

Title of workshop:

Defending or Damaging Democracy?

The Establishment's Reactions to Political Extremists in Liberal Democracies

Outline of Topic:

In every democratic system, there are political actors the establishment despises. Justified or not, the establishment tends to present itself as the defender of particular values important to citizens and the political order, and to portray the unwanted actors as extremist, i.e., threats to these values and the political order. In addition, it may take action against these actors, justifying it as necessary to defend such values. There are various ways in which the establishment reacts to such extremists, of which this workshop discusses four.

First, systematic boycotts. Historically, cordons sanitaires have been established in Western Europe around Socialists, Fascists, Communists, and right-wing radical parties. Second, the establishment of judicial measures meant to contain extremism. Communist, and right-wing radicalists have faced prosecution and bans. Recent examples include efforts to prosecute Marine Le Pen, and to ban the German NPD. Third, civil society reactions. In Cold-War Western Europe, Communists were dismissed from their jobs, and faced social sanctions. Nowadays, the establishment often turns a blind eye to antifascist violence against right-wing radicals and facilitates mass protest against them. Fourth, mainstream media responses. Western media demonized the far left in the 1950s. Recent reactions include Swedish newspapers' systematically ignoring Sweden Democrats, and a Dutch daily's campaign against the Socialist Party.

Although these reactions to extremism frequently occur, their origins are relatively unknown. Why do some extremists face boycotts, trials, stigma, and media hostility while others do not? We also know little about consequences of these responses. How do they affect public opinion, or extremists' success? Answering these questions, key to maintaining the quality of democracy, requires international cooperation and comparison. This workshop brings together scholars offering fresh approaches to this understudied topic. In engaging in comparative-empirical analysis, its participants will further our understanding of causes and effects of various responses to extremists.

Relation to Existing Research:

Reactions by the establishment are hardly mentioned, if at all, in studies on extremist political actors such as communist (e.g., Botella & Ramiro 2003; Tannahill 1976) or right-wing radical parties (e.g., Kitschelt & McGann, 1995; Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005). Exceptions include a few more descriptive studies (Donselaar, 1995; Eatwell & Mudde, 2004; Fennema, 2000; Husbands, 2002; Minkenberg, 2006). Our project is informed by, and relates to, three strands of the literature: (1) studies of responses to political extremism, (2) studies of political repression, and (3) studies of anti-immigrant voting. Although they lay a solid scholarly foundation for this proposal to build from, each of these literatures has left room for crucial new work.

(1) Studies of responses to political extremism tend to take a normative approach, identifying particular 'unwanted' political actors and addressing the question of how to combat them (e.g., W. Downs, 2001). Legal measures against certain political actors have been considered crucial not only for fighting "the extreme right" (Donselaar, 1995) but also for "defending democracy" more generally (Capoccia, 2005). There is not much empirical evidence for its effectiveness, however (a notable exception is Capoccia, 2005). More generally, this literature lacks an empirical foundation. The proposed workshop takes a step towards filling this gap by rigorous empirical assessment of intended and unintended effects of legal action.

(2) Studies of political repression take a radically different perspective. The term “repression” has regularly been used to describe legal action against anti-immigrant actors (Fennema, 2000; Minkenberg, 2006). Electoral effects of repression, or of the related concept of “legal control” (Barkan, 2006), have hardly ever been explored (for an exception see Beyerlein & Andrews, 2008). More generally, a key problem with this literature is that findings have remained inconclusive, perhaps as a result of assessing a wide variety of effects of a wide variety of repression forms in a wide variety of contexts (for an overview, see Earl, 2011). Our workshop, by contrast, would focus on a limited number of types of effect of two types of (what some would call) repression, in European countries only. The proposed workshop also adds to this literature by examining the conditionality of effects of such ‘repression’ on case, coverage, citizen, and country traits.

(3) Studies of anti-immigrant voting face the puzzle of why some anti-immigrant parties fail while others succeed. Existing theories on the electoral performance of anti-immigrant parties include explanations focusing on characteristics of their voters (e.g., Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002), of the parties themselves (e.g., Art, 2011), of competing parties (e.g., Meguid, 2005), of the countries in which they operate (e.g., Arzheimer, 2009), and of news media content in these countries (e.g., Walgrave & De Swert, 2004). These explanations to some extent fail to explain the variation in anti-immigrant parties’ performance across time and countries. This is because voter, party, country, and media content traits are relatively stable over time and relatively similar across Europe. Our proposed workshop presents a complementary explanation.

The idea that these non-policy-based responses to extremists matter is analogous to the recent insight that other actors’ policy-based reactions to the presence of anti-immigrant parties are crucial for anti-immigrant party electoral performance – i.e., changing policy stances in reaction to the presence of anti-immigrant parties (Meguid, 2005). Finally, one of the proposed workshop directors has studied the electoral effects of (non-policy-based) political (Spanje & Brug, 2007; 2009; Spanje, 2010) and legal (Spanje & Weber, 2010; Spanje & De Vreese, 2012a; 2012b) responses to the existence of anti-immigrant parties.

Likely Participants:

Likely participants include the members of the 2011 APSA Annual National Conference panel “Legal Responses to Political Extremism”: Giovanni Capoccia (Oxford), Erik Bleich (Middlebury), William Downs (Georgia State), Leonard Weinberg (Nevada), Ami Pedahzur (Texas), Susanne Martin (Texas), Arie Perliger (SUNY), Claes de Vreese (Amsterdam) and Chris Davenport (Notre Dame). This panel was organised by the proposed workshop convenors. More generally, participants may include members of the following four Standing Groups:

Standing Group on Extremism & Democracy (endorsement received from SG convenor David Art, 16/1/13)

Standing Group on Political Parties (endorsement received from SG convenor Richard Luther, 16/1/13)

Standing Group on Law & Courts

Standing Group on Public Opinion and Voting Behaviour in a Comparative Perspective.

Type of Papers required:

We aim at attracting papers concerning theory, empirical studies, and combinations of the two.

Funding:

Joost van Spanje has funding from the Dutch Science Foundation (NOW) that can be used for organising the Workshop following an NOW 'Veni' personal grant for a three-year research project, entitled "Characteristics and consequences of soft repression of political ideas by news media" [2012], €250,000.

Biographical Notes:

Joost van Spanje is assistant-professor of political communication and quantitative methodology, University of Amsterdam. He won the 2010 Dutch Political Science Association (NKWP) Dissertation Award and a 2012 Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) three-year 'Veni' research grant. His research interests include political behavior, electoral studies, and political communication. Joost's work has been published in eighteen articles in ISI-ranked international journals, among which two in West European Politics, two in European Union Politics, and three in the European Journal of Political Research.

Michael Minkenberg is professor of political science at European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). From 2007-10 he held the Max Weber Chair for German and European Studies at NYU. His research interests include the radical right in liberal democracies; immigration, nationalism and the politics of citizenship; and religion and politics in Western societies. He was Speaker of the German Political Science Association "Comparative Politics" Section (2001-2007). He currently is member of the editorial board of the journal "Comparative European Politics".

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