Original Article

How to find the 'winning formula'? Conducting simulation experiments to grasp the tactical moves and fortunes of populist radical right parties

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Abstract   This article puts party strategies at the centre of the analysis of radical right-wing challengers' fortunes. It extends most previous studies because the shifts of both established and populist parties are envisioned as a complex dynamic system, in which party leaders adaptively learn from feedback and voters continually update their party choices. We argue that agent-based modelling is a fruitful tool to systematically map out the implications of hypotheses on the behaviour of parties, voters and their interactions. Our argument is empirically illustrated by using computer simulations to examine the remarkable rise of the Dutch anti-immigration party PVV. Outcomes reveal that an adaptive strategy leads to large shifts towards the socio-economic left and considerably boost its electoral strength. The more general contribution of this article is that we show how to unravel the mechanisms by which flexible populist parties can find winning positions.
Acta Politica advance online publication, 14 September 2012; doi:10.1057/ap.2012.21

Keywords: agent-based simulation; adaptive behaviour; party strategies; populist radical right; immigration and integration issues

Introduction

Issues of immigration and the integration of foreigners have constituted the most prominent and controversial field of political contention in West European polities since the early 1990s (Koopmans *et al*, 2005, p. 3).

At the same time, anti-immigrant parties experienced a dramatic growth in electoral support in several European countries (Evans, 2005; Van der Brug *et al*, 2005). Examples are the French Front National, the Flemish Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang and the Austrian FPÖ.

The rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe can first be seen as the consequence of a transformation in the electorate (Ivarsflaten, 2008). The issue of immigration has emerged as a new and dominant cultural conflict dimension that divides the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization (Kriesi *et al*, 2008). However, the distribution and intensity of demand-side preferences cannot, by itself, explain the electoral strength of the radical right. Already since the seminal work of Kitschelt (1995), it has been acknowledged that the success of these parties is to a large extent dependent on the ideological choices and moves of both the established parties and radical right challengers. Kitschelt (1995, p.vii) put this as follows: 'the success of the extreme Right is contingent upon the strategic choices of the moderate conservative parties as well as the ability of the extreme-rightist leaders to find the electorally "winning formula" to assemble a significant voter constituency'. He posited that successful radical right parties combine culturally exclusionist/authoritarian positions with pro-market positions on socio-economic policies. In this current of thought, Goodwin (2006) argued that, for a full understanding of the successes and failures of anti-immigrant parties, we need to take into account that populist parties are able to actively adapt and shape their own fate (see likewise, for example, Ignazi, 2003; Mudde, 2007).

This article focuses on how strategic positioning explains the rise of the populist radical right. The central question is how it can find successful positions. In line with the plea of Kitschelt (2007), our first general contribution is to theoretically map out more sophisticated behavioural models of parties' strategies than generally used. A strategy defines if and how a party ideologically shifts in the policy landscape. It does not refer to the programmatic content or ideology a political party advocates (that is, a specific party position, see, for example, Meguid, 2008), but to the decision rules by which actors pursue their goals (Axelrod and Cohen, 2000).

In line with, for example, Kollman *et al* (1992), Laver (2005) and Bendor *et al* (2011), we assume that political party leaders are adaptive, instead of rationally forward-looking actors. This means that party leaders can learn from feedback and adapt their behaviour in the policy field accordingly. As party leaders continuously react to past outcomes and adjust their platform in response to each other and their environment, the dynamics of party competition resemble a complex adaptive system (Laver and Sergenti, 2011).

To put some empirical flesh to the theoretical bones, we will examine the remarkable rise of the controversial Dutch anti-immigration party Party for Freedom (PVV) headed by Geert Wilders. Because of its tough stance on

immigration and integration issues, scholars qualify the PVV as a 'radical right party' (see, for example, De Lange and Art, 2011). The PVV is an interesting case because its electoral support has spectacularly increased since its foundation in 2005. Thus, our study aims to provide a better understanding of the trajectories of radical populist parties in modern democracies in general and how these parties, or any newcomer party for that matter, sometimes succeed to break through.

Thus, the second, more specific aim of this article is to elaborate propositions on the role of the party strategy of both the PVV and the established parties in the electoral successes of the Dutch radical populist right. We will execute four simulation experiments on the basis of agent-based modelling (hereafter: ABM), taking the Dutch political landscape in 2006 as a baseline. ABM provides a fruitful and innovative tool for exploring the role of party strategies. A simulation is a simple, artificial representation of the complex dynamics of electoral competition. We manipulate and investigate the emergent properties of that system (that is, outcomes on the macro-level, in this case the vote share of the radical right) in order to provide insight into dynamic adaptive processes. In sum, to paraphrase Epstein (1999), we aim to 'grow' the history of the rise of the PVV.

The following sections first discuss the role of party strategies and issue saliency for explaining anti-immigrant party success and why ABM are necessary and fruitful. Next, we present the design of the simulation model for the Dutch case and discuss the outcomes. The article ends with the conclusion and discussion.

Explaining Anti-Immigration Party Success

The demand-side: The salience of immigration and integration issues

Explanations for the fortunes of populist radical right parties can be grouped into two broad perspectives: one focusing on popular grievances, and one on political opportunities and party characteristics. Scholars often borrow the market metaphor from economics and label these sets of factors as the demand-side, and the external and internal supply-side (Norris, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2007; Van der Brug and Fennema, 2007). This distinction matches the argument of Kitschelt (1995) that it depends on three premises whether radical right-wing parties can successfully occupy an electoral niche.

First, the extreme right does well when societies have a post-industrial economic structure that increases the divide between left-libertarian and

right-authoritarian citizens. Kriesi *et al* (2008) argued that globalization processes and mass immigration have transformed the meaning of the existing two-dimensional policy space: resistance to immigration and globalization have become integrated into and nowadays dominate the cultural policy dimension. They expect that an increase in saliency of the cultural dimension in a country enhances electoral successes for right-wing populist parties. Their findings show that economic issues have lost salience over the years in all countries they investigated (Great Britain, France, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands), except Germany. This might account for the fact that, thus far, right-wing populist parties did not have any electoral success in this country.

We argue that the public debate will play a key role in shaping and amplifying the salience of the new cultural divide among the population. Trends in media coverage can explain why party preferences are rather volatile, while voters had relatively stable attitudes towards immigration and integration issues over time (Kleinnijenhuis *et al*, 2007, p. 12; Meuleman *et al*, 2009, p. 355). The argument that the news media affects the salience of issues corresponds to the agenda-setting thesis: issues that appear frequently in the news tend to become the issues that voters deem important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Rogers *et al*, 1993).

Agenda-setting does not predict, however, which political party will be preferred when certain issues are more salient in the voter's mind. There are two distinct mechanisms by which issue saliency might affect individual party choices (Van der Brug, 2004; Tavits, 2008). First, the notion of issue ownership (Budge and Farlie, 1983) enables a link: certain parties will benefit because they 'own' an issue. When voters give more priority to certain issues, a party with a stronger reputation on dealing with these issues effectively or on prioritizing these issues will consequently become more attractive. In this current of thought, publicity for issues that are 'owned' by right-wing populist parties increases their electoral attractiveness.

In this article, however, we employ a second mechanism. In line with Benoit and Laver (2006), we argue that it is the party's *position* that ultimately counts in political competition. According to such a positional approach, when voters deem certain issues more important, those parties will benefit that are closest to their positions on these issues; at the same time, parties that are ideologically proximate on issues that are *not* prioritized by voters will be electorally penalized. In this view, established centre–right parties might even lose votes to a radical right party when they more strongly stress issues of migration and multiculturalism in their platforms. They will only undermine a populist challenger when they move towards their position, most notably in the direction of more restrictive policies concerning immigration and integration.

The supply side: Political party strategies

Kitschelt's second assumption is that when established parties converge, they create a configuration that leaves a 'political space' in the electoral market that can be exploited by new challengers. Other scholars have similarly argued that the behaviour of the mainstream competitors critically shape the electoral fortunes of niche parties (for example, Meguid, 2008). The 'adaptation hypothesis' of Kriesi *et al* (2008, p. 14) holds that established parties will reposition themselves as a result of the rising new cultural dimensions, and thus update their preferences and identities.

However, the adaptive capacity of established parties might be limited because of the dilemma between power and ideals. In the Netherlands, for instance, internal tensions have emerged within the established centre–right parties CDA and VVD about their stance on the 'foreigners issue' (Van Kersbergen and Krouwel, 2008). These parties face a trade-off: they might enhance their electoral support by advocating stricter immigration and integration policies, but such a shift might go against their core ideological values and thus upset certain factions of the party. McDonald *et al* (2004) conclude that parties are generally principled and consistent instead of opportunistic and vote-grabbing. Parties generally refrain from shifting policies and are inclined to keep the same position, even if it makes them unpopular. Likewise, Bale *et al* (2010) state that the so-called 'hold' strategy is the default setting of parties. Laver and Sergenti (2011) label such an 'ideologically intransigent' party a Sticker.

Another reason why political parties might exhibit rigidity is that they are satisficers. People often choose options that might not be optimal, but satisfy them enough (Simon, 1955). This implies that party leaders attempt to achieve at least a certain minimum level of electoral support, but do not move endlessly around to maximize their vote share (Bendor *et al*, 2011).

The third premise of Kitschelt corresponds with internal supply-side accounts, which stress that the strategic moves of the radical right actors themselves are important too. They do well provided that they find the 'winning formula'. The willingness and ability to adjust one's policy stances to boost electoral appeal is more strongly associated with populist leaders than with mainstream party leaders. In the public debate, the term populism is more often used as a label for electoral opportunism and a lack of consistent ideological principles, than for a certain ideology (Mudde, 2004). The flexibility to exploit whatever grievances can be mobilized is linked with an organizational structure of strong central leadership that allows this kind of party behaviour (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008). As Mazzoleni (2003, p. 5) put it: 'neo-populism, thanks to its chameleon-like nature, may adapt to different contexts'. In line with Laver (2005), we use the label Hunter for a

vote-seeking party that continually adapts to polls on electoral support. Hunters do not necessarily shift to moderate positions: where votes are to be won depends on the entire party configuration. The optimal vote-seeking option might be to stay put. Adams *et al* (2006) found that niche parties were electorally punished when they brought their policy positions more closely in line with the average preferences of the public.

A second way to learn from feedback is to adapt to the preferences of your supporters. Ezrow *et al* (2011) denote such responsive behaviour as 'partisan constituency representation', which corresponds with an Aggregator strategy (Laver, 2005). This decision rule means that a party continually updates its ideological stance by reflecting the mean policy position of its current voters. Ezrow *et al* (2011) find empirical support for the application of this strategy. They conclude that whereas niche parties appear unresponsive to shifts in the mean voter position, they do indeed respond to shifts in the preferences of their supporters.

Regarding the decision-making process of voters, ideological shifts of parties only matter if citizens are policy-motivated, that is, if their choices are based on preferences for an ideological position. In this respect, Van der Brug *et al* (2005) have shown that voters for the extreme right do not differ from voters for mainstream parties. Furthermore, whether party responsiveness is bearing fruit hinges on the assumption that voters are responsive as well. Adams *et al* (2011) call this 'policy-based partisan switching'. Their findings show that ideological positioning matters: voters generally react to shifts in their perception of the parties' stances and adjust their partisan support accordingly.

Simulating a Complex Adaptive System: Exploring the Rise of the Dutch PVV

It has become clear that the idea that party strategies matter is not new at all. However, academic work that explores the implications of hypotheses on party tactics is scarce. We believe that this lacuna results from the fact that dynamic assumptions of interacting actors generate a so-called complex adaptive system (Miller and Page, 2007). This brings us to our argument that we should envision the political landscape as a complex ecosystem inhabited by voters and party leaders. In accordance with an evolutionary framework, we do not assume *a priori* that it is advantageous or harmful for a particular mainstream party to shift towards a certain position or not. Likewise, we do not predict beforehand that there is a specific winning formula for a populist challenger: the most fertile location will depend on the position and behaviour of all competitors in that particular setting.

A primary tool for mapping out theories that involve complex system dynamics is ABM. This boils down to specifying how individual agents interact with each other and with their environment. Subsequently, computer simulation is used to gain insights about the emergent properties of the system as a whole. Axelrod (1997, p. 3) explicated that ABM provides 'a third way of doing science'. One starts with a well-defined set of assumptions, such as deduction. However, unlike deduction, ABM is capable of analysing consequences that cannot be deduced with conventional techniques. It would simply be too difficult or impossible to model such complex adaptive processes with verbal theorizing or mathematical deduction. Although ABM is in itself a solely theoretical exercise, it shares with induction its main method of revealing these processes through the analysis of a data set, in this case data generated by a computer simulation. ABM is particularly fruitful to explore the properties and dynamics of multi-party competition in a multi-dimensional policy space (Kollman *et al*, 1992; Laver, 2005).

To illustrate our argument, we will devote the remainder of this article to the analysis of a concrete case. Our target is the position and vote share of the Dutch populist radical right Party for Freedom, which was established in March 2005. Wilders, its controversial leader, left the conservative-liberal VVD in September 2004 because of disagreement about the party's stance on the accession of Turkey to the European Union. The PVV has experienced a remarkable increase in electoral support. It achieved nine seats during its first parliamentary elections in November 2006. In the most recent parliamentary elections in 2010, the party tripled its number of seats and became the third largest party in the Netherlands with 15.4 per cent of the votes. This was an absolute increase of almost 10 per cent of the votes, more than any other party. The continuous line in Figure 1 depicts the opinion poll support for the PVV (Synovate, 2010). The actual Dutch political landscape in 2006 is taken as a baseline for the simulations, which makes them empirically embedded instead of purely theoretical (for example, Boero and Squazzoni, 2005; Muis, 2010). The computational challenge is to specify plausible rules for the behaviour of political parties, voters and their interactions that match the 'true history'.

The Design of the Simulation Experiments[1]

Voter and party positions in 2006

We use a confrontational approach, which assumes that parties and voters are clearly in favour or against certain policy issues (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings, 2001). If all parties and voters do so on all issues, then a landscape with clearly demarcated party positions emerges (Kriesi *et al*, 2008). In line with Aarts and
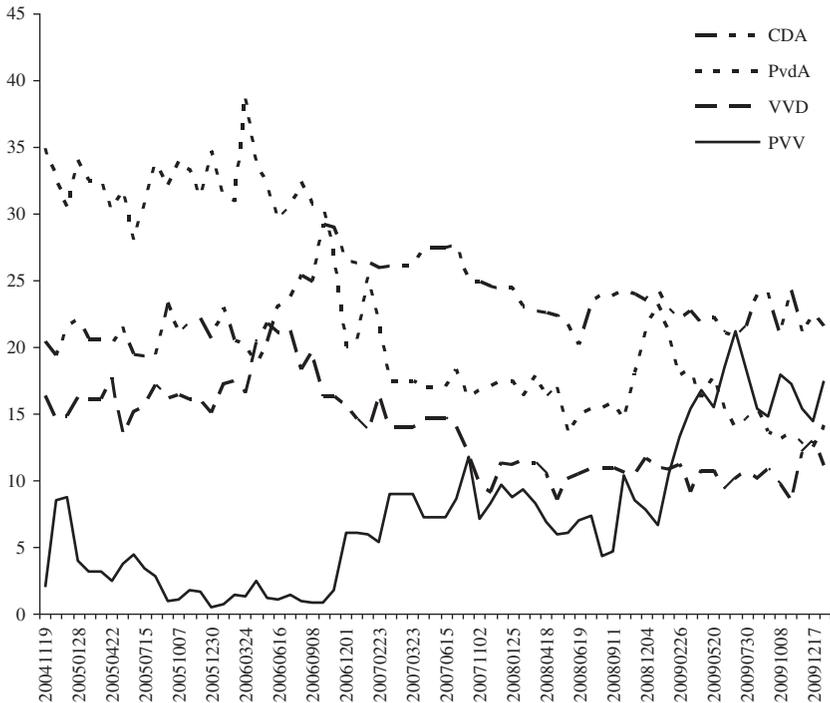
Figure 1: Opinion polls on party preference in the Netherlands between 2004 and 2010.
Source: Synovate (2010).

Thomassen (2008) (see also Pellikaan *et al*, 2007), we assume that the Dutch policy space is three-dimensional. The first dimension is the opposition between support for the welfare state and support for economic liberalism; the second divide is between the opponents and advocates of multicultural policies; and the third dimension is opposition to versus support for religious principles in politics. All parties that were represented in Parliament in 2006 and a representative group of voters got position scores on the socio-economic, cultural conflict and religious dimension, represented by, respectively, the x- y- and z-axis in a three-dimensional policy space.[2]

Party positions are derived from selected questions of the 2006 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Hooghe *et al*, 2008), converted into a −10 to 10 scale (See Tables 1 and 2). High scores on the socio-economic policy dimension indicate an emphasis on the market, whereas low scores indicate an emphasis on the state. The higher the score on the religious dimension, the more strongly a party supports religious principles in politics. Finally, high and low scores on the cultural conflict dimension represent, respectively, a preference for

Table 1: Expert survey items on the socio-economic, cultural conflict and religious dimensions

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Socio-economic dimension
  1. Improving public services versus reducing taxes
  2. Deregulation of markets
  3. Redistribution from the rich to the poor
Cultural conflict dimension
  4. Immigration policy: Support versus oppose tough policy
  5. Integration of immigrants and asylum seekers: Favour multiculturalism versus assimilation
  6. Ethnic minorities: Support versus oppose more rights
Religious dimension
  7. Role of religious principles in politics
  8. Social lifestyle (for example, homosexuality): Support versus oppose liberal policies

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Note: Items had an 11-point scale, ranging from 'strongly opposes' to 'strongly favours'.

restrictive immigration and integration policies, versus a preference for multicultural policies. As expected, the PVV has the highest score on the cultural axis (8.53), followed by the VVD (5.18); the Green Left (GL) Party (−4.75) and the progressive liberal D66 (−2.80) are most in favour of multicultural policies. Table 2 furthermore shows that in 2006 the PVV (6.85) and conservative liberal VVD (6.31) were the most right-wing on the economic axis, whereas the Socialist Party (−7.91) and GL (−5.33) were the most left-wing. Figure 2 shows the parties in a three-dimensional policy landscape in 2006.[3]

Voters got empirically based scores on the same three dimensions, based on four items from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2006 (Kolk *et al*, 2007). The survey was held among a representative sample of the Dutch voting population before the 2006 parliamentary elections ($n = 2793$). Similar to the party scores, the answer categories are converted into a −10 to +10 scale (see Table 3).[4]

Calculating electoral support

The output of main interest is the electoral support for the PVV over time. We assume that each voter prefers the party that is ideologically most proximate considering the distance on all three dimensions (using Euclidean distances). Over time, each month (each round) the distance for each voter towards all parties is calculated and reported. By varying the assumptions about the party strategies and agenda-setting, we generate different scenarios for the development of the PVV over time, each of which can be compared with the actual trajectory as depicted in Figure 1.

Table 2: Policy positions of Dutch political parties on socio-economic, cultural conflict and religious issues; the election outcomes in 2006 and 2010; and outcomes of the 2006 baseline simulation model (electoral support in percentage)

	Policy position (2006)			*Vote share parliamentary elections (in percentage)*		*Vote share baseline simulation model (2006)*
	x	*y*	*z*	*2006*	*2010*	
CDA, Christian Democrats	0.63	2.49	2.80	26.5	13.6	17.9 (0.4)
CU, Christian Party	−1.74	1.34	7.33	4.0	3.2	4.1 (0.2)
D66, Progressive Liberals	0.78	−2.80	−7.86	2.0	6.9	16.4 (0.4)
GL, Green Left Party	−5.33	−4.75	−6.50	4.6	6.7	5.7 (0.2)
PvdA, Labour Party	−2.95	−1.55	−4.71	21.2	19.6	28.8 (0.5)
PVV, Populist Right-Wing Party	6.85	8.53	−1.45	5.9	15.4	3.6 (0.2)
SGP, Christian Party	2.95	2.57	8.33	1.6	1.7	1.8 (0.1)
SP, Socialist Party	−7.91	0.89	−4.43	16.6	9.8	5.2 (0.2)
VVD, Conservative Liberals	6.31	5.18	−4.81	14.7	20.5	16.3 (0.4)
Mean (weighted by vote share)	−0.70	1.61	−1.87	—	—	—
Others	—	—	—	2.9	2.4	—

Note: Standard deviations between brackets.
Source: Hooghe *et al* (2008). For the SGP, expert scores of Benoit and Laver (2006) were used (rescaled likewise).
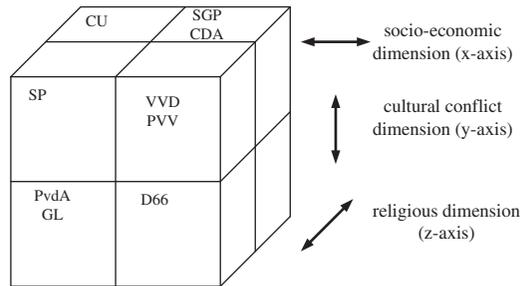
Figure 2: Dutch political parties in a three-dimensional policy landscape in 2006.

Table 3: Position of Dutch voters in the three-dimensional field, based on items from NKO 2006

	Score
Socio-economic items	
1. Differences in income should be decreased versus increased (v145)	−4.1
2. Taxes should be cut (v204)	−2.5
3. Tax reduction for people with mortgage should be abolished (v207)	4.1
4. People with a good pension should pay taxes (pay for the AOW) (v210)	1.5
Average position score	−0.5
Cultural conflict items	
5. One should permit more asylum seekers versus send them back (v155)	2.4
6. Foreigners should be allowed to preserve their own culture versus adjust to Dutch culture (v185)	4.0
7. One should stop the influx of Muslims (v209)	−0.7
8. Illegal citizens should get a citizenship permit (v206)	−0.1
Average position score	1.6
Religious items	
9. Euthanasia should be forbidden versus allowed (v135)	−6.3
10. Gay marriage should be forbidden: Agree versus disagree (v211)	−4.4
11. Adoption by homosexual couples should be allowed: Agree versus disagree (v200)	−1.8
12. Shops should be closed on Sundays: Agree versus disagree (v205)	−1.2
Average position score	−3.6

Note: Items are translated from Dutch. Between brackets are the original variable labels of the NKO 2006 data set. Some items had a 1–7 scale, others a 1–4 scale. We recoded all scores into a −10 to +10 scale. Items v145, v204, v209 and v200 were recoded in reversed order.
Source: Kolk *et al* (2007).

Varying agenda-setting

The relative importance of cultural, economic and religious issues in the eyes of voters is implemented by adding a 'weight' to each policy dimension. We vary these weights, but make sure that the three weights are constrained to sum up to one. The distance D between voter V and party P, while considering the salience of economic issues i_x, cultural issues i_y, and religious issues i_z is expressed as:

$$D_{xyz}(V, P) = [i_x(V_x - P_x)^2 + i_y(V_y - P_y)^2 + i_z(V_z - P_z)^2]^{1/2}$$

This implies, for instance, that an increase of i_y increases for voters the weight of the proximity towards parties on the cultural dimension compared with party's ideological distance on the two other dimensions.

Varying party strategies

We have argued that populist parties with a strong leadership are more capable of employing ideological flexibility than mainstream parties. We will use counterfactual reasoning to corroborate this argument. This means that we have to simulate both a scenario based on our assumptions and scenarios based on alternative assumptions, and determine whether the outcome of our scenario is more accurate. Thus, the strategies of the PVV and established parties have to be varied per simulation experiment. If our hypothesis is correct, then the simulated data set based on our assumptions should match the real political developments more closely than outcomes that are based on alternative assumptions.

The specification of the party strategies elaborates on the theoretical background we sketched earlier. First, *Satisficing* is implemented by setting a certain share of the vote as the aspiration level. When this level is reached or surpassed, parties stop moving around. We assume that parties were satisfied with their current platform as long as it did not yield a loss of more than 25 per cent of the amount of supporters they initially had in 2006. Furthermore, a *Sticker* stays on the party position of 2006, regardless of the opinion poll results or policy stances of its supporters (Laver, 2005). Next, an *Aggregator* moves towards the average position of all its current supporters for each of the three dimensions of the policy field. Thus, this so-called 'partisan constituency model' (Ezrow *et al*, 2011) means that a party adapts to the ideological stances of their supporters by advocating their average position. Finally, a *Hunter* compares the old and new amount of votes as expressed by the opinion polls. If its last policy shift increased electoral support, it continues in the same

direction; otherwise, it changes heading and makes an ideological move in the opposite direction.[5]

To avoid unrealistically large jumps across the policy field and make sure that parties can only 'locally' adapt (Kollman *et al*, 1992), the maximum size of an ideological move each round is set at 0.5 (on a scale from −10 to 10).

Outcomes[6]

Experiment 1: Varying issue saliency

The party sizes of the baseline simulation model resemble the real political situation in 2006, except for the considerably larger size of D66 and smaller sizes of the CDA and SP (see Table 2). First, we explore what would happen if the importance of either economic or cultural issues increases. As explained, we can expect that the smaller the ideological distance between a party and the voters, the more a party will electorally profit from an increased importance of that particular issue. Reversely, parties that deviate strongly from voters are put at a disadvantage. The outcomes in Table 4 show that this indeed is the case if we put a stronger emphasis on the parties' stances regarding economic issues. Stressing the positions on economic issues is harmful for the PVV (from 2.8 per cent to 1.9 per cent), which holds a relatively extreme position ($x = 6.85$), whereas it is advantageous for the parties (CDA, D66, CU) that are closest to the average voter position on economic issues ($x = -0.7$).

Remarkably, however, the outcomes show that an increase in saliency of the cultural dimension leads to exactly the opposite: parties with a score around the average ($y = 1.6$) shrink, whereas parties with extreme positions benefit. Although the position of the PVV deviates enormously from the average stance of the electorate (6.9 units), the party benefits most from emphasizing immigration and integration issues: the amount of electoral support doubles and increases from 3.6 to 8.6 per cent. A similar conclusion applies to the GL, which holds the second most extreme position on immigration and integration issues and enhances its electoral strength from 5.7 to 8.1 per cent of the vote.

For an explanation on why these two most extreme parties benefit most from an increased importance of cultural issues, we have to shift our focus from the positions of the voters to the positions of all other parties. The PVV and GL hardly face any competing party nearby on the cultural dimension issue, while at the same time they are confronted with a severe competition when we consider the positions of their competitors on the economic dimension.

Thus, a strong deviation from the mean voter position is not necessarily disadvantageous in itself; we have to take the whole configuration of party positions into account.

Table 4: Party support (in percentage vote share) while varying the agenda-setting of socio-economic (x) and cultural conflict (y) issues (Experiment 1)

	Relative increase in salience of cultural issues of:				Relative increase in salience of socio-economic issues of:			
	25%	50%	75%	100%	25%	50%	75%	100%
CDA	18.2 (0.4)	18.2 (0.5)	18.4 (0.5)	18.8 (0.5)	19.4 (0.4)	20.3 (0.4)	20.6 (0.5)	20.7 (0.5)
CU	4.0 (0.2)	3.9 (0.2)	3.7 (0.2)	3.6 (0.2)	4.3 (0.2)	4.6 (0.2)	4.8 (0.2)	5.0 (0.2)
D66	14.8 (0.4)	13.4 (0.4)	12.2 (0.4)	11.1 (0.4)	18.8 (0.4)	20.8 (0.5)	22.2 (0.5)	23.0 (0.5)
GL	6.3 (0.2)	7.0 (0.3)	7.6 (0.3)	8.1 (0.3)	5.4 (0.2)	5.1 (0.2)	4.8 (0.2)	4.7 (0.2)
PvdA	26.8 (0.5)	25.5 (0.5)	24.7 (0.5)	24.1 (0.5)	28.8 (0.5)	28.2 (0.5)	27.7 (0.6)	27.5 (0.5)
PVV	4.9 (0.2)	6.3 (0.2)	7.8 (0.3)	8.6 (0.3)	2.8 (0.2)	2.3 (0.2)	2.0 (0.2)	1.9 (0.2)
SGP	1.9 (0.1)	1.9 (0.1)	1.9 (0.1)	1.9 (0.1)	1.8 (0.1)	1.8 (0.1)	1.9 (0.1)	1.9 (0.1)
SP	5.2 (0.2)	5.1 (0.2)	4.6 (0.2)	4.4 (0.2)	5.2 (0.2)	5.3 (0.2)	5.4 (0.2)	5.4 (0.2)
VVD	17.9 (0.4)	18.8 (0.4)	19.2 (0.4)	19.4 (0.4)	13.5 (0.4)	11.6 (0.3)	10.6 (0.3)	9.9 (0.3)

Note: Standard deviations between brackets.

Experiment 2: Varying the strategy of the PVV

In subsequent scenarios, the PVV is inclined to choose new positions in the policy field, while other parties are Stickers. Obviously, if Wilders is ideologically rigid as well, he would not be able to enhance his electoral attractiveness over time. He would then consistently receive about 3.6 per cent of the votes. The impact of ideological flexibility for the radical populist right is rather large (see Table 5): the Aggregating PVV can generally achieve the support from more than a third of the electorate (34.5 per cent). The results also show that the PVV moves considerably (7.3 points) to the economic left although it also gets more moderate on immigration policies (4.8 points). On religious policies, the PVV becomes more secular (3 points). The strategy pulls the PVV to an 'electoral niche' that consists of voters on the economic left of the conservative liberal VVD and the cultural right of the Christian Democrats (CDA) and Social Democrats (PvdA). The location of this fertile niche corresponds the empirical findings of Van der Brug and Van Spanje (2009, p. 309), who state that 'large groups of citizens are not represented by any parties, in particular those who are left-wing on socio-economic issues and right-wing on cultural issues'.

In the second scenario, we consider what happens if the PVV applies the Hunter rule. Counter-intuitively, the Aggregator strategy, which has no built-in incentive to increase its vote share, is generally far more successful for the PVV than the Hunter, which does have such an incentive and achieves 17 per cent. In both scenarios, the inclination of the PVV to move to the

Table 5: PVV support (in percentage vote share) and position over time while varying the PVV party strategy (Experiment 2)

	Rounds	Percentage of PVV	x	y	z
PVV = Aggregator	5	7.1 (1.3)	5.4 (0.1)	8.4 (0.3)	−1.6 (0.2)
	10	16.8 (3.5)	3.2 (0.3)	7.7 (0.7)	−2.2 (0.5)
	15	25.2 (4.1)	1.4 (0.6)	6.5 (1.1)	−3.2 (0.6)
	20	32.9 (4.5)	0.0 (1.0)	4.7 (1.6)	−4.2 (0.9)
	25[a]	34.5 (4.9)	−0.4 (1.3)	3.8 (1.9)	−4.5 (1.2)
	30	34.5 (4.9)	−0.4 (1.3)	3.7 (2.1)	−4.5 (1.2)
PVV = Hunter	5	3.7 (1.4)	6.7 (0.6)	8.5 (0.6)	−1.7 (0.7)
	10	6.3 (4.4)	6.0 (1.4)	8.2 (1.4)	−2.3 (1.7)
	15	9.4 (6.7)	5.1 (2.1)	7.8 (2.1)	−2.8 (2.4)
	20	12.1 (8.0)	4.2 (2.5)	7.2 (2.6)	−3.1 (2.6)
	25	14.8 (8.9)	3.4 (2.8)	6.7 (3.0)	−3.4 (2.6)
	30	17.2 (9.7)	2.7 (2.8)	6.2 (3.3)	−3.6 (2.4)

[a]Stable situation is reached; Standard deviations between brackets.

economic left is much stronger than the tendency to move to cultural right. A Hunting PVV occupies a cultural position ($y = 6.2$) that remains more anti-immigrant than the VVD. The outcomes show furthermore that in that case the PVV moves, on average, somewhat to the economic left ($x = 2.7$), and becomes less religious ($z = -3.5$). The PVV mainly steals votes from the VVD, by triggering the same electoral potential on the socio-economic left and cultural right side of the VVD.

In sum, as a result of an apparent electoral niche in the Dutch political landscape, both adaptive scenarios lead to a steady and impressive growth of the electoral strength of the PVV, as we have observed in reality. Although we empirically based our party position scores on the situation in 2006 and did not provide empirical data on changes in positions, the hypothesized shift seems clearly in line with the actual ideological trajectory of the PVV that scholars and journalists have observed. For instance, Vossen (2011) concludes that one of the most import ideological changes of Wilders was the replacement of the harsh neo-liberal tone in the initial programme by a much more leftist stance. In contrast to previous statements, the PVV does not advocate the reduction of minimum wage levels and social security benefits anymore. Wilders protested against governmental plans to raise the official retirement age and announced to look for cooperation with the trade unions.

Experiment 3: Varying all party strategies

Third, we have explored 10 different scenarios with varying strategies of the established parties. Table 6 presents an overview of the predicted party size and position of the PVV. Table 7 displays the results of two of these scenarios in more detail.

The share of the PVV decreases significantly, and depends on the timing of the response and type of strategy used by the mainstream parties. The Aggregator appears to be the 'dominant' strategy here. Both the PVV and established parties are better off with this strategy than with the Hunter or Sticker strategy, regardless of the strategy used by the competing parties. We predict that when all other parties would immediately have used the Aggregator strategy from 2006 onwards, the PVV would have stayed considerably smaller (8.5 per cent) in comparison with the situation in which it faces Hunting competitors (15.6 per cent). The three largest mainstream parties CDA, VVD and PvdA lose the least voters to an Aggregating PVV if they copy their strategy, as they are then rapidly pulled to the same electoral niche.

This outcome can be due to the fact that the Hunter strategy entails a lot of risks because it uses 'blind' adaptation. It now and then makes a 'mistake' by moving in the wrong direction – when it would have been better to stay put

Table 6: Party support (in percentage vote share) and position while varying party strategies (Experiment 3). Average situation after 30 rounds

		Percentage of votes	x	y	z
PVV = Aggregator	CDA	14.4 (2.6)	0.3 (1.0)	2.4 (1.4)	1.0 (0.3)
Others = Satisficing	CU	4.6 (0.7)	−1.7 (0.1)	1.3 (0.0)	7.3 (0.1)
Aggregator	D66	14.7 (1.5)	0.7 (0.7)	−1.8 (0.8)	−7.5 (0.8)
	GL	7.2 (1.0)	−5.3 (0.1)	−4.8 (0.2)	−6.5 (0.1)
	PvdA	22.0 (1.7)	−1.4 (0.5)	−0.1 (1.2)	−3.8 (0.6)
	PVV	16.4 (1.3)	−1.4 (1.1)	6.1 (1.1)	−4.6 (1.1)
	SGP	2.1 (0.8)	2.7 (0.0)	3.2 (0.0)	9.6 (0.0)
	SP	5.2 (2.8)	−7.5 (0.4)	0.7 (1.2)	−5.7 (1.1)
	VVD	13.5 (1.1)	3.8 (1.1)	4.2 (0.7)	−5.6 (0.8)
PVV = Hunter	CDA	12.5 (5.3)	0.3 (2.1)	2.5 (2.4)	−0.7 (2.1)
Others = Hunters	CU	8.5 (4.0)	−1.2 (2.5)	1.7 (2.9)	2.5 (2.7)
	D66	14.0 (6.4)	0.1 (2.2)	−1.1 (2.6)	−5.6 (1.7)
	GL	9.4 (5.2)	−3.5 (2.7)	−3.2 (2.8)	−5.8 (1.9)
	PvdA	13.8 (5.9)	−1.8 (2.3)	−0.7 (2.5)	−4.9 (1.6)
	PVV	15.6 (6.3)	−0.6 (2.5)	5.2 (2.7)	−5.2 (1.8)
	SGP	6.5 (3.2)	1.2 (3.0)	3.2 (3.1)	4.4 (2.6)
	SP	8.4 (5.2)	−5.1 (2.9)	−0.2 (3.0)	−5.3 (1.9)
	VVD	11.3 (5.9)	3.4 (2.9)	4.3 (2.6)	−4.5 (1.8)

Notes: Satisficing means: not losing more than 25 per cent of start amount at the first round (see Table 4) is acceptable. Standard deviations between brackets.

or moderate one's stance. For instance, the first move of the PVV is sometimes towards an even stronger anti-immigrant stance than it already has, which diminishes its electoral attractiveness.

The crucial role of timing in political competition becomes evident when we consider the impact of Satisficing. We assumed that a party only undertakes action after it has lost a total of more than 25 per cent of its votes compared with the amount it initially had in 2006. When the established parties only decide to reposition themselves *after* they are faced with substantial electoral losses, the amount of support that the PVV is able to mobilize is much larger. For instance, when Wilders adopts the most profitable strategy (Aggregator) and the established parties immediately react when the PVV is established, the differences in the fortunes of the PVV are 9 (instead of 16) and 16 (instead of 26) per cent for Aggregating and Hunting mainstream parties, respectively.

Thus, the simulations show that the PVV gained votes because the governing parties were hesitating in responding. Given the actual election results in

Table 7: Overview of PVV position and party support (in percentage vote share) in different scenarios. Average situation after 30 rounds

Experiment	Agenda-setting: x:y	Strategy PVV	Strategy other parties	PVV in percentage	x	y	z
1	1:1	Sticker	Stickers	3.6 (0.2)	6.9	8.5	−1.5
	1:2	Sticker	Stickers	1.9 (0.2)	6.9	8.5	−1.5
	2:1	Sticker	Stickers	8.6 (0.3)	6.9	8.5	−1.5
2	1:1	Aggregator	Stickers	34.5 (4.9)	−0.4 (1.3)	3.7 (2.1)	−4.5 (1.2)
	1:1	Hunter	Stickers	17.2 (9.7)	2.7 (2.8)	6.2 (3.3)	−3.6 (2.4)
3	1:1	Aggregator	Aggregator	8.5 (1.6)	3.4 (0.9)	5.4 (1.7)	−1.8 (0.7)
	1:1	Aggregator	Satisficing Aggregators	16.4 (1.3)	−1.4 (1.1)	6.1 (1.1)	−4.6 (1.1)
	1:1	Aggregator	Hunter	15.6 (6.3)	−0.6 (2.5)	5.2 (2.7)	−5.2 (1.8)
	1:1	Aggregator	Satisficing Hunters	26.4 (6.5)	−0.5 (1.6)	4.2 (2.3)	−4.7 (1.3)
	1:1	Hunter	Aggregator	7.9 (4.7)	3.2 (3.2)	5.9 (2.8)	−2.9 (2.0)
	1:1	Hunter	Satisficing Aggregators	13.4 (5.0)	2.0 (2.3)	6.7 (2.6)	−3.3 (2.0)
	1:1	Hunter	Hunters	15.6 (6.3)	−0.6 (2.5)	5.2 (2.7)	−5.2 (1.8)
	1:1	Hunter	Satisficing Hunters	16.4 (9.4)	2.5 (2.8)	6.2 (3.2)	−3.5 (2.4)
	1:1	Sticker	Aggregator	3.0 (0.8)	6.9	8.5	−1.5
	1:1	Sticker	Hunter	3.9 (2.8)	6.9	8.5	−1.5
4	1.5:1	Aggregator	Sticker	34.0 (3.9)	0.1 (1.3)	3.6 (2.0)	−4.3 (1.1)
	2:1	Aggregator	Sticker	32.5 (3.6)	0.4 (1.3)	3.6 (1.9)	−4.3 (1.0)
	1:1.5	Hunter	Sticker	19.4 (10.7)	2.6 (3.0)	−6.2 (2.8)	−3.5 (2.4)
	1:2	Hunter	Sticker	19.3 (10.8)	3.0 (3.1)	−6.1 (2.7)	−3.4 (2.3)

Notes: Satisficing means: not losing more than 25 per cent of the start amount at the first round (see Table 4) is acceptable. Standard deviations between brackets.

2010 (the PVV received 15.4 per cent), our outcomes support the claim that mainstream parties aim to represent the stances of their supporters, but because they only become active when they clearly have lost votes, the adaptive populist newcomer could considerably boost its electoral appeal over time. An explanation for the fact that established parties nevertheless display inertia is that it is the easiest response: it does not require innovation and does not provoke, at least at first, internal disunity (Bale *et al*, 2010).

At the same time, however, the newcomer is only able to become a serious challenge to the established parties when it adopts ideological flexibility. If we in contrast assume that the PVV is ideologically rigid, it would be inexplicable how the party could have grown so steadily since its foundation. Wilders cannot enlarge his vote share in any scenario in which he adopts a Sticker strategy. It then hardly matters what all other political parties do: the vote share of the PVV does not significantly change over time and remains between 3 and 4 per cent.

Experiment 4: Varying issue saliency and the strategy of the PVV

Finally, we explore assumptions about the party strategy of the PVV and issue saliency simultaneously (see the last four rows in Table 7). The outcomes thus far have shown that both increasing the importance of immigration and integration topics and adaptive strategies generate a surge of the PVV. The combination of both saliency and strategy, however, does not lead to extra successes.

Nevertheless, an adaptive PVV can prevent a decrease in support when voters attach more significance to socio-economic issues and consider immigration and integration issues relatively less important (see Table 8). As Aggregator or Hunter, the PVV achieves roughly similar outcomes (32.5 and 19.3 per cent, respectively) compared with the scenario in which voters attach equal importance to the cultural conflict and socio-economic dimension (see Experiment 2: the PVV achieved 34.5 and 17.2 per cent). Thus, in contrast to an agenda-setting argument that suggests a straightforward positive association between immigration news and amount of support for Wilders, our simulations suggest that populist leaders are not necessarily put at a disadvantage in case of diminishing mass media publicity on immigration issues, if they strategically reposition themselves.

Conclusion and Discussion

The innovative contribution of this article is that it maps out the mechanisms that underlie the long-cherished theories on the impact of party strategies for

Table 8: PVV support and position while varying both agenda-setting and party strategy (Experiment 4)

	Rounds	Percentage of PVV	x	y	z	Percentage of PVV	x	y	z
PVV = Aggregator		Socio-economic issue agenda-setting: $x=1.5$				Socio-economic issue agenda-setting: $x=2$			
	5	5.2 (0.6)	5.7 (0.4)	8.0 (0.4)	−1.2 (0.4)	3.8 (0.5)	6.0 (0.5)	7.8 (0.4)	−0.9 (0.4)
	10	14.8 (2.1)	3.9 (0.8)	7.0 (1.0)	−2.1 (1.1)	11.0 (2.1)	4.5 (0.9)	6.5 (1.0)	−1.6 (1.30)
	15	25.4 (2.1)	2.2 (1.1)	5.7 (1.4)	−3.2 (1.2)	20.5 (2.4)	3.1 (1.2)	5.1 (1.4)	−2.3 (1.6)
	20	32.3 (2.9)	0.6 (1.4)	4.1 (1.7)	−4.1 (1.2)	29.6 (3.1)	1.4 (1.6)	3.9 (1.6)	−4.1 (1.3)
	25	34.0 (3.9)	0.1 (1.3)	3.6 (1.9)	−4.3 (1.1)	32.3 (3.2)	0.5 (1.4)	3.6 (1.8)	−4.3 (1.0)
	30	34.0 (3.9)	0.1 (1.3)	3.6 (2.0)	−4.3 (1.1)	32.5 (3.6)	0.4 (1.3)	3.6 (1.9)	−4.3 (1.0)
PVV = Hunter		Cultural conflict issue agenda-setting: $y=1.5$				Cultural conflict issue agenda-setting: $y=2$			
	5	6.5 (2.5)	6.7 (0.6)	−8.5 (0.7)	−1.7 (0.7)	8.6 (3.2)	6.8 (0.6)	−8.4 (0.7)	−1.7 (0.7)
	10	8.9 (5.3)	6.0 (1.4)	−8.2 (1.4)	−2.3 (1.6)	10.2 (5.2)	6.1 (1.4)	−8.1 (1.3)	−2.3 (1.5)
	15	11.8 (8.0)	5.0 (2.1)	−7.7 (1.9)	−2.8 (2.3)	13.0 (8.0)	5.3 (2.1)	−7.6 (1.8)	−2.7 (2.0)
	20	14.5 (9.2)	4.1 (2.6)	−7.2 (2.4)	−3.1 (2.5)	14.7 (9.2)	4.4 (2.7)	−7.1 (2.1)	−3.0 (2.3)
	25	17.1 (10.1)	3.2 (2.9)	−6.7 (2.7)	−3.3 (2.4)	17.0 (10.1)	3.7 (3.0)	−6.6 (2.4)	−3.3 (2.4)
	30	19.4 (10.7)	2.6 (3.0)	−6.2 (2.8)	−3.5 (2.4)	19.3 (10.8)	3.0 (3.1)	−6.1 (2.7)	−3.4 (2.3)

Note: Standard deviations between brackets.

both established parties and populist challengers. We have argued that ABM provides a fruitful tool in this endeavour. It improves our theoretical framework for explaining the rise of radical right contenders because the implications of adaptive actions and reactions of all actors can be systematically formulated. It can thus generate the aggregate outcomes (in this case: party sizes and party positions) that emerge from the complex dynamic interactions inherent electoral competition.

To illustrate our general argument, we took a closer look at the surge of the Dutch anti-immigration party PVV, which has spectacularly increased its electoral popularity since its foundation. In sum, our simulation experiments give two major insights.

First, our outcomes show that the PVV does well when voters attach more weight to cultural conflict topics, rather than the socio-economic or religious divide. We assumed that agenda-setting shapes the parties' fortunes as follows: when immigration and integration policies are at the top of the media agenda, voters judge parties more strongly by their positions on these issues. Likewise, when the economy is prominent in the news, voters predominantly evaluate parties by their positions on the socio-economic dimension. Our outcomes explain why it is understandable that Geert Wilders tends to publicly stress his views on citizenship, ethnic relations and immigration, and attack the viewpoints of other parties on particularly these issues: given the Dutch configuration of policy positions, he electorally profits when voters attach more importance to the policy positions of political parties on these issues and neglect others (cf. Kleinnijenhuis and Krouwel, 2007, p. 30). Interestingly, the policy positions are already sufficient to explain the fact that popular support for Wilders significantly increases when the debate in the mass media focuses more on Islam and immigration; it is unnecessary to supplement this with issue ownership notions.

Second, the simulation outcomes support our argument that populist radical right parties, or any party for that matter, should not be viewed as passive variables in order to understand its fortunes. In line with the hypothesis of Ignazi (2003), we showed that the difference between a marginal and successful radical right party is its strategic flexibility to exploit whatever favourable circumstances are available. In our simulation scenarios, the party strategy of the PVV has a much stronger impact on popularity than issue saliency. An increase in prominence of socio-economic issues is not necessarily harmful for the PVV at all – under the condition that Wilders adapts and moves to a more moderate socio-economic position compared with his initial outspoken liberal pro-market stance. In 2006, the PVV was positioned right socio-economically, which is relatively disadvantageous when voters deem the parties' view on socio-economic policies more important. Both adaptive learning by vote-maximizing and by copying the stances of one's supporters lead to a move

towards a moderate leftist socio-economic policy position, thus moving away from the party's 'Achilles-heel'. This policy shift contradicts Kitschelt's (1995) original claim that the 'winning formula' of the radical right is the combination of a liberal pro-market position on socio-economic policies with a culturally exclusionist position.

Our central focus on adaptive learning fills a remarkable gap in the literature on the populist radical right. Surprisingly, although policy positions and ideological distances are central concepts in theories of party competition, scholars seldom identify the mechanisms by which successful populist leaders are sometimes apparently able to find successful positions in the policy space, whereas many other attempts fail to do so. We have focused on policy position shifts, but it should be noted that political parties, especially governing parties, influence the media agenda and thus shape fluctuations in issue salience (Brandenburg, 2002). Future models could also include the deliberate, tactical moves of political actors with regard their distribution of emphasis on different issues instead of their position shifts on these issues only. This article is only a modest start, but we believe that the application of agent-based simulations can be very fruitful, as they can provide realistic accounts of how party leaders can improve their electoral attractiveness by learning from feedback.

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Notes

1 We used Netlogo. The syntax is available through the authors on request.
2 We only had to exclude the PvdD because the 2006 Chapel Hill Survey did not include this party. We also left out all other parties that did not gain seats in 2006 (for example, EenNL). One could include these parties, but additional non-policy related parameters would be necessary to account for their marginality, like a bias of voters (Adams, 2001) or a lack of media attention (Muis, 2010).
3 The party position scores we used correlate strongly with the expert scores collected by Benoit and Laver (2006) (Pearson's $r = 0.97$; $n = 21$). Hereby, we used the three items *taxes* versus *spending, immigration* and *social*. Obviously, Benoit and Laver did not measure the position of PVV, as the party did not yet exist at the time of their expert survey. Therefore, we decided to rely on the Chapel Hill data.

4 Every run is done with a slightly different sample of citizens: on each dimension, the individual voter's positions are randomly chosen from a normal distribution with each voter's score as mean and standard deviation of 1.

5 Change heading is done by making a random turn between 90 and 270 degrees.

6 All generated outcomes are the averages of 1000 model runs.

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