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Radical Right and Partisan Competition

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The New Radical Right and Partisan Competition

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In 2002, Jean Marie Le Pen, the leader of the most prominent French radical right party called the Front National (FN), shocked the nation as he emerged second in the presidential race. Although Le Pen lost in the secondary presidential run-off to the Rally for the Republic conservative party candidate and the incumbent Jacques Chirac, this event was surprising. Le Pen’s victory over the main left candidate from the Socialist Party, Lionel Jospin, however, raised many questions about the status of the radical right parties in France: who are their supporters, and more importantly, could they ever successfully run a government. The concerns and interest over the rising radical right in Europe are not coming solely from France. Netherlands, Austria and Belgium are among some of the other European democracies that have seen a recent rise in radical right candidacies for power.

With rising political interest, academics have also flooded the topic with accounts and theories about the radical right. This paper aims to analyze two prevalent theories to determine the important factors behind the rise of the radical right. Although radical right parties are often thought to be fueled by new sentiments caused by emerging social cleavages, their recent success can rather be attributed to the institutional constraints and the nature of partisan competition. The theory of Herbert Kitschelt, emphasizing social cleavages is thus considered against Pippa Norris’s account of electoral and institutional limitations for minority parties (such as the radical right). Both theories combine the supply and demand sides of party formation and competition to explain the rise of the radical right. Kitschelt supports the idea that a new social cleavage and an ideological opening in the political space gave rise to the radical right, while Norris proposes that changes in electoral institutions along with party strategies affect how people eventually vote. One of the main sources of tension between these two theories is that while Kitschelt considers
the new right to be an anomaly of the contemporary democratic system\(^1\), Norris regards their success as a result of the electoral systems. The paper begins with an account of the radical right, followed by the analysis of Kitschelt’s and Norris’s theories. Norris’s argument shows some shortcomings in Kitschelt’s understanding of the demand side as she clarifies the influence of electoral setting on party strategy and voters. The possible future success of the radical right parties is finally compared with the past success of some minority left parties that have since risen to prominence to illustrate which strategies helped dominate the partisan system in the twentieth century, and why the radical right has not been able to the same so far despite the definite increase of influence in recent years. The radical right is thus imbedded in an entrenched electoral system, and although the demands and social cleavages of the population are to be examined, they are not the sole explanation of the dynamics the radical right faces in competition for governmental power.

*Rise of the New Radical Right*

The radical right party generally promotes an authoritarian, nationalist and anti-statist agenda, whose ideology is thought to be accompanied by anti-immigrant, nationalist rhetoric. Although often compared to the fascist parties of the 1940s, the majority of the contemporary “New Right” parties have very little connection with the historical elements of fascism (and most radical right parties would like to keep it that way).\(^2\) Instead, the contemporary new right parties prefer to adhere to pro-capitalist, nativist and authoritarian rhetoric, and stray away from totalitarian ambitions.\(^3\) In short, the radical right parties rely on a specific type of nationalism


\(^3\) Ibid. Pp. 277.
(although not all forms of nationalist parties are the radical right). Radical right parties defend the nativist, authoritarian and market-based allocation of resources points of view. Despite this assessment, the identification of the new right parties has been met with some problems, as it is unclear where extreme conservative parties (Spanish Herri Batasuna, HB) or radical nationalistic and violent (Croatian Democratic Movement, HDZ) parties fall on the radical right spectrum. This has been one of the main problems across the literature, as classifications of radical right parties tend to differ from one author to the next.

In recent decades countries around Europe have witnessed of the new kind of radical right parties; indeed, their success has tripled. The theories that consider the rise of the new radical right often employ the supply and demand explanation to analyze these parties. Essentially, the aim of the supply and demand division is to investigate whether it is the people and social cleavages that create the desire for a specific political party, or whether it is the parties that inform people’s opinions and attract their votes. Until recently, many of the theories that explained the rise of the radical right parties concentrated on the demand factors. Academics sought to explain which electorate is a good “breeding” ground for radical right parties. They examined the structure and the demands of the European societies. Most recently, however, including the theories considered in this paper, academics have turned to explaining the supply side of the radical right parties as well. These theories seek to explain how the radical right parties form as well as to analyze the party strategies and structures. In short, they examine the

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way the parties themselves structure the competitive environment, how they gain a following, and how they affect the population itself.

Two Tales of the Radical Right

One of the most prominent theories integrating both the demand and supply side explanations was created by Hebert Kitschelt in collaboration with Anthony McGann. Kitschelt argues that the rise of the radical right parties depends on three key factors. The first factor integrates the demand side and posits that the rise of the radical right is due to an emerging social cleavage. In the post-industrial capitalist economy people will favor a free, market-based allocation of resources over political redistribution. As a consequence the economic division between classes will become increasingly more important. Kitschelt considers blue collar workers, petit bourgeois and lower salaried workers among the people who are most likely to vote for a radical right party. The demand side thus necessitates some sort of a societal cleavage where the lower classes dislike the current economic system and as a result begin to favor a market-based, authoritarian (and nationalist) party. There is, however, no apparent social cleavage that has emerged in recent years that would empirically confirm this proposition.

The other two factors employ the supply side of partisan competition. The difference between the two can be conceptualized in Cas Mudde’s terms as a difference between the external and internal factors of the supply side mechanism. The external factors are to be found outside of the party’s organizational structure. Kitschelt points to the influence of the ideological structure of the mainstream parties. He argues that the smaller the ideological gap between the centrist parties, the more room there is for a radical right ideology to rise in the periphery to take advantage of the people who are left out of the influence of the mainstream political opinions.

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The convergence between the left and right, therefore, allows for an alternative ideology to develop.\textsuperscript{12} The internal factor, and the third key factor in the rise of radical right parties, has to do with the internal strategy of the radical right party itself. In other words, it is how the party navigates the political environment, from responding to public demands and to opportunities within the political system. The party strategy needs to attract right-authoritarian support.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, others have contended that one of the reasons why the radical right has not had any bigger success is because it failed to attract all of its potential voters.\textsuperscript{14} The supply side for Kitschelt thus consists of two broad developments: the convergence of the centre-left and centre-right parties leaving a gap for a radical right party on the periphery, and the ability of the party to attract the appropriate right-authoritarian support. The emergence of an ideological gap however does not explain why there has been such a recent resurgence of the radical right, and more importantly, why has it been specifically the radical right ideology that emerged.

While Kitschelt’s theory is a comprehensive way to integrate the demand and supply explanations of the radical right, there are several shortcomings that become evident after an examination of Pippa Norris’s account of the political consolidation of the radical right. Although not disregarding Kitschelt’s theory, Norris places more importance on the supply side of the radical right parties. She gives the electoral systems within which the parties operate – the institutional environment – more importance than contemporary social sentiments.\textsuperscript{15} Party strategy, organization and leadership thus take on a fairly different role when they are placed within the institutional constraints of the electoral systems. Moreover, Norris disagrees with Kitschelt’s conclusion that it is the lower classes that are more likely to vote for a radical right

\textsuperscript{12} Kitschelt and McGann, \textit{The Radical Right in Western Europe : A Comparative Analysis}. Pp.275.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. Pp. 18-9.
party and that the demand for such a party comes from a social cleavage. The empirical evidence she provides suggests that followers of the radical right parties come from across a spectrum of economic backgrounds. This in turn suggests that there are other reasons for the rise of the radical right and those can be found within the institutional environment. Supporting Norris’s account of the demand side is Mudde’s finding that the demand for radical right parties is not an anomaly. The “breeding grounds” for radical right opinions are present everywhere. Furthermore, economic preferences in general have very little impact on the belief in the radically right ideologies, as the radical right generally influences the social and cultural spheres, rather than economic issues. Kitschelt’s account of the social cleavage and the economy-based consideration of the population are complicated by the findings from both Norris and Mudde, as both point out that radical sentiments exist within the population regardless and that in this case economic factors play little role in people’s voting considerations. The demand side thus calls for a supporting explanation from the internal and external structures of the radical right.

Since radical sentiments exist everywhere in society, it is more important to understand how these sentiments are activated and used by the political parties themselves rather than to know the origins of these sentiments. To do that, Norris looks at how radical right parties craft their strategies and how they respond to the demands of the population. She specifically pays attention to the institutional environment of the parties, since the electoral system has the potential to affect party ideological strategy, and consequently voter behavior. Kitschelt’s conception of the radical right success as a result of an ideological opening therefore does not take into account that the ideology that the party rhetoric preaches will change depending on the

16 Ibid. pp. 12.
electoral system. According to Norris, if the radical right party is in a plural system, it is much less likely to gain seats in the government than if it operates within a proportional representation (PR) system. This is evident in the case of France and the FN party, where the FN won no seats in 1981, but after the electoral system was changed to a proportional system in 1986 the party won 6.3% of the seats. After the changes were repealed in 1988, only one deputy from FN kept his seat, despite an unchanged proportion of the vote.\textsuperscript{20} Parties are not only affected by the electoral system in terms of acquiring seats, but the electoral system will also influence the party strategy. In PR systems, radical right parties are much more likely to stick with their radical ideologies, whereas in majority systems radical right parties will adhere to a much more general rhetoric. The proportion of people voting for them therefore is not so important, what matters in analyzing the success of radical right parties is the kind of system they operate in. Electoral rules will shape the radical right party strategy.\textsuperscript{21} This is because they already cater to a very specific group of people. These people do not vote for them because of a social cleavage but because of certain persistent attitudes that are already present. In other words, people who are either nationalist, have an affinity for strict governance or for a market-based allocation of resources may all vote for a radical right party candidate.\textsuperscript{22} (Admittedly, this is a very vague assessment, but this is the central problem of the radical right electorate: they do not form a coherent social class or have a consolidated identity.) Hence, the success of the party depends in large part on the party’s ability to manipulate the electoral system. If the same amount of people vote for the party in different types of electoral systems, the outcomes are likely to be better in the PR system. In Norris’s strategic agency theory, therefore, the external factors (the institutional

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. Pp. 262.
\textsuperscript{22} Mudde, \textit{Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe}. Pp. 298.
environment) and the internal factors of the supply side of the party competition continually influence each other.

Indeed, Kitschelt acknowledges the existence of theories based on institutional setting, by arguing that the electoral system is an important factor in party formation and fragmentation, but that it does not sufficiently explain party competition. To Kitschelt, party competition depends on the ideological gaps left by other (mainstream) parties. Norris, in contrast, argues that the institutional system is crucial since it either allows or denies the radical right party to gain seats. Pointing to the 1986 elections, Kitschelt contends that the systematic change did not damage the radical right party itself. Yet it did inhibit its success for the following years. In other words, although it did not affect the formation of the party itself, the electoral laws did affect the party success in entering governance institution, which is the most important step for a minority party in the first place. The pressure to convert votes into seats, therefore, instructs the party ideology, whose rhetoric in turn affects the perception of the voters. The fragmentary and uneven spread of the radical right ideology across European countries, therefore, are due to different party strategies and electoral systems, rather than to social cleavages or specific cultural changes.

Since the success or failure of the radical right parties depends in part on the institutional structure, it may be worth briefly investigating two factors that allowed some leftist parties to gain majority in the past: (1) the importance of initial electoral success for further consolidation of the electoral base, and (2) the moderation of the ideological message. Norris’s account of the radical right mirrors these two mechanisms, though radical right parties have generally failed to use either of these tools. Early twentieth century leftist parties serve as an example of how both electoral success and ideological moderation can help attain institutional power. First, the

24 Ibid. Pp. 60.
importance of initial electoral success is illustrated in the post-war success of the Christian
democratic parties. Stathis Kalyvas shows in his study on Christian democracies that electoral
success leads to a consolidation of the party, and thereafter helps it gain legitimacy and
credibility.\textsuperscript{26} Although the radical right has experienced some electoral success (especially in the
case of the FN in France or Vlaams Belang in Belgium), it has been unable to keep that success.
That is because of the second point of moderation of the ideological message. While the lack of
moderation can be attributed to the radical right being a “one-issue” party, as some critics
believe, the one-issue premise does not have any empirical basis. If this was true, a rise in
something like immigration in a country should have a direct effect on the success of radical
right parties as more people choose to vote for them; this conclusion is not empirically
supported.\textsuperscript{27} The ideological message of the radical right, however, does serve a larger purpose
that in some sense prohibits the party from straying too far from its ideology. The moderation
has not occurred in case of the radical right primarily because their electoral success closely
depends on a very specific ideology. Considering that the party strategy depends on the electoral
system, and that the party is more likely to win seats in a PR system where it does not have to
modify its message, the refusal to moderate the message is not surprising. The experience of
other leftist parties such as the social and Christian democratic parties suggests that moderation
is eventually inevitable. Moderation has to occur after the initial party breakthrough onto the
political scene if the party wants to secure more votes. In fact, this is the stage at which the party
has to not only keep all of its constituents (who are often radical), but it also has to moderate
their messages to attract and keep a broader electoral base.

\textsuperscript{27} Kitschelt and McGann, \textit{The Radical Right in Western Europe : A Comparative Analysis}. Pp. 61.
Comparing the case of the radical right parties and their refusal to moderate their messages like the leftist parties of the past suggests the choices the radical right may face in the future. They may choose not to moderate their message, which may have interesting consequences as party ideology has the capacity to shape people’s opinions. Indeed the radical right parties have already changed certain views. In places like Austria, the small success that the party enjoyed has already had some effects on the population as more restrictive immigration laws passed in recent years. Nevertheless, the radical right would have to seriously consider moderating their message to sustain their success within the electoral system.

Conclusion

The rise of the radical right parties can therefore be examined from both the demand and the supply side. The arguments about why there are sentiments that create the need for a radical right party often center around emerging social cleavages. However, this does not comply with empirical evidence on two grounds. First, there is no one group that is affiliated with the radical right party, as people come from fairly different social and economic backgrounds. What the demand side largely shares are large sentiments of nationalism, affinity for market-based resource allocation and strict enforcement of rules (authoritarianism). The demand for a radical right is therefore not an exceptional phenomenon (not a normal pathology but a pathological normalcy). The supply side also requires much attention in this matter. The supply is affected by both external factors (institutional constrains, electoral laws) especially when it is trying to breakthrough onto the political scene. The internal factors such as the party strategy, organization and leadership play a large role in breakthrough but also in the persistence of the party on the political field. However, contrary to what Kitschelt proposed, Norris argues that the

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relationship between the internal and external supply sides is much more interactive. While
Kitschelt argues that the ideology of the radical right is determined by existing ideological gaps
between the centrist mainstream ideas, Norris suggests that the ideology depends on the electoral
systems. Party competition is not so much affected by new gaps in ideological space; rather the
ideologies exist until they get electoral approval and consolidate a party. Majority systems are
likely to see more general and populist appeals from the radical right parties, whereas the PR
systems will keep their niche-oriented radical ideology. The more striking problem for radical
right parties, therefore, is how to attract a broader electoral base, given the fact that they do not
have a specific social group that they target and most of their followers adhere to their ideology.

References:


