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The mainstreaming of the far right and democratic erosion. Three analytical pathways

Caterina Froio

Department of Political Science, Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics,
Sciences Po, Paris, France

ABSTRACT

This lecture, delivered in memory of Peter Mair, discusses how political scientists can account for the far right's evolving relationship with democracy as far-right actors become increasingly integrated into mainstream politics. Building on Mair's diagnosis of the hollowing out of representative democracy, I argue that this integration challenges the conceptual and empirical frameworks long structuring the study of the far right. Three key pathways are identified: (a) defining what far right is, as distinctions between extreme, radical, and mainstream actors have blurred; (b) understanding what the far right does in power, where focus on policy outcomes — especially immigration — has obscured how far-right actors embed coercion and targeted violence within state institutions; and (c) locating where the far right operates, as movements increasingly operate across both civil society and electoral politics. The lecture proposes expanding party-centred perspectives to view the far right as a nativist-authoritarian social movement integrating multiple actors across a spectrum from street violence to institutional governance. By situating the far right within the 'void' Mair described, I highlights how democratic withdrawal has created structural opportunities for movements challenging liberal democracy, offering new directions for research on the far right, democracy, political parties, and social movements.

KEYWORDS Far right; democracy; political violence; civil society; political parties; social movements

1. Introduction

Thank you for your kind invitation. To be sincere, it is both an honour and a heavy responsibility to speak here today, as my research – and the way I conduct it – owes much to Peter Mair. I first met him when I began my PhD at the European University Institute under his supervision in 2010, and even though our time together was brief, he has embodied the ideal type of academic supervisor ever since. I was struck by this renowned scholar of political parties who devoted his work not to demonstrating their continued

CONTACT Caterina Froio  caterina.froio@sciencespo.fr  Department of Political Science, Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, Sciences Po 27, rue Saint Guillaume – 75007, Paris, France

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relevance, but to showing their decline: because parties had withdrawn from civil society (Katz & Mair, 1995), because they struggled to represent voters' preferences (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), and because they failed to adapt to multi-level governance in the European Union (Mair, 2013a, 2014).

Over time, I came to realize what was special about Peter: he was not interested in trendy topics; he studied only what genuinely intrigued him and approached these topics in the way he truly believed best. He engaged with mainstream literature but always read broadly and critically. Similarly, over the years, it became clear to me that what he was interested in was not only political parties, but democracy and society at large. He showed how actors once in the mainstream could drift to the margins. This broader concern was most clearly expressed in his posthumous 2013 book, *Ruling the Void* (Mair, 2013b), where he warned that representative democracy was becoming hollow: citizens withdrawing, while political elites retreat into insulated institutions.

The 'void' created by this mutual withdrawal also constituted a structural opportunity: an opening in the political landscape that could be seized by actors outside the traditional party system. In quantum physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle tells us that the void is never truly empty – energy fluctuations constantly generate brief appearances of matter and anti-matter. Contemporary democracies seem to follow the same logic: the political void Peter described has not remained empty. It has been filled by a social movement – one that is nativist and authoritarian, integrating multiple types of political and cultural actors, and engaging in a wide spectrum of practices, from insurgent street violence to institutional governance. Far-right actors, once marginal, have entered mainstream politics, operating simultaneously in elections, parties, protests, and civil society to consolidate power and reshape democratic norms. This dynamic extends beyond Europe, wherever the far right has gained strength. This keynote outlines three possible pathways through which political science can advance the study of far-right mainstreaming and the resulting forms of democratic erosion.

For the last fifteen years, I have studied these actors – the far right. Like Peter, I focus on a single piece of the puzzle, but that piece illuminates the broader transformation of democracy itself. In this keynote, I offer a broad overview – rather than an exhaustive account – of why, in my understanding at least, political science struggles to grasp the contemporary far right and its relationship with democracy, and how we move forward.

I argue that the discipline is challenged not because far-right actors are more electorally dominant or more influential in policymaking today than in the past, but because their influence is no longer confined to parties, elections, parliaments, or policy outcomes. Instead, it extends into civil society, protest movements, and cultural institutions, making far-right politics a comprehensive social and political project with profound implications for

democratic norms and institutions. Such engagement within civil society can contribute to the consolidation of support and to the diversification of far-right agendas and constituencies. I therefore propose three possible pathways for studying far-right mainstreaming and democratic erosion: (a) what the far right is as it becomes normalized; (b) what it does in power as erosion unfolds from within; and (c) where it operates as it expands beyond parties into movements and civil society.

2. What the far right is

Political science still struggles to understand what the far right is in three main ways. First, the classic distinctions that structured the field – especially between the extreme right and the populist radical right – no longer fully capture contemporary dynamics. Second, the boundaries between the far right and the political mainstream have become increasingly blurred. Third, these shifts are closely tied to the broader rise of illiberalism, as far-right actors today increasingly operate from within democratic institutions to erode liberal democratic norms.

2.1. From extreme to radical right: the limits of post-war typologies

Far-right mainstreaming begins with conceptual normalization: when categories blur, democratic boundaries blur too. Today's radical right has moved from the margins to the mainstream of politics, using elections and institutions to undermine liberal democracy from within. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) note, this form of democratic erosion is particularly insidious because it unfolds under the guise of popular mandate. How we define far-right actors matters both theoretically and politically: it shapes how we assess their compatibility with democracy and determines which policy responses – such as bans or *cordon sanitaire* – are considered appropriate.

Compared to other party families, the far right has attracted disproportionate scholarly attention within political science, even before attaining significant electoral relevance, largely because of its contested relationship with democracy. Figure 1 shows trends in scholarly publications by political party families, using data from Web of Science.

Since the late 2000s, publications about the far right (shown in black) have nearly doubled those on all other party families combined. Yet despite this wealth of research, our understanding of the far right's relationship with democracy remains incomplete, because the old conceptual distinctions used to study it are no longer analytically adequate.

The post-war distinction between the extreme right (opposing democracy outright) and the (populist) radical right (opposing liberal democracy) no longer captures contemporary dynamics. Beyond differences within the far

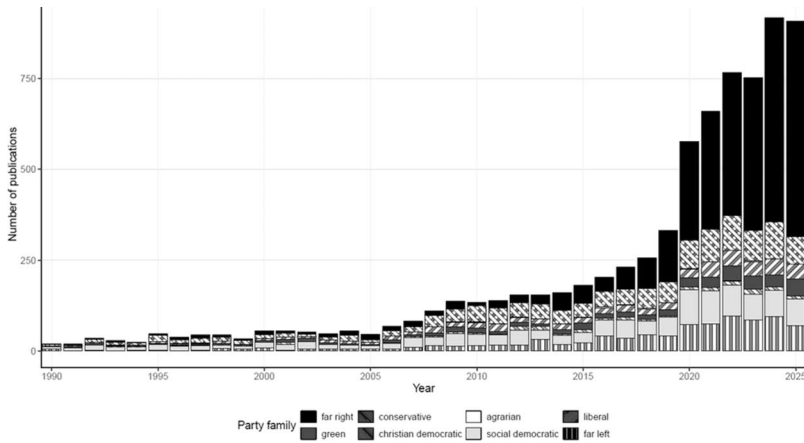


Figure 1. Trends in scholarly publications by political party family (1990–2025, Web of Science). Author’s visualizations based on data from Web of Science.

right, we must also consider overlaps with mainstream parties, as these shifting boundaries drive mainstreaming and shape the far right’s impact on democratic norms and institutions. The challenge is thus not only to refine definitions but also to recognize that extreme, radical, and, to some extent, mainstream actors increasingly converge in practice. Historically, the extreme-radical distinction has been central to tracing the evolution of this heterogeneous political family and its relationship with democracy (Mudde, 1996).

Drawing on Von Beyme (1988), the post-war development of far-right activism can be roughly divided into three waves: the first wave (c. 1945–1955) consisted of small neo-fascist groups nostalgic for historical fascism and openly anti-democratic. Their agendas focused on issues such as amnesty for wartime collaborators, and, with the exception of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI, Italian Social Movement), they remained politically marginal. The second wave (c. 1955–1970s) was driven less by fascist nostalgia and more by protest movements opposing taxation and welfare expansion. These groups achieved brief electoral success before quickly fading. Notable examples include France’s *Poujadistes* and Scandinavian ‘Progress’ parties, such as Denmark’s *Glistrup* movement. The third wave (late 1970s – 1990s) saw far-right parties achieve significant electoral breakthroughs, including France’s *Front National* (FN, National Front; renamed *Rassemblement National*, RN, National Rally in 2011), Austria’s *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ, Freedom Party of Austria), and Germany’s *Die Republikaner* (REP, The Republicans). These parties shifted the far-right agenda from fascist nostalgia to contemporary issues – immigration, national identity, and welfare – marking a move from petit-bourgeois protest to ethno-

nationalist and anti-immigrant politics, often backed by new intellectual networks. This shift paved the way for the contemporary ‘radical’ right.

By the 1990s, scholars refined this picture. Ignazi (1992, 1996) distinguished an old extreme right rooted in interwar fascism from a post-industrial extreme right combining neoliberalism with authoritarian and nativist values. Kitschelt and colleagues linked these developments to post-industrial societal transformations (Kitschelt, 2007), emphasizing populism and appeals to ‘the pure people’ against ‘corrupt elites’ (Betz, 1999; Mudde, 1996; Taggart, 2000, 2004). By the 2000s, a degree of consensus emerged: the distinction between extreme right and radical right populist parties became widely adopted (Carter, 2018). Mudde’s *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (2007) crystallized this framework:

- The extreme right rejects the very essence of democracy, namely popular sovereignty and majority rule;
- The populist radical right, by contrast, accepts electoral democracy but opposes fundamental aspects of liberal democracy: especially minority rights, the rule of law, and pluralism;
- Both share nativist and authoritarian worldviews.¹

This distinction has proven constructive to separate anti-system movements, opposing democracy in principle – like the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD, National Democratic Party of Germany, now *Die Heimat*) in Germany, the MSI in Italy or *Χρυσή Αυγή* (GD, Golden Dawn) in Greece – from radical right populist parties such as the *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League, renamed *Lega* in 2019), the FN/RN in France, or the FPÖ, which historically accepted electoral democracy while opposing key elements of liberal democracy – pluralism, minorities’ rights, and the rule of law – under the guise of representing ‘the people’.

Contemporary developments, however, require nuance. While parties such as the MSI, NPD, and GD were ideologically anti-democratic, they remained politically marginal. By contrast, today’s far-right actors – including Trump’s Republican Party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany), *Vorum voor Democratie* (FvD, Forum for Democracy) in the Netherlands, *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (Fidesz, Hungarian Civic Alliance), *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, Law and Justice) in Poland, *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP, Indian People’s Party) in India, and *Fratelli d’Italia* (Fdi, Brothers of Italy) led by Giorgia Meloni – demonstrate that mainstreamed far-right movements can combine electoral legitimacy with overtly anti-democratic, exclusionary, and nativist rhetoric. More importantly, they can translate these agendas into concrete policies and institutional practices that erode liberal democratic norms and advance illiberal objectives (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018).

Some contemporary radical-right actors are at least partially anti-democratic, not only in ideology – by challenging pluralism and liberal democratic principles – but also in practice, by exploiting institutions to consolidate power. For example, Trump’s Republican Party attempted to overturn electoral outcomes during the storming of the United States Congress (2021). In Hungary in 2014, Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán openly pursued an ‘an illiberal state, a non-liberal state,’² via constitutional and institutional reforms consolidating executive power. In India, the BJP maintains close ideological and organizational ties with the Hindu extremist *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Volunteer Organization), which has played a central role in shaping the party’s political agenda. In the current wave of far-right politics, some movements transform into governing projects, using their electoral mandate and popular support to hollow out democratic institutions. By ‘weaponizing democratic legitimacy’ they exploit majority rule and procedural authority to consolidate power, curtail rights, weaken institutional checks, and reshape policies in ways that undermine liberal democratic principles. These developments raise critical questions about the overlap between radical-right and mainstream parties, which the next section addresses.

2.2. Mainstream convergence: the normalization of far-right politics within democracy

If the boundaries between the extreme and radical right are eroding, so too are the boundaries between mainstream parties and the far right. This is not only because far-right actors have entered government in some of the world’s largest democracies – such as Brazil, India, and the United States – but also because the limits of acceptable democratic discourse have shifted (Mondon & Winter, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

Muslims and non-white minorities, as well as broader postcolonial narratives and cultural conflicts – over gender, education, and climate science – have become central sites of discursive and policy convergence between mainstream and far-right parties, providing politically ‘legible’ targets through which exclusionary frames are normalized within democratic discourse (Froio, 2018).

Immigration, once a marginal issue mostly associated with the economy of the *Gastarbeiter* programmes in Europe, is now central to political competition and framed in terms of identity and security (Gessler & Hunger, 2023; Hadj Abdou et al., 2022). Mainstream conservative and even some social democratic parties have increasingly adopted exclusionary frames once confined to the far right (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Krause et al., 2023; Meguid, 2008; Saldivia Gonzatti & Völker, 2025). This ‘contagion’ (Van Spanje, 2010) between the far right and the mainstream right is evident across and beyond Europe. Following the 2015–2016 Islamist terrorist

attacks in France, Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls proposed stripping dual nationals convicted of terrorism of their citizenship – a measure that ultimately failed but helped legitimize a long-standing FN/RN policy. Similarly, German Chancellor Friedrich Metz, David Cameron in the United Kingdom, and Mark Rutte in the Netherlands campaigned on the idea that immigration constitutes a security threat. In 2025, Keir Starmer praised Giorgia Meloni's initiative to establish detention centres for asylum seekers in Albania, even as Italian courts ruled the measure illegal.

Beyond the classic flagship issues of the far right, new cultural conflicts, so-called culture wars, and at times also the rule of law, have become additional points of convergence between the far right and mainstream parties. Freedom of speech, once a valence issue, has become increasingly polarizing, and it is used by the far right and some mainstream parties to challenge anti-discrimination norms, equity policies, and minority protections by portraying dominant groups as 'silenced'. Critiques of 'wokism' in universities echo far-right claims that academics – particularly in the social and climate sciences – promote ideological indoctrination, presenting themselves as defenders of intellectual freedom while simultaneously reinforcing exclusionary narratives. In France, a former Minister of the Interior from the mainstream right declared that 'the rule of law is not untouchable nor sacred' (L'État de droit, ça n'est pas intangible, ni sacré).³

In sum, across Europe and beyond, mainstream parties have increasingly adopted far-right rhetoric and policies, both on classic issues such as immigration, identity, and security, and in the realm of cultural politics and the rule of law. The cordon sanitaire, once a defining norm of post-war European politics, is now the exception rather than the rule (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2025).

2.3. The far right's illiberal turn: eroding democracy from within

Taken together, the blurring of boundaries between the extreme and radical right, as well as between the far right and mainstream parties, challenges our understanding of the relationship between the mainstreamed far right and democracy. It also creates conditions in which far-right actors can leverage democratic legitimacy to pursue illiberal agendas from within, raising questions about the adequacy of previous conceptual frameworks.

This raises a fundamental theoretical question: how should we conceptualize the far right's relationship with democracy when it operates from within democratic institutions to erode them? Some scholars interpret this phenomenon as a radicalization of mainstream values or social norms that challenges democratic principles (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Valentim, 2024). Others frame it as an illiberal or authoritarian shift, in which democratic institutions are undermined from within, thereby constricting the space for civil society (Enyedi, 2024; Enyedi et al., 2025; Vachudova, 2020).

To be clear, not all radical-right parties are extremist or inherently anti-democratic. Indeed, populist radical-right parties accept democracy while rejecting liberal principles. Yet these developments show that their assumed compatibility with liberal democracy can no longer be taken for granted. As Müller (2016) observes, ‘populists are not anti-democratic, but they are anti-pluralist’ and once in power they can ‘colonize the state’ and ‘suppress civil society’. Even actors operating within democratic rules can thus facilitate gradual democratic erosion, compelling political science to revisit how it conceptualizes the far right’s relationship to democracy.

In this context, the ‘umbrella concept’ of the far right (Pirro, 2023) may now be the most useful analytical category, precisely because both radical and extreme variants share a common illiberal core that poses an existential threat to liberal democracy. Using the term ‘far-right’ does not overlook the internal ideological differences that persist – and sometimes create divisions – within this political family, as is particularly evident in the European Parliament. Rather, the concept highlights a shared illiberal core that becomes most apparent when we shift the focus from electoral rhetoric to the exercise of power and policy implementation. This leads to my second argument: political scientists must confront what the far right can do once in power, especially when political violence targeting minorities or the opposition becomes embedded within state institutions.

3. What the mainstreamed far right can do in power

3.1. Far-right parties in office: policy, power and institutional access

Mainstreaming matters not only electorally, but also because it grants access to state coercion, accelerating democratic erosion from within. As the far right has moved from the margins to the mainstream, political scientists must reconsider not just *who the far right is*, but also *what it does*, namely *how it governs*.

This scholarly turn mirrors empirical developments. As shown in Figure 2, the number of far-right parties that have held offices at least once across Europe has increased steadily since the early 2000s (Döring & Manow, 2024). Far-right actors are no longer episodic coalition partners or parliamentary outsiders; they are increasingly embedded within executive institutions, where they gain access to state resources, administrative authority, and coercive capacities.

A substantial body of literature examines the consequences of far-right participation in office, including their influence on policy outcomes and coalition dynamics. Martin Schain (2006) was among the first to offer a systematic framework, distinguishing between indirect influences, mediated through changes in the party system, and direct effects that arise when

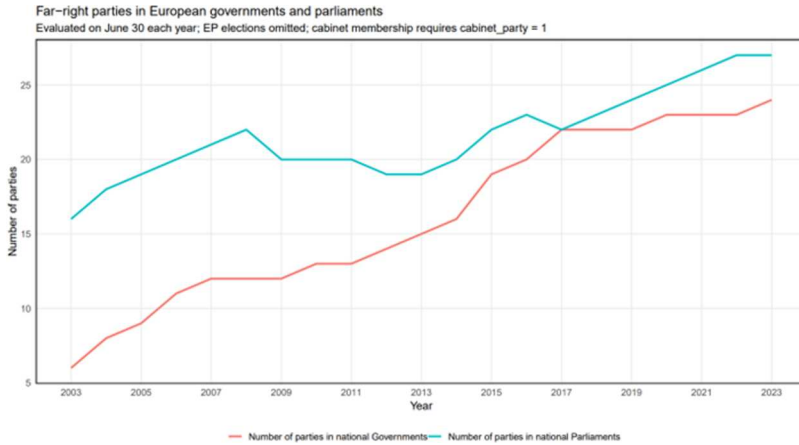


Figure 2. Number of far-right parties in European national governments and parliaments (2003–2023). Author's visualizations based on data from Web of Science.

Source: Döring & Manow, 2024.

radical-right parties themselves hold policy-making authority. Building on this approach, subsequent work focused on the conditions under which far-right parties gain office and the constraints they face once this is achieved (Akkerman & De Lange, 2012; Rydgren, 2007). Other studies confirmed that even when excluded from formal power, far-right actors can shape political agendas and redirect mainstream parties towards more restrictive positions (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Minkenberg, 2013; 2016). Empirically, this research has concentrated on domains central to far-right mobilization: immigration and asylum (Akkerman, 2012; Hadj Abdou et al., 2022), European integration (Hooghe et al., 2002; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008), as well as welfare chauvinism (Rathgeb & Busemeyer, 2022; Röth et al., 2018). Across these domains, scholars document both direct effects (policy change under far-right participation) and indirect effects (agenda-setting, policy convergence, and discursive contagion).

While this literature has yielded important insights about how far-right parties shape political competition and policy outputs, it largely treats the far right as a policy actor operating within otherwise stable institutional frameworks. What remains underexplored is how far-right governance reshapes the coercive capacities of the state itself, and in particular how political violence and repression can become tools of government. The growing institutional presence of far-right parties creates precisely the structural conditions under which political violence can shift from being external to the state to becoming embedded within governance practices. When far-right actors gain access to executive power, control over interior ministries, or influence over security forces and legal institutions, violence can no longer

be understood solely as ‘extra-state’, that is, as a pathology separate from state structures when not directly targeting them. Instead, it becomes necessary to examine how repression, intimidation, and the marginalization of opponents and minorities may operate through formal political structures.

Recent events in the United States vividly underscore this shift. During the Trump administration’s federally led immigration enforcement operation in Minneapolis – part of a larger surge of federal agents – federal officers fatally shot United States citizens, including intensive care nurse Alex Pretti and poet Renée Good, in separate incidents that have sparked sustained protests and national debate over the use of force and civil liberties. These shootings, and the political controversies they have generated, illustrate how coercive capacity and state violence can become integral to governance rather than remain external to it, highlighting the need to integrate analyses of far-right parties in office with studies of political violence. This will be the focus of the next subsection.

3.2. Far-right violence outside the state: traditional approaches and limitations

Research on far-right violence has developed largely in isolation from this literature on governance. Political violence can be defined, in a minimalist sense, as the threatened or actual use of force by state or non-state actors to achieve political goals, including influencing government, policy, or social norms (Davenport, 2007; Della Porta, 2009; Weinberg & Eubank, 1994). Classic studies overwhelmingly conceptualized far-right violence as extra-state – that is, as violence directed against the state or society by actors operating outside formal political institutions. Notable post-war cases such as the 1980 Bologna train station bombing, the 1995 Oklahoma City attack, and the 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utøya reinforced this understanding. Far-right violence appeared as carried out by fringe groups – including so-called lone actors, extremist subcultures, or hooligan networks – and took revolutionary, terrorist or accelerationist forms, the latter aiming to hasten the collapse of political or social systems (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2018). In other words, researchers primarily understood violence by the far right as a pathology distinct from state structures when not directly targeting them.

Even when scholars acknowledged the role of elite dynamics, violence was still treated as external to the state. Koopmans (1996) showed that political leaders can create opportunities for mobilization without directly organizing it; Kaplan and Weinberg (1998) demonstrated that far-right violence often aligns with organizational and elite goals while still remaining extra-state; and Della Porta (2013) and Sprinzak (2014) analysed how ideological narratives – rooted in race, religion, or honor – justify violence. Yet in all these accounts, violence remained analytically separate from state power.

More recent work has refined this picture without fundamentally altering it. In the United States, Blee and colleagues (Blee, 2021; Blee et al., 2023, 2024) have illustrated the social and moral dimensions of far-right violence, documenting social embeddedness of far-right violence. In Europe, Bjørgo (2011) emphasizes that far-right violence is often organized at the grassroots level, is socially embedded in networks, and largely operates outside state institutions. Similarly, Ravndal (2018) mapped patterns of far-right attacks across countries, ranging from hate crimes to terrorism. Despite recognizing that extremist ideas increasingly circulate in mainstream spaces, this literature still largely frames violence as a phenomenon outside state institutions.

Ongoing work challenges the tendency to treat political violence in democracies as anomalous or external to governance. Ruggeri et al. (2025) show that violence, including on the far right, has long coexisted with democratic institutions and, drawing on interwar Europe, illustrate how elites can legitimize, delegate, or depoliticize violence despite formal democratic constraints. Their analysis highlights a broader insight relevant today: political violence in democracies cannot be understood solely as the action of marginal non-state actors, but must be examined in relation to elite strategies, institutional incentives, and processes of normalization in democratic settings.

3.3. Violence as a tool of governance

The growing presence of far-right actors in government challenges the conventional analytical separation between extra-state violence and state authority. When far-right parties and leaders occupy executive office, political violence can emanate from within the state itself, rather than solely from the periphery. Violence thus *shifts from a challenge to state authority to a mechanism of governance* – used to police dissent, marginalize minorities, intimidate non-governmental organizations (NGOs) critical of government policies, and reshape democratic norms.

It is important to note, however, that violence as a tool of governance is not new. For decades, state actors in many countries have used coercion to control migration, suppress dissent, or marginalize minorities, as seen in police actions in Calais (France) or enforcement practices in Ceuta, Spain (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2017). What is distinctive in the current wave is the role of far-right actors in shaping and legitimizing these practices bluntly, often through elected office, electoral mandates, or mainstream party structures.

Recent events illustrate this dynamic. On 6 January 2021, far-right militias and supporters of President Trump violently disrupted the transfer of power in the United States; in January 2023, following his electoral defeat, Bolsonaro supporters stormed federal government buildings in Brazil. While attempts to contest elections are not unprecedented, what stands out is the involvement

of actors elected through mainstream party lists mobilizing supporters – and at times elements of the state apparatus – against democratic institutions. Elsewhere, the erosion of boundaries between far-right activism and state authority is evident in the targeting of marginalized groups and dissenting voices. In Israel, far-right Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir has called for Gaza to be emptied of Palestinians and repopulated with Israeli settlers, statements that recent events suggest cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric. In Hungary, state authorities have at times enabled far-right violence against Roma communities, blurring the line between omission and complicity, as in the aftermath of the 2012 Devecser attacks. In Poland, under PiS, police arrested LGBTQ+ activists during the 2020 Rainbow Night demonstrations amidst rising anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and the spread of ‘LGBT-free zones’, while NGOs critical of government policy faced audits and funding restrictions, creating a chilling effect on civil society (Amnesty International, 2022). Similarly, far-right-led government actions against academic institutions, including the Central European University in Budapest, illustrate how coercion can extend to universities, threatening academic freedom and independent civil society actors (Enyedi, 2018).

Securitization policies have not been introduced solely by far-right governments, but they often expand as far-right parties enter office, restricting protest, criminalizing dissent, and shrinking the space for civil society. In October 2025, President Trump deployed the National Guard against opposition protests in Portland, and in January 2026 in Minneapolis. After the killing of MAGA activist Charlie Kirk, the parliament of the Netherlands voted a motion to designate ‘Antifa’ as a terrorist organization. In Italy, the Meloni government passed a security decree increasing penalties for protest-related offences, expanding police powers, and allowing officers under investigation to remain on duty.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the far right’s relationship to violence cannot be understood only through fringe attacks or extra-state militancy. Rather, far-right actors in office increasingly contribute to the institutionalization of coercion – through policing, legal repression, and, at times, the direct or indirect use of force – within democratic governance itself. Violence in this context is not necessarily constant or spectacular, but operates through the normalization of intimidation, repression, and episodic state force against minorities, opponents, and civil society. To borrow Mudde’s (2010) formulation, this reflects a form of pathological normalcy: coercive power becomes embedded in the routines of government, undermining pluralism, weakening the rule of law, and constraining democratic contestation.

To capture contemporary developments, political science would benefit from moving beyond the distinction between the two forms of far-right violence discussed earlier. While analytically distinct, they have become

empirically intertwined as far-right actors have moved closer to the political mainstream – through electoral breakthroughs, participation in government, and growing influence over state institutions.

First, grassroots far-right violence refers to violence carried out by non-state actors, operating formally outside state institutions, which seems to be triggered by contextual factors (i.e. closed political opportunities), meso-level factors (narratives) as well as micro-level factors (activist construction of external reality), and which targets minorities and occasionally the state but acts mostly outside the state itself. Second, state-integrated far-right violence occurs when far-right actors exercise or influence state power directly through the policing of dissent (Trump-era policing, Italy's state response to protests, for example), or through policies that produce mass civilian harm and targeted group persecution (as in Israel).

Crucially, these two forms of violence do not simply coexist: they can reinforce one another. In contexts where far-right parties maintain strong ties to social movements, institutional authority may legitimize and embolden extra-state mobilization, lowering the costs of grassroots violence through permissive rhetoric, selective enforcement, or tacit complicity (Castelli Gattinara et al., [forthcoming](#)). At the same time, episodes of street-level violence can be instrumentalized by governing actors to justify further securitization, expand coercive capacities, and normalize repression.

Moreover, contemporary cases increasingly reveal hybrid configurations that blur the boundary between state and non-state violence. Recruitment patterns and informal networks can link extremist milieus to state agencies, as controversies surrounding the incorporation of individuals associated with the Congress storming on 6 January mobilization into immigration enforcement structures suggest.⁴ These dynamics underscore how far-right violence today cannot be understood solely as either extra-state militancy or state repression, but rather as an integrated and cumulative process unfolding across both arenas.

The Indian case illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. Anti-Muslim attacks carried out by local cadres, vigilante groups, or loosely organized citizens are formally 'grassroots', yet they occur in an environment in which BJP politicians and state officials have at times encouraged, legitimated, or failed to investigate such acts (Jaffrelot, 2021). This does not necessarily imply direct state orchestration; rather, it reflects a reinforcement dynamic in which tolerated or selectively prosecuted street violence strengthens the governing project, while institutional authority, in turn, lowers the costs and risks of extra-state mobilization. In this cumulative process, state and non-state coercion become mutually supportive rather than separate. Recognizing this continuum helps explain why political science continues to struggle with the far right today: its violence is no longer merely peripheral or episodic, but can become embedded in the routines of governance, operating through both

informal mobilization and formal state power. This leads me to my last point, about where the far right operates to build and consolidate support.

4. Where mainstreaming happens

4.1. *The blurred edges between party politics and social movements*

Mainstreaming is also about social embeddedness: it unfolds across elections, protests, and civil society networks simultaneously. A third reason why I believe political science struggles to understand the far right today is because we misinterpret where the far right operates to become rooted in society. Political scientists have generally treated electoral politics and street-level mobilization as distinct spheres. In practice, however, far-right actors frequently operate across both arenas, combining party competition with protest and extra-institutional activism.

This analytical separation between party politics and social movement politics reflects what Muis and Immerzeel (2017, p. 921) and Rydgren (2007, p. 257) describe as a persistent ‘division of labor’ within the discipline: scholars of political parties have focused on far-right organizations, campaigns, voters, and institutional politics broadly speaking, while social movement scholars have traditionally privileged the study of progressive or left-wing collective action, or contentious politics in general (Castelli Gattinara et al., [forthcoming](#)). Although social movement theory and the concept of movement parties – as developed by Kitschelt (2006) has been fruitfully applied to Green and Social Democratic parties (Della Porta et al., 2017), its potential to illuminate far-right organizations’ hybrid electoral and protest practices has been underexploited in much of the literature (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2024). As a result, we still tend to understand the far right as either a party family or a street movement, rather than as a set of actors operating across both arenas simultaneously.

We know from the work of Hutter and colleagues (Borbáth & Hutter, 2020; Hutter et al., 2018) but also from that of McAdam and Tarrow (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010), that the arenas of party politics and social movement activism are far more intertwined than we once believed. Rather than distinct and separate spheres, they are in constant flux (Borbáth & Paxton, 2025). There is therefore no reason to assume that the far right should be any different, as an increasing number of scholars have begun to highlight (Minkenberg, 2003; Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022; Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2024; Hunger & Hutter, 2025; Pirro 2019; Weisskircher et al., 2023).

At the macro level, political opportunities operate simultaneously across both arenas, triggering reinforcement or countervailing mechanisms that shape far-right mobilization as a whole, within institutional politics and beyond (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022; Hutter & Kriesi, 2013). At the meso level, many of today’s far-right organizations operate as genuine movement

parties. Castelli Gattinara and Pirro (2024) show how far right actors inhabit and connect multiple arenas of political action, combining the mobilizing networks and repertoires of social movements with the organizational structures of traditional political parties. Through these hybrid forms, actors such as the *Vazrazhdane/Mlada Rila Organizatsiya* (VMRO, Bulgarian National Movement), the *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD, Sweden Democrats), the *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* (EKRE, Conservative People's Party of Estonia), or *Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom* (Jobbik, Movement for a Better Hungary) in Hungary, engage simultaneously in electoral competition and street-level mobilization.

These are not parallel strategies, but interconnected channels through which ideas, resources, activists, and personnel circulate, turning protest and party politics into mutually reinforcing spaces of far-right contention. And in fact, at the micro level, we also know that far-right supporters themselves tend to move fluidly across these domains. Contrary to common assumptions, people holding authoritarian views are all but demobilized and participate in politics through overlapping networks of engagement within political parties, protest groups and civil society organizations (Pirro & Portos, 2020). Mass demonstrations in London and The Hague in 2025, and the episodic yet recurring outbursts of anti-migrant and anti-LGBTQI+ riots fuelled by far-right groups illustrate this dynamic vividly (in Torre Pacheco in July 2025, but also in Dublin, Charlottesville, Chemnitz, among others).

4.2. Revisiting the link between far-right protest and electoral politics

Despite growing recognition of the overlap between street and electoral politics on the far right (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022), much of the literature continues to rest on two assumptions: first, that far-right protest is primarily reactive to parties' electoral fortunes; and second, that such mobilization is episodic, emerging mainly in moments of crisis.

A first major limitation is the widespread view that far-right protest is merely reactive, a fallback strategy adopted when parties perform poorly in elections. In this perspective, taking to the streets compensates for a lack of institutional access by generating visibility and media attention (Hutter & Kriesi, 2013). Comparative research even suggests that far-right protest varies inversely with electoral strength, unlike the left, where mobilization in both arenas tends to be mutually reinforcing (e.g. Hutter, 2014).

Recent evidence challenges this interpretation. Drawing on data collected through the Far-Right Protest Observatory (FARPO, farpo.eu), which provides the first systematic cross-national measure of far-right protest over the last two decades, my colleagues and I show that protest mobilization is not

only reactive to electoral setbacks, nor is it only circumstantial or confined to moments of crisis (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022). Instead, protest is often widespread precisely where far-right parties are also electorally successful and represented in parliament (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022). This points to a mechanism of reciprocal support: street activism can fuel electoral strength, while parliamentary success provides legitimacy and resources for continued mobilization. In this sense, the far right increasingly operates across arenas as part of a broader movement linking institutional and extra-institutional action (Castelli Gattinara et al., forthcoming).

From a substantive point of view, examining the far right across both electoral and protest arenas reveals a crucial transformation. The far right no longer confines itself to electoral competition but increasingly seeks to expand its reach beyond parties and parliaments by shaping civil society from the ground up. This expansion matters because it signals that the far right is not simply an episodic electoral challenger, but a broader societal project that contests liberal democratic norms in everyday arenas of participation (Pirro, 2019; Pirro et al., 2025). Far-right actors can expand their appeal by operating outside formal institutions, enabling them to attract broader support, reach more diverse constituencies, and root their narratives within social networks, associations, and local communities.

4.3. Far-right mobilization across streets and ballots

In practice, far-right collective actors increasingly straddle the boundaries between electoral and extra-institutional arenas, raising questions about how and why institutional and non-institutional actors interact, and with what political consequences.

If the electoral rise of far-right parties demonstrates that cultural grievances can be channelled through formal political institutions, the persistence – and in some cases escalation – of far-right street activism suggests that institutional inroads do not necessarily diminish protest mobilization. On the contrary, protest can complement and, under certain conditions, actively reinforce far-right institutional politics, creating a positive-sum dynamic in which both arenas amplify social influence (Castelli Gattinara et al., forthcoming). As discussed in Section 3.1, far-right politics increasingly combine electoral competition with street activism. The protest arena thus becomes a space where parties, movements, and loosely organized groups can act independently or in coordination, circulating ideas, resources, and personnel across organizational boundaries.

Drawing on data from our forthcoming volume *Protests of the Far Right*, Figure 3 illustrates diverse patterns of interaction between street activism and electoral politics across European democracies, using protest rates and the share of joint party – movement events as indicators.

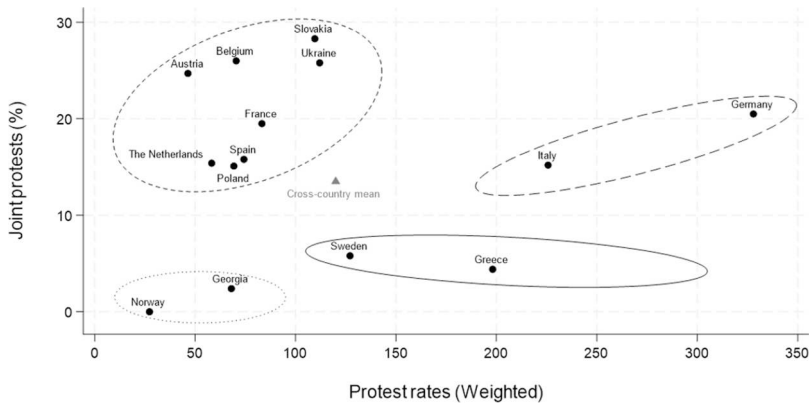


Figure 3. Protest Rates and Joint Party – Movement Mobilization on the Far Right (2008–2021). Data comes from farpo.eu and indicate farpo.eu (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2026).

Source: Far-Right Protest Observatory and Comparative Far-Right Protest dataset.

Some cases – such as Italy and Germany – combine high levels of protest with dense organizational linkages between parties and movements, suggesting a strongly integrated model in which street mobilization and electoral politics mutually reinforce each other. Other cases – such as France, Belgium, Austria, or Spain – display moderate protest rates but high levels of joint action, indicating structured coordination without mass mobilization. By contrast, countries like Norway or Georgia cluster at low levels of both protest and cooperation, reflecting more fragmented or peripheral far-right activity. Crucially, these patterns show that protest is not simply a substitute for electoral weakness. Far-right actors operate across arenas, using joint mobilization to circulate activists, legitimate claims, and convert street-level contention into institutional influence. Examining both domains thus reveals far-right social embeddedness: far-right protest is not a reactive phenomenon but a durable feature of contemporary democracies.

A second limitation in the literature is the assumption that far-right protest is circumstantial, arising primarily in moments of crisis such as the Great Recession, the so-called migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the invasion of Ukraine. Crisis has long been central to theories of far-right mobilization, as scholars emphasize how these actors thrive on perceived breakdown or actively construct a sense of emergency (Kerbo, 1982; Moffitt, 2015; Taggart, 2000). While crises can certainly act as catalysts, recent evidence challenges the idea that far-right protest is merely a crisis-driven phenomenon. As shown in Figures 4 and 5, longitudinal data on protest frequency and participation indicate that far-right mobilization often predates major crises (highlighted in grey shades) and persists

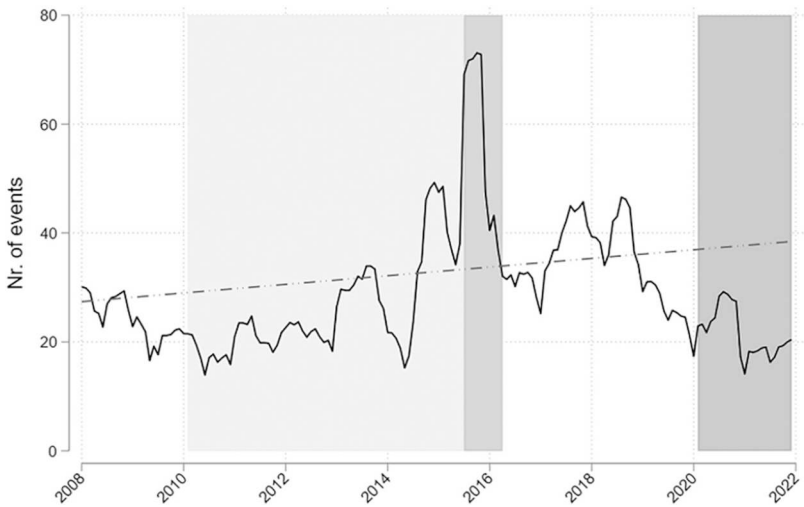


Figure 4. Monthly number of far-right protests in Europe, 2008–2021 (weighted, running averages). Data from the Far-Right Protest Observatory (FARPO), farpo.eu.
Source. Pirro, Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2025.

beyond them. Although the migration crisis represented an important critical juncture (Della Porta et al., 2020), the overall trajectory is one of steady growth: both the frequency and scale of far-right protest have progressively increased over the past two decades.

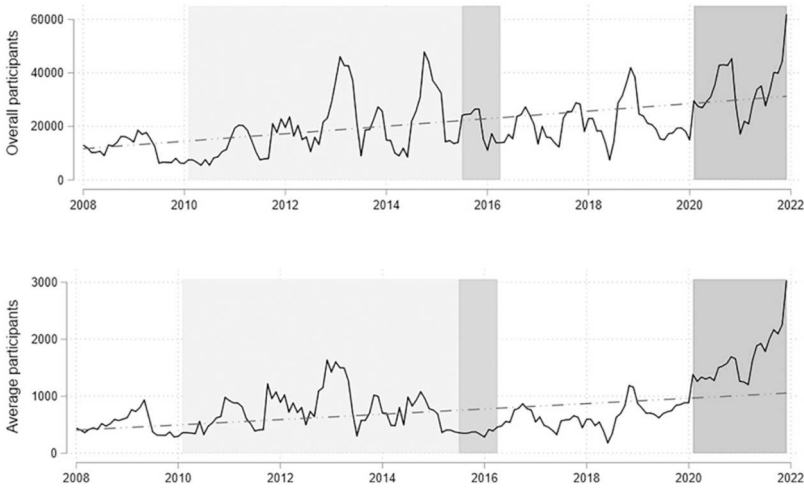


Figure 5. Overall and average participation in far-right protests in Europe, 2008–2021 (weighted, running averages). Data from the Far-Right Protest Observatory (FARPO), farpo.eu.
Source. Pirro, Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2025.

This cumulative expansion is analytically significant. It illustrates that far-right protest is not a temporary reaction to exceptional circumstances, but a recurring and increasingly normalized mode of action. Far-right actors use protest not only to respond to short-term events, but to entrench themselves socially, reshape and contest democratic norms. Recognizing the interaction between electoral and extra-institutional arenas highlights why far-right mobilization cannot be understood as exceptional: it is a durable feature of contemporary democracies – an expression of what Mudde (2010) terms a form of pathological normalcy, in which far-right contention is no longer peripheral but woven into the routine practices through which democracy is organized, challenged, and transformed.

5. Conclusions

I have argued that political science still struggles to fully grasp the contemporary far right and its relationship with democracy because the conceptual distinctions that long structured our understanding no longer capture its evolving nature. As far-right actors have moved from the margins to the mainstream, the boundaries between the extreme and radical right, between the far right and the political mainstream, between violence outside the state and violence as a tool of governance, and between elections and protest politics have become increasingly intertwined. As a result, the far right's challenge to democracy is not episodic or external – it is a structural, endogenous threat emerging from within democratic institutions and practices.

Peter Mair's warning in *Ruling the Void* remains prescient: the democratic void has not remained empty. It has been filled by a social movement that operates across multiple arenas – elections, protests, parties, and civil society – actively reshaping democracy in illiberal and authoritarian terms. Political science can no longer treat the far right as an external challenger in the electoral arena of politics; it must confront it as an insider force, normalized within democratic life, structurally embedded in the state and civil society, and actively redefining what democratic norms mean (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

To capture these dynamics, we should conceptualize the far right not merely as a party family or extremist fringe, but as a nativist-authoritarian social movement: a multiplatform, multilevel political project operating simultaneously across three dimensions. First, it integrates radical and extreme variants in networks of mutual interaction (Diani, 2015). Second, it combines state-integrated coercion with extra-institutional insurgent violence, producing a continuum of force and repression (Della Porta, 2009). Third, it spans parties, protest movements, and cultural organizations, blurring the line between elite and mass politics (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2024). In Sartori's

terms, the notion of the far right as a social movement represents a higher-order abstraction, capturing the far right as an encompassing, multidimensional movement rather than a single actor or tactic (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019).

As a social movement, the far right pursues three interrelated objectives: (a) removing rights and protections from marginalized groups; (b) restoring privileges claimed by previously dominant groups; and (c) weakening institutional checks and balances in the name of 'the people'. Repression, and intimidation – whether deployed through state institutions, organized militias, or allied extra-institutional networks – are strategic instruments that reinforce one another, stabilize the movement, and shape civil society according to its agenda. Participation in formal institutions, street-level activism, and cultural or associational networks all work in concert, consolidating legitimacy, mobilizing supporters, and extending influence throughout society.

Studying the far right today is not just about explaining the electoral outcomes of an external challenger; it is about understanding how its normalization reshapes institutions, norms, and civil society in contemporary democracies.

Notes

1. The anti-democratic stance of extreme-right groups means that they cannot coherently be "populist" (in the sense of invoking the people's sovereign will) because populism, as Mudde defines it, presupposes at least a minimal commitment to democracy.
2. See: 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp', 26 July 2014. Website of the Hungarian Government.
3. See Duguet, Margaux. "L'Etat de droit, ça n'est pas intangible, ni sacré" : pourquoi les propos du ministre de l'Intérieur, Bruno Retailleau, font polémique', Franceinfo, 30 September 2024.
4. MacFarlane, S. 13 January 2026. CBS News, 'House Democrats ask Trump administration if any Jan. 6 rioters are now working for ICE'.

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Notes on contributor

Caterina Froio is Associate Professor of Political Science at Sciences Po, Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics. Caterina's research focuses on political parties, political participation and the media, with a focus on the far right and democracy. Since 2025 she is Editor of the European Journal of Political Research.

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Appendix: List of parties and movements cited.

Country	Original name	Acronym	English translation
Austria	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria
Bulgaria	Вътрешна македонска революционна организация – Vazrazhdane/Mlada Rila Organizatsiya	VMRO – BND	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement
Estonia	Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond	EKRE	Conservative People's Party of Estonia
France	Poujadistes (Mouvement Poujade)		Poujadist Movement
France	Front National / Rassemblement National	FN/RN	National Front / National Rally
Germany	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands	NDP (now Die Heimat)	National Democratic Party of Germany
Germany	Die Heimat		The Homeland
Germany	Die Republikaner		The Republicans
Hungary	Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom	Jobbik	Movement for a Better Hungary
India	Bharatiya Janata Party	BJP	Indian People's Party
Israel	National Security Ministry (Ben-Gvir's faction is Otzma Yehudit)		Jewish Power
Italy	Lega (formerly Lega Nord)	L/LN	Northern League/League
Italy	Movimento Sociale Italiano	MSI	Italian Social Movement
Poland	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS	Law and Justice
Sweden	Sverigedemokraterna	SD	Sweden Democrats
United States	Make America Great Again (slogan and movement)	MAGA	
United States	Republican Party		(as referenced re: Trump)