Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family

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Abstract. This article presents a new model for explaining the emergence of the party family of extreme right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. As the old master frame of the extreme right was rendered impotent by the outcome of the Second World War, it took the innovation of a new, potent master frame before the extreme right was able to break electoral marginalization. Such a master frame – combining ethnonationalist xenophobia, based on the doctrine of ethnopluralism, with anti-political-establishment populism – evolved in the 1970s, and was made known as a successful frame in connection with the electoral breakthrough of the French *Front National* in 1984. This event started a process of cross-national diffusion, where embryonic extreme right-wing groups and networks elsewhere adopted the new frame. Hence, the emergence of similar parties, clustered in time (i.e., the birth of a new party family) had less to do with structural factors influencing different political systems in similar ways as with cross-national diffusion of frames. The innovation and diffusion of the new master frame was a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the emergence of extreme right-wing populist parties. In order to complete the model, a short list of different political opportunity structures is added.

Introduction

The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of a long period of marginalization for the extreme right in Western Europe. The outcome of the war – and not the least the brutish act of genocide of which the general public became fully aware only after the war – de-legitimized the extreme right and rendered its old ideological master frame, the basic pattern from which its appeals for support were delivered, impotent. Neither biologically based racism, antisemitism nor overt antidemocratic critiques of the prevailing societal order would attract more than marginal popular support. The main elements of the old master frame had become highly stigmatized, and so had, indeed, anything that could be associated with Nazism or fascism. To this we may add the strong economic developments of Western Europe up to the early 1970s, which kept the level of societal strain to a low level. Finally, the level of political trust was still high – or, to put it inversely, the level of political discontent had not yet decreased below a critical point.

As a consequence, with some few isolated and transitory exceptions (e.g., MSI in Italy in 1972, *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) in Germany during the late 1960s), the extreme right in Western Europe during this period was largely insignificant. After the oil crises in the 1970s, Western European economies became more unstable and plagued with deep economic downturns and a high level of structural unemployment. Moreover, since the late 1960s, the level of political trust has decreased rapidly in most Western countries. However, it took the development of a new, innovative master frame in the mid-1980s before the extreme right was able to escape marginalization. Since then, extreme right-wing parties of a new family – which in this article will be called 'extreme right-wing populist' (ERP) parties – have emerged in most West European countries.[1] Today, ERP parties are represented in the Austrian, Belgian, Danish, Italian, Norwegian and Swiss parliaments, and are also substantially represented at a local and regional level in France and Germany (if one excludes here the Dutch *List Pim Fortuyn*).

These introductory paragraphs indicate three possible ways of explaining the success and failure of political parties and social movements: through the development of potent master frames and how they may be rendered impotent by sociopolitical changes; the presence/absence of societal strain, sometimes caused by economic hardships and relative deprivation, that may result in waves of social protest; and through the expansion or contraction of political opportunities such as the level of trust in established political institutions. There are strong reasons to believe that the first alternative – development of potent master frames – might be particularly important in understanding why the ERP parties emerged when they did, especially if combined with political opportunities. It is hence somewhat puzzling that the literature on the family of contemporary extreme right-wing parties has focused on societal strain and/or political opportunity structures but ignored the question of how a new innovative master frame was constructed and, even more important, could be spread and adopted through cross-national diffusion processes (a dimension absent in, e.g., Eatwell 2003).

More specifically, with few exceptions, earlier research on ERP parties has focused on singular national cases (see, e.g., Hainsworth 1992, 2000; Betz & Immerfall 1998; Merkl & Weinberg 1993). ERP parties have commonly been treated as discrete entities arising independently of one another, which has prompted a search for the unique causes of the emergence of the national ERP party in question. These causes are typically sought *within* each country. This research design is highly problematic: by ignoring research done on similar parties in other countries, it often leads to *ad hoc* theorizing. Moreover, when doing research on social and political change, there are no reasons to assume that *explanans* and *explanandum* are to be found within the same delineated

geographical territory (of the nation-state). In fact, this is less likely to be the case today in our open globalized world than ever before. However, there are also some rather sophisticated comparative studies of ERP parties in Western Europe that seek to present a more universal theory of the emergence of these parties generally. Most of this comparative literature has been macrostructural-oriented, focusing on the postindustrialization of Western European societies (e.g., Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995), and is biased towards finding *one* universal cause of the new party family of ERP parties (e.g., Betz 1994). This focus is understandable given the puzzle to explain the clustering in time of emerging ERP parties within different political systems, and given the rightful ambition to avoid *ad hoc* theorizing. However, both these aims can be dealt with in another, and far better, way, which will be charted in this article.

The fact that the ERP parties look alike in different political systems – that is, they constitute a *party family* – has less to do with macrostructures forming the demand sides of these political systems in similar ways (as the prevalent demand-centred approach would have it) than with the fact that ideas and practices diffuse from successful ERP parties to embryonic ones in other countries. Second, instead of trying to find *one* universal cause of the emergence of *all* ERP parties, I will assume that the emergence of the ERP parties may have *different* causes in *different* countries. However, this is not to give in to a relativist 'everything-goes' methodology: instead of searching for grand, universal theories, we should look for causal mechanisms of some generality (Hedström & Swedberg 1998). The prevailing answer to why ERP parties emerged as a party family during the 1980s and 1990s is that the postindustrialization of Western European countries both undermined the salience of the economic (class) cleavage and created new 'loser' groups susceptible to a political message combining cultural protectionism, xenophobic welfare chauvinism, a populist critique of 'the establishment' and a reactionary call for returning to the 'good old values of yesterday' (e.g., Betz 1994, Minkenberg 2001). Hence, in most respects, this is a strain- or grievance-based explanation. As indicated above, although such an explanation need not to be wrong *per se* – and indeed may help us understand variances in electoral success of the extreme right *over time* – it tells us nothing about the variance in electoral success of the ERP parties *between different countries*. Countries in which ERP parties have done poorly have been postindustrial societies that have experienced economic downturns and high levels of unemployment during the last twenty years as well (Rydgren 2002). Furthermore, by itself this approach is also deterministic and tells us little about what is actually going on between *explanans* and *explanandum* (cf. Tarrow (1998) and McAdam (1999) for a critique of grievance-based explanations of social movement activity). Yet, as we

will see below, this kind of macrostructural explanation could, if successfully interwoven with other elements, contribute to our understanding of why the ERP parties emerged in the 1980s and 1990s rather than, say, in the 1950s or 1960s. However, I will propose that two other families of explanatory mechanisms are much more useful in understanding the emergence of the party family of ERP parties, and not least why these parties have been electorally successful in some countries and failed in others:

First, we need to take cross-national diffusion processes seriously. The emergence of ERP parties in different countries should not be explained in isolation, but be seen as a series of interdependent events (cf. Myers 2000). With the innovation of a new potent master frame combining ethnonationalism based on 'cultural racism' (the so-called 'ethno-pluralist' doctrine) and a populist (but not antidemocratic) anti-political establishment rhetoric, the extreme right was able to free itself from enough stigma to be able to attract voter groups that never would have considered voting for an 'old' right-wing extremist party promoting biological racism and/or antidemocratic stances. The development of this new master frame was a long process, in many ways going back to the neo-fascist international meeting in Rome in 1950 ('Carta di Roma'), although it did not reach its refined form until the late 1970s and early 1980s under the influence of the French *Nouvelle Droite*. The decisive moment, however, was the electoral break-through of the French *Front National* in 1984, which made the new master frame known *as a successful frame* for existing but marginalized extreme right-wing groups and networks all over Western Europe, and hence started a process of cross-national diffusion. By focusing on cross-national diffusion processes, two biases, common in the literature on the ERP parties, will be avoided: it will bring *agency* and *time* back into the analysis.

As will be argued below, adopting ERP parties never mimic innovations automatically, but creatively adapt and interpret things they have learned from others because they think they can gain something from doing so (cf. McAdam 1995). Political actors – ERP party leaderships included – can for good reasons be assumed to be rational in the bounded sense of the term. The main goal of a political party is to maximize its influence on policy outcomes (within a particular political system) in accordance with the core ideas and values embedded in its party ideology, and the duty of its party leaders is to use strategies that (given information shortage and uncertainties, cognitive limitations and biases, etc.) are judged to arrive at that goal as effectively as possible. One such strategy is 'rational imitation' (i.e., learning by looking at others' behaviour in situations in which the relation between strategies and goals are difficult to assess) (Hedström 1998; see also Hedström et al. 2000), which constitutes the motivational basis of diffusion processes as they are conceived

of here. Yet it is often irrational to imitate the behaviour of others without first translating it to fit the contextual situation in which the adopter is embedded. Moreover, as Tilly (1984), among others, has pointed out, *when* things happen affects *how* they happen: in trying to explain the emergence of, say, the Danish People's Party or the transformation of the Austrian FPÖ into an ERP party in 1986 one has to account for the simple but mostly overlooked fact that the *Front National* already existed as a successful exemplar influencing the action of others.

Although diffusion and successful adaptation of the master frame combining the ethnopluralist doctrine with anti-political establishment populism will be considered a necessary condition for explaining why ERP parties emerged *as ERP parties*, it is not a sufficient explanation by itself. In order to reach a full explanation of why the ERP parties emerged when they did in respective political system, and not the least, why they have failed completely in some countries, we must consider a second group of mechanisms falling within the composite notion of *expanding and contracting political opportunities*. If an ERP party is to emerge, some, but not all, of the various political opportunities presented below would have to be present.

These two families of mechanisms – diffusion and adaptation processes, and expanding and contracting political opportunities – will be extensively discussed below. The aim of this article is to outline a new model for understanding two basic things: the emergence of the new party family of ERP parties, and why such parties have been successful in some countries, but failed in others. This model is as suitable for explaining so-called 'positive cases' as it is for explaining 'negative' ones, and it has the advantage of being general enough to escape *ad hoc* explanations of singular cases while at the same time being flexible enough to be applicable to empirical cases all over Western Europe. Because of lack of room, this article will not provide empirical applications, only a few, scattered empirical examples. However, people are urged to apply the model to as many cases as possible (see Rydgren (2004) for a discussion of the Danish case along these lines). The article will be structured in a straightforward way. First, political opportunities will be discussed. Second, the development of the new, innovative master frame will be discussed, and, finally, the processes of cross-national diffusion and adaptation will be explored.

Political opportunities

Following Tarrow (1998: 19–20), political opportunities will be seen here as 'consistent – but not necessary formal, permanent, or national' resources

that are external to the party or movement in question. Although the term 'political opportunity structure' (POS) has been prevalent in much of the literature on social movements, it should be emphasized that not all mechanisms deemed to fall within this concept are of such stability and duration to qualify as structures – some of them are rather situational (see Tarrow 1998). Both stable political opportunities (POS) and more fluctuating, situational ones might be useful in explaining the emergence of ERP parties. We may expect that highly stable and enduring POS are particularly useful in explaining (long-term) geographic variation, while not very good at explaining variation over time within specific political systems, whereas the opposite is likely to be true for situational political opportunities.

As mentioned above, although political opportunities do not explain the success or failure of ERP parties completely by themselves, they contribute a great deal to such an explanation. More specifically, the following political opportunities, which are partly overlapping, are of particular importance in explaining the emergence of the ERP parties and not least why they have been successful in some political systems and failed in others. Most general – and most important – in any such explanation is the *emergence of niches* on the electoral arena (Rydgren 2003b). This is a composite notion and overlaps significantly with 'dealignment/realignment' and 'politicization of new issues' mechanisms (both discussed below). Nevertheless, we may assume that no new parties will emerge and sustain their electoral support over time if there are no sufficiently large *niches* (defined as gaps between the voters' location in the political space and the perceived position of the parties (i.e., the party images and/or position on crucial issues) in the same space) and the proportion of voters with high degree of party identification is close to 100 per cent.

Because of a time lag between voter and party movement within the political space, niches occasionally emerge in which new political parties can position themselves. When the voter distribution is shifting in one direction, the parties will have to adapt their positions in the same direction unless they want to risk loosing voters. The parties are not as flexible as the voters – to shift position is a process that takes time for a political party – which implies that there normally exists a considerable time lag between voter and party movement within the political space. However, niches are unlikely to evolve under stable conditions with relatively stable voter preferences when the established parties have had time to find their strategically optimal positions. Only at rapid changes in the voter distribution, and in situations when the political profile of one or several of the largest established parties have changed dramatically, are significant gaps between the political demand side and its supply side created. If a political party can position itself in this gap, or niche, it may have a good chance of attracting votes, at least if the number of party-identified

voters has decreased below a certain level. When the level of party identification is low, voters chose how to vote on the basis of ideological or issue preferences (Rydgren 2003b).

The probability of the emergence of niches is particularly great if the salience of a new or earlier weak cleavage dimension, or a specific issue connected to such a cleavage dimension that the established parties have been unable or unwilling to deal with, suddenly increases at the expense of the old, established cleavage dimension. In such situations, the established parties often have had no incentive to position themselves strategically within the 'new' cleavage dimension, but are likely to be positioned near one of the end-poles (if the new cleavage dimension has increased in salience as a reaction against a consensual way of thinking) or near the centre (if the parties used to be indifferent to issues belonging to the cleavage dimension). As a result, a rather large niche may emerge that a new political party may be able to mine.

Many Western European countries have seen a more volatile electoral arena during the last decades as well as radical changes in the distribution of voter attitudes and preferences in the political space (see Kitschelt 1995; Rydgren 2003b). This has partly been the result of profound macro-changes – most importantly, the transformation from industrial to postindustrial society, and economic, political and cultural globalization – that have caused increased stress, frustration and disillusionment among those whose situation has become impaired (absolutely or relatively) as a result of the changes. These changes have had four important effects. First, they have altered the interests of certain voter groups; second, they have resulted in a situation in which some voter groups have perceived a threat to their identity; third, they have fueled increased discontent with (established) politicians and political parties because of the perceived inability of these actors to solve the anomalies of the postindustrial society (such as high unemployment rates); and, finally, they have resulted in a situation in which certain voter groups perceive that their 'old' frames of understanding reality have become increasingly ineffective. The first three points indicate that some voter groups (especially those already sharing latent or manifest xenophobic attitudes) became increasingly susceptible to being attracted by a political programme combining anti-political-establishment populism, a quest to return to the *status quo ante* (including the priority to preserve the national identity), and welfare chauvinist racism and xenophobia (see Rydgren 2003b). This is a combined result of changing interests and emotional dispositions. In a situation of decreased salience of the economic cleavage dimension, fewer people will make use of class frames in understanding their impaired status. A frame stressing clashes of economic interests between immigrants and natives (e.g., claiming that 'they are taking

our jobs') may be adopted as an alternative interpretation of the same situation. The fourth point indicates that more people have become increasingly susceptible to adopting new frames at all (and, inversely, to abandon their old ones) and this has arguably benefited new left and green parties too (see Rydgren 2003b: Chapter 2). It also seems reasonable to assume that people who have lost trust in established parties and politicians are less likely to use traditional socioeconomic frames and are more likely to adopt ethnic ones. Hence, the transformation processes of postindustrialization and globalization have brought about 'unsettled times' in which, according to Swidler (1986), 'the likelihood that cognitive and affective routines will be abandoned in the search for new interpretations of reality' (McAdam 1999: xxxiii) is increased.

Since established parties have occasionally been unable or unwilling to meet these changing opinions – or, indeed, unable to canalize or articulate the increased frustration by *their* political frames – significant niches have emerged in several Western European political systems. Sociocultural authoritarianism and, more specifically, ethnonationalism and xenophobia have been the most important niches presenting ERP parties with expanding political opportunities, together with a 'negative' factor: the political transformation process has also resulted in growing discontent with political institutions and politicians, as well as in decreased party identification among voters (Putnam et al. 2000). This situation has facilitated the emergence of the ERP parties by freeing resources and opening up niches in the electoral arena (i.e., by making voters prepared to leave their 'old' party for a new, untried one) that has made it possible for some ERP parties to mobilize on ethnonationalism and xenophobia. In addition, it has become possible for ERP parties to foment popular discontent and political protest.

Hence, *dealignment and realignment processes* may present favourable political opportunities (cf. Kriesi et al. 1995). Decreased trust in established political parties and increased salience of alternative (or even conflicting) cleavage dimensions constitute political opportunities for emerging ERP parties. Several cleavage dimensions always exist simultaneously (see Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970), most of them ultimately based on social identity or interests. Although these cleavage dimensions exist side by side, either manifest or latent, their salience increases or declines during certain periods (Hout et al. 1996: 55–56). Contemporary Western European democracies are characterized by two major cleavage dimensions: the economic cleavage dimension that puts workers against the capital and concerns the degree of state involvement in the economy, and the sociocultural cleavage dimension that is concerned with issues such as immigration, law and order, abortion and so on (see Bell 1996: 332–333).

Although issues belonging to the sociocultural cleavage dimension have existed at an attitudinal level throughout the twentieth century, the economic cleavage dimension has structured most political behaviour in the postwar era (see Budge & Robertson 1987). However, there are certain indications that the salience of the sociocultural cleavage dimension has increased at the expense of the economic cleavage dimension during the past few decades, not least because of the politicization of issues like immigration, multiculturalism, feminism and environment (for discussion and empirical indications, see, e.g., Betz 1994; Clark & Lipset 2001; Ignazi 1996; Inglehart 1997; Kitschelt 1995; Perrineau 1997, Rydgren 2003b). This trend creates expanding political opportunities for the ERP parties.

More specifically, we may expect that the relative strength or salience of old cleavages influence the possibilities to mobilize on issues and frames connecting to new cleavages (Kriesi et al. 1995). As old cleavages lose in salience, frames connected to these cleavages become less effective for people's interpretation of the world. As Kriesi et al. (1995: 4) have stressed, old cleavages may provide 'a shield against the framing attempts of rising collective actors'. For instance, although xenophobic attitudes might be as common in countries strongly dominated by the socioeconomic dimension, voters sharing these attitudes are less likely to base their decision how to vote on these particular attitudes because there are other issues (and attitudes) deemed to be more important (often as a result of media coverage). A defining characteristic of the ERP parties during the 1990s has been their ability to mobilize working-class voters (see, e.g., Rydgren 2003b; Mayer 1999). This has not been the effect of increased xenophobia and authoritarianism among workers, but rather the increased salience of immigration matters and sociocultural issues generally *vis-à-vis* socioeconomic issues. As Lipset (1981) has argued, although manual workers traditionally have been at odds with the left-wing parties' positions on sociocultural issues (by being considerably more authoritarian, on average), this did not have any practical effect on their voting patterns as long as they identified with the socialist parties' economic positions (i.e., saw them as defenders of their class interests). In such a situation, they will vote for the left despite their conflicting opinions on sociocultural issues. However, in political systems in which the economic cleavage dimension has lost in salience (and the sociocultural cleavage dimension has gained in salience) this has started to change.

As a consequence, it is important to be sensitive to the fact that cleavage structures may be of different degrees of complexity. While countries such as Sweden have a relatively simple cleavage structure dominated by the economic dimension, countries such as France have a much more complicated one. In France, other cleavage dimensions (e.g., religious, ethnic, regional) have

for a long time cut through economic class bonds and loyalties, which has lessened the impact of social class on political behaviour (Lipset, cited in Mair et al. 1999: 313). It can be argued that stronger bonds of class loyalties may evolve in countries like Sweden that have been strongly dominated by the economic cleavage dimension, which delays the re-alignment process.

Yet, as indicated above, it is not only realignment processes but also dealignment processes that matter. More specifically, it will be argued that increasing political alienation among certain groups of individuals; decreasing trust in political institutions and a corresponding increase in discontent with political parties and politicians; a decreasing level of party identification among voters; and a decline in class voting have all presented the ERP parties with expanding political opportunities. These situations arose in several Western European countries for a variety of reasons, but only the four most important ones will be mentioned here. First, the political parties and other political institutions have found it difficult to adapt to the profound economic and social changes that have left many voters feeling that both politics and politicians are decoupled from the 'reality' experienced by 'ordinary people' (Mény & Surel 2000: 24). Second, the increasing complexity of the political process, combined with the declining political autonomy of the nation-state, has made the political decision-making processes more opaque (see Poggi 1990; Sassen 1996). Third, the real or perceived convergence between the mainstream parties in the political space in some countries has caused a widespread feeling that no real differences exist between the political right and left. And fourth, various political scandals, and corruption in particular, have had a disenchanting effect on many voters (see, e.g., Betz 2002).

Following Budge and Farlie (1983), we may assume that parties try to benefit from issue-voting not so much from opposing each other's issue positions as from trying to shift public (and media) attention from one issue to another. Hence, *agenda setting and politicization of new issues* (Campbell et al. 1960: 29–32) may provide expanding political opportunities. Politicization of new issues (especially the immigration question) is of great importance, not least because it may grant ERP parties increased media coverage. As Koopmans (1996), among others, have stressed, the amount of media coverage for social phenomena is influenced by issue-attention cycles. It is therefore always of strategic interest for political parties and social movements to link their pet issues to as many other issues of high and enduring political salience as possible (such as the European Union or 'globalization'). By doing so, they may extend the mobilization cycle (see Rydgren 2003a). It is also important to consider 'liberal' changes in policy, or increased mobilization of groups defending or propagating for the multicultural society, that may fuel the discontent of latent xenophobes and racists, who perceive a threat to their

interests and/or identity, as well as leading to growing salience of the immigration issue through increased mass media coverage. In any case, the result might be expanding political opportunities for ERP parties. For instance, the immigration issue was politicized during the early 1990s in Austria (see Betz 2002: 69–70) and in Denmark in the mid-1980s (see Rydgren 2004).

As Kitschelt (1995) has argued, the *degree of convergence in the political space* also provides expanding political opportunities for new political parties. First, a convergence may result in a feeling that the established parties 'are all the same'. This, in turn, may fuel popular distrust and discontent in politicians and political parties, and create an audience receptive to parties ready to mobilize protest votes. Second, of course, a convergence may also have direct effects in that it facilitates the emergence of niches within the political space. Finally, a convergence within the dominant cleavage dimension (i.e., the economic dimension) may contribute to a de-politicization of this cleavage by making it less engaging and vivid for the voters and the media (Schattschneider 1975), which might favour new contenders mobilizing on alternative cleavage dimensions (i.e., the sociocultural dimension). FPÖ and Austria during the Proporz system can be seen as a typical case in which the convergence in political space seems to have played an important role (Kitschelt 1995; Betz 2002) and Rydgren (2004) indicates that the convergence of mainstream parties with the economic dimension favoured the Danish People's Party by contributing to a realignment process making the sociocultural dimension increasingly salient.

The *relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political systems* (see, e.g., McAdam 1996) plays a role, as well. Whether a political system has a proportional or a majority voting system, for instance, and how high the thresholds are, all make a difference (cf. Katz 1980; Weaver & Rockman 1993). The idea that the majority voting system places constraints on the emergence of new parties is an idea that goes back to Duverger (1954). According to what has become known as Duverger's Law, the simple majority ballot system favours a relatively stable two-party system, while proportional voting systems favour a multiparty system (Duverger 1954: 217). Duverger argues that there are two reasons for this. First, there is a mechanical effect in that the third and fourth parties in an election held within a majority voting system will receive a much smaller share of legislative seats compared to the votes they received. Second, there is a psychological effect in that many voters will feel that a vote for a small party is a wasted vote, which makes them vote for one of the two major parties instead. In such a situation, the emergence of new political parties is less likely. Similarly, whether a political system has an entrance threshold of 2 or 4 per cent, for instance, makes a difference to the emergence of new parties. The same psychological effect identified by Duverger is likely to be operative here as well.

The *presence or absence of elite allies* (see, e.g., McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1998) can give increased legitimacy (Rydgren 2003a) and/or increased visibility. Situations in which the established parties chose to collaborate with emerging ERP parties, or associated actors, lend legitimacy to these parties. By being controversial, such events are also likely to arouse the interest of the mass media and thereby give ERP parties increased coverage. Similarly, the propensity of mainstream parties and other political actors to approach policy positions originally taken by ERP parties, or to adopt similar frames, may provide ERP parties with expanding political opportunities for reasons similar to those stated above. As a result, we should consider established political actors' willingness and/or capacity to present a solid front to ERP parties and similar groups and networks (see Tarrow 1998: 20).

However, cooperation between mainstream and ERP parties may also result in shrinking niches for further electoral mobilization. Under certain conditions, a situation in which mainstream parties occupy ideological space of the ERP parties has pre-emptive effects (see, e.g., Koopmans & Kriesi 1997). Cooperation may also make it more difficult for ERP parties to use the first step of the anti-establishment strategy (i.e., to present itself as in opposition to the political class). It is suggested that the presence of elite allies presents favourable political opportunities for ERP parties foremost in the early stage of mobilization (i.e., up to the electoral breakthrough) and for ERP parties originating from right-wing extremist groups and organizations. Here, the necessity of freeing itself of stigma (the second step of the anti-establishment strategy) outweighs the possible cost associated with shrinking niches. For ERP parties originating from populist protest movements (or those lacking a pre-history) and already 'established' ERP parties, it might be otherwise.

Similarly, timing plays a crucial role in whether a situation in which mainstream parties take up ERP party positions presents expanding or contracting political opportunities for ERP party mobilization. It is likely to have preemptive effects if this situation is established before ERP parties have grown to a critical point, but might have the opposite effect if it comes about after an ERP party has reached its electoral breakthrough – both because of legitimatization effects (as described above) and because voters might prefer the 'original to the copy'.[2]

As indicated above, *access to the mass media* plays a pivotal role. As Koopmans (forthcoming) has argued, the 'action of gatekeepers [within the mass media] produce the first and most basic selection mechanism . . . *visibility*'. Here we may expect important changes over time as well as rather large differences between different countries. For a country such as Sweden, for instance, the evolution from only two public-service television channels in the early 1980s to a variety of commercial channels in the 1990s has increased the

opportunities for visibility in the media for emerging new political contenders, which partly explains the emergence of the right-wing populist party New Democracy in the early 1990s. Moreover, the fact that the Danish media has been extremely generous in publishing articles written by representatives and supporters of the Danish People's Party (Rydgren 2004), whereas the Swedish media has, to a large extent, agreed upon a *cordon sanitaire* in order to keep the Sweden Democrats out, partly explains why the former has been electoral successful while the latter is still highly marginalized.

When considering the state's *capacity and propensity for repression* (see, e.g., McAdam 1996; Tilly 1978: Chapter 4), we should bear in mind that repression 'can be a double-edged sword, sometimes deterring and intimating and sometimes producing a political backlash that enhances the movement's support' (DeNardo 1985: 154). In line with the so-called 'inverted U-curve' hypothesis (e.g., DeNardo 1985; Muller & Weede 1990), we may assume that repression only becomes effective beyond a certain level. Up to that point, however, repression may lead to enhanced mobilization because it reinforces the movement's collective identity. Rather 'than being evaded as a cost, from these movements' perspective, repression embodies the very message that they seek to convey to their adherents and to the larger public, namely, that of a repressive political system that is in need of revolutionary change' (Koopmans 1997: 151). We therefore may expect that repression up to a certain level facilitates the successful use of anti-political establishment strategy by making it easier for ERP parties to present themselves as true outsiders. However, beyond that level, repression will be negative for ERP parties because they may lead to delegitimization, stigmatization, and/or radicalization and hence marginalization. Ultimately, ERP parties may be banned in some countries (such as Germany) and prohibited from running in public elections.

Finally, there is the *availability of a potent master frame* (McAdam 1994) or, more generally, prevalent strategies external to the party (cf. Kriesi et al. 1995). The political opportunities listed above have in common that they lead to the emergence of successful ERP parties only if embryonic groups or networks identifying with an ERP party programme have the capacity to take advantage of them. If they fail to do so, no successful ERP party will emerge. In order to exploit existing niches and other favourable political opportunities, new parties must present political programmes and use political rhetoric that fit the available niches. A potent master frame helps to form such a political profile. Potent master frames and other useful strategies for mobilization are seldom invented *within* embryonic parties and movements, although it does happen on rare occasions. More commonly, emerging parties and social movements try to make use of master frames and strategies already 'out there'

that they try to modify in ways to fit the specific political and cultural context in which they themselves are embedded. This being the case, it is of crucial importance to discuss (rare) innovations of master frames and action repertoires, how these are spread to embryonic ERP parties by cross-national diffusion processes, and how these manage to 'translate' them to fit particular cultural and political contexts.

The innovation of the new master frame

Following Snow and Benford (1992: 137), a frame can be seen as an 'interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action within one's present or past environment'. Collective action frames, employed by social movements and political parties, function as modes of attribution and articulation. They attribute blame for perceived social problems by identifying individuals, social groups or structures that are believed to have caused the problem in question (diagnostic framing); they also suggest a general line of action (prognostic framing). Master frames can be seen as encompassing, generic frames that have the potency of constraining more specific (derivative) frames used by specific social movements or political parties. Master frames are of importance because they have the ability to synchronize, and in fact give rise to, *families* of movements or political parties.

As Snow and Benford (1992: 143) show, the emergence of a cycle of mobilization is typically associated with the construction of an innovative master frame. In the case of the ERP parties, such an innovative master frame was constructed in France during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and was made known *as a successful frame* in connection with the electoral breakthrough of the *Front National* in 1984. As the old master frame of the extreme right that contained elements of biological racism, antisemitism and an antidemocratic (radical) critique of the political system was rendered impotent by the outcome of the Second World War, it took the extreme right a long time to establish a new, potent master frame that simultaneously met the conditions of: being flexible enough to fit (in modified form) different political and cultural contexts; sufficiently resonated with the lived experiences, attitudes and preconceptions of many people (see Snow & Benford 1992); and was sufficiently free from stigma. The master frame combining ethnonationalist, cultural racism and anti-political establishment populism met these requirements.

Inspired by Gramsci's notion of 'cultural hegemony', intellectual groups of the New Right formed in France during the late 1960s and 1970s in order to

counter the intellectual and cultural dominance of the left. The most important ideological innovation of the French *Nouvelle Droite* was to replace the old, biologically based notion of racism with the notion of 'ethno-pluralism' that constitutes the foundation of the so-called 'new racism' (Barker 1981) or 'cultural racism' (Wieviorka 1998: 32). Departing from the left's notion of *difference*, on which the doctrine of multiculturalism (i.e., the idea that migrants should have the right to preserve habits and traditions of their home countries) is largely based, the notion of 'ethnopluralism' states that in order to preserve the unique national characters of different peoples, they have to be kept separated. Mixing of different ethnicities only leads to cultural extinction (see Minkenberg 1997; Taguieff 1988). Moreover, in this doctrine, culture and ethnicity are deterministic and monolithic; chances for individual change and in-group variation are believed to be slight. Yet, contrary to the traditional conception of racism, the doctrine of ethnopluralism is not hierarchical: different ethnicities are not necessary superior or inferior, only different and incompatible. By adopting the doctrine of ethnopluralism (even though its nonhierarchical elements were often disregarded by ERP parties in practice), ERP parties were able to mobilize on xenophobic and racist public opinions without being stigmatized as racists.

The French *Front National* adopted this notion from the *Nouvelle Droite* – with which the party had many contacts, even overlapping members, some of the highly placed – and made it the core of the party's political programme and rhetorical profile (see Rydgren 2003b). As Schumpeter (1968: 65) has put it, to innovate is to carry out new combinations, and this is what the *Front National* did. The party leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, picked the other main element of the new master frame from the Poujadist movement, in which he was engaged during the mid-1950s; the populist anti-political establishment strategy (see Davies 2002). A party using this strategy tries to construct an image of itself as in opposition to the 'political class', while trying actively not to appear anti-democratic. A party that is viewed as anti-democratic will be stigmatized and marginalized as long as the overwhelming majority of the electorate is in favour of democracy (Schedler 1996). In order to create distance between themselves and the established political parties (i.e., both the government and the anti-incumbent opposition), populist parties aim to recode the political space with its diversity of parties into one single, homogeneous political class. One way of achieving this goal is to argue that the differences between government and established opposition parties are irrelevant surface phenomena. According to ERP parties, in reality the established parties do not compete, but collude.

In using the anti-political-establishment strategy, the aim is to present their own party as the only real opposition to the 'political class' while at the same

time being cautious not to overstep the line to opposition to democracy. This is the second part of the anti-political-establishment strategy: to position the party between the 'normal opposition' (i.e., the present nonincumbent party or parties) and openly antidemocratic groups. Since an overwhelming majority of Western European voters are in favour of democracy and view anti-democratic parties and movements as illegitimate, the ability of parties perceived as anti-democratic to win votes is slight.

Although the ideological difference between traditional forms of right-wing extremism and the ERP parties in many ways is slight (see Rydgren 2003b), the differences that do exist are of huge importance. What is qualitatively new about the master frame used by the ERP parties is the shift from 'biological racism' to 'cultural racism', which has permitted ERP parties to mobilize xenophobic and racist public opinions without being stigmatized as being racists, and the incorporation of the populist anti-establishment strategy, which has permitted ERP parties to pose serious critiques on contemporary democratic systems without being stigmatized as anti-democrats.

The evident success of this new master frame came in 1984 when the *Front National* got its electoral breakthrough. This is not the place to account for the reasons why the *Front National* succeeded and escaped electoral marginalization in the mid-1980s (but see Rydgren 2003b), suffice it to say that a combination of the political opportunities listed above was present in France at the time and the new master frame enabled the party to take advantage of the opportunities. Moreover, it should be stressed that a number of contextual factors (as well as entrepreneurial qualities of the leadership) made it possible to adopt the elements constituting the new master frame, and to use it successfully. First, the scattered, diverse currents of right-wing extremism in France (past and present) facilitated the ideological transformation; with only one strong current, such as fascism, this would have been more difficult. Second, had the *Front National* not expelled some of the groups of diehard activists of the 'old school' from the party, the new master frame would not have been credible (see Camus 1997; Kitschelt 1995; Rydgren 2003b). Nevertheless, the fact that this master frame evolved and proved itself useful in France, rather than in, say, Denmark, is of some importance. Political events in large countries are more likely to be reported in foreign mass media as they are typically seen as more newsworthy, whereas the 'news hole' for political events in minor countries is highly restricted.

Hence, as we have seen, sometimes innovations do occur. Mostly, however, embryonic ERP parties do not have to reinvent the wheel, but can draw on repertoires of ideas and practices already there: rather than playing the role of innovators, most ERP parties play the role of adopters in a cross-national diffusion process (cf. McAdam & Rucht 1993). By adopting constitutive ideas

and practices from others, these parties can be seen as spin-off parties (cf. McAdam 1995; Tarrow 1995) to the *Front National*, which initiated the diffusion process. Although spin-off parties may add to the collective 'tool kit' available to other ERP parties, only initiators establish new, innovative master frames with the ability to give rise to new party families. Yet, since latecomers are more likely to adopt ideas and practices from the most successful exemplars (Holden 1986), irrespective of this happen to be an initiator or a spin-off party, we are as likely to see a situation in which party A influences party B and party C, and party B influences party D and party E (as a situation in which party A influences parties B, C, D and E directly). This indicates that some of the parties under certain conditions are more likely to adopt party B's *modified version* of actor A's ideas and practices rather than the original ones. Concerning the ERP parties, we would therefore expect that the Austrian FPÖ has been at least as influential as the *Front National* since the mid-1990s (for empirical examples of such cross-national learning, see Betz 2002: 73; Veugelers & Chiarini 2002: 84, 88; Hossay 2002: 178; Minkenberg 2002: 245; Rydgren 2004).

Cross-national diffusion and adaptation processes

Katz (1968: 78) defined diffusion as 'the acceptance of some specific item, over time, by adopting units – individuals, groups, communities – that are linked both to external channels of communication and to each other by means of both a structure of social relations and a system of values, or culture'. Defined in such a way, diffusion is a general, encompassing term for processes embracing contagion, mimicry, social learning, organized dissemination and so on (Strang & Soule 1998: 266). However, this definition will be narrowed down here: cross-national diffusion is only believed to occur when the adopter (and often the emitter, as well) takes an active role in the process. Hence, to provide an answer to the title of this article, extreme right-wing populism *is not* contagious (in the sense that epidemics are); it only diffuses if actors want it to diffuse. Diffusion not only involves emitters and adopters, but also items that are being diffused, as well as a channel of diffusion, consisting of persons or media linking the emitter to the adopter (see McAdam & Rucht 1993). Although other items can be diffused from one ERP party to another or, indeed, to other political actors, the focus here is on the diffusion of master frames.

Concerning diffusion channels, diffusion can be either direct and relational or indirect through non-relational channels such as the mass media (e.g., Katz 1968). In real life processes, relational and non-relational channels typically

commingle (McAdam & Rucht 1993). Diffusion between ERP parties goes through both types of channels. Direct diffusion, in turn, can be either formal, as when ERP parties meet or communicate on a leadership level, or informal, as when activists from different ERP parties develop friendship links to one another or when activists and members read other ERP parties' publications (cf. Kriesi et al. 1995: 185). The latter kind of informal diffusion is today facilitated by the fact that some ERP parties post links to one another's Internet websites. Generally, one may assume that the new information technology (Internet and e-mail in particular) have facilitated both direct and indirect diffusion. (However, in assessing the impact of direct diffusion between ERP parties we meet a methodological problem: many ERP parties officially deny having anything to do with other ERP parties. In fact, they deny being an ERP party at all.) The likelihood that direct diffusion will occur is furthermore enhanced by the following factors. First, and arguably most important, actors are more likely to adopt ideas and practices from emitters that have proved themselves successful (Holden 1986). When actors think they can increase their effectiveness in obtaining their political goals by adopting elements from others, diffusion is more likely to occur. Second, opportunity for diffusion may increase in proportion to the geographical proximity, which makes the presence of direct ties between emitter and adopter more likely. Third, movements that are *a priori* similar in respect of political goals, ideological outlooks, values, historical 'idols' and so on are more likely to establish direct contacts with one another (Kriesi et al. 1995: 190; Strang & Soule 1998; Soule 1997).

Concerning indirect diffusion through information provided by mass media reports, it will be argued that mass media play an important role not only by facilitating indirect cross-national diffusion, but also by turning electoral successes of foreign ERP parties into expanding political opportunities for domestic ERP parties. If something extraordinary happens in place *x* (e.g., Le Pen's success in the first round of the 2002 presidential election), media in place *y* is likely to give the event great coverage and do their best to relate the event to domestic affairs (which is believed to make it more interesting for the readers/viewers). In this way, mass media not only communicate the event, but also create opportunities for embryonic ERP parties in place *y*, not the least by giving them increased visibility. For instance, this was exactly what happened in Sweden during the spring and summer of 2002 when the mass media brought the so-far marginal Sweden Democrats into the limelight.

However, when studying the effect of diffusion processes on the emergence of ERP parties, it is not enough to look at the diffusion of ideas and practices *per se*. Two additional aspects must be taken into account: how adopters manage to modify and adapt diffused items in a way that make them appealing to voters within the specific political culture characterizing *their* political

system, and how adopters manage to make diffused items attune to their internal party or movement history – that is, how they make activists (already identifying with certain aspects of the party or movement) accept the diffused ideas and practices. Hence, it should be emphasized that diffused ideas and practices are always being actively modified or even 'translated' to a greater or lesser extent by adopters in order to fit the unique political and cultural context in which they are embedded (cf. Czarniawska & Sevón 1996; Snow & Benford 1999). Following Snow and Benford (1999), we may assume that a situation of reciprocation – that is, when both the emitter and the adopter take an active role – facilitates the successful adaptation of diffused ideas and practices because all actors involved have an interest in smoothing the process in which the diffused item must be modified to fit a new cultural and political context. This is not an uncommon situation in the cross-national diffusion of ERP party practices and frames. However, as long as the adopter takes an active role in the process, adaptation is possible, even when the emitter remains passive.

Yet, not all frames can be modified to fit the particular national political and cultural context in which adopters are embedded, which means that they sometimes are left out. One example of such a frame is the ardent anti-abortion rhetoric of the *Front National*, which is a strategically dead issue in highly secular protestant contexts such as Sweden and Denmark. Hence, probably for strategic reasons, neither the Danish People's Party nor the Sweden Democrats have adopted it. Yet, this phenomenon mainly relates to more detailed, derivative frames, whereas potent master frames are potent partly because they have the capacity to fit into a wide range of different cultural and political contexts. At the same time, however, focusing on the *adaptation* process may help us understand instances of ERP party failure. Since diffused ideas and practices only work if they are sufficiently cultural resonant with the political system in which the adopter try to make use of them (or at least as culturally resonant that 'translation' or creative modification is possible), ERP party failure may be explained by exceptionalities in a political systems' political culture. Furthermore, actors sometimes make strategic mistakes. They may fail to 'translate' the diffused ideas and practices in a proper way, either because the leadership is trapped in a trade-off situation between strategic needs of renewal and activist groups' identification with the *status quo*, or because they lack the required level of (organizational) sophistication. 'Trade-off situations' – that is, the potential or real conflict between attracting voters and pleasing the opinions of (more extreme) party activists (cf. Rose & Mackie 1988) – in particular are likely to spoil a successful adaptation of master frames. As a consequence, whether an ERP party originates from a populist movement (as, e.g., the Danish People's Party) or from a more traditional

right-wing extremist tradition (e.g., the *Front National* and the Sweden Democrats) is of great importance. *Ceteris paribus*, it can be assumed that the former type of ERP parties face less aggravating trade-off situations. Furthermore, of the parties belonging to the latter group, ERP parties with a party or movement history dominated by only one, strong current of right-wing extremist ideology (such as fascism) are likely to become more constrained by trade-off situations than parties whose party or movement history has been more scattered and diverse.

Hence, even more generally, organizations matter. Emerging ERP parties need certain resources in order to reach out with their political message. Resonant master frames are of no use if they are invisible (or inaudible) to the voters. Although the need for internal, labour-intensive resources has decreased lately as a result of television and other information technologies (see, e.g., McCarthy & Zald 1977), a political party meets severe problems if it cannot mobilize a sufficient number of loyal activists putting up posters and distributing leaflets (see, e.g., Gamson 1975: 60). This is especially the case for still marginal ERP parties that are excluded from the media and lack access to public party subsidies. However, at the same time, the goal to obtain a coherent party organization (i.e., to satisfy the preferences of the activists) may under certain conditions be in conflict with the goal of voter maximization, especially if the activists are more 'extreme' than (most of) the voters. The inability to handle this conflict may be a reason why some ERP parties fail despite favourable political opportunities.

Conclusions

This article has presented a new model for explaining the emergence of the party family of extreme right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. As the old master frame of the extreme right was rendered impotent by the outcome of the Second World War, it took the innovation of a new, potent master frame before the extreme right was able to break electoral marginalization anew. Such a master frame, combining ethnonationalist xenophobia based on the doctrine of ethnopluralism with anti-political establishment populism, evolved in the 1970s and was shown to be a successful frame with the electoral breakthrough of the French *Front National* in 1984. With this new master frame, ERP parties could mobilize on xenophobic and anti-immigration attitudes without being stigmatized as racists, and mobilize on political discontent without being stigmatized as anti-democrats. The success of the *Front National* in 1984 started a process of cross-national diffusion, where the master frame was adopted by embryonic extreme right-wing groups and networks elsewhere

in Western Europe. Yet, in order to be successful, these parties must adapt the diffused frame to fit the specific sociopolitical context in which they are embedded, as well as persuade activists within the organization that new frames should be implemented. Hence, the emergence of similar parties, clustered in time (i.e., the birth of a new party family) has less to do with structural demand factors influencing different political systems in similar ways, as with the cross-national diffusion of frames, ideas and practices.

Although the innovation and diffusion of the new master frame was a necessary condition for the emergence of the ERP parties, it was not a sufficient one; nor does it explain cross-national variation in electoral success for ERP parties. In order to complete the model, one must also consider political opportunities. It should be kept an open, empirical question as to how many of these factors have to be added to explain singular cases, but it is suggested that dealignment and realignment processes, in which the socioeconomic cleavage dimension loses salience as the sociocultural dimension gains it, and politicization of the immigration issue are of particular importance.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I will not dwell on definitions in this article. As Mudde (1996), among others, has shown, there is an abundance of concepts and definitions of this party family. I will use a minimalist, generic definition: ERP parties *share the fundamental core of ethnonationalist xenophobia (based on the so-called 'ethnopluralistic doctrine') and anti-political establishment populism*. This is not to say that these parties have narrow political programmes; they have not. The ethnopluralist doctrine is mostly embedded in a general sociocultural authoritarianism, stressing themes like law and order and family values.
2. I am indebted to Ruud Koopmans for having pointed this out clearly to me.

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