

## Fringe Parties

There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a “fringe party”. “Fringe party” is mostly used by journalists, politicians and political scientists as a pejorative term to demarcate the boundary between “reasonable politics” and the “lunatic fringe”, a label famously applied by Theodore Roosevelt in his Autobiography to describe “the foolish fanatics always to be found in such a [reform] movement and always discrediting it” (Roosevelt 1922, 206). Consequently, some political scientists have argued that the term should best be replaced by more neutral expressions, such as “marginal parties”, “non-established parties” or “non-mainstream parties”.

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It is, however, possible to derive a set of common and interrelated characteristics of fringe parties from the way the phrase is used in political language: Fringe parties do usually attract only minor segments of the electorate, they are small in terms of party membership, their leadership does not (longer) belong to the established elite groups of their respective political system, and their

party ideology does either violate the political consensus or is simply considered irrelevant by most voters.

Put differently, fringe parties are not part of their countries political mainstream, and they are not normally electorally relevant parties. This statement does, however, require two qualifications: First, most new parties (e.g. the Green parties) started out as fringe groups but became both electorally relevant and accepted by the more established parties and the majority of the citizenry over time. Second, some parties remain isolated and outside the political mainstream although they attract relatively large segments of the electorate (e.g. some Communist parties and some members of the Extreme Right party family).

Moreover, the ideological marginality of a party is not only conditional on time, but also more generally conditional on political context. Within the boundaries of a liberal-democratic regime, parties that promote a dictatorship of the proletariat or biological racism are clearly beyond the pale because their ideology contravenes the system's most basic norms and values. Left- and right-wing extremist groups which aim to abolish or radically transform liberal democracy are therefore amongst the most prominent fringe parties in Western democracies. Within the context of a stable authoritarian system, however, a nascent grouping of democrats would well be considered a fringe party while the dominant non-democratic parties define the political mainstream.

Most fringe parties are, however, marginal not because they harbour extremist views but rather because they tend to campaign for a single issue which is not – at least not in itself – important enough to secure them sufficient levels of political support. Examples from Western Democracies include, but are not limited to:

*Religious parties.* Historically, religious conflicts have had an impact on the formation of European party systems during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In post-war Western Europe, the Christian-Democratic party family has been rather successful electorally, and Christian values have had an impact on the party ideologies of many other Western parties. Today there is, however, a number of tiny Christian parties that represent fundamentalist and/or evangelical views and try to distance themselves from both mainstream churches and Christian-Democratic parties. Moreover, an even smaller number of non-Christian (mostly Islamic), spiritual and New Age parties exists in Western countries. So far, they have had no electoral success whatsoever. In other countries where religious cleavages are more prominent (e.g. India or Israel), religious parties can be much more relevant and would not

automatically be considered as part of the “fringe”.

*Regional and ethnic parties.* In many countries, ethnic and regional cleavages are simply not salient enough to sustain a single-issue party, rendering attempts to mobilize political support on the basis of some long-forgotten territorial unit futile. However, where they exist, ethnic parties are sometimes well-integrated into the political system like the Swedish People's Party in Finland. They might even enjoy special privileges like the parties of the Danish and Sorbian minorities in Germany, which are exempted from the five percent electoral threshold. Therefore, it would be difficult to portray these parties and their constituencies as being “on the fringe” in any meaningful way.

In other countries, regionalist or separatist movements may have started out as fringe parties. But during the revival of regionalism after the Second World War, they became relevant political players that cannot be ignored by mainstream parties. This would include many of the regional parties in Spain, the Scottish National Party or the various regionalist movements in Italy that merged to form the Lega Nord. Similarly, many regional and ethnic parties in India are too relevant to be considered as genuine fringe parties.

*Social groups, specific interests and frivolous parties.* There is a host of rather colourful parties that claim to speak for large segments of society like women, the elderly, or families with children. Normally, the interests of these groups are fairly well represented by mainstream parties of the left and of the right who cannot afford to ignore these groups. Consequently, women's/feminist parties, family leagues and “grey” parties usually fail to attract relevant numbers of voters.

For more specific and concentrated interests like hunting, farming or even car driving, the incentive structure is slightly different because demands from these groups are more easily ignored by the existing major parties. In most countries, however, agrarian and similar parties were either absorbed into mainstream parties or linger at (or beyond) the border of political irrelevance. The French Hunting, Fishing, Nature, Tradition Party is a case in point.

Other parties might campaign for a single political issue which is less obviously linked to a social group but nonetheless seen as marginal by most voters. An example would be the host of tiny and ineffectual eurosceptic groups in generally europhile countries like Germany. It is, however, worth pointing out again that both the Green parties and the anti-immigration parties of the Extreme Right parties began their ascendancy as marginal single-issue movements.

Finally, there is a bewildering host of frivolous parties that exist to make fun of “real” fringe or mainstream parties, either to get access to state funding or just for the fun of it. Examples include beer-lovers parties in several post-soviet states, Canada, Germany, Norway and Poland, parties that allude to grand (and often fictional) political and religious ideas (“Imperial British Conservative Party”, “Scottish Jacobite Party”, “Church of Militant Elvis Party”), parties that exist to challenge political correctness and the establishment (the “Anarchist Pogo Party of Germany” and the “PARTY”, which campaigns for rebuilding the Berlin wall), or the many British groups that play with the word party (“Mongolian Barbecue Great Place to Party”).

Kai Arzheimer, University of Mainz

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