Parties after Success: Why some radical right parties persist and others collapse

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Abstract

In the past three decades radical right parties have made important electoral advances in most countries across Western Europe. In some cases such parties have managed to endure and grow after their initial electoral breakthroughs, while in other cases they quickly collapsed. To understand the reasons for their divergent trajectories the paper focuses on the development of four radical right parties after their initial breakthroughs: the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party, the German Republikaner and the Swedish New Democracy. It examines three different factors affecting their trajectories: the strategic responses of mainstream competitors; the positioning of radical right parties in the competitive space; and their internal attributes, like organization and leadership. The party finds no support for the first explanation and some support for the latter two. The analysis shows how electoral success sets in motion a process of internal reorganization, induced by membership expansion and by a push for centralization. In the two successful parties, reorganization facilitated organizational growth and leadership consolidation, while in the two failed cases, it led to organizational disarray and leadership feuds.
Introduction

In the past three decades radical right parties have achieved electoral breakthroughs in most countries across Western Europe. These breakthroughs have granted these parties significant financial, organization and communication resources, giving them the capacity to permanently change the electoral maps in their favor. While in some cases they managed to capitalize on these breakthroughs to sustain and extend their initial electoral gains, in others, they quickly collapsed. The purpose of this paper is to identify the reasons for their divergent trajectories.

The paper engages directly with the now voluminous literature on the radical right, especially with those works emphasizing supply-side determinants of party performance. Building on the findings of this literature, it examines how party positioning and how internal party attributes affect radical right performance at the polls. Departing from earlier works, though, it explores the evolution of radical right parties across time, focusing at one of the most important moments in their lifespans, that of their initial breakthrough. By doing so, it seeks to amass comparative evidence for the unfolding dynamics set in motion once radical right parties become successful, and to analyze the factors affecting their subsequent development. Why do some parties persist while other collapse? Do enduring parties behave differently than flash parties after their initial breakthroughs? Do they have a distinctive set of “winning” attributes that allows them to sustain the electoral momentum and to deflect programmatic pressures from mainstream competitors?

Answers to these questions require an in-depth analysis of the unfolding political dynamics once radical right parties achieve electoral breakthroughs – that is, once their electoral support increases significantly from one election to the other. The ambitions of this paper are more modest. Given the somewhat large universe of these parties (see Table 1) and the difficulty of “looking inside” them, the paper focuses on a small number of cases to generate hypotheses about the factors affecting the evolution of radical right parties after their initial electoral gains.

The first part of the paper situates it within the broader literature on the radical right. Whereas the bulk of this literature focuses on comparisons across countries, this paper takes a temporal view of party development. It argues that once these parties achieve electoral breakthroughs, the factors affecting their electoral fortunes are different than those determining their earlier development. The second section describes the evolution of four parties after such breakthroughs: the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party, the German Republikaner and the Swedish New Democracy. While the former managed to endure after their initial successes, support for the latter quickly collapsed. The third section explores possible explanations for the divergent trajectories of the four parties. The first relates to the strategic response of their mainstream competitors; the second to the positioning of radical right parties in the competitive space; and the third to their internal attributes, like organization and leadership. The conclusion discusses the implications of the findings.
Table 1: Radical Right parties after breakthroughs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Breakthrough</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Result*</th>
<th>% gain</th>
<th>Elect. Traject.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Front (France)</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>Stable growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Party (Austria)</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Rapid growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republikaner (Germany)</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Sharp decline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Democracy (Sweden)</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Sharp decline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Spring (Greece)</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Sharp decline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vlaams Blok/Belang (Belgium)</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Stable growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List Pim Fortuyn (Netherlands)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sharp decline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress Party (Norway)</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Sharp decline, then growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish People's Party</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Stable growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish Progress Party</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Decline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSI/Alleanze Nationale (Italy)</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Stabilization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lega Nord (Italy)</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Growth, decline, growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*National legislative elections; for Republikaner, European elections

Radical right parties across space (and time)

Efforts to account for the electoral fortunes of the radical right abound. There are, by now, hundreds of books, articles and dissertations seeking to explain the phenomenon. Their answers vary depending on the relative weight given to voter and party behavior. Some emphasize the effects of sociological (e.g. Ignazi 1992; Betz 1994; Kitschelt with McGann 1995), economic (e.g. Jackman and Volpert 1996; Knigge 1998; Lubbers et al. 2002) and institutional (e.g. Carter 2002; Golder 2003; Givens 2005; Norris 2005) variables on voter preferences; others focus on how the strategic positioning of parties in the competitive space affects their performance (e.g. Kitschelt with McGann 1995; Abedi 2002; Ignazi 2003; Lubbers et al. 2002; van der Brug et al. 2005; Norris 2005; Carter 2005; Meguid 2005); and a few concentrate on the internal characteristics affecting the behavior of radical right parties, especially their organization and leadership (Betz 1998: 9; Immerfall 1998: 254; Carter 2005; Mudde 2007; Art 2008).

Most of these works ask a similar question: “Why do radical right parties thrive in some countries but not in others?” This has pushed their search for answers along a common path, the examination of radical right performance in national parliamentary elections across Western Europe. This focus on spatial variation has diverted attention from the temporal dimension of this phenomenon. The notable spurts and drops in radical right support in certain countries suggest that this dimension is important. Why does radical right support vary across time?

The focus on temporal variation in party performance necessitates the breakdown of the electoral trajectory of radical right parties into different phases (Ellinas 2007a). This deceptively simple analytical step allows the reexamination of conventional explanations for radical right performance. It is plausible that the weight of each explanation varies
depending on the stage of radical right development. Some factors are likely to be more important during earlier stages in party lifespans, while others might better explain subsequent phases. The task, then, is to identify the different phases and to draw clear lines of demarcation between them.

The need to break down party development into phases directs attention to one of the most intriguing moments in party lifespans, that of their initial electoral breakthrough. This is the moment when a party’s national electoral strength increases significantly to a point where it changes the parameters of political competition. This increase is most noticeable in national elections, when a small party’s strength increases by a few percentiles or when a party passes the national electoral threshold and gains substantial legislative representation. But radical right parties have also made headlines through breakthroughs in European or in local elections. Regardless of how an initial breakthrough is achieved it marks a substantial increase in party strength that crowns minor players with the perception of political relevance.

An initial breakthrough is arguably the most important and most consequential moment in the trajectory of a marginal political party. There are several reasons for this. First, a breakthrough leads to a substantial increase in resources allowing marginal parties to compete in more equal terms with their established competitors. Prior to electoral breakthroughs parties might lack the monetary, communication and organizational resources necessary to disseminate their views. A spurt in electoral support changes this. It grants parties access to increased financial resources, since state subventions are usually related to party strength. It might also give parties greater media visibility, enabling them to take part in televised panel discussions and political debates. Furthermore, electoral advances can boost recruitment efforts helping parties expand their membership base.

Second, a breakthrough changes the parameters of political competition compelling established parties to take notice of the political newcomer. Breakthroughs make marginal parties politically relevant, and hence change the competitive environment and, consequently, the range of options available to mainstream parties. Before the radical right becomes electorally relevant, mainstream parties might afford to ignore their claims. But once confronted with a sizable opponent, the option of ignoring or dismissing (Budge and Farlie 1983; Meguid 2005) radical right claims seems riskier. The improved political standing of the radical right might compel its mainstream competitors to reclaim the lost political space, by co-opting the newcomer’s programmatic agenda. This puts pressure on the radical right to formulate strategic responses to the co-optation strategies of established parties.

Overall, initial breakthroughs lift small parties out of relative obscurity and turn them from backstage into important political actors, hence changing the political environment within which they operate. They confront radical right parties with changed internal and external conditions and furnish them with new opportunities and threats. Sudden spurts in support commence a new phase of party development directing attention to the factors affecting their subsequent development.
The empirical puzzle

To understand the unfolding dynamics after radical right parties achieve electoral breakthroughs, the paper examines the evolution of the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party, the German Republikaner and the Swedish New Democracy. All four parties were led by charismatic individuals who mixed their strong populist appeals with some form of nationalist or anti-immigrant rhetoric. In each of the four countries, radical right parties achieved a breakthrough in a national election, significantly improving their electoral standing. The most spectacular breakthrough was probably that of the National Front. After more than a decade of political irrelevance, the FN got approximately 10% of the vote in the 1984 European elections and the 1985 regional elections, before its success in the 1986 legislative elections. At around the same time, Austria was shocked by the electoral advances of a somewhat similar party to the FN. Having stagnated at around 5% for nearly two decades, the FPÖ nearly doubled its vote in the 1986 elections. The Austrians were not the only ones to be shaken by the rise of a radical right party. The German Republikaner got 7.1% in its first participation in the 1989 European elections six years after its founding. Finally, the newly-found New Democracy received 6.7% in its first participation in Swedish legislative elections.

In all four cases, the sudden spurts in support gave the parties access to bigger funding, boosted their recruitment efforts and increased their visibility in the mainstream media. Moreover, the electoral breakthroughs confronted the radical right with a similar strategic environment. In all these cases, the political neophytes had to confront coalition governments that included or were led by the mainstream right. On the one hand, these governments could reclaim the political space lost to the radical right by using policy instruments, such as stricter asylum or immigration laws. On the other hand, the heterogeneous nature of the coalitions could delay the implementation or the effectiveness of co-optation strategies due to internal disagreements.

Despite the notable similarities in their strategic environments and the parallel growth of their resource pool, their subsequent trajectories varied substantially. For nearly two decades, the National Front witnessed stable electoral growth, which peaked at nearly 17% of the national vote in 2002. Le Pen shocked the French electorate and the world, advancing to the second round of the presidential elections. The FPÖ similarly used its 1986-breakthrough as the basis for rapid growth. Throughout the 1990s the FPÖ staged a series of breakthroughs and by the 1999 legislative elections, it became the second largest party after the Social Democrats receiving 26.9% of the national vote. The party joined the governing coalition in February 2000 prompting the other fourteen EU member states to impose diplomatic sanctions on Austria. In contrast to their French and the Austrian counterparts, the other two parties failed to sustain their initial gains, and by the subsequent elections, collapsed. Only a year after its breakthrough in the 1989 Berlin and European elections, at the 1990 legislative elections of the reunified Germany, Republikaner support dropped to 2.1%. Apart from a series of breakthroughs in regional elections in the early 1990s, party strength has never recovered at the national level. Similarly, the New Democracy proved to be a flash phenomenon. Its support dropped
from 6.7% to 1.2% in the 1994 legislative elections and fell to a mere 0.2% by the 1998 elections.

What accounts for the divergent trajectories of the four parties? Why did the first two parties grow after their initial success, while the other two parties failed? The remaining of the paper examines possible explanations for the contrasting electoral fortunes of the four parties, looking in turn, at the responses of established parties, their own strategic positioning in the competitive space and internal party characteristics, like organization and leadership.

**Competing with the radical right after breakthroughs**

Can mainstream party strategies account for the contrasting electoral fortunes of radical right parties after their initial breakthroughs? A significant strain of theorizing suggests that they can. Although not focusing specifically on the subsequent trajectories of radical right parties, these works propose that the divergence of mainstream parties in the competitive space; the spatial proximity between the mainstream right and the radical right; and the accommodation of radical right issue appeals by mainstream parties, dampen radical right voting (e.g. Kitschelt with McGann 1995: 13-24; Hainsworth 1992: 11; Abedi 2002; van der Brug 2005; Carter 2005; Meguid 2005). Adapting the basic insights of these works to the phased-like approach proposed above, one would expect that the co-optation of the radical right agenda by the established parties would undermine the early inroads of the radical right. Three of the four cases provide a fertile ground to examine the impact of co-optation, while the fourth case, highlights an alternative strategy for blocking the electoral inroads of the radical right.

The sudden collapse of the German Republikaner party after its shocking breakthrough in the 1989 Berlin and European elections is suggestive of how mainstream party shifts in the competitive space affect the fortunes of political newcomers on the radical right. After the Berlin breakthrough in January 1989, poll after poll showed Republikaner support to steadily stand at around 5%. For the first time since the 1960s, in late 1989 it seemed that the Republikaner would be the first radical right party to enter the German federal parliament. Forty percent of those polled in *Spiegel* thought that this was likely and an alarming 13% said they would welcome this development. The Baden-Württemberg municipal elections in the fall of 1989 showed Republikaner reinforced the findings of German pollsters. The party exceeded 10% in three key state cities and received 6.9% and several seats in the Stuttgart city council.

Within a month, however, the breadth of Republikaner support shrank. By December 1989, support for the Republikaner started fading and by early 1990 it dropped to 2% of those regularly polled by *Spiegel* (Graph 1; see also Roth 1990). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the decision to reunify Germany in late November 1989, allowed Kohl to credibly present the Christian Democrats as resolute defenders of German nationhood, co-opting one of the major programmatic appeals of the Republikaner. A long-standing demand of national conservatives like Franz Josef Strauss, the reunification deprived the Republikaner of one its most distinctive demands. Moreover, the Christian Democratic
appeals to the “unity of the nation,” to “one German people” and to “the German fatherland” bolstered German national identity, allowing the CDU and the CSU to reclaim the national conservative political space from the radical right (Ellinas 2007b).

The French and Austrian mainstream right made similar efforts to co-opt the agenda of the radical right but their strategies proved counterproductive. In France, conservative attempts to trespass the programmatic territory of the National Front were evident as early as 1983 but crystallized after the electoral victory of the moderate right in the 1986 elections, which enhanced its capacity to co-opt radical right appeals. While in opposition, the two moderate right parties promised but could not deliver changes to the immigration policy. But their return in government put powerful policy weapons at their disposal, giving them the opportunity to regain issue credibility. To reclaim the political space lost to Le Pen, the new Chirac government introduced tougher immigration laws. This new policy approach was spearheaded by the interior minister, Charles Pasqua, who argued that the only way to win back FN voters was to adopt more muscular immigration policies. The centerpiece of his approach was a new immigration law – the so-called “Pasqua Law” – that introduced more restrictions for the entry and stay of foreigners in France (Fysh 1987). Moreover, the new government sought to reform the nationality code by adopting a less automatic process for citizenship acquisition.

The co-optation strategy of the moderate right proved, at best, to be ineffective. In the 1988 presidential and legislative elections, the FN managed to sustain and extend its earlier gains, consolidating its presence in the French party system. The party continued to grow throughout the 1990s, despite repeated efforts by moderate right governments to stop its electoral momentum by adopting tougher immigration policies. Why did moderate right strategy fail to undermine the electoral strength of the radical right? One reason was that it came too late (Meguid 2002; 2005). By the time the moderate right
made a decisive turn to the right on issues like immigration or national identity, in 1985, the FN had already established credibility on these issues. Another reason was the difficulty the new government had in implementing its stricter immigration policies. The reform of the nationality code proved far more divisive and controversial than Chirac had anticipated and the legislation was withdrawn in 1987 and subsequently, shelved. The backpedaling of the moderate right on immigration reforms along with its delayed response to the rising neophyte prevented the Chirac government from recapturing the political space lost to the FN.

Efforts of the Austrian governing coalition to stop the electoral momentum of the Freedom Party were much swifter and more comprehensive than those of the French moderates but also counterproductive. As in France, the rise of the FPÖ in the 1986 elections induced attempts by mainstream parties to co-opt its agenda by seeking to establish credibility over immigration. Between 1989 and 1992, the grand coalition introduced a series of legislative measures that turned Austria’s immigration regime into one of the most restrictive in Europe. The tougher immigration laws met most FPÖ immigration proposals, prompting its leader Jörg Haider to proclaim, albeit ironically, the fulfillment of his immigration policy. Nevertheless, the accommodative strategies of the two governing parties did not deliver the expected results. Despite the restrictiveness and effectiveness of the newly-introduced measures, the FPÖ retained ownership of the immigration issue throughout the decade (Table 2). In fact, the repeated attempts to recapture the issue helped to sustain its salience among the electorate and seem to have benefited the FPÖ, which was widely perceived as the most competent party to handle it.

**Table 2: Issue competence of the FPÖ, 1990-1998**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue area</th>
<th>Policy competence ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fighting corruption</td>
<td>3 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get control of the &quot;foreigners' question&quot;</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent waste of public money</td>
<td>2 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting crime</td>
<td>n.a. 3 3 3 3 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(In response to the question: "Could you please tell me for each of the following items, which of the parties - the SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, Greens, or LF - will be all the more likely to work hard in...")

Source: Müller 2002: 169

Whereas German, French and Austrian moderates sought to stop the electoral momentum of the radical right by co-opting its agenda, their Swedish counterparts pursued a different strategy. Instead of trying to capture the programmatic terrain of the radical right they chose to ignore it (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Rydgren 2006: 69-71). Since the 1960s when the country started having a steady flow of immigrants, there was a political consensus in Sweden in favor of immigration. This started changing in the late 1980s, when an increased flow of asylum seekers and local protests started putting the issue on the political agenda. After the electoral breakthrough of New Democracy, the issue became even more salient, in part due to the xenophobic appeals of the new party and in part due to the sharp downturn in economic activity, which increased fiscal strains and highlighted the financial difficulty of the state to deal with the rising number of foreign
welfare recipients and asylum seekers. The economic crisis of the early 1990s created an opportunity for the conservative government to divert attention to new issues and to connect immigration with the waning economic fortunes of the country. But the moderate parties of the right chose to avoid dealing with immigration, and focused, instead, on traditional materialist issues. This was despite the growing visibility of the immigration issue in the political discourse and the increasing resentment Swedes felt against the rising number of asylum seekers flowing into the country – especially, during the war in Yugoslavia (e.g. Rydgren 2002: 38). More importantly, the strategic choice to disregard immigration came at a time when New Democracy was best placed to put the issue on the political agenda and to benefit from it. Notwithstanding the obvious risks to the strategy of the moderate right, it seems to have worked, as the New Democracy failed to capitalize on the issue and, by the 1994 elections, it collapsed. But as the following sections show, its collapse was due to other factors, as well.

Radical right positioning after success

The above analysis points to the limitations of explanations attributing radical right performance to mainstream party strategies alone. Since similar strategies in Germany, France and Austria delivered opposite results, while contrasting strategies in Germany and Sweden had comparable results, one must go beyond mainstream party positioning to understand the divergent trajectories of radical right parties after their breakthroughs. Breakthroughs endow these parties with enhanced resources enabling them to compete with mainstream parties on a more equal basis. Prior to their initial electoral breakthroughs radical right parties might be at the whims of mainstream party strategies but afterwards, they are better able to shape their own electoral fates. How does their maneuvering in the competitive space affect their subsequent electoral trajectories? And how do they respond to the strategic moves of their mainstream competitors?

The maneuvering of radical right parties in the competitive space is a function of the strategic situation they find themselves in. To some extent, all four parties examined here confronted a somewhat similar situation because the moderate right was in government after their breakthroughs. This gave the moderate right the opportunity to use policy instruments to address the programmatic concerns the radical right raised. But as the Chirac government found out during its failed attempt to reform the nationality code, incumbency also limits strategic flexibility, thereby leaving the radical right considerable political space to maneuver. The strategic situation radical right parties confront is also shaped by the way mainstream parties choose to compete with them. The Republikaner, the National Front and the Freedom Party had to respond to mainstream party efforts to co-opt their agenda, while in Sweden, New Democracy had to address the disregard of its signature issue by mainstream competitors. The remaining of this section examines how each of the four parties positioned themselves in the competitive space after their breakthroughs.

After its breakthroughs in the 1989 Berlin and European elections, the Republikaner was well-placed to benefit from growing dissatisfaction with established parties and from the tensions the *Wende* created within the Christian Democratic camp (Ellinas 2007b).
While German reunification deprived the party a major component of its comprehensive nationalist platform, the Republikaner could still benefit from the increasing public resentment against immigration and from conservative efforts to reinterpret German history. Both issues offered the Republikaner the opportunity to present itself as a credible defender of German identity and as the rightful heir of Franz Josef Strauss’s legacy, the conservative leader of the Bavarian CSU who died in October 1988. Moreover, the programmatic emphasis on immigration was very well-timed, as German reunification and the collapse of the Soviet bloc gave rise to a significant influx of East German emigrants, ethnic German resettlers and refugees. The influx of new immigrants increased the salience of the issue and created considerable divisions within the CDU-led government coalition on how to address it. Along with the populist attacks of the Republikaner against the political establishment, which tapped on widespread public disaffection with older parties, its comprehensive nationalist platform placed it in position to sustain and extend its initial electoral gains. At the same time, however, the strategic maneuvering of the party confronted two major problems. The first was its support for ethnic and East German immigration to West Germany, which contrasted with the views of the vast majority of German public opinion, and more importantly, with those of its supporters. The second was its failure to supplement its national populist rhetoric with a comprehensive social program to address the economic concerns of its predominantly working class and economically disadvantaged electorate (Betz 1990: 54-56).

Like the Republikaner, the French National Front put forth a comprehensive nationalist platform, which allowed it to appear as a credible ideological alternative to the moderate right and to unite the somewhat heterogeneous groups that made up the core of party supporters. Throughout the 1980s, the FN established itself as the defender of French identity and culture and as a bulwark against the multiculturalism of the left. The issue of immigration has been at the epicenter of its ideological platform. Since the late 1970s the party turned immigration into its signature issue, connecting it with both unemployment and crime. By the mid-1980s, repeated surveys showed that the party had managed to establish credibility on the issue: a large segment of its voters considered immigration and the related issue of insecurity to be the primary determinants of their voting preferences. Upon its return to government in 1986, the moderate right sought to reclaim the immigration issue from the radical right by introducing a stricter immigration law and by trying to reform the nationality code. But the FN managed to fend off attempts to outflank it by upping the stakes and continuously shifting the goalposts. For example, when the Chirac government publicized its plan to deport illegal immigrants, Le Pen diverted attention to the welfare benefits immigrants enjoyed. By the late 1980s, the FN stopped making distinctions between legal and illegal immigrations, suggesting the deportation of both (Fysh and Wolfreys 1992). The effective maneuvering of the party in the competitive space was partly due to effective incorporation of new issues into its programmatic repertoire. In the late 1980s, for instance, the party tuned in to the public discourse over a headscarf incident, successfully linking it with immigration while adding a religious, anti-Islamic component to its nationalist platform (e.g. Bréchon and Mitra 1992). The successful resistance of efforts by the traditional right to outflank it was also due to the capacity of the FN to continuously generate new policy proposals, which provided further points of differentiation from established parties. In the early 1990s, for
example, the party published a fifty-point document outlining specific policy proposals for dealing with immigration.

After its 1986 breakthrough, the Austrian Freedom Party also managed to successfully position itself in the competitive space. Like the Republikaner and the National Front, the FPÖ espoused a comprehensive nationalist ideology, one rooted in the pan-German tradition of Austrian politics. In the midst of the international crisis created by the Waldheim affair, Haider relied on the revival of this tradition to win the party leadership in 1986. In the subsequent years, the party tactfully distanced itself from pan-Germanism and put forth a new version of Austrian nationalism. Emphasizing German cultural, instead of ethnic identity, this new nationalism allowed the FPÖ to extend its appeals to new issues and to tap into a wider pool of potential voters. The party managed to link its broad nationalist platform with the immigration issue, which grew in importance and in salience in the late 1980s, after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc and the war in Yugoslavia. As early as 1987, during the campaign for the Vienna elections, the FPÖ made a connection between the 140,000 unemployed Austrians and the 180,000 immigrant workers in Austria – a calculation it repeated many times afterwards (Gärtner 2002: 18-19). As seen before, in the next few years the party managed to establish credibility on the issue and to resist mainstream party efforts to reclaim it. When mainstream parties introduced a series of legislative bills tightening the screw on immigration, the FPÖ sought to outbid them, just like the National Front did. Unrestrained by the burden of implementing its policy proposals, the FPÖ used its easy access to the media to continuously move the goalposts on immigration beyond the point that the governing parties could afford to move. The most notable example of this strategy of outbidding was the initiation of a petition drive in early 1993 called “Austria First” to “secure the right to a fatherland for all Austrian citizens and, from this standpoint, ensure a restrained immigration policy in Austria” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 152, chapter 4). The 12-point petition included many of the measures already introduced by the government but went beyond them in calling for a constitutional ban and an immediate halt on immigration as well as a quota on foreigners in classrooms.

Apart from outbidding the coalition on immigration restrictions, the FPÖ was also able to consistently extend its nationalist appeals to new issues. In the 1990 elections, for example, the party turned Austrian neutrality into a campaign issue, and later, it opposed Austrian EU entry linking accession with the influx of East European immigrants to the country. After the mid-1990s, the party incorporated social themes into its program and by the late 1990s it received more worker voters than the Austrian Socialists. The social turn of the party, which was similar to that of the FN in the early 1990s (e.g. Ignazi 2003), was accompanied, in the 1999 elections, with an opening to women through the proposal for child support (the Kinderscheck). There was also an opening to traditional conservative constituencies. Abandoning the anticlerical position of the national-liberal camp, the party devoted an entire chapter in its 1997 program on Christianity and saw itself “as an ideal partner of Christian churches.”

Like the other three parties, New Democracy employed a populist anti-establishment strategy, which set it apart from the political mainstream. But unlike its German, French
and Austrian counterparts, New Democrats did not have a comprehensive nationalist ideology. The party mostly emphasized economic issues demanding lower taxes, less bureaucracy and the privatization of state enterprises. Immigration was largely a supplementary issue in the first party program and it was largely framed in economic, not cultural terms. This started changing, though, after its 1991 breakthrough. To capitalize on the growing political salience of the issue and increasing public resentment against foreigners, the party turned immigration into a focal point of its programmatic agenda. At a time of economic crisis and fiscal pressures, the programmatic shift of New Democracy seemed to have significant electoral potential. But the strategic positioning of the party confronted two important shortcomings. The first was its failure to extend the nationalist undertones of its immigration stance to other issues. EU accession was an issue with obvious electoral potential because of the considerable percentage of Swedes – and ND supporters – who opposed it. Absent a nationalist ideological basis, the party failed to see this potential and instead, it continued to support it against the wishes of its electorate. The programmatic reorientation of the party after its breakthrough resulted in another strategic challenge. Anti-foreigner calls tend to appeal to those who might feel economically threatened by immigration. This means that the persistence of radical right parties requires the development of a social program to supplement their anti-immigrant or nationalist appeals. Insisting on a largely neoliberal platform, New Democracy failed to develop a social program to address the concerns of those most likely to be affected by the influx of foreign labor.

Internal party characteristics

The analysis of patterns of political competition tends to view parties as billiard balls moving around the competitive space but a growing body of literature seeks to understand parties from within (Berman 1997). Internal party structures can influence how parties position themselves in the competitive space (e.g. Kitschelt 1994; Kitschelt with McGann 1995; Berman 1997) and can even affect electoral outcomes (e.g. Carter 2005; Art 2008). This is particularly the case after parties achieve electoral breakthroughs. Sudden spurts in electoral support create strategic dilemmas for parties on how to sustain and extend their gains. There are at least two types of dilemmas. One is about the strategic positioning of the party and the other is about the utilization of newly gained resources. While all parties constantly confront these dilemmas, radical right parties find themselves in a particularly precarious position when trying to resolve them after breakthroughs. Breakthroughs grant radical right parties much bigger resources than they are used to handle. If they lack the organizational infrastructure to deal with this sudden enhancement of their resources, they might collapse under the pressure of their own success. One example relates to human resources. Breakthroughs change the internal dynamics of political parties giving newly elected officials increased authority to shape party strategy. Party leaders are usually the prime beneficiaries of breakthroughs but they are not the only ones. Breakthroughs might grant parliamentary representation and state resources to previously unimportant party officials, giving them relative autonomy from the leadership and the capacity to shape the future course of the party. Moreover, breakthroughs bring about the expansion of the membership base of a party. New members can increase the capacity of small parties to mobilize voters but can
also exercise pressure on party leaders to adopt suboptimal strategies. This section examines how breakthroughs affect the internal life of political parties and their capacity to sustain their electoral momentum.

One of the most notable effects after party breakthroughs is the marked improvement of their recruitment capacity. Spurts in electoral support increase the visibility and the electoral prospects of smaller parties inducing more people to join them. Within a year after its breakthrough in the Berlin elections, the German Republikaner managed to almost triple its membership, from 8,500 in December 1988 to 25,000 by December 1989 (Backes and Jesse 1993). On account of its 1989 electoral breakthroughs the Republikaner also collected nearly 17.4 million deutsche marks in campaign reimbursements, most of it for the European elections. Having spent less than a third of this, the party ended the year with a big surplus.

Nevertheless, the organizational growth and financial consolidation of the Republikaner proved inadequate to help it sustain its electoral momentum. Although party membership expanded considerably in 1989, it was largely concentrated in Bavaria where it was founded in 1983 (Stöss 1990: 54). This prevented the party from contesting local elections, like those in North-Rhine Westphalia. In combination with the visibility obstacles the party confronted after 1989 (Ellinas 2007b), the failure of the Republikaner to expand its organizational reach beyond Bavaria limited its capacity to mobilize support outside its regional stronghold. The narrow membership base of the party became obvious in the 1990 legislative elections: while the party contested in all states, it received nearly a third of its 987,269 votes in Bavaria, where it received 5% of the vote. The reunification of Germany added to the organizational difficulties of the party, as it found it hard to set up effective regional organizations in the East German states. In the first elections of the reunified Germany, party support in all five new states was significantly lower than its overall result of 2.1%.

The subsequent development of the Republikaner was also affected by the failure of its leader, Franz Schönhuber, to consolidate his authority over the various factions within the party. Less than a year after its breakthrough in the European elections, the party witnessed an intense leadership struggle between moderates and extremists. Bitter infighting about the future course of the party diverted its resources away from the critical task of further organizational expansion. The leadership struggle led to the resignation of Schönhuber in May 1990 who came under fire from regional organizations and other party leaders for his authoritarian leadership style. After a series of litigation moves, public insults and staged walk-outs, he won reelection in a highly divisive and chaotic party congress in Ruhrstorf. Representing the moderate faction of the party, Schönhuber quickly moved to expel his opponents depriving the party human resources necessary for its future development. Other top party functionaries, like European Parliament members Köhler and Shoduruck, resigned voluntarily. By August 1990, the internal feud led to a 40%-drop in party membership, which fell to 15,000. Instead of using its previous breakthroughs as basis to grow its electoral strength, the party collapsed due to leadership and organizational failures that made it vulnerable to Christian Democratic co-optation strategies.
While the breakthrough of the Republikaner became the impetus for internal factionalism and disarray, in France, it set the basis for the organizational growth and leadership consolidation of the National Front. The series of breakthroughs in secondary elections brought to the FN an entire army of new recruits, which helped the party expand its organizational base beyond its purported local stronghold at Dreux. At a time of growing recruitment difficulties for established parties, the FN managed to increase its membership from a few thousands in the early 1980s to 65,000 in 1986 (Perrineau 1997: 46; see also Birenbaum 1992). In part, the new recruits came from the ranks for the RPR and the UDF and brought with them considerable organizational experience. The organizational spread of the party increased its capacity to contest local elections. In the 1985 cantonal elections, the party presented 1521 candidates to contest seats in the 1945 cantons, compared to 65, three years earlier (e.g. Schain 1988).

Throughout this early period, the FN also managed to improve its organizational structure. While in the 1970s the FN was a lose association of extreme right networks, towards the late 1980s it grew into a “centralized machine with a strong pyramid-like organization” (Marcus 1995: 47). Under the organizational leadership of Stirbois – and after 1988, of Carl Lang – the party set up parallel structures in all French departments and created numerous local sections across the country (Simmons 1997: 187-191). Mirroring the organization of the French communists, the regional and local branches formed the crucial links between the party and its growing number of voters. The organizational strength of the party was reinforced by associated organizations, like the Institut de Formation Nationale, which was formed in 1985 to organize training functions across the country. The themes of the conferences and seminars organized by the Institute included party ideology and principles as well electoral organization and public speaking. The Institute also issued a multi-volume manual with check-lists for how to set up a local branch, deal with the press and design party posters.

Changes in the organizational structure of the FN allowed Le Pen to consolidate his position within the party. Intraparty mechanisms granted Le Pen near absolute discretion in appointments to the political bureau and to the central committee of the party. Moreover, the national leadership had full control over potential candidates in local and regional elections. This ensured leadership continuity at the top echelons of the party, despite the large number of new recruits. Another mechanism of leadership control was the establishment of committees overlooking ideological orthodoxy and internal discipline with the organization. Dissent was dealt with decisively and, during this critical years of party consolidation, helped sustain party coherence (Ivaldi 1998). The centralization of authority was also achieved through party statutes that prevented contact between the various regional and local branches. Centralization helped Le Pen unify the heterogeneous groupings that made up the FN and minimize the factionalism brought about by the rapid recruitment of new members. Apart for these mechanisms for the centralization of power, Le Pen was also able to consolidate his power position in the party by becoming the unifying link between the various heterogeneous constituencies that co-existed in the FN. Key representatives of the major tendencies (e.g. royalists, Catholics, solidaristes, ex-collaborators and the Nouvelle Droite) were granted a say in
major party organs and each group had its own publications and principles. This allowed the various tendencies to communicate directly with their members, acting as a transmission belt between Le Pen and voters. The undisputed leadership of Le was demonstrated in both the 1990 and 1994 conferences of the party, in which he was reelected as party leader by all delegates.

Unlike its other three counterparts, the FPÖ already had an established organizational apparatus when it achieved its electoral breakthrough in 1986. The party contested all national elections since 1956, had a continuous presence in parliament and for a short period of three years, it also participated in the Socialist-led government coalition. But by the time Haider rose to the leadership of the party, its organizational capacity had reached its limits, as government participation started taking a toll on new member recruitment. In the early 1980s, party membership peaked at 37,517 and then dropped after the small coalition came into effect in 1983 (Graph 2). The 1986-breakthrough reversed this downward trend. In the next fifteen years, party membership grew by nearly 39%, from 36,925 in 1986 to 51,296 in 2000. This growth was smaller than the multifold growth of FPÖ’s electorate during this period, but it sharply contrasted with the membership decline of the two major parties (Müller 1992, Luther 2000, Luther 2006). The party managed to sustained and expand its membership base, even after its 1993 split, when a number of prominent liberal parliamentarians left the FPÖ and founded the Liberal Forum.

![Graph 2: FPÖ membership, 1956-2004](image)

Sources: Müller 1992 up to 1990; Luther 2006 after 1990. Reproduced with permission from authors.

Apart from a marked improvement in its organizational resources, the electoral breakthrough of the FPÖ helped consolidate Haider’s leadership position. Ascending to the leadership of the party only a month before the legislative elections, Haider was credited with the reversal of its waning electoral fortunes. The repeated electoral advances of the FPÖ in the seven Landtag elections held between 1986 and 1990 made Haider synonymous with the party, giving him unprecedented leverage to determine its
ideological direction. This was especially so after his personal triumph in the 1989 Carinthian elections and his appointment as governor. Unlike his predecessor, Haider was able to make full use of the formal powers granted to the party leader to turn the FPÖ into what critics unflatteringly called the Führer-party. In the early 1990s, Haider extended his power within the party by changing the party statutes and by setting up new intraparty structures such as the “leader’s office.” Along with the departure of the five dissenting MPs who founded the Liberal Forum, the institutional changes within the party reinforced the trend towards centralization. Towards the late 1990s, this trend was further strengthened by the increased intervention of the national leadership in provincial party activities, including those related to candidate selection. The recruitment of party outsiders to stand for key elected posts strengthened the national leadership, as the new recruits lacked organizational footholds within the party and were directly dependent on Haider (Luther 2000: 434). Up to 2000, he made all important strategic and personnel decisions in the party, often announcing them in public before discussing them internally (Müller 2004 et al.: 161). Haider’s leadership style created tensions with party functionaries, especially towards the late 1990s, when a number of regional organizations refused to give in to pressures from the national party leadership on candidate selection. But overall, his power position within the party was so strong that he managed to emerge from these internal battles unscathed.

The organizational evolution and leadership consolidation in the FPÖ increased its adaptability to the changing political environment. Despite its membership expansion, the FPÖ apparatus remained small enough to grant the party leadership the flexibility necessary to maneuver in the competitive space. Even at its peak, FPÖ membership was a fraction of that of the SPÖ and the ÖVP, which boasted more than half a million members each or nearly a third of their respective electorates. Unlike that of its mainstream competitors, the FPÖ apparatus afforded the party leadership considerable discretion rather than constraining it through elaborate control mechanisms or bureaucratic decision-making procedures. As the previous section showed, this slim organizational structure allowed the FPÖ to swiftly claim ownership of new issues and drop older ones.

Unlike the other three parties examined here New Democracy was a completely new party achieving its 1991 breakthrough without even a basic organizational apparatus. As in the other three cases, though, the electoral success became the impetus for its membership expansion and for a marked improvement of its financial resources. Within less than a year the party claimed more than 5,000 members. Its substantial representation in parliament gave it success to generous state subventions while the business connections of its founders granted it access to corporate funding.

The endowment of the party with increased resources did not suffice, though, to improve its organizational infrastructure and to consolidate the position of its leaders within the party. The two leaders of the party, Ian Wachtmeister and Bert Karlsson, chose to avoid setting up a complex organizational structure, in part to reinforce the anti-party image of ND and in part to concentrate authority in their own hands. In the next few years, the party failed to set up an effective administrative structure to support its parliamentary
group and to handle the flow of human and financial resources (Sörensen-Rhenman 1993). In addition, the party did not form any supplementary organizations to facilitate voter mobilization, like youth or women’s organizations. More importantly, ND purposefully avoided the establishment of local organizations to mediate between the national leadership of the party and its voters. Instead, ND created a franchise system, whereby local associations were not financed by, but needed to pay the national party to use its name. This created considerable tension between the national and the local leadership, and accusations that Wachtmeister was running the party in a “dictatorial manner.”

The organizational shortcomings of the party might have not been so critical for its subsequent development had it not been for the leadership struggles that ensued within a year after its breakthrough. In strictly organizational terms, leadership issues were bound to arise because of the bicephalous structure of the party. Although Wachtmeister was the official leader of the party, the other founder, Karlsson had considerable leverage within the party and used it to try pushing it in a different direction than the one advocated by his partner. After 1992, the bicephalous structure of the party became an impediment to its future growth because the two leaders disagreed over nearly everything. The most important disagreements were those regarding strategy: while Wachtmeister was more of a pragmatist, Karlsson proved to be more of an idealist. Wachtmeister was willing to compromise the anti-establishment rhetoric of the party and sometimes to support the non-Socialist government, but Karlsson remained committed to it on ideological grounds and disapproved of any tactical support for the government. Their disagreements led to the resignation of Wachtmeister and to a protracted leadership reshuffle during which the party changed two leaders. Interestingly, when Wachtmeister resigned, Karlsson refused to step in declaring himself as incompetent for leadership (Rydgren 2006; Svåsand and Wörlund 2005). Along with the other organizational deficiencies, the split among the two party founders led to its quick slide in the polls, and its drop to a mere 1.2% in the 1994 elections. Party membership, which is thought to have picked to 9,000 in 1992, dropped to 2,500 in 1994 (Widfeldt 1999).

Conclusion

This paper examined the trajectories of radical right parties after their initial breakthroughs to understand why some of them persisted after such successes while others collapsed. The analysis focused on the evolution of four parties: the German Republikaner, French FN, the Austrian FPÖ and the Swedish New Democracy. All four enjoyed a significant spurt in electoral support which boosted their access to financial, organizational, and communication resources; and they all had to compete with a government coalition led by the moderate right. But their subsequent trajectories diverged: the French and Austrian radical right thrived, while the German and Swedish collapsed. By analyzing the unfolding dynamics after their initial success, the paper highlighted the various processes shaping their performance.

In line with a considerable strain of theorizing on the radical right, the paper assessed first, the impact of mainstream party strategies, especially those of the moderate right.
The analysis concludes that the strategic maneuvering of mainstream parties in the competitive space cannot adequately account for the performance of radical right parties. Efforts to trespass the programmatic territory of the radical right were effective in Germany but failed in France and Austria. In Sweden, the strategy of the moderate right to ignore the immigration issue proved effective but only in combination with factors discussed below.

Mainstream party strategies cannot adequately account for the electoral trajectories of radical right parties because, after breakthroughs, these parties are better able to shape their own fates. Radical right parties like the FN and the FPÖ used their newly gained resources to sustain the ownership of their signature issues by outbidding mainstream parties and by continuously generating new policies. Their “winning formula” for persistence also included the incorporation of social issues into their nationalist programs to match the gradual “proletarianization” of their electorate. Interestingly, the two unsuccessful parties were those that failed to supplement their xenophobic appeals with social themes. In some ways, both the Republikaner and ND were ideally placed to benefit from the growing salience of the immigration. In other ways, though, they were unable to overcome the ideological inconsistencies in their platforms and to take the best possible position in the competitive space.

The suboptimal positioning of some radical right parties turns attention to the internal processes set in motion after their breakthroughs. Based on the analysis of the four parties, the most notable of such processes is reorganization, which is induced, in part, by their membership expansion as well as by efforts of their leaders to centralize authority. In the two successful parties, reorganization facilitated organizational growth and leadership consolidation, while in the two failed cases, it led to organizational disarray and leadership feuds. The diverging fortunes of the two parties highlight the effects of two distinct variables. The first relates to organizational structures: persisting parties have extensive organizational networks and clear hierarchies that collapsing parties lack. The second variable relates to the configuration of power relations within the party. In persisting parties, leaders manage to rise above factional rivalries and improve their power position against internal opposition. Their push to centralize authority helps consolidate their standing within the party. In collapsing parties, leaders become part of factional power struggles and hence their centralization efforts backfire, undermining their internal power position.

More cases and more research would be needed to determine why some parties persist and others collapse after their breakthroughs. The evidence presented here is enough, though, to suggest the need to pay closer attention to what happens inside parties after success. It is also enough to point to the risks involved in efforts to regain the programmatic territory of the radical right by co-opting its agenda. Contrary to what mainstream politicians might think, radical right parties sometimes have the capacity to sustain ownership of their signature issues and to claim new ones. This is especially the case, when the political neophytes have effective organizations and powerful leadership.
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