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The far right

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The Routledge Handbook of Political Parties

Chapter 11: The Far Right

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Abstract

This chapter offers an overview of the far right. First, it examines the far right ideological and organisational features, identifying commonalities and also the differences that exist between parties in this broad umbrella category. Second, it examines the far right voter base. Focusing on both contextual and attitudinal characteristics of the far right voter profile, the aim here is to show how the far right electorate has changed over time. Third, the chapter delves into explanations of far right party support broadly categorised into demand (cultural grievances, economic discontent, societal grievances and institutional grievances) and supply-side (political opportunities and discursive opportunities). Fourth it examines the impact far right have had on mainstream politics, both in terms of government participation and policy influence as opposition. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of this phenomenon outside the European context, and the identification of avenues for future research.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, and subsequent national elections that took place in a number of European countries, parties pledging to restore national sovereignty and implement policies that consistently prioritise in-groups over out-groups, became increasingly entrenched in their respective political systems. The Rassemblement National (RN) (formerly Front National), the Italian Lega (formerly Lega Nord) and the Greek Golden Dawn made headlines for dramatically increasing their voter share. Others, including the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) and the Austrian (FPÖ) joined government coalitions. Some have become successful even in the most unlikely political settings, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Spanish Vox. These parties have become successful political actors, appealing to a broad range of social groups. Their success does not lie solely in their electoral support, but also their ability to drive party competition and, in many instances, dictate the policy agenda.

Unsurprisingly this far right 'momentum' has been accompanied by a proliferation of studies in the topic. The purpose of this chapter is to offer an overview of this literature, focusing on the far right party family, its electoral base, and the various explanations for its support and political impact. First, the chapter examines the far right ideological and organisational features, identifying commonalities and also the differences that exist between parties in this broad umbrella category. Second, it examines the far right voter base.

Focusing on both contextual and attitudinal characteristics of the far right voter profile, the aim here is to show how the far right electorate has changed over time. Third, the chapter delves into explanations of far right party support broadly categorised into demand (cultural grievances, economic discontent, societal grievances and institutional grievances) and supply-side (political opportunities and discursive opportunities). Fourth it examines the impact far right have had on mainstream politics, both in terms of government participation and policy influence as opposition. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of this phenomenon outside the European context, and the identification of avenues for future research.

The far right party family: ideology and organisation

Terminology used to describe this party family varies. Frequently used terms include the 'radical right', the 'populist radical right', the 'extreme right', the 'anti-immigrant right' and the 'far right'. While any umbrella term inevitably subsumes a broad range of parties and groups that differ significantly in agenda and policy, scholars increasingly argue that the term 'far right' captures both the overarching similarities that make these parties comparable, and the important differences between parties in this diverse group (Golder 2016; Mudde 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020). Further distinguishing between different variants, based for example on the ways in which these parties relate to fascism and democracy, allows researchers to take into account the idiosyncrasies of specific cases.

The far right umbrella is used to describe parties that are sceptical of immigration and share a focus on sovereignty, nationalist policies and placing "native" inhabitants first in the provision of welfare and social services. Far right parties compete by emphasising extreme positions on immigration (Van Spanje 2010; Wagner and Meyer 2016) and seek to exclude members of the out-group from the national polity on the grounds that they constitute a threat to various dimensions of national cohesion.

Mudde's (2007) three-pronged definition that includes nativism, populism and authoritarianism remains a widely used guide for far right party classification. First, researchers agree that nativism- a narrow form of nationalism- is a core feature of the far right. Broadly understood as an ideological or political movement that pursues the attainment and maintenance of the unity, autonomy and identity of a deemed nation (Breuilly 2005), nationalism draws on a purported distinction between an in-group and out-group, which is key to the far right programmatic agenda. The important point is not simply that far right parties are all, to a degree, nationalist; but rather, that they use nationalism to justify their positions on all socioeconomic issues (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015). While all parties adopt nationalism, however, they do so in different ways, drawing on different configurations of various criteria of national belonging, as will be shown later on in the chapter.

Second, the far right often combines the nationalist axis with a people vs. elites axis, claiming to restore national sovereignty on behalf of the people. Not all far right parties, however, are populist. Much recent scholarship focuses on minimum and maximum definitions, suggesting that populism may be a question of degree, for example by defining populism as a communication phenomenon (e.g. De Vreese et al 2018). Third, far right parties differ in terms of their authoritarianism. Given the significant variations between these parties, scholars stress it is important to distinguish between them on the basis of whether they extreme or radical (Golder 2016). The extreme right includes both vigilante groups and political parties that are often openly racist, have clear ties to fascism and also employ violence and aggressive tactics. These groups may operate either outside or within the realm of electoral politics, or both. They tend to oppose procedural democracy. A good example is the Greek Golden Dawn, an openly fascist party that glorifies violence (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015). Radical right parties, on the other hand, have distanced themselves from fascism. They oppose the far right label and accept procedural democracy. These parties tend to be the most widespread and electorally successful in Europe, for example the French RN, the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the Sweden Democrats (SD), and the German AfD. While some may employ authoritarian tactics, they also adopt rhetorics that conceal this under a pseudo-liberal democratic façade that focuses on the popular will and emphasises ideological criteria of national belonging. This suggests that the three classification criteria- i.e. nationalism, populism and authoritarianism- often overlap.

The significant differences between these parties do raise questions about the extent to which the 'far right' is a single party family, and highlight the dangers of describing any democratic challenger as 'far right'. On the one hand, it may be argued that because of their ideological differences, these parties should not be included in a single category. For example, parties such as the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, the PVV and Fidesz have more differences than commonalities. On the other hand, from an empirical perspective, these parties tend to converge in terms of their policy prescriptions, which clearly distinguish them from other party families (Ennser 2012). While it may be more appropriate for qualitative studies comparing a small number of cases tend to select parties from the same variant (see e.g. Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2018 on extreme right variants) in order to ensure comparability, quantitative studies can, and indeed do, include far right parties broadly defined in their samples (Rooduijn 2018; Allen and Goodman 2020; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020; Stockemer et al 2020).

Table 1: List of selected far right parties

Country	Far Right Party
Australia	One Nation
Austria	Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)

Austria	Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)
Belgium (Flanders)	Flemish Interest (VB)
Belgium (Wallonia)	Front National Belge (FNb)
Bulgaria	National Union Attack (ATAKA)
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DF)
Finland	Finns Party (PS)
France	Rassemblement National (RN)
France	Mouvement National Republicain (MNR)
Germany	National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)
Germany	Alternative for Germany (AfD)
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)
Greece	Golden Dawn (GD)
Hungary	Movement for a better Hungary (Jobbik)
Hungary	Fidesz
India	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)
Italy	Northern League (LN)
Italy	Allianza Nationale (AN)
Italy	Fiamma Tricolore (MS-FT)
Lithuania	Order and Justice Party (TT)
Netherlands	List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)
Netherlands	Party for Freedom (PVV)
Norway	Progress Party (FrP)
Poland	Law and Justice Party (Pis)
Poland	KORWIN

Poland	Congress of the New Right (KPN)
Poland	League of Polish Families (LPR)
Slovakia	Slovak National Party (SNS)
Slovenia	Slovenian National Party (SNS)
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party (SVP)
Switzerland	Swiss Democrats
United Kingdom	United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)

How are far right parties organised? Western European far right parties are characterised by highly centralised organisational structures: decisions are made at the top, loyalty to the leader is strong and party organisation tends to revolve around a charismatic leader and is often too weak to withstand leadership changes (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). This suggests that far right party success often depends on the appeal potential of its leader, and many such parties implode in the aftermath of leadership changes- for example the List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. Research challenges in the field of party organisation notwithstanding- for example the lack of conceptual clarity and absence of reliable data - recent literature seeking to assess what determines organisational strength and how far right parties can endure such changes has made considerable advances with strong comparative work (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Art 2018). This literature emphasises factors such as the existence of a party rank, the establishment of small local branches and party unity as key in ensuring the party is able to mobilise support, infiltrate at all levels and avoid internal splits (See Art 2008; Ellinas and Lamprianou 2017)

Who votes for the far right?

An abundance of survey data (e.g. European Social Survey ESS, European Election Study EES) offers scholars insights into the far right voter profile. Research focusing on socio-demographic factors that may prompt support, for example education, unemployment, income level, gender and age, reports that far right supporters are more likely to be male, lowly educated, older individuals with poor prospects in the labour market (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012; Stockemer et al 2020; Swank and Betz 2018). In terms of their attitudinal characteristics, these voters are more likely to have stricter views on law and order, support anti-elitist beliefs and concerns about the impact of out-groups in their societies suggesting these individuals' voter preferences are driven by their authoritarian, populist and nationalist attitudes (Lubbers and Coenders 2017; Akkerman et al 2014; Geurkink et al 2019). Indeed, one of the greatest

predictors of far right voting is immigration scepticism (Ivarsflaten 2008). Far right voters tend to be dislike immigrants for a variety of reasons, including perceiving them to be a threat to national cohesion, a source of competition in the labour market as well as security threat (Rydgren 2008; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020).

A key characteristic of the more recent wave of far right party support has been the gradual broadening of the far right voting base to include more women (Allen and Goodman 2020) as well as younger, more middle class, educated individuals who may perceive themselves to be experiencing relative economic decline, but are not impoverished (e.g. Kurer 2020). Much recent literature focusing on the far right's widening appeal, provides evidence of variation of voter motives. Distinguishing between core far right voters who identify fully with the entire far right party platform and peripheral voters who identify only partially with this platform, this literature emphasises the idea that different voter groups vote for the far right for different reasons, forming coalitions of support (Stockemer et al 2020; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020). An interesting dimension of this is the far right appeal to unlikely voter groups that do not conform to the typical voter profile. According to Stockemer et al (2020), one third of the far right electorate does not have strong immigration concerns, pointing to the importance of the protest voter who may support the far right not on the basis of outright endorsement but rather in order to express discontent with the political system (Van de Brug et al 2000; Agerberg 2017).

Explaining electoral success

Demand

Any discussion of the far right voter profile(s) would be incomplete if not placed within a broader explanatory framework: why and under what circumstances are voters more likely to opt for far right parties? The extant literature that approaches the topic from the demand-side has systematically documented a range of grievances that may prompt far right party support (Golder 2016). The overall demand-side argument is that rapid societal changes associated with immigration, globalisation, technological advancement, community decline and material deprivation push voters towards the periphery (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi et al. 2006). These voters express their dissatisfaction by opting for far right parties, which capitalise on a broad range of societal grievances by emphasising policies that always prioritise over, and protect, in-groups from out-groups. Work in the field employs both quantitative and qualitative comparative methodologies and uses both aggregate and individual level data to examine a range of grievances that drive far right party support. While these are complex and often overlap, for the purposes of clarity this chapter proceeds with a brief overview of the *cultural*, *economic*, *societal* and *institutional* factors that are often highlighted in the literature.

Culture and value-based grievances: Cultural grievance theories stress the importance of value-based voter concerns within the context of an emerging transnational cleavage (Golder 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Lucassen and

Lubbers 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2018). This cleavage essentially creates an additional- or alternative- dimension of societal contestation to that between haves and have-nots by dividing voters with cosmopolitan values from those who are primarily concerned with preserving their national culture and identity. This is why globalisation, immigration and freedom of movement all contribute to voters' source of discontent. Many such explanations evidence their claim on the strong predictive power of immigration (See e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Economic discontent: Others have continued to emphasise the importance of materialist issues in terms of actual and relative economic performance (e.g. Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020; Kurer 2020), wealth inequality (Adler and Ansell 2020) and labour market competition with immigrants (Dancygier and Donnelly 2013). Some such approaches suggest that immigration is not only and by default evidence for the cultural grievance thesis, as many voters have immigration concerns beyond culture (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020; Rydgren 2008), suggesting a story that accounts for a combination of grievances.

Societal grievances: This is a social alienation perspective, which emphasises drivers such as anxiety and pessimism, deriving from a sense of alienation and declining social status (Engler and Weisstanner 2020; Gidron and Hall 2017). Research points out that individuals who perceive themselves to be detached from society, for example because of the decline of membership in community organisations such as churches, trade unions, and other civic associations, are increasingly likely to vote for far right parties (Gest 2016). This perspective often serves as a bridge between theories that focus on cultural and economic discontent.

Institutional grievances: This is a 'political trust' perspective that draws on a protest mechanism. The key argument is that the populist and authoritarian attitudes of far right voters are triggered by trust-related grievances over elites, institutions and the government. Citizens assess the efficacy and credibility of institutions within the broader context of democratic representation. These assessments shape their voting preferences. Negative assessments, manifested in declining levels of trust, are likely to result in punishment of the mainstream and/or the incumbent and subsequent support for far right parties (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2018; Agerberg 2017). According to this perspective, far right parties could be the main beneficiaries of trust-related grievances, and as such the far right vote can be best understood as an anti-establishment vote.

While these factors are much debated- and often juxtaposed against each other- in the literature, it is important to emphasise that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive perspectives. As noted above, in the discussion of the far right voter profile, during the current far right wave these parties have been particularly effective in mobilising support beyond their core voting base. What is interesting in this respect is to establish ways in which these different factors prompt different voters, and by extension the conditions under which the interests of diverse groups align, forming potential voter coalitions.

Supply

Supply-side explanations commence from the premise that grievances at the demand level are insufficient in explaining the electoral success of far right parties. This is because they often fail to explain variation both between and within countries. Supply-side arguments complement this picture, positing that political parties may themselves exert agency, and are able to shape their own support. In other words, parties do not only respond to, they also shape public opinion. There are two distinct, but interrelated mechanisms behind this: first, the political system may be conducive for far right party success by offering an open, or permissive, political space. This has to do with how parties compete and the system within which they operate. Second, certain strategies far right parties themselves adopt are successful in making their message appealing to broader sectors of the population.

Party competition and political opportunities: The focus here is on the opportunities and constraints offered by the political system within which parties operate. The degree of permissiveness of the system is a product of various factors including the electoral system, party organization, the policies and agendas of the main right-wing competitor and the degree of fragmentation of the right (Golder 2016; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2018). In terms electoral rules, majoritarian electoral systems that translate votes into seats disproportionately tend to penalise small parties, excluding them from political representation. Theoretically, therefore, it makes sense to expect far right parties to perform better under PR systems. Empirically, however, this is not always the case. A boost in far right party performance can be driven by good results in EP elections for EU members, and also the potential to impact on the policies of mainstream parties as credible competitors. UKIP and the Brexit referendum in the UK is a good example of this. This is at the core of party competition arguments, which suggest that the behaviour of mainstream parties can be key to far right party success, especially in terms of particular strategies towards issues that are salient, such as for example immigration.

Discursive Opportunities and 'winning formulas': Theories that focus on discursive opportunities examine the evolution of party programmatic agendas. The broad argument is that the de-demonisation, or normalisation, of far right rhetoric has contributed significantly to its electoral success. Perspectives on discursive change often focus on nationalism as a communication tool, putting forward explanations that centre on far right party 'civic' normalisation strategies. This literature notes that more electorally successful far right parties have increasingly adopted a rhetoric that excludes not on biological but rather on ideological criteria of national belonging (Koopmans and Statham 1999;Halikiopoulou et al 2013), allowing them to appeal to a broad range of social groups with different preferences. These parties present culture as a value issue, refraining from ascriptive criteria of exclusion, and distancing themselves from fascism and right-wing extremism. This makes their rhetoric more palatable, especially to peripheral supporters, i.e. those groups who vote 'against' the establishment rather than 'for' the far right in ideological terms. Most

electorally successful Western European far-right parties, including for example the RN, AfD and the PVV, adopt the 'civic nationalist normalization' while exceptions include far right parties such as the Greek Golden Dawn, which managed to gain votes while putting forward an openly extremist narrative.

This type of rhetoric is often accompanied by a shift from the neoliberal economic 'winning formula' of previous waves (Kitschelt and McGann 1995) towards more economically centrist positions with an increased focus on social welfare (Afonso and Rennwald 2017) that attempt to appeal to the left-behind and/or those who have suffered from economic deprivation (De Lange 2007; Ivaldi 2015). For example, the RN's economic policy has changed significantly from free market and support for privatisation in the mid–late 1980s towards an economic protectionist left-wing stance that places a strong emphasis on social issues during Marine Le Pen's leadership, in an attempt to appeal the economically insecure who have been marginalised by societal shifts such as globalisation and technological change (Betz 2013; Ivaldi, 2015).

Impact on mainstream politics

What distinguishes the current from previous far right waves is a shift from the *cordon sanitaire* to far right mainstreaming (Mudde 2019; Wondreys and Mudde 2020; Halikiopoulou 2017). In short, while in the past far right parties tended to be marginalised in their respective political systems, and often stigmatised as fascists and/or extremists, they have become legitimate actors competing for elections, joining coalitions and developing policies. The reversal of the cordon sainitaire may be interpreted in two ways: first, more widespread government participation; and second, policy influence as opposition. Far right party success has had an impact on the positions of mainstream parties, many of whom have responded by adopting accommodative strategies, moving to the right on certain policy positions including immigration, multi-culturalism and security (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018; Spoon and Kluver 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020). Indeed, the ability to shape the behaviour of other parties suggests a fundamental restructuring of the dynamics of party competition (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018) centred on emphasising stricter positions on immigration. This has broader consequences for the future and stability of democratic systems; ultimately, the far right's 'civic normalisation' strategy challenges democracy because it allows these parties to permeate mainstream ground by appearing legitimate to a broad electorate. However, so far the literature yields mixed results on whether it actually pays off to accommodate the far right, and which far right parties are likely to benefit the most and why.

Conclusion: opportunities and challenges

The socio-political context of the 2010s has provided a favourable opportunity framework for far right parties. First, a series of crises including the European economic and migration crises, intensified grievances that may be conducive to far right party support. At the intersection of a persisting materialist, and an emerging value-based cleavage, economic, cultural, societal and institutional discontent have triggered voters with a broad range of socio-demographic and

attitudinal characteristics to cast a far right vote. Second, party competition dynamics, including the implosion of the centre-left and the decline of the mainstream as political alternatives in many countries, have reinforced this phenomenon. Third, the development of a normalisation strategy at the core of which is a more civic form of nationalism and a conscious attempt to detach from the far right's fascist past, has enabled these parties to step in and occupy the empty space left by other competitors by allowing them to appeal legitimate and credible to a broad range of social groups.

There is yet another dimension to this: a domino effect, which has resulted in a broad geographic expansion of far right parties and political actors. This wider trend of the mainstreaming of far right ideas, increasingly observed outside the European context, highlights the possibility that the rise of the far right is a global phenomenon. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Donald Trump in the United States, One Nation in Australia, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India are but few examples of the spread of far right populism in the industrialised world and beyond, revealing the breadth and persistence of this phenomenon.

There are conceptual and methodological reasons why such broad comparisons may be problematic. Issues such as data availability, ambiguities surrounding the dependent variable, as well as vastly different political settings, party systems and historical experiences constrain researchers examining the broader manifestations of this phenomenon comparatively. These limitations notwithstanding, new work carrying out cross-Atlantic comparisons could yield interesting results about a potential far right populist contagion outside the European context.

While far right parties have increased their electoral support, and have become emboldened as a result, new developments have also presented these parties with significant challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic has offered researchers ample theoretical reasons to expect the far right's fortunes to be reversed, at least in the short run. The pandemic has highlighted the need for effective government, expertise and efficiency, suggesting voters may prioritise competence over emotions, casting a valence as opposed to a protest vote. This 'rally around the flag' affect can be expected to benefit incumbents, or mainstream parties with long-standing experience in office, at the expense of far right parties. Empirically, however, the picture is much more mixed. Recent work has found only a temporary increase in the support for incumbents (See e.g. Wondreys and Mudde 2020). While some far right parties imploded, this had to do more with party-specific dynamics, for example the indictment and imprisonment of Golden Dawn leading cadres in 2020, corruption scandals plaguing the FPO and internal divisions weakening the AfD. Other parties, however such as the French RN, have faired consistently strong in the polls throughout the course of the pandemic.

As we enter the third decade of the 21st Century, studying the far right seems at the same time both a strenuous attempt to contribute to an overcrowded field, and an exciting research opportunity. On the one hand, following the populism 'hype' in the aftermath of the 2014 EP elections, and subsequently the election of

Donald Trump in 2016 and the Brexit referendum of the same year, studies on the far right broadly defined have increased dramatically. Besides political science research, the topic has been also addressed from different angles including for example history, political economy and sociology. This extant literature has shed light on many dimensions of the topic, yielding interesting results and adding much to what we already know about who votes for the far right and why. On the other hand, and despite this voluminous literature, the far right is still in many ways puzzling. Empirical realities do not always conform to our theoretical expectations; on the contrary, much of the time empirical patterns seem to defy even the most established theories. Many questions remain unresolved either because of data availability constraints, or because of new developments altering political dynamics. This opens up a range of avenues for future research.

First, there is the issue of party organisation. More comparative research could shed light on local organisation dynamics, the role of women in leadership positions and the overall the conditions that allow far right party organisational structures to be more resilient and adaptable. Second, is the long-standing question of variation in electoral support, both within and between countries. While we know a lot about the underlying demand and supply-side forces that drive the far right vote, negative cases remain a puzzle. For example, while all societies have discontent voters, not all societies have successful far right parties. Why do far right parties not always emerge in contexts where demand is favourable? Also, in countries where more than one far right party is competing for elections, how may we explain which one gets the most votes and why? Also puzzling are the unlikely far right voters, i.e. those that do not conform to our typical far right voter profile. Why do more women, educated individuals and groups not primarily concerned with immigration also vote for the far right under specific circumstances? Fourth is the issue of party competition and whether it pays mainstream parties off to accommodate far right party strategies. How can we explain conflicting findings in terms of the far right contagion to other parties in the system? Next, there is also the issue of emerging opportunities and challenges posed by new developments such COVID-19. Why are some far right parties proving resilient despite the unfavourable conditions created by the pandemic? Finally there is the question of the breadth of the phenomenon and comparability outside the European context. Are far right populist movements in diverse contexts the symptom of the same malaise despite the fundamental differences that define their political experiences? These puzzles suggest there is much scope for future research to tackle important persisting questions about variations in far right party demand and supply-side dynamics.

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