POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT ATTITUDES AND VOTING IN GERMANY, FRANCE, ITALY AND POLAND: A BRIEF OVERVIEW AHEAD OF THE 2024 EP ELECTIONS

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A few months ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, where another wave of the populist radical right (PRR) is anticipated, the latest release of CEVIPOF’s Barometer of Political Trust conducted in January gives us the opportunity to examine typical PRR attitudes in Germany, France, Italy and, for the first time in our survey, Poland, comparatively. We look at the spread of such attitudes in the public, and how they may be correlated with populist radical right party affiliations. The analysis confirms the link between PRR voting and nationalist attitudes against immigration and the EU. The data also corroborate that PRR voters share stronger authoritarian views than all other voters. The report finds some heterogeneity, however, across the European populist radical right electorates investigated in the survey, which reflects the contextual diversity of these parties and their different political status in their country.

The European populist radical right is on the rise¹. This may possibly be heralding a new cycle of far-right extremism across the continent, with a major impact on the next European elections in June 2024.

These parties have made significant gains in recent elections. In 2022, in France, Marine Le Pen set a record high with 41.5% of the vote in the second round of the presidential election. Her party led by Jordan Bardella is set to win big in the forthcoming elections, up to 30% in the most recent polls. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia, has won the 2022 elections and is currently head of the centre-right coalition government with Matteo Salvini’s Lega and Forza Italia. Fdi dominates voting intentions at 28%, with Salvini’s Lega trailing at just under 10%. In Germany, the AfD is currently polling at about 18% of the vote. In Poland, Law and Justice (PiS), despite its electoral setback in the October 2023 elections, is still high in March voting intention polls, at about 29%, flanked by the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja), a heterogeneous extremist group at around 10% of the vote.

¹. https://theconversation.com/far-right-poised-to-score-big-at-next-european-elections-214702
Based on preliminary findings from the latest release of CEVIPOF’s *Barometer of Political Trust*, this brief survey report examines key populist radical right attitudes in Germany, France, Italy, and Poland, comparatively. Typical populist radical right attitudes include nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. The populism of the radical right is also traditionally associated with lower level of political and institutional trust. Finally, the populist radical right ideology has been connected with opposition to European integration and claims of national sovereignty.

Our data allow to look at the distribution of such attitudes across countries and the main political parties in each national context. Using respondents’ voting intentions, we explore the relationship between typical PRR attitudes and voting for parties like the French RN, Italian FdI and Lega, German AfD, and Polish PiS and Confederation.

### Data and methodology

This year’s *Barometer of Political Trust* was conducted in four European countries - France, Germany, Italy and, for the first time, Poland, on nationally representative samples of voting age citizens. The survey was administered online by OpinionWay, and relied on quota-sampling from national panels recruited via the internet. Participants were selected based on their age, gender, occupation, place of residence, and size of municipality to match the frequency of adult citizens in the most recent national census and/or community survey. The samples were 3,514 in France, 1,632 in Germany, 1,706 in Italy, and 1,820 in Poland. The survey included a wide range of indicators of trust, democratic beliefs, and general economic and sociocultural attitudes.

All analyses in this report were conducted using multivariate linear regression models that included sociodemographic controls i.e. gender, age, levels of education, social class, status, marital status, children, self-reported health as well as whether the respondent is a family caregiver. Additionally, all models had subjective measures of risks of unemployment and material deprivation, together with self-identification with an ethnic minority, and feelings of living in a deprived local community.

The Wave #15 of the CEVIPOF *Barometer of Political Trust* has been conducted in partnership with France’s Conseil Économique Social et Environnemental (CESE), Intériale Mutuelle, CMA-France, EDF, and the University Guido Carli - LUISS in Rome.

### Immigration, still the common denominator

Research into the populist radical right in Europe has identified immigration as a key issue for such parties. Populist radical right voters are primarily concerned with economic, cultural, and security issues associated with immigration.

A large majority of respondents in each of the four countries say that “there are too many immigrants” in their country: Italy (60%), France (61%), Germany (65%) and Poland (54%). Meanwhile, a majority say that their country should...
“close itself more to migration”. Such views are shared by 48% in Poland, 52% in Italy, and 62% in France. No less that 66% of respondents in Germany agree with closing national borders to immigration, that is an increase of 10 points on the previous wave conducted in January 2023, reflecting current heated migration debates amid increase in migrant arrivals.

Not surprisingly, anti-immigration attitudes are strongly correlated with political affiliations. When controlling for voter demographics, highest levels of opposition to immigration are found in the RN and Reconquête in France, the AfD in Germany (all above 90%), the Italian Lega (80%) and Fratelli (86%), Law and Justice (69%) and Konfederacja in Poland (66%), which confirms the strong resonance of immigration in the populist radical right. In all four countries, anti-immigration attitudes culminate among populist radical voters making them significantly different from the rest of the electorates, and such attitudes more generally follow a monotonic left-right distribution (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Too many immigrants by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland

Predicted values from multivariate logistic regression models with sociodemographic controls; For the purpose of the analysis, the dependent variable has here been recoded into two categories: 0=“Strongly disagree/disagree”; 1=“Agree/Strongly agree”; Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).

As can be seen from Figure 2, across all four countries, populist radical voters are also most likely to agree that their country should “close itself more” to immigration, showing significant differences with all other parties in their respective political system.

We see some intra-party family variation, however. When controlling for voter socio-demographics, support for the closing of national borders is found to be strongest among voters of the RN and Reconquête in France (above 95%), AfD voters in Germany (92%), and the Italian Lega (78%) and Fratelli (82%). Such support is still high albeit less pronounced among voters of the PiS and Konfederacja in Poland, at 63 and 71% respectively.

**Figure 2:** Closing national borders to migration by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland

Predicted values from multivariate logistic regression models with sociodemographic controls; For the purpose of the analysis, the dependent variable has here been recoded into two categories: 0=“Open/stay the same”; 1=“Close borders to immigration”; Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).

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**The authoritarianism of the populist radical right**

Next to nativism, authoritarianism is considered another core feature of the radical right’s ideology⁴. Authoritarianism implies a strong support for traditional social norms and conventions, ensured by political force, if necessary. Our survey does not allow to capture the full multidimensionality of the concept of right-wing authoritarianism⁵; here we rely on a single item relating to death penalty taken as a general proxy for authoritarian attitudes.

Public opinion support for reinstating death penalty is particularly high in France and Poland at 48%; it is much lower in Italy (33%, up 6 points nevertheless since 2023) and Germany where less than a quarter (23%) of all respondents agree that capital punishment should be reinstated.

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Our data confirm the well-established link between authoritarian attitudes and voting preferences (see Figure 3). In France, such attitudes follow a clear left-right distribution, once again culminating among Reconquête and RN’s voters at the extreme right of the political spectrum (84 and 78% respectively), with centrist-liberal Macron’s supporters showing similar levels of authoritarianism on average to that of left-wing voters at around 35% of support for death penalty.

**Figure 3:** Support for death penalty by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland

Predicted values from multivariate logistic regression models with sociodemographic controls; For the purpose of the analysis, the dependent variable has here been recoded into two categories: 0=“Strongly disagree/disagree”; 1=“Agree/Strongly agree”;

Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).

To some extent, such monotonic distribution of authoritarian attitudes is also found in Italy, however with some nuances. Support for death penalty is lowest among social-democratic PD voters to the left (only 16%), and it is significantly higher to the right of political axis amongst FI (32%) and Fdl (42%) voters, with the Lega standing out at the highest level of support for death penalty on average (57%). Interestingly, M5S voters (31%) show a similar profile to that of Forza Italia voters on reinstating capital punishment, which, in this case, is significantly higher than that of PD supporters.

Such left-right authoritarian divide is largely absent from the German data where support for death penalty is about the same across all parties, left and right alike - at around 20% or less - with only far right AfD voters showing significantly higher levels of support for death penalty (42%).
Finally, in the Polish case, authoritarian attitudes distinguish both PiS and Konfederacja voters (53 and 61%) from liberals among PO and Pol2050 supporters (43 and 44%), but differences here are of much smaller magnitude than those observed in Western Europe, reflecting more widespread support for capital punishment across the party spectrum in Poland.

**Alt-Europe and ‘taking back control’**

At the supply-level, European populist radical right parties have recently shifted towards what has been dubbed an “alt-European” policy program, that is a conservative, xenophobic, and intergovernmental vision of Europe as a community of ‘sovereign’ states, strongly opposing European integration.6

Looking first at the general public, positive views of EU membership dominate in Germany (58%), Poland (58%) and Italy (54%), while 46% French respondents say their country’s EU membership is a ‘good thing’. Across all four countries, only a minority of voters see EU membership as a ‘bad thing’.

Our data confirm that ‘hard’ Eurosceptic views are substantially stronger among PRR voters, however with substantial variation across both actors and countries (see Figure 4). Strongest negative views of country membership of the EU are found among France’s Reconquête (60%) and RN (47%) voters, Germany’s AfD (47%), and Italy’s Lega (42%) voters, making the populist radical right significantly different from all the other parties.

**Figure 4 : Views of EU membership by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland**

Predicted values from multivariate logistic regression models with sociodemographic controls; For the purpose of the analysis, the dependent variable has here been recoded into two categories: 0=“Good thing / Neither, nor”; 1=“Bad thing”;

Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).

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In Poland, both Law and Justice and Confederation show higher levels of Euroscepticism compared with the other parties, albeit at only 26 and 27% of negative views of EU membership, respectively, which reflects traditionally higher Polish support for the country’s membership of the European Union (EU) despite Law and Justice’s conflictual approach to EU institutions in recent years⁷.

Finally, FdI voters in Italia do not significantly differ from Forza Italia and M5S’s voters with regards to their views of EU membership as a ‘bad thing’ (at about 20% of negative opinions across all three electorates). This may possibly reflect the moderation of Giorgia Meloni’s Euroscepticism and, despite differences over migration policies, increased cooperation with the EU since in government⁸. As noted by recent studies, FdI has softened its Euroscepticism prior to the 2022 elections and adopted a pragmatic position towards the EU once in government, which may be seen as "instrumental both for the party’s attempt to strengthen its influence in the EU and for the smooth management of the NextGenerationEU funds⁹.".

In most cases, Eurosceptic positions in the populist radical right go hand in hand with claims of reestablishing national sovereignty. National sovereignty claims and the idea of ‘taking back control’ from Brussels are central to contemporary radical right-wing populist politics throughout Europe¹⁰.

Our data first confirm that sovereignist attitudes are widespread in the public at relatively similar levels across all four countries. Such attitudes are measured on a scale from 0 to 10 - i.e. more power to the national government versus more power to the EU -, which produced an average of 3.2, 3.6, 3.9, and 3.2 in France, Germany, Italy, and Poland, respectively. Across all four countries, a majority of about 53-56% of all respondents agree that “more power should be given to the national government to solve the country’s problems” by placing themselves between 0 and 4 on the scale¹¹.

**Figure 5:** More power to the EU by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland

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¹¹. Let us note here that there were a much larger number of DKs here, representing just under a fifth of all national samples, which calls for caution in the interpretation of our results
Predicted values from multivariate linear regression models with sociodemographic controls; The dependent variable is a 0-10 scale from “giving more power to the national government” to “giving more power to the EU”;

Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).

Such attitudes are strongest amongst PRR voters across four countries (see Figure 5): RN, Reconquête, AfD, FdI, Lega, PiS and Konfederacja voters show the lowest average on the 0-10 scale of ’giving more power to the EU’, which indicates stronger support for more power to the national government as opposed to the European Union. These scores make all those parties significantly different from their competitors in each of the four countries, except for Italy where Fratelli and Lega voters are more like those of Forza Italia which again is consistent with the reconfiguration of the political right in the country.

Let us note here that those who say they would vote for La France Insoumise in France and for the M5S in Italy also have stronger sovereignist attitudes compared with voters of the mainstream left and center-right, however still much less so than their radical right counterparts.

**Political trust**

Studies of populism suggest that populist voters generally demonstrate lower levels of political trust\(^\text{12}\) although such relationship has been found to vary across cases and over time\(^\text{13}\). In the general public, the lowest level is found in Poland albeit with small differences with Italy and France in particular, while Germany stands out as most trustful of all four countries.

In Poland, only 24% say they trust their government as opposed to 28% in France, 31% in Italy and 36% in Germany. About a quarter of Polish citizens say they trust the Sejm compared with 27% in Italy, 29% in France and 40% in Germany. Trust in political parties is also at its lowest in Poland (16%); it is 19% in Italy, 20% in France and 30% in Germany.

We see substantial variation in political trust according to political affiliations\(^\text{14}\). Significant differences are found across the different electorates in each of our four countries, somewhat reflecting the different political status of the populist radical right in France, Germany, Italy, and Poland (see Figure 6).

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\(^\text{12}\) See for instance: Agnes Akkerman, Andrej Zaslove and Bram Spruyt, “’We the People’ or ‘We the Peoples’? A Comparison of Support for the Populist Radical Right and Populist Radical Left in the Netherlands”, *Swiss Political Sciences Review*, vol. 23 (4), 2017, pp. 377-403

\(^\text{13}\) Christos Vrakopoulos, “Political and ideological normalization: Quality of government, mainstream-right ideological positions and extreme-right support”, *European Political Science Review*, 14(1), 2022, pp. 56–73

\(^\text{14}\) We measure political trust on a scale combining three items i.e. trust in government, trust in political parties, and trust in parliament. All Alphas are > 0.8. Individual country PCA suggests a one factor solution accounting for about three quarters of the total variance.
Figure 6: Average levels of political trust by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland

Predicted values from multivariate linear regression models with sociodemographic controls; Political trust is taken from an attitudinal scale combining three items i.e. trust in government, trust in political parties, and trust in parliament;

Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).

The German AfD and French RN and Reconquête’s voters show the lowest levels of trust of all electorates in their respective countries, reflecting those parties’ status as opposition parties, all secluded behind a cordon sanitaire. These findings are consistent with both the link that has traditionally been established between low trust and support for the radical right, and with the recent observation that identifying with such parties may in turn reduce political trust.15

In Poland, trust is lowest for Konfederacja voters and highest for Civic Platform (PO) supporters, with those who say they would vote for Law and Justice - now in opposition to Donald Tusk’s recently formed government - located halfway.

In Italy, FdI and Lega voters have, on the other hand, significantly higher trust than other voters, which illustrates the status of the two parties as members of the ruling coalition. Such findings also corroborate studies that suggest that political dissatisfaction is a stronger explanatory factor when far-right parties are in opposition but is a less important determinant of electoral support when they are in government.16

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15. See Kai Arzheimer. "Identification with an anti-system party undermines diffuse political support: The case of Alternative for Germany and trust in the Federal Constitutional Court", Party Politics, 2024

Finally, our data allow to examine the effect of populism which has been identified as an important corollary of the contemporary radical right\textsuperscript{17}. Populism is generally strongly correlated with low political trust, and with electoral support for populist parties across the board\textsuperscript{18}.

Here we use the scale of populist attitudes proposed by Akkerman et al.\textsuperscript{19}. Preliminary analysis confirms that the scale has strong reliability and homogeneity across all four countries, with Alphas all above 0.8.

Our data suggest different articulations between populist attitudes and voting preferences at the individual level when controlling for voter demographics (see Figure 7).

In France, populism is found at both extremes of the left-right ideological axis: populist radical right voters have stronger populist attitudes, but they share similar levels of populism with La France Insoumise (LFI) radical left voters and those who say they would vote for a left-wing extremist party - essentially one of the two small Trotskyite organizations. In line with previous research, the French case thus illustrates the ‘thin’ populist ideology and the variety of its manifestations across the political spectrum\textsuperscript{20}.

\textbf{Figure 7 : Average levels of populism by party choice in France, Germany, Italy and Poland}

Predicted values from multivariate linear regression models with sociodemographic controls;

Source: Barometer of Political Trust, wave #15, January 2024 (N=8,772).
We see a relatively similar picture in Germany, however showing significant differences between AfD and Die Linke’s voters. The former have the highest level of populism, distinct from all other parties, with radical left voters located halfway between the populist radical right and the mainstream.

A different picture emerges from the distribution of populist attitudes in Poland and in Italy where inter-party variance is lower on average. In Poland, all electorates share about the same average level of populism. Confederation and Law and Justice’s voters are more populist but differences here are smaller than in France and Germany.

Finally, in Italy, populist radical right voters do not show higher levels of populism: both Lega and Fratelli voters have about the same average score of populism as the mainstream left (PD) and right (Forza Italia). In the Italian sample, populism is essentially associated with electoral support for the M5S, a party that has been described as a specific case of ‘valence’ or ‘polyvalent’ populism. The Italian case corroborates previous studies that suggest that voters of populist parties may become more trustful of politics when their party is in government.

Conclusion

Based on the latest edition of CEVIPOF’s Barometer of Political Trust, this brief survey report has examined populist radical right attitudes in Germany, France, Italy, and Poland, comparatively. We have looked at the distribution of such attitudes across countries and the main political parties in each national context, and, by using voting intentions, we have explored the relationship between typical PRR attitudes and voting for parties like the French RN, Italian FdI and Lega, German AfD, and Polish PiS and Confederation.

The findings confirm the link that is generally established between the populist radical right and nationalist attitudes against immigration and the EU. The data also corroborate that PRR voters share stronger authoritarian views, which clearly sets them apart from the other parties in their respective political systems.

This brief report has found some heterogeneity, however, across the European populist radical right electorates investigated in the survey, which reflects the contextual diversity of these parties and their different political status in their respective country. Albeit essentially descriptive, the analysis has found differences in Euroscepticism, political trust, and populism across voters of parties such as the Italian FdI, Polish PiS, German AfD, and French RN. In line with recent research, such findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of the far-right populist appeal to voters in Europe.

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