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Extreme-Right Politics in Europe and South Asia: A Demand-Side Cross-Regional Study

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Abstract

The rise of extreme-right parties in Europe and South Asia has been shaped by political dissatisfaction, social breakdown, cultural backlash, and economic uncertainty. While extensively studied in the West, similar trends in South Asia remain underexplored. This study applies five demand-side theories to examine these movements: Protest Thesis, Social Breakdown Thesis, Reverse Post-Material Thesis, and Economic Interest Thesis. Using qualitative analysis of secondary sources, this research employs a comparative approach to analyze how these factors influence extreme-right parties across regions. Findings reveal that extreme-right parties thrive on voter dissatisfaction (Protest Thesis) and exploit the collapse of traditional social structures (Social Breakdown Thesis). Backlash against progressive policies (Reverse Post-Material Thesis) and economic anxieties (Economic Interest Thesis) further fuel support. In Europe, parties like France's National Rally and Austria's FPÖ capitalize on these factors, while in South Asia, India's BJP and Bangladesh's Jamaat-e-Islami follow similar patterns. Extreme-right parties gain traction through political discontent, identity concerns, and economic insecurities. Understanding these factors is crucial for policymakers to develop strategies addressing voter grievances and reducing polarization.

Keywords: Extreme-Right Parties, Europe, South Asia, Demand-Centered Thesis

Introduction

South Asia, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, has experienced a surge in extreme-right politics, mirroring trends seen in various European countries such as France, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Hungary (Qureshi & Naz, 2022). While much of the academic focus has been on the rise of extreme-right parties in the West, the emergence of similar movements in South Asia remains understudied. This research seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the socio-political factors driving the rise of extreme-right parties in the region and comparing these developments with their European counterparts.

Historically, extreme-right movements have drawn inspiration from authoritarian and nationalist ideologies. In Western Europe, for instance, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (FN) made a significant breakthrough in the 1984 European Parliament elections, securing 10% of the vote. By 1995, Le Pen's influence had grown further, with 15% of the French electorate supporting his candidacy in the presidential elections (Merkl & Weinberg, 2003). Similarly, in South Asia, Hindu nationalism in India has historical ties to far-right ideologies in Europe. During the 1930s, Indian Hindu nationalists collaborated with key figures in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to further their own right-wing political agenda. Vinayak Damodar (V.D.) Savarkar, one of the pioneers of Hindu nationalism, even suggested that India should address its "Muslim problem" by adopting measures similar to those used by the Nazis against Jews (Leidig, 2020).

The rise of extreme-right parties in South Asia is often justified under the banner of nationalism. These reactionary forces have gained substantial electoral support, allowing them to wield state power and promote right-wing ideologies that align with the interests of capitalist markets and corporate elites (Nayak & Chakraborty, 2023). Despite these significant developments, research on the extreme-right in South Asia remains scarce. It is essential to explore the socio-political factors that contribute to this rise and assess its broader implications.

To provide a structured analysis, this study applies Roger Eatwell's five Demand-Centered Theories: the Single-Issue Thesis, Protest Thesis, Social Breakdown Thesis, Post-Material Thesis, and Economic Interest Thesis (Eatwell, 2016). By drawing comparisons between South Asia and Europe, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and

practitioners seeking to understand and respond to the growing influence of extreme-right politics in the region.

Concept and Theoretical Framework

To define the terms ‘far-right’ or ‘extreme-right,’ it is essential to first understand the political spectrum, which categorizes political views along a continuum from extreme left to extreme right (Heywood, 1999). This spectrum helps in identifying ideological positions and beliefs based on five broad categories: Liberal, Radical, Moderate, Conservative, and Reactionary.

At the center, below figure 1, of this spectrum are the Moderates, who adopt a balanced approach to social and political issues, rejecting extreme measures and preferring peaceful resolutions to societal challenges. Moving towards the right, Conservatives value traditional beliefs and practices, favoring the status quo and gradual, non-disruptive change. On the left, Liberals advocate for equality, intelligence, and competency, often seeking progressive reforms that enhance individual welfare. Further left, Radicals express deep dissatisfaction with existing societal structures and demand rapid and significant changes.

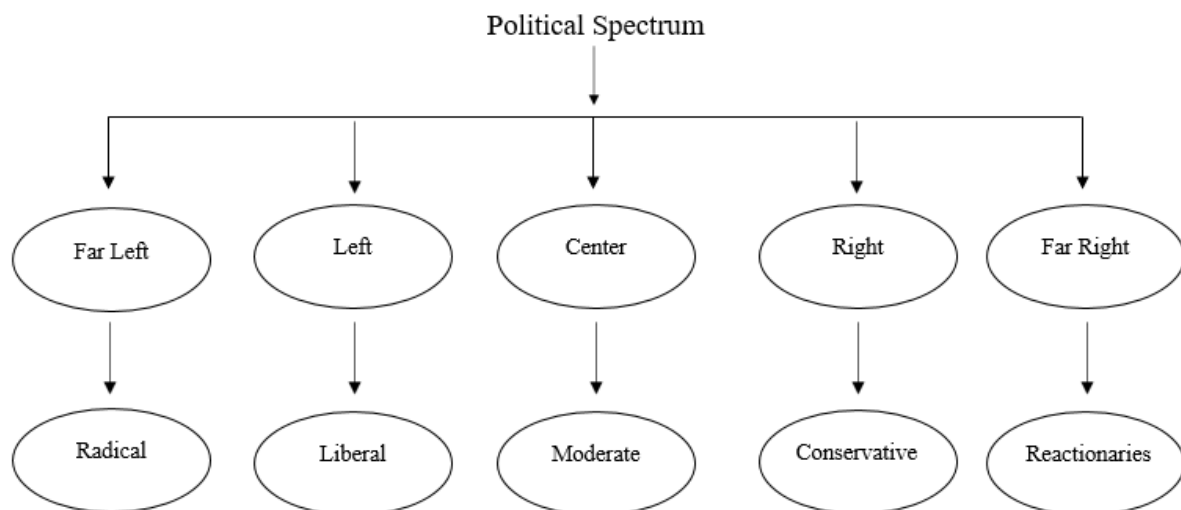


Figure 1: Political spectrum based on left, right and center positions

Sources: Adapted from (Qureshi & Naz, 2022)

At the far-right or extreme right end of the spectrum are the Reactionaries, who resist progressive changes and often seek to return to an idealized past (Qureshi & Naz, 2022). Within

this context, the far-right or extreme-right is frequently linked to rigid ideological positions that emphasize nationalism, exclusionary policies, and resistance to multiculturalism. Jones (Jones, 2022) describes far right or extreme right extremism as the use or threat of violence by specific groups aiming to establish racial, religious, or ethical supremacy while challenging government authority. On the other hand, Eller (Eller, 2017) argues that there is no universally accepted definition of the far-right or extreme right, as the term serves as an umbrella for various groups exhibiting intolerance, aggression, and rigid ideological stances. This broad category includes nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, all of which contribute to the ideological framework of extreme-right movements.

Roger Eatwell (Eatwell, 2016) provided a critical examination of dominant theoretical perspectives explaining the rise of extreme-right electoral success. He classified these into two broad categories: supply-side and demand-side arguments.

- Demand-side arguments focus on socioeconomic conditions that foster public support for extreme-right parties, such as economic hardship, immigration concerns, unemployment, and societal disruptions caused by globalization.
- Supply-side arguments pertain to how political actors, media, and party leadership influence voters by shaping messages that appeal to widespread discontent (Eatwell, 2016).

While both perspectives often overlap, this study specifically examines demand-side factors that have contributed to the rise of extreme-right parties, as these elements provide crucial insights into shifting voter preferences and political realignments.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore and interpret the factors driving the rise of extreme-right parties. Qualitative research seeks to understand real-world events, experiences, and perspectives through in-depth analysis (Al-Busaidi, 2008).

To achieve this, the research employs descriptive analysis methods, which allow for the systematic examination and characterization of qualitative data (Nassaji, 2015). The data for this study has been collected from various secondary sources, including books, journal articles, newspaper reports, and other relevant academic materials. By synthesizing these sources, this

research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political dynamics influencing the extreme-right's electoral growth in South Asia and Europe.

Extreme-Right Parties in Europe and South Asia

1. The Single-Issue Thesis

The Single-Issue Thesis suggests that extreme-right parties often gain popularity by focusing on a single, highly controversial issue—most commonly, immigration. In Western Europe, this strategy was particularly effective in the early stages of extreme-right electoral success. Anti-immigrant sentiment, combined with concerns about welfare, unemployment, and law enforcement, played a crucial role in shaping voter behavior (Billiet & De Witte, 1995).

One of the most notable examples is France's National Front (FN). In the 1980s, the party capitalized on fears surrounding immigration, leading to its electoral breakthrough. However, critics argue that the single-issue approach has limitations. Most extreme-right parties have broader platforms that go beyond immigration. For instance, when the FN was founded in 1972, immigration was not its primary focus.

Timing also presents a challenge to the single-issue theory. Extreme-right success does not always align with immigration surges. In the early 1980s, when immigration rates in France were relatively low, the FN still gained momentum. Similarly, in Germany, the German Republican Party (REP) made electoral gains in Berlin in 1989, even though immigration was not a nationwide political crisis at the time (Eatwell, 2016).

While the Single-Issue Thesis primarily explains the rise of extreme-right parties in Europe, similar patterns can be observed in South Asia, particularly in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has successfully leveraged nationalist rhetoric and religious identity to consolidate political support (Varshney, 2014).

The roots of far-right extremism in India can be traced back to the British colonial period. In the 1920s, the Hindu nationalist movement known as Sangh Parivar emerged. Its goal was to establish Hindu dominance in Indian society and marginalize religious minorities. Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) later became part of this movement, using propaganda and educational programs to spread their ideology (Marshall, 2004).

Today, the RSS, VHP, and BJP operate with overlapping ideologies but different areas of focus. The RSS primarily promotes cultural nationalism, the VHP emphasizes religious ideology, and the BJP functions as a political party (Venkatesh, 2019). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a former RSS member, Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) has become the dominant political ideology in India (Ahmad, 2016; Kronstadt, 2018). This rise of Hindu nationalism closely parallels the rise of extreme-right movements in Europe, where political parties capitalize on identity politics to gain electoral support.

This comparative analysis highlights the global nature of extreme-right politics, demonstrating how both Europe and South Asia have seen a resurgence of nationalist and exclusionary ideologies fueled by public concerns and strategic political messaging.

2. The Protest Thesis

Commentators have increasingly pointed to protest politics or "anti-politics" as a key explanation for the rise of extreme-right parties, particularly since the 1990s. This theory suggests that these parties are not necessarily driven by a well-defined ideology but instead thrive on public dissatisfaction with the political establishment. Their platforms often revolve around harsh criticism of mainstream parties rather than presenting concrete policy alternatives. Even debates on immigration, for instance, are frequently framed as failures of previous administrations, shifting blame onto political elites (Knigge, 1998).

A major characteristic of the extreme-right electorate is its unstable and fragmented nature. Voters who support these parties often do so as a form of protest rather than deep ideological commitment. This results in a radical vote that lacks strong social cohesion or a long-term structured base (Betz, 2002; Knigge, 1998).

In South Asia, similar dynamics can be observed. In Bangladesh, the rise of Jamaat-e-Islami reflects widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties. Many voters turn to Jamaat-e-Islami as an alternative, not necessarily due to ideological alignment but as a way to express frustration with governance failures (Islam & Islam, 2023). The party has positioned itself as a critic of the establishment, capitalizing on public discontent in a manner similar to extreme-right parties in the West.

This comparative perspective highlights how anti-politics sentiment fuels the growth of extreme-right movements across different regions, often exploiting voter frustration to gain political traction.

3. The Social Breakdown Thesis

Some analysts argue that the rise of extreme-right parties is linked to anomie—a sense of isolation and powerlessness caused by the collapse of traditional social structures. This thesis suggests that as institutions based on class, religion, and community networks weaken, individuals experience a loss of identity, leading them to seek ethnic nationalism as a source of belonging and self-worth. Psychological studies indicate that ethnic nationalism provides a sense of empowerment, attracting individuals who feel alienated or insecure, particularly young people who have grown up in unstable environments (Heitmeyer, 1993; Perrineau, 1997).

A variation of this thesis suggests that countries like Austria, Belgium, and Switzerland have been particularly affected by these changes. Historically, their party systems relied on consociationalism, where political parties represented distinct social groups such as the Church or labor unions. However, as these traditional affiliations weakened, new political spaces emerged. This shift allowed extreme-right parties to gain traction by appealing to nationalist sentiments and promising to restore a sense of collective identity.

A similar trend can be seen in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka, where the aftermath of the civil war led to a surge in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) capitalized on fears of cultural erosion and economic instability, using identity politics to mobilize support (DeVotta, 2007; Malji, 2023). By portraying minority groups as threats to national identity, they attracted disaffected populations searching for stability and belonging.

This evidence suggests that the social breakdown thesis is a powerful explanation for the rise of extreme-right movements in both Europe and South Asia. As traditional institutions weaken, extreme-right parties and nationalist movements exploit insecurity and social fragmentation to gain electoral success.

4. The (Reverse) Post-Material Thesis

In the 1970s and 1980s, many sociologists argued that wealthy Western societies were moving toward a post-materialist era. This shift was marked by a growing emphasis on lifestyle issues

such as environmentalism and feminism, along with a decline in traditional class and economic concerns. Citizens increasingly disengaged from mainstream political parties, showing more interest in issue-based and protest politics, while trust in national institutions weakened. The rise of Green movements was seen as a sign that these cultural transformations were shaping political dynamics (Ignazi, 1992; Minkenberg, 2000).

However, by the 1990s, this argument evolved to suggest that many voters—especially those from working-class and unskilled backgrounds—did not find the post-materialist agenda relevant to their daily struggles. Economic globalization and growing job insecurity led many to perceive progressive social policies as disconnected from their material concerns. As a result, they turned toward extreme-right parties, which focused on nationalism, economic protectionism, and opposition to cultural liberalism (Ignazi, 1992; Minkenberg, 2000).

A similar phenomenon can be observed in South Asia, where conservative movements have gained strength as a reaction against liberal social policies. In countries like India and Pakistan, opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and secular governance has fueled the rise of right-wing populist movements. These movements frame progressive reforms as threats to traditional values, using cultural nationalism to mobilize support (Chatterji et al., 2019).

This analysis suggests that the Reverse Post-Material Thesis helps explain the electoral success of extreme-right parties in both Europe and South Asia. As progressive agendas fail to address economic insecurities and cultural anxieties, many voters shift towards nationalist and conservative alternatives, seeking stability in times of rapid social change.

5. The Economic Interest Thesis

Despite the anti-materialist rhetoric of many extreme-right parties, economic factors have historically played a crucial role in extremist voting patterns. This theory suggests that individuals experiencing relative deprivation—those who have lost out in economic competition or feel economically marginalized—are more likely to support extreme-right movements. Economic grievances often drive resentment, making nationalist and protectionist ideologies more appealing (Kitschelt, 1999; Lipset, 1969). Many extreme-right parties strategically use economic narratives to broaden their appeal. For example, in February 2000, Jörg Haider, leader of Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), claimed that his party had replaced the

Social Democrats as the true defenders of the working class. This assertion resonated with voters who felt abandoned by mainstream left-wing parties (Kitschelt, 1999; Lipset, 1969).

Similar patterns are evident in South Asia, where economic hardship has fueled nationalist movements. In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has leveraged economic discontent to consolidate its support base, particularly among working-class voters who feel left behind by globalization. Similarly, in Bangladesh, economic instability has played a role in the rise of Islamist parties, which position themselves as champions of the marginalized.

This evidence suggests that economic distress and nationalist rhetoric are deeply interconnected, providing extreme-right parties with fertile ground for electoral success in both Europe and South Asia. By portraying themselves as defenders of economic justice, these parties capitalize on public dissatisfaction, further strengthening their influence.

Conclusion

The rise of extreme-right parties across Europe and South Asia is driven by a mix of political dissatisfaction, social breakdown, cultural backlash, and economic uncertainty. While each country experiences these factors differently, common themes emerge—disillusionment with mainstream politics, anxiety over economic instability, and fears about identity and societal change.

By analyzing various demand-side theories, this study highlights how different grievances—whether cultural, social, or economic—fuel support for extreme-right parties. As these parties continue to gain traction, it becomes crucial for policymakers and scholars to address the root causes of voter dissatisfaction and explore strategies to promote political stability and inclusivity.

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