Chaotic but Popular? Extreme-Right Organisation and Performance in the Age of Media Communication

Antonis A. Ellinas, College of the Holy Cross

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/antonis_ellinas/4/
Chaotic but Popular? Extreme-Right Organisation and Performance in the Age of Media Communication

ANTONIS A. ELLINAS*
College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

ABSTRACT  A notable strain in the literature suggests that party organisation has a net causal effect on the electoral performance of extreme-right parties. This view rests on a somewhat fuzzy definition and static conceptualisation of party organisation. Moreover, this organisational exegesis fails to fully acknowledge the impact of media communications on modern parties. The analysis of the evolution of the French National Front and the consideration of other extreme-right party trajectories casts doubt on conventional accounts of organisational effects pointing to various venues for future research. Party organisation does not affect how parties perform at the ballot box during their earlier phase of development but seems to explain why some parties survive their initial electoral breakthroughs while others collapse. The media can help parties overcome their early organisational deficiencies, but can also undermine future organisational growth.

KEY WORDS: extreme right, National Front, party organisation, media, electoral breakthrough

Does the organisation of a political party affect its performance at the ballot box? A notable strain in the voluminous literature on West European extreme-right parties suggests that it does. Some works find a direct link between organisation and performance (Taggart, 1996; Betz, 1998; Immerfall, 1998; Lubbers et al., 2002; Carter, 2005; Art, 2008), while others consider this link to be indirect, through the effect of organisation on the choice of party strategies and appeals (for example, Kitschelt & McGann, 1995). Party organisation, of course, is rarely thought of as a single cause of party performance but part of a broader range of explanations for the divergent electoral fortunes of the extreme right in Western Europe. At the most basic level, though, the key claim is that organisation has a net causal effect on electoral outcomes. The purpose of this article is to re-examine this claim by pointing to the limitations of organisational arguments and by suggesting the need to reconsider them in light of the growing importance of the media.

Treated here as a political resource for the dissemination of political information, the media helps extreme-right parties overcome their organisational or financial deficiencies. Especially during their earlier trajectory, before they achieve major electoral
breakthroughs, extreme-right parties need the media to publicise their views to national publics. The media can help such parties communicate their messages to much broader audiences than their organisational or financial resources would otherwise allow. Moreover, they can confer legitimacy and authority to political newcomers and they can dispel voter doubts about their electoral viability. In this sense, the media control the gateway for the entry of the extreme right to the electoral market. Where the media are willing to grant extreme-right parties outsized exposure, they will be able to achieve electoral breakthroughs even in the absence of basic organisational infrastructure. It is only after such breakthroughs that party organisation matters, helping parties to efficiently utilise their newly gained human, financial and communication resources and to sustain and extend their earlier voter gains.

To discuss the relevance of party organisation in the age of media communication, the article empirically focuses on the evolution of the French National Front (Front National, FN) though using evidence from other West European cases as well. The FN is one of the best known extreme-right parties in Europe and a good test case for arguments linking organisational strength with success at the ballot box. In the past few decades, the FN has become a potent and permanent force in French politics. Despite the strong majoritarian qualities of the French electoral system, the FN has averaged more than 9 per cent in all but the most recent national legislative elections since 1986. Jean Marie Le Pen, who failed to collect the 500 signatures necessary to run for the 1981 presidential elections, staged the biggest upset in modern French politics by making it to the second round of the 2002 presidential elections. Party officials and political commentators alike tend to associate the successful trajectory of the FN to its internal structure, pointing to its dense organisational network, its centralised decision-making and its charismatic leadership (for example, Mayer, 1998: 22; DeClair, 1999; Carter, 2005, pp. 83–85; Mudde, 2007).

The first section of this article reviews the literature on the organisation of extreme-right parties, situating it within the broader literature on the extreme right and identifying some conceptual and empirical challenges. The second and lengthiest part examines each of these challenges by examining the evidence available in the secondary literature for the FN as well as for other European extreme-right parties. The third section concludes by summarising the limitations of organisational arguments and by highlighting venues for future research.

**Party Organisation and Electoral Success**

While there is a long academic tradition that emphasises the importance of party organisation (for example, Ostrogorski, 1902; Michels, 1915; Panebianco, 1988), efforts to explicitly link organisational attributes with electoral outcomes are somewhat new (but see Janda, 1983). They are part of a broader intellectual project that seeks to understand parties from within (Berman, 1997). Instead of treating ‘each party as though it were a single person’ (Downs, 1957, p. 26), recent work on political parties examines how intraparty structures affect the way parties respond to environmental challenges (for example, Kitschelt, 1994; Lawson, 1994).

Regarding the extreme right, the argument about the importance of organisation comes in different variants. In its original formulation, the link between organisation and performance is indirect: intraparty structures shape electoral outcomes by affecting how parties position themselves in the competitive space. The existence of a strong leader, for
example, is thought to signal to voters a programmatic inclination to authoritarian values. It might also facilitate the recruitment of militants, which in turn, might hinder a party’s programmatic flexibility (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995, p. 3; also pp. 70–72). Organisational dynamics are not the sole determinants of electoral performance but part of a much broader theoretical framework. Within this framework, intraparty structures come to the fore only after changes in the political environment create opportunities for the rise of extreme-right parties.

A stronger version of this argument views extreme-right success as a direct result of organisational factors. As one analysis suggested ‘one of the most important determinants of success is party organisation. The most successful radical right-wing populist parties are led by charismatic figures capable of setting the political and programmatic direction. In addition, most parties display a highly centralised organisational structure, with decisions being made at the top by a relatively circumscribed circle of party activists and transmitted to the bottom’ (Betz, 1998, p. 9). Empirical studies have found considerable support for this argument. Relying on expert judgment surveys, one study has found that party organisation, leadership charisma and active membership are important in explaining variation in extreme-right performance (Lubbers et al., 2002). Another study has similarly demonstrated that well-organised and well-led parties perform better than badly-organised and badly-led ones (Carter, 2005). A more recent analysis has lent further support to organisational arguments by attributing the divergent electoral trajectories of the Flemish and the Wallonian extreme right to differences in their organisational strength (Art, 2008). Overall, these studies commonly argue that organisational factors are an important or the most important determinant of extreme-right performance. While intraparty organisation is usually considered alongside other explanatory factors, it is thought to have a net causal effect on electoral outcomes, which is distinct from the effect of those other factors (Kitschelt, 2007).

Despite their currency among students of the extreme right, organisational explanations confront a number of challenges. The first is conceptual: because party organisation is rarely defined, it remains a fuzzy concept. The usage of the term in the scholarly literature tends to conflate features that are specific to organisational structures with broader party characteristics, such as leadership qualities. The second challenge stems from the reliance on measures of organisational strength that are too static to capture the deterioration or improvement in party organisations across time. Comparative analyses of party organisations take snapshots of intraparty structures treating organisations as constants. This exacerbates what is thought to be the biggest weakness of organisational exegeses: the direction of causality. While it is reasonable to expect well-organised parties to perform better at the polls, it is as reasonable to suppose that electoral success enhances party organisational resources. The third and most important challenge relates to the advent of mass communications, which reduces the reliance of political parties on organisational resources for electoral success. Media access gives parties the capacity to communicate their messages to much wider audiences than their organisational infrastructure or financial resources would otherwise allow. The emphasis in the literature on organisational effects seems to ignore the implications of media access for party organisations.

The remainder of this article examines in more detail each of these challenges using evidence from one of the best known extreme-right cases, that of the FN, and to a lesser extent from other country cases. Since so much has already written about the French
extreme right, the analysis focuses on the intraorganisational structures of the FN rather than on the history of the party or the broader context within which it thrived.

**What is Organisation?**

Despite its frequent use in analyses of extreme-right performance, party organisation remains an elusive term that defies rigorous theoretical conceptualisation. In part this is a definitional problem, as most scholarly works avoid specifying what party organisation really means. The lack of a clear definition complicates efforts to spell out the causal mechanisms through which internal organisation affects electoral performance and to assess the impact of organisation on electoral outcomes. For the purposes of this discussion, there are at least three aspects of party organisation that are relevant to the analysis of extreme-right performance.

The first relates to the institutional configuration of political parties—to the formalised procedures for the execution of party strategy and tactics. Well-organised parties are thought to be those with non-personal, established and efficient ways of performing party functions. These parties are likely to be complex organisations with well-structured layers of authority and, in some cases, an extensive network of auxiliary organisations, like professional associations or labour unions. A second aspect of organisation relates to the internal distribution of power. This refers to the degree of top-down control, the easier it is for parties to respond effectively to environmental stimuli and to adjust their ideological course to changing voter preferences (for example, Kitschelt, 1994). A third dimension of intraparty organisation relates to the degree of consensus among the individuals and groups making up the party about its strategy and tactics. The more coherent an organisation, the easier it is to convince voters that it is a credible and viable aggregator of their preferences. Parties with high degrees of factionalism and infighting will find it difficult to be successful at the ballot box (Janda, 1983).

The FN is largely perceived as a well-organised party because it is a complex organisation, with centralised control mechanisms that maintain high levels of coherence. Towards the late 1980s, the FN grew into a ‘centralized machine with a strong pyramid-like organization’ (Marcus, 1995, p. 47) reminiscent of the organisational structure of the French Communist Party. Under the organisational leadership of Jean-Pierre 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. The organisational complexity of the party was further reinforced by the establishment of approximately 20 associated organisations that sought to recruit farmers, women, entrepreneurs, veterans and workers to the party, and by the creation of a think tank, a training centre and a series of publications. After 1995, the party also set up unions for police officers, prison wardens and bus and subway drivers (Mayer, 1998, pp. 15–16). Despite its organisational expansion, the party remains highly centralised. Intraparty mechanisms grant Le Pen near-absolute discretion in appointments to the political bureau and to the central committee of the party, while party statutes ensure direct control of the periphery from the centre by preventing contact between the various regional and local branches. To further ensure its grip on the regional and local branches, the national leadership appoints departmental and local officials on the basis of co-optation, whereby officials at higher levels appoint those at the lower levels (Simmons, 1996, pp. 187–191). The firm control
of the central leadership allowed the party to move away from its liberal economic platform towards the early 1990s, and to adopt a leftist agenda to woo socialist voters. After the 1990s, the party managed to ‘proletarianise’ its electorate at the expense of not only the moderate right, but also the mainstream left (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 98–102). The centralisation of authority has also helped reinforce the coherence of the party. Although the FN is sometimes conceived as a ‘fragile collection of disparate elements’ (Fysh & Wolfreys, 1992, p. 321), until the late 1990s it displayed notable unity among its various groupings. The concentration of authority in the national leadership and its low tolerance for dissent, helped limit the factionalism that usually characterises extreme-right parties.

The complexity, centralisation and coherence of a party point to its organisational strength but, upon closer examination, their actual effect on success at the ballot box remains unclear. One analysis of extreme-right party organisations, for example, finds that the degree of coherence or factionalism is inconsequential for party success at the ballot box (Carter, 2005). Some extreme-right parties have managed to survive bitter infighting, factionalism and splintering defying the odds given to such parties by organisational theories. One of the best examples is, again, the FN, whose leadership struggle led to the formation of a rival splinter party in 1999, the National Republican Movement (Movement National Républicain, MNR), by the FN’s second-in-command, Bruno Mégret. The new party managed to upset the organisational apparatus of the FN, recruiting nearly half of its elected representatives and two thirds of its cadres (Ignazi, 2003, p. 102; see also Hainsworth, 2000, pp. 29–30) Despite the serious blow to its organisational network, the party managed to launch an effective presidential campaign in 2002, which materialised in Le Pen’s advance to the second round. The Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) survived a similar split in 1993, when a group of its MPs left the party to form the Liberal Forum. Despite their departure, electoral support for the Freedom Party continued to grow, and by 1999 the party narrowly upstaged the moderate Right People’s Party to become the second-biggest Austrian party. Similarly, despite its 2005 split with the Alliance for the Future of Austria (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, BZÖ), the FPÖ improved its electoral standing in the 2006 and 2008 national elections.

While these two examples point to the limited effect of party coherence on electoral performance, the example of the German Republicans (Republikaner, REP) and the Belgian National Front (Front National, BNF) point in the opposite direction. After their electoral breakthrough in the Berlin and European elections in 1989, the REP’s experienced intense leadership struggles that led to their electoral demise in subsequent elections (for example, Veen et al., 1993; Kitschelt & McGann, 1995). The party rebounded in a series of local elections in 1992 and 1993, but renewed infighting contributed, again, to its electoral misfortunes in the 1994 national elections. Similar infighting and defections are also thought to account for the electoral misfortunes of the BNF. No less than 30 splits or dissident movements have emanated from the party in the past few decades, limiting its capacity to compete effectively in the electoral market (Art, 2008). The contrasting electoral fortunes of similarly factious parties highlights the limitations of the explanatory weight sometimes ascribed to party coherence.

Efforts to assess the net effect of organisational attributes on party performance are further complicated by the difficulty in separating party organisation from leadership. Part of the literature tends to associate party success with charismatic leadership (for example, Eatwell, 2003; Carter, 2005), but there is no empirical evidence showing that leadership qualities have an effect on electoral outcomes net of organisational or other factors.
The scattered evidence from case studies suggests, at best, that an endowment of leadership charisma can benefit but can also harm extreme-right party organisations. Charismatic leaders can unite party factions and energise party activists, but their tendency to concentrate power can prevent the development of robust administrative structures and formalised, non-personal procedures (Mudde, 2007). Without solid organisational bases, parties might fail to sustain initial spurts in support and might quickly collapse after their early breakthroughs.

A more fundamental problem with explanations emphasising leadership charisma is that they rely on a static conception of party development that cannot account for variation in party performance across time. Variation in leadership qualities might be useful for cross-country rather than cross-time comparisons. Differences in leadership attributes might help account for the contrasting electoral fortunes of the German National Democratic Party (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and the Haider FPÖ, but they cannot credibly account for variation in the electoral performance of the French FN across time. Since the same leader has led the FN since 1972, the sudden electoral rise of the party after the mid-1980s cannot easily be attributed to Le Pen himself, unless there was a substantial change in his persona in the period prior to the party’s electoral breakthroughs.

### Party Organisation Across Time: Cause or Effect?

The latter point alludes to the second important challenge for accounts emphasising organisational factors, the one of causality. As in the case of charisma, scholarly emphasis on organisational strength tends to disregard changes in party organisation across time. Instead, it relies on static conceptions of organisational strength that fail to account for improvements or deterioration in intraorganisational factors from one point in time to another. Without consideration of how organisations evolve across time, static measures of organisational strength seem to be *ex post facto* exercises that raise serious questions about the direction of causality. While it is plausible that organisational strength enhances party performance, it is equally plausible that success at the ballot box gives parties the resources to improve their organisational basis. To determine the direction of causality, it is necessary to carefully trace party development over time (Ellinas, 2007a).

The analysis of the organisational evolution of the FN can shed some light on the issue of causality. The critical question is whether the organisational growth of the party preceded or followed its series of electoral breakthroughs in the mid-1980s. Evidence from the secondary literature suggests that the party was organisationally weak during the first decade after its foundation, and that it grew organisationally only after its electoral success at the polls. The party was founded in 1972 as a federal organisation that sought to unite the somewhat heterogeneous groupings of the extreme right under the banner of nationalism. Initially, the party relied on the organisational networks of older extreme-right groupings—like the neofascist New Order (*Ordre Nouveau*)—to publicise its views and to become known. Moreover, the FN set up a central committee, regional organisations, a party newspaper and a youth organisation. But the 1973 legislative elections exposed its organisational deficiencies, as the FN managed to field only 104 candidates, barely a fifth of the total number of constituencies and a fraction of its original expectations. The electoral failure of the party at the legislative elections, and then at the
1974 presidential elections, became the source of more organisational troubles, when a group of party leaders left the FN to establish the Party of New Forces (Parti des Forces Nouvelles, PFN). When Jean-Pierre Stirbois joined the party in 1977, he ‘had imagined that the Front was a powerful organisation, but quickly discovered that even if it had a leader, some ideas, as well as some quality volunteers, it lacked organisation and an entrenched core of party militants’ (Stirbois, 1988, quoted in DeClair, 1999, p. 42) Characteristic of this organisational weakness was the failure to collect the signatures necessary for the 1981 presidential elections. In the subsequent legislative elections, the party only fielded 74 candidates to contest the 491 seats, compared with 156 in 1978. And in the 1982 cantonal elections, it contested merely 65 of the 1,945 cantons (Perrineau, 1997). Although this evidence is not comprehensive, it is sufficient to suggest that the party was organisationally weak before its series of breakthroughs in the 1983 municipal by-election in Dreux, the 1984 European elections and the 1985 cantonal elections.

Evidence from one of the most comprehensive studies of the FN further suggests that far from being the cause of its electoral rise, the organisational growth of the party was largely the effect of these initial breakthroughs. Birenbaum’s (1992) survey of FN’s officials at the 1990 party congress is suggestive of the impact of these initial—albeit secondary—breakthroughs on the capacity of the party to recruit new members (Figure 1). According to the survey, three-fourths of party delegates joined the party after its electoral success in Dreux; and almost a fourth joined the ranks of the FN in 1984 after its electoral spurt in the European elections.

The sharp improvement in the organisational capacity of the party after its breakthroughs was also shown in its membership figures. At a time of growing recruitment difficulties for established parties, the FN was reported to have increased its members from a few thousand in the early 1980s to 65,000 in 1986 (Perrineau, 1997, p. 46). In the 1985 cantonal elections, the party presented 1,521 candidates to contest seats in the 1,945 cantons, compared to only 65 cantons three years earlier. In the cantons the FN contested, party support exceeded 10 per cent, alarming the moderate right and inducing Mitterrand to change the electoral law to proportional representation in order to split the opposition. In the 1986 legislative elections, the FN received 9.5 per cent of the vote and sent 35 deputies to the National Assembly, as many as the Communists. Showing its growing organisational strength, the party fielded more than 2,000 candidates for the elections (Schain, 1988, p. 602).

![Figure 1. Recruitment rate of FN delegates, 1972–1990 (Source: Birenbaum, 1992, p. 354; reproduced with permission).](image-url)
Membership data for other extreme-right parties, like the Austrian FPÖ, the REP and the Belgian Flemish Block (Vlaams Blok, VB) bolster the findings from the French case and cast further the doubt about the real effects of organisational variables. Prior to its 1986 breakthrough in the national legislative elections, the FPÖ witnessed a membership drop. It was only after this breakthrough that its membership base expanded. In the subsequent years it grew by nearly 39 per cent, from 36,925 in 1986 to 51,296 in 2000. Similarly, the breakthrough of the REP in the Berlin state elections in January 1989 and in the European elections in June 1989 became the impetus for the rapid expansion of its organisational network. Its membership grew from 8,500 in December 1988 to 12,000 in March 1989, 21,000 in September 1989, and 25,000 by December 1989 (Backes & Jesse, 1993, p. 112). The scattered membership data available for the VB display a parallel pattern: prior to its major national breakthrough in the 1991 legislative election. In 1988 the party had 3,000 members, but after its breakthrough membership figures ranged from 7,639–9,000 (Art, 2008). Of course, membership numbers are not necessarily the best proxies of organisational strength, as they do not directly measure party complexity, centralisation and coherence. But given the difficulty in studying the internal workings of extreme-right parties, they constitute one of the few available tools for tracing their organisational development. This measure suggests that none of the three parties had a substantial organisational network prior to their early electoral breakthroughs. Their organisational growth was largely the effect, rather than the cause of their initial electoral advances.

While the available evidence suggests that party organisation is inconsequential for the early success of extreme-right parties, there is some evidence to suggest that it might be critical for their subsequent trajectories. After parties achieve major breakthroughs, they are able to tap into bigger pools of human, financial and communication resources. Electoral success expands their membership base; grants them increased state subventions; and gives them enhanced access to the mainstream media. To effectively absorb and use these newly-gained resources, parties need to have effective organisational mechanisms. Parties like the FN or the VB that set up solid organisational structures after their early successes were able to sustain and expand their electoral base. On the contrary, parties like the Swedish New Democracy (Ny Demokrat, NyD) or the Danish Progress Party (Fremskridtspartiet), which failed to use their newly-gained resources to build robust organisations, failed to sustain their early gains, and quickly collapsed.

What about the Media?

The most important challenge for the analysis of organisational effects relates to the advent of mass communications, which limits the parties’ reliance on elaborate organisational structures for communicating with and mobilising voters. ‘Changes in communication techniques are causing an earthquake in party organizations’ (Panebianco, 1988, p. 273). The growing importance of the media as a source of political information means that ‘an organizational apparatus intervening between candidates and voters may be less necessary, or at any rate less efficient, as a vote-getting device’ (Epstein, 1988, pp. 233–236). For smaller parties, like those on the extreme right, the media might be even more important than for major parties, because they might lack the organisational or financial resources to get their messages to voters. The media limits the reliance
of extreme-right leaders on centralised or complex organisational structures, and allows them to reach national publics with minimum organisational effort.¹

The trajectory of the French extreme right illustrates how the media can help marginal parties overcome their organisational weaknesses and enter the political mainstream with minimum organisational effort. As shown before, during the first decade after its founding, the party remained on the margins of French politics, struck by factional rivalries and organisational weaknesses, as well as by its failure to make itself visible in the mainstream discourse. Two main factors helped the FN overcome its visibility problems. The first related to the political manoeuvring of the Socialist-led government, which, amidst mounting economic problems and growing popular dissatisfaction, sought to use the FN in order to weaken the moderate right. After the first years of the Socialist administration, the FN started enjoying increased visibility from the mainstream French media when Socialist President, François Mitterrand urged the presidents of three public television channels to grant Le Pen airtime. While the French president claimed to be defending media pluralism, most political observers thought that the intervention aimed to empower Le Pen at the expense of the moderate right. Shortly after Mitterrand’s intervention, in June, Le Pen was invited to several news broadcasts; and in September a FN festival received broad media coverage (Durand, 1996, pp. 47–48). At a time of organisational weakness and electoral impotence, French television helped push the FN into the political mainstream. Important for the purposes of this analysis is that ‘the media rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen preceded his electoral success’ (Faux et al., 1994, cited in Simmons, 1996, p. 77).

The second factor that helped the FN overcome its earlier visibility problems was the amplification of its success in secondary elections by the mainstream media. Secondary elections offer minor parties important opportunities for electoral success because they often revolve around different issues than those debated in national elections, and because ‘they mobilise nationally unrepresentative distributions of voter preferences’ (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995, p. 99). The FN already had some success in the 1982 cantonal elections, especially in the small town of Dreux. The FN general secretary, Jean-Pierre Stirbois, and his wife received 12.6 per cent and 9.5 per cent of the vote respectively, compared to the 0.2 per cent the FN received nationally. And in the 1983 municipal elections in a Paris district, Le Pen received 11.3 per cent of the vote in the first ballot campaigning on the anti-immigrant slogan ‘Paris to the Parisians.’ These minor successes were largely overshadowed by the overall results in these elections, which showed growing popular discontent against the Socialist government. It was only a few months later that an isolated victory of the FN in a by-election in Dreux shook the political establishment and granted the party national media attention. In the first round of these elections, Stirbois received 16.7 per cent of the vote; in the second round the FN list joined that of the Gaullists and the Centrists to unseat the Socialist mayor. Four FN candidates, including Stirbois, secured seats in the town Council. Because the Dreux by-election was the only one held at the time, the FN’s victory drew national media attention, amplifying the anti-immigrant message of the FN and granting it an even wider audience. Along with the politically-motivated exposure that public broadcasters gave the FN, the Dreux victory helped the party establish itself as a viable political force.

A few months before the European parliament elections, in February 1984, Le Pen appeared on one of the most popular and sought-after French TV shows, L’Heure de la Verité (The Hour of Truth). As Le Pen recalls, the decision of Antenne 2 to host him on this
show transformed him into a respectable political leader and pushed him into the political mainstream:

> Just like that, I must have changed. Just like that, I became an acceptable politician. Just like that, I must have changed my ‘look,’ just as they are saying today. And yet, I had changed neither my look, nor my message, nor my language, nor my behaviour. What had changed was that a television network, Antenna 2, granted me an ‘Hour of Truth.’ Sixty minutes, after a battle that has been going on for 28 years. An hour is nothing, but it was enough for me to get rid of the monstrous and carnival-like mask that all my opponents have so generously applied to me. (Jean-Marie Le Pen, 1984, quoted in DeClair, 1999, p. 76)

A survey carried out after the broadcasting of the programme showed that voting intentions for the FN doubled, from 3.5 per cent to 7 per cent (Durand, 1996, pp. 52–53). Another opinion poll, carried out in May, showed that 18 per cent of the electorate had some degree of sympathy for Le Pen. Moreover, over 20 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition that Le Pen was a legitimate opposition leader (Marcus, 1995, p. 56).

Evidence from other countries suggests that the media-induced rise of the French extreme right is not an isolated phenomenon. In Italy, for example, the Berlusconi-owned media is thought to have aided the successful transformation and electoral advances of the post-fascist National Alliance (*Alleanza Nationale*, AN) into a legitimate party of the right after 1993, granting it much-needed exposure and respectability (Statham, 1996). In Austria, the rise of the Haider FPÖ became associated with the enormous and favourable exposure granted to the party by the most widely read Austrian newspaper, the *Neue Kronen Zeitung*. Moreover, Haider received excessive—albeit negative—exposure from influential liberal publications like *Profil*, which sought to capitalise on his controversial personality, partly for commercial reasons (Ellinas, 2007b). In Germany, the initial breakthrough of the REP in the Berlin elections related to the controversy the party created with the airing of a racist television advertisement. This breakthrough brought even more media attention to the party, which helped it achieve a notable breakthrough in the subsequent European elections. The occasional advances of the extreme-right German People’s Union (*Deutsche Volskunion*, DVU) in German local elections, as in Bremen in 1987 or in Sachsen-Anhalt in 1998, are also related to the availability of communication resources. In both cases, the DVU, which is a completely disorganised party, launched expensive advertising campaigns, outspending the Social and Christian Democrats. The electoral rise of the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally (*Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos*) has also been associated with the excessive media exposure granted to it by the mass media in the 2007 parliamentary elections. Such was the exposure the party received that its media presence itself became the subject of partisan exchanges.

All these examples suggest that the media can enhance the electoral standing of marginal or fringe political actors by helping them become part of the mainstream debate, legitimate their views and become known. The effect of the media is likely to be more important during their earlier stages of development, when many parties lack the organisational means to publicise their appeals to national publics. After parties enter the political system, media effects might be less important for their subsequent development, especially if parties develop the organisational apparatus necessary to sustain and extend their earlier electoral gains.
Conclusion

This article reviewed the existing literature on the electoral effects of party organisation and highlighted three main challenges confronted by organisational arguments using the examples of the French FN and other European extreme-right parties to illustrate its main points. The foregoing analysis has suggested that efforts to examine the effects of internal party workings would benefit from a clearer definition of organisation; a closer examination of causality; and a more careful understanding of how the media affect party organisation and performance. A clearer definition will enhance the conceptualisation of party organisation to take into account various organisational attributes like complexity, centralisation and coherence. Future research would need to specify how each affects electoral outcomes and why. It should also try to decouple organisational from leadership factors and to determine how the two interact.

Moreover, arguments about the electoral relevance of party organisation would need to carefully trace the evolution of party organisations to establish the direction of causality. The evidence from the French and other cases suggests that organisational growth might be more the effect than the cause of party success, especially during earlier stages of party development. Party organisation might more important for the persistence of extreme-right parties after their initial breakthroughs (Ellinas, 2007a; Ellinas, 2007b; see also Mudde, 2007). If so, future work would need to identify those organisational structures that allow parties to sustain and extend their early gains and to suggest the mechanisms through which they affect their persistence. It might also take interest in ‘flash phenomena’ like the Swedish NyD or the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List in search of organisational features that might have led to their sudden collapse.

More importantly, though, new research would need to better understand how the advent of mass communications affects the organisational development and performance of smaller political parties. Media access limits the need for complex organisational structures granting political newcomers the means to make themselves known with minimum organisational effort. The growing reliance of voters on the mass media for political information means that new or fringe parties can initially rely on television studios to communicate with national publics. Ross Perot was well aware of the importance of the media in 1992, when he staged one of the most spectacular upsets in American electoral history. As he explained, ‘if you talk to a thousand people a night seven nights a week, it takes you about three years to talk to a million. So, on shows where you get 20 and 30 million people ... you realise the multiplier effect you can get with just one short comment’. Indeed, in only 30 seconds after his appearance on 60 Minutes 18,000 people called his toll-free number, setting a record in telephone history (Laurence, 2003, p. 181, 183).

The media can also amplify organisational effects by highlighting successes in secondary elections. The effect of local organisation is indirect: local strongholds yield good electoral results in secondary elections, which are then amplified by the national media, pushing the party into the political mainstream and legitimating its ideas. The amplification of local breakthroughs makes the party attractive to new members and facilitates a recruitment boost. As suggested earlier, this boost was critical for the subsequent development of the FN after its local victory in Dreux and its breakthrough in the European elections.
Another organisational effect of the media is that it rewards a certain kind of leadership, elevating telegenic populists to a position of power and control within the party. In an era of growing public distrust and political apathy, market pressures compel media outlets to continuously search for political actors that are likely to generate public interest and attract new audiences. Media spotlights tend to reward good public performers, especially those with unconventional rhetorical style like Haider, who can stir controversy by breaking taboos or by attacking the establishment. The organisational effect of media choices is that, by granting communication resources to charismatic leaders, media editors allow these figures to rise above party institutions and to concentrate intraparty authority. The media facilitate the reconfiguration of intraparty power structures and help shift the locus of authority away from party cadres in favour of individual leaders. In some cases, this shift comes at the expense of organisational development, as the reliance on the media to communicate with voters sidelines the establishment of intraorganisational structures to execute party functions, distribute party resources and manage internal conflict. Media access can hinder organisational growth if party leaders come to regard communication resources as substitutes for organisational ones.

Note

1 There are several ways in which the media can affect the electoral performance of extreme-right parties. Some works focus, for example, on how the media fertilise the political discourse with extremist ideas (for example, Ignazi, 2003, p. 92; Mammone, 2008, p. 229, for the FN and the Nouvelle Droite) and how the media highlight the signature issues of the extreme right (for example, Walgrave, 2004, for the Vlaams Blok). This article focuses on how the media can help extreme-right parties reach national audiences by giving them outsized exposure.

References


