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Electoral Disorder, Social Change: An Introduction

Elections in advanced democracies have become increasingly unpredictable in recent years. New political elites and former pariah parties are gaining popularity while traditional, mainstream parties and leaders lose support. Perhaps most notably, Europe is in the midst of its most tumultuous electoral era since the inter-war years. Unconventional parties with leftist, rightist, and ideologically ambiguous platforms attract voters in political contests across the continent.[1] Vote shares of Europe's establishment parties such as left-leaning Social Democrats and right-leaning Christian Democrats are in precipitous decline in many countries. Election campaigns are increasingly confrontational, suggesting that the post-war commitment to political consensus among political parties has weakened. As challenger parties grow in popularity, they stand to further transform the nature of political competition and policy making. They also stand to alter political systems for decades to come as young generations enter a very different political environment than the one that ushered their elders into democratic citizenship.

The electoral ascent of radical right parties makes for particularly gripping headlines. These parties' campaigns hinge on anti-immigrant, anti-European Union, anti-globalization, and anti-establishment themes. High-profile examples range from the immensely successful Swiss People's Party, the winning party in Switzerland's last several legislative elections, to the National

[1] In Spain an upstart party on the left, Podemos, has risen to be the third largest party in the country since its founding in 2014 by a political scientist. On the right, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), established in the 1990s, engineered a successful referendum in favor of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. Italy's Five Star Movement is the recent creation of a comedian-turned-blogger-turned-populist. It received more votes than any other party in the 2013 lower house legislative elections. The Five Star Movement defies definitive classification in traditional left-right terms. These parties are examples of the many movements contributing to electoral disorder in Europe.

Front in France, which has experienced ups and downs over several decades, to the nascent but un-ignorable Golden Dawn in Greece, which brands itself in stunning neo-Nazi style.[2] Even in Sweden, a country widely believed to be immune to modern political extremes, the Sweden Democrats have a fast-growing constituency. In most west European countries and increasingly in some east European states, radical right parties attract significant vote shares in national contests.[3] Sometimes they obtain seats in governing coalitions. Even when they do not ascend to governance, their very presence in politics pushes national dialogues and public policies to the right.

As these electoral shifts shake up modern democratic politics, they pique popular curiosity and energize academic discourse. Many ask: what explains these historic developments? This book provides new insights into citizens' decisions to vote for radical right parties. I ask: why do certain people at certain times in certain places decide that a radical right party or candidate merits their electoral support?

In big-picture historical terms, today's radical right phenomenon has been linked by many experts to a widespread unmooring in modern politics. People do not feel connected to political parties like they did in the decades following World War II when the basic parameters of partisan competition were established.[4] Partisan dealignment – a process through which citizens have become progressively detached from traditional political parties (Dalton and Wattenburg 2000) – and the ascent of new electorally competitive parties represent two sides of the same coin.[5]

While both the dealignment trend and the rise of new parties are distinctly political in nature, they are rooted in broader, societal developments: people's weakening ties to traditional social groupings that for decades aligned with mainstream political parties. Group-based models of voting have shaped our understanding of electoral behavior in Europe (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and the United States (Campbell et al. 1960) as citizens traditionally view politics through various lenses – typically defined by class and religion. The process of approaching vote choice as members of defined social groups

[2] In recent legislative elections in these countries (in 2014 in Sweden, 2015 in Switzerland and Greece, and in 2017 in France) the Sweden Democrats received nearly 13 percent of the vote, the Swiss People's Party received nearly 30 percent of the vote, the French National Front about 9 percent of the vote in the second round (over 13 percent in the first round), and Golden Dawn received over 6 percent of the vote.

[3] They have also achieved success in European Parliament elections and many sub-national elections at municipal and regional levels.

[4] Lipset and Rokkan (1967) developed the "freezing hypothesis" that explains the post-war contours of Western European partisan debate in terms of deep-seeded social cleavages that originated in the 1920s.

[5] See Dassonneville and Hooghe (2018) on the consequences of partisan dealignment for broader political orientations. Ezro et al. (2014) make this case in reverse: connecting strong partisan attachments with very limited opportunities for extremist parties to compete electorally.

promoted stability in voter behavior for decades, resulting in relatively foreseeable electoral outcomes. Most notably, trade unions and their related social classes have traditionally synched in ideological terms with center-left parties while (typically Catholic) Christian churches and their religious communities have sided with center-right parties. As membership in unions and churches and their attendant social groups wanes,[6] support for mainstream left and right parties becomes less socially rooted in a traditional sense and less habitual.

Observing such trends, one might surmise that the era of social group-based voting that was once a powerful, stabilizing phenomenon in democratic societies is drawing to a close. Indeed, this is what some commentators and scholars have argued, referring to major segments of today's democratic electorates as "adrift."[7] The contemporary voter, according to this interpretation, is detached from foundational social groupings of modern life and increasingly inclined to make political judgments according to his or her own, idiosyncratic criteria. Instead of approaching elections from particular social positions, people now make choices at the polls that are motivated by attitudes on specific policy issues and attraction to particular political leaders (Ivarsflaten 2008, Stone 2017).

While the image of a detached, unpredictable, issue-focused voter may accurately capture the reality of electoral choices for some individuals, one fact of life stands in sharp tension with this interpretation of contemporary society as highly atomized: human beings have a psychological need to belong to social groups. It is natural – some would argue imperative – for individuals to locate themselves within defined social collectives. This attachment provides a source of identity, self-esteem, and well-being. Thus, as groups that formerly structured a significant portion of social life lose their stabilizing powers, other forms of belonging can be expected to take their place. In certain situations, these enhanced feelings of alternative group belonging will be salient for politics.

So what is happening in terms of group attachment and politics is not simply an unmooring; it is also a re-mooring. Thus, to understand large-scale transformations in society and politics, we should be on the look-out for types of group belonging that are on the rise in terms of personal salience and political salience. This approach will allow us to think differently about how various dimensions of social ties shape electoral choices.

In this book I introduce, develop, and test what I call the localist theory of radical right voting: an account of unconventional electoral behavior that is motivated by people's feelings of attachment to their local communities. I argue

[6] See Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) on the declining relevance of social class, and Pollack (2008) on religious decline.

[7] For a journalistic account of voters adrift, see Cowell's (2010) essay in *The New York Times* and Doggett's (2017) Agence France-Presse article. A classic scholarly source of this argument is Andeweg (1982). A modern empirical study is van der Meer et al. (2013); they argue that voter volatility stems from the emancipation of European voters from traditional partisan structures.

that those individuals with the strongest sense of belonging to their localities find the programs of radical right parties particularly appealing. In addition to contributing a fresh account of the radical right phenomenon, I mark a path toward a fuller understanding of the ways different facets of people's social identities shape their vote choices in modern elections.

To date, the connections people feel to their local areas have not attracted careful attention in research on voter behavior. This is an oversight because so many factors signal that people's ties to their localities fuel the rise of radical right parties. To identify a few: these parties often get started by appealing to local pride in local elections, their success levels vary markedly by locality even in national contests, and they often promise to protect the political autonomy of local communities. These observations suggest that there is great potential in exploring the connections between politically relevant local attachments and radical right voting. As such, they set the stage for my consideration of Tip O'Neill's famous adage, "all politics is local," as it relates to the raucus electoral politics of the twenty-first century.[8]

To the extent that the concept of "the local" features in studies on the subject, scholars ask whether community characteristics such as foreign-born population size or unemployment rate predict support for radical right parties. Studies also examine the ways in which participation in community organizations and the resultant gains in social capital relate to radical right support. To date, these studies provide conflicting accounts of whether and how locally oriented factors can motivate support for the radical right, thus inspiring further exploration into the ways the local connects to the politically radical.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I devote attention to radical right parties in order to clarify the nature and dynamics of their politics. I also consider alternate theories of radical right support, summarize my argument, and outline the chapters of the book. But first, I draw attention to the phenomenon of localism. Myriad observers point to the rise of local attachments and the implications of those attachments for many facets of life, but we know very little about how these trends influence politics.

THE RISE OF LOCALISM

People feel the need to belong; they crave membership in defined social collectivities and they find security when rooted in bounded communities. Scholars from Durkheim to Maslow to Tajfel make this observation. A sense of belonging provides positive self-identity, distinctiveness, and self-esteem (Livingston et al. 2008). Yet key facets of modern social change threaten individuals with anonymity. In an increasingly homogeneous, high-tech world there is great potential for people to sense that they don't matter. Many feel disempowered,

[8] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press for drawing this connection.

indistinct, and unanchored. It comes as little surprise that one Gallup poll after the next shows how stressed, anxious, and pessimistic many people are these days, particularly in Europe.[9]

One way to mitigate these negative effects is to seek refuge and empowerment in the locality. Small-scale communities can offer a sense of belonging and a sense of place; research in psychology bears this out. In the local arena individuals can feel connected with a group that distinguishes them in a visible way and provides the basis for feelings of pride and efficacy (see Bess et al. 2002), and a key source of identification can be the locality (Wilton 1998, Kingston et al. 1999, Forrest and Kearns 2001). Community psychologists Forrest and Kearns articulate the logic for this (re)localizing reflex as it relates to neighborhoods:

> Intuitively, it would seem that as a source of social identity the neighborhood is being progressively eroded with the emergence of a more fluid, individualized way of life … On the other hand, globalizing processes may have the opposite effects. As the forces which bear down upon us seem to be increasingly remote, local social interaction and the familiar landmarks of the neighborhood may take on greater significance as sources of comfort and security. (2001: 2129)

Thus, in response to the march of globalization, people retreat to small-scale, local groups that provide a much-needed sense of membership. Numerous commentators and researchers have noticed this very trend: the backlash against anonymity prompts a renaissance of the local. Some identify this as a world-wide phenomenon; Friedman (2000) and Barber (1996) narrate the retreat to local traditions for security in the face of globalizing forces. Indeed, there are plenty of manifestations of increased localization in today's world; localist economic movements in scores of countries exemplify the trend. The heightened visibility of "buy local," "food sovereignty," and "shop small" movements characterize small-scale life in many countries, particularly in the global north (Weatherell et al. 2003, Ayres and Bosia 2011). These movements have been found to boost feelings of community attachment among residents (Mitchell 2007), blossoming in response to a global system that is perceived as distant, depersonalized, and uncontrollable (see Hess 2009).

Academic work from a range of disciplines further emphasizes the importance of small-scale "place" in addition to the notion of community. From sociology comes a narrative that highlights the continued relevance of particular places for individuals:

[9] Many Germans are stressed and anxious: www.gallup.com/businessjournal/190049/high-cost-worker-burnout-germany.aspx?g_source=anxiety&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles. Many Greeks (followed by Bulgarians, Romanians, and Portuguese) are extremely pessimistic about the direction of their lives: www.gallup.com/businessjournal/159605/combating-greece-desperate-loss-hope.aspx?g_source=stress%20europe&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles (see also Fitzgerald, Curtis, and Corliss (2012)).

> Could it be that place just does not matter anymore? I think it does. In spite of (and perhaps because of) the jet, the 'net, and the fast-food outlet, place persists as a constituent element of social life and historical change. (Gieryn 2000: 463)

We can find corroborating observations in political science, as well:

> Modern life has not erased the importance of place … It may have, instead, increased the need for people to draw boundaries, to more crisply define their geographic community … and to behave in ways that signal their place-related identities … People are often proud of where they are from, and they continue to want you to know it. (Cramer 2016: 240, fn. 12)

Additional political science research shows that local attachments are on the rise in a range of European countries (Sellers and Lidström 2012). There is also a growing narrative about the political roots of the localist retreat, emphasizing that it is in part in response to a perceived lack of control and a feeling of distance from loci of power. Starr and Adams, for instance, find processes of "relocalization" to include "the practice of local sovereignty and the refusal of distant authority" (2003: 21) in response to globalization.

Altogether, economic, social, and political localism is on the rise, and this trend has high levels of support from many corners. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that tightly knit communities are especially well suited to meet the challenges of the day, making it possible for residents to cooperate and solve common problems and to insulate themselves from the strains of modern life. Yet there are those who criticize localist movements. One line of disapproval warns against social fragmentation. For instance, human geographers uncover the ways that localism can devolve into divisive and potentially unjust spatial or local "fetishism." The concept of "defensive localism" has been developed in recognition of the fanaticism that characterizes some localist movements (Winter 2003, DuPuis and Goodman 2005). There can be economic costs, too. "Buy local" movements are criticized by economists as inefficient for the market, and place attachment can reduce incentives for young people to seek out better job opportunities elsewhere (Green and White 2007).

Furthermore, a person who links his or her self-esteem and identity to the local community is in a position to feel personally threatened if they perceive the locality to be under threat. Just as globalization pushes people to invest reflexively in their local areas, it also threatens to undermine what makes each locality special. The distinguishing character and status of a local community are things that locals who care will want to preserve. So the positive psychic benefits of community are counter-balanced by the potential negatives that come from perceived threat. As a result, local attachments today put individuals in a precarious position with respect to their status and, ultimately, their sense of place in the world. When local identities are strengthened and drawn upon, a powerful local "us" can become the basis for intense political views.

It seems we have a solid understanding *that* localism is on the rise, and we also have compelling intuitions as to *why* it is on the rise. Yet while the psychological and economic implications have attracted scholarly attention, we have little knowledge of the *political effects* of localism. Some work has connected globalism's social disruption to changes in modern politics. For instance, according to Eric Hobsbawm (2007), the impersonalizing forces of globalization push people to invent mental connections to social groups, thereby reinforcing the rise of identity politics. As I read this collection of signs, the increasing importance of local attachments and their connection to new trends in electoral behavior merit careful examination.[10]

Stepping back from the enhanced value of localities in the lives and psyches of individuals, one also observes a parallel trend toward the heightened political relevance of local units in many democratic societies. For instance, while national governments and the EU elicit low levels of citizen trust, local governments enjoy relatively high levels of public confidence. In a range of countries, people have positive views of their local authorities and know a great deal about them. At the same time, national leaders increasingly recognize the capacities of sub-national collectivities for addressing modern problems and respond by empowering local governments.[11] The practice of devolving power to local authorities has been taking place across democratic systems for the past few decades (Loughlin 2001, Jeffery 2006). This makes the localities increasingly meaningful in political terms, enhancing the politicization of local identities, considerations, and issues.

In tension with this overall trend toward devolution, territorial restructuring in certain countries threatens the autonomy of some local communities. In efforts to streamline bureaucratic processes and achieve greater efficiency in public service delivery, some national governments institute agglomeration schemes. These reforms "clump" previously distinct and relatively autonomous municipalities – most often those located in sparsely populated rural areas – into merged units. Such practices may ultimately improve the quality of life in affected communities, but they also spur intense debate about the status of the locality – and thus the value of people's local identities – in today's world. Through this mechanism, too, the local can become increasingly salient for politics.

Building on all of these insights, this book investigates the *electoral* implications of this turn toward the local, which have been largely overlooked. I find that today's passion for all things local and localities' enhanced political salience have contributed to the growth of radical right parties.

[10] Eatwell (2000) makes an adjacent observation about the way identity politics is promoted by globalization.

[11] The European Union's guiding principle of subsidiarity – that all policy should be made at the lowest sensible level of governance – is consistent with this shift in authority to sub-national units.

THE RADICAL RIGHT AND DOMINANT ACCOUNTS OF ITS SUCCESS

Radical right parties are meaningful electoral challengers in many European countries; common themes emphasized by these parties include sharp curtailment of immigration, autonomy from the European Union, extremely tough law and order stances, and pointed criticism of mainstream political parties. More broadly, they aim to represent those citizens frustrated by modernization and globalization – and the societal strains these trends have wrought. Their ultimate goal is to undo the perceived damage that has accompanied modernization (Minkenberg 2000). Radical right rhetoric paints a picture of a "better" time characterized by less diversity, more safety, intact sovereignty, greater affluence, and elevated status. They invite voters to share their nostalgic vision and to join them on the quest for a return to the past.

It is their rhetoric – that is imbued with nostalgia – that helps to distinguish the radical right from other kinds of parties, particularly those on the ideological right. Many center-right parties have taken firm positions on some of the same issues such as immigration and the European Union. But it is the backward-looking view of societal developments that sets the radical right apart. Populism is a key aspect of their appeals, as well. They claim to carry the mantle of the true citizenry, bringing the people's unfiltered voice directly into the political arena (Mudde 2004). They blend this populism (which by definition is ideologically neutral) with rhetoric that holds mainstream politicians responsible for societal shifts in the wrong direction: becoming increasingly diverse and increasingly hamstrung by superordinate agreements, diluting the power of the people. They charge ruling elites with incompetency and mismanagement at best, rampant corruption at worst.

While the advent of these parties sets the backdrop of this study, there are significant dimensions of variation that require attention. Most obviously, their electoral shares in national elections are highly inconsistent across countries. Switzerland has the most electorally successful radical right party; countries hosting robust support for these parties also include Austria, Denmark, and France. In other countries such as Germany, Greece, Hungary, and Sweden, the radical right has only recently gained traction with voters. In contrast, there are other national contexts in which there is no national-level representation for the radical right to date: Portugal, Ireland, and Spain, for instance. The cross-national variation has been well studied, but is not fully explained. The major accounts in this vein of research point to the role of national electoral systems and the dimensions of competition (or lack thereof) among political parties. These factors surely matter, but they don't tell the whole story, and they are not well suited to explaining shifts over time. The temporal dimension is particularly important since it can help to push our explanations beyond the identification of where the radical right does well toward a better understanding of why.

We also do not know enough about the reasons for variation across different communities within countries. It is well documented that support for these parties is very patchy in a geographical sense. Some cities, towns, and villages turn out en masse for these parties; in other places they fare poorly at the polls. Yet this diverse electoral geography presents an unsolved puzzle. Even less clear is why those sub-national patterns change over time – what draws residents of a particular community toward the appeals of radical right parties in certain election years and not others? Again, we lack sufficient theoretical tools to make sense of this variation.

Finally, academic studies leave lingering questions about the reasons people decide to support these parties and the reasons they decide not to. A substantial literature has generated insights into the profile of a typical radical right supporter. We know that statistically speaking he is male with relatively low socio-economic status (which involves factors such as education, skills, and other personal resources) (Betz 1993). The typical supporter also tends to take a negative view of modern developments such as large-scale immigration, associating the arrival of newcomers from other countries with domestic strains in economic, cultural, and social life (Rydgren 2008).

The most-likely supporter also lives in (or close to) areas that have been affected by modern changes such as economic decline and immigrant-related diversity (Rink et al. 2009, Valdez 2014). Straddling the individual-aggregate divide are accounts informed by theories of social capital; the argument is that individuals who invest in social capital (through participation in civil society) and those communities rich in social capital will not find the radical right particularly appealing (Coffé et al. 2007). It is those individuals who do not partake in these (trans)formative activities and who do not live in associationally vibrant communities who will support the radical right.

Knitting together these accounts yields an image of the stock supporter of radical right parties. We have established the most-likely profile, but we do not have a full enough sense of the range of motivations that propel citizens toward these parties. Add this to the fact that people move in and out of the radical right voter category over time (meaning they sometimes choose to vote radical right but at other opportunities they choose other parties or opt to not vote), and the profiling approach becomes less useful. Simply put, our current characterization of the radical right voter and his motivations is too narrow for the complexity of the decision to support one of these parties.

Moreover, the increasing size of radical right vote shares requires a wider net in terms of theorizing the factors and processes that connect voters to radical right platforms. When these parties only represented the fringes of society, a few key characteristics went a long way in making sense of the movement. But today the radical right has become increasingly popular among less likely supporters such as women and those who situate themselves on the left side of the political ideology spectrum. The radical right landscape has shifted in other ways, too. Early support tended to come from areas (towns, cities,

neighborhoods) that had been immediately affected by the societal shifts associated with globalization. Today, there is rising support in areas that are quite different in nature: communities with little-to-no experience with immigration or post-industrial decline. Increasingly, areas that are rural, ethnically homogeneous, and economically prosperous host significant levels of radical right support in many countries. So while the existing accounts provide insight into a significant portion of the radical right electorate, they cannot address the motivations of many supporters. Furthermore, we have little understanding of when and where certain characteristics or motives will become salient enough to prompt a radical right vote choice. The analysis in this book yields newfound understanding of the diverse, broadening, and unstable coalition that is the radical right electorate.

To unearth some of the more nuanced aspects of radical right support, I examine variation in support for these parties at the individual level (why do some people vote for these parties while others do not?), at the municipal level (why do these parties receive higher levels of support in certain localities than in others?) and at the national level (why do these parties have more electoral success in some countries than in others?). I also consider the dynamics of radical right support over time: what explains shifts in support at the individual, local, and national levels? The analysis spans over thirty democratic countries, integrating surveys from advanced industrial democracies with data on key institutions and other societal characteristics. Couched in a broad-based analysis of radical right support in a range of countries, I devote particular attention to this phenomenon in France and Switzerland.

THE LOCALIST THEORY OF RADICAL RIGHT SUPPORT: A SUMMARY

I argue that local attachments underpin and motivate radical right support.[12] A sense of closeness to one's community involves a strong feeling of pride in the area and positive views of its residents. It also includes a desire for the locality to have status and some autonomy. "Localism" represents these ideals, establishing the basis for celebration and defense of the local community. Individuals can be characterized by their sense of closeness to their communities, and whole communities can be characterized by their levels of local pride and local rootedness.[13]

[12] By "local" I mean a defined, relatively small territorial arena in which people live. For measurement purposes, I focus on the municipality, the lowest administrative unit in most democratic state structures. When survey respondents answer questions about the local, it's possible they think smaller – as in a neighborhood, development, or estate – or even bigger – as in a metropolitan area that includes more than one municipality. But overall the term "local" refers to small-scale community that resides beneath the country and its constitutive regions.

[13] A community high in local cohesion is one characterized by feelings of closeness to the locality and its residents. I develop this concept more fully in Chapter 6.