

44. Extreme right

Public interest in the extreme and radical right has increased dramatically in the twenty-first century. From Viktor Orbán to Narendra Modi, from PEGIDA to the Proud Boys, from Christchurch to Utøya—anti-system politicians and racist violence in peaceful societies have challenged firmly held ideas about the resiliency of liberal democracy.

Who are those “fighting back” against, in their view, corrupt political elites that have betrayed their nation and ethnic majority population? How do they frame their messages in online chat rooms, in movement propaganda, or on the floor of a parliament? What opportunity structures make their success or failure more likely? In this entry, we outline political sociology’s major contributions to the study of the extreme right beginning with a sketch of the field’s major concepts. Then we outline demand- and supply-side approaches to understanding far-right mobilization. The latter set of approaches is used to introduce the far right as a social movement.

Most scholarship on the far right has defined “the right” in opposition to “the left” on an axis of anti-egalitarianism versus egalitarianism, respectively (Bobbio and Cameron 1996). While the right understands inequalities to be natural, the left sees inequality as amenable and unacceptable, directing the state to intervene.

Nearly 30 years of debate has produced a tentative definitional consensus on the key terms far, radical, and extreme right (Mudde 2007). Radical politics are distinguished from extreme politics by radical politics’ compliance with a minimal form of democracy. The extreme right rejects and attempts to replace democracy, while the radical right tries to reform it from within in their own illiberal ideological image. This radical/extreme bifurcation tempts us to exclusively link radical politics to the party sector and extreme politics to the non-parliamentary movement sector. But political sociologists have pointed out an ongoing hybridization and the mutual inclusivity of movement and party politics—leading some to prefer the use of the far-right concept instead (Pirro 2022). Analytically less precise but more encompassing, “far right” is an umbrella term which captures both radical and extreme variants of nativist collective action. The term helps recognize far-right

parties’ tendency to engage in contentious politics outside of parliaments, activities which include collaborating with alternative media outlets, organizing demonstrations, and at times engaging in political violence.

Though many have leant on comparisons to the pre-war rise of Nazism to explain the far-right milieu of the twenty-first century, most scholars agree that fascism is not the current essence of the radical right. Even (and especially) political parties with links to openly fascist movements typically work to distance themselves from the stigma of biological racism in order to be electorally viable (Ignazi 1992). This distancing has led to the creation of a salient radical-right master frame (Benford and Snow 2000) internationally: a pairing of ethnonationalist xenophobia (or nativism) and anti-establishment populism (Rydgren 2005). Nativism brings an exclusionary orthodoxy to nationalist ideologies’ contention that the borders of the nation and state should align. Rooted in myths of a harmonious and homogeneous past, nativists advocate policies which prioritize ethnic natives, internally and externally securitizing the nation against the wide-ranging threats posed by immigrants—the far right’s *raison d’être*.

Nativists’ arguments against immigration are distinguished from the fascists’ arguments against immigration, in part, by the ethnopluralist paradigm. Instead of claiming a hierarchy of racial distinction, the radical right purports to understand ethnic differences as non-hierarchical. Monolithic national cultures and heritages across borders can only be and should be protected by preventing their mixing, a miscegenation which eventually leads to individual cultures’ extinction at the hands of a decadent globalist culture. The exclusion of others via deportation is the fundamental ethnopluralist policy. This paradigm is notably, at times, linked to anxieties over the demographic replacement of an ethnic majority with an invading minority population, most often Muslims.

Why do people support nativist, anti-establishment political parties and movements? The bulk of early political scientific-inspired research on the far right was devoted to understanding the grievances which pushed people toward the populist radical right. Emile Durkheim’s anomie concept, borrowed from the sociological tradition, aided the development of the early social breakdown thesis. This thesis understood support for radical-right ideas to be a product of temporary social

crisis. This implied a manageable equilibrium of rational voters content with centrist policies unless subjected to social dissolution, a contention which has been empirically discredited (Mudde 2010). Support for far-right organizations is not irrational but linked to ideological and pragmatic choices. Ideology has long proven to be just as crucial to voters' decision to support the populist radical right (PRR) as other parties (van der Brug et al. 2000).

Scholars have turned to more sound demand-side explanations, all emphasizing voters' grievances with social change to explain their support for the PRR. These include anxieties over modernization, poor economic conditions, competition with minorities, and discontent with mainstream parties (see Rydgren 2007 and Golder 2016 for a review). At the structural level, sociologists have pointed to how the transition to a neoliberal, postindustrial economy has brought with it parallel demands for authoritarian forms of decision making (Kitschelt and McGann 1997). In summation, there is no single grievance that can uniformly explain support for the PRR across countries. Recent scholarship has explored how cultural and economic backlash is deeply interconnected (Norris and Inglehart 2019) and rooted not just in national contexts, but in local conditions as well (Harteveld et al. 2022).

The pathological normalcy thesis is one influential critique of demand-side approaches (Mudde 2010). This thesis treats radical-right politics not as a pathology or product of crisis but as an intrinsic feature of the demos. By empirically demonstrating that demand for nativism, populism, and authoritarianism is a given in liberal democracy (and not a temporary aberration) the critique of the social breakdown thesis—which suggests an equilibrium or state of “non-grievance”—is extended to the entire premise which demand-side questions are built on. This critique encouraged a generation of scholars to “bring parties back in” and approach the radical right from the supply side.

Supply-side approaches to the far right focus on the structural conditions, organizational make-up, and strategies which the far right uses to appeal to supporters. Methods and concepts of sociological social movement literature are used to explain how these actors capitalize on favorable political opportunity structures and frame their messaging.

Organizationally, in line with their emphasis on strong man-style authoritarianism, far-right movements and parties typically

have hierarchal internal structures. Decision-making power is often fixed within a small cadre. While this can allow organizations to emerge quickly and electorally break through in relation to certain events—the 2015 so-called refugee crisis, for instance—the development of a strong internal structure has proved necessary for maintaining success. Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) was able to rapidly organize mass, weekly demonstrations in East Germany in reaction to the crisis but failed, despite their attempts, to consolidate into an electoral force. Strong party organizations behoove all parties, including the far right.

This anecdote suggests an interaction between organizational capacity and political opportunity structures, the focus of much supply-side literature. Opportunity structures can be both political and discursive. At the state level, electoral rules or restrictions on offensive speech, for instance, can inhibit the participation of the far right in the public sphere. Far-right rejections of political correctness mean actors are often penalized for making racist, unsavory statements—such as Geert Wilder's conviction for insulting Moroccans by inciting a crowd to chant that they wanted “fewer” of the minority in the Netherlands. Similarly, a democratic deficiency in a centralized party structure can trigger exclusion from democratic consideration in, for example, more militant democracies like Germany. Far-right parties have to navigate these formal rules and de facto cordons sanitaires adopted by, for example, media outlets—who serve as gatekeepers between all political movements and the public. In Luxembourg, journalists nearly uniformly negatively cover the Flemish Interest party, refusing to reproduce their ideology uncritically (de Jonge 2019). The far right has tested and these cordons sanitaires have been eroded by unignorable electoral successes and updates to these organizations' external framing of their messages.

Frames, in part, explain how far-right movements navigate closed political opportunity structures in their pursuit of shifting public opinion and/or electoral success. Derivatives of the ethnonationalist xenophobic and anti-establishment populist master frame take different forms depending on their national contexts. Jobbik, a successful Hungarian party-movement hybrid, mobilized widespread anti-Roma sentiments to

mobilize Hungarian voters through cultural—not biological—stigmatization (Pirro 2018). The Sweden Democrats nostalgically harken to an imagined, past Golden Age to draw links between multiculturalism and national decline, drawing on the country's long history of welfarism (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). More general frames scholars have located through comparative analysis include anti-capitalism, anti-modernity, law and order, and racism (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). These cognitive “ways of seeing” are deliberated by movement elites and, from the top down, used by activists to ideologically interpret social issues they witness.

Policymakers and students of the far right should foremost recognize the heterogeneity of these actors across levels of organization (parties, movements, and subcultures), goals, and contexts. Treatment of the far right as a social movement then captures the reality of their mobilization across different planes of contention (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2018). Beyond elections, the far right has indeed contributed to a cultural and social milieu as well as the political. Future research should recognize this and make use of a variety of methodological tools across sociology's subfields. And while it may be tempting to, in reaction to their perceived novelty, treat the far right as an aberration of democracy “soon to pass”, these movements' specific brand of nationalism has a strong resonance in liberal democracies and is likely here to stay.

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