


To rule or not to rule? An experimental study of the electoral ramifications of claims to (not) rule with radical right populist parties

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Abstract

In a between-subjects experiment ($n = 3270$) conducted in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), we examine the electoral ramifications of claims by a right-wing mainstream party on their willingness to rule or not with RWPPs (radical right populist parties). Participants were exposed to a social media post by the largest right-wing party (New Flemish Alliance, N-VA) in which it either accepts or rejects ruling with the main RWPP in Flanders (Vlaams Belang, VB). Findings reveal a main effect on propensity to vote (PTV) for the RWPP: in the inclusion condition the propensity to vote for the RWPP is significantly higher than in the exclusion condition; this holds particularly for policy-driven voters. The mainstream party, however, nor gains or loses electoral support. This suggests a legitimization effect: claims by mainstream parties on willingness to rule with RWPPs serves the former, while mainstream parties do not gain electorally.

Keywords

Belgium, cordon sanitaire, experiment, government formation, ostracization, radical right

Introduction

Facing the rise of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) all over Europe, politicians from mainstream parties, especially right-wing parties do not know how to react. Should they collaborate with those parties or dismiss them? A core question in that respect is whether they are open to collaborate with those that perform well at the ballot box. The question is highly salient after the elections, but even before, during the (permanent) campaign. This question has received different answers recently. In the Netherlands, the liberal party VVD publicly declared that it was open to governing with the radical right Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders. After the electoral victory of PVV, several commentators claimed that the rise of this party was due to the claim made by the VVD leader during the campaign. According to them, it increased the credibility of PVV, pushing voters in the arms of this party, and especially pushing mainstream right-wing voters (from VVD) to vote for the RWPP (NU.nl, 2024).¹ In neighboring Flanders, however, Bart De Wever, party leader of N-VA in the run-up

to the June 2024 elections clearly excluded VB with a “definitely no”.² While polls predicted a landslide victory for VB, eventually N-VA remained the largest party. Research revealed that especially during the campaign they won over many voters which could be due to his ostracization strategy (Jacobs, 2024; Pauwels, 2011).

What strategy to adopt towards RWPPs is the question that many politicians from the mainstream right have in mind. But it is also a question that political scientists have discussed. The debate on potential government participation of RWPPs has developed into a rich research agenda in which different aspects are being examined (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). The extent to which non-issue-based

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reactions regarding inclusion or exclusion (i.e., a cordon sanitaire) of RWPPs in and from government shapes electoral outcomes has attracted some scholarly attention (Muis et al., 2022; Riera and Pastor, 2022). Based on observational data, however, no definitive answer can be provided. By contrast, debates on the electoral impact of claims made during the campaign about the inclusion or exclusion of RWPPs from government remains scarce. A few studies have studied the claims made by mainstream parties, especially in context like in Belgium where at the national level a cordon sanitaire blocking any coalition with the populist right remains in place (Jacobs, 2024). But we do not know what actual effect inclusion or exclusion claims may have on voters.

This study aims precisely to answer this question. We explicitly focus on parties' campaign rhetoric on their willingness to rule with RWPPs. We adopt an experimental approach that exposes voters to claims made by a mainstream right-wing party on its willingness (or refusal) to rule with RWPPs after the elections. We examine effects that those claims have on voters' propensity to vote for the RWPP and mainstream right party that made the claim, while also assessing subsets of voters. This experimental design serves to disentangle the underlying causal mechanism, clarifying how claims on exclusion and inclusion of RWPPs affect individual-level voting behavior. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first experimental study exploring the electoral ramifications of claims by mainstream parties to include or exclude RWPPs on electoral behavior for both the ostracized and mainstream party. We build further on prior experimental evidence which has assessed effects of ostracization on the excluded party (Van Spanje, 2018). We report evidence from a between-subjects survey experiment ($n = 3270$) conducted in Flanders, i.e., the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, a context where a strong right-wing party (N-VA) closely competes with a successful RWPP (VB) with a cordon sanitaire being a salient issue. While in some respects it is a specific case, the context is similar to other countries with a cordon sanitaire coupled with a strong radical-right party, such as Germany or France. Participants were exposed to two main scenarios on potential government collaboration in which the largest right-wing party (N-VA) claims to be either willing or unwilling to rule with the RWPP Vlaams Belang (VB).

Theoretical framework

Mainstream party strategies

Since RWPPs have emerged on the electoral landscape, scholarship has explored mainstream party responses to RWPPs. Downs (2001) has introduced a dichotomy between disengage strategies (referring to ignoring these parties, bans or legal restrictions, refusal to join coalitions)

and engage strategies (co-opt or adoption of policies, distinct forms of collaboration). Others have further refined these strategies. Meguid (2005) proposes three types of responses: dismissive, accommodative or adversarial. Bale (2003) distinguishes between hold, defuse and adopt strategies. These different strategies can be perceived as a continuum ranging from legal restrictions or bans, a cordon sanitaire, stigmatization or isolation, adopting views or imitation, to (government) collaboration (Bourne and Casal Bértoa, 2017; Meguid, 2005; Riera and Pastor, 2022; Van Heerden and Van Der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje, 2018). Some reactions are issue-based (i.e., imitation), while others are non-issue based (cordon sanitaire). In this study, we focus mostly on the latter while isolating its effect.

The exclusion strategy corresponds to a political cordon sanitaire. It refers to a specific situation in which mainstream parties agree to not form a coalition at any level with a given party which Downs (2001) calls a 'blocking coalition'. A cordon sanitaire is a far-reaching type of ostracization aimed at thwarting RWPPs' chances to assume office, occupy power positions, and shape policy outcomes. Motivations to maintain a cordon sanitaire are primarily grounded in claims that the ostracized party is extremist and unfit to rule, offering a justification for the political act of exclusion (Jacobs, 2024). Well-known countries where mainstream parties have formally installed a cordon sanitaire include Belgium and France (Biard, 2021). Other contexts (e.g., Germany) have more far-reaching instruments in line with the principle of 'militant democracy', such as party bans (Bourne and Casal Bértoa, 2017). Mainstream parties can, however, also opt for collaboration with RWPPs and join a (minority) government (Downs, 2001). For long, (minority) coalitions including RWPPs were exceptional, but under the impulse of RWPPs' recent electoral success its prevalence has risen with RWPPs in power in Italy and Austria, and formally supporting minority cabinets in the Netherlands, Norway or Sweden (Akkerman and De Lange, 2012; Riera and Pastor, 2022).

Electoral ramifications of claims on inclusion or exclusion for RWPPs

Inclusion or exclusion of RWPPs is a strategic, non-issue-based strategy which is usually influenced by values, and by perceptions of those parties as a threat for democracy (Jacobs, 2024). Research has studied how being open, or rather being reluctant, to govern with RWPPs will affect the electoral performance of those parties, but also of the mainstream parties that oppose or accept to govern with RWPPs. This is because the mainstream right and RWPPs typically closely compete for voters (Meguid, 2005).

A first strand of literature perceives a cordon sanitaire as potentially harmful for RWPPs for a variety of reasons.

First, consistent exclusion could signal to strategic voters that these parties are not a viable option if they want their vote to influence who will be in power (Heinisch, 2003; Pauwels, 2011). RWPPs may then be subject to views that they fail to deliver which can jeopardize their electoral fortune: staying in the opposition eternally, may foster perceptions of irrelevance or lack of efficacy which could harm their electoral attractiveness in the long run (Bos and Van der Brug, 2010). Second, a cordon sanitaire could elicit views of RWPPs as extremist and serve as an instrument of stigmatization (Bolin et al., 2023; Van Heerden and Van Der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje and Azrout, 2019), which could be especially efficient in Western democracies where anti-prejudice norms prevail (Blinder et al., 2013). Hence, following this line claims on exclusion should yield lower electoral support.

However, other scholars have argued for the opposite effect, suggesting that ostracization via a cordon sanitaire can give an electoral impetus (Downs, 2012). Ostracization allows RWPPs to maintain their outsider status as a challenger party, act as a victim of unjust behavior by political elites and construct an image as a martyr which could increase its appeal to voters (Jacobs and Van Spanje, 2021). Meguid (2005) has found that adversarial strategies are conducive to helping niche parties. Downs and colleagues (2009: 152) have stated that “the evidence from select countries suggests that strategies of isolation, ostracism and demonisation prove surprisingly ineffective at rolling back or even further containing threats to the democratic order”. Prior studies have observed that distinct disengagement strategies –e.g., persecution, isolation or stigmatization – can foster electoral support for RWPPs (Jacobs and van Spanje, 2020) or does not have an effect once a party has entered the party system and has been consolidated (Van Heerden and Van der Brug, 2017). Backlash effect in which ostracization backfires have been documented (Jacobs and Van Spanje, 2021). Research in the Dutch context, studying a cordon sanitaire directed against the Freedom Party (PVV) by the mainstream right, found electoral effects. Van Spanje and de Graaf (2018) establish in a comparative study that systematic ostracization can lower challenger parties’ electoral support, especially when combined with an issue-based response and imitating a party (parroting the pariah); experiments in the Dutch context confirm this finding (Van Spanje, 2018), although others have found no empirical evidence (Krause et al., 2023). These prior studies, however, focus on ostracization in the context of accommodation, while we test the isolated effect of a cordon sanitaire.

Similarly, one could ask to what extent claims to rule with a party (inclusion) affects RWPPs electoral support. First, if mainstream parties claim that they are willing to rule with a political party, this could signal to voters that a RWPP is not extremist, which could legitimize the party and consolidate it in the party landscape (Down and Han, 2020;

Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). This acceptance could operate as a catalyst for further normalization of RWPPs (Askim et al., 2021). Second, willingness to rule with a RWPP could be seen as a confirmation that it is generally recognized as a viable coalition partner and treated like any mainstream party (Bos and Van der Brug, 2010). This could boost electoral support for RWPPs, especially among voters who care about the government composition or policy change (see later). Still, opposite arguments can also be made, namely non-issue-based strategies hindering the electoral success of niche parties (see Meguid, 2005). RWPP supporters might fear that government participation will result in moderation-inclusion, urging RWPPs to attenuate their position and move toward the political centre (Bernhard, 2020; Haugsgjerd, 2019; Tepe, 2019). Still, we expect the former line of reasoning (i.e., recognition as a viable partner and legitimate actor) to outweigh the latter, since being accepted in government allows parties to maximize their power and realize policy goals and boost effectiveness, which voters have been shown to respond to (Bos and Van der Brug, 2010).

We build on this body of research, but we propose a new approach. We look at campaign claims from mainstream parties before the elections about their willingness to govern with RWPPs, and we examine their electoral ramifications.³ Our hypotheses reflect the scientific debate:

H1: Claims by a right-wing mainstream party on being willing to rule with a RWPP (inclusion) increases the propensity to vote for a RWPP compared to when the mainstream party claims not being willing to rule with a RWPP (exclusion).

Electoral ramifications of claims on inclusion or exclusion for mainstream party

When mainstream parties decide between inclusion or exclusion strategies towards RWPPs, their goal is not only to undermine electoral support for those parties. They also hope that it will benefit their own electoral fortune. Informed by rational choice theories, parties are competing for scarce resources (policy, office, votes), making that they have an interest to ostracize their rivals (Van Spanje, 2010). Mainstream parties may invoke various reasons for including or excluding other parties, which is anticipated to affect their electoral support. Typically, a cordon sanitaire is being justified via pointing to a necessity to defend democracy as the ostracized party is perceived to pose a threat to minority rights and democratic principles (Capoccia, 2001). In addition, Van Spanje (2010) identified three key reasons why mainstream parties either maintain a cordon sanitaire or not, linked to parties’ power, ideological distance to the ostracized party and whether a party is

perceived as being extremist. A decision to uphold a cordon sanitaire or not, is anticipated to affect mainstream parties' electoral support and function of those reasons.

Refusal to rule with RWPPs, especially if the latter performs well electorally and is ideologically close, could foster beliefs amongst the electorate that a mainstream party is not responsive to voter signals calling for change, which could be considered at odds with the principles of democratic representation. Exclusion then consolidates the anti-establishment views of voters already critical of the elite, adding to their further alienation of politics (Abts, 2015; Rummens and Abts, 2010). This may apply especially to right-wing parties that are ideologically close to RWPPs and whose voters have difficulties understanding refusals to govern with a populist right party.

Similarly, claims that a mainstream right-wing party is open to ruling with an RWPP may be well received by voters. Those citizens might perceive inclusion as democratic, giving a for long ostracized party a chance to rule. This might be true especially because voters of the mainstream right-wing party may feel ideologically close to the radical right and might hold the promise of a congruent government which would tackle specific issues (e.g., immigration) that both voters of the mainstream right and radical right party might agree on. Others would, by contrast, argue that mainstream right-wing parties will be sanctioned by voters who still demonize the undemocratic nature of RWPPs. Such voters may hold the mainstream right-wing party responsible to normalize RWPPs and facilitate their access to power.

Finally, strategic reasons could offer an explanation (Duch et al., 2010). First, since voting is compulsory in Belgium, there are voters that vote blank or invalid that might consider voting for a mainstream party if they lift the cordon sanitaire. On top of that, voters might be doubting between the radical right party and close competitor. Still, they might consider a vote for the radical right a step too far, but one for N-VA acceptable and voting for a mainstream party that is willing to rule with the radical right, might be a desirable alternative. Second, there could be voters who prefer the right-wing mainstream party over all parties, but especially want a coalition between this party and the radical right (and are hesitant of another, more left-wing coalition partner). Then they could vote for the radical right to force the mainstream party to form a coalition with the radical right. However, if the mainstream party has announced to abandon the cordon sanitaire, then they could go back to their first preference, which is the mainstream right party.

H2: Claims by a right-wing mainstream party on being willing to rule with a RWPP (inclusion) increases the propensity to vote for this mainstream party compared to when the party claims not being willing to rule with a RWPP (exclusion).

The role of prior predispositions. Arguably claims on inclusion or exclusion will mostly affect voters that are policy-oriented and feel ideologically close to RWPPs and its policy goals. This fits within strategic voting behavior literature, starting from the assumption that radical right and mainstream parties closely compete for voters (Van Spanje, 2018). RWPPs are typically the main issue owner of immigration (Damstra et al., 2019). Policy-oriented voters are more likely to vote based on ideological proximity, especially on core issues such as immigration and support for assimilation. Immigration is highly salient for these voters and that they tend to favor assimilation of immigrants. Still, many mainstream parties have imitated the immigration agenda of RWPPs (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Van Spanje, 2010). Policy-oriented voters, according to Van Spanje (2018) are attracted to RWPPs for at least two key reasons: they expect a restrictive immigration policy, and hope that the party will do well electorally (and rule), spurring other parties to initiate similar policies. A non-issue-based reaction, where mainstream parties claim to exclude or include the RWPP, could affect their propensity to vote for RWPPs. If a cordon sanitaire is maintained, especially policy-oriented voters that also have the mainstream right party in their consideration set may view the RWPP as marginalized and unable to deliver, reducing its appeal and which could make them vote for the closest political alternative (Van Spanje, 2018). Claims on inclusion could, in contrast, result in a higher propensity to vote for the RWPP amongst policy-oriented voters:

H3: The electoral effects of claims by mainstream parties on inclusion and exclusion on PTV to vote for RWPPs is moderated by citizens' prior vote choice (H3A), right-wing ideology (H3B), and support for assimilation (H3C).

Data and method

Context

We study Flanders, i.e., the northern region in the federal country Belgium in which the question on potential government collaboration of RWPPs is the subject of fierce public debate since the 1990s. Flanders is home to a strong conservative, right-wing party (N-VA) and a strong RWPP (VB) (Delwit and Van Haute, 2021). N-VA and VB are respectively the largest and second largest political forces in Flanders. While N-VA has for long been considered an outsider party, it has –due to persistent government participation at various levels—evolved into an established political party. VB, on its turn, is a classical RWPP which combines its three core ingredients: authoritarianism, nativism, and populism (Rooduijn et al., 2023). In 1991, a formal political cordon sanitaire was installed around VB:

all parties—except N-VA and the radical left PVDA-PTB—officially agreed to refrain from political collaboration with VB at any level (Biard, 2021). So far, this cordon sanitaire has remained intact at the federal and regional level.

After the 2019 elections, N-VA and VB negotiated for several weeks to form a regional government. Bart De Wever, party leader of N-VA explicitly claimed that the voter's signal should be respected (Jacobs, 2024). The negotiations were, however, unfruitful as no third partner was found willing to help obtain a majority as they decided to honor the cordon sanitaire. Eventually, an alternative Flemish government was formed with N-VA, but without VB. The official N-VA position has always been that they oppose a cordon sanitaire out of principle, perceiving it as essentially undemocratic. Still, as claimed on multiple occasions by party officials, N-VA upholds that the ideological and programmatic gap between both parties is too large to bridge (Biard, 2021; Jacobs, 2024). Moreover, N-VA has called on the VB leadership to moderate their positions and get rid of controversial figures if they want to be judged a realistic coalition partner. Any refusal to do so is perceived as a sign that VB is not 'coalitionable', notwithstanding its president's public claims on taking up responsibility. N-VA is internally divided over the issue where a substantial part of the electorate wants to eradicate the cordon (Abts, 2015). A content analysis of all 70 claims on X by the official account N-VA between 2006 and 2021 (i.e., the population) reveals that in 22.9% they supported ruling with VB, and in 77.1% they rejected it (Jacobs, 2024). So far, the "Chinese wall between N-VA and VB", as N-VA leader De Wever puts it, stands firm and tall nationally. N-VA and VB closely compete for voters with many doubting between both parties: they are largely communicating vessels (Walgrave et al., 2024). Indeed, we study a context in which the mainstream party (N-VA) has for a long period of time been imitating the radical right as an electoral strategy to address voters' concerns on immigration; the aim was to challenge Vlaams Belang's issue ownership on immigration via promoting strict anti-immigration policies and adopting immigration as a salient issue. N-VA, for instance, delivered between 2014 and 2018 the federal Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration. Analysis of official party positions has demonstrated that N-VA has moved closer to the VB issue positions on immigration, providing evidence of mainstreaming and imitation (Jacobs and Walgrave, 2024, 2024).

Sample

3270 participants participated in an experiment (73.9% men, 25.6% women, 0.5% other, $M_{\text{age}} = 58.9$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.5$) which was fielded between January 10 and February 7, 2023. Participants were recruited via the M²P Citizen Panel (University of Antwerp) which draws from a pool of

respondents that have participated in election studies before and have agreed to stay involved in scientific research. Participants were randomly assigned to an independent measures design with 5×2 factorial design (i.e., a post on X of a N-VA reporting on their (un)willingness to rule with VB, invoking different claims, see details below). The experiment was approved by the university's ethical board. 10,000 participants were invited via an e-mail including a link to a questionnaire of which 3804 responded and of which 3720 participants fully completed all variables of interest after listwise deletion (response rate: 37.2%). We rely on a convenience sample which deviates from the voting population in Flanders: most participants are male, highly educated and politically interested (comparison with population in Table A3). For at least two reasons we believe that our findings are still valid. First, we are not interested in population parameters but wish to assess the extent to which participants that are randomly allocated to distinct experimental conditions differ. To evaluate effects of experimental treatments convenience sampling is arguably less problematic. Second, recent advances in scholarship verify that convenience samples in political science are often well-suited to yield valid results from experimental treatments and that many effects can be reproduced using representative probability sampling (Krupnikov et al., 2021). Nevertheless, caution is warranted while interpreting the results: extrapolation to the general population is not self-evident.

Procedure

The participants took part via an online link accompanied with a cover story on the functioning of democracy. Participants received the invitation via e-mail after which they were redirected to an introduction screen in Qualtrics where they were informed of their rights and were asked to give informed consent. After questions on moderators, participants were exposed to the stimulus which consisted of one fictional X post (informed by actual political communication on ruling with RWPPs, see Author, 2024) that—depending on the condition—manipulated the extent to which N-VA was either willing or not to rule with VB. Immediately after the manipulation, participants' answers on various outcome variables were measured, followed by exposure and manipulation checks, and sociodemographic variables. At the end, all participants were thoroughly debriefed that the post was fictional. The experiment took place outside the electoral context, but aligns with permanent campaigning logic on social media, where N-VA is highly active.

Stimuli

There were two experimental conditions which included information on whether the mainstream party was willing to

rule with a RWPP.⁴ We did not include a control condition, a drawback of the study. Theoretically we were interested in either inclusion or exclusion, which are the two real-life conditions that occur as N-VA cannot remain silent on the issue. The manipulations of the posts used the actual layout of posts and logo of N-VA on the social media platform X. The claims presented in these posts were closely informed by a content analysis of the motivations that N-VA tends to invoke regarding a cordon sanitaire adding a great deal of external validity (Jacobs, 2024). The amount of time spent on this post was measured and the participants were randomly allocated to the different experimental conditions. The post text read: “N-VA is [not] prepared to rule with VB in the future.”⁵ This was followed by distinct types of justifications (Table A1 in the Online Supplemental Files).

Dependent variables

Propensity to vote

Propensities to vote (PTV) for party that either excludes or includes the RWPP (N-VA) and the RWPP that is being included or excluded (VB) were measured: “In Flanders, many different political parties are active. How likely is it that you would vote for each of these parties?” This was followed by a randomized close-ended list with all Flemish parties that are currently represented in the federal Chamber of Representatives. This was measured on an eleven-point scale from 0 (“Not likely at all”) to 10 (“Very likely”). We used PTV scores for N-VA ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 3.79$) and VB ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 3.03$).⁶

Moderators

We test policy-oriented voters using three proxies. *Prior vote choice* was measured via asking respondents in a close-ended question which party they voted for in the most recent (2019) federal elections. We took up the prior vote for VB and N-VA. *Support for cultural assimilation* of non-Western migrants was measured with a single-item: “Do you believe that they should adapt or can hold on to the customs and traditions of their own culture?” This was assessed on an 11-point scale ranging from a score of 0 (‘should fully adapt’) and a score of 10 (‘can hold on to own customs and traditions’). We recoded this, so that a higher score means that participants are in favor of assimilation. Finally, *left-right ideology* was a question on self-reported political orientation, “In politics, people often talk about ‘left’ or ‘right.’ Can you place your own opinion on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means ‘left,’ 5 means ‘center,’ and 10 means ‘right?’” This was gauged on an 11-point scale from 0 (“Left-wing”) to 10 (“Right-wing”). As we expect this effect to mainly occur for ideologically very right-wing voters, we

only test this for those scoring 8 or higher. A set of covariates was measured (Table A2).

Results

Randomization, exposure, and manipulation checks

In total, 3720 participants took part in the experiment which were randomly allocated over the conditions (Table 1). A randomization check (Table A4) ascertained that there were no significant differences between the experimental conditions in terms of gender [$F(9, 3793) = 1.39$, $p = .188$], age [$F(9, 3788) = 1.70$, $p = .084$], education [$F(9, 3791) = 0.97$, $p = .462$], and left-right self-placement [$F(9, 3790) = 0.31$, $p = .972$]. Therefore, we report our results without covariates; models including covariates yield identical results. Exposure and manipulation checks were also conducted. Participants were asked to identify which political party was the author of the post on X they were exposed to in a multiple-choice question, including the correct answer (N-VA) and three other parties as options (i.e., the greens, socialists, and liberals). Almost all participants (94.1%) correctly identified N-VA as the author’s post, validating that most had well picked up on the topic. Next, we tested whether participants correctly perceived the party’s intentions on (un)willingness to rule with RWPPs in line with the post’s content. Participants were asked how likely they considered it that N-VA would rule with VB in the future on an eleven-point scale from 0 (“Not likely at all”) to 10 (“Very likely”). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect, $F(1, 3800) = 58.8$, $p < .001$. Post hoc comparisons reveal that participants in the ‘willing to rule’ condition were significantly more likely to believe this to be the case ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 2.57$) compared to those in the ‘not willing to rule’ condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 2.72$), $p < .001$. Hence, the experimental manipulations were effective. We re-analyzed the results via testing a dummy for whom the manipulation or exposure checks failed (namely considering participation that responded with highly likely to rule > 8 in exclusion condition, and highly unlikely in the inclusion condition < 3 or those that did not pick up on the news story correctly). Results remain identical, also when excluding these participants from the analysis (see Tables A5 and A6).

Main effects. We find a significant main effect of the two experimental conditions on PTV for VB (Figure 1):

Table 1. Allocation to conditions.

Condition	Willing to rule
Exclusion: not willing to rule	1905
Inclusion: willing to rule	1899

Note. $N = 3804$.

participants in the exclusion conditions are significantly less likely to vote for VB ($M = 1.55, SD = 2.93$) than in the inclusion conditions ($M = 1.75, SD = 3.12$), $F(1, 3785) = 4.03, p = .045$. This supports H1.⁷ However, the effect is modest in size with a considerable sample size. A different picture emerges for PTV for N-VA: no significant effects of pooled conditions of inclusion or exclusion on PTV for N-VA are present. In the exclusion conditions participants are not significantly more likely to vote for N-VA ($M = 3.95, SD = 3.77$) than in the inclusion conditions ($M = 4.04, SD = 3.80$), $F(1, 3785) = 0.58, p = .445$. This rejects H2. To concretize the effects' substantive meaning, we calculate the vote shares and compare the PTV scores between both conditions. We note a vote share for VB of 8.1% in the exclusion, and 8.7%

in the inclusion condition. For N-VA the vote share is 20.2% in the exclusion condition, and 20.4% in the inclusion condition. Comparing only those with a high vote share for VB and N-VA shows that in the exclusion condition only 9.2% of the respondents indicate they are very likely to vote for VB ($PTV > 8$), in the inclusion condition this is 11.2%. For N-VA differences are negligible (26.2% for both conditions). When assessing switching in PTV, we find that 0.3% of participants switched from N-VA to VB in the inclusion condition; this is modest, but meaningful in a multiparty system with fierce competition and after exposure to only one post on X.

Moderation. We test interactions between our three moderators with the inclusion or exclusion conditions and its

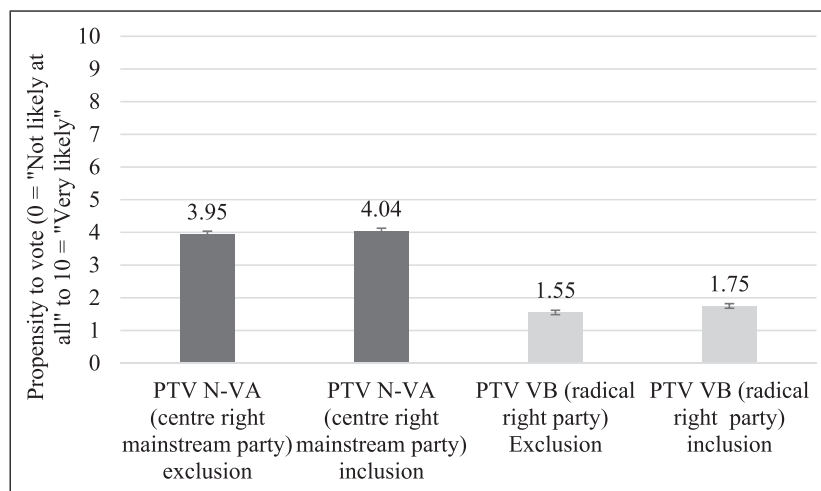


Figure 1. PTV for N-VA and VB for inclusion and exclusion conditions.

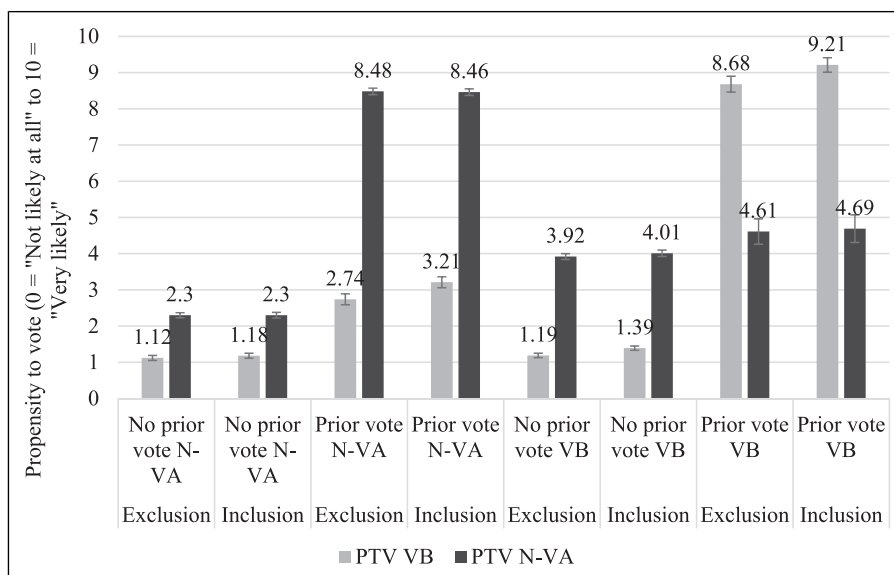


Figure 2. PTV for VB and N-VA and interaction effects between experimental condition and prior vote choice.

effects on PTV or mainstream parties (Figure 2)⁸. We test H3 to assess whether inclusion and exclusion claims affect policy-oriented voters more. First, we test prior vote choice for N-VA (claimant) and VB (object of claim)⁹ via one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with PTV for N-VA and VB as dependent variables and test an interaction. For PTV for N-VA, no significant interaction effects with prior vote for N-VA, $F(1, 3781) = 0.01, p = .938$ and prior vote for VB are found, $F(1, 3781) = 0.04, p = .838$. For PTV for VB, we find a significant interaction between the experimental condition and prior vote for N-VA, $F(1, 3778) = 36.62, p = .001$. Citizens who voted for the mainstream party N-VA before report lower PTV for VB when N-VA claims to exclude it ($M = 2.74, SD = 3.31$) than when N-VA claims to include it ($M = 3.21, SD = 3.50$). For citizens that did not vote N-VA before, there is no difference between exclusion ($M = 1.13, SD = 2.66$) or inclusion ($M = 1.18, SD = 2.76$). For PTV for VB, no significant interaction between the experimental condition and prior vote for VB ($F(1, 3778) = 1.89, p = .170$) is found. Second, we find a borderline significant interaction of supporting cultural assimilation of migrants with inclusion on PTV for VB, namely $F(1, 3780) = 3.45, p = .063$. Finally, the interaction with identifying as right-wing on PTV for VB is also borderline significant, $F(1, 3783) = 3.42, p = .064$. Hence, we can confirm H3A, while evidence goes in the direction of H3B and H3C, although the effects are not significant at $p < .05$ (but are one-tailed). Figure 3 plots the marginal effects of the interactions on PTV for VB. Overall, the moderations all point a similar conclusion: policy-oriented voters (those who voted N-VA before, support assimilation and self-identify as very right-wing) report higher PTV for VB when confronted with claims by N-VA on inclusion.

Discussion

We examined the electoral effects of claims by a right-wing mainstream party to rule (or not) with a RWPP on the electoral appeal of the ostracized party and the claimant. We proposed an experimental approach of the question to isolate the effect of the inclusion/exclusion claims. First, we assessed the effect of the claims on the propensity to vote for the two parties in the whole electorate (main effects). Second, we examined how those claims affect policy-oriented voters. With such a design, we directly contribute to both political and scholarly debate on the electoral benefits and costs of taking public claims regarding the possibility of governing with RWPPs ((Akkerman and De Lange, 2012; Riera and Pastor, 2022)). We fielded our experiment in Flanders where a public debate is ongoing on potential coalitions between the right-wing N-VA and RWPP VB (Jacobs, 2024).

Findings reveal main effects of claims by the mainstream party to include or exclude the RWPP on PTV for this RWPP. Inclusion claims boost the electoral appeal of VB.

This indicates that inclusion claims by a mainstream party can normalize the RWPP (Valentim, 2021). It suggests that mainstream parties have a large responsibility as claiming to be willing to rule with a RWPP could legitimize it and further consolidate it in the party landscape (Down and Han, 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). It may signal to voters that the RWPP is not extremist and a viable partner, confirming the party as an acceptable alternative. Interactions show that those observed effects are mostly found for citizens that voted for N-VA before and for policy-oriented voters (those that identify as right-wing and support assimilation of immigrants). This is in line with prior scholarship (Van Spanje, 2018) which tested combinations of issue and non-issue-based strategies (imitation and isolation).

Our analyses also examine the effect for the electoral appeal of the claimant. However, we have observed no effect, nor of the exclusion, neither of the inclusion claim. Such claims do not affect voters' propensity to vote for this party. The null effect has been confirmed when examining prior voters of N-VA, VB or policy-oriented voters. Hence, mainstream parties have nothing to lose, nor to win in making claims about their willingness (or rejection) of coalition in power with RWPPs, at least when it comes to their own electoral appeal.

Our experiment took place in Flanders, which is a specific case. Nevertheless, our findings concur partly with the interpretation made by many commentators after the last Dutch elections in 2023. Claims made during the campaign by the leader of the mainstream right party VVD that they could govern with the right-wing populist PVV could have contributed to PVV electoral victory. It remains to be verified to what extent our experimental findings materialize in real elections, when citizens need to decide at the polling station. Even if many open questions still remain regarding other potential individual-level mechanisms or the effects of the different types of justifications that are invoked by the mainstream party to motivate a decision to include or exclude a RWPP, we show that coalition preferences of mainstream parties can further normalize an RWPP. This holds regardless of whether eventually this decision materializes in a real collaboration or not, as this study reports the evidence of a claim to (not) rule rather than actual collaboration.

Several limitations, however, deserve acknowledgement. First, the effects seem robust, but are modest in size. Second, the sample deviates from the general population: respondents are older, more often male and highly educated. Given the experimental set-up which primarily compares between conditions to which respondents are randomly allocated without an interest in population parameters, this arguably is less problematic. Still, caution is in order when extrapolating to the broader population. The respondents are above-average interested in politics and opined, which

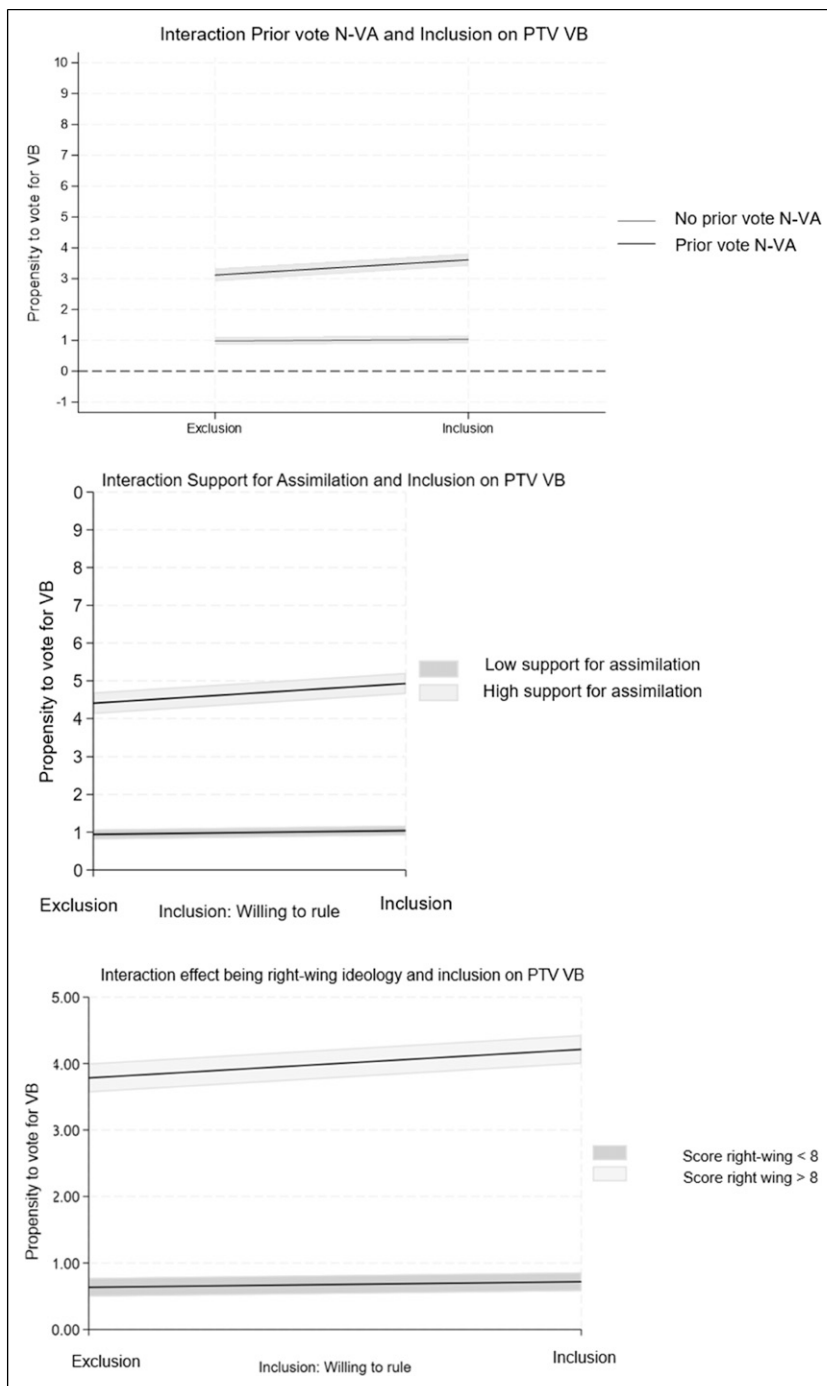


Figure 3. Visual illustration of interaction effects (on PTV for VB).

can affect the results. Arguably this sample presents a conservative test: with a more representative sample our manipulations may be even more effective, as citizens with lower levels of political sophistication could be more easily swayed. Replication with a representative sample is warranted. Third, future studies may want to extend this design

to other contexts to assess whether similar dynamics are at play. It remains to be seen whether context-specific features of the Flemish party landscape, strategic considerations, close competition for voters or permanent campaign, may result in distinct mechanisms across different spatial and temporal contexts. Several elements argue against

generalization, while others support it. The Flemish case –while offering ideal settings to test our hypotheses – is specific with two parties (N-VA, VB) closely competing for voters in a situation of a cordon sanitaire in a country with a tradition of majority governments, and not of minority cabinets. Both parties are fishing in the same electoral pond (Authors, 2024). Importantly, N-VA may not be fully considered a ‘mainstream party’, despite it taking up government responsibility for several years and becoming Flanders’ dominant political force. While N-VA is the most direct competitor of VB, it is equally relevant to assess whether these dynamics would apply to other mainstream parties making similar claims. The results seem to hint to strategic voting by citizens that are doubting between parties that are ideologically close and may observe a trade-off. This is underlined by the observation that especially prior N-VA voters, right-wing and voters advocating for assimilation seem mostly affected; it suggests that our isolated test of ostracization aligns with scholarship on ‘parroting the pariah’ (see Van Spanje, 2018; Van Spanje and De Graaf, 2018). We only focus on effects of inclusion or exclusion and aim to isolate these effects, but the context under scrutiny is one where the mainstream party has for a long time period in real-life imitated the radical right party on the immigration issue. Hence, this imitation context should not be disregarded when interpreting the findings, although we were not able to test it explicitly here. It could still be that, if and only if voters are presented a similarly alternative that such a decision may yield effects, a condition fulfilled in the Flemish context. We saw, for instance, that only a minor percentage (0.3%) directly switched from VB to N-VA. This may be –following the parroting the pariah thesis (Van Spanje and De Graaf, 2018) – because imitation (which we could not test here) might take away the immigration policy-driven reason to vote for VB and isolating the other, which does not necessarily make these voters choose N-VA. After discarding VB as option, they might prioritize other policy-issues, have non-policy-based voting motivations or may cast a blank or invalid vote or abstain. Future research could tap more into underlying voter consideration sets when deciding which party to vote for and should assess whether it can be replicated beyond the specific Flemish case. We do think, however, that the Flemish case –with a historical cordon sanitaire that is still adhered to – might be exemplary for other cases, such as Wallonia (which also has a cordon médiatique) or Germany (with a clear tradition of militant democracy and ‘Brandmauer’ to prevent extremist parties from gaining power). Flanders is a similar case with a limited political opportunity structure in terms of government access for the radical right, as opposed to other cases that have evolved to a more accommodative system with minority and government coalitions with the radical right (Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands); still also these latter countries have experienced similar evolutions over

time. Similar mechanisms might thus arise in contexts with equivalent features (a cordon, accommodative strategies). In France or Germany, adhering to a cordon or Brandmauer, we note an accommodation tendency with issue- and non-issue-based reactions (Krause et al., 2023). Importantly, it might travel to contexts and challenger parties with distinct ideologies, such as West European communists post-World War II and might apply to other parties (Islamist or separatist). Fourth, building on prior evidence (Jacobs, 2024), disentangling electoral effects of distinct motives or justifications for decisions to (not) rule with RWPPs is pertinent as well, as voters might react differently. Finally, the experimental design and its external validity warrants more in-depth reflection. While several design features aim to improve the study’s external validity (i.e., X posts inspired by actual content), the study was conducted outside the electoral period. While the exposure and manipulation checks seem successful, it remains a fictional set-up, of which generalization to a real-life election context is uncertain. The lack of a control condition offers a limitation. We compared claims in favor or against ruling as this closely reflects the actual situation, as parties in Flanders either adhere to a cordon sanitaire or not and cannot remain silent on this increasingly salient issue. Nevertheless, a control condition would offer more insight into a baseline of how citizens evaluate claims on rule with RWPPs. We examine one increasingly important element of political communication: future studies should examine other rhetoric or party’s strategic motivations, next to real-life situations of decisions and actual ruling with the radical right.

Despite these shortcomings, these results contribute to an ongoing, pertinent debate on the causal effects of mainstream parties’ decisions to rule with RWPPs. They offer a starting point for a broader research agenda and a call for future systematical research on this matter as a broader phenomenon, analyzing distinct parties and spatial and temporal contexts. Our findings corroborate theoretical insights on ramifications of non-issue-based strategies directed at RWPPs by mainstream parties. We encourage future studies to extend this perspective via studying the larger phenomenon which taps into the dilemmas that mainstream parties are dealing worldwide in how to deal with different (extremist) challengers. Informed by preliminary experimental data, we cautiously suggest that opening the door for ruling with the radical right –while not harmful for the mainstream party embarking on this strategy –electorally benefits RWPPs. This carries implications for the normalization of RWPPs in liberal democracies.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. NU.nl. (2023, September 7). Overwinning PVV komt vooral door kapitale fout van VVD [The PVV's victory is mainly due to a major mistake by the VVD]. NU.nl. <https://www.nu.nl/tweede-kamerverkiezingen-2023/6291034/overwinning-pvv-komt-vooral-door-kapitale-fout-van-vvd.html>.
2. VRT NWS (2024, May 24). Bart De Wever (N-VA) formeel: "Of ik een regering ga vormen met Vlaams Belang? Neen" [Bart De Wever (N-VA) decisive: "Whether I will rule with Vlaams Belang? No."]. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2024/05/23/bart-de-wever-n-va-vlaams-belang-regering-verkiezingen-eerste-ke/>.
3. It is imperative, we believe, to distinguish between a claim for inclusion (i.e., a willingness to rule with a RWPP) and electoral outcomes of actual inclusion. The former refers to a hypothetical situation offering information on the extent to which RWPPs are evaluated by mainstream parties and granted access to the political system which may yield consequences on its own. The latter implies in-depth assessment of incumbency records, which is beyond this study's scope. It is challenging to isolate effects of decisions to include a party from the evaluation of a track record of governments including RWPPs (Akkerman, 2012; Akkerman and De Lange, 2012; Heinisch, 2003; Riera and Pastor, 2022).
4. These conditions contained either a claim on being (not) willing to rule with the RWPP, but each invoked a different motivation, based on an analysis of mainstream party rhetoric (see Author, 2024). We pool these conditions, as we are interested in main effect of a claim to rule or not, while unravelling the (effects of) specific motivations is beyond the scope of this study.
5. Next to a general claim (in all conditions), there were four justifications, namely claims regarding the alleged extremist nature of the RWPP, policy (in)congruence, its projected efficiency, and regarding voter preferences.
6. Turnout would be a relevant outcome variable, but in Belgium there is a system of compulsory voting for regional and national elections. Only 1.3% of the respondents said they would not go out and vote, making that we cannot test this variable.

7. Inspection of the conditions (Figure A1), rather than the pooled inclusion/exclusion condition suggests effects seem weaker without justifications (conditions 1, 2) compared to reasons pertaining to the office, vote and policy triad with clearest results for the latter condition. For PTV for the mainstream party, results of the separate inclusion/exclusion conditions are identical.
8. Interactions with education, a proxy for political knowledge, were not significant.
9. Interactions with prior vote choice for all radical left, mainstream left and other mainstream right parties were not significant.

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