

POPULISM AND THE PANDEMIC: THE POLITICIZATION OF COVID-19 AND CLEAVAGE AGENCY AMONG POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES

Sabine Volk

University of Passau

Léonie de Jonge

University of Groningen

Lars Rensmann

University of Passau



Culminating more than a decade of crisis in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has opened an important window of opportunity for institutional and policy change, not only at the “reactive” level of emergency responses, but also to tackle more broadly the many socio-political challenges caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Building on this premise, the Horizon Europe project REGROUP (*Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic*) aims to: 1) provide the European Union with a body of actionable advice on how to rebuild post-pandemic governance and public policies in an effective and democratic way; anchored to 2) a map of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of Covid-19; and 3) an empirically-informed normative evaluation of the pandemic.



www.regroup-horizon.eu



info@regroup-horizon.eu



[@regroup_horizon](https://twitter.com/regroup_horizon)



[@regroup-horizon](https://www.linkedin.com/company/regroup-horizon)



[@regroup_horizon](https://mastodon.social/@regroup_horizon)
[@eupolicy.social](https://eupolicy.social/@regroup_horizon)



FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION
HORIZON EUROPE - RESEARCH AND INNOVATION ACTIONS
GRANT NO. 101060825

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Horizon Europe. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Abstract

This paper explores the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic and cleavage agency among populist radical right parties (PRRPs) across the European Union (EU). Conceptualizing PRRPs as meaning-making agents, we ask if and to what extent they have reshaped socio-political conflicts and cleavage politics through COVID-19 issue entrepreneurship. To this end, we draw on a small-N comparative analysis of three country and party cases from across Europe, covering different regions within the EU as well as different institutional settings, with PRRPs being either in opposition (AfD in Germany, FvD in The Netherlands) or in power (PiS in Poland). We conduct a critical discourse analysis of party mobilizations and discursive framing in these three country contexts based on an original qualitative corpus including party media and publications, manifestos, political speeches, and social media posts, published in the context of election campaigns in 2020/21. Our findings indicate that despite variation across cases, all PRRPs studied in this paper contributed to consolidating a new politico-cultural super cleavage between liberal pluralism and authoritarian populism, which ideologically frames all societal conflicts in terms of an antagonism between alleged “totalitarian elites” and the (values of the) “democratic people”.

Keywords: cleavage agency; populist radical right parties (PRRPs); super cleavage; anti-establishment; COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic may have first and foremost constituted a public health crisis; yet, it quickly turned into a political crisis in European democracies (Engler et al. 2021): Across Europe, governments struggled to reconcile “lockdowns” with liberal constitutions, and vaccine policy with democratic freedoms. A key factor in this pandemic crisis were Europe’s populist radical right party (PRRP) actors (Bobba & Hubé 2021; Zulianello & Guasti 2023).¹ Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, the anti-establishment politics of PRRPs had strongly shaped political and societal discourses in Europe, constructing novel political and social cleavages between “the true people” and the “liberal elites” (Mudde 2007). In a similar vein, from March 2020 onwards, PRRPs fashioned themselves as principal opposition forces, challenging elected institutions to manage the crisis (Ringe & Rennó 2022).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, scholars have sought to analyze the relationship between populism and COVID-19 (e.g. McKee et al. 2021; Pickup et al. 2020). Taking stock of the growing body of literature on this topic, Zulianello and Guasti (2023: 14) concluded that ‘the relationship between COVID-19 and populism has been far from straightforward’. On the demand side (i.e. focusing on the level of mass attitudes), their review article suggests (among other things) that anti-science attitudes and conspiracy beliefs feature prominently among populist voters (Zulianello & Guasti 2023). On the supply side (i.e. zooming in on the role of political actors themselves), studies have found that PRRPs *in opposition* initially used the pandemic to attack government (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart 2022), and then attempted to align it with their nativist agenda (Wondreys & Mudde 2022), while populist parties *in power* seemed to engage in denial before shifting to ‘blame-avoidance’ and ‘blame-shifting’ (Zulianello & Guasti 2023). What remains less clear is the relationship between demand- and supply-side factors. Specifically, we still know relatively little about the different ways in which PRRPs in Europe ‘performed’ the pandemic (see Moffitt 2015), and how this subsequently altered the political fault lines within European society.

This paper seeks to redress this gap. Conceptualizing PRRPs as meaning-making agents, we explore their COVID-19 issue entrepreneurship during the pandemic. Specifically, we ask how, why, and to which effect PRRPs politicized the pandemic. In answering these questions, we aim to shed new light on PRRP cleavage agency and (re)shaping of pre-existing and new socio-political conflicts in European societies. We do so by drawing on a small-N comparative analysis of three country and party cases from across the European Union (EU): Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, Forum for Democracy (FvD) in the Netherlands, and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. Our case selection covers not

¹ In this paper, we use Mudde’s definition, according to which PRRPs are primarily characterized by nativism, authoritarianism and populism (see Mudde 2007).

only different regions within the EU, but also very different institutional settings, with PRRPs being either in opposition (Germany, Netherlands) or in power (Poland) during the COVID-19 crisis. We conduct a critical discourse analysis of party mobilizations in the context of the countries' respective national or presidential elections taking place during the pandemic, focusing on the frames constructed by PRRP entrepreneurs. Our analysis draws on an original qualitative corpus including party media and publications, manifestoes, political speeches, and social media posts, published in the context of electoral campaigns within the first two years (2020/21) of the pandemic.

Our empirical analysis reveals important differences in how the pandemic was politicized across country contexts: while PRRPs in power proceeded to support government lockdowns, those in opposition accused ruling elites of allegedly introducing a “Corona dictatorship”. In doing so, they contributed to construing a new political cleavage between the “totalitarian, oppressive elites” and the “democratic, freedom-loving people”. Additionally, we trace the adoption and adaptation of several global conspiracy myths by PRRPs, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, where the pandemic served as a gateway for a wide range of conspiracies. Our paper makes an important contribution to the study of PRRP cleavage agency in contemporary Europe. Crucially, we complement existing demand-side studies on the reshaping of socio-political cleavages (Caramani et al. 2023).

Our argument proceeds as follows: First, we review the seminal literature on cleavages and cleavage politics in Europe, focusing on the supply-side of politics, and PRRPs in particular. Then, we explain this paper's research design and the employed methods of data collection and data analysis. The following empirical analysis of PRRP discourses during the pandemic delves into the three country and party contexts, shedding new light on their politicization of the pandemic. Finally, we discuss our qualitative findings by comparing and contrasting the cases, and formulating a synthesis on the new pandemic cleavage politics in Europe.

Theoretical framework

The study of the evolution of cleavages can broadly be separated into two complementary approaches: a ‘bottom-up’ and a ‘top-down’ approach (Rennwald & Evans 2014: 1109; see also Evans & Tilley 2012; Evans & de Graaf 2013). The bottom-up approach largely coincides with the demand side of politics (e.g. attitudes and voters), while the top-down approach refers to the supply side (e.g. parties). According to the ‘bottom-up’ theory, political conflicts are shaped by ‘structural political potentials that arise from the gradual evolution of social structure’ (Bornschiefer 2018: 212). In other words, cleavage structures change as a result of broad, macro-level changes such

as globalization, secularization and individualization. For instance, these changes can contribute to higher affluence and education, which can facilitate social mobility, or lead to new social stratifications and forms of material insecurity. This, in turn, can contribute to the erosion of boundaries between social classes or milieus and thereby weaken traditional voting patterns. This bottom-up approach attributes a rather passive role to political parties in the sense that they merely respond to changing social cleavages rather than actively shaping them.

By contrast, the ‘top-down’ approach, which has gained popularity in recent years but is still considerably less wide-spread, rejects purely structural accounts but instead focuses on the cleavage agency of political parties (i.e. the supply side). From this perspective, parties can help shape the evolution of social cleavages by providing voters with choices that allow for the political expression of preferences based on existing cleavages such as class or religion. Indeed, as Bornschier (2018) has noted, scholars have long emphasized the role of political actors in perpetuating existing cleavages, re-shaping them, or forming new ones altogether. Rennwald and Evans (2014) have demonstrated the importance of the ‘top-down’ approach in understanding differences in shifting patterns of class voting in Austria and Switzerland. By focusing on the strategies of social democratic parties, they show that, in contrast to their Swiss colleagues, Austrian social democrats maintained close ties to their working-class electorate, which resulted in weaker working-class support for the radical right. The underlying argument is that supply (i.e. political parties) can create demand for certain views.

From a conventional (‘bottom-up’) cleavage theory perspective, then, the emergence of political conflicts as well as the rise and fall of political parties is ultimately shaped by the gradual evolution of macro-level social structures, values, and cleavages in society-rather than demand being created by political agents as in ‘top-down,’ supply-side focus approaches (Bornschier 2018). In this bottom-up lens, the development and transformation of party systems-the political supply side are primarily viewed as the reflection of (changing) societal demand side and its conditions, i.e. (re-)configurations of social structures, demographics, group interests, values, and conflicts.

Among bottom-up theorists of party competition, it is widely accepted that historical dividing lines in society, or cleavages, which according to Lipset and Rokkan (1967) dominated and ‘froze’ the structure of party systems in European democracies, have largely crumbled. Just as societal groups and milieus that formerly bonded voters to parties have eroded over the last decades, the role of religion declined, and massive changes in occupational life in post-industrial society occurred which weakened the social ties that bound individuals to traditional social strata (Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021: 175). In other words, societal modernizations that changed the demographic composition and dominant dividing lines of post-industrial societies fostered the erosion of long-term alliances between social groups and political parties. Political conflicts, be-

havior, and voting, then, are today often only tenuously, if at all, related to conventional left-right divides. New research hereby confirms time and again that class location and education by now “only weakly distinguish mainstream left versus right parties,” especially among younger voter cohorts (Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021: 189). Accordingly, respective traditional patterns of party competition that are based on a left-right divide featuring, in particular, more redistributive or more market-oriented ideological positions on the economy, have increasingly faded (Norris & Inglehart 2019; Bornschieer 2010; Hooghe & Marks 2018; Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021).

Against the backdrop of a generally shared diagnosis among bottom-up approaches, which focus on structural changes affecting political demand as a key driver of party system change, it is important to note that different scholarly camps have emerged. Marks, Attewell, Rovny and Hooghe (2021) identify two major camps among demand side, bottom-up approaches. They distinctly and divergently theorize the structural effects of the erosion, or ‘defrosting,’ of traditional historical cleavages on the reconfiguration of political conflict and party competition. According to the first camp, more and more individuals in post-industrial societies now lead lives that are only tenuously encased by durable and homogenous social groupings. More importantly, this camp argues that the decline of traditional cleavages proceeds within the context of an ongoing dealignment process “in which political choice becomes short-term and oriented to particular issues or personalities” and political “preferences become a matter of individual choice” (Franklin et al. 1992; Dalton 2007). In this view, dealignment processes tend to produce a full-blown deconstruction of party systems and their underlying cleavages. Parties can hereby no longer count on specific social groups and organized interests that grant them stable support. Rather, they have to operate in increasingly unstable and competitive political environments displaying a high level of voter volatility, which forces them to offer better or more persuasive policy solutions to new issues.

The second camp argues that traditionally dominant cleavages have been accompanied or partially replaced by new political conflicts and divides—most importantly by cleavages based on cultural and social values. Most scholars in this camp, which can be categorized as neo-cleavage theory (Hooghe & Marks 2018), argue that such an adjustment, realignment, and partial ‘replacement’ has been a long time coming. According to proponents of neo-cleavage theory, of which there are many variations, exogenous social change remains presumably the primary cause of party system change. But societal transformations and the declining significance of many old divides in society have neither led to a comprehensive individualization that reduces political behavior to a multitude of individual preferences, nor, by consequence, to a full-blown deconstruction of hitherto existing party competition. Rather than a comprehensive restructuring of the electorate, the rise of new cleavages emerges alongside decreasingly salient older ones, while ‘a significant degree of volatility is likely to persist alongside structuration’

(Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021: 176). The response to changing cleavage structures and party system transformation thus come ‘chiefly in the form of new political parties that rise on a new cleavage’ whereby ‘processes of alignment and dealignment coexist as new divides become solidified among voters while old divides lose causal power’ (Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021: 176).

Already in the 1970s Ronald Inglehart (1977) points to a ‘silent revolution’ in democratic political cultures—a value revolution’ towards ‘post-material’ social value priorities favoring free individual self-expression, non-material concerns such as democratic participation and democratic equality, and social inclusion based on expanding, universalistic civil rights conceptions. For Inglehart, this value revolution has evolved in the wake of economic modernization processes that presumably engendered higher levels of material security, especially for the middle classes. However, the suggested longitudinal general trend towards the acceptance of individual self-expression values, which Inglehart and his collaborators empirically observe across modern liberal democracies over several decades (Inglehart & Welzel 2005), has not been unchallenged but points to reconfigured cleavage structures (Inglehart & Norris 2019). In fact, Inglehart and Norris (2019) recognize that the ‘silent revolution’ faces a full-blown backlash by now; since the turn of the century it has more and more transitioned into a politically articulated authoritarian-populist ‘counter-revolution’ that is no longer ‘silent’ but rather ‘noisy,’ in Europe and beyond (Rensmann 2017; Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021). To be sure, the origins of this emerging, increasingly salient new socio-cultural cleavage that arguably finds such a forceful political expression today are much older: Piero Ignazi (1992) was among the first to analyze the scope and political impact of a post-material backlash or ‘silent counter-revolution’ against transnational social value change diagnosed by Inglehart and others; accordingly, the former largely evolved in response and in step with the latter. Ignazi persuasively argues that the emergence of a full-blown new, value-based cleavage consequently started to reshape European party competition since the 1980s, giving rise to *both* new green parties and a post-material new extreme right (similarly: Kitschelt 1995). Hanspeter Kriesi (1998; Kriesi et al. 2008) relates newly salient value-based conflicts back to a newly emerging cleavage based in socioeconomic restructuring induced by globalization, namely between new middle-class winners of globalization and ‘losers of globalization.’

In general, we find it plausible to argue, as neo-cleavage theory suggests, that enormous societal transformations in the post-industrial, globalized age have helped restructure and partly replace dominant societal cleavages—without dissolving structuring cleavages altogether. Those structural changes did not only help generate new forms of social fragmentation, individualization, and the reconfiguration of structural conflicts. These transformations have also induced the partial breakdown of well-established cleavages that had long had a stabilizing effect on European politics and modern liberal

democracies in general (see Lipset & Rokkan 1967). In an early seminal contribution, Hans-Georg Betz (1994: 27) hereby suggests that the emergence of PRRPs could be seen as ‘a consequence of a profound transformation of the socioeconomic and sociocultural structure of advanced Western European democracies.’ This, in turn, has engendered opportunities for new parties, allowing them to ‘monopolize a new issue and thus find a niche in the new space of postindustrial politics,’ particularly where these issues had been neglected by mainstream parties (Betz 1994: 35). The erosion and restructuring process of societal cleavages thus helped newcomer parties to capture politico-cultural opportunities by focusing on new issues—and by politicizing and mobilizing voters along new lines of conflict. Accordingly, the emergence of the PRR party family in particular is commonly linked to the reconfiguration of cleavages, and ensuing processes of political dealignment and realignment.

First, we see much empirical support for the ‘bottom-up’ claim that voter volatility and party system change have evolved, and recently accelerated, in the wake of major post-industrial social transformations in a globalized and digital age that eroded many hitherto constitutive societal cleavages alongside traditional socio-political electoral milieus. Some long-established cleavages continue to matter, to be sure, on a European-wide scale, among them first and foremost a robust urban-rural divide. But in the process of realignments, even these divides have often transitioned into changed voting behavior. For instance, PRRPs and other authoritarian-populist parties generally gather significantly higher electoral support in rural areas than in urban ones (Rooduijn 2018). Jonna Rickardsson (2021) shows that in Sweden support for the PRRP Sweden Democrats is 33% higher in rural districts; even though some urban-rural divide effects can be explained by differences in income and individual characteristics of voters such as age and especially education, whereby a higher education ‘reduces odds of voting for the Sweden Democrats by 70% in non-urban areas and by 58% in urban areas’ (Rickardsson 2021: 231-233). We also agree with neo-cleavage theory that a restructuring has taken shape that reconfigured social cleavages, rather than a full-blown dissolution of social groups, values, ideological preferences and cleavages that allegedly turned voting into a mere of particular issues, personalities, and individual choice. Looking at (potential) voters for green parties as opposed to PRRP parties, as manifest in the Green-Alternative-Libertarian/Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist scale (GAL-TAN scale), we generally see significant distinctions in terms of levels of education, gender, occupation, locality across Europe, which actually further increase over time and are most strongly displayed among younger generational cohorts (Marks, Attewell, Rovny & Hooghe 2021). Underlying this reconfiguration, we argue, are increasingly salient and increasingly polarized conflicts over social values and cultural-identitarian issues that point to the evolution and consolidation of an emerging politico-cultural ‘super cleavage.’ On cultural value territory overshadowing most other interest conflicts, this super cleavage can be

traced back to the conflict between the progressive social value revolution initially diagnosed by Inglehart and the cultural counter-revolution that emerged since the 1980s but has become increasingly ‘noisy’ through social media ‘culture wars’ and PRRP mobilizations over the last decade (Grande 2022; Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012; Hooghe & Marks 2018; Norris & Inglehart 2019; Noury & Roland 2020; Rensmann 2017). The new politico-cultural super cleavage sets value orientations towards liberal-pluralist inclusiveness against authoritarian-populist (nostalgic) nationalism. It subsumes a whole range of issues that instantaneously become part of a cultural divide, combining (anti-)feminism and (trans-)gender politics, climate change and climate change skepticism, migration and anti-migration, and, we suggest, pandemic public health policies. The COVID-19 issue, we theoretically assume, has been incorporated into this politicized restructuring of cleavages and the emerging new politico-cultural ‘super cleavage’ that currently induces large-scale realignments and readjustments of party systems.

Second, however, we suggest that the relationship between transformed demand side conditions and the political supply side, or between changing cleavage structures and current party system change, should be viewed as an interactive and dynamic process (Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola 2023). We call into question the passivity ‘bottom-up’ neo-cleavage theory tends to attribute to parties as mere ‘respondents’ to structural changes. In fact, ‘structure and agency are two sides of the same coin, coexisting in a dialectic relationship,’ and with Deegan-Krause and Zoltan Enyedi we object to ‘reductionist approaches that regard political elites as “great men” on the one hand or mere superstructure on the other’ (Deegan-Krause & Enyedi 2010: 687). Therefore, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ approaches should not be viewed as competing but rather complementary. Party system change reflects structural transformations and new cleavage evolutions in society; yet parties should also be understood as active agents mobilizing, politicizing, shaping, realigning, and even partially constructing cleavages. Parties do therefore not only have the capacity to actively change the party system but also the cleavages themselves which underlie party competition and its patterns. Previous research has pointed to the politicization of conflicts and crises, and how this has contributed to political polarization-and ultimately the polarization of issues and cleavages-in the context of PRRPs (Moffitt 2016; Moffitt & Tormey 2014). A dynamic approach to both cleavage formation and party system change-and the transnational rise of PRRPs in particular-therefore integrates supply and demand side factors and seeks to reconstruct the transformative dynamic affecting both within particular politico-cultural, communicative, and institutional contexts (e.g. post-autocratic societies). Such a framework ‘emphasizes the interplay of contextual, structural, and agency-driven dimensions, understanding their interaction as a complex process rather than one-directional or in terms of a clear-cut causal mechanism.’ (Couperus et al. 2023, 261) In particular, PRRPs are arguably the most important political agents actively driving party

system change today. Without examining their contentious role in cleavage politics as an ongoing, multi-layered and interdependent process, it will be difficult to fully reconstruct the fast-paced contemporary dynamics of political conflict and party system change in Europe. They can neither be limited to, or solely explained by, changing structural conditions alone, nor by the rhetorical and ideological strategies of authoritarian-populist as cleavage agents in and of itself. This theoretical insight concerns both an adequate understanding of the emergence of a transnational, politicized and increasingly polarized socio-cultural super cleavage and its political mobilization, as well as the varying resonance, effects and political implications with regard to PRRP success and party system change at large. PRRPs tend to frame, often successfully so, the politico-cultural super cleavage, and thereby all societal conflicts, in terms of an anti-pluralist notion of an antagonism between alleged “totalitarian elites” and the (values of the) “democratic people.” The COVID-19 issue was expected to become politicized by PRRPs then within this ideological framework and according to the anti-pluralist side of the emerging politico-cultural super cleavage.

Third, then, following a proposed ‘cultural turn’ in the study of populism (Rensmann 2017; Rensmann, de Lange, and Couperus 2017), we hereby turn attention to the ways PRRPs may actively employ, shape, and change specific ‘politico-cultural opportunity structures.’ Such politico-cultural opportunity structures (PCOS) include nationally specific formations of value conflict (e.g. the persistent role of a politicized Catholicism-secularism divide in Poland as a driver of political conflict); distinct societal perceptions of political conflicts; particular cultural discourses and the changing ‘boundaries of the speakable’ in public discourse; as well as the social/historical meaning of (idealized) national narratives about national identity and the past (Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola 2023). Even though we claim that there are recognizable contours of an emerging transnational, value-based cultural “super cleavage,” we thus also attribute importance to national contexts and politico-cultural opportunities. Rather than viewing the transformation of cleavage structures and realignments *only* as a transnational process reflecting profound general transformations of socioeconomic and sociocultural structures in the wake of globalization, as Betz (1994) has initially suggested. case-sensitive analyses of national politico-cultural opportunity structures help explain cross-national variations in cleavage structures, party system change, and the success of PRRPs.

Ultimately aiming at a dynamic, process-oriented approach reconstructing the interplay of demand and supply, in this paper we initially focus on the supply side; in other words, we adopt a ‘top-down’ approach, notably by treating PRRPs as agents that play an active role in altering traditional political cleavage structures and bringing about related shifts in voting patterns. Focusing on PRRPs’ politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, we specifically emphasize the concept and context of crisis for PRR cleavage agency. Authors have identified the relationship between populism and crisis as ‘fuzzy’ (Kriesi

& Pappas 2015), pointing to an intricate and dialectic dynamic between the two. While populism is often regarded as the result of crises (e.g. Laclau 2005, 177), especially economic crises and recession, in line with our supply-side approach we emphasize that PRRPs also trigger and catalyze crises (Moffitt & Tormey 2014). As Moffitt (2016) argues, ‘crises are never neutral phenomena, but must be mediated and ‘performed’ by certain actors.’ PRRPs thus often act as the mediators and performers of crises, aiming to discredit the elected political establishment and further their own electoral gain.

We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic provides a critical context to study the cleavage agency of PRRPs during crises. From March 2020 onwards, the pandemic first and foremost constituted a health crisis, specifically a crisis of health care systems in Europe and beyond. Yet, European PRRPs - at least those in opposition - were quick to amplify the pandemic as a crisis of “mainstream” politics, the state, and democracy itself (Zulianello & Guasti 2023). For instance, PRRPs such as the Austrian FPÖ, the German AfD, and the Slovak L’SNS attempted to capitalize on the issue of the restricted civil rights during the ‘lockdowns’, claiming that their respective governments’ were about to implement an unconstitutional surveillance state (Lehmann & Zehnter 2022; Rensmann & de Zee 2022; Wondreys & Mudde 2020, 89).

In contrast, authoritarian populists in power were initially less able to polarize around the issue of pandemic policies - after all, they had to “manage crisis instead of performing it” (Stanley 2020; see also Buštiková & Baboš 2020). Nevertheless, throughout the years 2020-22, also PRRPs in power like Hungary’s Fidesz or Poland’s PiS strongly politicized the crisis, using polarizing strategies. For example, PiS articulated claims to protect Polish families from the coronavirus in conjunction with its pre-pandemic agitation against the liberal opposition, the EU, as well as internal ethnic and sexual minorities (Lipiński 2021, 123-24; Styczyńska & Zubek 2022, 119). By and large, initial research findings on the role of PRRPs during the pandemic point to particular politicizations of the COVID-19 public health crisis and multiple ways it was linked to other politico-cultural issues relating to cultural identity, cultural values, and anti-pluralist conceptions of democracy (Buštiková & Baboš 2020; Kaltwasser & Taggart 2022; Lehmann & Zehnter 2022; Rensmann & de Zee 2022; Ringe & Rennó 2022; Wondreys & Mudde 2022). Prior to delving into our case study analysis, the following section outlines the research design and methodology.

Research design

Aiming to shed new light on European PRRPs’ cleavage agency during the COVID-19 pandemic, we conduct a comparative analysis of three country cases: AfD in Germany, FvD in the Netherlands, and PiS in Poland. This relatively small number of cases allows

us to both provide the necessary case context, whilst also drawing broader conclusions beyond the individual cases. With regard to case selection, we consider countries that had scheduled key elections in the first two years of the pandemic (see Table 1). The underlying logic relates to our assumption that the run-up to elections provide a temporal context in which we may expect particularly high levels of PRRP activity - also for those PRRPs in opposition. Indeed, all three selected country cases held important elections within the first two years of the pandemic, namely direct presidential elections (Poland—originally scheduled for May 2020, and finally carried out in July 2020), and parliamentary elections (Netherlands—March 2021; Germany—September 2021).

Crucially, our case selection covers three different regions within the EU, namely post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (Poland), Central Europe (Germany), and Western Europe (Netherlands). At the same time, the cases vary in terms of their political and/or electoral systems within a liberal democratic framework, including a semi-presidential system (Poland), a parliamentary system with a relatively high threshold to enter the national parliament (Germany), and a parliamentary system without an entry threshold (Netherlands). Not least, the relative positions of the PRRPs within the respective national party systems strongly varies among these three countries, including a PRRP in power (Poland), a PRRP in opposition and behind a (for now) comparatively strong *cordon sanitaire* (Germany), and a more extremist PRRP in competition with a second PRRP within the same party system (Netherlands - i.e. Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom, PVV). For the Dutch case, we chose to focus on FvD (instead of the PVV) for two main reasons: first, operating from the fringes of the political spectrum, FvD was particularly vocal in politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic in the run-up to the 2021 election; second, as shown below, the positioning of FvD over the course of the pandemic is particularly interesting. While the party initially pushed for stricter lockdown measures, it soon made a complete U-turn by attributing the COVID-19 pandemic to George Soros and comparing the lockdown to the Nazi-occupation during WWII (Crum 2023).

In line with our qualitative-interpretive analytical framework, we built a multimodal corpus to analyze PRRP electoral campaigns during the pandemic (Table 1). To this end, we collected a wide variety of texts, ranging from official party publications such as manifestoes and platforms relating to the respective elections, speeches by key PRRP politicians, as well as social media data. For FvD, we focused in particular on the X (formerly: Twitter) profile of its political leader, Thierry Baudet (@thierrybaudet), because he functions as spokesperson and central figure of the party. By contrast, the AfD is a less leader-centric organization; most tweets are disseminated by the party's official account, while Alice Weidel is less active on X, and Alexander Gauland does not even have a verified X profile. PiS is more active on Facebook, so we chose to focus on its activities there (account name: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). We retrieved the manifestoes directly from the PRRPs' respective websites, and the speeches from the video sharing

platform YouTube. In terms of social media data, we scraped X data in 2022 (for Germany) and early 2023 (for The Netherlands), and thus before the impactful restrictions introduced in 2023. The Facebook dataset for the case of PiS was kindly shared with us by Artur Lipiński, who had generated the dataset for his work on PiS in 2020 (Lipiński 2020).

Table 1: Overview of cases and qualitative corpus.

Country case	Germany	Netherlands	Poland
PRRP	Alternative for Germany (AfD)	Forum for Democracy (FvD)	Law and Justice (PiS)
Type of election	Parliamentary	Parliamentary	Presidential
Time of election	September 2021	March 2021	May 2020, rescheduled for July 2020
Empirical material	AfD website: Election platform 2021 X (Twitter): AfD (@AfD) X (Twitter): individual AfD politicians	FvD website: Articles Renaissance Instituut (FvD partisan think tank): Articles X (Twitter): Thierry Baudet (@thierrbaudet)	PiS website: Program, (links to) statements, articles Facebook: account Prawo i Sprawiedliwość Facebook: account Mateusz Morawiecki
Data collection	June 2021 - September 2021	1 February 2021 - 15 June 2021	March 2020 - July 2020

We draw from (critical) discourse and frame analysis to analyze our qualitative corpus (Lindekilde 2014; Wodak 2001). In scrutinizing the rhetoric and discursive strategies applied in the data, we show how AfD, FvD, and PiS turn the COVID-19 pandemic into a political issue. We are particularly interested in how these parties and politicians politicized the pandemic to (try to) appeal to their voters, while scapegoating others, thus engaging in cleavage politics. Hence, following the theoretical approach of critical discourse analysis, we trace in-group and out-group (or: us and them) constructions. Applying frame analysis, we also examine how PRRPs frame the pandemic situation as such, including the health crisis as well as the preventive measures taken by the governments (in the Dutch and German cases) and by the EU (in the Polish case).

Findings

AfD in Germany: Using the pandemic against the “dictatorial” government

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, AfD was firmly established as the principal PRR actor within the German party system. Having started out as a socially conservative

and economically (neo-)liberal party in 2013, only a couple of years into its existence the party had veered to the right (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). As such it had entered the national parliament, the *Bundestag*, with 12.6 per cent of the overall cast vote in 2017, and one by one all regional parliaments (Rensmann 2018). In the fall of 2019, it had consolidated its local strongholds in the context of three Eastern German regional elections (Weisskircher 2020). While AfD was treated as a pariah by most of its political competitors, in February 2020 an Eastern German AfD party faction had landed a major coup: in contributing additional votes for a regional governor from the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP, *Freiheitlich-Demokratische Partei*) in order to jointly prevent a left-wing governor, AfD had demonstrated its capability to impact German party politics and coalition building.

When the pandemic hit Germany, AfD's response was inconsistent across regional and local party factions at first (Rensmann and de Zee 2022, 76), but then quickly consolidated around a populist elite critique, anti-system rhetoric, and conspiracy narratives. Indeed, Cain's (2022) analysis of AfD Facebook posts from January to December 2020, Lehmann and Zehnter's (2022) analysis of AfD press releases from January 2020 to March 2021, as well as Lewandowsky, Leonhardt and Blättle's (2022) analysis of AfD parliamentary speeches from March 2020 to spring 2021 underscore that AfD's reaction radicalized throughout the first year of the pandemic, and particularly from the fall of 2020 onwards. After initially criticizing the government's *management* of the pandemic (Lembcke 83), AfD soon framed the preventive measures as such as an "unlawful attack of the government against the people", while fashioning itself as a "defender of freedom" (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022, 13).

In the run-up to the 2021 general elections, AfD made the pandemic a central campaign issue alongside the long-standing issues of immigration and EU/Euro politics (Rensmann and de Zee 2022, 76). To begin with, the principal election platform entitled "Germany. But normal", approved at a party assembly in Dresden in April 2021, contains numerous mentions of the pandemic and the state-sponsored measures against the spread of the virus. The 200-page document expresses the AfD's fundamental critique of the government's pandemic politics, which allegedly constitute an infringement of German law and the constitution: "The federal and state government politicians have oftentimes violated the principles of German statehood, law and the constitution with their refugee, European and COVID-19 policies" (Alternative für Deutschland 2021, 12). Revealing a fair amount of corona skepticism, the election platform thus rejects the government's allegedly "disproportionate Corona-measures" such as face masks, lockdowns, vaccines, and the tracking app (Alternative für Deutschland 2021, 134).

In a similar vein, AfD heavily mobilized around the pandemic on social media. Adopting a more extremely anti-system rhetoric as well as anti-elitist conspiracy narratives, AfD politicians took advantage of the virtual space to deplore the supposed "corona dicta-

torship” instituted by the federal government (Cain 2022; Lehmann and Zehnter 2022; Rensmann and de Zee 2022, 78). In a tweet on 26 July 2021, AfD thus referred to the pandemic politics as a “totalitarian” attempt to oppress and control the pure people, taking up the international conspiracy discourse on the “plandemic”. In August 2021, AfD politicians went as far as to compare the alleged discrimination of non-vaccinated citizens with Third Reich antisemitism and the Holocaust. Among others, AfD MP Udo Hemmelgarn from the western German state of Northrhine Westphalia tweeted in August 2021: “Let us not forget that at the beginning of nationalist-socialist rule there was not Auschwitz, but the exclusion of people who were considered disruptive and harmful” (Hemmelgarn 2021; cited after Rensmann and de Zee 2022, 79), thus also revealing the ideological proximity to conspiratorial street protestors abusing the symbol of the “star of David” during the summer of 2021.

Crucially, AfD’s strategic framing both in the election platform and on social media bridged the new issue of the COVID-19 pandemic with previous issues, notably immigration and integration and AfD’s original issue, EU politics (Rensmann and de Zee 2022, 77). By way of example, the election platform conjured a continuation of allegedly anti-democratic and anti-constitutional politics by the government from the 2008 European financial crisis, to the 2015 migration and integration crisis and the 2020/21 pandemic crisis. The section on “Democracy and Rule of Law” starts out with: “The federal and state government politicians have repeatedly violated the principles of German statehood, law and the constitution with their refugee, European and Corona policies” (Alternative für Deutschland 2021, 12). In this context, governmental politics were framed as autocratic up to dictatorial and totalitarian, and specifically as “socialist”.

AfD’s politicization of the pandemic during the 2021 electoral campaign went along with the consolidation of movement-party strategies. Crucially, AfD factions and politicians, especially in Eastern Germany, entered into coalitions with the protest organizers of the German branches of the global anti-lockdown and anti-vax movements (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022, 11; Lembcke 81; Weisskircher 2023), the notorious “lateral thinkers” (*Querdenken*) (Daniel et al. 2023). For instance, AfD politicians co-organized protests against the government-mandated preventive measures, and appeared as guest speakers at events.

AfD’s politicization of the pandemic yielded a mixed electoral result. AfD won 10.3 per cent of the cast vote - 2.3 per cent less than in 2017. Nevertheless, its strong results in several Eastern German electoral districts reveal that the party hardly lost its appeal: AfD became the strongest force in parts of Eastern Germany, reaching relative majorities in nearly all electoral districts in Saxony and half of Thuringia (Arzheimer 2023). AfD thus won sixteen of the hard-to-get so-called first votes for “direct candidates” who enter parliament no matter their parties’ overall score. An AfD candidate even triumphed over exposed mainstream politicians such as Marco Wanderwitz (CDU), the

previous federal government's Commissioner for the New Federal States (Volk 2021).

Triangulated with relevant new publications, our empirical findings confirm the further ideological and discursive radicalization of AfD during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pre-pandemic AfD could be classified as a quite typical European PRRP (Rensmann 2018), it fully transformed into an anti-system movement party throughout 2020 and 2021 (Rensmann and de Zee 2022, 72). Crucially, AfD politicians adopted the extremist rhetoric associated with far-right movement players such as the Dresden-based 'Patriotic Europeans' (Volk and Weisskircher 2023), now delegitimizing the democratically elected institutions of the Federal Republic.

FvD in The Netherlands: COVID-19 as a gateway to conspiracy thinking

In the Netherlands, there is evidence of a similar radicalization trend within FvD. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, two PRRPs were active in the Netherlands, namely the PVV and FvD. This paper focuses on the latter, which is undoubtedly the most radical (if not extremist) PRRP in the Netherlands (de Jonge 2021). This was not always the case: FvD was founded as a Eurosceptic think tank in 2015 and registered as a political party in 2016. At the onset, the official goal of the party was to improve the state of democracy in the Netherlands by 'breaking through the party cartel' and giving Dutch voters a greater say in the decision-making process through binding referendums, popular initiatives, directly elected mayors and e-democracy (FvD 2016: 1). While the party's official party manifestos seem relatively 'moderate', the party leaders (most notably Thierry Baudet) have repeatedly made references to far-right themes. In 2015, for instance, Baudet expressed his wish for a 'predominantly white Europe' (Oude-nampsen 2020: 208), and in 2017, he warned about the alleged 'homeopathic dilution of the Dutch population' with people from other cultures, thereby popularizing the extreme-right *Great Replacement* conspiracy theory (Couperus & Tortola 2019: 113).

Despite its far-right profile (or perhaps because of it), the electoral ascent of FvD can be described as meteoric. The party first entered parliament in 2017 after winning two of the 150 seats in the *Tweede Kamer*. In 2019, FvD became the largest party in the Dutch Senate (with 12 seats) after garnering 16 in the Dutch provincial elections. Following a period of internal turmoil, the party won 5 per cent of the vote in the 2021 general elections, thereby quadrupling its parliamentary seats from 2 to 8. However, in May 2021, three FvD representatives split off to set up their own party, and in the 2023 provincial elections, FvD won just under 3 per cent of the vote. Notwithstanding its recent decline in the polls, the party was fairly successful during the pandemic, which the party sought to politicize to its own advantage.

In the Netherlands, the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on 27 February 2020. In

March, the Dutch government introduced an ‘intelligent lockdown’, which sought to keep the economy running whilst minimizing the spread of the virus. At the onset of the pandemic, FvD was actually one of the few parties in the Netherlands (alongside the PVV) that pushed for stricter lockdown measures (de Lange 2023; Louwerse et al. 2021). For instance, on 23 March 2020, Baudet accused the government of being too lax: ‘FvD advocates testing, testing, testing to protect our heroes in healthcare and patients’ (Baudet 2020, March 23). During the early phase of the pandemic, FvD’s criticism concentrated on governing parties and cabinet members rather than on ‘the establishment’ as such (de Lange 2023). However, this changed over the course of the pandemic: by April 2020, pleas for stricter lockdown measures started to give way for calls to transition out of the lockdown (Baudet 2020, April 7; April 15). The end of May constituted a critical juncture, when FvD’s critique of the government started to include some first allusions to conspiracy myths, notably by suggesting that the use of Hydroxychloroquine as a potentially effective medication against the virus. On 25 May 2020, Baudet tweeted a link to FvD’s own YouTube news show *FvD-Journaal*, which was entitled ‘A cure for Corona? Hydroxychloroquine?’ (Baudet 2020, May 25). While the party continued to downplay the severity of the virus, the blatant references to conspiracy myths subsequently ebbed down.² At the same time, the party started to perpetuate a discourse of democratic crisis by suggesting that freedom and democracy were being hollowed out under the pretext of the pandemic (de Lange 2023). This tendency is also evident in parliamentary speeches, during which FvD repeatedly described the government as ‘controlling’, ‘criminal’, ‘tyrannical’ and even ‘megalomaniacal’ (Bakema 2023).

It was not until January 2021 (which also marked the official start of the electoral campaign for the 2021 election) that the party started to criticize the lockdown measures by openly and wholeheartedly embracing conspiracy myths. At the end of January 2021, one day before the start of the World Economic Forum’s virtual Davos meeting, Baudet started to engage with the Great Reset narrative by tweeting a picture of a book entitled *COVID-19: The Great Reset* by Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret, stating the following: ‘Klaus Schwab explains it all. [...] For those who want to know why we are in this. What’s wrong with us. And how #FVD came to this resistance agenda!’ (Baudet 2021, January 25). In the run-up to said election, Baudet started to engage with a wide range of conspiracies ranging from the origins of the coronavirus and the alleged effects of the vaccinations to allegations of electoral fraud in the USA and Netherlands and conspiracies surrounding the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. During this time, Baudet also introduced the ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy in the Dutch House of Representatives. In May, Baudet tweeted the following: ‘#FVD requests parliamentary debate on The Great Reset & Build Back Better. Party cartel stops it - we see the same pattern

² It is interesting to note that the intensity of FvD’s use of conspiracist discourses about the coronavirus appear to mirror the rate of infections in the Netherlands; there is a sharp decline over the summer of 2020. A similar decrease can be observed in May 2021, as the third wave of COVID-19 infections ebbed out.

again and again. As if it shouldn't be known. As if it all has to take place in the shadows. Judge for yourself!' (Baudet 2021, May 18). During this time, FvD also aligned itself with the anti-lockdown movement *Viruswaanzin* (Virusnonsense) by amplifying their social media content and supporting their protests (de Lange 2023).

As the election drew closer, FvD launched a Trump-like campaign by touring through Dutch towns in a 'freedom caravan,' to allegedly 'set the Netherlands free' from oppressive lockdown measures, thereby mobilizing anti-lockdown supporters from across the political spectrum. It is worth noting that even though conspiracies featured prominently in the party's campaign and social media presence, the party's official election programme for 2021 seemed more moderate in this regard. Here the party merely advocated for a structural increase in the number of ICU beds, voiced its opposition against mandatory vaccinations, and emphasized the importance of evidence-based decision-making for any freedom-restricting measures without solid research and proof of their effectiveness (FvD 2021). By contrast, the 2023 platform proposes the introduction of a 'Freedom Law' that will make it impossible for future governments to ever impose lockdowns, vaccination mandates, access permits, or other 'dehumanizing restrictions on freedom' (FvD 2023).

The campaign strategy (i.e. mobilizing snit-lockdown supporters in the run-up to the 2021 election) proved fairly effective; according to a post-electoral survey conducted by Ipsos, 73 per cent of FvD voters stated that the COVID-19 measures played an important role in determining their vote choice (NOS 2021). Even though FvD managed to make a comeback in the 2021 election by securing 5 per cent of the vote, the party was unable to return to its glory days of 2019. However, the election campaign served as an entry point into the realm of conspiracy myths. From June 2021 onwards, the party started to appeal to an international audience with its conspiracy myths. On 3 June 2021, Baudet gave a speech in the Dutch Parliament in which he referred to a 2010 report compiled by the Rockefeller Foundation, which allegedly predicted the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, suggesting that the ensuing lockdown measures formed part of a plot to curtail individual freedom (Baudet 2021, June 4). He concluded by stating the following:

But the most important thing, and these are my closing words, is that we recognize that, on the pretext of some hysteria about this Chinese flu, an infrastructure has been set up that can be used again at any time for any random event. Lockdowns, face masks, keeping distance, no more traveling, no more shaking hands, having ridiculous experimental injections injected: this corona time was an obedience training. The House of Representatives and the Rutte government passed that training with flying colors. Congratulations. Klaus Schwab can be proud of you. The globalist plans can go ahead and the next step towards mass surveillance and total control can be taken.

This speech also appealed to international audiences; it went viral but was subsequently deleted from YouTube because it was in violation of the platform rules.

Since then, FvD has embraced a wide range of conspiracies, including various iterations of the ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy, questions about the authenticity of the moon landing, speculations about being ruled by reptiles, and even narratives suggesting that 9/11 was an inside job. Moreover, in 2022, the party aligned with the farmers’ protests against proposed regulations to reduce nitrogen emissions, claiming that these government measures formed part of an elite-driven plan to orchestrate food shortages, thereby once again aligning the protests with the ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy myth, according to which a global elite is using the COVID-19 pandemic to enforce radical social change.

PiS in Poland: Using the pandemic against the ‘LGBT virus’

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Poland was one of only two European Union countries that were governed by a populist radical right party. Law and Justice (PiS) had come into power in 2015, that is about 25 years after the democratic transformation, in whose aftermath populism, especially on the right end of the political spectrum, had played a key role in Polish politics (Stanley and Czeńnik 2019). Since 2015, PiS had been able to consolidate its power, again gaining the majority of the popular vote in the parliamentary elections in 2019.

Poland’s early response to the COVID-19 pandemic was primarily coordinated by PiS prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki and the health ministers. The government’s reaction went through at least three phases, ranging from ‘total neglect’ in February 2020 to the introduction of harsh restrictions in March and April 2020 (that included controversial exceptions for the Catholic Church) and finally to the quick relaxation in the immediate run-up to the presidential elections scheduled for 10 May 2020 (Styczyńska & Zubek 2022, 113).

Crucially, the context of the race for the presidential elections shaped PiS’s early policy and discursive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Expecting an electoral advantage for incumbent President Andrzej Duda if the elections were to take place as planned on 10 May, PiS tried to stick to the original date as long as possible, ultimately creating a legal chaos in the country (Kozłowska 2020; Vashchanka 2020). As the final round of elections in an ‘election marathon’ that had taken place over the previous months, PiS hoped to further consolidate its power by winning a second mandate for Duda. Combining both representative and political-administrative functions, controlling the office of the president would allow PiS to continue its radical right reform program. Yet, in the face of the tightening pandemic context the date of the presidential elections quickly became the ‘main bone of contention in the 1st half of the year [2020]’ (Styczyńska & Zubek 2022, 111). In fact, ‘[...] the struggle between PiS and the rest of the parties

over the date of the presidential election [...] coincided with or even overshadowed any debate on COVID-19' (Lipiński 2021, 121).

As a case of a PRRP in power, PiS's early policy response to the pandemic stood under the impression of the presidential elections campaign. In March 2020 PiS did not proclaim the 'state of emergency' or 'state of natural disaster' but merely mandated restrictions to social life ('lockdown') since, according to the Polish constitution, the state of emergency would have considerably delayed the presidential elections (Lipiński 2021, 120). Then, PiS pushed for elections to happen despite the pandemic restrictions, hoping that the 'rally 'round the flag' effect as well as the opposition's limited possibilities of campaigning in the context of restrictions might benefit their candidate. PiS effectively breached the constitution in the attempt to stick to the original date, e.g., by trying to push through a bill introducing postal voting only about a month before the date, even though changes in election legislation need to take place at least six months prior to elections according to the Polish constitution (Kozłowska 2020, 4). PiS's efforts notwithstanding, the rapid spread of the coronavirus in Poland and the state-mandated restrictions made it necessary to reschedule, and, after much controversy, the presidential elections finally took place on 28 June 2020 (the first round) and 12 July (second round).

Similarly, the presidential election campaign shaped PiS's discourse on COVID-19. While the party underwent a short period of discursive moderation at the very beginning of the pandemic, it rapidly returned to PRR discursive frames in the immediate run-up to the elections. In March 2020, PiS thus attempted to depoliticize the pandemic, aiming to create the image of a professional and responsible crisis manager. To this end, PiS inclusively appealed to the national people, national history, and national pride, framing Poland as a resistant country and positive example at the international level (Lipiński 2021, 122). For instance, Morawiecki posted on his official Facebook page on 11 March:

The coronavirus threat is a matter beyond all divisions - at this moment political disputes have no meaning and I will categorically stop all such narratives. In the face of the coronavirus, Polish society should be and is one. [...] Let us remember that the history of Poland teaches us one thing - when we are divided, we are vulnerable to external threats, but when united in a common fight, we have always emerged victorious from all the trials we have been faced with as a nation (Lipiński 2021, 122, transl. Lipiński)

Already from late March 2020 onwards, however, PiS returned to its previous populist radical right discourse, marked by its mobilization against the liberal opposition, the EU, and social minorities such as LGBT groups (Lipiński 2020). PiS's rhetoric radicalized especially when the Civic Coalition (KO), the main opposition actor, replaced their

presidential candidate Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska with the mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski, on 15 May 2020 (Lipiński 2021, 123). When opposition actors demanded to postpone the election, PiS also blamed them for undermining Polish democracy (Lipiński 2021, 127). Moreover, the party politicized the EU's slow response to the pandemic to advocate yet again a more intergovernmental model of integration (Lipiński 2021, 123; Styczyńska & Zubek 2022, 119).

Not least, faced with the new KO candidate Trzaskowski who presented himself as a supporter of liberal gender relations and LGBT rights, presidential candidate Duda took up again a traditionalist discourse focused on conservative visions of family and gender relations in the context of the pandemic. As Lipinski observes, 'the aim of PiS to protect Polish families from COVID-19 was occasionally articulated together with homophobic discourse defining LGBT as an 'ideology' that was "worse than communism"' (Lipiński 2021, 124). On top of that, ultraconservative and Church actors spread conspiracies framing the pandemic as a 'punishment' for the spread of 'LGBT ideology' (Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 1-2).

Incumbent president Andrzej Duda won the second round of the presidential election on 12 July 2020 with 51,03 per cent of the popular vote. In the aftermath of the election, PiS downplayed the COVID-19 pandemic (Styczyńska & Zubek 2022, 114). Instead, anti-leftist rhetoric marked PiS discourse in the summer of 2020 (Rak 2021).

Conclusion

These different case studies show that PRRPs in Germany, the Netherlands and Poland played an important role in politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic. The way in which this was done, however, differed across the cases. In Germany, the PRR opposition party AfD politicized the pandemic to denounce the allegedly 'totalitarian' policies of Merkel's coalition government. In the Netherlands, FvD used the pandemic to insert all sorts of conspiracy myths into the public discourse, including the idea that the pandemic was staged by a morally corrupt, globalist elite to curtail democratic rights and individual freedoms. In Poland, the governing PRRP PiS's pandemic discourse agitated against the liberal opposition and social minorities such as LGBT communities. Although the pandemic was politicized differently in these three countries, it did serve as a catalyst for reinforcing discourses and frames that are at the heart of PRRPs in these varying countries, thereby reinforcing a new politico-cultural super cleavage.

Specifically, our research findings on the role of PRRPs during the pandemic confirms that PRRPs specifically politicized the COVID-19 public health crisis and linked it to other authoritarian-populist frames and narratives-in particular in relation to social minorities, cultural identity, cultural values, and anti-pluralist conceptions of democracy.

PRRPs hereby sought to use the crisis for cleavage agency. By doing so, these parties played an active role in hardening and intensifying already existing post-material lines of conflict. The analyzed PRRPs tended to frame, often successfully so, conflicts on public health measures within the frame of an antagonism between alleged “totalitarian elites” and the (values of the) “democratic people.” Crucially, these parties contributed to the creation and consolidation of a newly emerged, transnational politico-cultural super cleavage, which, in turn, is fueling broader shifts in European party systems. This cleavage, the formation of which should be understood as a dynamic process involving structural transformations as well as demand side and supply side factors, subsumes a whole range of issues that instantaneously become part of a cultural divide, combining (anti-)feminism and (trans-)gender politics, climate change and climate change skepticism, migration and anti-migration, and pandemic public health policies. Our analysis of PRRP agents shows that the COVID-19 issue became hereby indeed incorporated into binary ideological antagonisms and issue politicizations reflecting the anti-pluralist, authoritarian-populist and nationalist-exclusive side of the value-based, politico-cultural super cleavage that currently induces large-scale realignments and readjustments of European party systems. The politicization of Covid-19 by PRRPs helped overall reinforce this new super cleavage. However, our research findings on COVID-19 responses also indicate that it remains an important task to pay attention to cross-national variations of cleavage structures and restructuring, and the particular national contexts, frames, and politico-cultural opportunity structures in which PRRPs actively shape specific political conflicts and cleavages.

While it is clear that by politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic, PRRPs contributed to the construction of a new politico-cultural super cleavage, it is less clear whether the pandemic represents a typical (illustrative) case of PRRPs’ performance of crises, or whether it stands as a unique scenario. Given its profound impact on public and private spheres, it is plausible that the latter holds true. Future studies should consider whether and to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic compares to other crises such as economic or geopolitical crises in terms of PRRP cleavage agency.

References

Primary sources

Bakema, Jan-Thieme. 2023. Dataset: Parliamentary Speeches about COVID-19 by FvD, 5 March 2020 to 10 March 2022.

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2020 (March 23). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1242053847281012736>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet] 2020 (April 7). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1247506302747754496>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2020 (April 15). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1250516386801164288>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2020 (May 25). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1265033564292370432>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2021 (January 25). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1353794703339171850>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2021 (March 17). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1372156760547549187>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2021 (May 18). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1394677488371048452>

Baudet, Thierry. [@thierrybaudet]. 2021 (June 4). Twitter. <https://mobile.twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/1400899020961222659>

FvD [Forum voor Democratie]. 2016. *Statuten*. Retrieved December 1, 2020, from DNPP [Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties] : <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/11144/1/FvD%20Statuten%202016.pdf>

FvD [Forum voor Democratie]. 2021. *Verkiezingsprogramma: Stem Nederland terug*. Retrieved 1 October 2023, from DNPP [Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties] <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/86169/>

FvD [Forum voor Democratie]. 2023. *Verkiezingsprogramma: Hoop, optimisme, herstel*. Retrieved 10 October 2023, from DNPP [Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties] <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/87726/>

Lipiński, Artur. 2020. Dataset: Facebook posts by Prawo I Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice), January 1, 2020 to May 30, 2020.

Secondary Sources

Betz, Hans-Georg. 1994. *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Bobba, Giuliano and Nicolas Hubé. 2021. *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bornschieer, Simon. 2018. Globalization, Cleavages, and the Radical Right. *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, edited by Jens Rydgren, 212-38. New York: Oxford Uni-

versity Press.

Couperus, Stefan, Lars Rensmann and Pier Domenico Tortola. 2023. Historical legacies and the political mobilization of national nostalgia: Understanding populism's relationship to the past. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31 (2): 253-267.

Couperus, Stefan, and Piero Tortola. 2019. Right-Wing Populism's (Ab)use of the Past in Italy and the Netherlands. *Debats: Journal on Culture, Power and Society*, 4 (Special Issue 2): 105-118. doi:10.28939/iam.debats-en.2019-9

Crum, Ben. 2023. Party System Hospitality, Internal Strife and Radicalization: The Evolution of the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* and the *Forum voor Democratie* in the Netherlands. In *Populist Parties and Democratic Resilience: a Cross-national Analysis of Populist Parties' Impact on Democratic Pluralism in Europe*, edited by Ben Crum and Alvaro Oleart, pp. 120-137. London: Routledge.

Dalton, Russel J. 2007. Partisan mobilization, cognitive mobilization and the changing American electorate. *Electoral Studies* 26 (2): 274-286.

Deegan-Krause, Kevin, and Zsolt Enyedi. 2010. Agency and the Structure of Party Competition: Alignment, Stability and the Role of Political Elites. *West European Politics* 33 (3): 686-710.

de Jonge, Léonie. 2021. Is the (Mass) Party Really Over? The Case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy. *Politics and Governance* 9 (4): 286-295.

de Lange, Sarah. 2023. The Netherlands: Divergent Paths for the Populist Radical Right. In *Populists and the Pandemic*, edited by Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó, 262-272. London: Routledge.

Evans, Geoffrey, and James Tilley. 2012. How Parties Shape Class Politics: Explaining the Decline of the Class Basis of Party Support. *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (1): 137-61.

Evans, Geoffrey, and Nan Dirk de Graaf. 2013. Explaining Cleavage Strength: The Role of Party Positions. In *Political Choice Matters: Explaining the Strength of Class and Religious Cleavages in Cross-National Perspective*, edited by Geoffrey Evans and Nan Dirk de Graaf, 2-36. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franklin, Mark N., Thomas Mackie, and Henry Valen. Eds., 2009. *Electoral Change: Responses to Evolving Social and Attitudinal Structures in Western Countries*. Colechester: ECPR.

Grande, Edgar. 2023. Civil Society, Cleavage Structures, and Democracy in Germany. *German Politics* 32 (3): 420-439.

Hooghe, Liesbeth, and Gary Marks. 2018. Cleavage Theory Meets Europe's Crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the Transnational Cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (1): 109-135.

Ignazi, Piero. 1992. The Silent Counter-Revolution. Hypotheses on the Emergence of Extreme Right-wing Parties in Europe. *European Journal of Political Research* 22 (1): 3-34.

Inglehart, Ronald. 1977. *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. New Jersey: Princeton.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. 2019. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kitschelt, Herbert. 1995. *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kozłowska, Marta. 2020. *MIDEM Policy Brief: Die Präsidentschaftswahl in Polen 2020*. MIDEM, Dresden.

Kriesi, Hanspeter, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschier, and Timotheos Frey. 2008. *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lipiński, Artur. 2021. Poland: 'If We Don't Elect the President, the Country Will Plunge into Chaos,' in: Bobba, G., Hubé, N. (Eds.), *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe*. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 115-129.

Lipset, Seymour M., and Stein Rokkan. 1967. *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. Toronto: The Free Press.

Louwerse, Tom, Ulrich Sieberer, Or Tuttnauer and Rudy B. Andeweg. 2021. Opposition in Times of Crisis: COVID-19 in Parliamentary Debates. *West European Politics* 44 (5-6): 1025-1051.

Marks, Gary, David Attewell, Jan Rovny, and Liesbeth Hooghe. 2021. Cleavage Theory. In: Riddervold, Marianne, Jarle Trondal, and Akasemi Newsome (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham.

McKee, Martin, Alexi Gugushvili, Jonathan Koltai, and David Stuckler. 2021. Are Populist Leaders Creating the Conditions for the Spread of COVID-19? Comment on 'A Scoping Review of Populist Radical Right Parties' Influence on Welfare Policy and Its Implications for Population Health in Europe. *International Journal of Health Policy and Manage-*

ment 10(8), 511-515.

MIDEM. 2021. Corona und Rechtspopulismus. MIDEM Jahresstudie 2021. Dresden.

Moffitt, Benjamin. 2015. How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism. *Government and Opposition* 50(2): 189-217.

Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2018. Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda. *Comparative Political Studies* 51 (13): 1667-1693. <https://doi-org/10.1177/0010414018789490>.

Norris, P., and R. Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

NOS. 2021. 'Welke rol speelde corona in het stemgedrag?' [What role did corona play in voting behavior?]. (March 18). Retrieved October 1, 2023, from: <https://nos.nl/collectie/13860/artikel/2373141-welke-rol-speelde-corona-in-het-stemgedrag>.

Oudenampsen, Merijn. 2020. *The Rise of the Dutch New Right: An Intellectual History of the Rightward Shift in Dutch Politics*. London: Routledge.

Pickup, Mark, Dominic Stecula, and Clifton van der Linden. 2020. Novel Coronavirus, Old Partisanship: COVID-19 Attitudes and Behaviours in the United States and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 53(2), 357-364.

Rak, Joanna. 2021. Framing enemies by the state television: delegitimization of anti-government protest participants during the first wave of the pandemic in Poland. *Journal of Contemporary Central Eastern Europe* 29: 157-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2021.2007601>

Rennwald, Line, and Geoffrey Evans. 2014. When Supply Creates Demand: Social Democratic Party Strategies and the Evolution of Class Voting. *West European Politics* 37 (5): 1108-35.

Rensmann, Lars, Sarah de Lange, and Stefan Couperus. 2017. Editorial to the Issue on Populism and the Remaking of (Il)Liberal Democracy in Europe. *Politics and Governance* 5 (4): 106-111. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1328>.

Rensmann, Lars. 2017. The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in the Digital Age. *Politics and Governance* 5 (4): 123-135. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1123>.

Rensmann, Lars. 2018. Radical Right-Wing Populists in Parliament: Examining the Alternative for Germany in European Context. *German Politics and Society* 36, 3: 43-71. <https://doi:10.3167/gps.2018.360303>.

Rensmann, Lars, and Thijs de Zee. 2022. The Pandemic Factor: The COVID-19 Crisis in the Alternative for Germany's 2021 Federal Election Campaign. *German Politics & Society* 40, 4: 69-103. <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2022.400404>.

Rickardsson, Jonna. 2021. The urban-rural divide in radical right populist support: the role of resident's characteristics, urbanization trends and public service supply. *The Annals of Regional Science* 67: 211-242 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-021-01046-1>

Rooduijn, Matthijs. 2018. What Unites the Voter Bases of Populist Parties? Comparing the Electorates of 15 Populist Parties. *European Political Science Review* 10, 3: 351-68, <https://doi:10.1017/S1755773917000145>

Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, and Paul Taggart. 2022. The Populist Radical Right and the Pandemic. *Government and Opposition*, 1-21 [online first]: <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.46>.

Stanley, Ben, Cześniak, Mikołaj. 2019. Populism in Poland, in: Stockemer, D. (Ed.), *Populism Around the World: A Comparative Perspective*. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 67-87.

Styczyńska, Natasza, and Marcin Zubek. 2023. Poland: The “Cardboard State” Versus the Virus, in: Lynggaard, K., Jensen, M.D., Kluth, M. (Eds.), *Governments' Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Europe: Navigating the Perfect Storm*. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 111-121.

Turska-Kawa, Agnieszka, Peter Csanyi, and Rudolf Kucharčí. 2022. From the ‘Rally ‘round the Flag’ Effect to a Social Crisis of Confidence: Poland and Slovakia in the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Comparative Politics*. 15 (1): 20-38.

Vashchanka, Vasil. 2020. Political Manoeuvres and Legal Conundrums Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: the 2020 presidential election in Poland. International IDEA, Stockholm.

Wondreys, Jakub and Cas Mudde. 2022. Victims of the Pandemic? European Far-Right Parties and COVID-19. *Nationalities Papers* 50(1): 86-103.

Zulianello, Mattia, and Petra Guasti, P. 2023. The Demand and Supply of Pandemic Populism: A Global Overview. *Government and Opposition*, 1-20 [online first]: <https://doi:10.1017/gov.2023.35>.