A People Left Behind: Ethno-Nationalist Populism in France and Hungary

Jack Corp

Drury University

Abstract

In this comparative paper, the development and welfare politics of the National Rally and Fidesz are examined. Right-wing populist parties often remain on the periphery of democratic discourse. In France, however, the National Rally – a once lampooned anti-communist party – proceeded into the second round of the 2017 presidential election. The National Rally’s recent success is a result of the party’s transformation alongside the cleavages of globalization. As immigration and deindustrialization dominate the politics of France, the National Rally has developed a welfare system dominated by ethno-nationalistic sentiments in an appeal to the precarious working class. In comparison, Hungary’s Fidesz party has dominated political discourse since the Revolutions of 1989. Fidesz rose to power as an anti-establishment party and acted as the champion of the working classes. While Fidesz echoes many of the same anti-globalization and anti-immigration points of the National Rally, the party desires a welfare system designed to bolster the Hungarian elites. Both the National Rally and Fidesz gained success through processes of exclusion, resulting in the creation of chauvinistic welfare systems used to protect the preferred citizens.

A People Left Behind: Ethno-Nationalist Populism in France and Hungary

Liberal democracies are under the threat of an illiberal, populist coup d’état. In Western Europe, the cleavages of modernization and globalization, championed by the cosmopolitan elite, has created a periphery: a population unprotected from economic stagnation and outsourcing; a population disillusioned and forgotten in search of a representative for the “common people.” Populist parties have emerged from the fringes and into mainstream discourse, deriving political legitimacy from the discontent of their constituents – those considered the true, national citizens of the sovereign state. The right-wing populist party of France, the National Rally (RN), and Fidesz of Hungary both echo nationalistic and apocalyptic sentiments in an appeal to those set aside by mainstream politics. While the two parties share an anti-globalist and nationalistic foundation, they diverge in a fundamental aspect of their populist character: chauvinistic welfare systems. Fidesz, formed in a newly established democratic society, enacts welfare policies to enrich the upper classes, creating an elite wholly under the party’s design. Conversely, the National Rally, rooted in a deeply democratic and proud society, seeks ethno-nationalistic welfare measures to protect the “true” French from a perceived cultural and societal conquest.

**Party Development**

In 1972, the neo-fascist Ordre Nouveau movement gave birth to the National Front (FN) in an attempt to consolidate a myriad of unorganized far-right groups under a collective banner. At its forefront stood Jean-Marie Le Pen – a charismatic, strongman leader who shifted the FN from its anti-communist roots to ethno-nationalist populism in the 1990s (Mondon, 2015). In the context of an increasingly globalized world, Le Pen introduced the French to two new enemies: the globalized establishment and, in the wake of 9/11, immigrants. This shift of rhetoric legitimized the once-mocked party, for in 2002, despite no prior large-scale success, Le Pen entered the second round of the presidential election. While it was a loss for Le Pen, the election was a major success for the spirit of the FN, as it played and fostered France’s disillusionment with the left-right hegemony, as evidenced by the drop of mainstream party support from 70.61% in 1988 – the year of Le Pen’s first presidential bid – to 42.9% in 2002 (Mondon, 2015). Nevertheless, internal strife and the blatant racism of Le Pen thwarted further acceptance of the National Front until Marine Le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie, assumed leadership of the party in 2011.

Under Marine Le Pen, party leadership sought the “dédiabolisation,” or the de-demonization, of the FN. As such, Le Pen shifted the party away from its neo-fascist roots and racist rhetoric, though its nationalist and xenophobic values remained unchanged (Anttila, 2017). Le Pen’s dédiabolisation of the National Front resulted in considerable success since taking power. In 2009, the FN won 6 percent of the votes in the European Parliament, whereas in 2014, the FN won almost 25 percent; moreover, Le Pen, who rebranded the National Front to the National Rally (which shall be used henceforth), won more votes in the 2017 presidential election than all of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s past elections combined. (Anttila, 2017). At its core, the RN’s success stands on the back of cultural cleavages, with Le Pen’s nationalistic agenda mobilizing precarious voters under welfare chauvinism and the defense of France herself.

Like the National Rally, Fidesz came from the fringes. With its beginnings as an outlawed, dissident movement under the communist government in the 1980s, Fidesz quickly established itself as a party after the Revolutions of 1989 and became a major actor in Hungarian politics. Fidesz, bolstered by its underground status as ‘martyrs’ of democracy, took charge of the center-right ideology, winning a majority in parliament from 1998-2002. Allied with the Hungarian People’s Party (MPP), Fidesz-MPP took a populist turn in 2002 following a parliamentary defeat by the Hungarian Socialist Party, stressing the nationalistic and popular aspects of its ideology. What’s more, Viktor Orbán, chairman of the party, sought to personally mobilize the common people against the “others” – opposing parties and immigrants (Szabó, 2011). Unlike the National Rally, Fidesz established a cultural hegemony amongst the people, proving itself as a viable, competitive party and champions against the cosmopolitan establishment – a success attributed to the rising economic and political stagnation and unrest that emerged in 2005 (Szabó, 2011).Furthermore, the anti-establishment rhetoric of Fidesz, which accused the left of manipulating the people, manifested itself in the 2006 riots in which thousands of Hungarians protested the “lies” espoused by the re-elected Hungarian Socialist Party (Szabó, 2011). In 2010, Fidesz’s populist mobilization come to fruition with the winning of a supermajority in parliament and Viktor Orbán becoming prime minister – a position he has held ever since. Since 2010, Fidesz has appealed to the ethno-nationalist sentiments of its constituency, scapegoating and demonizing Muslim immigrants as threats to the economy, culture, and survivability of Hungary to the point of becoming a single-issue party in the 2018 election.

**Exclusion**

At the center of the National Rally’s populist agenda lies the tenet of national sovereignty. To break from Brussels is to rediscover independence, reestablish a national identity, and protect the “cohesion of the French” (Le Pen, 2017). The RN’s policy of economic patriotism positions the party’s working-class constituency against the establishment of the left and the right, presenting the economic and social woes caused by globalization as the enemy of the true French identity (Betz, 2013). These new issues, such as deindustrialization and outsourcing, induce a sense of precariousness onto the individual, and because these troubles are not as poignant across all economic classes, the low skilled laborers are increasingly susceptible to the rhetoric of economic patriotism and welfare chauvinism (Michel, 2017). Such policies are inherently ethno-populist; for example, according to the RN’s presidential manifesto, Le Pen seeks to apply a 10% tax on all foreign workers, with the revenue being contributed to unemployment benefits (Le Pen, 2017). Such a policy furthers the perceived threat of immigration by linking the presence of Muslim immigrants directly to the wellbeing of the labor class. Moreover, Le Pen’s attacks on globalization embolden the precarious voter, encouraging them to mobilize against the elite who ostracized them, and the immigrants who advance economic insecurity (Michel, 2017). This is evidenced by the overwhelming amount of support Le Pen received in rural areas of high unemployment and low wages during the 2017 presidential election (Beckwith, 2017).

Similarly, Fidesz portrays Muslim immigrants as a threat to the economy and culture, urging the populace to protect the livelihood of Hungary from the ‘crimmigrants’ of the Middle East (Thorleifsson, 2017). Orbán, much like Le Pen, propagated the exclusive narrative of a chauvinistic welfare system through the otherizing of Muslim immigrants, describing the crisis as a “danger [that] has not yet passed,” warning that if he was not reelected, Hungary would be unable to correct the mistake of immigration and globalization (Csermely, 2018). Fidesz’s hostile discourse on the Muslim “Others” is, unlike the RN, national policy; a legitimized invocation of an apocalyptic reality in which the immigrants are harbingers of chaos, economic insecurity, and cultural pollution. Such a policy has been met with considerable public support, as evidenced by a 2015 poll which found that 60% of Hungarians were fearful an Islamic usurpation of European culture (Thorleifsson, 2017). The figure presented by the poll demonstrates the extent to which the Orbán regime has penetrated Hungarian thought with a nationalistic agenda – a feat not yet achieved by the National Rally.

**Protection**

Fidesz and the National Rally, despite sharing similar approaches to the issues of immigration and globalization, in addition to chauvinistic policies, differ in the delivery of a populist party’s primary objective: security for its constituency. The welfare policies of the National Rally are fundamentally exclusionary, as it prioritizes the socio-economic interests of native French citizens (Ivaldi, 2012). The RN’s chauvinistic approach presents Muslim immigrants and foreigners as undeserving beneficiaries outside the social contract, and ultimately, a drain of resources for the preferable lower classes (Michel, 2017). Consequently, RN’s chauvinistic welfare only furthers, and falsely legitimizes, the xenophobic sentiments of the party’s constituency (Ivaldi, 2012). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center supports this idea, finding that the supporters of the National Rally, compared to other citizens, twice as likely to have a negative perception of Muslim immigrants (Wike, 2017). Moreover, RN supporters are more likely to believe that the Muslim community is unwilling to conform to French customs (Wike, 2017). In terms of policy, large family subsidies, including those for the elderly and special needs, are quite generous under the National Rally; however, all financial aid is exclusive to families with at least one natural-born French parent (Michel, 2017; Le Pen, 2017). Such a policy is evidence of an ethno-nationalist agenda lurking at the core of the RN’s approach to welfare. The party’s goal to protect the “true” citizens of France is driven by exclusionary desires.

With the fall of the Socialist Regime, Fidesz inherited a robust welfare system. And yet, since Fidesz rose to power in 2010, this system has undergone a radical reform targeted at the old socialist social structure (Scharle & Szikra, 2015). Orbán’s regime has the explicit intention of redistributing the wealth to the upper classes, even if it results in harming the poor, as the government is deliberately neglecting the aspects of a welfare state in favor of a work-based society (Szikra, 2018). Fidesz, for example, implemented a flat tax rate and granted generous tax credits to higher income households, whereas the poor saw the elimination of tax credits and a severe reduction in labor protections, furthering inequality and insecurity, while also enriching the elites (Misetics, 2014). Fidesz’s redistribution policies, veiled by anti-immigration and chauvinistic policies, restructures the state’s social priorities. Instead of caring for the precarious members of the lower class, Hungary designed social policies with the intent of redefining which class deserves the merits of welfare. Under Fidesz’s work-based society, only citizens with a defined, stable place in the labor market with high incomes are permitted the benefits of redistribution (Szikra, 2018). Such protection of the stable classes furthers the precarization of the lower classes, as the “undeserving” families – citizens without stable or high income – are prevented upgrading family benefits and face gutted social assistance policies (Szikra, 2018). As a result, Fidesz can foster this economic insecurity and continue to scapegoat and ostracize what the party deems to be “others” (Misetics, 2014). Fidesz’s dynamic use of exclusion and protection furthers the discontent used to legitimize the party’s actions.

**Conclusion**

As the people of Europe grow ever more disillusioned and unsatisfied with the effects of a globalized world and the perceived neglect of their cosmopolitan leaders, populist movements and parties shall rise in their stead. While the two parties varied considerably in their history, with Fidesz garnering much greater electoral success, the roots of the ideology are the same: the precarization of the citizenry against an “other” is a fundamental tenet of right-wing populist parties. The National Rally and Fidesz appeal to the peripheral of their states, promising to ease the burdens caused by globalization through radical reform. To the RN, reform is sought through the creation of an ethno-nationalist welfare system, whereas Fidesz has established a welfare system in which the upper classes profit. With mainstream parties in disarray, right-wing populism will continue to thrive with nationalism and racism as its weapons.

References

Anntila, S. (2017). *The rise of the national front* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://digi.lib.ttu.ee/i/file.php?DLID=7835&t=1

Batz, H. (2013). The new Front National: Still a master case? *RECODE, 30*. Retrieved from http://www.recode.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Final-RECODE-30-Hans-Georg-Betz\_Final\_fin.pdf

Beckwith, M. (2017, May 10). *Illustrating the French presidential election results*. Retrieved from http://www.datainnovation.org/2017/05/illustrating-the-french-presidential-election-results/

Csermely, P. (2018, April 7). *Both Votes for Fidesz!* Retrieved from www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/both-votes-for-fidesz

Ivaldi, G. (2012). The successful welfare-chauvinist party? Retrieved from https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00765428/document

Le Pen, M. (2017). *Les 144 engagements présidentiels.* Retrieved from www.rassemblementnational.fr/le-projet-de-marine-le-pen/.

Michel, E. (2017). Welfare politics and the radical right: The relevance of welfare politics for the radical right’s success in western Europe (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/46384/Michel\_2017.pdf?sequence=1

Misetics, B. (2014, December 23). *A social catastrophe in the making: Social policy in Hungary since 2010.* Retrieved from www.boell.de/en/2014/12/23/social-catastrophe-making-social-policy-hungary-2010

Mondon, A. (2015). The French secular hypocrisy: The extreme right, the Republic and the battle for hegemony. *Patterns of Prejudice,49*(4), 392-413. doi:10.1080/0031322x.2015.1069063

Scharle, A., & Szikra, D. (2015). Recent Changes Moving Hungary Away from the European Social Model (D. Vaughan-Whitehead, Ed.). In *The European Social Model in Crisis. Is Europe Losing Its Soul?*(2015 ed.). doi:10.4337/9781783476565.00012

Szabó, M. (2011). From a suppressed anti-communist dissident movement to a governing party: The transformation of Fidesz in Hungary. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology & Social Policy*, 2(2), 47-66. Retrieved from https://drury.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=74153480&site=ehost-live

Szikra, D. (2018, March). *Welfare for the Wealthy: The Social Policy of the Orbán-regime, 2010-2017*(Publication). Retrieved https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/14209.pdf

Thorleifsson, C. (2017). Disposable strangers: Far-right securitization of forced migration in Hungary. *Social Anthropology*/*Antropologie Sociale*, 25(3), 318-334. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12420

Wike, R. (2017, April 21). *5 charts on France's National Front and who supports it*. Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/21/5-charts-showing-where-frances-national-front-draws-its-support/