

Fighting the system? Populist radical right parties and party system change

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Abstract

This article assesses the impact of populist radical right parties on national party systems in Western Europe. Has the emergence of this new party family changed the interaction of party competition within Western European countries? First, I look at party system change with regard to numerical and numerical–ideological terms. Second, I evaluate the effect populist radical right parties have had on the different dimensions of party systems. Third, I assess the claim that the rise of populist radical right parties has created bipolarizing party system. Fourth, I look at the effect the rise of the populist radical right has had on the logic of coalition formation. The primary conclusion is that, irrespective of conceptualization and operationalization, populist radical right parties have not fundamentally changed party systems in Western Europe.

Keywords

party systems, political parties, populism, radical right, Western Europe

‘The key problem with the phenomenon of party system change is that it is seen as either happening all the time or as scarcely happening at all.’

Peter Mair (2006: 63)

Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) are the most successful party family to have emerged in post-war Europe. Moreover, it is the only new party family that is relevant in both Western and Eastern Europe. Its importance, however, has often been seriously overstated in both academic and non-academic accounts. On the whole, PRRPs have thus far had only a rather modest influence over European politics (Mudde, 2013). Even on their most important issue, i.e. immigration, mainstream right-wing parties have generally been more important (see Bale, 2008).

While most authors have focused on the effects that PRRPs have had on the discourse and policy positions of mainstream parties, some have argued that their effect has also been systemic, i.e. that the whole party system has been affected. According to these authors, the rise of PRRPs has altered the way relevant parties interact with each other (e.g. Karapin, 1998; Meguid, 2005; Rydgren, 2010). In this article, I evaluate this claim on a number of

levels, while applying different operationalizations of party system change in Western Europe.¹ I focus primarily on what I call the *mechanical* dimension of party systems, i.e. the directionality of the interactions between the relevant parties. Consequently, I speak little of the so-called *substantial* dimension of party systems, i.e. the ideological basis of the interactions between the relevant parties. While the latter is often studied under the heading of party system (see Wolinetz, 2008), I believe it rather captures the essence of party competition.

PRRPs in Western Europe, 1980–2012

Radical right parties have emerged in post-war Western Europe in three separate waves (Von Beyme, 1988), but it was not until the last, which began in the 1980s, that this party family was able to establish itself in national party systems. The rise of the contemporary radical right has given way to an ‘insatiable demand’ for information, both within and outside the

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academic sphere (Bale, 2012). While most observers agree on the undesirability of the radical right, due to its alleged anti-democratic character, scholars have failed to reach an agreement on a definition and, consequently, a group of parties that may be identified as the 'radical right'. While this is not the place to reflect upon or further this debate, it is important to note that each individual definition and classification leads to (somewhat) different consequences for specific research questions, including the one addressed here. I briefly reflect on this in the conclusion.

I define the party family of interest as the populist radical right, arguing that parties in this family share a core ideology that includes (at least) a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde, 2007: chapter 1). By nativism, I mean a xenophobic form of nationalism in which a mono-cultural nation-state is the ideal and all non-natives (i.e. aliens) are perceived as a threat to the nation. Authoritarianism entails a strict belief in order and its stringent enforcement within society through discipline, law and order-based policies. **Finally, populism is defined as a thin ideology that considers society to be essentially divided between two antagonistic and homogeneous groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and wants politics to reflect the general will of the people** (Mudde, 2004). The combination of *all* three of these features defines the populist radical right party family.

The electoral and political relevance of West European PRRPs differ widely (see Mudde, 2013). The Swiss People's Party (SVP) has been, far and away, the biggest party in Switzerland, while the populist radical right currently constitutes the second largest party family in the Austrian national parliament, i.e. the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) together. And despite their recent losses, the Danish People Party (DF) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) continue to be the third biggest party in their respective country. Meanwhile, in several countries PRRPs either do not contest elections or are electorally irrelevant. Overall, members of the party family have been represented in only ten national parliaments since 1980.

Moreover, few PRRPs have been able to make it into government in Western Europe. The populist radical right has been part of majority governments in just three countries (Austria, Italy and Switzerland),² while in two others they have provided crucial support for minority governments (Denmark and The Netherlands). That said, the trend is clearly pointing upward. In the 1980s, no such government existed, and in the 1990s there was only one (Berlusconi I in Italy). However, in the first decade of the 21st century seven majority governments and three minority governments included the populist radical right. Still, only one PRRP is part of a majority government today; and this is in Switzerland, a unique case in which national governments are constituted on the basis of a 'magic formula' rather than the outcome of parliamentary elections.

Therefore, PRRPs are not completely irrelevant in Western European politics. The fact that, at least in electoral terms, it has been the most successful new European party family since the end of WWII – slightly more successful on average than the Greens (see Mudde, 2013) – warns against reaching such a simplistic conclusion. At the same time, the electoral and political successes of the populist radical right have at best been moderate, particularly when compared to traditional party families. Moreover, PRRPs tend to rise and fall fairly quickly, which should warn us against expecting too much of a systemic impact.

PRRPs and party system change

Party system change is often proclaimed, but seldom defined or clearly operationalized (see Wolinetz, 2008). A wide variety of meanings has been attributed to the term, often referring only marginally to changes in the party system. A party system denotes 'a system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition' (Sartori, 1976: 44). Consequently, party system change should refer to alterations in the *systemic interactions* of the relevant parties in a country and not necessarily in the characteristics of the relevant parties themselves (Mair, 1989). Measuring party system change has proved highly problematic; in fact many (quantitative) indicators gauge *electoral* change or *party* change rather than *party system* change. Alternatively, they measure changes in the number of relevant parties within a party system regardless of the fact that these changes might not affect the systemic interactions between parties (e.g. Pedersen, 1980).

I assess the claim that PRRPs have changed the national party systems of Western Europe on the basis of different classifications and operationalizations. First, I look at the most basic, and popular, conceptualization, which is based on numerical and ideological criteria. Second, I assess the effect these parties have had on the basis of the more recently proposed three-dimensional operationalization of party system change. Third, I evaluate whether the rise of PRRPs has led to a move toward bipolarizing party systems. And, fourth, I discuss whether the rise of PRRPs has changed the logic of coalition formation.

Changing the numbers?

The most basic typology of party systems is based exclusively on what is considered the number of relevant parties, i.e. parties with coalition or blackmail potential (Sartori, 1976). This normally leads to three types of party system: one-party, two-party and multiparty systems (e.g. Blondel, 1968).³ Not surprisingly, party systems have not changed in their most essential qualities. Most European countries have had multiparty systems since the late 1940s, and this has not changed. Similarly, the few two-party systems that do exist are quite stable (notably Malta and the UK).

In the past three decades, changes from a two-party to a multiparty system, or vice versa, have been rare and almost exclusively limited to party systems that do not have PRRPs (notably Greece and Portugal). Similarly, even if the recent change in the British party system lasts, it is the product of the rise of a well-established mainstream party, the Liberal Democrats, rather than the inconsequential populist radical right BNP.

The results change slightly if we use Giovanni Sartori's (1976) typology of party systems, which combines a numerical with an ideological criterion. The key distinction here lies within the category of multiparty systems. Based on the number of relevant parties and, perhaps more importantly, their ideological spread, Sartori makes a distinction between moderate and polarized pluralism. His operationalization of the latter is complex (1976: 131–145) and has led most notably to debates on the correct interpretation of anti-system parties (e.g. Capoccia, 2002; Wolinetz, 2008).

Sartori (1976: 133) writes: 'a party can be defined as being anti-system whenever it *undermines the legitimacy* of the *regime* it opposes.' If we adopt a strict definition of regime, i.e. as democracy, PRRPs are not anti-system. However, if this definition were a bit more specific, i.e. a liberal democracy, PRRPs can be considered to be anti-system, i.e. representing 'an *extraneous ideology*' (ibid.), in that they oppose (undermine) some key aspects of liberal democracy: most notably pluralism and minority rights (Mudde, 2007: chapter 6). This would mean that all party systems with relevant PRRPs are cases of polarized pluralism.

In past decades, 5 of 17 countries have had relevant PRRPs: Austria, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands and Switzerland.⁴ While the French FN has been one of the most successful PRRPs in Western Europe in electoral terms, the majoritarian electoral system has prevented it from becoming relevant in Sartorian terms. The remaining question is, then, did these countries develop polarized pluralism *because of* the rise of the populist radical right?

In Austria and Switzerland there is little doubt that they did; both had moderate pluralist party systems before the respective transformation of the FPÖ and the SVP into PRRPs. While both countries have previously had other anti-system parties in parliament – the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) and the National Action for People and Home (NAVH) – these were never relevant in the Sartorian sense.

The situation in Denmark is slightly more difficult to assess, since the DF in 1998 split from the Danish Progress Party, a neo-liberal populist party, which is considered anti-system according to the aforementioned logic. While the Progress Party was represented in the Danish Parliament from 1973 until 1998, it seems to have never had real coalition or blackmail potential (Bille, 1989).⁵ If this conclusion were correct, Denmark would be another case in which the rise of PRRPs has led to transformation of the party system.

The situation in The Netherlands is also complex, specifically in the past decade. The Dutch parliament has always

had a large number of parties, and broad coalitions, but left and right anti-system parties have not been relevant in the post-war period. This changed in the 21st century, however, with the meteoric rise of the neo-liberal populist LPF. Although the LPF became the first post-war anti-system party to gain relevance by entering the government in 2002, it was a flash party that immediately lost relevance the following year, after the fall of the Balkenende I government. Still, it could be argued that between the fall of the LPF and the rise of the clearly relevant populist radical right PVV, the Dutch party system remained polarized, since another anti-system party, the theocratic State Reformed Party (SGP), became relevant.

Italy was Sartori's prime example of a polarized pluralist party system that sported relevant anti-system parties on the left and right.⁶ Following his logic, one would probably have to conclude that, despite the implosion of the Italian party system in the 1990s and the almost wholesale change of political parties in the country (e.g. Morlino, 2001), the party system of the Second Republic is in essence identical to that of the First Republic, i.e. a polarized pluralism. While the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and, to a lesser extent, the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) were the relevant anti-system parties of the First Republic, the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC), the neo-liberal populist Forza Italia (FI)⁷ and the populist radical right LN are those of the Second Republic.

In conclusion, there are only two clear cases in which the rise of PRRPs has led to a change in party system, i.e. from moderate to polarized pluralism: Austria and Switzerland. Interestingly, in both countries, well-established mainstream parties radicalized into anti-system parties. In Denmark and The Netherlands the rise of PRRPs was preceded by the breakthrough of other anti-system parties, notably neo-liberal populist parties. In The Netherlands, this led to a transformation of the party system, since the anti-system party was relevant, while in Denmark it did not. Hence, Denmark is the third country in which a PRRP changed the party system from moderate to polarized pluralism. In Italy, the rise of the LN simply continued the long-standing tradition of polarized pluralism.

The fact that PRRPs have not led to much party system change in Sartorian terms is not that surprising. Just as is the case with regard to the aforementioned operationalization in pure numerical terms, party system change from moderate to polarized pluralism is relatively rare. There are few relevant anti-system parties in Western Europe, be they populist radical right or not. Moreover, in a few party systems different anti-system parties coexist – for example, in Greece (Golden Dawn and SYRIZA) and Italy (FI, LN, PRC), and often have done so for decades. This means that only a minority of Western European countries has had a relevant anti-system party at some point in time and, thus, few have seen party system change in terms of moderate and polarized pluralism.

This points to a more fundamental problem with Sartori's typology, and more specifically his operationalization of relevance as either coalition or blackmail potential, which significantly reduces the meaning of systemic interaction. In their analysis of the main problems that arise with the study of party system change, Luciano Bardi and Peter Mair write: 'The third problem is that the changes in party systems that we now observe often prove difficult to explain or analyse within Sartori's familiar framework' (2008: 149). They urge scholars to go beyond the old classifications, as they did in their own work.

Changing the dimensions?

In their 2008 article, 'The Parameters of Party Systems', Bardi and Mair argue that party systems have (at least) three relevant dimensions within which change can occur: vertical, horizontal and functional. They argue that focusing on these dimensions can highlight party system change that is overlooked by the more rudimentary numerical classifications analysed above.

The vertical dimension refers to 'the pillarization and segmentation of electorates' (Bardi and Mair, 2008: 156). As Arend Lijphart (1968) so aptly observed, various Western European democracies had highly pillarized and segmented electorates in the first half of the 20th century. In the late 1960s, a process of depillarization (*ontzuiling*) started to unfold in all consociational democracies, although it was most pronounced in The Netherlands (Hellemans, 1990; Méndez-Lago, 1999). This process had slowly but steadily weakened the vertical dimension well before the wave of PRRPs hit Western Europe (also Wolinetz, 1999). Bardi and Mair refer specifically to Belgium and Northern Ireland as countries in which the vertical dimension still plays an important role in the 21st century. One could perhaps add Austria to the list, at least with regard to the 1990s.

While Austria is probably still the most pillarized society in Western Europe, it has not always been immune to depillarization. At the end of the 1980s, when the FPÖ started to rise significantly in the polls, the two main pillars of Austrian society had already started to lose power (e.g. Méndez-Lago, 1999). While presenting itself as an anti-pillar party, the FPÖ sought to build its own 'blue' pillar (Luther, 2003). And, while cross-party voting had already increased before the ascendance of the FPÖ, there is no doubt that the rise further eroded the vertical dimension in Austria. Many voters left the two main parties (dealignment) to join the FPÖ (realignment), only to leave in the wake of the 2002 split. At the same time, many new voters were socialized in a more or less depillarized society, which has further undermined the vertical dimension in the country.

Although pillarization in Belgium in general, and Flanders in particular, proved more resistant to change than in The Netherlands, it has waned significantly in recent decades (e.g. Hellemans, 1990). There is little doubt that

the VB has been a factor in the depillarization process, providing an alternative to disenchanted depillarized voters. The party has attracted voters from across the political spectrum, most notably the social democratic Socialist Party (SP, now SP.a), the liberal Party for Freedom and Progress (PVV, now VLD), and the Flemish nationalist People's Union (VU, now N-VA). Structurally, the VB was most threatening to the nationalist pillar of the now defunct VU, which, in the 1990s, it seemed to have completely absorbed. However, the recent rapid rise of the conservative nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), successor to the VU, which comes largely at the expense of the declining VB, might re-establish the nationalist pillar to some extent (Deschouwer, 2013).

Only in Northern Ireland has the populist radical right reinforced the vertical dimension. The DUP, a somewhat idiosyncratic PRRP (Mudde, 2007: 55), falls squarely within the pillarized system of Northern Irish politics, competing exclusively for the Protestant vote. Although it eventually formed a coalition with its archenemy, Sinn Féin, it did not change the direction of electoral competition. In fact, one could argue that the DUP reinforced the vertical dimension of Northern Irish politics by pitting ethnic unionism against the more moderate civic unionism of the Ulster Unionist Party (McGlynn et al., forthcoming).

Within the horizontal dimension, which Bardi and Mair (2008: 156) describe as 'determined by the existence of several levels of government (and of electoral competition)', PRRPs have also caused little systematic change. First, many successful parties operate in unitary states, like Denmark or The Netherlands, where the horizontal dimension has a minor role. Second, in most countries with a relevant horizontal dimension, PRRPs are not very strong (e.g. Germany, Spain and the UK). There are only four countries where they could potentially influence the horizontal dimension: Austria, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland.

Both the Austrian and the Swiss PRRPs have strong regional *Hochburge* (strongholds) from which they launched their electoral rise and ideological transformation. The FPÖ has always had its stronghold in the southern state of Carinthia, which was also the home state of the party's former leader, the late Jörg Haider (e.g. Luther, 2003). For decades the FPÖ has been the largest party in parliament, regularly winning over 40 percent of the vote and occupying the governorship.⁸ However, because the FPÖ has no interest in fundamentally changing the federal structure of the Austrian state, and because state coalition politics are largely unrelated to federal coalition politics, the rise of the party has not affected the horizontal dimension of Austrian politics. This is also true for the Swiss SVP, which has its stronghold in Zurich but is a strong supporter of Swiss federalism. Hence, while local politics do play a role in the internal politics of the SVP (Skenderovic, 2009), this does not affect the horizontal dimension of Swiss politics.

One of the few cases in which a PRRP has had an influence on the horizontal dimension of politics is Belgium, which has become a strongly federal state in which the state and federal governments are highly dependent upon each other. While the VB does not play an important direct role at the federal level, it does influence the Belgian level indirectly by affecting the Flemish level (see also Bardi and Mair, 2008: 160). Simply stated, because of the combination of the VB's electoral strength and the *cordon sanitaire*, i.e. its exclusion from government coalitions by the other parties, Flemish government coalitions have become much broader than before. This has put pressure on the federal government coalitions, which try to reflect (in party political terms) the Flemish and Walloon coalitions (e.g. Deschouwer, 2013).

The situation in Italy is, as it so often is, more complicated. Italy has always had strong regional identities and North–South tensions. The populist radical right LN emerged out of regional secessionist movements in the North and has been a voice for regional (more concretely: Northern) autonomy ever since – even if the level of autonomy demanded has changed significantly over the years (e.g. Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2010). The latter is in part a consequence of its (uncomfortable) political alliance with Berlusconi, which also included the post-Fascist National Alliance (NA), the strongest supporter of the unitary state in Italy. However, the rise of the LN affected the horizontal dimension of Italian politics only between 1995 and 1998, when it brought down the right-wing government and aligned itself nationally and sub-nationally with the political left.

Finally, Bardi and Mair describe the functional dimension as ‘the existence, even at the same level of government, of different competitive arenas’ (2008: 157). Here, the authors focus in particular on the potential mismatch between the electoral arena and the parliamentary arena, which they believe to be most probably the result of institutional factors. For example, they suggest a situation in which:

polarization may be much more pronounced in the electoral arena, where parties may take extreme positions in order to respond to the electorate's expectations, than in the parliamentary one, where most if not all may converge towards the centre of the political spectrum and engage in consensus-seeking practices in order to partake in governmental responsibilities (and the spoils of office). (ibid: 157 f.)

This seems to have been the case with regard to PRRPs. In many countries, the other political parties initially ignored them and their issues. After their electoral breakthrough, PRRPs were ostracized in the electoral and (where relevant) the parliamentary arena. When their electoral success continued, however, their issues became more prominent, prompting the other parties (particularly the mainstream right) to converge on their discourse – if not always their

policies (see Bale, 2008; Mudde, 2013). The few times mainstream (right-wing) parties changed their parliamentary strategy, and entered into government coalitions with PRRPs, this was often preceded or followed by a change in the electoral strategy (e.g. De Lange, 2008). The only partial exception is Switzerland, where the SVP is mostly attacked in the electoral and parliamentary arenas but is integrated by law in the executive arena.

Polarizing the party systems?

Assessing the success of Green parties in Western Europe, Peter Mair concluded that their main achievement was that they had become mainstream and had become *Koalitionsfähig* (acceptable for coalitions). He argued that this development had two party-systemic consequences: (1) a lasting advantage in coalition formation for the expanded left; and (2) a reinforcement of bipolarity (Mair, 2001). Tim Bale (2003) developed this argument further, focusing in particular on the increasing willingness of the mainstream right to collaborate with PRRPs. According to Bale, this change in the behaviour of mainstream right-wing parties explains why Mair's first prediction has been shown to be wrong, insofar as it was based on the assumption that the right bloc would remain divided because the radical right would remain *Koalitionsunfähig* (unacceptable for coalitions). With regard to the second prediction, Bale argues that the act of opening up to PRRPs on the part of the mainstream right has actually strengthened the shift toward bipolarizing party systems in Western Europe, which was started by the rise of Green parties.

More specifically, Bale (2003: 69) states: ‘[T]he much-touted fragmentation and polarisation under way is occurring alongside a trend towards two-bloc electoral competition.’ While claiming that ‘(t)here are few West European countries unaffected by all these changes’ (ibid.), he tests his hypothesis on the basis of three groups of countries, following Mair's original argument.

This produces a group of countries where the centre- and far right have recently either formally coalesced (Italy, Austria and the Netherlands) or put together a parliamentary majority capable of supporting a government of the centre-right (Denmark and Norway), and a second, smaller group where this kind of formation is not currently the case (Sweden and Germany). (Bale, 2003: 70)

He finds that ‘the evidence from a range of countries provides broad, though sometimes nuanced, support for our hypotheses’ (ibid.: 84). However, this was in 2002. Ten years later the evidence is much less convincing. Or, perhaps more precisely, the thesis that the rise of PRRPs has led to bipolarizing party systems with opposing blocs of parties holds, at best, only for a few Western European countries.

Table 1. Western European countries by strength of populist radical right party and presence of two-bloc polarized party system, 1980–2012.

Strength of PRRP	Two-bloc polarized party system	
	Yes	No
Strong	Denmark, France, Italy	Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland
Weak	Norway, Spain, Sweden	Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal

Table 1 divides Western European countries on the basis of two dimensions, electoral strength of the populist radical right and the presence of a two-bloc polarized party system. PRRPs are considered strong when they attain 5 percent or more in two consecutive parliamentary elections within the 1980–2012 period, and countries are considered two-bloc polarized when government *coalitions* tend to alternate between left and right coalitions of parties.⁹

Only 3 of the 16 countries (19 percent) have strong PRRPs together with a two-bloc polarized party system (**boldface** in Table 1). These are the cases that correspond to the hypothesized relationship. This low number is in itself not surprising, the moment the thesis can only apply to countries with a relevant PRRP, which, as we have seen above, applies at best to only half of Western Europe.¹⁰ Some cases will be examined in more detail to see whether they are indeed examples of countries in which the rise of PRRPs has led to a bipolarized party system.

The first case, Denmark, seems to be a textbook case of Bale's thesis. In 2001, the long-standing left-wing government was replaced by a right-wing minority government, which was dependent upon the explicit support of the populist radical right DF. Ten years later a left-wing majority coalition succeeded the third consecutive right-wing minority government – all three of which had been supported by the DF (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2012). After their defeat, the right-wing parties directly indicated that they wanted to replace the left-wing government with another right-wing coalition at the next election. Although there had already been a tendency toward two-bloc polarization since 1981–1982, with a short interlude in 1987–1988 (Green-Pedersen and Hoffmann Thomsen, 2005), this tendency was, at the very least, veritably strengthened electorally and ideologically by the rise of the DF.

France is a somewhat problematic case in terms of party relevance, insofar as the FN attains much more than 5 percent in national elections but has virtually no seats in parliament due to the highly disproportional electoral system; hence, in Sartorian terms, the FN has never been relevant. This notwithstanding, the FN was relevant for some time to two-bloc *electoral* competition in France. This ended in the late 1990s, when the leadership of the mainstream right reinstated a *cordon sanitaire* around the FN (Knapp, 1999), which continues to hold. Hence, while French politics remains divided in a left and right bloc, both blocs exclude the populist radical right.

On the surface, the Italian case seems to adhere to Bale's thesis even better than the Danish; at the moment Italy does not only have alternations of ideologically consistent coalition governments, it actually has largely two-bloc electoral competition. However, while the Italian party system has become one of bipolar bloc opposition, this was the consequence of the implosion of the old party system of the early 1990s and the consequent change in the electoral system in which the populist radical right played very little role (e.g. Morlino, 1996). Moreover, the political polarization is driven primarily by neo-liberal populist Berlusconi and, to a lesser extent, national conservative Gianfranco Fini. In fact, while the LN has participated in all three of Berlusconi's governments, it has also been the only party to break the two-bloc opposition, which it did in 1995.

In short, PRRPs are only relevant in the two-bloc polarized party systems of two countries, Denmark and Italy; their role, however, is not altogether straightforward. In fact, rather than causing the transformation into a two-bloc polarized party system, they only seem to have been the enabler of the transformation, which was, however, initiated by other right-wing parties. Bale also saw evidence of this in Austria and The Netherlands at the turn of the century, but the situation has since changed considerably.

In Austria, Prime Minister Schüssel's right-wing governments (2000–2006) have been replaced by traditional Grand Coalitions. The situation in the Netherlands seems even more fluid. Bale bases his assertion on the right-wing Balkenende I government (VVD-CDA-LPF) of 2002, which fell after a record low of 89 days. While the LPF is not a PRRP, I am sure Bale would argue that the recent right-wing VVD-CDA minority government, which was supported by the PVV, also fitted his model. The problem is that no two-bloc alternation occurred after the right-wing Balkenende I, which instead was followed by a centre-right Balkenende II, a right-wing Balkenende III (without the populist radical right, however defined), and a centre-right Balkenende IV. Similarly, a centrist Rutte II majority government has succeeded the right-wing Rutte I minority government.

Finally, it is important to note that the majority of countries with a strong PRRP do not have a bipolarized party system (Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland), and conversely the majority of countries with a two-bloc polarized party system do not have a strong PRRP (Norway, Spain, Sweden). In short, there is little evidence to support the bipolarizing party system hypothesis.

Changing the logic?

Party system change may also be examined using the *logic* of coalition formation. Much of the literature on PRRPs explicitly or implicitly assumes that mainstream parties think differently about potential coalitions that include PRRPs than those that include other political parties (e.g. De Lange, 2012a). The idea is that, with regard to coalitions containing anti-system parties, a different cost-benefit analysis revealing potentially higher costs is made. Hence, a different logic of coalition formation exists for anti-system parties than for (even new) system parties. PRRPs are special parties that require particular additional arguments in order for them to be considered *Koalitionsfähig*.

For many years, it was considered that this received wisdom was supported by the simple absence of coalition governments with PRRPs. When the first such party entered a national government, i.e. the LN in 1994, most observers explained this as an Italian anomaly, a consequence of the idiosyncratic implosion of the Italian party system. The Austrian governments of Christian democratic Prime Minister Schüssel, first with the FPÖ and then with the BZÖ, proved to be more challenging, as did the Danish and Dutch minority governments later on.

Sarah de Lange has comparatively studied government coalitions with right-wing populist parties, focusing on majority and minority governments as well as neo-liberal populist and populist radical right parties. Her research shows that existing coalition theories explain coalitions with PRRPs as well as coalitions without them (e.g. De Lange, 2012a). She argues that mainstream right-wing parties prefer populist radical right parties to mainstream left-wing parties ‘because they are “cheap” coalition partners which can easily be dominated and with which coalition agreements can be concluded without too many difficulties’ (2012b: 194). In other words, PRRPs are like all other political parties when it comes to coalition formation.

Conclusion

This article has analysed one important aspect of the potential systemic impact of PRRPs in Western Europe, namely their effect on party systems. In summary, it is clear that they have not been a major factor in party *system* change in Western Europe. While their rise has changed the identity of *some* of the political parties in *some* of the party systems of Western Europe, this analysis shows that PRRPs have hardly changed the systemic interactions between the relevant political parties within *most* countries. In other words, electoral change, or even party change, does not necessarily equate to party system change (Mair, 1989).

The finding that PRRPs have not fundamentally changed the party systems of Western Europe is, despite the disproportionate attention devoted to these parties in the academic literature (see Bale, 2012), not altogether surprising. After all,

PRRPs are electorally successful in about half of all Western European countries, and not every party that is successful in elections is also relevant in party system terms (Sartori, 1976). This is partly a consequence of the *cordon sanitaire*, which has kept relatively successful parties like the FN and VB out of the coalition game. That said, the experiences in other countries, notably Austria and The Netherlands, teaches us that this reality can change at any time.

It should be noted that the strength of the main conclusion is partly the result of my conceptualization and categorization of PRRPs. Scholars who focus on what I call right-wing populism in general, i.e. including both populist radical right and neo-liberal populist parties (Mudde, 2007; also Pauwels, 2010), will perhaps find more cases of party system change. Most notably, this could include Finland in 2010 (PS), Italy since 1994 (FI), the Netherlands in 2002 (LPF) and Norway since 2001 (FrP), depending on the operationalization of party system change. If one were to broaden this even further, i.e. to speak of populist parties in general, and thus include left-wing populists as well, an additional case might be Germany (The Left), insofar as Greece has always had a relevant left-wing populist party (PASOK).

Obviously, one could also broaden the focus to include, what Florian Grotz and Till Weber (2012: 734) euphemistically call, ‘the dynamic party-system environment’ of Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike Green parties, PRRPs have been relevant in various countries in the region, although often at different times. However, despite having existed for more than two decades now, most Central and Eastern European party systems have not been very stable, largely because of the high levels of volatility at the level of both the voting masses and the party elites (e.g. Tavits, 2008). Hence, in many cases the situation is so fluid that it is hard to truly speak of systematic change.

Similarly, party system change can be operationalized differently. Most fundamentally, Sartori’s operationalization of party relevance, i.e. coalition or blackmail potential, limits relevance almost exclusively to coalition politics – while blackmail potential can often only be assessed *post-facto*. However, even were we to use relevance in these strict terms, non-relevant parties can impact the systemic interactions of the relevant parties in a country, i.e. the party system (e.g. Herzog, 1987). This is particularly the case for the substantial dimension of party system change. Non-relevant parties can force issues on the political agenda that mainstream parties have ignored – as was the case in many countries, for instance, with European integration and immigration (e.g. Mudde, 1999; Parsons and Weber, 2011). This might lead not only to a different basis for party competition, and dealignment and realignment of large groups of voters, but also to a change in the systemic interactions between the relevant parties.

Finally, I have focused almost exclusively on the national level of party politics in this article. Given that most new parties achieve their first electoral successes at the sub-national

level, it would be interesting to see whether PRRPs have had a stronger influence on sub-national party systems. For example, the VB has been the largest party in Antwerp for decades, and while it was restrained with a *cordon sanitaire* its continued exclusion from electoral and parliamentary coalitions has had a profound effect on party politics in the biggest city of Flanders. Indeed, former mayor of Antwerp and social democrat, Patrick Janssens, referred to the city's party system as a two-party system, pitting all 'democratic parties' (under his leadership, of course) against the 'anti-democratic' VB.

Studying sub-national party systems can also be useful for the prediction of possible future scenarios of party interaction. Several new parties became *Koalitionsfähig* at the sub-national level first. A good example is the German Greens, which entered government first at the state level in Hesse in 1985, before entering the federal government in 1998 (Lees, 2000). Similarly, the LPF's entrance into the national government was greatly facilitated by developments in Rotterdam a few months earlier, when the LPF's local affiliate, Liveable Rotterdam, entered the city government with the same two parties (CDA and VVD). Finally, somewhat differently, the Austrian FPÖ entered governments at the sub-national level first, thanks to legal provisions, and gained national recognition in part because of its performance at the sub-state level (De Lange, 2008).

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Notes

1. Although PRRPs have also gained significant electoral results in some Central and Eastern European countries, I focus exclusively on Western Europe, since (most) CEE countries have not yet developed stable party systems (e.g. Enyedi, 2008; Tavits, 2008).
2. LAOS was part of the Greek government for only two months in 2011–2012. As soon as the first major decision had to be made by the new government, i.e. approving a European bailout, the LAOS ministers defected from the party line and were kicked out of the party.
3. Blondel (1968) also identified a 'two-and-one-half party system', i.e. party systems with two large parties that govern alternately in coalition with a smaller party (such as in West Germany). In line with much of the literature, I consider these to be specific types of multiparty system (e.g. Sartori, 1976).

4. Greece is not included because LAOS was only relevant for two months and has since disappeared from parliament. I exclude Golden Dawn (CA) because it is extreme right, i.e. anti-democratic, rather than populist radical right.
5. Incidentally, it seems that Sartori struggled with this question too. Writing directly after the 1975 election, in which the still new Progress Party consolidated its position, he wrote uncharacteristically hesitantly: 'In any event, if Denmark were to be reclassified as a system of extreme pluralism, the question would become whether Denmark is also transforming itself into a system of polarized pluralism' (1976: 150).
6. To be fair, Sartori's classification of the Italian party system was fiercely debated from the start. Scholars argued that the MSI was not relevant and the PCI was not anti-system (e.g. Daalder, 1983).
7. This also applies to the FI's successors, including the People of Freedom (PdL), which have all been dominated by Berlusconi. They are considered anti-system because their populism goes against fundamental aspects of the liberal democratic system (see above).
8. The power base turned out to be more personal than party-based, however, which became clear after Haider split from the FPÖ in 2005, founding the BZÖ, which promptly replaced the FPÖ as the dominant party in Carinthia. Today, the state is governed by the Freedom Party of Carinthia (FPK), the Carinthian branch of the BZÖ, which cooperates with the FPÖ at the federal level.
9. I have excluded the United Kingdom, which is a two-party system, and therefore doesn't (normally) have coalition governments and party blocs. With regard to the multiparty systems included, the blocs can consist of pre- and post-electoral coalitions, including electoral coalitions that contest elections as one party, such as 'Italy. Common Good' and 'The People of Freedom' in the 2013 Italian parliamentary election.
10. This number would increase to four if we categorized the Norwegian FRP as a PRRP, as most scholars do. While this would mean a significant increase in the number of cases that fit the theory, it would still amount to just 24 percent of all Western European countries.

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