

The Organizational Origins of the Contemporary Radical Right

The Case of Belgium

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Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, radical right parties emerged in nearly every country in western Europe.¹ As many scholars have noted, the rise of these new parties was driven by a common set of factors, including immigration, electoral dealignment, postmodernization, and globalization.² But if these parties were responding to similar concerns, the foundations upon which they attempted to construct party organizations differed immensely. Although scholars of the radical right have recently turned to the importance of party organization for electoral success, little is known about the factors that influence this variable.³ Organizational strength, or lack thereof, is a product of previous legacies of far right activity.

It is conventionally thought that the far right was decimated across western Europe following the second world war. To be sure, the parties and organizations that collected former Nazis, fascists, and collaborators were shadows of their former selves, and many were marginal players in politics and society. However, there was a significant degree of variation. In some states, the far right landscape was essentially destroyed and contained within it a miniscule number of unreformed fascists or, in later decades, neo-Nazis who, in the rare cases in which they garnered any attention, were universally denounced. In other states, however, there were far right parties and organizations that attracted a significant number of members and were broadly, although certainly not universally, viewed as legitimate actors within politics and society. Radical right parties were unable to build functioning organizations in the first instance but were able in the second.

Flanders and Wallonia, two regions of Belgium that possess their own party systems, illustrate this argument. In Flanders the postwar far right was incorporated into a mainstream nationalist movement that dates back over a century. Although the Flemish far right was suppressed after the second world war because of its collaboration with the Nazis, it quickly reconstituted itself in one faction of a Flemish nationalist party, the *Volksunie*, and in a range of other nationalist organizations and informal social networks. When the *Vlaams Blok* (renamed *Vlaams Belang* in 2004) split from the *Volksunie* in

1979, the new party was able to build a strong party organization from the resources that the radical wing of the Flemish movement provided. Wallonia, by contrast, never possessed a strong Wallonian nationalist subculture, and what did exist was largely leftist in orientation. The postwar far right consisted of fringe groups that were the remnants of a fascistic political movement, the Rexists, which had been all but destroyed in the 1930s. When the radical right *Front National* (FN) was founded in 1985, it was built largely from right-wing extremist elements that were unable, and indeed often unwilling, to build a functioning party organization. As a result, the FN has remained on the political margins since its foundation.

Very little has been written on radical right party organizations. Belgium is an ideal case to trace the causal mechanisms linking organization to electoral success. Standard explanations for variation in the radical right's success do not apply to it. The divergent fates of the Walloon and Flemish radical right parties are in large part a continuation of historic trends. Twenty-seven interviews with politicians from the *Vlaams Belang* and the *Front National*, in addition to secondary sources, provide empirical support for this article.⁴

Organization and Radical Right Success

While a growing number of scholars maintains that party organization is crucial to the long-term electoral success of the radical right, there have been few systematic efforts to test this proposition.⁵ The lack of reliable data on party organization has been a chief reason for this lacuna. Many radical right parties, including both the *Vlaams Belang* and the *Front National*, are notoriously secretive about their internal workings. As a result, even country experts may have virtually no knowledge of the relevant organizational features of radical right parties.⁶ In the most comprehensive study to date, Carter finds a strong, positive relationship between organizational strength and the electoral success of the radical right. In her statistical models, organizational capacity accounts for nearly half the variance in the success of radical right parties across western Europe over the last several decades.⁷ The origins of a strong organization lie outside Carter's analysis.

Of course, causation could potentially run in the opposite direction. Parties that do well electorally are able to recruit more members and more candidates and to receive state funds to strengthen their organizations. It is also true that electoral success does not automatically strengthen party organization. There are many examples of flash parties that did well in elections but failed to build organizations. And the Belgian *Front National* is just one example of a party that began to fracture after its greatest electoral success. There are also examples of parties, such as the *Vlaams Blok* and the Norwegian Progress Party in the early 1980s, that possessed strong organizations before they achieved electoral success. Thus, although electoral success is likely to lead to organization building, it is

also necessary to consider the effect of organization on electoral success.

It is not difficult to imagine why, *ceteris paribus*, a strong organization produces more electoral success than a weak one. One component of a strong organization is the existence of a party rank and file to mobilize potential voters. While mobilization includes activities such as canvassing, telephone calls, and direct mail, both experimental and empirical studies find that only personal canvassing raises turnout rates.⁸ If it is assumed that the reach of canvassing increases with the size of the party rank and file, apparently a safe assumption, then the greater the number of party members is, the greater will be their ability to mobilize potential radical right voters.

A second causal mechanism linking party strength to electoral outcomes is the ability to form electoral lists. A party with few members—or with no local party organizations in some areas—may have trouble fielding candidates to contest all constituencies in national parliamentary elections. While a party may do better by concentrating its scarce personnel in a few constituencies rather than spreading its resources thin, the more constituencies a party is able to contest, the better its final total is likely to be. This principle also applies to local electoral contests, and the extent to which a party is able to field electoral lists in municipal elections says a great deal about its organizational strength.

The third and probably most important mechanism is the maintenance of party unity. Party splitting leads, under most circumstances, to a decrease in electoral support for the original party. Although the new parties that break away from the original party may be small, they are likely to draw at least some votes from it, as well as some party elites and members. Significant defections and high degrees of factionalism are also likely to damage the party's reputation and decrease electoral support.

All new parties face the difficult tasks of attracting a rank and file, finding leaders, and avoiding excessive factionalism. Yet in the absence of preexisting resources radical right parties have an especially difficult time achieving them. The pool of party members and qualified candidates for office is likely to be quite small, for several reasons. First, like most new parties, radical right parties in their early periods of development do not have a functioning party organization or the youth organizations or other associations that established parties normally draw upon for political recruitment.⁹ Second, social norms against working on the behalf of radical right parties, coupled with the fear of losing their jobs, often prevent sympathetic individuals from joining and campaigning.¹⁰ Radical right parties are thus often starved for candidates and activists. They often do not have the human capital to contest elections in more than a small percentage of constituencies; they lack both the candidates to fill the party lists and the activists to distribute election brochures, canvass neighborhoods, and fulfill all the other mundane but crucial tasks of campaigning.

The lack of organization, however, does not always preclude an initial electoral breakthrough. Indeed, there have been several cases in which radical right parties have pulled off an electoral coup either regionally or nationally with virtually no party on

the ground. Some notable examples include New Democracy in the 1991 Swedish parliamentary elections, the DVU in the Sachsen-Anhalt regional elections, and the List Pim Fortuyn in the 2002 Dutch parliamentary election.¹¹

Nevertheless, the recruitment patterns of these types of parties lead to defections, factionalism, and the formation of splinter parties. When their ranks are thin, radical right parties are often forced to accept just about anyone willing to stand for office. And when they win far more seats than expected, they need to scramble to find people to occupy them. As a result, many of the elected officials from radical right parties are political novices, political opportunists, or some combination of the two. The novices often feel overwhelmed in their new positions and either resign or are pushed out. Furthermore, the novices often become easy targets for the media and create an aura of incompetence around the party. The opportunists, who have not been socialized within the organization and possess no loyalty to it, are likely to defect to other parties or try to form their own independent power bases.

There is a third problem that affects all radical right parties but is likely to be particularly severe for those that are building their organizations essentially from scratch: the presence of the right-wing extremist milieu. Members of this milieu include unreconstructed fascists, neo-Nazis, Holocaust denialists, and violent militants. It exists in some form in nearly every western state. One can think of these right-wing extremists as the radical fringe of the far right landscape. When a new radical right party is formed, they often flock to it, and it is difficult for a party without a rank and file to turn away highly motivated volunteers. However, the influx of these activists brings with it serious costs. For one, right-wing extremists tend not to see the importance of political compromise or of reaching out to a broader electorate. To borrow from Kitschelt's analysis of the formation of left-libertarian parties, right-wing extremists are interested, not in electoral competition, but in constituency representation.¹² They tend to be poor organizational builders. The factions and rivalries that characterize a right-wing extremist subculture are also likely to be reproduced within the new party. Right-wing extremist subculture is usually rife with personal and ideological rivalries that lead to the proliferation of small factions that are often as hostile to one another as they are to mainstream political parties and parliamentary democracy. When a radical right party is composed of multiple groups within the right-wing extremist milieu, there are likely to be frequent leadership challenges, a high degree of infighting, and party splits. Finally, the activities that right-wing extremists tend to pursue are also detrimental to successful party building. Since many of these individuals have criminal pasts or continue to belong to right-wing extremist organizations, they often bring radical right parties into trouble with the legal authorities, the net effect of which is likely to be a decrease in political recruitment. Moreover, the presence of violent individuals, neo-Nazi skinheads, and Holocaust deniers within a radical right party often leads to intense, and unwanted, media exposure and increased stigmatization.

The presence of preexisting far right organizations and political parties, as opposed to merely right-wing extremist fringe groups, does not eliminate all of the problems of political recruitment and retention. However, it does mitigate them. Such parties and organizations constitute “recruitment networks” for radical right parties.¹³ The latter can draw upon the former and reach a pool of committed activists to fill their party ranks, party lists, and elected seats. These individuals are less likely to defect once in office, for they have been socialized within an organization and are more likely than political newcomers to feel a sense of loyalty to the party. Finally, when far right organizations exist and possess some legitimacy in politics and society, radical right parties are less reliant on the extremist fringes for members. To be sure, many radical right parties that build on preexisting resources do have extremists in their ranks. However, the presence of more moderate members and leaders tends to dilute their influence and allows the party the luxury of banning them should their activities become too deleterious.

What Can Be Learned from Belgium?

Belgium provides an excellent laboratory to test arguments about the success and failure of the radical right. The country is divided into three regional units: the bilingual Brussels Capital Region, the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders, and the French-speaking region of Wallonia.¹⁴ Belgium has a confederal party model, and national parties no longer exist. Except in the complex situation in Brussels, a Flemish citizen can not vote for a French-speaking politician, or vice versa. Hence both of the larger regions have their own party systems and can be treated as two separate cases. Most important for this study, the two regions also possess significant variation on the dependent variable: the electoral strength of the radical right. The *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest, VB) has been one of the strongest radical right parties in western Europe over the last two decades. By contrast, the Wallonian *Front National* (National Front, FN) is generally considered a marginal radical right party, even though it performed relatively well in the 2004 regional elections in Wallonia. Table 1 presents the results of the two parties in federal elections over the last several decades. The difference is even more striking when one looks at the results of communal elections (see Table 3).

Belgium is also interesting since it defies many standard explanations of the radical right's success and failure. Since the electoral system is the same in the two regions, at least for federal elections, the institutional differences that some scholars argue explain cross-national variation in the success of the radical right do not apply to Belgium.¹⁵ Unemployment, another variable that scholars have linked to far right success, can not help explain the success of the VB and the failure of the FN, since unemployment has been far higher in Wallonia than in Flanders.¹⁶ A third possibility is that differences in immigration between the two regions explain the divergent trajectories of the radical

Table 1 Election Results of *Vlaams Belang*, 1981–2004, in Flemish Region and of *Front National*, 1991–2004, in Wallonian Region in Federal Parliament (Percentage of Valid Votes)

Year	Percentage Vlaams Belang	Percentage Front National
1981	1.8	
1985	2.2	
1987	3.0	
1991	10.3	1.7
1995	12.2	5.5
1999	15.3	4.1
2003	17.9	5.6
2004	24.2	8.1

Source: Ministry of Interior

Note: As Belgium has a confederal party model, electoral results are given per region. The 2004 results are for the regional elections for the Flemish and Wallonian Parliament.

right. Many scholars have indeed argued that high levels of immigration increase support for radical right parties, although there is currently a scholarly debate over how much immigration matters and under what conditions.¹⁷ Yet, however one conceptualizes the link between immigration and radical right support, this variable is not significant for Belgium. Foreigners comprise 10.3 percent of the population of Wallonia and only 4.8 percent of the population of Flanders.¹⁸ A fourth possibility is that Wallonians are simply more tolerant of immigrants than the Flemish. Yet previous work shows that the regional difference in electoral results can not be explained by differences in voters' attitudes.¹⁹ Indeed, as Patrick Hossay writes, many universalist explanations for the rise of the radical right "would lead us to expect the radical right to be stronger in Wallonia than in Flanders."²⁰ To understand why the reverse occurred, historical factors need to be considered.

The Far Right Landscape in Flanders and Wallonia

The *Vlaamse Beweging* (Flemish movement), an umbrella term for the heterogeneous groups that have fought for Flemish interests, dates from the latter half of the nineteenth century. These groups, which ran the gamut from political parties to cultural organizations,

represented the demands of Dutch speakers who battled the francophone elite. Whereas the Flemish movement had not previously been dominated by far right ideology, the foundation of the authoritarian and Nazi-financed *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (Flemish National Union, VNV) in 1933 marked a decided step in this direction. The party received 13.5 percent of the vote in Flanders and Brussels in the 1936 elections and 15 percent in 1939. In marked contrast to the Wallonian Rexists, the VNV not only consolidated itself but was expanding its voter base and membership before the war. It is thus not surprising that a substantial minority of the Flemish population collaborated with the Nazis after the VNV offered its full cooperation with the German occupiers in the hope of gaining independence for Flanders. The VNV successfully recruited Flemish elites and was deeply rooted in Flemish society.

The purge of collaborators immediately following the war nearly destroyed the Flemish movement and the Flemish far right. In the long term, however, the pattern of postwar justice in Belgium provided Flemish nationalists with both a geographic concentration in the city of Antwerp and a narrative of victimization. Those Flemish collaborators who were not executed or imprisoned lost their civil rights, and these so-called *incivieken* (those unworthy of citizenship) still numbered 150,000 in 1954.²¹ Many of them were legally required to leave their native villages and settled in Antwerp, which provided protective anonymity and economic possibilities.²² Especially in Antwerp, collaborators were widely viewed as well-meaning, if politically misguided; patriots whose alliance with Nazi Germany was driven by their desire for Flemish independence. They were presented as victims of an anti-Flemish Belgian state. This interpretation persists to this day within mainstream Flemish society, not only within far right circles.

Since a significant part of the Flemish nationalists were *incivieken*, former Flemish nationalist politicians could not be openly politically active during the first several years after the war. However, covert political activity continued. In 1949 several radical Flemish nationalist organizations were founded, including the antirepression party *Vlaamse Concentratie* (Flemish Concentration, VC) and the direct action group, *Vlaamse Militanten Orde* (Order of Flemish Militants, VMO). The latter was charged with defending the meetings of the VC and soon morphed into a paramilitary organization.²³ The true political regeneration of Flemish nationalism, however, occurred when the catholic *Volksunie* (People's Union, VU) was formed before the 1954 electoral campaign. Much like the Austrian VdU, the precursor to the FPÖ, the party initially drew its leaders from nationalist circles that had not collaborated with the Nazis but nevertheless soon became the party of the "blacks" (former collaborators). There were former VNV politicians within its party executive, and although most founders and party workers did not have a political past, most had been confronted with the consequences of the repression in their immediate environment.²⁴ Like its predecessors, the VU pressed for cultural and political autonomy and eventual independence, but its central demand in its first decade was amnesty for former collaborators. The party won a modest six percent of the vote in

Flanders in 1961. A decade later, however, the VU won 18.8 percent and became the third largest party in Flanders.

In addition to the VU, several other organizations gathered radical Flemish nationalists. The first was the intellectual group *Were Di*, which sought to preserve what it viewed as the central features of Flemish national identity.²⁵ In 1976 some younger members of *Were Di*, feeling that the group's ideology and actions were too tepid, formed the direct action group *Vorpoost*. Like the VMO, *Vorpoost* was organized along paramilitary lines and even set up training camps in the Ardennes.²⁶ Youth and student organizations have also been integral components of the Flemish nationalist movement. The *Vlaams-nationalistische Jeugdverband* (VNJ) dates from 1961. In 1971 a more nationally oriented group split from the VNJ and founded the *Algemeen Vlaams Nationaal Jeugdverband* (AVNJ).²⁷ Also in the 1970s the *Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverband* (KVHV) transformed itself into a militant Flemish Nationalist organization. This group became even further radicalized in 1976, when the *Nationalistische Studentenverband* (NSV) split from the KVHV. The NSV formed an organization of high school students, the *Nationalistisch JongStudentenVerbond*, in 1981; it created several dozen sections throughout Flanders.²⁸

The radicalization of the Flemish nationalist movement in the 1960s and 1970s began to affect the *Volksunie*, which contained both far right and centrist factions.²⁹ These rifts were exposed in 1977, when the VU leadership signed the so-called Egmont Pact that called for the federalization of Belgium. The less moderate elements within the VU, and within the broader Flemish movement in general, viewed the pact as too great of a compromise and rebelled against the VU's leadership. While the story is too complex to present here, the result of the VU's signing of the Egmont Pact was the departure of several prominent leaders, a backlash from the party's base, and the eventual foundation of the *Vlaams Blok* in May 1979.

The support of the radical wing of the Flemish national movement was critical for the VB during its early years, for the party did not immediately enjoy electoral success. The VB garnered only 1.8 percent of the vote in the elections of 1981, 2.2 percent in 1985, and 3.0 percent in 1987. The real change in the party's fortunes came when the VB dropped its exclusive focus on traditional Flemish nationalist interests and adopted an anti-immigrant program similar to other radical right parties in western Europe. If the Flemish nationalist movement was important for organization building, electoral surveys show that separatist motives are important for only a small percentage of the VB's electorate. In 1999, only 4 percent of the VB's electorate mentioned Flemish nationalism as a reason to vote for the radical right party, as opposed to 27 percent who mentioned immigration.³⁰ In some ways, however, the shift toward opposition to immigration was not a major departure from the party's core ideology. As Filip Dewinter once put it, "how can a party resist the Francification of Brussels without resisting its Moroccanization?"³¹ The VB's electoral breakthrough came in the 1988 local elections, when it won twenty-three seats in ten local councils and polled 17.7 percent of the vote in Antwerp. After the

1991 parliamentary elections, in which the VB won 10.3 percent overall and became the largest party in Antwerp, there was no doubt that the party had consolidated its place in the Flemish party system.

Wallonia has never produced a regional movement equivalent to the *Vlaamse Beweging* in Flanders. As the ruling minority in Belgium, there was little need to fight for francophone interests, and in fact Belgian nationalism was a much stronger force in the region than Wallonian nationalism ever was. Moreover, Walloon nationalism has always had a leftist orientation with strong roots in the labor unions. Since the mid 1980s it has been nearly completely absorbed by the francophone socialist party (PS).

The high-water mark of the francophone far right occurred in the 1930s, with the rise of Léon Degrelle and his Rexist Party. The Rexists gained a surprising 11.5 percent of the vote and twenty-one of 202 seats in the elections of May 1936 and appeared unstoppable in the months afterward. Degrelle's success was shortlived, however, as political forces within Belgium mounted a vigorous defense of democracy.³² The keys to this defense were twofold: the prevention of the defection of the Catholic Party's right flank to the Rexists and the interventions of King Leopold III. In the 1939 elections the party gained only 4.4 percent of the vote after eight Rexist MPs and senators resigned from it.³³ The comparison with the VNV is striking. While the Flemish far right was on the rise before the occupation, "the Rexists remained an isolated and largely irrelevant group."³⁴ When the German occupiers installed Degrelle, he was very much a marginal figure without any significant basis of support—the Quisling of Belgium. Given the size of the movement, it was quite easy to destroy the remnants of the Rexists after the end of the war.

Unlike the VNV within Flanders, the Rexists were viewed as utter traitors within Wallonian society.³⁵ Because the environment was so repressive and collaboration was so demonized, Walloon collaborators never created the types of support networks that existed in Flanders, and no amnesty movement for collaborators formed. There was a small spike in organizational activity following the independence of Zaire (Congo) and the return of francophone colonists in 1960, but the ultranationalist organizations they created quickly dissolved.³⁶ The Belgian francophone far right was thus one of the weakest in all of western Europe in the postwar period, probably numbering only a few hundred activists into the 1970s.³⁷ This weakness, however, did not prevent the formation of a bewildering array of right-wing extremist *groupuscules* during this period, many of which operated clandestinely and embraced violence. They included the *Centre Politique des Indépendants et Cadres Chrétien* (CEPIC), the *Mouvement d'Action Civique* (MAC), *Jeune Europe*, the *Front de la Jeunesse* (FJ), the *Mouvement social populaire* (MSP), *Delta Nord*, and *L'Assault*. Many of these groups failed to survive into the 1980s, however. FJ, for example, was disbanded in 1983 when many of its members were found guilty of belonging to a private militia. The remnants regrouped into the *Parti des Forces Nouvelles* (PFN), which continued to practice violence and openly praise Rexism and Nazism.

In 1985 Daniel Féret, who had been active in *Jeune Europe*, founded the Wallonian

Front National (FN). Féret made no attempt to hide the fact that he was copying the *Front National* of Jean-Marie Le Pen, taking the French party's name along with many of its symbols and slogans. He tried to integrate the various right-wing extremist elements, such as the PFN, the MSP, Delta, and *L'Assault*, into the new party. The PFN passionately resisted the FN's embrace but ultimately dissolved in 1991, and some of its key figures, including Patrick Cocriamont, Daniel Leskens, and Patrick Sessler, entered into Féret's party. These individuals, like many individuals in the FN, were directly tied to violent organizations and would face a number of legal challenges.

For the first five years of its existence, the FN tallied miniscule vote totals in the elections in which it competed. In the 1985 and 1987 legislative elections it captured 0.5 percent and 0.9 percent of the vote, respectively. After gaining only several seats in communal and regional parliaments in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the FN achieved a breakthrough in the mid 1990s, winning seventy-two seats in communal parliaments in 1994 and 5.5 percent of the vote and eight seats in the Wallonian regional elections. However, the 1999 regional elections and the 2000 communal elections proved disastrous for the party. For example, whereas the party won forty-six seats in municipal councils in Brussels in 1994, it won only two in 2000. The FN seems to have recovered better in Wallonia; it managed its best score ever in the 2004 regional elections (8.1 percent) and again won twenty-six seats on municipal councils. However, it is still a marginal player nationally. It elected only one member each to the federal chamber and senate in 2003 (the *Vlaams Blok* elected eighteen and five members, respectively).

In sum, while the *Vlaams Blok* emerged from a dense network of far right organizations that were historically rooted in Flemish society, the *Front National* had no such legacy on which to build. These different starting points affected recruitment, factionalism, and right-wing extremism in the two parties.

Recruitment

The Flemish nationalist organizations provided the VB with a ready-made rank and file and organizational network. The majority of the early members came from the *Volksumie*, and the new party adopted its organizational structures.³⁸ Local branches of organizations like *Voorpost*, *Were Di*, and the VMO doubled as local party branches of the VB in the early years of the party's history.³⁹ The members of these organizations provided a stream of highly committed activists who volunteered their time and allowed the party to mount permanent electoral campaigns. Numbering somewhere between two and three thousand, these "political soldiers" did the "dirty work" of campaigning, stuffing tens of thousands of mailboxes with campaign material and postering the city of Antwerp.⁴⁰ These activists also recruited others from the Flemish nationalist movement, such as the individual whose political biography, quoted at length below is typical for a *Vlaams Bloc* party member.

My grandfather was with the VNV. He was a teacher and pro-Flemish....After the war, my grandfather spent several years in prison....My grandmother also did some time. So I more or less grew up in the Flemish Movement...When I was 6, I became a member of the VNJ. It's an ideological youth movement, and many children of Flemish nationalists are members. You are given certain values and a particular vision: the pan-Dutch and right-wing view in general. When I was 16, I joined the VNJ leaders' corps....At a certain point, X asked me to become a member of *Voorpost*. I agreed, because ideologically I backed *Voorpost*, and because I had already participated before....It's assumed that someone from my background knows what *Voorpost* is about. In fact, not much has changed....I recently became a member of the *Vlaams Blok*.⁴¹

The party's membership probably doubled between 1980 and 1985 and has grown steadily since then. Table 2 lists membership estimates by both VB and FN politicians.

Table 2 Estimates of Party Membership

Year	Estimate of VB (reported)	Estimate of FN (reported)
1980	1,231 ⁱ	
1985	3,698 ⁱⁱ	
1988	2,000-3,000 ⁱⁱⁱ	250 ^{iv}
1992	7,639 ^v ; 8,000-9,000 ^{vi}	
1995	11,000 ^{vii}	1,000 ^{viii}
1996	12,000 ^{ix}	
2006	20,000- 25,000 ^x	400 ^{xi}

ⁱ According to political scientist Kris Deschouwer in Swyngedouw, p. 61.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with De Man.

^{iv} According to Féret in Andrea Rea, "Le Front national. Faiblesse institutionnelle et force électorale", in Pascal Delwit and J.M. De Waele, *Les partis politique en Belgique* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1997), pp. 193-204.

^v According to Frank Vanhecke in Mudde, *Ideology of Extreme Right*, p. 93.

^{vi} According to Filip Dewinter in Mudde, Ibid., p. 93.

^{vii} According to Dewinter in Swyngedouw, 1998.

^{viii} According to Féret in Rea.

^{ix} According to Karl Dillen in Van der Brink 1996, p. 123.

^x Interview with Schoofs.

^{xi} Interview with Pire.

Although these numbers are likely exaggerated, the difference between the two parties is striking.⁴²

The leading figures in the *Vlaams Blok* were drawn nearly exclusively from the *Volksunie*, *Were Di*, and *Vorpoost*, the VMO, and the various right-wing student organizations. The founder and first chairman of the *Vlaams Blok* was Karel Dillen, a Flemish nationalist who had bolted from the VU in 1970 as the party moderated its demands. He was active in nearly all of the Flemish nationalist organizations mentioned above, was the leader of *Were Di* for several years, and kept in close contact with sympathetic Flemish nationalist organizations. Of the eighteen members of the VB's parliamentary group in 1991, all but two had previously belonged to Flemish nationalist organizations.⁴³

The existence of a motivated, ideologically coherent, and politically experienced cohort allowed the party to contest a number of constituencies in the early period of its history. Since the Flemish nationalist movement cut across class lines, there was also a significant number of educated personnel in the *Vlaams Blok* from the beginning. As the NSV began to produce more party cadres, and as the party's local success in Antwerp began to attract more members (again, predominantly from Flemish nationalist organizations), the VB was able to contest more and more constituencies in local elections (see Table 3). The presence of radical Flemish nationalist movements in the universities also meant that the educational level of the party leadership gradually rose. And although the quality of candidates declines the lower one goes, the party organizes extensive training sessions for their local personnel through the VVBM (Association of Vlaams Belang Mandates) in which fledgling councilors learn the basic procedures of communal politics.

As the tables suggest, the FN had much less success than the VB in recruiting activists, candidates, and leaders. Despite Féret's claim of 1,000 members in 1995, it is unlikely that the party ever counted more than several hundred members, only about half of

Table 3 Results of Communal Elections for the *Vlaams Belang* and *Front National*

Year	Number of Lists (VB)	Number of Seats (VB)	Number of Lists (FN)	Number of Seats (FN)
1988	56	23	9	1
1994	140	204	53	72
2000	190	493	18	6
2006	247	794	23	28

whom were active.⁴⁴ The party leadership has been dominated by the president for life (Féret), who even his allies in the party describe as “rigid” and dictatorial.⁴⁵ His enemies are less charitable, arguing that Féret consciously places only imbeciles and toadies in positions of power. For example, his selection of Patrick Cocriamont, a bus driver by profession and hardly a skilled orator, to take his seat in the federal assembly was widely criticized within the party.

The FN has built virtually no local organization, despite its sporadic success in communal elections. Out of a possible nineteen communes in Brussels, the FN was able to present lists in all three communal elections of 1988, 1994, and 2000 in only three communes. If one restricts the timeframe to the latter two elections, the list expands by only five communes. The FN has even less continuity in Wallonia: out of 262 communes, the party was able to field lists in only six in both 1994 and 2000.⁴⁶

The FN has failed to leave much of an imprint even in those localities in which it has won representation and even at the zenith of its power following the 1994 elections. To demonstrate this point, Manuel Abramowicz conducted a survey of council members from the major political parties (the Greens, Socialists, Christian Democrats, and Liberals) in fourteen of the twenty-five communes where the FN was represented in 1995. FN council members were perceived as being active in only five of the fourteen city councils. The councilors said that they were aware of a local FN party section in six communes, claimed that such did not exist in three communes, and did not know in five others.⁴⁷

Lacking a reservoir of potential candidates, the FN allowed just about anyone who was willing to stand for office in local elections to do so, and hoped for the best. In 1994, for example, Féret wagered that, if two-thirds of the candidates proved reasonably competent and stayed with the party, then the elections would be a success.⁴⁸ However, this assessment was optimistic, as even high-ranking members of the party admit that many of these councilors “didn’t understand a thing” about communal politics and “had no idea what they were doing.”⁴⁹ Lacking the equivalent of the VVBM, FN councilors received no education in communal politics. According to the only current FN member of the chamber of deputies, most FN candidates have no experience and no education and “simply lack culture.”⁵⁰ According to another member of the party, there are perhaps three people in it who have any university education.⁵¹

Factionalism

Although there are certainly rivalries within the party, the *Vlaams Belang* has never suffered from factionalism or defections. One of the primary reasons is that its members are socialized within the same broad movement and are working for the same basic goals. It is no secret that loyalty is demanded from party members and is a requirement for receiving a prime place on the national, provincial, or local lists (which are all decided

by the party leadership). As one parliamentarian put it, his NSV background helped him rise quickly within the party because “they [the party leadership] knew I would be a solid and loyal party member.”⁵²

It is no exaggeration to say that the FN began to split from the moment of its creation. Manuel Abramowicz has documented more than thirty splits and dissident movements emanating from the party.⁵³ While some of these splits involved only one or two individuals, others have been quite large and torn the party apart. In 1995 Marguerite Bastien formed her own party after Féret had excluded her from the FN on the grounds that she “was colluding with an organization whose goals are incompatible with those of the FN.”⁵⁴ The organization in question was *L’Assault*, a neo-Nazi *groupuscule* comprised of former FJ and PFN members. Although Bastien certainly had close contacts with *L’Assault*, the notion that her relationship with extremists disqualified her from membership in the FN is difficult to fathom. The FN has always been permeated by such individuals. According to Bastien, Féret ousted her from the FN because she was examining possible financial improprieties on his part. She also presented the hitherto most formidable challenge to his leadership.

Bastien brought several enemies of Féret with her into her new party, which she initially named the *Front National-Nationaal front*. She lost a legal struggle with the FN over the right to the acronym and renamed the party the *Front Nouveau de Belgique* (FNB). Although more than half of the FN’s communal councilors followed her into the party, the FNB was soon to suffer from the type of internal conflicts that had plagued the francophone extreme right for decades.⁵⁵ In the communal elections of 2000 the FNB was able to field lists in only four communes in Wallonia and nine in Brussels and elected two councilors overall (both in Wallonia). By 2006 the party appeared moribund. It put together a mere seven lists comprised of only fifteen candidates (the party had sixty-two candidates in 2000) and won a single seat. The current leader of the party, François Xavier-Robert, readily admits that the only reason he continues to keep the party together is to damage Féret.⁵⁶

In 2005 dissidents from the FN formed another party that, like the FNB, looked to trade on the party acronym. The *Force Nationale* (FNationale) was created by Paul Arku, Jacqueline Merveille, Francis Detraux (the FN’s only senator, who had been elected in 2004), and Juan Lemmens. The FNationale first fielded candidates for the 2006 communal and provincial elections, an election in which four parties from the radical right—the FN, FNB, FNationale, and *Front de Bruxellois* (FDB)—battled for votes. Like the FNB, however, the FNationale was unable to appeal to former FN voters. It won only one council seat and two seats in the Wallonian provincial parliament. Juan Lemmens, formerly of the FN and the FNB, took one of the latter seats, although he had previously been fired by the Belgian senate for misrepresenting his educational qualifications.

None of the parties that split from the FN has ever won more than a handful of seats in communal and regional parliaments or tallied more than a fraction of a percentage

point in federal elections. One might thus argue that the FN's centrifugal tendencies have not cost it votes. However, the counterfactual argument to consider is whether the FN would have performed better electorally had it not been so fissiparous, and there are good reasons to believe that it would have. For example, in the late 1990s support for the FN hemorrhaged after the breakthrough elections of 1994 and 1995. The party suffered a wave of defections; it lost at least twenty of its seventy-three seats in communal councils by 1996, as various elected officials formed new parties, were excluded from the FN, or resigned.⁵⁷ Of the eight members of the Wallonian provincial parliament elected in 1995, only two remained in the party as of 1998. As the president of the FN readily admits, the Bastien split in 1995 "cost the party five years" and was responsible for their electoral collapse in 1999 and 2000.⁵⁸

Right-Wing Extremism

Although there are undoubtedly right-wing extremists within *Vlaams Belang*, the party tries to keep them at arms length and periodically distances itself from them. In 2001, for example, after vice-president Roeland Raes cast doubt on the scale of the Holocaust in an interview with Dutch television, the *Blok's* leadership called an emergency meeting to "distance itself totally" from him, and Raes was forced to resign his post.⁵⁹ At the local level, VB politicians screen possible candidates for local lists for connections to extremist groups and eliminate those who might damage the party, even at the risk of not filling the list. As one parliamentarian puts it: "we prefer having five good candidates than five good ones and five lunatics."⁶⁰ The party has also tried to avoid any connection with Holocaust denials as it reaches out to Jewish voters in Antwerp.

The situation is rather different in the FN. Neo-Nazis, Holocaust deniers, and violent activists were present from the founding of the FN, but the party became even more radical following the dissolution of the PFN and the incorporation of its members. Daniel Leskens, formerly of the FJ and sentenced to six months in prison for belonging to a private militia, resigned his council seat in the commune of Anderlecht after the Belgian television station RTBF released a video of him urinating on the graves of Jewish victims of the Holocaust at a meeting of former Waffen SS members.⁶¹ Patrick Cocriamont, currently the FN's sole representative in the federal assembly, imitated the Nazi salute during his swearing-in ceremony as a city councilor in Anderlecht.⁶² Leskens is currently Cocriamont's parliamentary secretary.

Leading members of the FN have been convicted of criminal acts, and Féret himself has accumulated a long rap sheet over the years. In 1987 he was convicted of writing a fake medical certificate that had served as the (unsuccessful) alibi for an individual who had committed a robbery. Féret was fined, and his political and civil rights were suspended for five years for this offense. In 1995 he lost his seat on the city council

of Brussels-Ville because he had falsified his residence. In 2006 he was convicted of spreading racist propaganda and election manifestoes and barred from standing for elected office for ten years. He was also required to complete 250 hours of community service in the immigrant integration sector. Michel Delacroix, the party's lawyer and current member of the senate, was arrested for possessing illegal firearms and neo-Nazi literature in November 1994 and received a one year suspended sentence in 1999. Two months after the 1994 communal elections, an FN city councilor from La Louvière was arrested for armed robbery. A member of the Wallonian provincial parliament was charged with theft after he stole a copy of the statement he gave after being pulled over for speeding (the document was later recovered at his residence).⁶³

These incidents, combined with the factionalism described earlier, have badly damaged the reputation of the *Front National*. In the words of one *Vlaams Belang* parliamentarian, the party possesses just enough members "to occupy a wing of a psychiatric ward."⁶⁴

Conclusion

Recent research on the radical right has demonstrated that demand-side explanations, or those explanations that focus on changes in mass preferences caused by immigration, unemployment, political alienation, or some other factor, can not explain why radical right parties succeed in some contexts and fail in others.⁶⁵ A supply-side explanation that focuses on radical right parties themselves and their organization predicts, in contrast, that radical right parties that possess a reasonable degree of organizational strength, along the dimensions outlined in this article, will succeed electorally, and not just in a single election.

In Wallonia and Flanders the organizational strength of radical right parties was determined largely by the shape of the far right landscape. As one long-time *Vlaams Belang* activist told me, "it's not like we began from nothing" and, like every other politician from the party I interviewed, attributed the party's success to its continuity with the Flemish nationalist movement.⁶⁶ In Wallonia the *Front National* began from close to nothing, and the resources that did exist—the militant extremists—hampered rather than helped party building.

To what extent does this argument apply to other cases beyond Belgium? Although further research is obviously needed, there are examples in western Europe where radical right parties created strong organizations from preexisting resources. In France, for example, members of the Vichy, Poujadiste, and Algerian settler movements provided the foundation of the *Front National*.⁶⁷ Austria and Italy represent cases in which former fascists reconstituted themselves into far right political parties after the second world war, and the success of the MSI/AN and the FPÖ have much to do with these historical legacies. Norway and Denmark represent cases where existing parties—the Progress

Party in both cases—were transformed from right-wing antitax parties into radical right parties. While the preexisting resource took a different form in each case, some degree of continuity helped radical right parties build strong organizations in each. There are also other cases like Wallonia where radical right parties had little to build upon, such as the Netherlands and Sweden, and therefore failed to construct viable political parties.⁶⁸

Nearly every single comparative study of the radical right is quantitative and fails to consider types of historical developments. By treating the radical right in an ahistorical manner, not only are the building blocks of the radical right obscured, but so too are the critical junctures that pushed nationalist subcultures along different trajectories. No serious student of social democratic parties would ignore the role of labor movements in their formation. Nor would a student of Christian Democratic parties ignore the church-state conflict that preceded their creation.⁶⁹ Historical legacies have also been deemed critical to the success of postcommunist parties.⁷⁰ Why should the radical right be different from these party families?⁷¹ By ignoring historical legacies, or treating them as a residual variable, one misses the underlying causes of the radical right's success and failure. The enormous variation in the radical right's trajectory over the last several decades demands a comparative-historical analysis.⁷²

NOTES

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1. This article does not address the definitional debate surrounding radical right parties. For attempts to define this party family, see Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

2. Rachel Gibson, *The Growth of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002); Jens Rydgren, "Is Extreme Right-Wing Populism Contagious? Explaining the Emergence of a New Party Family," *European Journal of Political Research*, 44 (2005), 413–37; Piero Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Herbert Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Hans-Georg Betz and Duane Swank, "Globalization, the Welfare State and Right-wing Populism in Western Europe," *Socio-Economic Review*, 1 (2003), 215–45.

3. Elisabeth Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*.

4. Few studies of the radical right use interview data from radical right politicians and activists. An exception is Nonna Mayer and Bert Klendermans, eds., *Through the Magnifying Glass: The World of Right-Wing Extremism* (London: Routledge, 2005). Although open-ended interviews with partisans introduce problems of validity and reliability, I have attempted to mitigate them by interviewing multiple subjects from the same organization (ten current and former members of the *Front National*, eleven members of the *Vlaams Belang*) and by cross-checking the data gleaned from them during six additional interviews in Belgium with academics and journalists who research the radical right.

5. Both Norris and Mudde identify organizational factors as important.

6. This point is made by Mudde.

7. Carter, p. 99.

8. For an experimental study of canvassing, see Alan Gerber and Donald Green, "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment," *American Political Science Review*, 94 (September 2000), 653–63. For empirical studies, see Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, "Political Parties and Electoral Mobilization: Political Structures, Social Structure, and the Party Canvass," *The American Political Science Review*, 86 (March 1992), 70–86; David Niven, "The Mobilization Solution? Face-to-Face Contact and Voter Turnout in a Municipal Election," *Journal of Politics*, 66 (August 2004), 868–84.

9. On youth organizations, see Marc Hooghe, Dietland Stolle, and Patrick Stouthuysen, "Head Start in Politics: The Recruitment Function of Youth Organizations of Political Parties in Belgium (Flanders)," *Party Politics*, 10 (2004), 193–212.

10. On social sanctions against radical right activists, see David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 167–68. It is important to note that the strength of these sanctions varies across states.

11. On New Democracy, see Paul Taggart, "New Populist Parties in Western Europe," *West European Politics*, 18 (1995), 34–51; Jens Rydgren, *From Tax Populism to Ethnic Nationalism: Radical Right-Wing Populism in Sweden* (New York: Berghahn, 2006). On the DVU, see David Art, "The Wild, Wild East: Why the DVU Doesn't Matter but the NPD Does," *German Politics and Society*, 22 (Winter 2004), 122–33. On the LPF, see Philip van Praag, "The Winners and Losers in a Turbulent Political Year," *Acta Politica*, 38 (2003), 5–22.

12. Herbert Kitschelt, *The Logic of Party Formation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

13. Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

14. The Brussels Capital Region is not included in the comparison. On the institutional complexity of this region, see Hilde Coffé, "The Vulnerable Institutional Complexity: The 2004 Regional Elections in Brussels," *Regional and Federal Studies*, 16 (2006), 99–107.

15. On institutional differences, see Terri Givens, *Voting Radical Right in Western Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Norris, *Radical Right*.

16. Robert Jackman and Karin Volpert, "Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe," *British Journal of Political Science*, 26 (1996), 501–21.

17. One example is Gibson. For a critique of the immigration argument, see Norris, *Radical Right*, pp. 166–87.

18. These percentages are from the International Labour Organization, at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/migrant/papers/imp23/ch2.htm>. See also Hilde Coffé, *Extrem-rechts in Vlaanderen en Wallonië: Het verschil* (Roeselare: Roularta Books, 2005).

19. Hilde Coffé, "Do Individual Factors Explain the Different Success of the two Belgian Extreme Right Parties?," *Acta Politica*, 40 (2005), 74–93.

20. Patrick Hossay, "Why Flanders?," in Martin Schain, Aristide Zolberg, and Patrick Hossay, eds., *Shadows over Europe: The Development and Impact of the Extreme Right in Western Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 160.

21. Hugo Gijssels, *Het Vlaams Blok* (Leuven: Kritak, 1992), p. 41.

22. Marc Swyngedouw, "The Extreme Right in Belgium," in Hans-Georg Betz and Stephen Immerfall, eds., *The New Politics of the Right* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), p. 60.

23. Christopher Husbands, "Belgium: Flemish Legions on the March," in Paul Hainsworth, ed., *The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA* (London: Pinter, 1992), pp. 126–50.

24. Frank Seberichts, "Beeldvorming over collaboratie en repressie bij de naoorlogse Vlaams nationalist," in R. van Doorslaer et al., eds., *Herfstij van de 20ste Eeuw: Extrem-rechts in Vlaanderen 1920–1990* (Leuven: Kritak, 1992), pp. 65–82.

25. Husbands, p. 132.

26. Hugo Gijssels and Jos Vander Velpen, *Le Chagrin des Flamands* (Brussels: EPO, 1994).

27. Vos, p. 39.

28. Gijssels and Velpen, pp. 101–3.

29. Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 84.

30. Marc Swyngedouw and Maarten Van Craen Maarten, *Het Vlaams Blok: Een overzichtsstudie* (Leuven: K. U. Leuven, Departement Sociologie/ISPO, 2002).

31. Quoted in Hossay, p. 176.
32. See Giovanni Capocchia, *Defending Democracy: Responses to Extremism in Inter-war Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 116–33.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
34. Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 17.
35. Alain Colignon, “Les commémorations en Belgique francophone.” in Alain Colignon, Chantal Kesteloot, and Dirk Martin, eds., *Commémoration: Enjeux et débats* (Brussels: Centre de recherches et d’études historiques de la seconde guerre mondiale, 1996), pp. 13–65.
36. François Balace, “Le Tourment des Années Soixantes,” in François Balace et al., *L’Extrême Droite en Belgique Francophone* (Brussels: De Boeck–Wesmael, 1994), pp. 107–211.
37. Hossay, p. 170.
38. Interview with Gerolf Annemans, *Vlaams Belang*, Brussels, February 2007.
39. Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, p. 87; interview with Bob Hulstaert, *Vlaams Belang*, Antwerp, February 2007.
40. Interview with Filip De Man, *Vlaams Belang*, Brussels, February 2007.
41. Hans De Witte, “Extreme Right Activism in the Flemish Part of Belgium: Manifestation of Racism or Nationalism?,” in Mayer and Klandermands, eds., p. 133.
42. Swyngedouw, p. 61, for example, claims that the figures from the mid 1990s are exaggerated.
43. The biographical information can be found in Gijssels and Velpen, pp. 164–67.
44. Interview with Charles Pire, FN, Brussels, February 2007.
45. Interview with Michel Delacroix, Brussels, February 2007.
46. Pascal Delwit, “The Belgian National Front and the Question of Power,” in Pascal Delwit and Phillipe Poirver, eds., *Extreme Right Parties and the Power* (Brussels: Editions de L’Université de Bruxelles, 2007).
47. Manuel Abramowicz, *Les Rats Noir* (Brussels: Luc Pire, 1996).
48. Interview with Daniel Féret, FN, Brussels, February 2007.
49. Interview with Delacroix.
50. Interview with Patrick Cocriamont, FN, Brussels, February 2007.
51. Interview with Pire.
52. Interview with Bert Schoofs, VB, Brussels, February 2007.
53. *ResistanceS*, Feb. 5, 2005.
54. Rinke van der Brink, *L’International de la Haine* (Brussels: Luc Pire, 1996), p. 65.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
56. Interview with François Xavier-Robert, FNB, Brussels, February 2007.
57. Van der Brink, p. 61.
58. Interview with Féret.
59. *The Guardian*, Mar. 9, 2001.
60. Interview with Luc Sevenhans, VB, Brussels, February 2007.
61. *ResistanceS*, Aug. 27, 2000.
62. Abramowicz, p. 173.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
64. Interview with Schoofs.
65. According to Wouter van der Brug, Meindert Fennema, and Jean Tillie, “Why Some Anti-immigrant Parties Fail and Others Succeed,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 38 (2005), 563, “sociostructural developments within the European Union are so similar in all member states that those developments cannot explain the enormous differences in aggregate support for anti-immigrant parties.”
66. Interview with Hugo Vejsels, VB, Antwerp, February 2007.
67. John Veugelers, “Ex-Colonials, Voluntary Associations, and Electoral Support for the Contemporary Far Right,” *Comparative European Politics*, 5 (2005), 408–31.
68. Making this argument for the Dutch case is Cas Mudde and Joop Van Holsteyn, “The Netherlands: Explaining the Limited Success of the Extreme Right,” in Hainsworth, ed., *Politics of the Extreme Right*, p. 164.
69. Stathis Kalyvas *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
70. Anna Gryzmala-Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

71. I am indebted to Adam Ziegfeld for providing the analogy to the study of Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties.

72. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschmeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).