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Radical Right Parties in Europe: What, Who, Why?

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Radical Right Parties in Europe: What, Who, Why?

Given the dominance of party politics in Europe, political parties have always been at the forefront of European comparative politics. And no group of political parties has attracted so much academic interest as the ‘radical right’. Described by a plethora of terms – ranging from ‘neofascist’, ‘extreme right’ and ‘far right’, to ‘right-wing populist’ and ‘anti-immigrant’ – these parties have been the topic of literally hundreds (if not thousands) of articles and books in all major languages.

While this academic interest might be disproportionate to the political relevance of the parties in question, it is matched by the non-academic interest. Throughout Europe journalists, intellectuals, and politicians have been debating the ‘rise of the radical right’ after virtually every electoral victory of an alleged radical right party in the past

So, what are they? In my own work, I define these parties as populist radical right, itself a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism entails a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, i.e. an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that nonnative (or ‘alien’) elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state. Authoritarianism refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely. Populism, finally, is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the peo-

Biography

Cas Mudde is a Dutch political scientist and currently the Hampton and Esther Boswell Distinguished University Professor of Political Science at DePauw University (Indiana, USA). He is the author of *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), which won the Stein Rokkan Prize in 2008, and the editor of *Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2005). Next year the co-edited volume (with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser) *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective to Democracy?* will be published by Cambridge University Press.

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three decades. What has the combined intellectual labor of at least one hundred political scientists taught us about radical right parties in Europe? In this short piece I will address the what, who and why questions on the basis of the state of the art of the study of the radical right, with particular reference to my own work, most notably *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (2007).

What are we talking about?

It is not surprising that a phenomenon that goes under many different names will also be defined in many different ways. And while there are definitely widely different definitions out there, today most authors define the ‘radical right parties’ in roughly similar ways. This is in part a consequence of the professionalization of the study of the radical right, or perhaps better: the increasing dominance of social scientific studies over mainly historic or pseudo-scientific studies. For example, today few authors still use terms like ‘neofascist’ and ‘extreme right’ or argue that the parties in question are anti-democratic, racist, or violent.

It is the combination of *all* three ideological features, however, that makes a party populist radical right.

Essentially, the populist radical right is democratic, in that it accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule. It also tends to accept the rules of parliamentary democracy; in most cases it prefers a stronger executive, though few parties support a toothless legislature. Tensions exist between the populist radical right and liberal democracy, in particular arising from the constitutional protection of minorities (ethnic, political, religious). In essence, the populist radical right is monist, seeing the people as ethnically and morally homogeneous, and considers pluralism as undermining the (homogeneous) ‘will of the people’ and protecting ‘special interests’ (i.e. minority rights).

Who are they?

Logically, the question “what they are” influences the answer to the question “who they are”. In the study of the radical right, however, this is often not the case; authors using very different definitions will come



up with very similar lists of parties. This is largely the consequence of a lack of attention to the classification of parties. While most authors will devote at least some sentences to explaining the choice of term and definition, few if any will show on the basis of secondary, let alone primary, sources that the listed parties indeed share the definitional features.

This is in part a consequence of a continuing lack of detailed party studies. As happens in other areas, the bulk of the academic writing on radical right parties focuses predominantly on the big European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom. It is clear that the choice of these countries is not led by the national relevance of the radical right parties, as both Germany and the United Kingdom lack strong radical right parties. At the same time, some of the most relevant parties that come from smaller countries like Belgium, Denmark, Hungary or Switzerland, are barely studied outside their own country (and sometimes not even within it). This is undoubtedly in part a consequence of the economics of publishing, which rewards studies of phenomena in big countries.

Table 1 lists the electorally most successful radical right parties in European Union member states since 1980. The average highest result of these 13 successful parties is 12.7 percent, while their average most recent result is 9.8 percent. In fact, in only four countries have radical right parties gained more than 10 percent of the national vote. In two of these countries, Hungary and the Netherlands, the successful parties are also very new, and time will tell whether they will follow the common pattern of relative quick disintegration, or the rarer path of party establishment and institutionalization.

It is important to note that Table 1 includes just 12 of the 27 current EU member states. In the other 15 countries radical right parties are either electorally unsuccessful, gaining less than 5 percent of the national vote (e.g. Czech Republic, Germany, United Kingdom), or they do not contest national elections at all (e.g. Iceland, Ireland). In addition, there are some political parties whose radical right status is debated, that is, some scholars include them, but others do not. It would go too far to get into a detailed discussion of these cases here, but the most notably 'borderline cases' are the True Finns (PS), Hungarian Civic Union (FIDESZ), Italian Forza Italia (FO) and National Alliance (AN), the Norwegian Progress Party (FP), and the Swiss People's Party (SVP). All

Table 1. Electoral Results of Parliamentary Populist Radical Right Parties

Country	Party	Highest Result (%)	Latest Result (%)
Austria	Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)	10.7	10.7
	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	26.9	17.5
Belgium	Flemish Interest (VB)	12.0	7.8
Bulgaria	National Union Attack (NSA)	9.4	9.4
Denmark	Danish People' Party (DFP)	13.8	13.8
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)	5.6	5.6
Hungary	Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik)	16.7	16.7
Italy	Northern League (LN)	10.1	8.3
Latvia	National Alliance (NA)	7.7	7.7
Netherlands	Party for Freedom (PVV)	15.5	15.5
Romania	Greater Romania Party (PRM)	19.5	3.2
Slovakia	Slovak National Party (SNS)	11.6	5.1
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)	5.7	5.7

share some of the features of the populist radical right – nativism, authoritarianism and populism – but not all three. In most cases the debate is over the question whether the nativism (most often anti-immigrant sentiments) is ideological or

that different authors come to different conclusions.

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opportunistic, i.e. only used strategically in election campaigns.

Why are they relevant?

The last question has two different, if connected, meanings here. First, why are radical right parties successful? In a discipline dominated by 'why' questions, even if the 'what' question has not been answered completely, most scholars of the radical right study the reasons why radical right parties have been successful in post-1980 Western Europe. Given the many conceptual, data, and methodological constraints and differences, it should not be surprising

ical right electorate. We also know that radical right voters tend to consider immigration more important than the average voter, believe there are more immigrants than there really are, and want to limit immigration. At the same time, the majority of voters in most countries share these values, so the difference is not so much in terms of attitude toward the issue of immigration (crime or corruption), but the salience of the issue to the individual.

Most quantitative analyses look for the usual suspects, that is, the easily available socio-demographic and attitudinal data, at



the macro (i.e. national) level. Inconclusive results exist for the influence of levels of economic development, (individual) unemployment, (increase in) number of immigrants or refugees, etc. While these are meant to explain the demand side of radical right politics, institutional variables (like type of electoral and political system) and party variables (like ideological convergence) should gauge the supply side.

While much needs to be done to answer the 'why' question convincingly, running roughly the same problematic data over and over again, but using different advanced statistical methods, will not bring us much closer to the truth. Most scholars now agree that the key is not the demand side – through a variety of interrelated processes 'globalization' has created, at least since the 1990s, a fertile breeding ground for the radical right in Europe. Hence, the real question is: why, given this fertile breeding ground, are so few radical right parties able to establish themselves as significant political actors in their country?

The full answer to this study will require a broader research agenda, combining innovative qualitative and quantitative methods, and focusing on a wider range of successful and unsuccessful cases. It will have to look more at the supply side, in particular at the role of the radical right party in its own success or failure. Unfortunately, this will mean money- and time-intensive studies of relatively unknown parties in small countries, which is not much rewarded in the contemporary publish-or-perish market.

The second part of the 'why' question is the 'so-what' question: why are radical right parties relevant to European politics? To a large extent the relevance question is a direct consequence of the public debate: media and politicians alike are obsessed with radical right parties. The main reason for this public attention is the difficult relationship of radical right parties and liberal democracy, discussed above, which is often (for ideological or opportunistic reason) inflated by debaters.

In terms of direct power, i.e. government participation, radical right parties play a fairly secondary role in European politics. Table 2 lists all government participation of radical right parties in European states since 1990. These cases are fairly equally spread over the eastern and western parts of the continent, but most East European governments with radical right participation are of the 1990s, while most West

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European governments are of the 21st century. Still, in mid-2011, only two European countries have governments that include a radical right party: Italy and Switzerland. In addition, two countries have minority governments that are supported by a radical right party: Denmark and the Netherlands.

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ner in the government; and (2) they are controlled by a resilient judicial apparatus that protects the fundamentals of liberal democracy. In most cases radical right parties tighten immigration and integration legislation and enforce a more strict law and order agenda; often with clear support of their senior coalition partner (and sometimes with tacit support of the opposition). Yet while countries that have or have had governments with radical right participation or support have some of the strictest

Table 2. Participation in Government by Populist Radical Right Parties

Country	Party	Period(s)	Coalition Partner(s)
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	2000-2002	ÖVP
		2002-2005	ÖVP
	Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)	2005-2006	ÖVP
Croatia	Croatia Democratic Union (HDZ)	1990-2000	
Estonia	Estonian National Independence Party (ERSP)	1992-1995	Isamaa
Italy	Northern League (LN)	1994	AN & FI
		2001-2005	AN & FI & MDC
		2008-	PdL & MpA
Poland	League of Polish Families (LPR)	2005-2006	PiS & Samoirona
Romania	Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR)	1994-1996	PDSR & PSM
	Greater Romania Party (PRM)	1995	PDSR & PSM
Serbia	Serbian Radical Party (SRS)	1998-2000	SPS & JUL
Slovakia	Slovak National Party (SNS)	1994-1998	HZDS & ZRS
		2006-2010	HZDS & Smer
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	2004-	SPS & FDP & CVP



immigration laws in Europe, they are not the only ones. In other words, there is a broader European trend towards tighter immigration legislation and stricter law and order policies, which seems at best only partially related to the electoral and political strength of radical right parties.

But while political influence is not limited to government participation, studying the radical right's *indirect* influence on European politics is not an easy feat. First of all, it is difficult to establish exactly *how* radical right parties influence other parties to do things. Do other governing parties respond to pressure from radical right parties or from the population (and can these pressures be meaningfully disaggregated)? Second, on many issues we lack longitudinal or reliable data, which makes the study of highly contested issues impossible – like the relationship between the level of support of radical right parties and anti-immigrant sentiments at the mass level or racist violence.

Conclusion

Radical right parties are among the most studied political phenomena in contemporary Europe. Consequently, we know more about this relatively new party family than about established groups like the Christian democrats, the social democrats, or the liberals; despite the fact that these party families still constitute the backbone of most government coalitions in Europe. There remains much to discover, but this will require departing from well-beaten paths and from mainstream comparative politics. Let me finish this short overview by suggesting a couple of original research programs on the two aspects of the 'why' question, which are highly relevant and long overdue.

First, we still know very little about the context of electoral success. While electoral success varies between countries, it also differs significantly within countries. Intra-national comparisons can have the advantage of controlling for various independent variables, particularly on the supply side (e.g. electoral system, radical right party), and are perfectly set for meso level studies, which look directly at the immediate political and social *context* in which radical right parties flourish or falter.

Second, what is the relationship between the radical right and religion? More specifically, with the main 'enemy' redefined from *ethnonational* 'Turk' into *ethnoreligious* 'Muslim', how has this redefinition affected the self-definition of the host



(...) what is the relationship between the radical right and religion?

nation (the 'native') and the preferred role of (Christian) religion in political life? For example, the FPÖ emerged out of the anti-clerical subculture in Austria, but has recently become the most vocal defender of some orthodox Catholic priests in the country. Yet in the Netherlands the PVV seems to be willing to attack long-established Christian privileges in its struggle against Islam.

Third, what exactly are the effects of radical right parties on the various European party systems, particularly on the way the main political parties structurally interact? And what explains the differences? For example, in Belgium the cordon sanitaire against the VB has in many cities transformed *de jure* multiparty systems into *de facto* two-party systems – i.e. all 'demo-

cratic' parties are in coalition against the VB. Yet in Italy the LN has been a major component of the two-block system, in which multiple parties are essentially clustered into two opposing blocks.

Fourth, and finally, what have been the effects on European democracy, on the essential features of the liberal democratic political system? This is the key question, as much of the attention paid to radical right parties as well as opposition to them is a direct effect of their alleged anti-democratic program. And while there are clearly tensions between the monist radical right ideology and the pluralist essence of liberal democracy, so far little actual damage seems to have been done... or has it simply not been studied?