

The Populist Radical Right in the European Parliament: Between elective affinities and disreputable companies

Book Reviewed: International Populism, Duncan McDonnell and Annika Werner (Hurst Publishers, London, 2019), 282 pp. ISBN: 978-1787381391

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After the 2014 European elections, populist radical right parties (PRRP) sharply increased their representation in the European Parliament (EP). This result attested to the international rise of radical right populism. It also introduced an element of novelty in EP politics, drawing observers to contemplate the possibility of a PRR alliance in the parliament. In reality, the alliance was not as straightforward. Even though more radical right populists were elected to the EP than ever before and the Europe of Nation and Freedom (ENF) group was entirely composed of PRRPs, some PRR MEPs (member of the European Parliament) decided to join other parliamentary groups, reinforcing the history of fragmentation that has characterised this party family in the EP.

In *International Populism*, Duncan McDonnell and Annika Werner engage with this puzzle to explain why and how populist radical right parties decided to cooperate with each other—or preferred not to—during the eighth EP (2014–2019). They focus on nine PRRPs, divided among three EP groups: (1) the ENF group, composed of the French National Front (FN), the Italian Northern League (LN), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and the Flemish Interest (VB); (2) the European Conservatives and Reformist group (ECR), joined by the Danish People’s Party (DF) and the Finns Party (PS); and (3) the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group made up from the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD).

Noticing that policy congruence, the widely accepted explanation for EP groups’ formation, fails to explain all coalition dynamics of PRRPs, the authors make an important contribution by providing an alternative theoretical framework to understand these dynamics. They build on the well-known schema developed by Müller and Strøm (1990), which theorises that parties form government coalitions, not only on the basis of policy, but also on the basis of office and vote returns. Through a rich and systematic analysis, based on extensive interview material with PRR MEPs and national politicians, triangulated with party policy position data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), EP voting data and press releases, McDonnell and Werner prove that all three logics—policy, office and votes—matter in explaining the formation of the three EP groups.

Adopting the metaphor of marriage, the authors describe the various alliances formed by PRRPs in the eighth EP.

They find that the decision of the True Finns and the Danish People Party to join the UK conservative-led ERC group was a “respectable marriage” mobilised by a desire to protect and secure votes. Both parties considered being associated with the UK Conservatives could increase their respectability and credibility in the eyes of their national electorates, whereas association with parties perceived as too “extreme” (e.g. the National Front) could discredit their domestic image and lose votes.

Following a logic of office, the UKIP and the SD in the EFDD group chose a “marriage of convenience”, to ensure access to the perks of group membership in the EP.

Finally, the EFN represents a “marriage of love” in which members are “happy to parade their affinities” (p. 197) and shared policy positions—particularly on migration and EU integration—while actively overcoming reputational considerations and prior disagreements.

The authors also identify two additional factors—leaders and party histories—as fundamental in shaping the conditions for PRRP alliance building.

This book makes a valuable contribution to PRR research for a number of reasons. Firstly, McDonnell and Werner deeply enrich our understanding of PRRPs behaviour at the EU level. Secondly, they engage critically with, and provide an informed answer to, the ongoing debates on the transnationalisation of populism and the future of the PRR party family. More specifically, they argue that if the ENF group is seen as a first step towards an enduring cooperation of PRRPs, these parties are still far from acting as a coordinated force in the EP and at the EU level. Thirdly, the empirical contribution of this book overcomes masterfully one of the shortcomings of current scholarship on (populist) far right, that is, the over-reliance on secondary sources at the expense of primary ones (Castelli Gattinara 2020). However, the inclusion of Fidesz, the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) and the German Alternative for Germany (AfD) coalition-building dynamics would have strengthened the theoretical contribution of the book, by confirming or perhaps expanding the authors’ theory of “marriages”.

Finally, the book stimulates reflections on the current EP term in the aftermath of the 2019 elections. The new group Identity and Democracy (ID), the successor of ENF, definitely brought together more PRRPs on the basis of policy congruence. Yet, newly elected PRRPs such as the Italian Brothers of Italy and the Spanish VOX decided to join the ERC group, whose internal dynamics have changed, as a result of the UK Conservatives leaving after Brexit. Does the theory of “a respectable marriage” still hold under these circumstances, in a now PiS-led ECR group?

Do we instead see the emergence of other affinities beyond migration and EU integration, for example, on issues such as opposition to gender equality and Christian conservative values? May these potentially constitute an alternative axis of cooperation among the different forces of PRR in the EP in future and, perhaps, change our understanding of the PRR as a rather homogeneous party family?

We await for the sequel of *International Populism* to shed light on these questions, but in the meantime, this book is an enjoyable must-read for anyone interested in the politics of populist radical right parties.

References

- Castelli Gattinara, P. 2020. The study of the far right and its three E’s: Why scholarship must go beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism. *French Politics* 18: 314–333.
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