

A radical vision of radicalism: Political cynicism, not incrementally stronger partisan positions, explains political radicalization

Alain Van Hiel¹, Jasper Van Assche¹, Tessa Haesevoets¹, David De Cremer², & Gordon Hodson³

1 Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, Ghent University, Belgium

2 National University of Singapore, Business School, Singapore

3 Department of Psychology, Brock University, Canada

Abstract.

Is political radicalization a product of increased issue position polarization, by which left and right-wing attitudes become ever more extreme? We argue that this is not the best explanation. Indeed, radical left and right supporters are not so much ‘left’ or ‘right’ in terms of their ideological attitudes. Instead we argue that political cynicism is a relevant attitude, with radicals being characterized by distinctly high levels, making them truly distinct from moderates. Radicals are primarily driven by anger, more than by anxiety, meaning that their information processing is heavily focused on consistency and closure. We discuss that political cynics have become highly effective as a political force, and we offer suggestions for how traditional parties may overcome the “trust crisis” in politics. It is concluded that issue position polarization is a phenomenon that operates to an equal extent in moderate voters than in adherents of radical and populist parties. The abyss between moderates and radicals concerns whether or not ‘to be in the political system’ at all.

Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Alain Van Hiel, Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium. Alain.VanHiel@UGent.be. An earlier version of some portions of this paper has been published in Van Hiel, Van Assche, & Haesevoets (2021).

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Two trends co-appear in current society. A first trend is the raise of support for radical-populist parties, politicians and ideas (Fagerholm, 2018; Whiteley, Larsen, Goodwin, & Clarke, in press). A second trend is the increasing degree of ideological polarization in terms of more extreme issue positions (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Simas, Clifford, & Kirkland, 2020). These trends, if continued, would culminate into a situation where the adherents of the left-wing and right-wing blocs become ever more extreme and therefore will have nothing in common anymore, or at least, that people perceive this to be the case (see Mason, 2015; Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015). At first sight, both phenomena seem to go hand in hand. On the surface, polarization appears to be an important precursor of populism and radicalism, and it is almost self-evident that in times of polarization, radicalism is on the rise. Yet such apparent connections might not be on solid footing. In this contribution, we challenge the priority afforded to the idea that moderate people espouse ever more radical ideas because of issue position polarization (Isenberg, 1986), whereby more moderate left-wing adherents gradually becoming more and more attracted to radical left-wing parties and moderate right-wing supporters becoming ever more attracted to radical right-wing parties.

Here we first focus on issue position polarization, a phenomenon that has been introduced in classical group dynamics literature. Issue position polarization is the psychological process that makes like-minded people become more extreme, and because of this, also more similar (Isenberg, 1986; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Myers, 1982; Myers & Lamm, 1976). Attempts have already been made to explicitly link issue position polarization to support for radical parties (see Harton & Latané, 1997; Latané & Nowak, 1994; Liu & Latané, 1998). In contrast, we argue that, unlike the work of Latané and colleagues, and

claims in the recent literature (e.g., Mouffe, 2005; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018), issue position polarization (or the lack thereof in traditional parties) is not the best way to understand the rise in electoral support for radical parties. Rather, there is decisive evidence that issue position polarization is *not* the major driving force behind ‘political polarization’, with other mechanisms likely at play, namely those rooted in political cynicism (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961; Eisinger, 2000; Pattyn, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Onraet, 2012). From this perspective, the abyss between moderates and radicals concerns whether or not ‘to be in the political system’ at all. *Political cynicism*, which entails a profoundly negative attitude towards and lack of trust in the establishment, divides moderates from radicals and populists. The ‘classic’ left-right ideological attitudes that are so familiar to us – like authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) – mainly have relevance for moderates (also see Van Assche, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Roets, 2019). If issue position polarization plays a role, then it is foremost important among moderates not radicals.

We also discuss the role of anxiety (Onraet, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Pattyn, 2013; Onraet, Dhont, & Van Hiel, 2014) and anger (see Vasilopoulos, Marcus, & Foucault, 2018; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019a) in fueling radicalism, showing that anger holds more promise as an explanatory variable of political cynicism-based radicalism and populism, and that anger provokes biased information search of politically relevant information. We end this contribution with the implications of political cynicism for democracy and discuss how the political system can regain trust.

Unlike the U.S. political situation, which is dominated by two political parties, the Western European political systems are often more complex and usually include many parties that can be arranged from moderate to radical, both at the left-wing and the right-wing side (Huddy, Bankert, & Davies, 2018). Hence, in Europe changes in political attitudes may

coincide with changes in political party preferences, which makes radical and populist party support and its psychological backup easier to study. The present contribution is thus based largely on research conducted in European countries. That said, the raise of political cynicism at the expense of centrist ideas, the increasing popularity of populist and radical politicians, and the cleavage between the ‘ordinary people’ and the establishment, is by no means solely a European affair, and our theory development has relevance for the U.S. political context as well (Oliver & Rahn, 2018). Recent political events, and in particular the advent of Donald Trump, have demonstrated that partisans and elected officials may become receptive to a radical party leader’s points of view, as was the case with Trump’s hard-edge “America first” principle and gut-level cultural appeals (Bartels, 2018). This suggests that, in the U.S., traditional parties are at risk of being taken over by populists and radicals (Bartels, 2020), and thus shows the dramatic effects that populism and radicalism may have on the American political system. Also note that in the present contribution, we use the terms *radicalism* and *populism* interchangeably, as both terms usually refer to the same political parties, which are mostly extreme on either the left-wing or the right-wing side of the political spectrum.¹ Finally, in line with Mudde (2004), we reserved the term ‘extreme’ for populist parties and movements which explicitly promote violence, and the term ‘radical’ for populist parties that seek political change through non-violent means.

How Does Issue Position Polarization Operate?

It is well established that people infect each other with their opinions and attitudes, making themselves more extreme. *Issue position polarization* is the exaggeration of the initial individual tendencies through group discussion (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Myers, 1982; Myers & Lamm, 1976), with two traditional theoretical frameworks explaining such polarization (Isenberg, 1986). According to persuasive arguments theory, the attitudes of group members become more extreme as more convincing arguments become available and

salient (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1974). During group discussion, members are confronted with convincing arguments for a particular decision option – some new, others as a repetition of what they already thought – so that pre-existing attitudes become more extreme and confidence is strengthened (Brauer, Judd, & Gliner, 1995). This represents informational influence. The second explanation is based on social comparison and the desire to be liked. According to this approach, group polarization is explained by the exchange of views. Individuals discover like-minded others' points of view during group discussion, with the initial majority prevailing through normative pressure (Brown, 1965; Sanders & Baron, 1977).

Attempts to apply the concept of issue polarization to political topics are understandable. There is no reason to assume that political attitudes necessarily develop differently than any other attitude type. Moreover, people form social groups with which they identify and in which they allow other group members to influence them (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). They also prefer to associate with people from their own group (Allport, 1954). The rise of social media fits in nicely with the theories of issue position polarization: People interact with others who have similar opinions in their self-created echo-chambers, resulting in people becoming increasingly convinced of their (own) cherished ideas (Grover, Kar, Dwivedi, & Janssen, 2018; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

An issue position polarization model has already been introduced and applied to political polarization: The Catastrophe Model of Political Attitudes (Harton & Latané, 1997; Latané & Nowak, 1994; Liu & Latané, 1998). This model predicts that increasingly more extreme attitudes occur in political groups, even to the point that the worldview of members of such groups no longer corresponds to the perception of the general public. In the spirit in which this model is formulated, people drift further and further away from the middle in small steps, such that the eventually large quantitative differences ultimately become a qualitative

difference. In terms of the left-right attitudinal dimension, this would imply a particular distribution of attitudes, with a flat distribution of attitudes of moderate people in the broad center, and narrow, steep distributions of attitudes in extreme circles, on the poles of the left-right continuum. The tails of the curves would hardly overlap, if at all.

Interestingly, the Catastrophe Model specifically includes an additional source of political polarization, namely the tendency of extremists to push themselves away from mainstream sentiment. Extremist movements create a dichotomy between themselves and their ideological opponents to mobilize support among members and neutralize possible external influence (Gamson, 1975; Simons & Mechling, 1981). This creates a fault line, with on the one hand one's own group (that is superior), and on the other hand the other groups (that are ill-informed and misled). This process bears some similarities to that of negative partisanship, as members of other political groups are perceived most negatively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2015). However, there exists a crucial difference: Political radicals tend to also hate the political system and establishment as a whole, with some even desiring to reverse or undo it.

Overall, the Catastrophe Model portrays extremism as a *step-by-step evolution towards a separate consensus that deviates from mainstream thought*. Yet one aspect, the step-by-step polarization into a separate consensus, is not well supported by the available data (as we outline below). In contrast, the aspect concerning antagonism toward the establishment is better supported and indeed fuels political radicalization and populism.

Issue Position Polarization Does Not Offer the Best Explanation of the Success of Political Radical Parties

There are good reasons to suspect that support for political radical parties is unlikely the result of a step-by-step process linked to ideological left/right attitudes. Indeed, we first present existing empirical findings which allow us to conclude that the issue position

polarization hypothesis is on weak footing. We then further analyze data of two samples reported in Van Assche et al. (2019) to directly show that right-wing attitudes are not particularly adequate to distinguish supporters of moderate right-wing from extreme right-wing adherents.

Indirect Evidence

A first empirical anomaly with regard to the polarization hypothesis is based on the tenet that such polarization should not only lead to more extreme attitudes, but also to more similar attitudes within the group. Indeed, polarization is a process whereby group members tend to ‘think alike’.² However, this outcome is not empirically borne out for extremists. Van Hiel (2012) found that, especially on the extreme sides of the political spectrum (as opposed to the center), there is a wide variation in personal values such as openness, conformity and safety, precisely those values that strongly correlate with left-right attitudes in moderate samples. It is striking that this greater heterogeneity occurred both on the radical left side (perhaps not unexpectedly, because the radical-left is notoriously famous for its lack of consensus) and on the right-wing side (perhaps more unanticipated, because often there is more consensus here).

A second finding that works against the issue position polarization hypothesis is based on observations in the political sciences. Mudde (2004) argues that populist parties are ‘ideologically poor’ -- unlike traditional left and right parties, they show less ideological coherence. Instead they select left and right recipes that they embed in their own story as they see fit. The Italian Five-Star movement, for example, combines both typical left and right ingredients into a ‘new’ soup bowl, and thus cannot be called left or right, a dichotomy which party officials consider to be outdated (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). Consider also how, during the last elections of the Belgian parliament, the radical right-wing Vlaams Belang positioned itself on the left for socio-economic themes. Likewise, the radical right-wing PVV in the

Netherlands has also been in favor of policies that can be called progressive, especially in the domain of social measures. If radical right-wing voters would be hyper-polarized in terms of right-wing attitudes, such strategic repositioning of radical parties could have led to a loss of electoral support, or to opposition among party officials or supporters, but all of this did not happen.

Direct Evidence: Re-Analysis of Data of Van Assche et al. (2019)

A final finding that runs contrary to the issue position polarization hypothesis is related to the distinctiveness of radical political parties vis-à-vis other political parties. On the basis of party preferences, it is possible to segment the political landscape. In the Western European situation, for example, people who are positive about the program of the Social Democrats often have a positive orientation toward Green Parties as well, but not toward right-wing parties. In Belgian (Flemish) and Dutch samples, four distinct party types typically emerge: libertarian, traditional left, traditional right, and radical right.³ These right-wing radical parties (Flemish Bock/Interest and Party for Freedom, respectively) are characterized by their anti-immigration platform, their focus on security, their political exploitation of corruption and other scandals in the establishment parties, and their defense of traditional values (see Billiet & De Witte, 1995). A relevant question in this context is whether the distinct preference for the radical-right would be characterized by a very high score on right-wing ideological views among its adherents? The data suggest that it does not.

The research by Van Assche et al. (2019) sheds more light on the relative impact of right-wing attitudes. Two samples were included. A first sample of Flemish citizens ($N = 509$) without a migration background was collected by undergraduate students. These students recruited adults within their social network in order to obtain a heterogeneous community sample. The second sample was a nationally stratified sample of Dutch citizens ($N = 628$) without a migration background, collected through an independent survey company. In these

two samples the left-right attitudes were operationalized in terms of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA, Altemeyer, 1981) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO, Pratto et al., 1994). Two additional attitudinal scales were also administered: The political cynicism scale developed by Pattyn and colleagues (2012) and the subtle racism scale (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005).

Van Assche et al. (2019) reported that, as reasonably can be expected, right-wing attitudes were related to radical right-wing party support and voting, but also that additional variance was consistently explained by political cynicism and ethnic prejudice. To further clarify these results, here we present a re-analysis of their data. Specifically, we created ‘purified’ indicators of each construct by calculating z-standardized residual scores for each target variable (corrected for the other attitudinal scales in a regression analysis). As can be seen in Figure 1, right-wing attitudes are not particularly distinctive in characterizing radical right supporters from the other ideological groups. Indeed, adherents of traditional right-wing parties obtained an even higher authoritarianism score than the radical right supporters (a result reminiscent of the findings of Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2002); in terms of SDO the libertarians and radicals showed quite similar scores. From this result it can be inferred that polarization in terms of expanding left and right attitudes becoming ever extreme is at least as characteristic for moderates as for radicals. What is particularly distinctive in characterizing the radical right group, however, are political cynicism and ethnic prejudice. In fact, the radical right group is the only group with positive z-values in this respect.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In conclusion, left-right attitudes were less important in characterizing the radical-right position, but instead was particularly relevant to distinguish among the adherents of the various *moderate* parties. Put another way, the moderate and radical right do not differ much from each other in terms of being ideologically right-wing. Instead, and this is the more

important finding, political cynicism and anti-migration attitudes are typical for adherents of radical parties.

Conclusion

In sum, based on these findings it is fair to conclude that polarization in terms of ever increasing attitudinal left-right attitudinal differences is an unlikely candidate to form the basis of radicalism. Although we agree with Latané and colleagues that radicals substantially differ from moderates, it is clear that processes other than issue position polarization should be considered and might take priority.

Populism Captures the Ideology of Radical Parties, but It is not an Ideological Attitude

What is it then that distinguished radicals from moderates? An important contemporary approach to define the individual's radical position – both at the left and the right – makes use of the concepts 'radicalism' and 'populism' (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014). According to Canovan (1999), "Populists in established democracies claim to speak for the silent majority of 'ordinary decent people', whose interests and opinions are (they claim) regularly overridden by arrogant elites, corrupt politicians, and strident minorities" (p. 5). In the history of political psychology, there have been various attempts to demonstrate similarities on both radical sides of the political spectrum, which would distinguish them from moderates. These so-called extremism theories (see Eysenck, 1954; Rokeach, 1960) were not very successful and were often not supported by the data (see Brown, 1965).

In the interim, however, the political landscape has changed considerably, re-opening this possibility. Indeed, recently, evidence on the similarity of radical left and radical right supporters has been presented. For instance, Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins (2020) collected a sample of American citizens and observed that partisan intensity goes together

with reduced cognitive flexibility, irrespective of whether one's favorite party is left-wing or right-wing. Also in samples of American citizens, Lammers, Koch, Conway, and Brandt (2017) showed that people on both ends of the political spectrum—strong Republicans and strong Democrats—form simpler and more clustered categories of political and non-political stimuli than moderates. Also, in a large sample of Dutch voters, van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, and Eendebak (2015) reported that those at both ends of the political spectrum (1 = “very left-wing”) and 10 = “very right-wing”) are less tolerant of a number of societal groups (e.g., “Bankers,” “Muslims”) than those at the center. As all of these recent findings exemplify, adherents of radical parties at both sides resemble each other and at the same time are different from moderates.

The question arising here is whether we can identify a political attitude that is similarly shared by radical people and which differentiates them from moderates? We will explain that although populism describes the political party pamphlet of radical parties very well, it is not an ideological attitude in itself. Instead, we argue that political cynicism holds promise as being a relevant political attitude which makes people receptive for populist parties.

Theoretical Considerations

According to the rationale advanced by Mudde and colleagues (Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018), there is a supply and demand side to populism (which we also apply to radicalism). The supply side is represented by the populist parties, whereas the demand side is represented by the populist electorate. The bottom line is that populist parties ‘serve’ populist people by providing them with a direct political translation of their beliefs. Hence, a high level of congruence is assumed between the worldview of the radical person and the political pamphlet of radical parties. This perceived fit of ideas connects the party and its voters. Reasonable as it seems at first sight, this is a

somewhat special vision within the domain of political psychology. We argue here that the populism concept is not the optimal way to describe the ideological attitudes of adherents of such parties, both for theoretical and empirical reasons.

Indeed, in the traditional study of ideological attitudes, the relationship between an ideology on the one hand and the attitudes of the individual on the other hand, is often less direct. The very concept of ideological attitudes assumes that this attitude is a basis that is not contained in ideology itself, but instead makes an individual receptive to a particular ideology (see Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, de Plessis, & Birum, 2002). For example, Adorno et al. (1950) considered authoritarianism as the individual's tendency to be receptive to the rhetoric and propaganda of fascist parties, and this without saying a word about this particular ideology (i.e., fascism) in the scale measuring the concept of authoritarianism. The pull towards radical parties is thus situated on a 'deeper level'; it does not start from the phenomenon on the surface – namely the ideology itself. It is therefore 'psychologized' and thus bears a less straightforward relationship with ideology. Hence, although we agree that supply and demand play a role, we believe that this relationship is more complex than an almost one-to-one relationship.

Empirical Considerations

There is also a problem on the empirical level. Akkerman et al. (2014) introduced a scale measuring 'the demand side' of radicalism, and more specifically their populism facet scale serves this purpose. This scale is the most widely used psychological measurement of the populism concept (Roccatò, Corbetta, Cavazza, & Colloca, 2019). All eight items of this populism scale reflect a very negative attitude towards politics and politicians, with the perceived rottenness of politics present in every scale item. In only four of these items, the perverse politician and his/her politics is directly contrasted with the pure people. Remarkably, no scale item exclusively gauges the perceived purity of the common people. It

is therefore no exaggeration to state that the backbone of this scale is the negative conception of traditional politics and politicians, which in the end is nothing but political cynicism. The scales measuring populism and political cynicism thus show substantial conceptual overlap.

A further analysis by Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azevedo (2020) of the populism scale of Akkerman et al. (2014) points to the most discriminating item between populists and non-populists: “What people call ‘compromise’ in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.” This item lacks any reference to common ‘pure’ people, and it would not be out of place in a scale that measures (political) cynicism.

Analysis of Populism and Political Cynicism

To investigate this issue more directly, Van Hiel, Van Assche, and Haesevoets (2021) performed a more explicit test of the distinctiveness of the populism and political cynicism scale in a joint analysis. To empirically show that populism and political cynicism are essentially measuring the same mindset, they administered the populism items of Akkerman et al. (2014) together with the political cynicism items of Pattyn et al. (2012) in a sample of 198 adults living in the United States. Both the populism and political cynicism scales yielded an acceptable internal consistency, and the correlation between both scales was highly significant and very strong, $r = .69, p < .001$.

A Principal Component Analysis of the populism and cynicism items was conducted, based on the premise that if two scales are truly distinctive, the joint analysis of these scales should yield clean, separate dimensions, each of them with high loading items that refer to one of the scales (for the rationale of such analyses, see Lemery, Essex, & Smider, 2002, and Lengua, West, & Sandler, 1998). As can be seen in Table 1, the first component consisted of a mix of populism and cynicism items; six populism items and four political cynicism items had their primary loadings on this component. The second component also consisted of a mix of populism and political cynicism items: Two populism items and four cynicism items had their

highest loading on this component. It can thus be concluded that the items of these two scales tend to mix up, which according to the rationale of Lemery and colleagues does not lend support for their distinctiveness.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis reported by Van Hiel et al. (2021) confirmed the results of the exploratory analyses. Two models were compared: Model 1 in which all items load on one dimension, and Model 2 with a clean factorial structure with the populism items loading on one dimension, whereas the political cynicism items were forced to load on another dimension. The difference in statistical fit between these two models was not statistically significant. Given that the two-factor solution did not show superior fit, the more parsimonious one-factor model should be preferred, again indicating that these two scales probe into essentially the same content.

It can thus be concluded that the items of the populism and political cynicism scales did not load on distinct dimensions in a Principal Component Analysis, and that the theoretically valid two-dimensional model did not show a significantly better fit than a one-factor model. The two scales thus showed substantial empirical overlap. For the sake of clarity, we repeat here that compared to populism theory, we hypothesize – in line with the ideological attitudes approach - that we hypothesize there is less stringent connection between political cynicism and support for radical parties. Specifically, the latter two concepts cannot be equated; political cynicism is assumed to underlie such preferences rather than to be the reflection of the political pamphlet of radical parties.

Political Cynicism: A Relevant Ideological Attitude Distinguishing Moderates from Radicals

From the joint analysis reported above it can be inferred that the ‘new’ populism scale by Akkerman and colleagues (2014) has not demonstrated that it offers something new to the ‘old’ political cynicism concept. In order to advance the literature, a new concept must be distinctive vis-à-vis already-known variables (also see Wuttke, Schimpf, & Schoen, 2020). This does not seem the case with the ‘new’ populism scale as compared to the ‘old’ political cynicism scale. The political cynicism concept has the further advantage that it forms an applied manifestation of a ‘deeper’ personality concept, namely (general) cynicism. This is useful for checking the personality base in the form of related individual traits, and locating the construct in more comprehensive personality models such as the Five-Factor (Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1992) or HEXACO models (Ashton & Lee, 2007) .

Critically, consideration of the concept of political cynicism allows us to better understand the radical electorate. The so-called humane orientation of ‘populists’ towards ordinary folks and common people is something that deserves further attention. The data of Pattyn et al. (2012) are particularly telling in this respect. These authors reported that the correlation between political cynicism and general cynicism is positive and strong, $r = .49$, $p < .001$. The general cynicism scale consists of items such as “Most people are just out for themselves” and “People will tell lies to get ahead.” These items, of course, do not go together with the seemingly gentle orientation towards ordinary people which has been assumed to be present in adherents of populist parties (see Akkerman et al., 2014; Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007). Hence, although populist and radical politicians refer to ordinary people (also see Oliver & Rahn, 2018) in the most kind and gentle words, and they actively claim to represent these citizens in their communication, such kindness is not characteristic of their cynical adherents. In other words, while it cannot be denied that the care for the interest of common people is a vital ingredient of populist parties’ communication and ideology, as rightfully

observed in political science, at the same time it should be stressed that the ‘common people theme’ is not central to the ideological attitudes of their adherents.

Finally, political cynicism has a long history in political science and political thinking. Machiavelli (1532) and Rousseau (1762; see Grant, 2008) argued that deception and hypocrisy are basic ingredients of political success. Further, the concept of political cynicism among voters has drawn scholarly interest in the 1960s as “the extent to which people hold politicians and politics in disrepute” (Agger et al., 1961, p. 477). Political distrust is a part of the cynicism syndrome, but at the same time the concepts should be distinguished. Pattyn et al. (2012) argued that political cynicism represents an antagonistic form of contempt, with anger and hostility as two of its core elements. It is this emotional aspect that distinguishes the concept from mere lack of political trust, which refers to the more neutral and passive lack of faith in the (performance of) politicians and the current regime (Eisinger, 2000). One could say that all cynics have no trust; but, the opposite way around, the idea that all distrustful people are cynical, does not hold. Hence, politically cynical people show low trust *and* they generally have active, overt negative feelings towards and negative expectations about the intentions and actions of politicians. It is because of the powerful negative emotions embedded in political cynicism that may make it particularly central in shaping political preferences.

Other Alignments Dividing the Moderate and Radical Electorate

Political cynicism is, however, not the whole story underpinning why individuals are attracted to radical and populist parties. That said, it should be stressed that it is the one political attitude that left-wing and right-wing radicals share. Although the left-right attitudinal dimension is no longer the dominant factor differentiating between moderates and radicals, other dimensions that relate directly to policy choices have become particularly topical today. These alignments involve negative attitudes about the ever-increasing diversity

that characterizes most Western countries (Van Assche, Dhont, Van Hiel, & Roets, 2018; Van Assche et al., 2019), and a negative attitude towards big finance and economic globalization.

In radical right-wing circles, there is a very negative opinion about immigration and the presence of different ethnic-cultural groups in society. This dimension seemingly took some time to crystallize into a dominant political topic. Indeed, right-wing ideological attitudes were invariably considered as the basis of prejudice. An abundance of evidence was gathered for this over the years, in many political contexts (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). The idea that prejudice itself can form a basis of right-wing radicalism – alongside right-wing ideological beliefs – was not perceived as an interesting research question, as it seemed too self-evident. However, although diversity has been a lingering issue for quite some time, it has become increasingly important in the current political debate, and thus has become a topic in its own right (see Bartels, 2020). Attitudes towards diversity may thus show an increasingly looser connection with left-right attitudes than in the past, yet may become an important additional source of radicalization.

The research by Van Assche et al. (2019), which we discussed above as evidence against the idea of an ever increasing expansion of left and right ideological attitudes to extremes, illustrates how these alignments in terms of cynicism *and* prejudice contribute to the rearrangement of the political field. Specifically, radical right parties were found to be particularly appealing to voters who are both highly politically cynical and who are biased against minorities (and negatively inclined towards immigration as well), even when the shared variance with right-wing attitudes was taken into account.

A further demonstration that ‘there is more than right-wing attitudes’ to explain radical right party preference can be found in research on the role of diversity. Table 2 (based on Van Assche et al., 2018) shows that in homogenous, low-diversity neighborhoods, right-wing attitudes coincide with voting for both traditional and radical right-wing parties. In high-

diversity neighborhoods, however, right-wing attitudes are only related to a vote for radical right-wing parties. Particularly in highly heterogeneous neighborhoods, people with right-wing ideological attitudes are more negative towards immigration (Fasel, Green, & Sarrasin, 2013; Karreth, Singh, & Stojek, 2015; Sibley et al., 2013). In other words, the relationship of right-wing attitudes to radical right-wing party preference depends on diversity.

Insert Table 2 about here

Comparable studies are needed in a political context which includes radical left parties. The radical left draws on a reservoir of people who are politically cynical *and* anti-capitalist and perceive globalization, international banking, and unbridled capitalism as a major problem (see Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2016). Just as political cynicism and immigration attitudes on the right-wing side are distinctive between radicals and moderates, political cynicism and anti-capitalism attitudes are expected to distinguish moderates from supporters of radical left-wing parties such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece.

A New Ideological Attitudes Model of Radical Party Support

Before going into depth in the psychology of political cynicism, we present our new model of radical party support. The basis of this model explicitly resides in the ideological attitudes approach, and we acknowledge that other approaches – such as the one based on cognitive styles – may also shed a light of radical party support. Here we thus delineate the contours of our new attitudinal model of radical party support and present its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the traditional polarization model. In this model, political cynicism has a central place. This section thus summarizes and formalizes our theoretical contributions.

A first issue in need of clarification pertains to the relationship between political cynicism and left-right ideological attitudes, which we assume to depend on the specific political context (as depicted in Figure 2). According to Trait Activation Theory (Tett &

Burnett, 2003), activation of traits and their influence on behavior is contingent upon the availability of trait-relevant cues in the social context. Put differently, the theory proposes that a situation may 'bring out' particular traits if a thematic connection exists between the situation and the individual's trait (Judge & Zapata, 2015). Interesting to the present research, Tett and Burnett (2003) noted that "a situation is relevant to a trait if it is thematically connected by the provision of cues ... [which] ... indicate a person's standing on the trait" (p. 502). Hence, the anti-establishment rhetoric of radical parties provides trait-relevant cues for political cynicism to be expressed in their adherents. If a political system only includes radical parties on the right-wing side of the political continuum, political cynicism will only flourish on that side, resulting in a positive correlation between right-wing attitudes and political cynicism. If the political system, however, includes both successful left-wing and right-wing radical parties, political cynicism will flourish at both sides of the continuum, resulting in a U-formed quadratic relationship, which reflects an orthogonal model.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Figures 3 and 4 present a graphical representation of the traditional polarization model and the new model we developed, to clarify their distinctiveness. Such a polarization model (see Figure 3) can be represented by a linear model: increasing scores on right-wing (left-wing) ideological attitudes make people more and more susceptible for adherence to radical right-wing (or left-wing) parties. Hence, the step-by-step development of ever increasing scores on right-wing (or left-wing) ideological scores paves the road for the electoral success of radical parties. A well-known example of such a linear model is authoritarianism theory (Adorno et al., 1950), although this theory only focused on right-wing extremism. The more authoritarian an individual is, the more this person supports extremist parties. Also note that the migration and globalization attitudes are considered to coincide with left-right attitudes.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Conversely, as Figure 4 clarifies, our four dimensional new model of ideological attitudes related to radical party support deviates from the polarization model in at least four ways: (1) it consists of the political cynicism dimension (instead of populism) as ‘a new’ (independent) ideological dimension with high scores among (left-wing *and* right-wing) radicals; (2) it limits the relevance of the left/right dimension to moderate parties support; and (3) it includes the globalization and migration attitudes as relevant new dimensions and ‘topics in their own right’, which relate to radical-left and radical right party support, respectively. As we argue in the next section, the model also (4) stresses the role of anger in political cynicism (as opposed to the relevance of anxiety for right-wing attitudes).

Insert Figure 4 about here

Towards a Political Psychology of Political Cynicism

In this section, we pay attention to political cynicism in terms of political psychological processes. Specifically, we argue that political cynicism and right-wing attitudes have a different emotional basis, and that cynicism is typically rooted in anger, leading to biased information search and processing. Next, we go into depth into the cynic’s belief superiority and dogmatic intolerance against ‘other’ opinions. Finally, we discuss the presumed political inefficacy of political cynics, as has been advanced in classic literature, and we argue that such inefficacy can be attributed to the political context rather than being an inherent characteristic of political cynicism itself.

The Role of Anger and Anxiety

Classic literature on right-wing attitudes claims that a portion of the electorate votes radically because of anxiety and threat-proneness. Hundreds of studies primarily conducted in

samples of moderates provided evidence for such a relationship, which is particularly present with societal threats (see Onraet et al., 2013, 2014). However, heavy focus on this particular emotion has distracted the research community from investigating other emotions that may play an even a bigger role.

Indeed, recent studies indicate that radical attitudes are driven more by anger than by anxiety.¹ Anger is accompanied by an increase in populism (and thus political cynicism) in situations, such as after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris (Vasilopoulos et al., 2018, 2019). Anger also plays a role in attitudes towards immigration (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015; Verkuyten, 2004). Anger can thus act as a powerful motivator to radicalize moderate people. The role of anger in radicalism is not just a radical-right phenomenon, but is relevant also among radical leftists, as evidenced after the financial and housing market crisis in Spain (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017). During the 2008 financial crisis, people in the U.K. were also angry with the government, especially if holding the government responsible for the situation, for example due to financial sector deregulation (Wagner, 2014). Another important source of anger resides in injustice perceptions. Indeed, a vast amount of research has shown that procedural justice variations particularly elicit anger-related emotions (De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2010; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998), and perceived injustice has been related to radicalism and extremism as well (van den Bos, 2020).

The notion that anger plays a major role in the leap to radicalism is in line with the idea that political cynicism is important. Conceptually, political cynicism is not based on threat and anxiety, but is rather an antagonistic form of contempt, with anger and hostility as two of its core elements (Eisinger, 2000). Precisely because of the powerful negative

¹ We acknowledge that other experiences that are affect-laden may lead to support for radical parties, such as the experience of being ostracized (Hales & Williams, 2018).

emotions embedded in political cynicism, it may be an ideal candidate for shaping radical party-political support (see Van Assche et al., 2018).

Anger indeed undermines confidence in politics and feeds antipathy towards politicians from other parties (Webster, 2018). Anger also leads to the biased search of information, whereby opinion-consistent information is especially favored (Suhay & Erisen, 2018). Anger also exacerbates the tendency to accept as such incorrect information that favors one's own group (Weeks, 2015). On the internet, anger-inducing information (such as in political advertising) yields higher click-through rates (Ryan, 2012) and is more easily distributed to others in one's social network (Hasell & Weeks, 2016), all of which can lead to an echo-chamber dynamic (Wollebaek, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Enjolras, 2019). This, of course, does not imply that people are exclusively subdued in a circle of likeminded people, but it cannot be denied that for most citizens their social network is dominated by people with similar opinions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). In such ways, one's own attitude is increasingly being fed by new 'evidence', which may lead to even greater antipathy towards political opponents and the political system. Anger is therefore an emotion that feeds political cynicism, which ensures that one's cynical attitude is increasingly confirmed. Anxiety, in contrast, does not show such effects; it instead urges caution and therefore often leads to the search for information inconsistent with one's beliefs (Wollebaek et al., 2019), presumably as a strategy that serves a person to be reassured ("It's not as bad as I initially thought").

While we stress the role of anger and call for further investigation of this emotion in political psychology, we do not want to convey the message that anxiety does not matter at all. In an interesting study, Frimer, Brandt, Melton, and Motyl (2019) have shown that adherents of both radical left and right express more angry language (e.g., on social media, in US congress, and so on), but these authors suggested that this anger was attributable to feelings of threat caused by political rivals. Along similar lines, Jost (2019) has suggested that

threat may be an antecedent of anger. However, and this is the more important point, in each study (Frimer et al., 2019; Jost, 2019; see Vasilopoulos et al., 2019a) anger is more strongly related to radical party preference than anxiety. Moreover, the simultaneous inclusion of both variables even reveals a negative direct effect of anxiety (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019b).

The fact that anger is more prevalent in radical people than in moderates is an additional piece of evidence that the political attitudes of moderates and radicals are truly distinct. If the relevant attitudes of each group had the same emotional basis, this finding would instead be in line with the idea that the moderate and radical positions are variations of each other, albeit with different intensity. The observed difference in the emotional basis therefore reveals that radicalism is not just an enlarged and polarized version of moderate ideology but rather represents ‘something else’.

Belief Superiority and Dogmatic Intolerance

As we already discussed in the context of the Catastrophe Model, at least one part of this model holds promise as a rightful component of the political cynic’s psychological functioning. Indeed, radical movements create a dichotomy between themselves and their ideological opponents not only to mobilize support among their members, but also to neutralize possible external influence (Gamson, 1975; Simons & Mechling, 1981). This creates a fault line, with on the one hand one’s own group (that is said to be superior), and on the other hand the other groups (that are said to be ill-informed and misled). A relevant question arising here is whether radical movements are successful in disseminating this idea among their followers. A study conducted by Toner, Leary, Asher, and Jongman-Serano (2013) speaks to this issue. These authors reported, in a sample collected in the general public, greater belief superiority on the more extreme positions (i.e., very liberal (1) and very conservative (5) on a 5-point political ideology self-placement scale) compared to the

moderate positions (i.e., 2 to 4). It is useful here to clarify the concept of belief superiority by comparing it with belief certainty. Belief certainty pertains to the degree to which people are sure about the views they hold; belief superiority, however, entails a social comparison and thus explicitly represents the idea that one's beliefs or attitudes are better than those of other people (Petty, Briñol, Tormala, & Wegener, 2007). One can be certain about one's ideas, but this does not imply that one thinks his or her ideas are better (or not) than those held by others. Certainty and superiority are therefore two distinct concepts.

Dogmatic intolerance is another variable that is closely related to belief superiority. In three studies conducted on samples collected in the general public, van Prooijen and Krouwel (2017) measured dogmatic intolerance with items like "I believe that everyone should think like me," "If everyone would think about it, they would hold the same opinions as I do," and "How I feel about issues is the truth." Again, self-placement scales were used (e.g., ranging from 1 ("very left-wing") to 10 ("very right-wing")). These authors reported significant quadratic effects showing the highest scores on dogmatic intolerance at the low and high ends of the self-placement left/right scale. The concepts of belief superiority and dogmatic intolerance resonate well with the writings of Gamson (1975) and Simons and Mechling (1981). The suggestion here is that attempts of radical parties to elicit such superiority beliefs fit well with the mindset of their followers (and vice versa), and thus might serve as a mechanism to mobilize support. Future studies may therefore directly investigate whether cynical people may show belief superiority, and whether this contributes to populist party support.

Political Efficacy

From the previous paragraphs, it can be concluded that political cynicism is a creature that continuously feeds itself, fueled by anger and by biased information processing strategies. A relevant question is what people *do* with this cynical attitude? Do they merely fight their

small, personal wars on social media, or do they also try to make a true difference in the political arena, for instance when casting their vote in the ballot box, or engaging in collective action such as political protest?

Most scientists would agree that high political cynicism is accompanied by a lack of perceived political efficacy (see De Vreese, 2005). According to this view, cynical people no longer believe that their political actions make any difference. They are averse to politics and, at the same time, do not take action because “the ship is already sunk anyway.” There is a great deal of research on collective action that has been applied to the willingness to vote in elections, and here too a reduced level of perceived political efficacy is linked to a lack of engagement (for example, Van Zomeren 2016; Van Zomeren, Susilani, & Berend, 2016; Valentino et al., 2011).

There are circumstances, however, which allow political cynics to suddenly become a major political force, and anger can play a role in this process (see Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, in press; Weber, 2013). One such situation is when elections have a high stake in terms of the overall political system. Van Zomeren et al. (2016) showed that anger indeed played a role during the Italian elections in 2013, where the radical Five-Star Movement and the right-wing populist Lega Nord became important political forces. Angry Italians with a deep antipathy towards the traditional parties suddenly had the opportunity to change the system with their vote, which represented an entirely novel situation for them. Meaningful here is that the anger about the overall political system (as characterized by cynicism) contributed positively to the intention to vote, while the anger towards the incumbent government (as comprised in negative partisanship) played no significant role.

Politically cynical people may (rightly) assume that their vote may indeed make a difference, as such raising their political efficacy. Supporters of the Five-Star Movement, for instance, ‘suddenly’ witnessed that the polls predicted electoral success. In the past, politically

cynical voters would have left the political system because they could only vote for small, marginal parties with little electoral weight, which were never allowed to participate in any government or decision body. Cynics were not able to change the political landscape, and could solely communicate their discontent by casting a protest vote (e.g., a spoiled ballot, or voting for a candidate with no hope of winning). However, when radical parties have a realistic chance to become game changers in the political system, the cynic's vote makes a difference, activating segments of the voting public. This was the case in Italy where, at a certain moment, the radical parties gained the majority.

We are now living in times in which radical options are gaining momentum, being electorally successful, despite representing marginal options in a not-so-distant past. The situation has thus changed dramatically for the political cynic. As such, we assume that the lack of political efficacy presumed in the classic literature is at least in part situated in the political context, and not entirely in the psychological makeup of the politically cynic individual.

Political Ramifications of Cynicism

Are cynical people anti-democratic, representing a major threat to the current political system, or are they the messengers of political change that eventually will benefit democracy? Both potentials are valid. As noted by Pattyn et al. (2012): "Historically, the term cynicism stems from a Hellenistic philosophical school famous for criticizing ancient Greek society. By publicly ridiculing anyone who seemed pompous, materialistic or pretentious, they held up a mirror to society, hoping to elicit change therein" (p. 566). Moreover, according to De Vreese (2005), cynicism is positively related to political refinement, suggesting that cynicism is an indication of an "interested and critical citizen." Furthermore, this author stated: "It seems that citizens have the capacity to be both interested and knowledgeable about politics while at the same time critical and rather disparaging about politicians and their performance" (p. 294).

Nevertheless, most researchers have expressed negative ideas about (political) cynicism. Indeed, a recurring theme in literature is that political cynicism is harmful to political participation (see Patterson, 2002). Because democratic governments derive their authority from public support, a persistently high level of political cynicism threatens their credibility and legitimacy. But even if the legitimacy of the government is not at risk, a politically cynical climate has been shown to lead to a situation in which political leaders have a harder time solving societal problems (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Neustadt, 1990). As a result, they make weak decisions and fail to address controversial issues decisively (Hetherington, 1998; Porter, 2008).

In this section, we first argue that the political situation is suffering from a trust crisis (Hardin, 2006). Political distrust and cynicism are ever high, as manifested by the startling high figure of not less than three quarters of the electorate which nowadays does not trust anymore politics and politicians. Next, we discuss how center parties – traditional parties and new movements – can react to the upraise of cynicism. Finally, building on the distinction between genuine and toxic radicalism, we discuss Trumpism as an example of the latter type of radicalism.

The Political Trust Crisis On the back cover of ‘The Cynical Americans’ – a seminal book on cynicism written in 1989 by Donald Kanter and Philip Mirvis - it is written: “Cynicism is growing rampant in America. It pervades the workplace. Worse yet, you, your boss, and fellow co-workers may be cynics and not even know it. This corrosive outlook threatens our personal lives, organizations, communities, and country.” It seems as if, in any period people, feel to be living in cynical times. However, many people have lost their faith in traditional politics and politicians, and this seems more true now than before. What better way to demonstrate the inadequacy of the traditional parties than with figures about political distrust? In the broad literature, a common understanding has grown that “trust is a psychological state

comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). Trust has been considered a social glue connecting people, and, as such as an important and necessary precondition for cooperation between people to occur (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977). Trust is not only important in interpersonal contexts, but societal institutions also need to be trusted in order to elicit cooperation (Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler, 1990). People assign power to politicians hoping that they will make good use of it, for the people’s prosperity and well-being. Political actors must therefore ensure that they are not perceived as people who only serve their own interests and the interest of ‘not-the-people’, but also the interests of the electorate that they represent. The question arising here, therefore, is whether the establishment has succeeded in eliciting trust among citizens.

Numerous surveys and polls show how political trust keeps on eroding . It has widely been argued that we now live in an “age of distrust” (Da Silva, 2009, p. 86; also see Hardin, 2006). Citrin and Stoker (2018) have shown the longitudinal trends over six decades in trust in the American government. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a gradual decline in trust, which preceded a more volatile period until 2004, after which trust eroded up to an all-time low in 2016 (the last year of the survey). Recent surveys around the world indicate that trust in politics is at a historical low. According to the Pew Research Center (2021a), the percentage of Americans who trust the government dropped from 73% in 1958 to below 30% in 2007. Since 2007, the percentage of Americans trusting the government always or most of the time has not surpassed 30%, although there seems a modest upturn since Biden has been in office (i.e., April 10th, 2021, the percentage was 24). Such trends of declining trust are not only be observed in the United States, but also in many European, Asian, and African countries. For instance, the latest Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) – an annual online survey conducted in 27 countries with over 33,000 respondents – reported that in 2021 governments

were distrusted in 13 surveyed countries. The IPSOS Global Trust in Professions poll ($N \approx 20,000$) revealed that politicians and government officials are considered the least trustworthy professions. More specifically, in their 2019 poll, politicians were considered the most untrustworthy profession in all 23 surveyed countries – with 67% of the respondents agreeing that politicians cannot be trusted. This decline in trust is problematic, and as it is one of the constituting elements of political cynicism, it is not surprising that political cynicism is rampant. Many would, however, wish it were different. A recently published survey of the Pew Research Center (2019b) reported that the large majority of the general population wishes that trust in politics would rise, and that more than 80% thought that such improvements are possible.

Given the low trust shown in many countries, the political enterprise is in need for change, but improvement of this situation is unlikely to occur soon. Taking into account that not less than three quarters of the citizens do not trust traditional politics and politicians, wanting to electorally ‘punish’ them (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016), it should come as no surprise that anti-establishment candidates like Donald Trump and parties such as the Five Star Movement in Italy and Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands are able to attract a large number of voters. In fact, the 75% share of votes of distrustful citizens can be considered the possible upper limit of the voter potential of radical-populist parties. Of course, not everyone in this large reservoir is a supporter of radical-populist parties, and many of these people have ‘just’ lost their interest in politics. It is highly doubtful, however, that when their political engagement is revived, it will be for the benefit of the traditional parties, which have been the major forces behind their indifference and disinterest in the first place.

How to Overcome the Trust Crisis in Politics: Lessons for Moderate Parties

What can reverse the trust crisis in politics, and thus help in reducing political cynicism? Bridging the trust divide between the general population and the government is

certainly not an easy task. Political action against distrust and cynicism from a polarization lens is unlikely to succeed, and probably even counterproductive. Indeed, a possible reaction might be to try to take advantage of the fact that issue position polarization is at least as strong for moderates as for radicals. A possible reaction of traditional parties, therefore, might be to align themselves with their ideologically polarizing electorate, implying political polarization by which moderate left-wing parties would become more left-wing, and moderate right-wing parties more right-wing. Such shifts towards extremes have already been observed among moderate right-wing parties for immigration policies, particularly after the electoral successes of radical right-wing parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Carvalho, 2017). Such a strategy, however, is likely to be unsuccessful on logical grounds. One problem is that traditional left and right parties depend on each other, especially in the context of multi-party systems (Haselmayer & Jenny, 2018), and that in order to successfully implement policies it is in their own interest to cooperate, which requires good compromises with broad support. To put it in terms of philosophy, good syntheses, so to speak, of the theses and the antitheses (e.g. Hegel, 1970/1807). Political polarization, however, further divides the traditional parties and may increase their powerlessness to cooperate and to come to solutions together, which prohibits the formulation of convincing answers on the fundamental issues raised by the radical parties. Moreover, another problem is that, all too often, there is a world of difference between the bold statements before the elections and the actual policies afterwards. This is, of course, especially the case for coalition governments in which parties work together and must willingly compromise, but even when a single party holds power, reality is often more unruly than expected. The difference between pre-election word and post-election lack of action, in turn, further undermines trust and feeds political cynicism (see Pattyn et al., 2012), paving the road for further electoral success of radical parties.

In times of great political distrust and rising political cynicism, the central political struggle is over the legitimacy of the system, which includes both the left-wing and right-wing traditional parties. The situation in which traditional parties find themselves is very much like a social dilemma. In a social dilemma situation, people are torn between the desire to benefit themselves and the moral obligation that all of us must take care for others and the collective (Kollock, 1998; Komorita & Parks, 1995). A soccer player may feel the need to go for his own glory by scoring from a seemingly impossible angle, while a teammate stands alone in front of the goal. Likewise, we may want more than our share of scarce, valuable resources (such as water and clean air), while this leaves less or nothing for others. In each of these cases, the individual gets the most benefit from pursuing self-interest. However, if everyone acts in such ways, football teams will no longer score goals and our planet will be ruined. The same logic applies to the traditional political parties. If the traditional parties want to build a dam against radicalism, they will have to think in terms of the collective, and focus on cooperation; this goal is not served by affirming the high degree of issue position polarization among its adherents.

More effective action from the traditional parties themselves should explicitly target trust issues. They will need to acknowledge that the concerns of radical voters should not be ignored. Oliver and Rahn (2018) refer to the situation in which political parties are not responding to the desires of large sections of the electorate as a “representation gap” (p. 194), which they consider an important antecedent of the raise of populist politicians. Traditional parties will thus have to take positions on immigration and globalization, and they will have to debate these new positions with the electorate. If they distance themselves from past decisions, they cannot but take responsibility for what went wrong at that time. It is an option to symbolize this distance with the past by apologizing for it, a means to regaining trust (e.g., Scher & Darley 1997; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004). This seems a better

strategy than portraying radical parties as populist, demagogic and irresponsible, and their adherents as indecent and marginal ‘deplorables’ (Van Assche, Roets, Van Hiel, & Dhont, 2019). It is indeed doubtful that this strategy will bring the radical voter back to the traditional herd, as shown by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2019) in the Greek political context. Another plan that is doomed to fail is to simply copy parts of the political pamphlet of radical parties, as this does not alleviate the deeper level problem of trust concerns. Such a focal strategy might even backlash and be experienced as too good to be true (Steinel, van Beest, & van Dijk, 2014).

If the moderate, establishment parties do not succeed in joining forces against cynicism, the political counter-reaction, of course, can also come from non-traditional parties that try to unite the political center. Western Europe is witnessing anti-radical initiatives that attempt to unite citizens. Consider the political movement of Emanuel Macron, La République en Marche (or, abbreviated, ‘en Marche’). En Marche explicitly distances itself from the opposition between left and right as well as from the traditional parties. In other words, they try to transcend the left-right contradictions, and this is particularly achieved by the movement’s claim of technocratic competence. Moreover, the movement positions itself as an anti-establishment party and has been called “technocratic populism” (see Ivaldi, 2019; Perottino & Guasti, 2020). This new movement thus united the political middle and at the same time marginalized the important political parties that had dominated France for decades (especially the Social Democrats and Republicans). En Marche became the challenger of the radical right (i.e., Marine Le Pen’s Front National). The positive campaign of the Macron movement was striking and paid off electorally.

Radical Parties and Political Change: For Better or Worse

In many ways, radical parties are like ‘canaries in the coalmine’, signaling that a part of the electorate believes that the political establishment is inadequate. Radical parties

highlight the major problems and, like other parties, seek to gain voter approval. Some of these radical parties can be considered to be legitimate political forces. Indeed, repeatedly insisting on certain program points is not an attack on democracy, but, instead, it is an inherent feature of the democratic process itself (De Ceulaer, 2020). According to Sidanius (1985), “Specific social or political ideas, which may be very ‘extreme’ in one geographical or cultural context, may be very ‘moderate’ in another context. For example, belief in the political and social equality of Blacks would most certainly have been a very ‘extreme’ idea in the America of 1776 and is now becoming a very moderate idea” (p. 639). Society sometimes needs political radicals to change systematic injustices. Moscovici (1976) stressed that minority opinions are the motor of societal change (which he calls “conversion”) and that things would never change if majorities would always prevail. However, not all radical movements can be considered genuine, and some radical parties and movements surely pose a threat to democracy, especially in countries with weak political and social institutions (Weyland, 2020).

A discussion of political cynicism is incomplete without reflection on the presidency of Donald Trump. The advent of Trump is intricately linked to his use of social media -- Donald Trump and Steve Bannon created a toxic form of radicalism that aims to fill the minds of their cynical adherents with ‘alternative facts’. Toxic radicalism does not envisage to reveal the truth, but it aims to feed frustration, general negativism and revanchism among its adherents, with the sole aim to serve the personal interests of the leader (who is presented as the one and only alternative for a failing establishment). Here facts have been replaced by appeals to emotion and personal belief (McDermott, 2019), which in turn form the basis of a new consensual belief that replaces the original facts. In this context, it is relevant to make a distinction between misinformation and disinformation. *Misinformation* refers to the communication of inaccurate or false information without the explicit intention to mislead

(Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Conversely, as Hameleers (2020) writes, *disinformation* refers to the intentional fabrication of (half) lies through the use of techniques such as manipulation and de-contextualization. Trumpism clearly embodies the frequent use of disinformation. At the same time, the so-called ‘mainstream’, traditional media have been discredited for being dishonest, and to even hurt the interests of common people. As such, more accepted accounts of reality become discredited, because the source itself is portrayed as being unreliable. According to Ross and Rivers (2018), “Trump himself is a serial offender in the propagation of mis- and disinformation in the same vein that he accuses the [mainstream] media” (p. 1).

Toxic radicalism is not only about telling lies. Even worse, the status of truth itself is compromised, and people are led to believe that the distinction between truth and falsity is rooted not in an objective reality, but instead in differing social conventions, and that there are many radically different and even incompatible ways, yet equally valid, of knowing the world (Dillet, 2017). Trumpism thus does not clarify the contours of the truth but instead conceals them. Instead of making people virtuous, disinformation poisons the mind of countless citizens. As we argued above, social media have the capacity to reinforce one’s opinion: People read and hear more and more of the same, and come to believe this more and more, and become more certain about it (see McDermott, 2019), up to a level that such views – even if shown to be wrong – can hardly be corrected (Morris, Morris, & Francia, 2020). Toxic radicalism thrives on political cynicism, but perverts it among its supporters, victimizing the truth itself. It manipulates cynical followers to the point of alienating them from reality (Bakir & McStay, 2018; McDermott, 2019).

Political cynicism is a powerful trait. Disgust for the political establishment makes people rightfully receptive of critical messages about the policies and actions of political actors (De Vreese, 2005), but also to disinformation and grotesque manipulations of the truth. History has revealed to us that untruths are to be actively belied. As has been shown by

Jonathan Israel (2014), the archetype of toxic radicalism is the terror regime of Robespierre during the French Revolution. On the basis of the raise of Robespierre lies the propaganda of Jean-Paul Marat, which was arguably more slanderous and misleading than what happened in the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump. The famous philosopher Karl Popper (1945) once told of the paradox of tolerance, namely that tolerant societies must be intolerant of one thing, namely intolerance itself. We would like to add that such societies, however, should first be intolerant of lies and grotesque falsehoods, and that well-informed citizens can be expected not to fall prey to intolerance if they know the truth. In conclusion, political cynicism renders citizens receptive of the rhetoric of radical movements, which is not wrong in itself and can even benefit society, except when such movements are toxic and spread lies.

Concluding Remarks

In this contribution we demonstrated that issue position polarization is not the most important explanation of radicalization. Adherents of radical left and right ideas are not so much 'left' or 'right' in terms of their ideologically attitudes; indeed, they are not that distinct from moderate left- and right-wing voters in this respect. Rather they are *politically cynical* (along with being concerned with the negative effects of globalization and Wild West capitalism, or with immigration and the increasing presence of ethnic minorities). They are distrustful and driven by anger, and their information processing is heavily focused on consistency and closure. They often distance themselves from traditional politics, and if the opportunity arises to reverse the establishment, they become very politically effective.

Issue position polarization instead seems to play a role among *moderate* voters, and the left-right cleavage is highly predictive of differences in the electorate of the traditional party families. Hence, for politics to become more effective, depolarization is needed for the moderate voter, and resocialization into the political system is needed for the radical voters.

This resocialization is only possible when traditional parties can regain trust in politics and in the establishment among radical citizens, and this will require them to take responsibility for government actions that have made the population increasingly cynical.

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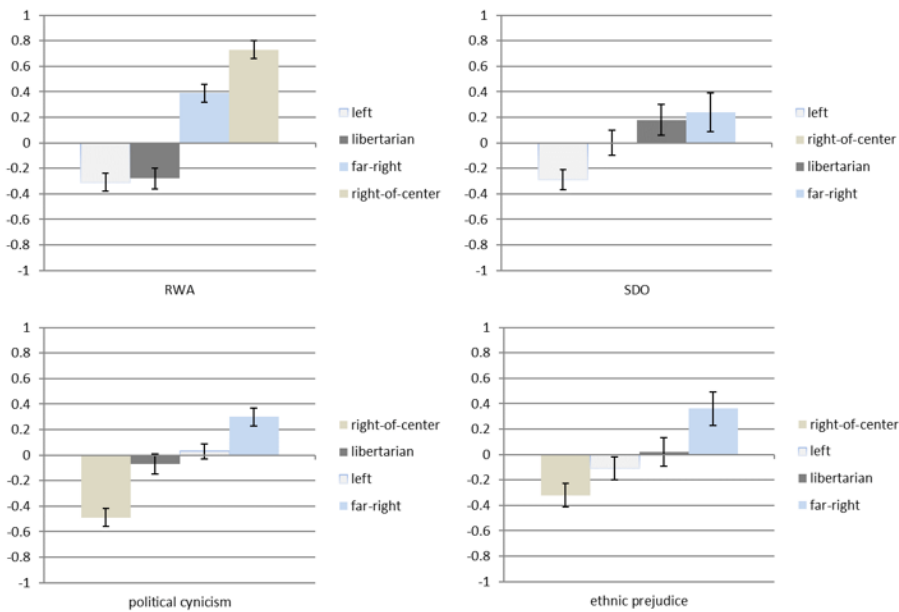
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Figure 1. Standardized residual scores (with 95% confidence interval error bars) for RWA, SDO, political cynicism, and ethnic prejudice among left ($N = 135$), libertarian ($N = 85$), right-of-center ($N = 98$), and radical right-wing ($N = 68$) voters in the Netherlands (in ascending order per political alignment).



Note: These plots are based on a re-analysis of data reported in Van Assche et al. (2019). RWA = right-wing authoritarianism; SDO = social dominance orientation.

Figure 2. The relationship between left-right attitudes and political cynicism depends on the political context.

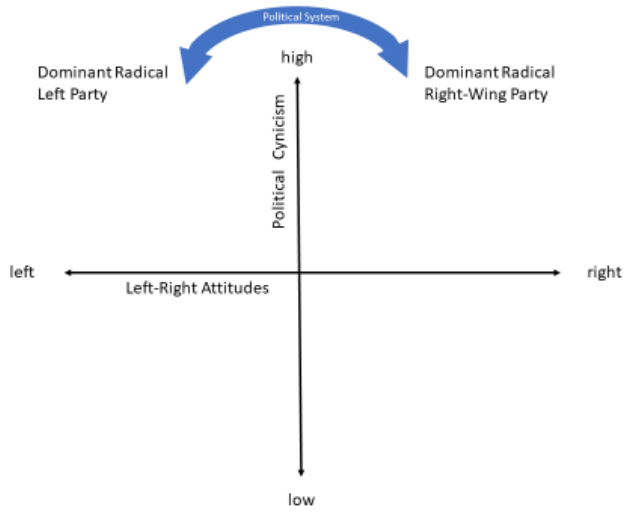


Figure 3. A graphical representation of the traditional polarization model of support for radical parties

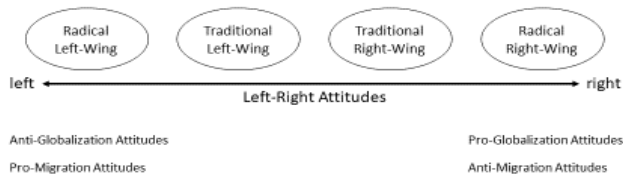


Figure 4. A graphical representation of the present model of support for radical parties.

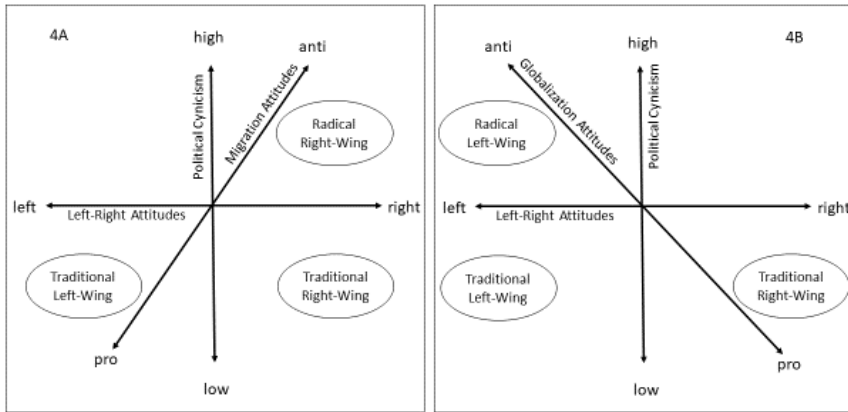


Table 1. Pattern Matrix Coefficients among Cynicism and Populism Items, Based on a Principal Component Analysis with Direct OBLIMIN Rotation ($N = 198$).

	I	II
Cynicism_01 People are very frequently manipulated by politicians.	.56	.11
Cynicism_02 Politicians are only interested in getting and maintaining power.	.60	.32
Cynicism_03 Politicians pretend to care more about people than they really do.	.73	.15
Cynicism_04 Our political leaders are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes.	.57	.36
Cynicism_05 If a politician sticks to his ideals and principles, he is unlikely to reach the top of his profession.	.16	.46
Cynicism_06 No man can hope to stay honest once he enters politics.	-.14	.78
Cynicism_07 Almost all politicians will sell out their ideals or break their promises if it will increase their power.	.27	.72
Cynicism_08 All politicians are bad – some are just worse than others.	-.05	.75
Populism_01 Politicians need to follow the will of the people.	.66	-.16
Populism_02 The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	.51	.01
Populism_03 The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.	.51	.00
Populism_04 I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.	.62	-.05
Populism_05 Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.	.64	.12
Populism_06 Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.	.03	.68
Populism_07 What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.	-.03	.78
Populism_08 Interest groups have too much influence over political decisions.	.64	-.14

Note: Primary factor loadings in bold.

Table 2. Simple slope effects of RWA on support for traditional right parties (Christian Democratic Appeal - CDA, and Christian Union - CU) and radical right parties (Party for Freedom - PVV, and Proud of the Netherlands - TON) in the Netherlands as a function of neighborhood-level diversity ($N = 628$).

	Traditional Right Parties		Radical Right Parties	
	CDA	CU	PVV	TON
RWA effect in neighborhoods...	<i>b</i> (CI ₉₅)	<i>b</i> (CI ₉₅)	<i>b</i> (CI ₉₅)	<i>b</i> (CI ₉₅)
... low in diversity	0.41* (0.05; 0.77)	0.52** (0.14; 0.90)	0.76*** (0.42; 1.11)	0.53** (0.15; 0.91)
... medium in diversity	0.29* (0.04; 0.55)	0.39*** (0.12; 0.65)	1.15*** (0.91; 1.39)	0.67*** (0.49; 1.02)
... high in diversity	0.18 (-0.18; 0.53)	0.25 (-0.12; 0.63)	1.54*** (1.20; 1.88)	0.99*** (0.61; 1.37)

Note: Unstandardized estimates reported, with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses) *: $p < .05$; **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$. Re-analysis of data reported in Van Assche et al. (2018).

FOOTNOTES

¹ Although relatively rare, various authors (e.g., Muller, 2016) have noted that centric populism is a possibility, and a common example in this respect is Silvio Berlusconi, a populist who was center-right but not radical right-wing.

² Although some radical groups are not particularly well informed (e.g., QANON), in general radicals are better informed than moderates about political issues, which increases the chance that people will be confronted with information that affirms their attitudes. They also often discuss politics with others (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2003), which creates situations in which issue position polarization can play its full role.

³ The party landscape in these contexts lacks a radical left party.