Influence of far-right parties on mainstream politics: uk and germany

Would you say that the success of far-right parties has an impact on the positions of mainstream parties? In your essay, consider at least two countries to make your argument.

Theinfluence of far-right parties on mainstream parties has remained a relativelyundeveloped area in political literature with many instead writing explanatorypieces on the emergence of such parties (Williams, 2006). This is becausefar-right parties have been largely successful across a great deal of Europe inrecent years. To highlight this, in Britain there was the brief, but meaningfulrise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), in Germany theAlternative für Deutschland party (AfD), in Austria the Freedom Party ofAustria (FPO) and in France the Front Nationale to name but a few. This essaywill argue that the success of these far-right parties has brought aroundchanges in the more mainstream, centre-ground parties in two ways; both inregards to ideological position, and in reference to their position ingovernment. This essay will also argue that the size of this impact on ideologydepends greatly on the original position of the mainstream party on thepolitical spectrum. There is a great distinction between a rightward leaningparty's reactions to a far-right party's success and a leftward leaning party'sreaction. However, this essay ultimately concludes that it is impossible tostate that the mainstream parties' reactions are as a direct result offar-right parties. This is because there are a great deal of politicalinfluences that could impact the positions of mainstream parties. Moreover, theterms " mainstream parties" and " far-right parties" must be defined toeffectively argue the magnitude of any impact. The phrase mainstream partiesrefers to the more traditional, often relatively centre, parties that do nothold extremist views. On the other hand, far-right parties

are essentiallypolitical parties characterised by being on the right of mainstream partiesideologically, or those who promote xenophobia and the social exclusion ofnon-nationals (Williams, 2006).

Academicsargue that far-right parties certainly influence the ideological position ofmainstream parties for several reasons which will be explained shortly. Moreover, mainstream parties that align themselves on the right side of thepolitical spectrum undergo greater changes. Right-wing parties are evidentlymore open to ideological change as a result of far-right emergence, whereasleft-wing parties are a great deal more resilient for reasons that shall beexplained. The following two paragraphs detail the differences between theideological reactions of originally left leaning mainstream parties andoriginally right leaning mainstream parties towards far-right parties.

In regards to right-wing, traditional, mainstream parties, the far-right parties essentially drain the further right, more extreme section, of their voter base. These individual voters previously had no viable alternative beforehand, and therefore aligned with the closest party to their view which had a chance of success to avoid a wasted vote. With the emergence of a far-right party, the individual voter has a party closer to their own political belief and thus supports the far-right party instead, sapping the original mainstream party of votes. To counteract this effect, the mainstream parties must appeal to these lost voters by shifting their ideology rightwards, even if it be by a single policy. This is since, according to the single-issue party thesis, many far-right parties are essentially single policy pressure groups in regards to immigration with many political commentators referring to them as the anti-

immigration parties (Mudde, 1999). For example, it was said by Wright and Cooper, that the United Kingdom Independence Party was draining the Conservative party's more fringe supporters by offering amanifesto pledge of a Brexit referendum. Thus, the more centre-ground party, the Conservatives in this case, had to second that promise to stop their support from leaving them for UKIP. Hence, this is the reason why we saw a 2015 general election manifesto promise of a Brexit referendum from the Conservatives. As Wright and Cooper (2016) put it, in 2015 " for Tory MPs facing re-election this [UKIP's success in polling] looked ominous. They were worried, not that Ukip [sic] would take their seats but they would take enough of their votes to hand victory to Labour." Therefore, to ensure victory the Conservatives had to lurch rightward on the political scale. Han argued that this outcome showcased the fact that far-right parties could benefit by pulling mainstream parties towards their own ideological positions (Han, 2014).

Theemergence and success of far-right parties can arguably cause centre ground, mainstream parties to lurch to the right on single policy issues to stop themlosing specific voting blocks. Han rightfully states that " the electoralsuccess of RRPs [Radical right-wing parties] is believed to have appliedpressure… to mainstream parties (MPs) on both sides of the political spectrum" (Han, 2014) and therefore we must speak not only of right-wing mainstream parties, but also those who are more leftward leaning. Left leaning mainstream partiesare much less likely to have ideological waverings since many members of thoseparties have fundamentally different political beliefs, which are at ends withthe policies of far-right parties. Moreover, left leaning parties are awarethat they cannot simply politically " flip-flop" or " U-

turn" on key policies asKollman, Miller and Page rightfully state that " voters may be wary of a partythat moves across the ideological spectrum in search of votes" (Kollman, Miller& Page, 1998, p141). This opinion of how parties making gross changes instance can ruin party legitimacy is furthered in Tavits' work (Tavits, 2007). " Adheringto certain values serves the purpose of defining a party's identity and helpingto build a reputation of commitment, consistency, and probity. Ideologicalmovement devalues these reputations." In short, left-leaning mainstream partiesare simply not influenced to the same extent as right leaning mainstreamparties by far-right parties, because of " historical ideological commitments" (Baleet al, 2010).

However, when looking at these sources critically it is possible to see that the impactof far-right parties on mainstream parties is limited. This limitation is a keyargument of this essay. When comparing Han's, Bale's and Tavits' articles, withAkkerman's we see this disparity between academics' beliefs on the topic. Akkerman used a different data set, which analysed a total of 176 manifestosand concluded that " the impact of radical right parties on mainstream policyagendas tends to be overestimated" (Akkerman, 2015). The fact that differentdata yielded such different results would suggest that far-right party'sinfluence is impossible to see isolated from other political influences. WhileAkkerman still concurs that mainstream parties are indeed influenced, he statesthe extent to which they are influenced is debatable. This essay argues thatcorrelation is not necessarily causation; just because select data sets show acorrelation between the far-right's rise and manifesto changes does not meanone caused the other. There are a great deal of political agents that caninfluence a party's manifesto, and therefore to state

a change in a mainstreamparty's manifesto is as a result of a far-right party is a statement that failsto look at the wider political picture. In this case there are severalacademics that link these manifesto changes to other causes. For example, " Jeanette Money makes a convincing casethat the move towards restriction in Britain and France long pre-dated theemergence of the extreme-right, and was linked to electoral dynamics" (Money, cited in Schain, 1999). Therefore, whilst the claims of Han, Bale et al andTavits are duly noted, Akkerman's criticism of the claims being overstatedcarries with it a weight too large to ignore. The fact that another data setproduced such different results, in tandem with bringing to mind all thepossible influences on mainstream parties' manifestos, showcases how thepossible influence of far-right parties is difficult to determine.

Anotherdebatable aspect of the question comes with the term " position". Hitherto, position has been discussed in the sense of ideological position on thepolitical spectrum. However, the position of a party can also be seen inreference to their position in the political system. More simply the mainstreamparties' potential position in government, such as majority or minority partyor the opposition party. Similarly, in regards to position in governance, theoriginal ideological position of the party makes a difference as to how theyreact; leftist parties experience greater opposition whereas right-wing partiesexperience this whilst also losing potential voters and therefore power. Thefollowing two paragraphs highlight the ways that the potential governmentalposition of a mainstream party is impacted by the success of a far-right party.

Whenthere are more far-right parties being " successful", consequently mainstreamparties, as well as the far-left parties, must inherently be less successful. The mainstream parties are more likely to be influenced by this as it isunlikely for an individual voter to take such a great leap from the far-left tothe far-right. When one considers that many European countries utiliseproportional representation the truthfulness of that statement is laid bare, for each percentage point of a far-right party's success is directlyproportional to the amount any other mainstream party loses. Thus, any successof a far-right party is detrimental to a mainstream party's position ingovernance. As a result, mainstream parties will find it harder to gain aposition of power due to potential voters, voting for these populist, far-rightparties. In many cases this will meanfar-right parties will be members of the opposition in government. This is inpart due to the proportional representation systems used across consensusdemocracies in Europe. However, in some cases, such as in Austria, it can alsomean they may form the actual government. The Austrian People's Party (OVP)will likely form a coalition with the FPO (a far-right party) to have a totalof 104 seats, following provisional exit poll results, when 92 is a majority. Whilst a minority OVP government is still an alternative (Oltermann, 2017), theFPO's success has still influenced the governmental position of the OVP. Thismeans the OVP's position and power in governance is highly influenced by thesuccess of this far-right party.

Moreover, the success of far-right parties can also impact the position of a party in government as it impacts the mainstream party's reputation. The rise of a far-right party during the tenure of a specific leader can be

detrimental to that leader's reputation, which in turn is often detrimental to the mandate of the party in power. Take for example Angela Merkel, who has been chancellor for Germany since 2005, it has been said that she " has secured a fourth term as German chancellor but with her authority diminished, after… [she] failed to halt the march of rightwing populists" (Connolly, 2017). The rise, rather than the emergence of AfD, under Merkel has threatened the Christian Democratic Union of Germany's approval and authority in the German political sphere. Alternative für Deutschland achieved a historic third place success, holding 13% of the vote according to exit polls, which marked the first time in almost six decades that an openly nationalist party will enter the Bundestag (Connolly, 2017). The rise of an anti-establishment party under a well cemented member of the establishment, would suggest that Merkel is leading theelectorate to become disenchantedwith standard democratic institutions. This obviously reflects poorly on Merkel's governance and tenure, and overall reduces her authority. Therefore, it is relatively apparent how the rise of any far-right parties under a political agent's leadership is seen as detrimental to their mandate and character.

To conclude, there are a great deal of theories as to what extent the far-right influences mainstream parties, as explained in this essay with reference to Han, Bale et al and Tavits. However, these theories do not consistently hold true when using other data sets, and fail to look at all the other possible influences that could cause mainstream parties to change. Several academics state the success of far-right parties indubitably impacts both the ideological position (Han, 2015) and position in government of mainstream

parties. Ideologically, far-right parties are able to drag right-wing mainstream parties towards the right, but are less effective at pulling left-wing mainstream parties rightwards (Han, 2015) due to historical ideological commitments (Bale et al, 2010). In reference to government, far-right parties are able to influence the position of mainstream parties by taking potential voters reducing their majority, by influencing their position in a coalition and by weakening the authority and perception of their leader. However, as Akkerman states, it is easy to overstate the influence of far-right parties on mainstream parties (Akkerman, 2015). Moreover, to quantify the exact influence that far-right parties have on mainstream parties is impossible; for example it is simply not feasible to state all manifesto changes are as a direct result of their growing influence.

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