

The Legitimacy Trap:

How Mainstream Party Strategies Shape the Electoral Success of the Populist Radical Right (PRR)

Research Proposal

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1. Rationale and the Research Puzzle

Beginning in the 2010s, Europe witnessed a strong rise in Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties across the continent. However, their growth has varied significantly from country to country, even in comparable democracies.

My puzzle is: why? Why do PRR parties, that share similar ideologies and themes, experience different electoral trajectories? For instance, both the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria draw on overlapping issues (e.g. migration, identity, euro skepticism, distrust of elites etc.). Nevertheless, they have not followed identical paths in terms of electoral growth and perceived governing legitimacy.

A concrete example (and what first drew me to this puzzle) was Austria's 2019 "Ibiza" scandal. The FPÖ's time in government quickly became a disadvantage, and its electoral support dropped. But, during roughly the same period, the AfD (in opposition) continued to strengthen its support base. If the simple claim that "normalization helps populist parties" were enough, it is hard to account for why participation in government harmed the FPÖ and opposition did not harm the AfD.

My proposal starts from the premise that an important part of this variation lies in the strategic environment created by mainstream parties. Mainstream actors can attempt to keep the PRR outside the boundaries of legitimate coalition politics (known as "cordon sanitaire"), or they can accommodate the PRR through varying forms of cooperation. The design is intentionally parsimonious: mainstream strategy is treated as the key causal factor (IV) and PRR electoral growth as the outcome (DV). Scholars have identified mainstream party strategy as a crucial factor shaping PRR electoral trajectories (Meguid 2005. Art 2011)

2. Research Question

What is the effect of mainstream party strategy toward the PRR, namely: isolation ("cordon sanitaire") vs accommodation/cooperation, on the electoral growth of PRR parties in Western Europe?

3. Theoretical Justification and Hypotheses

I treat this as an explanatory study that tests competing claims in the literature about whether isolation decreases PRR growth or whether it can backfire. The hypotheses are constructed to be mutually competing and to test the effect of the same independent variable (IV) on the same dependent variable (DV).

Two debates motivate the competing expectations. The first concerns exclusion. One argument treats a cordon sanitaire as a tool that keeps challengers outside the arena of “responsible” government and therefore limits their coalition credibility (van Spanje 2010, Art 2011). In this view, voters who seek influence rather than protest are less likely to support a party seen as permanently blocked from office.

A second line of argument stresses the opposite: exclusion can supply PRR parties with a ready-made narrative of elite collusion and unfairness. If the PRR can present itself as the only authentic opposition, isolation may mobilize protest voters and increase the party’s appeal precisely because it is rejected by the establishment (Mudde 2007).

A parallel debate concerns accommodation and coalition participation. Normalization can make a PRR party appear competent and governable, lowering the psychological and strategic costs of voting for it (Bale 2003; Akkerman 2016.). At the same time, once accommodation grants access to influence, PRR parties may become vulnerable to “responsibility costs”: compromises, scandals, and policy disappointments that are harder to deflect when the party is treated as a governing partner (Rydgren 2018). The proposal therefore keeps the model parsimonious: strategy as the core explanatory factor and electoral growth as the outcome, while using within-case evidence to evaluate which of these expectations best fits the observed trajectories across matched pairs.

Hypotheses

H1 ("Containment"): Isolation (cordon sanitaire) limits PRR electoral growth over the longer term by reducing coalition viability and constraining mainstream legitimation of the PRR as a governing alternative.

H2 ("Backlash"): Isolation increases PRR electoral growth by strengthening anti-establishment framing and mobilizing protest voters in response to elite exclusion.

H3 ("Normalization"): Accommodation via cooperation/coalition participation reduces long-term PRR electoral growth by exposing the PRR to compromise, accountability, and blame, weakening its outsider appeal.

The mechanisms differ sharply. (H1) should work by signaling to pragmatic voters that the PRR can't deliver influence. (H2) would work by strengthening the PRR's outsider appeal as exclusion validates their anti-elite narrative. (H3) should work by exposing the PRR to governing "costs" and such compromises erode their claim to be any different from mainstream parties.

Alternative explanations could confound the relationship. Maybe PRR growth simply tracks migration salience, economic downturns, or specific scandals, regardless of mainstream strategy. My MSSD design addresses this by comparing cases that face similar background conditions, but differ in mainstream strategy. If the AfD and FPÖ diverge despite similar contexts, or if Sweden and Denmark show different patterns during comparable periods, mainstream strategy offers the most parsimonious explanation

4. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, small-N comparative design using a Most-Similar Systems Design (MSSD) (King, Keohane and Verba 1994; Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2012). The aim is to hold constant major background

features typical of advanced European parliamentary democracies while leveraging variation in mainstream strategy toward the PRR. Variable control comes from case selection and structured comparison, not stats. Process tracing strengthens internal validity within cases by assessing temporal ordering and the plausibility of the hypothesized mechanisms.

5. Cases and Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the PRR party within a national party system, observed across election cycles 2013-2025. The project uses two matched pairs to strengthen analytical generalization while remaining feasible within a small-N design.

5.1 Case selection (two matched pairs)

Pair A (German-speaking core comparison)

Germany (AfD): dominant mainstream strategy at the federal level is isolation (no coalition cooperation, explicit exclusion commitments).

Austria (FPÖ): repeated episodes of mainstream cooperation/coalition inclusion, making accommodation empirically observable.

Pair B (Nordic replication pair)

Sweden (Sweden Democrats): long period of isolation followed by partial normalization, providing leverage on strategy shifts while keeping the cross-case comparison central.

Denmark (Danish People's Party): sustained influence via cooperation arrangements, representing accommodation without full coalition entry in all periods.

Mainstream strategy can shift over time (Sweden), so I code the IV by election cycle and major coalition-formation episodes rather than as a timeless country trait. In the Nordic pair, the comparison focuses on the post-shift period in Sweden against Denmark in the same time window, keeping the design comparative.

The core period of observation is 2013-2025. Temporal precedence is addressed by identifying mainstream strategy commitments and coalition outcomes first, and then examining the following electoral outcomes for the PRR in the next election cycle.

6. Conceptualization

Independent Variable (Mainstream strategy): defined as isolation versus accommodation based on (a) official party declarations and "red lines," (b) coalition outcomes and formal agreements, and (c) sustained patterns of parliamentary cooperation or exclusion.

Dependent Variable (PRR electoral growth): measured primarily by national election results (vote share) across the period. Seat share is used as a robustness check where relevant. To minimize short-term noise, I assess

'growth' election-to-election. Multi-election trends matter more than polling fluctuations. The main comparison is whether vote share increases or decreases in the election cycles following an isolation or accommodation episode, using the paired cases to assess whether major shocks would plausibly predict similar movements in both countries during the same period.

In cases of mixed strategies: I handle them explicitly. Formal non-cooperation pledges are considered isolation, even if occasional ad-hoc votes do happen. Accommodation is coded only when cooperation is sustained and publicly acknowledged (coalition entry or a stable support agreement). When strategy shifts, the coding records the date and the public signal that marks the change.

Legitimacy and governing acceptability: not treated as a separate dependent variable. Where used, indicators such as "suitability for government" polling or mainstream coalition rhetoric are treated as supporting qualitative evidence to interpret sequencing and the plausibility of each hypothesis.

6.1 Coding rules for the independent variable (strategy)

I think it's important to keep the IV transparent and replicable. Hence, my strategy classification follows simple rules applied consistently across all cases:

- Isolation is coded when mainstream parties publicly commit to non-cooperation (explicit "no coalition" pledges) and this is reflected in coalition outcomes (PRR excluded from government) and routine parliamentary practice (no stable bargaining arrangements).
- Accommodation is coded when mainstream parties enter a coalition with the PRR, form a confidence-and-supply arrangement, or repeatedly negotiate legislative support in a sustained way that grants the PRR recognized governing influence.
- Some periods might be ambiguous. I resolve this by prioritizing observed outcomes (e.g. coalition formations and formal agreements) over rhetorical signals. When strategy shifts over time, my analysis codes the period before and after the shift separately.

All coding decisions shall be documented in an appendix table, listing the evidence (public declarations, coalition agreements, and key parliamentary episodes). This inevitably involves some judgment calls in borderline cases.

7. Methodology and Data Collection

I'm combining two approaches: structured cross-case comparison and within-case process tracing. Process tracing is used to establish temporal ordering and to assess whether the observed sequences align with the competing hypotheses (Bennett and Checkel 2015).

Data will be collected from primary sources including party manifestos, coalition agreements and protocols, parliamentary debate transcripts, and major leaders' public statements. Reputable national media is used for triangulating timelines and documenting public positioning (not as a substitute for primary political documents).

To keep the study feasible and comparable, neutral selection rules will be used for document selection. For each election cycle in each case, I will collect:

- (1) The manifestos of the PRR and two largest governing alternatives.
- (2) The coalition agreement or (where relevant) a formal support agreement.
- (3) The first major parliamentary debate on government formation or the government programme (opening debate of the new term).
- (4) the first major televised leaders' debate in the official campaign period.

If no coalition/support document exists for a cycle, item (2) is replaced with the public coalition commitment statements issued by the relevant party leaders in the immediate post-election bargaining period. Newspapers are used only to triangulate dates and to identify these pre-specified events, not to substitute for primary documents.

A practical limitation is that Austrian coalition protocols might not always be archived as systematically as German federal documents. Where necessary, high-quality reporting (e.g., Der Standard) will be used to reconstruct timelines, but the analysis will prioritize publicly available primary political documents wherever possible.

8. Validity and Limitations

The main threat to inference is endogeneity: mainstream parties may adjust strategy in response to PRR strength. I address this by focusing on identifiable coalition-formation moments, checking whether strategy signals precede changes in PRR vote share, and weighing rival explanations (migration salience, economic shocks, leadership change) when interpreting divergence across matched pairs.

Internal validity rests on three pillars: MSSD case selection, transparent coding rules for the independent variable, and careful attention to timing and sequences (i.e. "what happened when"). Alternative explanations (e.g. economic shocks, migration salience, leadership scandals, institutional changes) are explicitly considered and assessed against the comparative timelines.

External validity is limited in the statistical sense. The intended claim is analytical generalization: the project specifies conditions under which isolation or accommodation is more likely to be associated with higher or lower PRR electoral growth in comparable European parliamentary democracies.

9. Expected Contributions

Substantively, I aim to answer this question: Does isolation contain PRR growth or can it backfire by strengthening protest appeal? Does accommodation reduce PRR growth (through responsibility "costs") or vice versa.

Methodologically, my proposal demonstrates how to study a politically loaded question without drifting into normative claims: it keeps the design parsimonious (one IV, one DV) while using process evidence to evaluate competing causal narratives.

A second methodological contribution is replication logic within qualitative research. By adding a Nordic pair alongside the core Germany-Austria comparison, the proposal tests whether the same strategic relationship

appears in a different but still comparable context, strengthening confidence in findings despite lacking in statistical generalization.

For practitioners, I aim to add to an ongoing strategic debate: whether exclusion or accommodation is more likely to stabilize democracies in the face of PRR challenges.

10. Tentative Schedule (Total timeframe: 12 weeks)

Weeks 1-2: finalize operational definitions. Build case timelines. collect election results.

Weeks 3-5: compile key documents (manifestos, coalition agreements, statements, debates).

Weeks 6-8: within-case write-ups (pair A, then pair B) and cross-case structured comparison.

Weeks 9-10: draft findings and validity/limitations.

Weeks 11-12: revision and bibliography.

11. Preliminary Bibliography

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