

How Big-Data Reveals Unique Radical Right Election Strategies

Showing the importance of timing for radical right parties in Europe

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Which electoral strategies do radical right parties employ in order to gain electoral success? Although radical right parties are far from a new phenomenon in modern politics, the existing explanations have yet been able to pinpoint the exact reasons behind their electoral success. This article argues that time heterogeneity is an important and unifying variable, bringing together previously incompatible theories on radical right electoral success and showing that they are in fact complimentary narratives once this is accounted for; time is an important factor which has been so far largely ignored by mainstream literature. By using Big-Data and regression analysis to analyse electoral data from 19 European countries between 2006 and 2010, it was shown that radical right parties adjust their public economic policies throughout the electoral cycle: during election years they present right/conservative economic policies, whereas in non-election years they present more left/centrist economic policies. These findings have important implications for future elections which includes radical right parties.

Radical Right Election Strategies

The reputational shield hypothesis developed by Elisabeth Ivarsflaten in 2006 states that in order for a radical right party to become electorally successful despite promoting anti-immigration policies they need a positive legacy to shield them from criticism for being racist, and this is achieved by consistently promoting other policies that are important to the electorate. Ivarsflaten argues that it is not the issue itself that determines whether a party promoting anti-immigration policies will be successful, but instead the credibility of the party. She bases her argument on the assumption that widespread social norms inhibit, or make voters reluctant, to vote for parties with racist or extremist reputations. However, she also argues that these social norms can be circumvented by parties with a positive legacy of promoting policies that do not have an anti-immigration sentiment. In other words, Ivarsflaten argues that the key to promoting anti-immigration policies is not the nature of the policies, but instead the credibility

and perceived integrity of the party introducing them.

This study builds upon the work of Ivarsflaten but incorporates a previously unexplored approach for radical right electoral strategies aptly named the sliding theory. The sliding theory rest on

‘Junk news is defined as information that is deliberately misleading and contains subject matter that is deceptive or incorrect’

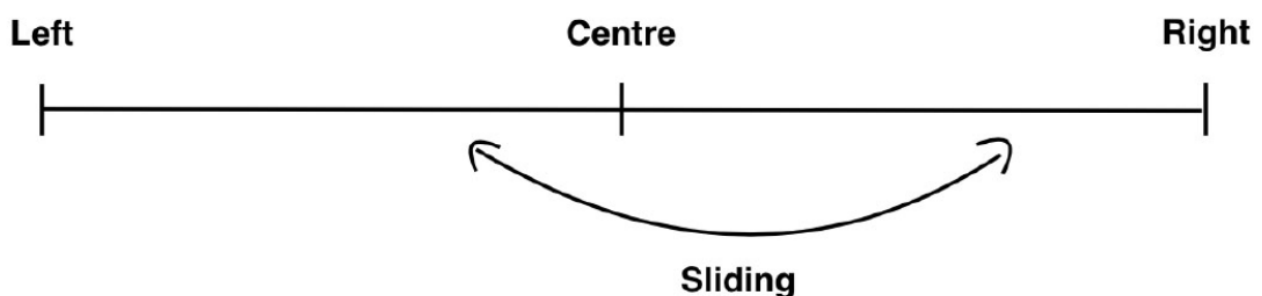
the fundamental assumption that radical right parties adjust policy direction of key non-preferred issues in order to achieve electoral success; this is achieved by sliding back and forth between the traditional centre-left and right first dimension political spectrum. The sliding theory argue that in order to gain a reputational shield there is a distinct need for a radical right party to slide their policies to the opposite side of where they were originally positioned. The sliding theory states that a radical right party will maintain a constant emphasis on its preferred issue irrespective .

Case Selection

of election year but will, during non-election years, adopt more left/centrist economic policies (such as increasing redistribution) in order to both attract non-traditional voters and to shield themselves from criticism for being extreme, radical right, single-issue parties. The sliding theory suggest that a reputational shield is vital to a radical right party's success and must be obtained even if it means sacrificing ideological consistency. Rather than simply trying to create a reputational shield through emphasis or de-emphasis of key issues, this new "sliding" concept instead addresses the need for a radical right party to promote policies meant to attract voters from the opposite side of where their traditional economic policies are located.

The countries used for the quantitative section in this research are limited to the those surveyed by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) and include: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Austria, Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Although the Chapel Hill Expert Survey also includes Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Croatia, Malta, Luxemburg, and Cyprus, these countries lacked complete information about stocks of foreign born population and social expenditure and were not included in the analysis. Radical right parties from countries

Figure 1. The Sliding Theory



Note: This figure illustrates how radical right parties should slide their policy preferences on non-core issues back and forth between the traditional left and right political spectrum.

included in the CHES were examined, and needed to meet two main criteria qualify to for inclusion in the study: (a) be commonly identified in the literature as to belong to the radical right and (b) to have received a score of at least 7 out of 10 on position and saliency of immigration in the CHES. The vast majority of parties had scores of 8.5 and above for both position and saliency of immigration, whereas a few had scores just above 7. If a country had a score closer to 7 than 10 extensive additional research was carried out on those parties in order to identify sufficient evidence for their classification as having a radical right ideology.

Measurement

The data used for this study is primarily gathered from the CHES which estimates party positioning on a variety of issues in Europe, and the issues addressed by the survey range from left-right economic positioning, integration, multiculturalism, and redistribution amongst others. The first CHES was conducted in 1999 and has collected data in several subsequent years,

including 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014. The key dependent variables used in this study were all sampled during 2006 and 2010, and are position on immigration, saliency on immigration, left-right economic positioning, redistribution, and position on democratic liberties. However, position on immigration and saliency on immigration were both excluded in the 2014 survey and, as a result, the quantitative section of this study will limit its focus to the 2006 and 2010 survey years which includes 24 European countries. Further, I am treating the survey year as the year when the experts submitted the survey, which is especially important as it then also takes into account the current affairs influencing the survey participants.

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Due to the nature of the CHES and, specifically their set time 4-year time interval between each survey year, this data set is particularly suited to exploring exogenous effects. As this study is exploring time heterogeneity, it is essential that the distribution of election years and non-election years among the studied countries are at random, otherwise an exogenous measure of election year would not be determinable; the data set contains 15 instances of election years and 25 instances of non-election years. The time interval between the CHES – and particularly as it is conducted in each country irrespective of election year – is an important factor which can be considered as a random distribution, thus providing statistically unbiased results.

The independent variable is election year and is coded using a dummy variable where 1 represents an election year and 0 a non-election year. When a country experienced a parliamentary election during the time of the survey they were awarded a value of 1. The data used to determine whether the survey years matched a

parliamentary election was collected by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data which has a large collection of election information including that from parliamentary elections, presidential elections, European Union elections and local elections.

Statistical Model

The aim of this study is to understand when radical right parties change their election strategies over time, with emphasis on election year dynamics. In order to test the sliding theory several mixed effect (ME) and fixed (FE) regression analyses were conducted. The ME model which is used in this study contains both fixed and random effects and allows for a wide range of distributions assuming there is a normal distribution of the random effects, making it an appropriate test for the analysis. The FE model on the other hand makes fundamentally different assumptions compared to the ME regression analysis, and instead assumes that the differences in observed effects are simply due to sampling error.

The results presented in Table 1

and 2 estimate the main effects and the interaction between radical right parties and other mainstream parties during election years and nonelection years given the dependant variables, and as listed previously the dependant variables used were position on immigration, saliency of immigration, left-right economic position, position on redistribution, or position on democratic freedoms and rights.

If the sliding theory is accurate, the regression analysis should find evidence of a consistent emphasis on the radical rights core issue of immigration, whilst also detecting a change in emphasis of non-core issues such as economic policies.

When using both left/right economic position and radical right position on redistribution as dependant variables both show a negative coefficient which is consistent with the sliding theory. The negative coefficients indicate that during non-election years radical right parties, on both left/right economic position and position on redistribution, address more left/centrist economic policies, whereas they revert back to their more traditional economic position during election years; this result is consistent when using both the ME and FE regressions.

Table 1. Fixed Effects Model Results

Dependent Variables	Fixed Effects Model
Position on Immigration	-0.083 (0.746)
Saliency of immigration	-0.100 (0.455)
Left-right economic positioning	-1.707 ** (0.854)
Redistribution	-2.124 ** (0.825)
Position on democratic liberties	-0.207 (0.868)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Mixed Effects Model Results

Dependent Variables	Mixed Effects Model
Position on Immigration	-0.233 (0.724)
Saliency of immigration	0.269 (0.159)
Left-right economic positioning	-1.676 ** (0.816)
Redistribution	-1.907 ** (0.801)
Position on democratic liberties	-0.171 (0.832)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

In summary, as a result of the regression analysis it is possible to conclude that radical right parties appear to consistently address anti-immigration issues. However, radical right parties also adjust their economic policies from more left/centrist positions during non-election years to more right/conservative economic positions during election years, which provides supporting evidence for the sliding theory.

"A reputational shield is not achieved by decreasing a radical right party's focus on immigration issues but is rather achieved by highlighting other non-core issues"

These results suggest that the radical right parties cannot manipulate core issues like immigration over time, but that they definitely adjust strategically their economic strategy by being economically more centrist during non-election years. This may be a way to enlarge their base without incurring in any cost during election years, especially

when they cannot compete with issue ownership of other parties. At this point it is important to keep in mind that the measure of election year used in this study is exogenous, dependant of survey fieldwork by the CHES and therefore not subject to national conditions and variability.

Conclusion

A reputational shield is not achieved by decreasing a radical right party's focus on immigration issues but is rather achieved by highlighting other non-core issues such as the economy. This is arguably a result of how their core immigration issue is too important to the overall success of a radical right party and they cannot therefore risk decreasing their focus and losing the issue of immigration to one of the established mainstream parties. Secondly, as evident from the quantitative analysis, a radical right party gains a reputational shield by focusing on issues such as economic policies. However, all non-core issues are not suitable for use in reputational shield strategies, and this is evident from the lack of statistically significant results when using "position on

democratic freedoms and rights” as the dependant variable. Thirdly, one distinct way in which a radical right party appears to be gaining a reputational shield is by sliding their economic policies back and forth between the traditional left and right regarding economic policies, and this happens during specific times of the electoral cycle where a party will adopt more left/liberal economic policies during non-election years and those that are more right/conservative during election years.

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Although Ivarsflaten’s original iteration of the reputational shield was an important contribution to the literature on radical right election strategies, it failed to explain the complexity of radical right electoral strategies. When we consider time heterogeneity as a final ingredient to radical

right parties’ electoral strategies, a compelling narrative emerges that can explain the statistical regression results from this study. Rather than assuming a constant emphasis on immigration issues amongst radical right parties as suggested by the mainstream literature, this research has been able to show how radical right parties’ electoral strategies are far more complex.

About the author(s)

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