1

Introduction

In March 1984, a foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post* tracked down Pierre Poujade, the stationery salesman who had led a political revolt of French shopkeepers three decades earlier. Poujade's movement, the Union de Défense Commerçants et Artisans (Union for the Defense of Tradesmen and Artisans, UDCA), did not survive beyond a single parliamentary term in the French National Assembly and serves as a classic example of a "flash" party. But the ideology of Poujadism – the defense of small business interests and traditional values against the forces of modernization – appeared to be making a comeback in the form of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (National Front, FN). Le Pen had first entered parliament as a twenty-eight-year-old deputy of the UDCA, and although he was now well into his sixth decade, Poujade still spoke of him as a protégé. "A handsome kid with a fine gift of gab" was his estimation of the FN's leader. Le Pen was attracting national attention after his party, with the cooperation of two mainstream conservative parties, won several council seats in the town of Dreux. This led to a series of television appearances and increased visibility, and by the time of the interview with Poujade the FN was polling between 10% and 15% for the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. Nonetheless, Poujade foresaw a bleak future for Le Pen: "Take my word for it: by 1988, he will be down to 1 or 2 percent of the vote."[1]

Poujade's prediction may have been colored by his own meteoric rise and fall, but the overwhelming majority of commentators at the time also viewed the FN's success as ephemeral. Most were unwilling to believe

---

[1] *Washington Post*, March 18, 1984.

that the party represented anything more than a hodgepodge of political cranks riding a momentary wave of protest. When Le Pen and the other elected FN parliamentarians took their seats in the European Parliament in July 1984, an article in the *Guardian* described them as the "Strasbourg Cuckoos" and argued that French voters would soon toss them out.[2] This view persisted four years later, even after Le Pen had captured 14% of the vote in the 1988 presidential election. "So far," the *Economist* reminded its readers, "Europe's post-Hitler experience has been that far-right parties wane almost as quickly as they wax."[3] There was thus no reason to believe that Le Pen would not become the next Poujade.

The media's tone, however, had changed markedly by the early 1990s. Not only had the FN consolidated its electoral position and established a national organization, but other parties that railed against immigration and the political establishment had also begun to do surprisingly well across Western Europe. Journalists started to juxtapose quaint, travel-book descriptions of small European states with this new wave of xenophobia. "The gentle face of Belgium, affectionately teased as the home of beer, chips and Tintin, had turned ugly overnight," reported one after the Vlaams Blok's breakthrough in the 1991 municipal elections in Antwerp.[4] "The photograph shows three young, handsome Austrians with wind-blown hair and open collars, laughing at the camera as they pose for a picture high in the Alps," wrote another of an Austrian Freedom Party poster in 1990.[5]

By the turn of the twenty-first century, it had become clear that many of these parties, which I will refer to as radical right parties, were here to stay. They had participated in national governments in Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, supported minority governments in Denmark and Norway, and won representation in state parliaments and local councils across Europe. Several had approached 30% of the vote in national elections. The French National Front never reached the latter mark, but Jean-Marie Le Pen's entrance into the second round of the 2002 presidential election, despite no meaningful chance of winning the contest, marked the culmination of his political career.

Poujade obviously failed to predict the rise of the FN, and a plethora of other parties like it, nor did he foresee how their emergence would reshape

[2] *Guardian*, July 26, 1984.
[3] *Economist*, April 30, 1988.
[4] *Independent*, November 26, 1991.
[5] *New York Times*, October 7, 1990.

European party systems. Some observers, frightened by the electoral success of the radical right, went to the other extreme, predicting fundamental political change from what proved to be only transitory electoral breakthroughs. Many scholars of German politics, for example, believed in the early 1990s that the radical right Republicans (Republikaner, REP) would become a permanent fixture in the party landscape. They have, to an extent, but given their underwhelming electoral performance since then (0.4% in the last federal election), the party can hardly be considered a meaningful presence. When New Democracy (Ny Demokrati, ND) became the third-largest party in the Swedish parliament (Riksdag) in 1991, many argued that Sweden was simply following in the steps of Denmark and Norway, where anti-tax parties had converted themselves into successful radical right ones several years earlier. But ND imploded after its electoral breakthrough, and by 2000 it was defunct. The attention lavished on parties like the FN, the Vlaams Belang (VB, formerly the Vlaams Blok), and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) has obscured the inability of other radical right parties to capture more than a couple of percentage points in national elections or even to survive after a particularly impressive electoral showing. The development of the radical right in Western Europe over the past quarter-century has thus been a story of failure as well as success.

That scholars and pundits were unable to predict with any accuracy in the 1980s, and even in the 1990s, the trajectories of radical right parties is not surprising. European states underwent a more or less common set of structural changes – the most important being an increase in ethnic heterogeneity – over this time period. And while these states and societies differed in important ways, they did possess enough in common for reasonable people to believe that they would respond to these changes in parallel ways. Hence, the success of a radical right party in one presaged consistent victories elsewhere. That this did not occur is puzzling.

Furthermore, when one looks more closely at the trajectories of radical right parties in particular sets of cases, it becomes clear that existing theories – which I review at length later – cannot account for the variation in their success across different regions or countries. For example, some theorize that specific electoral systems or economic crises act as catalysts for radical right success. Yet the same electoral rules in Flanders and Wallonia have not produced the same outcome: the radical right is strong in Flanders but weak in Wallonia. The latter has also been mired in a permanent economic crisis, while the former has done relatively well. Yet another theory suggests that rates of immigration in a given country

determine the electoral fortunes of radical right parties. However, the theories of both electoral systems and immigration rates are contradicted by the example of the three Scandinavian countries, which use similar electoral systems and whose basic commonalities often make them the subject of structured-focused comparison. It is far from obvious why the radical right has thus far failed in Sweden, which has nearly twice the percentage of foreign-born residents as neighboring Norway and Denmark, where the radical right has succeeded.

The goal of this book is to explain the variation in the success of radical right parties across Western Europe. Although there are many ways of conceiving of success and failure, I use electoral persistence as my dependent variable and define success as receiving more than 5% of the vote in three successive national parliamentary elections.[6] This means that I am not concerned with explaining how radical right parties achieve their initial electoral breakthrough.[7] The reasons for these breakthroughs, however defined, have been so varied that they are probably better viewed as contingent events rather than the result of similar processes.[8] Since every party I examine in this book has experienced some form of electoral breakthrough, I take this event as my starting point rather than my outcome of interest. Electoral persistence does not overlap perfectly with other possible measures of success, such as representation in parliament, government participation, or influence on mainstream parties.[9] Yet since

[6] The election results for radical right parties since 1980 can be found in Appendix A. The reader will see that changing the 5% barrier by a couple of points in either direction, or looking at two national elections rather than three, does not lead to different codings.

[7] There is no common definition in the literature of what constitutes an electoral breakthrough. For some scholars, such as Mudde (2007: 301), it means winning enough votes to enter parliament. My view is that this is too restrictive a definition, as it would exclude cases such as the municipal elections in Dreux in 1983 that most scholars would agree represented a "breakthrough" for the FN. I would therefore define a breakthrough as an election in which a party receives enough votes to attract the attention of the media and other political parties.

[8] For example, the REP owed its breakthrough in the West Berlin elections of 1989 to a xenophobic television commercial that the local media seized upon and amplified. The FN's success in the town of Dreux in 1983 can be attributed largely to the efforts of Jean-Marie Stirbois and his wife, Marie-France, who had campaigned there for five years. The German DVU won nearly 13% in state elections in Sachsen-Anhalt in 1998 through an unprecedented mass mailing of propaganda material. The BNP won local representation in 2002 in towns that had recently experienced ethnic riots.

[9] For example, in France the FN has persisted electorally despite being effectively denied representation in the National Assembly. The VB is one of the largest parties in Flanders but has been shut out from government at every political level. Alternatively, the LPF did not persist electorally but certainly reshaped the public debate over immigration and integration.

electorally persistent parties also tend to succeed on these other dimensions, it makes sense to focus on this variable rather than on something else. Moreover, looking at persistence (or lack thereof) allows us to analyze the trajectories of radical right parties over the past quarter-century and to avoid overemphasizing any particular election result. While we are thus unable to fully account for the occasionally wild swings in their electoral support, taking the long view brings into sharp relief those forces that have created strong radical right parties in some countries and weak ones in others. A decade from now, the list of successes and failures might look very different: some of the parties I code as successes here (such as the Front National) appear to be in decline, and some new parties (perhaps the Party of Freedom in the Netherlands) may have consolidated themselves in their party systems. But while comparative historical analysis is obviously backward looking, my hope is that the lessons that emerge from this book will help us to understand future patterns. The case selection is explained toward the end of this chapter, but the cases themselves – eight cases of success and nine of failure – are summarized in Table 1.1.

Some of these parties will be familiar to anyone who has followed European politics over the past several decades. Others – particularly the ones that have failed – are more obscure, and one might wonder why I have spilled so much ink over parties that have left such a small political footprint. The reason, aside from the obvious methodological imperative in case study research of including variation on the dependent variable, is that unless the failures are examined, the success of radical right parties appears to be almost natural, and even theoretically uninteresting. Indeed, one could tell a relatively simple story about the rise of the radical right in which massive structural transformations – primarily postindustrialization, immigration, globalization, and European integration – generated a predictable and uniform backlash. Looking at cases in which radical right parties should have done well, but did not, helps us dismiss such deterministic arguments.

This book breaks with much of the literature on the radical right by taking a careful look at the parties themselves. Once we begin to look inside them, dramatic differences emerge between successful and unsuccessful cases. To put it bluntly, failed radical right parties have adhered to the so-called Pogo principle: "We have met the enemy, and it is us." Bitter factionalism, incompetence, criminal activity, organizational chaos, and a host of other internal pathologies have led to party implosion, oftentimes at the very moment that these parties had registered a large electoral gain.

TABLE 1.1. *Successful and Unsuccessful Radical Right Parties, 1980–2009*

Country	Party	Outcome
Austria	Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	Success
Belgium (Flanders)	Vlaams Belang (VB)	Success
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DF)	Success
France	National Front (FN)	Success
Italy	National Alliance (AN)	Success
Italy	Northen League (LN)	Success
Norway	Progress Party (FrP)	Success
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	Success
Belgium (Wallonia)	Belgian National Front (FNb)	Failure
Germany	German National Party (NPD)	Failure
Germany	German People's Union (DVU)	Failure
Germany	Republicans (REP)	Failure
Great Britain	British National Party (BNP)	Failure
Netherlands	Center Democrats (CD)	Failure
Netherlands	List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	Failure
Sweden	New Democracy (ND)	Failure
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)	Failure

Note: Successful parties are those that received 5% in three successive national parliamentary elections. Unsuccessful parties are those that did not.

The radical right parties that persisted have not been entirely immune to these types of problems. Yet they not only have managed to weather them, but have also developed organizational capacities that rival, or even surpass, those of mainstream parties.

The question, of course, is what accounts for these differences. This book claims that the internal life of radical right parties – and, indeed, political parties in general – is shaped by the nature of their activists. While we know a great deal about radical right voters, we know extremely little about those people whose commitment to radical right politics goes far beyond casting a ballot every couple of years. With a few notable exceptions, scholars have treated the individuals who work on behalf of radical right parties as either homogeneous fanatics or the docile followers of a powerful, and often charismatic, leader. Yet radical right activists hold different ideas about immigration and parliamentary democracy. They have different visions of their parties and different levels of commitment to them. They come with different levels of education and political experience. Through a combination of comparative historical analysis, ethnographic research, and an analysis of an original data set of radical right candidates for office, this book demonstrates how the types of activists a

party attracts ultimately determine its success or failure. Most important, it offers an explanation of why radical right parties attract the types of activists they do.

Although this book focuses on a particular type of political party, both the rise of these parties and my argument for their diverse trajectories have broader implications for the study of party politics in advanced industrial societies. This is not the place to recapitulate the debate over whether the political cleavages that Lipset and Rokkan (1967) described as "frozen" have thawed to the point where they are no longer useful in predicting contemporary voting behavior (for a review see Bornschier 2009) or whether new cleavages have replaced them (Kriesi et al. 2008; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009; Bornschier 2010). One thing, however, is clear: electoral volatility in Western democracies has increased over the past several decades (Drummond 2006). Party fortunes and individual electoral behavior have become far less predictable than in the past, and the effective number of parties has increased across advanced industrial societies (Dalton, McAllister, and Wattenberg 2002). Radical right parties – particularly those that use populist appeals – may be uniquely positioned to take advantage of this fluid electoral environment, since skillful use of the media and ideological flexibility have become two of their hallmarks (Poguntke 2002). Yet they are clearly not the only type of new party, even if they currently receive more academic attention than all other types of new parties combined. Green, regionalist, far left, center, liberal, and now even pirate parties have contested elections across Western Europe, and many have won seats in national legislatures.

Most of the literature on new parties is concerned with explaining their emergence (Harmel and Robertson 1985; Hug 2001; Tavits 2006) and, to a lesser extent, their electoral success. Given their novelty, it is not surprising that few scholars have tried to explain why some of them disappear while others persist or why their participation in government has thus far received little attention (an exception is Deschouwer 2008). If the argument in this book is correct, the electoral persistence of new parties will have less to do with sociostructural or institutional factors than with their ability to navigate successive developmental stages in their political life cycle (Pedersen 1982). Put another way, changes in the basic political cleavages of advanced industrial societies may have given new parties the opportunity to prosper in a more volatile electoral environment, but it is up to them to take advantage of this opportunity. In this less predictable world, agency matters more.

Over the past several decades, the personalization of elections – and, indeed, of politics writ large – across advanced industrial societies has produced a wave of research on its causes and consequences for democracy. The simple insight that some candidates for office are of higher quality than others has generated a large literature in the field of U.S. elections (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Krasno 1994; Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). That campaigns are becoming more candidate centered, and that parliamentary systems are increasingly taking on some of the key features of presidential systems, has attracted the attention of scholars of European electoral behavior as well (Poguntke and Webb 2005; McAllister 2007). Radical right parties would seem to fit particularly well into this literature on the personalization of politics. Indeed, perhaps the most popular explanation for the rise of radical right parties is that they are led by charismatic personalities who exert nearly dictatorial control over their organizations. Although I, like others (Van der Brug and Mughan 2007), take issue with the charismatic leader thesis, this book looks closely at the difference that individuals make in both winning elections and building viable parties.

In sum, the study of the radical right is important for understanding broader trends in contemporary party politics. Yet because this book deals exclusively with radical right parties, it is also necessary to justify their real-world importance. This is something that scholars studying the radical right have not often paused to consider, in part because there have always been enough politicians and commentators warning, in apocalyptic fashion, that its rise prefigures a return to the politics of the interwar period or, somewhat less hysterically, that it threatens to undermine the quality of European democracy. The fourteen member states of the European Union appeared to endorse the latter view when they placed sanctions on Austria after a radical right party (the Austrian Freedom Party) joined a coalition government in February 2000. But after six months of refusing to appear in photos with their Austrian counterparts, EU politicians dispatched a crew of three "wise men" to determine whether minorities were suffering under the new government. They were not, the report concluded, nor was the FPÖ dismantling Austrian democracy. Radical right parties that have been parts of governments elsewhere in Europe, or who have propped up minority governments in Denmark and Norway, have not behaved much differently. Moreover, since radical right parties have been denied the reins of government even in places where they are electorally strong, like France and Flanders, it is reasonable to ask whether and how they matter.

Yet the fact that radical right parties are not threatening to overturn liberal democracy does not mean that they are not important or that their differential success across Europe will not produce lasting consequences. Indeed, they have been both the products and agents of some of the most fundamental changes in European politics over the past several decades. Most strikingly, immigration has turned nation-states that were formerly homogeneous into ones with large minority populations; the rise of the radical right would have been inconceivable without this basic social transformation. At the same time, the radical right is profoundly influencing how European states and societies negotiate the issues that immigration has introduced. Even when they have not been in power, radical right parties have shown a startling ability to set the agenda on issues such as asylum, immigration quotas, integration requirements, and citizenship laws (Williams 2006; Howard 2009). Mainstream parties seeking to co-opt the radical right have instituted policies that they otherwise might not have. Furthermore, in the cases where they have exercised power at the national level – such as Austria, Denmark, and Italy – radical right parties have largely succeeded in making immigration policies more restrictive (Van Spanje 2010). Since these policies will shape the nature and pace of immigration over the coming decades, it is likely that variation in radical right success will produce enduring differences in the ethnic composition of European societies.

In addition to policy changes, the radical right influences the ongoing public debates in European states about immigration, integration, and national identity. Politicians facing strong radical right parties have often tried to co-opt them by integrating elements of their discourse. Jacques Chirac's references in the 1980s to the "smells" emanating from immigrant households was in part a response to Le Pen, as was Nicolas Sarkozy's tough talk on law and order and preserving national identity in the 2007 presidential election. Pim Fortuyn's attacks on Islam provoked an intense public debate in the Netherlands about the compatibility between it and Dutch political culture that continues to this day.

As noted earlier, the growth of the radical right, along with the libertarian left (or the Greens), also marked a historic transition in European party systems that had been "frozen" since before the Second World War (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The ties that had inextricably bound certain social groups to specific political parties loosened for many reasons: postindustrialization and the growth of the service sector eroded the power of unions and, by extension, the link between workers and Social Democratic parties; secularization cut into the base of Christian

Democratic parties; new forms of mass media (particularly television) rendered voters less dependent on all types of political parties for information while simultaneously promoting more candidate-centered political campaigns. The radical right has been a beneficiary of this electoral dealignment and has at the same time accelerated it. By providing parties on the right with another coalition partner, the radical right has led to the bipolarization of party systems (Bale 2003; Mair 2008). In so doing, it has helped to alter patterns of policy making in European countries. The growth of the Austrian Freedom Party was aided by Austria's specific form of consociationalism, but has also undermined it. The politics of consensus in Denmark, and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands, has not been able to coexist with large radical right parties. Switzerland's "Magic Formula," under which four parties form a national coalition government, was first altered, and later broken, by the Swiss People's Party.

Finally, the radical right also clearly matters for the course of European integration. Although their positions toward the European Union have shifted over time, most of these parties have become deeply skeptical of the integration process. In France, the National Front played an important role in helping to defeat the referendum on the EU constitution in 2005. One can imagine radical right parties mounting similar campaigns if, and when, EU member states call on their citizens to vote on future issues. Some scholars have even argued that the rise of the radical right is a by-product of European integration itself (Berezin 2009).

Defining the Radical Right

The term "radical right" requires an immediate definition, particularly since scholars have used a number of designations – extreme right, right-wing populist, far right, to name a few – to refer to the same basic party family. In this book, I use "far right" as an umbrella term for any political party, voluntary association, or extraparliamentary movement that differentiates itself from the mainstream right. The term is problematic for a number of reasons, but given its wide usage it is a convenient way of referring to political movements across time and space. "Radical right" refers to a specific type of far right party that began to emerge in the late 1970s. This term, too, is potentially misleading because parties that have carried the adjective "radical" include left-liberal parties in nineteenth-century France and Italy, as well as anticommunist conservative movements in the postwar United States. However, since there has been a convergence around the term in the literature, I will use it rather than invent another.