

An analysis and comparison of the influence of the far-right in France and Sweden between 2002 and 2017.

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Abstract

Reflecting the resurgence of far-right politics across Europe, the National Front (FN) and Sweden Democrats (SD) have entrenched themselves in the French and Swedish political landscapes. This paper analyses and compares how and why FN and SD became major political actors between 2002 and 2017, arguing both grew through the banalisation and diffusion of their ideas by the political establishment, normalising them within mainstream politics. Drawing from Pederson's thresholds of institutionalisation, Kallis' theory of 'diffusion', and Berezin's concept of 'banalisation', the analysis demonstrates how these mechanisms enabled FN and SD to cross thresholds of relevance, embedding them within national political discourses. It further compares institutional arrangements and cultural resonance, arguing majoritarianism and receptivity in France allowed FN greater success than SD. This paper concludes that far-right influence derives less from ideological moderation (dédiabolisation) by far-right parties than establishment legitimisation, producing a cyclical dynamic of normalisation and institutional consolidation.

Introduction

In 2002, National Front (FN) and Sweden Democrats (SD) were in quite different positions. The FN finished ahead of the establishment socialists in the first-round of the Presidential election, with reaction to this success ranging from perceptions of FN as simply an electoral

nuisance (Auberger and Dubois, 2005) to a strong challenger (Bonnetain, 2004). In comparison, SD was further behind in representation; with some representation in local municipalities, but still distant from the halls of power, and still widely perceived as illegitimate and unacceptable by the political establishment (Oja and Mral, 2013). By 2017, FN and SD were established features and influential power-brokers of French and Swedish politics, emerging as the second-largest parties (FN by the presidential election, and SD based on election polling [Surel, 2019; Sennero, 2017; Sharman, 2017]). How then, did these parties rise in influence over these fifteen years?

In this paper, I shall analyse the growth in influence between the French National Front and the Sweden Democrats through Pederson's (1982) thresholds of institutionalisation, and the banalisation and diffusion of far-right ideology within France and Sweden (Berezin, 2006; Kallis, 2013), emerging as significant power-brokers and influences on the political discourses of both countries by 2017, as well as *dédiabolisation* ('de-demonisation' {Surel, 2019}). I shall argue the FN emerged as somewhat more influential than SD due to their countries' differences in constitutional arrangements and cultural norms. I have chosen to compare the influence of the far-right in France and Sweden due to these differences, to understand how far-right politics has entrenched itself. The 2002-2017 time-frame covers the most significant years of SD and FN's rises to prominence, beginning with significant elections for both parties, and ending with significant landmarks of influence for both parties.

Ideologies of FN and SD

FN and SD's ideologies are quite similar, and are underpinned by similar values and ideas, which I shall describe briefly here where relevant for this paper. They rely upon nativist and exclusive-populist ideas—the French and Swedish 'natives' must come first in policymaking, and immigrants (and multiculturalism) pose a significant threat to the nation and its natives (Vahter and Jakobson, 2023). Furthermore, they position themselves as anti-establishment, and

therefore I shall frequently demarcate between ‘political establishment’ and FN and SD throughout this paper (*ibid*). Significantly, SD are squarely neoliberal in their (sparse) economic policies, whereas FN has shifted from neoliberal to more interventionist under the premiership of Marine Le Pen (2012-present), with opposition to TNCs, financialisation and support for state-directed reindustrialisation (Mudde, 1999; Surel, 2019).

Thresholds of institutionalisation

For this paper, I shall employ two modified *thresholds of institutionalisation* by Pederson (1982) to understand the rise in influence of the far-right, underpinning how SD and FN have transformed themselves from minor parties into permanent fixtures in political institutions. Firstly: *the threshold of representation*, wherein a party is able to gain representation. In 2002, SD only penetrated the municipal level, and achieved the national threshold in 2010. FN are more complicated: a single representative in parliament until 2002, and achieving representation in the second-round presidential elections. They returned to parliament in 2012 and grew in 2017, whilst achieving representation in the second-round presidential elections again in 2017. Therefore, FN were in an ambiguous position to this threshold until 2012, when they consolidated themselves. Secondly, *the threshold of relevance*: party representation in government. However, in this analysis, I shall modify this threshold to instead refer to a party’s ability to lead national political discourses. This is because both FN and SD espouse anti-establishment sentiments, thus presenting a façade of disinterestedness in collaboration with the establishment (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019) – so, to reach this threshold, a party need not control the executive, but instead control political discourses. How they achieved this threshold is key to my argument.

Processes of legitimisation

In Sweden and France, these processes of political legitimisation to reach different *thresholds* as described by Pederson rest on two different concepts: ‘banalization’ (Berezin, 2006) and

‘diffusion’ (Kallis, 2013), working hand-in-hand, referring to the process where the dialogues of the far-right are given increasing legitimacy by the political establishment (‘banalised’), and then are adopted by the establishment (‘diffused’). The end-product of these processes was the far-right reaching the *threshold of relevance* and establishing themselves as political thought leaders within the two countries between 2002 and 2017.

Oja and Mral (2013) provide a useful historiography of the rise of SD throughout the 2000s, showing how ‘banalization’ allows the far-right to be legitimated by the establishment, through a case-study of advertising. In preparations for the 2002 general election in Sweden, there was an almost blanket boycott of providing advertising space to SD, particularly in newspapers. Their justifications for this decision were viewing SD as illegitimate, racist, and even antithetical to Sweden as a free and tolerant country. However, they found as SD gained traction in the municipalities, the boycott began to erode—such that by 2010, newspapers still boycotting SD advertisements were rare. By 2010, justifications for ending the boycott painted SD as a party with perhaps excessive or wrong beliefs, but nonetheless legitimate and equally entitled to exposure as establishment parties, a process of ‘banalising’ the party by the political establishment and paving the way for the party to break the *threshold of representation* in the 2010 elections. Whilst these decisions were made by national newspapers, part of the political establishment and close to the hallways of power, as the chief vehicles of national political discourses, they reveal wider implications of how the far-right were perceived. Elgenius and Rydgren (2019) expand on this historiography, discussing how the legitimization of SD by 2010 opened the doors for a paradigm shift in national discourses towards an SD-oriented conception of nationalism—one resting on nativist and exclusionary conceptions—allowing SD to reach the *threshold of relevance* by the mid-2010s. Thus ‘banalization’ of far-right ideologies was a key process in the rise of far-right influence in Sweden through their legitimization by the political apparatus between 2002 and 2010, facilitating their rise in influence between 2002 and 2017.

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Regarding France, Berezin (2006) discusses the European Constitutional referendum in 2005 – one which FN positioned itself against due to its opposition to the European Union—and the riots later in the year. The victory of the ‘no’ vote was discussed by some establishment parties as a repeat of the 2002 election, or a ‘Boomerang of April 21’ (Berezin, 2006, p. 270) – further evidence of the growing influence of FN and far-right ideas therein. This was compounded with the rioting, mainly from those of Arab and African descent, throughout the projects of France later in 2005. Berezin notes a SOFRES poll (2005) concurrent with the riots, one showing how the discourses of FN were under the process of ‘banalization’: It found Le Pen’s ideas had captured some 38% of the French demos, but most significantly, the number of people who considered Le Pen’s ideas unacceptable was decreasing, and the number who perceived them as merely excessive was increasing—the ‘banalization’ of far-right discourses in effect, clear evidence of how FN was reaching the *threshold of relevance* and increasing its influence.

Similarly, the legitimization of these discourses within the political establishment was already in effect via ‘diffusion’: Chirac came out from the riots and “proclaimed a problem of “national identity” (Berezin, 2006, p. 72) – a move ceding ideological ground to FN. Two other events show this process of ‘diffusion’ (Kallis, 2013): the 2004 ban on religious symbols in schools, and the landmark 2011 ban on full-face Islamic veils in public. Both decisions are significant, because they play directly into the discourses of FN of a confrontation between the *laïcité* (secularism) of France and Islam (Cremer, 2023) – furthermore, the growing conspicuousness of these laws, which pit *laïcité* versus Islam, gives credence to the idea FN discourses were growing in their influence in France. Notably, both decisions came from the establishment right-wing UMP governments, most in competition with FN for voters. The UMP’s adoption of FN rhetoric shows these processes of legitimization and ‘diffusion’ by the mainstream establishment, bringing FN closer to the *threshold of relevance*, with growing influence.

We must also consider the role of *dédiabolisation* ('de-demonisation'), or the process whereby SD and FN have engaged in internal reforms to gain political legitimacy—or *legitimation from the inside*. FN has engaged in two rounds of *dédiabolisation*: the first round in 1997 (Berezin, 2006), and the second under Marine Le Pen in the early 2010s (Mayer, 2013); SD underwent the process in 1999. Both involved removing blatant fascist language and a party split purging the parties of their most extreme. The importance of intraparty legitimisation through *dédiabolisation* is certainly relevant to the wider banalisation and diffusion of their ideas, especially considering Bjånesøy et al (2023) found that people are far more likely to accept far-right ideas if they are not explicitly connected to Nazism.

However, if the role of this intraparty *dédiabolisation* is to reach out to further cleavages and establish a Kirchheimerian catch-all populism—which the reduction of ideological baggage in FN and SD certainly point to (Kirchheimer, 1966; Surel, 2019; Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019) – then this should be viewed as secondary in increasing their influences to banalisation and diffusion because these processes by the establishment had already entrenched their ideologies into the electorate and demonstrably allowed for their brands of exclusive populism to become the *lingua franca* of a significant cleavages of the demos—and therefore a catch-all strategy was unnecessary. Most importantly, we can already directly correlate the parties' increasing 'banalisation' to the electorate with the legitimising actions of the establishment, whereas their *dédiabolisation* strategies occurred earlier. Removing Nazi connotations has certainly aided the demos' acceptance of their discourses, but without external banalisation and diffusion, their influences would not be anywhere as impressive. Therefore, I argue the roles of institutional factors and intraparty *dédiabolisation* are relevant, but nonetheless less important than the roles of banalisation and diffusion by the political establishment in the rise of influence of the far-right in France and Sweden between 2002 and 2017.

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Beauzamy (2015, p. 182) argued the “acceptability of FN ideology increases not because it has toned down to appeal to moderate voters, but because the whole space of political discourses has shifted to include FN themes and vocabulary”. It is through the legitimisation, ‘banalisation’ and ‘diffusion’ of FN and SD discourses in France and Sweden that their political apparatuses themselves were forced to move to the right to accommodate them. Through Pederson’s thresholds, the *thresholds of representation* and *thresholds of relevance* work in tandem with one another – when a far-right party’s *threshold of representation* increases, the compensatory strategies adopted by the political establishment—of ‘banalisation’ and ‘diffusion’ whether wittingly or not—work to increase their *thresholds of relevance*—creating a cyclical process elevating the influence of far-right parties in France and Sweden between 2002 and 2017.

The process of banalisation, legitimisation, and diffusion of far-right discourses in France and Sweden has the clear and instrumental role of increasing their influences through wider support of their ideologies in the demos—but it also increases their influence through positioning them as thought leaders to the demos, particularly when their ideologies begin to ‘diffuse’ into the political establishment. Bezerin (2006) provides a particularly transparent example of this process from the 2005 riots: in response to the riots, when Sarkozy declared a problem of “national identity” within France, a discourse playing directly into the hands of FN, Le Pen was able to declare he had “said it”, positioning himself as a political thought leader for a majority of the demos. As far-right discourses were ‘banalised’—moving from labels of unacceptable and illegitimate to excessive but legitimate—both FN and SD were able to boast as the first parties to openly address the issues of immigration, or of multiculturalism, or of globalisation (Beauzamy, 2015), issues the out-of-touch establishment only now was realising. Therefore, the processes of ‘banalisation’ and ‘diffusion’ by the political establishment have the added effect of playing into the far-right as thought leaders to the demos, increasing their influence even further in France and Sweden between 2002 and 2017.

Institutional and cultural factors

I shall now discuss the role of institutional and cultural factors, and compare how they affected the rise of influence of FN and SD in France and Sweden between 2002 and 2017, and why this leads to FN having more influence than SD, although they were both major fixtures of their respective countries' political landscapes by 2017.

Perhaps the most important institutional factor is the electoral system and its effects on the paths taken by FN and SD to reach *thresholds of representation* and *thresholds of relevance*. France employs a more majoritarian two-round first-past-the-post election system for its legislative and presidential elections, which often leads to only two major parties, whilst Sweden employs a more consensual proportional-representation system—one which is characterised by more parties with lower vote-shares (Lijphart, 1984). For SD, this resulted in a continuous increase in representation after breaking the *threshold for representation* in 2010, and thereby the greater and greater legitimisation of their ideas, and growing their *threshold of relevance* in the aforementioned cyclical pattern. The relationship with France's more majoritarian system is more complicated for FN, and can be best described as hindering the party *until it didn't*: whilst they were unable to gain major and proportionate (both to their vote-share and their *relevance*) representation in parliament, they were able to break through to the second-round and gain a third of the voteshare in 2017 – twice their 2002 result – evidence FN were one of the two major parties, and thus the majoritarian French system was now working to their advantage. Their vote-share was also higher than that of SD's polling under a proportional system (Surel, 2019; cf. Sennero, 2017; Sharman, 2017). Therefore, institutional arrangements help explain why support for FN is higher than for SD.

The other significant factor in considering the rise of the far-right is the translatability of their ideologies to the general demos. FN presents a broader programme than SD, and one more economically populist than the neoliberalism of SD since Marine Le Pen's party leadership –

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SD are sharply focused on immigration, to the degree they come close to a single-issue party (Mudde, 1999). Given the significant connections between poor economic circumstances and support for the far-right (Dehdari [2022, p. 2] even finds a correlation of 0.17-0.45 new SD voters for every factory closure in some Swedish constituencies) – then the sparser economic commitments of SD as well as their stronger neoliberal commitments help explain their lower levels of political influence by 2017 (de Lange, 2007). Furthermore, the French demos appears predisposed to more xenophobic tendencies: van der Valk (2003) suggests racist tendencies are more common in France, and IPSOS (n.d.; as cited in Surel, 2019) finds France worst for overestimating its Muslim population of surveyed countries. Indeed, there is no correlation between votes for FN in France and the number of migrants in an electoral constituency (Beauzamy, 2015) – but this correlation *does* exist in Sweden (Dehdari, 2022) – suggesting greater xenophobia. Therefore, the greater prominence of FN versus SD between 2002 and 2017 may be due to greater disposition to xenophobia in France. As FN and SD have a leading role in stoking xenophobic discourses within national political conversation, these differences could be an indication FN has embedded itself deeper than SD within their respective countries, suggesting higher levels of influence for the far-right in France compared to Sweden between 2002 and 2017.

Conclusion

In conclusion, between 2002 and 2017 both National Front and Sweden Democrats have experienced a massive growth in influence in France and Sweden, although SD wields less influence. I have considered this rise in influence through the perspective of Pederson's thresholds of institutionalisation to mark their growing influence, and have argued this growth in influence is primarily due to the legitimisation of these far-right parties and their ideas by the political establishment through the 'banalisation' of their ideas and 'diffusion' of them across the political landscape—creating a cycle of breaking *thresholds of representation* and of *relevance*. Whilst internal 'banalisation' through *dédiabolisation* has been relevant, it is a secondary factor.

Furthermore, I argue institutional arrangements (chiefly electoral system) as well as the translatability of their economic and cultural discourses to the French and Swedish demos help to explain why FN have captured more of the demos and held more influence than SD throughout the 2002-2017 period.

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