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When do Culturally Conservative Parties develop Illiberal Policies? The Moderating Role of Mass Publics

Robert Rohrschneider, Prof.

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Based on a paper co-authored by:

Robert Rohrschneider, University of Kansas
Mark Peffley, University of Kentucky
Stephen Whitefield, Pembroke College, Oxford University
with
March Hutchison, University of Rhode Island
Michal Shamir, University of Tel-Aviv

Abstract:

A prevailing wisdom in the study of illiberal party systems in Europe holds that culturally right-wing parties often support illiberal policies —i.e., they favor limiting the rights of political minorities, the press, and high courts. However, case studies document substantial heterogeneity in the extent to which these parties embrace illiberal policies. This ambiguity defines our goals. First, based on a 2019 expert survey conducted in Europe, along with V-Dem data, we describe how illiberal nearly 200 European parties are in 20 European democracies. Second, to explain the diversity we observe, we argue that party entrepreneurs have incentives to offer illiberal policies mainly when illiberal affinities of mass publics—their predispositions make them receptive to illiberal appeals—are strong. We conduct two types of analyses to test the argument. We show that even after controlling for several well-known predictors of party illiberalism, culturally conservative parties promote illiberal policies primarily when they compete in electorates with significant illiberal affinities. We also present experimental evidence from surveys conducted in Germany and the USA (2023) showing that an illiberal affinity among government supporters *and* opponents increases their readiness to endorse

illiberal government policies. Thus, illiberal policies appear to cross-cut partisan loyalties, helping right-wing parties to succeed under a specific set of conditions. However, the results also suggest that a mass public under the right conditions can provide a bulwark against illiberal elites.

Robert Rohrschneider, PhD is Worcester Distinguished Professor of Public Opinion Research at the University of Kansas. His research interests are Comparative public opinion and parties; European politics; German politics; research methodology.
