DAPHNE HALIKIOPOULOU

# The endurance and stability of the far right in Europe

During the 2024 'mega election year', far-right parties made significant electoral gains at the local, national and European levels: the Alternative for Germany in German federal states such as Thuringia and Saxony in September 2024; the National Rally in France's snap parliamentary election a couple of months earlier. The June 2024 European Parliament elections witnessed the rise of the far right across many – if not most – member states. The examples do not end here. In late 2023, Geert Wilders' anti-Muslim far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) won the Dutch parliamentary election, following a decade-or-more surge that has witnessed the rise of far-right parties from every corner of the continent. In fact, looking at a map of Europe, one struggles to find a country with no far right. Even in cases formerly considered 'immune', such as Spain and Portugal, Vox and Chega are now making the headlines. Outside Europe, Donald Trump's recent victory in the US emboldens the far right, while the recent victories of far-right leaders such as Argentina's Javier Milei and El Salvador's Nayib Bukele suggest this is fast becoming a global phenomenon.

The bigger problem is not just the vote share but also the entrenchment of far-right parties in the system and their access to power. Many have held in the past – or continue to hold – government positions, including the Lega and the Brothers of Italy in Italy, the Austrian Party for Freedom, Orban's Fidesz, the Finns Party and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS). This emboldens them and makes them increasingly politically relevant, as they can implement policy and influence the programmatic agenda of other parties.

In other words, the far right is the new normal. Should we be surprised? Not necessarily. This phenomenon has been brewing for decades. A look at the longer term, at least in Europe, reveals a stark picture: in national elections last year, 32% of European voters opted for an anti-establishment party compared with 20% in the early 2000s and 12% in the early 1990s. About half of anti-establishment voters support far-right parties – and this is the vote share that is increasing most rapidly. If 2024 already saw the far right emerge victorious in a series of elections across Europe and beyond, 2025 will likely witness an intensification of this phenomenon.

This is largely the result of the normalisation of the far right: a rhetorical streamlining and a conscious window-dressing strategy of distancing from fascism and extremism.

Most successful European far-right parties frame exclusion not along ethnic but along civic nationalist lines. While at their core is a purported distinction between in-group and out-group (natives versus immigrants), they justify this distinction on ideological rather than biological criteria of national belonging. Geert Wilders' PVV builds its exclusionary Islamophobic agenda using a purportedly inclusive narrative that centres on democratic values along the lines of 'we must not tolerate those who are intolerant of us'. This narrative is much more difficult to counter than traditional racism. Other parties in the party system contribute to this far-right normalisation. Competing on far-right issues legitimises and emboldens the far right, but does not win the mainstream parties any votes.

Normalisation makes these parties more broadly appealing to voters. Indeed, the far-right voter base is much more diverse than we might initially assume. Immigration is one factor driving voters to support the far right, but it is not the only one. In addition, immigration itself is a multi-faceted concept: while some voters may oppose immigration for cultural reasons, others are driven by economic concerns, fearing immigrants as competitors in the labour market. Far-right parties link immigration to a broad range of societal problems. Those voters with strong cultural concerns – the far right's core ideological voters – are numerically a relatively small group. The largest group of far-right voters are protesters: peripheral voters driven by discontent. Their concerns range from material insecurity to a lack of access to welfare, declining social status and a distrust in institutions.

## What should we expect?

Far-right parties are both willing and able to compromise liberal institutions. Once in power, they introduce constitutional changes to undermine the judiciary and media, which are designed to outlast them. A good example is Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, which gradually radicalised while in government. Orbán has used his constitutional majority to fundamentally change the Hungarian political system and transform the country into an 'illiberal democracy'.

Should we be worried? Yes! Although some of these developments have been stalled or overturned – PiS, for example, was outvoted in Poland during the most recent election – the far right remains powerful and entrenched in many countries across Europe and the globe. Many of these parties are now in power, meaning they can implement policies that hamper democracy and long-term political stability and societal prosperity.

We expect this to impact a broad range of policy areas, including attacks on abortion and women's reproductive rights; the adoption of 'refugee response plans' sending asylum seekers abroad; the de-prioritisation (at best) of a climate agenda and economic policies that give rise to significant medium- and long-term economic costs, contributing to the creation of a vicious circle for democracy as austerity and deteriorating economic conditions, which further feed the far right. Another extremely important policy area is education. Far-right parties actively adopt education policies aimed at directly targeting science, academia expertise and gender equality by seeking to cut billions of euros from research, shrinking

and/or closing down academic departments and discouraging international students – the cases of the UK, the Netherlands and the Central European University are pertinent. In their attempts to copy the far right, many centre-right governments are following suit, for example, in France. This is extremely worrisome, as we consistently observe a correlation between lower levels of education and far-right party support.

## Contestation domains

This means that there are now multiple domains in which the far right should be fought. Firstly, in elections, with competitors developing viable campaign strategies in their rhetoric and narratives. Secondly, in the media, to counter the normalisation of hate in communication. Thirdly, in the institutional domain to contest democratic backsliding instigated by far-right incumbents. Fourthly, the policy domain, to stall or block specific far-right policies through judicial activism and other mechanisms.

As we enter 2025, important elections are ahead in countries such as Germany and Poland. The far right is already in power in many European countries. This is worrying for the future and prosperity of our democracies. The ability to develop an effective and multi-faceted resistance is more important than ever.