'What Causes People to Vote for a Radical Right Party?' A Rejoinder to van der Brug and Fennema

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'WHAT CAUSES PEOPLE TO VOTE FOR A RADICAL RIGHT PARTY?' A REJOINDER TO VAN DER BRUG AND FENNEMA

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The article by Van der Brug and Fennema reviews a number of recent works on what they call anti-immigrant parties or what we have called extreme-right parties. We would like to briefly reply to some of the insightful criticisms that the authors have made with regard to our book Contested Citizenship (Koopmans, Statham, Giugni, & Passy, 2005). The topic of this book, it should be emphasized, is much wider than just a cross-national comparison of extreme-right mobilization, as it focuses on all forms of political claims making related to issues of immigration and integration, including also the mobilization of immigrants, antiracist movements, as well as mainstream political discourse. Van der Brug and Fennema’s criticism is addressed only at Chapter 5 of our book, which discusses the impact of institutional and discursive opportunity structures on the claims making by the extreme right, radical right, or anti-immigrant right, whatever one wants to call it.

We can start precisely from this definitional matter. Van der Brug and Fennema urge us to abandon the term extreme right, and propose the term anti-immigrant parties, but stick to that of radical right parties, at least for this review. While we may use different labels, we in fact agree largely with Van der Brug and Fennema. We also consider the most important common denominator of these parties to be their anti-immigrant stance and their advocacy of an ethnocultural conception of the nation (pp. 180–181). However, this alone is an insufficient criterion to delineate the category of actors that we—and Van der Brug and Fennema—are interested in. If this was namely the single defining characteristic, we might as well include the British Conservatives and the Bavarian Christian Social Union, which, as we show (p. 192), have also consistently taken anti-immigrant positions in the public debate during the 1990s. The actors that we are interested in are not just anti-immigrant—although we agree that that is their most salient characteristic—but also anti-establishment—which is different from nonestablished; here, we agree with the authors and should perhaps have chosen our terminology more carefully—and often anti-European. To call them anti-immigration parties is therefore at least as misleading as to label them extreme-right parties. Perhaps the term ‘radical right’ that Van der Brug and Fennema have stuck to for their review is not as bad as a compromise. At any rate, we have no problem with abandoning the label extreme right and using radical right instead. In spite of all the definitional debate in the literature, there tends to be, in fact, a very high degree of agreement on the empirical delineation of the phenomenon to be explained. Van der Brug and Fennema nowhere contend that we have included or excluded in our analysis an empirical phenomenon or actor that we should not have
included or excluded. The definitional issue is, therefore, to a large extent just that: a question of labels, not of substance.

A more substantive criticism raised by Van der Brug and Fennema, however, concerns what they see as our one-sided emphasis on supply-side variables—discursive opportunity structures and the availability of political space—to the neglect of demand-side variables. Contrary to what Van der Brug and Fennema claim, we do however, neither implicitly nor explicitly assume that demand-side variables are constant across countries. In fact, we consistently contrast our predictions derived from a political opportunity model with those that follow from an emphasis on demand-side factors such as the level of unemployment, the rate of immigration, and the size of the foreign population. As we show on page 184, these variables are not constant across the five countries included in our analysis—Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. However, we show that the cross-national variation on these variables does not fit the cross-national variation on the dependent variables of interest: the electoral strength of extreme right parties (p. 184), the strength of extreme-right claims making in public discourse (pp. 193–194), and the share of violence in the action repertoire of the extreme right (p. 199). All these aspects of extreme right mobilization are much better explained by cross-national variation in discursive opportunities and political space. In fact, our findings here almost perfectly match those of Van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie (2005), which the authors mention towards the end of their review article. In that paper, they also show that unemployment, inflation, and immigration rates do not provide good explanations for cross-national variation and that opportunity structure variables—including a measure of political space in the form of the left/right position of the most important ‘mainstream’ competitor—provide a much better explanation (73 percent explained variance). The quibble seems to be about the effects that they find for two measures of the ideological proximity of voters to extreme right parties, which are rather small (10 percent additional explained variance), and of which it is moreover questionable whether they are truly independent variables, or rather aspects of what needs to be explained.

Van der Burg and Fennema see another weakness of our work in ‘the fact that radical right claims making […] is subdivided in radical right violent and unconventional mobilization on the one hand and electoral success of radical right parties on the other.’ They argue that these two dependent variables create confusion in our model. We contend, however, that it is the failure to make this distinction that creates confusion in much of the literature on the extreme right, which either studies the electoral fortunes of parties without seeing them as part of a broader extreme-right movement, or studies extra-parliamentary mobilization, and particularly xenophobic violence, without paying attention to its interrelation with extreme-right political parties. Only because we make this distinction between party mobilization and xenophobic violence, are we able to arrive at one of our most interesting findings, namely the inverse relationship between extreme-right party strength and the level of xenophobic violence. The strength of the social movement perspective that we take on the extreme right is precisely to view mobilization

\[1\] Note that the authors themselves do not succeed in delineating the parties of interest just on the basis of their anti-immigrant stance, but differentiate them from ‘mainstream’ parties that advocate anti-immigrant positions in just the same way as we do by referring to them as ‘non-established.’
through parties as one strategic option in a wider repertoire of possibilities that extreme-right groups have. From our theoretical approach, it follows that the moderate repertoire of working through electoral channels of representation will be followed where political opportunities are favorable, i.e., where extreme-right demands resonate with dominant political discourses on citizenship and national identity, and where mainstream parties leave relatively much political space to extreme-right challengers. However, where such institutional opportunities are unfavorable, the expectation is that extreme-right groups will choose more radical action forms, including violence. In other words, we predict that extreme-right party strength and xenophobic violence will be inversely related, and this is indeed what we empirically find. In the light of the documented findings for other types of movements, this finding is not so surprising.

Analyses of the New Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the new social movements of the 1980s have documented that radicalization of these movements, including left-wing terrorism, was most prevalent in countries where these movements had been least successful in entering mainstream politics through new left-libertarian and green parties, or through co-optation into existing social-democratic and communist parties (e.g. Della Porta, 1995; Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendaak, & Giugni, 1995). While this finding is well-established for left-wing movements, the common wisdom on the extreme right still seems to be that strong and successful extreme-right parties provide fertile soil for violent extra-parliamentary extreme-right groups. Our findings show that in spite of the ideological differences between right-wing and left-wing movements, they follow the same basic logic. In both cases, the inverse relationship between institutionalization and violence is likely to be produced by a combination of factors. First, it is a question of tactical choice, in which activists will prefer less costly and risky, moderate and institutional forms of mobilization where such forms are successful. Second, strong parties provide an alternative political career path for radicals who might otherwise have been engaging in violence, but who can now become party activists. Third, parties may exert an active moderating pressure on activists, because they have an interest in not spoiling their electoral chances by becoming associated to violence. There is no theoretical reason to assume that these mechanisms do not apply in the case of right-wing movements, and our analyses in Contested Citizenship show that there is no empirical basis for this assumption either. We believe, therefore, that rather than being confusing, our distinction between party mobilization on the one hand, and violent and unconventional mobilization on the other, throws light on important issues that would otherwise have remained obscure.²

REFERENCES


² By extension, what holds for left-wing and right-wing movements is likely to be also true for other types of movements, such as religious movements. Violent and fundamentalist challenges are in this view most likely to occur where there are few political opportunities to articulate demands in more moderate forms.


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

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