

# Regional Influences on Europe's Populist Radical Right: Social Benefits, Immigration, and Climate Change Policy Perceptions

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## Abstract

In this study, I delve into the regional dynamics that influence the electoral successes of Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties across Europe. I examine the interaction between economic conditions, public policy preferences on social benefits, immigration, and climate change, and their joint impact on voting patterns. The puzzle that emerges is how these factors coalesce to either bolster or diminish the PRR's appeal. By utilising a dataset that merges regional economic indicators with local-level public opinion and electoral results, I indicate that while PRR parties generally find support in economically struggling regions, their success is not uniform. Regions with lower economic output and strong opposition to climate change mitigation policies and immigration show significant PRR vote shares. However, contrary to this pattern, in economically disadvantaged areas with a strong preference for social benefit policies, these parties score lower electoral rates. The findings contribute to understanding PRR's heterogeneous electoral geography and suggest that economic distress alone does not perfectly predict their rise; rather, it is a confluence of localised economic and policy discontent that shapes their electoral success.

**Keywords:** Populism, Radical Right, Subnational, Elections

## Introduction

In the contemporary political landscape of Europe, the ascent of Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties and movements marks a significant and transformative period (Krause and Giebler 2020; Mudde 2014). This rise, characterised by pronounced shades of nationalism and xenophobia (Loch and Norocel 2015), has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon across the continent (Rooduijn 2015; Zulianello and Larsen 2021). The appeal of antiestablishment sentiment and populist rhetoric, once relegated to the fringes of political discourse, has now found resonance within the mainstream of many societies (Inglehart and Norris 2016). This article aims to explain the complex features at the sub-national level behind the electoral successes of these parties, which challenge and potentially erode the foundations of democratic norms and values.

At the heart of the populist radical right's rhetoric lie two interwoven narratives: an intense anti-establishment stance and a robust commitment to nationalism (Caiani and Kröll 2017; Dunn 2015).

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These narratives are not merely political strategies but represent a fundamental challenge to the democratic fabric, threatening to undermine the principles of pluralism, mutual respect, and the rule of law (Baggini 2015; Muis and Immerzeel 2017). By positioning themselves as the true representatives of the "people" against a purportedly corrupt and disconnected elite, PRR parties skillfully craft an image of authenticity and moral superiority (Vahter and Jakobson 2023; Versteegen 2023). This populist approach, coupled with a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and the preservation of traditional values, resonates with segments of the population who feel alienated by the rapid pace of social and economic change (Bowler et al. 2017; Jay et al. 2019; Salmela and Von Scheve 2017).

The reasons behind the rise of PRR parties are as diverse as they are complex. Economic disenfranchisement (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2021; Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2022), social insecurity, and a pervasive sense of uncertainty have left many citizens disillusioned with the status quo (Béland 2020; Gidron and Hall 2020; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Salmela and Von Scheve 2017). PRR parties exploit these sentiments, promising radical solutions to unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Furthermore, issues such as the migrant-refugee crisis have become focal points for these parties, who frame such challenges as existential threats to national identity and social cohesion (Haugsgjerd and Bergh 2023; Lutz 2019; Zaslove 2008). This narrative is bolstered by a broader crisis of confidence in traditional parties and institutions (Kutiyski, Krouwel, and Prooijen 2021; Rooduijn 2018), which are often portrayed as ineffectual or complicit in the perceived decline of national sovereignty and public welfare.

The case of Italy provides a stark illustration of this phenomenon. In the early general elections of 25 September 2022, the "Brothers of Italy" party, led by Giorgia Meloni, emerged as a formidable force, securing a significant majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic (Garzia 2023). Meloni's political trajectory, rooted in the post-fascist Italian Social Movement and its successor, the National Alliance, exemplifies the hardline faction within the PRR spectrum (Puleo and Piccolino 2022). Her persistent Euroscepticism, opposition to abortion, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage, and advocacy for national conservatism underscore a broader trend among PRR leaders who prioritise national identity (De Giorgi, Cavalieri, and Feo 2023), cultural homogeneity, and traditional values over the principles of pluralism and inclusivity (Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci 2022).

The appeal of PRR parties extends beyond any single factor, reflecting a confluence of societal discontent with traditional governance, economic disparities between urban and rural areas, and rising inflation. These parties' tough stance on immigration and scepticism towards multiculturalism further

accentuate their appeal in an era marked by economic uncertainty and social upheaval (Downes and Loveless 2018; Gidron and Mijs 2019; Gidron and Hall 2020; Rama and Cordero 2018). By championing the protection of national identity and cultural cohesion, they tap into a deep-seated yearning for stability and a return to perceived social and moral certainties (Smeekes, Wildschut, and Sedikides 2021; Steenvoorden and Hartevelde 2018).

The overarching narrative that emerges from recent studies, and which finds empirical support, is that regions suffering from economic hardships—irrespective of their urban or rural classification—are fertile grounds for PRR parties (Essletzbichler et al. 2021; Rossi 2018). The economic fabric of a region, thus, emerges as a pivotal factor in the electoral fortunes of PRR entities. It is within this context that this article situates itself, aiming to dissect the relationship between a region's economic vitality and the electoral viability of PRR voting patterns. However, the ambition of this paper extends beyond mere economic analysis to explore how local perspectives on crucial governmental policies intersect with and potentially influence this relationship.

This paper endeavours to unpack how regional consensus on the provision of social benefits, policies to combat climate change, and attitudes towards immigration modulate the nexus between economic robustness and PRR electoral success. The hypothesis guiding this investigation posits that PRR parties are likely to find electoral favour in regions with a positive disposition towards welfare policies coupled with a negative stance on immigration and climate change mitigation efforts. This exploration is predicated on the assumption that the economic backdrop, while crucial, does not singularly determine PRR success. Instead, it is the interplay between economic conditions and policy orientations that shapes the electoral landscape for PRR parties.

The empirical foundation for this analysis is derived from a triangulation of data sources encompassing a pan-European public opinion survey (the eighth wave of the European Social Survey), regional economic indicators, and electoral outcomes. The European Social Survey's eighth wave provides a rich dataset on public attitudes towards immigration, social welfare policies, and climate change policies. This subjective data is complemented by objective measures of economic vibrancy, gauged through GDP per capita for each region under study. The electoral dimension is captured through aggregated data at the NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels, offering a granular view of PRR electoral performance across different European locales.

The analysis utilises data from 195 European regions across 15 European countries, providing a broad yet detailed canvas to investigate the proposed hypotheses. This extensive dataset not only allows for a comprehensive examination of the economic-policy nexus but also facilitates a nuanced

understanding of regional variations in PRR party support. By integrating subjective attitudes with objective economic metrics and electoral outcomes, this paper seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on PRR parties in Europe, offering insights into the complex interdependencies that underlie their rise and consolidation in the contemporary political spectrum.

## **Literature Review**

The emergent contours of PRR politicians and parties across the US and the European landscape have become a focal point of academic inquiry, seeking to understand the spatial dynamics underpinning this political phenomenon. Recent research endeavours have been undertaken beyond the surface, probing into the spatial tropes related to the emergence of PRR ideologies (Arzheimer and Bernemann 2023; Förtner, Belina, and Naumann 2020; Kevický 2022; Patana 2022; Suchánek and Hasman 2022; Westinen 2014). Central to the discourse is the argument that PRR rhetoric finds fertile ground in regions characterised by a pervasive distrust in institutions and traditional parties. This narrative has led to the hypothesis that the rise of PRR parties is predominantly observed in regions perceived as being 'left behind by globalisation' (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021). Such areas, often marred by economic decline and social fragmentation, are posited as the bastions of support for PRR entities, driven by the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement experienced by their inhabitants.

Concurrently, the binary opposition, often drawn between economically deprived rural locales and their developed urban counterparts, has been subjected to scrutiny (Rossi 2018). A growing body of research posits that urban centers, notwithstanding their developmental advantages, are not immune to the contradictions and inequalities that breed distrust towards established institutions and political parties. These areas, plagued by comparatively worse living conditions within their confines, emerge as equally potent breeding grounds for PRR parties (Crulli 2022; Essletzbichler et al. 2021; Harteveld et al. 2022; Loftus and Gort 2023; Rossi 2018; Gent, Jansen, and Smits 2013). The empirical evidence accumulated thus far suggests that the PRR vote holds significant weight in large urban centers marked by socioeconomic disparities, thereby challenging the rural-urban dichotomy traditionally associated with the geographic distribution of PRR support (Rossi 2018).

The landscape of electoral geography has long served as a useful instrument for exploring how the confluence of social context and the local environment shapes political inclinations and voting behaviour (Prescott 1959). This domain of study posits that electoral decisions transcend mere individual choice, embedding themselves within the intricate web of the social fabric and institutional frameworks that govern daily life. Scholars in this field have highlighted the pivotal role played by local institutions in crafting the social narratives that influence electoral outcomes (Johnston and Pattie

2009; Jusko 2014; Woolstencroft 1980). These entities do not merely exist within the community; they actively shape the political landscape, weaving through the social threads that guide voting decisions.

The concept of stronghold zones, areas where political parties garner overwhelming support, underscores the intimate relationship between social structures and party mobilisation efforts (Miguel 2017; Hopkins 2017; Johnston, O'Neill, and Taylor 1987). Early electoral geography scholars illustrated how a community's social composition—economic status, community bonds, and social diversity—creates a landscape ripe for political influence (Prescott 1959; Woolstencroft 1980). This dynamic clarifies a natural alignment with parties that reflect the predominant social group's interests and concerns, an alignment that becomes increasingly pronounced in regions where the group's presence is overwhelming. Thus, the regional variance in social and economic landscapes emerges as a critical arena for political parties to cultivate influence, embedding themselves as representatives of local interests and concerns over time.

Within this complex terrain, PRR parties have emerged as significant disruptors, challenging the established order and setting paths into territories once considered strongholds of traditional political entities. This phenomenon unfolds against a backdrop of research probing into the shifting contours of electoral geography during periods marked by political upheaval and realignment (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Downes and Loveless 2018; Rama and Cordero 2018). Such periods test the resilience of established electoral geographies, underscoring the enduring influence of social and economic structures on regional political dispositions. Yet, the emergence of PRR parties into these bastions of traditional power highlights a crucial re-calibration of political allegiances and the potency of populist rhetoric in appealing to diverse social strata.

Critics, however, caution against overstating the role of contextual factors in shaping voting patterns, arguing for the importance of individual decision-making processes that may not be as deeply rooted in social networks as traditionally believed (David and Van Hamme 2011; Green and Gerber 2019). Despite this contention, the endeavour to unravel the geographical and social foundations underpinning support for ideologically driven parties, from extremists to contemporary PRR entities, remains a vibrant and contested field of research. These investigations shed light on the non-uniform distribution of support for such parties, revealing discernible geographical and structural patterns that inform their electoral base.

Studies showed that PRR support is mainly concentrated in the countryside and suburban areas, revealing that the rural-urban divide is more complex than we thought. Rural areas, often idealised as the last bastions of traditional values, stand in ideological contrast yet in complementary support to

urban bases, depicting the multifaceted appeal of PRR parties across demographic divides (Kestilä and Söderlund 2007; Westinen 2014). The discourse surrounding immigration further complicates this electoral geography, intertwining with economic and cultural narratives to shape the political landscape (Bowyer 2008; Lubbers and Scheepers 2002).

Discussions about the transformation of European economies are contributing to the polarisation caused by the PRR parties, especially as traditional industrial workers, who feel marginalised by conventional trade unions and left-wing political parties, are increasingly aligned with PRR ideologies (Gidron and Hall 2020; Salmela and Von Scheve 2017). This realignment underscores a broader socioeconomic shift, positioning PRR parties as a refuge for those navigating the uncertainties of economic adaptation to globalisation (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022). Such sentiments cultivate a profound sense of vulnerability and neglect, casting PRR parties as champions for the economically insecure and disaffected.

Moreover, contemporary political challenges like climate change introduce new dimensions to the electoral calculus. PRR parties, characterised by their strong opposition to environmental policies, navigate these issues with a distinct narrative that portrays climate initiatives as disproportionately burdening rural and working-class communities. This stance not only reinforces their appeal to these demographic groups but also situates them as the main opponents of policies aimed at mitigating climate change impacts (Hess and Renner 2019; Kulin, Johansson Sevä, and Dunlap 2021). The anti-environmental rhetoric of PRR parties emerges as a strategic component of their broader political agenda, appealing to constituents who perceive environmental policies as a threat to their economic well-being (Huber et al. 2021).

As mentioned above, the objective of this paper is to examine the divergent electoral outcomes of PRR parties across various European regions. By merging survey data on localised public opinion concerning key policy issues—issues that are frequently politicised by PRR parties—with economic indicators and electoral results, all at the local level, I aim to give a nuanced picture of the regional success of PRR parties. This methodology enables a comprehensive analysis of the geographical variations influencing the rise and consolidation of PRR parties. By integrating local-level public opinion data with economic and electoral variables, the paper seeks to reveal the micro-level dynamics that govern the electoral viability of PRR parties in Europe. This research aims to shed light on the complex interplay between economic hardship and policy preferences, thereby offering an advanced understanding of the spatial patterns of PRR support within the European context beyond the rural-urban divide. Below, I present the main working hypotheses that direct this study.

*Hypothesis 1: PRR parties perform electorally better in areas with less economic activity.*

The relationship between economic disadvantage and the electoral success of PRR parties is a key result of contemporary political analysis. Regions characterised by economic hardship often exhibit higher levels of political disillusionment, where PRR parties capitalise on narratives of national decline and socioeconomic abandonment. PRR parties effectively harness economic grievances to mobilise support, framing themselves as defenders of the 'forgotten' working class against both the economic elite and perceived external threats to national prosperity (Gidron and Mijs 2019; Gidron and Hall 2020). This hypothesis is a starting point as I aim to examine how other localised factors influence the relationship between ecological hardship and PRR rise.

*Hypothesis 2: PRR parties perform electorally better in areas with less economic activity and voters supporting social benefit policies.*

The second hypothesis posits that in regions with stronger preferences for social benefits, PRR parties gain more traction. This argument challenges traditional perceptions of the welfare state as inherently antithetical to radical right ideologies, which often emphasise individual responsibility. However, recent studies suggest that due to their populist component, PRR parties support generous social benefit policies that provide "ordinary people" with a safety net (Abts et al. 2021; Krause and Giebler 2020). I expect this people-centric narrative of PRR parties to resonate in areas where economic insecurity contributes to voters' positive perception of the importance of social benefits policies.

*Hypothesis 3: PRR parties perform electorally better in areas with less economic activity and voters opposing climate change mitigation policies.*

The third hypothesis explores the correlation between opposition to climate change mitigation policies and the success of PRR parties in economically disadvantaged regions. PRR parties often critique climate change policies as elitist plans that threaten jobs and national sovereignty, resonating with voters who fear economic displacement (Hess and Renner 2019). The academic discourse highlights how PRR narratives exploit socioeconomic vulnerabilities, positioning environmental policies as contrary to the immediate economic interests of the working class and rural communities (Huber et al. 2021). This framing taps into broader anti-elitist sentiments, appealing to individuals concerned about the economic implications of stringent environmental regulations.

*Hypothesis 4: PRR parties perform electorally better in areas with less economic activity and voters opposing immigration.*

Finally, the fourth hypothesis examines the relationship between anti-immigration sentiment and PRR party performance. It is widely documented that PRR parties employ anti-immigration rhetoric as a core component of their political strategy, arguing that immigration poses a threat to cultural identity, social cohesion, and economic stability (Downes and Loveless 2018; Rooduijn 2015; Muis and Immerzeel 2017; Zaslove 2008). In economically disadvantaged regions, these arguments find fertile ground among voters who perceive immigrants as competitors for scarce resources and jobs. This hypothesis aligns with empirical studies indicating a strong correlation between concerns over immigration and support for PRR parties, suggesting that anti-immigration sentiment serves as a significant predictor of PRR electoral success.

### **Data and Methodology**

This study draws upon multiple data sources to conduct a thorough examination of the electoral outcomes of PRR parties across European regions. The primary dataset is the 8th wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), which provides comprehensive survey data on public opinion regarding various policy issues within European nations. Most notably, it provides survey data on Europeans' views regarding social benefits, climate change mitigation policies and immigration. The ESS dataset is complemented by two additional datasets detailing electoral results at the NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 regional levels. These offer insights into the localised electoral performance of political parties, including those classified as PRR. Additionally, we incorporate GDP per capita data for each NUTS region (taken from Eurostat).

During the 8th wave of the ESS, participants were asked to give their views on a series of questions on social benefits, climate change policies and migration. The electoral datasets provide the party vote shares aggregated in NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 (based on availability), demonstrating in which regions the PRR parties did better than the rest. This dataset was compiled by Schraff, Vergioglou, and Demirci 2022. Furthermore, GDP per capita data serve as the main predictor of economic activity in each region.

I constructed three key variables aggregating public opinions on social benefits, immigration, and climate change. The aggregation process involves standardising individual responses to relevant ESS questions, ensuring comparability across different scales. For social benefits, questions on the perceived strain on the economy, poverty prevention, equality enhancement, business tax burdens, and the impact on individual initiative and communal care are combined. In the issue of climate change, attitudes towards tax increases on fossil fuels, subsidies for renewable energy, and restrictions on energy-inefficient appliances are integrated. Immigration attitudes are synthesised from questions



assessing the economic, cultural, and general impact of immigration on the country. Then, individuals' scores in the above indices were aggregated at the NUTS 2 or NUTS 3 level, enabling the exploration of the relationship between localised policy preferences and PRR electoral support.

The final dataset produced for this study includes a compiled sample of 2,180 dyads, each representing the vote share of a party in a specific region in 195 unique European regions from 15 countries. This selection spans the period from 2014 to 2018, aligning with the election year closest to the execution of the 8th wave of the ESS in each of the 15 countries in the sample. This temporal alignment ensures the relevance of the data, reflecting the political climate and public opinion close to the survey period. The countries included in this study - Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and Sweden - represent a broad geographical and cultural cross-section of Europe. This diverse composition of nations allows for a comprehensive examination of the dynamics affecting the electoral success of PRR parties, as over the past decade, they have all experienced, to some extent, the rise of such political formations.

Then, the study followed an analytical strategy that employed multilevel modelling techniques to dissect the influence of localised attitudes and regional economic conditions on party success. This approach acknowledges the hierarchical structure of the data, with observations nested within countries, thereby enabling the examination of cross-level interactions.

Specifically, Linear Mixed Effects Models are utilised to assess the impact of economic conditions, social benefits, immigration, and climate change opinions, and their interactions with regional GDP per capita on party vote share. Below, I present the fundamental model of this study, based on which I run the interaction models between the main independent variables and the PRR condition.

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{party\_percentage} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Support for Social Benefits} \\
 & + \beta_2 \times \text{Support for Climate Policies} \\
 & + \beta_3 \times \text{Support for Immigration} \\
 & + \beta_4 \times \text{PRR Party} \\
 & + \beta_5 \times \text{GDP per Capita} \\
 & + \beta_6 \times \text{NUTS (Level 3=1)} \\
 & + \beta_7 \times \text{Abstention Rate} \\
 & + (1|\text{Country})
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

In the fundamental model, each coefficient represents a unique aspect of the analysis:

- **Support for Social Benefits:** This measures the support of the regional population for social benefits policies. Higher values indicate that in this region voters evaluate social benefit policies positively.
- **Support for Climate Policies:** Reflects the regional stance on climate change mitigation efforts. The variable gets higher values in regions with pro-mitigation attitudes.
- **Support for Immigration:** This variable measures the regional attitudes towards immigration. Higher values indicate that the regional population is in favour of immigration.
- **PRR Party:** A binary indicator defining the PRR parties of the sample, aiming to capture its direct effect on vote percentage. The classification of parties into PRR (value = 1) and non-PRR (value = 0) was based on The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2023).
- **GDP per Capita:** This is the main economic indicator describing the economic situation in each region. It was retrieved from the Eurostat database.
- **NUTS (Level 3=1):** Binary variable that distinguishes between NUTS level 2 and NUTS level 3. Not all European countries are divided into NUTS level 3 (especially the smaller ones). Also, on some occasions, ESS researchers collected regional in NUTS level 2 due to laws restricting the collection of personal data.
- **Abstention Rate:** Accounts for the percentage of the electorate that did not participate in elections in each region.

Furthermore, the model incorporates random effects for countries to account for unobserved heterogeneity across nations. This acknowledges that electoral dynamics, cultural contexts, and political climates unique to each country can influence the relationship between the predictors and PRR party success, allowing for a better understanding of these dynamics at the national level.

After establishing the fundamental analytical framework, the research proceeds by running models incorporating interaction terms to robustly evaluate the formulated hypotheses. These models are designed to explore the elaborate dynamics at play, focusing in particular on the interactions between the main explanatory variables, such as GDP per capita, attitudes towards social benefits, climate change policies and immigration, with the electoral viability of PRR parties. By integrating these interaction terms, the analysis delves into the conditional effects of economic and attitude variables on the success of PRR parties. This methodological evolution from a basic model to those incorporating multiple interactions facilitates an exploration of how particular contexts and public sentiments might enhance or moderate the electoral appeal of these parties.

## Results

The initial model within this study's analytical framework establishes a foundational understanding of the factors influencing the vote share of parties within various European regions. This model clarifies the direct impacts of support for social benefits, climate policies, and immigration, as well as whether a party is classified under the PRR category, alongside economic indicators such as GDP per Capita, the NUTS regional level, and the abstention rate in each region. The dependent variable contains electoral percentage points for both PRR and non-PRR parties at the regional level, offering a comprehensive view of the electoral landscape.

Model 1, in Table 1, serves as the basis of my investigation, indicating a significant positive impact of the PRR Party variable on vote share, suggesting that PRR parties in the sample countries, on average, secure a notable portion of the vote share. The coefficients for Support for Social Benefits, Support for Climate Policies, and Support for Immigration in this model, however, do not reach statistical significance, indicating no relationship directly observable between these localised societal attitudes and party performance.

In Model 2, I introduce an interaction between the PRR Party variable and GDP per Capita, testing the association between economic conditions and the electoral success of PRR parties. The significant negative coefficient for this interaction term (-4.081) reveals that in regions with higher GDP per Capita, the advantage that PRR parties hold diminishes. This interaction suggests that economic factors play a differential role in shaping the electoral fortunes of PRR versus non-PRR parties, with PRR parties faring better in less affluent regions. This result coincides with the findings of previous studies, as the relationship between economic hardship and the success of PRR parties is well documented in the relevant literature.

Next, in Model 3, I add interactions between Support for Social Benefits and the PRR Party variable, as well as a three-way interaction involving these two variables and GDP per Capita. Introducing these terms allows for a deeper exploration into how economic context and social policy preferences interact to influence PRR party vote shares. The significant positive coefficient for the three-way interaction (3.998) indicates that in regions with higher economic prosperity, the impact of support for social benefits on PRR party vote shares is more pronounced, suggesting an interdependence between economic conditions, social policy preferences, and political orientation.

Model 4 shifts focus towards environmental concerns by including interactions between Support for Climate Policies and the PRR Party variable, as well as its interaction with GDP per Capita. The significant negative coefficient for the interaction between Support for Climate Policies and PRR Party

(-3.357) underscores a divergent response to climate policies between PRR and non-PRR parties, possibly reflecting the PRR's typical scepticism towards environmental regulations. However, the interaction between climate policies, PRR Party, and GDP does not achieve significance, indicating that economic prosperity does not moderate the relationship between environmental attitudes and PRR party success.

Finally, in Model 5, I examine the role of immigration attitudes by introducing interactions between Support for Immigration and the PRR Party variable, alongside its interaction with GDP per Capita. While the interaction between Support for Immigration and PRR Party condition is insignificant, the positive coefficient of the three-way interaction with

**Table 1.** The results of Linear Mixed Effects Models

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Support for Social Benefits	0.091 (0.361)	0.104 (0.359)	0.038 (0.371)	0.088 (0.357)	0.122 (0.358)
Support for Climate Policies	-0.144 (0.307)	-0.128 (0.306)	-0.092 (0.304)	0.258 (0.328)	-0.130 (0.307)
Support for Immigration	-0.003 (0.433)	0.015 (0.435)	0.111 (0.438)	-0.028 (0.438)	0.176 (0.445)
PRR Party	8.404*** (0.675)	8.510*** (0.669)	6.195*** (0.791)	8.072*** (0.707)	7.463*** (0.740)
GDP per Capita	-0.362 (0.318)	0.113 (0.325)	0.472 (0.372)	0.215 (0.328)	0.134 (0.331)
NUTS (Level 3=1)	1.623 (1.255)	1.500 (1.300)	1.624 (1.325)	1.422 (1.261)	1.651 (1.303)
Abstention Rate	-0.011 (0.038)	-0.007 (0.038)	-0.001 (0.039)	-0.017 (0.038)	0.000 (0.039)

PRR Party * GDP	–	–	–	–	–
	4.081***	4.504***	5.445***	3.764***	
	(0.644)	(0.793)	(0.770)	(0.732)	
Social Benefits *		0.047			
PRR Party		(0.816)			
Social Benefits *		3.998***			
PRR Party * GDP		(0.736)			
Climate Policies *			–		
PRR Party			3.357***		
			(0.720)		
Climate Policies *			–0.498		
PRR Party * GDP			(0.622)		
Immigration *				–0.870	(0.713)
PRR Party					
Immigration *				1.717**	
PRR Party * GDP				(0.590)	
Num.Obs.	2180	2180	2180	2180	2180
R2 Marg.	0.073	0.091	0.102	0.099	0.095
R2 Cond.	0.109	0.129	0.142	0.135	0.133
AIC	16 324.5	16 285.8	16 258.2	16 268.4	16 279.2
BIC	16 381.3	16 348.3	16 337.8	16 348.0	16 358.9
ICC	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
RMSE	10.09	10.00	9.92	9.95	9.97

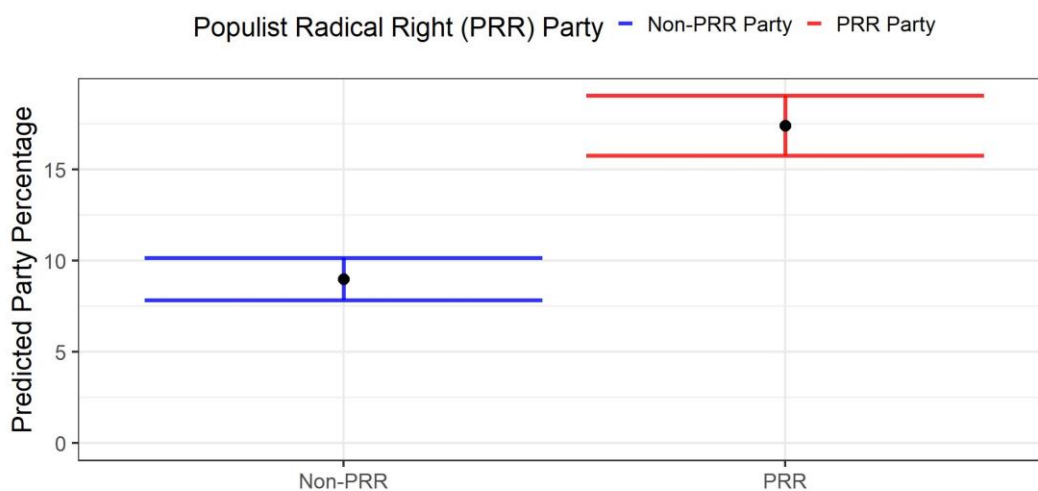
+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

Standard errors in parentheses - Observations nested within countries

GDP per capita (1.717) suggests that in wealthier regions, the influence of immigration attitudes on PRR party vote shares becomes (more) pronounced.

Across models, the PRR Party variable consistently exhibits a significant positive effect on vote shares, affirming the electoral competitiveness of PRR parties. However, the introduction of interaction terms across models highlights the conditional nature of this success, influenced mainly by economic conditions, social benefit support, and immigration stances. However, because the three-way interactions are difficult to adequately describe and explain from the output of a table of regression results, below I present a series of graphs with the predicted values of the main factors and interactions from Models 1 to 5.

Figure 1, presented below, delineates the predicted party percentages for both PRR and non-PRR parties, as indicated by Model 1. PRR parties are depicted with a red line, symbolising their higher predicted vote share, while non-PRR parties are represented with a blue line, indicating a lower predicted share. The black dots placed on the red and blue lines mark the mean predicted values for each party type, with the error bars extending vertically to display the confidence intervals, offering a visual representation of the precision of these predictions.



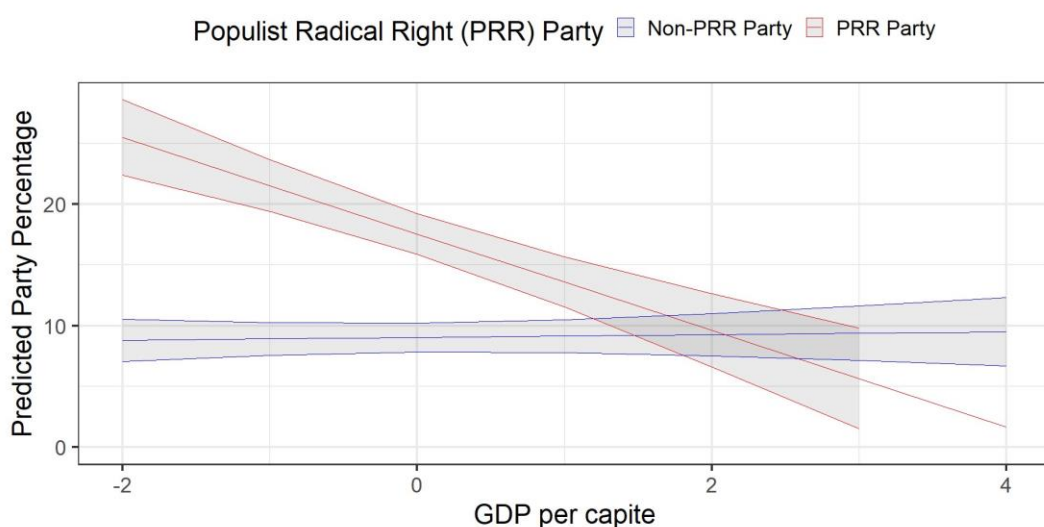
**Figure 1.** Electoral Performance of PRR versus Non-PRR Parties - Mean predicted vote shares with corresponding 95% confidence intervals

For non-PRR parties, the predicted vote share clusters around a lower percentage with relatively narrow confidence intervals, suggesting a more definitive expectation of their electoral performance. In contrast, PRR parties exhibit substantially higher predicted vote shares, with wider confidence intervals reflecting greater uncertainty or variability in their electoral outcomes. This graphical

illustration underscores the differential electoral success predicted for PRR versus non-PRR parties in the sample countries. This outcome is not particularly unexpected since we know that PRR parties have achieved significant electoral successes in the post-eurozone crisis period in the sample countries, always compared to all other parties competing in the elections.

Next, Figure 2 portrays a comparative analysis of the predicted vote shares for PRR and non-PRR parties as a function of GDP per capita (the values of GDP per capita have been standardised for better presentation and visualisation). Lines represent the relationship between GDP per capita and the predicted vote share for each party type, with PRR parties in red and non-PRR parties in blue. The declining red line indicates that as the GDP per capita of the regions increases, the predicted vote share for PRR parties decreases, suggesting that PRR parties tend to perform better in regions with lower economic output. The shaded areas around each line represent the 95% confidence intervals, depicting the range within which the true values are expected to fall with high probability.

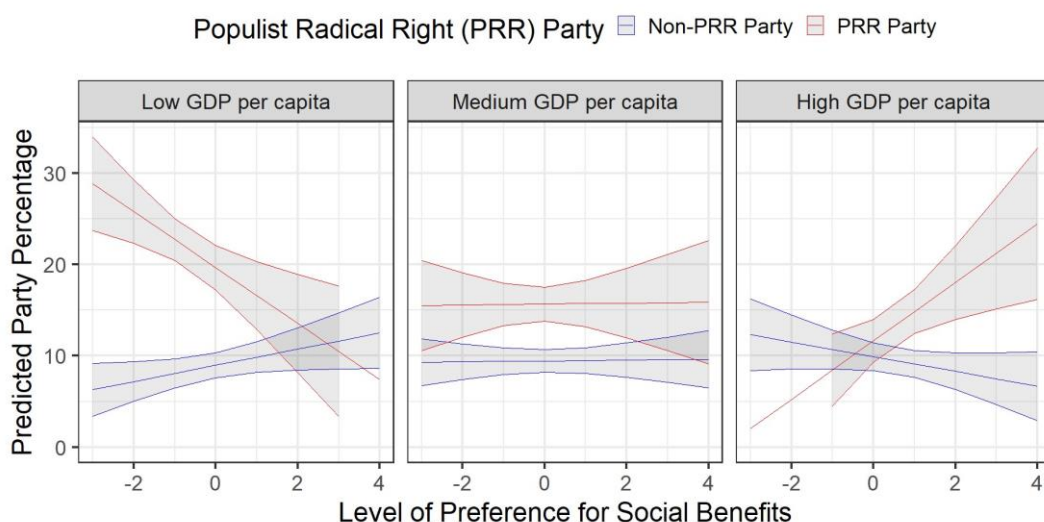
In stark contrast, the blue line, representing non-PRR parties, remains relatively flat across different levels of GDP per capita, indicating a level of insensitivity to economic indicators, at least in terms of predicted vote share. This pattern suggests that non-PRR parties maintain a consistent share of votes regardless of economic prosperity. The figure thus visually encapsulates the significant impact of economic conditions on the electoral success of PRR parties compared to their non-PRR counterparts. The width of the confidence intervals for PRR parties further suggests greater variability or uncertainty in their vote share predictions across varying economic conditions compared to the more stable predictions for non-PRR parties.



**Figure 2.** The Impact of GDP per Capita on Predicted Vote Shares for PRR and Non-PRR Parties - Shaded areas denote 95% confidence intervals

Moving on to the visualisation of the first three-way interaction, Figure 3 illustrates how the preference for social benefits influences the predicted vote share of PRR and non-PRR parties across regions with varying levels of GDP per capita. The panels represent low, medium, and high GDP per capita contexts, highlighting the interaction between economic conditions and social policy preferences. In regions with low GDP per capita, the predicted vote share for PRR parties decreases sharply with increasing preference for social benefits, suggesting that in less affluent areas, PRR parties fare better where there is less emphasis on social welfare. Conversely, in regions with high GDP per capita, PRR parties gain more support as a preference for social benefits increases, indicating a complex relationship where wealthier regions that favour social benefits tend to support PRR parties. The vote share for non-PRR parties remains relatively stable across different levels of preference for social benefits, regardless of the economic context. The shaded regions around each line, representing the 95% confidence intervals, are narrower for Non-PRR parties across GDP contexts, suggesting more certainty in their predicted vote shares.

This visual analysis highlights a new interpretation of the success of PRR parties, as they score high electoral percentages mainly in economically deprived areas with significant opposition to social benefit policies and in economically affluent areas with citizens who strongly support social benefit policies. At the same time, in areas of moderate economic activity, preferences for social benefit policies do not determine the vote shares of the two groups of parties. This unexpected pattern may be directly related to the level of welfare state in the sample regions. In economically deprived regions, the welfare system likely has poorer outcomes, resulting in the development of populist opposition to it as it may be perceived as yet another negative offshoot of the 'corrupt elite'.

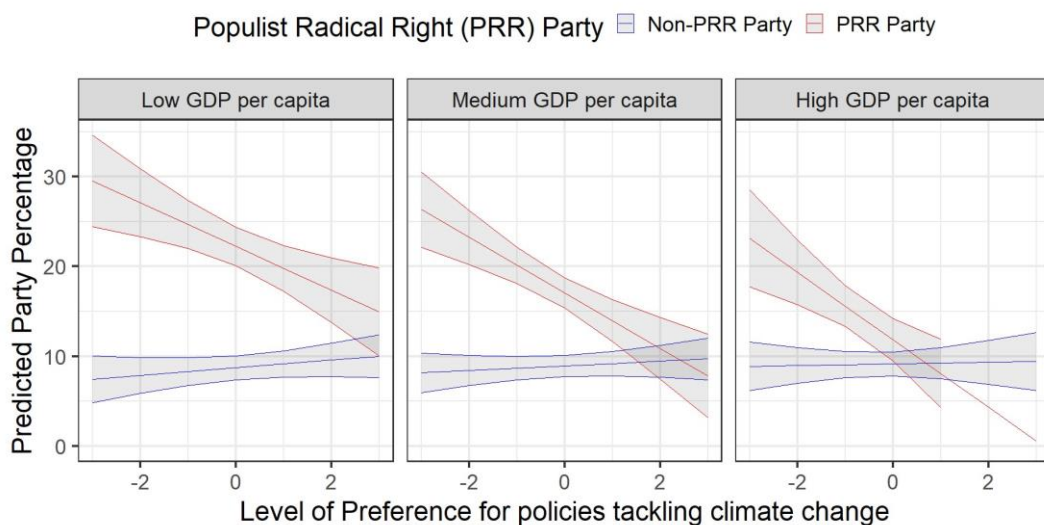




**Figure 3.** Interaction Effect of Social Benefits Preference and GDP per Capita on Predicted Vote Shares for PRR and Non-PRR Parties - Shaded areas denote 95% confidence intervals

Figure 4 delineates the relationship between the level of preference for policies tackling climate change and the predicted party percentage, segmented by GDP per capita levels. Within regions of low GDP per capita, the graph reveals a marked decline in the predicted vote share for PRR parties as a preference for climate change policies increases, suggesting that PRR parties are less favoured in economically disadvantaged areas that support climate action. The decline is less steep in regions with medium GDP per capita and becomes almost flat in high GDP areas, indicating that the influence of climate policy preferences on PRR party votes diminishes as economic prosperity rises.

Conversely, the non-PRR parties show a slight increase in predicted vote share with the preference for climate policies in low GDP regions. Overall, despite the reduction in the influence of localised public opinion on climate change mitigation policies the richer a region is, in regions where citizens are more negatively inclined towards these policies, PRR parties have better electoral rates compared to the other parties.



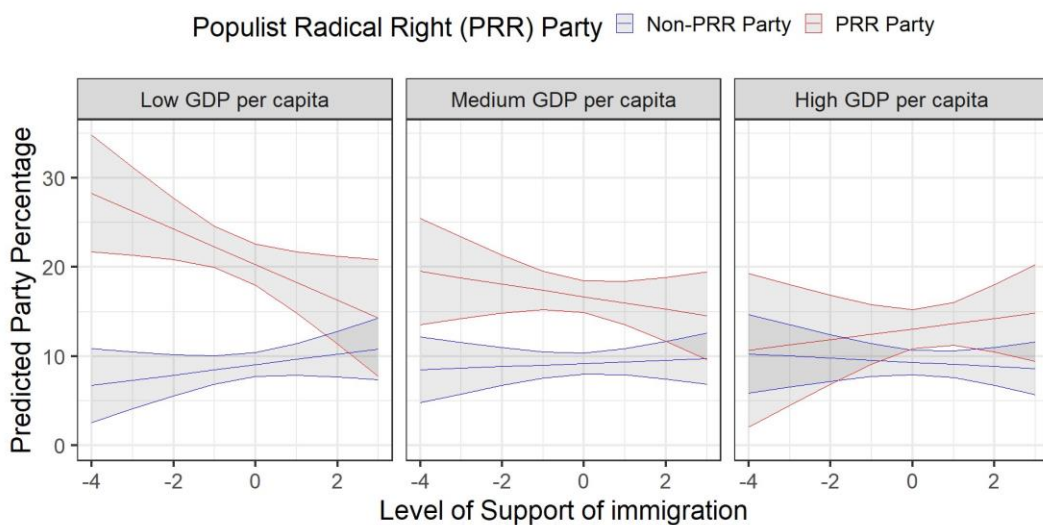
**Figure 4.** Predicted Vote Shares by Preference for Climate Change Policies Across GDP Levels - Shaded areas denote 95% confidence intervals

Figure 5 depicts the final three-way interaction examined in this study. It depicts how support for immigration influences the predicted party percentages across regions with varying GDP per capita. For regions with low GDP per capita, there is a prominent decrease in the predicted vote share for PRR parties as the level of support for immigration increases. This trend suggests a negative correlation between the approval of immigration and the electoral success of PRR parties in less affluent regions.

The line flattens as we move to regions with medium and high GDP per capita, indicating that in more economically prosperous areas, the level of support for immigration has a less pronounced effect on the predicted vote share for PRR parties. In contrast, non-PRR parties exhibit, as expected, a relatively stable relationship with support for immigration across all GDP levels.

The result is largely unexpected, given that a result similar to that presented in Figure 4 for the 3-way interaction with the localised view on climate change mitigation policies was anticipated. In other words, I expected that the difference between PRR and non-PRR parties in regions with negative attitudes towards immigration would always be noticeable and statistically significant. Instead, it seems that in economically robust regions, the negative dispositions towards immigration cease to strengthen PRR parties. This probably indicates that in more affluent regions where citizens enjoy economic stability and security, the rhetoric of PRR parties depicting immigrants as a threat to the job and economic security of locals diminishes.

Looking at the results altogether, it emerges that of the three variables related to local public opinion, the one related to climate change mitigation policies is the most consistently



**Figure 5.** Interaction Effect of Support for Immigration and GDP per Capita on Party Vote Share - Shaded areas denote 95% confidence intervals associated with the rise of PRR parties. Despite the economic conditions, in regions where citizens are negatively predisposed towards such policies, PRR parties have better electoral outcomes. On the other hand, the influence of local opinion on social benefits and immigration on the electoral performance of the PRR parties is moderated (or even reversed) by the economic prosperity of each region.

## Conclusion

This paper provides a systematic analysis of the factors underlying the rise of PRR parties at the regional level in Europe. The study set out to disentangle the interconnected narratives of economic conditions, social attitudes towards policy issues and the electoral viability of the PRR. Through the multilevel modelling of comprehensive datasets, the research findings offer insights into the electoral geography of PRR parties, making an important contribution to the academic debate. In addition, this study demonstrates the importance of analysing electoral results at the regional level, i.e. beyond the individual level or the aggregate national level. At the regional level, the multiple unique sequences that unfold can govern the driving factors behind the rise of the PRR in a diverse manner.

The ascent of PRR parties, marked by a potent mix of nationalism and xenophobia (Dunn 2015; Kulin, Johansson Sevä, and Dunlap 2021; Loch and Norocel 2015), resonates with an increasing number of European electorates. This study confirms that PRR parties skillfully leverage a climate of economic disenfranchisement. Throughout the results, it was evident that despite accounting for differences arising from the national context, in regions with lower GDP per capita, PRR parties had their highest percentages. Nevertheless, this result was expected, and the relationship was mainly used as a benchmark for the more elaborate statistical analyses concerning the influence of localised public opinion regarding the three prominent issues covered in this study. The findings from the analyses of the interactions between the independent variables yield some rather unexpected results. Below, I outline the four hypotheses that guided this study, verifying whether they ultimately hold and confirm my initial assumptions derived from the relevant literature and the results of previous studies.

Starting from the baseline, Hypothesis 1, which argues that PRR parties perform better in areas with less economic activity, finds support. As I mentioned above, it is evident through the results of this study that economic hardship enhances PRR appeal. PRR parties do indeed find fertile ground in economically disadvantaged areas and score electoral successes.

Next, Hypothesis 2 suggested that PRR parties gain more traction in areas where voters exhibit a preference for social benefit policies alongside less economic activity. This hypothesis was refuted. The findings indicated that while economic adversity alone was a consistent predictor of PRR success, the interaction with social benefit support had the opposite direction than expected. PRR parties resonated in regions where economic deprivation was combined with reactionary perceptions of social benefit policies. At the same time, the PRR parties achieved significant gains in the exact opposite circumstances, i.e. in economically prosperous regions where citizens were positively inclined towards social benefit policies. This result is probably due to the influence of the actual quality of the welfare system on the populist rhetoric itself, as it may be that in the more deprived regions where the welfare

system is generally worse, the PRR parties confront it as another negative outcome of the 'corrupt political establishment'.

Hypothesis 3 is clearly confirmed. PRR parties perform better in areas opposed to climate change mitigation policies. Regardless of economic conditions, the anti-environmental rhetoric of PRR parties finds resonance among voters wary of the economic implications of such policies. This finding takes on greater weight when considering that economic conditions are the strongest predictor of PRR percentages, but in this case, its influence is not enough to mitigate the effect of opposition to climate change mitigation policies.

Lastly, Hypothesis 4 explored the impact of anti-immigration sentiment on PRR parties' electoral performance in economically challenged regions. The results confirmed that antiimmigration sentiment was a potent electoral force for PRR parties especially in poorer regions, reflecting the wider academic consensus. PRR parties' anti-immigration rhetoric found resonance in regions where immigrants are perceived as competitors for limited resources and employment opportunities. However, this sentiment's effect on PRR support diminishes in more affluent areas, suggesting economic stability may temper immigration concerns.

The study's contribution to the literature is manifold. It highlights the importance of understanding the economic underpinnings of PRR support while highlighting the influence of localised attitudes towards government policies. This dual approach improves our comprehension of the spatial patterns of PRR success, offering a refined perspective on how economic and policy-related factors intertwine to shape the PRR electorate.

Looking forward, this research opens avenues for continued exploration into the dynamics of PRR party support. Future studies could delve deeper into the causal mechanisms linking economic conditions with policy preferences, possibly through a longitudinal lens. As the political landscape evolves, ongoing research could track how changes in public opinion towards immigration and climate policies might recalibrate the support base for PRR parties.

In closing, this paper not only confirms and challenges existing hypotheses about the rise of PRR parties but also invites further inquiry into the socioeconomic triggers of their success. Situating the phenomenon in a broader geographical and policy-related context extends an invitation to scholars to continue questioning the intricate realities of PRR politics, thereby improving our understanding and contributing to a more subtle dialogue on the future of European political stability and democratic integrity.

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