



REVIEW OF DIPLOMA THESIS

Review type: Opponent's Review

Author of the diploma thesis: Nelson Tang

Title: We Are Family: The Welfare State Agendas of European Populist Radical Right Parties Between 1990 and 2021

Author of the review: Mirna Jusić, M.A., Ph.D.

Evaluate the diploma thesis based on the following considerations (not necessarily in this order):

1) Factual benefits of work and its added value;

The thesis challenges, from a social policy perspective, a common scholarly assumption that Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRPs) from Western Europe and those from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) cannot be compared due to differences in their ideological profiles.

The author makes a contribution to the literature by comparing the welfare state agendas of the PRRPs in the EU-15 countries and the post-Communist member states (MS) of the European Union (EU) in the 1990-2021 period through the lens of historical institutionalism (HI). Through statistical analysis performed on two custom-designed datasets, the research shows that there are no “comprehensive systematic differences in the emphasis PRRPs place on welfare state expansion and welfare chauvinism,” (III) as would be expected from the perspective of HI. In addition to the statistical analysis, the author also conducts an interpretative analysis of “more than 500 welfare-related passages from the manifestos of European PRRPs,” which point to two common ideas motivating policy positions of PRRPs: “a populist fear of abuse and the family as the nativist societal nucleus.” (III) However, such analysis also points to ideational differences which can be tied to the communist legacies, where the PRRPs in post-Communist states show reservation towards institutional diversification of welfare states, unlike PRRPs in the EU-15 states.

The author thus makes the point that there is some analytical value concerning the distinction in literature between the PRRPs from the two respective regions concerning parties' social policy stances; however, given his findings on two common and predominant ideas that PRRPs from both regions derive their social policy positions from, this should not discourage (similar) future comparative research. Interestingly, such research (as the one done by the author) “may facilitate prognosis of future



developments regarding potential cooperation among PRRPs across Europe on social policy issues.” (p. 13).

Moreover, given the fact that research on the fundamental ideas guiding welfare state agendas of Western European PRRPs is scarce (p.9), the author makes another contribution with his analysis of political manifestos of such parties.

Last but not least, and in support of the ideational amendment to HI, the author makes a contribution to the HI literature dealing with the welfare state by showing in his analysis that “only when reflecting on the significance of ideas for institutional change, the social policy positions of actors (i.e., PRRPs) may be adequately compared to each other because there appear to be ideas guiding these positions regardless of critical junctures” (p.72).

2) *Setting and answering research questions;*

The author’s main research question is: “In what ways do the welfare state agendas of PRRPs in the old, EU-15 and new, post-Communist member states of the European Union (EU) do (not) differ?”

The question is answered in a thorough and convincing manner.

3) *Structure of work;*

The structure of the work is clear and contains all important elements of an academic text. The author starts with an introduction, which includes the main research question, and continues with the literature review on PRRPs and the welfare state, a theoretical background on historical institutionalism, a research design chapter, an overview of results from quantitative analysis and interpretive analysis, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

4) *The factual accuracy and convincing of the argumentation;*

The argumentation flows well, and the author’s arguments are backed by evidence. The literature review is robust and comprehensive, relying on a vast number of sources. The results section builds upon a very robust conceptualization and operationalization of the core concepts that the author applies in his work. The statistical and interpretive analyses have yielded relevant results that the author is able to interpret in a convincing manner.

Small comment: already in the introduction, the author mentions that “This thesis argues that PRRPs in both EU regions base their welfare state agendas, in part, on two mutual ideas” (p.7), but it is not explained in the introduction what these are.

5) *Sophistication and application of theoretical approaches;*

The theoretical framework of HI is well-suited for the author’s research focus and is commonly used in welfare state research. By relying on this framework, the author also



includes the operationalization of the main terms used (*ideas, welfare state, other political actors, critical junctures*) and outlines a theoretical model integrating these concepts (p. 24).

The framework is elaborated in detail, and it is clear how the author intends to use the concepts in his work. A robust application of HI is included in the results and discussion sections.

I very much appreciate the elaboration of elements of both rapid institutional change (through critical junctures) and more gradual institutional change and its ideational amendment.

6) *Methodological approach and application of particular methods and approaches;*

The methodological approach of the thesis is clear. The author relies on a sophisticated combination of methods in order to answer his research question and suggests the utility of both positivist and interpretivist paradigms in analyzing PRRPs' welfare agendas (p. 26).

The methodological section first elaborates in a detailed manner on the quantitative analysis applied, including the hypotheses formulated, the data sets used, and statistical analyses applied. Further information on the analyses performed is included in the appendices.

The author then lays out the sample and structure of the interpretative analysis of PRRPs' manifestos, performed in the study.

A few comments:

- In the elaboration of his approach to interpretative analysis, the author mentions how ideas from the manifestos have been deductively categorized into different types of categories denoting gradual institutional change (layering, drifting, conversion, displacement). However, the category 'welfare state chauvinism', which is somewhat more specific than the other categories, has been added as well. The author could explain this addition during the defense.
- While I understand the reasons for excluding Croatia from the sample (p. 14), it would have been a very interesting case to look at because it tends to very much conform to the findings for the PRRPs from CEE MS when it comes to social policy agendas.

7) *Use of literature and data;*

The author relies on an extensive number of relevant scientific sources. The literature review is comprehensive and well-written. Turnitin shows a 28% similarity score. However, the text shows similarity of two sources to the extent of 3 and 2%, and all other sources to the extent of less than 1%. After carefully reviewing the Turnitin report for the thesis, it is clear that the similarity score can be attributed to the use of an extensive number of quotes (especially from the manifestos of political parties).



8) *Stylistic and text editing (quote, text layout, etc.).*

Very well-written academic text with no stylistic or text editing issues.

9) *Question for defense (not obligatory)*

I appreciate your finding that “welfare chauvinism appears to be ideationally more flexible than often assumed because it is not restricted to the scapegoating of immigrants and/or ethnic minorities; rather, it is based on a general fear of institutional abuse.” This brings to mind the theory of social construction of target populations by Schneider and Ingram. However, one may wonder if – by applying welfare chauvinism to anyone potentially framed as abusing the system – we are not overstretching the concept a bit and departing from its traditional association with nativism?

For the above reasons, I recommend the diploma thesis for the defense.

My grading is "A".

Date: 1/9/2024

Signature: