Why Have Far-right Parties Been More Successful in Some States Than Others?

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From the Joppik Party in Hungary to the Progress Party in Norway far-right parties have made significant electoral gains across Europe; quadrupling their average share of the vote in recent decades (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 2011). In many countries these parties now occupy roles in government as part of coalitions, and have found themselves becoming a part of mainstream politics. In other countries, such as Spain and the United Kingdom, however, far right-parties have struggled to ever garner public support within traditional politics (ibid.).

This discrepancy has been studied by various academics (Kittschelt 1995; Jackman and Volpert 1996; Knigge 1998), but very little consensus appears to have been formed as to why some far-right parties have been more successful in some states than others (Lubbers, Gijsberts and Scheepers, 2002). In order to investigate how and why success has varied across Europe I have selected three states with contrasted experience of far-right parties: Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries provide interesting case-studies because despite being separated by only a short stretch of the North Sea, they have witnessed significant variations in terms of electoral success.

While examining the more obvious factors such as theories and data of how high levels of immigration effect the success of these three states and of the variation in electoral systems, there will also be an exploration of more subtle reasons for varying success. This includes the growing trend of rejecting traditional electoral politics, the softening of opinions from hard lined racism to a focus upon immigration levels and economics, the geo-politics of the different states, the integration of policies by opposition parties and of specific events and their close proximity to the different states. Success will be defined, consequently, not only in seats gained, but also in other forms of populism such as online support, street movements and lobbying power thereby extending the potential of this work in establishing why some far-right parties have been more successful in some states than others.

In the United Kingdom far-right parties have struggled to enter traditional politics despite the British National Party [BNP] having been an active anti-immigration party for nearly thirty years (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 2011, pp.266). Although they continued to gain support taking 1.9% of the popular vote in the 2010 general election, a plurality electoral system has meant that they still have no members of parliament (BBC, 2010). The English Defence League [EDL] is a controversial non-party 'street' movement which organises marches and uses the internet to mobilise. It has been highly criticised for its anti-Islamic rhetoric and for the violence many of its marches and membership have come to be associated with (Demos. 2011a).

Founded in 1995, the Danish People's Party [DF] now exists as Denmark's third largest political group in Parliament. In September 2011 a coalition of centre-right parties was replaced by a left-wing coalition led by Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the country's first female prime-minister (BBC, 2011c). Denmark also has several smaller far-right groups such as the Vederfolner and Den Danske Forening (Demos, 2011b).

The Netherlands largest far-right party is the Party For Freedom [PVV]. Set up in 2004 it is one of the most recognisable far-right political parties in Europe. Led by the charismatic and popular Geert Wilders (BBC, 2011a), it is the third largest political party in the country. Its popularity dwarfs competing far-right parties who preceded the

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PVV's rise to prominence in the Dutch political scene such as the Pim Fortuyn List [LPF] (Ignazi, 2003).

Levels of Immigration

Two competing theories surround the role of immigration and net migration levels, and the success of far-right parties. Swank and Betz (1996) and Knigge (1998) found there to be strong positive correlation between the two whilst Kitschelt (1995) found there to be little indication between levels of far-right party turnouts and the proportion of foreign-born population. In Denmark foreign population as a percentage rose steadily from around 2% at the beginning of the 1980s to over 5% in the 2000s (OECD, 2010a). Similarly the UK has experienced a steady rise of foreign population. While in 1990 foreign population as a proportion stood at 3.2%, having risen reliably across the two decades, by 2008 it stood at 6.5% (OECD, 2010b). Although there was a marked increase in the level of foreigners in the Netherlands between 1990 and 1994, overall across the 1990s and until 2008 foreign population as a percentage remained at around 4.5% (OECD, 2010c) although this has shifted since (Statline, 2010). If Swank and Betz (1996) and Knigge (1998) were correct in their assertions one would assume there would be a correlation, with the BNP and DF being highly successful over these years and the PVV remaining at a static level of support over this period.

Net migration across the three countries has a marked difference, however. In Denmark, since the mid-1980s, immigration has always exceeded the rate of migration and has risen sharply since 2003 (Statbank, 2010). In the Netherlands net-migration was negative between 2003 and 2008 after which levels of immigration soared while migration fell behind (Statline, 2010). In Britain levels of immigration have consistently out-weighed migration since 1993 with 253,000 more people arriving last year than those leaving (Home Office, 2011). Consequently, while the success in the Netherlands now struggles even more to fit into the theory of Swank and Betz (1996) and Knigge (1998), the results of the United Kingdom and Denmark appear to leave the theory with real difficulties.

Events

A number of high profiled events such as the Norwegian terrorist attack have occurred over the past decade which may have contributed to the electoral successes of the different parties. 9/11 is widely recognised within literature to have been an important factor in a surge of support for far-right parties (Geaves 2005′; Art 2011).

The Danish general elections of 2001 were the first in the EU to follow the American 9/11 attacks and represented a massive swing to the far-right with the DF taking 22 seats compared to the previous result of 13 (Election Guide, 2011a). Of the close proximity to the event, Geaves (2005, pp.134) argues "The main political thrust of the election was one based on an anti-Muslim/anti-immigration campaign culminating with those right-wing parties… seeing a significant percentage of the national vote shifting towards them". Danish general elections of 2011 were also the first to follow the Breivik terrorist attack in Norway. Although the share of vote only shrank back marginally (ibid.), it went against the trend for the right to make gains and the election represented a move to the left (BBC 2011c).

In the Netherlands, the assassination in 2002 of Pim Fortuyn, the head of the Pim Fortuyn List [LPF] came eight days before the general election. Having performed well in polls with an anti-Islamic rhetoric, the murder seemed to propel them to gain 24 seats and second place in only their first election (Election Guide, 2011b). Whilst Geaves (2005, pp.134) argues that it is difficult to match the success to the assassination, he asserts "there is no doubt that [Fortuyn's] strong anti-Muslim…, his anti-immigration standpoint, and his emphasis upon protecting the values of Dutch liberalism… was one that tapped into the fears, beliefs and attitudes of a post-9/11 Dutch society".

With no elections situated close after either the 9/11 attacks, nor the 7/7 bombings it is difficult to establish how these events effected support for the BNP. In 2005, however, it can be seen with 193,000 votes, 0.7% of the UK total and over four times the number at the 2001 general Election that there did appear to be a significant rise in support

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(Election Guide, 2011c). In 2010 they nearly tripled their overall share of the votes to 564,331 giving them 1.9% of the vote (ibid.). Even though they are still absent in Parliament, they have managed to translate votes into seats in the more representative elections such as in the European Parliament and within the Greater London Assembly.

Electoral System

One obvious difference between the three countries is of their electoral systems. Whilst Britain has a plurality system of First Past the Post [FPTP], Denmark and the Netherlands both use Proportional Representation [PR]. More representative systems are generally viewed to be more advantageous to smaller parties and David Art (2011, p.16.) claims that it is "Not surprisingly, if one defines seats won by radical right parties as the dependent variable, majoritarian systems have a straight-forward mechanical effect".

The theory of electoral systems being key to the number of parties succeeding appears to explain the disparity in seats gained and lends the argument of voters not wishing to cast a "wasted vote" (Cox, Shugart, 1991). PR systems also tend to favour the formation of coalitions which Art argues helps the far-right: "By providing parties on the right with another coalition partner, the radical right has led to the bipolarisation of party systems" (Art 2011, p.10.).

Neto and Cox, (1997), however, assert that it is too simplistic to reduce the ability of a range of parties to succeed in elections down to the electoral system in place, preferring to instead examine the social cleavages which exist, and to combine them to set a model of success. Echoing this rejection of reductionism, Art (2011, p.16.) notes that "Arzheimer and Carter found that the chances of voting for the extreme right actually increase as the disproportionality of the electoral system increases".

Integrated Policies

The British think-tank Demos tries to examine the more subtle successes of far-right groups by including an analysis of how their opinions have been adopted by other political parties. "The growing political power of these parties has exerted a gravitational pull on the centre ground, with countries like France banning the Burqa, and top politicians such as David Cameron and Angela Merkel declaring the end of multiculturalism" (Demos 2011a, p.20.). The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, in its declaration in March 2005, warned of the trend for discourse typically reserved for the far-right becoming more accepted "The use of racist, anti-Semetic and xenophobic political discourse is no longer confined to extremist political parties" (ECRI, 2005). In Britain it is argued that the main parties incorporate the issues of smaller parties (Art 2011). Ignazi (2003) supports this conclusion pointing towards the policies of the centre-right party: "the Conservatives took a clear stand in the immigration issue. Since the 1961 [BNP] party".

Softening and Diversification of Views

Others attribute the ability for parties to succeed due to the softening of more hard-line policies (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 2011; Art, 2011). The current economic climate has heightened rhetoric beyond national cultural protection to include economic interests and workers' rights allowing them to gain support from different sections of societies. Kittschelt (1995) describes a "winning formula", which involves the combination of xenophobia with economic liberalism to target the support of anti-immigration blue-collar workers as well as white-collar workers anxious for reduced government intervention in the economy. Ignazi (2003), similarly, describes "the emergence of new unaccounted issues to the creeping crisis of representation... to the increasing political and societal alienation and the dissatisfaction for traditional features of the political system and for politics as such". For the PVV this diversification, has extended beyond nationalist economics to forms of liberalism usually reserved for left-wing parties such as its

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embracing of homosexuality and Judaism (BBC, 2011a). Its targeting of liberal voters from the perspective of Islamophobia has allowed them to reach a new audience. This diversification of ideals and policies, however, is argued to have not been adopted by the BNP who are said to resemble the failures of the "old, toxic far-right" (Guardian, 2011).

Personality

Ignazi and others talk about "the emergence of proto-charismatic figures in the extreme right, well-knit with the growing personalization of politics" (Guardian, 2011). Some even argue that of the variety of reasons, success should be attributed "above all, to party characteristics of the extreme right-wing parties themselves" (Lubbers, Gijsberts and Scheepers, 1997, p.345.). Nowhere has this been more obvious than in Holland with Geert Wilders. His political party has experienced great controversy, but along with it publicity and popularity. In 2009 he was brought to court on charges of inciting hatred and discrimination and in the past he has been banned from the UK. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, notoriety he was voted politician of the year in 2007 by the Dutch political press (BBC, 2011a). In the UK, this reliance on personality has had its ups and downs. Nick Griffin, leader of the BNP, managed a period of popularity whilst he adopted more centrist views highlighting immigration over race. Controversies throughout the press however (BBC, 2003) have undermined this, and as a public figure he is now regarded as a liability during the parties recent slump in support.

Alternatives to Traditional Politics

The British think-tank Demos has extensively covered the rise of the far-right. It has also taken a look beyond electoral politics into the motivations of supporters and to non-traditional participation. They argue that in its research of the far-right "Supporters display low levels of trust in both national and European political institutions compared with national population averages" (Demos 2011a, p.20.). Denmark has several minor far-right groups such as the Vederfolner with about 200 members and Den Danske Forening which considers itself a lobbying group. These do not submit electoral candidates, but instead organise marches and pit pressure upon government without the restraints of having to appease the centre for votes (Demos, 2011b). The British National Party (BNP) has just under 15,000 formal members and over 80,000 Facebook fans (Demos 2011a, p.19.). "The English Defence League (EDL) is the newest and biggest right-wing street movement in a generation" (Bartlett and Littler, 2011).

Conclusion

No theorists appear to suggest there to exist a single causal factor to explain the rise of the far-right, nor one to describe the variety of successes between states. Indeed the only consensus amongst the literature appears to be that there is a clear plurality of contributing reasons for the diversity in electoral success. Although the type of electoral system in place is key to electoral success in terms of seats gained, the characteristics of the party and the personality and charisma of the leaders is also central to success as has been seen in the form of Geert Wilders.

Specific events have also been key to the rise in support as we have seen in all three nations, but most clearly within Denmark. It is also important that we take into account other forms of success than elections. Smaller groups such as the EDL and Vederfolner are beneath the surface of traditional politics, but can still influence government by accentuating growing anti-immigration or racist sentiment. Similarly, it is not just in the ability to win seats, but to shape debates.

In conclusion, there are a range of reasons to the diversity in success between the European countries – some new and a reflection of modernity (Bartlett, Birdwell and King, 2011), others have been documented extensively for

decades (Swank and Betz, 1996; Knigge, 1998). The potential for far right exists within most contemporary European societies, but it is a range of contextual factors that are required for the success of the far-right.

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