

## **Empowerment or Abandonment: Do Radical Right Parties Promote Violence?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the relationship between electoral support for radical right wing parties and levels of right wing motivated violence. Two competing theoretical arguments are tested against each other—the first states that as radical right wing parties become electorally relevant, fringe ideologies become normalized and violence increases. The second argument states that radical right wing parties represent an opportunity for extremist right wing opinions to be expressed nonviolently, resulting in less violence. These two theories are tested using a fixed effects regression on national level data from 13 Western European countries. The results of the regression show weak support for the former theory, suggesting that radical right wing parties empower radical actors to commit acts of violence.

### **1. Introduction**

The recent rise in far right politics across democracies worldwide has raised many questions into the nature and consequences of such ideologies. New radical right parties have found success in the legislatures of Western European countries such as Spain, Germany, Greece and Finland. How might the presence of these parties, and their older counterparts, affect society and government? One narrative that is prevalent among media outlets is that radical actors may be emboldened by the success of these parties. Individuals that harbor extreme nationalistic and xenophobic values, empowered by the rhetoric used by radical right parties, may be spurred to commit acts of violence in the name of their extreme beliefs. This theory, while intuitive, has been far from proven empirically. Does electoral success of radical right wing parties increase rates of violence?

Evaluating the effects that successful radical right parties have is important for several reasons. It is important for the voters in a democracy to be aware of any unintended consequences that electing a party might bring. If the success of a party results in higher levels of violence, that is a fact that voters must incorporate into their calculus. Furthermore, identifying the relationship between radical political actors and societal violence helps inform the institutional safeguards that are designed to protect the wellbeing of a given nation. Seeking to understand what factors contribute to violence is an important goal on its own merits. Deciphering what role radical right parties play in the puzzle of violence contributes to the conversation concerning how to make society safer, and how to predict which countries will suffer from more violence than others.

Consequently, I put the “common sense” assertion that radical right parties promote violence to the test. Contrary to some, but not all, of the existing literature, my findings suggest that the success of radical right parties is associated with more violence. This finding however is only weakly supported by the data, and its significance must be considered within the larger context of the existing scholarship.

This paper is divided into six sections. Following this introduction is the literature review, where relevant academic findings are discussed and the scholarly foundation that underpin the arguments used is laid out. In the next section I

lay out my theoretical arguments, highlight the causal mechanisms that are potentially at work, and list the subsequent hypotheses. Next is the measurements section where I explain how I have operationalized my concepts. The following section is where I perform analysis on the data and discuss the results. Finally, the implications of the findings are discussed in the conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Despite efforts from scholars in recent years, the academic study of right wing violence still faces challenges in regards to data collection and conceptualization of the phenomenon in question. Nevertheless, significant progress has been made on both fronts by researchers in the past two decades. Ravndal compiled the RTV dataset which examines incidences of right wing terrorism and violence from 1991-2018 and codes for: time and location, perpetrator and victim characteristics, organizational affiliations, weapon types, and number of casualties<sup>23</sup>. Additionally, Ravndal and Bjørgo propose three distinct conceptual definitions for the field to specify in research moving forward: violent radicalization, violent events, and aggregate levels of violence<sup>21</sup>. The authors identified these three categories after reviewing the state of literature in the field, in the hopes of creating more conceptual clarity for studies in the future.

A wide variety of causal factors that drive right wing violence have been identified by various authors. Falk, Kuhn and Zweimüller have found a positive relationship between unemployment and right wing extremist crime when comparing data between West and East German states<sup>9</sup>. Another piece by McLaren explores the relationship between the economy and the presence of foreigners in determining rates of right wing violence, finding that rising levels of unemployment in Germany do not result in increased levels of violence unless the level of foreigners is also on the rise<sup>16</sup>.

Koopmans applies social movement theory to account for cross national differences in extreme right violence among 8 European nations<sup>14</sup>. Koopmans tests the grievances and opportunities models against each other, finding that the opportunity model is the more useful of the two, and concludes that opportunity structures such as political salience of immigration issues and discursive opportunities created by elites are conducive to mobilization by far right extremists. Moreover, Koopmans identifies the presence of a viable political outlet in the form of an extreme right party as an important factor to determine whether or not the mobilization results in violence.

Ravndal builds on the theoretical framework that Koopmans develops<sup>22</sup>. Ravndal also employs the grievance and opportunity models, but argues that the two perspectives complement rather than contrast with each other. Ravndal additionally identifies a third causal mechanism, polarization between far right activists and their opponents, as a requirement for extensive violence. Using the RTV dataset and the theoretical framework mentioned previously, Ravndal conducts another cross national study that includes data from 18 Western European nations between the years 1990 and 2015, finding evidence for six causal mechanisms that can be categorized under grievances, opportunities or polarization. Ravndal also divides the mechanisms into two groups, one applying to Northern European countries and the other to Southern European countries. The mechanisms for the first “recipe” are high levels of immigration, low levels of electoral support for right wing extremist parties, and public repression/stigmatization of radical right actors and opinions. The second recipe includes socio-economic hardship, legacies of authoritarianism, and left-wing terrorism/militancy.

Interestingly, there is a lack of consensus in the academic community about the role that radical right parties play in encouraging or discouraging violence. Ravndal, Koopmans, and Koopmans and Braun have found a negative relationship between vote share and ethnic violence, while Braun has found a positive but insignificant relationship<sup>22,14,2,3</sup>. Jäckle and König’s study of German attacks on refugees produced a positive and significant relationship between radical right parties and violence<sup>12</sup>. Mechanisms such as economic performance, seasonal differences, presence of refugees, media discussion, and geographic, sociological and temporal proximity have all been explored in the studies mentioned above. However, none of these studies have employed datasets that varied both nationally and temporally. To complement the existing discussion over the relationship between radical right parties and violence, such methods are required.

## 3. Grievances and Opportunities

As both Ravndal and Koopmans note in their investigations of far right violence, social movement theory offers two useful models that can potentially be used to explain how extremist and violent sentiments develop and are expressed<sup>14,22</sup>.

The grievance model states that certain conditions cause discontent (i.e., grievances) that then manifest as social movements. In the context of this study, the grievance model could be used to explain right wing violence in the following way: an increase in immigrants provokes an anti-immigrant backlash in a country, leading to increased levels of far right violence. Specific causal mechanisms flowing from the grievance model will be discussed in the controls section.

The opportunity model does not view the level of grievances as the explanatory factor for social action, but rather the available outlets that exist for those grievances to be acted on. Koopmans argues that social movements often lack the resources on their own to define a condition as a “social problem” and to make the condition a politically salient issue. As a result, movements depend on a “favourable political opportunity structure” to make sure the conditions that the movement is concerned with become a relevant issue<sup>14</sup>. The nature of the opportunities available not only determine the relevance of a movement, they also determine how the actions of a movement are expressed. When outlets for effective political expression exist, violence becomes a less appealing avenue for disgruntled individuals to take, with nonviolent means of political participation being chosen more frequently by potentially radical actors. While the grievance and opportunity models have traditionally been seen as contrasting, Ravndal notes that combining elements of both models paints a more complete picture of the causes of right wing violence<sup>22</sup>.

The first hypothesis tested in this analysis flows from the opportunity model. When far right parties wield significant power within government, I expect that political participation becomes a more attractive option than violence. Thus the first hypothesis:

*H1a: As far right parties gain electoral relevance, rates of right wing violence decrease.*

However, it is possible that as far right parties become significant political players, issues of nationalism and immigration become more salient. Consequently, rhetoric employed by these parties could potentially increase feelings of hostility against foreigners and increase the legitimacy of acts of violence against those groups. Jäckle and König have pointed out that far right parties often have organizational links with other radical groups, meaning that the success of such parties could result in greater potential to mobilize individuals towards acts of violence<sup>12</sup>. From these mechanisms, the second hypothesis flows:

*H1b: As far right parties gain electoral relevance, rates of right wing violence increase.*

### 3.1 Controls

Various scholars have identified a long list of factors that potentially impact levels of right wing violence within a country. Since this study is concerned with isolating the effects that far right parties have on violence, these factors must be controlled for. This section will review the causal mechanisms that drive each factor and produce hypotheses that must be accounted for when testing hypotheses 1a and 1b.

As previously mentioned, the grievance model can be used to explain variation in right wing violence. Since the grievance model does not examine the relationship between parties and violence, it is used as a control. Koopmans identifies two causal mechanisms that drive the grievance model, namely, the percentage of foreigners in a country’s population and the level of asylum seekers in a country<sup>14</sup>. Importantly, Koopmans found little support empirically for both of those measures, and little difference between them. Jäckle and König on the other hand argue that many violent attacks are driven by a fear of the unknown, and that the presence of foreigners in day to day life reduces this fear and results in less attacks<sup>12</sup>. Either way, the presence of foreigners has been identified as a potentially important variable in determining right wing violence, and is controlled for.

*H2a: As more refugees enter a country, levels of right wing violence decrease.*

*H2b: As more refugees enter a country, levels of right wing violence increase.*

Several scholars have found a relationship between unemployment levels and rates of right wing crime and violence<sup>9,16</sup>. This relationship fits nicely within the framework of the grievance model; as unemployment rates rise, discontent spreads throughout the population and manifests in acts of violence:

*H3: As unemployment rates increase, rates of right wing violence increase with it.*

As previously mentioned, Ravndal identified six causal conditions that translate into increased levels of right wing violence<sup>22</sup>. The first two conditions of the North European recipe (high levels of immigration, low levels of electoral support for radical right parties) have already been addressed. Ravndal, however, notes that polarization also plays a role in the incidence of right wing violence. As right wing extremist ideology and opinions are stigmatized and attacked by the media and elites, violent methods will be increasingly employed by right wing extremist actors in response to the increased levels of perceived threat<sup>22</sup>. A hypothesis is required to control for the relationship between repression of extreme right wing ideology and violence:

*H4: In countries where extreme right wing opinions are repressed, rates of right wing violence will be higher.*

The last three causal conditions identified by Ravndal (the South European recipe) are “socio-economic hardship, authoritarian legacies, and extensive left-wing terrorism and militancy”<sup>22</sup>. These represent a mix of grievances, opportunities, and polarization. Socio-economic hardship represent a form of economic grievance that could potentially be channeled into violence. Authoritarian legacies represent an opportunity structure; the lingering experiences of fascism make it easier for activists to be mobilized militantly, resulting in a deadlier form of activism. Finally, the presence of left-wing terrorism and militancy represents a form of polarization. Left-wing militancy serves to threaten the extreme right and escalate the use of violence through militant confrontation. These three mechanisms produce the following three hypotheses:

*H5a: As a country’s level of socio-economic hardship increases, right wing violence increases.*

*H5b: Countries that have stronger legacies of authoritarianism will have increased levels of right wing violence.*

*H5c: Countries that have high levels of left-wing militancy will have increased levels of right wing violence.*

## 4. Measurement

To test these hypotheses, an observational study will be conducted. This study will examine how levels of violence and right wing party representation interact over time within 13 Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom). The unit of analysis is the country-year, which includes every year during the timeframe, not just election years.

The dependent variable in this instance is the level of right wing violence. To measure this phenomenon, I use the Right-wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset. This dataset contains 757 events, gathered from a variety of resources such as online newspapers and blogs. These events represent acts of violence or plots of violence that were motivated by right wing ideologies. Each entry in the dataset includes the time and location of the event, the organizational affiliation of the perpetrator, the weapons used, the ethnic or political or organizational identity of the victim, and the number of wounded/killed.

This measure has its advantages and disadvantages. Less visible acts of violence are obviously not represented. Unfortunately, data limitations must be considered. Hate crime statistics offered by government agencies could potentially be used to capture a wider range of violent acts, but hate crime definitions and reporting standards differ from country to country, resulting in an unreliable measure. The RTV dataset on the other hand offers a consistent set of criteria applied to each country, from 1990 to 2018.

The RTV dataset includes both plots to commit violence and actual acts of violence. As a result, I decided to measure right wing violence by the number of RTV events that occurred in that country-year instead of the number of deaths resulting from RTV events. Consequently, the numbers being represented in the data are relatively low—the highest value for RTV events in a country-year is 39, and many country-years have few or no events recorded. Substantively, this should not make the results of regression analysis unimportant. Even a change of 1 RTV event is significant given the severity of the events recorded in the dataset.

The independent variable, radical right wing parties, is somewhat difficult to define but easy to measure. For the purposes of this study, I use the conceptualization of radical right wing parties detailed by Minkenberg<sup>17</sup>. Minkenberg classifies right wing parties in four ways: extremist right (fascist parties, they also often are racist/xenophobic in nature), ethnocentrist right (racist/xenophobic but not fascist), populist right, and religious fundamentalist right. To measure the level of electoral support for each party, the vote shares for radical right parties in elections for the lower houses of each country’s national legislature is used. These data are drawn from The European Election and Referendum Database and a variety of European government sources<sup>1,4,5,6,7,8,11,13,18,19,20,25,27</sup>.

A variety of data are used to capture the variables mentioned in the control hypotheses. Data on refugee populations by country of asylum taken from The World Bank is used to represent the number of asylum seekers in a country. The annual unemployment rates for each country and year are found by averaging the monthly unemployment rates for each time and location<sup>26</sup>. Socio-economic hardship is also represented by the unemployment rate. The causal mechanisms linking unemployment rates and socio-economic hardships to violence are very similar and I do not think anything is lost by testing both hypotheses with the same variable. Additionally, there are a litany of potentially relevant geographical and temporal mechanisms not included in the controls section. These effects, and the effects detailed in hypothesis 5, will hopefully be captured by the fixed effects variables representing year and country that are included in the regression.

#### 4.1 Data Description

There is significant variation in RTV events among countries and across time. Figure 1 displays the average amount of annual RTV events from 1981-2018 for each country.

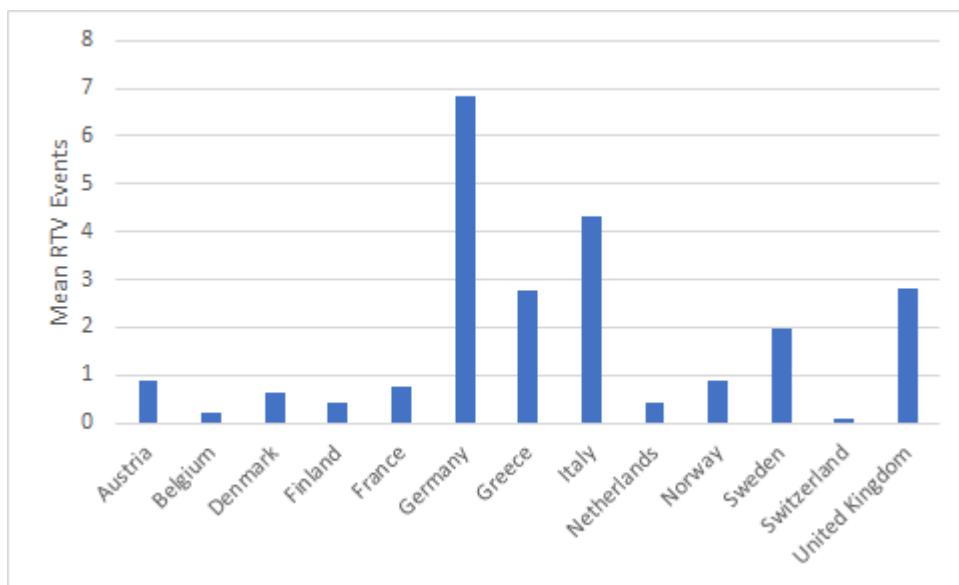


Figure 1. Average annual RTV by country

Figures 2 and 3 show RTV over time; most countries experience low amounts of RTV events per year (5 or less), but there are significant spikes in RTV events from year to year, especially in countries like Italy, Greece, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

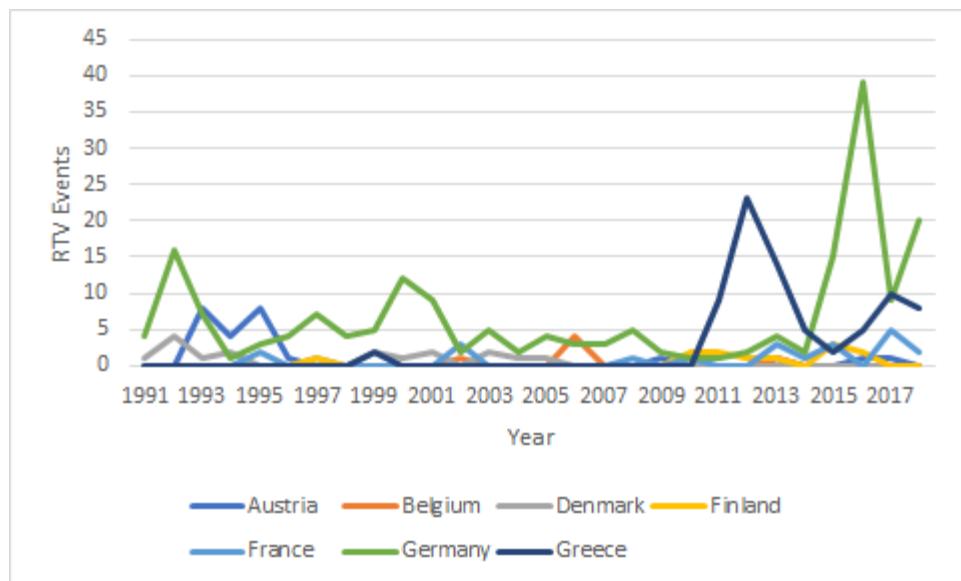


Figure 2. RTV events over time

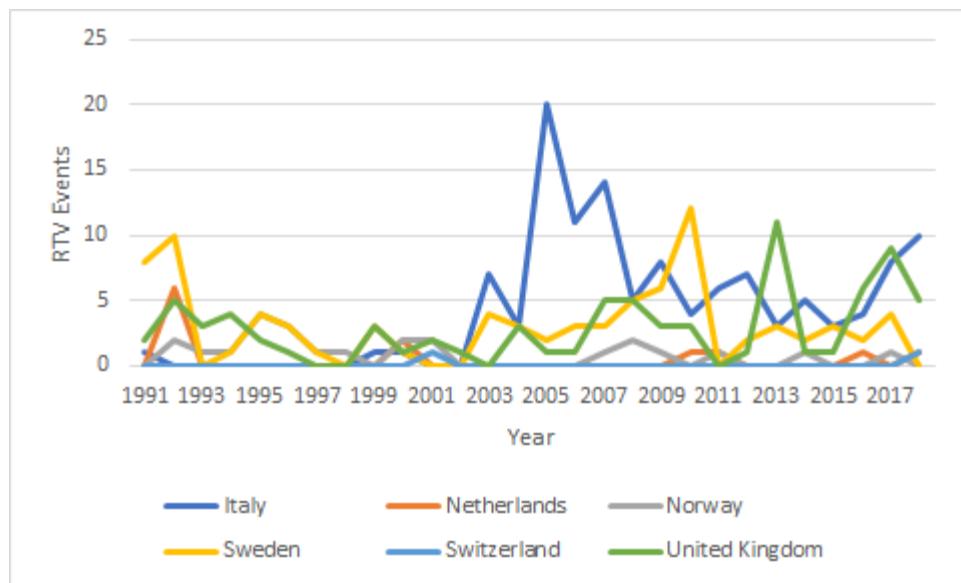


Figure 3. RTV events over time

Figures 4 and 5 show the percentage of votes cast for radical right parties in national elections for the lower house in each country from 1991-2018.

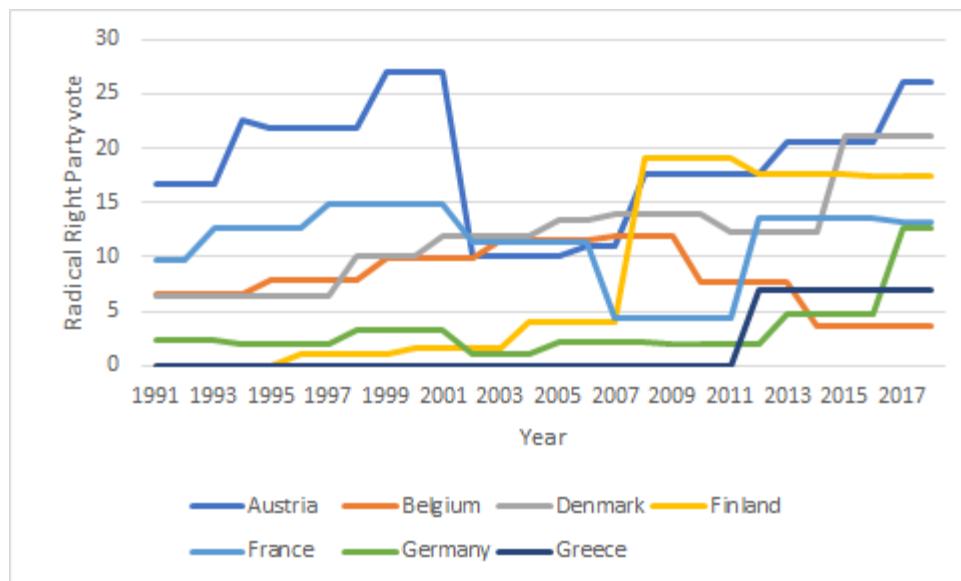


Figure 4. Radical Right Vote Share

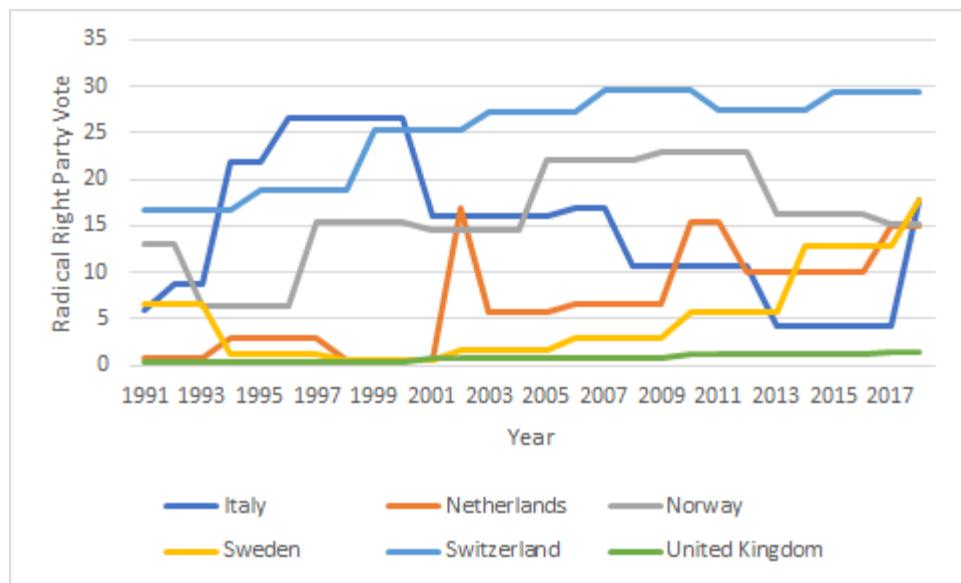


Figure 5. Radical Right Vote Share

The variation in both RTV and radical right vote share is promising. The difference in RTV between years and countries means there is some effect occurring—one that could potentially be linked to the independent variable, radical right vote share.

Table 1. descriptive Statistics of Control Data

| Variable           | Mean     | Max     | Min  |
|--------------------|----------|---------|------|
| Unemployment       | 7.4      | 27.5    | 1.8  |
| Refugee population | 119845.4 | 1418000 | 1444 |

To give the reader an idea of what the control data looks like, table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. The mean, averaged across both country and year, as well as the maximum and minimum values are displayed.

## 5. Analysis Result

Table 2 shows the results of a fixed effects regression between RTV events per million population and radical right vote share. Two control variables, unemployment rate and refugee population per million, were also included. The number of observations included in the analysis is 364.

Table 2. Regression Results

|                | <i>Coefficients</i> | Standard Error |
|----------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Intercept      | -0.090              | 0.082          |
| Unemployment   | 0.031***            | 0.005          |
| Vote           | 0.004*              | 0.002          |
| Refugee        | 0                   | 0              |
| Belgium        | -0.133**            | 0.064          |
| Denmark        | -0.003              | 0.057          |
| Finland        | -0.148**            | 0.067          |
| France         | -0.212***           | 0.067          |
| Germany        | -0.049              | 0.068          |
| Greece         | -0.044              | 0.082          |
| Italy          | -0.168***           | 0.065          |
| Netherlands    | -0.037              | 0.061          |
| Norway         | 0.108*              | 0.056          |
| Sweden         | 0.190**             | 0.076          |
| Switzerland    | -0.101*             | 0.057          |
| United Kingdom | -0.038              | 0.071          |

Note: \* =  $p < .10$ , \*\* =  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .01$

The coefficients for both controls are positive, as expected. Substantively, unemployment is more meaningful than refugees. If a country with a population of 7 million took on 5000 more refugees per million in a year, RTV would increase by .058 (the coefficient for refugees per million was 1.662e-06). However, a five point increase in the unemployment rate would result in .145 more RTV events per million; in a country of 7 million people that would result in roughly one more RTV event per year. It is important to remember that a single RTV event represents a terrorist act or plot that could potentially result in the death or injury of many, thus a single point increase in RTV is significant. The variable of interest, vote, has a positive relationship with RTV, lending support to the idea that radical actors are empowered by the mainstream success of radical right parties. The coefficient size is moderate; a ten point increase in vote share would result in a .04 increase in RTV events per million, or a .28 increase in RTV in a country with a population of 7 million. For context, Austria had a population of roughly 8.9 million in 2019, and experienced a yearly average of .9 RTV events from 1990-2018.

Dummy variables representing both country level effects and temporal effects were included in the regression. Only Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland were statistically distinct from Austria (Austria was used as the intercept). The effects for all of these countries are low to moderate, with the largest coefficient being France at -0.2. Not included in the table were the coefficients representing the effects of changes from year to year. Only the effect for the year 1998 had a p value less than .10, and none of the effects were substantively large.

The vote and unemployment estimates remained consistent across a variety of models, while the refugee estimate's direction would flip depending on which measures were included. If the raw amount of RTV incidents instead of RTV per million was included, if the number of refugees instead of refugees per million was included, or if the dummy variables representing year were not included, the coefficient for refugee became negative. Regardless of sign however, the effect remained small, and omitting it from the model has a negligible impact. Excluding the two controls

had almost no effect on the vote estimate. Removing the fixed effects for country cut the size of the vote estimate to .002; removing the fixed effects for year had almost no effect on it.

Although the coefficient for vote share is positive, supporting the findings of Jäckle and König, it is possible that the alternate causal story about political opportunity structures is still occurring in tandem. The success of radical right parties could simultaneously be empowering certain individuals to act violently while providing a nonviolent outlet to others, resulting in the effects washing each other out. If this is the case, the results of the regression would suggest the empowerment effect is the stronger of the two, especially when considering that the sign of the vote coefficient is consistently positive across every version of the model. Further research is needed to disentangle the causal effects being observed here. Analysis on individual level behavior is vital to determine which mechanisms are motivating which behaviors—if both of the causal stories are truly happening, studies of the sort conducted in this paper will not be able to parse out the sources of the observed effects.

## 6. Conclusion

Earlier in this paper, I presented two causal stories about parties and violence. One story argues that radical right parties increase and normalize hostility against foreigners, the other argues that the parties defuse anti-immigrant sentiments and provide a less destructive outlet for racially motivated anger. The findings presented here are consistent with that first story: there is evidence of a weak relationship between electoral support for radical right wing parties and incidences of right wing terror, consistent with Jäckle and König.

On its face, these findings are troubling. Democracy is supposed to be an avenue through which conflicts can be settled without the use of violence, but these results suggest that certain outcomes of the Democratic process can encourage acts of violence and terror. It is important to note however that the relationship between parties and violence is far from the complete story; many scholars have identified alternate factors in the types of violence measured here and have provided solutions to reduce them.

The use of the RTV dataset for the dependent variable limits the scope of these findings somewhat. The RTV dataset measures the most salient, explosive acts of violence in a society. Inferences about violence as a whole can be drawn from this analysis, but further studies using crime data are required to paint a clearer picture of how day to day violence changes with radical right parties. Additionally, this study only looks at Western European democracies. Research on how these causal mechanisms perform in other regional contexts is still needed. The potential effects that the structure of a democracy could have on how grievances interact with opportunities is still unclear as well—does a parliamentary system differ from a presidential one when it comes to the manifestations of right wing violence? This paper adds to the conversation about the role of radical right parties in encouraging or attenuating violence, but there is still much more to be done.

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