

# 1 *Introduction*

## **The Rise of the Populist Radical Right: From the Periphery into Power**

The dramatic rise of populist radical right (PRR) parties has attracted a huge amount of popular and academic attention regarding its causes and consequences. A series of long-term structural changes and sudden crises – globalization, the Euro crisis, the migrant crisis – have unleashed new structural conflicts in society, increasing the salience of sociocultural issues and the programmatic appeal of PRR parties (Kriesi et al. 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2018). These parties have proposed radical policy changes regarding the issues of immigration, law and order, and the functioning of representative democracy (Mudde 2007). Until recently they could only exercise influence over such issues indirectly from opposition. Yet thanks to their rising popularity and greater electoral successes, PRR parties have now also increasingly held government roles. The ‘populist spectre’ has transformed from one that comprises outsiders and challengers, with potential indirect impact, to one often within establishment institutions, with direct access to the levers of power. This has heightened the normative concern regarding the threat PRR parties pose to liberal democracy (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013: 364; Urbinati 2014; Rummens 2017). This study responds to this concern and enquires into the consequences of PRR parties in positions of power. Do they make a difference? How radical are PRR parties when in power? How does this vary between countries? And how can this variation be explained?

This introductory chapter positions the study within the scholarly debates on the impact of PRR parties and presents its guiding approaches and intended contributions. Far more has been written about PRR party family in recent years than any other (Mudde 2016b). Yet, compared with popular topics like party organization, their ideology and discourse, and, above all, the causes of their electoral success,

their government participation has until recently been neglected. What remains particularly lacking are comparative studies that analyse PRR parties in power and compare their impact while facing similar governing challenges at the same time, especially analyses of them in senior roles in government coalitions.

This study aims to address this gap and, in order to do so, shifts attention towards the neglected local level of government. Subnational arenas are an appropriate context to study the PRR party family in particular. Their growth was a provincial phenomenon from the very beginning. Prior to their breakthrough on the national stage, their most crucial strategic innovations and electoral successes have tended to take place at the subnational – that is, regional and local – levels of politics.

Consider the four largest PRR parties in Western Europe. The radicalization of both the previously moderate Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and Swiss People's Party (SVP) took place away from the national centres of power (McGann and Kitschelt 2005). The rightward revolution inside the FPÖ was driven by Jörg Haider, prior to becoming party leader, in the region of Carinthia. This largely rural region borders Slovenia and has a sizeable minority Slovene population. As leader of the Carinthia branch of the FPÖ from 1983, Haider developed his far-right playbook: stirring up latent anti-ethnic minority sentiments with novel discourses, and – after becoming regional governor in 1989 – policies and governing practices (Morrow 2000; Albertazzi and Mueller 2013: 350–351). This radical strategy was rolled out for the wider party following the 1990 Vienna municipal elections (McGann and Kitschelt 2005: 151). As well as a strategic testing ground, subnational politics offered routes towards legitimacy for the radicalized FPÖ. The party gained support at local and regional elections in the 1980s and 1990s, and was involved in coalitional negotiations with the SPÖ that were barred at the national level (Art 2005: 187, 2007: 343). In Switzerland, the SVP's turn to the far right, and ascent to become the country's largest party, was also driven by a young political entrepreneur in a local branch. The relatively independent Zurich wing of the party, led by later party leader Christoph Blocher, overcame opposition from the moderate leadership in the political capital Bern to reposition SVP as a solidly PRR party. Zurich in the 1970s and 1980s served as a 'laboratory' or 'training ground' for new policies, strategies and organizational tools. Their success, and the local electoral strength of the radical Zurich SVP, shifted control of the party to Blocher, resulting in the adoption of his approach by the wider party

from the 1990s onwards (Skenderovic 2009). Similar patterns can be witnessed in the other giants of the PRR party family in Western Europe. The Lega Nord (now simply Lega) was formed by a union of six regionalist groups in the north of the country, far from – and in enthusiastic hostility towards – the capital Rome. Their first experience in power came in 1993 with the mayoralty of Milan. Their crucial figures prior to the national breakthrough of 2017 were mayors, regional councillors and regional presidents in the North. Matteo Salvini, who completed the Lega's transformation from a regionalist into a PRR party after becoming leader in 2013, first developed his populist and anti-immigrant strategies as a local councillor in Milan (Pucciarelli 2019: 13). The growth of the French Front National (FN, since June 2018, Rassemblement National, RN) has been significantly aided by subnational elections. More than any other PRR party in Western Europe, the RN is excluded from the political establishment due to a longstanding *cordon sanitaire*. Their breakthrough began with the 1983 municipal elections, particularly the alliance formed with the centre-right in Dreux, from which followed significant media attention and the steady construction of legitimacy (Schain 1987: 240–241; Hainsworth 2000: 20). The FN made further electoral advances in the municipal elections of 1995 and 2014 and gained a number of mayoralties, predominantly in the far north and south east of the country.

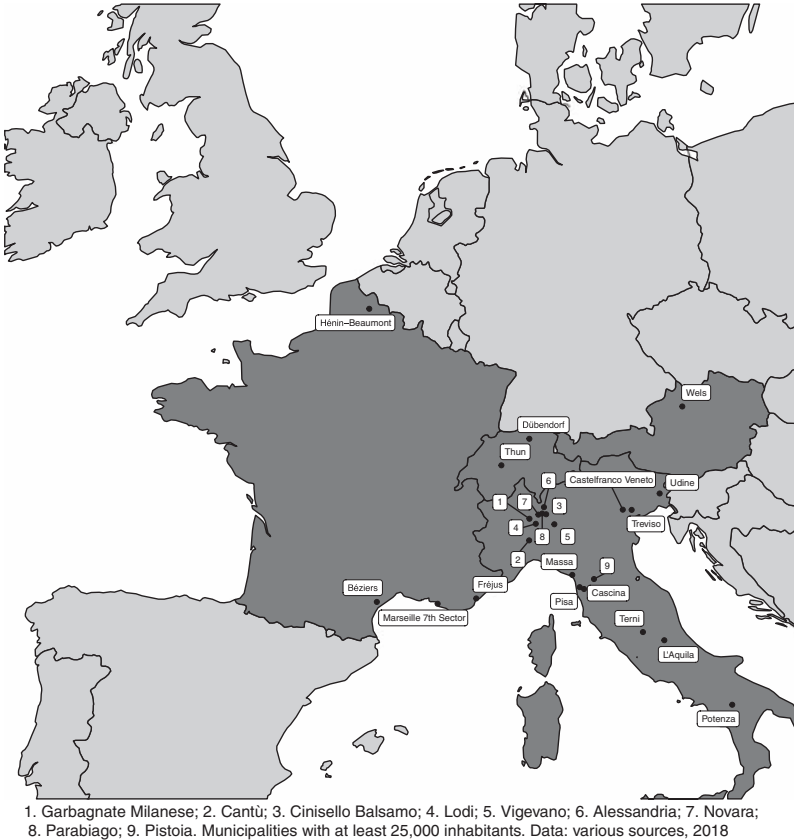
Subnational politics, therefore, do not merely constitute a 'second-order' arena, relevant as a theatre in which citizens can express their discontent with the mainstream (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Mudde 2007: 235–236). Over many decades, regional and local elections have provided opportunities for PRR parties to make electoral breakthroughs, develop their programmes and establish legitimacy (Eatwell 2003; Kitschelt 2007). Yet while many studies have sought to explain the subnational variation in PRR demand through local contextual factors (Coffé et al. 2007; Bowyer 2008; van Gent et al. 2014; Fitzgerald 2018; Patana 2018; Stockemer 2018), less academic attention has been given to the subnational variation in their supply: that is, the diversity of ideological and organizational strategies from parties across different regions and localities, as well as the distinctiveness of subnational strategies in comparison to those pursued by the national party.

There are good reasons to study the actions of PRR parties at the *local* level of politics in particular. Local government has long been

considered crucial for the functioning of democracy. Both Tocqueville (1840) and Mill (1861) described local politics as a training ground for democratic behaviour and a governing arena more representative of local interests. For Dahl (1994), it was a crucial resource of democratic legitimacy. More recently, attention has been paid to the potential for mayors to resolve tricky, often transnational, problems more effectively than national governments through a more pragmatic governing approach (Barber 2013). Trounstine (2009) offers three arguments for the renewed study of local politics: the numerical predominance and perceived significance of political activities at this level; the methodological advances offered in particular by the great variation across localities; and the distinctive questions that a local, rather than national, level focus can generate, as well as the different answers that local-level studies can provide for questions of interest to political science as a whole. This study responds to Trounstine's call and seeks to make use of the analytical leverage provided by the local-level focus to provide new insights into the study of PRR parties. Moreover, it challenges the more normatively charged viewpoints that tend to imbue local politics with a sense of productivity and progressivism. It enquires into whether local politics is also an area of democratic vulnerability, in which ideologically driven forces may gain a foothold with which to implement policies that are harmful to liberal democracy and develop their capacity to do so more widely.

In the 2010s, a new wave of support for the PRR brought forth new cases of their local government leadership. Often in locations previously held by the centre left, these PRR mayors have been subject to a significant amount of media attention, framed as 'laboratories' and 'showcases' of the increasingly popular and influential party family.<sup>1</sup> They have also – and this is not unconnected – been showered with attention by party leaders. The most famous case is Marine Le Pen's fixation upon the town of Hénin Beaumont, as we shall see in this study. According to the media and the parties themselves, these cases are said to reveal to us the PRR ideology in practice, in microcosm. They are often framed as illustrative of a political shift in Europe, as places where the PRR are taking over from the left. They are also framed by the media as helpful for answering the question: What would they do in (national) power?

<sup>1</sup> Examples can be found in *Die Zeit* (Kapeller 2016), *The Guardian* (Chrisafis 2015) and the *Financial Times* (Chassany 2017).



**Figure 1.1** Populist radical right mayors of Western European municipalities (2018)

Despite dramatic nationwide rises in support, such examples of mayoralties held by PRR parties remain rare in Western Europe, as Figure 1.1 shows. In 2018, soon after this research began, there was just one such case in Austria, two in Switzerland, four in France and rather more in Italy (16), particularly in the northern heartlands of the Lega in Lombardy, Veneto and Piedmont.<sup>2</sup> A year later, at the height of the popularity of the Lega, there were 34 Italian municipalities under PRR control. Table 1.1 shows the Western European municipalities

<sup>2</sup> These numbers only concern cities with a population above 25,000, as local governments and mayoralties tend not to play party political roles in smaller towns and villages.

**Table 1.1** *Western European municipalities led by a PRR party mayor (2022)*

Country	City	Population	PRR party of mayor	Year elected
Austria	Wels	61,233	FPÖ	2015
France	Perpignan	119,334	RN	2020
	Fréjus	54,458	RN	2014
Italy	Hénin-Beaumont	25,992	RN	2014
	Cagliari	148,881	FdI	2019
	Ferrara	131,091	Lega	2019
	Terni	107,314	Lega	2018
	Novara	101,727	Lega	2016
	Udine	97,761	Lega	2018
	Pisa	89,828	Lega	2018
	Pistoia	89,501	FdI	2017
	Treviso	84,793	Lega	2018
	Cinisello Balsamo	74,534	Lega	2018
	Pavia	71,159	Lega	2019
	L'Aquila	69,508	FdI	2017
	Potenza	64,786	Lega	2014
	Vigevano	62,384	Lega	2010
	Foligno	55,520	Lega	2019
	Montesilvano	53,174	Lega	2019
	Ascoli Piceno	46,079	FdI	2019
	Cascina	44,775	Lega	2016
	Biella	42,761	Lega	2019
	Macerata	40,820	Lega	2020
	Sassuolo	40,544	Lega	2019
	Cantù	39,340	Lega	2017
	Castelfranco Veneto	33,112	Lega	2015
	Casale Monferrato	32,520	FdI	2019
	Parabiago	27,786	Lega	2015
	Novi Ligure	27,442	Lega	2019
	Vittorio Veneto	27,213	Lega	2019
	Garbagnate Milanese	26,777	Lega	2017
Tortona	26,545	Lega	2019	
Montichiari	26,150	Lega	2019	
Giussano	25,988	Lega	2019	
Legnago	25,416	Lega	2019	
Arzignano	25,210	Lega	2019	
Mariano Comense	25,193	Lega	2019	
Switzerland	Thun	43,723	SVP	2010
	Dübendorf	29,907	SVP	2018

with more than 25,000 inhabitants that were governed by a PRR party mayor in 2022, just prior to the time of this book's publication.

To understand the approaches taken by these various PRR parties in local power, systematic comparative analysis is required. Such studies of PRR party-led local governments and cases of PRR party mayors remain lacking (but see Paxton 2019; Paxton 2022; Paxton and Peace 2021). Through assessing how radical they are in local power, and how this radicalism varies between countries, this study aims to reveal the distinct forms of impact made by the PRR in local government power across Western Europe.

### **The Impact of the Populist Radical Right in Government**

While most of the academic debates on the rise of the PRR party family, and populism in general, have focused on its causes, less attention has been paid to its consequences. The topic has risen in salience as these parties, previously considered 'outsiders', have made sizeable electoral gains and frequently attained government positions (see Table 1.2). As the number of cases have increased, so have the number of comparative studies investigating the cross-national variation in impact. Whether they have made an impact from these positions, and in what form, are now subjects of lively debate. In this section, I outline the main approaches taken to the study of the impact made by PRR parties, within which I situate this comparative study of their participation in local government. To transfer these approaches to the local level of government requires adjustment, both theoretically and methodologically, as will be outlined in Chapter 2.

Impact can be distinguished between its direct and indirect forms: whether made from government positions, particularly through policymaking, or through influencing other actors. The impact has been measured across three domains: policy, politics and the polity. While this impact is the main consequence, or 'dependent variable', of interest for this study, I also consider the existing literature regarding the impact that PRR parties are subjected to themselves when in power. These two forms of impact are linked, as the changes undergone by the parties due to government responsibility, both in an ideological and organizational sense, have consequences for their governing behaviour and the impact that they will generate.

**Table 1.2** *Populist radical right parties in national government in Western Europe*

Country	PRR party	Period	Coalition partners
Austria	FPÖ	2000–05	ÖVP
	BZÖ	2005–06	ÖVP
	FPÖ	2017–19	ÖVP
Denmark	DF*	2001–05	V, KF
	DF*	2005–07	V, KF
	DF*	2007–11	V, KF
Finland	The Finns	2015–17	Centre, National Coalition
Italy	LN	1994–96	FI, CCD-UDC, AN
	LN	2001–05	FI, AN
	LN	2008–11	PdL
	Lega	2018–19	M5S
	Lega	2021–22	M5S, PD, FI, IV, Art.1, CD, NcI, +E
	FdI, Lega	2022–present	FI
Netherlands	LPF	2002–03	CDA, VVD
	PVV*	2010–12	CDA, VVD
Norway	FrP	2013–17	H
	FrP	2017–20	H, V, KrF
Sweden	SD	2022–present	M, KD, L
Switzerland	SVP	1929–present	CVP, FDP, SP

\*Supported government without formally entering government and gaining cabinet posts.

### *The Impact of the Populist Radical Right: Indirect and Direct*

Even without government responsibility and accompanying policy-making capacity, there are a number of means by which PRR parties may influence other actors to implement their preferred policies. While existing literature has explored many possible forms of such *indirect* impact made by PRR parties, the evidence is mixed. One mechanism by which they exert this influence is electoral competition. The rising support for PRR parties has put mainstream parties, particularly of the right wing, under pressure. To regain support lost to these new challengers, many have changed their issue positions and policy outputs in ways that are desirable to the PRR. These changes are intended to co-opt PRR issues to capture – or recapture – voters inclined towards PRR parties (Schain 2006: 272; Williams 2006; De Lange 2007a;



Bale et al. 2010; Loxbo 2010: 312; Rydgren 2010; de Lange 2012: 914; Minkenberg 2013; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). According to this idea, PRR parties have influenced changes in mainstream party policy agendas through their electoral threat and thus indirectly influenced policy changes. The changes in issue positions have been assessed through expert surveys and analyses of party manifestos. The effect can also be seen in the impact on coalition formation (de Lange 2012), including at the local level (Loxbo 2010). However, both for changes in issue positions and patterns of coalition formation, we can question whether they are a result of the (indirect) impact of PRR parties. Mainstream right parties have adopted a harsher immigration stance in countries without PRR challengers (Bale 2008), and in countries where PRR parties had not yet reached electoral success (Mudde 2013). Perhaps public opinion drives these changes in mainstream issue positions and policies, rather than the electoral pressure from PRR parties. For example, increasingly authoritarian security policies, some argue, have been driven primarily by a heightened sense of insecurity following terrorist attacks – rather than the influence of the PRR (Haubrich 2003).

Scholars have also enquired into the influence of PRR parties upon shifts in public attitudes and behaviour. While mainstream parties may be influenced more by public opinion than by competition with other parties, could these shifts in voter inclinations be attributed to the influence of PRR parties in the first place? This could be a more fundamental step by which PRR parties can indirectly impact the political process. Core issues of the PRR – in particular immigration, European integration, as well as anti-elitist attitudes – have become more salient in recent decades (Dennison and Geddes 2019). Some accounts attribute these changed issue positions and attitudes to the increasing prominence of PRR parties (Williams 2006; Bohman 2011). According to these interpretations, high levels of support for PRR parties can raise the salience of issues that they ‘own’ and are central to their electoral campaigns (Semyonov et al. 2006; Wilkes et al. 2007; Sprague-Jones 2011). Others argue while these changes benefit the PRR parties, there is lacking evidence that they are caused by them (Dunn and Singh 2011). Besides the question of causation, there is more fundamental scepticism regarding the very changes to public opinion. Anti-immigration attitudes are stable over time and, according to ESS data (2002–12), have not become more negative in Europe

(Bohman and Hjerm 2016). While issue salience has shifted – as seen to dramatic effect with immigration in the past decade – there is also a lack of evidence to attribute these shifts to PRR parties (Dennison and Geddes 2019: 7). All in all, the existing literature is conflicted on how much indirect impact – conceived in terms of issue competition, coalition formation, and voter positions and attitudes – the rise of PRR parties has generated.

Alternatively, once in government, PRR parties may generate impact in a more direct manner. Studies of PRR parties in government were until recently restricted to a small number of cases and sceptical of their level of impact. Scholars in the 1990s and 2000s concentrated on two PRR party governments above all: Italy, in which the Lega Nord was part of centre-right coalitions from 1994–1995, 2001–2006 and 2008–2011, and Austria, where the FPÖ governed with the centre-right People’s Party (ÖVP) between 2000 and 2004. Besides Switzerland, where the newly radicalized SVP was in government but received less academic attention, PRR parties elsewhere remained marginal outsiders. The participation of the Italian and Austrian PRR parties in government were deemed largely unsuccessful: failing to deliver on their policy pledges, appearing inexperienced and ineffectual, and – in the case of the FPÖ – even suffering an electoral collapse and party split (Heinisch 2003; Fallend 2004; Duncan 2010; Luther 2011). As a result, the evidence seemed to support the theories that populists were ‘doomed to fail’ in power (Mény and Surel 2002; Heinisch 2003). The conclusions of such single case studies were specific to the particular contexts and contradicted by later, more successful, examples. During the 2010s, PRR parties and leaders have gained power in more regions of the world and made clear and sustained impact. In Eastern Europe, Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland show the compatibility of extensive policy impact with the maintenance of electoral support. Further afield, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the USA have shown the geographical reach of the ideas, if not always their effectiveness in implementation. The conclusions made based on the studies of the Lega and the FPÖ in the 1990s and 2000s were therefore shown not to be generalizable for the PRR as a whole. With the global spread of the party family, the debate regarding the influence of the PRR in power has become more contested. The diversity of cases across countries and institutional settings has opened the door to more systematic, comparative research.