

Europe's Tea Parties

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Insurgent parties are likely to do better in 2014 than at any time since the second world war



that the federal government is a bloated, self-serving Leviathan, and that illegal immigration is a threat to social order. The Tea Party movement is central to the conflict that has riven American politics and the difficulty of reforming budgets and immigration laws.

Now something similar is happening in Europe (see pages 16-18). Insurgent parties are on the rise. For mainstream parties and voters worried by their success, America's experience of dealing with the Tea Party holds useful lessons.

The squeezed, and angry, middle

There are big differences between the Tea Party and the European insurgents. Whereas the Tea Party's factions operate within one of America's mainstream parties, and have roots in a venerable tradition of small-government conservatism, their counterparts in Europe are small, rebellious outfits, some from the far right. The Europeans are even more diverse than the Americans. Norway's Progress Party is a world away from Hungary's thuggish Jobbik. Nigel Farage and the saloon-bar bores of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) look askance at Marine Le Pen and her Front National (FN) across the Channel. But there are common threads linking the European insurgents and the Tea Party. They are angry people, harking back to simpler times. They worry about immigration. They spring from the squeezed middle—people who feel that the elite at the top and the scroungers at the bottom are prospering at the expense of ordinary working people. And they believe the centre of power—Washington or Brussels—is bulging with bureaucrats hatching schemes to run people's lives.

Mainstream politicians in Europe have tried to marginalise the insurgents, by portraying them as unhinged, racist or fascist. But it is not working, partly because many of the insurgents are making a determined effort to become respectable. UKIP, the FN and the Freedom Party (FPV) in the Netherlands could each win the most votes in European Parliament elections in May. In France, 55% of students say they would consider voting for the FN. The Progress Party has joined Norway's government. Slovakia has a new far-right provincial governor. Count insurgents on the left, such as Syriza in Greece and the Five Star movement in Italy, and mainstream parties in Europe are weaker than at any time since the second world war.

The insurgency is doing well partly because the mainstream has done so badly. Governments encouraged consumers to borrow, let the banks run wild and designed the euro as the pinnacle of the European project. In the past five years ordinary people have paid a price for these follies, in higher taxes, unemployment, benefit cuts and pay freezes.

This newspaper is sympathetic to the Tea Parties' insight

that the modern state often seems designed to look after itself, rather than the citizens it is supposed to serve. It is true that the EU has no answer to the problem that minorities of voters in many countries feel it lacks legitimacy—a looming threat to the euro. But Europe's insurgents go further than that.

When Geert Wilders, leader of the FPV, calls the Koran "a fascist book" and Islam "a totalitarian religion", he is endorsing intolerance. When Ms Le Pen demands protection for French firms from foreign competition, she is threatening to impoverish her compatriots. When UKIP promises British people prosperity outside the European Union, but within a free-trade zone of its own devising, it is peddling an illusion. Increasing inequality and growing immigration are the corollary of technological progress and economic freedoms that most people would not willingly give up.

Such details do not detain Ms Le Pen who, with the swagger of a politician on the rise, predicts that she will be in the Elysée within a decade. That is highly unlikely, partly because national elections are less susceptible to protest votes than European elections are, and partly because as they get closer to power almost all Europe's Tea Parties are likely to reveal themselves as incompetent and factional. Yet the insurgents do not need victory to set the agenda or to put up barriers to reforms. That is why Europeans need to see them off.

Honesty in all things

Attacking the insurgents as fascists worked when Hitler's memory was fresh, but many of today's voters rightly see it as mostly a scare tactic. Even as the mainstream demonises the insurgents, it also panders to them by adopting pale versions of their policies—against immigration, global finance and the EU. But the mainstream is inhibited by a sense of what is possible and an understanding of what is legal. So it ends up flattering the idea that something needs fixing, while seeming to lack the courage to do anything.

The lesson from America is that if Europe's politicians do not want the insurgents to set the agenda, they need to counter their arguments. As long as Republican leaders have indulged Tea Party demands to put purity above the work of governing (for instance, by shutting down the federal government) they have sunk lower in the public esteem. The hardline positions of Republican candidates satisfy the party faithful but drive away undecided voters, costing the party Senate seats in recent elections and arguably the presidency in 2012. Politicians need to explain hard choices and dispel misconceptions. Europe's single market is the source of prosperity: enlarge it. Workers from eastern Europe pay more into government coffers than they take out: welcome them. Politicians prepared to speak out will find that most citizens can cope with the truth.

Ultimately, though, the choice falls to voters themselves. The Tea Party thrived in America partly because a small minority of voters dominate primary races especially for gerrymandered seats. In elections to the European Parliament many voters simply do not bother to take part. That is a gift to the insurgents. If Europeans do not want them to triumph, they need to get out to the polls. ■

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- Rendre l'article à l'examinateur avant de quitter la salle