MIGRATING EXTREMISTS: Evidence of a direct link between today’s right-wing extremists and post-war Nazi arrivals

Parts of Austria to which Nazis relocated after the Second World War are more likely to support right-wing parties today. That is the central finding of research by Christian Ochsner and Felix Roesel, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016. Their study shows how migrating political extremists can shape their destination regions towards their political attitudes even over decades.

The researchers find that Austrian regions that witnessed an influx of Nazis in the aftermath of the Second World War exhibit significantly higher voting shares for right-wing parties throughout the entire post-war period. Indeed, long-gone Nazi-migration is still visible in the current surnames of fellows of the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). The study indicates that there is a direct link between former Nazis and recent populist right-wing parties in a Western democracy.

Ochsner and Roesel analyse the unexpected reassignment of occupation zones in Austria after the Second World War, when an initially US-liberated part of the state of Upper Austria had been reassigned to the Soviets.

Nazis were in a fear of being punished harder by the Soviets. So as soon as rumours got around of the impending reassignment, Nazis started to flee the future Soviet-controlled sector towards the US zone. As a result, the population share of former Nazi elites (highly convinced Nazis) was three times as high in the US sector compared with the adjacent Soviet sector.

This shock in the initial regional density of Nazis has influenced election results right up to the present. The authors find robust spatial discontinuities in the voting shares of right-wing populist parties along the temporary occupation zone border for all national elections after the Second World War.

Before the Second World War, however, there were no spatial differences in right-wing voting. In the 2013 national election, right-wing voting was still 40% higher in former US controlled regions compared with adjacent former Soviet-occupied regions.

Ochsner and Roesel apply a so-called ‘geonomastic’ approach to explain their persistent findings. They compare current surnames of more than 17,000 local election candidates with the regional surname distribution before the Nazi migration.

They find that surnames of right-wing local election candidates in 2015 in the former US zone are more prevalent in 1942 phonebook data (Reichstelefonbuch) of the former Soviet zone compared with other parties.

Current right-wing affiliation thus can be traced back to past migration patterns. Furthermore, migrating Nazis might have leveraged their political attitudes to local residents via an early formation of local party institutions in their destination municipality.
The study delivers a reasonable narrative that selective migration pattern of political extremists can shape the political attitudes of their destination region – even in the long run.

This suggests that regional voting behaviour is not only a function of current economic and social circumstances, but also reflects values that are inherited over generations. Furthermore, extremists might influence residents nearby due to personal contact or the formation of local institutions.

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'Migrating Extremists'
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http://www.cesifo-group.de/ifoHome/publications/working-papers/CESifoWP/CESifoWPdetails?wp_id=19190307

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