

PRESS RELEASE

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Why people vote for “populists” – researchers from the University of Mannheim report

- EPoS Economic Research Center of the Universities of Bonn and Mannheim publishes new paper
- Swing voters examined with equilibrium model

Bonn, Mannheim, Germany, 21.11.2023 – The fear of losing office in the next election provides a strong incentive for political leaders to satisfy voters. Those in power are particularly prepared to change their political course if the potential successor may belong to a populist party. The threat of voters to switch to populists has a serious impact. These are findings of the discussion paper “Shaking Up the System: When Populism Disciplines Elite Politicians” by the EPoS Economic Research Center at the Universities of Bonn and Mannheim.

Unlike business managers, politicians do not receive bonuses for good performance during their term of office. What incentives drive the government to satisfy the electorate? “Politicians from established parties don't want to be voted out of office – least of all by populists. With our research model, we show how effective the ‘populist threat’ is,” says Nicolas Bonneton from the EPoS Economic Research Center.

Swing voters know the shortcomings of populists

Even though they are aware of the possible competence deficiencies of populists with no experience of government, rational voters can sometimes find it useful to vote for a populist. These disadvantages are priced in as if in a cost-benefit analysis. Established politicians are hit particularly hard by the “punishment” from these voters. If establishment politicians are sufficiently afraid of voters, it may induce them to focus on the wishes of the broad electorate rather than sticking to ideologically based goals.

Populist “warning” in Germany

“In the short to medium term, this populist pressure from dissatisfied swing voters in Germany is more of a warning – this is especially true by international comparison,” say the researchers. “The probability of replacing a government led by established parties with one led by populists is relatively low in Germany. Our proportional representation electoral system means that establishment parties, if they are united, can keep populist parties out of government even when those receive an increasing vote share. As a consequence, we are hardly seeing any changes of course on the issues of immigration and nuclear power, i.e. issues that many voters view differently to the government according to representative population surveys.”

Immigration policy in Denmark

The situation is different in Denmark, for example. Here, the Social Democratic Party has been following the broad shift in public opinion for years and is pursuing a restrictive immigration policy. “The example of Denmark shows how the threat of being replaced by a right-wing populist party can influence the policies of an established party,” say the authors. In Germany, too, the populist threat to established parties will increase in the long term if dissatisfaction with the course of the governing parties increases accordingly.

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The model

The research of the EPoS Economic Research Center examines the incentives of politicians and voters in a formal equilibrium model with rational voters. The focus is on the conditions under which an electoral strategy that potentially favors a populist party is optimal for voters. The behavior of swing voters was examined in contrast to core supporters of a party. The model thus explains both the strong increase and decrease in support for populist parties.

The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Access the full discussion paper here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers/archive/dp473>

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Authors

Emmanuelle Auriol, Professor in Economics, Toulouse School of Economics

Nicolas Bonneton, Assistant Professor in Economics, University of Mannheim and member of EPoS Economic Research Center

Mattias Polborn, Professor of Economics and Political Science, Vanderbilt University

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Established in 2018, [the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS](#), a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

Press Contact

Sonja Heer
Rothenbaumchaussee 185
20149 Hamburg, Germany
Telefon + 49 (0) 40 82244284
Sonja.Heer@econ-news.de

Contact

Prof. Nicolas Bonneton
University of Mannheim
nicolas.bonneton@gmail.com

Prof. Mattias Polborn
Vanderbilt University
mattias.polborn@vanderbilt.edu

CRC TR 224 Office, Marja Eisheuer

phone | +49 228 737926

email | crctr224@uni-bonn.de

www.crctr224.de