

THE FREEDOM PARTY IN COMPARISON:
RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES IN WESTERN EUROPE

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I. Introduction

What is a radical right party? Radical right parties are not new to the political scene. Different parties have come and gone over the last century. What is different about the radical right parties of the 1980s and 1990s is their staying power, and their impact on the mainstream parties. The rise of new parties on the right in the 1980s led to a great deal of controversy over how these parties would be defined. On the other hand, there is little argument regarding their challenge to established party systems in Western Europe. I will argue in this paper that there are many similarities between the radical right parties in France, Germany and Austria.

I begin by comparing different authors' definitions of extreme or radical right parties, and develop my own definition of a radical right party. I then describe the radical right parties and their histories in section III. Section IV provides a description of the nationalism that defines radical right parties, and the positions they have taken on immigration, economics, and the mainstream parties. Despite differences in their historical development, the parties I will be describing have taken very similar positions on issues such as immigration and the European Union.

II. Defining the Radical Right

In this section I begin by describing the debate over what defines a radical right party and offer my own definition. I then compare the parties' positions on a set of topics, particularly immigration. I conclude by comparing the baselines of party support, to show that these parties have similar levels of potential support in each country.

What is a Radical Right Party: The Debate

The rise of parties in Western Europe who generally have an anti-immigrant message has led to a debate on how these parties should be defined. Some authors refer to these parties as "extreme-right" and consider these types of parties to be anti-system (Ignazi 1992, Ignazi and Ysmal 1992, Fennema 1996). Others use terms such as "far right" (Cheles 1995), or "new right" (Minkenberg 1997) to describe the same set of parties. This difference in terminology is an example of the difficulty researchers have had in classifying these parties.

Despite varied labels, most authors agree that radical right parties do have certain characteristics in common. For example, Swank and Betz note that, "Concretely, RRWP [Radical Right Wing Parties] combine radical free market programmatic commitments with xenophobic and strident anti-establishment positions" (1995, 1). In a survey of political experts by Huber and Inglehart (1995) these parties (except for the NPD which was not included) are placed on the extreme right. Although there may be different labels for these parties, they do fit into a particular category that is different from the center and far left parties.

Rather than use terms like extreme or anti-immigrant that may have negative meaning, I use the term radical right to describe the parties in this analysis. One of the main defining characteristics of these parties is their nationalism, which I describe in more detail below. For the purposes of this analysis, radical right parties also have the following traits in common:

- They take an anti-immigrant stance by proposing stronger immigration controls, the repatriation of unemployed immigrants, and call for a national (i.e., citizens only) preference in social benefits and employment.

- They consider themselves “outsiders” in the party system, and therefore are not tainted by government or mainstream parties’ scandals.
- Although they may have started out pro-EU they are now critics of the Maastricht treaty and monetary union
- In contrast to earlier extreme right or fascist parties they work within a country’s political and electoral system and do not have the goal of tearing down the current political system.

These criteria may change with time and the rise of new issues, but this definition fits well for the radical right in the 1980s and 1990s.

III. Party Background

In this section, I begin by describing the main political actors in each country. I then describe the history of the radical right parties in France, Germany and Austria.

The Actors

I focus on the following radical right parties: the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party–NPD) and the Republikaner (Republicans–REP) in Germany, the Freiheitlichen (Freedom Party–FPÖ) in Austria, and the Front National (National Front–FN) in France. The Republikaner party was founded in 1983, the NPD in 1964 and the FPÖ was originally formed in 1956. The FPÖ became more clearly identified with the radical right when Jörg Haider became the party leader in 1986. The FN was formed in 1972 with Jean-Marie Le Pen as party leader.

The mainstream political parties in Germany are the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and its Bavarian branch CSU (Christian Social Union), SPD (Social Democrats), and FDP (Free Democrats). The main parties in France are the Gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR), the Socialist party (PS), and the Communist party (PC). The conservative Union for French Democracy (UDF) became an umbrella for several smaller parties in 1978. In the French case I combine the vote for the RPR and UDF, since these two parties only presented one candidate in most constituencies in elections after 1986. Austria has two main parties that have been part of government since the end of World War II. The ÖVP (Austrian People’s Party) is the conservative, Catholic party and the SPÖ (Social Democrats) represent the moderate left. The parties are displayed in their respective categories in table 2.1.

The National Front in France

From 1945 until the early 1980s the extreme right performed poorly in French elections. In his 1977 book on French parties, J.R. Frears writes that the extreme right failed due to a lack of internal cohesion and feuds with other parties. He also argued that the stability of the Fifth Republic discouraged the rise of the extreme right and that, “It is economic crisis and political instability that are the recruiting sergeants of extremist movements” (Frears 1977, 165). France enjoyed political stability until the mainstream right party split in the late 1970s.

The Front National (FN) formally became a party in 1972 and first contested elections at the national level in 1973. When the Front National was formed in 1972, the Gaullists had continually held power since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. The main party players at this

time were the Gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR), the Socialist party (PS), and the Communist party (PC). In the 1974 presidential election Valéry Giscard d'Estaing won a narrow election victory over the Socialist candidate, François Mitterrand, showing a weakening on the Right. This weakening was due to a bitter internecine battle to consolidate or regain leadership of the right-wing coalition between Chirac's RPR and Giscard's various supporters (UDF from 1978). The Union for French Democracy (UDF) emerged in 1978 as a coalition of centrist and right forces united behind President Giscard d'Estaing. However, this split on the Right helped to lead to a Socialist victory in 1981. Mitterrand was elected president in 1981, at the expense of both the Right and the Communists. Mitterrand promptly dissolved the conservative-dominated National Assembly and the Socialist party obtained an absolute majority in the legislative elections of June 1981. This majority would hold until 1986, when the Socialists lost to the UDF-RPR coalition, despite Mitterrand changing the electoral rules to a proportional representation system. This change, however, allowed the National Front (FN) to gain a foothold in the legislature with 9.7% of the vote (35 seats). This election also set up the period of "cohabitation" in France. The left returned to government after Mitterrand was reelected president in 1988 and called new elections.

After performing very poorly in the 1979 European Parliament elections and the 1981 legislative elections, when it received only 0.35% of the vote, the FN broke through in 1983 by gaining 17% of the vote in a local election, thus getting the attention of the media across the country. The mainstream right joined a coalition with the FN on the second ballot in this local election, and the unified ticket won 55.3% of the vote, giving legitimacy to the FN. In the 1984 euro-elections the FN gained 11% of the vote and ten members of the European Parliament -- gaining the same percentage of the vote as the PCF (Communist party). In 1988 Le Pen received 14.4% of the vote in the presidential election and had an equally impressive showing in the 1995 presidential election. The FN received 9.6% of the vote in the first round of the 1988 legislative elections and 12.5% of the vote in the first round of the 1993 legislative elections.

The FN has been strictly controlled by Le Pen and those who disagree with him are either silenced or removed from the party. Until recently, Le Pen has managed to maintain harmony between the different factions through his charismatic leadership. Since the 1986 legislative election the FN has been well distributed throughout the country, although it is strongest in the south of France near Marseille.

The NPD and Republikaner in Germany

The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) was formed in 1964 by several rightist regional parties, including members of the DRP (German Reich Party) that had contested national parliamentary elections in 1953, 1957, and 1961. The NPD received only 2% of the vote in the 1965 parliamentary election but received enough votes to enter state parliaments in several *Länder* elections from 1966 to 1969.

Splits began to appear in the party in early 1967. Two factions, led by Adolf von Thadden and Fritz Thielen, struggled for control of the party. The Thadden faction would win out, but the struggle caused difficulties for April 1967 state elections. Also, unemployment was declining and the Great Coalition that had been formed in December 1966 was having success in both domestic and foreign policy. The NPD received only 5.8% of the vote and four seats in the state legislature of Schleswig-Holstein, a former Nazi stronghold. The party received a slightly better 6.8% of the vote in Rheinland-Pfalz, but only received four seats in the state legislature.

The NPD achieved its highest national vote totals in the Bundestag election of 1969.

The party nearly entered parliament with 4.3% of the vote in 1969 but fell short of the 5% of the national vote required. When the economy began to improve in the early 1970s and the government stopped the importation of labor,¹ the party's support shrank and the NPD virtually disappeared from the electoral map. During the 1970s the NPD made headway in the legislatures at the *Länder* level but was on the wane by the beginning of the 1980s. The NPD still exists, but has received less than 1% of the vote in recent years.

The German Republikaner party was formed in 1983 by Franz Schönhuber and two other disgruntled members of the Bavarian Christian Social Union. After several years of infighting among the three founding members, Schönhuber, a journalist and former member of the Waffen SS, became party chairman in 1985. The name Republikaner was chosen in direct reference to the Republican party in the U.S. – the party wished to be seen as conservative like Ronald Reagan (Veen, et. al., 1993). The party received only 3% of the vote in the Bavarian *Land* elections in 1986, but this made it eligible for Federal electoral funding that allowed the party to organize throughout the country (Betz 1994, 18). In 1989 the Republikaner gained six seats in the Berlin *Land* parliament and six seats in the European parliament with 7.1% of the vote.

Despite the successes at the local level, and in the European parliament elections, the Republikaner struggled at the national level. The party's best performances in national parliamentary elections were in the 1990 and 1994 Bundestag elections where it received 2.1 and 1.9% of the vote, respectively. Although it has received more than 5% of the vote in Bavaria, the Republikaner party has never achieved the 5% of the national vote necessary to gain seats in the national parliament.

The Republikaner has been distracted with internal quarrels, similar to those experienced by the NPD. The main disputes have been among party leaders. In 1990 Schönhuber quarreled with his own hand-picked successor and entered into a struggle for leadership of the Bavarian wing of the party. After a contentious party convention at which Schönhuber was reelected party chairman, he replaced his leadership team and Dr. Rolf Schlierer became the new heir apparent. The party's internal struggles damaged its position and the party barely missed making the 5% threshold in the Bavarian parliamentary election of 1990. The party rebounded in 1992 with 10.9% of the vote in the Baden-Wurtemberg parliamentary election.

The Republikaner are poorly organized outside of Bavaria and Baden-Wurtemberg which has made it difficult for them to achieve success at the national level, despite some success in cities such as Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg. Internal fractionalization has also hobbled the party. The party leadership is currently based mainly in Stuttgart and Berlin.

The Freedom Party in Austria

The Austrian Freedom Party was formed in 1956 and as Sully notes, "provided a natural home for ex-Nazis" (Sully 1990, 63). The party struggled for many years as a third party in a strong two-party system. From the party's inception in 1956 until 1983 it received between 5 and 7% of the vote in parliamentary elections. However, the FPÖ became a part of government in a coalition with the Socialists (SPÖ) in 1983 after the SPÖ lost their absolute majority in parliament. Intra-party rivalries, as well as a split between nationalists and liberals within the FPÖ led to a collapse of the coalition in 1986. Nationalist Jörg Haider took control of the party

¹The percentage of foreigners nonetheless continued to increase due to family reunification and the flow of refugees.

after the power struggle in 1986. Haider has been outspoken in his anti-immigrant stance and German nationalism. However, the party's main strength is in its ability to promote reform and attack the mainstream parties. In 1993 the liberal wing of the FPÖ broke away to form a new party, the Liberales Forum.

Austria has two main parties that have been part of government since the end of World War II. The ÖVP (Austrian People's Party) is the conservative mostly Catholic party in Austria and the SPÖ (Socialists) represent the moderate left. In 1947 the SPÖ and ÖVP formed a "Great Coalition" that lasted until 1966. The ÖVP formed a single-party government in 1966 that lasted until 1970, when the SPÖ formed their own government. The SPÖ maintained a single party government until 1983, when they formed a government with the FPÖ. This coalition fell apart in 1986 and the SPÖ and ÖVP once again formed a great coalition led by the SPÖ.

Until the rise of Haider in 1986, the FPÖ had tried to improve its electoral fortunes through cooperation with the SPÖ. Haider's move to directly attack both mainstream parties as well as his move from a liberal agenda began the party's move to the radical right, and its increased electoral success.

Since the FPÖ is already established at the local and national level, they have been able to pursue a strategy at both levels. Some of the party's most impressive gains have been at the local level, such as in the Vienna council elections. The party's base is in Carinthia and it was unexpected that the party would have success in a region that was once an SPÖ stronghold. However, the FPÖ eventually became the strongest party in Carinthia.

The party has had to deal with a struggle between the liberal and the German-national factions within the party. This struggle ended soon after Haider's ascension as party leader in 1986. The liberal faction soon broke away and created its own party, the Liberales Forum. Since 1986 the FPÖ and Haider have survived several scandals, including a scandal in 1998 that laid bare irregularities in the party's finances. Haider could no longer claim to have "clean hands," however, his popularity has not declined significantly.

IV. Comparing Party Positions

In this section I compare the radical right party's positions on issues such as immigration, the economy, and the European Union. These positions are drawn from primary materials such as party programs, speeches and interviews with party officials. I also draw material from secondary sources, mainly books and articles that have explored the ideology of the radical right. To understand the positions that these parties take, one must first examine the nationalism that is a primary element of a radical right party's ideology.

One of the main defining features of radical right parties is their strong nationalism. Most of the positions that the parties take on other issues are derived from this nationalism. Nationalism is defined by Gellner:

In brief, nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state – a contingency already formally excluded by the principal in its general formulation – should not separate the power-holders from the rest. (Gellner 1983, 1)

Therefore, any foreign presence is a threat to the nation as defined by the nationalist. Gellner goes on to point out that this nationalist principle is violated when foreigners are included in a

nation, or those who are considered nationals are not included. Nationalists not only want to exclude foreigners, they may also want the actual territory of the nation to be extended to include those who are considered part of the nation.

For each of the radical right parties, the preservation of national identity is paramount. The radical right parties tend to see themselves as the only true “patriots” in the country. Unlike the other parties in the country, they are not ashamed of the country’s history and long for a return to a more glorious past. This can be seen in the way that party leaders in Germany and Austria downplay the Holocaust and Nazi crimes in World War II. In France, Le Pen has also downplayed the importance of the Holocaust, calling it “a detail of history.” The party manifestoes also provide evidence of their nationalist tendencies.

The Austrian Freedom party’s preamble to its October 1997 party program is entitled “Austria first.” Sully (1997) notes that in this document,

the party declared itself to be the only credible guardian of Austrian patriotism: ‘The Freedom movement puts Austria, the country and its people, above everything else especially party political interests’ (Sully 1997, 53).

Although the Freedom party had been known for its German nationalism, the party has placed more emphasis in recent years on Austrian nationalism, while still acknowledging the common German cultural heritage.

In the 1984 European elections the National Front ran under the list name “Les Français D’Abord,”² highlighting the party’s emphasis on French identity. The National Front, in the 1993 book *300 Mesures Pour La Renaissance de la France*³ states that

The National Front is therefore in favor of a grand politics centered on national identity, aimed at the defense of our people, our cultural and natural patrimony as well as the values that make us what we are (Front National 1993, 23).⁴

The FN’s leader, Le Pen, is well known for the oft-repeated statement, “France pour les Français!”⁵

The preamble of the Republikaner’s 1990 program begins with the statement that, “Our Program is Germany”(Republikaner 1990, 2). The party emphasizes the German people’s right to self-determination, in relation to the reunification of Germany. In my interview with a Republikaner official, it was clear that this reunification meant more than what had already occurred with the 1990 German reunification. The Republikaner wants to restore Germany to its 1937 frontiers, which would include giving Austria the right to reunite with Germany.

²The French First.

³300 measures for the renewal of France.

⁴Translation by the author.

⁵“France for the French”

Immigration

Nationalism also guides the parties' positions on issues like immigration. Leaders of the radical right in Germany and Austria have declared that their homelands are not countries of immigration. In France Le Pen has argued for the deportation of foreigners who threaten to overwhelm the "French" population with their numbers. Each of these parties has spoken out against a multicultural society.

Each of the parties relates unemployment and problems with law and order to immigration. For example, the leader of the National Front regularly compares the number of unemployed French workers to the number of immigrants in the country. The assumption is that there would be fewer French unemployed if there were fewer immigrants. Jörg Haider has used the same formulation in comparing the number of *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) to the number of unemployed in Austria.

The Republikaner party includes immigration policy in the section of their 1990 party program dealing with law and order. For the most part, the Republikaner position on immigration is not much different from that of the CDU or CSU. The difference comes during election campaigns, where the party is much more openly xenophobic. As Saalfeld (1993) points out, "In their public appearances, leading Republikaner politicians treat immigrants as scapegoats for unemployment, lack of housing and crime" (Saalfeld 1993, 191).

Immigrants are seen as a threat to national identity, and the homogeneity of the country. In its 1993 party program, the Freedom party states that "The protection of cultural identity and social peace in Austria requires a stop to immigration" (Sully 1997, 51). The issue of law and order arises again with the reference to "social peace." In the 1994 electoral platform the FPÖ states,

We stand for the preservation of natural ethnic groups and the protection of their cultural identity. However such protection is not to be extended to new immigrants. Austria is not an immigration country. (Quoted in Sully 1997, 52).

In 1992, the Freedom party pursued a petition drive on an initiative that called for a stop to immigration. Entitled "Austria First," this initiative was ultimately unable to gather enough signatures to push the legislature to take any action. In the campaign for the initiative, the Freedom party linked foreigners to crime and an increase in drug dealing.

The National Front has been very clear over time about its position on immigration. The party's 1993 program begins with a section describing the dangers of continued immigration flows. They consider immigration to be "at the heart of the French crisis." They also see immigration as a danger to the civil peace and a major cause of unemployment.

Economic Policy

The common theme of the parties' economic positions is a contradictory combination of neo-liberalism on one hand and economic protection (particularly of the agricultural sector) on the other. Each of the parties has a neo-liberal aspect to their economic agenda.

The Republikaner party has a positive attitude toward capitalism, but also appeals to the middle classes with a call for protective measures. The 1990 party program emphasizes the role of the free market and private property in one section, yet calls for protection and state support of agriculture and small business in a separate section (Saalfeld 1993, 187).

Marcus describes the FN's economic policy as follows, "The strong dose of economic

liberalism often sits uneasily with the overarching demands of a politics of 'national preference.' The Front's policy seems to be torn between two poles – a sort of Francophone Reaganomics on the one hand, and nationalist corporatism or protectionism on the other" (Marcus 1995, 109). The 1993 party program calls for measures to support small and medium-sized companies. The FN demands the protection of forests and agriculture, to allow for agricultural self-sufficiency for France.

The FPÖ's economic positions are also somewhat contradictory. Similar to the Republikaner, the party recognizes the need for private property but also calls for protection for agriculture. The 1994 party program states:

We want a competitive social market economy based on private property. We want the reduction of taxes and the privatization of all state-owned companies, administrative reform and a balanced budget (quoted in Sully 1997, 51).

But then goes on to state:

We fight for the maintenance of the farming community through agricultural and forestry policies which guarantee the protection of agricultural structures and the maintenance of family farms (quoted in Sully 1997, 52).

Each of the parties defends farmers and argues for policies to protect the agricultural sector. It is interesting to note that both the FPÖ in their 1997 program and the Republikaner in their 1990 program call for a 'renationalization' of agricultural policy. This renationalization would protect the agricultural sector from collapse, as globalization progresses, and competition increases from the East, as well as the West. The FN calls for a reestablishment of "La préférence communautaire," that would no longer allow the entry of American agricultural products without tariffs, that are currently produced in the EU. (National Front 1993, 202). Marcus notes that the FN is willing to extend their idea of the free market to other nations within the EU, "on condition that the external barriers around its member states are sufficiently strong" (Marcus 1995, 110).

The positions of these parties have been described as "economic nationalism." Part of this "economic nationalism" is a rejection of the Maastricht treaty and the European common currency. Although each of the parties offers support for the idea of the European Union, they question the way the treaties have been implemented, and the bureaucracy in Brussels that they describe as having little accountability.

Attitudes toward Mainstream Parties

The lack of responsiveness of the mainstream parties is often a rallying point for the radical right. The parties seem to strike a chord with some voters when they accuse government elites of not understanding the plight of the "common man." Each of these parties emphasizes that they are outside of the corrupt party system. Although they work within the system, as outsiders they can show themselves to have "clean hands" and that they are not a part of the many government scandals that have surfaced over the last few years.

Similarities and Differences

Although each of the parties emphasizes strong families in their party programs, one of

the differences between the FPÖ, the FN and REP is their position on the role of women. The Austrian Freedom party has little to say about women in its party programs. On the other hand, both the Republikaner and the FN are very strongly anti-abortion. However, the Republikaner also emphasizes that women and men are equal and should receive equal pay for equal work (REP 1990). The FN argues that women should be given more opportunity to stay at home with their children (Marcus 1995).

Each party must design a platform to fit its political environment. Although there are differences to be found in the party platforms of radical right parties, the similarities in the positions taken by these parties are striking. One must assume that they learn from each other, both through direct and indirect communication. However, it is also clear that they are responding to similar economic and social conditions that make their positions appealing to different segments of the population.

V. Conclusion

The history of the three radical right parties described above show that the 1980s and 1990s have generally been a time of expansion for the radical right. This expansion was stunted for the Republikaner, despite taking positions similar to those pursued by the National Front and Freedom party. Further empirical studies (Givens 2001) will show that differences in economic and social factors across regions can partially explain the difference in the vote for the radical right. The explanation is incomplete, however, without an understanding of the impact of electoral systems on party strategies.

Table 1
Party Positions: Left to Right

	Communist	Social Democrat	Liberal	Conservative	Radical Right
Austria		SPÖ	LF ⁶	ÖVP	FPÖ
France	PC	PS		RPR/UDF	FN
Germany		SPD	FDP	CDU/CSU	NPD/REP

⁶The LF was formed in 1993 by a group of disaffected FPÖ members of parliament. The party is not included in the analysis.

