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Disaffected but Efficacious: Why People Join Populist Radical Right Parties

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Abstract

The number of grassroots members of populist radical right (PRR) parties is on the rise, in contrast to the trend of membership decline in mainstream parties. While scholars have explained this by studying PRR parties' organizational strategies, I focus on party members and ask: Why do people join PRR parties? To answer this, I look not only at motivations, which is the dominant framework in party membership studies, but also at triggers – factors activating those motivations. Drawing on collective action scholarship, I argue that grievances and efficacy can work as triggers for joining PRR parties. Using interviews with 82 members of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the League in Italy and the Sweden Democrats, I uncover three elements in the path to PRR party membership: disaffection, affiliation and action. As well as questioning established narratives on why citizens join parties, my findings provide a novel theoretical framework to investigate this form of political participation.

Keywords: party membership; radical right; populism; grievances; efficacy

Populist radical right (PRR) parties have been on the rise for decades. As the number of PRR voters has increased worldwide, so has that of PRR grassroots members (Bardi et al. 2017). This upward trend stands in sharp contrast to that experienced by mainstream parties, whose membership numbers have shrunk. It also begs the question of what makes PRR party membership so appealing. From the point of view of PRR parties, one possible explanation is that some of them have developed locally rooted organizations to socialize their grassroots (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; van Kessel and Albertazzi 2021) in a moment where most parties have instead retrenched from the ground (Mair 2013). What remains unknown, however, is why PRR supporters decide to enrol formally in these parties, from the perspective of members themselves. In this article, therefore, I investigate what drives increasing numbers of citizens to get involved as PRR rank and file, by asking: Why do people join PRR parties?

Scholars have addressed the question of why citizens become party members by looking primarily at their *motivations*. To gauge the complex nature of the joining process, however, recent work has recommended also investigating *triggers* – that is, those factors that lead individuals to act on their motivations and activate membership mechanisms (Power and Dommett 2020). This research is still at an embryonic stage, with the main triggers uncovered being national events such as elections and party leadership changes, and its scope has so far been limited to British political parties (e.g. Bale et al. 2020; Collard and Kernalegenn 2021). In this article, I identify two novel triggers for joining PRR parties by drawing on the collective action literature and specifically on the notions of grievances and efficacy (Klandermans 1997). I argue that potential PRR party members hold a series of grievances against outgroups (defined in racial, ethnic and/or religious terms) and political elites. These grievances can work as triggers that activate their collective and ideological motivations to join a PRR party. However, in order for individuals actually to become PRR party members, they also need to possess feelings of political efficacy.

Drawing on original interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022 with 82 rank and file of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, the League in Italy and the Sweden Democrats (SD), I show that PRR grassroots members in diverse contexts are largely driven by similar triggers and motivations when deciding to enrol. In particular, the process of joining a PRR party consists of three elements, which I label *disaffection*, *affiliation* and *action*. Disaffection is characterized by grievances against outgroups, who are perceived as posing a threat to the ingroup's native culture, physical safety and economic welfare. These grievances activate individuals' desire to express their nativist beliefs and to support PRR parties' nativist and authoritarian policies. Affiliation consists of grievances against other parties, which are criticized for not caring about the ingroup. These grievances foster individuals' populist ideas and loyalty towards the PRR party, which is seen as the only one close to the people's needs. The final element is action, which represents the decisive push in people's paths to PRR membership. Ultimately, these supporters are driven by a strong sense of political efficacy, and a belief that by joining the PRR party they can most effectively redress the grievances identified above.

This article makes several contributions to the study of PRR parties and that of party membership more generally. Theoretically, drawing on the collective action scholarship, it identifies two overlooked triggers for joining political parties: grievances and efficacy. In this regard, while the mechanisms I uncovered in this study refer to PRR membership, it is plausible that these triggers characterize the process of joining other party families. Methodologically, this research responds to calls for adopting qualitative methods in party membership studies (Gauja and van Haute 2015; Power and Dommett 2020). Empirically, the findings of this study invite us to reinterrogate the prominence of collective and ideological incentives as motivations for joining (Gauja and van Haute 2015); rather, it appears that political efficacy plays a bigger role in driving this form of political behaviour. Finally, with its selection of cases, this article contributes to our knowledge of the PRR party family in two ways: by adopting an international comparative perspective, which has been lacking in research on PRR parties based on primary data, and by redressing the Eurocentric bias from which this work suffers (Castelli Gattinara 2020).

Joining a PRR party

While mainstream parties have seen their memberships shrinking for decades, PRR parties have witnessed an increase in their numbers of grassroots members (Bardi et al. 2017). This growth could be explained by looking at both 'demand-side' factors, which refer to the organizational choices made by PRR parties, and 'supply-side' ones, which relate to the motivations of PRR party members (Bale et al. 2020; Scarrow 1996). On the demand side, it is noteworthy that in a moment where most parties are withdrawing from the ground (Mair 2013), some PRR parties have developed locally rooted and stable organizations, with the aim of socializing their grassroots and fostering their collective identity (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; van Kessel and Albertazzi 2021).[1] What is less clear, however, is why citizens are increasingly joining these parties, from the perspective of citizens themselves – that is, the supply side of PRR party membership. In fact, research on PRR grassroots is still scarce (Castelli Gattinara 2020: 322; Mudde 2019: 76), not least because they are a 'hard-to-reach population' (Ellinas 2021). Relatedly, party membership scholars have noticed how PRR parties refuse to cooperate with researchers to a larger extent than others (Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen 2021). As a result, neither the literature on the PRR, nor that on party membership, have answered the question of why people decide to enrol in PRR parties. Nonetheless, the body of work on party membership, to which I turn below, can help develop some expectations in this regard.

Motivations for joining: the General Incentives Model

The research conducted by Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley on British grassroots members represents a pioneering contribution to the study of party membership (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley and Seyd 1996, 2002). They developed a model of participation, the General Incentives Model (GIM), which drew insights from both rational choice theory and sociopsychological models of political participation. This has since become the dominant framework to investigate why citizens join and become active in political parties. According to the GIM, individuals weigh the costs of membership against a series of collective and selective incentives. The former 'are based on the provision of collective goods, the policy goals of a political party' (Whiteley and Seyd 2002: 53) and are thus enjoyed by the public at large. By contrast, selective incentives are enjoyed only by those citizens who decide to become party members. These derive from the process of getting involved in politics (selective process), by the material rewards which a political career may offer (selective outcome) and by the desire to express one's own ideological beliefs (selective ideological). In addition to these motivations, individuals can be encouraged by factors that go beyond a rational cost–benefit calculation. These include an expressive attachment to the party or leader; feelings of political efficacy, based on which they think that 'their party can make an important difference in the lives of people with whom they identify' (Whiteley and Seyd 2002: 54); and social norms – that is, how political participation is perceived by 'significant others' whose opinions the (potential) member values and respects (Whiteley and Seyd 1996: 221). The GIM has been tested through party membership surveys in a variety of contexts, although predominantly in Western democracies. Its findings have

been consistent across parties and countries: individuals join first and foremost because of collective and ideological incentives (Bale et al. 2020; Heidar and Kosiara-Pedersen 2020; van Haute and Gauja 2015).

Joining a party, however, is not just a matter of motivations. In their qualitative study of the Greens in Britain, Sam Power and Katharine Dommett (2020: 508) observe how motivations can be latent and require activation 'in order to transform a desire for membership into the actual act of membership itself'. Consequently, they argue that to grasp fully the complexity of the membership process, we should look also at triggers. To date the investigation of triggers for party membership is still at an early stage, and largely limited to the UK. Power and Dommett (2020) emphasize in particular the importance of national events, such as general elections or the EU referendum, in driving citizens to join parties. Echoing this, Tim Bale et al. (2020) observe how the UK Labour Party witnessed a membership surge once Jeremy Corbyn announced he would contest the party leadership. Finally, Susan Collard and Tudi Kernalegenn (2021), in their research on British party members abroad, found that Brexit was a crucial trigger for these individuals. While the triggers mentioned so far all refer to specific incidents, it is important to note that, in the view of Power and Dommett (2020: 514), 'the idea of a trigger is not synonymous with an event'. Beyond the few examples just reported, however, party scholars have neither theorized nor provided further empirical evidence of triggers for joining a political party. To investigate this element of the path to PRR membership, therefore, I draw below on a different body of work: the literature on collective action.

Triggers for joining: grievances and efficacy

Scholars of social movements have long recognized that motivations are not enough to explain why people engage in collective action; rather, 'at the heart of every protest are grievances' (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013: 888). Grievances have been defined as the 'outrage about the way authorities are treating a social problem' and can be categorized into three groups: illegitimate inequality, suddenly imposed grievances and violated principles (Klandermans 1997: 38). The first type of grievance refers to feelings of relative deprivation. These arise when three conditions are met: first, individuals compare themselves or their ingroup to other people, outgroups or themselves in the past; second, they perceive that they (or their ingroup) are at a disadvantage; and third, the perceived disadvantage is viewed as unfair and results in angry resentment (Smith et al. 2012). Suddenly imposed grievances arise from critical events that pose an unexpected threat to people's lives, such as a nuclear accident (Walsh 1981). The last type of grievance occurs when principles and values that are perceived as important are violated, and this violation sparks a moral outrage (Kriesi 1993). The motivations for participating in a protest, be they instrumental (to transform the sociopolitical environment, similarly to the collective incentives to join a party) or expressive (to express one's view, similarly to the ideological incentives to join a party), always result from one or more of these grievances (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013).

Given that not all aggrieved people protest, however, grievances themselves do not provide enough of a trigger to get involved in collective action. Here is

where feelings of political efficacy, which are also included in the GIM, come into play. Political efficacy, which can be defined as 'the feeling that individual action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process' (Campbell et al. 1954: 187), is one of the discriminants between aggrieved people who protest and those who do not (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Accordingly, the more individuals are convinced that their participation will be effective in redressing a certain grievance, the more likely it is that they will engage in collective action (Klandermans 1997). While some individuals will be more prone to developing feelings of political efficacy thanks to their socioeconomic resources and civic skills (Verba and Nie 1972), perceptions of the effectiveness of participation can also be shaped by the strength of social movements themselves (Klandermans 2004). Similarly, when translated into the context of political parties, this sense of efficacy is said to be partly fostered by two factors related to the demand side of party membership: parties' electoral strength and organizational efficiency (Pettitt 2020: 15). In other words, individuals should be more motivated to join, first, if they believe they would be part of a successful organization that is able to achieve its policy goals, and second, if they perceive that their action can make a difference to political outcomes (Whiteley and Seyd 2002). As regards the latter, while 'the individual's ability to influence national party policies is effectively zero … this is not true of local party politics' (Whiteley and Seyd 2002: 54), for instance when it comes to local policymaking or candidate recruitment. Therefore, when parties put effort into building and maintaining their local organizations, people may be more prone to perceive that, by participating locally, they can have an impact on the political process.[2]

Theoretical model

Building on the scholarly work discussed so far, it is possible to elaborate a theoretical model that describes the process of joining a PRR party. This includes the two triggers identified in the work on collective action – grievances and efficacy – as well as the two most common sets of incentives for joining a political party according to the GIM: collective and ideological. To start with, studies have provided vast evidence of the centrality of grievances for explaining PRR voting. For example, feelings of relative deprivation towards one's past or against a perceived social standard have been found to predict voting for PRR parties in Western democracies (Gest et al. 2017; Gidron and Hall 2017). Similarly, suddenly imposed grievances such as changes in housing prices (Ansell and Adler 2019) or in local levels of immigration (Patana 2020) can affect PRR support. These grievances, however, are addressed against two specific sets of 'enemies', rather than against the authorities as proposed by social movements scholars. In fact, PRR supporters feel threatened from above by a number of political, cultural, financial and media elites, and from below by the presence of various 'Others' (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019: 487). As nativism is at the core of PRR politics, these 'Others' will be characterized first and foremost in racial, ethnic and/or religious terms (e.g. Muslims, immigrants, ethnic minorities), but they could also include groups such as homosexuals, left-wing supporters or criminals (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019: 488).

Grievances against elites and 'Others' can be expected to represent a trigger which activates PRR supporters' ideological incentives (i.e. the desire to express

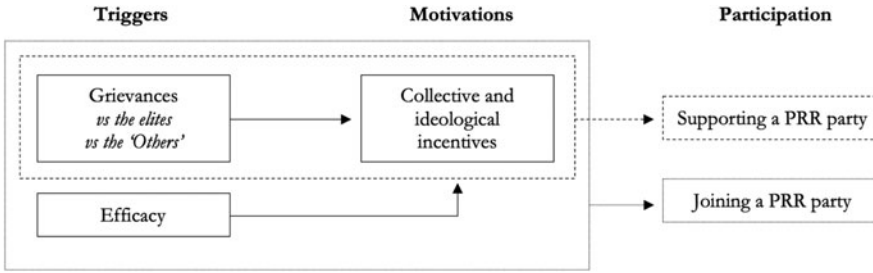

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of the Process of Joining a PRR Party

their nativist, authoritarian and populist beliefs) and collective ones (i.e. the desire to support PRR policies). In the case of nativism, these collective goods may include restrictive policies on immigration, integration and minority rights, as well as welfare chauvinist provisions to ensure that jobs and benefits are directed to the native population only (Golder 2016: 480). As regards authoritarianism, collective incentives may consist of strict law-and-order measures – for instance to increase the police's competencies and give tougher sentences to criminals (Mudde 2019: 34). Finally, regarding populism, policy incentives could encompass the promotion of instruments of direct democracy and provisions such as the reduction in the size of parliament (Betz and Johnson 2004: 316). However, not everyone who holds grievances against elites and 'Others', and thus supports these ideas and policies, will end up joining a PRR party. On the contrary, most people will limit themselves to voting for one, since voting would still allow them to voice their beliefs and help the PRR party achieve its goals. Those who actually decide to become PRR party members can thus be expected to possess stronger feelings of political efficacy. Accordingly, they will think that by joining the party, they can be more effective in bringing about the desired policy outcomes. Figure 1 provides a visualization of the theoretical model.

Case selection, method and data

Given the exploratory nature of this study, I investigated the path to PRR party membership on three 'diverse' cases of PRR parties (Gerring 2006). Following David Art (2011), the main criterion for the case selection was the reaction of other political parties towards the PRR in question at the time of the data collection. As Art (2011) argues, whether parties provide a permissive or repressive environment for PRR actors shapes both the supply side and demand side of PRR party membership. In fact, on the one hand, it affects the types of individuals who join them, not only in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds, but also as regards their ideological profiles and motivations; on the other, it influences both the electoral strength and organizational efficiency of PRR parties. To gauge the wide range of contexts in which people become PRR party members, therefore, I studied three PRR parties that vary considerably in terms of how they are treated in their political system: these are the BJP in India, the League in Italy and the Sweden Democrats (SD). While the SD has long been subject to a *cordon sanitaire*

Table 1. Results Obtained by the BJP, League and SD in the Last Five General Elections Prior to the Data Collection

BJP			League			SD		
	Votes (%)	Seats (total available 543)		Votes (%)	Seats (total available 630)		Votes %	Seats (total available 349)
1999	23.7	**182**	*2001*	3.9	**30**	*2002*	1.4	0
2004	22.2	138	*2006*	4.6	26	*2006*	2.9	0
2009	18.8	116	*2008*	8.3	**60**	*2010*	5.7	20
2014	31.3	**282**	*2013*	4.1	18	*2014*	12.9	49
2019	37.5	**303**	*2018*	17.3	**123**	*2018*	17.5	62

Note: The mandates in which the BJP and the League have been in government are in bold.

due to its origins in Sweden's extreme right milieu, the League and the BJP have enjoyed more respectability as coalition partners and political actors.[3] This is reflected by their electoral fortunes, as illustrated in Table 1. Unlike the SD, which has always been isolated and in opposition, both the BJP and the League had been in power three times in the last five governments prior to the data collection. However, the BJP is far more normalized than the League, as PRR politics in India has become increasingly mainstreamed under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Ammassari et al. 2022). This can also be seen by the fact that in 2014 and in 2019 the BJP gained two clear majorities. In terms of acceptability, therefore, the League would sit somewhere in between the BJP and the SD. This 'diverse case' research design provides a strong basis for generalization within the PRR party family (Gerring 2006). Furthermore, with the inclusion of the BJP, it redresses the Eurocentric bias from which the comparative literature on PRR parties suffers (Castelli Gattinara 2020), allowing me to capture those elements that make the appeal of PRR politics global.

To investigate why people join PRR parties, I conducted semi-structured interviews with PRR grassroots members. The decision to rely on interviews responds to calls by party scholars for the use of qualitative methods to 'bring additional insights into the phenomenon of joining parties' (Gauja and van Haute 2015: 199). In fact, as Anika Gauja and Emilie van Haute (2015) observe, close-ended survey questionnaires, which are the dominant methodological tool to test the GIM, do not enable us to uncover how mobilization actually occurs. On a related point, interviews are best suited to approach an under-theorized and underexplored topic, such as the triggers for joining political parties. Accordingly, between January 2021 and January 2022, I interviewed 82 rank and file from the three selected parties. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were done by phone or on online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom. Interviewees were recruited through a mix of purposive and snowball sampling to account for variation in terms of their gender, age and geographical region. Regarding the latter, I chose regions that differ according to the electoral strength of the three PRR parties selected, following the same principle stated above for the case

Table 2. Regions Selected for the Recruitment of Interview Participants

	Stronghold	Battleground
BJP	Gujarat	Maharashtra
League	Veneto	Tuscany
SD	Skåne	Stockholm (county)

selection (Art 2011). I therefore targeted grassroots members from both party strongholds and what I define henceforth as 'battlegrounds' – that is, regions where the three parties are less popular. These regions are listed in Table 2.[4]

After establishing my sampling strategy, the second step was gaining access to PRR grassroots members. These can be considered a 'hard-to-reach population' (Ellinas 2021) for several reasons. First – and this holds for grassroots members of any party – they are not as easy to locate as party elites, whose contact details tend to be public and readily available. Second, between PRR supporters and social scientists, there tends to be a 'lack of proximity', which is both political (in terms of political worldviews and preferences) and sociological (in terms of social identities, interests and lifestyles): it is therefore unlikely that 'social scientists … [will] cross paths with these voters and activists in their daily (professional) lives' (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022: 3). This lack of proximity also means that PRR actors tend to view academics with suspicion (Ellinas 2021; McDonnell and Cabrera 2019), and PRR parties refuse to cooperate with researchers more often than other parties do (Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen 2021). Finally, in certain contexts, PRR grassroots members can be highly stigmatized because of their political engagement (Art 2011) and therefore will be wary of disclosing their membership. The challenge of gaining access to this hard-to-reach population was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, because I could not recruit PRR grassroots members by attending public party events (see Ellinas 2021). Given these difficulties, I relied on the PRR parties themselves to locate their grassroots members and invite them to participate in my project.[5] Specifically, I contacted party officials from the regions listed in Table 2, presented the project, and asked them to help organize the interviews, explaining that I was interested in talking to a mixture of women and men, younger and older grassroots members. As a result, I interviewed 35 women and 47 men, of whom 44 lived in party strongholds and 38 in party battlegrounds; 26 were members of the BJP, 26 of the League, and 30 of the SD.[6] The adoption of a non-random sampling to recruit these rank and file implies that the sample is not representative of the population of PRR party members in probabilistic terms. However, the sample's width and heterogeneity, together with the selection of cases discussed above, help strengthen the generalizability of my findings.[7]

To identify the triggers and motivations that led these individuals to become PRR grassroots members, I employed semi-structured interviews. These were divided into three main parts: the reasons why they joined the party, the reasons for their sustained commitment (where applicable) and the kind of activities they undertake as party members. This article is based upon the information

taken from the first part of these interviews.[8] While the interviews with League and SD grassroots members were conducted by me in Italian and English, those with BJP grassroots members were conducted in Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi and English with the support of either a Gujarati or a Marathi native-speaker translator (both women), who were physically with me throughout the whole interviewing process. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and reassured that the only information I would disclose about them would be their gender, age and geographical region. The 82 interviews were all recorded with their consent, fully transcribed, and those with BJP grassroots members were translated into English by native speakers.

The transcribed text was uploaded on the software NVivo12. I analysed my interview data by employing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This is a method 'for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data', and can be particularly helpful when the research goal is to explore an under-researched topic (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). In conducting it, I took a 'semantic approach' in which the themes emerged from the explicit meanings of the transcripts, rather than from latent meanings and underlying ideas (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). To familiarize myself with the data, I carried out a first cycle of coding by using a theory-driven node structure distinguishing between personal, local, national and international triggers for joining (Power and Dommett 2020), and the motivations developed in the GIM (Whiteley and Seyd 2002). After coding each interview, I drew on the codes and my analytic memos to trace the process of joining the PRR party of each participant, uncovering triggers and motivations. Doing so allowed me to identify three overarching themes that came back repeatedly in the accounts of the interviewees. I thus proceeded with a second cycle of coding, this time with an inductive node structure based on these three main themes and a number of subthemes. Finally, I undertook several phases of 'defining and refining' the themes to make sure that they were distinct and internally coherent (Braun and Clarke 2006: 92). The 'prevalence' of a theme was counted at the level of the interview item (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). Accordingly, if the theme was mentioned once or more in the interviewee's account, that counted as one.

Triggers and motivations for PRR party membership

My interviews with grassroots members of the BJP, the League and the SD showed that the process of joining a PRR party consists of three key elements, which I call: *disaffection*, *affiliation* and *action*.

About two-thirds of PRR party members displayed all three elements, suggesting that there is an established pattern for joining PRR parties regardless of how these parties are treated within their political systems, and which is consistent across very different regions of the world.[9] In the remainder of this section, I draw on the interview material to trace the process of joining a PRR party and describe which triggers and motivations characterize each element.

Disaffection: a moment of societal realization

When thinking back to the decision to join their party, PRR grassroots members often began their accounts by expressing a sentiment of disaffection with some

developments in their locality or in their country. These grievances originated from the experience of being in contact with outgroups, who in the case of the BJP consisted of religious minorities, in particular Muslims, while in the case of the League and the SD were immigrants. PRR rank and file felt threatened in several ways by their presence and developed the idea that their ingroup was treated unfairly in comparison to them. These grievances worked as triggers that instilled or fuelled already existent ideological incentives in the form of nativist beliefs, and activated members' collective incentives to join, for instance in the support for policies and provisions curbing immigration, giving more funding to the police or spending less public money on outgroups' welfare.

Many participants from the BJP and the SD explained that outgroups represented a threat to what could be described as their *native culture*. SD grassroots subscribed to an ethnopluralist view of society, according to which different cultures are incompatible and thus cannot live together. Member 60, talking about the influx of immigrants coming to Sweden in the past years, observed, 'They don't want to live like we do. They have another way of looking at how you should live, and it's impossible to get a society to function if you're that different.' SD interviewees thought this was because 'in Sweden we have rules and everything that are adjusted to the Swedish culture' (Member 54), and therefore immigrants 'must accept assimilation' if they want to stay (Member 55). This alleged incompatibility between outgroups' norms and those of the native population, which is a key cultural grievance of Western PRR parties against immigrants (Golder 2016), was not shared by BJP interviewees, since Hindus and religious minorities have been living together in India for centuries. Rather, BJP rank and file feared for the survival of the Hindu culture. For instance, Member 1 deplored the presence of Muslim and Christian missionaries in his local area, and their attempts to convert Hindu citizens: 'If this propaganda gets continued for some more days or maybe some more years, then our entire tradition, our entire culture would get damaged, and that is dangerous.' In addition to religious minorities, Member 24 thought that the Hindu culture was being endangered by a process of Westernization, lamenting the fact that nowadays Indians celebrate festivities such as Christmas and New Year's Eve: 'If we have such a rich culture, then it should be followed and it should not be forgotten. It's good accepting from other countries and other cultures … but don't forget where you started.'

In addition to threatening the native culture, outgroups were blamed for undermining the *physical safety* of their ingroup. BJP grassroots members often mentioned communal riots between Hindus and Muslims as critical events in their paths to membership. For example, Member 17 recalled some riots in her local community: 'As a doctor I used to give sutures, and help them [injured Hindus], and support them, and somehow I started to think that I belonged to them.' Even when interviewees did not personally witness the riots, they still felt they 'grew up assimilating these things' (Member 15), and they developed the idea that Hindus were 'suffering' at the hands of Muslims (Member 22). On the other hand, for League and SD rank and file, the main issue was that immigrants were allegedly involved in crimes and had rendered their societies more dangerous. Member 67, from the SD, lamented: 'Twenty years ago, I could just walk on the street. I wasn't afraid. Today, I am. It actually affects my normal daily living.' SD

grassroots members referred to certain areas of Swedish cities as 'ghettos' (Member 74) or 'no-go zones' (Member 68) where crime is rampant, and reported that Sweden had become 'the worst in Europe' when it came to shootings (Member 64), and that 'it's mostly migrants that do these crimes' (Member 60). Similarly, according to Member 49, in Italy nowadays 'even living in your own house is dangerous', which is one of the various 'disasters provoked by uncontrolled and unregulated immigration'. Some interviewees, like Member 50, from the League, even attempted to justify the alleged criminal behaviour of immigrants: 'Either we give them the possibility to come, to work with dignity, otherwise the successive step can happen – the instinct to commit crimes, which is not an instinct characterizing the Senegalese man, but it's an instinct characterizing the desperate man.'

This latter point is related to another criticism directed against outgroups by members of the League and the SD: that immigrants were a threat to their *economic welfare*. In their opinions, their countries did not have the resources to welcome and integrate these individuals. For League grassroots members, it was primarily an issue of competition in the job market. Member 40 noticed that

> If we welcome people here in Italy without giving them the possibility to truly build their future, these people end up working illegally, with really low salaries because they are not aware of their rights, and involuntarily they enter in an illicit competition with Italian people, who instead know their rights and would never work for certain salaries.

According to SD rank and file, an additional problem was that immigrants were draining the very generous Swedish welfare system, with not only economic consequences but also societal, as Member 53 pointed out:

> It's a very vulnerable society that we have, that has been built up, you know, for small families, built up on a social consciousness where people don't go and take benefits if they don't need the money. … It used to be that way. Now, people just max out and if there's money available, people will go and claim it, and it erodes the togetherness in society and the trust.

This behaviour was contraposed to that of Swedish people, who allegedly would never take advantage of public money in this way, and felt frustrated that despite working in Sweden their entire lives, they 'did not get any freebies' (Member 70).

Affiliation: a moment of political realization

The second element characterizing the process of joining a PRR party is 'affiliation'. By learning about their country's political landscape, PRR grassroots members became convinced that the PRR party was the only one that could do something to address the causes of their disaffection. Relatedly, they developed grievances against the other parties, which were seen as uninterested in, or incapable of, dealing with their concerns. This moment of political realization activated several motivations for joining among the interviewees. In particular, grievances against the political elite worked as triggers that fuelled people's desire to oppose other parties'

agendas ('negative' collective incentives – see Whiteley and Seyd 2002: 53), to voice their populist and nativist beliefs (ideological incentives) and to display their loyalty to PRR parties and leaders (expressive attachment).

PRR parties were seen by grassroots members as the solution to their disaffection for several reasons. To begin with, interviewees widely agreed that their party was the only one that was *close to 'the people'* and their needs, a distinctive trope in the populist worldview (Müller 2016). For instance, the BJP was described as unique in the Indian political arena, in that its rank and file were very active on the ground and regularly engaged with 'the common people' (Member 4). As a result, the party could develop policies and provisions that were 'only in the people's best interest' (Member 13). Member 35 thought that this was a distinctive feature and strength of the League too: 'Those who are active in the League, regardless of their position, go among the people. … [They] go among the people to talk with them and listen to them.' Accordingly, the League was able to make a 'correct diagnosis of Italy's illnesses' (Member 48), and the party leader Matteo Salvini could address 'the real issues' that affected citizens, both through his speeches and his political agenda (Member 38). The same was said about SD party leaders such as Jimmie Åkesson and Mattias Karlsson, who 'really care about the people of Sweden … and know what they want for our future' (Member 64). These accounts are reminiscent of the 'extraordinary powers' that can be ascribed to populist leaders by their supporters, especially as regards their ability to read events and provide solutions thanks to their superior political vision (McDonnell 2016).

Conversely, interviewees condemned other political parties for being elitist and out of touch, neither willing nor able to deal with the problems affecting their countries. This is a key charge of PRR actors: that established parties are 'a self-serving … elite that pursues its own narrow agenda without concern for the legitimate concerns and interests of ordinary citizens' (Betz and Johnson 2004: 313). In the opinions of BJP rank and file, this resentment stemmed from the fact that most parties in India are dynastic, and thus only interested in promoting the interests of their own family. They believed that Indian parties 'do not have the aim of taking India forward' (Member 9), but rather 'have only one goal, which is to gain positions of power' (Member 13). On the other hand, for SD grassroots members, the main fault of Swedish parties was not recognizing that immigration had become a problem, and therefore not proposing any solution to it. Member 81 complained, 'It's hard to hear other leaders telling us that "No, everything is fine, it's good. I haven't seen any problems at all." No? Of course. Because you are living in another area. Not the area where normal people are living.' In this regard, the so-called 'refugee crisis' that hit Sweden in 2015 was often invoked as a landmark event, during which it appeared obvious that 'things were going to hell very fast, while everybody was sticking their head in the sand' (Member 53). Since then, in the opinion of Member 80, no political party had wanted 'to take the responsibility to change the direction, and to admit that they have done wrong'. Rather, as Member 57 pointed out, 'they point their fingers at us and call us racist'.

A similar but distinct articulation of the above theme was the idea that the PRR party was the only one that *cared about the ingroup*. All three PRR parties were praised for putting the interests of the native population 'first' in their policy

platforms. Furthermore, several PRR rank and file, such as Member 19 from the BJP, recognized that their party was the only nationalist in their country's political landscape: 'Nationalism really attracts me, and besides BJP I do not see this in any other party.' Similarly, Member 43 observed how the League was the only political actor that 'reflected the idea of nation, as opposed to other parties that serve less the interests of the Italian people, and more those of others'. This latter grievance, that other political parties tended to favour outgroups, is at the core of the 'us-and-them' distinction that characterizes the PRR ideology (Mudde 2019: 46) and was widely shared by members of the three PRR parties. For example, Member 7 was convinced that, with the exception of the BJP, Indian parties 'only prioritize Muslim people and treat Hindus as worthless'. On a related point, Member 60 from the SD lamented how other parties were 'always referring to other people outside of Sweden, their rights. But how about the Swedish people's rights? Don't we have the right to live in a society that is safe?' These accounts show how, in the PRR ideology, national political elites can be criticized not only in populist terms, as we have seen above, but also from a nativist perspective, as 'traitors to the nation' (Mudde 2019: 37).

Action: a moment of self-realization

The final element shared by PRR grassroots members in their joining process is 'action'. In this moment of self-awareness, they realized that by joining the party they could best redress the societal and political wrongs detected in the two previous stages, and thus make a difference in the lives of those with whom they identified (Whiteley and Seyd 2002: 54). This sense of efficacy worked as a trigger that activated both collective and outcome incentives to join. Regardless of whether their target was their local community, the nation or society at large, PRR grassroots members shared the belief that by joining the PRR party they could bring about the changes needed to improve their situation and that of 'their people'. This could be done by supporting the party in the realization of its goals (collective incentives) and getting involved in local politics (outcome incentives). Importantly, these feelings of efficacy were at least as relevant in members' decisions to join as the desire to support the PRR ideology and agenda, bringing some nuance to the prevailing wisdom that policy and ideological incentives are the most prominent reasons for joining parties (Gauja and van Haute 2015).

The interviews highlighted two main ways in which PRR rank and file thought they could influence the political process, and thus make a difference in the lives of their ingroup. The first was by *providing assistance to the party*. At the very basic level, the mere act of paying a yearly membership fee was seen as a way to help the organization grow. Furthermore, participants felt that by contributing to the work of the party with their own ideas, proposals, knowledge and professional experience, they could have a bigger impact than just by voting, and 'be the protagonists of what gets done in our local community, but also at the regional and national level' (Member 32, League). In particular, they felt that 'being a party member gives you a say on what issues you address and how' (Member 31, League). Finally, rank and file thought they could act as 'ambassadors to the community', winning new party support through their daily contacts (Scarrow 1996: 43). As Member 31, taking

the example of a long-standing policy issue of the League – federalism, that is, giving more autonomy to regional governments – explained:

> [Being a party member] gives you the possibility to say, 'Ok, I cast my vote to support federalism, but I will also explain to other people the reasons why I want federalism, why I want [regional] autonomy.' … And perhaps, people can say, 'Ok, you are right, I trust you, I understand that this motive is valid, and I support you.'

The importance of providing these outreach benefits was shared by Member 78, who recognized they were especially useful for a party like the SD because of the severe stigma characterizing its support: 'A lot of people said what we [the SD] thought, but they were afraid, actually. It was as simple as that, and I felt, "Well, somebody has to be there and speak out for these people, and then they will join."' Therefore, in their decision to enrol, PRR grassroots members valued both the prospect of having a voice in party matters and the idea of promoting the party's ideas and policies in their social circles.

The second way in which rank and file felt they could have an impact was by *making use of the party's resources*. Several interviewees recognized that the PRR party could be used as a platform to achieve their collective goals in a more efficient and outreaching way. They identified a variety of assets that the party could supply them with and that could serve their causes, including funding, networks, know-how on the workings of local politics, and party or public offices. Networks and public offices were seen as particularly valuable in this regard. Member 23 from the BJP, for example, noticed how 'There is a lot of work that only gets done if there is a representative.' Echoing this, Member 15, from the same party, believed that 'if you have a desire to do good and work for the benefit and well-being of the people, then you can only do so through politics', because power ultimately lies in the government, and elected representatives are best equipped to address the problems of the citizens. These considerations were well summarized by Member 35 (League):

> If you want to bring about certain ideas, you need to belong to a party and you need to become a party member. And why is this the case? Because you start to have a whole series of relationships with like-minded people, and you create a production chain. … If you want to really change things, you need to belong, for instance, to a local body of government, because otherwise everything you have in mind remains just an idea, and is never put into practice.

In other words, PRR grassroots members recognized that by securing a public office (or by being close to those who held one), they could best fulfil their aims, especially in their local community. Here their strong sense of political efficacy activates an additional reason for joining: the pursuit of outcome incentives, such as a seat in the local council. The realization that 'within a branch party or a local constituency party, one individual can make a difference to policy outcomes' (Whiteley and Seyd 2002: 54) has therefore the potential to foster PRR rank and file's political ambitions, which may have been latent until then.

The above excerpts suggest that efficacy can be partly enhanced by demand-side factors such as a well-functioning local organization – one that gives citizens a wide range of opportunities to get involved, from having a say during party meetings to

Table 3. The Elements of Joining a PRR Party

Element	Triggers	Motivations
Disaffection	*Grievances*: 'Others' are a threat to native culture, physical safety and economic welfare	*Ideological*: Nativist beliefs *Collective*: Nativist and authoritarian policies
Affiliation	*Grievances*: Elites do not care about 'the people'/the ingroup	*Ideological*: Populist and nativist beliefs *Collective*: Opposition to other parties' policies *Expressive*: Loyalty towards PRR party
Action	*Efficacy*: Bigger impact on the political process by helping the party and making use of its resources	*Collective*: Support to PRR party in achieving its goals *Outcome*: Funding, networks, party and public offices

holding local party and public offices. This is in line with Bale et al. (2020) and Robin Pettitt (2020), who find that active local party branches can make a difference in membership recruitment. Accordingly, PRR rank and file described their parties' grassroots presence as something that set them apart from other parties, which 'don't do anything on the ground' (Member 37, League) and 'only appear during elections' (Member 14, BJP). Regardless of whether these perceptions are grounded in reality, it is noteworthy that of the 68 interviewees who explicitly described the dynamics of their recruitment, over two-thirds mentioned joining through their local branch. In this sense, it appears that efficacy is more related to parties' organizational efficiency than electoral strength. In fact, despite the fact that the SD had long been subject to a *cordon sanitaire*, and was thus incapable of influencing policymaking, over three-quarters of SD interviewees – a proportion similar to that of BJP and League participants – displayed feelings of efficacy.

Table 3 summarizes the main findings, reporting the three key elements that the path to PRR party membership consists of, and the triggers and motivations that characterize each element. The table highlights how, like any party, joining a PRR party is a 'multi-faceted and complex' process (Power and Dommett 2020). Accordingly, these findings should not be interpreted in a linear way; rather, it is likely that there are feedback mechanisms by which triggers and motivations within and across elements reinforce one another. Moreover, as previously mentioned, any form of political participation, including party membership, is characterized by the interaction of supply-side and demand-side mechanisms, whose full coverage goes beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, what the table provides is a comprehensive window on the shared narratives and experiences of those individuals who join PRR parties today, from a global comparative perspective.

Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this study was to uncover why people become grassroots members of PRR parties. I did so not only by examining their motivations, which is the

dominant framework in party membership studies, but also by looking at triggers, the factors that activate those motivations (Power and Dommett 2020). Drawing on the literature on collective action, I argued that grievances and efficacy can work as triggers for joining PRR parties. To investigate this, I conducted interviews with 82 grassroots members of the BJP in India, the League in Italy and the SD in Sweden. I identified three key elements in the process of joining a PRR party: disaffection, affiliation and action. Based on these, I found that a general sense of disaffection with how society and politics work, together with an expressive and programmatic commitment towards the PRR party, and a strong sense of political efficacy, are key to comprehending why people enrol in these parties. These findings have several implications for our understanding of PRR politics, and of party membership, which I address below.

The interviews showed how PRR party members are resentful towards both outgroups, who are condemned for the threats they pose to their native culture, physical safety and economic welfare, and the political elite, which is blamed for being incapable or unwilling to address their concerns. It thus appears that the 'thin' ideology of populism gives a political expression and shape to the disaffection caused by the PRR ideological core, nativism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). In other words, if the 'us-and-them' contraposition is at the basis of PRR politics, it is its *horizontal* dimension (ingroup versus outgroups) that makes PRR grassroots aware of their state of relative deprivation, while its *vertical* dimension (people versus elites) allows them to identify the real 'culprits' (and, conversely, the 'heroes') and to act accordingly.[10] Consequently, even though nativism and populism overlap and intersect, they have different roles in the joining process of PRR grassroots members. These findings speak to recent scholarly debates on whether and how populism and nativism – a specific form of nationalism – are related, providing empirical evidence of the utility of treating these two concepts separately (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2020; Moffitt 2020). Further research is needed to understand how the interaction between the two functions in practice, and its role in mobilizing PRR support.

Importantly, this study uncovered dynamics of involvement in PRR parties that were similar among rank and file based in very different sociopolitical, cultural and geographical contexts. The PRR grassroots members I interviewed were ultimately united by a common goal: improving the situation of the ingroup. This sentiment was a stronger push for joining than negative attitudes towards outgroups and elites, in that in the 'action' moment of their membership paths, what they perceived as their duty was saving 'the people', rather than fighting the 'Others'. This finding is noteworthy, considering how the literature tends to portray populist actors as having a vague idea of 'the people' but a clearer one of its enemies (Mudde 2004) and emphasizes how PRR mobilization is largely driven by negative emotions towards the latter (Betz 2021).[11] It would be interesting to investigate whether this belief – that uplifting the ingroup is more important than downgrading the outgroups – drives other forms of PRR support as well as party membership, for example voting. This research could be very informative for those interested in how to respond to the increasing popularity of PRR politics.

The fact that PRR grassroots members in such different countries were led by similar triggers and motivations corroborates recent findings demonstrating that

not only the supply, but also the demand of PRR politics has become a coherent global phenomenon (Ammassari et al. 2022). Furthermore, it has broader implications for the study of party membership. As Knut Heidar (2006: 308) observes, even though it is perfectly plausible to think that different party families will attract different kinds of people, the 'party family' variable has received surprisingly little attention in membership studies. Rather, it appears that country differences are more prominent than party family ones in understanding how parties organize (Scarrow et al. 2017). Clearly, to assess whether party families matter, one should compare grassroots across them. While this was not the focus of the article, my findings from India, Italy and Sweden suggest that there is value in adopting this variable. In this regard, future research could apply my theoretical framework on paths to membership of other party families, to investigate whether the three elements I identified – disaffection, affiliation and action – work as 'empty boxes' in which one can find distinctive triggers and motivations depending on the type of party. For example, it is plausible that grievances arising from an environmental crisis or rising social inequality may drive citizens towards joining green and social democratic parties.

Finally, this article has revealed how becoming a PRR party member is a highly articulated process, providing further support for the idea that motivations for joining can be latent and need to be activated (Power and Dommett 2020). Accordingly, the investigation of triggers and motivations is a promising path for future party membership studies, for at least two reasons. First, it allows scholars to better grasp the mobilization dynamics that citizens experience in the process of becoming members. Second, it has the potential to reinterrogate the prominence of collective and ideological incentives as motivations for joining parties (Gauja and van Haute 2015: 194). In this regard, my study has shown that while these incentives are indeed present in the paths to membership of PRR rank and file, their sense of political efficacy represented the final push that made them join. To prove definitively that efficacy is the major discriminant between PRR grassroots and voters, one would of course have to interview both groups. Nonetheless, my findings are in line with quantitative studies on the differences between party members and supporters, which have observed how the former are characterized by higher levels of political efficacy (Bale et al. 2020; Hooghe and Kölln 2020; Seyd and Whiteley 1992). In the case of PRR supporters, joining a PRR party seems to turn them from angry and disaffected citizens into proactive and efficacious members.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.8.

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Notes

1 It should be noted, however, that this is not a uniform trend. Some PRR parties, like Pauline Hanson's One Nation in Australia and the Dutch Party for Freedom, have minimal or no formal grassroots.
2 While this article focuses primarily on the supply side of PRR party membership, the above considerations nonetheless highlight how supply-side and demand-side factors interact in mobilizing individuals, be that for joining a party (Power and Dommett 2020) or participating in collective action (Klandermans 1997).
3 A *cordon sanitaire* consists in the refusal by political parties to cooperate or enter coalitions with PRR parties. While this was still in place in Sweden at the time of the data collection, following the 2022 general election it was lifted, as the right-wing coalition formed a minority government with the SD support.
4 See Appendix A in the online Supplementary Material for information on the vote share of the BJP, League and SD in each selected region.
5 For a detailed explanation of how I gained access to the three PRR parties, see Appendix B in the online Supplementary Material.
6 For further information on the sample of interviewees, see Appendix C in the online Supplementary Material.
7 Given that PRR party members may be wary of disclosing their membership because of the stigma, one may argue that my sample includes only individuals who do not feel stigmatized and are thus particularly active, especially in the case of SD grassroots. However, as I explain in Appendix B, my status as 'outsider' was helpful in this regard, as interviewees did not seem to feel judged because of their political engagement. Therefore, while the majority of members were active to different degrees, I also interviewed 10 passive rank and file. Of these, four are quoted in the text (Members 1, 4, 49, 54).
8 For the interview scheme, see Appendix D in the online Supplementary Material.
9 For further information on the recurrence of themes, see Appendix E in the online Supplementary Material.
10 See De Cleen (2017) for a theoretical elaboration of the spatial dimensions of nationalism and populism.
11 I would like to thank Benjamin Moffitt for suggesting this point to me.

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