Ike Sharpless
GOVT 284
Sarah Wiliarty
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Fringe Politics & Voter Disillusionment: Ideology & Instability in the European Party System

An analysis of the roles played by three young continental parties is useful to best understand the evolution of the modern European party system; patterns exhibited by the French National Front, by the East German PDS, and by the Italian Forza Italia – and by the voter constituencies of said parties – largely discredit both Lipset and Rokkan's party stabilization theory and modernization theory's predicted death of ideology. Although modernization theory's concept of individual empowerment in modern (as opposed to traditional) societies remains largely verifiable via the protest votes of disillusioned French, [East] German, and – to a lesser degree – Italian citizens, it is often undermined by the centralizing biases of the electoral systems. Whereas the National Front, the PDS, and the Italian Lega Nord demonstrate both strong ideology and party formation along potentially new lines of cleavage, Berlusconi's Forza Italia – a perfect counterexample to Lipset and Rokkan's 'party freeze' – though tied to the powerfully ideological far-right, shows signs of being a populist/functionalist catch-all party along the lines predicted by modernization theory.

The first of the two theories in question, that of frozen party organization, was set forth by Seymour Martin Lipset's and Stein Rokkan's "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments." They argue that there exist only "four critical lines of cleavage",[1] two the product of national revolution and two the product of industrial revolution. They conclude that there occurred a

> freezing of the major party alternatives in the wake of the extension of the suffrage and the mobilization of major sections of the new reservoirs of potential supporters…*the party systems of the 1960s*

> *reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s…the party alternatives, and in remarkably many cases the party organizations, are older than the majorities of the national electorates.*[2]

I will attempt to demonstrate that potentially new lines of cleavage have arisen, specifically in France and in Germany but also in northern Italy, due to which the post-1960s party systems have substantially changed.

Although modernization theory, the second archetypal model which will pose as a backdrop, is broad and many-faceted, it pivots around the centrality of the "polar contrast between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies."[3] According to Bernard Brown, Samuel P. Huntington argues that modernization involves the "rationalization of authority…the development of specialized political structures to perform specialized functions, and mass participation in the political system."[4] Huntington's "The Change to Change" asserts that the "essential difference between modern and traditional society…lies in the greater control which modern man has over his natural and social environment."[5] I will argue that French/German mass participation is being undermined by voter disillusionment and the turn to extremist/regional parties, the existence of which – it could be argued – are signs of political empowerment. Furthermore, David Bell's 1962 assertion that we have, due to urbanization and secularization, reached 'the end of ideology', points towards a political future of American-style pragmaticism rather than ideology. In respect to the FN, the PDS, and Italian voting behavior (Bell's assertion *does* arguably apply to Berlusconi's FI), however, the evidence points rather to a resurgent desire for clear but qualitatively new ideological differentiation.

FRANCE & THE NATIONAL FRONT

Broadly speaking, the scandalous 2002 presidential election and the fragmentation both of the French party system and of the vote speak not to the death of ideology *or* to the stabilization of party systems. Rather, the voters' decision to look beyond the largely discredited (the right for scandal and the left for inching to the right) mainstream parties in support of extremist ones implies a potential chasm between the 'modernization' of the mainstream political elite and potentially new ideological foundations both of the extremist elite and of the voting populace.

The elections of 2002 – both presidential and parliamentary – demonstrate the French voters' disgust for watered-down mainstream politics,[*] thus negating both Bell's apparent death of ideology and Huntington's mass participation theory. Arnauld Miguet clearly sums up the key factors of the election in what he terms the "fragmentation of the system and volatility of the electorate, a growing political apathy manifesting itself in a low turnout and an extremist, populist vote."[6] In the words of Edward G. DeClaire, "the French continue to vote *against* the incumbents, while failing to vote *for* anything."[7] A record 16 candidates ran for president (nine previously),[8] and Jospin, obtaining 16.18 per cent of the vote, lost 2.5 million votes in seven years.[9] Equally relevant were the unprecedented rates of abstention: 28.4 percent in the 1st round of the presidential election (13 points up from 1974),[10] 40 per cent (14.5 million people) in the parliamentary election.

Of central importance is Miguet's assertion both of "a new political fault-line" and of a "division between the elites and the electorate."[11] After nine years of

[*] Before the election, political commentators/cartoonists commonly lampooned Chirac and Jospin for running what essentially amounted to the same platform.

cohabitation, the public had a view that "no doubt blurred the distinctions between those in power."[12] In the words of Mark Kesselman:

> Popular support and political stability increase when elections represent a choice between alternative political coalitions. In recent years, however, the decline in ideological distance between the Center-Left and Center-Right has reduced the importance of the electoral outcome; many French citizens feel unrepresented by *both* of the two major alternatives.[13]

Although Chirac's newly-formed UMP won an absolute parliamentary majority of 355 seats[14], the lack of voter representation is made clear by the fact that while "in terms of votes [the UMP and the PS] represent only one voter in two (47 per cent of those registered), they occupy 80 per cent of the seats in the new Parliament, the other parties having been wiped out in the ballot."[15] The broadly-perceived public-elite schism thus speaks against Huntington's assertion of mass participation in modernized democracies, and the built-in anti-extremism of the electoral system undermines modernization theory's of political self-empowerment.

Arguably, it is this very schism which allows Le Pen's National Front to draw support from such a disturbingly wide voter base. According to DeClaire, "the Front's voters came form all political camps";[16] "the Front's ability to keep the issues of immigration and insécurité at the forefront of the political agenda have perhaps led to the creation of alternative cleavage structures."[17] Arguing against modernization theory, Le Pen's party – "the only contemporary French political force to have increased its mass-based membership over the span of the past decade."[18] – is, at least at the top, strongly ideological: "25 percent [of the National Front elite] point to the decline in French fertility as the primary problem in France", and "18 percent believe that France is confronting a serious moral crisis".[19] Although a potential counterargument could be formed from the fact that immigration ranks 7th (22 per cent) among the French public,

who are primarily concerned about unemployment,[20] the massive disillusionment with mainstream politics still emphasizes the populace's desire to maintain clear ideological party boundaries.

Much like the Dutch Fortuynists – followers of the late Pim Fortuyn – caught the Netherlands by surprise in voicing a public concern against a social taboo, DeClaire affirms that "the Front is most attuned to the concerns of the general French public with respect to societal questions."[21] Arguing against the French taboo, Mmalek Boutih is cited by *The Economist*'s survey of France:

> France is wrong not to publish, as other countries like American do, statistics of criminality by social category, age, place, type of city development and so on. It is even more wrong not to establish a public debate on the question, as though the French are so irrational that they cannot calmly consider the reality of their problems.[22]

Although for vastly different reasons, both the right and the left therefore desire a more open dialogue on the topics of immigration and ethnic issues, and the inability of the mainstream government to do so further alienates the voting public.

Finally, the National Front's very existence undermines the validity of Lipset & Rokkan's argument by which the party organizations freeze at the moment of full suffrage. The FN was not even created until 1972, and it's electoral breakthrough was in 1984.[23] It is therefore quite relevant that the only party to have a truly high voter loyalty – "Fully 91 percent of those who voted for the Front in the 1992 regional elections cast their ballots for the Front once again in the 1993 legislative contest."[24] – is also among the few parties to be outside the original party system.

GERMANY & THE PDS

As with the French support for the National Front, a specific analysis of the voting habits in the East German *Länder* will reveal the continuing importance of

ideological coherence and the general disillusionment of at least some of the East German populace. Although Lipset & Rokkan's theory has in fact remained largely true in East Germany, the rise of the comparatively powerful German Green party and what Ron Inglehart terms 'postmaterialism' – in which ideology transcends economics – nonetheless substantially invalidates it.[*] Finally, against Huntington's claim regarding mass-empowerment and mass-participation, the PDS rejects some of the fundamental precepts of the Basic Law.

Douglas Webber's "The Second Coming of the Bonn Republic" sets the stage for the myriad political similarities of voter disillusionment/polarization between modern France and Germany:

> unification contributed to the decline of partisanship and thus increased electoral volatility…it increased…the level of fragmentation of the party system, as the former Communist Party, the PDS, established itself alongside the SPD and the Greens on the left side of the Political system in eastern Germany, and the Republicans and the DVU (*Deutsche Volksunion* – German People's Union), riding a wave of nationalist and xenophobic sentiment fueled by a massive influx of immigrants and political refugees, emerged on the right.[25]

The polarized political spectrum that the Eastern German *Länder* find themselves in demonstrates signs of ideological backlash and fledgling party formation as per the aforementioned French examples.

Like the immigration question in France and in the Netherlands, the East/West – old/new – *Länder* conflicts create potential new cleavage lines in the face of which Lipset & Rokkan's argument largely collapses. For Offe Claus, "the conflict between the old and the new *Länder* is a macropolitical cleavage and conflict within the political economy that lacks a proper arena – a table at which it could be carried out and

[*] For example, the watering-down of Gerhard Schröder's Social Democratic policy along Blairist lines is meeting with much popular discontent.

eventually reconciled."[26] Similarly, Daniel Hough's "Made in Eastern Germany" demonstrates how the PDS' call to "democratise democracy"[27] has fostered a damaging "unwillingness of the major parties to enter into anything other than nominal discourse with the PDS at the national level."[28] Hough justly argues that because "institutions have to 'grow out' of a given society",[29] the hegemonic expansion of the West German parties – from which the subsumation of their East German counterparts ensued[30] – both damaged the roots of democratic participation in Eastern Germany and created a new social cleavage.

To delve for a moment into the roots of said cleavage, the foundations of civic commitment that were so carefully laid in post-WWII Western Europe were largely lacking after the fall of the GDR. In *The Civic Culture Revisited*, David P. Conradt notes a "sharp shift in the perceptions of younger, better-educated, and politically active Germans toward freedom of expression in the Federal Republic."[31] On a similar note, "the proportion of adult Germans who regard "independence and freedom of will" as the most important values that parents should transmit in the rearing of their children had increased from 28 percent in 1951 to 51 percent by 1976."[32]

It is essential to realize that no such transition took place in Eastern Germany. Rather, a social contract – *Sozialvertrag* – existed by which "citizens were allowed to achieve a certain material security and to make use of a very limited private sphere in return for outward compliance to the aims of the state."[33] For this and other reasons, the East Germans – "second-class citizens in their own state"[34] – have turned to the PDS in ideological protest much as the French turned to the FN (though perhaps the comparison should not be overemphasized). In a telling EMNID survey for *Der Spiegel* before the

1998 Bundestag election: "only four per cent of *PDS supporters* would actually like to return to the GDR; 87 per cent of PDS supporters, however, would prefer to see more of a mixture of the FRG and the GDR in the current Federal Republic."[35] When high unemployment, the structural legacy of communist economics, and the refusal of Western politicians to address Eastern concerns are taken into consideration, the social backlash of an economically distraught post-unification East Germany is manifesting itself via a new – albeit potentially temporary – social cleavage.

To further call into question both Huntington's assertion of modern mass-participation and Bell's death of ideology, the supplicant status of the ex-GDR under Kohl's unification implied assimilation rather than participation. Curiously enough, Kohl's decision to invoke Article 23 – by which 'other parts of Germany' could simply join the FRG – rather than Article 146 – which called for a massive restructuring of the Basic Law[36] – is precisely that which made it difficult for the Eastern Germans to tackle what he himself called the legacy of "40 years of communist dictatorship in people's minds and in the cultural life of the country and in human relations."[37] Finally, the opening of the stasi files "has meant that almost every politician who had lived in the GDR is potentially vulnerable",[38] thus further alienating the Eastern German populace from their own political representation.

ITALY & FORZA ITALIA

Unlike France and Germany, certain aspects of modern Italian politics do in fact cohere – though only partially – with many of modernization theory's precepts; Berlusconi's Forza Italia, founded on money, media coverage, and largely empty promises, is very much a populist party. The fact remains, however, that Forza Italia

could not have risen to power in 1994 without its strongly ideological coalition partners, the Northern League (LN) – a party that again demonstrates its ability to manipulate long-standing social cleavages to new ends – the National Alliance (NA), and the neo-Fascist MSI. In any case, Lipset & Rokkan's stabilization theory is thoroughly rejected by the political upheavals of the '90s.

To begin with party stabilization theory, both the original party system of the Italian First Republic and the massive collapse of 1993 speak to the general inapplicability of Lipset & Rokkan's theory. As Frederic Spotts and Theodor Wieser point out in *Italy, a difficult democracy*, "a party representing a third of the electorate is excluded from government, yet a party with 3 percent of the vote has held the prime ministry of two administrations."[39] When combined with the proverb that "the Christian Democrats are their own alternative government"[40] it becomes clear that substantial change to Italian *partitocrazia* was inevitable (or at least desirable). Furthermore, Stephen Hellman notes that pure bicameralism, excessive party powers, and the secret ballot[41] created a system that was – and arguably still is – fundamentally short on democratic representation.

An acerbic statement from *the Economist* portrays the extent to which party instability remains even today: "It's called the Olive Tree. Trouble is, it has too many branches, and they are now blowing every which way."[42] For a taste of the political restructuring, just within the left, in the late 1990s, Mark Donovan writes:

> The two years between early 1998 and the spring of 2000 saw a kaleidoscopic series of party fusions, quasi-party formation and associated government change. In February 1998, the PDS became the DS, fusing with the four minor lay, Catholic, socialist and communist formations whilst three ex-socialist groups hostile to the former PCI's hegemony of the DS formed the SDI (Italian Social Democrats). That autumn, Communist Refoundation went in to the opposition, bringing Prodi's government down over the budget, and itself splitting – the

> PDCI (Italian Communists) breaking away to back the formation of a new government led by the DS leader, Massimo D'Alema…[43]

And so on (ad infinitum). The [worrisome] endemic political fragmentation of the European left itself discredits Lipset & Rokkan's theory. For a brief glance at the once-mammoth DC's disintegration, Hellman writes: "the once mighty DC lost its left wing, renamed itself the Popular Party, and then lost its right wing."[44]

Although Forza Italia's coalition partners – particularly the Lega Nord – are strongly ideological, Berlusconi's FI represents a prime counterexample to the pattern presented by the FN and the PDS; very much in swing with the apparent – though by no means assured – end of ideology, Forza Italia was vaulted into power by a barrage of ambiguous yet appealing promises. Donovan rightly calls Forza Italia[*] "a party created by Berlusconi in the space of months, using his vast economic and media resources."[45] Furthermore:

> Surveys suggested that the slogans which had most caught the electorate's imagination were those which identified Berlusconi as a 'worker', followed at some distance by his slogan 'Less taxes for all'. Six days before the election, Berlusconi unveiled on television a five-point contract with the Italians, promising, were he elected, specific details regarding tax cuts, improving public security, increasing minimum pensions, halving unemployment and undertaking a major public works programme.[46]

Staffed by the giants of Berlusconi's Finivest empire, Forza Italia is more a *partito-azienda* – 'Company Party'[47] – than a political party proper; the clientelism of Italian *lottizzazione*[48] is therefore alive and well in Forza Italia, which can fairly be said to adhere to the pragmatic de-ideologization of modernization theory.

Nonetheless, strong ideological divides have always existed along cultural and religious lines in Italy, and both the oft-fragmented left and highly ideological right imply

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[*] It is telling that 'Forza Italia' was originally nothing more than a popular soccer cheer.

that – at least for now – ideology is here to stay. Accordingly, Spotts & Wieser point out the three highly isolated subcultures of Italian ideology: "Catholic, Communist, and lay."[49] On the right of the political spectrum, Ivo Diamanti notes that:

> the various Leagues were able to break with more traditional bases of identity and representation, such as religion versus secularism, or class, taking other long-standing cleavages (e.g., north-south, center-periphery, "common folks" versus big government) and expressing them in a new way, thus dramatically altering the political landscape…the league turned the southern question into the northern question.[50]

Although Berlusconi's *partito-azienda* shows many signs of turning towards the ideologically nebulous and populist center, the fact remains – as with France and Germany – that the political Fringes as strongly ideological as ever, if not more so.

In closure, at least one general pattern seen in France and in Germany is present in Italy as well: voter disillusionment with the mainstream center-right and center-left with the effect of pushing the vote to the poles of the political spectrum. Hilary Partridge fairly asserts:

> The DC poll dropped from 34.4% in 1987 to 29.7% -- below 30% in elections to the Chamber of Deputies for the first time in its history. The PSI poll dropped from 14.3% to 13.6% -- a small decrease, but significant in the light of the consistent upward trend in its support since 1976. At the same time, new secular and 'protest' parties, perceived as outside the 'particracy', received public endorsement. Support for the Northern League, whose appeal was to a large extent based on its anti-Southern and anti-particracy rhetoric, rose from 0.5% to 8.7%.[51]

Although the specific motivations of the Italian electorate's political polarizations are not founded in pure ideology, the fact remains that mass-participation as per Huntington is arguably not taking place.

CONCLUSION

If any sweeping claims can be drawn from this analysis of fringe politics in France, Germany, and Italy, it is this: although the mainstream parties of continental

Europe may well be edging towards political pragmatism a là United States, both extremes of the political spectrum – particularly the right – remain powerfully ideological. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the voting public is becoming strongly disillusioned with the bland and indistinguishable rhetoric of the mainstream parties such that they are turning in increasingly large numbers to the poles of the political spectrum.

As regards the applicability of the two theories in question, Lipset & Rokkan's stabilization theory collapsed under the pressure of new cleavage lines – both the much-touted 1968 'postmaterialist' ones, those of regional identity, and the public/elite schism – that introduced unexpected variables into their equation. Modernization theory, although slightly more salvageable, has also come under attack by the continued adherence of the often-unrepresented voting public to the ideological foundations that have been largely discarded by the mainstream political elite.

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[2] Ibid, p. 134.
[3] Brown, Bernard E. "The French Experience of Modernization". *World Politics*, Volume 21, Issue 3 (Apr., 1969), 366-391, p. 366.
[4] Ibid, p. 371.
[5] Huntington, Samuel P. "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics". *Comparative Politics*, Volume 3, Issue 3 (Apr., 1971), 283-322, p. 286.
[6] Miguet, Arnauld. "The French Elections of 2002: After the Earthquake, the Deluge." *West European Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 2002), pp. 207-220, p. 210.
[7] DeClaire, Edward G. Politics on the Fringe: the people, policies, and organization of the French National Front. Duke University Press, Durham. 1999, p. 174.
[8] Ibid, p. 211.
[9] Ibid, p. 208.
[10] Ibid, p. 211.
[11] Ibid, p. 212.
[12] Ibid, p. 212.
[13] *European Politics in Transition*, 4th Edition. Mark Kesselman, Joel Krieger, Christopher S. Allen, Stephen Hellman, David Ost, George Ross. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York. 2002, p. 289.

[14] Miguet, p. 217.
[15] Ibid, p. 217.
[16] DeClaire, p. 178.
[17] Ibid, p. 191.
[18] Ibid, p. 183.
[19] Ibid, pp. 128 & 132.
[20] Ibid, p. 134.
[21] Ibid, p. 118.
[22] *The Economist*, Vol. 365, No. 8299 (November 16-22), p. 5.
[23] Ibid, p. 115.
[24] Ibid, p. 181.
[25] *Negotiating the New Germany: Can Social Partnership Survive?* Lowell Turner (ed.). Webber, Douglas. "The Second Coming of the Bonn Republic." Cornell University Press, New York. 1997, pp. 238 -9.
[26] *The Postwar Transformation of Germany: Democracy, Prosperity, and Nationhood.* John S. Brady, Beverly Crawford, Sarah Elise Wiliarty (eds.). Offe, Claus. "The German Welfare State: Principles, Performance, Prospects." The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, p. 217.
[27] Daniel Hough, "'Made in Eastern Germany': The PDS and the Articulation of Eastern German Interests." *German Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (August 2000), 125-148, p. 141.
[28] Ibid, p. 143.
[29] Ibid, p. 132.
[30] Ibid, p. 132.
[31] Conradt, David P. "Changing German Political Culture." *The Civic Culture Revisited.* Almond, Gabriel & Verba, Sidney (eds.). Sage Publications, Newbury Park. 1989, p. 243.
[32] Ibid, p. 252.
[33] Hough, p. 136.
[34] Ibid, p. 139.
[35] Ibid, p. 139.
[36] Smith, Gordon & Paterson, William E., *Developments in German Politics*. Duke University Press, Durham. 1992, p. 25.
[37] Ibid, p. 28.
[38] Ibid, p. 28.
[39] Spotts, Frederic & Wieser, Theodor. *Italy, a difficult democracy: a survey of Italian politics*. Cambridge University Press, New York. 1986, p. 1.
[40] Ibid, p. 16.
[41] Hellman, *European Politics in Transition*, pp. 476-7.
[42] *The Economist*, Vol. 365, No. 8294 (October 12-18), p. 48.
[43] Donovan, Mark. "A New Republic in Italy? The May 2001 Election". *West European Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (October 2001), p. 195.
[44] Hellman, p. 482.
[45] Donovan, p. 194.
[46] Ibid, p. 198.
[47] Hellman, p. 490.
[48] Spotts & Wieser, p. 6.
[49] Ibid, p. 10.
[50] Hellman, *European Politics in Transition*, p. 489.
[51] Partridge, Hilary. "Can the leopard change its spots? Sleaze in Italy (Sleaze: Politics, Private Interest and Public Reaction). *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 4 (Oct. 1995), p. 711.