Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology

Understanding Populist Party Organisation

The Radical Right in Western Europe

Edited by
Reinhard Heinisch and
Oscar Mazzoleni

Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology

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Understanding Populist Party Organisation

The Radical Right in Western Europe

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Preface

This book was a result of an academic collaboration between authors from different European countries assembled in a research group examining populist party organization and representation. The researchers organized workshops first at the University of Lausanne in September 2012, at the University of Amsterdam in June 2013, and again at the University of Salzburg in September 2014. The original idea behind the project was to look at populist parties as 'normal' parties in the sense that they do not require special theories or a unique conceptual framework for their analysis. The notion of normal parties not only related to the fact that over the span of 20 years such parties had become more common across Europe, thus acquiring an air of 'normalcy' by their sheer number but also implied that conventional theoretical tools from the literature on parties would help us understand their endurance and success. The research group's discussions were also guided by increasing evidence that the focus on structural and demand-side explanations of why populist parties are successful or unsuccessful may make us miss important clues as to their true strengths and advantages in a competitive political environment.

The longevity of older right-wing populist parties and the successful emergence of new ones was thus an important point for consideration. Another question had to do with the role of charismatic leadership, the phenomenon often considered to be at the heart of explaining the success of populist parties. In the context of the Austrian Freedom Party

Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), for example, the media rarely tired in attributing its successes to the 'Haider phenomenon'. And if it was not the leaders' almost magical political skills and personal magnetism that accounted for the surge of populist parties then it was said to be the winning formula the leaders applied in pursuing a relentless vote-maximizing strategy. The image of an almost deinstitutionalized and amorphous formation, more movement-like than real party, also crept into the scholarly discourse and fostered an image of such parties as outsiders and 'not normal' by the standards of conventional European parties. However, by the time the research group met, several parties had undergone leadership changes. Moreover, all right-wing populist parties under consideration had faced important internal and external challenges to which they had to also react organizationally. In fact, all the parties, including the ones created more recently by a small band of activists or single founder, had become in one form or another institutionalized, with complex organizational features, and appeared organizationally rather conventional and thus 'normal'. As a result, it made no sense to ignore these facts when trying to understand a party's endurance.

In the eyes of the researchers assembled in this group, scholarship had neglected the question of how individual populist parties are organized territorially and how representation within these parties functions at all levels. Thus, the members of the research group favoured treating populist formations rather as long-standing Western European parties with complex multilevel organizations and an extensive representative presence in elected institutions. This led to the idea to apply a standardized theoretical framework and guiding questionnaire to allow for genuine comparisons across country cases. Yet, the researchers have remained open to the possibility that populist parties are indeed similar to one another but different from mainstream parties in their own countries and as such unconventional in their respective national contexts. Thus, any meaningful analysis would have to examine populist party organization in the national context. It was important to understand the political 'ecosystem' in which these parties operate and how they respond to it organizationally. Finally, there emerged the question of whether a typology of 'right-' and 'left'-wing populist forms of organization and representation can be constructed.

Whereas the concept of the 'normal' party was an important heuristic device to help guide the framing and conceptualization of this volume, the term does not appear as an operational category because it proved difficult to define without ambiguity—'normal' as 'typical' in national organizational terms or 'normal' as in approximating the mass-party legacy (e.g. Duverger 1963) or 'normal' in being analyzable based on the typical organizational party literature. Moreover, also normal parties fail in handling leadership transitions. Therefore, 'normal' would also have to be defined in terms of party families or party models (i.e. mass/cartel parties), all of which have different 'normals'. As a result we did not want to employ a potentially controversial concept that would distract from the findings presented in this book. However, the term does capture the idea that populist parties are an ordinary phenomenon. They are neither fleeting nor episodic but have indeed organizational depth that is central to their existence.

As with all such books, logistical and conceptual constraints required that a selection of cases had to be made. For reasons of engaging in meaningful comparisons, it was clear that at least for the purposes of this book the focus needed to be on a single region, Western Europe, and on one part of the political spectrum, the far right. With respect to the actual party cases, one can of course always argue in favor of this party versus that party. We wanted to have parties with a proven track record in terms of significant electoral success and repeated presence in the national legislature. We also aimed for a mix of longer established and relatively more recent parties. While trying to have variability in terms of national settings and foundational characteristics, we purposefully excluded parties that were politically or functionally very different from the rest of the sample. The German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), for example, is too recent a party to be included whereas Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI) was too much like a business-firm party rather than a right-wing populist one. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has been seen (also by itself) as nationalist and rather different from the populists on the far right and has rejected offers of collaboration with the latter. Its success also came rather recently compared to that of the other parties examined. Geert Wilders' Dutch Freedom Party Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) would clearly qualify as right-wing populist, yet its organizational

structure, given that Wilders is the party's sole member, makes it so unique that meaningful comparisons in this context would be difficult. Hence, we settled on the Austrian Freedom Party Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), the Belgian Flemish Interest *Vlaams Belang* (VB), the Swiss People's Party Schweizerische Volskpartei (SVP), the Italian Northern League *Lega Nord* (LN), The French National Front *Front National* (FN), the Norwegian Progress Party Fremskrittspartiet (FrP), and the Sweden Democrats Sverigedemokraterna (SD). All contributing authors in this volume are recognized specialists on their respective parties and thus represent expertise that is second to none.

Using both English and native language names to refer to the parties in this book may appear an impermissible inconsistency. However, a rigid insistence on uniformity would have required writing about the *Freiheitliche Partei* (Freedom Party) if we consistently use the national-language expression whereas translations into English would have meant using 'Flemish Interest', the 'Northern League', and the 'National Front' with all associations that such terms employ. In these cases, the party names have arguably become political 'brand labels' that carry certain connotations that the technical English translation will never have. Thus, we wanted to let authors decide which form they preferred and national language names were invariably used where this is also common in the scholarly literature. Consequently, at the beginning, we provide for all parties their native language names, and at the same time, an English translation and common acronym (see the list of abbreviations below).

Finally, one of the principal objectives of the group was to develop standardized tools and concepts for investigating organizational development and effectiveness in populist parties. The findings presented in this volume represent only a part of the materials gathered and conclusions reached by the researchers in this collaboration.

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