Policy backlash: a novel approach to the study of radical right mobilisation


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Comparative research on far-right parties’ mobilisation and electoral success typically focuses on social factors and changes and accompanying patterns of party competition. This book follows the same trajectory but changes the angle: instead of the interplay between radical right challengers and mainstream parties, it looks at the politics of minority accommodation through minority parties and their allies in the mainstream, and thus provides a novel version of the “backlash thesis”. While conventional backlash arguments posit the radical right as a reaction to societal processes, Lenka Bustikova sees radical right parties as a reaction to the political ascendance of minorities. Instead of “group hostility”, the author identifies “policy hostility” as the key driver of radical right mobilisation. Moreover, focusing on Eastern Europe where significant minority populations exist in numerous countries, the study expands existing research on the backlash phenomenon in Western democracies.

Bustikova develops a theory of radical right mobilisation which is grounded in “a logic of electoral counter-mobilisation” (p. 20), driven by resentment, not of minorities or others per se, i.e. group hostility, but by policy shifts that advance the status of minorities relative to the dominant ethnic group, i.e. policy hostility. In a sequential logic, the theory argues that minorities that aspire to social or political advancement form their own ethno-liberal party, a “bilateral opposite” of the radical right, the advances of which would result in electoral gains of the radical right, too. When an ethno-liberal party finds mainstream allies adopting its demands or is invited into a governing coalition by a mainstream party, the result is the same. The politicisation of minorities’ status then threatens the dominant group’s sovereignty, and its “fringes” react by calling for retrenchment and exclusion. Once the radical
right is electorally successful and its agenda is enacted, it inevitably faces an electoral decline (p. 45).

The theory does not relate minority size to radical right mobilisation success in a linear way; rather, if minorities are large, mainstream parties will advocate restrictions of the minority’s status without the threat of the radical right party. Against this backdrop, rival explanations, like economic models or theories of identity politics, cannot account for the up- or down-swing of radical right parties, argues Bustikova. Instead, mainstream parties’ approaches to minority politics, with or without a minority party as junior partner, are crucial.

Three implications of the theory are tested for all of Eastern Europe widely understood (seventeen post-communist countries with competitive party systems and fifty-seven parties classified as radical right; pp. 80–82). The radical right is defined as a single-issue, programmatic niche party advocating minority exclusion and a strong state. That includes all parties which score high on the group-grid model (authoritarianism and nationalism), while its “bilateral opposite” scores low on both. The classification scheme and the grouping of the empirical cases are explained in an elaborate appendix to Chapter Three. With an original dataset including all national elections in these countries during 1990–2012 and a statistical model identifying the determinants of these parties’ electoral support, Bustikova shows strong support for two of her three hypotheses: a radical right party’s vote share increases when the vote share of an ethno-liberal party had increased in the previous election, and likewise when an ethno-liberal party participates in a government coalition in the period preceding the election in question. The analysis confirms empirically that radical right mobilisation is not proportional to the minority’s size.

Furthermore, the book provides in-depth analyses of two country cases (Slovakia and Ukraine) chosen because both exhibit salient levels of contestation over minority issues but diverge regarding the radical right’s electoral success and consolidation. Bustikova uses specifically designed survey datasets to test her theory at the individual level, to assess the impact of group hostility towards specific groups and to trace the effects of economic anxieties and attitudes towards government spending on minorities on voting for the radical right. Her findings confirm the overall theory and add additional insights about the threat perception of radical right voters who are driven more by anxieties about aspiring minorities than by the love of their own nation. Although the “portfolio of enemies” (p. 154) has widened in Slovakia as the new Kotleba party is adding Muslim immigrants, the Roma community, and gays and lesbians to the Hungarian minority, the overall reactive nature of radical right mobilisation is corroborated. Confirming the mechanism, the most distinctive characteristic of Svoboda voters in Ukraine—as compared to all voters—is their hostility towards a policy, in this case government spending on the highly organised Russian minority, rather than group hostility (pp. 183f.).

In sum, the book presents a clear argument and a novel approach to studying radical right mobilisation. Whereas existing studies focus primarily on economic factors or employ cultural backlash arguments, Bustikova emphasises the policy dimension of radical right support, while demonstrating its volatility and unintended consequences. Her study combines a general quantitative view of the entire region with a mixed-method in-depth analysis of two pivotal country cases.
Some questions emerge, nonetheless. The theory involves the concept of a “fringe” which can be mobilised by the radical right but does not clarify the border between the fringe and the rest of the dominant group. The concept of nationalism is underspecified by equating it with ethnic nationalism only. Moreover, the role of xenophobia is probably more complex than discussed here. While it is widespread in Eastern Europe and by itself cannot account for radical right mobilisation, some studies have shown that a particular framing and levels of intensity of resentment may well be the underlying cause why fringe members of the dominant group turn towards the radical right. Finally, if contestation over minority issues is the key criterion, the selection of Slovakia and Ukraine is not immediately evident, especially since Ukraine may not classify as fully democratic compared to most cases covered, in the studied period in Chapter Three. Other cases, like Estonia or Bulgaria, could have been considered.

Overall, Bustikova’s study is one of the most original comparative works on the radical right today and highly relevant for further studies in the field.

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