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Reverting to the Right: Analyzing the recent reversion of Western liberal democracies

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Political Science and International Studies.

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Jamie Scalera

ABSTRACT
This paper will investigate and analyze the rise of the far-right movement’s influence and legitimacy in European Union (EU) states. The far-right movement has been characterized by its nationalism, nativism, and skepticism of global and regional integration. In Europe the global financial crisis of 2008 and the current European immigration crisis have shaken public faith in EU integration efforts and led to the legitimization of far-right political movements that previously represented a bare minority in political discourse. The expansion of such movements has led to massive policy shifts throughout Europe, such as the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU in 2016. In this paper, I analyze the conditions that have led to the recent rise of far-right movements to determine whether Europe may be experiencing a temporary political phenomenon or a more substantial break from pervious policies of international integration and liberalism. I examine the cases of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom to determine how far right parties achieve electoral and policy success by capitalizing on issue salience and party platform flexibility. My findings have important implications for the future influence of these movements in national politics and in the EU.

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April 2018
Department of Political Science and International Studies
University Honors Program
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Introduction

The expansion of the far-right movement and its legitimization in Europe has coincided with recent stress on European Union (EU) financial policies as well as a significant immigration crisis. The far-right movement has been characterized by policies of isolationism, xenophobia, decreased will for international, and, above all, a high mutability of these policy stances. It is remarkable that, given the historical effect of fascist and far-right ideals on the continent, European politics would begin to shift back towards the extreme right. The shadow of the German Third Reich is still felt strongly in Germany and throughout Europe. However, there has recently been an increase in far-right legitimacy even in Germany, where the Alternative for Germany party won 12.6 percent of the vote in the 2017 Bundestag elections (Federal Returning Officer, 2017). This shift is occurring in defiance of more than six decades of international liberalism and cooperation, and it represents a massive pivot point for international politics, especially among Western democracies.

Recent Trends

In the last ten years, Europe has faced a series of economic, security, and cultural crises that have shaken faith in the EU system. The global financial crisis of 2008 shook faith in the EU system’s ability to regulate regional and international trade in Europe’s favor (European Commission, 2009).

Additionally, many states, such as France, Greece, and others, faced significant economic hardship, while other states, such as Germany, weathered this storm fairly well. From the perspective of many states, EU integration exists in part to prevent these types
of inequalities and to promote a more flexible and resilient EU economy as a whole. This, however, did not prove to be the case.

Additionally, following the Arab Spring of 2011 and the expansion of the Islamic State in 2014, Europe has faced an unprecedented immigration and security crisis that has exposed the flaws of the EU internal security system (Stanford University, 2014). Some states have been overwhelmed by an influx of migrants, while other states continue to welcome immigration. Some states have rallied around state nationalism and xenophobia while their neighbors continue to allow the flow of immigrants into the essentially borderless region. Conflict between EU openness and state priorities has led some states to withdraw from the EU altogether and others are beginning to eye the door.

This crisis of international integration, national cultural preservation, and national security has created an environment of well-earned skepticism of the EU system from member states. It remains to be seen whether the ideologies of international liberalism can weather this maelstrom of crises will capsize the European project, but if domestic politics are any indication, we may soon see significant shifts in the EU system.

American Mirroring of European Trends

At the same time, the United States of America (US) has experienced a massive shift in administrations with the 2016 election of populist candidate, now US President, Donald J. Trump. Already, in the first year of Trump’s Administration, the United States’ government has altered its stance on many issues that were previously a given of international cooperation and understanding. For example, there has been increased scrutiny of the equitable funding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a cornerstone of Euro-American cooperation (U.S. Mission to NATO, 2017). Additionally, the North
American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an example of the multilateral free trade policies that have been promoted by the Washington Consensus, has been criticized by the Trump Administration as detrimental to United States’ industry and development (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2017). This inquiry is particularly relevant, as these policy shifts represent a significant move from the norm in Western democracies of globalized cooperation. Historically, these states have promoted international cooperation from the founding of the Bretton Woods Institutions in 1944 to the 2015 Paris Agreement, representing more than a half-century of international liberalism.

What political factors create ideal environments for the rise and legitimization of far-right parties in European Union (EU) states? Is a similar shift occurring in the United States as well? I argue that the combination of high saliency of far-right issues - such as immigration, rising prices, globalization, and terrorism - as well as a flexible party platform that adapts promptly to these changing issues creates the ideal political formula for the ascension and legitimization of far-right political views and discourse in European democracies.

Literature Review

Much of the existing research and investigation on far-right parties and their expansion is spread across investigations of: the effects of globalization and European integration, the influence and mechanisms of populism, and the specific strategies of far-right parties that allow for electoral success. Much of the foundational literature - the research and debate that defined these topics - focuses on theoretical definitions of concepts such as international liberalism, globalism, nativism, and anti-globalism.
Additionally, there has been an increased academic focus on the strategies and performance of far-right parties and populism throughout Europe. These works give insight into the mechanisms of power and persuasion that these parties have been harnessing to so quickly change national policy directions and debates. Finally, there has been other recent literature that is critical of the globalization and liberalization of the international economy and political space. These works are essential in understanding how national and international factors have combined to some degree to create the modern tension between the neo-liberal policies of the EU and the far-right movement.

**Defining the Far-right in Europe**

Defining Europe’s far-right parties is often a difficult task. As Polyakova and Shekhovtsov (2016) point out in “On the rise: Europe’s Fringe Right,” one of the key factors of success for far-right parties is their ability to adapt and change their parties’ positions to react to current external shocks. However, there are several recognizable hallmarks of far-right rhetoric in Europe that Polyakova and Shekhovtsov (2016) present: 1) a perceived, urgent threat to the “ethnicity, religion and culture they deem fundamental to their national identity”, 2) skepticism or hostility towards nonnative Europeans as the perceived cause of domestic distress or economic hardship, and 3) a perception of alienation from mainstream, centrist politicians and parties (p. 73). These factors outline a flexibility of issue, platform, and policy that characterizes the far-right. Main ideological and party politics are often defined by a reactionary stance to current issues or events, rather than a steady pressure for some ideological reform.

Cas Mudde (2010) makes some distinctions within the group of parties he identifies as populist radical right parties. Mudde (2010) frames far-right parties, not as
movements totally alien to the mainstream political culture, but simply as radical interpretations of mainstream political values. Care is taken to separate those movements that are compatible with democratic ideals from those that espouse some form of fascism authoritarianism. Mudde (2010) states that extremist far-right parties are the “antithesis of democracy” and are entirely incompatible with a stable democratic system (p. 1168). However, Mudde (2010) also defines a second, more common variety of far-right party whose ideologies are rooted in radicalism, which is defined as “being in opposition to *liberal* (or constitutional) democracy” (p. 1168).

In this study, I will focus solely on those movements that fall into this second ‘radical’ far-right category as these are the movements that are most likely to coexist with mainstream parties in a democratic environment. Mudde (2010) goes on to argue that these radical far-right parties do not exist as an anomaly outside the normal political system, as was previously theorized, but have a permanent place on the fringes of mainstream politics. These radical right parties are not anomalies of the democratic process instigated by crisis, but are permanent fringe fixtures of the democratic system. Instead of radical politics being a symptom of political crisis, Mudde (2010) states that there is a constant demand in the electorate for far-right or radical politics. The real determining factor, according to Mudde (2010), is the ability of far-right party leadership to harness current issues to pull their movements from fringe obscurity into the mainstream political spotlight.

*Populism as an Unacknowledged Staple of European Politics*

Traditionally, far-right parties and candidates have been the perennial outsiders of the European political process. Where there was traction and legitimacy given to these
movements it has been focused on demand side explanations. However, Mudde (2010) has argued that there is an increasing need for in depth, empirical supply side analysis of the factors that propel radical and far-right movements into the mainstream political arena. Mudde (2010) argues that there has been an overemphasis on radical right movements as a ‘normal pathology’ of western democracies, which is to say that these movements inherently garner little support in ‘normal’ political circumstances but find more support during times of national and international crisis. However, given the increasing relevance of radical right groups in European politics, there has been a struggle among academics to define precisely what crisis is motivating the electorate to flock to parties that would normally be seen as outside the normal political field.

Mudde (2010) acknowledges that much of the demand side factors for this type of politics has been related to some form of “modernization -theory related crisis” that is driving the electorate away from traditional or mainstream platforms (p. 1181). Mudde (2010) argues that current traction experienced by radical right platforms is not a result of some underlying crisis but is simply a distortion of what is normally considered to be mainstream political values. Given a constant, fringe level demand, why have these movements not been successful in what should be a fairly fertile and undisputed electoral breeding ground? Mudde (2010) states that this lack is not to be found in the demand side of the issue, but is a problem of issue saliency in the supply side of radical right parties and their ability to really harness this untapped, underrepresented electorate.

Far-right Parties and Euroscepticism

Far-right parties, in the European context, often prioritize sentiments of Euroscepticism, and anti-globalism that reflects policies of economic isolationism, trade
restriction, and an aversion towards international economic integration (Gawor, 2008). Gawor (2008) defines anti-globalism as activists or parties that are opposed to the activities of “supranational consortia” such as the Bretton Woods institutions, European Union, and other international trade organizations (p. 127). In the case of Europe, many of those who support far-right parties are also skeptical of participation in the European integration efforts.

Recently, following the European immigration crisis and 2008 financial crisis, many far-right parties have incorporated aspects of the Eurocentric nativism described by Polyakova and Shekhovtsov (2016) as well as the anti-globalist, eurosceptic tendencies described by Gawor (2008). The combination of these two definitions broadly defines modern far-right party ideology and movements in Europe since 2000 and is represented in the case studies of Romania and Hungary found in Polyakova and Shekhovtsov’s (2016) article.

One of the key aspects of radical far-right rhetoric throughout Europe is euroscepticism, a reluctance to embrace policies of European economic, social and political integration. In their 2002 article Marks, Wilson, and Ray clearly address this issue (Marks, Wilson, & Ray, 2002). The authors analyze the issue of euroscepticism by organizing political parties of EU member states into ‘party families’ with general shared ideologies. They then organize these party families along a traditional liberal to conservative political ideology spectrum. According to these authors, the relative euroscepticism of individual political parties throughout Europe varies as one moves through the political spectrum. Those parties that are at the edges of the political spectrum, primarily far-right and communist party movements, are most skeptical of
European integration, while more moderate parties are generally more accepting of integration efforts. However, within the subset of moderate European party families, the authors found that there was high variance in the actual policy positions of these parties in the domestic setting, while the more extreme political parties were almost universally opposed to integration efforts. It seems that what has most united national far-right movements throughout the last several decades has been their collective desire to be disunited. As these movements gain national influence and notoriety, this will likely result in increased strain on EU cohesion and a notable increase in the importance of national policy within the EU.

The influence of EU integration has come under increased scrutiny since the European immigration crisis began in 2011. Many national European leaders have become incredibly skeptical of European integration, particularly the necessity of the Schengen Area. In 2016, due to increased nationalist and eurosceptic rhetoric, the United Kingdom voted by referendum to remove itself from the EU. Why have European states recently lost confidence in the European integration project?

The argument and conclusions of Lipscy’s (2015) article would suggest that the EU has failed to maintain its competitiveness in comparison to national alternatives. While Lipscy’s (2015) article focuses primarily on the relative strength and influence of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), he concludes that the same model can be successfully applied to regional integration projects, such as the EU. In his discussion Lipscy (2015) states that the influence of international organizations is often based on how closely they are forced to compete with national alternative institutions. If those national institutions provide more relevant and adaptable solutions for an individual
state, then there will be a great decrease in the relative importance of the supranational body. Therefore, those supranational or international bodies must remain more relevant than their national alternatives in order to maintain popular approval. In the case of the EU, recent strains on long standing integration policies, such as the Schengen Area, have decreased the appeal of EU integration in national contexts and increased the political influence of far-right and Eurosceptic factions within national politics. Based on the application of Lipscy’s (2015) theory of institutional competition, the EU must remain responsive and adaptable, to the best of its ability, or face the possibility that other EU members may choose to withdraw from the project.

Far-right Movements in the United States

In his 2016 article “Rise of the Alt-Right,” Scott McConnell gives a more contemporary and conservative perspective on the increased influence of far-right parties in Europe as it relates to the United States’ presidential elections. McConnell (2016) states that there is “ample reason to interpret Trump’s success as a nationalist pushback against globalism” (p. 16). McConnell (2016) proposes that this pushback against globalist policies has been growing in both the United States and Europe for decades and is now finding its political voice amid the perceived economic and immigration crisis. McConnell (2016) frames this development as a struggle of survival for major contemporary civilizations.

Much of this argument is based in Samuel Huntington’s well-known Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1996). McConnell (2016) poses the current immigration crisis in Europe and the United States as an existential threat to Western civilization. The primary fear is that this conflict will result in a civilization and culture that is no longer
identifiable as either of the original cultures, but something entirely new. The pushback against this process is what McConnell (2016) claims is driving the far-right movement in Europe and the United States. McConnell (2016) claims that political figures such as President Trump have gained support by building a support base of anti-globalists and pledging to protect national culture, industry and sovereignty from foreign influence.

Issue Salience and Party Strategy

Radical right movements and parties have often held slim minorities in both the electorate and government in European states; however, despite this lack of core representation, these parties have remained politically relevant in discourse over many years. Kitschelt (1995) notes that the success or failure of these parties is strongly dependent on the ideological choices and moves of both the established parties and radical right challengers. The strategic choices in party platform of both mainstream and far-right parties heavily influence their ability to succeed in maintaining their current electorate and stealing votes from their opposition.

Through computer simulation it is possible to model what these winning formulas might resemble by determining the ideological stances of both parties and voters to find the ideological overlap that would normally indicate political support (Muis and Scholte, 2012). Through agent-based modeling (ABM), Muis and Scholte (2012) were able to model the key factors and strategies that affect the success of radical right movements. Muis and Scholte (2012), using the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) as the subject of their modeling, found that radical right parties generally find more success when they chose strategies and rhetoric that solidifies them with their current supporters rather than proactively changing their rhetoric in an attempt to garner the votes of a more moderate
Additionally, through these models it was found that party strategy - whether passive, aggressive, or aggregative - had more of an effect on the success or failure of these movements than issue saliency or issue ownership (Muis and Scholte, 2012). In modeling the PVV, Muis and Scholte (2012) found that the difference between a marginalized radical right party and a successful one is often the amount of agency and flexibility the party exhibits. In order to be successful, these parties must have a great deal of strategic flexibility in order to fully exploit any and all favorable circumstances that are available (Muis and Scholte, 2012). Additionally, Muis and Scholte (2012) found that radical right parties achieve greater success when they are more flexible in their economic policies. When socio-economic issues have high saliency, it benefits radical right parties to shift their economic ideologies to a more moderate position rather than reinforce their more extreme views (Muis and Scholte, 2012).

This seems to contradict Kitschelt’s (1995) claim that the ‘winning formula’ for radical right parties consists of a combination of neo-liberal economic stances and culturally exclusionist positions. Traditionally successful political parties have not exhibited high volatility or flexibility in their core ideology. Mainstream parties often have a core, defining platform that tethers their current rhetoric to a strong foundation. However, for radical right parties, more success may be found in encouraging adaptation to current events and deft reactions to public issue salience and public opinion regardless of previous party ideology (Muis and Scholte, 2012).

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I will apply decades of study on radical and far-right politics in Europe and apply it to more contemporary issues such as: the departure of the United
Kingdom from the European Union, the ongoing immigration crisis in Europe and the meteoric electoral rise of candidates, such as Marine Le Pen, of France’s National Front (FN) party. Since 2011, there has been a notable departure from long standing norms in European politics. The rise of euroscepticism, nationalist policies, and anti-globalization rhetoric have created a situation that might dramatically alter the political landscape of Europe and send shockwaves throughout Western politics.

Theory

The confluence of events in Europe over the last decade, ranging from the 2008 global financial crisis to the Syrian migrant crisis, has created a political context that has been more accepting of far-right sentiments. Far-right parties, such as France’s National Front have seen a notable increase in electoral success and acceptance into mainstream European discourse.

I argue that the combination of high saliency of core issues along with high party flexibility has allowed some far-right parties to achieve unprecedented electoral success and strong influence over national and international policies and discourse. The provision of both an ideal supply of key cultural issues and acute stress on the EU system have turned the spotlight from long-term, macro-level political discussion to issues of immigration, anti-globalization, and nationalism, the issues on which far-right rhetoric gains the most political traction through the inflationation of economic, cultural, and security related fears. Additionally, national parties with high levels of policy or platform flexibility are those that have been able to successfully adapt and ride this wave of popular discontent and concern in the polls. In other words:
H₁: *The higher the salience of a particular type of cultural issues, the higher the likelihood that a far-right party will experience electoral success.*

I expect that as the salience of cultural issues, including immigration, globalism, and economic nationalism increases among the electorate, in the media, and in political arenas there will be an increase in the electoral support of far-right parties. Specifically, the salience of these issues will be harnessed by adept far-right parties and used as a vehicle to propel them into electoral significance by framing these issues as an existential threat to the well-being of the state, culture, and populace. As noted in Music and Scholte (2013), issue saliency is often a determining factor in the success or failure of the efforts of far-right parties in Europe. If cultural issues, including concerns over immigration, globalization and economic performance, become the important issues of the day then the chance of success for far-right parties is greatly increased in that state.

However, simply supplying a fertile political environment based on salient issues does not ensure the total success of far-right parties. This leads to my second hypothesis:

H₂: *The greater the level of party platform flexibility, the higher the likelihood of electoral success.*

High flexibility of policy and platform is required for these parties to successfully address the high saliency concerns of the electorate. Parties that are more able to adapt their policy statements, and objectives to conform to the important issues of the day are those far-right parties that are most successful. While change in political platform is not unheard of in mainstream politics, established, historical, or mainstream parties are
significantly less likely to make radical changes to message or platform that compromise their core ideological values in response to the changing pressures of contemporary issues (Muis and Scholte, 2012). However, far-right parties often present reactionary and flexible behavior that allows them to conform to current issues. This reactionary disposition plays on the populist concerns of the moment to the electoral benefit of the party.

**Research Design**

**Cases**

For this investigation, I have chosen to examine far-right party strategy and electoral outcomes in three states: Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (UK). In each of these states, I focus on the dominant far-right party based on data from the European Election Database (Norwegian Center for Research Data, 2017).

These states were chosen because they are currently EU member states (although the UK as resolved to withdraw) that are tied to regional political and financial issues regarding the European continent with similar economic performance, some shared culture, and a similar level of regional and international integration in regard to trade and politics. Additionally, they are all democratic states with some form of multiparty parliamentary system.

Germany will serve as a null case in this investigation. While Germany weathered the 2008 financial crisis comparatively well, there have been increasing political pressures on the issues of immigration policy, the Schengen Area, and other integration policies. While there is not a significant far-right party presence in Germany, according
to data from the European Election Database, there has been increasing pressure on the current government to desist in promoting open immigration and economic policies. Despite some growing opposition, Angela Merkel retained the position of Chancellor with the support of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in 2018. Due to the lack of policy or government change in Germany compared to other European states, it will serve as my null case.

France will serve as my negative case for electoral legitimacy and success of far-right parties. The National Front Party (FN) in France has been in existence since 1972; however, until recent years it was mostly a fringe party. From 1997 to 2016, the FN held a grand total of 3 parliamentary seats in France (Shields, 2007). However, since 2011 the party has experienced a revival under Marine Le Pen, the daughter of founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. In the most recent presidential election, Le Pen successfully made it to the national runoff elections where she received 33.9 percent of the overall national vote (Nossiter, 2017). While this still counts as a loss, it marks a remarkable shift in fortunes for FN in France, which, in 2012, represented only 13.6 percent of the National Assembly (European Election Database, 2017). Despite the significance of this electoral performance, FN still failed to gain significant seats in the French National Assembly and did not succeed in winning the presidency. Therefore, I consider the French case as a failure of far-right parties, specifically FN, to garner the majority electoral support required to pass policy and enact change in government.
The United Kingdom (UK) will serve as the positive case for far-right legitimization and electoral success. This is, however, a slightly unique case. In 2015, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) joined in coalition with the Conservative Party in exchange for an expedited national referendum on the UK’s European Union membership. Despite the fact that UKIP held only a single legislative seat in 2015, they were able to achieve major electoral support for their key policy: the secession of the UK from the EU. UKIP’s measure received a bare 51.9 percent majority to leave the EU. For a far-right party that holds only a single seat in the House of Commons, this national electoral victory is quite significant. While it is certainly true that the only way that UKIP was able to get this policy to the floor was through leveraging their way into a governing coalition, their ability to promote their policy and succeed in gaining the support of 52.9 percent of the electorate showcases a positive case of far-right parties gaining both legitimacy and power to change policy.

*Independent Variable: Issue Salience*

Borrowing from Muis and Scholte (2012), my main focus will be on the salience of those issues that most impact the success of far-right parties. These issues were broadly defined as cultural issues related to *immigration, terrorism, rising prices, unemployment, health and social security,* and *crime.* In my study, these cultural issues will be extended to include issues of globalization and EU integration/euroscepticism.

In order to measure the relative salience of these issues in each of my three cases, I use the LexisNexis database to gather data on the instances of keywords associated with cultural issues in the major news media publications within each case state. In Germany these are *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.* In France, I use *Le*
Figaro and Le Monde. Finally, in the UK I use The Sun and the Daily Mail. These publications were chosen in each state based on reported circulations from the German Audit Bureau of Circulation, the Alliance for Press and Media Figures, and the Audit Bureau of Circulations (UK) respectively. In order to gather more accurate data on the occurrence of keywords I simplify rising prices to inflation and health and social security to social security. I also translate each term into French1 or German2 in the corresponding cases. After gathering this data, I analyzed it to find the most salient issues over time from the perspective of news organizations.

I recognize that such organizations often have a political bias as well as an elite bias. Therefore, I also gather data from the Eurobarometer database on the question: “What are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?” (European Commission, 2017). By combining measures from these two sources, I am able to gauge which issues are most important to voters from both the perspective of elite news organizations and individual voters themselves.

In the analysis of both the elite and popular issue salience I focus on election years for parliament, presidential elections, and, in the case of the UK, the 2016 national referendum from 2008-2016. I analyze salience data from three-time frames: six months before the electoral event, one year before the electoral event, and two years before the electoral event.

1 The French terms were translated from inflation, immigration, social security, unemployment, crime, and terrorism to inflation, immigration, sécurité sociale, chômage, criminalité, terrorisme.
2 The German terms were translated from inflation, immigration, social security, unemployment, crime, and terrorism to inflation, einwanderung, sozialversicherung, arbeitslosigkeit, Kriminalität, and terrorismus.
Independent Variable: Party Flexibility

Using the Comparative Manifesto project data on Left-Right party positioning I assess the results of strategic moves of far-right parties in the political space (Volkens, 2017). I use this scale to track the positions of parties in the Left-Right space throughout the electoral cycles that I cover. I compare significant moves from centrist positions to right leaning for far-right positions, with consideration of the positions of other parties within the political context and electoral outcomes and the coincidence of high salience far-right issues. Through examining this data, I am able to compare the shifts of party platforms in the policy space with salient issues and electoral success to determine whether or not the policy changes of these parties are or are not electorally viable in different issue contexts.

Dependent Variable: Electoral Success

To best measure the effect of issue salience and party flexibility on the success of far-right parties, I focus on electoral results in each case state. If these parties make significant progress in gaining power and legitimacy in democratic discourse, then this should be reflected in their share of the electorate.

In order to measure an increase or decrease in electoral success, I establish a baseline level of electoral representation for these parties by finding the mean percentage of electoral support over the last two election cycles. These two numbers provide context for any measurable electoral gains or losses by these parties in response to either of my independent variables.

Electoral success is assessed by three different perspectives: percentage of overall
vote won, seats won in legislative institutions, and national electorate share (i.e. percentage of votes won in French presidential election and UK referendum). By observing the electoral performance of these parties at both the parliamentary and national levels, I can compare the difference between direct electoral support at the national level and provincial electoral support at the parliamentary level.

I obtain this data from both state election records and European Election Database data. These two datasets will be compared to ensure there are no discrepancies in reporting and to fill any missing data in either database (Norwegian Center for Research Data, 2017; Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017; Federal Returning Officer, 2017).

By comparing election results to measures of issue salience and party platform flexibility, I determine how changing relevance of issues as well as party adaptability have affected far-right parties’ electoral success since 2008.

Analysis

*United Kingdom*

Beginning with the 2015 UK general election, it is worth noting that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – the far-right party in the UK – has traditionally, and ironically, held significant sway in the UK delegation to the European Parliament (EP). For example, in the 2014 elections UKIP representatives held a plurality in the UK delegation with 24 of 73 seats (EU Parliament, 2014). However, at the national level UKIP has struggled to gain seats in the national legislature and has never approached a true usurpation of traditional UK parties.

In 2015, approximately a year before winning a national majority in the Brexit
Referendum, UKIP won 12.6 percent of the national electorate in UK general elections, resulting in the possession of a single seat (The Electoral Commission, 2015). While this may be insignificant in a legislative sense, it represented their most successful electoral win to date.³ To investigate the effects of issue salience on this election I used the same methods of identifying key popular issues and determine their elite salience through newspaper content analysis.

Leading up to the 2015 general election, there was little change in the popular issue salience indicated by Eurobarometer polls⁴. Rising prices was the most important issue to polled votes from 2013 through the 2015 elections (European Commission, 2017). The most common secondary issue from 2013 to 2015 was health and social security, but there was some interchange between this response and household financial situation and pensions, which both overtook or matched health and social security in May 2013 through November 2014, six months preceding the general election. Immigration and unemployment, averaging 8.5 percent and 13.5 percent from 2013 to 2015, were not significant challengers to the issues of rising prices, pensions, and household finances, especially after 2013 (European Commission, 2017).⁵

The important issues in the 2015 general elections, as indicated by Eurobarometer polls, were: rising prices, social security, crime, unemployment, immigration, and terrorism. Nearly all these search terms experienced a decrease in elite salience from 2014 to 2015 and from 2013 to 2015⁶. The occurrence of rising prices and crime, two of

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³ In 2010, for example, UKIP won only 3.1 percent of the national vote and no seats (BBC 2010)
⁴ See Table 1.5
⁵ Unemployment was cited by 18 percent of respondents in May 2013, overtaking Health and Social Security, but had decreased to 12 percent by November of the same year (European Commission 2017)
⁶ See Table 1.6
the most important issues indicated by the 2015 Eurobarometer data, decreased by 42 percent and 26 percent from May 2013 to May 2015. Each of the other important keywords identified from the Eurobarometer data also experienced a decrease in newspaper occurrence with the exception of *immigration*, which increased by 18 percent from 2013 to 2015, and *financial security*, which increased by a meager three percent over the same two-year period.

It seems that, when applied to the general election of 2015, H1 does not find significant support. While there was some increase in the elite newspaper salience of *immigration* from May 2013 to May 2015, it was coupled with a 30 percent decrease in the occurrence of *unemployment* and a 42 percent decrease for *rising prices*, two issues that the far-right could certainly capitalize on.

The 2016 Brexit Referendum could be represented as a national referendum on far-right policies and the platform and rhetoric of far-right parties within the state, such as UKIP.

Initially, I used Eurobarometer survey data on the “two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) [United Kingdom] at the moment” to gauge the salience of issues both political and personal to constituents (European Commission, 2017). Using the results of these surveys I gathered a series of keywords that represented salient issues, including *rising prices, immigration, terrorism, crime, unemployment*, and *health and social security* (See Table 1.3). Of these keywords I identified *immigration, rising prices, terrorism, and crime* to be far-right issues. There was little change in the prevalence of these keywords leading up to the Brexit Referendum in June 2016. The two top measured issues from May 2015 to May 2016 were consistently *rising prices* and *health and social security*. 
security according to Eurobarometer data (European Commission, 2016). However, there was a slight decrease in the prevalence of these two variables in the last survey taken before the election. From November 2015 to May 2016, one month before the referendum, there was a five percent decrease in the prevalence of rising prices and a modest two percent decrease in the prevalence of health and social security. There was a corresponding increase for the issues of immigration and terrorism, key issues of UKIP’s Leave Campaign. Additionally, the prevalence of terrorism increased threefold from 2015 to 2016, moving from the least important issue to one of at least moderate importance to those surveyed. While the issues polled by Eurobarometer remained fairly static leading up to the Brexit Referendum, the elite salience of these keywords changed fairly dramatically in the year leading up to the vote.

Using LexisNexis, I searched the occurrence of the same important keywords taken from Eurobarometer data and applied them to the publication of the two most popular newspapers of the UK. From May 2015 to June 2016, there was a sharp increase in the occurrence of immigration and unemployment in newspaper publications (See Table 1.4). The occurrence of immigration increased from 869 to 1493, a 58 percent increase. The occurrence of unemployment increased by 72 percent, from 271 entries to 374 entries.

However, the other issues that seemed relevant at the popular level, as indicated by the Eurobarometer surveys, decreased significantly in prevalence in the news. Most notably, rising prices, the consistent top popular issue, decreased by ten percent, health and social security decreased by 39 percent, and terrorism decreased by 23 percent. These decreases in issue salience at the elite level seem to be contrary to some of the

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7 See Table 1.4
prominent issues pushed in the Leave Campaign. However, this may simply indicate that there is some correlation between the salience of immigration issues and unemployment issues that create a political echo chamber, making them the most influential issues in the Leave Campaign, even if this is not captured in the popular Eurobarometer measurements.

The powerful salience of these issues in the year leading up to the Brexit referendum likely impacted the perceptions of the electorate and greatly strengthened the political sway of UKIP policy, even if such influence was only temporary. Additionally, the high occurrence of unemployment and immigration in news media likely shaped the perceptions of the electorate in precisely the manner that allowed for the capitalization of fears leading up to the referendum.

The polls leading up to the referendum were quite contentious. The Leave and Remain factions leapfrogged in a plurality for the months and even days before the vote. However, on June 23, 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU by a slim 51.9 percent majority (BBC, 2016). It is quite impressive that UKIP, a party that won only 12.6 percent of the national electorate and a single seat in the UK parliament in 2015 was capable of gaining a national direct electoral majority for their key policy points of leaving the EU (Electoral Commission, 2015).

These results indicate a partial confirmation of H1, that the salience of relevant far-right issues plays a key role in the ability of these groups to gain electoral support. In the case of the Referendum, it allowed a policy of a minority party to capture a national majority and the support of at least 37.5 percent of the total population of the UK. However, this increase in salience was only partial. The issues of immigration and
unemployment experienced a truly massive increase in salience in news publications, while traditionally important issues, such as rising prices and social security experienced a decrease. Terrorism, a prime target for a far-right party such as UKIP, experienced a decrease in salience. Additionally, the change in Eurobarometer data did not reflect the dramatic shift in newspaper salience, indicating the views of surveyed voters did not necessarily reflect or the relative increase in the salience of far-right issues.

In the case of the UK it seems there is a separation between national and regional performance of far-right parties and policies. In the context of the national referendum, issue salience for immigration and unemployment soared at the elite level, allowing UKIP to capitalize on salient issues to bolster support of the Leave Campaign. For the initiative of a minority party, who rarely captures a single parliamentary seat, to capture a national majority is no small feat.

In the context of the Referendum, H1 finds significant support as UKIP harnesses salient issues to direct debates and capture electoral power. However, this electoral victory was not as pronounced in the UK general elections. Just one year prior to the Brexit referendum UKIP captured only 12 percent of the electorate. The reason for this might be the lack of salient far-right issues. From both the popular and elite perspective, the issues of the 2015 general elections did not generally reflect the salience of issues just one year afterwards. This lack of salient far-right issues, or perhaps UKIP’s inability to direct the national debate away from Pensions to something more palatable, such as immigration, caused their comparative failure to capture significant sway in the Parliament.8

8 Despite capturing only 12 percent of the vote and a single seat, this was a relative victory for UKIP. They won only three percent of the vote in 2010 and captured no seats (The Electoral Commission
Since the end of the Second World War there has been little overt political support for far-right political policy in Germany (Volkens et al, 2017). For this reason, I have chosen it as a null case for far-right legitimacy. However, in the recent 2017 Bundestag elections the Alternative for Germany (AFD) party, a far-right party that scores a 17.43 on the Manifesto Project’s scale of Left-Right position, experienced significant electoral gains. This success is unexpected due to the fact that the Free Democratic Party (FDP) held a similar position in the 2013 elections and was severely punished electorally. The success of the AFD as a far-right party on the heels of the FDP failure makes Germany a more complicated and interesting case. Additionally, far-right political positions have been largely unviable in German politics for decades, making the AFD success even more unusual.

Beginning with the 2013 Bundestag elections, Eurobarometer data indicates that, at the popular level, the most salient national issues were rising prices, immigration, and unemployment in the six months preceding the election scoring at 25 percent, 16 percent, and 20 percent respectively. The salience of these three issues changed very little in the months and years leading up to the Bundestag election with the salience of each issue varying by about three percent on average. However, unemployment did decrease in salience by 38 percent between the 2009 and 2013 elections, from 58 percent to 20 percent. Terrorism, a key salient issue by the 2017 elections, was measured at only two percent salience in the 2013 elections. The occurrence of these key issues also remained

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9 For comparison, the National Front in France scored a 5.0 in 2017 with 0 representing political centrism (Volkens et al 2017).

10 See Table 2.4
fairly static in the two years leading up to the 2013 election with two exceptions. The occurrence of *immigration* increased by 69.6 percent in the six months preceding the election and the occurrence of terrorism increased by 42.5 percent in the same period, a change not reflected in Eurobarometer data\textsuperscript{11}. Despite this nominal increase, there were not strongly salient far-right issues leading up to the 2013 election.

In 2013 the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the most right leaning party at the time, won 4.8 percent of the vote, narrowly failing to meet the five percent requirement to win seats. This was approximately a nine percent decrease in electoral support from the 2009 elections (Federal Returning Officer, 2018). This seems to partially confirm my hypothesis that, with the relatively low salience of cultural issues - such as *immigration* and *terrorism* - the FDP was unable to gain electoral support. Additionally, the massive decrease of *unemployment* as an issue of popular salience likely robbed the FDP of tangible anti-establishment positions that would have likely drawn votes from the mainstream parties. While there was an increase in the occurrence of *immigration* and *terrorism* in the media preceding the election, it was likely too late for the FDP to convert the salience of the issue into electoral support.

However, it is also likely that far-right party rhetoric was just not viable in Germany regardless of issue salience. According to the Manifesto Project (2017) the FDP moved from a score of four on the Right-Left scale to a 14 between the 2009 and 2013 elections. This significant move to the right may have been a strong contributing factor to their electoral defeat in 2013. The Christian Democrats were the next furthest right with a score of only two points, making the FDP a clear outlier in the 2013 political environment. The fact that the FDP was so electorally penalized for their ideological shift

\textsuperscript{11} See Table 2.3
to the right reinforces the choice of Germany as a null case for the expansion of the far-right movement.

The 2017 Bundestag elections paint a different political scene. The FDP, reacting to electoral pressure, returned to a politically centrist position (Volkens, 2017). Simultaneously, a new far-right party – the AFD - found a political foothold in Germany and, unlike the FDP, performed remarkably well.

The relevant issues of the 2017 election were nearly an inverse of the previous national election. Eurobarometer data indicates that terrorism, immigration, and, to a lesser degree, crime were the issues at the forefront of that national consciousness. Compared to the 2013 elections, immigration increased in salience by 22 percent while terrorism increased by 25 percent, originally polling at two percent. Inflation and unemployment both decreased by ten and 15 percent respectively between the two elections. This is likely due to the increase in immigration due to the expansive policies of Chancellor Merkel from 2013 and 2017. Additionally, many states were finally recovering from the bulk of the economic damage caused by the Great Recession a decade before.

This significant change in salient issues was also reflected in the media. The occurrence of terrorism in German newspapers increased by 63 percent between the 2013 and 2017 elections, peaking at an 86.6 percent increase between election day 2013 and September 2016, one year before the most recent German election. The occurrence of immigration increased by 155 percent between the two elections, from 78 occurrences in a six-month period to 199 occurrences. Similarly, the occurrence of immigration peaked

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12 See Table 2.1
13 See Table 2.2
one year prior to the 2017 election, occurring 611 times, a 683 percent increase in salience from September 2013.

The other measured issues experience a much lower change in salience between the two elections. The occurrence of inflation decreased by 31.4 percent. The occurrence of social security increased by 48 percent but only decreased by 11.6 percent on average between the two election cycles. Unemployment decreased by 23 percent between the two elections, but, on average, increased by 29 percent. Each of these measures had changed significantly between the two elections, indicating a significantly different political context from the 2013 elections.14

It is presumably this change in political context that allowed the AFD to succeed in a political space that electorally punished the FDP in previous years. In the 2017 election the AFD won 12.6 percent of the electorate, earning 94 of the 709 seats in the Bundestag. This represented a 7.9 percent increase in electoral power from the 2013 elections, where they failed to meet the five percent requirement for representation (Federal Returning Officer 2017). The AFD also managed to outperform the FDP by a narrow 1.5 percent. This is significant due to the fact that, following their brief experiment with right leaning politics, the FDP returned to a centrist political position in the 2017 elections.15 While the FDP was strongly punished by the electorate for the right-leaning position, the AFD was electorally rewarded. This seems to partially confirm my H1 theory that some increase in salience of far-right issues, particularly terrorism and immigration, may have allowed for the success of a far-right party in a political culture.

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14 See Table 2.2
15 According to the measures of the Manifesto Project (Volkens 2017), the FDP moved from a 14 in the Right-Left Position scale in 2013 to a 0.5, an even more centrist position than their 2009 political position. The AD, however, maintained a 17 on the Right-Left scale, a more extreme position than the FDP, and were electorally rewarded.
that previously punished any right leaning rhetoric with immediate electoral losses.

The change in issue salience from 2013 to 2017 created a viable political space for a far-right political position that had previously been a political taboo in Germany, where the average Right-Left position has been a -6.08 for the last two decades and the most successful parties have been consistently centrist (Volkens, 2017). However, it is also possible that the failure of the FDP could be a result of their abrupt move in the political space from a relatively centrist position to a significantly right-leaning position. Such an abrupt political shift, often made in an effort to proactively “hunt” votes from other parties, is often electorally punished (Muis and Scholte 2013:16). The AFD, however, had the luxury of being a relatively new and undefined party in the 2017 elections, allowing them to adopt a far-right stance in German politics without forfeiting their traditional electorate. The success of the AFD compared to the FDP’s an impressive feat in the German political context, but as their success has not resulted in control of government or passage of significant policy, the German case does not substantially confirm my H1. Regardless, the salience of far-right political issues in Germany likely played some role in the relative acceptance of far-right rhetoric in the national political space, especially considering that such political positions have been nearly nonexistent in Germany for some time.

**France**

Far-right sentiments have existed in French politics for decades. The relevant party in this case, The National Front (FN), is the oldest far-right party in the three cases. Founded in 1973, this party has been a minority force in French politics for decades (Shields, 2007, p. 163-164). However, with the recent oust of Jean-Marie Le Pen by his
daughter, Marine Le Pen, the party has moved from a dedicated fringe position to a position of greater legitimacy in mainstream French politics (BBC, 2011). Since that time the party has risen in legitimacy and electoral significance, culminating in Le Pen’s participation in the 2017 French runoff for the presidency (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017).

The rise of the National Front in France serves as an interesting case to analyze the effects of supply side politics on the success or failure of far-right parties.

Beginning in 2012 with the French National Assembly elections, the most relevant issues on the popular level were unemployment, inflation, and crime (Eurobarometer, 2017). However, the most salient issue by far was unemployment, which was cited by 55 percent of those surveyed, 34 percent more than inflation, the second most salient issue (Eurobarometer, 2017). Crime, immigration, and terrorism scored 15, 12, and two percent respectively (Eurobarometer, 2017). There is a lack of Eurobarometer data from October 22, 2011 to April 22, 2010, but, according to the April 2010 statistics, there was little change in popular issue salience over the two-year period. Inflation increased by four percent in this time, and immigration increased by six percent, but other changes were extremely minor.

Elite issue salience mirrored popular salience in the months and years preceding the 2012 National Assembly election. Of the leading issues, social security and unemployment both occur with high frequency in the national press, followed by immigration, terrorism, inflation, and crime. The occurrence of each issue changed very little in the two years leading up to the 2012 election. While social security clearly leads in absolute terms among the issues, it was certainly an outlier and was likely over

16 See Table 3.7
17 See Table 3.8
18 The average variance for all terms over all years was only 11.82 percent.
sampled compared to other issues. However, the absolute difference between social security and other issues, such as inflation, which polled as more salient in Eurobarometer (2017) data, may indicate a disparity between popular salient issues and elite salient issues. That aside, the occurrence of the other sampled issues seems to be fairly congruent with the popular salient issues indicated by Eurobarometer data.

If these measures of salience were any indicator, it would seem that the 2012 National Assembly election in France was essentially a single-issue election that revolved around the issue of French unemployment. In this election the FN showed only minor electoral significance with a national electoral percentage of 3.66 percent, placing them in the third place position after the two majority parties which garnered a combined 78.86 percent of the national vote (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). This poor showing of the FN partially confirms my H1 hypothesis. The lack of strong nationalist or culturalist issues caused the party to lose votes to more mainstream parties that could capitalize on issues like unemployment to a greater degree than a party of the far-right.

The 2012 Presidential elections, held only two months before the 2012 National Assembly elections, share nearly the same salient issues as the National Assembly elections. However, Marine Le Pen and the FN performed significantly better electorally in the presidential race than in the legislative contests. In the first vote, Le Pen garnered 20.41 percent of the national vote, placing FN, again, in the third-place position after candidates from the two majority parties (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). Le Pen was only four percent from the second-place plurality that would have allowed her and the FN to continue on to the runoff.

This significant difference between presidential and legislative performance in

\(^{19}\) See Table 3.3 and 3.4
2012 could be due to several factors. In a less crowded presidential election, it is likely much easier for FN, and an individual like Le Pen, to garner much greater political attention than in local elections for the National Assembly where local FN candidates may not exist, or may be overshadowed by mainstream incumbents. Additionally, Le Pen’s presidential bid likely drew much greater attention than local legislative elections and drew more far-right voters to the polls at the national level. The fact the Le Pen placed third in the presidential elections is not surprising, as we can see that FN is the third most influential party in legislative elections. However, the disparity between FN and the two mainstream parties is much narrower in the presidential election than in the legislative election. This could potentially present as evidence against my H1 due to the fact that the issues did not favor FN, as noted in their poor showing in legislative elections, but Le Pen nearly made it to the runoff at the presidential level. Other factors, such as personal charisma or idiosyncrasies of Le Pen as a candidate may have had more influence on voters than actual issue salience or party positioning.

There was little change in salient issues in France from 2012 to 2017. By the 2017 French elections, *unemployment* was still the leading issue at the popular level, scoring 50 percent. It was followed by *terrorism*, previously the least salient issue, which now scored at 36 percent in Eurobarometer polls (Eurobarometer, 2017). The other issues in the 2017 election closely followed those in the 2012 elections. *Inflation, immigration, social security, and crime* changed by only four percent on average between the two elections. A slight increase in the salience of *immigration* and *social security* coincide with a slight decrease in the salience of *inflation* and *crime* (Eurobarometer, 2017).

The most important change between the 2012 and 2017 elections is the increase

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20 See Table 3.1 and 3.5
of terrorism as a salient issue. From April 2012 to April 2017 terrorism increased in salience from two percent to 36 percent, the greatest change in any issue in French politics at that time. This change was also reflected at the elite level. Occurrences of terrorism increased by 190 percent between the two elections. The occurrence of immigration also significantly increased by 74 percent between the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections and 38 percent between the 2012 and 2017 legislative elections. Additionally, in the last six months preceding the 2017 elections the occurrence of immigration increased by ten percent.

In the 2017 legislative elections the FN garnered 13.2 percent of the vote in the first round and 8.75 in the second round (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). The FN maintained its position as the third most powerful party in the legislature, but was still dwarfed by the electoral success of the two mainstream parties, which won a combined 65 percent of the national electorate. However, FN gained ten percentage points of electoral power between 2012 and 2017, resulting in the acquisition of five additional seats, bringing their seats to a total of 8 (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). This significant increase in electoral performance between 2012 and 2017 partially confirms my H1. The increase in salience of immigration and terrorism, too far-right issues, increased the legitimacy of the FN and their platform in the French political space.

In the addition to the legislative gains made by FN in 2017 the party also achieved its first Presidential runoff vote in 15 years (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). With Marine Le Pen as their candidate, the FN won 21.3 percent of the national vote in the first round and 33.9 percent of the national electorate in the runoff for President (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). The change in vote share between the initial elections of 2012 and 2017

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21 See Table 3.2 and 3.6
was minimal, little more than one percent. However, in the national runoff against a mainstream candidate Le Pen won 33 percent of the national electorate, the greatest electoral victory of the FN to date. The increased salience of terrorism and immigration in the months and years preceding the election, along with the increased performance of the FN legislative mandates and Le Pen’s presidential bid, indicate some support for my first hypothesis. Primarily, the increase in the salience of terrorism increased the national appeal of the FN’s far-right positions on immigration, security, and nationalism. However, the increase of FN’s vote share in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections only increased by four percent from 2012 (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017). The slight increase in electoral power in the legislature did not result in the FN controlling levers of governmental power. While Le Pen’s runoff bid against Macron marks a significant increase in the legitimacy and relevance of FN, it does not substantially confirm my first hypothesis.

The National Front proves to be an inadequate case to prove my H2 as well. According to the Comparative Manifesto Project, their score on the Right-Left position indicator increased only marginally as far-right issues gained slight relevance in France, from a 5.0 to an 8.0. This is especially relevant considering that, in both elections, they were not the furthest right party in 2017; that position was held jointly by the Union of Democrats and Independents and The Republicans. Because FN shows little flexibility, but still gained electorally from 2012 to 2017, they do not confirm my H2 hypothesis.

Conclusion

In all, these three cases demonstrate some support for my first hypothesis
regarding issue salience and more moderate support for my second hypothesis regarding party flexibility. In the UK, we see that an increase in issue salience allowed for UKIP to leverage its few new seats into a governing coalition. This increase in real political power seems to confirm my first hypothesis. Additionally, the success of the Leave campaign to capitalize on salient issues shows increased flexibility of UKIP to adapt to powerful issues, confirming my second hypothesis. In Germany, we see an uncharacteristic increase in the influence of the far-right with the success of the AFD. While the rise of the AFD coincided with an increase in far-right issue salience, they did not manage to control government, and gained only token representation in the Bundestag. Because of this there is only mild support for my first hypothesis. However, the flexibility of the AFD in taking advantage of salient political space provides more moderate support for my second hypothesis. In France, we see that issue salience did help the National Front party make some electoral gains, but not enough to cause significant policy change at the national level, which suggests moderate support of my first hypothesis. However, the FN did not demonstrate any party flexibility but still gained electorally, which does not confirm my second hypothesis. All together, these results represent an important step in better understanding the influence and legitimization of far-right parties in Europe.

Conclusion

The success of far-right candidates throughout Europe historically been minimal since 1945. However, these parties have benefited from proportional representation and have been able to persist throughout the years with little electoral support. In a change of events, recent events have led to a rise in policy legitimacy and electorate share for these
parties across Western Europe. Far-right policy, previously a minor detail in the political debates of the region, has become one of the main issues of European politics.

Following previous scholarship, I believe that there remains a constant demand for far-right representation in government, instead of viewing far-right political ideologies as simply a crisis phenomenon. Therefore, the expression of this demand must be limited by the availability and quality of the supply of salient issues and competent parties to harness them. I first hypothesized that as far-right issues such as terrorism, immigration, rising prices, and unemployment increase there will be an increase in the electoral performance of existing parties. Additionally, I hypothesized that more flexible parties who can react to the changes in salient issues will be more successful than those parties that fail to react appropriately to these changes.

While there was slight evidence for my H1 in each case, it was only confirmed in the UK case where UKIP managed to obtain control of the government. As the salience of far-right issues such as immigration and terrorism increased the performance of these parties also increased, but these gains were only substantial in a relative sense. As was the case for the FDP in Germany, when far-right issues were not salient, parties were electorally punished for attempting to proactively move to the right. The overall increase in the silence of these issues in all three case countries resulted in an overall increase in the electoral legitimacy of far-right parties in these states and an increase in far-right discourse in the political debate.

In the case of the United Kingdom, the partial success of UKIP in the British Parliament allowed them to exercise an unproportional amount of power in initiating the Brexit referendum. This increase in salience of far-right issues, as a result of both the
Leave Campaign and the natural political landscape, resulted in a disproportionate electoral victory for UKIP policy. However, following this referendum, the party has failed to persist in politics and faded from prominence. The UK case demonstrates the power of salient far-right issues to significantly move the political dial in a state. UKIP, a party that struggled to even be represented at the national level, successfully harnessed salient issues to drive 33 percent of the UK population to support a referendum championed by a party that struggled to win 13 percent of the electorate in the preceding national elections.

In Germany, the failure of the FDP and the subsequent success of the AFD both serve to confirm my H1. The FDP moved significantly to the right in the German political space during the 2013 elections but were punished harshly by the electorate. This is likely due to the fact that far-right issues were not particularly salient in the 2013 elections and, therefore, the FDP miscalculated the benefit of their political shift. However, four years later the AFD succeeded electorally by the same strategy: moving from a centrist position to a far-right position. The AFD’s can be attributed to the significant changes in issue salience between the 2013 and 2017 German elections. The increased salience of immigration and terrorism leading up to the election created a much more viable political space for the AFD than the FDP in 2013. The German case does not fully confirm my H1, but does offer some evidence for my H2 regarding the failure of FDP, followed by the success of AFD. The success of AFD, the most far-right party in recent German history, coincided with an increase in the salience of far-right issues both at the popular and elite level, but did not enable them to take control of the government or enter any governing coalition. However, it seems that the ability of the AFD to adapt to
these changes in salience in a reactive, rather than proactive, manner enabled them to succeed where the FDP had failed. The slight shift in salient issues in Germany allowed for the electoral success of a far-right party in a country where such positions had long been considered taboo and had previously been punished electorally, as the FDP experienced in 2013.

The issues of French politics changed very little between the 2012 and 2017 elections. The only notable change on both the popular and elite levels of salience was the increase in the salience of terrorism. However, this increased salience of a prime far-right issue allowed the FN to achieve their greatest electoral victories of the party’s history. From 2012 to 2017, FN experienced a threefold increase in vote share in legislative elections and Marine Le Pen won 33 percent of the national electorate in the presidential runoffs. However, as with AFD, FN failed to gain control of the presidency or representation in the governing coalition. While FN made strong relative gains, they still maintain a minority position in the reality of French politics.

The success of these parties in the European political space is not due to an underlying change in the electorate. In decades past there has been little interest in the policies of candidates of far-right parties, relegating them to a seemingly permanent minority in political discourse. Indeed, for many years even far-right discourse was not seen as a legitimate position in mainstream European politics. However, recent elections have shown an increase in both the electoral power and the political legitimacy of these parties and their policies throughout Western Europe. The increase in public interest in far-right issues has created a fertile ground for shrewd far-right parties to press policies as UKIP did in the UK, burst onto the national political stage as FN did in the French
presidential elections, or carve a new place in a previously uninhabited political landscape as the AFD managed to do in Germany. The recent increase in the power and legitimacy of these parties has been dependent on the increased salience of immigration, terrorism, and other far-right issues on the continent as well as the ability of these parties to correctly time their adaptations and harness the salience of these issues. However, it still remains difficult for these parties to seize the reins of power within their respective states. While their relative gains have been significant in the last two election cycles, they still maintain a minority position in their respective national governments.

Further investigations remain to be completed into the corresponding rise of President Donald Trump and far-right sentiments in the United States. While the USA is no stranger to populism or far-right sentiments, this movement, like its European counterpart, has made significant gains relative to its previous overt political support. However, there are key differences between the European and American cases that would discourage a direct application of this method or a direct comparison of the two cases. Firstly, the majoritarian system of the USA severely limits the ability of far-right parties to find representation in government and, therefore, a legitimate space in the national political debate. Additionally, the system of primary elections used by both the Republican and Democratic parties represent a very different election system even compared to that of France. It was by this system that President Trump gained control of a major party and then the presidency, but the extent of his far-right influence in the mainstream Republican Party remains to be seen.

Regarding the European Integration project, the legitimization of far-right parties, both in political debate and electoral contests, has shifted domestic debates regarding the
wisdom of integration. Issues ranging from economic interdependence to problematic security and immigration concerns have come to the forefront. This concern culminated in the departure of the UK from the EU. Various other movements throughout Europe have still been growing in power. These far-right sentiments have grown into a continent-wide movement that could shatter the EU status quo. However, it remains to be seen how these movements will shift mainstream politics. The most likely, and problematic effect of these parties will likely be in the policy changes of mainstream parties attempting to adapt to a new political debate, possibly changing the trajectory of the EU.
Bibliography


http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1
### Appendix

**Table 1.1: UK, 2017 MP Election, Eurobarometer**

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<th>Social Security</th>
<th>Unemployment</th>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Terrorism</th>
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**Table 1.2: UK, 2017 MP Election, Nexus Uni**

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Table 1.3: UK 2016 Brexit Referendum, Eurobarometer

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Table 1.4: UK 2016 Brexit Referendum, Nexus Uni

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### Table 1.5: UK 2015 MP Election, Eurobarometer

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### Table 1.6: 2015, UK, Nexus Uni

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### Table 2.1: Germany, 2017 Bundestag Elections, Eurobarometer

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### Table 2.2: Germany, 2017 Bundestag Elections, Nexus Uni

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### Table 2.3: Germany, 2013 Bundestag Elections, Eurobarometer

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### Table 2.4: Germany, 2013 Bundestag Elections, Nexus Uni

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<th>Unemployment</th>
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<th>Terrorism</th>
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Table 3.1: France, 2017 Presidential, Eurobarometer

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Table 3.2: France, 2017 Presidential, Nexus Uni

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Table 3.3: France, 2012 Presidential, Eurobarometer

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Table 3.4: French, 2012 Presidential, Nexus Uni

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Table 3.5: French, 2017 National Assembly, Eurobarometer

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Table 3.6: French, 2017 National Assembly, Nexus Uni

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### Table 3.8: French, 2012 National Assembly, Nexus Uni

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