

Why are Extreme Right Parties so Popular in Europe?

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Abstract: This topic has witnessed a real increase in media coverage due to the recent activity of extreme right parties across Europe, notable being in the past year the Greek parties and the Dutch stance regarding immigration. For answering the question, and following the pathway of the module, the essay is looking at the extreme right parties in four European countries: France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. Research for this paper has been focused mostly on the specialised literature, Pietro Ignazi being brought into discussion the most. Because of the large variables over years, the essay is looking at the parties from the 1960s until the early 2000s.

The question that sets the topic of this essay is going to be answered by analyzing the most important arguments produced in relation to this field of European politics. The importance of post-industrialist value changes will be explained first, giving details about the parties that emerged in the 1960s and their identities. Following history, the institutional setting of the 1980s characterizes the second argument of this paper. The link between party volatility and ascendancy of extreme right parties is analyzed, as well as the importance of the conservative parties in relation to the extreme right movements in the four countries mentioned. The final two arguments presented are Cas Mudde's paradox of anti-party parties and the idea of emergence of extreme right parties as a civic reaction to the crisis of confidence in the national systems.

Why are extreme right parties so popular in Europe?

The structure of the essay is created around the theories that present the link between the birth, growth and actions which brought the popularity of extreme right parties in Europe; prominent being the changes of the post-industrial values, the institutional setting, party volatility, and reduction of polarization, radicalization of discourse, the paradox of anti-party attitudes and the case of the system crisis of confidence. Extreme right parties in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy will be presented along with theories that can be identified in these. Comparisons and similarities will be pointed out between theories, core principles of this essay being those of Piero Ignazi. It has been preferred to focus on these theories because they answer the question in the title clearly: we can identify the actions and events that made the extreme right parties popular.

Academics were expecting a re-emergence of ideological right parties during the 1950s to 1970s because of the context in which the European political environment was found: such an environment in which the reappearance of fascist oriented parties was expected. This did not happen when expected, but during late 1970's with a significant expansion during the early years of the 1980s. As of their nature, the right party family is divided into two types by their historic legacy: the 'traditional' parties which have a fascist tradition and the newly emerged 'post industrial' parties that present beliefs, attitudes and values characteristic to the post-industrial society.

As described in the introduction, the European extreme right parties have found their electoral support in those affected by the post-industrial value changes¹. During the 1960s, the development of post-industrial Western societies had created the left libertarian and green parties, while on the other hand, a mass of people in need for self-defence and self reassurance. The latter was fuelled by "the weakening of state—and national—authority in the domestic and international arena, the erosion of traditional social bonds, the perceived

¹ Bell, Daniel. - *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Harper 1974)

collapse of conventional moral standards and sexual mores, and the waning of an ordered, hierarchical, homogeneous, and safe society”². Ignazi calls it a ‘silent counter-revolution’ because the extreme right parties were the voice of those affected and disadvantaged by globalization, mostly self employed and manual workers, especially in times when unemployment rocketed from two to three percents during the 1970s to 10% by the middle of the 1980s. Considering the link between the extreme right parties and those disadvantaged, it is clear how they rallied them under a nationalist movement as a response for the need of identity, xenophobia in response of homogeneity and authoritarianism as a substitute for a hierarchy based on strong leadership. The French extreme right party, the National Front, had a strong appeal to the public with their stance against immigrants and foreign workers: “two million immigrants are the cause of two million French people out of work”³. A similar stance was adopted in Germany where the German Republicans had as a motto: “Eliminate unemployment: Stop immigration!”⁴ With a clear sense of how a certain proportion of the population was feeling, the extreme right parties were trying to deal with citizens’ insecurities.

The second factor responsible for the popularity of extreme right parties was the institutional setting of the 1980s. Considering a combination of proportional electoral systems and accessible requirements to participate on the political scene, it was easy for the right parties to make an entry in the political arena. Maurice Duverger considered that single-member districts and plurality methods are the factor behind two-party systems while the proportional electoral procedures generate multi-partism⁵. As such was the case of the French extreme right party, Front National, which took advantage of the 1984 European election which was held with a proportional system and in which the party had a raise from 0.2 to 11.1 per cent. Like the French example, the German Republikaner made their breakthrough in 1989 after a second-order regional election and the Dutch right extremist party CD came back into the political arena after the local elections of the 1990 and 1991. It is clear that the institutional setting was important for extreme right parties’ emergence and consolidation.

The increase in party volatility and ascendancy of extreme right parties is linked and proved by the statistics of the elections in which extreme right parties made a breakthrough: 1973 for Denmark and Norway, 1984 for Netherlands, 1984 and 1986 for France, 1991 for Belgium and Sweden as well as 1992 and 1994 for Germany. The explanation is that higher voter volatility is the characteristic of a political de-alignment, a process generated by the societal evolution towards post-industrialism⁶. A simple explanation of this phenomenon is that voters do not identify themselves with the existing parties, consequently moving to other parties that could match their views. This phenomenon was associated with the increase of extreme right parties’ membership and support, when the misidentification of voters’ was high⁷. Misidentification allowed the breakthrough of extreme right parties in Netherlands and

² Ignazi, Pietro – “Extreme Right Parties: The By-Product of a ‘Salient Counter-Revolution’?” in *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship, 2003) p. 6

³ Brechon, Pierre and Mitra, Subrata – “The National Front in France: The Emergence of an Extreme Right Protest Movement” in *Comparative Politics*, 25 (1993),

⁴ Betz – “The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe” in *Comparative Politics* (1993, 25)

⁵ Duverger, Maurice. - *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (New York: Wiley, 1963).

⁶ Ignazi, Pietro – “Extreme Right Parties: The By-Product of a ‘Salient Counter-Revolution’?” in *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship, 2003) p. 11-12

⁷ Inglehart, R. and Klingemann, H. – “Party identification, ideological preference and the leftright dimension among Western mass publics”, in I. Budge et al (ed.), *Party identification and beyond: Representations of voting and party competition*. (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1976)

France in 1984, Italy and 1992 and Germany in 1994, 1990s being characterised by an increase in volatility and popularity of extreme right parties throughout Europe⁸. Besides the advantages taken through the use of proportional electoral systems and electoral volatility, extreme right parties evolved on the bases established by the conservative parties. On these bases they have brought into the political arena the topics of nationalism, egalitarianism, identity and security, but moved to a more centre-located attitude once they came back into power⁹. This mismanagement of political attitude by the conservative parties enabled the extreme right parties to approach and develop an already existing idea in the electoral market¹⁰, mostly because of their left-right movement. Another explanation for this phenomenon is through the reduction of polarization, explained in the form of Ignazi's distance between most right and left mentioned before.

With the conservatives changing their attitude in order to cover a larger part of the electoral market, a gap appeared: the electorate that they focusing on weren't identifying anymore. The radicalization of discourse is a similar case to the one made in the first paragraph, but now it is viewed from the perspective of a previous process that allowed the extreme right parties to find their place in the electoral systems. As stated in the beginning of this paragraph, the radicalization of speeches by the mainstream parties in the 1970s has created a precedent by introducing a large spectre of issues characteristic of the extreme right parties. The case of France and the emergence of the Front National is a clear example of radicalization of discourse, because in this case the party found a right-wing attitude of the public after the politicization of particular issues by the previous governing parties. In Germany, the rightward move of CDU in the 1970s and then Helmut Kohl's turn to a central position, as well as the politicization of the "volkish" lines allowed for the radicalization of right wing parties¹¹. In the Netherlands, the Liberal Party (VVD) has radicalized its discourse when it was in opposition during the early and the later part of the 1980s, consequently obtaining their best scores in the 1990s through the use of the immigrations issues¹².

Another important perspective which explains the popularity of extreme right parties is from the work of Cas Mudde and his paradox of the anti-party party¹³. The author is talking about the anti-party sentiment shown by the extreme right parties, distinguishing two categories: extremist and populist. Even if Bertz portrays the extreme right parties as to "present themselves as true 'antiparty parties'"¹⁴, Mudde goes further with his analogy of extremist and populist sentiments to make a clear distinction between the two of them. The idea that extreme right parties are antiparty is translated into a manifestation against the established parties that are considered to be unrepresentative for ordinary people or divisive¹⁵. The paradox presented by the author is questioning whether the extreme right parties are parties that end all parties or they simply just use the existing sentiment against established parties in their own advantage. The author continues by looking at the type of anti-party sentiments held by far right parties and the way they see themselves as

⁸ ibid

⁹ Bartolini, S. and Mair P. - *Identity, competition and electoral availability: the stabilisation of European electorates 1885-1985*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

¹⁰ Kim, H. and Fording, R. - "Voter ideology in Western Democracies" in *European Journal of Political Research* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000, vol. 37)

¹¹ Minkenberg, Michael. - "German unification and the continuity of discontinuities: cultural change and the far right in East and West" in *German Politics* (International Association for the Study of German Politics, 1994, vol. 3, issue 2)

¹² Tillie, J. and Fennema, M - "A rational choice for the Extreme Right" in *Acta Politica* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1998, vol 33)

¹³ Mudde, C. "The paradox of the Anti-Party Party: Insights from the extreme-right" in *Party Politics* (London: Sage, 1996, vol. 2)

¹⁴ Bertz, Hans-Georg - "The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-wing Populist Parties in Western Europe" in *Comparative Politics* (1993, vol. 25) p. 419

¹⁵ Voerman, Gerrit and Lucardie, Paul - "The Extreme Right in the Netherlands: the Centrists and Their Radical Rivals" in *European Journal of Political Research* (1992, vol. 22)

organizations. Three extreme right political parties are analyzed by the author: the Belgian Vlaams Blok, the Dutch Centrumdemocrated and Centrumpartij'86/Nationale Volkspartij. According to Ignazi's 10 point classification, the Vlaams Blok, an extreme right party in Belgium, is the most successful gaining around twelve percent as well as being classified between the concept of moderate 'new' extreme right and the old extreme. While Centrumdemocrated is less successful with only two and a half percent, it is characterised as a 'new' extreme right while the Centrumpartij'86 are being less successful and traditional extremism¹⁶. The distinction between antiparty sentiments is that through the extremist sentiment, other political parties are rejected because of their divisive nature or because of a barrier between rulers and the ruled, this being described by Daalder as "the denial of party"¹⁷. On the other hand, the populist antiparty sentiment is characterised by a criticism of political parties because of their functioning or because of the electoral group they represent or do not represent, this being described as "the selective rejection of party"¹⁸. Another comparison between the two sentiments, extremist sentiment and the populist antiparty sentiment is the historical heritage of the extreme sentiment being characteristic of the fascist parties of the 1930s and being displayed by Vlaams Blok in 1988 when it criticised all of the parties acting in the political arena. Conversely, the populist sentiment is used by both extreme right and extreme left parties, in the form of targeting the policies and the behaviour of other political parties, the argument that they favour immigrants over their own citizens being most often encountered. Also, when criticising the behaviour of other political parties they find four themes: party-centrism, corruption, anti-democratic behaviour and relics of the past. As of political behaviour, the extreme right parties describe their practices in positive terms contrasting to what they point out in the other parties, the three parties analyzed by Mudde presenting themselves as defenders of their people.

Following the principle of anti-party and anti-system parties, the idea that extreme right parties have emerged and have been embraced in reaction to weak political governance is often discussed when trying to identify the origin of right wing parties' popularity. The idea of the legitimacy crisis has circulated since the 1970s and especially since the criticism of capitalism by the Frankfurt School, well known for critiquing the democratic system. Even if democracy as a concept has been accepted after the Second World War, the practice of democracy in states has seen high oscillations over time¹⁹. "Less than half of the public in each nation expresses confidence in the national legislature, rating it eighth in the list of ten institutions"²⁰; with this in mind and considering the existent practice of the right wing parties to criticise the institutions, as shown in the argument regarding their anti-system stance, we can clearly see why those voters which have low confidence in the system would vote for them. As examples, the case of Front National in France and the fact that they made their breakthrough in 1984²¹, the year when confidence in the system was at its lowest, as well as

¹⁶ Ignazi, Piero. – „Antidemocratic Antipolitics: the Re-emergence of the Extreme Right” in “Vienna Dialogue on Democracy” (Vienna: 7-10 July), cited in Mudde, C. “The paradox of the Anti-Party Party: Insights from the extreme-right” in *Party Politics* (London: Sage, 1996, vol. 2)

¹⁷ Daalder, Hans – „A crisis of Party?” in *Scandinavian Political Studies* (1992), cited in Mudde, C. “The paradox of the Anti-Party Party: Insights from the extreme-right” in *Party Politics* (London: Sage, 1996, vol. 2), p. 267

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson – “Support for the Democratic system” in (ed) Klingeman and Fuchs – *Citizens and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 349

²⁰ Dalton, Russel. – *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies: Public Opinion and Political Parties in the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, and France* (Chatham: Chatham House, 1996), p.269

²¹ Mayer, Nonna. - *Ces français qui votent Le Pen* (Paris : Flammanion, 1999), cited in *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship, 2003) p. 19

the continuing decline of confidence in the German system can explain the success of the right wing party, Republikaner²².

As a conclusion, this essay has provided an analytical response to the question and it proves that extreme right political parties have seen an increase in popularity (and in some cases even their emergence) on the flows of national systems, emergence of globalization and the disadvantages brought by post-industrialist changes. Similarities and differences have been identified based upon the political environment and history of the countries in case, a valid conclusion being the fact that the popularity of the extreme right parties in Europe being a variable notion based on a number of factors. The focus upon the actions of the extreme right parties, being backed with events in recent history gives the reader a concise idea of why extreme right parties are so popular in Europe. All the factors presented can be applied to any extreme right party or organization and their tactics for making themselves heard are still practiced, especially nowadays in regard to the economic crisis that affected Europe since 2008²³, culminating with the unprecedented election score of the Front National in France, 18% of the votes, translated into 6.4 million people voting for the extreme right party²⁴.

²² Fuchs, D. – „Trends in Political Support“ in (ed) Bergg-Schlossed and Rytlewski – *Political Culture in Germany* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993)

²³ Crespo, Miguel. – “Europe: A continent in crisis, a rising far right” in *International Viewpoint Online* (October, 2010) <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1931> – on March 3rd 2012

²⁴ Chifrasis, Angélique. – *Francois Hollande on top but far right scores record result in French election.* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/23/francois-hollande-french-election> - accessed on March 8th 2012

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