The Organizational Origins of the Contemporary Radical Right:

The Case of Belgium

David Art
Tufts University
david.art@tufts.edu

Draft: Comments Welcome

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Introduction

This article focuses on a topic that the burgeoning literature on the radical right has largely ignored: namely, the influence of interwar and postwar right-wing movements on the development of contemporary radical right political parties. As images of Jörg Haider and Adolf Hitler were juxtaposed on magazine covers, and as even some academics warned of the return of fascism (Cheles, Ferguson and Vaughan, 1991), most scholars were quick to point out the differences between interwar fascist movements and the new radical right.[1] The distinctions are certainly important; radical right parties are not committed to overthrowing parliamentary democracy, nor do they possess a paramilitary component that was a defining feature of fascist parties (Mann, 2005). Yet, by treating radical right parties as a fundamentally new phenomenon, scholars have largely obscured their origins and provided atemporal accounts of their success and failure. This is a mistake, for across Western Europe contemporary radical right parties have been profoundly shaped by the radical right-wing political parties, movements, and associations that preceded them. Indeed, we argue that the roots of the contemporary radical right's success and failure can be traced back to developments in the interwar and immediate postwar period.

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, radical right parties emerged in nearly every country in Western Europe. As many scholars have noted, the rise of these new

parties was driven by a common set of factors, including immigration (Gibson 2002), electoral dealignment (Rydgren 2005), postmodernization (Ignazi 2003; Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995), and globalization (Betz and Swank 2003). But if these parties were responding to similar concerns, the foundations upon which they attempted to construct party organizations differed immensely. Some radical right parties were able to build strong party organizations from pre-existing elements within the far right political landscape, while others failed to do so. Although scholars of the radical right have recently turned to the importance of party organization for electoral success (Norris, 2005; Carter 2005; Mudde, forthcoming), we know little about the factors that influence this variable. In this article, we claim that differences in party organization are largely attributable to the shape of the postwar far right political landscape.

This landscape can be divided into two types. The first is a landscape in which strong nationalist organizations and subcultures survived the Second World War and dominated any right-wing extremist movements that also existed on the far right flank. These nationalist organizations were broadly, although certainly not universally, viewed as legitimate political actors within politics and society. The second is one in which this relationship is reversed: the far right was dominated by right-wing extremist elements (a group we define later) and the more mainstream nationalist groupings were small or non-existent. In this case, far right politics in general was nearly universally condemned—indeed criminalized—by political elites and ordinary citizens. Our core argument is that the first type of landscape provides an excellent foundation upon which to build a party organization, while the second largely precludes successful party building.

The cases of Flanders and Wallonia, two regions of Belgium that each possess their own party system, illustrate our thesis. Flanders represents a case in which the postwar far right was incorporated within a mainstream nationalist movement. The existence of this large nationalist movement dates back over a century and has been a critical factor in the success of the Vlaams Blok (renamed Vlaams Belang in 2004). Although the Flemish far right was repressed after the Second World War because of its collaboration with the Nazis, it quickly reconstituted itself in the form of a political party, the *Volksunie*, and in a range of nationalist organizations and informal social networks. When the Vlaams Blok split from the Volksunie in 1979, the new party was able to build a strong party organization from the resources that the Flemish nationalist subculture provided. Wallonia, by contrast, never possessed a strong Wallonian nationalist subculture, and that which did exist was largely leftist in orientation. The postwar far right was dominated by right-wing extremist elements that were the remnants of a fascistic political movement, the Rexists, which had been all but destroyed in the 1930s. When the radical right National Front was founded in 1985, it was built largely from right-wing extremist elements that were unable, and indeed often unwilling, to build a functioning party organization. As a result, the FN has remained on the political margins since its foundation.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. We begin by reviewing the scant literature on radical right party organizations and unpack our argument about how nationalist subcultures contribute to successful party building while right-wing extremist subcultures make it nearly impossible. We then explain why the small country of Belgium presents the ideal case to test our theory, and why standard explanations for

variation in the radical right's success do not apply to it. The bulk of the article provides empirical support for our argument that the divergent fates of the Walloon and Flemish radical right parties are in large part a continuation of historic trends. We conclude by appealing to scholars to integrate historical, organizational, and cultural variables into the study of radical right parties.

Nationalist Organizations and Radical Right Success

While a growing number of scholars maintain that party organization is crucial to the long-term electoral success of the radical right (Norris, 2005; Mudde, forthcoming), there have been few systematic efforts to test this proposition. The lack of reliable data on party organization has been a chief reason for this lacuna. Many radical right parties, including both the Vlaams Belang and the Wallonian Front National, are notoriously secretive about their internal workings. As a result, even country "experts" may have virtually no knowledge of the relevant organizational features of radical right parties (Mudde, forthcoming). In the most comprehensive study to date, Carter (2005) does find a strong, positive relationship between organizational strength and the electoral success of the radical right. In Carter's statistical models, organizational capacity accounts for nearly half the variance in the success of radical right parties across Western Europe over the last several decades. The origins of a strong organization lie outside Carter's analysis, but they are the central concern of this article.

It is not difficult to imagine why, *ceteris paribus*, a strong organization produces more electoral success than a weak one. One component of a strong organization is the

existence of a party rank-and-file who, as witnessed by recent elections in the United States, play a major role in mobilizing potential supporters and bringing them to the polls. A second component is the ability to field candidates in multiple constituencies and to fill the seats a party wins with trained, and usually loyal, politicians. A third component of organizational strength is the existence of mechanisms to reduce factionalism and cut down on the frequency of party splits. Rydgren (2006b) offers a twist on this conventional wisdom, arguing that the absence of an organizational backbone may actually help radical right parties in the short run, but ultimately hinders them in the long run. When party leaders are not dependent on party members, as is often the case for newly formed radical right parties, they can avoid internal ideological conflicts and concentrate on maximizing their votes. They face no contradictions between the organizational and electoral arenas. However, the lack of an extensive party organization means that radical right parties have little to fall back upon if their vote-share declines precipitously. The lack of a "binding ideology and common history", according to Rydgren (2006b), can also lead to factionalization and infighting. This is an important insight, for many radical right political parties, including, as we shall argue, the Wallonian Front National, have been torn apart by such infighting.

The existence of a historically rooted nationalist subculture which enjoys a certain degree of legitimacy is of crucial importance for the organizational strength of contemporary radical right parties. To understand the importance of nationalist organizations and subcultures, it is helpful to outline the pitfalls that radical right parties face in their absence.[2] Most of these problems involve the recruitment and retention of leaders, officeholders, candidates, and party activists. The pool of qualified candidates

and officeholders is likely to be quite small, for several reasons. First, like most new parties, radical right parties in their early periods of development do not have a functioning party organization, nor the youth organizations (Hooghe, Stolle and Stouthuysen, 2004) or other associations that established parties normally draw upon for political recruitment. Second, social norms against working on the behalf of radical right parties, coupled with the fear of negative occupation repercussions, often prevent sympathetic individuals from joining and campaigning. Radical right parties are thus often starved for candidates and activists. They often do not have the human capital to contest elections in more than a small percentage of constituencies; they lack both the candidates to fill the party lists and the activists to distribute election brochures, canvass neighborhoods, and fulfill all the other mundane but crucial tasks of campaigning.

When the ranks of radical right parties are thin, they are often forced to accept just about anyone willing to stand for office. Since these people have not been socialized within the organization and possess no loyalty to it, the risk of defection is high. Indeed, one of the recurring syndromes that plague weakly organized radical right parties is sporadic electoral success followed by a wave of defections among the party's officeholders. They often join rival radical right or right-wing extremist parties. Such defections obviously enervate the original radical right party, which was probably already quite weak to begin with.

The lack of organization, however, does not always preclude an initial electoral breakthrough. Indeed, there have been many cases in which radical right parties have pulled off an electoral coup at either the regional or national level with virtually no party on the ground. Some notable examples include: New Democracy in the 1991 Swedish

Parliamentary Elections (Taggart 1995; Rydgren 2006a); the DVU in the Sachsen-Anhalt regional elections (Art 2004); and the List Pim Fortuyn in the 2002 Dutch Parliamentary election (van Praag 2003). However, electoral success means that radical right parties need to fill their seats, and they often need to dig very deep in their own thin ranks to do so. Not surprisingly, the parliamentarians and council members who emerge after a “phantom" party (a party without substantial organization) wins an election are often political novices and appear overwhelmed in their new office. They often become easy targets for the media, and create an aura of incompetence around the radical right party.

The presence of a nationalist, as opposed to a right-wing extremist, subculture does not eliminate all of the problems of political recruitment and retention listed above. However, it does mitigate them. Nationalist organizations constitute “recruitment networks” (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) for radical right parties. The latter can draw upon the former and reach a pool of committed activists to fill their party ranks, party lists, and elected seats. These individuals are less likely to defect once in office, for they have been socialized within a nationalist subculture and are more likely than political newcomers to feel a sense of loyalty to the party. Finally, when a nationalist subculture exists, radical right parties are less reliant on right-wing extremist fringes for members.

In contrast to our argument, Kitschelt (1995) considers the influence of pre-existing right-wing organizations on the radical right, but in his account their presence represents a curse for party formation. In the German case, Kitschelt argues that members of the neo-Nazi subculture flocked to radical right parties like the *Republikaner*, which created internal divisions within the party about the desirability of these new activists.

This migration from the right-wing extremist milieu also gave other parties ammunition in their denouncement of the Republikaner as a threat to German democracy (Art, 2006). We agree with this analysis: a pre-existing far right subculture is a handicap for a radical right party when it consists only of small, right-wing extremist groups that are condemned within society. However, the same does not apply for a reputable or mainstream nationalist subculture that enjoys a certain degree of political and social legitimacy. To be sure, the borders between "reputable" nationalist organizations and the right-wing extremist fringe are often porous, and some members of the former often moonlight with the latter. Yet the premise of this article is that a conceptual and empirical distinction between the two can be made.

A mainstream nationalist subculture is different from a right-wing extremist one in the following ways. While the former rejects violence and accepts the institutions of parliamentary democracy, the latter is often paramilitary and embraces either fascism or some form of authoritarianism. Whereas nationalist organizations operate legally, right-wing extremist organizations often operate illegally. Whereas leaders of the former normally seek the approbation of some broader sectors of society, the leaders of the latter are concerned with appealing only to their immediate ranks. Right-wing extremism in postwar Europe has become the bastion of neo-Nazis, unreformed fascists, Holocaust denialists, and conspiracy theorists.

A right-wing extremist subculture is not a boon for fledgling radical right parties, but rather a burden. When a radical right party is formed, right-wing extremists often flock to it, and it is difficult for a new party to turn away highly motivated volunteers. However, the influx of these activists brings with it serious costs. For one,

right-wing extremists tend not to see the importance of political compromise or of reaching out to a broader electorate. To borrow from Kitschelt's (1989) analysis of the formation of left-libertarian parties, right-wing extremists are not interested in electoral competition but in constituency representation. They tend to be poor organizational builders, and their presence magnifies any existing cleavages in the party between moderates and radicals.

The factions and rivalries that characterize a right-wing subculture are also likely to be reproduced within the new party. Right-wing extremist subculture is usually rife with personal and ideological rivalries that lead to the proliferation of small factions that are often as hostile to one another as they are to mainstream political parties and parliamentary democracy.[3] When a radical right party is composed of multiple groups within the right-wing extremist milieu, there are likely to be frequent leadership challenges, a high degree of infighting, and party splits. Although factionalization is likely to occur within nationalist organizations as well, we hypothesize that it will be significantly more intense in right-wing extremist ones.

Finally, the activities that right-wing extremists tend to pursue are also detrimental to successful party building. Since many of these individuals have criminal pasts, or continue to belong to right-wing extremist organizations, they often bring radical right parties into trouble with the legal authorities, the net effect of which is likely to be a decrease in political recruitment. Moreover, the presence of violent individuals, neo-Nazi skinheads, and Holocaust denialists within a radical right party often leads to intense, and unwanted, media exposure and increased stigmatization.

With this background on nationalist and right-wing extremist subcultures in mind, we now turn to our two case studies. We draw on a variety of secondary sources for our evidentiary base. But before advancing our argument, it is important to eliminate some alternative explanations for the variation in the success of the radical right in the two largest regions of Belgium.

What can we learn from Belgium?

Belgium provides an excellent laboratory to test arguments about the success and failure of the radical right. The country is divided into three regional units: the bilingual Brussels Capital Region[4], the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders, and the French-speaking region of Wallonia. Belgium has a confederal party model and national parties no longer exist. Except in the complex situation in Brussels, a Flemish citizen cannot vote for a French-speaking politician, or vice versa. Hence, both of the larger regions have their own party system and can be treated as two separate cases. Most importantly for this study, the two regions also possess significant variation on the dependent variable: the electoral strength of the radical right. The *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest, VB) has been one of the strongest radical right parties in Western Europe over the last two decades. By contrast, the Wallonian *Front National* (National Front, FN) is generally considered a marginal radical right party, even though it performed relatively well in the 2004 regional elections in Wallonia. The following table presents the results of the two parties in federal elections over the last several decades.

[Table 1 about here]

Belgium is also interesting since it defies many standard explanations for the radical right's success and failure. Since the electoral system is the same in the two regions – at least for federal elections –, the institutional differences that some scholars argue explain cross-national variation in the success of the radical right do not apply to Belgium (Norris, 2005; Givens, 2005). Unemployment, another variable that scholars have linked to far right success (Jackman and Volpert, 1996), cannot help explain the success of the VB and the failure of the FN, since unemployment has been far higher in Wallonia than in Flanders. A third possibility is that differences in immigration between the two regions explain the divergent trajectories of the radical right. Many scholars have indeed argued that high levels of immigration increase support for radical right parties (Gibson 2002), although there is currently a scholarly debate over how much immigration matters and under what conditions (Golder, 2003; Norris, 2005; Coffé et al., 2006). Yet however one conceptualizes the link between immigration and radical right support, the fact that Wallonia possesses nearly twice the number of foreigners as Flanders should cast considerable doubt about the importance of this variable for our case (Coffé, 2005a). A fourth possibility is that Wallonians are simply more tolerant of immigrants than the Flemish. Yet previous work shows that the regional difference in electoral results cannot be explained by differences in voters' attitudes (Coffé, 2005b).

We thus agree with Hossay (2002), who writes that many universalist explanations for the rise of the radical right "would lead us to expect the radical right to be stronger in Wallonia than in Flanders (160)." Most observers of the Vlaams Belang

and the Front National are quick to point out that the former is a highly organized, professional party, while the latter is "marked by amateurish leadership and a lack of organizational direction (Coffé and Art, 2006)." We believe that these differences are not only a result of the differing electoral success of the two parties, but also a primary cause of them. Below we argue that the divergent success of the Vlaams Belang and the Front National in building party organizations is rooted in long term historical trends and in the nature of the postwar far right landscape.

Flanders and the Vlaams Belang

The *Vlaamse Beweging* (Flemish Movement), an umbrella term for the heterogeneous groups that have fought for Flemish interests, is as old as the Belgian state founded in 1830. French was the official and only language of public affairs, and the Dutch-speaking majority found itself in a decidedly subordinate position, both politically and economically, relative to the Francophone minority. The small Flemish middle-class pushed for greater language rights for Dutch speakers in the military, the schools, and the courts over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hossay, 2002). The introduction of universal suffrage in 1919 gave this movement a political voice in the form of the *Frontpartij* (Front Party), a party founded by Flemish veterans of WWI who resented the exclusive use of French in the military. Stories circulated about Flemish soldiers being accidentally sent to their deaths by French-speaking officers. The Front Party campaigned for linguistic reform and enjoyed moderate success in the interwar years, gaining a handful of parliamentary seats in the elections of 1919, 1921 and 1925.

Although the Belgian state responded to Flemish demands by introducing new language laws, these laws were slowly and inconsistently implemented and thus failed to satisfy nationalist groups (Capoccia, 2005: 134). However, the Front Party was never able to fully mobilize this discontent and faded after its defeat in the 1932 parliamentary election.

Whereas the Flemish Movement had not previously been dominated by extreme right ideology, the foundation of the authoritarian and Nazi-financed *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (Flemish National Union, VNV) in 1933 marked a decided step in this direction. The VNV brought together the myriad Flemish organizations, including the deteriorating *Frontpartij*, and agitated for the reunification of Flanders and the Netherlands in what would be a fascist state. The party received 13.5% of the vote in Flanders and Brussels in the 1936 elections and 15% in 1939. In marked contrast to the Wallonian Rexists, analyzed below, the VNV had not only consolidated itself but was *expanding* its voter base and membership before the war. It is thus not surprising that a substantial minority of the Flemish population collaborated with the Nazis (Mudde 2000) after the VNV had offered its full cooperation with the German occupiers. The VNV successfully recruited Flemish elites and was deeply rooted in Flemish society. As of 1944, the VNV still had 10,000 paying members and controlled half of all cities in Flanders (Interview with Bruno De Wever). The VNV 's only serious rival prior to the Second World War was the *Verbond van Dietse Nationaal-Solidaristen* (Association of Diets National Solidarists, Verdinaso). Verdinaso was unabashedly fascist: it had a militia with uniforms and symbols, salutes and the like. Verdinano's influence was limited and it never attracted

more than 5000 members (Ignazi 2003). Compared with Verdinaso, the VNV appeared as a more moderate alternative for Flemish nationalists.

The purge of collaborators following the war led to the near destruction of the Flemish movement and the Flemish extreme right in the short term. In the long term, however, the pattern of postwar justice in Belgium provided Flemish nationalists with both a narrative of victimization and a geographic concentration in the city of Antwerp. Nearly twice as many Flemings as Walloons were convicted of collaboration (Huyse et al., 1993). Although rates of collaboration were higher in Flanders than in Wallonia, there is still a historical debate about whether Flemings were treated fairly (Witte et al., 2000). Those Flemish collaborators who were not executed or imprisoned lost their civil rights, and these so-called *incivieken* (those unworthy of citizenship) still numbered 150,000 in 1954 (Gijsels, 1992: 41). Many of these individuals were legally required to leave their native villages and they went to settle in the city of Antwerp. This largest Flemish city provided protective anonymity (Swyngedouw, 2000) and economic possibilities. Agfa Gevaert, which was at that time a typical example of a Flemish company, for example, was willing to engage collaborators in its Antwerp factory (Interview with Bruno De Wever). Yet for many former collaborators, the only available job was that of a traveling salesman, peddling soap, pencils, cigars and the like to other former collaborators. Several self-aid organizations also sprung up in the immediate postwar years to help those who were widely viewed as the victims of postwar justice. Repressive measures strengthened the lager mentality of former collaborators, and indirectly produced dense social networks– particularly in Antwerp.

If the resistance movement insisted on severe punishment, there were several factors that pushed Flemish society toward moderation and even sympathy for former collaborators. Repression, it was generally agreed, should not get in the way of postwar economic reconstruction (Witte et al., 2000: 175). A significant group within the Flemish right-wing also showed moderation since it had links with those who had cooperated with the Germans on ideological or pro-Flemish grounds. Also within the Catholic Party (CVP), a majority of the office holders supported softening the repression against the collaborators (Van Doorslaer, 2003). Collaborators were widely viewed as well-meaning, if politically misguided, patriots whose alliance with Nazi Germany was driven by their desire for Flemish independence. The collaborators were presented as victims of resistance and of the (anti-Flemish) Belgian state. This is an interpretation that persists to this day within mainstream Flemish society, and not only within extreme right circles.

Since a significant part of the Flemish nationalists were *incivieken*, former Flemish-nationalist politicians could not be openly politically active during the first several years after the war. However, covert political activity continued. In 1949 several radical Flemish nationalist organizations were founded, including the anti-repression party *Vlaamse Concentratie* (Flemish Concentration,VC), and the direct action-group, *Vlaamse Militanten Orde* (Order of Flemish Militants, VMO) (Mudde, 2000). The latter was charged with defending the meetings of the VC, and soon morphed into a paramilitary organization (Husbands, 1992). The true political regeneration of Flemish nationalism, however, occurred when the catholic *Volksunie* (People's Union, VU) was formed in anticipation of the 1954 electoral campaign. Much like the Austrian VdU, the precursor to the FPÖ, the party initially drew its leaders from nationalist circles that had

not collaborated with the Nazis, but nevertheless soon became the party of the 'blacks' (former collaborators). There were former VNV-politicians within its party executive and although most founders and party workers did not have a political past, most had been confronted with the consequences of the repression in their immediate environment (Seberechts, 1992). One of the most important demands of the VU was amnesty for former collaborators. Their repression after the war was interpreted as yet another example of Francophone domination. Like its predecessors, the VU also pressed for cultural and political autonomy and eventual independence (Hossay 2002: 168). The party won a modest six percent of the vote in Flanders in 1961.

Like most of Western Europe, the 1960s were a period of remarkable economic growth in Belgium. This growth, however, was concentrated in Flanders and led to the rapid expansion of the Flemish middle class. With the industrial economy of Wallonia in decline, Flemish leaders pushed hard for regional autonomy and sparked a conflict that threatened to tear apart the Belgian state and led to a split within the Belgian political party structure (Deschouwer, 1995). The VU was a prime beneficiary of these developments, winning a record 18.8% of the Flemish vote in the 1971 parliamentary elections and thereby becoming the third largest party in Flanders.

The VU contained within it Flemish nationalists of varying political orientations, but there was a particular tension between a relatively radical base and a moderate leadership (Mudde, 2000: 84). These rifts were exposed in 1977 when the VU leadership signed the so-called Egmont Pact that called for the federalization of Belgium. The less moderate elements within the VU, and within the broader Flemish movement in general, viewed the Pact as too great of a compromise and rebelled against the VU's leadership.

While the story is too complicated to present here, the result of the VU's signing of the Egmont Pact was the departure of several prominent leaders, a backlash from the party's base, and the eventual foundation of the Vlaams Blok in May of 1979. This party could build upon the pre-existing nationalist organizations and historical narratives. First, the Flemish movement had existed for over one-hundred and fifty years and its goals were broadly perceived as legitimate. For the better part of the century, this movement had taken a political form, from the Frontpartij to the VNV and Verdinaso to the VU. The Vlaams Blok could thus claim a historical continuity that few radical right parties in Western Europe possessed. It could recruit from, and was supported by, a number of different Flemish organizations that sprouted up after the Second World War. These ranged from radical extremist groups to cultural organizations. It included the radical right-wing action group the Order of Flemish Militants (VMO), the intellectual group Were Di, Voorpost, and the Nationalist Student Movement (NSV). Even though these are nowadays generally conceived as right-wing associations, collaborating members of these organizations were after the War viewed as misguided patriots and victims of a vindictive Francophone-led repression. Moreover, and crucially, these organizations were incorporated within a nationalist movement which was viewed as legitimate within Flemish societies and which also included mainstream Flemish nationalist organizations like the General Dutch Song Association and the Ijzer Pilgrimage Committee. The former group began organizing annual folk-song festivals in 1933 (Witte, 2005), and these have since become massive events. The latter group holds an annual meeting, attended by several thousand Flemish nationalists, in Diksmuide at the Ijzertoren (a tower erected to remember the Flemish soldiers killed in WWI). The first meeting was held in 1920 by

members of the veterans' movement, and it has since become a forum for the Flemish movement to advance its political demands.

The founder and first chairman of the Vlaams Blok was Karel Dillen, a Flemish nationalist who had bolted from the VU in 1970 as the party moderated its demands, was active in nearly all of the Flemish nationalist organizations mentioned above. He was the leader of Were Di for several years and kept in close contact with sympathetic Flemish-nationalist organizations. As one expert notes: "nearly all of the VB's founders, officers, and elected representatives were former members of one or more of these organizations or were trained by them (Swyngedouw, 1998: 61)." The study of Gijsels (1992) confirms this conclusion. Filip Dewinter and Frank Vanhecke (the current party leader), for example, were leaders of the Nationalistische Studentenvereniging (Nationalist Student Movement, NSV). The two were also the founding fathers of the Vlaams Blok-Jongeren (VBJ). Frank Vanhecke also descends from a family with a VNV background. Various members of his family were member of the VNV and took via this party and its militia (Zwarte Brigade) present at the eastern front and ended up in prison after the War (van den Brink, 1999). Gerolf Annemans was also born in a family that took Flemish nationalist viewpoints. He was active member of the Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudenten Verbond (KVHV) and wrote contributions in the weekly 't Pallieterke. The latter, is a Flemish satiric weekly which was published for the first time on May 17, 1945 and which has always played an important role as a voice for the radical Flemish nationalists (de Schryver et al., 1998).

The Flemish nationalist organizations also provided the VB with a ready-made rank and file and organizational network. The local branches of organizations like

Voorpost, Were Di and the VMO also served as local party branches of the VB in the early years of the party's history (Mudde, 2000: 87). The members of these organizations provided a stream of highly committed activists. As one close observer notes: "they know how to organize, they know what party discipline means, they volunteer their time (Interview with Bruno De Wever)."

It is also important to note that when the party was founded in 1979 (after having participated at the elections of 1978), the Vlaams Blok was not labelled an extreme-right party, but rather a conservative separatist party which strove for the independence of Flanders. In 1981, the president of the Volksunie Vic Anciaux attempted to attach the Vlaams Blok to the VU (Interview with Vic Anciaux). Anciaux was convinced that cooperation among the different Flemish-nationalist forces would hasten the federalization of the country.

The support of the radical wing of the Flemish national movement was critical for the VB during its early years, for the party did not immediately enjoy electoral success. The VB garnered only 1.8% in the elections of 1981, 2.2% in 1985 and 3.0% in 1987. Most of its votes came from Antwerp, where the VB concentrated its efforts (Mudde, 2000: 87). The real change in the party's fortunes came when the VB dropped its exclusive focus on traditional Flemish nationalist interests and adopted an anti-immigrant program similar to other radical right parties in Western Europe. This was not a major departure from the party's core ideology. As Filip Dewinter once put it "how can a party resist the Francification of Brussels without resisting its Morocconization? (Debunne, 1988, quoted in Hossay, 2002: 176)." In the same period, Dillen introduced the so-called *Operation Rejuvenation* in which various young Vlaams Blok members, mostly ex-

leaders of nationalist youth and student bodies, were integrated into the party leadership and helped create a highly structured internal party organization. The party also created a youth wing in this period, which has since become an important instrument for training and recruitment (Hooghe, Stolle, and Stouthuysen, 2004).

The VB's electoral breakthrough came in the 1988 local elections when it won twenty-three seats in ten local councils and polled 17.7% of the vote in Antwerp. This electoral coup led to the type of media attention, and hence free publicity, that the party had hitherto lacked. After the 1991 parliamentary elections in which the VB won 10.3% overall and became the largest party in Antwerp, there was no doubt that the party had consolidated its place in the Flemish party system. Since then, the VB has increased its vote-share in every election, winning 24.2% in the most recent regional one in 2004.

Why was the VB able to sustain itself through the lean years of the 1980s, build upon its gains in local elections, and become the largest party of Flanders by 2004? The answer has much to do with party organization, which was in turn the product of long-term historical developments. As already mentioned, the VB could count on a highly motivated army of foot-soldiers to work on behalf of the party. The party was thus able to mount "permanent campaigns", particularly in the city of Antwerp, when other parties could not. Antwerp, for the historical reasons mentioned above, provided the VB with a concentration of activists and sympathizers and became the political center from which the party could then build. The VB still recruits from Flemish nationalist organizations, although these organizations have become smaller over the last two decades. In terms of elites, the VU and the Flemish nationalist organizations provided the VB with its initial office holders and leaders. These politicians were well-known, and often well-respected,

figures within the Flemish community, not the political novices and loners that often flock to radical right political parties. In fact, to this day most of the central figures in the VB were initially politicized in these organizations. Unlike many other radical right parties, the VB was able to fill the seats that they won with (relatively) trained politicians from within their own ranks. These politicians by and large did not then bolt from the party, as has been the case in other national contexts. This ability to fill and retain the seats the party has won in local councils and national parliaments is one of the key, if often overlooked, ingredients in the success of radical right parties.

Like most radical right parties, its internal workings are largely shielded from outsiders, and the discipline of party members has prevented much accumulation of knowledge about its organizational features. Even analysts who have written books on the movement admit they know precious little about what goes on inside the VB (Mudde, personal communication). Yet by all accounts, the VB is one of the best organized and most professional radical right parties in Western Europe (Carter, 2005; Coffé, 2005a). The contrast with the Wallonian FN is dramatic.

Wallonia and the Front National

Wallonia has never produced a regional movement equivalent to the *Vlaamse Beweging* in Flanders. As the ruling minority in Belgium, there was little need to fight for Francophone interests, and in fact Belgian nationalism was a much stronger force in the region than Wallonian nationalism ever was. Moroever, Walloon nationalism has always

had a leftist orientation with strong roots in the labor union. Since the mid 1980s, it has been nearly completely absorbed by the Francophone socialist party (PS).

The high-water mark of the Francophone extreme right occurred in the 1930s with the rise of Léon Degrelle and his Rexist Party. Degrelle had been the director of the publishing department of the Catholic Actions of Belgian Youth, but his withering attacks on the incompetence of the Catholic Party led to his break with it. Always more of a political opportunist than an ideologue, Degrelle followed the political winds of the 1930s and his Rexist Party advocated a "physical and moral reform of the nation" and corporatism that placed it within the fascist camp (quoted in Capoccia 2005: 41). The Rexists gained a surprising 11.5% of the vote and 21 of 202 seats in the elections of May 1936, and appeared unstoppable in the months afterward.

Degrelle's success would be shortlived, however, as political forces within Belgium mounted a vigorous defense of democracy. This defense is well-chronicled by Capoccia (2005), and led to the rapid dissolution of the Rexists as a political force. The keys to this defense were two-fold: the prevention of the defection of the Catholic Party's right flank to the Rexists and the interventions of King Leopold III. In the 1939 elections, the party gained only 4.4% of the vote after eight Rexist MP's and Senators had resigned from it (Capoccia, 2005: 115). The comparison with the VNV is striking: while the Flemish extreme right was a party on the rise before the occupation, the Rexists had been reduced to a small group of militants and sympathizers that found little support within Wallonian society. On the eve of the invasion of Belgium, "the Rexists remained an isolated and largely irrelevant group (Conway, 1993: 17)." When the German occupiers installed Degrelle, he was very much a marginal figure without any significant basis of

support – the Quisling of Belgium.Given the size of the movement, it was quite easy to destroy the remains of the Rexists after the end of the war. As Conway (1993: 289) concludes: "Long before the German retreat of September 1944, the movement had become a political irrelevance and the subsequent trials of Rexist militants served merely as the public expression of its demise. Collaboration had become a disaster which not only destroyed the lives of many followers of Rex, but also consigned their movement to a political oblivion from which there was to be no escape."

In marked contrast to the leaders and followers of the VNV within Flanders, the Rexists were viewed as utter traitors within Wallonian society. Indeed, whereas in Flanders a balanced and subtle attitude was taken regarding collaboration, Walloon politicians sharply condemned collaborators and referred to them as criminals (Colignon, 1996). Because the environment was so repressive and collaboration was so demonized, Walloon collaborators never created the types of support networks that existed in Flanders and no amnesty movement for collaborators originated. Most Walloons identified collaboration with violent excesses such as the execution of resistance fighters and the persecution of the Jews.

The far right was so closely linked with this perception of collaboration that the regeneration of any political movement proved impossible in the first several postwar decades. What remained of the Francophone far right was divided into small right-wing extremist "groupuscules" that were often hostile to one another, operated illegally, and embraced violence. There was a small spike in organizational activity following the independence of Zaire (Congo) and the return of Francophone colonists in 1960, but the ultranationalist organizations they created quickly dissolved (Balace 1994). The Belgian

Francophone far right was thus one of the weakest in all of Western Europe in the postwar period, probably numbering only a few hundred activists into the 1970s (Hossay, 2002: 170). This, however, did not prevent the formation of a bewildering array of right-wing extremist groupuscules during this period, many of which operated clandestinely and embraced violence. These included: the *Centre Politique des Indépendants et Cadres Chrétien* (CEPIC), the *Mouvement d'Action Civique* (MAC), *Jeune Europe*, the *Front de la Jeunesse* (FJ), the *Mouvement social populaire* (MSP), *Delta Nord*, and *L'Assaut*. Many of these groups failed to survive into the 1980s, however. FJ, for example, was disbanded in 1983 when many of its members were found guilty of belonging to a private militia. The remnants regrouped into the Parti des Forces Nouvelles (PFN), which continued to practice violence and openly praise Rexism and Nazism.

In 1985, Daniel Féret, who had been active in *Jeune Europe*, founded the Wallonian Front National (FN). Féret, made no attempt to hide the fact that he was copying the Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen, taking the French party's name along with many of its symbols and slogans. He also tried to integrate the various right-wing extremist elements, such as the PFN, the MSP, Delta and L'Assault, into the new party. The PFN passionately resisted the FN's embrace, but ultimately dissolved in 1991 and some of its key figures, including Patrick Cocriamont, Daniel Leskens, and Patrick Sessler, entered into Féret's party. These individuals, like many individuals in the FN, were directly tied to violent organizations and would face a number of legal challenges.

In contrast to the VB, the FN does not promote regional nationalism but supports a federal Belgium and opposes separatist actions.[5] The FN was electorally unsuccessful throughout most of the 1980s, never winning more than a couple of percentage points in

local elections and the Brussels regional elections. When the FN contested for the first time federal elections in 1991, it scored a meager 1.7% of the Walloon votes. Since then, however, the party's performance has improved, and it captured 8% in the 2004 Wallonian regional elections. Compared with the Vlaams Belang, however, the FN is insignificant, and recent developments bode poorly for it.

The relative poor performance of the FN over the last two decades is largely a result of its inability to build a functioning political organization. The resources that were available - the underground groupuscules - did not strengthen the fledgling radical right party but actually weakened it. The fractionalization of the postwar Wallonian far right was reproduced within the FN. One study counts fourteen different factions within the FN (Abramowicz, 1996). The same author finds that these factions have led to the formation of thirty different dissident movements or splinter parties over the past several decades (Abramowicz, 2005). In 1995 alone, the FN lost over half of its seventy-two local council representatives through defections to these splinter groups (Abramowicz, 1997). In that year, Marguerite Bastien, who had been banished from the FN because of her continued links with the violent, neo-Nazi group L'Assaut, formed the Front Nouveau de Belgique (FNB). In 2004, dissidents within the FN formed the FNationale. And in 2005, Paul Arku, after being kicked out of the FN for launching a failed putsch against Féret, formed the FDB, or Front de Bruxellois (Abramowicz, 2005).

In addition to factionalism, activists from the right-wing extremist associations that formed the core of the FN had little interest in recruiting more moderate members, meaning that the party never built anything akin to the VB's rank and file. In fact, the party has been accurately described as a phantom party by two of its former members:

"The Belgian version of the 'National Front' which presents itself as an alternative, has no leader, nor program, nor local tangibles. It is only a phantom party… Jean Marie Le-Pen is thus not mistaken in refusing all contact with such insignificant people (quoted in Hossay 2002: 181)."

Although these comments may be dismissed as politically motivated, they are consistent with those of the few academics who have analyzed this fringe party. Coffé (2005a) argues that the FN has never been able to take full advantage of its opportunities because of its poor organization and lack of leaders, members and organizational background. Similarly, Swyngedouw's (1998: 59) judgment that "in terms of organization and policies…the FN does not represent much at all" and that it is "little more than an ad hoc collection of individuals of quite divergent natures" still holds today. Indeed, now that Féret has been charged with incitement to racial hatred and banned from all political activities for ten years, the FN appears weaker than ever. The party was only able to submit lists in 30 of 360 Walloon communities for the October 2006 regional elections. The FN will also not be able to participate under the name "Front National" since the party did not follow correct procedure when submitting its lists. It will also be fighting against no less than three different splinter groups that are each using a variation on the original acronym: the Force Nationale (FNationale), the Front Nouveau de Belgigue (FNB), the Front des Bruxellois (FDB) and Front des Wallons (FDW). In short, it is highly doubtful that the FN will be able to match its 2004 result. Even if the FN recovers from its current nadir, the historical and organizational factors analyzed here make it highly unlikely that the party could ever consolidate itself in the Wallonian party system. And it is unthinkable that the party could become a national player.

Conclusion

Our case studies illustrate the importance of the pre-existing far right landscape for the success of contemporary radical right parties. When a nationalist subculture is historically strong and widely viewed as legitimate, as in Flanders, radical right parties are able to successfully build party organizations from it. When nationalist organizations are historically weak, or have been decimated before the rise of new radical right parties, as in Wallonia, party building is probably doomed to fail. Those right-wing extremist organizations that tend to dominate the far right nationalist landscape in such cases preclude successful party building.

We believe that our argument travels beyond the Belgian case(s) to other states in Western Europe. In France, for example, members of the Vichy, Poujadiste and Algerian Settler movement still form the core of the FN's membership. Austria and Italy represent cases in which former fascists reconstituted themselves into extreme right political parties after the Second World War, and the success of the MSI/AN and the FPÖ have much to do with these historical legacies. Examples such as the Dutch and the Swedish cases show how countries that possess very little in the way of nationalist organizations can produce "flash" radical right parties that quickly collapse as a result of their organizational weakness.

These, as well as our case study, suggest a correlation between a historically rooted, and relatively legitimate, nationalist subculture and a well-organized radical right party. Further research obviously needs to demonstrate causation. We believe that this represents a fruitful research agenda, not the least because it involves unpacking two

types of variables that have received nearly no attention in the literature on the radical right: historical and political-cultural. Indeed, nearly every single comparative study of the radical right is quantitative and fails to consider the types of historical developments that we have analyzed in this article (Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Golder, 2003; Carter 2005; Givens, 2005; Norris, 2005). By treating the radical right in an a-historical manner, not only are the building blocks of the radical right obscured, but so too are the critical junctures that pushed nationalist subcultures along different trajectories. No serious student of social democratic parties would ignore the role of labor movements in their formation. Nor would a student of Christian Democratic parties ignore the church-state conflict that preceded their creation (Kalyvas 1996). Historical legacies have also been deemed critical to the success of postcommunist parties (Gryzmala-Busse 2002). Why should we think that the radical right is different from these party families?[6] By ignoring historical legacies, or treating them as a residual variable, we miss the underlying causes of the radical right's success and failure. The enormous variation in the radical right's trajectory over the last several decades demands a comparative-historical analysis, a research tradition in comparative politics that looks for theoretically and empirically important puzzles, searches for causal mechanisms that operate over time, and it sensitive to key events (or critical junctures) that profoundly shape future developments (Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, 2003). This article represents a first step in that direction.

As other authors (particularly Mudde, forthcoming) have noted, the role of political culture has been neglected in the study of the radical right. There is a presumption in much of the literature that radical right parties stimulate the same reactions across advanced industrial democracies, and that they prosper in spite of the

near universal revulsion toward them. This view is incorrect. As we have suggested in this article, popular and elite attitudes toward the radical right differ across time and place. In some societies, such as Wallonia, they are universally denounced as the enemies of democracy. In other places, such as Flanders, the radical right may be marginalized (there is still a cordon-sanitaire in effect that prohibits any cooperation between mainstream parties and the Vlaams Belang) but still viewed as a legitimate representative of a particular nationalist tradition. The legitimacy (or lack of legitimacy) that the radical right possesses is as crucial factor in its success or failure, and is one that scholars would do well to consider in future research.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Results obtained by the Vlaams Belang since 1978 in the Flemish region and by the Front National since 1991 in the Wallonian region in the federal Parliament elections (in percentages of valid votes)

Year	Percentage Vlaams Belang	Percentage Front National
1978	2.1	
1981	1.8	
1985	2.2	
1987	3.0	
1991	10.3	1.7
1995	12.2	5.5
1999	15.3	4.1
2003	17.9	5.6
2004	24.2	8.1

Source: Ministry of Interior

Note: As Belgium has a confederal party model, we give the electoral results per region. The 2004 results are for the regional elections for the Flemish and Wallonian Parliament.

ENDNOTES

[1] We do not go into the definitional debate surrounding radical right parties in this paper. For attempts to define this party family, see Mudde (forthcoming).

[2] Since the focus of our paper is on the relation between the existence of a nationalist subculture and the organization of contemporary radical right parties, we limit ourselves here to organizational topics. It is however obvious that the existence of a nationalist subculture may also be directly related to the electoral success of radical right parties, since the stronger the nationalist subculture, the larger the potential electorate of a radical right party. However, as Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie (2005) have

demonstrated, radical right parties vary immensely in their ability to mobilize potential supporters. We believe that party organization is a crucial variable linking electoral potential to electoral success.

[3] One very plausible, if scientifically difficult to validate, hypothesis is self-selection: right-wing extremists tend to have highly irascible personalities and, ironically given their supposed fealty to an ethnically pure state, have difficulty developing cooperative relationships with others.

[4] We did not include the Brussels Capital Region in our comparison, given the institutional complexity of this region (Coffé, 2006).

[5] The extreme right in Wallonia has always supported the Belgian state. The party formation AGIR is a notable exception. Running of the slogan of ‘Les Wallons d’abord!’ (Wallonians first!), the party won 6.2% of the votes in its home city, Liège, in 1994. Yet, it suffered from internal struggles and factionalism, and disintegrated after the May 1995 elections.

[6] We are indebted to Adam Ziegfeld for providing the analogy to the study of Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties.