

# Lacking control – analysing the demand side of populist party support

Reinhard Heinisch <sup>a</sup> and Viktoria Jansesberger <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria; <sup>b</sup>Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of lack of control, a diffuse attitude closely associated with emotions, on support for radical populist parties of the left and right. Lack of control is the perception of not having control over one's own life. Although this is not political per se, it is hypothesized that underlying emotions and associated feelings shape political preferences. We argue that as populist parties offer a clear distinction between in – and out-group and promise order, less complexity, as well as economic protection for ordinary people, they have a greater appeal to such citizens. In doing so, the paper tests three hypotheses. The findings of two cross-country analyses carried out with data of the European Values Study 2017 lend empirical support for the theoretical arguments made. The two pooled analyses of 12 radical right populist parties and six radical left populist parties yield that lack of control increases support for radical populist parties of both the left and the right. An examination of interaction effects suggests that sensing a lack of control tends to have a reinforcing effect on voters with nativist attitudes in support of RRPP.



## KEYWORDS

Populist party support; lack of control; emotions; quantitative study; Europe

## 1. Introduction

Some people feel they have no control over their lives, no choice, and no real effect on what happens to them. While these notions may be per se not political, the underlying emotions and associated sentiments are likely to have political consequences. Political parties and their messages may hold, more or less appeal to such citizens. Calls for order, authority, stability, less diversity and thus less complexity may resonate with those experiencing lack of control.

At least since Cas Mudde's (2010) essay on 'The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy', psychological factors have come into focus in demand-side populism research (e.g. Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Magni, 2017; Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017, 2018; Skonieczny, 2018). This study contributes to the literature focused on the importance of factors related to political psychology and emotions. In contrast to the large literature

**CONTACT** Viktoria Jansesberger  viktorija.jansesberger@uni-konstanz.de  Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

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on different types of political efficacy, lack of control over one's life and thus a more general feeling has not received broad attention (but see Pratt, 2007), certainly not in a cross-national survey analysis. Locus of control is also a closely related concept to a general lack of control (Judge et al., 2002). While it features prominently in research on what drives ethnocentrism and negative sentiments towards immigrants few studies have focused on the impact of lacking control on party support.

Among these, including Mudde's (2010) article, a majority is centred on the radical right, even though such effects may be present on the populist left too (see here esp. Salmela & Von Scheve, 2018). However, research in this area struggles with limitations in terms of available indicators and corresponding data beyond experimental settings and single country cases. This is the point of departure for our paper. Our specific contribution is to assess the effect of lack of control in the context of a broad cross-country demand-side analysis. Specifically, we ask *what influence an individual's sense of lack of control has on party preference, particularly with respect to support for radical populist parties*. Our study also goes a step further by focusing on the interaction between sensing a lack of control and anti-immigrant sentiments. Although several studies (e.g. Agroskin, 2010; Harell et al., 2017) problematized the effect of lack of control on negative feelings towards immigrants none of them focused on the interplay between these sentiments in support for radical populist parties.

We do not conceptualize lack of control as an alternative explanation to existing political and social factors, but rather as a complementary diffuse attitudinal disposition that has direct and interactive effects on political preferences. We draw on data from the 2017 European Values Study, which provides a way to measure this emotion-based state and allows us to link these feelings to party appeal.

Analysing 12 cases of radical right populist parties (RRPP) and six cases of radical left populist parties (RLPP), our results show that lack of control increases voter support for radical populist parties of the left and right. Interestingly, an examination of interaction effects found that lack of control has a clear reinforcing effect on individuals with nativist sentiments to support the RRPP.

Our paper proceeds as follows: First, we present our theoretical argument in detail and show where our approach differs from the existing literature. We then explain our methodology and operationalization. After a brief description of our cases, we present our models and describe our results.

## 2. Theoretical discussion

### 2.1. Defining populism

Before discussing our theoretical argument about lack of control, it is important to clarify the conception of populism we employ. It follows an ideational approach (Hawkins, 2009; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), which defines populism as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups. Juxtaposing 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', it argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of 'the people' (Mudde, 2004). In fact, in populist discourse both the corrupt elite and the pure people appear as two homogeneous and amorphous groups, without any differences of interest or class (Heinisch & Werner, 2019; Rooduijn, 2014; Taggart, 2004).

On the part of voters, populism exists, according to the ideational approach, as a set of widespread attitudes among ordinary citizens that lie dormant until activated by weak democratic governance and policy failure. These attitudes are centred on three core ideas which are (1) the depiction of elite as corrupt and self-serving, (2) the belief that people are homogenous, and (3) a Manichean and moral cosmology. Thus, the three constituent ideational elements of populism are anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manicheism (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013)

In populism, the people are seen as the 'ultimate source of legitimacy' (Van Kessel, 2015) for democracy and thus the popular will is above criticism and beyond institutional constraints. Accordingly, radical populists in European democracies regard *the people* are not simply as betrayed by the personal corruption of elites but by systematic programmatic misrepresentation (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Barr, 2009; Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Van Kessel, 2015). Populism is thus not antidemocratic per se (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), but antagonism to liberal representative democracy is well-established (Galston, 2018; Pappas, 2019; Plattner, 2009; Taggart, 2002; Urbinati, 2019).

In electoral terms, this implies the alienation of potentially large voter segments from the political establishment and mainstream parties. In the sense of Schedler (1996, p. 294) notion of 'De-Differentiation' between mainstream parties, we would expect a diffuse anxiety to cause a person to turn away from them and find appeal in a radical change agent promising to be different from the political status quo and restore something that appears to be lost. We would further assume that this search for relief is less ideologically driven and more of a strongly emotionally driven preference. Thus, we expect to see an effect of lack of control on preferences for populists regardless of their radical right or left host ideology.

## **2.2. Radical host ideologies**

As a thin ideology or ideational framework, populism is closely connected with different host ideologies which have important implications for how voters evaluate their political position and choose the party they support (Stanley, 2008; Taggart, 2000). Radical left and right host ideologies define manifestations of social grievances in society, assign blame (to those they label responsible), and propose solutions in the form of radical change as to who should govern in the place of corrupt politicians.

The ideological focus of the radical right is authoritarianism along with nativism and xenophobia (Rydgren, 2007, 2018). This nativist worldview 'holds that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state' (Mudde, 2007). The second characteristic is right-wing authoritarianism and encompasses the characteristics of authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer & Altemeyer, 1981). It is the belief in a strictly ordered hierarchical society demanding deference to authority and social conventions (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2018) and is due to an 'uncritical, respectful, obedient support for existing societal authorities and institutions' (Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013).

It follows that individuals who feel they have no control over their lives are likely to find the demands of populist parties for greater in-group cohesion and protection from outsiders appealing. Agroskin (2010) for instance shows that low perceived control

contributes to the emergence of ethnocentrism and prejudice towards immigrants. This is substantiated by the findings of Harell et al. (2017). Their study on a sample of Canadian, US and UK respondents reveals that locus of control increases negative attitudes towards citizens belonging to an outgroup. Additionally, Schwartz et al. (2021) further corroborate this by showing in their case-study on attitudes in the aftermath of the Brexit that an alleged restoration of control can actually spur a decline in anti-immigrant sentiments.

Moreover, order and stability are clearly welcomed by someone who is afraid of change that is beyond his or her control. As we explain below, this feeling differs from political efficacy in that the former is not about influencing political outcomes or feeling publicly ignored, but refers to a more fundamental feeling about a threat to the stability of one's life. Only when this displeasure translates into a motivation for political action and is then met with the experience of political powerlessness can one speak of a lack of efficacy. The latter is the conscious or unconscious evaluation of one's role in relation to political decision-making. By contrast, lack of control is a much more primal feeling.

The host-ideology of left-wing populism is focused on the exploitation of societies in contemporary capitalism and thus promotes alternative redistribution policies and a strong role of the state in economy (Bonikowski et al., 2019; March, 2007, 2017; March & Mudde, 2005; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). Depending on the extent of redistributive policies and state intervention, socialist policy demands can be more or less radical. In contrast to traditional socialism, radical leftist populists share the Manichean outlook and views capitalism less as a function of systemic evolution but the result of the machinations of self-interested elites. Yet, left-wing populist parties often represent libertarian and pluralist social interests and cultural values such as environmentalism and feminism (March & Mudde, 2005; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). This tendency toward tolerance and inclusiveness seems to run counter to an emotional state in which an individual is seeking to affirm control and protection. Thus, the idea of economic protection and redistribution toward those with little control may hold great appeal but may be tempered by messages by leftist parties that embrace universalism and cosmopolitanism. As we suggest below, we would generally expect the effect of lack of control to be weaker on the left given that leftist populist parties embrace viewpoints that are more diverse.

Nonetheless, radical right and left conceptualizations have important consequences for how people respond politically to situations of social, economic, and political societal change. In the following, we discuss how we conceptualize lack of control and propose to measure its effect.

### ***2.3. Conceptualizing lack of control***

Lack of control is the state in which a person feels powerless to influence or direct the behaviour of others or the course of events that significantly affect him or her. Following the work by Frijda (1986), we, therefore, conceptualize lack of control as psychological state based on emotions, which are bodily responses to significant external stimuli, in our case to certain social and political events and experiences (Frijda, 1986, p. 4). Events are significant 'when they touch upon one or more core concerns of the subject' (Frijda, 1986, p. 6). Thus, emotions follow 'from the interaction of an event's actual or anticipated consequences and the subjects concern' (Frijda 1986, p. 6).

While the psychological state of lacking control and its influence on political preferences have hardly been studied, the literature has focused on a variety of other emotions, such as fear and anger. Research shows that 'citizens' emotional states serve as guides to their attention to politics ...' and strengthens their own beliefs (MacKuen et al., 2010, p. 13). Thus, Valentino et al. (2008) show in their study how anger and fear influence political information seeking. Likewise, MacKuen et al. (2010) investigate how these emotions affect the way in which individuals decide to practice their citizenship. While these scholars suggest that anger and fear lead to different political responses, both anger and fear, have been shown to explain support for radical populist parties.

Beginning with work on cultural irrationalism (Scheuch, 1967), the literature has focused on a variety of emotional and psychological states such as anger that increase the propensity to support radical politics, including populism (Demertzis, 2006; Magni, 2017). In German public discourse, radical right sympathizers are often even thought of as *Wutbürger* (angry citizens) and populist parties routinely tap into grievance politics (Betz, 1993; Koopmans, 1996). Moreover, the role of economic fear has featured prominently in recent literature on political decisions and populism (Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Skonieczny, 2018). In *Politics of Fear*, Wodak (2015) analysed discursive mechanisms used by radical populists to tap into citizens' emotional register. In Salmela and Von Scheve (2018) framework for explaining support for radical right and left populist parties, fear and anger are presented as intertwined factors, with the former developing into the latter under certain conditions.

Several recent studies have shed further light on extreme emotional states on voting for the radical right (Nguyen, 2019; Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017, 2018) and include emotions such as aversion and resentment of the (cultural) 'other' (Kinnvall, 2018); but see already Betz (2002). Of course, anger and dislike are emotions that resonate not only with voters on the right but also on the left, leading to preferences for leftist populists (Lefkofridi et al., 2014).

In fact, the normal pathology literature, explains extreme political responses as a reaction to adaptation pressures that occur among the people least able to adapt in times of stress inducing change (Betz, 1993; Decker, 2004; Ignazi, 2003; McGowan, 2002; Minkenberg, 2000). Incidentally, this is seen as distinct from the pathological normalcy argument that views populist responses as a radical interpretation of mainstream values (Ignazi, 1992; Kitschelt & McGann, 1995; Mudde, 2007).

Turning to the lack of control, we can assume that it links to political responses in two ways. As an emotional state, it influences both the evaluation of an event or situation, such as media reports on immigration or bad economic news, and the evaluation of a policy response to that event by political actors. Thus, the experience of ontological insecurity, when individuals cannot fulfil their need for establishing confidence and trust in the world around them, would likely lead one to pay greater attention to politics connected with this intolerable state, typically with the goal of reducing this problem.

Second, this state would lead a person to evaluate the policy responses offerings by actors. Pratt (2007) has shown that a sense of losing control influences local social exclusion agendas and contributes to policies of penal populism. The appeal of far-right populist politics in cases of ontological insecurity is emphasized by Kinnvall and Svensson (2022). Accordingly, the interaction of structures and emotions create support for the radical political actors (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). Others have called

this the affinity between extreme emotional states and extreme positions (Betz, 2002; Cramer, 2016).

We argue that the sense of lack of control has its origins in a diffuse sense of ontological insecurity resulting from uncertain social and economic conditions. These are caused by macro-level political and social changes, which permeate down to the level of the individual, who is not necessarily aware of these connections. Thus, we examine a state in which a person feels powerless to influence people and events that significantly affect his or her life. We then want to know what political consequence results from this initial state. Drawing on theory of ideational populism laid out above, it follows that ideas can be politically activated and translated into party support (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Goertzel, 1994; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Wood et al., 2012). This prompts the question of why populism is so appealing to individuals sensing a lack of control over their lives.

There are two main aspects of populism that are important for understanding this relationship. First populism embraces what Basile et al. (2020, p. 4) define as ‘conspiracy thinking’ in that the populist reframe their messages in ‘a hyper-simplistic binary narrative of friends and foes, good and evil, pitting the pure, sovereign people against the corrupt elites, and excluding the existence of any other possible division’ (Basile et al., 2020, p. 4). In its simplicity, it provides clarity, direction, along with a seeming explanation of cause of one’s state of powerlessness. This dichotomy between in – and out-group clearly distinguishes populist parties, both of the radical right and the radical left from mainstream parties. We stress that it is above all this sharp distinction between the ‘good people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, that holds such appeal to citizens lacking control over their lives. The separation into two antagonistic groups provides very clear guidelines and helps to reduce the overwhelming complexity of societal changes that lead to experiencing a lack of control. Moreover, populism provides a moral justification for adopting a radical position. The promise of order, authority, and the protection of the in-group along with the exclusion of the cultural other implies that a reduction in diversity and complexity is likely to appeal to an individual struggling with maintaining control.

The second, important aspect is populism’s promise to restore a status quo ante, the return to an already familiar place. On one hand populism promises radical change and thus delivery from an intolerable state. However, the promise of more change may also prove frightening to people already feeling overwhelmed and powerless in the face of change and complexity. Therefore, populists mitigate this prospect with the promise of a return to something familiar (Jost et al., 2007, 2020). In short, populism’s solution is the promise to restore popular sovereignty by acting in the present to return to a status quo ante in the future (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2021). While proposing radical change, change is simultaneously presented as the restoration of a familiar but long-lost state of affairs. Populism appeals to this sense of security and clarity by not evoking revolutionary chaos, but rather by promising a return to the ‘proper’ ordering of the community.

This idealized community to which populism appeals is described by Bauman (2001) as a place where ‘the people’ feel safe and ‘where it is crystal clear who is one of us and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion’ (Bauman, 2001). Populism appeal entails the assurance that in the end ‘having control’ means also restoring mastery over one’s own lives (Basile et al., 2020; Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Kallis, 2018).

The appeal of leftist populists is similar but the framing is different (Lefkofridi et al., 2014). People who perceive a lack of control as a result of economic change may be open to the view that their condition is caused by ‘fat cats,’ corrupt politicians and an unfair economic system. Populist actors who promise to crack down on wealthy elites and advocate radical economic change in favour of ordinary people may therefore win the support of voters who otherwise feel stuck and lack choices.

It is important to emphasize that this more fundamental state of helplessness is not synonymous with political efficacy. The latter is generally conceptualized in connection with politics and government. Typical measures of internal efficacy ask about a person’s understanding of politics, their ability to follow political issues, and their general sense of political competence (Kim, 2015; Rasmussen & Nørgaard, 2018; Spruyt et al., 2016; Wolak, 2018). Conversely, external efficacy captures the extent to which people believe that politicians pay attention to them or listen to people like themselves (Kim, 2015; Rasmussen & Nørgaard, 2018; Spruyt et al., 2016). Similarly, the related concept of collective efficacy asks about the influence as a group (Kim, 2015), while another related term, political efficacy, refers to people’s perceived influence on public affairs (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2019; Magni, 2017), the ability to be heard politically (Hu et al., 2015), and the fairness of the political system with respect people’s influence (Boulianne, 2019; West, 2017).

In contrast, our concept here is not about collective feelings of influence, nor about the conclusions people draw about their relationship to the body politic. It is a more fundamental and *prima facie* non-political feeling in the partisan or ideological sense, but one that can nonetheless provide a filter or focal point for choosing a political party. The initial attraction to a party is primarily a sympathy or greater antipathy toward other parties. Attraction, however, is not synonymous with turnout, as the latter always involves a strategic decision. We are therefore more interested in party appeal than turnout, but recognize that the two are related.

Moreover, for the reasons outlined here, we assume, *ceteris paribus*, that people who feel they have no control are attracted to populist parties because the latter make certain demands. Furthermore, we acknowledge that locus of control in the conceptualization of Levenson (1981) is closely related to a general lack of control. However, we stress that the main independent variable of our study is not identical to the former. Whereas locus of control clearly aims at assessing to what extent an individual sees a cause–effect-relationship between own actions and the events taking place (Judge et al., 2002), lack of control is more diffuse. We consider it an emotional state entailing vague notion of being overwhelmed and not being fully able to grasp and influence what happens.

We do not envision the connection between lack of control and populism as a categorical one, but rather one of emphasis and degree. While we do not expect anyone to change their entire political ideology due to the experience of lack of control, we presume it to have a radicalizing influence on the convictions already present. Thus, voters of mainstream right-wing parties, who are generally comfortable with moderate preferences for order, authority, social hierarchies, and the protection of one’s own group, and who display some scepticism about outgroups, would harden their position and move further to the right if they sense a lack of control. This increases their propensity to vote for radical right-wing parties. Alternatively, those voters who normally support the

moderate left are already in favour of redistribution and social protection. Under conditions of lack of control, they are then more likely to support more radical socioeconomic change, which increases their propensity to vote for radical left populists. We recognize that this might imply a greater change for individuals with right-wing orientations than for those on the political left, as the former will have to change from liberal and pluralist to ethnonationalist and authoritarian. Nonetheless, research by Salmela and Von Scheve (2018) and Salmela and Capelos (2021) demonstrates that emotional mechanisms are capable of inciting such a severe radicalization of political preferences.

While our survey cannot measure emotions directly, we can assess attitudes that are closely connected with emotions and then examine their effect. In this context, a respondent's claim of 'lacking control' is understood as people's subjective sense of no longer having mastery over their lives and thus lacking choice or ability to influence what happens to them.

Drawing on our discussion, we state the following hypotheses:

H1a: Voters with socio-culturally right orientations who perceive a lack of control are significantly more likely to support radical right populist parties.

H1b: Voters with socio-economically left orientations who perceive a lack of control are significantly more likely to support radical left populist parties.

*Causal mechanism:* Lack of control increases the support for the party viewed as most likely to bring about policies designed to increase control into the ideologically preferred direction.

H2: Lack of control has an interactive effect on party choice by increasing the propensity of voters with socio-culturally radical positions to vote for populist radical right parties.

*Causal mechanism:* Voter experiencing a lack of control are more likely than those who do not to opt for radical populist parties. This is because such parties promise in-group protection, which additionally strengthens the nativist ideological motivation. The motive of exclusion is not only ideologically based but also emotional due to the fear of decline.

### 3. Methodology and data

In our empirical strategy, we are interested in the effect of a lack of control on political behaviour. Consistent with our theoretical argument, this means that we expect the feeling of lack of control to have a significant and measurable effect on the attractiveness of a party as well as an interactive effect with respect to other positions typically associated with support for radical left or radical right populist parties. Specifically, we want to determine whether lack of control increases preference for a radical right or left populist party relative to preference for mainstream parties. We are also interested in how such feelings may make positions more extreme compared to those who do not experience such conditions. This sheds light on how the appeal of populist parties increases under certain constraints that influence emotions and closely related attitudes.

In order to test our hypothesis, we draw on data collected through the European Values Study 2017. In it, we select the answer to the following survey-question as our measure of lack control:

Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, and other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use the scale to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out?

Thus, lack of control is our main independent variable. We conceive of it as the attitudinal state in which an individual no longer has the subjective sense of being sufficiently able to determine preferences and outcomes with respect to their own lives. While such sentiments are likely related to objective economic and social conditions, we focus on the subjective dimension because we consider this more relevant for determining political responses.

Our main dependent variable is the response to the survey-question: *Which political party appeals to you most?* We prefer this variable because ‘appeal’ captures the notion of a subjective preference much more clearly than for example party vote, which often implies strategic considerations. Parties send out numerous cues about their position. If voters feel, a party appeals to them, then we assume it best expresses their overall political preferences.

In terms of case selection, we use West European member states of the EU in which we examine only parties identified as populist according to the PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2019) and which are classified as either far right or far left. We also include the Five Star Movement among the parties of the populist left, which fits well with the general scholarship on this party (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). Naturally, we can only use parties that were included in the EVS 2017. This yields 12 cases of radical right populist parties (RRPP) and six cases of radical leftist populist parties (RLPP). Thus, our analysis includes de facto all those populist parties in Western European EU-member states which have established themselves as important national political actors as identified by the party literature and their presence in the national parliament (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Van Kessel, 2015). We provide a complete list of the parties in the summary Table A1 in the appendix.

Our analyses include established control variables that typically account for supporting populist and radical parties (Gidengil et al., 2005; Hawkins et al., 2020; Immerzeel et al., 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015; Spruyt et al., 2016). The two critical attitudinal variables, we derived from EVS 2017 as key indicators for radical right and radical left position taking are anti-immigration and socio-economical positioning. We treat both of these as explanatory and control variables in the sense that we first want to see whether lack of controls has independent effects on the dependent variable and secondarily, are also curious to what extent we can observe interactive effects.

We also use key demographic variables such as gender, age, and education. An overview of the relevant survey questions is to be found in Table A2 in the appendix. These are not only standard control variables but factors of significant theoretical relevance as they have crucial connection with party choice in the context of lack of control. For example, people with a higher status may be more likely to experience a lack of control whereas people with more education may be more able to insulate themselves from such threats. Likewise, we are curious about the role of age. On one hand it is plausible to assume that older people are more likely to have achieved something they fear losing again, on the other, we also know that older voters tend to have formed long standing partisan ties and are less prone to switch parties.

## 4. Empirical analysis

In a first step, we want to understand whether lack of control has any effect on radical populist party appeal using a case selection that the literature on populism typically identifies as radical populists (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Specifically, we look for confirmation (a) that lack of control exerts a direct and independent effect on the support of radical populist parties and (b) that this effect is present both for radical right and radical left populist parties (Hypotheses 1a, b). In keeping with our theoretical argument, we specifically test whether lack of control makes a significant difference in preferring radical populist parties to mainstream parties. We accomplish this by comparing RRPP and RLPP with mainstream parties.

### 4.1. Descriptive analysis

Before testing our hypotheses, we take a look at descriptive statistics and frequencies in the pooled sample. The results are compiled in [Table A3](#) in the appendix. There, we notice that the mean lack of control varies between 3.14 in the Finnish sample and 4 in France. Yet, a widely shared sentiment does not mean that all these individuals opt for a radical populist party. Nonetheless, the extent of cross-national variation in the sample is not trivial, if we consider the still relatively modest electoral shares of radical populist parties in many countries. Generally, we find that these sentiments to be fairly evenly distributed between men and women and slightly more prevalent in older cohorts. We also notice that lack of control is more common among lower educated respondents. While citizens having completed secondary education experienced on average a lack of control of 3.54, it was 3.94 among individuals without completed secondary education.

### 4.2. Lack of control and support for radical populist parties (Hypothesis 1a & 1b)

Our first empirical test is to examine the impact of lack of control and control variables on populist party support. Here we are not yet distinguishing between radical left and right orientations, as we mainly want to gauge the underlying psychological effect regardless of ideology. [Table A4](#) in the appendix presents the results of a multilevel logistic regression assessing the impact of lack of control on populist party versus mainstream party support. Respondents experiencing lack of control are significantly more likely to support a radical populist party. The model remains robust once the control variables were added. We also notice that male voters and those with socio-economic extreme (either right or left) orientations are more likely to support radical populists. The same applies for anti-immigration sentiments. Respondents holding negative attitudes towards immigrants display a higher propensity for endorsing a radical populist party. However, voters with higher levels of education and the older age cohorts are significantly less likely to support radical populist parties. This conforms to an empirical pattern that is well-established in the literature.

To test our first hypothesis, we compare the RRPP with the mainstream parties as our baseline for the following pool of countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Sweden. Our analysis depicted in [Table 1](#) below is a multilevel logistic regression model. We can clearly see that lack of control has a significant effect

**Table 1.** The effect of lack of control on radical right populist party appeal (Multilevel logistical regression).

Variables	Radical right populist party
Lack of control over life	0.111*** (0.0151)
Anti-immigration attitudes (Baseline = 'Immigrants have a very good impact on the development of the country')	
1	-0.149 (0.222)
2	1.338*** (0.205)
Socio-economic orientations (Baseline = Neither left, nor right)	
Left wing	0.0700 (0.0717)
Right wing	0.344*** (0.0656)
Gender (Baseline = Female)	
Male	0.389*** (0.0561)
Age (Baseline = 18-34 years)	
35-49 years	0.0532 (0.0837)
50-64 years	-0.138* (0.0828)
65 + years	-0.522*** (0.0854)
Education (Baseline = No completed secondary education)	
Completed secondary education	-0.622*** (0.0668)
Constant	-2.990*** (0.301)
Observations	11,910
Number of groups	8

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

confirming that it has a direct impact on party appeal independent of the control variables including opposition to immigration and adopting an economically right-wing position. Specifically, the model explains that lack of control significantly increases the appeal of RRPP when compared to that of mainstream parties. Overall, the model clearly conforms to the well-known pattern of predicting support for RRPP in that such voters are more likely to be male, lesser educated, and positioned to the economic right of the political spectrum.

In our test of H1b, the above analysis is repeated with RLPPs. The results, shown in Table 2, confirm the previous analysis in the sense that again lack of control significantly increases the appeal of RLPPs when compared with mainstream parties. The effect remains robust despite the smaller universe of cases. In fact, the result holds true even though leftist populist parties, as we discussed in the theory section, tend to send out mixed messages when it comes to appealing to people who sense a lack of control. Whereas the promise of radical economic change may be attractive, the left's inclusiveness and tolerance of diversity may be unnerving to an individual looking for stability and order. Interestingly, the pooled model also suggests that these voters not only have economically leftists positions (and are thus different from RRPP voters), but are also lower educated.

**Table 2.** The effect lack of control on radical left populist party appeal (Multilevel logistical regression).

Variables	Radical left populist party
Lack of control over life	0.0523** (0.0231)
Anti-immigration attitudes (Baseline = 'Immigrants have a very good impact on the development of the country')	
1	-0.356* (0.205)
2	-0.0321 (0.194)
Socio-economic orientations (Baseline = Neither left, nor right)	
Left wing	0.587*** (0.0955)
Right wing	-0.0691 (0.106)
Gender (Baseline = Female)	
Male	0.0142 (0.0822)
Age (Baseline = 18-34 years)	
35-49 years	-0.248** (0.113)
50-64 years	-0.520*** (0.112)
65 + years	-1.253*** (0.128)
Education (Baseline = No completed secondary education)	
Completed secondary education	-0.269*** (0.0972)
Constant	-1.297*** (0.427)
Observations	5,294
Number of groups	4

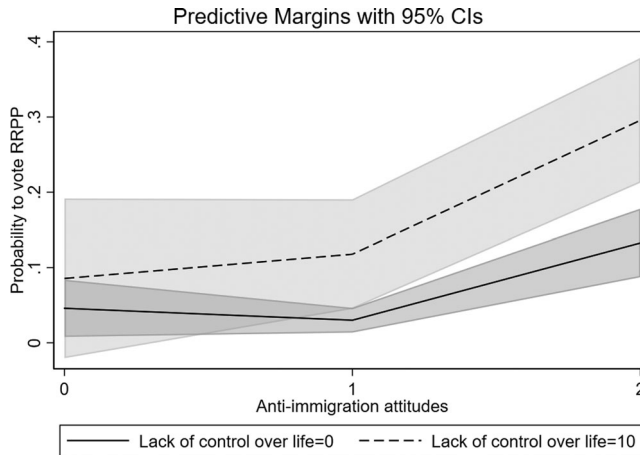
Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Overall, our findings suggest that Hypothesis 1a and 1b can be confirmed in that pool of advanced West European Democracies. Voters with socio-culturally right or left orientations who perceive a lack of control are significantly more likely to support radical right or left populist parties respectively. In short, there is clear and significant effect of lack of control on a voter finding appeal in a radical populist party rather than a mainstream party. The effect also holds when radical left and radical right voters are grouped together. After establishing that the effect is present across our cases for both the left and the right, we need to further explore lack of control and its effect.

#### 4.3. Interactive effects

Next, we turn to hypothesis 2 and the question to what extent, we can detect interactive effects based on lack of control. The theoretical argument is that lack of control is a highly diffuse emotion-based attitude that may strengthen more specific political positions designed to heighten stability and control. As such, we examine the interactive effect with respect to immigration. The idea is that lack of control is more likely to increase the effect of nativist attitudes such as anti-immigration sentiments and thus makes voters more likely to support a radical right populist party.

The results are presented in Figure 1, which shows a plot of the predictive margins. We find that anti-immigrant attitudes have a positive effect on preference for RRPP over the



**Figure 1.** Predictive margins plots showing the interactive effect of lack of control on the relationship between anti-immigration attitude and RRPP appeal.

mainstream alternative. However, we clearly observe a strengthening effect of lack of control on this relationship. Even among respondents with negative attitudes towards immigration the ones experiencing a lack of control show a significantly higher likelihood for supporting a RRPP than nativist individuals who feel in control over their lives and are not concerned with control anxieties. Once lack of control is added to the relationship, the probability of endorsing a Radical Right Populist Party increases significantly. We conclude that we find confirmation of hypothesis 3 about the interactive effect of lack of control.

## 5. Conclusions

In our study, we aimed to examine the influence of lack of control, a diffuse attitude closely associated with emotions, on voter support for radical populist parties of the left and right. We understood lack of control as originating from diffuse fears about people's perceived lack of control over their lives. Whereas the causes may originate in political, social, and economic changes that occur at the macro level and permeate down to the individual level, people are not necessarily aware of these connections. Yet, this experience still affects people's political choices, but less in a strictly ideological way and more in terms of supporting greater group cohesion, stability, protection, and less diversity. Thus, people tend to support parties that promise radical change in that direction.

While this resonates more strongly among people on the right, the effect is also present among voters on the left, which speaks to the fundamentally de-ideological nature of lack of control. Here we test two hypotheses that we can confirm. The main findings are that loss of control increases support for radical populist parties on the left and right. The results remain robust when control variables are added. In examining the interactive effect, we found that lack of control interacted in specific ways with fears of immigration. In this regard, we were able to show a reinforcing effect between lack of control and anti-immigrant attitudes on RRPP-support.

With respect to lack of control and like sentiments, much more research is needed. In the future, the concept of lack of control ought to be explored as dependent variable. Only then we will be able to better understand cross-national variation in this phenomenon. Nonetheless, we hope to have made a first significant contribution to this avenue of research.

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## ORCID

Reinhard Heinisch  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0019-2423>

Viktoria Jansesberger  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0126-0889>

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Party selection for analyses.

Country	Populist_Farright	Populist_Farleft
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	
Denmark	Danish Peoples Party (DF), The New Right (NB)	
Finland	Finns Party (Ps)	
France	Republic Arise/France Arise (DLR/DLF); National Front/ National Rally (FN/RN)	
Germany	Alternative for Germany (AfD)	The Left (Linke)
Italy	Brothers of Italy (Fdi); (Northern) League (LN)	Five Star Movement (M5S)
Netherlands	Forum for Democracy (FvD); Party for Freedom (PVV)	Socialist Party (SP)
Spain		In Common We Can (ECP); Podemos (Podemos); In Tide (EM)
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)	

**Table A2.** Overview of variables.

Variable	Survey question	
Party	Which political party appeals to you most?	
Lack of control over life	Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, and other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use the scale to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out?	1–10 No lack of control over life – Complete lack of control over life
Gender		Female = 0 Male = 1
Higher education		0 = Respondent has not successfully completed higher secondary education 1 = Respondent has successfully completed at least higher secondary education

(Continued)

**Table A2.** Continued.

Variable	Survey question	
Age		Baseline (0) = 18-34 years Category 1 = 35-49 years Category 2 = 50-64 years Category 3 = 65 + years
Anti-immigration attitude	<i>Now we would like to know your opinion about the people from other countries who come to live in [your country] – the immigrants. How would you evaluate the impact of these people on the development of [your country]?</i>	Baseline (0) = 'Immigrants have a very good impact on the development of the country' 1 = 'Immigrants have a good impact on the development of the country' 2 = 'Immigrants have a neither good, nor bad/ quite bad/very bad impact on the development of the country'
Socio-economic orientations	<i>On this card you see a number of opposite views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale? equalize incomes vs. incentives for individual effort (1-10)</i>	0 (Baseline) = Neither left, nor right (4,5,6,7) 1 = Left wing (1,2,3) 2 = Right wing (8,9,10)

**Table A3.** Descriptive statistics and frequencies.

	Lack of control over life_mean
Mainstream party supporters	3.545599 (0.015963)
RRPP supporters	4.008357 (0.0479594)
LPP supporters	3.908287 (0.0605491)
Socio-economic orientation = Neither left, nor right	3.695877 (0.0205111)
Socio-economic orientation = Left wing	3.717711 (0.0333965)
Socio-economic orientation = Right wing	3.339311 (0.0304181)
Anti-immigration attitude = 0	3.151181 (0.0744502)
Anti-immigration attitude = 1	3.410505 (0.0284017)
Anti-immigration attitude = 2	3.717725 (0.0179055)
Female	3.654655 (0.0208618)
Male	3.590941 (0.0210812)
Age – 18–34	3.480897 (0.0312267)
Age – 35–49	3.594262 (0.0298174)
Age – 50–64	3.691294 (0.0292681)
Age – 65+	3.679828 (0.0280203)
No completed secondary education	3.938842 (0.0355918)

(Continued)

**Table A3.** Continued.

	Lack of control over life_mean
Completed secondary education	3.538636 (0.0161922)
Austria	3.810047 (0.0556469)
Denmark	3.253232 (0.0306329)
Finland	3.137795 (0.0480074)
France	3.995974 (0.0554259)
Germany	3.754104 (0.0341446)
Italy	3.720894 (0.0449412)
Netherlands	3.927964 (0.0372643)
Spain	3.641958 (0.0731318)
Sweden	3.363549 (0.0527725)

**Table A4.** The effect of lack of control on radical populist party appeal (Multilevel logistcal regression).

Variables	Radical populist party
Lack of control over life	0.0978*** (0.0132)
Anti-immigration attitudes (Baseline = 'Immigrants have a very good impact on the development of the country')	
1	-0.281* (0.151)
2	0.742*** (0.140)
Socio-economic orientations (Baseline = Neither left, nor right)	
Left wing	0.240*** (0.0593)
Right wing	0.237*** (0.0582)
Gender (Baseline = Female)	
Male	0.290*** (0.0482)
Age (Baseline = 18-34 years)	
35-49 years	-0.0560 (0.0699)
50-64 years	-0.252*** (0.0691)
65 + years	-0.692*** (0.0728)
Education (Baseline = No completed secondary education)	
Completed secondary education	-0.503*** (0.0582)
Constant	-2.128*** (0.277)
Observations	13,323
Number of groups	9

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .