CHAPTER 3

DETERMINANTS OF DEMOCRATIC DEFENSIVENESS

The institutions that are at the centre of historical institutionalist analysis... can shape and constrain political strategies in important ways, but they are themselves also the outcome (conscious or unintended) of deliberate political strategies of political conflict and of choice.

—Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo
Structuring Politics, 1992

The preceding chapter provided a clear depiction of the expansive range of responses to party-based political extremism observable in contemporary democratic systems. We turn now to advancing a theoretical framework for understanding how and why mainstream actors in those democratic systems choose to deal with pariahs in their midst in the ways that they do...and with what consequences. This is no small task, and we make no claims of proffering the kind of grand theory that would explain and predict all outcomes at all times. Thinking comparatively, we know all too well that there is significant variation in the types of threats posed by parties sharing the “pariah” label. We also know that national contexts vary, that stakes are anything but constant, and that the players in this strategic game are both compelled and confined by too many intervening factors to allow for simplistic, one-size-fits-all models of the kind political science sometimes covets. However, what we can—and must—do is to construct some theoretical order that can facilitate explanation of observed patterns and help anticipate likely choices and outcomes.

Understanding responses to the pariah-induced democratic dilemma requires attention at individual, party, and system levels. This chapter will make the case for an approach that examines evidence at each of these levels. A multilevel, multimethods analysis
should rely on a theoretical foundation that grants analytical priority, first, to the importance of the past in shaping contemporary democratic responses. Historical context arguably provides an environment that defines and constrains strategic imperatives and alternatives for democratic actors. Too much variation within countries and across parties exists, however, to vest exclusive explanatory weight in path dependence or what some might deem historical determinism. Instead, theory building must incorporate the intervening impact of system-level structures (e.g., electoral rules and the territorial distribution of power) on strategic choice. The extent to which electoral systems exhibit proportionality can profoundly impact strategic responses to extremism, and greater decentralization of political power multiplies the number and consequence of arenas in which the defense of democracy may occur. Moreover, institutional rules will shape the contours of national party systems, defining the space for strategic maneuvering. It becomes important in this regard to account not just for how the moderate right responds to threats from its own flank but also how the moderate left reacts—either to exploit the situation and bind the hands of their mainstream conservative competitors or to join with those same conservatives in a more united front against commonly perceived antidemocratic adversaries. Less frequent, but no less important, is the maneuvering that follows the emergence of an electorally viable pariah from the far left. National pasts and institutional rules are likely necessary but still insufficient components of any theoretical framework. They are largely static factors and as such struggle to help explain change within systems. Therefore, this chapter’s formulation of a theoretical understanding of democratic defensiveness also highlights the

Figure 3.1  Determinants of democratic defensiveness