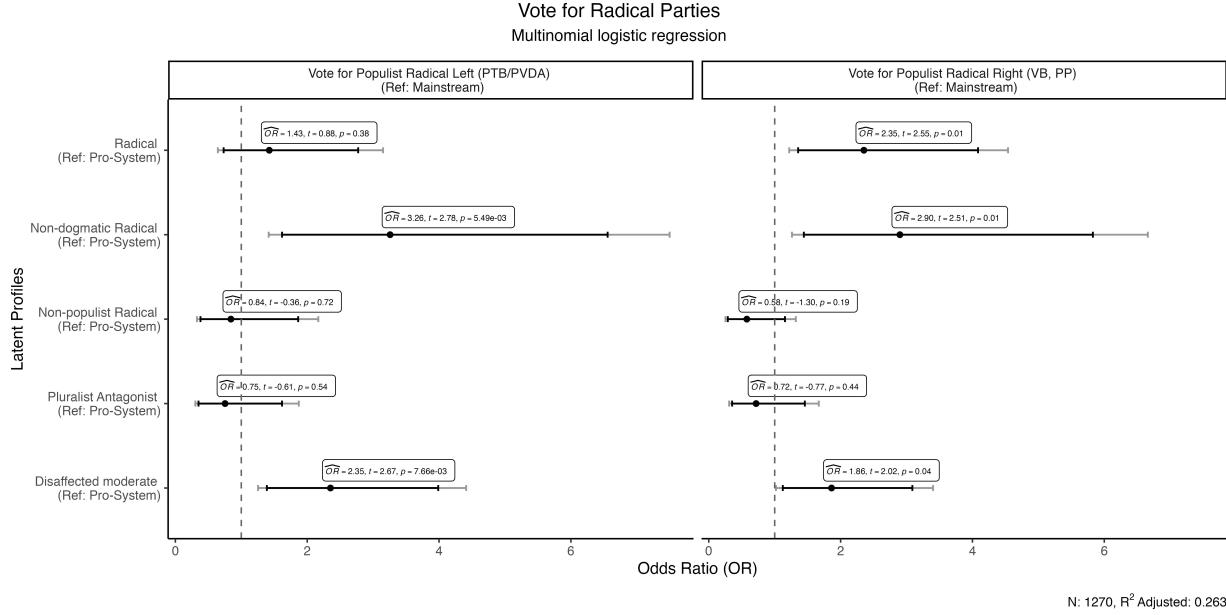


Figure 2: Effect of ideological profiles on vote choice controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% (black) and 90% (grey) confidence intervals around the estimated odds ratio. T- and p-values reported in the logit scale.

likely to vote for either radical left or right parties compared to the Pro-system profile. Although, at first sight, this result might appear surprising, it is in line with recent research on the generalized discontent that pervades contemporary political discourse ([Passarelli and Tuorto 2018](#); [Bertsou and Caramani 2020](#)). Individuals subscribing to the Disaffected moderate profile are likely to represent a group of citizens that is disillusioned by traditional parties and, thus, they are likely to vote for radical parties to signal their frustration with how politics and representation work, and not necessarily because of the party's radical positions.

## Conclusions

The paper conceptualizes the ontological nucleus of radical ideologies and quantifies its prevalence in the general population. Against the assumption that radical individuals are simply a more ‘radicalised’ version of mainstream voters ([Spierings and Zaslove 2015, 138](#)), our results indicate that they are substantially different in the abstract and general ideas that compose their belief system

([Mudde 2010](#)). We show that antagonist, dogmatic, and populist beliefs allow us to distinguish between radical and ‘Pro-system’ belief systems. Yet, we also discover a non-negligible amount of heterogeneity in the nucleus of political radicalism and differences across radical left and radical right electorates. These findings support the idea that radicalism should not be reduced to a single (e.g., left-right continuum) or specific domain (e.g., anti-immigration) but should be rather studied as a complex and multi-layered ideological system centred around the ontological rejection of mainstream political practices ([Laclau 2005](#)).

From this perspective, our study supports the idea that non-mainstream beliefs are not monolithic and binary ideological systems but rather fragmented ideologies subjected to different interpretations ([Bertsou and Caramani 2020; Lancaster 2019](#)). In addition to the Radical and Pro-system integrated profiles, we found different alternative ideological systems that combine some but not all ontological core elements of radical belief systems. This emphasises that individuals’ understanding of politics and representation is not as straightforward as sometimes presented in the literature. Some individuals can endorse compromise-based practices but, nonetheless, see politics as a conflict-seeking form of antagonism against the political establishment and the current system of governance. Others might reject the *status quo* and compromise but have a positive view of the current political elites. This tendency contributes to explaining the widespread presence of ‘flexible political identifications’ ([Bennett and Segerberg 2012](#)) in the past decades, as well as the success of radical ‘thin’ ideologies that often combine different ideological content to create alternative ideological narratives ([Freeden 2001](#)).

Our paper also shows that even though the share of voters of radical parties and radical individuals might be similar, it does not mean, by any means, that they represent the same group of citizens ([Rooduijn 2017](#)). We provide evidence that a non-negligible part of the electorate of both radical left and radical right parties is rather moderate, yet disaffected, by how politics works. As previous research suggests ([Gomez, Morales, and Ramiro 2015; Mudde 2010](#)), this is likely to be connected to the growing electoral potential of populist radical parties that have become able to attract an

ideologically heterogeneous coalition that also includes moderate, and even centrist, voters that express their discontent towards mainstream politics ([Abts, Kochuyt, and Van Kessel 2018](#); [Kochuyt and Abts 2017](#)). We also show that radical voters are not “all the same” in terms of attitudes and ideological features. Compared to right-wing radical voters, radical left voters are less likely to endorse a black-and-white understanding of politics despite showing high levels of populism and antagonism (c.f., [Greenberg and Jonas 2003](#)). This finding highlights that radical voters on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum do not differ only in terms of specific ontic elements (e.g., economic and cultural issues) ([Lancaster 2019](#)) but also ontologically in regard to the general and abstract principles that structure their belief system ([Laclau 1990](#); [Pierre Ostiguy and Casullo 2017](#); [Mudde 2007](#)).

The theoretical distinction between the ontic and ontological dimensions in the study of belief systems highlights the importance of examining both the concrete policy manifestations and the underlying general and abstract principles that underpins radical ideologies. While this paper encourages researchers to transcend a purely policy-based approach to the study of radical ideologies, it does not focus on the ontic manifestations of different types of radical beliefs. Future research should integrate both ontic and ontological dimensions within a single explanatory model with the aim of understanding how these different components interact, structure, and give rise to different (radical) belief systems.

In spite of this limitation, our study have important implications for the study of radical ideological thinking, in general. While policy-based opinions are more strongly susceptible to contextual factors and temporal fluctuations, the approach presented in this study enables the identification of fundamental abstract beliefs that underpin more tangible expressions of political radicalism, such as voting behavior or extreme stances on specific political issues. We also show that these abstract and general beliefs are combined in different ways resulting in a non-negligible degree of ideological fragmentation. This implies that the mass public tends to organise political beliefs following different schemata or frameworks. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to understanding the core

components of political radicalism and the combination and prioritization of certain ontological aspects is likely to inform and guide (radical) individuals' political attitudes and actions.

Consequently, to better understand political radicalism, the study of political ideology should, first and foremost, focus on the ontological elements of ideological beliefs and understand how individuals combine these ontological elements with other, more concrete and contextually defined, ontic elements ([Federico and Malka 2018](#); [Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009](#)). Doing so would allow for a more refined understanding of how ideological belief systems connect different political values to create meaningful ideological narratives and, in turn, how such systems are related to political choices.

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