Crafting the Nation to their Advantage: The Case of the French National Front and the Vlaams Blok

Brian Afeltra
Professor Randolph Persaud
American University School of International Service
University Honors in International Studies
Spring 2013

Crafting the Nation to their Advantage: The Case of the French National Front and the Vlaams Blok

Abstract

This capstone analyzes how European right wing populist parties portray nationalism and national identity in their discourse, specifically examining the French National Front (NF) and the Belgian Vlaams Blok (VB). Examining party rhetoric, it is evident that populist parties of the new radical right must now incorporate aspects of civic identity into their construction of the nation that normally is grounded in ethnocentrism. Operating in a political environment that has seen a resurgence of liberal values driven by globalization and integration, these parties present themselves as defenders of their respective nations' cultures and identity that are portrayed as threatened by non-European immigrants. The NF and VB have been successful because they have been able to detach their anti-immigrant message from the stigma of extremism by associating it with civic signifiers of the nation. This research addresses a deficiency in the literature that has not sufficiently established the changing relationship between right wing populist parties and the way they construct national identity to their advantage.

Nationalism and the Construction of the Nation

In his seminal work, renowned historian Eric Hobsbawm traces the changes and transformations of the concepts of 'the nation' and 'nationalism' throughout the nineteenth century, focusing on the social and historical contexts in which they operated. He outlines his stances within nationalist discourse to that frame his analysis. First, Hobsbawm defines nationalism as "primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" and that the national identity overrides all others. Second, the nation is a constantly changing social entity and that nationalism precedes the nation. Nationalism is not manufactured, but the nation is. Third, nations must meet certain criteria of technological, political, administrative, and economic development, meaning they are part of a largely top-down construction. Despite being constructed from above, Hobsbawm argues that it is essential to

analyze nationalism from below by examining the assumptions, needs, and interests of ordinary people.[1]

Further, he asserts that 'national consciousness' does not develop evenly among social groups and a country's regions and often the popular masses are the last to be affected by it. This is an interesting point to make, as populist parties make their nationalist appeals to the masses and rely on them as the backbone of their support. Hobsbawm then divides his analysis of nationalism into three time periods. In the first, from 1870-1918, he acknowledges that presence of myth-making methods of creating nationalism after state creating, but asserts that they are not primary factors of developing nationalist ideas. After 1880, nationalism became more geared towards the masses and was implemented to make everyone a 'citizen.' The postwar era saw a change in the definitions of what constituted a nation, with a redrawing of maps and a sudden manifestation of new 'nations' that did not adhere to previous definitions.[2]

Nationalist literature also associates a nation with an identity that distinguishes a group from an 'other'. The identity is usually classified as primarily civic or ethnic. Civic identity is based on features such as territory, the economy, the law, and common institutions; ethnic identity is defined by criteria including language, race, and creed.[3] The parties that are examined in this paper are consistent with most right wing populist parties that construct the nation based primarily on ethnic identity; however, they also reflect the trend of incorporating more civic aspects into their rhetoric in order to gain mainstream appeal and legitimacy. In the current age

---

[1] Hobsbawm, E.J. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[2] Ibid

[3] Halikiopoulou, et. al. "The Civic Zeitgeist: Nationalism and Liberal Values in the European Radical Right." *Nations and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2013): 109.

of globalization and further European integration, civic values have become increasingly prominent in European political context.[4]

The Rise of Right Wing Populism in Europe

The rise of European right wing populism is a relatively recent phenomenon. The extreme right wing that included fascism and Nazism imploded, as these ideologies were deemed vastly unsuitable for post-WW2 governance after the authoritarian regimes they spurred collapsed. It was at this time that American-style modernization and capitalism flourished as Western European countries began to rebuild and recover from the war. The immediate postwar period saw rapid economic growth, rising affluence, and unprecedented material security spurred by more advanced industrialization. This began to come apart in the 1970s, when productivity declined, income stagnated, and the gap between the rich and the poor widened. The shift from mass production to 'lean' production and from an industry to service-oriented economy caused high levels of unemployment where near full employment was previously the norm.[5] Globalization began to flourish with technological advancement and the widening and deepening of the European Union contributed to increased ease in labor and capital flows among member states. The ensuing changes associated with globalization provided an environment where right wing populist parties could insert themselves into the political landscape and generate support through rhetoric that appealed to those marginalized by globalization.

Globalization has contributed to the electoral success of radical right wing populist (RRWP) or "new far-right" parties. Greater degrees of international integration and transnational flows of people and capital have broadly helped their electoral success, but the magnitude is in

---

[4] Ibid

[5] Betz, Hans-Georg. Introduction to *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*, edited by Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, 7. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

part influenced by the structures of national welfare states. Universalistic, generous, employment-oriented welfare states directly depress the appeal and electoral success of RRWP parties. Higher volumes of foreign immigration bolster the success of the right wing parties in multiple countries, but that effect is weakest in universal welfare states. Trade and capital mobility, however, do not have a direct effect on the voting outcome of the parties. Post-industrialization, specifically declines in manufacturing jobs, contribute to increases in electoral success for RRWP parties, but this effect is also minimized in universal welfare states. Interestingly, countries with firmly established, more mainstream right wing parties lessened the votes for RRWP parties, likely because the policies and ideology of the entrenched parties guaranteed votes that would otherwise go to RRWP parties.[6]

There is a multitude of factors that contribute to the success of RRWP parties. Jackman and Volpert examined the conditions that influenced the success of extreme right parties in Western European elections from 1970-1990. The specific populist and nationalist aspects of each party varied slightly, but all those included had policy platforms that indicated that they were (neo-)fascist or generally anti-system focused. Xenophobic stances towards non-Europeans, ethnic exclusion, nationalism, and nativism were frequently present among the political movements in the study. They analyzed results from 103 elections in sixteen countries and came up with three main factors that they argued contributed to extreme right party success. Countries with proportional representation electoral systems were found to have a greater number of extreme right parties in their governments, as that system allows for greater multi-partism. Voting thresholds that had to be met to earn seats dampened the amount of support garnered by the extreme right parties. Finally, the authors found that high rates of unemployment provided a

---

[6] Swank, Duane and Hans-Georg Betz. "Globalization, the Welfare State and Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe," *Socio-Economic Review* 1, (2003): 215-45.

favorable environment for these movements to manifest themselves. They clarify, however, by stating that the support of the extreme right parties does not necessarily come from economically marginalized individuals; instead, high unemployment rates often indicate economic instability and imbalance that spawns xenophobic proliferation that is a characteristic of extreme right movements. The authors conclude that the three factors of electoral proportionality, multi-partism, and unemployment can be adjusted through policy intervention that would limit the influence of extreme right wing parties. Jackman and Volpert provide sound evidence for major factors that contribute to electoral success of right wing parties that have proven to be consistent in the current literature.[7]

The new right wing populist movement of Europe manifested itself with slight variations in each country but can be broadly characterized through a variety of shared aspects. Hans-Georg Betz provides an adequate foundational description of the new movement that can be further analyzed. In his introduction to *The New Politics of the Right,* he notes that instead of more extreme fascist and militant views of the past, the new movements are defined by "programmatic radicalism and populist appeal."[8] Unlike center-right parties, the new right parties are opposed to the prevailing social-democratic paradigm, especially the social welfare state and multiculturalism. Populist ideals are also a distinguishing feature of the new right, described by Betz as general support for and faith in the common people who have been denied the opportunity to be heard in daily discourse. They emphasize individual's efforts and contributions to society and oppose the current system that is believed to serve the special interests of the few

---

[7] Jackman, Robert W. and Karin Volpert. "Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe," *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1996): 501-21.
[8] Ibid, 3

over the many. Populists champion free-market economies and capitalism and believe themselves to be the true champions of a genuine democracy.

Betz notes that immigration is a phenomenon nearly every populist party takes issue with and describes how they will often combine nativist sentiments and economic nationalist rhetoric as part of their belief platform. He continues by saying that the rise of populist movements can be attributed to the "psychological strain associated with uncertainties produced by large-scale socioeconomic and sociostructural change"[9] fueled by globalization. This is supported by the fact that radical right wing populist parties have been able to embed themselves in democracies around Europe and not just in isolated instances. Thus, populist parties are likely to find the most success amongst groups who have the most anxiety and insecurity about the changing global regime, including blue-collar workers and young people lacking education. This climate of insecurity led to decline in the faith of established parties and the political process that have not been able to halt the spreading economic problems, rising unemployment, and income gap. When combined with a centralized organizational structure and charismatic leader, right wing populist parties have proven adept at tapping into this environment of insecurity and garnering support.

The Challenge for Right Wing Populist Parties

The new wave of the European extreme right has had to move towards the middle of the political spectrum in order to maintain electoral viability. With the rise of globalization and deepening integration in the EU, many European countries are embracing values of tolerance, liberalism, and diversity. Ethnic nationalism traditionally is a core ideological element of radical right wing parties, utilizing it in rhetoric with racist and xenophobic undertones that champions

---

[9] Ibid, 6

the parties as protectors of the nation. Using anti-immigration stances as the base of these viewpoints, the radical right can then expand their grievances against ethnic 'others' into different areas of public policy, from education to law and order to welfare. These exclusionist views clearly run contrary to the prevailing civic popularity, thus the extreme right has had to adapt.[10]

Parties gain legitimacy from voters when there is the perception that they operate within the democratic system, not as a threat to it. Radical right parties can struggle with this based on anti-democratic and anti-constitutional legacies; therefore, they must portray themselves as being critical of the system but still willing to participate. This is a difficult balance to establish since, by nature, radical right parties have been exclusionary and are now attempting to incorporate civic ideals as part of their party rhetoric. The solution has been to frame ethnic values in civic terms. For example, radical right parties can portray immigration as negative not because it exposes the country to an 'inferior' people, but because it hinders the country's liberal institutions and exposes them to those who might not value them in the same way as natives. This, in turn, would undermine the democratic functions of the state. Emphasizing cultural differences and the incompatibility of Europeans and non-Europeans can be described as 'egalitarian neo-racism' and is frequently used by radical right parties.[11] Higher electoral success correlates with how effectively the parties of the radical right are able to frame such discourse.[12] The French National Front and Belgian Vlaams Blok provide examples of radical right parties that have been successful in this endeavor.

---

[10] Halikiopoulou, et. al., 110.

[11] Swyngedouw, Marc and Gilles Ivaldi. "The Extreme Right Utopia in Belgium and France: The Ideology of the Flemish Vlaams Blok and the French Front National." *West European Politics* 24, no. 3 (2001): 4.

[12] Halikiopoulou, et. al., 112

Poujadism: Predecessor to the French National Front

      The French National Front (NF) party is a premier iteration of a new right wing populist party in Europe. Before analyzing the party itself, it is important to highlight the historical context in which it began to manifest. The long time leader and founder of the NF has been Jean-Marie Le Pen, who only recently relinquished his leadership duties to his daughter, Marine Le Pen, in 2011. The Poujadist movement preceded the NF.

      Pierre Poujade was a populist politician whose viewpoints and brief Poujadist movement strongly influenced Jean-Marie Le Pen. The Poujadists formed in 1956 as a populist, single-issue movement that opposed the modernization of French society. This modernization was characterized by the depopulation of the countryside as more rural French were forced to move to the cities for work in the rising post-war industrial and retail sectors. Farmers and shopkeepers suffered and Poujade took up their cause and drew support from them and others from rural areas whose livelihoods were most threatened by this socioeconomic shift and who were opposed to the corruption in national politics. He also drew support from the traditional extreme right who held antiparliamentary, ultra-nationalist views. In addition to being anti-tax and anti-establishment, Poujadist rhetoric frequently contained thinly veiled anti-Semitic themes, as the Jews had been the most commonly targeted out-group of the pre and immediate post-war period.[13]

      The main goal of elected Poujadists was to paralyze the National Assembly and replace it by convening the Estates General. The campaign began to employ nationalist rhetoric by espousing extreme colonialist views towards North Africa and stressing the dignity and patriotism of the wartime soldier in relation to the corrupt behavior exhibited by democratic

---

[13] Simmons, Harvey. *The French National Front*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996. 28.

citizens and politicians. These nationalist views were seen in election posters that read "The Country Is In Danger" and appealed to the rural French public who had continuously fought for their country when it was threatened and insisted for them to do so again.[14] Despite being frequently dismissed as a fascist, Poujade was able to capitalize on feelings of discontent for the government and put significant effort into creating direct contact with his supporters. He realized that above all, French people were tired of politicians who constantly talked but rarely acted, so Poujade ensured that he came across as a man of action. Emphasizing door-to-door campaigning and intimate conversations with small groups of supporters, Poujade effectively portrayed his strong convictions and introduced a new, more hands on aspect to French politics that had rarely been seen before.[15] From him, Le Pen learned the importance of having a highly organized party structure with clear party doctrine and coherent leadership.

Birth of the National Front

Jean-Marie Le Pen was elected president to the nascent NF in October 1972. Consistent with the emerging crop of right wing populist parties, Le Pen rejected violence as a means to obtain power, insisting instead on gaining electoral success in the parliament. Fascist , comparisons to the NF would ensure that electoral success would be limited in scope and Le Pen realized that his far right wing party needed to create more appeal towards the middle than in the past. However, he still made sure to embrace and promote the NF as a right wing party, casting it as "the national, popular, and social" right.[16] When describing the NF, Le Pen incorporated nationalist undertones including the party's attachment to traditional values and French national culture, fidelity to the country, and a feeling of sacrifice. Immigration was seen as a threat to

---

[14] Ibid, 31

[15] Ibid, 33-34

[16] Ibid, 63

employment, security, and the independence and national defense of France. Internal propaganda described immigrants as being "degenerates and criminals" and advocated that immigrants who broke the law should be immediately deported.[17] The anti-immigrant "Defend the French" program that the NF advocated for included tough immigration regulation from both inside and outside Europe. This earliest iteration of the NF, however, did not create enough distinction between itself and more moderate right wing parties and did not perform well in the 1973 parliamentary elections and was essentially a fringe party until 1981.[18]

The NF did not enjoy much electoral success until the early 1980s, when the socioeconomic situation became ideal for a right wing populist party to gain a rapid following. Enjoying a majority in the legislature and Francois Mitterand as president, the French left embarked on a period of radical social and economic program change in 1981. They nationalized banks and other industries and generally expanded government control in hopes of stimulating industry and increasing jobs and tax revenue. Reform efforts progressed too far, however, leading to multiple devaluations of the franc, skyrocketing inflation, a massive trade deficit, and quickly rising unemployment. Dissatisfaction spread amongst the populace and Mitterand was criticized for many of his policies, including one that allowed immigrants to vote in local elections. This provided an entrance point for the NF to assert itself, arguing that immigrants contributed to unemployment and undermined law and order. The NF then attacked the left, arguing that they coddled immigrants while the mainstream right simply avoided the issue. Promoting itself as a party of action, the NF pledged that it would confront the immigrant "problem" head-on. These sentiments resonated with a French public whose latent xenophobia

---

[17] Ibid, 64
[18] Ibid

towards immigrants, especially from the Maghreb, was reactivated due to the economic difficulties the country faced.[19]

As Le Pen began to gain notoriety through media appearances where he could showcase his debate prowess, he began promoting the backbone of the Front's political program – anti-immigration policy. Le Pen preached that France's unemployment problem could be fixed if all further immigration was stopped and 2 million foreign workers in France at the time were repatriated to their countries of origin. He stirred nationalistic sentiments by claiming that he put "France and the French first," with that idea driving the NF program.[20] The anti-immigrant policy has been gradually refined since its inception but is based on a consistent logic: there are millions of immigrants in France; these immigrants are the source of a slew of problems facing the country; therefore, they should be forced to emigrate to solve these problems. These exclusionary attitudes also gave way to rhetoric linking immigration to insecurity for the French state and its people. Le Pen argued that many foreigners came to France not expecting to find work and instead resorted to petty theft and the drug trade, thus increasing insecurity.[21]

The anti-immigrant policies of the NF gained traction in 1981 for a variety of reasons. The mainstream right was desperate to counter the Socialists that were in power and was thus more willing to ally themselves with the extreme right if it meant they could increase their appeal and gain votes. This was equally beneficial for the NF, which gained legitimacy by entering into alliances with the mainstream right parties that had much broader appeal to a larger electoral base. In addition, the mid-1980s was the golden age of neoconservative ideals being put into practice by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The increasing acceptance of these views

---

[19] Ibid, 72
[20] Ibid, 79
[21] Ibid, 80

made policies of the NF seem less radical than in the 1970s and even early 1980s. With the economy spiraling out of control, the French people became increasingly cynical towards the government, often a characteristic for populist movement success. A 1984 poll reported that 62% of respondents were dissatisfied with how politicians treated issues important to French life while 82% believed that politicians did not tell the truth.[22] The NF seized this opportunity to gain the support of those whose livelihoods were threatened by the Socialist-implemented changes that led to rising inflation and unemployment.

The 1986 elections brought a windfall for the NF from an unlikely source – the Socialists. Desperate to change the course of the elections that were predicted to be a victory for the right, President Francois Mitterand changed France's electoral system from first-past-the-post to proportional representation. This was seen as a move that would aid the left by dividing the parties of the right. Advocating for proportional representation had been a key issue championed by Le Pen, since the near 9.8% of the vote that the NF earned in the 1986 election meant the party earned 35 seats in the National Assembly under proportional representation, as opposed to the few, if any, that would be won under the two-ballot system. The seats earned in that election solidified the Front as a major party in French politics and gave it a forum to attempt to execute its policies.[23]

The National Front's View on French Nationness and Immigration

The Front's anti-immigration stance has been the largest contributor to its electoral success. Immigration and security have remained two of the most important issues for which Front voters have the greatest concern. Linking immigration's social costs with an 'ideology of difference' towards mainly North African immigrants fuels the potency of the anti-immigration

---

[22] Ibid, 76
[23] Ibid, 83

rhetoric. Le Pen and the NF believe that these immigrants are incapable of assimilating into French culture and that the French, as with every other nationality, have the right to defend the integrity of their identity. Because assimilation is impossible, the only other option is that immigrants pose a threat to French culture and traditions. For the NF, French national identity is predominantly an ethnic construction where, "only those people are French who, through their origins and their family, share the long history of the French nation."[24] Bruno Megret, a prominent Front party member second in command to Le Pen, has vocalized many of the NF's views on the French nation. His views are anti-primordialist, as he claims that a nation can only be developed over time, incorporating a similar people, place, and culture. French citizenship is acquired through *jus sanguinis*, or by blood – it cannot be acquired by birth in the territory or by marrying a native.[25] Cosmopolitanism, spurred by immigration and globalization, is a threat to the nation that has taken centuries to develop and cannot so radically create a shift in what it means to be French.[26] This example of cultural nationalism is typical of populist movements in that it highlights differences of an established "other" to promote the values of the movement itself.

The Front also employed interesting rhetoric regarding anti-French racism as a guilt-inducing mechanism for those who disagreed with the party's views. The NF espouses the belief that there is no such thing as a superior or inferior race, but that nations and cultures wish to protect their different and distinctive characteristics and feel threatened when large populations of people with alternate beliefs appear. The Front plays the role of defender against populations of immigrants that threaten the French way of life. Therefore, those who are opposed to the NF

---

[24] Ibid, 162
[25] Swyngedouw and Ivaldi, 17
[26] Simmons, 162

and defend immigrants are inherently anti-French racists because they essentially advocate for the destruction and infiltration of the French nation.[27] The belief in the right to difference provides a justification for the Front's national preference policy. This is a policy that the Front has sought to implement that gives French nationals preference in multiple aspects of social policy, including healthcare, education, social welfare, and employment.[28] It is clearly a discriminatory measure against immigrants and promotes French feelings of superiority against outsiders, despite the party's rhetoric claiming otherwise.

The NF provides an example of a populist party that mobilized its own view of nationalist sentiments that it shared with a segment of the electorate to justify its policy positions. The manner in which Le Pen and his deputies constructed the idea of anti-French racism was rhetorically powerful and manipulative and inevitably confirmed the opinions of those who believed that immigration and security were a threat to France. The success of the party in the 1980s and 1990s can partially be attributed to fortunate timing as well. In France, value politics began to take precedence over interest politics. Traditional affiliations between social class and party weakened and gave way to increased concern over identity, corruption, immigration, crime, and other areas, allowing the NF to have access and greater appeal to a larger section of the electorate.[29]

The NF garnered greater access and appeal in 1995, when the party made significant strides in both the presidential and municipal elections. Le Pen earned 15% of the presidential vote on the first ballot, the highest total for a Front candidate to that point, which cemented the

---

[27] Ibid, 163

[28] Mayer, Nonna. "The French National Front." In *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*, edited by Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, 16. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

[29] Simmons, 256

party's relevance in the French political system. The party's showing in municipal elections was even more important, with the NF winning 6.7% of the vote, giving them 1,075 local seats throughout the country, including three mayors.[30] Success on the local level gave the party the opportunity it had been seeking to begin implementing its policies.

The NF has had to walk a line between promoting ethnic and civic narratives in order to gain electoral support, doing so with varied success. French political culture has long associated with civic values that stem from the French Revolution and the republican system it spawned but has also reconciled them with a distinct ethno-religious and lingual history. Secularism has been crucial to accommodating the national narratives of liberal values and religious history and the NF has acknowledged this point in its rhetoric. The Front continues to outwardly champion liberal values and argues that Islam is a threat to carefully crafted French identity; therefore, immigrants from Muslim countries cannot be tolerated. Simply, the NF holds the view that the cultures of non-European immigrants cannot be reconciled with French and European culture.[31] Halikiopoulou, et. al., recognize that some of their campaign materials have had mixed messages that, on the face, present contradictory viewpoints.

Figure 1. "Against racism, stop immigration."

---

[30] Ibid, 111
[31] Swyngedouw and Ivaldi, 14

Figure 1 provides one example of mixed messages from the NF when trying to appeal to civic values while still promoting their anti-immigrant views. Anti-immigration is framed as being against racism, but the immigrant portrayed is non-white and incorporates stereotypical elements that invoke people of North Africa, the primary area of origin of migrants to France.[32]

Figure 2. "No to Islamisation. The youth with Le Pen."

Similar to Figure 1, Figure 2 targets the Muslim population. The minarets and crescent cover the country and cast a shadow over France and the republican values it represents. The woman wearing a burka adds another visual representation of the ethnic 'other' that is in question.[33] The insinuated message is that Le Pen is the most qualified to defend France from the shadowy, mysterious threat of Islam. The Vlaams Blok party in Flanders similarly echoed the NF's position as protector of its country's culture and values.

Origins of the Belgian Vlaams Blok

The separatist Vlaams Blok party in Belgium advocates for the establishment of an "independent, prosperous, and ethnically pure Flemish homeland."[34] It has become one of the most successful radical right wing parties in Western Europe based largely on its anti-

---

[32] Halikiopoulou, et. al.,123

[33] Ibid

[34] Hossay, Patrick. "'Our People First!' Understanding the Resonance of the Vlaams Blok's Xenophobic Programme." *Social Identities* 2, no. 3 (1996): 343.

immigration and anti-Belgian policies. The basis for the party's support has been built on the socially constructed identities of two communities – the indigenous Flemish nation and the migrant Muslim community.

The Belgian state has had to contend with asymmetric relations between its two main linguistic groups (French and Dutch) that have developed separate interests, identities, and territory. Belgian independence and the constructing of Belgian nationness was largely an elite affair, with French being chosen as the official language. This relegated the Dutch-speaking Flemish people to secondary status "in a bilingual country with a monolingual state."[35] Slowly, the people of Flanders began to develop the notion that their territory was a coherent homeland and that the Flemish people were deserving of self-determination.

Belgium followed the European centralization trend of the 1940s and 1950s and implemented a welfare state regime to accompany the economic successes of the country. However, in the post-war period Belgium succumbed to the post-industrial socioeconomic shift that led to economic decline. The fortunes of Belgium's two main regions began to reverse – French-speaking Wallonia had been an industrial center and saw rapid unemployment and discontent. Flemish cities, especially Antwerp, began to flourish as hubs of economic trade. Antwerp's status as a port city helped bring in foreign investment as goods needed to be transported worldwide. The status reversal between Flanders and Wallonia led to increasing distinctions between Flemish and Walloon interests. [36]

These divergent interests contributed to the rise of nationalist sentiments in Flanders. Resentful of the Belgian state's neglect of social and economic issues of the region and the clear francophone bias of the national political system, Flemish regional tensions rose. Constitutional

---

[35] Ibid, 346
[36] Ibid, 348

reform in the early 1970s was meant to alleviate these by granting cultural affairs and economic development responsibilities to the regional level. However, these changes were not sufficient, and many in Flanders called for further decentralization of the Belgian government. Seizing on this opportunity, Karl Dillen and Lode Claes merged their parties to found the Vlaams Blok in 1978. Similar to many other right wing populist parties emerging in Europe at the time, Vlaams Blok attracted those left powerless and disenchanted by the quickly changing socioeconomic landscape. Belgian unemployment jumped from 100,000 to 550,000 from 1976 to 1984 and the legitimacy of the welfare state was called into question due to its inability to provide the economic security it had intended.[37]

The 1980s brought further constitutional change that increased regional cultural, political, and economic autonomy. Decentralization divided the country into linguistic communities – French, Dutch, and German – and territorially defined regions – Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. These were each given independent legislative bodies and an executive. The Dutch language community and the Flemish region combined and brought unity to the area, while unification was not easily obtained in Wallonia due to the presence of both the French and German linguistic communities.[38] The federalization program left the central Belgian government with extremely limited powers, mostly constrained to a coordinating role. Communication between Flanders and Wallonia was at a minimum, with the populations of each much more likely to identify with and sympathize with the commonalities of their own linguistic groups. This division laid the foundation for a furthering construction of Flemish identity. In this context, the early Vlaams Blok garnered a following primarily on popular resentment towards

---

[37] Ibid, 350
[38] Ibid, 351

government inefficiency and corruption, but would soon be strengthened by anti-immigrant rhetoric.[39]

Crafting an 'Other' and Establishing a Platform of Xenophobia

Compared to the rest of Belgium, Flanders was relatively unaccustomed to immigrant labor. Significant numbers of migrants did not arrive in the region until the 1960s, when the Belgian government recruited Moroccans and Turks to work in the mines. They made up the two main immigrant groups and, during their time working in Belgium, essentially took on the role of gastarbeider – temporary workers. The communities they lived in were isolated from the Belgians and there were limited instances of naturalization. It thus became customary for the Flemish to view them more as migrants than immigrants, insinuating that they would return to their home countries upon conclusion of their working periods. The economic recession caused by the oil crisis of the 1970s changed this, however. Despite the termination of foreign worker recruitment and the implementation of tighter immigration measures, the Moroccan and Turk cultural communities grew. High birth rates, a rise in undocumented immigration, and a refusal to return home for fear of not being allowed back into Belgium contributed to a shift in attitudes among the foreign populations that crept towards permanent residence.[40]

The Vlaams Blok seized on the surging Flemish nationalism that accompanied the region's greater autonomy and the enduring presence of foreign populations. It took this opportunity to integrate anti-immigrant rhetoric into its anti-government program. The party adopted the motto "Our People First" and called for Flemish separation from Belgium and the repatriation of all immigrants in order to establish a purely Flemish homeland. It cleverly tied its francophone resentment into its nationalism by insisting that that it could not resist the

---

[39] Ibid, 352
[40] Ibid

"Francification of Brussels without resisting its Moroccanisation."[41] Similar to the policy of the French National Front, the racism of the Vlaams Blok was not one that asserted a superiority of one people over another, but one that insisted on the incompatibility of what they viewed as irreconcilable traditions, values, and life styles.[42]

The party succeeded at enunciating its desire for Flemish cultural homogeneity and the benefits of repatriation for foreign populations without the use of explicitly racist language. Dillen argued that it is easy to assimilate small numbers of foreigners, but cultural differences are too significant to do so for millions. Instead of integration, confrontation would be the most likely outcome from such a campaign; therefore it was in the interest of all parties involved to embrace the repatriation process. In addition, the Flemish were unlikely to embrace multiculturalism after fighting for so long to gain equal recognition with the Walloons. Conveniently, the Flemish nation allowed for anti-immigrant and anti-Belgian feelings to reinforce one another and provide further justification that their policies were not exclusionary towards only Muslim populations.[43]

The Vlaams Blok's European Rhetoric

The Vlaams Blok has made an interesting distinction between how it views Europe and how it views the European Union. The party maintains a negative view towards the EU, but is positive towards Europe. The VB constructs a romanticized 'real Europe' that emphasizes history, culture, and civilization, whereas the EU is seen as a corrupt political entity that exacerbates the 'immigration crisis.' Thus, non-Europeans compose the party's chosen out-group that is not capable of assimilating into this utopian version of Europe, of which Flanders is a part.

---

[41] Ibid, 354
[42] Ibid
[43] Ibid, 356

Distinguishing non-Europeans as the out-group allows for the VB to not be portrayed as hard-line nationalists, since they are not automatically antagonistic to non-Flemish people.[44]

This is part of the VB's effort to appeal to a broader audience through the utilization of less inflammatory rhetoric. Adding a more cosmopolitan façade to the party's ideals can help gain the support of potential voters who do not hold as ethnocentric values as the typical VB voter base. It allows the VB to present a more mainstream appeal to voters and develop a positive message towards Europe while still persuading them of the party's core anti-immigrant message.[45]

Vlaams Blok ideology is of course based on the idea that the Flemish nation is central to political life. It acts as a nodal point from which the rest of the party's rhetoric derives its meaning. Since Flanders is established as the nationalistic center, the VB is then able to delineate a list of 'others' that conflict with Flemish nationhood: Belgium, Wallonia, the EU, bureaucracy, the political establishment, and immigrants. An essential function of VB rhetoric is to tie these seemingly disparate entities together to construct a more powerful narrative of threats to Flemish nationhood. For example, the party accuses Belgium and the EU for the rise in immigration that threatens the Flemish nation. This chain of equivalence ties together multiple signifiers in opposition to the Flemish nation.[46] The VB has created a similar chain of equivalence between the Flemish nation and Europe, not the EU. Europe is a 'Europe of the nations,' of which Flanders is a part. Here, the Flemish nation and Europe function as empty signifiers, allowing for

---

[44] Adamson, Kevin and Robert Johns. "The Vlaams Blok, Its Electorate, and the Ideological Articulation of 'Europe'" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 2 (2008): 134, 151
[45] Ibid, 151
[46] Ibid, 137

redefinition so that the VB can draw the most effective equivalence chains possible to express their message.[47]

Depicting Europe and the Flemish nation in this manner allows for the VB to make two crucial points: that the two entities not only can co-exist but are part of one another and that the Flemish-European civilization and cultures are worth protecting. Being European becomes part of the essence of being Flemish and non-European outsiders cannot threaten this.[48] This leads to another ideological assertion by the VB: that Europeans versus non-Europeans is a significant political frontier. Similar to the French National Front's insistence on national preference for social policy, the VB advocates for European preference. Europeans and the Flemish are culturally linked in the party's ideology – the VB claims that European immigrants are capable of assimilation with Flemish national culture due to "cultural proximity" but non-European immigrants are too different to assimilate.[49]

Vlaams Blok's criticisms of the EU stem largely from its perception as an ineffective bureaucracy and the fact that, as a supranational organization, it runs counter to the party's core "our own people first" slogan that asserts that power comes directly from the nation itself. The VB also is critical of the EU's potential enlargement outside of traditional Europe. Turkish accession to the Union would violate what the VB perceives as 'real' Europe and would be another sign that the EU is actively endangering Europe's cultural identity. Here, Europe is again an empty signifier, sometimes being used to describe the EU but for the VB it is seen as a civilization that the EU harms.[50]

---

[47] Ibid, 138
[48] Ibid
[49] Ibid, 139
[50] Ibid, 141

Conclusion

The National Front and Vlaams Blok represent right wing populist parties that have established themselves as significant forces in their respective political systems. Both seized on the opportunity created by the era of post-industrial modernization in Europe. This crucial turning point left many Europeans feeling marginalized and spurred feelings of distrust and discontent for governments that could not adequately meet their needs in a time of great socioeconomic change. Inserting themselves into this landscape as the best option for citizen empowerment, the NF and VB gained popularity by railing against the status quo and by using immigrant populations as scapegoats for a multitude of socioeconomic problems affecting the average European citizen, ranging from unemployment to security.

To remain relevant and legitimate, the parties crafted rhetoric that veiled their anti-immigration beliefs by framing the issue in a new way. Instead of claiming that there were superior and inferior groups of people, the parties insisted that there were merely cultural differences that needed protection from non-European outsiders. Both the NF and the VB were advocates of preference programs that benefitted native populations and encouraged the repatriation of immigrants. The shift towards utilizing civic identity as opposed to solely ethnic is indicative of the desire of right wing populist parties to establish staying power in the political landscape and adapt to the views of the electorate to appeal to the greatest number of people possible. Remaining adaptable and accountable to the people will be the best way to ensure relevance for both parties in the future.

Works Cited

Adamson, Kevin and Robert Johns. "The Vlaams Blok, Its Electorate, and the Ideological Articulation of 'Europe'" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 2 (2008): 133-156.

Betz, Hans-Georg. Introduction to *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies,* edited by Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, 7. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Halikiopoulou, Daphne, Steven Mock, and Sofia Vasilopoulou. "The Civic Zeitgeist: Nationalism and Liberal Values in the European Radical Right." *Nations and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2013): 107-127.

Hobsbawm, E.J. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Hossay, Patrick. "'Our People First!' Understanding the Resonance of the Vlaams Blok's Xenophobic Programme." *Social Identities* 2, no. 3 (1996): 343-364.

Jackman, Robert W. and Karin Volpert. "Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe," *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1996): 501-521.

Mayer, Nonna. "The French National Front." In *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies,* edited by Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, 16. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Simmons, Harvey. *The French National Front.* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996.

Swank, Duane and Hans-Georg Betz. "Globalization, the Welfare State and Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe," *Socio-Economic Review* 1, (2003): 215-245.

Swyngedouw, Marc and Gilles Ivaldi. "The Extreme Right Utopia in Belgium and France: The Ideology of the Flemish Vlaams Blok and the French Front National." *West European Politics* 24, no. 3 (2001): 1-22.