



Researching Extreme Right Parties' Impact Using Case Studies

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Abstract

This case study reviews a comparative research project on the political impact of extreme-right parties on their domestic political systems. Since most extreme-right parties are distinctive for their cultural xenophobia or biological racism, this research evaluates the impact of these parties on immigration politics and policy. Research on ERPs' political impact had remained overlooked in political science literature, mainly due to the lack of interaction between political scientists focused on the politics of international migration and scholars interested in extreme-right parties. To attain the proposed objectives, the project employed a case studies approach, drawing on a small-*N* research strategy based on the selection of a limited number of cases: the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. Extreme-right parties' impact on immigration politics and policy was disaggregated according to three distinct dimensions: interparty competition, public attitudes toward immigration, and the development of immigration control. A mixed-methods strategy was deployed to evaluate the extreme-right party impact on these dimensions that involved the combined employment of qualitative and quantitative research methods. This case study reviews the challenges faced during the research process inherent to the development of the proposed research project, ranging from the formulation of the research question, the justification of case selection, the choice of the research methods, and the problems faced through its implementation.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Have a better understanding of the development of a research project based upon the employment of a case studies approach with a comparative scope
 - Know how to implement a mixed-methods strategy within case studies
 - Have learnt the advantages of case studies in the study of contingent political processes
 - Have learnt the difficulties inherent to implementing a mixed-methods strategy project
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Selecting the Research Problem

During my undergraduate degree, I became familiar with the history of immigration in the United Kingdom, as well as with African American politics in the United States. These experiences enhanced my interest in the politics of international migration and ethnic minorities. Half a decade later, I decided to devote my PhD thesis to the study of a political process that was first described in the mid-1990s and then restated a decade later:

Co-optation of radical-right issues has operated quite successfully in the British case (in the 1970s), somewhat less so in the German case (in the 1980s), and not at all in the French case (in the 1990s) [...] However, the question of why and how co-optation 'works' in some cases and not in others

remains to be analysed. (Schain, 2006)

Co-optation of extreme-right parties (ERPs) had also been referred as “clothes stealing” or considered evidence of the ERPs’ contagion effects over mainstream parties’ proposals and the management of immigration control by national governments (Hainsworth, 2008; van Spanje, 2010). Following this suggestion, my initial objective was to seek to understand the occurrence of mainstream parties’ co-optation of ERPs’ discourse and to explain their variable levels of political success in terms of neutralizing the electoral threat posed by far-right parties. In the literature, co-optation was regarded as a strategy of a political actor to improve its position through the formal or informal incorporation of a challenger group or its proposals. Thereby, I interpreted co-optation processes as a bi-dimensional political process: either as evidence of ERPs’ political impact or as a strategy of mainstream parties to attain electoral objectives. Given this, the research question was reformulated accordingly as follows: Did the ERPs have an impact on immigration politics and policy in the selected cases during the 2000s? As the research question indicated, a comparative framework was selected that involved a small-*N* research design concerning the analysis of a restricted number of case studies (Brady & Collier, 2010).

The few available studies focusing on the ERP impact over their domestic political systems mostly addressed policy developments concerning immigration control (Schain, 2006; Williams, 2006), so my object of research seemed closely interlinked with the literature. Drawing on this past research, ERP political impact was considered as the ability to promote a particular outcome that otherwise would have not been observed if it was not for the agency of the selected ERP. This political process was also disaggregated as direct or indirect depending on whether the ERP was represented or excluded within the national government (Schain, 2006), and classified as proportional or disproportional in light of whether they were represented in parliament (Minkenberg, 2001). The measurement of indirect impact was considered a particularly tricky issue (Mudde, 2007). A tripartite typology (non-significant, significant, and very significant) was employed to evaluate the intensity of ERP impact to improve the binary classification found in the literature. These premises formed the theoretical framework that I employed throughout the research process.

I conducted an extensive literature review on the politics of international migration and on ERPs. As a result, I observed two shortcomings in the available literature. On the one hand, ERPs were recurrently associated with restrictive policy developments in immigration studies despite the absence of sufficient empirical evidence to establish this causal relationship. On the other hand, the literature on far-right parties neglected the complexity inherent to immigration and tended to “naturalize” public concern and hostility toward this social phenomenon. One of the aims of my research involved promoting a synthesis of the two strands (immigration studies plus studies on ERP literature) of political research to overcome these shortcomings (Bale, 2008). Finally, the literature review of immigration studies highlighted the prevalence of case studies, despite the lack of overt references to research designs within this strand of political analysis.

Furthermore, a “policy gap” was recurrently observed between the immigration control objectives set by national governments at the discourse level, in particular concerning the restriction of immigration flows or the deployment of zero-immigration policies, and the later outcomes of the implementation stage concerning

the lack of attainment of the initial objectives (Cornellius, Tsuda, Martin, & Hollifield, 2004). Case studies seemed, therefore, to be the most suitable research strategy to address the complexity of immigration control and for the assessment of the extent to which the ERP contagion effects at the discourse level of national governments were effectively transposed into the later stages of the policy process (Czaika and De Haas, 2013). Another shortcoming of ERP literature concerned the neglect of the contingency of immigration politics at the cross-national level.

Due to my constructivist approach, I suspected that the ERP impact on immigration politics and policy could take different outlines at cross-national level as the meaning of immigration is a social construction, that is, how it is conceived depends on the individual society (Furlong & Marsh, 2010). Constructivism explores how political reality is socially constructed, instead of assuming that the social realm is independent from human behavior, and examines the role of political ideas in human perception of social phenomena (Hay, 2002). The employment of a small-*N* analysis rather than a large-*N* survey enhanced the investigation of the potential idiosyncrasies of the ERP impact in the selected cases and addressed questions of multicollinearity, whereby similar outcomes can be promoted by distinct causal factors (Brady & Collier, 2010).

Defining the Research Design

The final step of this first stage of the conception of the research design involved the case selection for the small-*N* analysis. Initially, the selected cases only included the United Kingdom and France, but the scope of the analysis was extended to Italy to enhance the triangulation of the observations made at the single-case level. The case selection was initially based on the observation of significant flows of immigration (United Kingdom and France were ranked as old countries of immigration, while Italy was considered a new country of immigration) and the presence of relevant ERPs within those political systems. The ERPs were selected due to their overall relevance within the domestic political systems. In the United Kingdom, the British National Party (BNP) ranks as the most successful far-right party in British history, while the French Front National (FN) was the leading ERP in West European party systems. In Italy, the Lega Nord (LN) was one of the parties constituting the government during what is known as the second Berlusconi government, when Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi held power for the second time in 2001–2005. LN also was a member of the right-wing coalition that was victorious in the 2008 general elections.

The variations in the electoral success of the selected ERPs would enrich the analysis. In the latter stages of the writing up process, a more consistent justification for the case selection was requested by my PhD advisers. The provided justification followed the procedures of a most-similar-cases research strategy, which means that case studies were selected by the presence of a common set of variables that could influence the observation and the outline of the dependent variable, that is, the ERP impact. These common factors are therefore excluded from having an important role on the potential variance of the dependent variable at the cross-national level. The selection of the United Kingdom, France, and Italy was derived from the presence of three similar characteristics: the liberal character of their political systems, their membership in the European

Union, and the bipolar character of political competition within their party systems. Whereas the first two factors constrained the potential scope of ERP impact, the pattern of political competition within their party systems boosted the selected ERPs' electoral threat to the mainstream center-right parties.

The object of the analysis of the investigation was limited to immigration politics and policy, rather than carrying out an evaluation of the ERPs' overall impact on their domestic political systems. Since most ERPs were considered distinctive for their cultural xenophobia or biological racism, immigration seemed to be the most sensible topic for developing the assessment of the selected parties' impact (Carter, 2005). Regarding the definition of the dependent variable, I disentangled immigration policy (immigration control) from integration policy (the conditions provided by the host state for the settlement of the foreign citizens) and focused only on the former area of public policy (Czaika and De Haas, 2013).

The next step of the research process consisted of defining the ERP impact, whereas the timeframe of the analysis was limited to the 2000s. Drawing on past research, ERP political impact was characterized as the ability to promote a political outcome that would not have been observed in the absence of the selected party (Williams, 2006). Three dimensions were proposed for the assessment of the ERP impact on immigration politics and policy: interparty competition, public attitudes toward this social phenomenon, and the development of immigration policy. Thus, the ERP impact would be interpreted as the ability to reinforce the restrictive character of mainstream parties' positions in the national first-order ballots, to intensify public concern and hostility toward immigration, and to strengthen the restrictive character of national immigration policies. The ERPs' discourse, electoral manifestos, and levels of electoral support were examined in depth to identify later processes of informal co-option of their proposals by mainstream parties.

Since the initial objectives of the research design included understanding the observation of the ERP impact on immigration politics and policy, the elaboration of the hypotheses was necessary for the testing of potential explanations for these political processes. Drawing on the extensive literature review, four independent variables were selected for the examination of their potential causal relationship with the expected variable levels of ERP contagion effects on the selected dimensions. This first concerned the intensity of immigration flows, as the intensity of this social phenomenon was recurrently associated with ERP influence on this area of public policy. The second referred to public concern with immigration, due to the references of public opinion as a potential driver of the ERPs' electoral support and, subsequently, of the dependent variable's observation. The electoral threat to the mainstream parties posed by the selected ERPs or their level of electoral support formed the third independent variable, which was considered in accordance with the characteristics of each party system. The last variable was concerned with the strategies of mainstream parties toward ERPs, which could be classified as disengagement or engagement on a broad level (Downs, 2001). The comparative synthesis of the observations extracted from each single case analysis would enhance the assessment of the validity of the potential causal relationships at a cross-national level according to necessity and sufficiency conditions (George & Bennett, 2005).

Selecting the Methodology

The second stage of the research design consisted of selecting the most suitable methodology for the attainment of the proposed research objectives. The decision to employ a mixed-methods strategy combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies derived from the premise that the methodological choices should depend on the research question (Brady & Collier, 2010). In the research problem, ERP impact was disaggregated into distinct dimensions, excluding the use of a single and uniform methodology. I based the selection of research methods on the three proposed dimensions of ERP impact: analysis of political discourse and content analysis of party manifestos to evaluate ERP impact on interparty competition in first-order ballots, analysis of public polls conducted in the context of first-order ballots to assess the ERP impact on public attitudes toward immigration, and the examination of policy developments taking place in the selected timeframe.

As part of the study, I employed discourse analysis, content analysis, poll analysis, and policy analysis. Discourse analysis addresses how relations of power, power abuse, and inequality are enacted and reproduced by text and talk in the social and political context. In particular, I was interested in how frames employed in immigration politics and selected by political elites can mobilize particular sectors of the audience. I performed content analysis to estimate the employment of particular words or expressions within political texts, which were envisaged as particular categories. Thereby, the analysis evaluated the frequency of references to each of the selected categories in relation to the entire text.

Content analysis was complementary to the discourse analysis in strengthening the reliability of the analysis of the ERP impact on interparty competition. I conducted both analyses through examining party manifestos presented by the selected ERPs and the national mainstream parties at the national first-order ballots during the 2000s. I developed a quantitative content analysis with the support of a software program named NVivo that enhanced the coding of the sentences related to immigration control and calculated the overall salience of the coded sentences within the overall party manifestos. The theoretical premise was that the ERP impact would lead to the expansion of the overall salience of immigration within the interparty proposals.

Poll analysis seemed the most suitable method for measuring public concern and attitudes toward immigration. A synchronic approach, which focuses on the events on a particular point in time, was deployed in the evaluation of public attitudes in the context of the first-order ballots. As Hay (2002) suggests, "A synchronic analysis is one which effectively freezes the object of analysis in time, thereby focusing attention on the structure of social or political relations at a specific instant" (p. 144). A diachronic approach would imply the analysis of the ERP impact on public behavior from a longitudinal perspective, but this option would be excessively ambitious, time-consuming, and dependent on the availability of regular polls in the selected case studies.

Finally, policy analysis of the development of immigration control was deployed because of the assumption that the ERP impact on this dimension could only be traced through in-depth analysis. Furthermore, this option implicitly suggested that the ERP impact would be characterized by its contingent character and could take on a different outline over time, both within a single country and at the comparative level. This approach implied the disaggregation of the typology of migration flows (labor immigration, family reunion, asylum, and

irregular immigration) according to a stagist approach. This approach proposes that the policy process should be divided into four distinct stages: the input level, the definition of policy outputs, the implementation stage, and the outcomes of the implementation stage (Czaika and De Haas, 2013).

Method in Action

After setting the theoretical framework that supported the research project, the next step involved the collection of empirical data for the attainment of the proposed objectives. This task proved more troublesome than previous stages. Though I was proficient in French and Italian, I attended training in these languages to improve the necessary skills for the collection and analysis of the empirical data. Using the Internet, the process began with collecting the political manifestos of the mainstream parties and the selected ERPs, the political discourse of party leaders throughout the electoral campaigns for the national first-order ballots, the electoral surveys conducted for these elections, and secondary literature on immigration and the development of ERPs in the selected countries. The analysis of the ERPs' discourses and manifestos was indispensable for the identification of their political slogans and proposals related to immigration, which could potentially be adopted into the mainstream parties' electoral proposals or, later, into the policy process.

The first problem was that I had difficulty obtaining direct access to Italian political speeches because of their lack of availability on the Internet or in paper. As a result, I relied more heavily on the media reports of the mainstream parties' political campaigns in Italy than I did for Britain and France. The analysis of the ERP impact on public opinion was facilitated by electoral surveys carried out before the first-order ballots, such as the British Electoral Survey, the Panel Electorale Français, and the Italian National Elections Studies. However, the comparative dimension within the single-case analysis or at the cross-national level was hampered by the variations in the questions concerning immigration included in the national surveys, which came as an unpleasant surprise. To overcome this problem, additional electoral surveys conducted during the electoral campaigns of the selected first-order ballots were employed to supplement the single-case analysis, but the scope for direct cross-national comparisons of public attitudes was a lot more reduced than initially anticipated.

One of the most complicated choices was related to the collection of empirical evidence for developing the assessment of the ERP impact on the policy of immigration control. As I later discovered, the selection of the empirical data to collect is one of the most difficult choices, when conducting case studies, due to the lack of explicit guidelines (George & Bennett, 2005). Initially, I conducted in-depth interviews with top policy makers and performed fieldwork in France and Italy to obtain data for the assessment of the potential ERP contagion effects on policy developments. Interviews were conducted with former top officials in Britain and France, but the scope of information obtained was uninteresting and failed to support the assessment of the ERP impact.

Most of the top officials denied any evidence of the ERP impact and justified the deployment of restrictive and repressive measures on immigration control on other grounds. In France, a French official argued that the restrictive measures and proposals there did not challenge the national republican paradigm, and that it

was the immigrants' disrespect that forced the government to adopt restrictive measures such as the contract of integration for newcomers, which requires that they undergo language training and instruction on French values. Given the lack of insights extracted from the direct meetings in Britain and France, interviews with top officials were not conducted for the Italian case study. Nevertheless, the fieldwork in Italy was still valuable, due to the scope of secondary literature amassed during my short visiting scholarship at the University of Sienna.

This unexpected event fostered the reliance on secondary literature and further in-depth examination of the policy process related to the regulation of the different inflows. To have a full understanding of the context surrounding the policy process, in-depth analysis of media reports and parliamentary sessions related to the presentation of immigration laws was performed. Due to the uncertainty regarding which data would be suitable for assessing the ERP impact on immigration policy, at a certain stage, a printout of the British laws on immigration control was made, only to be binned shortly afterwards due to the inherent legal character and its inaptness for conducting political analysis. Secondary literature and the reading of parliamentary debates were fundamental to guide the collection of empirical evidence to support the analysis of the ERP impact on immigration control. Finally, the strenuous efforts required for the collection and analysis of the empirical data related to the ERP impact on immigration politics and policy were further rewarded, as they provided in-depth knowledge about the political systems of the three distinct countries.

Practical Lessons Learned

After amassing a sizable amount of empirical evidence, the writing up process started with the production of the draft of the analysis of the British case study, which was a fairly straightforward process. An unexpected problem was concerned with attaining the proper balance between the level of analysis provided by the in-depth research and the word limit which had been set for each chapter. With the help of my internal examiner, I removed the excessive amount of detail initially included in the text and selected parts to be proposed for publication separately as a research article. One of the most important recommendations provided by my PhD adviser concerned the quality of the narrative. Another unexpected problem concerning the content analysis was the presentation of figures that coded the party manifestos' references to immigration control according to types of inflows. In the end, the number of sentences coded in each manifesto was excessively low to draw conclusions as highlighted by my external adviser. Consequently, most of the 50 initial figures were dropped from the final version.

Drawing conclusions concerning the examination of the ERP impact on public policy was not difficult but I was surprised by the results. In France, the hostility toward immigration across the French and Italian public opinion diminished between 2002 and 2007 despite the presence of significant ERPs. Consequently, my conclusions highlighted the contingency of public attitudes toward immigrants and warned against the tendency to overemphasize the ERPs impact over the electorate. The findings on the ERP impact on immigration control suggested that the BNP had been wrongly associated with the New Labor's repressive

approach toward undesired inflows throughout the 2000s, as my research highlighted the intense interparty competition with the Conservative party as the cause for the center-left's adoption of a repressive approach toward the regulation of undesired inflows.

In the French case study, the greatest difficulty was concerned with the ranking of the scope of the FN's impact on policy developments during President Jacques Chirac's term and, then, during the first half of President Nicolas Sarkozy's term. Under Chirac, there was evidence of significant ERP impact on interparty competition and immigration control, while this political process expanded to a very significant level of intensity in the first 2 years of Sarkozy's term with the creation of a ministry of immigration and national identity. Similar difficulties were faced over the Italian case study in the context of right-wing coalition governments that included the LN, where this ERP's impact on interparty competition and immigration control varied between significant in the early 2000s to very significant in the late 2000s. Deprived of guidelines, this evaluation proved a lot more difficult than initially anticipated, seeing as the only distinctions regarding this political process involved direct/indirect impact when ERPs held cabinet seats or were excluded from government and proportionality/disproportionality related to the levels of ERPs' electoral support (Minkenberg, 2001; Schain, 2006). This exercise depended heavily on my interpretative skills, but the confidence provided by my PhD adviser helped me to trust the overall quality of the analysis.

Regarding the evaluation of the proposed hypotheses to explain the ERP impact on the three selected dimensions, the conclusions highlighted that further research would be required to understand ERPs' contagion effects on public opinion as the selected explanatory variables were considered irrelevant. As for the two remaining dimensions, the comparative synthesis of the observations extracted at the single-case level clearly dismissed intensity of inflows and public concern with immigration as relevant factors behind the ERP impact on interparty competition and on immigration control. The observation of a significant ERP electoral threat to mainstream parties was considered a necessary but insufficient condition to stir the ERPs' contagion effects, while the agency of mainstream parties was considered the most relevant overall causal factor. The employment of case studies enhanced the association of the scope of the ERP impact with the strategies of the leaders of center-right parties, respectively, Sarkozy in France and Berlusconi in Italy, and their willingness to engage at formal/informal level with ERPs.

An additional difficulty encountered during the last stage of the writing up process was related to the overall organization of the thesis and the case studies. Initially, the project considered the second and third terms of British Prime Minister Tony Blair as two different case studies. Similarly, the French case was divided into two different cases: President Chirac's last term followed by the first half of President Sarkozy's term. Finally, Italy also included two case studies concerning the distinct Berlusconi governments. Following the advice of the external examiner, my initial three different chapters were condensed into just seven in the final draft of the PhD thesis, which resulted in a monograph (Carvalho, 2014). Therefore, I learnt that presentation of the cases as organized by country and following a sequential matter improved the reading of the text. However, my excessive attachment to the initially ideal structure that supported the elaboration of the investigation prevented me from taking this advice from my colleagues during an earlier stage.

Conclusion

The aim of the research described in this case was to expose the different stages required for the elaboration of an investigation on the ERP impact on immigration politics and policy through the employment of case studies. The initial research question was disaggregated according to three distinct dimensions and a mixed-methods methodology was deployed to evaluate the ERP impact on interparty competition, public attitudes toward immigration, and on the policy of immigration control. The content analysis developed to evaluate the first dimension proved to be excessively ambitious and most of the produced figures were dropped out due to the low number of observations, which hampered its overall relevance. The analysis of public attitudes was more difficult than initially expected due to variations on the questions included in the electoral polls, but the employment of additional surveys helped to overcome this problem. The analysis and the ranking of the ERP impact on immigration control was also a strenuous process due to the reliance on my interpretative skills only, but that problem was overcome. In my opinion, case studies are most suited to conduct investigations of political processes characterized by intense levels of contingency like political impact, whose complexity is easily neglected by statistical analysis.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are some advantages of employing a mixed-methods strategy in conducting a case study of a political phenomenon?
 2. What are some challenges of deploying content analysis within a case studies research strategy?
 3. Think of a policy approach that you would like to study in terms of its development, its implementation, and its outcomes. What would be your first step in determining what empirical data to gather?
 4. What are some advantages of case studies when comparing the impact of a political phenomenon across multiple countries?
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