

# Fleeing Nazis shaped Austrian politics for generations after World War II: study

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A new study in *The Economic Journal*, published by Oxford University Press, suggests that migrating extremists can shape political developments in their destination regions for generations. Regions in Austria that witnessed an influx of Nazis fleeing the Soviets after WWII are significantly more right-leaning than other parts of the country. There were no such regional differences in far-right values before World War Two.

There is a long history of ideological radicals who have moved abroad to spread their [political views](#): From the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin over the revolutionary Che Guevara to Jihadist fighters returning to their home countries from the Islamic State. Governments fear that these immigrants bring political turmoil and often react with travel bans or harsh surveillance. Beyond anecdotal evidence, however, researchers have not yet identified effects of migrating extremists on the spread of actual political beliefs.

The researchers use the Allied occupation of Austria after World War Two as a natural experiment. In the summer of 1945, occupation zones in the Austrian federal state of Upper Austria were unexpectedly reallocated between the United States and the Soviets. US-liberated regions north of the Danube River were reassigned to the Soviets, while the southern bank remained under US control. People started to flee to the US zone in large numbers immediately. Primarily Nazi elites fearing Soviet punishment migrated to the south bank of the Danube River. The zoning along the Danube River divided an otherwise historically, economically and culturally homogeneous region into two areas—one with a high density and another one with comparably low density of Nazi elite members.

Austria's long tradition of far-right populism allows the authors to trace the effects of migrated Nazi elites since the late 1940s until today. The results

indicate a substantial and persistent increase in extreme right-wing attitudes in the destinations of migrating extremists. Even seventy years after the Nazi influx, vote shares for far-right parties are still much higher in places where Nazi elites settled.

The authors provide two main explanations for the long-term persistence of far-right values: local institutions and family ties. Migrated Nazis founded and penetrated local party branches at their destination. Those institutions multiplied their impact. The researchers found that migrating Nazis leverage far-right votes by at least a factor of 1.3 up to a factor of 2.5. Another explanation for persistence is intergenerational transmission. The authors collected pre-war phone book entries and show that names of far-right politicians today still reflect long-gone migration of Nazi elites after the war. All results hold when including controls for socio-economic and time invariant geographic characteristics.

It appears that political preferences are transmitted from generation to generation. Even after three or four generations, attitudes and beliefs of Nazi migrant families and communities continue to differ. Descendants of migrating extremists together with local party institutions are continuously spreading their beliefs to residents through active engagement in local politics.

"We were surprised to learn that imported extremism can survive for generations and does not fade away," said the paper's lead author Felix Roesel. "The good news is that liberal and democratic values spread in a very similar manner. This is what new research has shown. Populism is not more contagious than other political ideas."

**More information:** Christian Ochsner et al, *Migrating Extremists*, *The Economic Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/ej/ueaa017](https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueaa017)

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