A Matter of Timing? The Dynamics of Radical Right Party Support and Mainstream Parties' Programmatic Change in France[*]

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Abstract: It is now widely accepted that the electoral success of the Radical Right in Western Europe is conditional on a range of contextual factors that provide the Right with "opportunities" to mobilise potential voters. One particularly important aspect of the so-called political opportunity structure is the salience of the Radical Right's issues (most notably immigration) in the manifestos of the established parties: even when a whole host of micro and macro variables is held constant, a vote for the Radical Right becomes more likely if the established parties address questions of law and order, immigration and national identity in their manifestos, regardless of the direction of these statements. It is, however, not clear whether the increased salience is actually a precondition for contemporary Radical Right success or a mere reaction to past support for the Right. In a bid to shed some light on that puzzle, this paper analyses the dynamics of aggregate support for the Radical Right and party manifestos in France from the 1980s into the 21st century.

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1 The Research Problem

1.1 Contextual Factors and the Radical Right Vote in Western Europe

Since the 1980s, "new" radical right parties have become a permanent feature of many Western European political systems. While most of these parties have faced serious setbacks and challenges, there is little doubt that they are by no means a flash-in-the-pan phenomenon. While the parties of this new radical right family arguably differ in terms of their membership, programs, and ideological predilections, researchers were soon able to identify common traits of their core electorates: they are overwhelmingly blue-collared, male, and xenophobic.

Given that the size of this segment of the electorate is fairly stable or even declining in all West European societies, the waxing and waning of the radical right's support must be the result of external factors. Accordingly, much of the current research on the radical right is focused on two classes of meso- and macro-level variables: "supply-side" variables pertaining to the radical right parties themselves (i. e. their manifesto, leadership, campaign-style or parliamentary performance) on the one hand and "contextual variables" on the other. The latter class of variables includes (but is not restricted to) macro-factors like unemployment rates, immigration figures and the basic configuration of the welfare state and the political system at large as well as the media agenda, the format of the party system, and the manifestos of the radical right's more established competitors. Collectively, these external factors form a "political opportunity structure" (POS) for the radical right (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006).

1.2 The Research Question

Amongst these factors, the programmatic positions of the established parties feature prominently in recent research. Using multi-level modelling techniques and drawing on data from the Eurobarometer-project as well as UNHCPR immigration figures, OECD labour market and welfare statistics and the wealth of information collected by the Comparative Manifesto Project, Arzheimer, 2009 (see also Arzheimer and Carter, 2006) concludes that the radical right vote in Western Europe is to a large degree driven by the prominence of the radical right's issues in the manifestos of the established parties. This positive relationship holds even when immigration figures, unemployment rates and a whole host of other contextual and individual-level variables are controlled for, suggesting that by addressing the issues of the radical right (most prominently immigration), the established parties might actually

lend credibility and legitimacy to their right-wing competitors.

There is, however, a different explanation for these findings: if party leaders are rational actors that react to past losses and form reasonable expectation about future electoral battles, and if support for the radical right is autocorrelated in the short to medium run, the relationship between the radical right's success and the salience of the radical right's issues in the established parties' manifestos at time t could be spurious, i. e. the result of a previous radical right success at $t - 1$.

Within the multi-level framework it is difficult to test hypotheses about dynamic relationships. Introducing previous levels of support for the radical right into the model substantially reduces the number of cases and leads to multi-collinearity and further complications.

There is, however, an alternative approach. In the spirit of Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002), one may look at *aggregate* support for the radical right and treat the relationships between this variable on the one hand and salience of the radical right's issues on the other as a multiple time series scenario. This should provide some additional leaverage for tackling the research problem.

Analysing data on the aggregate-level inevitably implies a certain loss of information. This loss, however, is restricted to the single survey data variable, since party manifestos (as well as unemployment and immigration figures) are intrinsic system-level variables. Moreover, decision-makers within the established parties will respond to aggregate support for the radical right, not to individual opinions. While it would be problematic to introduce macro-level variables into a micro-level regression of political behaviour or attitudes, a multiple time series model is well-suited for studying the question of whether a surge in radical right support is triggered or rather followed by a change in the established parties' policies (or neither).

While the focus of this paper is on the dynamic relationship of radical right success and the salience of the radical right's issues in the manifestos of other parties, contemporary levels of unemployment and immigration rates should also be included as controls in the model because they closely linked to the electoral prospects of the radical right. Introducing these important controls should provide some guard against omitted variable bias.

2 Data and Method

Individual level data on support for the radical right come from the European Commission's bi-annual series of Eurobarometer surveys for the years from 1980-2002.[1] These data were aggregated on a per-survey/per-country base. Time series on party

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[1]The partial cumulation of the Eurobarometer produced by a team led by Hermann Schmitt (Schmitt et al., 2002) greatly facilitated the construction of the data set.

positions, unemployment and immigration were constructed from information in the datasets produced by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Klingemann et al., 2006), the UNHCR statistical yearbook (UNHCR, 2002) and various publications by the OECD (1992, 1999, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004).

Unemployment enters the model in a standardised form devised by the OECD that should render them comparable across time and countries (see Arzheimer, 2009). Immigration was measured as the number of new applications for asylum per capita per year (see Arzheimer, 2009 and Arzheimer and Carter, 2006 for an explanation of the rationale behind this operationalisation). Finally, "salience" reflects the salience of the radical right's issues in the manifestos of all other parties (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006). For this figure, the scores calculated by Klingemann et al. (2006) were weighted according to the relative size (vote share) of the respective parties. Since the party manifestos are usually published only when an election is imminent, party positions and party sizes between publication/election dates were linearly interpolated on a per-party basis.

The nature of the research problem and the structure of these data call for Vector Auto Regression (VAR), a very general type of multiple time series analysis (Brandt and Williams, 2007). The basic idea of VAR is that every variable is regressed on its own lagged values as well as on the lagged (and optionally the contemporary) values of all other variables in the model.

The model can be applied to all West European countries which are a) continuously monitored by the Eurobarometer since the 1980s and b) where support for the radical right was continuously strong enough to be captured by the Eurobarometer surveys. At the moment, however, due to time constraints the analysis is restricted to France.

VAR is well-suited for the research problem at hand because it provides a glimpse into the dynamics of multivariate time series and can help identify two important preconditions for a causal mechanism: correlation and temporal order. It has, however, a number of drawbacks. First, VAR models generate a very large number of coefficients which can be overwhelming. Interpretation therefore has to focus on overall tests and graphical presentations. Second, like any method that is based on non-experimental data, VAR can provide some circumstantial evidence but is unable to provide a strict test of causality. Third, VAR is "data-hungry" while the Eurobarometer series are somewhat short and rather sparse. Therefore, all findings should be considered preliminary and interpreted with caution.

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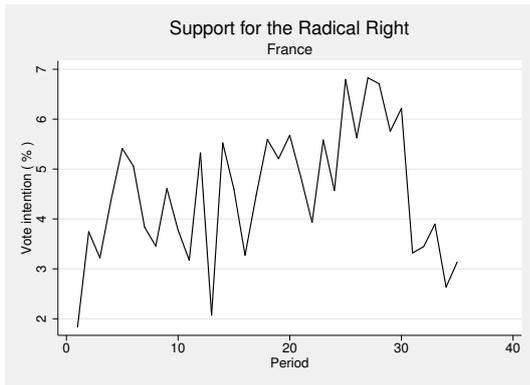
Figure 1: Support for the Radical Right in France
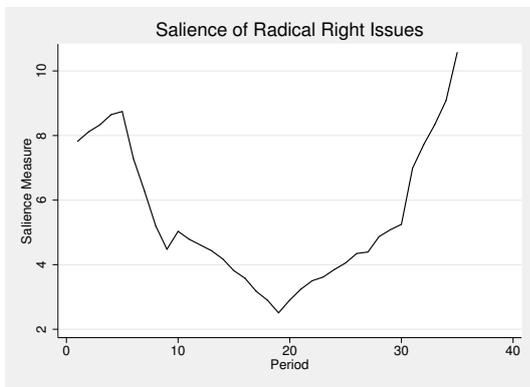
**Figure 2:** Salience of Radical Right's issues in France

3 Findings

Figure 1 shows that the share of self-declared FN voters amongst the French Eurobarometer respondents started at just under two percent in the early 1980s and peaked at just under seven percent in the 1990s. Moreover, the figure displays some local trends and a lot of presumably random noise.

Figure 2, on the other hand, which depicts the salience of the FN's traditional issues (law and order, national pride and identity, and so on) in the discourse of the other French parties, is roughly U-shaped: the salience of these issues declined during the 1980s but then rebounded and massively increased during the 1990s.

Rather intriguingly, the number of asylum applications displays much the same pattern (Figure 3), whereas unemployment follows a sine-shaped cycle (Figure 4).

VAR requires all variables to be stationary. Both the augmented Dickey-Fuller as well as the Phillips-Perron test indicate that support for the radical right is sta-
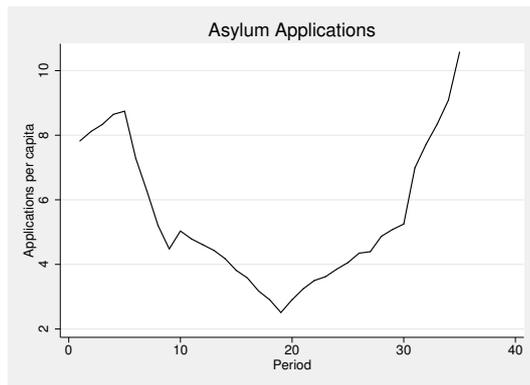
Figure 3: Asylum Applications in France
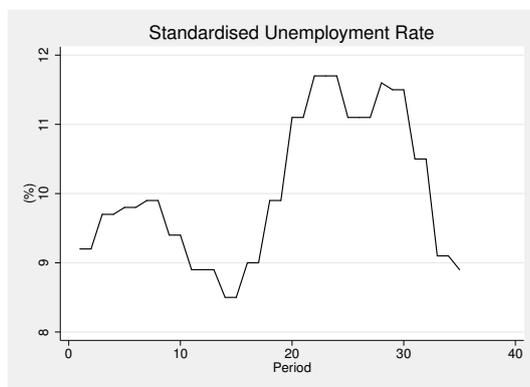
Figure 4: Unemployment in France

tionary. On the other hand, both tests agree that there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the process which generates the salience time series contains a unit root. The measure of salience is, however, based on percentages of manifestos devoted to issues of the radical right and therefore (like many political science time series) bounded above and below. Over the long term, such variables must be stationary and should be treated accordingly (Williams, 1993).

As a rule of thumb, the number of lags should be chosen with the seasonality of the data in mind. But for the two political variables, the length of the electoral cycle is not set in stone. Moreover, with only 35 observations, using to many degrees of freedom would lead to inefficient and potentially unstable estimates. Therefore, the number of lags was set to four, which is roughly equivalent to two years.

A whole host of measures for selecting the final lag length has been proposed in the literature, including a range of information criteria. While the HQIC and the SBIC (which imply a heavy penalty for the additional parameters that must be

estimated) suggest that an even shorter of lag length of one or two periods might be optimal, the AIC supports the initial choice of four lags, and so this length was retained. The resulting model is stable (as indicated by the modulus test), and the residuals are uncorrelated over time and do not significantly depart from normality.[2]

One of the central tools for interpreting the findings from a VAR is the notion of "Granger Causality" (Granger, 1969). This technical term is slightly misleading because it does not imply "real" causality, which requires, amongst other things, isolation from other influences and a theoretically sound explanation (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, chapter 3). Rather, "Granger Causality" focuses on two other necessary but insufficient conditions for a causal explanation, namely correlation and the temporal order of events: one variable X Granger causes another variable Z if past values of X provide for a significantly better prediction of Z than past values of Z alone. If the salience of "right" issues in the manifestos of mainstream parties was function of past radical right support, this should show up in an appropriate statistical test of the hypothesis that the coefficients for the four lagged values of radical right support a jointly different from zero.

A Wald test shows that this is indeed *not* the case, i.e. there is insufficient evidence for a Granger-causal effect of past Front National support on the salience that other political parties assign to the issues of the Front National. The reverse is, however, not true: knowing the past values of this salience measure significantly improves the prediction of Front National support.

Another, more direct way to look at the dynamics of support for the radical right and the salience of its issues is the analysis of so-called "Impulse Response Functions" (IRF). An IRF graphs the response to a random shock in one of the focal variables (salience of or support for the radical right) on the variable itself as well as on the other variables in the system. Conventionally, the results of a shock equivalent to one standard deviation of the respective variable's residuals are used.[3]

Figure 5 shows the reaction of support for the radical right to a random increase in the salience of the radical right's issues (as reflected in other parties' manifestos). According to the model, this shock leads to an increase in support within a year

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[2]The residuals for the ideological measure are a borderline case since the Jarque-Bera test and the skewness test indicate a departure from normality while the Kurtosis test does not. For the residuals of the support variable, all three tests agree that they are normal. The more critical question of serial correlation was assessed with a Lagrange-multiplier test, which picks up no significant autocorrelation for lags 1-7 and 9. At $p = 0.06$, lag 8 (four years, i.e. roughly the average of the electoral cycle) could be considered another borderline case but is well beyond the conventional threshold of significance.

[3]The estimation of IRFs require an identifying assumption about the contemporaneous correlation of the variables. For the graphs presented below, the conservative assumption was made that radical right support comes first in this ordering. Additional analyses show, however, that the findings are virtually identical regardless of the ordering.
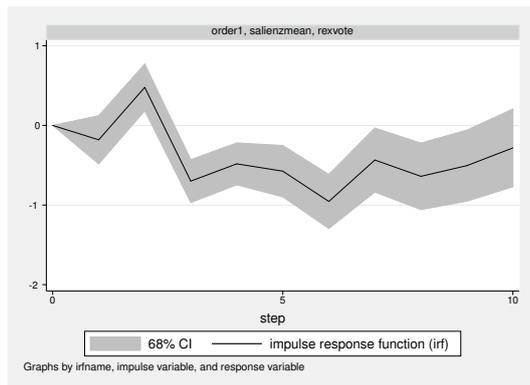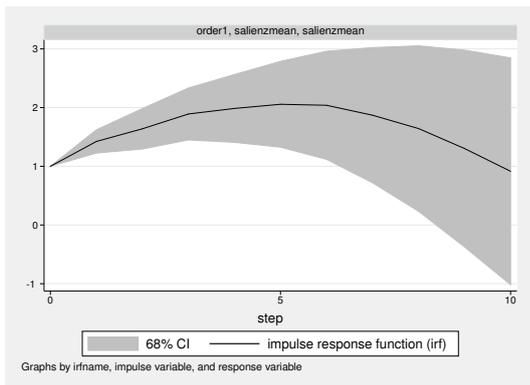
Figure 5: Shock to salience, response of radical right support

(two periods), which is followed by a marked decline that lasts for several periods. It takes four to five years for the series to revert to its initial level.

While this is an interesting and important finding (which is broadly compatible with the findings by Arzheimer and Carter, 2006 and Arzheimer, 2009), three things should be borne in mind here: first, the findings do reflect the situation in France, which is not necessarily representative for other West European countries. Second, although the rather liberal confidence level of 68% that is sometimes recommended in the literature was chosen, the function is significantly different from zero only at two points (after three and after six periods). This reflects the relative vagueness of our knowledge of the true parameters, which in turn is a function of the very limited number of observations. Finally, while the results suggest that increase in salience (which is brought about by political action of the elites) leads to a short-time increase in support for the radical right that is (more than) offset in the medium term (and has no effect in the long run), one must bear in mind these findings should not be interpreted in terms of individual political choices made by the voters, as this would be a fairly typical case of the ecological fallacy.

Figure 6 depicts the effect of the same shock on salience itself. From the graph, it is quite obvious that the impact of this shock builds up gradually over time and takes a long time to fade away. This pattern is intuitively plausible and reflects the fact that manifestos are only updated every four or five years, and that the ideological positions of parties between elections had to be interpolated.

Figure 7 is the most crucial for the research question at hand, as it explores the question of whether a flash success of the radical right will lead to an increase in the salience of its issues, that could in turn lead to a spurious correlation between contemporaneous ideological positions and micro-level voting behaviour. It is, however, obvious that this is not the case: the collective ideological reaction of the established parties to an increase in radical right support (as measured by the

**Figure 6:** Shock to salience, response of salience
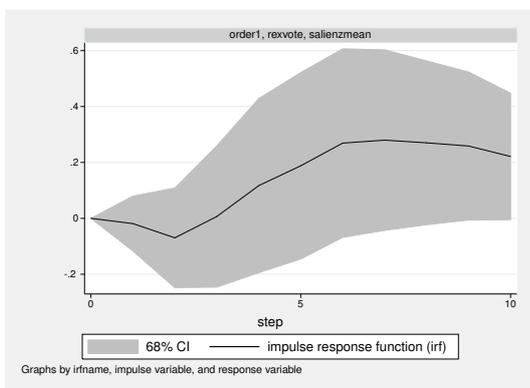
Figure 7: Shock to radical right support, response of salience

Eurobarometers) is minimal and statistically insignificant at all periods over the five year horizon.

Finally, Figure 8 graphs the reaction of a random increase in radical right support on itself. The figure shows that such a shock is (once that salience and the two control variables are taken into account) indeed nothing but a blip: as soon as in the next period, the series is not significantly different from its previous level. The only exception is the fourth period, where the shock results in a significant (though very small) negative deviation from this level.[4]

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[4]This dip, which is probably the result of a remaining seasonality (i. e. some sort of midterm-loss), is of no substantial importance.
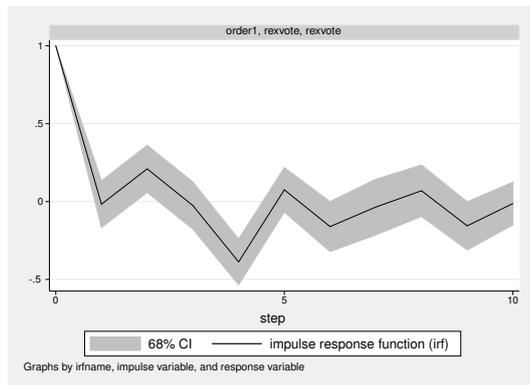
Figure 8: Shock to radical right support, response of radical right support

4 Conclusion

While previous research at the micro-level has demonstrated that electoral support for the radical right is contingent on external factors, which include the programmatic stances of more established parties, it is not clear whether these stances are actually a precondition for contemporaneous or rather a reaction to previous successes of the radical challengers. In a bid to shed some light on this puzzle, the paper has analysed the dynamics of aggregate support for the radical right in France on the one hand and the salience of the FN's issues in the manifestos of all other relevant parties on the other by means of a simple Vector Autoregressive Regression Model.

While it is impossible to adequately test for causal relationships in the absence of experimental data, the results suggest that changes in the relative importance of "right" issues were *not* driven by an increase in the support for the FN (as measured by the Eurobarometer surveys). This finding supports the arguments made by Arzheimer and Carter about the role that established parties might play in providing credibility and legitimacy for the radical right's discourse: if an increase in salience is not triggered by past radical right success, then it seems much safer to assume that the contemporaneous positive relationship between salience and individual voting behaviour does indeed reflect a causal mechanism.

The findings do, however, come with a lengthy disclaimer. The time series are rather short and are partly based on interpolations that should be further improved. Moreover, the robustness of the results with respect to alternative specifications of the model should be investigated more thoroughly. Finally, it is not yet clear whether the results hold in other West European countries.

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