New parties in a crowded electoral space: the (in)stability of radical right voters in the Netherlands

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Abstract
Previous research demonstrated that voters for the Dutch radical right party PVV were the most stable voters among the highly volatile electorate. However, since 2017 two new radical right parties have successfully entered the Dutch Parliament: Forum for Democracy (FvD) and JA21, conceivably at the expense of the PVV. The success of these new parties is puzzling, because there does not seem to be much room for new parties campaigning on a highly similar platform. In our paper, we use LISS panel data to study the determinants of vote switching patterns between four subsequent elections from 2017 to 2021. We find that the surprise victory of the new far right in 2019 can be explained by its ability to attract both former PVV voters as well as voters new to the far right. Since then, FvD has lost many of its supporters again, but these voters have mostly switched to other far-right parties, meaning the far-right support base has become fragmented, yet enlarged. This suggests that when provided with viable alternatives, radical right voters are as volatile as other voter groups.

Keywords Radical right-wing populism · Voting behavior · Electoral volatility · Forum for democracy (FvD) · Freedom party (PVV)
Introduction

At the time of writing this article, four radical right parties\(^1\) are represented in the Dutch Second Chamber of Parliament. Three of these were directly elected, the Freedom Party (PVV), Forum for Democracy (FvD), and ‘Right Answer 21’ (JA21), and one is a split-off from FvD, formed after the elections: ‘Dutch Interest’ (BV NL). For more than 10 years, between 2006 and 2017, the PVV had been the only party at the far-right end of the Dutch political landscape. In 2017, a new far-right party, FvD, entered the Dutch Second Chamber, winning two seats (roughly 1.5% of the votes), while the PVV gained 20 seats in that same election. Just two years later, FvD became the largest party nationwide in the provincial elections in March 2019 (gaining 14.5% of the votes). Yet the victory was short-lived, as FvD lost about a quarter of its supporters only two months later in the European Parliament elections. In the national parliament elections of 2021, FvD obtained 5 percent of the votes, while JA21 (a split-off from FvD founded in December 2020) obtained 2.3 percent. So, in 2021 the two parties together gained about half of the votes that FvD received in the Provincial elections of 2019.

This paper seeks to explain the initial unexpected success of new far-right parties in the Netherlands: the rise of FvD in the Provincial elections of March 2019, as well as its declining popularity in the following two years, concurrent with the rise of JA21. It does so by employing four waves of the LISS panel, in order to study vote switching patterns between four consecutive elections: the national elections of 2017, the provincial and European Parliament elections of March and May 2019, and the national elections of 2021. We describe where the voters for the new radical right parties (FvD and JA21) came from and where those who abandoned FvD after the provincial elections of March 2019 switched to. More importantly, we conduct several multinomial regression analyses to assess which factors explain these switching patterns.

The analyses show that FvD’s major victory during the 2019 provincial elections was founded both on attracting a sizeable proportion of former PVV voters, as well as voters that were new to the far right. Initially, the party mobilized support predominantly on ‘core’ radical right issues, such as anti-immigrant stances, while presenting itself as a less extremist electoral alternative. In subsequent electoral campaigns, FvD emphasized other issues, thereby alienating large parts of its voter base. At the 2019 European elections, particularly FvD voters who did not share its hard Euroskepticism abandoned the party again, whereas in 2021 especially the Corona-related conspiracy theories propagated by FvD estranged some of its former supporters. The fact that attitudes toward these types of issues are predictors of switching to the new radical right parties does indicate that these parties have found a new,\(^1\) There is debate in the literature as to the exact nature of the Dutch parties at the far-right end of the spectrum. The introduction to this special issue describes how FvD changed from a radical right populist to a more extremist party, embracing conspiracy theories (Jacobs et al. 2023). While there are clear differences between the three parties, we refer to them with the more general terms ‘radical right’ or ‘far right’ (see also De Jonge 2021).
albeit small, ‘niche’ that has enlarged the overall electoral support for the Dutch far right, while at the same time fragmenting it. Notably, while FvD lost most of its supporters by 2021, these voters mostly went to other radical right parties that did not embrace conspiracy theories. So, even though the radical right is more fragmented than it was in 2019, its total support base has been enlarged.

Our study makes three contributions to the literature. First of all, our study contributes to our knowledge of voters for new parties, as well as voters for the radical right. Earlier studies have suggested that new parties often make an entry into the party system by competing on a new issue on which their main competitors are internally divided, so called ‘wedge issues’ (e.g., De Vries and Hobolt 2012, 2020; Van de Wardt et al. 2013). Yet, in the case of FvD, it appears as if its original breakthrough did not so much depend upon a wedge issue, but that the party was searching for issues to politicize after its original breakthrough. We are aware of just one study of FvD supporters (Otjes and Voerman 2020), which focuses exclusively on explaining differences between voters in their support for the PVV and FvD. While Otjes’ study provides important insights into the differences between the drivers of support for these parties, it does not look at similarities and the extent to which the support bases of these parties overlap. Moreover, it does not focus on patterns of switching, so that we still do not know to what extent the new radical right parties compete with each other and/or with mainstream parties. By zooming in on the dynamics of switchers between different elections, we are able to distinguish between the motives of different groups of voters for the various parties at the far-right end of the political spectrum.

Secondly, our paper speaks to debates on the volatility of radical right voters. A cross-national study shows that dissatisfied voters for populist parties are more stable in their party support than supporters of other parties (Voogd and Dassonneville 2020). This finding seems somewhat at odds with other research showing that dissatisfied voters are likely to be the most volatile voters (e.g., Dejaeghere and Dassonneville 2017; Söderlund 2008) and that voters for populist parties tend to be dissatisfied with politics (e.g., Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Ivarsflaten 2008; Rooduijn et al. 2016). Voogd and Dassonneville (2020, p. 364) conclude that “(...) populist parties succeed in stably binding a specific part of those voters who are very dissatisfied with politics.” This is an important conclusion with implications for the way in which populist parties represent a stable group of discontented voters who would be switching between different parties or abstain in the absence of a populist party. However, the conclusion of Voogd and Dassonneville may be largely caused by the fact that populist parties usually face little competition on their core issues from other parties in the party system. The mainstream right competes with these parties on policies toward immigration (e.g., Abou-Chadi 2016; Van Spanje 2010), but does not offer the same mix of anti-immigrant, anti-EU, and populist rhetoric. Hence, if radical right parties face little competition on their core issues, it is not surprising that their support base is quite stable. Yet, we do not know how these voters respond when viable alternatives present themselves.

Finally, our study contributes to a better understanding of the increasing fragmentation of the Dutch party system. Van der Meer et al. (2012) demonstrated that up until the national elections of 2012 party competition took place mainly within
two ‘blocks’ of parties at the left and the right side of the political spectrum, with few voters switching between the two sides. The right block included the radical right PVV, which competed mainly with the mainstream right. However, Voogd and Dassonneville (2020) have since concluded that voters for the PVV were the most stable voters in the Dutch party landscape, so there appears to be less competition between them and the mainstream right than some eight years earlier when Van der Meer et al. conducted their study. Our study suggests that as a consequence of the increased competition among radical right parties, the Dutch party system is increasingly divided in three blocks of parties (left, mainstream right, and radical right).

**Voting for radical right parties**

Different models have been proposed to explain support for radical right parties, focusing on demand- and supply-side factors (Eatwell 2003; Golder 2016; Otjes 2021; van der Brug and Fennema 2007). Lacking sufficient variation in supply-side characteristics in our study, we focus mainly on the demand side in this paper. Yet, it is important to mention that the Netherlands has a highly proportional electoral system combined with a very low threshold for representation, so that it is relatively easy for a new party to enter parliament.

The first demand-side explanation for radical right support focuses on the socio-structural characteristics of their supporters. The idea is that globalization of world markets has increasingly created groups of winners and losers of globalization. The ‘losers of globalization’ are those who feel threatened economically and culturally the most by the increased mobility of capital (making them more vulnerable to job loss) and mobility of people (making them compete more with migrants for the remaining lower-skilled jobs). They are the ones most likely to support the radical right (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2006). This model predicts that voters in the most precarious positions are drawn to the radical right, in particular people with low levels of education, from lower social classes and the lower-income groups. While most studies find support for the predictions of this model (e.g., Bornschier 2010; Stubager 2013; Rooduijn 2018), a first study of FvD supporters showed that these supporters are on average better educated than voters for the PVV (Otjes 2021). It remains to be seen whether this is still the case after the party leaders’ embrace of conspiracy theories. So, while the socio-structural model allows us to make clear predictions about the group of voters who are most likely to support the radical right, we cannot derive predictions about those who are most likely to vote for one of the ‘new’ radical right parties versus the ‘older’ one.

The second explanatory approach is that the choice to support a radical right party is driven by political discontent. Those who are dissatisfied with mainstream parties and the political regime might vote for radical right populist parties to demonstrate their discontent (e.g., Bélanger and Aarts 2006; Hernández 2018). However, research shows that voters for far-right parties cannot be seen as purely ‘protest voters’ (e.g., Van der Brug et al. 2000). Measures of political discontent (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018), as well as populist attitudes (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), moderate the effects of policy positions. So, support for far-right parties is
particular strong among those who are politically discontented and who share these parties’ positions on substantive policies.

The policy voting model represents a third demand-side model and is the one with the most explanatory power. Empirical research has repeatedly confirmed that policy considerations are a prime explanatory factor for vote choices (Dalton 1985; Iversen 1994), including the choices of those who support a radical right-wing party (Van der Brug et al. 2000; Rooduijn 2018). A policy voting model assumes that electoral competition works like a market with demand- and supply-side factors (e.g., Van Der Brug et al. 2005; Van Hauwaert 2021; De Jonge 2021). Parties are expected to be successful if many voters share their policy positions on issues that voters care about, while there are few other parties that hold similar policy positions. All radical right parties have very similar anti-immigrant and Euroskeptic attitudes (Rydgren 2008; Werts et al. 2012). So, voters who agree with them on these issues will find far-right parties in general attractive. Yet, the different far-right parties do not distinguish themselves from the other far-right parties on these issues. So, why would voters vote for one far-right party, rather than the other?

De Vries and Hobolt (2012, 2020) and Van de Wardt et al. (2014) argued that new parties make an entry into the party system by competing on a new issue on which their main competitors are internally divided, so called ‘wedge issues.’ However, when FvD entered the Dutch party system with two seats in 2017, it did not mobilize support on a clearly distinct policy program. Otjes and Voerman (2020) focuses particularly on the competition between the PVV and FvD in the period between 2017 and 2019. He confirms that support for both parties is mainly driven by socio-cultural issue stances, while the (usually rather small) differences in sympathy for these two parties are linked to voters’ positions on socio-economic issues, where FvD attracts more socioeconomically liberal voters. FvD had initially presented itself as a ‘more reasonable’ alternative to the PVV (De Jonge 2021, p. 288). Both of the party’s MPs were highly educated and affluent speakers (Baudet has a PhD in philosophy and the number two, Hiddema is a criminal defense lawyer). This may have made FvD initially more attractive as a vote choice for highly educated and first-time radical right voters. Yet, after the provincial elections, various incidents undermined the credibility of the image of a non-extremist anti-immigration party, in particular scandals around FvD’s youth organization involving cases of blatant racism and anti-Semitism. This divided the party internally and led to the resignation of several prominent politicians (for details, see De Jonge 2021). Some of them founded the new party JA21, which tries to retain the image of a non-extremist radical right party. Its party leader Eerdmans is one of the very few radical right politicians in the Netherlands with a decent track record in public office in the municipality of Rotterdam. However, substantively its program is not so different from that of FvD.

Beyond a difference in manner between PVV and the new far right, FvD also increasingly combined its core radical right positions with newly accentuated issues, in particular skepticism toward environmental concerns and, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, opposition against Corona policies of the government. Since 2018, environmental policies intended to reduce global warming and to protect the environment had become increasingly politicized in the Netherlands.
and FvD expressed their cynicism regarding the need for costly measures to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The Netherlands is a small country but has a very large, industrialized, and export-oriented agricultural sector, which places a heavy burden on the environment. A reduction of this agricultural sector became almost unavoidable after the highest administrative court ruled in May 2019 that existing government policies regarding nitrogen emissions were in violation of EU agreements on the protection of nature reserves (Otjes and Voerman 2020). The announcement of new policies to reduce cattle led to farmers’ protests, which were supported by the PVV and FvD, although prominent politicians of FvD were more visible during these demonstrations. Hence, the policy voting model would predict that those who oppose measures to protect the environment would be drawn to FvD. Additionally, FvD embraced the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown campaign. This sets FvD apart from all other parties, including the PVV. So, anti-vaccination might be seen as FvD’s wedge issue, because the potential voters of other parties were divided on that issue.

In sum, the policy voting model has most explanatory power for party preferences, which is why vote switching takes place mostly between parties that are ideologically similar (e.g., Van der Meer et al. 2012). This is also the case for radical right parties (Van der Brug et al. 2013). Hence, in the specific case of our study, we would expect most vote switching between the three radical right parties PVV, FvD, and JA21, and we would expect mainstream right parties (VVD and CDA) to be important competitors of all far-right parties. We expect the core issues of radical right parties—in particular anti-immigration and anti-EU attitudes—to explain switches between the mainstream right and the far right, whereby we expect the newer far-right parties that present themselves as less extremist to attract more switchers from the mainstream right. Yet, as the positions of far-right parties on these core issues are quite indistinguishable, these issues are unlikely to explain switches among the far-right parties. Instead, on the basis of anecdotal information, we expect environmental concerns and anti-vaccination to explain switches between FvD and the PVV, because of differences between these parties along these dimensions. JA21 was a split-off of FvD. It was founded in December 2020, just half a year before the elections and it has less of a clear profile. So, regarding factors that explain switches to JA21, our study is highly exploratory in nature.

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2 The data set that we employ in this study contains an item tapping into support for policies to reduce global warming. This is a different issue than those focusing on the agricultural sector, yet substantively the two are likely related, because they both pertain to environmental protection and sustainability. We expect strong negative effects of this issue on support for FvD already in 2019, but the effect could have increased over time because the farmers’ protests increased the saliency of these types of issues.
Data and analysis strategy

To study the electoral fortunes of new radical right parties in the Netherlands, we use data from the Dutch LISS Panel, which is based on a randomly selected probability sample of households in the Netherlands. The panel members are interviewed regularly online and receive a small compensation. We measure vote switching patterns based on four waves of the LISS Panel, fielded after the national parliament elections of 2017, after the Provincial elections in March 2019, after the European Parliament elections of May 2019, and after the national parliament elections of 2021. The sample sizes in these four waves are very different. The question about party choice in the Provincial elections was asked to all members of the LISS panel (about 8000 respondents), the questions about voting in European elections were only asked of 1000 respondents. The two national election waves consist of roughly 2000 respondents. Since the different samples do not fully overlap, we would be left with a very small sample when restricting ourselves to those who participated in all four waves. In order to optimize the sample size, we study vote switching patterns between pairs of elections: we compare the 2017 national elections with the provincial elections, the provincial elections with the European elections, as well as the provincial elections with the 2021 national elections. In total, our sample consists of 4237 respondents for whom data about their vote choice in both components of a ‘pair’ of elections is available.

As is often the case, voters for far-right parties tend to be somewhat underrepresented in the samples. Appendix D provides details of the proportion of far-right voters in our sample relative to the population. We do not think that the underrepresentation of far-right voters threatens the validity of our analyses, since we are interested in explaining patterns of switching between parties. If specific groups of switchers would be more underrepresented than other groups of switchers, the descriptive part of our analyses could be biased. Yet we have no indication that this would be the case. More importantly, these biases are unlikely to affect our explanatory analyses.

From our total sample, we use various sub-samples for different parts of our analyses. Primarily, we analyze the supporters of new far-right parties in the Netherlands, that is supporters of FvD and JA21, and we compare them to supporters of the ‘older’ radical right party in the country, the PVV, as well as to supporters of mainstream parties. We investigate who generally supports new radical right parties and especially who switched their vote choice to one of these new far-right parties in the provincial elections of March 2019 and in the national parliament elections of 2021. This allows us to understand both where the new far-right’s voters ‘originated from’ and whereto they ‘defected’ as well as what the motives behind these vote switching decisions were.

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3 The four waves include: the LISS version of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 (fielded in March 2017), a wave conducted after the provincial elections in March/April 2019, the LISS version of the European Election Studies Voter Study 2019 (fielded in June 2019), and the LISS versions of the core and panel components of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2021 (fielded in spring 2021).
We employ a three-step analysis strategy. First, we comparatively analyze how support for different radical right parties at different points in time can be explained. These analyses are presented in online appendix A because of space limitations. Second, to investigate who switched to the new far-right parties, we descriptively analyze the vote switching patterns between the four elections in the time period from 2017 to 2021. Third, to understand the motives behind voters’ switching decisions, we use multinomial logistic regression to relate voters’ political attitudes to their vote switching patterns, analyzing the differences between sub-groups of voters for the new far right. Given our incremental analysis approach, we provide more detailed explanations of our methods in the relevant sections. Details on the operationalization of the variables are presented in online appendix D.

The origins and destinations of Dutch far-right voters, 2017–2021

In online Appendix A we present regression analyses of the factors that drive support for the PVV and FvD in 2017, as well as the PVV, FvD, and JA21 in 2021. Even though we find a few differences in the support base of these three parties, the overall conclusion of those analyses is that the different far-right parties attract very similar supporters, particularly in terms of their attitudes toward key far-right issues. So, this prompts the question what motivates people to switch to one of these far-right parties, rather than another one. Is this more or less a random decision or do we find systematic patterns? To answer this question, we begin by simply describing the vote switching patterns between different elections. In a first step, we focus on the people who voted for the two radical right parties FvD and the PVV in the Provincial elections of March 2019, the election in which FvD made an unexpected breakthrough and became the largest party. Figure 1 describes where the voters for
FvD and the PVV in March 2019 came from, that is, how they had voted in the national parliamentary election of 2017.

Considering that FvD received less than two percent of the votes in 2017, it is not surprising that only 6.3% of the provincial FvD voters had already voted for FvD previously. The largest proportion of FvD supporters, yet less than a third (27.8%) are those who voted for the radical right PVV. This could have been expected in view of the ideological proximity of PVV and FvD, but it goes against the image of the PVV having a very stable support base. The second and third largest proportions of voters had previously voted for mainstream right-wing parties, VVD (16.7%) and CDA (13.2%). However, almost as many voters came from the radical left Socialist Party (12.5%) as from the CDA. Only a small share of voters had previously been non-voters (5.6%). In total, for about two-thirds of the provincial FvD voters, their origin was a far (34.1%), respectively, moderate (37.6%) right-wing party, but for almost a fourth (23.0%) the origin was a left-wing party. Thus, this first descriptive account suggests that FvD’s major victory in the provincial elections crucially depended on competing successfully with a very wide range of parties. This diversity in electoral origins of FvD’s voters is all the more noteworthy when comparing it to the PVV: more than three-fifths (61.7%) of PVV voters had already voted for the party in 2017, suggesting that PVV did not compete as successfully with other parties.

At the provincial elections of 2019, the FvD attracted votes from across the whole political spectrum (even though more from the right than from the left). Figure 2 shows what FvD’s support base looked like two years later at the 2021 parliamentary elections. The results show that in 2021 all three far-right parties attracted most of their support from former non-voters and particularly from among the radical right parties. By contrast, there was almost no traffic from mainstream parties to radical right parties between 2019 and 2021, suggesting
that the radical right exhausted its potential at the provincial elections of 2019. So, what happened to the voters who supported the PVV and FvD in 2019?

While the origins of the FvD voters at the 2019 provincial elections are surprisingly diverse, their destinations during the ensuing European elections are more homogeneous (see Fig. 3). Only half of the provincial FvD voters (46.5%) continued to vote for FvD during the European elections, whereas a third of them did not turn out in these elections (33.3%). Nationwide, turnout at the European Elections was lower than at the Provincial elections, falling from 56 to 42%. Yet, while the proportion of non-voters in the European elections among FvD’s supporters at the provincial elections was the same as for the PVV (33%), it was much higher than for the other parties (18% of the people who voted for other parties during the provincial elections did not turn out at the EP elections). Hence, a large part of FvD’s loss in voter support was due to vote abstention. In addition, about 20 percent of the provincial FvD voters had a party other than FvD as their destination. The parties that they switched to were diverse, encompassing both left- and right-wing parties, without a clear favorite destination. Notably, hardly any provincial FvD voters became PVV voters at the European elections.

The PVV voters at the provincial elections of 2019 were even less stable in their voting behavior in the European elections that took place just two months later. Only about 25 percent continued to vote for the PVV, 25% switched to FvD, a third did not vote, and the rest switched their vote choice to other parties, mostly from the right. So, the pattern is similar: most radical right voters at the Provincial elections of 2019 voted for one of the radical right parties (overwhelmingly FvD) and the rest did not vote. Very few switched to other parties. Importantly, this suggests that these voters are as volatile as other voters as they are willing to shift to another radical right party if that opportunity presents itself. It follows that the apparent electoral stability of radical right voters that other
researchers have pointed out (Voogd and Dassonneville 2020) was the result of a lack of party competition rather than of stable party support.

Finally, Fig. 4 shows the party choice at the national elections of 2021 of the far-right provincial voters. It can be seen that the overwhelming majority of these voters voted for one of the radical right parties again. The turnout at national elections (around 80%) is much higher than at provincial (about 50%) and European elections (about 40%), so that very few of the far-right voters at the provincial elections abstained in 2021. If they switched, it was mainly to another radical right party or in some cases to the mainstream right (especially VVD). One could conclude that about 40 percent of the FvD voters switched to one of the mainstream parties; yet, in view of the fact that two-thirds of the 2019 FvD voters originally came from mainstream parties, the rise of FvD and its split-off JA21 still mark an overall switch to the radical right.

Explaining the vote switching patterns of far-right voters

The descriptive analyses of the vote switching patterns of far-right voters between four elections from 2017 to 2021 have demonstrated that FvD attracted voters from very diverse parties in 2019 and that even though they have since lost most of those voters, many switched to a different far-right party, instead of returning to the mainstream. Thus, although FvD was not able to bind its voters to the party in the longer term, many of the new far-right voters have successfully been bound to the far right. In the next step, we try to explain these different patterns of vote switching.

To understand the fragmentation of the far right, we start by focusing on voters of the ‘older’ far right, that is PVV voters, and we examine differences between those who remained loyal to the PVV and those who switched. We distinguish two categories of switching: to the new radical right parties (FvD or JA21) and to other parties.
In light of the small sample sizes, we had to pool the switches between two election ‘pairs,’ that is between 2017 and the 2019 provincial elections as well as between the 2019 provincial elections and 2021. Since FvD presented itself differently over time, standard errors are clustered at election level, and we use interaction effects to explore whether any effects differ between the elections. We fit multinomial logistic regression models and the full results are displayed in Table B1 in the online appendix. For the sake of interpretability, our discussion focusses on the plots of PVV voters’ predicted probability of switching to new far-right parties (Fig. 5). These predicted probabilities are generally lower in 2021 than in 2019 since a much smaller percentage of the PVV voters switched to the new far right in 2021 (8.1%) than in 2019 (36.7%).

In what ways do those PVV voters who switched to new far-right parties differ from those who remained loyal to the party? Figure 5 clearly shows that, both in 2019 and 2021, those who switched from the ‘older’ to the new far right tended to be women, those with relatively lower support for redistribution and lower political trust. The large percentage of PVV voters that switched to the new far right specifically in 2019 can furthermore be explained with attitudes toward European integration and climate action: PVV voters were more likely to defect to the new far-right if they were Euroskeptic and opposed to climate action. By contrast, those who switched and those who remained loyal to PVV in 2019 hardly differed in terms of their anti-immigration stance and their populist attitudes. In 2021, the probability to defect from the PVV and switch to the new far right increased with Corona skepticism, whereas it decreased with age, more populist attitudes, as well as with anti-immigrant stances.
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Notably, issues on which defecting and loyal PVV voters considerably differ—Euro- and climate skepticism in 2019, Corona skepticism in 2021—are among the issues that FvD emphasized much more than its direct far-right competitor PVV. This suggests that voters switched because issues relevant to them were (slightly) better represented by the new far right than by the ‘older’ PVV. On the other hand, political trust and core far-right issues such as anti-immigrant and populist attitudes had no significant effect on PVV supporters’ probability to switch to the new far right in 2019. Thus, in seeking an explanation for the surprising victory of the new far right at the 2019 provincial elections, these results demonstrate that FvD managed to strike a balance between core far-right and newly accentuated issues, attracting voters on the basis of both.

We now look at the other side of the coin and focus on those who voted for the new far right, specifically on those who voted for FvD in the provincial elections 2019 (the ‘provincial FvD voters’). Given how diverse these voters’ electoral origins were according to our descriptive analyses presented above, extending beyond previous PVV supporters, we assess whether there are systematic differences between voters with different ‘origins,’ that is between provincial FvD voters with distinct prior vote choices. Why were all these voters attracted to FvD? In Fig. 6 below, we differentiate between three groups of provincial FvD voters: (1) those who voted for a radical right party in 2017 (FvD or PVV); (2) those who voted for moderate right-wing parties; and (3) those who voted for left-wing parties. Considering that we study a very specific voter group and considering the high number of parties in the Netherlands, we aggregate voting behavior in this way to ensure a sufficient number of cases per category.

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4 By right-wing parties, we mean CDA, VVD, CU, SGP, 50Plus, and VNL. Left-wing parties encompass SP, PvdA, GroenLinks, and D66. These were categorized based on the parties’ left–right score in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019 (Bakker et al. 2020). Non-voters are excluded due to small sample size.
We first use multinomial logistic regression to compare all these three sub-groups of provincial FvD voters to those who did not vote for a far-right party at the provincial elections of 2019 (see Fig. 6; regression coefficients are displayed in Table C1 of the online Appendix). Overall, it can be seen that provincial FvD voters with different electoral origins were not very distinct in terms of their background and attitudes. Voters who had previously voted for a far-right party were comparatively less educated, voters who had previously voted for the mainstream right were comparatively more opposed to redistribution, and voters who had previously voted for left-wing parties were relatively more moderate in their anti-immigration stance and their Euroskepticism. Beyond these differences in degree, however, the provincial FvD voters shared, irrespective of their electoral origin, positions ‘typical’ of the far right, including low political trust as well as anti-immigrant, Euroskeptic, and populist stances. Moreover, they shared positions emphasized by FvD in particular, including a more opposing view of redistributive policies as well as climate skepticism.

These conclusions are confirmed when directly comparing provincial FvD voters of different electoral origins with each other. The results of this multinomial regression model are presented in odds ratios in Table 1. There is some evidence that previous mainstream right-wing voters were comparatively more politically trustful than recurring far-right voters and that previous left-wing voters were comparatively more supportive of European integration and climate action. Because of the subdivision of provincial FvD voters depending on their electoral origin, the relatively small sample size, and the number of predictors, the model does not have much statistical power to find significant effects. Yet, taken together with the analyses presented above, the model substantiates the conclusion that voters of the new far right, irrespective of their previous vote choice, agree with core policy positions of this party family in general and of FvD in particular.

Table 1 Voters of FvD at the provincial elections 2019, by electoral origin

|                            | Right wing vs far right | Left wing vs far right |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Age, categorized            | 1.104 (0.227)           | 1.165 (0.262)          |
| Female                      | 0.452 (0.274)           | 0.780 (0.506)          |
| Education                   | 2.514 (1.584)           | 1.955 (1.357)          |
| Political trust             | 1.427* (0.253)          | 0.924 (0.175)          |
| Redistribution              | 0.644 (0.222)           | 1.433 (0.514)          |
| Anti-immigration            | 1.585 (1.112)           | 0.448 (0.340)          |
| EU support                  | 2.538 (1.820)           | 3.337* (2.325)         |
| Climate action support      | 1.391 (0.556)           | 1.965* (0.795)         |
| Populist attitudes          | 1.090 (0.288)           | 0.923 (0.265)          |
| Observations                | 100                     |                        |
| Pseudo $R^2$                | 0.177                   |                        |

Exponentiated coefficients; standard errors in parentheses

Relative risk ratios based on multinomial logistic regression

$^*p<0.10$, $^*p<0.05$, $^**p<0.01$, and $^***p<0.001$
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In sum, the results show that the success of FvD in the 2019 provincial elections stemmed from its ability to attract voters from diverse electoral origins that agreed with the party on a number of issues, notably on anti-immigration and populist attitudes—core radical right issues which were previously ‘owned’ by the PVV. However, these voters that were attracted by FvD extended beyond habitual far-right voters, including also previous mainstream right-wing and left-wing voters, and the provincial FvD voters’ commonalities extended beyond core radical right issues, including also FvD-specific issues, such as opposition to redistribution and climate action. This suggests that FvD’s success at the provincial elections 2019 was built on the party carving out its own—small—niche, emphasizing core radical right issues in combination with issues particularly accentuated by FvD. How can FvD’s subsequent vote loss be explained then?

Having studied the electoral origins of the provincial FvD voters, we now focus on their voting behavior in the European elections in order to understand why voters ‘abandoned’ FvD. We examine whether sub-groups of provincial FvD voters systematically differ in their political attitudes, this time depending on their ‘destination,’ that is their vote switching between the 2019 provincial and 2019 European elections. We differentiate between three types of voting behavior during the European elections: (1) those who continued to vote for radical right parties (FvD or PVV); (2) those who switched to other parties; and (3) those who became non-voters. Again, given the high number of Dutch parties, we aggregate voting behavior to ensure a sufficient number of cases per category and employ multinomial logistic regression. Table 2 presents the odds ratios.

The regression results demonstrate that those provincial FvD voters who abandoned the far right at the European elections in 2019 do not differ in key radical right issues from those who continued to vote for FvD or PVV: the defecting voters do not statistically significantly differ in terms of their anti-immigrant, climate

| Table 2 FvD voters in the provincial elections 2019 who defected in the European elections 2019, relative to staying with the far right |
| Switch to other parties vs staying | Non-voter vs staying |
| Age, categorized | 0.608* (0.146) | 0.632* (0.132) |
| Female | 0.844 (0.602) | 1.314 (0.739) |
| Education | 0.246* (0.174) | 0.197* (0.130) |
| Political trust | 1.451* (0.292) | 1.146 (0.198) |
| Redistribution | 0.944 (0.373) | 1.587 (0.512) |
| Anti-immigration | 0.382 (0.275) | 0.746 (0.570) |
| EU support | 3.036* (1.952) | 2.596 (1.516) |
| Climate action support | 0.477 (0.235) | 0.874 (0.334) |
| Populist attitudes | 0.668 (0.201) | 0.713 (0.187) |
| Observations | 101 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.196 |

*Exponentiated coefficients; standard errors in parentheses

Relative risk ratios based on multinomial logistic regression

$^*p<0.10,$ $^*p<0.05,$ $^{**}p<0.01,$ and $^{***}p<0.001$
skeptic, or populist attitudes from the loyal far-right voters. Given the small sample size, this finding should be treated with caution; yet, even with low statistical power, there is evidence that the voter groups do differ in other respects. Those provincial FvD voters who did not vote in the European elections as well as those who switched to other parties are significantly younger and lower educated than those voters who continued to support the far right. Moreover, those who switched their vote choice from FvD to non-far-right parties are more likely to be supportive of the EU and to have higher political trust. This implies that FvD lost support at the European elections because some of its voters disagreed with the party on an issue of particular relevance in the European election campaign: support for European integration. Moreover, seemingly in line with Voogd and Dassonneville (2020), these results suggest that the most discontented supporters of the radical right—although not of any specific radical right party in particular—are relatively stable in their far-right support.

We now turn to our final analysis, seeking to explain the different types of vote switching patterns of new far-right supporters between 2019 and 2021 when a third far-right party, JA21, entered the electoral competition. Table 3 presents a multinomial logistic regression model with vote switching behavior at the 2021 national parliamentary elections of 2019 provincial FvD voters as the dependent variable. We distinguish between three groups of 2019 provincial FvD voters: (1) those who stayed with FvD in 2021; (2) those who switched to JA21; (3) those who switched to the PVV; and (4) those who switched to another party. The regression results are displayed in odds ratios.

Table 3  FvD voters in the provincial elections 2019 who switched to JA21, PVV, and to other parties in 2021, relative to staying with FvD

|                          | Defect to JA21 vs staying | Defect to PVV vs staying | Defect to others vs staying |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Age, categorized         | 1.124 (0.263)             | 1.401 (0.338)            | 1.186 (0.251)               |
| Female                   | 0.873 (0.714)             | 1.650 (1.292)            | 0.805 (0.620)               |
| Education                | 0.501 (0.366)             | 0.103** (0.0793)         | 0.587 (0.401)               |
| Political trust          | 1.072 (0.245)             | 1.319 (0.297)            | 1.131 (0.241)               |
| Redistribution           | 0.781 (0.363)             | 0.972 (0.431)            | 0.641 (0.283)               |
| Anti-immigration         | 0.452 (0.367)             | 0.501 (0.399)            | 0.246* (0.189)              |
| EU support               | 2.619 (1.588)             | 1.377 (0.847)            | 2.486 (1.434)               |
| Climate action support   | 0.769 (0.313)             | 1.048 (0.422)            | 1.238 (0.454)               |
| Populist attitudes       | 1.000 (0.349)             | 0.782 (0.271)            | 0.819 (0.266)               |
| Corona skepticism        | 0.568** (0.114)           | 1.015 (0.202)            | 0.612** (0.114)             |

Exponentiated coefficients; standard errors in parentheses
Relative risk ratios based on multinomial logistic regression
+p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
The regression results clearly demonstrate that the less Corona-skeptic FvD voters were very likely to switch to JA21 or to mainstream parties. The FvD voters who were relatively less anti-immigrant were more likely to switch to mainstream parties, and the less educated FvD voters were more likely to switch to the PVV. Taken together and in light of FvD’s shifting emphasis toward Corona-skeptic positions between 2019 and 2021, Tables 2 and 3 suggest that former FvD voters left the party because they disagreed with some of the party’s core positions—a development that began already at the 2019 European elections and manifested in 2021. Hence, while FvD was successful at carving out a—small—electoral niche at the provincial elections in 2019 and attracting voters from diverse origins on the basis of this campaign, the party’s subsequent transformations, particularly into an anti-Corona platform, meant alienating a large number of its original supporters.

It follows that FvD did not lose support because its supporters no longer shared far-right positions—quite the contrary: many of the provincial FvD voters abandoned FvD but continued to vote for the far right, yet chose one of the alternative options from this party family. Thus, while FvD’s surprise victory at the 2019 provincial elections was short-lived, the enlargement of the far-right’s voter base that accompanied the fragmentation of the far right has so far turned out to be rather stable. The rise of new far-right parties has provided a new entry point to the far right but, once inside, voters do not hesitate to switch within the far-right party family, choosing whatever of the available party options provides—relatively—the best ideological match for a voter.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Based on previous theoretical and empirical insights, the electoral fortunes of the Dutch far-right present a bit of a puzzle. In a situation in which two ideologically highly similar radical right parties compete for voters, the newer party of the two (FvD) became the largest party nationwide during the provincial elections in March 2019, while the more established party of the two (PVV) lost many votes. This is unexpected, because new parties are normally successful only when they mobilize support on new issues that the existing parties have tended to ignore. In 2019, FvD mobilized support mainly on the classical radical right issues, in particular anti-immigration, Euroskepticism, and populist attitudes. Why would people want to support a new party that mobilizes support on issues where another radical right party already has ownership?

Our analyses of vote switching patterns show that the heterogeneity of FvD’s support base in 2019 is key to solving the puzzle. The party’s surprising victory can be explained by FvD’s ability to attract a rather diverse group of voters; next to PVV supporters, also large groups of voters from mainstream right and left parties switched to FvD. These voters shared anti-immigrant attitudes and tended to be politically discontented. Yet, many of them disagreed with FvD on some important issues, in particular on European integration. During the European elections two months later and especially the national elections two years later, precisely partially ideologically incongruent voters abandoned the party again,
becoming either non-voters, switching to another radical right party, or switching to a mainstream party. Those voters who ‘abandoned’ FvD were mainly voters who disagreed with the party on the EU in the 2019 European elections or on Corona skepticism at the 2021 national elections.

These findings have important implications for the wider literature on radical right voters and parties. First, our analyses demonstrate that supporters of PVV, FvD and JA21 form one ‘core’ of radical right voters. Supporters of all far-right parties can be distinguished by political discontent, Euroskepticism, anti-immigrant stances, and populist sentiments. Voters who switched from PVV to FvD, that is, from one radical right party to the other, hardly differ from those PVV voters who stayed with PVV. The main difference is that FvD supporters are higher educated and more opposed to redistributive policies in 2019 (see also Otjes 2021); whereas in 2021, support for FvD is strongly driven by Corona skepticism. So, in that sense, FvD found a—small—niche that distinguishes it from other far-right parties. These findings are also consistent with the idea that new parties search for a ‘wedge issue’ on which the support base of competing parties is divided (Van der Wardt et al. 2014; De Vries and Hobolt 2012, 2020). Corona skepticism is clearly such a wedge issue.

However, while radical right parties differ in some policy positions or issue priorities, these parties (and their voters) agree on a wide range of topics. Our conclusion about PVV and FvD supporters forming one single core differs slightly from those of Otjes (2021), who showed that differences in the sympathy that voters express for the two parties are significantly related to their issue positions. In part, these different results may stem from Otjes’ larger dataset and explicit focus on explaining differences, so that he did not put much emphasis on the huge overlap in support.

Since FvD, JA21, and the PVV have very similar stances on core radical right issues, like anti-immigration, anti-EU, and anti-establishment, their voters switch easily between the three parties. This suggests that the electoral stability of dissatisfied populist voters reported in previous research (Voogd and Dassonneville 2020) needs to be qualified. The discontented populist voters are more likely to remain loyal to populist parties and they are less likely to defect to the mainstream. Yet, they are not loyal to one specific party. When provided with viable alternatives, that is when given a choice between two (or more) parties that provide ideological matches for core radical right voters, these voters are as volatile as other voter groups. The apparent electoral stability of dissatisfied populist voters is thus the result of a lack of competition in most countries, not the result of remarkably stable party support (see also Chou et al. 2018).

These results also have implications for our understanding of the way party competition is structured in the Netherlands. Van der Meer et al. (2012) demonstrated that a decade ago, party competition took place mainly within two ‘blocks’ of parties at the left and the right side of the political spectrum, with few voters switching between the two sides. Based on our analyses of the period from 2019 to 2021, we additionally see very little movements between radical right parties and mainstream right-wing parties. This suggests the Dutch party system now consists of three blocks instead of two.
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Taken together, our study confirms that substantive policy positions are the main drivers of support for radical right-wing parties. This mirrors conclusions from previous studies, which show that voters for these parties do not behave differently than voters for other parties (Van der Brug et al. 2000; Rydgren 2008; Otjes 2021; Rooduijn 2018). Our paper contributes to this field the finding that radical right voters are neither intrinsically more nor less volatile than voters for other parties. Just like supporters of other parties, their volatility depends upon the nature of the competition these parties face.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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