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REPORT

THE PARADOX OF THE ANTI-PARTY PARTY

Insights from the Extreme Right

Cas Mudde

ABSTRACT

On the basis of an extensive analysis of the party literature of three extreme-right parties, the paradox of the anti-party party is studied. Two types of anti-party sentiments are distinguished: extremist and populist. The first type holds a rejection of the political party per se and seems to have gone out of vogue. The second type holds a critique of certain parties either on the basis of their policies or their behaviour. It is these sentiments that are (omni)present, in different interlinked themes, in the literature of extreme-right parties. They serve, on the one hand, to help them to profit from the existing anti-party sentiments at the mass level and, on the other hand, to help them present themselves in a positive manner, by self-defining the party as the opposite of the other parties. It is thus that the paradox of the anti-party parties can exist.

KEY WORDS • anti-party parties • anti-party sentiments • right-wing extremism

Introduction

In the debate about anti-party sentiments, which seems to captivate political scientists around the world, extreme-right parties play an important part. As the 1980s have brought the third wave of right-wing extremism (Von Beyme, 1988), several political scientists have interpreted the electoral successes of these parties as a sign of the rise of anti-party sentiments (Ignazi, 1992; Stouthuysen, 1993; Betz, 1994). They are supported by various
electoral studies, which show that the voters of these parties are more critical of the (established) political parties than the general voter (Roth, 1990; Billiet et al., 1992; Plasser and Ulram, 1992).

Not only those voting for extreme-right parties are considered to have ‘anti-party sentiments’, but the parties themselves too. Hans-Georg Betz (1993: 419) has pointed to the fact that these parties ‘present themselves as true “antiparty parties”’. In most literature on right-wing extremism this hostile relationship is even taken further; extreme-right parties not only present themselves as anti-party, they outrightly condemn ‘all established political parties, government as well as opposition, either because political parties as such are seen as divisive and therefore evil, or because these particular parties do not represent ordinary people’ (Voerman and Lucardie, 1992: 35).

The paradox of the ‘anti-party party’ lies at the heart of this article. Are extreme-right parties really the ‘parties that end all parties’ or do they just use the widely felt sentiments against the established parties to replace them in power. To answer this question, two other research questions have to be answered: what types of ‘anti-party sentiments’ do extreme-right parties hold, and how do they see their own parties? These questions will be answered by analysing the primary source documentation of three extreme-right parties: party programs and party papers. On the basis of a detailed analysis of this literature, their view on (other) political parties and their own party is examined.

The following three parties were selected according to both practical and intrinsic criteria: the Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block, VB) from Belgium and the Centrumdemocraten (Centre Democrats, CD) and Centrumpartij ’86/Nationale Volkspartij (Centre Party’86/National People’s Party, CP’86) both from the Netherlands. All three parties are generally considered to be right-wing extremist, yet they differ in two important aspects: electoral strength and ideological extremity. The VB is electorally one of the most successful extreme-right parties in Western Europe, gaining around 12 percent of the Flemish votes; the CD is moderately successful with 2.5 percent of the vote, and the CP’86 belongs to the less (or not) successful, with under 1 percent. Ideologically, the CP’86 is classified as part of the more extreme ‘old’ extreme-right parties, whereas the CD is part of the more moderate ‘new’ extreme-right parties, with the VB being classified partly in both groups (Ignazi, 1994b).

This article does not consider extreme-right anti-party sentiments at the ‘mass level’; that is, at the ‘level of mass opinion’ (Poguntke, 1994: 2). Nor, on the other hand, does it deal with the ‘elite level’ in the narrow sense – at the level of the ‘intellectual and political elites’ (Poguntke, 1994: 2). One can speak of a third level, or perhaps of a specific part of the elite level – the ‘pariah-elite level’. In some ways, the extreme-right parties are at the elite level, yet they are not accepted by the main actors of the elite. This is probably also the main reason for the lack of attention paid to them in the
literature on anti-party sentiments at the elite level. Nevertheless, although small and/or extreme parties may not be accepted as part of the official political elite, they can and do influence (parts of) them in a significant manner (Herzog, 1987; Müller-Rommel, 1991).

Two Types of Anti-party Sentiment

Before we can answer the first question raised above, we have to define (or describe) what anti-party sentiments are. This is, as so often in the social sciences, not an easy task. What is ‘party’, what is ‘anti’, what is a ‘sentiment’, and what combination makes for an ‘anti-party sentiment’? Even though there are several definitions and types of anti-party sentiments given in the literature (Daalder, 1992; Poguntke, 1994; Scarro, 1994), most authors work with one of the two following meanings, which are also implicit in the above quotation from Voerman and Lucardie (1992: 35):

1 *Extremist* anti-party sentiments: in this narrow definition the political party as an institution is rejected, often on the grounds of its divisive nature or the fact that it forms a barrier between the rulers and the ruled. This is what Daald (1992: 269) has called ‘the denial of party’.  

2 *Populist* anti-party sentiments: in this broad definition certain political parties are criticized, often because of their bad functioning or because of the group they (do not) represent. This is, to some extent, comparable to what Daalder (1992: 270) has called ‘the selective rejection of party’.

**Extremist Anti-party Sentiments**

The first type of anti-party sentiment is regarded as one of the key features of historical fascism. Extreme-right leaders and ideologues of that time, like Hitler and Primo de Rivera, openly voiced their rejection of the institution of the political party (Fennema, 1995: 10–11). As contemporary right-wing extremism is still primarily defined and interpreted in terms of historical fascism, anti-democracy and monism, thereby including the rejection of all parties, are often seen as key features of this ideology too (Mudde, 1995a: 214–16).

In the case of contemporary extreme-right parties, however, extremist anti-party sentiments are far less obvious. The two Dutch parties, for instance, do not even address this question explicitly. Indeed, all three parties studied here are insulated by accusations that they are not full political parties, but only ‘single-issue’ or ‘protest’ parties, and go all out to prove their ‘full value’. This is taken furthest by the CD, which defines itself as a purely electoral party and has done its level best to become accepted by the established parties (the Christian Democrats in particular). The CP’86 seems to be more sceptical towards the institution of political parties, but because of a general lack of elaborated ideas remains vague in its criticism.
The VB is the only party that has produced a clear and relatively coherent ideological vision. In its party program (Vlaams Blok, 1988) it openly criticized the degeneration of the Belgian existing order and the politics of the other parties. Nevertheless, it clearly stated that it wanted to be a “different” party in program, behaviour and attitude, different but a political party all the same. Its ‘proposal for a Constitution for the Republic of Flanders’ (see Van Hauthem and Verreycken, 1991), a sort of charter for an ideal state, also indicates a rather positive attitude towards the political party. Under point 25 is written: ‘The foundation of political parties is free. They contribute to the expression of the political will of the people’ (p. 115). There are, however, some references to the limitation of the power of the political parties. The most important one is that the VB wants political parties to be incorporated and to be accountable to the government and the controlling citizen in case of manifest mismanagement (Van Hauthem and Verreycken, 1991).

**Populist Anti-party Sentiments**

Populist anti-party sentiments are part of the discourse of a wide variety of actors, ranging from opposition parties of both the left (e.g. left-libertarian parties) and the right (e.g. extreme-right parties) to dissident voices within (the top of) established parties (for instance, the former German Bundespresident Richard Von Weizsäcker). These various actors carry a wide variety of anti-party sentiments (for a discussion of the German case, see Scarrow, 1994).

The analysis of the party literature of the three extreme-right parties shows a variety of themes of populist anti-party sentiments that can best be summarized under the motto: ‘all against one, one against all’. It is remarkable that all sentiments are aimed at all established parties, be they in government or opposition, yet not at ‘the’ political party per se. This indicates that there is a fine line between populist and extremist anti-party sentiments. The various themes can be classed into two more general categories of populist anti-party sentiments: (1) those aimed at the *policies* of other parties, and (2) those aimed at the *behaviour* of other parties.

Even though the critiques of the policies of the other (established) parties are varied, almost all can be classed under one heading: anti-‘own people’. According to all extreme-right parties, all other parties favour immigrants over their ‘own’ (Dutch or Flemish) people. The other parties are portrayed as pro-foreigner and anti-Dutch/Flemish in the propaganda of the extreme-right parties. They accuse them of trying to destroy ‘our own identity’, even of trying to destroy their own *volk* (by making the Netherlands/Flanders into a multi-ethnic country). One of the slogans of the CP’86 catches this sentiment well: ‘Trade the politicians before they trade the people’.

Even though extreme-right parties accuse all other parties of their treacherous politics, it is the socialist parties that are their most wanted target. In
the propaganda of the Dutch parties, the Partij van de Arbeid (Party of Labour, PvdA) is often called the Partij van de Allochtonen (Party of the Foreigners). On top of that, all extreme-right parties stress that some parties try to win votes from them by copying some parts of their propaganda (especially the liberal parties, but in the case of the CP'86 also the CD), but that they do nothing and are just like the rest of the anti-Dutch/Flemish parties.

The anti-own-people criticism is not only aimed at the policies of the other parties on foreigners, asylum-seekers, illegal immigrants, and measures of (perceived) affirmative action, but also at their foreign policies. An often-voiced complaint of the CD, for instance, is that 'the big parties know exactly how it has to be in the world, yet for convenience sake they overlook the Netherlands'.

For the VB, the anti-own-people argument also has a specific 'Belgian' characteristic. This holds that the other Flemish political parties are puppets of the Walloon parties (especially the supreme Parti Socialiste), and that they sell out Flanders to the Walloons. In their 1991 election programme Uit Zelfverdediging (Out of Self-defence), the party writes: 'The “Flemish” governmental parties of Martens VIII . . . have sold, belied, and betrayed the Flemish interests' (p. 3). Especially in the discussion of the 1993 state reforms, known as the Sint-Michiels accords, which contain a further federalization of the Belgian state, the Flemish parties were harshly criticized by the VB (especially the moderate nationalists of the VU–VVD, of which the VB is a split). The accords showed, according to the VB, the power of the Walloons and the weakness and leniency of the Flemish parties.

The anti-party sentiments aimed at the behaviour of the other (established) parties are diverse. Four interlinked themes can be distinguished in the literature of the three parties: party-centrism, corruption, anti-democratic behaviour and relics of the past. Admittedly, the division of the criticism into these thematic headings is artificial and much of the critique contains a combination of the different themes, but it nevertheless helps in gaining a better insight into (and overview of) the ‘political’ anti-party sentiments of right-wing extremist parties.

The first theme, 'party-centrism', holds that the established political parties are only interested in the (financial) gains and interests of their own party and its delegates. They are not at all interested in the interests of the people. After luring the people into voting for them, they will return to business as usual; that is, ignoring and deceiving the voters for another 4 years. All their pretended ideals and goals are dropped instantly for a slice of the power. One of the slogans of the CP'86 captures this sentiment in a short and simple phrase: 'We have no representatives of the people but only of the party'.

Various 'facts' are mentioned in the party papers to prove the egoism of the political parties. The support of state funding of political parties, for instance, is described in the party paper of the VB as 'a nice annual present
of somewhere near half a billion. However, the criticism is not only aimed at ruling parties, opposition parties are also targeted. According to the extreme-right parties the so-called opposition parties would sell out their ideals (and those of their voters) at the first chance they could get of joining the government. In the words of the VB:

The citizen is disillusioned with the political parties. Rightly so. The traditional parties comply with no rule whatsoever and are inspired by power and financial gain. They are in the first place characterized by short-sightedness and fiddling. The ‘new’ parties, the ‘protest parties’, VU, Agalev and ROSSEM turn out to be not much better, however.

The second theme takes the theme of party-centrism even further, focusing on corruption. All established parties are accused of being thoroughly corrupt. Especially in the case of the VB, the party literature is filled with terms like ‘the Gang of Four’, ‘the political mafia’, ‘the political profiteers’ and ‘political banditry’ to describe the established parties. The corruption scandals, most recently the Augusta affair, are portrayed in the paper as symptomatic of the manner in which the ruling parties work, and parallels are drawn between Belgium and Italy (especially between the Walloon and Italian socialist parties). Another argument of the corruption theme is that the ruling parties have corrupted the civil service, as well as state-owned organizations such as the broadcasting companies, with their system of political appointments. These last allegations are less frequent in the case of the Dutch parties, which is certainly explained by the fact that political appointments are less frequent (and open) in the Netherlands and, on top of that, the Netherlands have, until now, been bereft of big corruption scandals.

The third theme accuses the established parties of being anti-democratic. The extreme-right parties stress that the political establishment is incorrectly seen as the ‘real democracy’; that is, the ruling of the people. Attacks from the media and other political parties on their own anti-democratic nature are countered by accusations of anti-democratic behaviour from the attackers. In particular, the media and political boycott of the extreme-right parties is used by them to prove the anti-democratic nature of the political establishment. In an article about the actions of a PvdA mayor against the council member of the CP’86, the party paper writes:

Conclusion, a red majority automatically excludes democratic principles, so that only the law of the jungle, the club-law applies. But . . . do not expect that Christian and liberal politics deal differently with the principles of power, they hop to the same dans macabre. Power in the hands of dwarfs will lead to no more than hunger for more.

The established parties are also accused of controlling the media and the opinion polls, so that the real power of the ‘nationalist’ movement (read the extreme-right parties themselves) remains hidden from the people. The CP’86 takes this argument furthest by accusing the other parties of being
servants of international high finance (as part of a more broad and old-fashioned anti-semitic conspiracy around such organizations as the ‘Bilderberg-Group’, the ‘trilaterals’ and the Council for Foreign Relations).

The fourth and last theme focuses on the future of the other political parties. According to the extreme-right parties, the established political parties lack both the motivation and the vision to rule the country. The other parties know that they are no longer a true reflection of the people and this is why they are so afraid to confront the voters (both in person and in elections). The extreme-right parties even accuse the established political parties of artificially maintaining pillarization to remain in power. Both CP’86 and VB have argued that the other parties have outlived themselves and are no more than rusty relics of the past. According to VB, the other parties, except for the green Agalev, are based on ‘the old axis “capital versus labour” [which] is slowly but definitely replaced by a new axis “multicultural versus national (volkse) identity” ’.11 This theme is, again to some extent, comparable to what Daalder (1992: 270) has called ‘the redundancy of party’.

The above-mentioned anti-party sentiments are linked to a specific vision of what they see as the role of their alternative parties. This linkage is always in the form of opposites and seems to be strategically motivated: the criticism of the other parties serves the purpose of both describing their own party in positive terms and distinguishing it from the others. Not surprisingly, the three parties all share one theme in their vision of their own party: they see themselves as the (only) defender of their own people. In the case of the CD, this is even seen as the only difference between them and the other political parties. It considers itself to be a political party like the others, only with another policy. Even though the VB (and the CP’86) are far more radical than the CD, they also stress this difference: ‘With respect to the “Away with us”-politics of the traditional parties, only the “Own people first”-principle of the Vlaams Blok can be placed. There is no middle course’.12

However, they consider their parties not only to be different from the other political parties in ideology and policy, but also in strategy and ethics. Consequently, both the VB and the CP’86 also stress their honesty and activism in their literature. They present themselves as ‘sincere, reliable, and brave patriots’ who work ‘neither on confessional nor on party political foundations [but] in the interest of the country and the people’.13 On top of that, they believe that they are the only parties of the future, defending the people against the ‘prophets of the multicultural society’, whereas the other parties are rusted relics of days long gone, based on an extinct struggle between classes.

Notwithstanding these similarities, the three parties differ quite substantially in their self-perceived essence of their party. Whereas the CD sees itself exclusively as an election party, believing that ‘victory in elections is the only way to go and exercise influence’,14 the CP’86 sees itself as follows: ‘We are not a party that can only stand its ground by dragging itself from election to
election. . . We are a party of cadre, not of mandate’.15 The VB, finally, has yet another self-image:

Even now the Vlaams Blok is still a pressure party [zuweppartij], a party that puts the other parties under electoral pressure to adjust their policies to the wishes of the people, to the citizen. If the parties of power are not prepared to listen to the voice of the people, . . ., they will keep on losing the elections. We are not falling over ourselves to join the government, but, when it has to be done, it has to be done.16

Summarizing, we can state that the extreme-right parties are ambivalent towards the institution of political parties. On the one hand, they smear the other parties and stress their own difference, yet on the other hand they are even insulted by accusations of just being single-issue parties and try to prove their ‘full value’. The distinction between the other parties and the extreme-right parties is simple: the other parties are anti-own people, party-centrist, corrupt and anti-democratic relics of the past; whereas the extreme-right parties are pro-people, honest, truly democratic and the only real alternative for the future.

What is probably most remarkable, is that the party that is (or was) the most radical of the three in stressing its total difference vis-a-vis the other parties, the VB, now seems to have become the victim of its own electoral successes. Under the (perceived) pressure of its electorate, the party has (said to have) left its position of pressure party and has declared its ability and willingness to govern, albeit only in those cities where the party will become the biggest party (most notably Antwerp), and not on a national (Belgian) level. The party that has always stressed its aversion to compromises now seems willing to form coalitions at a local level. It thus seems that even extreme-right parties like the VB follow the same path as all other new political parties; that is, after the necessary electoral successes they become ‘socialized into the realities and limitations of effecting political change and the need for compromise to achieve any progress’ (Flanagan and Dalton, 1984: 9).

Discussion: From Extremism to Populism

Extreme-right parties are not truly anti-party parties. They do not have extremist anti-party sentiments (any more); that is, rejection of political parties per se. They are, however, true agents of populist anti-party sentiment – criticism aimed at the policies and/or behaviour of other parties. Their propaganda is larded with criticism of the established political parties, ranging from accusations of corruption, through selling out the people, to being ideologically rusty and overtaken by events. Even though their critiques are aimed at all other parties, both in government and in opposition, they do not cross the, admittedly fine, line of criticizing the institution of the political party.
Whether the extreme-right parties’ shift from an ‘extremist’ to a ‘populist’ view on political parties is based on tactical considerations, such as fear of being associated with the ‘black’ past, as has been often claimed by their opponents, or on a genuine difference in ideology is difficult to answer. However, in the 1930s, the heyday of historical fascism, extremist anti-party sentiments were well spread among opposition parties (both of the right and left). Both democracy and political parties were relatively new phenomena at that time, and had not yet proved themselves. After the Second World War, and especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the system of (liberal) democracy has become almost without serious opposition. Criticism nowadays has consequently shifted from the system itself to the practice of the system (Poguntke, 1994). As political parties have increased their grip on democracy and the two have become linked in the consciousness of the citizen, leading to terms like partitocrazia or Parteienstaat, it comes as no surprise that the practice of political parties has been at the fore of these critiques (see also Ignazi, 1994a: 9).

The paradoxical presentation of the ‘anti-party party’ can possibly explain another paradox; that is, the paradox that voters with strong anti-party sentiments still vote for political parties. In the famous terms of Albert O. Hirschman (1970), those discontented with the (established) political parties have generally three options: exit, voice and loyalty. Within the second group, ‘voice’, there are two options for expressing discontent: either they voice their discontent within the existing party-political system or they voice it outside that system. The second option is generally taken by the so-called (self-perceived) ‘winners of modernization’, the new middle class, who are the main supporters of the so-called new social movements (Dalton and Kuechler, 1990; Betz, 1994).17

However, the (self-perceived) losers of the ‘dual society’ (Swyngedouw, 1992) have no place in these organizations. They have to achieve their so-called ‘silent counter-revolution’ (Ignazi, 1992) within the existing party-political system. It is they who have no other option than voicing their discontent through the old and despised institutions of the political parties. Moreover, it is they who will vote for the extreme-right parties that they perceive as true anti-party parties, but are no more than successful agents of populist ‘anti-party sentiments’.

Notes

This article is based on the paper ‘Right-wing Extremist Parties in the Low Countries: Agents of Anti-party Sentiments or True Anti-party Parties?’ presented at the workshop ‘Anti-party Sentiments’ at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Madrid, 17–22 April 1994. I would like to thank all participants of the workshop as well as Petr Kopecký, Peter Mair, Joop Van Holsteyn, Paul Webb and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.
In this paper the term ‘extreme-right parties’ is used to describe those parties that are generally called right-wing extremist (or extreme right) in the media and in the scientific literature. Since the 1980s there has been a broad international consensus regarding the use of the term, even though there is an increasing use of alternatives (Mudde, 1996). What the exact definition of right-wing extremism is, and whether these parties are labelled so correctly, is beyond the boundaries of this paper. For some initial studies into this matter, see Gardberg (1993) and Mudde (1995a).

For a more detailed description of the method of analysis, see Mudde (1995a: 208–9).

The principal intrinsic criteria were (1) the organization has to have contested elections (with some success), (2) in the media and the scientific literature the organization has to be reputed generally as right-wing extremist, and (3) the organization must have been politically active since the 1980s. The most important practical criteria were language and the availability of party literature.

Because of the lack of space, the history of the parties in question is not described in this report (for short histories see Mudde, 1994). For literature on the VB, in English, see Fitzmaurice (1992), Husbands (1992b) and Mudde (1995b). For literature on the Dutch parties, in English, see Husbands (1992a), Voerman and Lucardie (1992) and Van Donselaar (1993).

For a detailed overview of the analysis, see Mudde (1994).


Centrumnieuws 1988, No. 1.

Vlaams Blok 1993, No. 4.


Centrumnieuws 1988, No. 1.


Vlaams Blok 1993, No. 8.

Centrumnieuws 1990, No. 2.


Centrumnieuws 1989, No. 2.


On top of that, they can and do voice their discontent within the party system by supporting left-libertarian or ‘new politics’ parties.

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