



The study of the far right and its three E's: why scholarship must go beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism

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Abstract

Over the past decades, the far right has become one of the most studied phenomena in international political science, attracting more attention than all other party families combined. This article critically assesses the scholarly progress made so far and discusses what future research on the far right should focus on. It argues that although the number of studies has grown disproportionately, scholars have been slow in acknowledging that far-right politics have entered a new phase, where traditional aspects progressively lost momentum and new ones acquired central stage. To understand the transformations in the contemporary far right, scholars must address three shortcomings of international comparative research—*Eurocentrism*, *Electoralism* and *Externalism*. Today, we need to re-embed the study of the far right into the broader literature on party politics and political sociology, acknowledging the diversity that exists within the far right, its diffusion beyond (western) Europe and its mobilization outside the electoral arena.

Keywords Far right · Radicalism · Populism · Extremism · Party politics · Social movements

Introduction

Over the last decades, representative democracies have witnessed the resurgence of far-right politics, as parties, movements and ideas of the ‘far right’ have profoundly reshaped social and political cleavages in Europe and beyond. Political parties that used to be marginal and marginalized, like the French Front National (FN; now Rassemblement National—National Rally), progressively gained electoral support, and ultimately drifted into the political mainstream, by radicalizing the positions of their

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competitors, and—at times—by entering governments. The sociocultural themes at the core of their campaigns, such as immigration, crime and European integration, have come to dominate public agendas to such an extent that they are no longer exclusively their own. In response to this increasing societal relevance, since the early 1980s more articles and books have been written about the far right than about all other party families combined (Mudde 2016, p. 2). As the second decade of the new millennium draws to a close, the far right is one of the most widely studied phenomena in the international literature on political science, and the time is ripe for a critical review of this scholarship. While this ‘insatiable demand’ (Bale 2012) led to significant progress in the understanding of far-right politics, the social scientific scholarship suffers, however, from at least three major shortcomings: *Eurocentrism*, *Electoralism* and *Externalism*. These three E’s risk obfuscating some of the most important transformations taking place within the far right.

Following the three successive ‘waves’ of right-wing extremism in post-war Europe (von Beyme 1988), far-right politics have entered into a new phase, where elements that used to be crucial are losing momentum, while others that were previously less important are acquiring centre stage (Mudde 2013). To date, however, scholars have been slow in acknowledging this changing scenario. First, the mobilization by nativist-authoritarian groups and individuals (Mudde 2007; see below) constitutes an increasingly global phenomenon. Far-right parties continue to gain momentum in France and across Europe, but their ideas are also siphoning into the global level. Today, some of the world’s most highly populated countries are run by right-wing populist leaders, such as India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi (leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party—BJP and representative of the Hindu nationalist movement), or Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump (both of whom came to power on the list of non-far-right parties and then moved progressively to the right). While a growing body of research acknowledges this, as I will illustrate, most studies still suffer from a glaring ‘Eurocentric’ bias, in terms of both theories and empirical analysis.

Second, the far right is increasingly active in the streets. Today, it no longer mobilizes only in the form of political parties and electoral politics, but it also features street groups and social movement organizations engaging in the arena of protest (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019; Caiani et al. 2012). Yet, as the scholarship became increasingly specialized and ‘electoralist’, interdisciplinary dialogue shrank, alongside studies on non-party politics and the progressive embedding of the far right in society.

Third, far-right actors are increasingly aware of the utility of visibility and newsworthiness, and are therefore open to academic research and insider observation (Cahuzac and François 2013; Bouron and Froio 2018). By contrast, research on the far right has become routinized and mannerist: it reproduces classic ‘externalist’ studies of the 1990s and 2000s, looking at the far right from the outside rather than exploring new opportunities, notably offered by digital data, insider observation and direct interaction with individuals who support, or identify with, the far right.

In this review, I make the case for reinstating the study of the far right within broader social science theories on political parties and social movements, as a necessary step towards a renewed research agenda on contemporary far-right politics. To



do so, I bring together the main insights from research published in English, French and Italian over the past decade (since 2010). This literature review will be by necessity selective (due to the magnitude of existing research on this topic), and purposely idiosyncratic (as it focuses on a small number of contributions which I consider crucial to understand ongoing developments in the field). The article is divided in two main sections. First, I set the perimeter of the review: I discuss how the notion of 'far right' has been used to study right-wing politics since the early post-war years and present the successive waves of scholarship that have expanded knowledge on these topics. Second, I suggest ways forward for future research, building upon what I consider to be the main limitations in the existing literature, namely eurocentrism, electoralism and externalism. The conclusion suggests that only a truly interdisciplinary approach can broaden the focus of existing studies, addressing new research questions with innovative methodological designs. This may contribute to the scholarly understanding of continuities and changes in contemporary far-right politics, while avoiding the risks of over-specialization and routinization in social science research.

Delimiting the field of study

The extremist, radical and populist variants of the far right

This article deals with the broad category of far-right actors. Debates about the definition of the far right flourished in the 1970s, starting with early comparative studies on right-wing extremism (Del Boca and Giovana 1969; Eisenberg 1967; von Beyme 1988). This led researchers publishing in English to progressively distinguish between 'extreme' and 'radical' variants of right-wing politics (Mudde 2000), which are both encompassed in the French notion of *extrême droite* (Camus and Lebourg 2015).¹ Today, most authors agree that far-right ideology rests on the belief that inequalities are natural and therefore some groups are superior to others. This informs the core worldview of the far right, which combines *authoritarianism*—the belief in a strictly ordered society in which any infringement of the dominant moral standards are severely sanctioned—and *nativism*—the idea that nation states shall be inhabited only by native people, because all non-native elements, persons and cultures constitute a potential threat (Mudde 2007). This resonates with Lipset and Raab's definition of political extremism as being opposition to pluralism based on a monist view of society that seeks to repress all differences and dissent (Lipset and Raab 1970).

Specifically, most scholarship in English distinguishes between right-wing actors that are entirely anti-democratic—the *extreme right*—and others that only oppose some key features of liberal democracy, notably pluralism and the protection of minorities—the *radical right*. In essence, the extreme right operates in direct opposition to the democratic constitutional order, whereas the radical right has a strained

¹ Cas Mudde's pioneering article on 'The War of Words' (Mudde 1996) was among the first to raise this terminological question with respect to no less than 26 definitions of right-wing extremism by then available in academic literature.



relationship with the tenets of liberal democracy, but not with democracy per se. Hence, contemporary radical right organizations are hostile to liberal democracy but accept popular sovereignty and the minimal procedural rules of parliamentary democracy, and often combine nativism with a populist vision of society as divided into the two antagonistic moral categories of the ‘pure’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elites (Mudde 2007, 23).² This includes notable figures like Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu and Jair Bolsonaro, as well as the majority of radical right parties represented in parliaments across Europe (e.g. the French Front National, the Italian Lega Nord, and Alternative für Deutschland in Germany) and beyond (e.g. the Justice and Development Party—AKP in Turkey, and the BJP in India). In contrast, extreme right organizations are inspired by Fascism or National Socialism, believe in a system ruled by individuals who possess special leadership characteristics and who are naturally different from other people, and are open to the use of violence to achieve political goals (Eatwell 2011). The extreme right thus includes actors such as the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn in Greece, or the neo-Fascist movement CasaPound in Italy, and paramilitary organizations like the National Volunteer Organization in India and the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan in the US.

The advantage of using the English notion of far right is that it is an umbrella concept including extreme right and radical right variants, which also accounts for the existing differences within this category. This notion acknowledges that the contours of the classification are blurred, as activists of radical right-wing parties often have close contacts with extreme right groups and networks, which makes it difficult, in practice, to draw a watertight distinction between the two subtypes (Copsey 2018). Hence, the term far right is more inclusive without entailing any loss of precision, because the concept still bears a ‘traceable relation’ to a set of specific factors (Sartori 1970, 1041).

Three waves of research

Cas Mudde suggested that the literature on the far right could be classified into three academically distinct waves of scholarship (2016). The first wave of studies was mainly concerned with the conceptualization of post-war right-wing extremism, whereas the second focused primarily on demand-side explanations for the success of far-right parties, and the third brought attention to the supply side of far-right politics.

The first wave of research lasted from 1945 to 1980. The phenomenon was mainly labelled as post-war ‘neo-fascism’, and it was particularly pronounced in contexts where fascist regimes collapsed by force, such as Germany and Italy. These years are characterized by relatively few comparative works, mainly by historians, focusing on the concepts and ideas of post-war right-wing extremism (Eisenberg

² There is simply not enough space in this essay to address the debates on whether populism configures an ideological trait or a political style, and on populism’s democratic credentials (e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Aslanidis 2016). Still, my choice to focus this review on the more general category of the far right allows addressing both populist and non-populist variants.



1967; Del Boca and Giovana 1969). In his review of French scholarship on the Front National, Dézé underlines how a whole strand of early research focused on defining the party's ideology and its links with historical Fascism (Berstein 1991; Taguieff 1985; Camus 1997; Chebel d'Appollonia 1998; Dézé 2017).³ Overall, research in this phase mainly aimed at describing the continuity between the pre-war and post-war periods and the incompatibility between the ideology of far-right groups and the newly established democratic constitutional orders in Western Europe.

A second wave of studies on far-right politics in Europe took place between 1980 and the early 2000s. These scholars have been concerned mostly with the political demand side of far-right politics, in other words, the societal demands to which these parties responded (Eatwell 2003; Mayer 2002). Attention was therefore mainly on the causes of the phenomenon, focusing on individual-level explanations, based on sociodemographic profiles, psychological features, and attitudes, as well as structural factors such as the institutional settings, unemployment and immigration (see: Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018; Amengay and Stockemer 2018). This approach, strongly influenced by U.S. scholarship on the 'normal pathology' of representative democracies (Bell 1964; Lipset and Raab 1970), led to many comparative studies on the electorates of the Front National, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Italian Social Movement (MSI) and the Flemish Block (VB) (Billiet and Witte 1995; Lubbers 2001). A similar tendency holds true in France, with respect to the emergence and electorate of the FN (Vanlaer 1987; Falter 1999; Mayer and Perrineau 1992; Mayer 1997, 2007). During this same period, the far right was undergoing major cultural and ideological developments (Minkenberg 1998), which resulted in the emergence of new partisan cleavages and the electoral breakthrough of contemporary radical right parties (Ignazi 2005; Mayer and Perrineau 1992). In response, scholars of the far right engaged in the first successful attempts to link historical approaches with political science and sociology, especially through modernization theories (Minkenberg 2000). A major contribution came from the work of Hans-Georg Betz, Piero Ignazi, and Herbert Kitschelt, who reinterpreted the original historical studies of neo-fascism with theories and concepts developed in the field of party politics (Betz 1994; McGann and Kitschelt 2005). Notably, some authors suggested that the progressive intergenerational value change affecting advanced industrial societies since the 1970s produced not only political alignments and new movements on the left (Inglehart's 'silent revolution' 1977), but also authoritarian reactions and the reappearance of parties on the far right (Ignazi's 'silent counter revolution' 1992).

A third wave of studies emerged in the early 2000s as scholars shifted attention away from demand-side explanations and started to focus on supply-side factors, namely on the political messages that far-right actors send to their voters and supporters and on their organizational characteristics. Researchers now looked at radical right political parties themselves, rather than studying their electorates and the

³ Defining fascism in its multiple historical and contextual configurations goes beyond the scope of this review. I will refer to 'fascism' when dealing with the broad fascist ideology and to 'Fascism' (with a capital 'F') when discussing its institutional manifestations through history, such as Italian Fascism.



circumstances that would explain their electoral success (Swyngedouw and Ivaldi 2001; Ivarsflaten 2005; De Lange 2007).

On the one hand, political scientists have looked at the role of the far right in party competition (Meguid 2005; Van Spanje 2010; Downes and Loveless 2018). They argued that the success of far-right ‘niche’ parties does not depend on demand-side factors only, but also on their own strategies and on the responses by other parties in the system (Rovny 2013; Pardos-Prado 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2016). On the other, the publication of Cas Mudde’s *The Populist Radical Right in Europe* marked a renewed interest by scholars in the ideologies of these parties (Betz and Johnson 2004; Stanley 2008). Furthermore, scholars started questioning the internal workings, or ‘internal-supply side’ of the far right (Art 2011). This concerned notably the role of leadership and charisma (Carter 2005; Van der Brug and Mughan 2007), and that of the internal committees in charge of communication and propaganda (Hameau 1992; Ellinas 2010; Aalberg et al. 2016). While some researchers also began to focus on membership (Orfali 2012; Biggs and Knauss 2012) and on the relationship between activists and the group (Blee 2003; Dechezelles 2011; Busher 2015), international comparative work in this area is still marginal.

In short, with the rise of the number of electorally relevant populist radical right parties, research on the far right has become a fertile field of study. The three waves of research discussed above made a fundamental contribution to conceptualizing contemporary far-right politics, to understanding its root causes, and to explaining the related political and social developments. However, this near infinite supply of studies has not offered fresh perspectives, and therefore risks missing some crucial developments in contemporary far-right politics. I have identified at least three reasons explaining why current research fails to make further advancements in the comprehension of the far right, which relate to: a) the Eurocentric focus of most research, b) the bias towards elections and political parties, and c) the predominance of externalist approaches and methods over internalist ones based on insider observation. As I shall illustrate, addressing these limits in future research implies a fundamental change in the way in which we study contemporary far-right politics.

Studying the far right: limits and ways forward

Eurocentrism

A first limit of the literature is that it is disproportionately focused on Europe and on a few national cases. Despite significant progress in recent years, the scholarship still concentrates on specific countries and radical right parties, whereas other manifestations of the contemporary far right receive little or no attention at all, especially those outside Europe. Furthermore, scholars observe the far right mainly at the national level, overlooking the role of local politics and the increasing importance of supranational arenas.

To begin with, the literature examined only the successful parties, which led to an overwhelming focus on the same western European countries. At least until



the mid-2000s, most research focused on Germany, the United Kingdom and France, and on the countries hosting the then successful far-right parties, such as Austria, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands (Ignazi 2003; Ivaldi 2004; Dézé 2004; Koopmans and Muis 2009). While these countries still receive most of the scholarly interest, attention to Central and Eastern Europe increased in response to the growing relevance of actors such as the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the League of Polish Families (LPR), among others. Scholars engaged in comparing the ideologies of these parties and their role in national party competition in the region (Pytlas 2015; Pirro 2015). The same applies to Nordic countries: as in the recent past the Norwegian Progress party, the Danish People's Party, the True Finns, and the Sweden Democrats became increasingly successful in the elections, they also received growing attention from far-right scholars (Arter 2010; Jungar and Jupskås 2014; Rydgren and van der Meiden 2018). By contrast, there is still little work on non-European parties and few efforts have been made to link research on Europe and other regions (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019; Leidig 2019). This is even more frustrating considering the relevance of far-right politics across Latin America, India, Indonesia, Turkey (Jaffrelot 2007; Tapia 2011; Lengkeek 2018), as well as industrialized countries like Australia, Israel, Japan, South Africa and the United States (Fleming and Mondon 2018; Perliger and Pedahzur 2018; Higuchi 2018; Parker 2018). In short, while the number of studies has grown significantly, we still know very little about the nature and behaviour of several important political parties beyond the western European context.

Moreover, most of the abovementioned scholarship observes far-right politics at the national level, based on the assumption that mobilization is largely shaped by the national political context. In contrast, some scholars have also looked at the local level to study the behaviour of far-right parties in power, especially concerning urban policy-making on immigration, integration and asylum (Bolin, Lidén, and Nyhlén 2014; Castelli Gattinara 2016; Paxton 2019). Others have suggested that far-right ideas and activities can also inform supranational and transnational arenas (Macklin 2013). Taking advantage of the European Parliament, parties like the French Front National and the Danish People's Party have effectively entered a new international and transnational phase (McDonnell and Werner 2019). In addition, recent years have brought about a revival in cross-country mobilization via the swift spread of the pan-European Identitarian network (Zuquete 2018), the emulation of the PEGIDA rallies outside Germany (Berntzen and Weisskirker 2016) and the rise of citizen street patrols and vigilante groups (Bjørge and Mareš 2019). Finally, certain far-right ideas, notably white supremacy (Blee 2017a), anti-feminism (Blakely 2010; Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017; Lavizzari 2019) and Islamophobia (Bail 2014; Froio and Ganesh 2019), have transcended national borders to become effectively transnational, also thanks to the increasing availability of internet-mediated technologies that allow for greater connectivity between actors (Schroeder 2019). More efforts, however, are needed in the future in order to fully acknowledge how the far right informs local and supranational arenas, especially concerning the interplay between far-right politics and multi-level governance structures.



Electoralism

A second, major shortcoming is that the study of the contemporary far right, especially in the English-speaking literature, is a predominantly party-centred discipline. Despite the growing real-world relevance of far-right grassroots movements, the collective action dimension of far-right politics remains a blind spot in comparative research (Minkenberg 2003; 2019; see also: Lebourg 2015). Most notably, while many recognize that far-right parties are part of a broader mobilization process, few studies have gone beyond electoral politics and looked at demand and supply factors of the far right in the non-party sector.

Concerning the demand side of far-right politics, few topics have received as much attention as the description of why people vote for far-right parties. By contrast, few scholars have considered the intersections between different forms of participation in the electoral and protest arenas. Researchers have mainly looked at the micro- and macro-level conditions explaining the electoral support for far-right parties, often focusing on immigration figures, such as inflows, the framing of public debates, and the contact between immigrants and native population (Lubbers 2001; Arzheimer 2009; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2018). Anti-immigration sentiments in fact emerge as the single most important reason for supporting the far right in elections (Arzheimer 2018; Rydgren 2008), just as authoritarianism tends to resonate most commonly among less educated, mainly male, voters (Ivaresflaten and Stubbager 2012). Even though socioeconomic factors are at play (Coffé 2005; Rydgren 2013), most agree that voters are generally attracted more by sociocultural issues than by economic policy programmes of the far right (Oesch 2008; Ivaldi 2015). The emphasis on electoral politics also prompted considerable attention to the role of women in far-right parties (Köttig et al. 2017), and the presence (and, according to some, the progressive disappearance) of a large gender gap in far-right electorates (Givens 2004; Immerzeel et al. 2015; Amengay et al. 2017).

Very few studies, however, applied these insights beyond the realm of political parties, by comparing different subtypes of far-right actors engaging in elections and in the streets (Castelli Gattinara 2017; Froio 2018). While some studies looked at the social characteristics of movement activists and the profiles of far-right protesters and online publics in France (Dechezelles 2009; Bouron 2015, 2017; Gimenez and Voirol 2017), we still know very little about these aspects in an international comparative perspective (see e.g. Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Miller-Idriss 2017; Spierings et al. 2015). Similarly, there is little empirical research on the nexus between individual factors, notably gender, and far right mobilization in general (Blee 2017b). Similar studies could help shed light on whether the far right is drifting away from pre-existing social cleavages in the attempt to build its own social base.

As regards the supply side of far-right politics, comparative scholarship focuses primarily on the electoral success of political parties. This applies to research on both contextual aspects, like political opportunity structures, and factors inherent to the far right itself, such as ideas, organization and leadership (Rydgren 2005; Mudde 2007). Studies at the contextual level developed spatial models of party competition, suggesting that the convergence of established parties, institutional arrangements



and electoral laws, explain far-right parties' breakthrough and performance (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Rovny and Edwards 2012; van Spanje and Graaf 2018). The far right also thrives in response to shifting dimensions of conflict, as sociocultural issues become increasingly salient in public debates, in times of high abstention and volatility (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Bornschier 2018). While some of these studies have addressed the interactions between protest politics and electoral change in general, only a few researchers have looked at the linkages between elections and far-right movements in particular (Lebourg 2015; Pirro 2019). Other studies, instead, have shown that electoral success also rests on how far-right parties work internally and on their ability to develop successful frames (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Halikiopoulou, Mock, and Vasilopoulou 2013). Yet, we still know little about why people join and what does membership entail, especially if we turn attention away from the restricted domain of institutionalized political parties (Pirro and Castelli Gattinara 2018). Although some attention has been accorded to issues such as charisma and leaders (McDonnell 2016; Campus 2017), we still lack a comprehensive understanding of far-right intellectuals, writers and opinion leaders, and of the mechanism by which different types of groups identify and train their cadres or militants (Jupskås 2015; Göppfarth 2018). At present, considerable gaps remain concerning the new forms of collective action by, for example, PEGIDA, the Identitarians and other grassroots groups (Busher 2015; Virchow 2016; Ravndal 2018), as well as the transmission of practices and ideas across these groups, the media and more established far-right parties (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2018a).

Finally, a third strand of scholarship deals with the impact of the far right. This too, however, is conceptualized predominantly in electoral terms and with respect to policy influence in the domain of immigration and integration. These studies suggest that far-right parties have been relatively unsuccessful in government, but successful in shifting the positions of mainstream parties on these issues (Zaslove 2004; Van Spanje 2010; Carvalho 2016). Many different paths can be followed to expand this strand of research, especially if scholars acknowledge the indirect impact of the far right via agenda setting and protest (Schain 2006; Minkenberg 2001). To begin with, we need to develop studies on the impact of the far right on public policy, beyond the areas of migration and security (Hampshire and Bale 2015). If, traditionally, the far right engaged in policy-making primarily in areas such as diversity, crime and corruption, these actors are becoming increasingly interested in the environment (François 2016; Forchtner 2019), labour market regulations, redistributive policies and public health (Otjes et al. 2018; Falkenbach and Greer 2018), as well as foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). Further studies could also look at the broader impact of the far right on public attitudes and on the quality of public debates, as well as on liberal democratic institutions per se (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Minkenberg 2017).

Going beyond a limited focus on elections and campaigning would thus allow examining more closely the impact of the far right not only on people and parties, but also on policies and politics. To have a better understanding of the impact of the contemporary far right, scholars must recognize that these actors no longer play the sole role of outsiders, and that far-right politics is no longer limited to far-right parties. We need to study the process by which these parties have become integrated



members of the political systems, and the mechanisms that are making the distinction between mainstream and far-right politics more and more blurred. Similarly, we still lack a comprehensive account of how far-right fringe ideas drift from grassroots milieus into the mainstream, and whether this is simply a product of far-right ideologies, or rather of other factors, such as structure, agenda, or tactics (Bail 2012; Froio et al. 2020). The progressive blending of the conservative and far right, and the mainstreaming and normalization of radical and extreme right ideas, is in fact likely to represent one of the most fundamental challenges to liberal democracies in the years to come.

Externalism

The final shortcoming of current scholarship is methodological and it pertains to the empirical observation of far-right actors. To date, most comparative research is still ‘externalist’ in the sense that it focuses on processes and factors operating outside the far right, which are observed retrospectively, based on secondary data (Goodwin 2006). So-called ‘internalist’ research made of primary data gathered from insider observation has been applied for several case studies in France and Italy (e.g. Bizeul 2003; Avanza 2008; Barone et Négrier 2015; Bulli 2020), but it still suffers from a glaring lack of empirical analysis in international comparative research. The impressive amount of attention towards the study of the far right over the past years, in fact, marked not only a quantitative rise in publications on this subject, but also a turning point in the methods adopted by (especially English-speaking) researchers. Most of the early work in this field rested on qualitative methods and original data, but were seldom truly comparative. The rise in the electoral support for far-right parties in Western Europe, and the gradual integration of this subfield of study in the broader political science literature, have instead progressively increased the number of comparative studies, but also the share of research resting on quantitative methods and secondary data.

On the one hand, this reflects broader trends within the discipline, as prominent political science journals tend to favour this type of method and data. The shift towards quantitative secondary data is linked to the type of research questions that authors seek to address, since most researchers have been interested in explaining the contextual and/or individual explanations for the success of far-right parties (Stockemer et al. 2018). Accordingly, they have based their studies on pre-existing databases, such as the Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey and the data banks of OECD and the World Bank, providing detailed information on countries’ economic and demographic profiles, and aggregate attitudinal data that could help to predict the breakthrough of far-right parties in a given context or time. Yet, even scholars interested in studying parties themselves, their ideology and organization, often rely on secondary data. Datasets like the Comparative Manifesto Project (now MARPOR), the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), and the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), while without doubt useful in large comparative studies in which far-right political parties are one of the (independent) variables of interest, run the risk of equating party ideologies to policy priorities (MARPOR) or issue emphasis (CAP).



On the other hand, the prevalence of externalist approaches reflects some specific problems linked to the study of the far right itself, which can be attributed to mutual suspicion between far-rightists and academics, and the reluctance of the former to share information with scholars concerning the workings of their organizations, or the profile of their activists. Hence, studies on the internal workings of far-right groups have been mostly based on secondary data, to the point that very few assumptions on these aspects have been tested empirically (Blee 2007). It has been difficult to derive insider information about the structures and procedures of these organizations from activists themselves. Today, however, many far-right radical right parties and movements have grown aware of the usefulness of visibility in the news (Ellinas 2010), and they are thus increasingly open to scientific research. Hence, a number of comparative studies have successfully applied an 'internalist' approach and/or used interviews with members and representatives (Art 2011; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). These studies complement the small amount of scholarship relying on in-depth interviews with far-right activists (Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Ellinas and Lamprianou 2017; Castelli Gattinara 2018; Pirro and Róna 2019), and the even smaller ethnographic literature focusing on the far right (Blee and Deutsch 2012; Albanese et al. 2014; Meadowcroft and Morrow 2017; Thorleifsson 2018). Despite their potential to innovate the literature, however, the data produced via face-to-face interactions with individuals holding far-right values poses specific challenges, for instance concerning value neutrality and the management of stigma, which are increasingly addressed in recent works (Avanza 2008; Boumaza and Campana 2007; Toscano 2019).

In recent years, moreover, comparative political scientists have also begun to invest in mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data. This has mainly benefited from new software that allows the gathering and processing of large amounts of data extracted from the internet. Similar databases have been used predominantly to examine the structure of far-right networks online and offline (Pirro et al. 2019; Klein and Muis 2019), but can also facilitate studying the individual characteristics of far-right activists who are unwilling to take part in face-to-face interviews (Burris et al. 2000). Similarly, using primary data produced by far-right actors on the web allows measuring the content and nature of mobilization by those groups that struggle to gain visibility in the mainstream media (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2018b). So far, however, scholars have been slow in acknowledging this changing scenario, which is why most of the existing knowledge still rests on studies conducted by standing at a distance from far right actors and individuals, both online and offline.

Conclusion

Since 1945, most countries in Europe and beyond have witnessed the emergence of successful far-right political parties and movements. While at first these actors occupied a marginal position and obtained little electoral support, at the turn of the twenty-first century, their popularity increased along with their parliamentary representation, media visibility and societal impact. In this article, I have



presented a non-exhaustive overview of the most recent research on this topic in the international literature in political science. I have shown that, as the far right constituted an endless source of fascination for the media, think tanks, students and researchers alike, its study has made much progress over the past decades. At the same time, however, this field of research has become increasingly specialized: the exceptionalism with which the far right has been treated came at the cost of a progressive detachment from other disciplines and the understanding of broader political and social processes. Hence, my main goal has been to highlight the ways in which the knowledge built throughout the 1990s and 2000s might need to be critically reviewed to account for current developments in far-right politics and beyond.

In this ever-growing subdiscipline, there are still areas that remain largely obscure in the study of the far right due to the three E's. Most notably, and partly in response to broader developments in international research evaluation standards and publication practices, many recent studies tend to simply replicate existing quantitative electoral research, generally focusing on a very limited set of European contexts and parties, and largely failing to formulate new research questions. As a result, we lack a comprehensive acknowledgement of the diversity that exists within this family of actors, the diffusion of the far right beyond (western) Europe and its mobilization beyond the electoral arena. The electoralist bias of most international comparative research is even more serious if one considers that, today, far-right demonstrations are a common occurrence in the streets of major cities worldwide. This plea for greater interdisciplinary dialogue seems rather compelling with non-party organizations such as think tanks, civil society groups and intellectual circles becoming increasingly visible within and without the far-right milieu. The sociodemographic of far-right protest seems to be changing too, as radical activists are often involved in multiple types of organizations and activities, which in turn requires methodological innovation in the study of online and offline participation. These developments may indicate that far-right actors are no longer simply campaign strategists who catalyse the vote of dissatisfied citizens via electoral propaganda, but are turning into truly bottom-up representatives, with solid roots in society and a more clearly defined social base.

Overall, to better understand the far right today, scholars need to pay more attention to the coupling of party and non-party politics and the progressive mainstreaming of far-right ideas in contemporary societies. These questions concern not only political scientists, but also the public at large, as they are part of the broader societal debate on the relationships between the far right and representative democracy. It is only by infusing the field with insights from broader social and political science paradigms, by adding knowledge from other contexts beyond Europe, and by exploring new methods and data, that we can acknowledge and theorize ongoing developments within this specific breed of politics. Re-embedding the study of the far right into the broader study of party politics and political sociology is thus a necessary step forward for a new research agenda on the contemporary far right.

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