The Extreme Right in Europe and Democratic Malaise

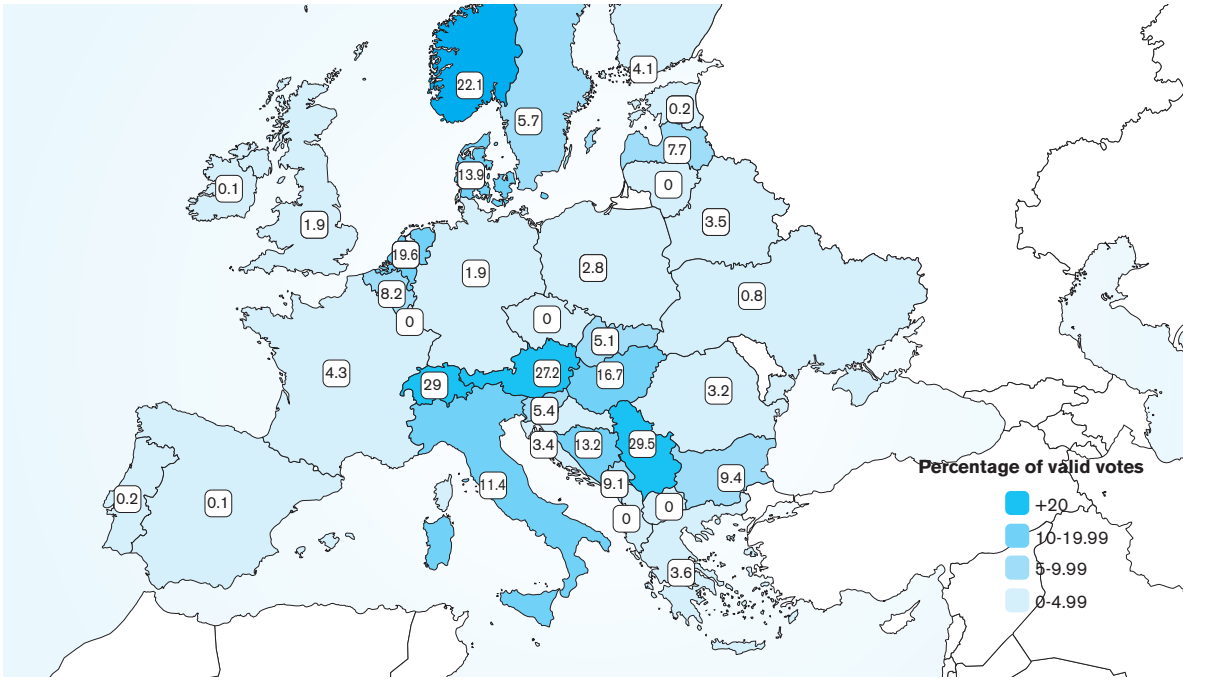
Pascal Perrineau
Professor
Institut d'études politiques (Sciences Po), Paris
Director
Centre for Political Research at Sciences Po (CEVIPOF), Paris

For some years now, the extreme right and right-wing populisms have been enjoying significant success in legislative elections in certain countries: 29.5% in Serbia (2008), 29% in Switzerland (2007), 28.2% in Austria (2008), 19.6% in the Netherlands (2010), 17.2% in Norway (2009), 16.7% in Hungary (2010), 13.9% in Denmark (2007) and 11.4% in Italy (2008). In many other countries, these parties have surpassed the 5% mark. These electoral successes in the heart of Europe cannot, however, be interpreted as signs of the irresistible growth of the extreme right. A good number of countries escape this trend, among them Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom. However, in many European countries, populist parties or the extreme right exert weight on the political agenda and are even at the threshold of power, as is the case in the Netherlands or Denmark (cf. Map 1).

How Can Their Political Identity Be Defined?

Independently of heteroclite, at times relatively hazy doctrinal references and despite varied political itineraries, these diverse extreme right parties have some points in common. They are most often characterised by: centralised partisan operation under the authority of charismatic leaders, frequent recourse to populist demagogy and finally, certain central, recurrent themes in their political arguments. Among these can often be found a highly xenophobe discourse commonly embodied by frequent recourse to "anti-immigration" topics, a declared authoritative component, particularly explicit in the sphere of "law and order", a composite economic programme, synthesising the neo-liberalism of the 1980s and the protectionism of the 1990s and overuse of the "anti-system" discourse regarding the "elite ruling from above". Of course, many of these themes have been used at other times by political forces demonstrating little attachment to democracy. Directly and generally lumping today's parties together with the fascism arising between the two World Wars would, however, be ambiguous and even false. The fascist parties of the 1920s and 30s arose in a context of very deep economic and social crisis – the Great Depression of 1929 – for which there is no equivalent today. They also developed thanks to frustrations emerging after the World War I: the frustration of humiliating defeat in Germany, the frustration of the neglected victor in Italy. Today, neither economic and social misery nor the traumatisms of a long, bloody conflict are the case in Europe. These fascist parties were also totalitarian, considering that a single party should dominate the whole of society and organise it from the top down. The Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), The French National Front (*Front National*, FN), the Netherlands Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) and the Italian North League (*Lega Nord*, LN) do not advocate turning away from the regime of pluralist democracy. The parties from between the wars practiced the "Führerprinzip" or the "Cult of the Duce", whereas the central role of the leaders of today's populist-nationalist parties falls well short of this. In sum, none of today's parties advocates massive State intervention in the economy – whereby the Nazis and Fascists did – or a corporatist organisation of society. Today's reality cannot be viewed from yesterday's perspective for then

MAP 1 **The Extreme Right in Europe in the Latest Legislative Elections**



we might not grasp the element of modernity characterising contemporary extreme right parties. Focussing on filiations would mean running the risk of overlooking the broad and original nature of a new political phenomenon. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the old extreme-right parties of a fascist type that still survive in Europe are anaemic. Neither the Spanish extreme right (which won only 0.1% of the votes in the last legislative elections), mostly bogged down with nostalgia for defunct Francoism, nor the British extreme right with neo-fascists undertones (1.9% for the British National Party in the last legislative elections), nor the Portuguese extreme right, still weighed down by memories of Salazarism (0.2% of the votes in the last legislative elections), have a great deal of repercussion in elections. They have all fallen in the shadows of electoral marginality. On the other hand, when the more or less distant heirs to these old groups tackle today's problems, their success can be spectacular. The FPÖ in Austria, the FN in France, the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*, DF) in Denmark, the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*, FrP) in Norway and the PVV in the Netherlands have all well surpassed the 10% mark, and in Austria and Switzerland, extreme right or right-wing populist parties have even obtained over 20% of the vote.

How Can We Interpret These Outbreaks?

In Eastern Europe, the issue of national minorities and borders is a strong vehicle of nationalist fervour. A fervour fuelled by a precocious political disillusionment prospering on a background of authoritarian culture. Yet disillusionment also affects long-standing Western democracies. *The dissatisfaction of the voters with stagnant political systems* where the quasi-consensus can seem to stifle public debate is particularly evident in countries such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The extreme right then appears as a number of anti-system populist parties denouncing those who have "monopolised" State power to the point of being confused with it. The extreme right thus politicises the anti-political sentiment that questions traditional parties and their systems of alliances.

A questioning that is all the more virulent since partisan loyalties based on class or religious divisions that were often underlying traditional parties in Europe are in crisis. The working class has gone into decline, religious engagement has faded, immense middle classes have developed and their values have detached themselves from the religious moulds of yore. *The extreme right is creating new shared lines* around new issues: Europe, globalisation and immigration. By insisting on national crite-

ria against the real or supposed multiculturalism of its adversaries, ethno-cultural nationalism is attempting to gain sway. This nationalism likewise attempts to revive a set of traditional values undermined by the "cultural liberalism" of our societies. After the 11 September 2001 attacks and the development of Islamist terrorism, it has found an enemy of its stature and the anti-Islamist tone of its struggle has become accentuated. Attesting to this is the major victory of the Swiss referendum on prohibiting the construction of minarets, which gained 57.5% of votes on 29 November 2009, or the extremely heated debate undertaken in Germany regarding Thilo Sarrazin's statements on the impossible integration of Muslims in his book "*Germany Does Away with Itself*".

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Until the early 1980s, numerous observers considered that post-industrial societies were undergoing a true "silent revolution" bringing "new politics" where issues such as gender equality, quality of life or the promotion of minorities were becoming essential. The strong comeback of the extreme right constitutes a challenge to this model of analysis. In the face of the libertarian pole of "new politics", concerns for law and order, strict respect for authority, less tolerance for minorities, attachment to traditions and traditional moral values have returned, brought on, among other things, by the significant ageing experienced by European populations. In a way, the "new left" and social movements of the 1970s were succeeded by a "new right" and identity-based movements in the 1980s and '90s. With the crumbling of social ties, the sense of insecurity and anomie have progressed and have entailed a demand for a sense of belonging, for community and for identity that the extreme right and neo-populist movements attempt to meet.

However, beyond this largely culturalist explanation of the success of the extreme right, a more global explanation in terms of political response to the new economic and social state of our societies is worth expounding. Over the past few decades, the move from an industrial capitalism with social assistance (with its Welfare State) to a more individualist, post-industrial capitalism has been accompanied by true world upheaval marked by social fragmentation, alienation from traditional identity groups (social classes, ideological families, local cultures), the individualisation of risks, the growing mobility and the double movement of cultural and ethnic diversification within societies and at the same time, their growing interdependence. The economic and financial crisis of autumn 2008 did not reverse the trend. The emergence of the extreme right was a direct response to these transformations. The rejection of immigration and sometimes xenophobia then became the response to the challenge of a mobile world, increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural. Gradually, rejection of the "Other," presented as a real means of "cultural protectionism," emerged as an extension of the call for "economic protectionism" and a questioning of the earlier neo-liberal creed. The extreme right then developed a real "Welfare State chauvinism" that has had great success among popular circles directly threatened by the advent of post-industrial society. In addition, it has condemned neo-liberal globalisation, advocated leaving the European Union and the euro, demanded protectionist economic measures, called for re-nationalisation of the economy, etc. Thus, in the face of the growing opening up of our societies on the economic as well as the cultural and political levels, the extreme right structures itself on the anxiety generated by "open society" and is attempting to invent the alternative of a "nationally refocused society."

Democratic Malaise

Finally, the latest element of the crisis of modernity seems to be continuously fuelling the dynamic of the extreme right: democratic malaise. In his brilliant political history of religion, Marcel Gauchet demonstrated how "disenchantment with the world"[1] not only affected the religious sphere but more globally, all systems of representation justifying a collective *devoir-être* (moral ideal) in the making and thus political ideologies. This collapse of systems of repre-

[1] Gauchet Marcel, *Le désenchantement du monde : Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris, NRF, Gallimard, 1985.

sentation alleging knowledge and control of the future has led to a loss of political reference points and a profound crisis of political representation. The latter is generalised in Europe and the symptoms are numerous: high abstention rates, an increasingly negative image of politicians, growing forces of protest, etc. Certain countries are experiencing a deeper malaise because political representation no longer reflects the diversity, novelty and complexity of divisions traversing societies.[2] This malaise seems to attain its climax in political systems where political conflict has lost its meaning, where left and right at times give the impression of making agreements on the essentials, where the main political groups divide the spoils of power among themselves in an institutional quasi-consensus. This system has at times gone quite far and has been institutionalised under the form of what Arend Lijphart has called "consociational democracy".[3] In those countries where the "democracy of consensus" or "consociational democracy" has become a full-blown system – the "Proporz" system in Austria, the "concordance" system in Switzerland, "verzuiling" (pillarisation) and particracy in Belgium and the Netherlands – extreme right and/or populist parties have room to rally discontent and opposition to the status quo. When citizens say to themselves: "Society changes but the system of distribution of power and the elites are immutable", protest and identity-based populists are seen as the only real opponents. In France, an impoverished version of this "democracy of consensus", the so-called "cohabitation",[4] produced the same effects and, in the second round of the presidential elections in 2002, boosted Jean Marie Le Pen, herald of a radical opposition to the "system" and the "Establishment."

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The rise of the extreme right in Europe is not an inevitable phenomenon. True, when politics are desacralised and become disenchanted, certain people nurture nostalgia for the old, revolutionary or ultra-reactionary passions that still drove the political scene only a few decades ago. But as Marcel Gauchet recently recalled,[5] "The enchantment of politics was the nightmare of the 20th century." The resurgence here and there of both right and left-wing extremisms is often but the echo of a poorly digested disenchantment and of the difficulty of assuming "disenchanted," "modest," yet above all modern politics.

[2] As Marcel Gauchet writes in *Le désenchantement du monde*, conflict as an axial form of political relations requires that "the antagonism concern, at least virtually, the ensemble of the collective phenomenon and that it be anchored in civil discord, that it represent on the political stage a dissension or an array of dissensions inherent to the very functioning of relations established between individuals and groups" (p. 282, *op. cit.*).

[3] Based on his studies of the political system of the Netherlands, Arend Lijphart came up with the notion of "consociational democracy", which is defined as governance by a cartel of political elites attempting to transform a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy. The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland have often been considered the best examples of this model. Cf. Arend LIJPHART, Julian Thomas HOTTINGER, "Les démocraties consociatives", in *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1997, p. 529-697.

[4] "Cohabitation" or power sharing between a left-wing President of the Republic and a right-wing Administration lasted from 1986 to 1988, and then again from 1993 to 1995. From 1997 to 2002, "cohabitation" existed between a right-wing President and a left-wing Administration. Hence, for twenty years, France primarily experienced a political system of power sharing rather than a regime where the Executive and the Legislative branches share the same political bent.

[5] Marcel GAUCHET, "Le double refus du religieux et du politique, entretien", *Le Figaro*, 29 July 2002, p. 23.