In power but not in office: how radical right ‘outsiders’ can influence their mainstream rivals – the UK and Australian cases

Alan Wager a, Tim Bale b, Anika Gauja c and Jordan McSwiney c

aThe UK in a Changing Europe, King’s College London, London, UK; bSchool of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK; cDepartment of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT
Countries with populist radical right governments are the exception rather than the rule. This paper uses the Australian case of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (PHON) and the UK case of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) – and its effective successor, the Brexit Party – to help explain a puzzle: how do populist radical right parties in the absence of any likely route to winning office or even holding legislative influence achieve policy payoffs? Tracing the political factors that have driven policy influence in these two cases reveals that an entrepreneurial leader with agenda-setting influence can have policy impact, despite disadvantageous structural conditions, through the following: leveraging electoral influence over both social democratic and mainstream right parties; gaining credibility through sub-national elections; and achieving (or threatening to achieve) defections from centre-right parties.

KEYWORDS Populist radical right; Brexit Party; Pauline Hanson’s One Nation; policy influence; immigration

A great deal of work has gone into trying to understand the broad cultural, social, political, economic and institutional factors that have led to a surge in electoral support for populist radical right (PRR) parties – a surge that has helped secure victories in presidential and parliamentary elections in, for example, the United States, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, India and Brazil and seen them enter coalition government and take ministerial office in countries such as Italy, Austria, Finland, the Czech Republic and Switzerland (see Mudde, 2019). This has already led to attempts to assess their influence on policy in those countries (Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016; Biard et al., 2019). But what about the influence exercised by those PRR parties which have yet to win or share office? If greater than zero – and especially if it can be called significant – how does it come about?

CONTACT Alan Wager alan.wager@kcl.ac.uk

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The question is an important one because, notwithstanding the successes referred to above, countries in which the radical right exercises executive power remain the exception rather than the rule. Yet those countries without a radical right presence in government – or indeed much of one in parliament – have implemented policies that would suggest otherwise. Taking as case studies the United Kingdom Independence Party and its successor the Brexit Party, and Australia’s Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party (PHON), this paper explores how PRR parties can influence the policy outcomes of mainstream parties absent executive or significant parliamentary power. Following Schain’s (2006) exploratory analysis of the French National Front (now National Rally), we theorise that PRR parties can influence mainstream party policy through electoral and organisational factors. As such, two questions guide our analysis of the UKIP/Brexit and PHON cases. First, how do these parties leverage indirect electoral influence in the absence of any significant legislative representation or serious capacity to win executive office? Second, how do these parties exert organisational influence on their mainstream competitors?

This article begins by first looking at what the existing literature can already tell us about the policy interaction between PRR and mainstream parties, and what the existing case study literature has already uncovered when looking at the indirect policy influence that the PRR can have on mainstream parties. We then set out the cases we will examine and how we will approach them, looking at two cases where influence of the populist radical right on the mainstream has been widely interpreted but not fully analytically understood, demonstrating their congruence in terms of institutions and outcomes, before drawing out causal mechanisms and similarities within the two cases examined. We discuss the importance of three common causal factors which we find persuade the mainstream to ape the extreme absent direct routes to office and significant national electoral success – namely, an entrepreneurial leader with agenda-setting media influence; an ability to leverage electoral and legislative influence over both social democratic and mainstream right parties, gaining credibility through sub-national elections; and a threat, as much as a reality, of defections from supposedly centre-right parties. The common thread through these routes to policy payoffs lies in effective agency-led efforts to destabilise equilibrium, either within party systems or through disrupting political parties as organisations – an important lesson when understanding the dynamics of influence between the populist radical right and the mainstream.

Indirect policy influence: PRR influence in restrictive institutional contexts

How the populist radical right relates to ‘mainstream’ right-wing politics and political parties is constantly evolving (Kallis, 2013; Winter & Mondon, 2020;
Brown et al., 2021). Neither the PRR nor the ‘mainstream’ right are historically or ontologically fixed (Brown et al., 2021). Distinguishing where one ends and the other begins has become increasingly fraught: one of the defining characteristics of the far right today is its close connection to the mainstream, and ‘in more and more countries it is becoming the mainstream’ (Mudde, 2019, p. 2). Recognising then that the ‘mainstream’ cannot be essentialised as inherently ‘good’ or ‘moderate’ (Brown et al., 2021), we treat ‘mainstream parties’ as those most likely to form or lead government. In conceptualising PRR parties, we follow Mudde’s (2007) definition as those with an ideological core combining nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

There is a significant and growing body of work that seeks to understand what happens to the policy platforms of PRR parties when they enter office, and conversely what happens when they are denied entry. The literature broadly runs along an ‘inclusion-moderation’ and ‘exclusion-radicalisation’ axis: when PRR parties are included in office they experience pressures pushing them to moderate their discourse and policy; exclusion by cordon sanitaire, on the other hand, leads to policy radicalisation. These effects are thought to happen principally through the dynamics of coalition negotiation and policy delivery when included in government, or stigmatisation leading to policy rigidity or radicalisation if excluded (van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007). However, inclusion has not resulted in moderation, and exclusion has not induced radicalisation (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Akkerman et al., 2016). Far from either being ‘doomed to failure’ the moment they sacrifice principles for power (contra Kitschelt & McCann, 1995, p. 201), or destined to ‘freeze’ and radicalise if excluded (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015), the evidence suggests the life cycle and impact of PRR parties is instead contingent in no small measure upon their own behaviour and strategy (e.g. Mudde, 2007; Art, 2011).

While much research has focused on how public office has influenced PRR parties, how do PRR parties effect mainstream parties’ policy positions and attitudes? When PRR parties are included in governing coalitions, their policy influence comes about in fairly direct ways: through mainstream acceptance of their policies (Minkenberg, 2013; Akkerman et al., 2016; Twist, 2019). However, when PRR parties are excluded from government but are still successful in exerting policy influence, how this comes about is less clear. Scholarship in this vein tends to emphasise mainstream party strategy in response to radical right electoral success (e.g. van Spanje, 2010; Abou-Chadi, 2016; Meijers, 2017; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). The success of ‘niche’ parties like the PRR, but also the Greens, is highly dependent on mainstream party strategies (Meguid, 2005, 2008). Namely, their capacity to determine ‘whether issues can be established on the political agenda’ (Abou-Chadi, 2016, p. 418). The agenda-setting power of mainstream parties means that how they engage (or do not engage) with PRR parties and ideas will help determine PRR policy influence and mainstreaming (Kallis, 2013; Brown
et al., 2021). Attempts to mitigate the electoral threat of the PRR by matching them in key areas like immigration or multiculturalism may have the inverse effect, increasingly the electoral salience of these issues and normalising the PRR (Kallis, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Winter & Mondon, 2020; Sengul, 2021). This matters not only in terms of concrete policy adoptions, but also the broader discursive conditions under which such policy is made and enacted (Sengul, 2020; Wodak, 2021).

However, this leaves the mechanisms available to PRR parties themselves largely unexamined. If we accept that agency is ‘extremely important’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015), internal supply-side factors can help to explain how PRR parties can shape their own fate through strategy, leadership and effective internal organisation, even when factors beyond their direct control limit their strategic options. External supply-side factors – the constraints and opportunities that the political-institutional context offers, including but not limited to the electoral system and the ‘political space’ left open by political competitors – can thus be successfully managed through political strategy.

**Similar, though not the same: the case selection of Australia and the UK**

Both of these cases – UKIP (and the Brexit Party) and PHON – are chosen, therefore, as two exploratory case studies with institutional commonalities which allow us to build a theory of policy influence in unpropitious circumstances that can then be tested and built on elsewhere. They are chosen because, on the dependent variable of PRR influence, they are ‘typical’ case studies: there are persuasive examples within each case that policy influence has been achieved, and both cases are clearly within the PRR family. In both cases, as we set out below, the parties benefit from charismatic and entrepreneurial leadership. However, how this ‘typical’ level of policy success has been achieved in an atypical institutional environment by these entrepreneurial leaders is a puzzle. After all, the party systems in both countries operate either a Westminster or a ‘Westminster adapted’ majoritarian system, which limits the electoral opportunities of insurgent parties. We present our cases through a synthesis of secondary data, utilising academic studies and journalistic accounts of these two parties. Using a process-tracing approach, we exploit existing material to examine the electoral and organisational mechanisms of policy leverage. This approach provides a contextual analysis that complements studies based on manifesto and expert survey data (see, for example, McDonnell et al., 2021).

**Evidence of mainstream-PRR policy congruence**

It is important when attempting to understand the policy effect of the PRR not to conflate two distinct phenomena: mainstream parties adopting
policies due to PRR influence, and parties making ideological or electoral choices that tally with PRR aims independent of PRR influence (Bale, 2003). Crucially, mainstream parties are not simply helpless bystanders. Mainstream parties play an active role through agenda-setting shaping the context which the ideas of the populist radical right can flourish, increasing the salience and legitimacy of the PRR’s preferred issues, like immigration (Brown et al., 2021; Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). This article seeks to demonstrate this policy congruence first on the issue of immigration, and sets out the claims that have been made on policy influence by the PRR in both cases.

In the UK case it did not take the rise of the populist radical right to push the British Conservative Party into talking – and, indeed, acting – tough on immigration. The Tories, after all, had been politicising the issue since the early 1960s, aware that the widespread antipathy toward migrants, particularly those of African-Caribbean and South Asian descent, could be exploited to divide and weaken Labour’s coalition of middle-class progressives and working class, small-c cultural conservatives. It took UKIP, however, and in particular the politician who became its leader in 2006, Nigel Farage, to inject new urgency and potency into the immigration debate by fusing it with Euroscepticism. Moreover, it did so just as the Conservative Party, under David Cameron, was retreating from it (at least temporarily) as part of its ‘modernisation’ drive to prove that it was in tune with the multicultural society that twenty-first century Britain had become (Bale, 2018). Nor were the Tories the only party affected: movement by the Labour Party on the issue of immigration during the period of UKIP’s insurgency – calling for reform of EU freedom of movement – was certainly framed, internally and in the media, as an attempt to assuage voters concerned about immigration and thinking about voting for UKIP. But it was the Tories who were left holding the ball in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum vote for Brexit, and they moved quickly under new leader and prime minister, Theresa May, to make it clear that freedom of movement would end completely just as soon as the country’s departure could be effected. It also confirmed that it would be introducing what was long one of UKIP’s signature demands, namely an ‘Australian-style points-based system.’

In Australia itself, the major parties – the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) and particularly the centre-right Liberal National Coalition – have made a distinct shift in their policies over the last two decades congruent with PHON’s positions, most notably in terms of asylum seeker policy, and to a lesser extent, immigration more generally. On asylum seeker policy, though the introduction of mandatory detention of maritime arrivals pre-dates PHON, Australian governments have taken an increasingly restrictive approach to laws and policies toward those seeking onshore asylum since Hanson’s election in 1996. In the early 2000s, the conservative Coalition government further extended these restrictions to progressively prevent almost
any form of onshore asylum-claim by those reaching Australia by boat. Then-
prime minister John Howard (2001) launched the successful Liberal-National
Coalition election campaign with a speech that famously pronounced, ‘We
will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they
come’. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Pauline Hanson claimed that Howard and
the Liberals had stolen her policies (Wear, 2002). Though the asylum seeker
policy went through a brief period of liberalisation during the early years
of the Rudd ALP government, this was reversed in favour of more hardline
policy prior to Hanson and PHON’s electoral comeback in 2016. Since 2016,
the various Coalition governments have continued to harden asylum
seeker policy, including a reduction in financial support for asylum seekers
(Baines, 2017), and expanded ministerial powers to revoke refugee status
and indefinitely detain refugees.

Even if Pauline Hanson’s ultimate goal – a significant reduction in immigra-
tion to Australia – has yet to be effectuated in policy, PHON’s return to parlia-
ment has coincided with a significant hardening of government discourses
on immigration and multiculturalism. In 2016, the day after Hanson advo-
cated a ban on Muslim immigration, the Liberal National Party’s George Chris-
tensen called for immigration restrictions from countries with high levels of
(Islamic) extremism and which do not share ‘Australian values’ (in Yaxley,
2016). More broadly, restrictions to the availability of temporary skilled
migration visas by the Turnbull Coalition government were described in
terms echoing Hanson and PHON, with the Prime Minister claiming the
changes would help to ensure ‘that Australian jobs are filled by Australians’
(Turnbull, 2017). In 2019, the Morrison Coalition government reduced Austra-
lia’s permanent migration intake ceiling. The reduction was announced in
2018 on grounds echoing Hanson’s claims about population growth and
overcrowding (e.g. PHON, 2018), with the Prime Minister declaring that ‘Aus-
tralians in our biggest cities are concerned about population. They are saying:
Enough, enough, enough. The roads are clogged, the buses and trains are full’
(Morrison, 2018). In 2021, the Morrison Coalition government increased the
Newly Arrived Resident’s Waiting Period, which forces new migrants to
wait a period of time before they are able to access most government
welfare payments, from two to four years. These changes mirror a longstand-
ing PHON talking point, that immigrants present an unnecessary financial
strain on Australian welfare (e.g. Hanson, 2016). Though some of these
changes, such as the cuts to the permanent immigration ceiling, may in prac-
tice only formalise the reality of immigration in contemporary Australia, the
changes – and the language in which they were announced, justified, and
defended – serves to normalise many of PHON’s talking points around
borders, immigration, and multiculturalism (Sengul, 2020; 2021).

It should be noted that in both the cases of the UK and Australia, both real
and rhetorical shifts in asylum and migration policy have not led to a
significant decrease in the overall level of migrants. Both Farage and Hanson have advocated for a fall in net migration and – the contingency of Covid-19 aside – levels of net migration have not fallen in either country. In 1996, the year Hanson first entered Parliament, 73,900 visas were granted by the Australian government (Parliament of Australian Library, 2010). In 2019, that number was 173,200 (Scalon Institute, 2020). In the UK, falls in migration from the EU have been largely counterbalanced by rises in non-EU migration (Portes, 2021). This means that in both cases the demands of the labour market have meant shifts on asylum policy or freedom of movement have not led to the fall in net migration that the radical right has advocated. This demonstrates that policy convergence – while having real effects on both the systems that govern migration and the rhetoric used – is not absolute in either case, the (economic) realities of governing prohibiting a sustained reduction in numbers.

**Institutional environment**

Both the Australian and UK party systems operate under institutional rules and cultural norms that mitigate against the electoral success of insurgent and smaller parties. The UK’s First Past the Post plurality system is famous in this respect and the ‘alternate vote’ (and the accompanying system of preference allocation) used to elect the Australian House of Representatives (HoR) also creates similar institutional disadvantages for insurgents by allocating seats on a majoritarian, rather than proportional, basis. Consequently, while both parties have attracted a sizeable vote share at various points in their histories – PHON reaching 8.4% of the HoR vote in 1998 and UKIP reaching 12.6% of the Commons vote in 2015 – this did not translate into a commensurate parliamentary presence (no seats for PHON and only one for UKIP). In addition, Australia’s compulsory voting operates to mitigate the challenge of far-right politics by, reducing the capacity of new parties to capture an increased vote-share by simply having a more mobilised political base (Mackerras & McAllister, 1999).

Despite these constraints within both systems, the radical right have used their electoral leverage to act as kingmakers, attempting to influence electoral outcomes in both the Australian and UK contexts. In the UK, the Brexit Party in December 2019 stood down candidates in Conservative-held seats – seen (not necessarily correctly) as a crucial factor in determining the size of the Conservative majority (Interview, Brexit Party figure; Norris, 2019). In the Australian case, in several instances One Nation have directed its supporters to give their preference votes to the Liberal party ahead of Labor (Knott, 2017; Remeikis, 2018). For both PHON and the Brexit Party, these deals have come at a significant electoral cost, with very little benefit to either party and no clear explicit policy gains or concessions (though, in
both cases, there are some claims that concessions were made in private). In truth, these deals have broadly demonstrated the institutional constraints for small parties: unable to make real legislative breakthroughs themselves, even their capacity to act as kingmakers is constrained.

**Charismatic leadership**

As Mudde (2007, p. 261) has noted, it is true that PRR parties have achieved influence and success in the absence of ‘charismatic’ leadership personalities; conversely, ‘history is littered with leaders who can be fitted into this conception of ‘charisma’ but who have made very little absolute policy impact (Eatwell, 2018, p. 256). Charisma, then, is a necessary, but not a sufficient, explanation for how electoral success turns into policy gains. However, it is clear that both cases contain this necessary ingredient.

One Nation’s success owes something to the entrepreneurial leadership and media impact of its founder and leader Pauline Hanson. Hardly a charismatic leader in the traditional sense of the term (Moffit, 2016: 62), Hanson’s appeal lies in her ‘self-conscious ordinariness’ (Eatwell, 2018, p. 255). Despite a near 30-year political career, Hanson is adept at presenting herself as an ‘average Australian’ in contrast to other political elites. Hanson is one of the few politicians in the current parliament without a white-collar background (Gauja & McSwiney, 2019), and supporters see her use of language and even her gaffes as evidence of her authenticity and status as a non-professional politician (Coghlan, 2019). Even as Hanson’s charismatic appeal and media impact have declined due to her election and loss of ‘outsider’ status, her strategic use of political stunts has helped sustain media attention (Sengul, 2021). However, despite Hanson’s (external) charisma, the party has struggled significantly with internal leadership and organisation, resulting in several high-profile scandals and the defection of several federal and state PHON parliamentarians (McSwiney, 2021).

It is no exaggeration to say that any influence that the radical right has exerted in the UK has depended hugely on the presence of Nigel Farage. During his first period as leader between 2006 and 2009 UKIP surged, forging a niche as an anti-politics party and making the transition from ‘a single-issue pressure group into a professional electoral force’ (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 65). After Farage stepped down as leader to try (and fail yet again) to win a seat at Westminster, his party disappointed massively at the 2010 general election, winning just 3.1% of the vote and electing no MPs. Upon Farage taking up the reins once again in its aftermath, the party moved from the periphery to becoming a driving force in the UK’s political system – further fusing anti-immigration sentiment and Euroscepticism and forcing the Conservative Party towards a referendum on EU membership. Between the 2015 and 2017 general elections – the first fought with
Farage as leader and the second without – ‘its share of the national vote dropped from almost thirteen per cent to just 1.8 per cent, and the number of seats in which UKIP polled at least 10 per cent of the vote crashed, from 450 to only two’ (Heath & Goodwin, 2017, p. 346). In 2019, Farage’s new vehicle, the Brexit Party – barely a month old and operating as a limited company with ‘registered supporters’ rather than a membership and with Farage as ‘CEO, chairman and owner combined’ (McTague, 2019) – finished first in the European parliamentary elections with nearly a third of the vote. Even more importantly, it reduced the Conservatives to under 10% of the vote in a national election for the first time in living memory. Little wonder that a Conservative Party titan like Ken Clarke (2017) described Farage as the ‘most successful politician of my generation’.

There are intuitive reasons for thinking that within political systems where the opportunity structure is less favourable for the radical right – and where there is a greater reliance on exerting indirect policy influence through the electoral space rather than elected office – there should in turn be a greater reliance upon leadership with the ability to engineer sustained agenda-setting influence, which then demands a mainstream response. When seeking to understand policy influence outside the office-seeking dimension the idea of entrepreneurial leadership – ‘an alertness to disequilibrium’ (Kirzner, 1973) – is important in seizing political opportunities for parties marginalised from office. Entrepreneurial leadership provides an umbrella term to link together the internal (charisma) and external (electoral and organisational) facets of successful leadership. As ‘issue entrepreneurs’, these parties and their leaders are able to create new lines of political division (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012). How UKIP and PHON, through their leaders, were able to exploit electoral and organisational opportunities to gain policy leverage is examined in the next section.

Leveraging indirect electoral influence

Farage: UKIP and the Brexit Party

By 2009 UKIP had managed to pull off a second-place finish to the Conservatives in elections to the European Parliament, sparking fears among some Tory candidates that a good performance at the 2010 general election might cost them their chance of a seat at Westminster. The Conservatives’ pledge to reduce migration to the ‘tens of thousands’ was a clear attempt to head it off at the pass. The policy was politically expedient in the short term: a YouGov poll conducted immediately after the announcement found that in 43 Labour marginal seats, 44% of voters were more likely to vote Conservative if the party were to back an absolute limit on migrant numbers (Partos, 2019). While influential figures in the modernisation
project saw an ever-increasing danger in Cameron attempting to ‘out-UKIP’, the next five years saw increasingly desperate, draconian, and doomed attempts on the part of the Conservative-led government to meet the reduction it had promised in the face of a rise, rather than a fall, in net migration (see Hampshire & Bale, 2015).

The Conservative-led government’s evident failure to achieve its target, however, only served to increase the salience of the immigration issue, which Nigel Farage was able to successfully rhetorically intertwine with a Eurosceptic case for an EU referendum. Farage’s strategy relied on significant electoral successes in ‘second order’ elections, demonstrating his two parties’ capacity to wound their mainstream opponents – not just on the centre-right but also on the centre-left. The party’s political oxygen came from the fact a polling surge was backed up at the ballot box: in the 2012 local elections 13% supported UKIP, by the 2013 local elections one in four voters in England and Wales voted for Farage’s party. The 2014 European elections were the high point for UKIP – the party finished first in the European Parliament elections in 2014 with 27.5% of the vote, despite the fact that Cameron had, a year and a half previously, promised the country an in–out referendum on its membership of the European Union should the Conservatives be re-elected in 2015. There was a significant internal debate within the Conservative Party over whether this would be translated into success for UKIP in a general election, and therefore what the Conservative policy response should be: while senior figures like William Hague and Kenneth Clarke argued voters were expressing their discontent with a ‘free hit’, others (including Cameron) doubled down on the need to show the government was taking action.

Cameron’s efforts on immigration may or may not have helped the Tories win re-election in 2015 but they did nothing, as the 2016 EU Referendum campaign got underway, to prevent prominent Conservative politicians on the Leave side (most notoriously, perhaps, Boris Johnson) adopting populist radical right-wing messages (and messaging) on migration and multiculturalism (Bale, 2022). Cameron’s successor’s inability to ‘get Brexit done’ then provided the ideal opportunity for his nemesis, Nigel Farage, to re-enter British politics at the 2019 European Parliament elections, marking a moment that some commentators and members saw as a potentially critical juncture or tipping point for the continued hegemony of the Conservative Party on the right of British politics. Indeed, the prospect of a political realignment was being taken seriously by senior strategists within its ranks – until, that is, May was replaced by Johnson. During the leadership campaign that brought Johnson to power Farage signalled that he would be open to a formal alliance. Meanwhile only 8% of those intending to vote Conservative said they were opposed to an electoral pact with Farage, and only 6% of Brexit Party voters said the same; 70% and 81%, respectively said they supported an inter-party agreement (Smith, 2019). In the event, no such
official pact was needed, not least, perhaps, because of Farage’s decision not to contest Conservative-held seats in the 2019 general election – arguably a *de facto*, albeit partial, alliance.

But Farage’s influence extended beyond the centre-right. In both the general elections of 2015 and 2019, a key feature of Farage’s appeal was the claim that his party would cause equal (or, in the case of 2019) greater damage to the Labour Party than to the Conservatives. Certainly, between 2010 and 2015, Farage’s electoral influence had a perceptible impact on the discussion on immigration within Ed Miliband’s Labour Party. The disruptive electoral implications of an insurgent radical right party on Labour were well understood, and were pressed by Nigel Farage with increasing force as his electoral successes in European elections (and to a lesser extent by-elections and local elections) accumulated. The September 2014 UKIP annual conference was held in Doncaster, Miliband’s own seat (where UKIP finished second in 2015). Just a week before a by-election in Heywood and Middleton in September 2014 – a seat that had been held by Labour since its creation – had seen UKIP leap from 2.6% of the vote in the previous (2010) general election to 38.7%, with Labour holding on by a mere 616 votes.

The Labour-affiliated Fabian Society produced a report – published in October 2014 – that highlighted the risk of injecting a multi-party system into long-held Labour seats. The report highlighted 31 Labour-held seats where the conservative Party were the main challenger, but UKIP could have an indirect effect on the outcome (Roberts et al., 2014). At the 2015 general election, three of these 31 seats were lost to the Conservatives. Following the 2019 general election, 21 of these 31 were held by the Conservative Party. Between those two elections, Labour, under its liberal-left leader Jeremy Corbyn, had shifted away from an attempted cultural accommodation with the radical right – a shift made easier as UKIP became more peripheral in the wake of the EU Referendum and Farage’s apparent departure from British politics. And by the time he returned to the fray following the UK’s failure to exit the European Union on 31 March 2019, most observers believed that the (pro-Remain, pro-Second Referendum) Liberal Democrats posed more of a threat to Labour than did the Brexit Party. But the truth was that many of the ‘left behind’ voters first identified during UKIP’s resurgence half a decade earlier were also highly motivated by Brexit and, given their antipathy to Jeremy Corbyn, were by no means bound into Labour’s electoral coalition (Cutts et al., 2019) – as those who believed those voters’ cultural concerns could be trumped by a left-populist economic offer, soon found out.

**Pauline Hanson: PHON**

The electoral breakthrough of Pauline Hanson and the Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (PHON) in the 1990s demonstrated that populist radical right parties
could win parliamentary representation in Australia (Ghazarian, 2015). Both the mainstream right and mainstream left initially adopted a strategy of ‘wait and see’ in response to the emergence of Pauline Hanson. The rhetorical exclusion and isolation of Hanson was symbolised by Prime Minister John Howard’s refusal to speak Hanson’s name in public (Sullivan, 1997). Yet it is worth noting that under Howard’s leadership the Liberal Party had already shifted their position on migration, basing their 1996 federal election campaign on a critique of Labor’s ‘politically correct’ policies on race and immigration (Mondon, 2013). Still, the attempt to exclude PHON from the national political conversation appeared relatively successful and precluded significant policy influence. It was PHON’s performance as an insurgent political force at the 1998 Queensland State elections, securing 23% of the vote, which changed that – providing an electoral jolt that prompted an organisational response. This prompted significant internal division within the Liberal Party on how to react – whether to embrace or further isolate PHON from getting near office. Less remarked upon was that this organisational response was matched by a further perceptible shift rightwards from Howard in the immediate aftermath of One Nation’s insurgency around policy areas such as native title, reconciliation and increasingly restrictive immigration policies (Mondon, 2013; Fleming & Mondon, 2018).

Since Hanson returned to PHON’s leadership in 2014, PHON’s state election results have yet to reach the levels of 1998. In 2017, three members of the party were elected to the WA state parliament (with one later defecting), while in Queensland the party picked up one seat, while the state leader Steve Dickson (who had defected from the Queensland Liberal National Party) lost his. The party also managed to elect two of its candidates to the NSW state parliament in 2019. Subsequent to the decision in 1998, Australian parties have generally chosen not to preference PHON, so that the practice of constituency-based, preferential voting in the Australian lower house has tended consistently to contain – rather than amplify – the threat of illiberal populist influence in democratic policy-making. However, during in the second period of her leadership Hanson has begun to penetrate this cordon-sanitaire, using preference allocation as a means to indirectly advance the agenda of PHON. Hanson herself has argued the discussion over preferences demonstrated her party ‘can actually negotiate on issues, we are not extremist’ (Elton-Pym, 2017). This suggestion by Liberal strategists that PHON has changed, and their policy platform is therefore less extreme, is an example of mainstreaming in action (Benton, 2017). Nevertheless, this has led to internal tensions within the Liberal Party, both between elite figures and Liberal Party divisions, about how to handle preference allocation. Most notably, the decision by Liberal Premier of Western Australia, Colin Barnett to direct preferences to PHON and ahead of the Liberal’s coalition partner in the states upper house, caused consternation in the federal
Liberals – even if Barnett framed the decision as ‘practical, pragmatic’ with no direct effect or connection to policy (in Doran & Uhlmann, 2017).

The willingness of Australia’s mainstream political parties to entertain the possibility of entering into preference deals with PHON has happened in parallel with shifting policy rhetoric, and illustrates the perceived electoral threat PHON poses for both the Coalition and the ALP. Important to the policy influence of PHON is the political geography of their support. This threat is geographically concentrated, in, for example, outer-urban electorates and rural electorates with declining manufacturing and primary industry, such as Hunter (New South Wales, a traditional ALP seat) and Maranoa (Queensland, a traditional Coalition seat). Survey research on the attitudes of PHON voters demonstrates that they share many of the same values of those who vote for the major parties. However, it is their attitudes to immigration and their low levels of trust in the political system that make them distinct (Markus, 2019). PHON therefore has the capacity, in reflecting the attitudes of its supporters, as well its orientation as a protest party appealing to those disillusioned with Australian politics, to draw votes away from both the mainstream centre-right and centre-left. This was most explicit in 2016, when lower houses preferences from PHON voters flowed virtually 50–50 to the ALP and Coalition (AEC, 2016). However, by the 2019 federal election, PHON’s capacity to appeal to the centre-left had declined, with the preferences flow a 35/65 split between the ALP and Coalition (AEC, 2019).

**The routes to electoral influence**

Key in these case studies is the ability to leverage influence on just mainstream centre-right parties but also mainstream centre-left parties, primarily through strong performances in opinion polls and in second order and subnational elections; both UKIP and the Brexit Party managed this. Though it has ebbed and flowed over time, PHON has posed an electoral threat to both the Coalition and the ALP, and has seen reasonable success in state elections in Queensland, West Australia and New South Wales.

The importance of the interaction between mainstream and insurgent on the right may well be pivotal in creating opportunities for the radical right. However, there is also plenty of evidence in these cases that the electoral threat supposedly posed to social democracy also creates political reactions on the left that, in turn, shape policy outcomes and the influence of the radical right. How this electoral threat exerts itself – so the causal mechanism to make the mainstream take notice, and to trigger a contagion from the right – is an underexplored question. In both these institutional contexts with high electoral thresholds such as the UK and Australia, demonstrating areas where social democracy’s electoral coalition is vulnerable to the radical right is one method of achieving indirect influence. Two obvious ways are through
targeting and achieving support among the working-class electorate, or areas of geographically concentrated support that have been long-held by the left. If the radical right is able to demonstrate its electoral value by extracting support from the left or reinforcing the right ‘bloc’ through forms of formal or informal electoral co-operation, this also provides a potential method of intra-bloc influence on centre-right parties through elections. The importance of these forms of co-operation is particularly apparent within political systems with high thresholds for entry. However, forms of overt political co-operation between the radical and mainstream right are not necessarily a positive-sum game or an ‘additive’ process. Centre-right parties have to ensure they do not alienate their more middle-class, and more liberal, supporters. As a result, it is possible that electoral co-operation may broadly operate as a one-way street: with mainstream parties unwilling to publicly work through preference deals or other form of co-operation, but benefitting nevertheless.

Organisational influence

Farage: UKIP and the Brexit Party

In 2014, around a quarter of UKIP’s European election candidates were previously Conservative candidates in local, European or general elections. Its biggest donors were almost exclusively former backers of the Conservative Party (Bale et al., 2015). Yet the key concern for David Cameron – and, as a result, the pressure point on which Farage could exert strongest political influence – was the prospect of Farage’s extra-parliamentary influence turning into parliamentary presence, through mass defections of MPs from UKIP to the Conservatives. Between 2010 and 2014 the Conservative government experienced a rate of parliamentary rebellion of 25% – higher than all but one government in the post-war period. This parliamentary pressure was cumulative and sustained, particularly on the issue of Europe – so much so that there was a growing sense that a significant group of Conservative MPs were rebelling at such a rate, even after Cameron had given into their calls to promise an in/out referendum on the issue, that many feared they might cross the Rubicon and defect to UKIP. And in August and September 2014, two Conservative MPs did make that leap when Douglas Carswell and then Mark Reckless announced their defection to UKIP. David Cameron’s speech on immigration in November 2014 was a direct response by Conservative strategists, fearful that a trickle of defections could soon become a stream. This movement at an elite level was seen as a symptom of movements among Conservative Party members to UKIP: a survey at the time revealed that nearly 30% of them were seriously thinking of voting for the country’s radical right-wing populist party, though only 5% ultimately did so (Webb et al., 2017).
Fast-forward to 2019, and many of the same dynamics applied. In 2019, as the neophyte Brexit Party gained traction (and donations from former donors to the Conservative Party) in the run-up to the European Elections, the big concern again for the Conservative Party was that Farage would exacerbate significant divisions between the leadership, MPs and party members – not unreasonably it turned out given that YouGov went on to find that some 59% of Conservative Party members had voted for the Brexit Party that summer (Curtis, 2019). Elite defections by that stage, however, were more symbolic than significant. Indeed, once Boris Johnson replaced Theresa May in the subsequent leadership contest – one defined by who could unite the parliamentary party and members with an agreed position on Brexit, the sense was that Farage had exerted enough of an influence over the Conservative Party that defections and funding began to seep from the Brexit Party back to the Conservatives. For instance, millionaire businessman, Aaron Banks, who had been a vocal advocate and donor for Farage backed the Conservatives; key Brexit Party MEPs elected in May 2019 declared for them too. The insurgency had had its intended effect, which was not to win office independently, but to assert its power and influence over the Conservative Party to achieve a ‘hard’ withdrawal from the European Union.

**Pauline Hanson: PHON**

The genealogy of PHON runs through the Liberal Party. Most notably, both Hanson and fellow co-founder (and later NSW state leader) David Oldfield had been Liberal Party members (Broinowski, 2017). Hanson began her career in federal politics as a Liberal Party candidate, who was later disendorsed. Despite her disendorsement, Prime Minister John Howard was reluctant to criticise Hanson’s racism, instead celebrating a lifting of the ‘pall of censorship’ in Australia (Mondon, 2012). Oldfield meanwhile had famously worked with Hanson to set up the party in secret, while still working in the parliamentary office of Liberal MP and future Prime Minister Tony Abbott (Broinowski, 2017).

The reestablishment of PHON as a political force following Hanson’s return to the leadership was coordinated by former Liberal Party staffer, James Ashby, Hanson’s most trusted advisor and national secretary of the party. Though no federal parliamentarian has defected to join PHON, the party secured its first Queensland state representative in 2017 when Liberal National Party backbencher Steve Dickson defected to the party, and was quickly promoted to state leader. Former PHON Western Australian MLC Charles Smith was also a National Party member who sought preselection for the federal seat of O’Connor in 2016 prior to joining Hanson’s party (Chiat, 2017). The symbolic importance of these personnel exchanges is a
way of underlining the idea of the change of image that Hanson achieved when reforming PHON.

The routes to organisational influence

Here, it is clear that the potential and perhaps the actuality of the movement of personnel between the populist radical right party and its mainstream centre-right rival is a key factor in destabilising institutional equilibrium: both UKIP and One Nation achieved this through movement of both elected parliamentarians and professional staff. Although we need to be careful not to exaggerate the extent and scope of any defections, these personnel links have two key effects: destabilising the organisational structure of mainstream competitors and prompting subsequent policy discussion, while also creating coverage that amplifies PRR policy messaging.

This churn in personnel between elites within radical and mainstream right parties is an obvious way for radical right parties to move from political outsider to policy influencer – providing ‘proof of concept’ of mainstream credentials; expanding political networks, and proving an ability to influence political actors supposedly within the mainstream; and creating intra-party conflict and turmoil, as mainstream parties try to adapt and respond to losing elites and members to an insurgent opposition. However, the influence may come not just in the act of defection but in attempts to pre-empt through organisational or policy change, to accommodate those members or elites considering switching to radical right parties.

Conclusion

Understanding the route through which policy payoffs are achieved by parties operating in unpropitious institutional contexts – where taking executive office remains a fairly distant possibility, and even wielding significant legislative influence has not been possible – is something not just of concern to radical right parties, but also other party families operating outside the ‘mainstream’. Here we sought to examine how two PRR parties leveraged indirect electoral influence and exerted organisational influence to achieve policy change. The evidence here from the UK and Australian cases suggest it is very possible for insurgent parties to achieve significant policy gains through successfully leveraging their capacity for disruption. This is done by the following: demonstrating their supposedly simultaneous reach into the electoral coalitions of social democratic as well as centre-right parties; achieving mainstreaming through the recruitment of personnel from long-established parties, with the anticipation of these political defections causing policy change; and having a leader with the charisma, political
reach and strategic capacity to generate policy debate within the mainstream.

The three mechanisms for policy influence that have been developed here can and should be applied to the fast-developing literature that looks to understand the influence of the radical right – not least because they do not assume that such influence is only (or even primarily) achieved through the radical right choosing to ‘mainstream’ by moderating policy positions and attempting to enter government (see Akkerman, 2016). While the mechanisms are dependent on the actions of insurgents, they also reflect the fact that achieving mainstream success requires mainstream parties to make strategic decisions in response to perceived external threats to their electoral coalitions and the stability of their organisations. In order to understand how policies associated with the populist radical right come to be implemented by governments in which they stand little chance of playing a part or even influencing through parliament, future research should focus on the wider dynamics of the relationship between mainstream and PRR parties, and the role both play as agents in reciprocal processes of mainstreamping and normalisation.

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ORCID

Alan Wager http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1854-5135
Tim Bale http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5917-1312
Anika Gauja http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6691-9421
Jordan Mcswiney http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4317-8012

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