Structural Conditions of Far-right Emergence in Contemporary Western Europe:

A Comparative Analysis of Kitschelt’s Theory

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This paper provides an empirical analysis of Kitschelt’s theory of variation in right-wing extremism in contemporary Western Europe (see Figure 1). I present and discuss the key elements of his theory, as well as the types of cross-national data that are appropriate to an empirical analysis of it. I then employ qualitative comparative analysis, a method discussed in Ragin (1987) and previously applied to study the conditions of democratic survival or failure in interwar Europe (Berg-Schlosser and De Meur 1994) as well as cross-national variation in the success of left-libertarian parties (Redding and Viterna 1999). Analysing the relationship between macrostructural conditions and variation in far-right support in thirteen West European countries, I provide an assessment of Kitschelt’s theory as well as a discussion of directions for further research.

A new demand in advanced postindustrial capitalism

For Kitschelt, the demand for right-authoritarian politics is rooted in the “distinctive market and work experiences to which individuals are exposed in advanced postindustrial capitalism” (p. 8). In the advanced industrial societies of the cold war era, voter concern with economic issues such as the expansion of the welfare state (p.15) resulted in an alignment between class and left-right voting of the type posited by Lipset
and Rokkan (1967). This alignment is weakening because of a decline in the kinds of job experiences that promote old left (“authoritarian socialist”) orientations in the population; meanwhile, the kinds of job experiences that promote liberal (“libertarian-capitalist”) orientations in the electorate remain relatively restricted (p. 8). At the same time, however, citizen preferences and salient political demands are becoming increasingly split between postmaterialists (“individuals who ... have a much stronger orientation toward a reciprocal, egalitarian design of democratic politics and cultural institutions” (p. 7)) and voters whose job tasks and employment in international competitive sectors of the economy predispose them to “authoritarian visions of the social structure” (p. 7). Consequently, a new cleavage has emerged between those voters, especially in the public sector, “who work in symbol- and client-processing organizations where social relations are at the heart of the work process” (p. 7), and those who work “in internationally exposed manufacturing industries or in financial and business services” (p. 6).

In sum, during the cold war era the conflict between social libertarianism and authoritarianism had little salience, the structural transformation of postindustrial capitalism has shifted the old left-right axis somewhat, with a new pool of authoritarian voters emerging alongside the libertarian left (pp. 15-16). Voter demand for the new extreme right is stimulated by postindustrial capitalism because occupations and sectors that are exposed to international competition (p. 8) are associated with a workday experience and personality type that encourage right-wing authoritarian demands. Accordingly, a society that is not postindustrial can only give rise to a form of
right-wing extremism that is a throwback to the type witnessed during the interwar period. The new extreme right only appears in postindustrial societies in which a “comprehensive welfare state” (p. 6) coexists with international market pressures on firms.

Kitschelt does not provide a direct empirical test of these claims, largely on the grounds that “Surveys typically do not allow us to measure several of the critical variables that are hypothesized to impinge on political preference formation” (p. 9). Nonetheless, data that make it possible to test the macrostructural elements of these theoretical claims are available.

Table 1 presents cross-national data on the proportion of GDP devoted to civil consumption expenditure (total spending by the state, outside of defence) in 1990. Though the range of cross-national variation is noteworthy – the level for Sweden is more than twice that for Belgium or the Netherlands, it would seem that each of these countries has a comprehensive welfare state. In this respect, according to Kitschelt, they provide fertile ground for the new radical right as opposed to the fascistic types of movements that emerged when “elements of premodern agrarian elites still controlled important political institutions” (1995:37).

More directly pertinent to the potential of the new radical right, according to Kitschelt, is a country’s openness to international markets. Table 2 presents data on each country’s openness to international trade in 1992. Clearly, the range of variation is wide, with the openness of the top-ranked country (Belgium) nearly four times that of the bottom-ranked country (Spain). Further, a pattern is evident in terms of the
distribution of the countries. Belgium, which has a markedly high degree of openness, is an outlier. Otherwise, the countries cluster into two distinct groups in terms of openness: Ireland and the Netherlands are in the first group, and the remaining countries are in the second group.

A possible misconception is avoided when the country rankings are considered. Kitschelt believes that an increase in international competition is behind the demand for the new right in advanced postindustrial societies. The country rankings provide a reminder that this cannot be because exposure to international competition is higher for European economies than for others. Belgium, for example, has less openness than Lesotho, Malaysia or Belize. In the global rankings, Denmark sits alongside Honduras and Egypt, while 77th-ranked Burundi is between Italy and Spain. In sum, exposure to international competition does not distinguish the advanced societies of post-industrial capitalism from the rest of the world.

What happens if we combine the data on the welfare state with those pertaining to economic competition? Drawing on Kitschelt, we would expect that citizen demand for the far right might increase with the size of the welfare state and the degree of openness. But inspection of Figure 2 shows the difficulty with this assumption. Though trade openness and welfare spending are not exactly orthogonal to each other, clearly they are only loosely related ($r^2 = .12$). More important, as the scatter plot shows the relationship between the two is negative rather than positive: on average, countries with more openness are likely to have less welfare spending, not more. Admittedly, the relationship between openness and welfare spending becomes positive when the three
outliers (Belgium, Ireland, and the Netherlands) are removed. However, I fail to see how their exclusion from the analysis can be justified.

In sum, I have tried to meet Kitschelt on his own ground by adopting and empirically applying his own specifications of “advanced post-industrial capitalism.” In doing so, I have encountered a difficulty: the relationship between openness and welfare is weak, and the reverse of what we would expect if both are attributes of advanced post-industrial capitalism. What indicator should thus be used?

Recall that Kitschelt posits a direct relationship between the intensity of international market pressures and support for the new radical right; by contrast, occupations that are sheltered from such competition, such as those in the welfare state, are said to provide an occupational experience that is conducive to support for left-libertarian politics. I therefore conclude that economic openness ought to be selected as the indicator of a country’s demand for right-authoritarian politics.

The structure of party competition: Core convergence

Kitschelt writes that the strategies of the main parties of the moderate right and – to a somewhat lesser extent, the moderate left – have had important consequences for right-wing extremist parties (p. 25). He remarks that “voters of radical rightist parties are not necessarily more authoritarian than the voters of conventional conservative parties” (p. 11). In his view, this therefore makes the strategy of the moderate right a crucial determinant of the electoral opportunities of the extreme right. When the main party of the moderate right moves away from the centre of politics, it projects a credible image as an alternative to right-wing extremism and thereby captures the support of right-
authoritarian voters. Conversely, when the moderate right moves toward the political centre, electoral space opens up for a party of the far right. A centripetal tendency in the party system is reinforced by a long period of conservative government in which voters come to identify the moderate right with other parties of the political establishment. At the same time, a centripetal movement of the major party of the left can likewise create, among potential supporters of the far right, the perception of a cartel of established left and right parties that do not represent separate alternatives (p. 17). In Kitschelt’s words:

*Convergence of SD [Social Democratic] and MC [Moderate Conservative] parties, together with an extended period of government participation by the moderate conservatives thus creates the electoral opening for the authoritarian Right that induces voters to abandon their loyalty to established conservative parties* (p. 17, italics in original)

Does core convergence (i.e., convergence between the major parties of the left and the right) denote a state of affairs, or a process? The answer to this question is important because it will set limits on the kinds of evidence needed to evaluate Kitschelt’s theory.

Let us begin with semantics: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines convergence as “the action or fact of converging; movement directed toward or terminating in the same point.” This dynamic conception is not always present in the analysis of party systems. In Sartori (1970), for example, where the ideas of centripetal and centrifugal competition are used as keys to the classification and analysis of party systems, the evidence provided is based on the distance between parties at a single point in time. In
Kitschelt’s analysis, by contrast, the treatment of core convergence is dynamic – except at a crucial point in his argument.

Thus, when arguing against the view that parties are simply the reflection of voter preferences, Kitschelt emphasizes that the rise of right-authoritarian parties “depends on the strategic interaction of competing parties in the party system” (p. 14). As I mentioned above, he then hypothesizes that when moderate conservative parties follow a centripetal strategy, the emerging space of authoritarian politics is abandoned to parties of the extreme right (pp. 16-17). Additionally, erosion of the ideological distinctiveness that binds the right-authoritarian electorate to moderate conservative parties can result “when left social democratic parties move toward the median voter” (p. 17). Switching from theory to evidence, Kitschelt’s emphasis on process is sustained in his detailed discussions of the structure of political opportunity in different countries. For France, the “pinnacle of [...] convergence was probably reached at the time of the 1984 European elections, the first national breakthrough of the National Front” (p. 97). In the case of Scandinavia, a “critical condition” for the rise of parties that took votes away from the moderate right “was the gradual emergence of the policies and programs supported by the social democrats and their bourgeois opponents” (p. 124). In Austria and Italy, during the 1970’s and 80’s each “party system [...] moved toward convergence” (p. 167). In West Germany, continuity between the SPD and CDU governments of the 1970’s and 80’s shows that the “politics of centripetalism” had remained intact (p. 213). In Britain, by contrast, the political opportunity structure was favourable to the extreme right until convergence between Labour and the Conservatives ended in the mid-1970’s (p. 248). Implicit in each of these discussions of
convergence between the main parties of the left and right is a comparison of change over time.

However, a static treatment of convergence creeps in elsewhere. Between the theoretical exposition and country-by-country case analysis I have discussed so far, Kitschelt inserts a more systematic comparison of the distance between major left and right parties in 15 countries (Kitschelt 1995, Table 2.2). These data are based on an expert survey of party positions in 1989.\(^1\) Convergence denotes a process, however, so it cannot be properly ascertained from a study such as this, which provides observations at only a single point in time. Though the measure of convergence used here is flawed, there is no problem inasmuch as the ensuing analysis yields results not substantially different from those in Kitschelt’s more detailed country-by-country analysis. But what happens if we conduct a similar analysis using data that permit a more appropriate measure of convergence?

Such data can be found in Knutsen (1998), which gives expert judgements of party positions in 13 European countries for 1982 and 1993.\(^1\) To be sure, Knutsen’s data resemble Kitschelt’s in that they share the drawbacks of expert judgements of party positions (see Budge 2000). However, Knutsen’s data also offer the advantage of permitting a calculation of change over time in the distance between major parties of the left and the right.

Table 3 presents data on the positions of core left-right parties in the 13 countries studied by Knutsen. The calculations of the 1982 and 1993 differences are based on the positions of the same left and right parties found in Kitschelt’s analysis. Greece and
Portugal are omitted due to the unavailability of data for these two countries. Inspection of Table 3 reveals that between 1982 and 1993, the core parties:

(1) converged in nine countries: Austria, Belgium, Britain, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain;

(2) diverged in two countries: Denmark, Italy;

(3) maintained the same distance in two countries: Ireland, Sweden.

Figure 3 presents a stem-and-leaf display of Kitschelt’s data on party distance. Austria is clearly a country in which the core parties were relatively close in 1989. Most of the countries – Sweden, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Greece, Spain, France, Denmark, Italy – clustered around the average, while the others – Britain, Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, Finland – belong to a group in which the distance between the major left and right parties was distinctly greater. To compare these findings for 1989 with Knutsen’s data on 1982-93, I decided to classify the countries into two categories: those in which the core parties were relatively close in 1989, and those in which they were relatively distant. As a criterion for classification, initially I considered taking the average of party distance as a break point: countries over the average would fall into the “distant” category while those below would be “near”. However, I rejected this method on the grounds that it would lead to arbitrary results, for the many countries near the average would be put into qualitatively different categories. I therefore decided to distinguish in terms of the two main clusters: the five countries in which the distance was distinctly higher are classified as “distant” and the rest (plus the outlier, Austria) are “near.” This method yields results that are consistent with Kitschelt’s own interpretations of party distances.
Table 4 presents a series of paired comparison of party distance in 1989 and patterns of convergence between 1982-93. Clearly, there is a varying match between static and dynamic measures of convergence. If we organize the 13 countries according to the nature of this match, we find they fall into four groups. Countries:

(1) support Kitschelt’s theory because both measures of “convergence” indicate the party system has favoured the far right: Austria, France, Germany, Norway, Spain; or

(2) support Kitschelt’s theory because both measures of “convergence” indicate the party system has not favoured the far right: Ireland, Sweden; or

(3) do not support Kitschelt’s theory because his data suggest the party system has favoured the far right, whereas over-time data do not: Denmark, Italy; or

(4) do not support Kitschelt’s theory because his data suggest the system has not favoured the far right, whereas over-time data suggest it has: Belgium, Britain, Finland, the Netherlands.

In conclusion, it matters what method is used to ascertain if a system is undergoing convergence between its major left and right parties. Analyses based on core distance at a single point in time and at multiple points in time do not yield similar results. This is because nearness is not the same as convergence and distance is not the same as divergence. Given the nature of the concept, I conclude that a dynamic measure of convergence is preferable to one that is static.

**Patronage/Corruption**

Kitschelt believes that a subtype of the new radical right – the populist antistatist party – is most likely to be successful in post-industrial societies with both left-right
convergence and “a clientelist/patronage-driven political economy” (p. 22). In countries with these characteristics, the “immobility of the conventional parties opens vast regions of the electorate to the conquest of new rightist parties” (p. 56). Among the cases Kitschelt considers, Austria and Italy are examples of partocracy, which is “the fusion of state, party, and economic elites in politico-economic networks characterized by patronage, clientelism, and corruption” (p. 161). According to Kitschelt, partocracy creates a demand for more transparency and mass participation in politics. Partocracy is not a precondition of NRR success. Instead, the particular form of dissatisfaction it generates has coloured politics in Austria and Italy, where the demand for populism has been met by the Freedom Party and the Northern League, respectively. By comparison with NRR parties, populist parties enjoy a much wider base of support. And, because they compete in systems in which the conservative right is particularly discredited, Kitschelt believes that populist parties may prove to be more durable than NRR parties (pp. 200-201).

Though Kitschelt is quite certain that Austria and Italy are partocracies, he does not say if they are the only partocracies in Europe. It is likely that he did not expand beyond these obvious cases because there is a paucity of cross-national research on the subject. As Mair (1997:142) writes, the available evidence on patronage “is necessarily nebulous and sometimes sketchy”. Frustrated in my search for data on cross-national variation in patronage, I have turned to an alternative: cross-national rankings of perceptions of the degree of political corruption. Although patronage and corruption are not synonymous, I feel the substitution is defensible. Kitschelt’s discussion of the Austrian and Italian cases makes it clear that it is not the mere
existence of partocracy or patronage alone that has been responsible for populism. Along with concerns over excessive state intervention and a lack of opportunities for political involvement, voter support for populism stems from a desire for more transparency in politics. To my mind, this implies a perception of hidden impropriety that must be rooted out. Indeed, in analysing the rise of the Northern League, Kitschelt (1995:175) writes “it was primarily the overwhelming concern with the corruption and inefficiency of the partocratic state and party machines that rallied voters around the new party”. The perception of corruption therefore appears to be a central – though not the only – element of the citizen reaction against patronage politics.

The study of corruption is still quite undeveloped. Nonetheless, extensive surveys of business people who operate in different countries have yielded the findings presented in Table 5. The two cases of populism dealt with by Kitschelt – Austria and Italy – are classified differently, but at least they are not in the category of countries that are least corrupt. Interestingly, Belgium, France, Germany, and Spain are also among the countries where the degree of corruption is perceived to be somewhat or quite high. This suggests that cross-nationally, the potential for populism is greater than Kitschelt’s analysis would lead us to believe. This potential may have been missed because the cases included in Kitschelt’s analysis of populism were selected along the dependent variable.

Analysis

Table 6 presents a classification of countries according to data provided by
Kitschelt. Table 7 displays the far-right outcomes that are expected, given Kitschelt’s theory and the data on structural conditions that I have introduced in this paper. To read this table, assume that a "1" indicates the presence of a condition, and a "0" its absence. For example, Austria is a country:

- with openness to international trade ("1" in the first cell of the row for this country)
- core party convergence between 1982-93 ("1" in the second cell)
- which is perceived as somewhat or quite corrupt ("1" in the third cell)
- consequently, the expected outcome is that Austria will be among those countries with stronger support for the extreme right ("1" in the fourth cell).

This table also displays the observed outcome, based on the evidence on the relative strength of far-right parties that is presented by Kitschelt. So, in the case of Austria for example:

- the observed (or actual) outcome is that Austria is among those countries with stronger support for the extreme right ("1" in the last cell).

A first glance indicates that the thirteen countries studied fall into four groups:

1. **three** cases that support Kitschelt’s theory because they were expected to have a stronger far right: Austria, Belgium and Norway;
2. **five** cases that support Kitschelt’s theory because they were expected to have a weaker far right: Britain, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Sweden;
3. **four** cases that do not support Kitschelt's theory because the far right is stronger than expected: Denmark, Finland, France, Italy;
4. **one** case that does not support Kitschelt’s theory because the far right is weaker than expected: the Netherlands.
In sum, eight cases conform to Kitschelt’s theory, while five do not. Additionally, the theory is better at predicting where the far right will be weaker (five cases support the theory, one does not) than where it will be stronger (three cases support the theory, four do not).

In accord with Kitschelt’s theory, a combination of openness, convergence and corruption is invariably associated with stronger support for far-right parties (Austria and Belgium). At the same time, a combination of openness and convergence alone (i.e., without corruption) is associated with stronger support for the far right in Norway.

Inspection of the various combinations of conditions associated with the four cases (Denmark, Finland, France, Italy) in which the far right is stronger than expected fails to reveal a clear pattern: openness is below the median for Italy, Finland and France, but above for Denmark. The core parties have converged in Finland and France, but not in Italy and Denmark. Perceived corruption is higher for Italy and France, but lower for Finland and Denmark. In sum, the absence of a clear pattern among the four anomalies suggests that among the conditions of far-right strength considered here, none are sufficient causes.

Among the countries with weaker support for the far right, the only anomaly in terms of Kitschelt’s theory is the Netherlands. It is open to international market competition and its core left-right parties have converged; reasoning in a deductive fashion, we would conclude that what has reduced the chances of the far right in the Netherlands is the weakness of perceived corruption. Germany and Spain have more corruption and their core parties have converged, but Kitschelt’s theory would imply that
it is a lack of exposure to international market pressures that has kept the far right weak. The conditions of far-right strength posited by Kitschelt are either absent or minimally present in Britain, Ireland and Sweden.

Summary and discussion

In this paper, I have tried to meet Kitschelt theory on his own ground. For the most part, I have side-stepped the task of criticising his theory. Instead, I have tried to apply it in a systematic fashion to a set of thirteen European countries for which the appropriate data were available. In seeking to do so, I have questioned a few assumptions. Among the set of advanced post-industrial societies considered, there is only a weak relationship between two of their defining features, welfare spending and trade openness. By comparison with the rest of the world, moreover, these countries are not particularly exposed to competition from international markets. Additionally, I questioned Kitschelt’s measure of convergence between core parties on the grounds that it fails to capture change in the distance between the main parties of the left and the right over time. I also demonstrated that using a more appropriate, dynamic measure of convergence yields results substantially different from those that are found in Kitschelt’s analysis. Finally, I have raised the difficulty of finding comparable cross-national measures of partocracy or patronage. Turning instead to perceptions of corruption in different countries, I have argued that Kitschelt’s focus on Austria and Italy leads to a neglect of other countries that have similar problems with transparency, if not citizen exclusion from the political process.

Using a qualitative comparative analysis, I have studied the relationship between,
respectively, the conditions identified in Kitschelt’s theory, the expected strength of the far right, and the observed (or actual) strength of the far right. This test of the theory does not provide grounds for rejecting any of the three specified conditions. Further, in the two cases (Austria, Belgium) in which all conditions associated with far-right strength were present, the far right is indeed relatively strong. However, the far right is also relatively strong in countries in which one (France, Norway) or even two (Denmark, Finland, Italy) of the conditions are absent. Kitschelt’s theory therefore identifies only one of a number of possible combinations of conditions associated with far-right strength. On the other hand, the theory does a better job of explaining why the far right has been weak in some countries.

Research based on the findings from this study might proceed in three different directions.

(1) Further research using the same method (qualitative comparative analysis) to analyse a set of countries can be carried out in which additional conditions are incorporated. For example, Mayer (1999) has shown that French voters who belong to unions are much less likely to support the Front national; this seems to be because unions encapsulate their members within a leftist political subculture. On these grounds, cross-national comparisons of union density ought to be incorporated. Similarly, Mayer (1999:291-295) has argued that the strength of the far right depends on its legitimacy, which in turn depends on the extent to which a country has maintained ties with its extremist past. Although more difficult to operationalize than the strength of the union subculture, the strength (or continuity) of a country’s right-extremist tradition
merits attention nonetheless.

(2) The search for additional conditions might be guided by the attempt to resolve contradictory cases from the present study. This research would involve comparative studies of two or three strategically selected cases. As Table 8 shows, the application of Kitschelt’s theory yields four sets of contradictory cases (i.e., instances were identical combinations of causal conditions are associated with different outcomes). For example, France, Germany, and Spain all lack trade openness, had core convergence between 1982-93, and are among the countries with more corruption, yet the far right has been relatively strong in France but relatively weak in Germany and Spain.

As Ragin (1987:113) points out, the case-oriented approach involves the treatment of “any specification of relevant causal conditions as tentative.” Contradictory cases can be aids toward the specification of additional conditions because, by narrowing down possibilities, they simplify the search (Ragin 1987:113).

In the case of France vs. Germany and Spain, for instance, it becomes clear that the electoral system must be excluded as an additional condition. True, in terms of electoral systems, France is different whereas Germany and Spain are similar. France has a majoritarian system, whereas Germany and Spain have a proportional system with a threshold for representation. However, the French system would be expected to present a stronger barrier to extremist parties than is provided by the kind of system found in Germany and Spain – an expectation which is not borne out by the outcomes. Accordingly, the nature of the electoral system – at least in the terms in which I have discussed it here – would be rejected as an explanation for the divergent outcomes between these countries with shared conditions.
The task of explaining the contradictory outcomes presented in Table 8 therefore suggests four small-n comparative studies whose results may nonetheless carry clear implications for a general understanding of the far right: (1) Denmark vs. Ireland; (2) Finland vs. Britain; (3) Norway vs. the Netherlands; (4) France vs. Germany and/or Spain.

(3) Finally, the results of this study might be useful for studies of single cases that depart from a hypothetical-deductive mode of analysis. The sets of causal conditions identified in this study might be used as Weberian ideal-types – conceptual abstractions based on exaggeration and simplification that are intended as heuristics in the task of bringing out the uniqueness of a concrete historical phenomenon. Examining the reasons for the unavoidable divergence between particular cases and the empirical conclusions of this study makes it possible to study individual cases without losing a footing in theory.

References


Penn World Tables (http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca/pwt)


Notes

1. These data were derived from an expert survey of party policies. Laver and Hunt made an initial mailing to the 1228 political scientists selected for their survey in February 1989; non-respondents received a reminder six weeks later, and again prior to the 1989 annual meeting of the European Consortium for Political Research (see Laver and Hunt, 1992:35-36).
1. Also considered for inclusion in this study were the over-time, comparative data on party distance presented in Table 5 of Bartolini and Mair (1990). I decided not to use these data because they indicate the distance between left and right party *blocks* instead of major parties. In addition, the data presented by Bartolini and Mair continue only until 1985 and hence fail to overlap with the date (1989) the data used by Kitschelt were collected.

2. Kitschelt implies that West Germany was a partocracy during the 1960's at least (1995:209,329).

3. Mair (1997:143) nonetheless suggests that the more obvious cases of patronage involve Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, and Belgium.

4. However, the *Vlaams Blok* is not an anti-partitocratic, populist party, which is also what Kitschelt’s theory would predict given that this country is perceived as relatively corrupt.