

“Migration, Nativism and Party System Change in Western Europe”

Summary

My project examines how small, programmatically-focused (“niche”) parties grow in previously stable party systems.

I find that a key mechanism of niche party growth is the rapid re-weighting of issue priorities or social identities generated by unanticipated, high impact events, such as a severe economic downturn, terror attack or ethnic riot. For some individuals, these *shocks* unsettle expectations about economic security, physical safety or group position and increase the salience of a related issue or identity dimension, such as the economy, domestic security, or one’s feelings of national or religious belonging. A niche party grows when 1) the salience of the dimension it emphasizes increases and 2) the distribution of voter preferences gives the party a comparative advantage when the relevant dimension is salient; the niche party is an “issue owner.” My argument is fundamentally structure-based, focusing on sudden events and their capacity to alter issue salience and voter calculations. While political entrepreneurs might aggravate or mitigate public concerns, they are also constrained by exogenous events.

I specifically examine the rapid growth of West European anti-immigrant (“Nativist”) parties. Nativist parties, which make up much of the European “Radical Right,” appeal to natives *as an ethnic group* and frame economic and social issues as ethnic conflicts. Migration to Western Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period of rapid Nativist growth, was unanticipated and unprecedented in volume, becoming a highly salient political issue in many countries. Nativist parties in these countries, with a popular stance on immigration, leveraged increased salience into significant electoral gains. The continued (but reduced) salience of immigration and the elevated (but static) level of Nativist support twenty years later, despite declines in immigration, suggest that a durable political realignment has occurred.

My project employs a mixed methodological strategy. To generate hypotheses and causal mechanisms, I conducted two years of research in Germany and Austria, consisting of a content analysis of four regional newspapers (1960-2005), 185 elite interviews (50 with Nativist elites), observations of Nativist meetings and rallies, and an analysis of Nativist party literature. To test competing hypotheses I constructed a dataset on Nativist support in Western Europe (1973-2006), as well as datasets at the state and local levels for Germany and Austria. The datasets include variables that have never been systematically collected and tested, such as crime rates, while nearly all of the sub-national data was acquired through original research at state agencies and libraries.

By studying niche party growth, my project connects to debates about voting behavior, such as the relative importance of structures or processes (like economic growth or immigration) in electoral breakthroughs or vote choice, as opposed to actors or institutions. By studying a type of ethnic mobilization, my project speaks to debates about when and why voters for non-ethnic parties are motivated to support ethnic appeals, a topic becoming increasingly relevant as West European societies diversify.