

The Return of the Radical Right

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KATHARINA REMSHARDT, APR 23 2012

After the ideological and political bankruptcy of fascism after the Second World War, parties located on the right part of the political spectrum seem to have made a come-back across various European countries during the past three decades (Arzheimer, 2009:259). The re-emergence of this 'new' far right (FR) has recently attracted heightened media attention following the act of right-wing extremist terror in Norway in 2011 and the heated and on-going debates about the criminal activities of the neo-fascist NPD in Germany (Borchard, 2011:online). Despite enormous public interest and the proliferation of academic literature on the issue, a conclusive and all-encompassing explanation for the phenomenon is yet to be developed (Norris, 2005:4). Scholarly agreement so far has been limited to the consent that regardless of considerable national differences and specificities, parties like the Front National in France, the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, the British National Party and the German NPD can be grouped together under the heading of a single, albeit heterogeneous party family (Arzheimer, 2009:259).

Given the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon at hand, both exogenous (demand) and endogenous (supply) factors and their interplay have to be taken into consideration in order to uncover some of the reasons for the FR's increased success in terms of ability to gain votes in regional, national and supranational elections as well as with regards to their capacity to impact on national political discourse and mainstream agendas (Hainsworth, 2000:14). This essay shall attempt to exemplify this complexity by looking at the French Front National (FN) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) which in contrast to analogous sister parties in the UK or Germany have managed to exit the political margins and made their way into mainstream politics (De Angels, 2003:78; Norris, 2005:9). In addition, according to Ignazi's classification, both FN and FPÖ can be regarded as members of a new strand of far right parties of the post-industrial era (cited in Hainsworth, 2000:5). Therefore, both the French and the Austrian case are instructive when it comes to analysing the rise of 'new' FR populism in Western Europe.

As mentioned above, the far right party family is rather diverse. However, as Mudde has argued, three key characteristics can be singled out which generally apply to all FR political movements: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (2010:1173-). Nativism is linked to the Westphalian notion of the nation-state, implicitly building on the idea that the territory of a state should be inhabited by one people, the 'nation' (Mudde, 2010:1173). Therefore, one of the FR's main concerns is the question of immigration which is problematized in the context of other issues such as security, social cohesion, national identity or welfare provision (Rydgren, 2008:760). This often goes hand in hand with a xenophobic, neo-racist discourse, deliberately shifting the blame for all kinds of social ills on specific minority or ethnic groups (Hainsworth, 2000:7). Moreover, FR parties tend to share the view that societies should be governed with an authoritarian law and order framework championing strict rules and austere enforcement measures (Mudde, 2010:1174). Finally, the notion of populism entails the idea of far right parties being the expression of the 'volonté générale' as opposed to allegedly corrupt and elitist mainstream politics (Mudde, 2010:1175).

Naturally, discourse, policy emphases and institutional design of FR parties tend to vary depending on the national context, but the complexities of political performance patterns can be captured within a similar framework. In the past, researchers have mainly concentrated on the demand side of the political game, namely on factors facilitating the emergence of certain policy ideas and spurring support for them by creating a favourable political opportunity structure. The latter has been defined by Arzheimer as the relative "openness and accessibility of a political system for would-be political entrepreneurs" (2009:261). In practice, this has led to a focus on what Rydgren broadly refers to as "strain- and grievance based explanations" (2005:415). These subsume a group of theories which stress the

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role of public frustration and anxiety which FR parties are able to exploit when partaking in national electoral competitions (Hainsworth, 2000:11)

Alongside general disenchantment with policy makers and democratic representation evident in declining turnout rates across Europe (Eatwell, 2004a:3), the strains imposed on certain segments of society by globalization and mass migration are frequently cited as the main reasons behind voters' inclination to support FR parties (Norris, 2005:4). Ignazi has famously combined these contextual factors in his idea of a "silent counter-revolution" of the disadvantaged against the shortcomings of a post-industrial society which has come to neglect certain groups amongst its members (Spies and Franzmann, 2011:1045). De Angels finds that especially the manual labour force, the main recipient of post-war welfare provisions, has increasingly felt the pressures of the neoliberal globalization and its consequences (2003:86).

Other scholars have confirmed this observation by noting that the majority of FR supporters share a specific socio-economic profile. Arzheimer and Carter have hinted at the fact that being male, young or old, underprivileged, low-skilled and from a working class background considerably heightens the probability of a right-wing inclination (2006:421), even more so in times of economic crisis, high unemployment rates and large influx of foreign citizens which tend to be perceived as a threat to national cultural and societal coherence (Norris, 2005:9/10; Arzheimer, 2009:273). This in turn makes people more receptive to extreme right-wing populism, xenophobic rhetoric and radical policy propositions (Rydgren, 2005:415) which offer simple solutions and therefore appear to be more in tune with the electorate than many of the mainstream parties (Kessler and Freeman, 2005:263).

In short, demand factors touch upon the external conditions within which political competition and policy-making take place and whether they provide for a favourable political opportunity structure for parties (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006:422). However, various scholars have argued that exogenous dynamics only account for part of the picture and fail to explain the mixed record of FR electoral success across countries (Norris, 2005:14). More recent works on the emergence of FR parties have acknowledged the importance of supply side factors (Arzheimer, 2009; Norris, 2005; Boomgarden and Vliegenhart, 2007 et al.). Special attention has been given to the party agency of the FR itself (Hainsworth, 2000:12; Arzheimer, 2009:274). In order to take advantage of electoral niches, far right parties need to be able to position themselves within the political arena by building up a functional internal organization and leadership, launching well-targeted campaigns and an effectively communicated policy agenda (Arzheimer, 2009:274; Norris, 2005:15). This allows them to increase the salience of FR core issues within political discourse and the media and to sell their policy goals within a coherent and convincing ideological framework (Rydgren, 2005:416).

So far this essay has shown that the recent re-emergence of FR populism is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon which is contingent on both demand and supply factors and their interplay. The following section will underpin these findings by carrying out two short case studies of the French FN and the Austrian FPÖ. After a brief introduction of their history and development to date, the independent variable (voters' support for both parties) will be scrutinized by controlling for two broad dependent variables: the general political climate (demand) and far right party agency (supply). The analysis will show that both sides are essential and intrinsically interlinked.

The FN had been present on the margins of French politics for decades after its foundation in 1972 by Jean-Marie le Pen, the long-term party leader who has only recently been replaced by his daughter, Marine le Pen (Norris, 2005:58; BBC, 2011b: online). The "grandfather of the current crop of European populist parties" (De Angels, 2003:78) has witnessed a first genuine surge in electoral support in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections, when le Pen ousted the socialist prime minister Jospin by gaining almost 17% of the vote (Hainsworth, 2007:101). Although this caused a public outcry at the time, the FN still plays an important role in contemporary French politics; indeed Marine le Pen outstripped her father's 2002 performance in the first round of the 2012 elections (BBC, 2011b/c: online), taking almost one fifth of the vote.

The FPÖ on the other hand was founded in the 1950s, but didn't move to the radical right of the political spectrum until party leadership was taken over by Jörg Haider in 1986. In 1999, the party came second in national elections with 26.9% and its inclusion into a coalition government triggered international protest, eventually leading to the dismissal of Haider (Norris, 2005:62). Today, the party seems to have recovered from both the defection of Haider

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and internal fragmentation and has once again become a serious political player under its new leader Hans-Christian Strache (Heinisch, 2008:42; Borchard, 2011: online).

Both parties have considerably benefited from the general political climate in France and Austria around the turn of the millennium. In France, the sentiment of national identity and coherence was being undermined by fears concerning increasing Europeanization, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and the perceived lack of immigrant integration which seemed to have culminated in the booing of the French national team in the France-Algeria football match in Paris (De Angels, 2003:80). This was compounded by growing public discontent with the political establishment after years of cohabitation power-sharing (Hainsworth, 2007:108) and Chirac's notoriety for corruption (De Angels, 2003:81). Similar observations can be made for Austria which had also experienced a period of a coalition government infamous for political usury of office and tainted by a range of scandals (Heinisch, 2008:44). This fits in well with Arzheimer's and Carter's argument which confirms the connection between grand coalition governments, public disaffection and a general rightward shift of the electorate (2006:439). Both FN and FPÖ succeeded in presenting themselves as a feasible political alternative (Rydgren, 2005:427; Heinisch, 2008:45).

However, neither would have been able to do so had their leaders not decided to transform their parties' image by toning down the xenophobic rhetoric, cut ties with their fascist origins and overhauled their party programmes in order to broaden their appeal to a modern and non-radical electorate (De Angels, 2003:82). According to Rydgren, it was le Pen in particular who popularized a new FR "master frame", that is an overarching discursive framework which has underpinned FR policy making since the 1970s (2005:416). Hereby old-fashioned racism based on biological hierarchy has gradually been exchanged for a more temperate version of cultural racism which theoretically embraces racial equality whilst insisting on the incompatibility of different ethnic groups. Hence, 'new' FR parties manage to partly escape the stigma of being outright racists and at the same time capture prevalent anti-immigrant feelings of the 'native' population (2005:427).

This strategy has been adopted and taken further by le Pen's daughter Marine whose self-declared mission is the de-demonization of the FN (Coomarasamy, 2001: online). She has banned die-hard members and skinheads from the party's May Day march in Paris (BBC, 2011a: online), embodying a "more gently smiling form of extremism" (BBC, 2011b: online) and replaced plain xenophobia and Islamophobia with a seemingly pragmatic stance on immigration (The Economist, 2011: online), suggesting that immigration is in fact a major "source of costs" (Front National, 2011: online). The Austrian Freedomites are somewhat more open about their xenophobic resentments, constructing immigration as a threat to social coherence (Heinisch, 2008:50) and designing their 2009 electoral campaign as a crusade against foreign and especially non-Christian intruders (Mühlberger, 2009: online). Nevertheless, historic minorities are officially considered an "enrichment and integral part of Austria and the Austrian people" (FPÖ, 2011: online). Moreover, both parties have officially committed themselves to uphold and respect their countries' democratic system and values (Front National and FPÖ, 2011: online).

The party programmes of both FN and FPÖ have considerably evolved over time, adapting to the political tide when necessary (Heinisch, 2008:48; Hainsworth, 2007:105). This would hardly have been possible without the stringent, authoritarian and charismatic leadership of the le Pen and Haider respectively who were able to adjust their parties to the challenges of modern politics, utilizing voters' grievances and consolidating a loyal core constituency (Mudde, 2007:1180; De angels, 2003:79; Heinisch, 2008:48/49). Both parties seem to be here to stay and will certainly continue to unfold their disruptive potential in future elections.

The number of factors that could be included into a research design targeted at the emergence of new FR parties is almost unlimited and the list presented here is by no means exhaustive. The main goal of this essay was to go beyond the classic focus on demand side factors and instead illustrate the interdependence of demand factors on the one hand (such as the general political climate and the tendencies within public opinion) and supply factors on the other (such as programmatic flexibility and leadership skills on part of FR parties themselves). The examples of the French Front National and the Austrian Freedom Party have confirmed that the reasons for the rise of far-right populism are complex and contingent upon external and internal dynamics.

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Date written: December 2011