

**The Nationalist International**

By

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In the post-war period, far right political movements have been outsiders that largely engaged on the fringes of democratic political systems. Over the last decade, however, they have moved from the periphery to the center of power in the United States, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, and Italy to name a few prominent examples. This is particularly surprising as political gatekeepers within the center right, the media, and financial community have been quite successful at limiting the far-right access to the main levers of democratic institutions. What changed?

A core argument in this memo is globalization. The rapid transformation of the world economy and its governance since the end of the Cold War has reshuffled the opportunity structures available to far right movements. Here there are two main channels. On the one hand, the explosion of trade in goods and services as well as information has transformed the issue space of political competition, elevating debates over nationalism and political authority. On the other hand, globalization has eroded the power of political gatekeepers and lowered the barriers to entry for far right parties. In particular, the memo suggests that transnational changes in global governance, finance, media, and migration all contribute to a new political environment that showers political resources on previously marginalized political movements of the far right.

The memo has important implications for theoretical arguments in political science as well as policy geared towards shielding democracy from extremist forces. First, it emphasizes the transnational dimension of far right political movements. Early literature in comparative politics suggested the limits of direct cooperation between far right parties (Macklin 2013; Startin 2010). While this might still be true, it underestimated the international factors that drive the success of these parties. The nationalist international does not have to be a coherent movement of actors directly collaborating across borders. Instead, the rise of nationalist forces can be the product of international change. Second, and more generally, it underscores the dynamic and endogenous channels through which economic globalization is transforming domestic politics. Considerable work in political economy frames globalization as an exogenous shock that is filtered through preexisting interest group or institutional configurations. The memo offers an alternative account developed with Henry Farrell, which focuses on how the political battles and power resources available to actors are themselves transformed by globalization (Farrell and Newman 2014, 2019). Domestic politics is global politics. Third, and finally, it suggests that efforts to address far right parties must tackle the structural conditions identified, which undermine the authority of political gatekeepers. Alternatively, policy-makers must consider how alternative groups that focus on centrist policies could take advantage of these changes for their own advantage.

### **Far Right Parties Traditionally Faced High Barriers to Entry**

For the last half decade, few far right parties have successfully dominated democratic politics. This is largely a result of the political elite, who serve as gatekeepers to political entry (Ziblatt 2017; Mudde 2007; Ellinas 2007; Norris 2005). Center right parties, for example, have weeded out far right candidates in candidate selection and strategically move their political platforms to squeeze out threats from the far right. Similarly, traditional media outlets have limited the airtime provided to extreme candidates, filtering content so as to elevate

mainstream debates. Finally, far right parties frequently lack access to the financial resources necessary to fund and maintain dynamic party structures.

The barriers to entry for far right parties result from a range of underlying dynamics from strategic to sociological. Parties in the center right, for example, must protect their right flank so as to maintain their political majority vis-à-vis left leaning parties. Other gatekeepers, like banks or financial institutions, risk their reputation. Corporations, for example, who donated to Iowa Republican Steven King, have come under increasing pressure to justify their contributions given his statements of support for white supremacy. Still others, such as traditional media outlets, may be shaped by societal norms of civic participation, limiting access to views that promote racist or xenophobic sentiments.

Regardless of the specific driver, far right parties long faced high barriers to political participation. It is no coincidence then that these parties are often anti-establishment and argue that the system is rigged. The establishment and the system do work to contain forces, which might undermine basic democratic norms, and as a result have served as an important bulwark against the far right.

### **What Role for the Global? Can nationalist be international**

There is a standard story in the comparative politics literature that far right organizations have difficulty making use of global politics. In particular, it focuses on failed efforts to cooperate transnationally (Macklin 2013; Startin 2010). Put bluntly, the nationalist and ethnocentric focus of these movements means that it is difficult for them to forge lasting and meaningful collaboration with foreigners. Even more specifically, irredentist claims within one national movement often drive frictions with others. This scholarship, for example, documents failed efforts by early neo-Nazi parties in Germany and France to work together. More generally, it suggests that the tactics and frames used by these organizations are tailored to the national cultures and settings and so do not necessarily translate across countries. Additionally, such cooperative efforts have been beset by infighting over priorities and status within such groups with national representations claiming their own national superiority over other national groupings.

### **Rethinking the role of Globalization and the Nationalist International**

While the rise of far-right parties in Europe and the Americas has forced scholars to revisit this question of direct ties between them (and there does seem to be growing evidence of such networking), the memo suggest an alternative research agenda. This agenda focuses on the way globalization has transformed the structural conditions facing far right parties. In other words, increasing flows of trade, services and information as well as its governance has generated new political opportunity structures and reduced the barriers to entry for these groups. The memo focuses on two broad channels through which this has happened.

#### *Reorienting the Issue Space*

Globalization has radically altered the issue space of political competition across the advanced industrial democracies (Kayser 2007; Farrell and Newman 2017). For much of the post-war period, the major dimension of contestation concerned issues of redistribution and government intervention. In other words, the famous left/right cleavage. Economic exchange and its governance, however, have reasserted issues of nationalism and authority. As a result, domestic political fights increasingly center on whether the national state or supranational governance structures should be responsible for policy oversight.

Globalization, and its current particular neo-liberal incarnational, narrow policy maneuverability over redistributive issues. For many small to medium sized economies, they face the policy constraints of global markets, where excessive spending triggers market discipline. These are buttressed by neo-liberal beliefs around deficit spending and monitorism as well as spending limits in the European Union and national governments that further box in center left and center right parties.

At the same time, as economic governance has proliferated at the international level through organizations like the WTO, the EU, and other preferential trade agreements, national governments face growing constraints on their autonomy. National policy is increasingly determined by political authorities residing above the level of the nation-state.

These shifts in the level of politics, then, triggers renewed political space for debate on where political authority should rest. The Brexit campaign to 'take back control' or the Trump administration's disdain for international organizations epitomize this trend.

Far right parties benefit because they focus on issues of nationalism and state authority (Mudde 2007). It also offers a common cause for collaboration as nationalist parties can focus their efforts on sharing attacks on transnational sites of authority. Recent collaboration between the Hungarian and Polish governments on their 'Europe strategy', for example, suggest the useful foil of a common transnational foe.

At the same time, the traditional center left and center right parties are not coherently organized to engage these themes. Because they have largely arranged their constituents around issues of redistribution, nationalist and cosmopolitan camps are distributed across the parties. The difficulty of the Labour and Tory parties to successfully negotiate the Withdrawal Agreement reflects this problem. Both parties have significant blocks of pro-openness and pro-closure. This phenomenon is similar in the US party system with the tension in the 'main street'/'wall street' coalition of the Republican party and the 'white collar'/'labor' coalition of the Democratic party. While the far right can cleanly compete on issues of authority, the other parties face internal divisions and infighting.

The spread of global economic networks and their governance, then, transform the issue space of domestic politics, reigniting contestation over issues of nationalism, sites of authority, and xenophobia. Ultimately, this opens up an opportunity structure conducive to far right parties.

### *Lowering Barriers to Entry*

At the same time, globalization creates other opportunity structures for far-right parties by lowering the barriers to entry and weakening the power of traditional gatekeepers.

Ironically, the spread of global governance over global economic networks has expanded the institutional setting in which these parties can compete for electoral success and institutional resources. Here, the European Union offers the clearest example (Farrell and Newman 2017). Many far-right parties face barriers to entry because of national electoral systems and rules. UKIP, for example, has never been able to clear the first past the post system and had a member directly elected to Westminster. The proportional system of the European Parliament, by contrast, has allowed far right parties to win elections and gain the legitimacy associated with elected office.

Additionally, there are new transnational financial resources, which provide a powerful lifeline to far right parties. Election to the European Parliament comes with individual salaries for members. Nigel Farage can spend hours on BBC because he was paid by the EU. More generally, election to the European Parliament opens up access to public campaign funds. These European funds can then be used for party building and development. This issue will become even more important after the next European Parliamentary elections in May, when the far right group is estimated to grow significantly.<sup>1</sup>

Relatedly, the EU provides funds that far right governments can use to support their policy agendas. The Orban government, for example, has used EU regional funds as a source of patronage. This funding stream, then, allows Orban to recreate patterns of power within Hungary in a way that makes the related oligarchy more dependent on him and his patronage.<sup>2</sup>

The shift in possible financial resources, however, is not limited to the EU as foreign agents increasingly play a role in campaign finance. These foreign actors have different reputational constraints and normative priors. Russian banks, for example, played an important role in shoring up the Front National during the 2017 elections, providing the party with roughly 10 million euros. As the Wallerand de Saint-Jus, the treasurer of the National Front, explained, “The party is applying to foreign banks...and why not Russian ones.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the billionaire Robert Mercer offered support for UKIP and the UK Leave Campaign, providing data analytic services to the Leave campaign. While the firm, Cambridge Analytica, ultimately filed for bankruptcy after it was revealed that it illegally used Facebook data in its services, it played an important role in the media campaign.<sup>4</sup> Links between Russian sources and the National Rifle Association in the United States offer more evidence that transnational financial flows to far right groups are far from limited to Europe.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time that new foreign sources of finance become available, so to have new transnational media. There has been a general fragmentation of media environments driven by cable networks, social media, and other internet-based news. This has undermined the dominant position of traditional media outlets. Transnational actors have seized on this opportunity to push their agenda. Robert Mercer, for example, funded a London affiliate of Breitbart in 2014, which played an active role in supporting UKIP’s European Parliamentary

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/blogs/eu-decides-2019-european-elections-blog/2019/02/parliament-releases-european-election-projection/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/ecf6fb4e-d900-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/le-pen-russia-crimea-putin-money-bank-national-front-seeks-russian-cash-for-election-fight/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/us-billionaire-mercero-helped-back-brexit>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/11/nra-russia-money-guns-516804>

campaign as well as the Leave campaign. Since Trump's election, Breitbart has expanded further into Europe. Russia has similarly used RT, its global English language cable channel, and social media campaigns to promote far right agendas in third countries.

Finally, the transnational movement of peoples further lowers the far right's barriers to entry. Most observers focus on the ways in which the far right campaigns on migration and fear of foreigners. This is no doubt true and likely contributes to the issue space conversation above. But migration plays another equally important role, which I along with my co-authors label political brain drain (Ganga, Newman, Savatic 2019). In short, globalization encourages high skilled labor to concentrate in high income countries with skills shortages. International migration systems, like the Schengen Agreement or H1-B visas, promote such flows. These high skilled workers are also highly educated voters, who typically support center right and center left parties. As these voters emigrate, the left behind population shifts the median voter to more far right positions. Importantly, these lower skilled voters tend to support nationalist policies. We argue that the rightward turn in many European countries like Poland or Hungary has been shaped by the political brain drain made possible by free movement.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this memo is to reorient debates on recent far right political success to the role played by globalization and transnational politics. While considerable literature has focused on the entrepreneurial activities of far right parties to network and develop cross-border channels of communication, this memo underscores the ways in which economic interdependence is transforming structural conditions of their success.

Of courses, these two streams do not need to be mutually exclusive. New information technologies offer new channels for collaboration between far right parties. That said, the memo's approach deemphasizes the incompatibility of far right nationalism and calls attention to the ways that these fringe parties benefit from larger economic transformations.

Theoretically, the memo hopes to break down barriers between IR and comparative politics on the role of globalization in political contestation. Rather than a common shock filter through national systems, globalization is transforming the opportunity structures available to political operatives both in terms of the salience of particular issues and the political resources available to them.

In terms of policy, the memo calls attention to the ways in which transnational forces are weakening traditional political gatekeepers. As center left and center right parties, financial institutions, and media are circumvented, it is likely that fringe parties will play a greater role in politics. Policy needs to consider both how to reinvigorate traditional gatekeepers but also discipline new transnational players. For example, as political finance goes transnational so too must reputation checks on behavior. Here, lessons might be drawn from supply chain pressure around labor practices. That said, it is not clear that Russian oligarchs or the state face the same types of public pressure. Instead, it is necessary to adapt such pressures to the weaknesses of the transnational sources of funding. Alternatively, traditional gatekeepers need to consider how to coordinate their activities transnationally so as to meet their foes where they are. If the problem is global in nature, so too must be the solution. While this plea may require significant

effort on the part of status quo and center leaning actors, a failure to do so could have far ranging implications for the future of liberal democracy.

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