

**Electoral Events as Collateral Damages**  
**Sovereign Debt and the Old 'New' Nationalism in Post-Security Europe<sup>1</sup>**  
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### Abstract

In spring 2012, a series of elections suggested an extreme nationalist turn in European politics. Academic and media commentators responded to these events as novelties. This article takes an opposite analytic position. By viewing the spring elections as “events,” it argues that they represented end points rather than beginnings. The data for this article is an election survey that dates back to 1970; as well as public discourse of politicians and European policy and media elites. The article argues that the acceleration and normalization of the nationalist right in contemporary Europe is the *collateral damage* from the sovereign debt crisis that exacerbated fault lines in the expanding European Union project. It starts from the proposition that the Europe that the 1992 Maastricht Treaty formalized and the subsequent European Monetary Union (EMU) posed a political, and to some extent, cultural challenge. Europe and the *eurozone* were never solely economic issues. The European Union that evolved institutionally and culturally in the 1980s and 1990s, was a fragile and fissured political and cultural entity. The European sovereign debt crisis is the “tipping point” that has exposed all of the cracks in the European infrastructure as well as its shaky foundation.

### **Spring 2012: Surprising Electoral Events**

In April 2012, the French Socialist Party candidate, Françoise Hollande came in first in the first round of the Presidential election. Two weeks later, French citizens elected Hollande their President. As only the second Socialist since François Mitterrand's 1985 election to obtain the presidency, Hollande's victory set off a night of celebration in the streets of Paris. The dark side of the left's victory was the third place finish of Marine Le Pen, the Presidential candidate of the National Front—France's long standing right nationalist party. On the same day as the second round of the French Presidential election, a neo-Nazi party the *Golden Dawn* appeared virtually out of nowhere to become contenders for seats in the Greek parliament.

In between the French and Greek elections, the Dutch Prime Minister dissolved Parliament and called for new elections. The Dutch dissolution, less noticed than the French or Greek results in the international press, was important because it appeared to signal the end of political influence for Geert Wilders—the anti-Islamic, eurosceptic head of the right nationalist Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV]). Alarmed headlines such as: “Golden Dawn and the Rise of Fascism;” “Europe on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown; Are we on the brink of repeating the catastrophe of the 1930s?; “ “Hitler Who?”; began to emerge in the international press.

By spring 2012, three years of economic crisis and austerity generated anti-Europe sentiment among ordinary citizens and contributed to what politicians, pundits and even social scientists described as a surprising electoral presence of the populist nationalist right. The recidivist nationalist political parties that dominated the spring 2012 electoral events shared a desire to exit the *eurozone* and to turn the clock back on, if not the entire post-war period, much that had occurred after 1979 when the post-war social contract along with post-war prosperity began to unravel (Eichengreen 2007). From the avowedly neo-Nazi Greek *Golden Dawn* to the French *National Front*, parties of various nationalist and conservative stripes promote a backward, rather than forward, looking vision across Europe.

In spring 2012, the *euro* was heading towards its *nth* crisis since the May 2010 bailout talks began. Unemployment was at 11.4% for adults and 23% for youth (job seekers under age 25) in the *eurozone*.<sup>2</sup> Public expectations that the June 2012 European summit that produced a “Compact for Jobs and Growth” would offer workable solutions to the crisis were low (EUCO 2012b). The spring 2012 national elections forced politicians and citizens to question whether the *euro* was sustainable. In addition, these elections shattered European and global public perceptions that the *euro zone* occupied a forward looking and democratic collective political space. The escalating European sovereign debt crisis challenged the hope of a Europe of “common values” and dream of a “constitutional patriotism” (Müller 2007) that would provide the economic union with a scaffold of civic solidarity.

This article argues that fault lines and *lacunae* in the European project as it evolved, since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that promoted accelerated integration, have provided a powerful opening for the nationalist right to give voice to existent, albeit submerged, collective nationalist ideas and feelings. The elections of spring 2012 constituted a moment that focused public attention on the nationalist right and the defects in the European project.

The electoral and communicative salience of the European right is a collateral damage of the debt crisis. The sovereign debt crisis fueled an unprecedented discussion in the European public sphere that linked economics, culture and morality (Fourcade, Steiner, Streeck and Woll 2013). Multiple voices addressing multiple publics contributed to this discussion. The nationalist right was a particularly noisy and prominent participant in the public discussion and used the moment of crisis to make electoral gains and to advance its own positions.

This article takes as its starting point the spring elections of 2012 and focuses on the period between 2010 and 2012—the years during which the European debt crisis heated up. The salience of the European nationalist right is trans-European

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[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Unemployment\\_statistics](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics)

phenomenon with specific national iterations. This article discusses the phenomenon as a whole and marshals evidence from specific instances of the right where appropriate. The article's method is narrative and historical—meaning that it pays attention to temporality and sequence as it maps events. The evidence that the article deploys to support its claims consist of election results; policy statements; newspaper accounts and political propaganda.

The article proceeds in four sections: first, it discusses elections as events; second it maps the electoral salience of the nationalist right and shows the correlation between rise of the right in five countries and the progress of the debt crisis; third, it examines multiple responses to the debt crisis across a range of public voices. Lastly, the article identifies three institutional factors that created a favorable climate for the nationalist right to thrive sufficiently under the policy and media radar screen so as to appear to have emerged out of nowhere. These institutional factors are: conflicting visions of the meaning of Europe; the durability of the nation-state; and a radical shift in the form and content of security.

### **Elections as Events: Focusing Collective Attention**

The political crisis brewing in contemporary Europe coupled with the attendant insertion of right parties into mainstream political processes has deep roots in the *longue durée* of post-war political history more broadly and European integration history more narrowly. Elections are more than simply temporal occurrences that provide grist for the mill of political statistics and public opinion polls. Recent literature on the intersection of the politics and culture (for example, Sewell 1996, 2005; Wagner-Pacifici 2010; Berezin 2012) has identified events as *loci* of political meaning.

Sewell (1996, p. 844) defines a historical event as “(1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures.” Sewell's theory of *events* has several characteristics. Events are the subject of narrative and are recognized as significant when they occur. Events reveal “heightened emotion;” collective creativity; take ritual form and most importantly—generate more events. For example, Sewell

(1996b) treats the storming of the Bastille as a unitary event that was pivotal to the series of events that constituted the French Revolution. Sewell's (1996b) story of the Bastille depends heavily upon sequencing, but he also uses "thick description" to embed his analysis in its cultural particularity. His richly contextualized narrative underscores the importance of collective perception, performance and emotion.

Sewell is interested in identifying events that change the course of history. Arguably there are many events, such as elections, that occur and recur in political life that are not as iconic as the storming of the Bastille and that still have importance within a nationally constituted political space. Few events result in a "durable transformation of structures;" but many events, such as elections, are capable of altering collective perceptions. Sewell's theorizing leaves us with a question. How do we as social analysts determine what constitutes political importance? In the realm of politics, *what matters* is as crucial for analysis as *what happened*. Why does meaning suffuse some events more than others? Implicit cultural and political knowledge assigns importance to some events and not others.

Events re-calibrated as "social facts" serve as conduits to implicit political and cultural meaning. Emile Durkheim ([1894]1964) described "social facts," as "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness (2)." Social facts include collective phenomena—the law, the economy, the unemployment rate, or in the context of this article, elections—as well as the individual and collective perception of them. Thus, Durkheim argues that a "social fact" is a structural and a psychological fact that goes beyond structure. He labels this combination of material and mental phenomena as "social currents" and describes them as ". . . the great movements of enthusiasm, indignation, and pity in a crowd do not originate in any one of the particular individual consciousnesses. They come to each one of us from without and can carry us away in spite of ourselves. (4-5)."

It is a short analytic leap from a *social fact* to a *political fact*. Within the realm of cultural analysis, political facts, rather than politics or the polity *per se*, are social facts that combine emotional valence, collective perception, institutional arrangements—and implicit cultural knowledge. Drawing upon Sewell and

Durkheim, Berezin (2012) reformulates events as *templates of possibility that collectivities experience as political facts*—bounded temporal phenomena that permit publics to see relations and interconnections that link to broader macro and micro level social processes. In this formulation, events are important for *what* they force publics and analysts to imagine—and these imaginings may generate hope as well as fear, comfort as well as threat.

*Events* speak to collective resonance, present possibilities, and offer visions of possible paths—even if those paths are *not* pursued. *Events* speak to futurity.<sup>3</sup> They make manifest what *might* happen, rather than predict what *will* happen. Public political events, such as the spring 2012 elections, engage the collective imagination and have the capacity to alter public perceptions that *may* in the future alter political actions. Because they make manifest the possible, they have the power to engage collective emotions from fear to collective euphoria and the range of emotions that lay in between these polarities.

Elections, such as the elections of spring 2012, recalibrated as events provide a powerful interpretive lens on political significance. In this context, history and temporality matter. The political landscape upon which extreme nationalist politics emerged extends back to the 1970s and the unraveling of the post-war social contract. In this view, the electoral events of spring 2012 are the end rather than the beginning of a process.

### **The European Nationalist Right From Post War to the Debt Crisis**

The elections of spring 2012 solidified and accentuated recidivist nationalist trends that had been part of the European landscape for decades. Political parties that academics today categorize as nationalist and/or right had been in existence since at least the 1970s and some go back further. For example, the Swiss People's Party

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<sup>3</sup> Eliasoph and Tavory (2013) have theorized the importance of “anticipation” for social action; Beckert (2013) has theorized the relation between the economy and futurity.

(SVP) began in 1918. Other parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Italy's Italian Social Movement Party (MSI) were outgrowths of World War II. The MSI became the National Alliance in 1995 and has since moved center right.

Until recently, these parties were more significant for their perceptual impact than their electoral salience, as they rarely became part of governing coalitions. Initially, political analysts focused on the right challenge to social democracy (for example, Kitschelt 1995) as opposed to its ethnocentrism or xenophobia which has engaged a newer cohort of analysts (for example, Bale 2012; Mudde 2007; Betz 1994). In general with some exceptions (for example Art 2011), these scholars take a party centric approach to the study of the right that does not focus upon the historical context in which parties emerged and grew attractive to citizens.

National specificities characterize right parties, yet trans-European generalities are identifiable. The trajectory of right party salience maps onto shift in European political economy and European Union development. "Left-over" right parties such as the MSI in Italy, and agrarian conservatives such as the Danish Progress Party (FP) as well as the newly formed National Front dominated a long post-war period that ended in 1989. In the years between the 1973 Arab oil embargo and the beginning of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, the right had little electoral salience. In the 1990s, the right became more visible principally but not exclusively around issues of immigration.

The French National Front is a benchmark right party for social scientists. Jean Marie Le Pen founded the National Front in 1972. Its original animus was directed against Marxists and it had anti-Semitic tendencies. In the 1980s, the National Front became identified as the leading anti-immigrant and xenophobic party in Europe. Restriction of immigration within European national states began in the post-war period and accelerated in the 1960s and 70s when non-European nationals entered the migrant stream.<sup>4</sup> Immigration policy within Europe was built on a post-

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<sup>4</sup> Using (Triandafyllidou and Gropas. 2007; Zincone, Penninx, and Borkert. 2011) as sources, I completed a survey of European immigration law in 14 European national states from 1945 to the present that supports this claim.



war European commitment to human rights. Freedom to immigrate and the right to seek asylum were built into Articles 13 and 14 of the UN's 1948 *Declaration of Human Rights*. The moral obligation attached to the right to immigrate encouraged nation-states to move quietly as they began to control the flow of immigration and to tighten borders in the 1980s. While nation-states were designing restrictions on immigration, the European right led most notably by Jean Marie Le Pen in France began its noisy chorus of anti-immigrant rhetoric. Anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia became the calling card of the vocal right. For this reason, early social science analysis of the right (most notably, Schain 1996) began with immigration and immigrants as a major causal factor and either ignored or under-emphasized other causal narratives.

The emphasis upon immigration distracted attention from the fact beginning in the late 1990s, the right has increasingly made European integration one of its issues (Berezin 2009). Immigration may be necessary but it is not sufficient to explain the contemporary salience of the right. As early as 1998, Jean Marie Le Pen in France made Europe the target of his attacks (Berezin 2009, pp. 99-111). In 2002 when Jean Marie Le Pen came in second place in the first round of the French Presidential election, Europe and its potential dangers occupied a large part of the National Front's political platform. By 2002, even French left parties began what seemed a quixotic and recidivist attack on the accelerating European project that promised benefits for all.

A trans-continental euroskepticism, which has only increased in recent years as the debt crisis and austerity policies continue, carries an aura of respectability and legitimacy that xenophobia did not. A political party can be anti-Europe without carrying the social and political stigma of being against a person or group. This anti-Europe sentiment that was fueling the nationalist right hit forcibly in 2005 when both France and the Netherlands within weeks of each other rejected the draft European constitution in popular referenda (Berezin 2009, pp. 167-95).

Strong nationalist tendencies that did not support the continued expansion of Europe and were opposed to European Monetary Union bubbled beneath the surface of European integration. These right voices began to dominate after 2000 and the

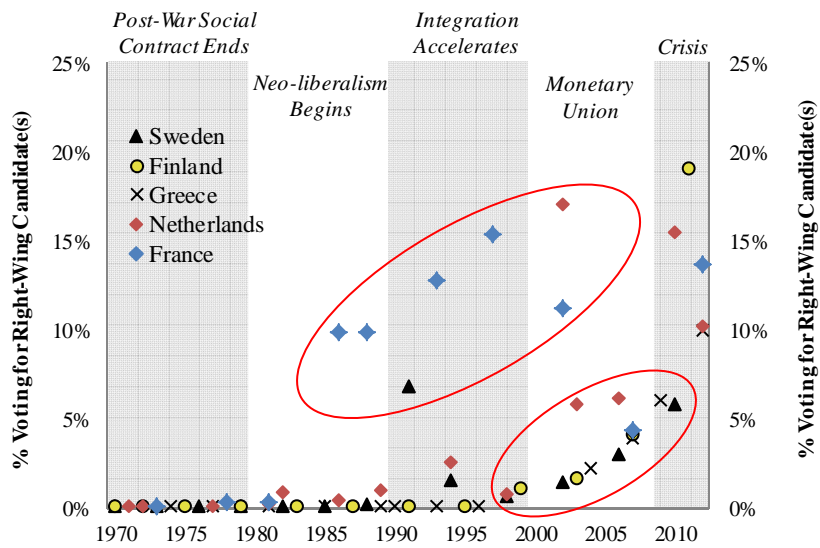
electoral salience of the right increased. From 2009 when the sovereign debt crisis emerged in response to the first Greek crisis, right parties began to move upward in polls. In some instances, they became part of governing coalitions. Upward movement occurred in countries that one would not expect, such as Sweden and Finland. While this analysis is centered on what used to be Western Europe, as recent political developments in Hungary suggest, the former Eastern Europe has not been immune to this tendency.

In the years between 2009 and spring 2012, there were 16 Parliamentary elections in what was Western Europe. Among these elections, results in Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and Greece, as well as the French parliamentary and presidential election stand out either because they defy expectations or because they enforce underlying trends. Figure 1 maps these trends in these five nation-states and illustrates the right's ascendance is temporarily coincident with the expansion of European Union in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The graph traces the showing of the right in national parliamentary elections beginning in 1970. The vertical bars represent periods in European political and economic development. With the exception of the National Front that begins to ascend in the mid-1980s, the other right parties do not start to achieve electoral salience until after the year 2000 and the big jump occurs after 2010. These five cases were abstracted from a larger data base that mapped these trends for a total of fifteen national-states. For reasons of visual clarity, we limited Figure 1 to the five nation states that drew particular attention between 2010 and 2012. The overall trajectory does not depart from the trends that Figure 1 maps.

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<sup>5</sup> Berezin and Braun. 2013. Unpublished ms. has compiled a list of core right parties in Western Europe based upon a consensus of experts approach. In addition, we track the electoral salience of right parties from 1970 to the present in 181 parliamentary elections using Mackie and Rose (1991) and [http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/index.html](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/index.html). These are the sources for all statistical references in this article.

Figure 1  
 Trajectory of Right Electoral Salience  
 1970-2012  
 Selected Countries



Source: Mackie and Rose (1991) and  
[http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/index.html](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/index.html).

On June 9, 2010, Geert Wilder's Freedom Party [*Partij voor de Vrijheid* (*PVV*)] came in third place with 15.45% of the vote in the Dutch parliamentary elections. In this election, Wilders who is known for his support of free market capitalism and his virulent campaign against Islam in the Netherlands earned a place for himself and his party in the Dutch governing coalition. On September 19, 2010 a Swedish right populist party, the *Swedish Democrats*, received 5.7% of the vote which made the party eligible for a seat in the Congress. The Swedish Democrats decorated their campaign mailings with blue and yellow flowers—the colors of the Swedish flag. “Safety and Tradition” was their motto. “Give us Sweden back!” was their *cri de coeur*. On April 2011, the Finnish populist party *True Finns* received 19% of the vote in the Parliamentary Election. This percentage provides a sharp contrast to the 4.1% that they received in the 2007 Parliamentary election. In 2011, the *True Finns* received the same percentage of votes as the Social Democrats (19%) and a percentage point less than the Liberal Conservatives (20%).

The 2012 Greek parliamentary elections held on the same day as the second round of the French presidential election initially received minor attention in international media. Greece was waiting for a bailout and struggling with its national iteration of austerity. By the day of the election, the central question in Greece was whether the Socialist party [*PASOK*] would oust the *New Democracy* austerity focused/Germany friendly center right ruling party Greece. The Greek elections defied expectations as citizens voted against mainstream parties and supported extreme left and extreme right anti-austerity and anti-Europe parties. The extreme left Syriza party received 16.8% of the vote in the first electoral round and polled second behind *New Democracy*.

The avowedly neo-Nazi *Golden Dawn* party polled 7% of the vote—enough to make it a contender in the second round elections held on June 17. The success of the *Golden Dawn* served to focus the attention of European policy makers and the media on the second round of the Greek parliamentary elections. On June 17, 2012, the *Golden Dawn* polled 6.9% of the vote and acquired 18 seats in the 300 member Greek Parliament. The *Golden Dawn* with harsh Neo-Nazi symbols and a violent

anti-immigrant and anti-Europe agenda even managed to oust *LAOS*-- the long standing Greek right party (Dinas and Rori 2013).

### **Templates of Possibility: Crisis and Beyond**

The sovereign debt crisis generated a large discussion in the public sphere. Social and political actors of all sorts gave voice to various public imaginaries in the period between spring 2010 and 2012, as well as the months that followed. Deploying the terms developed in the second section of this article, we ask, what *templates of possibility* did the crisis events generate. What visions of futurity emerged in the European public sphere? The article examines three different voices and their publics: first, the right nationalist party leaders themselves; second, the European intellectuals and media; and lastly, the ordinary national citizen as represented in voting and popular protest.

#### *Hoping for Success: Political Rhetoric Becomes Economic Rhetoric*

In the years between 2010 and 2012, the nationalist right began to view the ongoing sovereign debt crisis with its attendant unpopular austerity policies as a political opening. In the space of those two years, parties began to shift the orientation of their political communications from issues of solely of national identity to issues of economics. During this period, right nationalists began sounding similar to classic left politicians in their defense of the people and the working classes and accelerating their attacks on European Union politicians and policies (Berezin 2011). The absence of a viable left alternative has opened up a rhetorical space for nationalists to give voice to traditional left concerns. Marine Le Pen is a master of this strategy.<sup>6</sup> The European left and center right share increasingly similar, if not identical, positions on European integration and generally support with some modification neoliberalism as an economic strategy.

The rhetorical strategies of right nationalist politicians are increasingly economic in orientation. Timo Soini the Finnish leader of the populist True Finns

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<sup>6</sup> On the longstanding relation between the French right and the working classes see Viard (1997); on Marine Le Pen's strategy see (Berezin 2013, pp. 250-254).

writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on May 9, 2011 explained why he did not support bailing out Europe's failing nations.<sup>7</sup> He writes, "At the risk of being accused of populism, we'll begin with the obvious: it is not the little guy who benefits. He is being milked and lied to in order to keep the insolvent system running.....I was raised to know that genocidal war must never again be visited on our continent and I came to understand the values and principles that originally motivated the establishment of what became the European Union. This Europe, this vision, was one that offered the people of Finland and all of Europe the gift of peace founded on democracy, freedom and justice. This is a Europe worth having, so it is with great distress that I see this project being put in jeopardy by a political elite who would sacrifice the interests of Europe's ordinary people in order to protect certain corporate interests."

In April 2012, Dutch politician Geert Wilders learned that his 2010 victory was not as substantial as he thought. Wilders refused to support the right centrist government's decision to adopt austerity and save the *euro*. His resistance to the governing coalition of which he was a part generated a parliamentary crisis and on April 25, the Queen dissolved the Dutch Parliament. Wilders thought that his party's success in the June 2010 and his place in the governing coalition had earned him a right to resist. He overplayed his hand and overestimated his popularity. In the September 12<sup>th</sup> Dutch election, Wilders and his party received a 10.08% vote share and did not earn seats in the new governing coalition.

Wilders is gone but not for long as he maintains an active public presence. On June 9, 2013, Wilders addressed a conference on "Europe's Last Stand" sponsored by the conservative think tank, the *American Freedom Alliance* in Los Angeles, California. Wilders speech, "The Resurgence of National Pride and the Future of Europe," identified "three things" that "ordinary people" in Europe "want": politicians to solve the "problem of Islamization;" to "restore national sovereignty;" and "they do not want their money to be used to pay for mistakes made elsewhere."

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<sup>7</sup> "Why I Don't Support Europe's Bailouts," *The Wall Street Journal* (New York) May 9, 2011 (*WSJ.com*, Accessed August 4, 2011).

(<http://www.geertwilders.nl/index.php/in-de-media-mainmenu-74/nieuws-mainmenu-114/1829-speech-geert-wilders-los-angeles-june-9-2013>) On November 21, 2013, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Wilders identified the “euro crisis” as the key to what he describes as the “resurgence of European Patriotism.”<sup>8</sup> Citing Ronald Reagan as his hero and denying the label of extremism, Wilders notes: “Next May [*date of European Parliamentary elections*], all over Europe, voters will rebel at the ballot box. They will reject the supranational experiment of the European Union. They will cast their votes for a restoration of national sovereignty. They are not extremists, they are democrats.” On January 21, 2014, the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* reported a poll that showed Wilders’ party gaining public support and likely to be part of a governing coalition if election were called at that point. In February 2014, Wilders commissioned a report, *NExit: Assessing the Economic Impact of the Netherlands Leaving the European Union* (Capital Economics 2014).

Electoral trends suggest that political rhetoric that nationalist and economic claims have resonance among European citizens. Marine Le Pen resurrected the Front National after its 2007 Presidential and parliamentary defeats. She based her campaign on France exiting the *eurozone*, generalized Europhobia coupled with Islamophobia, and a pledge to protect French industry and workers (Berezin 2013). Marine Le Pen used rhetoric similar to Wilders in the run up to the 2012 French Presidential election (Berezin 2013). Hollande won the Presidency but the significant election results came in two weeks earlier on April 22, 2012 during the first round of the two tiered French voting system. Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front came in third place. With 17.9% of the first round vote, Le Pen trailed Hollande and sitting French president Nicolas Sarkozy who virtually tied each other with 28% and 27% of the vote respectively.

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<sup>8</sup> Geert Wilders, “The Resurgence of European Patriotism,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2013 ([www.WSJ.com](http://www.WSJ.com), accessed 12/3/2013).

Le Pen captured a larger portion of the vote than Jean-Luc Mélenchon's hastily assembled Left Front [*Front de Gauche*] coalition. She outperformed her father, Jean Marie Le Pen, in his 2002 first round "victory" where he only polled 16%. Mélenchon's platform was not all that dissimilar from that of Marine Le Pen. The official 2012 program of the Left Front, entitled *Human First* [*L'humain d'abord*]*—*as a counterpoint to the National Front's familiar *France First* logo*—*called for France to abandon the Treaty of Lisbon and to construct another Europe. The program identified the European Central Bank as "an obstacle to ending the crisis." The extreme left is no friendlier to the *eurozone* than the extreme right. If one adds the vote totals for Le Pen and Mélenchon in the first round, the candidates from both extremes of the political spectrum in France polled more than either Hollande or Sarkozy.

The volatility of spring 2012 continues and the nationalist right, if anything, is gaining ground. Since taking office François Hollande's approval ratings have taken a downward turn in French public opinion polls, in part due to his attempt to straddle the divide between being pro-Europe and anti-austerity. In November 2013 *TNS Sofres* poll, 76 % of French citizens had no confidence in Hollande. In the eighteen months since he had assumed the Presidency, Hollande's confidence rating had dropped over 30 percentage points—making it the sharpest decline of any sitting French president in thirty years.

In contrast to Hollande, Marine Le Pen's fortunes are on the rise. In a recent *TNS Sofres* poll, the French public is split 47% versus 47% as to whether the National Front's ideas are dangerous. Although the percentage of the French who view the National Front as dangerous has been in decline in the last five years, the figure acquires meaning when we consider that as late as 2002, 70% of the French viewed the National Front as a danger. A French opinion poll taken in spring 2013 asked respondents: "If the first round of the presidential election took place next Sunday, and you had a choice among the following candidates, for which one would it be likely that you would vote? (CSA 2013)" Nicolas Sarkozy came in first with 34% and Marine Le Pen came in second with 23% of the vote. Hollande trailed with 19%. Hollande and Marine Le Pen had virtually traded places in French public opinion.



Marine Le Pen has a new slogan on her Google website (<https://plus.google.com/+MarineLePen/posts>), « Solidarity with the victims of fiscal injustice and eurosterity !” She has a new logo that says “No to fiscal injustice!” The image in the colors of the French flag exchange the “e” at the end of the French spelling of fiscal with a *euro* sign. In October 2013, Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen met to plan a joint strategy for the 2014 European parliamentary elections.

*Fearing Dissolution and the Return of the 1930s*

After the spring 2012 elections, academics, journalists and various public intellectuals began to consider the possible disintegration of the *eurozone* and to draw increasingly explicit connections between intractable economic issues and the rise of recidivist nationalism. The shock of the Greek elections, the continuing failure on the part of European leaders to negotiate a solution to the debt crisis, and the unpopularity of the bailouts of defaulting members in Germany and northern Europe focused public attention and generated a new line of political commentary that began to consolidate in early summer 2012. The public commentary had two prongs: first, that the strength of the right was a surprising development and would possibly initiate a replay of the 1930s; and second, that the crisis of the *eurozone* was becoming a political, as well as economic, problem.

In 2013, it is common to find headlines in global media such as a recent *New York Times* editorial that shout “Europe’s Populist Backlash” and warn that the “politics of populist anger are on the march across Europe . . . .”<sup>9</sup> In spring 2009 when the European crisis first began, few academics or commentators viewed the crisis as potentially challenging to democratic practices or sentiments. In general commentators on the European sovereign debt crisis addressed its economic consequences and paid little or no attention to its political consequences. Amartya Sen writing in the *Guardian* in July 2011 when the Greek crisis was heating up was

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<sup>9</sup> Editorial Board. 2013. “Europe’s Populist Backlash.” *New York Times* (NY): 10/15/2013. [www.Nytimes.com](http://www.Nytimes.com) accessed 10/21/2013/

among the first public intellectuals to draw the connection between the crisis and challenges to democracy (See Berezin 2013, pp. 240-241 for a summary of these opinions). A *LexisNexis* search of international English language newspapers between the years 2000 to 2013 confirms the claim that the return of fascism has become a pressing concern of the global media. Beginning in 2009, there is a steady up-tick in articles that contain “fascism” and “rise and/or return” in their headlines.<sup>10</sup>

European leaders began to warn that the *eurozone* must be held together to contain nationalist and populist backlash. Two examples from prominent European officials illustrate the point. On April 25, 2012, three days after the first round of the French presidential election, Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council in an address to the Romanian parliament warned that the European integration must be preserved to hold off “threats to democracy.” “We politicians must work hard to convince people that this [a united Europe] is possible. . . This is a challenge, as election results and opinion polls all over Europe confirm. Nationalist and extremist movements are on the rise; many of them blame “Brussels” for bad news” (EUCO 2012a).

On September 12, 2012, Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, speaking at the Ambrosetti Forum on Lake Como proposed a special European summit to confront growing populism in the face of the continent's financial crisis. We are in a *dangerous phase* [emphasis added], . . . "It is paradoxical and sad that in a phase in which one was hoping to complete the integration instead there is forming a dangerous counter-phenomenon [“angry populism”] that aims at the disintegration.” Monti himself became a casualty of “angry populism.” An economist, Monti had assumed the role of Prime Minister of Italy in November 2011 when Silvio Berlusconi's third government collapsed. Italians perceived Monti as Angela Merkel's choice which did not help his government. Monti ran for Prime Minister in February 2012 but his pro-Europe, pro-austerity and pro-growth policies were widely unpopular with Italians. His coalition came in fourth in the popular vote behind the

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<sup>10</sup> The raw numbers for years and articles (y/a) are: 2009/2363; 2010/2009; 2011/2103; 2012/2259; 2013/2713.

discredited Silvio Berlusconi and the singer turned politician Beppe Grillo whose 5-Star movement was against all forms of pre-existing political coalitions.<sup>11</sup>

### *Imagining Nothing*

In his last book, the late political scientist Peter Mair has described contemporary European politics as *Ruling the Void* (2013) which captures the spirit of the European public and citizenry. The social psychologist Nico Frijda (1993) has devised the analytic category “mood” to capture “climate.” Volatility characterizes the European political climate—volatility of institutional and extra-institutional popular politics and volatility of collective response (Mair 2013, pp. 29-34). It is this volatility that is more evocative of the 1930s than any specific events.

Volatility is manifesting itself in fear, anger, uncertainty, depression and distrust. Indices of ill health and even increase in suicide rates in crisis stricken countries such as Spain, Italy and Greece provide evidence of collective despair (Stuckler and Basu 2013). Increasing rates of youth unemployment, as high as 50% in Greece and in Sweden 30%, contribute to the prevailing mood of hopelessness (OECD 2012). Voting patterns in European elections are visual displays of volatility. Using data from *NSD: European Election Database*

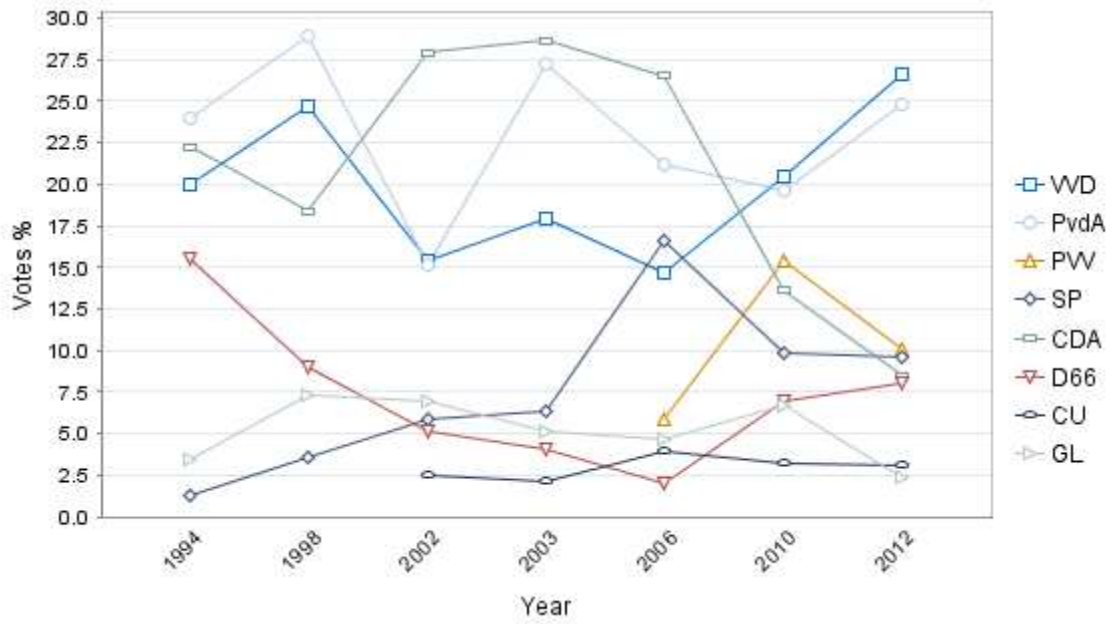
[http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/index.html](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/index.html).

I have created an archive of visual displays of volatility across parliamentary elections since 1994 in 15 European nation-states. Electoral outcomes in the Dutch parliamentary elections provide a typical example of the pattern that can be observed across nation-states.

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<sup>11</sup> Fella and Ruzza (2013) provide an early assessment of this election.

Figure 2  
Dutch Parliamentary Elections 1994-2012



Source: [http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/country/netherlands/](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/country/netherlands/)

Party salience, as represented in voting results, even volatile ones are institutional responses to the erosion of security that might have been imaginary in the 1980s and 90s but has become very real in the new century—with the sovereign debt crisis being at the core of this. Extra-institutional responses, such as trans-European protests against austerity, are evocative of the 1930s.

For example, in October 2010, the French Socialist Party organized a grand march through the center of Paris and strikes of public services to protest the raising of the retirement age. The official party organizers gave out stickers with sayings such as “retirement is life, not survival” and “60 years is freedom.” Plastered on street posts throughout central Paris were posters that a youth group called the *New Anticapitalist Party* designed and distributed. The posters displayed a picture of Sarkozy and Francois Hollande on a 500 euro note. Referring to the politicians and the bank note, the poster proclaimed in bold letters “GET OUT! (Dehors): Because they are worth nothing.”

Social disenfranchisement is most acutely felt among European youth. Kaldor and Selchow (2012) studied youth protest across Europe. They identified a phenomenon which they labeled “Subterranean Politics” by which they meant *ad hoc* protest around social issues that rose up and captured cross cutting constituencies of youth that had no strong institutional base. *Occupy Wall Street* would be one genre of this type of protest but groups such as the Pirate Party would be another. According to Kaldor and Selchow (2012), their most surprising finding was that European youth had no interest in European Union policy or politics and did not see it as relative to their concerns.

From the ballot box to the streets, the volatility of the European political mood state coupled with the almost anomic quality to European youth protest are more evocative of the political mood of the 1930s than any specific policies or statistics can capture.

### **Why Is the Nationalist Right Resonating Among European Publics?**

So far, this article has focused upon the correlation between the general salience of the national right as evidenced in electoral gains and the European sovereign debt crisis. But correlation, as we know, is not causation. This section explores the institutional factors that support a collective retreat to nationalist sentiment and which have contributed to the upward trajectory of the nationalist right. These factors are: competing and conflicting visions of what Europe is and does and the practical consequences of that conflict; the institutional durability of the nation-state; and lastly, the shift in the locus of security.

#### *What Does “Europe” Mean? Conflicting Visions*

Europe in theory and practice is a terrain of conflicting visions and multiple stories.<sup>12</sup> The meaning of Europe is very much dependent upon who is speaking and to whom. Given that Europe is a set of institutional and governing arrangements, these different visions pose practical as well as theoretical problems. The Europe that politicians and intellectuals speak of today is distant from the original post-war European peace project. In response to the current crisis, some European politicians have tried to strategically invoke the past. For example, on September 22, 2012, French President François Hollande and his German counterpart Angela Merkel attended a ceremony in Ludwigshafen, Germany to mark the 50th anniversary of Charles de Gaulle’s speech or reconciliation to German youth (Elysee 2012). Hollande invoked the traditional post-war vision of Europe when he said, “Europe is not simply institutions, procedures, juridical texts—they are necessary. Europe, generation after generation, is the most beautiful political project that we can imagine together.”

In the 1990s, the traditionalist vision of Europe as a post-war peace project began to recede in response to political and social changes. The fall of Eastern Europe made war and peace less of an issue and globalization and privatization made

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<sup>12</sup> See *European Stories* (2010); Mudge and Vauchez (2012) following Pierre Bourdieu describe this phenomenon as a “weak field.”

markets and trans-boarder cooperation more of an issue. These two phenomena led to a growing neo-liberal and bureaucratic vision often coded in popular discourse as “Brussels,” and a competing and more idealistic vision that focused on creating a single European identity.

Both visions had academic champions. Political scientists (for example, Moravcsik 1997) tend to elaborate the neoliberal and institutional vision of Europe. Public intellectuals and left leaning politicians more often espouse the idealistic vision of Europe. The public discourse and writings of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas elegantly espouse the idealistic vision. As a sequel to his 2009 book, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, Habermas published *The Crisis of the European Union* (2012) that argued for the necessity of a “constitutional project” for Europe. In summer 2012, Habermas engaged in a policy debate that first appeared in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on the necessity of organizing a broad public debate on the re-organization of the European polity. He followed up on these ideas in April 2103 when he gave a lecture in Leuven entitled, “Democracy, Solidarity and the European Crisis.” While the political science approach to Europe does not factor in social issues and immigration, the Habermasian approach is often understood as a defense of multiculturalism.

Both analytic approaches inhabit different mental worlds as do the conflicting visions of Europe that they represent. Listening to realists and idealists on the subject of European Union politics (not that they are often in the same room together!), it is difficult to understand that they are discussing the same political entity. Both realists and idealists fail to take into account that “Europe” writ large has never been popular among ordinary people. The well known low voter turnout figures for EU parliament elections—figures which have been declining over time; as well as the failure to pass a European constitution in any of the nation-states where it was submitted to a popular, as opposed to a parliamentary, referendum attests to the weak appeal that the ideal of Europe has for citizens of various national states.

Lack of popular support would make Europeanization no different from other 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist projects where peasants had to become Frenchmen (Weber 1976). What is salient about the European project is how ineffective the European

identity project has been among ordinary, not elite citizens.<sup>13</sup> The sovereign debt crisis with the injunction to bail out citizens of debtor countries is a tipping point phenomenon that makes it clear how little today's national citizens view themselves as part of a common European project. As the World War II generation passes on and the post-war generation ages, the living memory of World War II fades and along with it, the argument for a European peace project.

As the traditionalist argument for European Union and solidarity wanes, the neo-liberal and idealist versions remain—but hardly in robust form. The sovereign debt crisis tarnishes the neo-liberal solutions to global competitiveness and social well being. The idealist version is often connected to the incorporation of immigrant groups across Europe. Events such as the May 2013 riots in the suburbs of Stockholm, among others, have made the right wing argument that some immigrants are not capable of incorporation compelling at the same time that economic crisis is worsening their material conditions. The landscape of competing claims and visions that dominate the European project make for benign confusion in the absence of crisis, but become seriously undermining of the entire project when faced with the stress of debt.

*The Nation-State: A Durable Institution*

It is a truism of the *euro* crisis to point out that EU created a currency union (EMU) but neglected to create viable regulatory systems or political institutions to buttress it. On one level, a failure of institutional design plagues the entire EU project. Throughout Europe, policy is often decided at the national level and there are many contradictions built into the system. For example, one cannot be a citizen of Europe and carry an EU passport unless one is first a citizen of a member state.

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<sup>13</sup> On the class differentiation among European citizens and support for Europe, see (Diez-Medrano 2003; Favell 2008; Fligstein 2008).



Talk of European federalism continually emerges; yet, the obstacles to such a step are large.

On September 2, 2013, Daniel Cohn-Bendit founder of the German Green Party and member of the European Parliament wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* in which he argued that the “Fix for Europe” resided in “People Power.” Adopting a pragmatic tone, Cohn-Bendit proclaimed that, “...we need a Pan-European effort to determine Europe’s best practices in every field and adopt them across the Continent. . . [Europe] will change only when European-minded politicians who are elected to national offices agree to transfer power to truly European institutions.” Less than a week after Cohn-Bendit’s article appeared, Vaclav Klaus, former President of the Czech Republic, published an article on his web-site entitle “Democrats of Europe, wake up!” in which he denounced Cohn-Bendit’s ideas. Klaus known for his active euroscepticism defends the nation-state as a safeguard of European democracy. He accuses Cohn-Bendit of as naively supporting expansion of Europe which Klaus describes as a “totalitarian ideology coated with modern paint.”

Survey data suggests that ordinary citizens will not be as easily mobilized as Cohn-Bendit suggests. The presence of an ascendant European nationalist right suggests that arguments such as Klaus presents have greater resonance for ordinary citizens. In times of prosperity and growth, it was relatively easy for policy makers to overlook the lack of interest in European parliamentary elections and the distrust of moving to a European constitution. When the constitution was rejected by popular referenda in 2005 in both France and the Netherlands, scholars and politicians attributed its rejection to temporary glitches in national politics rather than any deeper distrust of the constitutional project.

The *Global Attitudes Project* of the *Pew Research Center* monitors public opinion in Europe on an annual basis. In a report released on May 29, 2012, “European Unity on the Rocks,” Pew (2012) researchers found as their title suggested that the European project was wobbly but still fundamentally in tact. In Pew’s 2012 report, they found among the eight countries that they surveyed a median 60% favorability rating towards the “European Project.” There was wide variability among national states surveyed—with a 68% favorability rating in Germany, and not

surprisingly a 37% favorability rating in Greece. A year later in Pew's May 2013 survey, the median favorability rating had dropped to 45%. Support for Europe dropped in all countries but the steepest drop occurred in France where favorability went from 60 % to 41%--a loss of 19 percentage points. The title of the Pew's 2013 report, "The New Sick Man of Europe: The European Union," captured the dreary statistics that the document contained and did not augur well for Europe's future.

A central problem facing Europe and one reason why the crisis appears intractable in face of numerous solutions is the durability of the nation-state as a political institution. At its core, the Europe that began with Maastricht in 1992 sought to build solidarity based upon a community of interest rather than a community of culture—albeit a community of constructed culture. Ernst Renan's warning that a "Zolverein was not a patrie" was equally applicable to the contemporary European project as it was to 19<sup>th</sup> century France and Prussia.

Nation-states are durable political institutions because they wed culture to politics and economics. Nation-states are material objects embedded in geographical space and territorially bound. As Poggi (1979) elegantly argues, states adjudicate risk for their members by providing physical protection and social security. *National experience*, the point where collective and individual biography intersect, interrogates the past to produce the future, is a crucial by-product of the activities that citizens perform in common and the materiality of the state.<sup>14</sup> *Experience*, individual and collective, does not simply float unanchored in social and political space. As Parsons ([1942] 1954, p. 147)) observed in his discussion of propaganda, institutions anchor experience since they define expectations. Thus, institutions are a necessary, but not sufficient dimension of political cultural analysis. Culture and politics come together in national institutions that bind individuals together in national communities of meaning. Citizenship is the legal institution that defines the boundaries of belonging (Brubaker 1992), but it is not the only institution. Schools, religion, military

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<sup>14</sup> I prefer the term *national experience* to the over-worked *national identity*. *National experience* as I define it is a more dynamic concept and accounts for variability and stability over time.

conscription, and common language engage citizens in the collective practice of belonging. In short, the European project has not offered any alternative to date that attenuates the durability of national cultures and national states.

### *When Security Ends*

Europeanization, which is often a code word for neo-liberalism and globalization particularly among nationalist politicians, threatens to shift the locus of security from the state to the market. Before the financial crisis, such distinctions and tropes presented themselves in the public sphere as the fear mongering of extremist politicians. The crisis with the constant public discussion of debt and bail outs coupled with rising youth unemployment across Europe has lent more than a patina of reality to nationalist claims

The expanded EU project that we can date to the 1992 Maastricht treaty was a project of *plenty, not of scarcity*, and scarcity is emerging on a global scale. Scarcity in a trans-national polity such as EU threatens the practical security (social welfare, linguistic and cultural similarity) that the European nation states guaranteed in the post-war period. The old forms of security are weakening if not entirely disappearing in Europe and elsewhere and creating a *post-security polity where scarcity not plenty is the norm*; and marketization takes precedence to re-distribution. The collective reaction to the *post-security polity* is that national protection over-rides European solidarity and promotes a resurgence of a nationalist center or right depending on the historical specificity of the individual national-state.

The global financial crisis has exacerbated economic fissures and cultural fault lines in the European project and brought into focus institutional problems that nations formerly adjudicated. The sovereign debt crisis is forcing Europe to recalibrate itself as a *post-security polity*. Nation-states, the bedrock of pre-EU Europe, institutionalized a form of “practical security” that lent collective emotional security to citizens. Political security was located in citizenship laws and internal and external defense ministries. National social welfare systems produced economic security and social solidarity as a by-product. Linguistic, educational and even religious policies created cultural security because they enforced assumptions, if not

realities, of similarity and identity. In contrast to the “old” Europe where security, solidarity and identity were guaranteed, the *post-security polity* privileges markets, fosters austerity that threatens solidarity, and supports multicultural inclusion at the expense of nationalist exclusion.

### **Looking Backward, Marching Forward**

The social, cultural and political space of contemporary Europe is different from 1930s Europe. Context matters, but history also matters. The volatile political mood is of concern. The warnings of John Maynard Keynes in the aftermath of the Paris Peace meeting are as prescient today as they were in 1921. Keynes observed:

The bankruptcy and decay of Europe, if we allow it to proceed, will affect every one in the long-run, but perhaps not in a way that is striking or immediate.

This has one fortunate side. We may still have time to reconsider our courses and to view the world with new eyes. For the immediate future, events are taking charge, and the near destiny of Europe is no longer in the hands of any man. *The events of the coming year will not be shaped by the deliberate acts of statesmen, but by the hidden currents, flowing continually beneath the surface of political history, of which no one can predict the outcome* [emphasis added]. In one way only we influence these hidden currents,—by setting in motion those forces of instruction and imagination which change *opinion*. (Keynes, *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, 1919)

The “hidden currents” of today are no doubt different than they were when Keynes wrote. But, events are compelling and Keynes’ warning is well taken. The confluence of events, the sovereign debt crisis, and a volatile political mood provide an empty space in which anything might happen. In the 1930s, leaders with anti-democratic yet forward looking projects stepped into the void. Contemporary political parties challenge democracy by looking backward to enforce a political form, the national state, despite its durability might have been better suited to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries than to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This article argues that the acceleration and normalization of the nationalist right in contemporary Europe is the collateral damage from the sovereign debt crisis that exacerbated fault lines in the European project. . Europe and the *eurozone* were never solely economic issues. Europe, the Europe that evolved institutionally and culturally in the 1980s and 1990s, was a fragile and fissured political and cultural entity. The European sovereign debt crisis has served as a “tipping point” that has exposed all of the cracks in the European infrastructure as well as its shaky foundation. In 2010, the first wave of the global financial crisis hit Europe. National primacy began increasingly salient for ordinary citizens and a sea change in the electoral fortunes of the nationalistic right followed.

*Events are templates of possibility* that focus analytic, as well as collective, attention. Events shift the unit of analysis from political actors, whether voters or party operatives, to events that marked salient moments in collective national perceptions. Events as political facts lend analytic rigor to the cultural analysis of politics. Events are *templates of possibility* only for agents. Political analysts must treat events *as if* they were fixed and unitary—with the full understanding that different agents might assign different possibilities to them.<sup>15</sup>

Many events led to the elections of spring 2012, the sovereign debt crisis and the electoral salience of the old “new” nationalism. But without the fixity of “spring 2012,” it would be analytically difficult to proceed with an analysis that crosses temporal boundaries. By viewing the elections of spring 2012 analytically as events, we are able to place them in a broader historical context as well as to imagine what possibilities for the future they might portend. The rise of the old “new” nationalism is a major form of collateral damage of the sovereign debt crisis. But the handwriting was on the wall long before 2009 or 2010, pick your starting date. There should have been no surprises. As the crisis drags on, the right only needs to show up to be a salient political force—and that is today’s challenge to democracy.

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<sup>15</sup> For a different approach to this point, see Wagner-Pacifici (2010).

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