Phased out: Far right parties in Western Europe

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Contents

Legislative Preferences, Political Parties, and Coalition Unity in Chile
Eduardo Alemán and Sebastián M. Saleh

253

The Conflict of Conflicts in Comparative Perspective: Euthanasia as a Political Issue in Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands
Christoforos Green-Federson

273

Economic Insecurity and Welfare Preferences: A Micro-Level Analysis
Anthony Mughan

293

Election Pledges, Party Competition, and Policymaking
Lucy Mansergh and Robert Thomson

311

Selective Engagement and Its Consequences for Social Movement Organizations: Lessons from British Policy in Northern Ireland
Devashree Gupta

331

Review Article

Phased Out: Far Right Parties in Western Europe
Antonis A. Ellinas

353

Abstracts

273
Phased Out

Far Right Parties in Western Europe

Antonis A. Ellinas


Writing about the far right in the late 1980s, Klaus von Beyme complained that “there is virtually no comparative literature on the topic.” Ever since, though, far right parties have attracted more academic attention than any other party family in Europe. It is a good time, then, to take stock. The four monographs under review provide an opportunity to reflect critically on this burgeoning literature. Much like the earlier work, the recent scholarship on the far right is intrigued by the divergent electoral fortunes of these parties in advanced postindustrial democracies. The question these books ask is similar to that of earlier writings. Why have far right parties advanced in some countries but not in others? But their answers differ. Socioeconomic explanations, which dominated earlier writings, are now only the starting point of scholarly efforts to account for the electoral trajectories of far right. The recent scholarship lays more emphasis on the domestic political setting, examining the effects of party competition, organization, and appeals. Moreover, the new studies attempt to correct the earlier neglect of electoral institutions. To examine the impact of these factors, the new wave of studies utilizes the enormous wealth of data that has become available since the earlier analyses to subject
the various hypotheses to rigorous statistical tests. The findings do not yield firm conclusions about the drivers of far right performance, but they have important theoretical implications. To capitalize on the theoretical insights of recent work, future scholarship must pay closer attention to temporal variation in far right performance.

The geographical spread of far right advances encouraged earlier scholarship to privilege broad socioeconomic explanations. As one of the most influential accounts put it, the simultaneity of far right parties across western Europe suggests that “the wave of contemporary radical right-wing populism, unlike other right-wing radical or extremist movements in the postwar period, is a response to developments shared by all or at least most Western-style democracies.” Of course, the emphasis on broad structural change has a long intellectual lineage. Nevertheless, two decades of theorizing have failed to produce a direct link between socioeconomic change and far right performance. While globalization and postindustrialism can account for electoral dealignment, they can not predict the timing, scope, or direction of realignment. Hence the departure of the new studies from the socioeconomic approach. This departure is less obvious in Pierro Ignazi’s Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe, which marks the transition between the earlier studies’ focus on broad socioeconomic variables and the new studies’ emphasis on domestic political context. Largely a synthetic work, it brings together earlier theorizing about the impact of postindustrial change and the effects of the domestic political setting on the performance of far right parties. The most obvious departure from the socioeconomic approach is Elizabeth Carter’s The Extreme Right in Western Europe. To account for far right performance, its first two chapters focus on far right ideologies, organization, and leadership while the remainder of the book examines the impact of party competition and electoral institutions.

The new studies also make an effort to examine the role of electoral institutions on far right performance. Earlier work showed little interest in institutional factors, but three of the books under review deal extensively with the electoral effects of institutional configurations. Pippa Norris’s Radical Right is probably the most ambitious of the three, since she tries to integrate the analysis of electoral institutions with the examination of party competition and voter behavior. She argues that institutions regulate the electoral market; they interact with both the supply and demand side of electoral politics. In Voting Radical Right in Western Europe Terri Givens makes the most forceful case for electoral institutions. She contends that far right support is likely to be suppressed in institutional settings that encourage strategic voting. To support this argument, she looks in depth at elections in four “most similar” cases, Austria, Germany, France, and Denmark. Finally, Carter looks at the “mechanical” effects of electoral institutions and explores the impact of “supplementary” institutional mechanisms, such as those regulating access to the ballot, the media, and funding. Although not conclu-
Globalization and Postindustrialism

The growing consensus on the basic attributes of the far right contrasts with the apparent dissent about the likely drivers of its performance. Due to the transnational nature of the far right, broad socioeconomic factors have featured prominently in efforts to explain it. Previous analyses have viewed the rise of the far right as the consequence of two related but distinct socioeconomic processes: postindustrialization and globalization. Both involve fundamental changes in the structure of capitalist economies that hurt particular segments of society. The social groups that are most vulnerable to socioeconomic change are thought to be the ones most likely to be swayed by far rightist appeals. Interestingly, individual-level data seem to corroborate expectations about the profile of the far right voter. Repeated survey evidence suggests that far right voters are young and undereducated, usually overrepresented among blue collar workers and small business owners. For reasons that remain unexplored, there is also a wide and persistent gender gap among far right voters. Men are overrepresented in the far right vote, while women are underrepresented.

What makes these voters switch their political preferences, desert the mainstream parties, and vote for the far right? Socioeconomic accounts diverge along three distinct, albeit overlapping, theoretical paths when speculating about the factors affecting voter preference formation. The first one associates voting with economic motivations. Deeply rooted in the historical experience of Weimar Germany and influenced by the development of the theories of economic voting, this approach views economic interest as the primary motivation for voting and economic conditions as a determinant of the level of far-right support. The most commonly used measure is aggregate unemployment, but it is rarely used alone. It is sometimes supplemented with measurements of aggregate immigration levels or rates. But the findings of the now voluminous studies of the topic remain inconclusive despite the impressive amount of data that has been amassed. Evidence collected at the individual level has also failed to yield the expected results, as the unemployed are rarely overrepresented in the pool of far right voters.

Givens can be commended for subjecting the economic interest thesis to a rigorous test of her own. Instead of relying on the fuzziness of previous findings to reject this explanation, she collects and examines subnational unemployment, immigration, and electoral data in Austria, Germany, and France going as far back as the 1960s. But the evidence produced is, again, mixed. She finds a significant relationship among unemployment, immigration, and far right voting in France and Austria, but not in Germany. Though more limited in temporal scope, Norris’s tests cast further doubt on the unemployment thesis. Looking at 2002 national unemployment data, she finds no significant relationship with radical right support, even after she combines various indicators of ethnic heterogeneity with unemployment rates.

A second approach to preference formation, associated with the first wave of studies, focuses on patterns of social and economic interaction. Building on earlier sociological work, this approach views political consciousness as a function of voters’ occupational, market, and communicative skills and experiences. Citizens who work in sectors of the economy that face tough international competition or in occupations that require them to follow rules and orders and to process documents and objects are thought to be more likely to demand the kind of policies supported by the far right than those who work in domestically protected sectors or in fields such as education, social work, health care, and cultural production, where social relations are at the heart of the work process. According to Herbert Kitschelt, the main proponent of this approach, “contemporary postindustrial democracies generate a limited but distinctive demand for a political combination of ethnocentric, authoritarian, and free market liberal appeals.” But despite the early inroads of this approach, the clustering of culturally protectionist and economically liberal predispositions has proved hard to document.

This difficulty might explain the shift toward a third approach that associates political preferences with value orientations. In Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe, Ignazi largely follows this last approach. Divided into country chapters, the book provides a wealth of historical information related to the rise of the far right across West European countries, along with a considerable amount of electoral and survey data. The book’s biggest strength is the thorough conceptualization of the far right at the beginning and the rich theoretical discussion at the end. Instead of focusing on social interaction or economic interests, Ignazi sees far right voting as the outcome of a fundamental change in voters’ value priorities caused by postindustrialism. Whereas on the Left this change created demands for self-affirmation, as Inglehart has suggested, on the Right it
generated calls for self-defense and self-reassurance. The latter have been reinforced by the advent of globalization, which deepened uncertainty and displacement and produced the need for collective identification.26

Norris’s book similarly connects the rise of the far right with growing demands for cultural protectionism. Globalization, she argues, alters the distribution of voter preferences, creating reactions against cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. Unlike Ignazi, she does not offer a comprehensive theory linking globalization with preference formation. Reflecting the reorientiation away from socioeconomic explanations, she treats globalization merely as an “external shock.”27 To document the impact of this shock she marshals an impressive array of evidence that connects far right voting with attitudes favoring cultural protectionism. In general, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee attitudes seem to be more prevalent among far right voters than among the general electorate in Europe. Moreover, and contrary to earlier assertions, cultural predispositions are better predictors of the far right vote than attitudes toward economic equality.28

The match between individual attitudes and voting behavior should not exaggerate the explanatory weight of broad socioeconomic processes, for there is little direct evidence linking globalization or postindustrialism with levels of far right support. If broad socioeconomic change could sufficiently account for far right support, there would be a strong correlation between the timing, scope, or pace of socioeconomic change and levels of far right support. Critical cases like Germany and Finland, where the far right is weak, underscore the wide variation in far right performance among postindustrial countries and point to the limitations of broad socioeconomic explanations. Given these obvious limitations, it is not surprising that, while both Ignazi and Norris view socioeconomic change as a uniform challenge for West European polities, they quickly turn to domestic political conditions to account for the electoral ramifications of this challenge. In this respect, the recent scholarship recognizes that globalization and postindustrialism create a political opening for the far right but treats them as the starting point of the analysis, realizing that political opportunities do not automatically translate into far right support. To understand why, the new studies examine the constraints that domestic political factors place on far right performance.

Location, Location, Location

One of the most important constraints on the far right is the structure of domestic political competition. A newcomer to the electoral market might find it impossible to gain a substantial voter share if existing parties spread their appeal to accommodate the neophyte’s position and block its entrance. The location of mainstream parties in the competitive space is hence an important determinant of far right success. Mainstream parties can be seen as the gatekeepers of the electoral market: unless they leave an opening, newcomers can not break through. But even when major parties open a window of opportunity, the newcomer does not automatically achieve an electoral breakthrough. To capitalize on electoral opportunities, far right parties need to occupy the “right” position in the competitive space.

In line with this Downstairs reasoning, earlier work attributed the rise of the far right to the programmatic convergence of the mainstream parties. According to this “convergence thesis,” broad structural factors like postindustrialism and globalization have changed the distribution of electoral preferences and have shifted the traditional contours of party competition. This change confronted mainstream parties with strategic dilemmas about their location in the competitive space. Their responses brought about their programmatic convergence (for example, the Austrian grand coalition in the 1980s and 1990s), opening a window of opportunity for the far right, especially where the mainstream Right has been in government for an extended period of time. According to this earlier work, far right parties that put forth a combination of authoritarian and capitalist appeals have been the most successful in seizing this opportunity.29 Subsequent efforts to compare the spatial location of mainstream parties and the far right have found considerable support for the convergence thesis.30

Albeit in different ways, three of these books reexamine the convergence thesis. Their findings are mixed, if not contradictory, but the theoretical implications of each book should not be left unnoticed. Using expert judgments to assess the position of political parties on the left-right scale, Norris tests two versions of the convergence thesis. She looks at the spatial gap between the Socialists and the Conservatives and between the Conservatives and the far right. She finds no support for either and suddenly shifts her focus from the determinants of party performance to the determinants of party location, making location the dependent, rather than the independent variable. Norris argues that the location (or the appeal) far rightists choose in the competitive space is largely a function of electoral institutions. This argument is a major departure from earlier theorizing, which associated party location and appeal with party organization and historical legacy. She suggests that proportional representation encourages far rightists to emphasize ideological values, while majoritarian systems induce them to adopt populist strategies.31 Far right parties need to locate themselves close to the median voter in majoritarian systems, while under proportional representation they need to appeal to voters clustered at the extreme of the ideological spectrum. This emphasis on the impact of electoral institutions on party appeals is probably the most important theoretical contribution of the book. It is also the closest she comes to ascribing causal autonomy to institutional variables.

Carter also examines the impact of party competition on the electoral fortunes of the far right. She makes use of a number of expert judgment surveys from 1984 to 2000 that allow her to see how temporal variation in party location has affected the fortunes of the far right. This analysis is an important corrective to earlier studies, as most work on party competition relies on a snapshot of party positions that is too static to capture shifts in location across time. Unlike Norris, Carter finds support for a number of
hypotheses (including the convergence hypothesis) about the electoral impact of the spatial location of moderate and far right parties on the far right.\textsuperscript{32} But the analysis fails to account for some of the most important far right cases, including the French National Front and the Austrian Freedom Party. To explain this failure, Carter introduces the much neglected concept of threshold of relevance. She suggests that, once far right parties pass this threshold, their fortunes depend less on what their mainstream competitors do.\textsuperscript{33} Although Carter only mentions this point in passing, future work on the far right should note that the factors affecting far right performance might vary at different stages in party development. Spatial location of mainstream competitors might be important before the initial breakthroughs of the far right, but afterwards other variables might be needed to account for the sustenance and growth of far right support.

Estimates of party location run the risk of presenting a mechanistic picture of party competition that omits the substance over which politics is fought. Party competition takes place over specific issues, interests, and ideas, and any effort to account for its impact would be incomplete if it were devoid of the content of political contestation. In his book Ignazi identifies three issues that were politicized in the 1980s: immigration, national identity, and security. He notes that in the late 1970s the moderate Right politicized these issues as part of its neoreconservative turn but later abandoned them when it regained power. The radicalization of these issues widened the political space on the right, and the subsequent deradicalization of mainstream conservatives left the space open to far rightists. Ignazi argues that the emphasis on mainstream party convergence misses entirely the oscillation of the moderate Right and captures only the return of the conservatives to the political center. The full explication of the oscillation thesis comes too late in the book to allow for systematic testing, but the scant evidence Ignazi provides is suggestive of the analytical utility of this approach.\textsuperscript{34} To test it, one would need to capture the dynamism of political contestation, going beyond static measurements of party positions.

**Party Organization**

The analysis of patterns of political competition tends to view parties as billiard balls moving around the competitive space. However, a growing number of studies seeks to explain parties from within.\textsuperscript{35} Instead of treating "each party as though it were a single person," the recent work on political parties seeks to explain why parties respond to environmental challenges.\textsuperscript{36} While there is a long academic tradition that emphasizes the role of party organization, efforts to link organizational attributes with electoral outcomes are relatively new.\textsuperscript{37} Not surprisingly, students of the far right have been at the forefront of such efforts. The earlier wave of studies explicated two different variants of the party organization thesis. The stronger of the two viewed far right success as a direct result of organizational centralization and leadership charisma.\textsuperscript{38} The weaker version saw party organization as having an indirect effect on electoral outcomes by influencing party choices about strategic location.\textsuperscript{39} Both variants view leadership autonomy and programmatic flexibility as organizational assets that yield maximum returns to the far right when the opportunities for breakthrough arise.

Partly due to the unavailability of comparable data, the organization thesis has defined systematic analysis. The new studies of the far right seek to fill this gap. In one of the most insightful chapters of her book, Carter undertakes one of the most systematic efforts to date to explore the link between party organization and electoral performance. Relying on secondary evidence, she divides parties based on three organizational criteria: the degree of centralization, the strength of the leadership, and the level of factionalism. She shows that centralization and leadership go a long way in explaining party performance, while factionalism is less important. Well-organized and well-led parties perform better than poorly organized and poorly led parties. In fact, party centralization and leadership can account for 44 percent of the variation in the electoral scores of far right parties.\textsuperscript{40} But these findings need to be treated with some caution. In the absence of specific criteria for assessing party organization or leadership charisma, the classification of parties seems to be an ex post facto exercise, raising questions about the direction of causality. Moreover, this classification scheme misses the important variation in intraparty structures across time. Carter averages electoral performance across a twenty-five year period but seems to rely on a single point in time for the classification of party organization and leadership. She appears to treat organization as a constant, missing the relative improvement or deterioration in party organization from one point in time to another. By tracing this temporal variation, future research can gain considerable analytical leverage and can establish with more certainty the direction of causality.

Norris also discusses the effects of party organization but focuses, albeit indirectly, on one of the most interesting phases in the development of far right parties, the period after their initial breakthrough. She is puzzled by the electoral trajectory of flash parties, like the Dutch Lijsen Putin Fortuyn and the American Reform Party, which failed to sustain their initial electoral successes and quickly fell into oblivion. She attributes the electoral misfortunes of such parties to fragile organizations, internal splits, and factional rivalries. Her argument is muddled by the descriptive details of the case studies, while the whole chapter is sidetracked by the reproduction of a typology of elections. But the broader theoretical point should not be missed: intraparty structures might matter only after political parties pass the threshold of relevance. After their initial breakthrough, effective organization and charismatic leadership might help far right parties to sustain and extend their initial electoral gains. Yet, before parties become big enough to matter, their organizational attributes might have no significant effect on their performance. Future efforts to examine the impact of organization on electoral outcomes can benefit by breaking down the electoral trajectory of far right parties to different phases.
The Return of Electoral Institutions

Apart from spatial competition and party organization, three of these books examine the impact of electoral institutions on party competition and voter preferences. A long-established scholarly tradition suggests that electoral institutions can shape voter preferences and affect party strategies. The argument comes in different variants, but it usually claims that high electoral thresholds, small district magnitudes, and disproportional translation of votes to seats inhibit the electoral fortunes of small parties. Although the original, law-like formulations of the institutional thesis have since been qualified, its main assertions continue to guide studies of elections and voting.

Despite the theoretical inroads of the institutional tradition, an earlier wave of studies of the far right downplayed the significance of electoral laws. The new studies seek to correct this earlier neglect. According to these studies, institutions regulate the electoral market, shaping the behavior of both parties and voters. Norris is the most explicit proponent of an integrated approach, by which "the varying fortunes of the radical right are understood to be the product of the way in which the formal institutional rules set the context of, and thereby interact with, both party supply and public demand in any election." Wherever earlier theorizing on the far right mostly focused on core electoral institutions, the new studies also examine the effects of supplementary electoral regulations. Carter and Givens undertake chapter-long efforts to assess the impact of such regulations on party competition, bringing to surface a considerable body of evidence that will prove of tremendous aid to students of electoral institutions. Carter compares the provisions of three specific electoral regulations across Europe. Measuring the relative restrictiveness of each law, he finds that "low ballot access requirements, low media access requirements, and low state subvention access requirements together make for more successful right-wing extremist parties." Along the same lines, Norris illustrates through a number of examples that under certain conditions "legal requirements governing party registration and ballot access at nomination probably play an important role in limiting opportunities for radical right parties." Le Pen's failure to collect the 500 signatures necessary for presidential candidacy in 1981 is one of the best examples of how ballot access regulations affect the electoral fortunes of the far right. When it comes to regulations governing financial and media access, though, Norris finds no significant relationship between the combined effect of such regulations and far right support. Overall, while both Norris and Carter show that supplementary electoral regulations can pose significant obstacles for any (not just far right) new parties, their contrasting findings point to the difficulty in measuring the effects of such regulations. The measurement and aggregation of these effects (for their statistical analyses, both Norris and Carter assign arbitrary values to each regulation) and the consideration of informal mechanisms that allow far rightists to bypass formal institutional barriers (for example, plebiscite leaders can get free media exposure) will pose an important challenge to future research on the topic.

Apart from assessing the impact of supplementary institutions on party competition, the new studies also examine the effects of the electoral system on voter behavior. The broader literature on electoral institutions distinguishes between mechanical and psychological effects. While earlier work on the far right mostly focused on the former, recent scholarship largely analyzes the latter. The emphasis is mainly on strategic voting. Givens, who is the most forceful proponent of this approach, argues that the far right will have difficulty attracting support in electoral systems that encourage strategic voting. Strategic voting can be directly induced by the electoral institutions, but it can also be brought about by coalition signals sent by mainstream parties prior to the election. The signaling of coalition preferences depends on the electoral institutions. This dependence is most evident in Givens' study of French and German elections but is less apparent in Austria and Denmark, which have simple proportional representation systems. Overall, she finds that the four cases support her argument about the importance of strategic voting. In the absence of strategic voting, the Austrian and Danish far right has performed well, while in Germany and France strategic voting induced by coalition signaling has kept the far right out of parliament. Through her skilful application of the strategic voting thesis, Givens hypothesizes that a considerable number of potential far right voters are strategically deserting their primary voting preferences for other parties. In the absence of reliable survey evidence, the hypothesis is hard to substantiate. Givens must be credited for using multiple and innovative methods to make up for the unavailability of individual-level data. In one of her two positive cases, Germany, she finds a negative correlation between the FDP and the Republikaner second ballot vote in the 1990 and 1994 national elections. Since the relationship is tested in those districts where the FDP got less than 5 percent of the first ballot vote, Givens takes the findings to suggest that potential Republikaner voters deserted the party to help the FDP surpass the 5 percent threshold. Yet, not only does the relationship weaken by the 1994 elections, but, as Givens admits, the results "do not provide firm evidence of strategic voting. Without more specific data it is hard to prove that voters who preferred the Republikaner chose to vote for other parties." The other positive case, France, is even more challenging for the strategic voting thesis, since, unlike its German counterparts, the National Front has made significant advances in French legislative (and presidential) elections since 1986. Givens suggests that strategic voting can account for the failure of the French far right to win legislative seats, rather than votes. This departure from the usual measure of far right performance would have been less ambiguous if the argument could address the reasonable counterfactual: would the far right have received any seats had there been no strategic voting? Viewed from this angle, the failure of the National Front to achieve legislative representation is due, not to the psychological effects of French electoral
institutions, as the emphasis on strategic voting implies, but to their mechanical effects. Even if voters had not deserted the far right in the second round, plurality rules would still have kept it out of parliament. Norris’s analysis of electoral institutions casts further doubt on the strategic voting thesis and encourages the reconsideration of its rationality assumptions. To examine the psychological impact of electoral institutions of far right voting, she compares thirty-nine countries around the world. Contrary to conventional wisdom, she finds that “the share of the vote achieved by radical right parties in the most recent national legislative elections was similar under majoritarian (7.2 percent) and proportional (7.1 percent) electoral systems.” Since there are only six majoritarian cases in the dataset, the evidence is not as strong as in other parts of the book. Further, because of the small number of cases, dubious cases of radical right parties like the Canadian Reform Party and borderline majoritarian systems like the French have a distorting effect on the average.

Nevertheless, Norris’s interpretation of the findings might be worth noting, as it invites a reexamination of some of the most basic rationality assumptions in voting studies. She suggests that strategic voting is less likely among far right voters, either because their secondary party preferences are located too far away from their primary choices or because they want to cast a symbolic vote to send mainstream parties a message. In either case, a purely ideological vote can prove quite strategic if it compels the government to tighten immigration or asylum policy. That so many European countries chose to tighten their immigration policy in light of far right advances suggests that voters need not vote for parties that have a chance to participate in government to maximize their utility. If so, then future research might need to reconsider some of the core assumptions of the strategic voting thesis. And it might need to pay closer attention to Givens’s intriguing finding that three out of four first round Le Pen voters continued to support him in the second round of the 1997 parliamentary elections, even in those districts where the National Front had absolutely no chance of winning.

The evidence for the mechanical effects of electoral institutions is also mixed. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Carter shows that there is no significant correlation between the disproportional electoral systems—the deviation of seat from vote shares—and the level of far right support in fifteen countries between 1979 and 2003. Moreover, she finds no consistent link between specific institutional features of proportional and majoritarian systems, like district magnitudes and electoral thresholds, and far right voting. Similarly, Norris finds that legal thresholds do not affect the share of the vote for the radical right, though they do affect the share of seats. Other institutional features of electoral systems, like effective thresholds, the index of proportionality, and the mean district magnitude, are also found to have no significant effect on the vote share of the far right.

Future Research

Few postwar phenomena have put so much pressure on European party systems as the far right. No other party family has managed to make such significant electoral inroads across so many countries in such a short time. The geographic scope of the phenomenon compelled earlier work on the far right to look into broad structural changes for its roots. The new studies suggest that this earlier emphasis might have underestimated the role of political agents. To the extent that this agency lies with mainstream actors, the focus of recent scholarship is somewhat comforting: the rise of the far right is not a structural inevitability but the result of political choices, the selection of the proper strategies, appeals, and institutions. Less comforting is the uncertainty, despite the exponential growth of the scholarship, about what these choices should be. This uncertainty reflects the complexity of the phenomenon, not the lack of proper social scientific inquiry. But the mixed findings of the new studies might also point to the need to approach the topic from new angles. Two decades of scholarly inquiry into the far right have been motivated by a single question: Why in some countries, but not in others? This question pushed the search for answers along a common path: the examination of far right performance in national parliamentary elections across western Europe. But this focus on spatial variation has diverted attention from the temporal dimension of the far right puzzle. To exploit fully the theoretical implications of recent work, future research should pay closer attention to this dimension. Attentiveness to the temporal dimension of far right development necessitates the breakdown of the electoral trajectory of far right parties into different phases. The recent contributions seem to recognize the analytical value of this deceptively simple conceptual step, but they stop short of capitalizing on it. To do so, future research should distinguish between earlier and subsequent phases of party development and examine the impact of various factors at each phase. It is plausible that each phase is affected by separate factors. The next step is the clear demarcation of these phases. Here, Carter’s suggestion might be useful: a party’s initial electoral breakthrough—the moment it passes the “threshold of relevance”—can serve to differentiate between its earlier and subsequent development. Norris’s 3 percent threshold, used to distinguish between “fringe” and “relevant” parties, can become an arithmetic indication of party relevance. This stage-like view of party development can shed new light on the analysis of electoral competition. It is plausible that, as far right parties move from the first phase to the second, their electoral fortunes depend less on the behavior of their mainstream opponents and more on their own political choices. In line with this temporal reasoning, the appeal of far-right parties might be more important after their initial breakthrough, while those of mainstream parties might be more significant beforehand. In other words, the relative importance of certain political agents could vary across time. Before the far right becomes big enough to matter, it is reasonable to focus primarily on the strategic choices of mainstream parties, for example, on their programmatic convergence. But
afterwards the examination of party competition must concentrate on both the old and the new competitors. By focusing on the competitive dynamic between mainstream actors and the far right, the analysis is confined to the second phase of party development, missing the first and, arguably, more intriguing phase.

The differentiation among various phases of party development has consequences not only for the relative importance ascribed to political agents, but also for the analysis of their tactical choices. Once far right parties pass the threshold of relevance, they change the competitive environment and, consequently, the range of options available to mainstream parties. Before the far right becomes electorally relevant, mainstream parties might be able to ignore or even to accommodate their claims. But once confronted with a sizable opponent, mainstream parties can no longer ignore the far right. They might try to either accommodate or confront it.27 Similarly, after the far right passes the threshold of relevance, it can be expected to moderate its appeal tactically in order to widen its pool of potential voters. This tactic is exactly what the Austrian Freedom Party adopted after the early 1990s. To extend its original gains, the party replaced its explicit references to the German ethnic community with vague calls for the preservation of German cultural identity.28 Likewise, by the early 1990s the French National Front abandoned its ultrabiblical program and adopted a worker-friendly agenda, which marked the “proletarianization” of its appeal.29 These examples suggest that students of political parties should avoid static conceptions of party ideology and should carefully track the variation in party appeals across time. Contrary to claims about the impact of electoral institutions, the choice between ideological and populist appeals might depend less on the electoral system and more on the stage of party development.

Party competition aside, the breakdown of party development into different phases can also facilitate the reexamination of organizational effects. Arguments about the impact of intraparty structures on far right performance do not distinguish between various stages in party lifespans. But it is reasonable to expect the impact of organization to vary from the first phase to the second. Good organization can help a party sustain or extend its gains after its first breakthrough but might be irrelevant before. As Norris’s analysis implies, even the most disorganized parties, like Pauline Hanson’s One Nation in Australia or Pim Fortuyn’s List in the Netherlands, can still achieve electoral breakthroughs. But without solid organization they are likely to disappear from the electoral prosenium as quickly as they appear. The examination of their organizational deficiencies or strengths can help explain how intraparty structures affect electoral results. This examination might be more rewarding than current research if it is confined to the period after the initial electoral breakthrough.

The emphasis on different phases of party development can also elucidate the impact of the media on far right performance. This role is often acknowledged, but there has been a marked reluctance to examine it systematically.30 Earlier work has suggested, for example, that, unless the media are willing to disseminate their messages, far rightists will not be able to capitalize on the opportunities that are made available in the elec-

366

367
far right parties pass the threshold of relevance, they are harder to combat. Perhaps for this reason, the adoption of tougher immigration policies in countries like France or Austria has failed to suppress electoral support for the far right, and strategies of establishing a cordon sanitaire have not achieved the desired outcome. As far right parties grow, their electoral fortunes are less dependent on the tactical maneuvering of their mainstream competitors or on the mass media.

For countries where the far right has yet to become electorally relevant, this analysis, is good news. Political choices can block its rise. But for the other countries the news might not be as good. The electoral fate of the far right depends a lot on its own leadership, organization, and strategy. In these countries, political efforts could hence focus on limiting the policy influence, rather than the electoral appeal, of the far right. Future research might find that this influence is even more alarming than the far right’s electoral performance.

NOTES

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3. Ibid., p. 27.


10. “The presence or absence of a fascist legacy,” on which Ignazi insists, can best describe the Italian far right, but the MSI is not a typical case in the far right spectrum. Ignazi, p. 33.


16. Ibid., p. 49.

17. In the words of one of the most prominent students of politics, “there is one characteristic of fascism as which all analysts agree it is the central place of nationalism in its ideology, particularly the type of nationalism that goes as far as placing loyalty to the nation ahead of loyalty to the state.” Juan Linz, “Political Space and Fascism as a Late-Come: Conditions Conducive to the Success or Failure of Fascism as a Mass Movement in Interwar Europe,” in Stein Ugelvik Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, and Jan Peter Myklebust, eds., Who were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), p. 161.


23. See, for example, Lipset; Kornhauser.

24. Kitschelt, p. 5.

25. To show this clustering, Kitschelt relies on the 1990 World Values Survey. Subsequent work, including Noram’s analysis of the 2002 European Social Survey, casts doubt on the association Kitschelt found between neoliberal and ethnocentric predispositions. See Norris, p. 182. Norris’s findings are consistent with the apparent turn of some of the most successful far right parties, like the French National Front and the Austrian Freedom Party, away from nationalism in an effort to make electoral inroads into blue-collar constituencies.


27. Norris, p. 23.


30. Amit Aboli, for example, finds that the "overcompensing" of the center facilitates the rise of anti-political-entitlement parties, in which he includes both the far right and the Greens. Similarly, van der Brui, Fransen, and Tiffée show that the d-space between the mainstream right and the far right can explain much


32. Carter, pp. 11-40, finds that the more moderate the mainstream right is, the greater will be the far right vote; the more intense the ideology of the far right is, the lower will be the support; ideological moderation by both the moderate and the far right favors the latter; ideological extremity by both the moderate and the far right harms the latter; and spatial convergence of the mainstream left and the moderate right favors the far right.

33. See ibid., p. 121, for the discussion of the threshold of relevance.

34. Ignazi, pp. 203-4, 207-12.


42. Kneale, The Radical Right, pp. 36-40, finds “only a modest correlation between electoral laws and the strength of the Extreme Right in Europe.” Similarly, in her earlier work Carter found no significant association between electoral systems and the level of far right support. Elizabeth Carter, “Proportional Representation and the Fortunes of Right-wing Extreme Parties,” West European Politics, 25 (July 2002), 125-46. But others have shown that electoral institutions can explain some of the variation in far right support. See Jackman and Volpert; Goldfrank.

43. Norris, p. 18.

44. Carter, The Extreme Right in Western Europe, pp. 194.

45. Norris, p. 103.

46. Whereas the mechanical effects of electoral institutions relate to the “way in which votes are translated into seats,” the psychological effects come about “when voters realize that due to the mechanical workings of the electoral system, small parties may be underrepresented.” Carter, p. 147.

47. To show the potential for far right support, Givens looks at a combination of national, European, and local elections as well as survey data. She argues that the “underlying baseline of support” averages 15 percent in France and Austria but also in Germany, where the far right has performed poorly in national elections. The latter is the case upon which she constructs the most significant component of her puzzle. If possible for far right support hovers around 15 percent in Germany, why has the German far right performed so badly in national elections? But her data for potential far right voting are highly ambiguous. For example, in one of the surveys she cites, 11-18 percent of respondents thought it would be a good idea for the RE and the DVU to copy the Bundestag, but only 3 percent would vote for them. While Givens takes the former to indicate voters’ primary preferences, most analysts would take only the latter. Givens, pp. 10-13.

48. Ibid., p. 131.

49. Givens, pp. 122-25, suggests that the coalition signals sent by the mainstream Right induced voters to down the National Front in the second round of the 1997 legislative elections. This desertion is evident in the districts in which the far right faced both a right- and the left-wing candidate. Since the far right stood no chance to win those districts, due to the plurality rules that apply in the second round of French parliamentary elections, average support for the National Front dropped from 22.6 to 17.3 percent. This drop is not unusual, but even without the far right’s vote would still be deprived of legislative representation.

50. Norris, p. 112.

51. For an excellent analysis of the policy impact of the far right, see the country-specific contributions in Martin Schain, Aristide Zolberg, and Patrick Hussy, eds., Shadows over Europe: The Development and Impact of the Extreme Right in Western Europe (New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2002). Building on the work of Gary Cox, Givens, p. 90, suggests, that “if voters know that their party has no chance of being part of a coalition, they may choose to vote strategically for another party that does have a chance.” See also Gary Cox, Taking Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World’s Electoral Systems (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

52. Givens, p. 123.


56. Norris, p. 53.


59. Ignazi, p. 100.

60. There are a few exceptions. See, for example, David Art, The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Giampaolo Mazzoleni, Julliane Stewart, and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, eds., The Media and Neo-Populism: A Comparative Analysis (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

61. Kitchin, p. 130.


64. See Guy Breneman and Martina Villa, “The Media and Neo-Populism in France,” in Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Bueno de Mesquita, eds., pp. 45-70.


66. Ibid., p. 183.
