

***An Explorative Study of the Impact of Local Political Opportunity Structures on the Electoral Mobilization of the Far-Right in Sweden***

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Since the early European labour movements, *one* preferred action and organisational strategy of social movements has been to mobilize their followers in political parties. As an outgrowth of the environmental movement the Swedish Environmental Party was formed in 1980 and first entered parliament in 1988, the same year that the Sweden Democrats, at that time a rather obscure sect within the Swedish neo-Nazi movement, was formed. In the 2006 elections the Sweden Democrats received 2.9 percent of the votes in the national election and 280 seats in municipal councils. In 2010 the party successfully mobilized voters and entered the Swedish parliament with 5.7% of the vote in the national election and 612 seats in the municipal councils. However, voters were mobilized unevenly across the spread of Sweden's 290 local governing municipalities—more successful in some and less in others. In this paper we utilize the notion of local political opportunity structure (LPOS) to interrogate these geographical differences in mobilization outcomes. The aim of the paper is two-fold. Firstly, we will contribute to an understanding of the conditions under which rightwing parties find favourable circumstances for their emergence and success at the polls. While the original concept of POS formulated by Eisinger in the early 1970s focused local government structures, the notion has been more commonly employed in Europe in cross-national research. By re-focusing on local political opportunity structures the second aim of the paper is to contribute new insights as to its relevant aspects, which can further advance the notion as a viable instrument for comparative research on movement outcomes more generally.

**Research on Political Outcomes and Far-Right Political Parties**

In a review article of the current research on the causal influence of social movements on political outcomes and processes, Amenta, Caren, Chiarello and Su (2010: 289-292) point out that almost all of the research is on policy influence, with only three instances among the 54 articles they surveyed that the movements studied sought structural influence. They contend that while most collective action is aimed at the intermediate level seeking to bring about policy changes, they nevertheless argue that a challenger can make the greatest impact by targeting the structural or systematic level of state processes. “The main potential political consequences of social movements at the structural level are the extension of democratic rights and practices and the formation of new parties (p. 289)”. While one step removed from democratic transformations of states, such as the electoral mobilizations instigated by the contentious coalitions in the former Soviet republics of the Ukraine and Georgia, the formation by movements of political parties, which succeed in gaining parliamentary and/or local governing bodies, is a structural political change that can provide the movement with continuing leverage over political processes. This latter movement strategy has particularly found resonance in parliamentary systems, when “movements have formed their own parties, which can take office (usually in coalitions) and act on their platforms” (p. 292). Rucht (1999:

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213) argues that it is debatable whether these parties should be regarded as a vital part of a movement or rather as an outgrowth than can be analyzed as a separate category. Rucht chooses the latter analytical strategy in that they tend to adopt more or less the structure of established parties and focus on electoral and parliamentary politics. Subsequently, the existence and strength of a party formed by a movement is an intervening factor in his model. Rucht (1999: 211) distinguishes between three key factors that mediate the impact of movement claim making on policy making: public opinion as represented in public statements; individual attitudes and behaviours; and the existence of a movement party (in Rucht's analysis a Green Party) or their equivalent. Rucht's model of intervening factors is valuable, but it does raise the question as to whether movement-parties are an important and even crucial part of a movement or whether these parties sever their roots with the movement and enter parliamentary politics as autonomous actors. Rucht is ambivalent in regards to this question. While Rucht maintains that parties are best analyzed separately from movements, it is only when a party succeeds in reaching a hegemonic position "controlling virtually all collective resources" (p. 187), that he would no longer consider it a part of a movement. The radical-right neo-Nazi movement in Sweden still retains an active network of groups/organisations, which emphasize unruly, radical protests. The movement has focused in recent years their annual commemoration of the death of a fellow activist in the Stockholm suburb of Sala, which has gathered radical-right activists from across Europe, as well as attracting an annual counter-protest by antiracist activists (Wahlström 2011). Another focus has been their ongoing protests against the construction of mosques. We contend that the radical-right/neo-Nazi movement in Sweden successfully combines the grassroots model of activism with the party model in Rucht's scheme. What the movement lacks in Sweden are elements of the interest group model.

Despite the potential impact of this movement strategy on long-term structural conditions for the political outcomes of contentious politics, the formation by movements of political parties has garnered little interest in the body of social movement outcome research. This gap in the research may reflect the contextual 'bias' of the researchers, in that, according to Giugni (1998), the dominant empirical research on movement outcomes has been conducted by American social movement scholars (see also Bosi and Uba 2009: 407). Working within a relatively stable two-party political system, American researchers have brought attention to how social movements have gained political leverage through connections with political parties and through electoral activity (Amenta et al 2010; McCarthy, Smith and Zald 1996) thereby impacting the structural level of the political system, however they have not been inclined to turn their attention to the formation by social movements of political parties, which is a more viable option in parliamentary multi-party political systems.

Amenta et. al (1992) argue that the political opportunity structure is the mediating factor between social movements and their success in bringing about tangible outcomes from their actions. This leads Giugni (1998) to conclude that: "ultimately, therefore, the state and the political party system determine whether social movements can win acceptance and new advantages" (p. 382). We argue that by changing the political party system itself through the formation of a political party that gains electoral success, a social movement *can* change the structural opportunities that mediate their future impacts on policy and legislative outcomes. In the terms of Tarrow (1996: 58), the action strategy whereby movements form their 'own' parties, can expand the movement's 'own' opportunities. Whether we label this social movement strategy "party movements" as in the work of Schwartz (2000) or "movement party" as in the work of Keuchler and Dalton (1990) and Bomberg (1992), or as a separate intervening category as in the work of Rucht (1999), attention to this strategy promises to fill

theoretical and empirical lacunae in research on the political consequences of social movements and the outcomes of their collective actions.

Generally in the social movement literature ‘tasteful’ movements such as the environmental, women’s, human rights, and peace movements have attracted the most attention. Using and extending the theoretical tools developed in this research has been less common in the study of ‘distasteful’ movements, such as the neo-Nazi and other far-right movements. However, West European right-wing extremist parties have received a great deal attention in the academic literature due to their electoral success, though the variation of their success across political contexts has been less studied and the few comparative studies that do exist have only analyzed their variations of success cross-nationally, and have offered only partial explanations for this phenomenon (e.g. Jackman and Volpert 1996; Aberdi 2002; Knigge 1998; Kitschelt 1995; Lubbers et.al. 2002; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Rydgren 2003). These studies have in turn tended to focus only on why right-wing parties have been successful, rather than on why they have not (an exception is the discussion in Rydgren 2002).

### **The Socioeconomic and Demographic Impact on Support for the Radical-Right**

Important for this study is Rydgren and Ruth’s (2011) analysis of the socio-economic and demographical impacts on voting for the Sweden Democrats in Swedish municipalities. They found support for the social marginality hypothesis in that the Sweden Democrats gained more votes in both the 2006 elections and 2010 elections in socioeconomically marginalized municipalities, i.e. those with lower Gross Regional Products (GDP for municipalities); higher aggregated unemployment rates; and a lower average level of education. Further, they found rather ambiguous support for the ethnic competition hypothesis in that for the 2006 elections negative correlations for the proportion of immigrants from non-European countries (and a positive correlation for the proportion of immigrants from EU/EFTA countries). This changed in the 2010 elections when the correlation was positive. This means, according to Rydgren and Ruth, “that the party has been able to advance their electoral support more in municipalities with a relatively higher proportion of non-European immigrants” (p. 22). Lastly, they found robust positive correlations between the rate of reported criminal offenses and electoral support for the Sweden Democrats. Rydgren and Ruth’s analysis makes a strong case for the socioeconomic and demographical characteristics of geographical electoral entities and support for the radical right. Place matters! The socioeconomic and demographic context is a vital intervening factor in explaining the impact of movement mobilizations (cf. Rucht 1999; Midttun and Rucht 1994). Nonetheless, we argue that the socioeconomic and demographic context does not explain all of the variation. Social marginality, ethnic competition, and in Rydgren and Ruth’s analysis even an insecurity hypothesis measured by the rate of reported criminal offenses, does not explain all of the variations in radical right voter mobilization. In this paper we will complement this research by interrogating the impact of the local political contexts on the voter mobilization success (or relative failure) of the Sweden Democrats.

### **The Impact of Political Opportunity Structures on Social Movement Organisational and Action Strategies**

We will take as our theoretical point of departure the notion of political opportunity structure (POS), a concept which highlights the importance of the political context for the mobilisation of social movements and the chances for their ‘success’. In short, the POS is the impact of the state and the political representation system on social movements, it traces the regulatory contours of the political environment within which social movements operate. In Eisinger’s (1973: 11-12) classical study the POS refers to the “openings, weak spots, barriers and

resources of the political system itself'. Kriesi et al. (1992) conceptualize the POS as including three broad sets of properties of a political system:

its formal institutional structure, its informal procedures and prevailing strategies with regard to challengers, and the configuration of power relevant for the confrontation with the challengers. The first two sets of properties provide the general setting for the mobilisation of collective action; they also constrain the relevant configurations of power (p. 220).

These authors argue that the POS “determines the set of strategic options available for the mobilisation of ‘challengers’” (ibid). On the national level the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden and their xenophobic claims have been met with “full exclusion” by the Swedish state with neither formal nor informal access to the political system thereby restricting their strategic options vis-à-vis the state. Fridolfsson and Gidlund (2002) maintain that the parliamentary parties in Sweden forged more or less a cartel against extreme right parties. While the movement enjoyed partial success with some concessions in some municipalities in the region of Skåne in southern Sweden during the latter 1980s and 1990s, the Swedish neo-Nazi movement was confronted by a situation in which they could choose continued marginalization *or* make a bid to enter the political system as the most direct way of achieving their goals. Political entrepreneurs within the movement formed the party in 1988 as a successor to the Sweden Party. Until the mid 1990s the party was entrenched within the openly anti-democratic Nazi and racist networks within the broader movement, however in their work to erect a more respectable façade the party banned uniforms in 1996 and in 1999 the Sweden Democrats openly renounced Nazism. In 2005 the new party leader Jimmy Åkesson continued efforts to reform the party along the lines of the more successful far-right parties in Western Europe (Rydgren and Ruth 2011: 4). The early successful radical right parties across Europe have impacted the developmental dynamics of latecomers such as the Sweden Democrats. In a sense we can regard the Sweden Democrats as a spin-off electoral mobilization whereby through diffusion processes “the ideational, tactical, and organizational lessons of the early risers are made available to subsequent challengers” (McAdam 1996: 33).

This social movement strategy—forming a “movement party” as the partisan arm of the movement (Keuchler and Dalton 1990)—brings with it inherent dilemmas (Bomberg 1992). In order to enhance the appeal of the party among the electorate the party must rid itself of its most radical elements. The Sweden Democrats have undergone many of the internal organisational strategies, which are characteristic of movement parties during a process of reform or “make-over” (cf. Schwartz 2009). Factionalism, as a result of the power struggles within the party, led to a split in the party in 2001 when hardliners founded the National Democrats. There have been ongoing purges when party officials have been expelled for public statements that have put in question the sincerity of the party’s make-over process, e.g. overt and offensive racist claims or support for Nazism. While not without a great deal of friction, the Sweden Democrats have been able to transform their movement party into a more appealing form, which has made possible their relative success among the electorate.

### **The Impact of Political Opportunity Structures on Movement Outcomes**

Amenta et al. (1992: 309ff) argue that the political context, here conceptualized as the political opportunity structure (POS), mediates the impact of a movement’s range of possible outcomes. The POS mediates the political conditions under which movements win recognition and achieve their goals. Giugni et al. (2005) point out that in the social movement literature we can distinguish between two competing sets of explanations for far-right support.

Firstly, the dominant approach has been to focus ‘demand-side factors’, which refer to “conditions that have led to the creation of a social and cultural ‘reservoir’ to be exploited by far-right organisations (p. 146)”. Within this set of explanations we find the social marginality hypothesis and the ethnic competition hypothesis, which Rydgren and Ruth (2011) tested and found support for in explaining variations in far-right voting patterns in Swedish municipalities (see above). Secondly, social movement researchers have also focused ‘supply-side factors’, that point “to political and institutional aspects such as the structure of the electoral system, the responses of established actors, and the dynamics of party alignment, demarcation and competition, which may provide the extreme right with a political niche to be exploited (Giugni et al. 2005: 146)”. These authors modify the political opportunity approach by combining political-institutional factors based on the political opportunity model and cultural-discursive factors based on a framing perspective in their cross-national analysis of extreme right mobilization.

### *Local Political Opportunity Structures*

By international standards, Sweden can be regarded as a relatively open political system, one in which it is generally easy for its citizens to gain access to political institutions (Kitschelt 1986; Rothstein 1995). Its highly developed corporate structure makes access particularly easy for (some) movement organizations and associations, particularly and traditionally, labour market actors, i.e. unions and employer associations. Karl-Werner Brand (1985) summarized the comparative findings of a study of social movement marginalization, respectively incorporation, by institutional politics in Western Europe and the United States, as primarily determined by the existence of corporate political structures (see also Nollert 1995). Sweden distinguished itself in this comparative study as a nation-state with a highly developed corporate structure, which readily incorporates movement organizations (not only labour movement organisations), as well as their demands (or rather some of these [more moderate] demands) within traditional political channels and institutions (see also Micheletti 2003; Rothstein 1992; Wahlström and Peterson 2006). While the institutional corporate structure has crackled since the early 1990s, the informal practices of corporatism have nevertheless lingered on in a somewhat diluted form. Sweden can still be regarded as a comparatively open political system that has been to varying degrees relatively facilitative to the demands of the labour movement and the so-called new social movements, e.g. women’s, environmental, human rights, and antiracist movements.

The points in the discussion above have been related to comparative studies of, for social movement researchers in general, more ‘tasteful’ movements such as, for example, the environmental movement and the women’s movement. We argue that the Swedish corporate system’s relative openness has far less relevancy for what has been regarded in the research as ‘distasteful’ movements, such as xenophobic and nationalist movements. In Sweden the corporate political structures have been closed for these types of movements (Fridolfsson and Gidlund 2002), and the established political parties, particularly on the national level, had been opposed to any sort of engagement or debate with the Sweden Democrats prior to the 2010 elections. The established political parties, i.e. the seven parties represented in parliament, across the Swedish political spectrum, actively attempted to close political space to the challenges posed by the Sweden Democrats.

The strategy of the established political parties has been discursive repression towards the challenges of the Sweden Democrats. However, these attempts of closure or discursive repression might have in fact opened the electoral space available to the Sweden Democrats in that a significant proportion of the voters felt that their views were excluded. As the

established political parties, even the moderate-right parties have not occupied anti-immigrant positions within the public discourse, this left a large political space open for the Sweden Democrats thereby enhancing their chances for electoral success (cf. Giugni et al. 2005: 150). Subsequently, voting for the Sweden Democrats can be regarded as an indication of discontent with the prevailing parties (cf. Ignazi 1996). Schedler (1996) has argued that new extremist parties across Europe have accused established parties of forming an exclusionary cartel, unresponsive and unaccountable to ‘ordinary citizens’. In this political framing the extremist parties contra pose the political elite against citizens, on the one hand, and against themselves, on the other.

Happy to affirm their own identity in opposition to anti-political establishment challengers, political elites often respond to anti-political establishment attacks with symmetrical hostility. Quite often, therefore, anti-political-establishment parties indeed end up as party-systemic outcasts, punch bags and untouchables (Schedler, 1996: 300; cf. Diani 1996).

Schedler argues that most anti-political-establishment parties, which have succeeded to present candidates in more than three consecutive national elections, can be found in parliamentary systems with proportional representation (cf. Blais and Carty 1991). Arzheimer and Carter (2006: 423) have found that the empirical evidence for this hypothesis is not without exceptions. They have found that even in disproportional electoral systems the extreme right has found some electoral success. They field a further possible conflicting hypothesis that second order elections in disproportional electoral systems may serve as a kind of safety valve for the political system by providing citizens with an opportunity to express their political frustration with the mainstream parties without overly disturbing the political process on the national level. While the Swedish electoral system is not disproportional, local elections might offer this type of safety valve for voters reluctant to cast a vote for a party, which they regard has little chance of entering the parliament.

The stability of elite alignments is the key to understanding the prevailing political culture in a country. During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Sweden’s national five-party system was regarded as one of the most stable in the world (Bartolino and Mair 1990), solidly entrenched within a left-right dimension of block politics. New political dimensions, however, began to challenge the hegemony of the left-right dimension. The Christian Democratic Party was the first to gain entry, followed by the Green Party towards the end of the 1980s and New Democracy, a short-lived xenophobic populist party in the early 1990s. At the national level the 4% threshold for entrance to the parliament has made it difficult for new parties to gain entry. In the cases of the Christian Democrats, the Green Party and now the Sweden Democrats they have first entered municipal politics as a springboard to their later parliamentary successes. There is no threshold in the municipal parliamentary system for representation, which has encouraged the formation of small parties. Entry into local party-political systems augments the legitimacy of a party and increases later chances for a party’s bid for national representation. *Our hypothesis is that in municipalities where the Sweden Democrats had gained seats in the local governing body in the 2006 elections, the vote for the Sweden Democrats in that municipality in the 2010 national elections had risen.*

The Sweden Democrat’s 2006 electoral success when they gained 280 municipal council seats resulted in a political breakthrough. We argue that the outcome of the 2010 election is related to the 2006 municipal election results (while the elections are situated on different political levels, they are comparable since municipalities (with a very little variation) have relatively similar percentage of votes on these two levels;). We assume that the municipal success in

2006 amplified the success of the Sweden Democrats on the national level in the subsequent election—a ‘springboard effect’. Nonetheless, it needs to be kept in mind that in more than half of the 144 municipalities where the Sweden Democrats received at least one seat in the local council in the 2006 local election, the party received less than 3% of the total votes in the respective municipality (*Expo* 2010). The question remains as to whether the Sweden Democrats’ success is due to the electoral success on the local level, i.e. that the party received more than 3 %, or due to the fact that the party was represented in the local municipal council.<sup>2</sup> One argument that would support the latter explanation is that figures clearly show that in all of the municipalities where the Sweden Democrats had acquired seats in municipal councils in 2006, even though they had received less than 3% of the total vote, they received more than 4% of the total vote in the 2010 national election. 53% of the municipalities that had received less than 3% in the 2006 local election but still managed to take seats in the municipal council 2006 received more than 6% of the total vote in the 2010 national election (Swedish Electoral Authorities). Subsequently, in municipalities where the Sweden Democrats were represented in the local council they received more than double the number of votes in the 2010 national elections four years later.

In comparison to the 147 municipalities where the Sweden Democrats did not take seats in the 2006 municipal councils, the party received more than 6% of the total vote in the 2010 national election in less than a third (Swedish Electoral Authorities). Thus, the Sweden Democrats garnered a significantly greater success in municipalities where they were already represented in the local council prior to the 2010 national election compared to those where they were not. This result is further reinforced when comparing the results of the 2010 national election in those municipalities that received seats in the municipal councils in 2006 with those municipalities that did not.<sup>3</sup> In the municipalities where Sweden Democrats had been represented in the municipal councils prior to the 2010 national election, they received 2 percentage points more of the vote compared to those where the party were not represented in the same period (6,8% in the first category compared with the latter 4,8% of the total vote in the 2010 national election).

In all municipal councils where Sweden Democrats were represented, they managed to increase their support in the 2010 national election. In contrast, the party significantly increased the number of votes in the 2010 national election in only a couple of the municipalities where the party had not taken any seats in the 2006 election. We argue that the Sweden Democrat’s representation in municipal councils in 2006 had a positive influence on the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats in the 2010 national election. An intermediary factor that resulted from success in the 2006 municipal election, which enhanced the party’s political opportunities in the following national election, was that an increasing number of party members succeeded in entering the local media sphere in that they were represented in the local party-political system of government. Local representation provided the party with a channel into the local media domain and an increased legitimacy in the local party-political

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<sup>2</sup> The voting procedures for municipal elections do not prescribe that a party needs to clear a specified hurdle in order to sit in the local council. On the municipal level in Sweden representation is proportional and the existing mandates are shared between all the parties that received votes in the election (*Vallagen SFS* 2005: 837, chapter 14 §6).

<sup>3</sup> In order to carry out the comparison all the municipalities were split up into two separate categories, each of which contains a population of its own; one group in which all municipalities showed at least one mandate for Sweden Democrats and one group where none of the municipalities showed a mandate for Sweden Democrats. In every group the total number of votes for Sweden Democrats in each municipality was summed up separately and divided by the total population of the specific group.

system. We found substantial support for our hypothesis that the political opportunities for a far-right vote on the national level increase through political representation on a lower level, e.g. by entering the municipal council—a factor we designate as the ‘springboard effect’.

In regards to the Swedish electoral system with its relatively high threshold for parliamentary representation, Miller and Listhaug (1990) characterized the Swedish national party system as comparatively rigid, where accumulating dissatisfaction among voters tended to be directed at the regime more generally because people failed to see any of the parties as a viable alternative. In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party elites have more or less governed the country since the 1930s; less since 2006 when a moderate/right coalition entered government. The election in 2010 was a struggle between a newly formed left alliance including the Social Democrats as the major party, together with the Green Party and the Left Party and a moderate/right alliance including the Conservative Party as the major party, together with the Liberal Party, the Centre Farmers’ Party and the Christian Democratic Party. In the 2010 national election the latter alliance won over the left alliance, however, they did not succeed in collecting a clear majority of the votes. The moderate/right coalition formed a minority government and the Sweden Democrats found themselves in the attractive position of holding the balance of power in the parliament between these two block alliances.

Whereas national politics can be characterized as remaining relatively stable with alternating left-right block alliances governing the country, this is less the case on the level of municipalities. In addition to the established national parliamentary parties, on the local level a wide variety of local political parties have emerged since the 1960s, which has successively weakened the hegemony of the left-right blocks alternating in local governments. At the local level block alliances have had to increasingly seek new allies within less stable and more tentative coalitions in order to form majority governments (Fridolfsson and Gidlund 2002). This has brought a new instability into local political landscapes. Small local parties (or small national parties as in the case of the Green Party and now the Sweden Democrats) increasingly find themselves in a position of power far beyond their electoral support in that they often hold the balance of power between the two traditional left-right blocks. In that position they are either invited to join in the governing coalition, which is often the case for the Green Party at the local level and which is increasingly the case for small local parties. However, in none of the local municipalities where the Sweden Democrats have gained mandates, have they been invited to join the governing coalition. According to Sartori (1976), for a party to be politically relevant in a specific party-system, it must have a “coalition-potential”, i.e. the party must be interesting for other parties to collaborate with in creating alliances, *or* the party must have the capacity for political extortion, “blackmail-potential”. The former capacity is an option for small parties in the middle of the political spectrum, for example the Green Party, while the latter option is that available for small extremist parties. The Sweden Democrats have assumed the role of ‘horse-traders’, what Sartori calls “blackmail-potential”, in the national parliamentary political market, hoping to gain some concessions for their political goals and have the same role in many municipal governing bodies. What we should keep in mind, however, is that even in municipalities such as Bjuv with 19.25% SD vote, Burlöv with 17.32% SD vote and Svedala with 16.19% SD vote (all municipalities in the southern region of Skåne) were the Sweden Democrats invited by the established left-right parties to join in a governing coalition. The established parties have not only taken a strategy of discursive repression they have also assumed a strategy of exclusion in governing bodies. These strategies employed by the established parties to exclude the Sweden Democrats from the party-political space leaves the party with the alternative of “political blackmail”. In municipalities with what we define as ‘weak’ governments and/or



minority governments this potential is nevertheless a significant avenue for political influence.

*Our hypothesis is that in municipalities with unstable left-right block alliances strong support for the Sweden Democrats is more likely to emerge.* We contend that there are two arguments, which support this hypothesis. Firstly, weak governments ‘open’ for challengers in that voters perceive that chances will be available for concessions in goals that are not expressed by the established parties. Voters ‘calculate’ that the Sweden Democrats can find the leeway to negotiate regarding immigration and integration issues that would not otherwise be on the local agenda. Secondly, coalitional electoral alliances between the major parties, we argue, tends to result in a convergence between the mainstream parties in their joint struggle to attract voters in the middle of the political spectrum and their efforts to convince voters that their alliance is strong enough to form an effective government. Another possible explanation is that the Sweden Democrats benefited from the convergence of the mainstream parties in that the party could credibly argue that if voters wish to see a real alternative to both the government and the mainstream opposition, then they should support the Sweden Democrats, what Diani (1996: 1057) would define as a ”antisystem frame”. This mobilizing frame directly challenges the political system and encourages voters to support their entrance into the political system itself.

We have defined unstable left-right block alliances as those municipalities with minority governments, and/or coalitions with small local parties, alternative right moderate governments including the Green Party, or cross-block governing coalitions, or municipalities that had not yet two months after the 2010 elections succeeded in building a governing coalitions. This included 132 municipalities out of a total of 290 Swedish municipalities or 45.5% of the municipalities in Sweden had governments with unstable left-right block alliances (Swedish Electoral Authorities). Among the 91 municipalities with less than 3% voter support for the Sweden Democrats only 27.4% had unstable block alliances, significantly less than the national average. Among the 46 municipalities with more than 8% electoral support for the Sweden Democrats 45.6% were governed by unstable block alliances. We conclude that the successive weakening of the hegemony of Swedish left-right block politics has improved the political opportunities for Sweden Democrat electoral support, just as it has improved the political opportunities for small local parties more generally (alternative, the Green Party as a local ally of a conservative/moderate liberal government in contrast with their national alliance with the Social Democrats and Left Party in the 2010 national elections). The political opportunities for a far-right vote are considerably undermined in local political contexts, which remain dominated by left-right block politics. We found significant support for the hypothesis that ‘weak’ governments opened a political space for a successful mobilization of voters for an extreme right-wing party.

#### *Local Cultural Opportunity Structures*

Recognizing the importance of culture, Tarrow (1994), among other researchers, has struggled to incorporate the role of symbolic production into his theory of the political opportunity structure, a vague notion of political culture, which became the key explanatory variable in his model. Gamson and Meyer (1996) have also argued for the inclusion of cultural aspects of the POS with factors such as values, myths and worldviews (more stable), as well as zeitgeist, class-consciousness and media representation (more contingent factors). Koopmans and Statham (1999) elaborated on these attempts to incorporate the ways in which social movements mobilize symbolic resources in their claim making, arguing that not only political institutional factors constrain and facilitate mobilization, but also political-cultural

factors constrain and facilitate social movement mobilization. They introduced the notion of “discursive opportunity structure”, which:

may be seen as determining which ideas are considered ‘sensible’, which constructions of reality are seen as ‘realistic’, and which claims are held as ‘legitimate’ within a certain polity at a specific time (p. 228; cf. Diani 1996).

In a later work analyzing the institutional and discursive opportunities for radical-right mobilizations Giugni, Koopmans, Passy and Statham (2005) operationalized the cultural-discursive factors in their modified POS model with the notion of national configurations of citizenship, which either constrain or facilitate the extent and forms of claim making by the radical-right. In order to define the concept they combined two dimensions: “(1) the *individual equality dimension*, or the national community’s formal criteria of inclusion or exclusion; and (2) the *cultural difference dimension*, namely, the cultural obligations imposed on outsiders to become members of the community” (p. 147). By combining these dimensions they obtained four ideal-typical models of citizenship: the assimilationist model; the universalist model; the multicultural model; and the segregationist model. The Swedish model of immigrant policy, which has never been subject to partisan competition in Sweden (Lindvall and Sebring 2005: 1067; Dahlström 2004), has been traditionally characterized as multicultural. Until the 1990s this model of immigrant policy enjoyed a political consensus among the political parties, however, since then the model has been tentatively questioned with voices being raised as to the necessity of immigrants’ integration in Swedish society and their acceptance of at least certain Swedish norms and values. Nevertheless, on the national level among the established political parties, we find a basic consensus behind the multicultural model of immigrant policy (Lindvall and Sebring 2006; Borevi 2002). According to Giugni et al. (2005), xenophobic and extreme-right claims, for example restricting or halting immigration, “should be facilitated where they ‘resonate’ better with the prevailing configuration of citizenship and where they are more legitimate, in the sense that they have a greater degree of acceptability in the public domain” (p. 148). We do not find support for this hypothesis in our study. Despite a dominant political elite consensus behind the multicultural model of immigration, the Sweden Democrats xenophobic messages resonated among a significant number of voters in some municipalities and less in others. In order to understand these variations in support for the Sweden Democrats we will have to bring further nuances to the notion of cultural-discursive factors for far-right mobilizations. Two factors can be included that underline the saliency of political culture for the success of the far-right movement’s capacity to mobilize voters in specific municipalities. Both factors allow for xenophobic claims to resonate in local political cultures that are more or less at odds with the cultural discourse in the national political opportunity structure. The one factor traces the historical connections in municipalities with the Swedish Nazi Movement during the inter-war and post-war periods. The other factor attempts to capture local public opinion on issues related to immigration and immigrant integration policies. This leads us to formulate two tentative hypotheses regarding the local political culture’s impact on the far-right vote. Firstly: *In municipalities, which were historically footholds for National Socialism in Sweden, we will find a far greater propensity for a far-right vote today than in municipalities, which lack historical ties to National Socialism.* Secondly: *In municipalities where the local media spaces are open to the messages of the Sweden Democrats and where the dominant ideology of multiculturalism is challenged, we will find greater support for the Sweden Democrats than in municipalities where this space is more restricted to these messages or where the ideology of multiculturalism is supported.*

In order to capture how local political opportunity structures shape voting behaviour for the far-right in regards to cultural-discursive factors we have concentrated upon a small sample of municipalities (kommuner) (see table 1). Three of the municipalities are significantly above the average voter support for the Sweden Democrats (Kristianstad, Trelleborg and Borlänge) and three are significantly under the national level of voter support (Östersund, Luleå and Gotland) (see table 1). All of the municipalities in our sample with weak voter support for the Sweden Democrats have left alliance governments, whereas two of the municipalities with strong electoral support for the Sweden Democrats have moderate-right minority government alliances.

**Table 1:** Electoral support in our sample population for the Sweden Democrats in the last two national and local elections (percent)

Municipality	2006		2010		Local government after 2010 election
	Vote SD local	Vote SD national	Vote SD local	Vote SD national	
Kristianstad	4,4	4,4	12,3	11,8	Moderate-right alliance; minority
Trelleborg	12,6	9,0	15,1	13,8	Moderate-right alliance; minority
Borlänge	4,0	3,6	10,9	9,2	Left alliance; minority
Östersund	0,0	1,3	2,3	3,1	Left alliance; Social Democrats and the Greens
Luleå	0,0	1,3	2,0	3,5	Left alliance
Gotland	1,3	1,6	2,4	3,2	Left alliance; power shift

*Note:* Data collected from the Swedish Election Authority (Valmyndigheten)

We attempt to roughly control for the socioeconomic and demographic variables employed by Rydgren and Ruth (2011), which they found interacted with the level of electoral support for the Sweden Democrats, in order to approximate the degree to which even local cultural opportunity structures had interaction effects on the level of electoral support (see table 2).

**Table 2:** Socioeconomic profiles among the municipalities in the sample population (2010)

Municipality	Population	Median income (SEK)	Percent with any given college or university education
Kristianstad	79,543	230,144	36
Trelleborg	42,219	231,091	29
Borlänge	49,251	235,291	30
Östersund	59,416	235,793	42
Luleå	74,178	244,027	43
Gotland	57,178	214,199	31

*Note:* Data collected from Statistics Sweden. Median income refers to the individual annual income in 2010. The level of education refers to the percentage of the population with any given college or university education, not the level of people holding a university degree.

Rydgren and Ruth (2011) found that the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats increased between the 2006 elections and the 2010 elections in municipalities with a higher proportion of non-European immigrants relative to other municipalities. Our research sample matches their findings (see table 3).

**Table 3:** Percent of the local population with a foreign background

Municipality	Born in a foreign country	Born in Sweden with both parents foreign born	Born in Sweden with		Total
			one parent born in Sweden and one foreign born	Born in Sweden with both parents born in Sweden	
Kristianstad	13,7	3,9	4,7	77,6	100
Trelleborg	14,2	4,2	7,0	74,5	100
Borlänge	13,4	3,8	6,0	76,7	100
Östersund	6,1	1,0	5,2	87,8	100
Luleå	8,9	1,9	8,1	81,1	100
Gotland	4,7	1,1	5,3	88,9	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>14,7</i>	<i>4,4</i>	<i>6,9</i>	<i>74,0</i>	<i>100</i>

*Note:* Data collected from Statistics Sweden (SCB),

Our sample is well in line with Rydgren and Ruth's (2011) findings that an increase in the number of refugees living in the municipalities during the period between the two elections strengthened the support for the Sweden Democrats (see table 4).

**Table 4:** Percent of the population outside EU/EFTA

Municipality	2010	2006
Trelleborg	7,3	6,8
Kristianstad	9,6	7,2
Borlänge	9,5	6,3
Östersund	3,7	2,9
Luleå	4,9	4,4
Gotland	2,4	2

*Note:* Data collected from Statistics Sweden.

The municipalities in our sample population correspond to the general findings in Rydgren and Ruth's study of 'demand-side factors', which explain variations in far-right voting patterns in Swedish municipalities according to the social marginality hypothesis and the ethnic competition hypothesis. While we recognize the importance of demand-side socioeconomic and demographic factors for support for the Sweden Democrats, we argue that this is only one side of the explanation. Even 'supply-side factors' factors, local political opportunity structures, impact the electoral support for the extreme right, in our case, support for the Sweden Democrats.

To operationalize the cultural-discursive factors in our analysis we gleaned historical connections to the Nazi/fascist movement among our sample of municipalities through a survey of previous research. To capture public opinion, which resonates with the claims of the Sweden Democrats, we analyzed the local newspapers in each of the six municipalities for a period of two months prior to the 2010 elections and one month after<sup>4</sup>.

#### *The historical legacy of extreme right support*

The Swedish national socialist, fascist and extreme nationalist movement has been divided between contending factions throughout its existence between 1919 to today. During the interwar period in the 1930s the Swedish National Socialists sought to acquire political power through democratic elections and their primary action strategy were highly organized propaganda campaigns to mobilize voters. However, divisions within the movement resulting in a flora of parties inhibited their success at the polls. It is first with the emergence of the Sweden Democrats that the movement is united behind one party (Lööv 1998).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Hadenius and Weibull (2005: 401), more than 90 per cent of the Swedish population reads a daily newspaper. Furthermore, the part, which is most frequently read in the daily newspaper, is the local news and the local paper is a highly influential actor in shaping local political opinion. In Sweden, most of the municipalities/regions only have one dominant newspaper, even if the government often subsidizes the second largest news source. Nonetheless, the reader is quite often solely informed about the local political agenda by means of a one-dimensional information-source represented by the dominant local print media.

According to Lööw (1990), the national socialist movement was considerably larger than what previous research has maintained. Rather than focusing on a single organisation she has estimated the total number of active supporters to exceed 30.000 in the mid-1930s. In the 1936 national elections the two major national socialist parties amassed 51,523 votes of a total of 2,295,255 votes cast, concentrated to Gothenburg and its regional coast, Stockholm and the southern most municipalities in Sweden where their electoral success was greatest (p. 269). In the 1938 and 1942 municipal elections the Swedish National Socialist Party acquired seats in a number of local councils either on their own or in election cartels with right-wing parties. These included scattered mandates in northern Sweden, amongst others, a municipal council seat in Luleå, which is included in our research sample as a municipality with weak support for the Sweden Democrats. In 1936 the Swedish National Socialist Party had the largest number of members and local organisations in the southern most region of Sweden (see also Berglund 1994 regarding the support for the national Socialists among the political, economic and cultural elite in the region;) where we find two of the municipalities in our sample population—Kristianstad (a major foothold for the party) and Trelleborg—two municipalities which in the 2010 elections the Sweden Democrats enjoyed considerable electoral success. The third municipality with strong support for the Sweden Democrats, Borlänge, had a relatively weak presence of the National Socialists. However, the three municipalities in our sample with weak support for the Sweden Democrats had in 1936 relatively significant numbers of National Socialist members in relation to the total local populations at that time in Luleå, Östersund and not least Gotland (Lööw 1990: 273-75). This can be perhaps partially explained by military deployment at that time with the presence of military regiments in these municipalities (in Sweden National Socialists had strong support among officers and under-officers in the military).

Lööw (1998: 24ff) maintains that the Nordic National Party is the intermediary link between the inter-war Swedish Nazi movement and the post-war neo-Nazi movement. The organisation has transmitted the traditions, ideology, and action and organisational strategies to new generations of followers. Hardcore factions, which emerged from this organisation include the Sweden Party, National Socialist Front and Save Sweden Swedish, all of which provided early recruits to the Sweden Democrats (Lodén and Larsson 1994). The Nordic National Party and its spin-off factions have their strongest geographical footholds in the regions of Skåne and Blekinge in southern Sweden where we find the strongest support for the Sweden Democrats, as well as scattered communities on the west coast of Sweden.

We found ambiguous support for our hypothesis that in municipalities, which were historically footholds for National Socialism in Sweden, we will find a far greater propensity for a far-right vote today than in municipalities, which lack historical ties to National Socialism. However, the movement's historical foothold in southern Sweden—both during the inter-war period and the post-war period—does appear to have influenced a cultural-discursive climate, which has been open to the Sweden Democrats messages as to ethnic minorities posing a threat to Swedish identity (see also Berglund 1994). These messages found a more hospitable breeding ground in municipalities located in these geographical regions. The exception would be the island of Gotland in our sample, which had a relatively robust presence of National Socialist sympathizers during the inter-war period, but this can probably be explained by the strong presence of the military. During the post-war period we have not been able to detect observable neo-Nazi movement activities on Gotland. The other two municipalities with weak support for the Sweden Democrats are located in northern Sweden in an area with little post-war support for the neo-Nazi movement and strong labour

movement traditions. The anomaly is the municipality of Borlänge with strong support for the Sweden Democrats, which has no legacy of National Socialism and strong labour movement traditions.

#### *Local media spaces*

The data for the media analysis is based on information retrieved from the local newspapers with the highest sales figures in each of the six municipalities: *Kristianstadsbladet* for Kristianstad, *Trelleborgs Allehanda* for Trelleborg, *Borlänge tidning* for Borlänge, *Östersundsposten* for Östersund, *Norrbottenskuriren* for Luleå and *Gotlands Allehanda* for Gotland. As there was more than one dominant newspaper with approximately the same sales figures in Luleå (*Norrbottenskuriren* and *Norrländska Socialdemokraten*) and Gotland (*Gotlands Allehanda* and *Gotlands Tidningar*), the newspapers with the more conservative profile were selected (*Norrbottenskuriren* and *Gotlands Allehanda*). Social Democratic newspapers (with approximately the same sales figures) were excluded. As we are measuring the political-discursive space open for the Sweden Democrats and their political challenges we excluded the left-wing Social Democratic newspapers. All of the newspapers in our research sample are either independent liberal or conservative, and thereby at least potentially more open for the far-right's political messages.

For the analysis of newspaper articles we examined all of the relevant articles that were published in the period extending from two months before the national and local elections on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2010 until one month after the election. Of all the newspaper articles published in this period only those were chosen for further analysis that matched the specific criteria defined by the authors. The articles needed to show at least one of three relevant keywords associated with the far-right movement and the Sweden Democrats. The chosen keywords were: *immigration*, *refugee* and *integration*. In addition, we examined how these keywords correlated with the actual party, the *Sweden Democrats*.

To gain an overview over the 1,317 articles matching the criteria laid out above, they were coded into different groups as shown in table 4. This table provides a quantitative synopsis containing all the articles published during the actual period and matching the keywords. The local newspaper in Kristianstad published almost double the number of articles containing the keyword "Sweden Democrats". Furthermore, the same pattern appears with regard to articles where the party name correlated with both the keywords "immigrant" and "refugee" (Table 5). We found the local media space in this municipality was particularly open for the political messages of the Sweden Democrats. A factor, we argue, that boosted their successful voter mobilization. In Kristianstad the local electoral support for SD increased with almost eight percent between the 2006 election and the 2010 election (see Table 1).

**Table 5:** Total number of articles for each concept/phrase in local newspapers during the period between 19-07-2010 and 19-10-2010 (number)

Local newspaper (L= Liberal; Cp= The Centre Party; C=Conservative)	Immigrant (immigrant + Sweden Democrats)	Refugee (refugee + Sweden Democrats)	Integration (integration + Sweden Democrats)	Sweden Democrats	Total (any of the four phrases included in article)
Kristianstadsbladet (L)	102 (42)	24 (10)	38 (12)	232	345
Trelleborgs Allehanda (L)	71 (17)	12 (3)	31 (8)	143	228
Borlänge tidning (L)	50 (14)	7 (2)	32 (6)	136	195
Östersunds-posten (Cp)	49 (19)	5 (2)	9 (5)	123	169
Norrbottns-Kuriren (C)	39 (13)	2 (0)	18 (5)	139	188
Gotlands Allehanda (C)	31 (13)	6 (0)	15 (4)	155	192

Note: There are more than one dominant newspaper with approximately the same extent in Luleå (*Norrbottnskuriren* and *Norrländska Socialdemokraten*) and Gotland (*Gotlands Allehanda* and *Gotlands Tidningar*). Therefore, in order to gain comparability, the conservative newspapers were selected (*Norrbottnskuriren* and *Gotlands Allehanda*).

The quantitative overview indicates that there is a vast variation in the articles dealing with the Sweden Democrats in the local media over the chosen period. The articles were further coded into different subcategories. Those were, among others, letters to the editor, editorials and regular news coverage. A significant number of the articles examined were letters to the editor and editorials expressing the personal opinions of the readers respectively, the editors. While only 28% of all the articles examined were reader's letters or editorials we found significant differences among the newspapers in our sample. Whereas 52% of the articles in *Gotlands Allehanda* reflected personal opinions, only 18% of the articles in *Trelleborgs Allehanda* do so. Opinion-reflecting articles are more frequent in the municipalities with a lower electoral support for the Sweden Democrats (Östersund, Luleå and Gotland) than in the other three municipalities (Kristianstad, Trelleborg and Borlänge) where the proportions of opinion-reflecting articles were lower. There are two interrelated explanations for this pattern. Firstly, the number of regular news articles covering the Sweden Democrats is higher in these latter three municipalities. We assumed that the Sweden Democrats are more active in the latter three municipalities, as there were more news articles that related to local events or current campaigns. Therefore, a possible outcome is that readers in the municipalities with a higher local electoral support acquire a more active view of the local branch of the party in the local media. Secondly, we argue that the media spaces in the three municipalities were more closed for a coverage of the Sweden Democrats electoral mobilization. In this situation opinion-reflecting articles, letters to the editor and editorials, remain as an avenue for entering the media space—for both Sweden Democrat supporters (letters to the editor) and critics (letters to the editor and editorials). While Sweden Democrat supporters used letters to the editor to bring their political messages forward, it was above all the critics in municipalities with weak support for the Sweden Democrats who used this channel to make their warnings heard.

In many articles, journalists connect the Sweden Democrats with their historical past, mainly their connection with the neo-Nazi/radical far-right movement. In articles including quotations from party members we found that they try to emphasize that the party has officially cut its connections with their racist historical legacy, thereby 'making-over' their party image. This is clearly the case when the Sweden Democrat's attempt to break with their past in letters to the editors and in interviews. Journalists are, however, tenacious in reminding readers of the party's less savoury past, which leaves the Sweden Democrat

supporters with the feeling that they were misinterpreted, as exemplified in several of the articles.

The local elections on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2010 can be regarded as a clear turning point for what has been written in the six newspapers. Compared to the situation prior to the election, the editorials in *Kristianstadsbladet* (four times) and *Trelleborgs Allehanda* (five times) more often used the word Islam in connection with the Sweden Democrats, e.g. when the party is described as an “Islam-critical party.” Prior to the election, both *Kristianstadsbladet* and *Trelleborgs Allehanda* do not show this combination. In the other four local newspapers, this keyword is only mentioned once or twice after the election. Further, the keyword “refugee” appears more frequently after the election, while “immigrant” and “integration” are mentioned more often before the election. In *Borlänge tidning*, *Kristianstads-bladet* and *Trelleborgs Allehanda*, the government’s immigration and integration politics were repeatedly criticised. This is an ongoing issue primarily before the election where the percentile is more frequent in these three municipalities with a significantly higher proportion of Sweden Democrat voters. In the local public domains of the three municipalities with strong support of the Sweden Democrats the anti-immigration and integration critical messages of the party resonated with the local media and the party was thereby awarded a legitimacy that they did not enjoy in the local media in the three municipalities with weak electoral support. In the terms of Koopmans and Statham (1999), their political messages appeared “sensible” and “realistic” to voters.

Election results show that the Sweden Democrats attracted more voters in the southern part of Sweden than in the north. Fridolfsson and Gidlund (2002) found in their factor analysis of 92 local parties in 1998 significant regional differences. The local parties in the north had a decidedly left-wing orientation, while the local parties in the south had a distinctly right-wing orientation. Furthermore, the local parties in the most southern region of Sweden were the most xenophobic, while the local parties in the north were the most positive to immigration (pp. 64-65). Their findings dovetail with the geographical variations in the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats. The party had its strongest support in the most southern Swedish municipalities and the weakest in the north with mid-region municipalities occupying a more varied position. While the results of our empirical media analysis show that the variations are complex, we could observe a different political climate in the northern part of the country compared to the south. In our media analysis the Sweden Democrat’s political agenda shows clear regional differences. Some of the articles written in the north (in *Norrlands-Kuriren* and *Östersundsposten*) deal with the relationship between the Swedish majority population and the indigenous population, the Same. The articles written in the south, in *Kristianstadsbladet* and *Trelleborgs Allehanda*, instead focus on immigrants and segregation. In these southern newspapers these issues are represented as threats to Swedish ethnic culture and the national identity. Immigration and integration issues are more often discussed in the south compared to the north (see Table 5). This might explain why the two local newspapers in the northern municipalities (Luleå and Östersund) have a lower correlation with Sweden Democrats and the three selected keywords (immigrant, refugee and integration). A significant number of the articles deal with the party’s will to preserve a strong Swedish ethnic identity and Swedish traditions. This is clearly visible in all six newspapers, which represent the Sweden Democrat party as an organisation that feels threatened by local ethnic minorities, even though the origin of the “threat” towards the Swedish national identity varies across the regions and the resonance as to the viability of the ‘threat’ varies between the local media domains.



### **Conclusions**

Preliminary analyses from the 2010 elections in Sweden provide us with a rough ‘socio-economic picture’ of the ‘average’ Sweden Democratic voter: an unemployed male member of the blue collar union confederation LO between the age of 18-29. However, we also know that there were significant variations in the percentage of the vote that the Sweden Democrats achieved across the 290 governing municipalities (kommuner) in the country. In other words, the ‘average’ Sweden Democrat did not vote for the Sweden Democrats to the same degree in all of the municipalities: significant differences, for example, could be found between ‘northern’ and ‘southern’ municipalities, between major cities and middle-sized cities, and between urban and rural municipalities/counties. Furthermore, and most importantly, the party was more successful in some municipalities and less in others in mobilizing the vote among broader sections of the local population in addition to the ‘average’ Sweden Democrat voter. While we recognize the influence of socioeconomic and demographic factors for support for the Sweden Democrats, we argue that even the local political context influences the relative success or failure of the party’s voter mobilization in the municipalities. Local political and cultural opportunity structures—political context— influence the success of the extreme-right’s potential to mobilize support in the form of voter preferences.

We found that success on the national level was not won overnight. Voter mobilization is a process, which was enhanced by the Sweden Democrats’ relative success in the 2006 municipal elections. Their success in 2006 paved the way for their later success in the 2010 national election. Local municipal election success and subsequent representation in local municipal councils acted as a ‘springboard’ for their mobilization efforts in the following national election. Furthermore, we found that what we defined as ‘weak’ local governments acted as windows of opportunity for the extreme right Sweden Democrat Party’s voter mobilization. In contrast, ‘strong’ local governments where traditional left-right block politics dominated undermined the political opportunities for the party’s voter mobilization. In regards to the local cultural opportunity structures we found ambiguous support for the hypothesis that a historical legacy of inter-war and post-war Nazi movement presence enhanced the voter mobilization potential for the Sweden Democrats. Nevertheless, we conclude that the overall strong voter backing for the Sweden Democrats in the regions of Skåne and Blekinge in southern most Sweden (significantly above that found in the rest of the country) is related to the regions’ legacy of Nazi and neo-Nazi support. This legacy helps pave the way for the political messages of a far-right party. Lastly, we found that in the local public domains of the municipalities in our study, which had significantly higher proportions of Sweden Democrat votes, the local media was open to the political messages of the party. The party’s anti-immigration and integration critical arguments resonated with those in the local media providing the party with legitimacy and their messages with a degree of sensibleness. In conclusion, place matters! On the local level, demand-side factors are joined by the supply-side factors studied in this paper in together explaining the emergence of far-right political parties and their relative success at the polls.

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