

COMPARATIVE MAPPING OF EXTREME RIGHT ELECTORAL DYNAMICS: AN OVERVIEW OF EREPS (“EXTREME RIGHT ELECTORATES AND PARTY SUCCESS”)

<http://www-cidsp.upmf-grenoble.fr/guest/ereps/>

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INTRODUCTION: EREPS’S RATIONALE

In a little-cited chapter in Peter Merkl’s *Western European Party Systems*, Stephen Fischer noted that the study of small or minor parties was neglected for four main reasons: concentrating on large parties delimited analysis of party politics, and thus made it more manageable; data collection problems were reduced; minor parties were thought to be irrelevant; and minor parties were considered dysfunctional elements of a system (1980: 609-10). Since 1980, two families of minor parties have come under considerably greater scrutiny, namely Green parties and Extreme Right parties (ERPs), not least because whilst in many cases they may still be small, they are no longer regarded as minor. It is still true, however, that at least as far as the latter family is concerned, data collection and dysfunctionality are two facets which inform much if not all research into the constituent parties.

In particular, Extreme Right voters are notoriously difficult to come by, characterised by the sparse n of even the largest national surveys. Faced with this problem, much research has simply avoided it by dealing with the party ideologies and elite discourse, or extrapolating voting motivations from campaign issues and qualitative approaches such as interviewing. Consequently, ERPs have been largely excluded from the more formalised models of voting which have grown up around mainstream parties. Yet, Extreme Right parties certainly cannot be ignored, even if omitting them would perhaps make analysis “more manageable” – and yet their own analysis is still often broached in terms of dysfunctionality, of properties which would seem out of place in relation to other parties. “Why do people vote for Socialist parties?” is not an article or book one expects to see soon, and for obvious reasons: mainstream parties still present alternative, if converging, programmes for government and appeal to core, if shrinking, electorates of generational lineage. For those less enamoured of traditional ideological concerns, governing credibility, economic management and geopolitical perspective all provide equally tenable reasons for mainstream voting.

For the Extreme Right party, few if any of the above explanations are employed, except as double negatives (not voting for an ERP because it does not have governing credibility, for example). Ideology yes, but as a small subset of key issues, such as immigration, law and order and national preference in welfare matters - issues neglected by mainstream parties, placing ERPs close to the “prolocutor” category in Lucardie’s recent suggested framework for emerging new parties (2000).¹ Such parties are no longer usually given the single-issue “anti-immigrant” treatment, but neither are they often accredited with possessing a defined *Weltanschauung*. Of

¹ ERPs themselves would no doubt claim the “prophet” categorisation.

course, such parties would contest this, but in economic matters, for instance, programmes are unfeasibly idealised – if they are present at all – and, paradoxically, shift pragmatically between different positions with apparent impunity. From many of these parties’ neo-liberalism *ad absurdum* of the 1980s to the neo-protectionism of the 1990s, dramatic statements of intent can be made precisely because there seems little risk or hope, depending on one’s perspective, of their programmatic bluff being called.

Dysfunctionality, too, in the normative sense, whereby that subset of issues is treated negatively: populist, oppressive, anti-democratic, authoritarian, racist, politically incorrect, again depending on one’s standpoint. ERPs occupy their own hostile and reactionary political space, blackmailing mainstream parties with the possibility of electoral sapping. Influence over politics and policies is therefore no longer open to doubt, whether in political reaction to competition on the right wing or in political anticipation of potential competition in that quarter.

As such, Fischer’s first reason for neglect becomes untenable – party politics simply cannot be delimited to exclude such high profile and broadly influential parties – and yet dysfunctionality ensures the deviant case status. But these parties provide an essentially unique “geological” record unlike any other. As much research has shown, success of ERPs, indeed of all new parties, is dependent upon institutional context, political opportunity structures, voter preferences and the like. What ERPs also provide is immense variance of success both across time and across nations at one time. The observer can map the successive births, consolidations and in some cases deaths of parties all within the post-war period and in all but the Italian and Austrian cases, visible consolidation at the national level has occurred since the 1970s. In one of the few articles feeding from Fischer, Pedersen emphasises the potential utility in typologising parties according to their lifespans (1982). The principal implication of lifespan is evidently evolution - the surpassing of “thresholds of legitimation”, determined by politico-institutional setting and increasing electoral demand; the resolution of “crisis” events in ideological and strategic terms; and the changing role of a party from groupuscule beginnings as far as and, today, including governmental participation, if not domination. In many ways, such developments are standard for all parties, but the trajectories of the ERPs to date are ones which epitomise such evolutions in their variance and the comparative brevity of the successful parties’ implantation subsequent to their initial electoral surge.

Convened initially as an ECPR research session in Barcelona in September 2000, EREPS (“Extreme Right Electorates and Party Success”) aims to address both these previous analytical strictures and the consequent relative dearth of comparative research into ERPs, and in particular the profiles and roles of their electorates, which have proved so key to the varying success of the parties. Sufficient survey data does exist to engage in relatively in-depth analysis of ERP electorates, although it is scattered amongst national surveys rather than the more manageable cross-national datasets. The Barcelona meeting decided that what was needed was primarily to collect these national datasets together and look at just how far they could be used in a comparative framework to look at the electoral development of the parties, especially in terms of the sociodemographic and attitudinal evolution of their electorate. This article delineates the principal developments underlying these parties’ electoral implantation, and highlights the beginnings of the group’s work in terms of analysis.

A TREND IN ERP CONVERGENCE?

At this point in time, there is a theme which is implicit in a growing proportion of research into ERPs in Europe, but which has not received a great deal of focused attention, namely the convergence in their profiles. Although there are still a number of areas in which the parties diverge, the similarities are now far greater than at their idiosyncratic roots. Ignazi and Ysmal noticed the beginnings of such convergence in the prediction that the new ERPs would enjoy the greater success, with the old type of party drifting into electoral obscurity (1992). Manifestations of this convergence, and the parties' own channelling of such change, can be seen at a number of levels – fragmentation of the Extreme Right bloc, role within the party system, changing voter profiles, concomitant programmatic change – and variance of each of these indicators is closely linked to the level of success of the parties. As the new ERPs have developed, so the bloc has fragmented either with one party becoming dominant or, in some cases, with more equal and generally unsuccessful partners splitting the vote. To adopt a rather brazen dichotomy for the sake of illustration,² two evolutionary streams can be seen – the liberal parties of Norway, Denmark and Austria (perhaps somewhat cavalierly ignoring the VdU's Nazi heritage) and the illiberal parties, whether through nationalism or fascism, of France, Belgium, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.³

In the former, the emerging parties have sloughed off their liberal skins to espouse increasingly authoritarian and ethnocentric lines: the departure of four out of 10 MPs and of the youth organisation from the Norwegian Progress Party in 1994; Heide Schmidt and the Liberal Forum founders of 1993 leaving Jörg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria; Pia Kjærsgaard conversely leaving the Danish Progress Party in 1995 to set up the People's Party.⁴ In the latter cases, fragmentation has either seen the withdrawal of the older fascistic groups – François Brigneau and the *Parti des Forces Nouvelles* in France in 1974, and the *Movimento Sociale – Fiamma Tricolore* in Italy in 1995 after the Fiuggi Congress heralding MSI's transformation into National Alliance (AN); or the inability of divergent parties to cooperate – the Republicans and the German People's Union (DVU) and the three streams of theocratic Protestantism, neo-fascism and ethnocentric nationalism identified by Voerman and Lucardie (1992). Belgium in some ways represents an exception, with *Vlaams Blok* (VB) enjoying a steady radicalisation of its agenda over a progressively broader remit – regionalism to ethnocentrism to social and law-and-order issues – without any significant split within the organisation, other than its own schism from *Volkswijde* in 1978.

Where splits have occurred and continue to occur – the departure of Bruno Mégret's National Republican Movement from the FN in France, for example, or the expulsion of “disloyal” MPs from the Norwegian Progress Party and the subsequent formation of alternative lists for the 2001 elections – they are undoubtedly based not so much upon ideological conviction as upon the dual pragmatic concerns of power and power-base. Indeed, the ERP which has enjoyed a curious mirror evolution from party to

² And to avoid adding an umpteenth definition to the growing litany of ERP/populist / anti-establishment / democratic-fascist labels. The group is of course conscious of the necessity of a satisfactory definition of ERP to choose units of analysis.

³ For reasons of space, only the relatively successful ERPs are mentioned here. Evidently, in any robust model of ERP success, one must also account for the failures.

⁴ Mogens Glistrup had left the party in 1990 to form the Party of Well-being.

violent protest-movement – the National Democratic Party in Germany – is also the party with perhaps the most obstinate and stolid adherence to its ideological lineage from Nazism. The charismatic leaders who have been a constant in the success of all ERPs to date are reliant upon improving or continued electoral success to justify their position of hegemony within a party, and the quest for such success can often imply a programmatic shift to satisfy evolving demand. Whether parties respond to a changing electorate or whether they set out to attract a changing electorate with their programmatic development will probably remain largely unspecified as a model – the importance has simply been the shift of parties related to changing social circumstance amongst available sections of the electorate.

Unsurprisingly, this has revolved around the post-industrial “modernisation losers” hypothesis, and itself marks a point of convergence in the parties’ profiles. Whether starting from an anti-tax position appealing to small traders, businessmen and other petty bourgeois groups, as in the Scandinavian cases, or as a hotchpotch of reactionary concerns, as in the French case, or from ultra-nationalist aims, as in Flanders, all parties now espouse inegalitarian protectionism of the disenfranchised strata of native populations, via outgrouping of ethnic populations and “social undesirables” condemned under ethnocentric / authoritarian thinking. Welfare chauvinism appears to have become a necessary ingredient in the winning formula, *pace* Kitschelt (1995). The combination of petty bourgeois voters with their neo-liberal concerns and the working-class and low human capital non-manual workforce with protectionist desires has often been seen as a contradictory mix, held together by shared rejection of “The Other”, low political sophistication and expert political entrepreneurship. There is of course a competing explanation, namely that the two separated social groups are not all that distant in their desires: petty bourgeois groups have generally been no more in favour of the deregulated free-market than the lower classes have been in favour of extended taxation and state regulation. As often the former’s message has been “deregulate me [but don’t extend that to competing corporations, and for God’s sake not international trade]”, the latter’s “tax them [to allow me easy access to existing benefits, pensions, public health service, etc.]”. Unhindered by ideological consistency, it is precisely the converging ERPs which have been able to exploit such demands concurrently, catering to the demands of two pragmatic but largely self-contradictory doctrines.

Two additional ingredients have also developed within this convergence. Firstly, the *sine qua non* of ERPs, anti-immigrant feeling, is itself an item which has evolved. In no sense can it be regarded as an issue which has been salient for all parties since their inception. In particular, the Scandinavian Progress parties and their commentators have always been anxious to point out the lack of importance immigration and ethnocentrism more generally had in the early years of these parties. In other parties, ethnocentric issues have been secondary or muted by emphasis on other factors, for instance in Italy where the AN electorate’s views on immigrants have in the past been more moderate than other ERPs’, in Flanders where Filip De Winter only pushed immigration up VB’s agenda in the 1980s, or the Freedom Party under Norbert Steger during the same period. Even the FN in the 1970s during its electoral wilderness years did not place anywhere near as great an emphasis on the immigrant question as from the 1980s onwards. This does not mean that, in value-terms, ethnocentrism was not present or latent within the parties or their members. Equally, on the part of the voter the non-issue of immigration at various junctures does not mean that ethnocentrism

potential was not latent amongst sections of the population. It instead indicates the key ability of ERPs to tap a fecund source of potential electoral support in the years preceding greater success at the ballot box.

Moreover this entrepreneurship is evident in other evolutions in ERPs' ideology and indeed strategic concerns. A perception of potential electoral stagnation after the 1994 European elections led VB to emphasise social morality issues and law and order, as well as linking this latter to immigration. In Italy, AN has apparently adopted the federalist line of the Right-wing *Casa delle Libertà* electoral and subsequently governing coalition, thus avoiding the clashes between its nationalist self and the Northern League over the territorial issue. Perhaps most strategic of all has been Jörg Haider's shunning a ministerial post and subsequent relinquishing of the Freedom Party leadership in February 2000. Such a gamble allows him to retain the high-profile governorship of Carinthia, remain very much the power behind the newly crowned Susanne Riess-Passer's throne, and dissociate himself from unpopular government decisions, thus allowing him to stay whiter than white, at least in policy terms, in any potential future bid for the Chancellorship.

This strategic approach, though in Haider's case doubtless as much to do with personal careerism as the good of the party, illustrates the second evolution which has given ERPs the most awkward balancing act to perform. In their early years, ERPs appeared to many commentators as the quintessential anti-system parties. During their respective years of development, those ERPs which have prolonged themselves beyond the "flash" phenomenon have appeared as actors who railed against the politico-institutional system, if not against democracy itself, and as such functioned as a pole of discontent against mainstream politics. The MSI traditionally espoused neo-fascist and anti-democratic lines, and as a result conformed closely to the Sartorian anti-system party, although by 1992 it was railing against the corrupt system embodied by the "First Republic" – more a case of anti-establishment. Similarly, the FN in its early years still followed the neo-fascist rejection of the Fifth Republic, although again by the 1980s Jean-Marie Le Pen *et al* were condemning the lack of ideological alternatives and self-interested nest-lining characteristic of the moderate parties. The Freedom Party's condemnation of the *Lager*-mentality and "party-book nepotism" followed a similar if perhaps even more intense discourse. Indeed, for these parties, anti-democratic discourse stems more from the espousal of values which are inimical to liberal democracy as to any rejection of elections and the democratic regime *per se*. It is civil / human rights, rather than the ballot box, which are currently under threat.

Whatever the discourse, the mainstream parties have found it difficult and often electorally pernicious to engage in negotiations or associations with ERPs, but for reasons of competition have felt the need to follow their hated neighbours' ideological line in radicalising their agendas. This blackmail potential of the ERPs, again characteristic of the anti-system party, has nevertheless not worked consistently in their favour in evolutionary terms, leading to electoral success in a party landscape, if not a regime type, which they characterise as immobilist, corrupt and increasingly impotent in the face of contemporary globalised forces. Either these parties have to play on their glorious isolation and continue railing from behind their *cordon sanitaire* – VB and the post-Mégret FN; or, to follow Mégret's line, they need to take advantage of electoral strength and high public profile to engage in pacts and

coalitions with the Moderate Right, these latter willing – AN and the Freedom Party’s approach.

Both present problems: how long can a party remain in glorious isolation, shouting at everyone else, without demonstrating a viable governing alternative within the system? The FN’s rhetoric against the mainstream may be powerful and may have been successful until the mid-1990s, but its own record in municipal power has been no less tarnished by corruption and scandal than the parties it condemns. Once in coalition or government, on the other hand, how does a party continue to retain that specificity which was attractive to disenchanted voters in the first place? Indeed, what can the party bring to the debate which is new and concrete, as opposed to bombast from the luxury of the opposition sidelines? In party lifespan terms, the capacity to deal with this rite of passage from obnoxious adolescent to responsible adult – indeed to embark upon it in the first place – may instead prove to be the party’s rapid decline into dotage.

LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ERP ANALYSIS

The above comparative overview presents a number of evolutionary trends which to date have received little systematic treatment. In the most basic of models, charting the relative electoral success of ERPs across time comes down to a continuous loop of supply and demand. The same can be said of any party, but perhaps this loop has most strikingly appeared with ERPs. Ideological shifts; the changing social profile of ERP voters; the concomitant change in these electorates’ value-structures; the dynamics of and bases to anti-system and anti-establishment feeling; the interaction of ERPs with the other parties in the system: all of these elements show an immense dynamism which, contextualised according to the classic socio-economic and politico-institutional indicators, account for the evolution in ERP support. It is precisely this framework which motivates the research currently being undertaken by EREPS.

The temptation to be blinded somewhat by the specificities of each case is large, and indeed the very nature of these parties contributes to the emphasis on their individual study - national experts have tended to dwell upon the growing social and cultural threats of parties which in their early period were largely seen as flash phenomena. In a mirror image of, say, Socialist parties, ERPs have emerged from specific national contexts with often unique concerns, and converged upon a common profile. Yet the comparative approach is one which is consequently best applied to these parties during the convergence process.

The main problem faced in this sort of analysis is “access to data” in its broadest sense, and this forms the foundations of EREPS’s work. The sorts of questions which the above perspectives on social evolution of electorates, attitudinal change and development, and distribution of preferences within the competitive space suggest are much more nuanced and complex than the simplistic “anti-immigrant + authoritarian + disenchanted = ERP voter” equation. Attitudes to the economy and its management, social and cultural concerns, including their status as true attitudes or possibly nonattitudes, the extent of political dissatisfaction, and so on require in-depth surveys with a large number of items pertaining to each concept. Unfortunately, existing cross-national datasets simply do not provide this across time, or even in cross-sectional format. The logistical aim of the group so far, then, has been to collect

existing national datasets in an attempt to see to what extent any sort of comparability is possible between them. Current wisdom looks at common items as the threshold for comparability, and whilst clearly such a state of affairs would be helpful, it is essentially a dead-end when looking at the last fifty years of surveys. Moreover, common questions may be comparable simply in their inability to tap the principal dimensions of *any* of the country-cases.

The second accessibility advantage of the national surveys is obviously the consideration of *n*. Many cross-national surveys have been known to provide ERP analysts with a whole three or four respondents to analyse, even in the case of relatively successful parties, often due to sampling bias and a spiral of silence amongst ERP voters. Thus even with pooled data across time, and even employing models which allow for censored data, any hope of addressing complexity is dashed. For some countries, such as the Netherlands or Germany, *n* remains painfully small even in national surveys due to the small electoral returns of the parties, but for the larger parties the samples are much healthier, if not ideal.

Since its initial Barcelona meeting, EREPS has expanded from six researchers to a dozen members from eight European nations with country / area and methodological expertise, meeting twice a year in plenary session and at other interim meetings under French CNRS *Aide à Projet Nouveau* funding. To date, the group has collected national survey data from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway and Sweden on its firewalled server based at CIDSP-IEP in Grenoble, and is about to receive the Italian data from Itanes. This allows members of the group full access to these datasets for analysis, as well as allowing the possibility of working on common datasets for standardisation. To this end, the server's webpage also holds templates for data standardisation concerning sociodemographic categories, for instance, or data-file lists of attitudinal items for each survey. The bulk of datasets have been transcribed into English, but for each country case there are native-speakers who can ensure that nuances in questions that have been lost in translation are allowed for. Finally, the results of the group's own analysis, together with secondary analyses of electoral results across time and overview papers of contemporary developments in each ERP, are also available.⁵

In the medium term, the group intends transferring much of the information on the website to an open access area. Of course, permission to hold the national datasets requires that the actual datasets themselves cannot be provided. However, as EREPS's secondary analysis develops, so the results will be disseminated via the website, with information on where the datasets themselves can be obtained, and full information on how the data has been structured in the group's analysis for the purposes of replication.

As noted above, membership of the group so far has been based upon participation of country-experts and methodologists in the group to allow the in-depth analysis as well as studying the extent to which cross-national comparison is viable. In addition, the group has embarked upon standardisation of sociodemographic categories, but with a variety of perspectives. For instance, class categorisation has used the Goldthorpe

⁵ The overview papers used for this article are available on the open access area of the website: <http://www-cidsp.upmf-grenoble.fr/guest/ereps/>. For further details, contact Jocelyn Evans (j.a.evans@salford.ac.uk) or Gilles Ivaldi (ivaldi@cidsp.upmf-grenoble.fr).

schema and its adaptation by Hout, Manza and Brooks, the latter allowing the testing of potential differences between managerial and professional categories. Similarly, educational strata need to test the hypothesis that “middle-level technical education” is the key ERP predictor, rather than “no education” (Betz, 2001: 416). This is the first step towards a longitudinal analysis of evolutions in ERP electorate social profiles. Similarly, the group has begun to collect macro data on politico-institutional (party system fragmentation, electoral disproportionality, etc.) and socio-economic indicators (GDP, unemployment, criminality, immigration, etc.) to update and expand upon work done on ecological factors, such as that of Jackman and Volpert (1996) and Knigge (1998), and again with the aim of studying the role of change on ERP success, and in this case particularly on the role of change in contextual factors, as opposed to absolute levels. As van der Brug *et al* have indicated, this work is important at the aggregate level, but also with individual data in multi-level analysis (2000: 96).

The bulk of the work remains to be done, as one would expect from a multinational group with members which first met one year ago. In particular the group is about to move onto the major consideration of attitudinal item comparability. An initial step has been taken with members of the group testing possible methodologies on case-studies, for instance an analysis of changes in political space in France since the implantation of the FN. Such an approach does not solve issues of comparability, but it does allow the testing of a framework and an idea of the sorts of insights such an analysis can produce. More broadly, such frameworks as have been used by members of the group in previous analyses, such as electoral availability, mass-elite interaction in party space, anti-establishment function, *inter alia*, also contribute to the foundation for an eventual “full model” of ERP electorates.

Dissemination of findings via the website, as well as the usual journal and conference routes, should begin in 2002 with the publication of the initial macro and sociodemographic longitudinal models, as well as some of the case-study pilot-test analyses. The long-term goal of the group is to build up the full model framework in tiers, following the contextual-sociodemographic-attitudinal hierarchy, and linking this to relevant perspectives on political dynamics - emergence of new parties, party system format, conditions of vote-choice, etc.. The group is looking at producing the resultant comparative monograph after 2004.

In conclusion, the project remains very much in its infancy, although the insights that the basic framework seem able to reveal are already very promising. To use ERPs not only as examples of new party emergence and consolidation but also as benchmarks of system development more broadly goes very much against the “unmanageable-dysfunctional” label which was levelled against ERPs twenty years ago. Whilst the specificities of such parties remain unmistakable, the decline in within-group specificities suggest that this group of parties now exercise an increasingly homogenised function within converging post-industrial systems, a role which it is imperative to explore.

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