

HOW (NOT) TO FIGHT THE FAR RIGHT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy study investigates the strategies employed by European social democratic parties in response to the rise of far-right political parties since the 2010s. By building on well over 100 academic studies, we draw clear strategic implications for progressive actors facing far-right competition. These can be summed up as follows.

Adoption is a strategic dead end

The literature shows a strong academic fixation on the strategy of adoption – the partial incorporation of far-right issues or frames – yet also a broad scientific consensus on its strategic limits. While adoption can generate short-term electoral gains in specific contexts, these effects are fragile and rarely transferable. Over time, adoption tends to erode social democratic credibility, blur partisan identity, and increase the salience and legitimacy of far-right agendas. Beyond electoral risks, the normative costs are substantial: adoption normalises exclusionary and authoritarian discourse and undermines democratic trust. These risks are intrinsic to the strategy itself, not unintended side effects.

What social democrats should stop doing

Across engagement and disengagement strategies, we identify recurring pitfalls. Social democrats should stop allowing the far right to set the political agenda, as reactive politics reinforces far-right issue ownership. They should avoid euphemistic labels such as “populism”, which obscure the nativist core of far-right politics and weaken progressive alternatives. Finally, purely technocratic, moralising or exclusionary responses – such as demonisation or *cordon sanitaire* – may reduce short-term pressure but in the long run often strengthen far-right outsider narratives and deepen systemic distrust.

How (not) to fight the far right

What social democrats should start doing

After looking at scientific research on how to fight the far right, a minimum of three strategic orientations emerge:

1. Social democrats must systematically understand why far-right narratives resonate – examining social grievances, emotions and discursive strategies – without adopting far-right frames.
2. They must reclaim agenda-setting power by foregrounding areas of long-standing credibility – notably, welfare, redistribution and economic justice – and by refusing debates imposed on far-right terms.
3. Social democrats need a positive, forward-looking vision that combines an inclusive collective identity with a credible agenda for economic equality, reconnecting policy with collective emotions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, and especially since the 2010s, Europe has witnessed a steady rise of far-right political movements, with many far-right parties making significant electoral gains in numerous countries. This far-right resurgence is fuelled by a combination of economic, social and political factors. Far-right parties exploit people's fears about the economy; immigrants, who are blamed for unemployment; their identities; the widespread distrust of political elites. The concept of the far right is used as an umbrella term to define various movements and parties from populist radical-right parties to extreme-right parties.¹

At the same time, the rise of these parties is the sign of a certain failure of mainstream parties – either of the right or the left – to express or satisfy the interests and demands of particular sections of the population. Chantal Mouffe has described this predicament as the post-political condition,² namely, the fact that, in many cases, there is no longer any real difference between the policies of centre-left and centre-right parties, especially regarding economic policy. As a result, this often leads to political alienation and apathy, abstention from politics or votes for the far right.

In this course, certain events play a major role. In line with other researchers,³ we also identify three critical moments that have affected most European countries to varying degrees. Firstly, the 2008 financial crisis caused widespread economic insecurity and disaffection with traditional parties due to the harsh austerity measures imposed at that time, therefore laying fertile ground for nationalist movements⁴ – and protest parties in general. Secondly, the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 was another pivotal moment in this trajectory. Refugees were framed by far-right parties and mainstream media as threats to national identity and security,⁵ offering credibility and legitimisation to far-right narratives across Europe. This enabled parties such as the Dutch PVV and

Belgium's N-VA to consolidate new electoral support and increase their influence on national politics. A third critical moment was the COVID-19 pandemic. Far-right groups took advantage of public frustration over lockdown measures and, more broadly, of the fear related to the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic and further increased their appeal using conspiracy theories as their main propaganda mechanism.⁶ Arguably, the above conjuncture can be understood as critical moments offering the far right the opportunity to perform and create a sense of crisis with their own meaning⁷ and creating the opportunity to capture critical political space. More recently, the issues of gender, sexuality, LGBTQIA+ rights and the so-called “woke agenda” have gained traction and are turning into a catalyst for a new far-right offensive internationally. The epitome of the consolidation of the far right is the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency, which symbolises the normalisation of the far right in everyday political life.

The current conjuncture presents urgent challenges for progressive and social democratic forces. Currently, we are witnessing the far-right consolidation in European party systems. Their success is reflected not only in increasing electoral shares but also in the normalisation of far-right rhetoric within mainstream political discourses.⁸ Considering this, progressive and social democratic forces face the urgent challenge of developing effective counter-strategies to halt this rightward shift and reaffirm their political relevance.

Over the years, the strategies of social democratic parties have been analysed by various studies.⁹ However, the picture remains unclear – especially for political actors who do not have the time to familiarise themselves with the complex state of the research situation and track every methodological nuance. Therefore, this study systematises existing knowledge in the field, mainly by carrying out two

steps: (1) we categorise the diverse counter-strategies based on a comprehensive typology; and (2) we discuss the identified strategies based on their effectiveness. Two criteria are used to assess the latter:¹⁰ (1) the electoral-political dimension, which relates to achieving electoral victory and halting the rise of the far right; and (2) the ideological-value dimension, which means that any electoral strategy should also uphold the core values of social democracy and contribute to the strengthening of progressive ideals, as outlined by Schieder et al.¹¹ Legitimising far-right discourses poses a significant risk. This cannot be justified by a strategy that may prove only temporarily electorally successful, or even counterproductive, as vividly described in the case of the centre-right as “cannibalisation”.¹²

Thus, our main objective is to offer clarity in a complex and often fragmented field of research, and improve our understanding of how progressive forces respond to the far right across different national and political contexts. In doing so, the study seeks not only to advance academic debates in the field but also to offer practical insights for political actors. Despite the engagement with counter-strategies in both academic and public spheres, there is a pressing need for this policy study and the systematisation of the existing body of work. Scholars have suggested that, by crafting compelling narratives, social democratic forces can mobilise significant untapped electoral potential.¹³ In line with this perspective, by identifying both failed strategies and positive examples, **the study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on how social democracy can effectively navigate and counter the challenges posed by the far right and to offer politicians and policymakers a starting point for developing strategies that are both electorally effective and ideologically sound.**

Two main reasons prompt us to revisit this subject: (1) the apparent failure to stem the surge of far-right parties in recent years, which has now led to the mainstreaming of the far right and radicalisation of the mainstream;¹⁴ and (2) the return of Donald Trump, which gives fresh impetus to a new international spread of the far right. These events can be seen as a testament to how existing strategies may have failed or are at an impasse. The current predicament carries the risk of the consolidation of far-right ideas, and the transformation of democracy into a reactionary version of itself. Now is the time to rethink, assess and potentially readjust these strategies to determine the best way forward.

Our policy study is structured as follows: in the next section, we present the typology we have constructed based on the literature and define all the relevant categories that form our main axis of analysis (engage versus disengage). In the same section, we also present the methodology employed, namely, a systematic literature review, as outlined by Xiao and Watson.¹⁵ We discuss how we built the body of literature, the selection criteria for the papers evaluated, as well as the limitations we encountered and how we dealt with them (Section 2). The main part of the study consists of the analysis and categorisation of our corpus. Here, we proceed in two steps: the first is a rather descriptive assessment of the corpus and, subsequently, the second step provides an in-depth analyses that corresponds to the two poles of the axis engage-disengage (Section 3). Finally, in the last part of the study, we discuss the research gaps we have found, the political implications of our analysis and we explore policy recommendations (Section 4).

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

2.1 Typology

To make sense of the corpus, we constructed a typology framework for the various strategies of social democratic and ideologically aligned parties against the rise of far-right parties in the EU. We build on existing research, which suggests that strategies against the far right can be categorised into two groups: strategies of engagement and disengagement.¹⁶ While strategies of engagement aim to “woo back voters who drifted to the fringe to voice their protest”,¹⁷ strategies of disengagement “seek to deprive the pariah of any sense of legitimacy or importance to be gained purely by becoming the subject of attention”.¹⁸ We then divided these two broader categories into more specific substrategies. To assess the applicability of our typology and the intercoder reliability, we conducted a pre-test using 20 randomly selected papers from the corpus, repeatedly consulting the literature on the typology of counter-strategies throughout the process.¹⁹ Through this, we arrived at nine substrategies that assumed a continuum ranging from hard engagement to hard disengagement:

Strategies of engagement

1. **Collaborate:** as the “hardest” strategy in our typology spectrum, social democratic parties can team up with far-right parties at legislative, executive or electoral levels in the hope of containing and controlling their influence or potential harm. It could also be the case that parties collaborate with the far right due to (partial) ideological alignment.²⁰
2. **Adopt:** following the model of democratic representation, social democratic parties can conclude that far-right parties are successful because they have identified a lack of voter

representation in a specific segment of the political discourse. The corresponding strategy is therefore to (partially) adopt the positions of these parties to win back these voters.²¹ In this category, we also subsumed co-opting and copycat strategies.²²

3. **Selective representation:** referring back to Adorno’s idea of the authoritarian personality,²³ another possible counter-strategy for the social democratic party is to propose political solutions towards far-right-party voters’ “grievances that have a rational core”, thereby refraining from adoption while driving a wedge into the far-right-parties’ electorate.²⁴

Strategies of disengagement

1. **Defuse:** a relatively soft disengaging counter-strategy adopted by social democratic parties is to defuse topics raised by the far right and then change the perceived importance of a specific issue, for instance, by placing greater emphasis on socio-economic topics.²⁵ This category includes the strategies of denaturalising conflict and emphasising political solutions, as proposed by Biskamp.²⁶
2. **Hold:** social democratic actors can try actively to win debates against the far right by reinforcing their own policy positions, communicating these more clearly and concentrating on the mobilisation of their core electorate.²⁷
3. **Demonise:** a social democratic party can publicly demonise the far-right parties’ political positions and their members, for instance, as extreme or unacceptable, and prohibit any collaboration with them.²⁸

4. **Cordon sanitaire:** a social democratic party can form a *cordon sanitaire* with other mainstream parties to prevent the far-right actors from gaining political office or influencing policymaking, thus presenting the party as “extremist” and their supporters as “wasting” their vote.²⁹
5. **Legal restrictions:** another strategy against far-right actors may consist of attempting to isolate them using legal or political measures, such as “raising the elections thresholds, limit their right to speak or refuse public funding”.³⁰
6. **Ignore:** as a very hard disengaging strategy, a social democratic party may decide not to address the issues raised by the far right at all, not to be influenced by these parties, and instead to continue to focus on its own core issues.³¹

2.2 Systematic literature review

As outlined in the Introduction, the aim of this policy study is to provide an overview of existing strategies against the far right and to assess their prospects of success. To do this, we chose a systematic literature review as our method. After all, the goal of such a literature review is to examine and systematise all literature relevant to a research question. After identifying the relevant literature, we engaged in a critical discussion of it. To build our body of literature, we followed the procedure outlined by Xiao and Watson.³² It comprised the following steps:

1. **Inclusion criteria:** we only included studies that analysed the responses of social democratic parties in the EU to the challenge of the far right and focused on the development since 2010. We picked this year as a starting point because, since the early 2010s, we have witnessed the rise of far-right parties.³³ The focus on social democratic parties implies that studies which analyse the responses of conservative parties to the far right were not included in our literature review. With social democrats, we refer to the parties making up the Party of European Socialists (PES). However, not all studies distinguish clearly between what could be called mainstream parties and focus on conservative and social democratic (and in some cases green) parties. In that case, we included the paper in our body of literature. We included studies from all relevant disciplines, ranging from political sciences, sociology and philosophy. To ensure that every member of our international research group can read all identified articles, we only searched for articles written in English. To ensure quality, we only included papers that were published in a peer-reviewed journal.
2. **Literature identification:** for the identification of relevant literature, we followed a two-step procedure. Firstly, by reading different publications on the topic, we collected a list of widely used synonyms for the terms “counter-strategies”, “far right” and “social democrats”. For “counter-strategies”, those were terms such as “response”, “react” or “contain”; for “far right”, terms such as “new right”, “alt-right” or “extreme right”; and for “social democrats”, terms such as “left” and “progressive”. Secondly, with these keywords, we searched Web of Science and EBSCOhost for the relevant literature. We linked the keywords together by using the Boolean Operators AND/OR. To ensure the likelihood to include all the relevant literature while, at the same time, limiting the total results, we searched titles, abstracts and the articles’ keywords for the terms “social democrats” and “counter-strategies” (and its respective synonyms). For “far right” (and its synonyms), we conducted a title search only. As of April 2025, this search yielded a total of 1,529 results on Web of Science and 1,022 results on EBSCOhost.
3. **Screening for inclusion:** to screen the literature for its relevance for our study, we proceeded in four steps. Firstly, we determined each study’s preliminary relevance by reading the title. If the content seemed to discuss social democratic parties’ response to the rise of the far right, we obtained its full reference, including author, year, title and abstract, for further evaluation. If in doubt, the study was included. This first step of the screening process yielded 342 results (Web of Science) and 294 results (EBSCOhost).

Papers were mostly excluded because they focused either on a time frame prior to 2010 or on countries outside of the EU, or on strategies the far right is using to influence public discourses. If a paper conducted a comparison of an EU country to a non-EU country or a comparison of before 2010 to after 2010, we included it in our analysis. Papers that focused on the UK after Brexit were also included since we deemed the influence of British politics on the EU important even after the UK had left the EU.

Secondly, we retrieved the included studies as two Excel sheets and screened for duplicates, which were excluded. This second step left us with a total of 367 results. In the third step, we read the abstracts of these studies to further decide their relevance to the research topic – social democratic parties' responses to the rise of the far right. Two researchers performed parallel independent assessments of these manuscripts. Discrepancies between the reviewers' findings were discussed and resolved. A total of 118 studies were deemed relevant, and we obtained the full-text article. Papers were mostly excluded because they either focused on strategies for how to fight far-right discourses in the media or they focused on the mainstream right's responses to the far right. Some papers were also excluded because they merely described election results or shifts in party landscapes without any reference to strategies.

4. Data extraction: a total of 118 papers were distributed among our team of researchers and read carefully. In this step, another 36 papers were dropped, mainly because they did not focus on strategic responses to the far right, but more general shifts in the party landscape or media discourses, or because they exclusively focused on conservative parties. One paper was dropped because it was not written in English (only the abstract); one was dropped because it focused on the USA only. Theoretical papers were kept to inform the discussion section (nine in total). We ended up with 82 papers and, thus, the final body of literature lies within a gross-to-net-hit ratio of 1:4 to 1:20, as recommended for a systematic literature review.³⁴

From those 82 papers, we extracted the relevant data based on a set of pre-defined aspects: we looked at which countries and which strategies were studied. Then we examined how successful these strategies were based on the two dimensions outlined in the Introduction: did the strategy help (1) to achieve electoral victory or to gain more votes (electoral success); and/or (2) to uphold and progress social democratic values (value success)? In doing so, we always took the specific contexts into account, such as the respective party or electoral system, or whether the social democratic party was in government or in opposition. The results of that analysis are discussed in the next section.

3. HOW (NOT) TO FIGHT THE FAR RIGHT

As described in Section 2.1, our typology framework consists of nine far-right counter-strategies, which can be roughly categorised into two groups. The three strategies collaborate, adopt and selective representation belong to the category of engagement. The remaining six strategies – defuse, hold, demonise, *cordon sanitaire*, legal restriction and ignore – can be viewed as strategies of disengagement.

Looking at a purely quantitative analysis of our body of literature, a clear pattern emerges: out of the total 82 papers, 42 focus on the strategy “adopt”. In second place, among the most discussed strategies was the “*cordon sanitaire*”, however, with only eight papers. “Demonize” and “hold” were discussed in five papers each, “collaborate” and “defuse” in four each, “selective representation” in two, and “ignore” in only one and “legal restriction” in none.³⁵ Thus, most papers focused on strategies of engagement.

The focus of existing research on the “adopt” strategy could be explained by the fact that it is also the most widely used strategy. However, it could also be that numerous studies on the strategy of adoption simply reflect a focus within the scientific discourse on the topic. Logic would suggest that greater use explains greater scholarly attention, but the evidence does not allow us to affirm this with certainty. Nevertheless, this result is puzzling mostly for two reasons: (1) from a purely normative standpoint, it should be clear that adopting political stances which are very often diametrically opposed to progressive values poses clear challenges for social democratic parties; and (2) as we will discuss in more depth in the following section, the “adopt” strategy has also not proven to be very successful electorally.

A purely quantitative look at our body of literature also shows a clear focus in terms of the countries

studied: with a total of 17, most studies dealt with a large-scale comparison of ten or more countries. Studies focusing on fewer countries (between one and four) most frequently dealt with Denmark (11 studies), Sweden (eight studies), Germany, the Netherlands, the UK (five studies each), France and Austria (four studies each). The focus of the analysed studies is thus clearly on Central and Northern Europe. Southern European countries such as Italy (three studies), Spain (one study) and Greece (one study), as well as Eastern European countries such as Poland (two studies), Bulgaria (one study) and Hungary (one study), were only examined in a few studies. Since in countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands the adoption strategy was very prominently used by social democrats, the overall focus on the adoption strategy and on specific countries might go hand in hand. The following sections discuss our findings in greater detail, starting with the strategies of engagement followed by the strategies of disengagement.

3.1 Focus on strategies of engagement

As mentioned above, we observe that the group of strategies which lead to engagement with the far right has been studied in greater depth than those focused on disengagement, with the adoption strategy receiving the most academic attention (42 papers). This strategy is being researched as a tactical response by social democratic and/or other mainstream parties to the rise of the far right. It is a tactic justified either by the fear of the far right entering parliaments or by the risk of social democracy losing voters.³⁶ The core rationale behind adopting this strategy is that social democratic parties could neutralise the threat posed by the far right by appropriating parts of its agenda.

However, the use of this strategy does not imply an actual exact copy of the proposals of the far right.³⁷ In this sense, the focus is usually placed on issues or policies championed by the far right, offering similar solutions to approach these postulates: the clearest example emerging from the literature is the use of the adoption strategy on migration issues in Scandinavian countries. Many of the studies analysed warn of the ideological and electoral risks that the use of this strategy may entail. The most notable case, largely due to the media coverage it has received, is that of the Danish Social Democratic Party (SDP), but there are other important examples such as those of Sweden, Norway, Greece and the Netherlands. These cases suggest that, under certain conditions, the adoption strategy can provide electoral success and become a useful tactical tool to stem immediate losses.

Those who have analysed the viability of this strategy tend to agree on some key points regarding electoral results and the long-term consequences for the parties that employ it. One of these points of agreement among academics is that, electorally, it can have some short-term benefits. In the paradigmatic case of the Danish SDP, despite its adoption of an anti-immigration stance, it managed to retain its traditional voters, reducing the centrality of the issue and allowing for new coalitions on the left of the political spectrum.³⁸ Furthermore, the adoption strategy can be useful in the short term to prevent the loss of votes to these new far-right parties or even to weaken the main competitors emerging from that ideological sector.³⁹

“Centre-left parties can increase the salience of immigration, not suffer electoral losses, but lead the centre-right mainstream party to lose votes. Thus, these indirect electoral strategies do not maximise votes, but rather, drive voters away from a party’s main competitor. This strategy could result in a mainstream party winning the most votes and becoming more likely to form a government while not increasing (or decreasing) its own votes. Put differently, it is a winning strategy of voter retention combined with opponent torpedoing.”⁴⁰

However, the negative effects of using this strategy are the most prevalent in the literature analysed. The electoral benefits mentioned in the previous paragraph represent a temporary solution and, as studies indicate, may lead to greater electoral gains for far-right parties in the long term. This is due to the normalisation of far-right discourse, increasing the presence on the agenda of issues in which these groups are strong (such as immigration or national identity).⁴¹ This can translate into electoral losses for social democracy in the long term or an asymmetric benefit where the far right would be the main beneficiary. Even when there are no direct electoral losses, the effect can be seen in the medium term: mainstream and especially social democratic parties see their identity and progressive values eroded, losing credibility and sowing democratic disaffection.⁴² Thus, this strategy would not only legitimise the policies and practices of the far right, but also undermine the identity of what a social democratic party should represent.

“Western European citizens increasingly blame established political parties for their opportunistic behaviours and a lack of their responsiveness to voters, and their distrust of the established political system drives them to vote for anti-establishment parties as well as to abstain from voting or cast blank/invalid votes. Then, voters in industrialised democracies will become more cynical about liberal democracy and its institutional foundation and more vulnerable to alternative extreme ideologies and arguments such as authoritarianism and populism when they keep finding ambiguity and uncertainty in political parties’ policy positions that fail to reflect and represent voters’ interests and preferences. If this is the case, political parties actually sow seeds for citizens’ condemnation of themselves by blurring their policy positions.”⁴³

The impact of the adoption strategy, therefore, cannot be assessed solely in electoral terms. Its normative and cultural consequences are even more problematic. In this sense, in terms of the results linked to the values of social democratic

parties, the use of the “adopt” strategy has negative consequences for the party. Firstly, it contributes to the normalisation of the far right, as the social framework and debate shift toward the positions defended by these parties, making a reversal to the left even more difficult.⁴⁴ Secondly, accepting this discourse leads to the erosion of fundamental principles of social democracy, such as the protection of minorities and the defence of human rights.⁴⁵ Finally, beyond the consequences for the groups that the left has historically appealed to, using this strategy undermines credibility with the electorate, which may perceive these shifts by the party as opportunistic and distrustful. This, in turn, can result in a loss of votes, either through protest voting or voter apathy, both of which are typically unfavourable for social democratic parties. Furthermore, if institutional mistrust grows, voters will be attracted to projects that position themselves as anti-establishment.⁴⁶ In conclusion, **while using the “adopt” strategy may have short-term benefits, the cost in terms of legitimacy and connection to social democratic values is extremely high.**

Some studies suggest that the Danish SDP took this risk of the possibility that its voters would defect, not to the right but to other left-wing options, by adopting the discourse of the far right on immigration and gambling.⁴⁷ This would give them room to negotiate and form a government without having to do so with the far right or mainstream right.

“While accommodation does cost votes among pro-immigration voters, these voters tend to defect to other parties on the left, which typically support a mainstream left government. Since accommodation attracts former supporters of populist right-wing parties, the result is a net gain for the mainstream left’s governing coalition.”⁴⁸

However, although the SDP won the elections in 2019, a study indicates that this was more due to the collapse of the Danish People’s Party (DPP) than to an ideological shift by the SDP.⁴⁹ It is therefore crucial to consider the political context in which the adoption strategy has proven electorally successful, as appears to be the case in Denmark.

Whether this strategy works depends on several factors, including the structure of the party system, the possibility of cooperation with other left-wing parties, party leadership and parties’ prior positions on key political issues (before adopting far-right discourse). Where these conditions are not in place, the adoption strategy often fails or even backfires, ultimately strengthening the far-right parties it was intended to weaken.

“While the adoption of PRR [populist radical right] strategies for centre-right parties might be fruitful [...], Social Democrats, adopting a similar strategy, are only successful in very few outlier cases. At the same time, the results point out that Social Democrats are better advised to strengthen their traditional support for the welfare state if they want to win elections.”⁵⁰

Therefore, this strategy cannot, and should not, be generalised to all social democratic parties in Europe and beyond. It is a strategy that has not proven to be stable and functional; on the contrary, the “adopt” strategy is highly dependent on many specific circumstances and is contingent on the context, both inside and outside the party.⁵¹ Therefore, the benefits that can be obtained by applying it will tend to be fragile, limited and dependent on the contextual aspects referred to above. Rather than a stable solution to the crisis of representation, trust in social democratic parties and the rise of the far right, the adoption strategy appears to be a desperate measure, capable of postponing the loss of support, but at the cost of accelerating the marginalisation of progressive forces and, paradoxically, strengthening the very adversaries it sought to neutralise: the far right. Given its limited success, the frequency with which this strategy is discussed and used seems to be problematic.

3.2 Focus on the other forms of strategies of engagement

As noted above, we also consider strategies centred on selective representation and on collaboration as forms of engagement. The former seeks to identify

the needs of the population that far-right actors attempt to address and to propose alternative solutions in response. Its goal is to prevent these policy domains from being fully co-opted by the far right. By contrast, the latter, referred to as the collaboration strategy, entails various forms of cooperation with far-right actors. Such collaboration may occur in the legislative arena – through aligned voting on specific bills – or in the executive sphere, either by entering government coalitions or by offering external support, including non-aggression pacts with minority governments backed by the far right.⁵² In our body of literature, four papers focused on collaboration and only two on selective representation.

To assess the effectiveness of the cooperation strategy, scholars have frequently examined the case of Austria in the early 2000s, when the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) entered government.⁵³ Although the FPÖ governed in coalition with the mainstream-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) rather than with the social democrats, this case has often been used to analyse the broader effects of collaboration with far-right actors on mainstream parties, including the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ). It is particularly relevant because, during this period, the SPÖ relaxed its ostracism policy by supporting a restrictive government bill on migration.⁵⁴ Similar to the adoption strategy, however, cooperation appears to yield benefits only in the short term.

"The strategy of incorporation by the mainstream right was to some extent successful because it led to splitting the right-wing populists into 'moderates' (the government team) and 'radicals' (the party grass-roots). However, this did not preclude the revival of the radical wing when given a new opportunity while the moderates quickly lost their raison d'être and atrophied."⁵⁵

Therefore, what appeared to be a positive short-term effect of these strategies was, as the authors make clear, largely illusory. They highlight two key elements: (1) the SPÖ – although in opposition but supportive of the migration bill – failed to attract far-right voters in subsequent elections; and (2)

the temporary decline of the far-right party was not the result of a moderation of its policy positions but rather a consequence of incompetence and its inability to deliver on promises.⁵⁶ In addition, by looking at the Danish case, it should be mentioned that collaborating with the far right often entails a move away from progressive values.⁵⁷

On the other hand, regarding the selective representation strategy, we note that there are not many studies dedicated to analysing this strategy. This may be because the strategy can be combined with other approaches more typical of disengagement, such as the hold strategy. Even so, this strategy has its own particularities. Selective representation refers to the incorporation of the demands of vulnerable social groups – the “losers” of globalisation or marginalised communities – to offer them real channels for participation and political response.⁵⁸ Biskamp highlights the need to “denaturalise” conflicts through this strategy.⁵⁹ This refers to moving the debate away from identity-based or cultural explanations and placing it within structural socioeconomic roots. In this way, the party does not copy the rhetoric of the far right, but rather advocates for a progressive framework that addresses the root causes of unrest.

However, when addressing these groups, it clashes with the interests of the far right, as they also seek the votes of these social groups. The representation strategy then becomes a battle to appropriate the issues that appeal to the population. In this arena, and depending on the issue, it may be easier for the far right to gain control due to its ability to offer simplistic solutions to complex social problems, such as immigration. This ability to provide solutions often works against left-wing parties, as they do not get their message across as clearly and forcefully as their opponents on the other side of the ideological spectrum.

Based on the literature review, we cannot draw conclusions that can be generalised about the use of this strategy. However, it follows the logic of other strategies linked to the “engage” strategies. It may work in the short term, but maintaining it over time is complicated. Even so, this strategy is interesting

because it raises the idea of including various sectors of society in the political project, an issue that can be decisive in terms of electoral results and, moreover, a necessary issue in terms of the values defended by social democracy.

3.3 Focus on strategies of disengagement

Disengagement has received relatively limited attention in the literature on party strategies. In our corpus, only 23 of 127 studies explicitly or implicitly examine this approach, whereas strategies of engagement are discussed far more extensively. Disengagement is usually understood as an attempt to defuse or marginalise issues strongly linked to far-right actors, particularly immigration and integration, by reducing their visibility in political debates. Rather than competing directly on these issues, social democratic actors aim to redirect attention to areas where they have traditional strengths, such as redistribution, welfare policies, and economic governance. In this sense, disengagement represents a deliberate effort to limit the agenda-setting power of far-right actors.

The effectiveness of the disengagement strategy is highly context-dependent. It can succeed when socio-economic concerns dominate the political agenda, since demands for restrictive immigration policies carry less weight in shaping voter behaviour.⁶⁰ In such circumstances, social democratic actors can disengage with the immigration debate without suffering electoral losses. Therefore, this strategy can only work in contexts where the issues championed by the far right are not already at the top of the political agenda. In other words, once immigration or cultural issues become highly salient, avoiding these topics becomes increasingly difficult.

Disengagement can also function as a pre-emptive strategy, but only when other parties, especially the centre right, also avoid politicising immigration.⁶¹ Under these conditions, issues politicised by the far right are likely to remain marginal. However, unilateral disengagement is rarely sustainable: once the far right politicises an issue, unilateral withdrawal

may lose its effectiveness and can cause electoral loss. This reflects the nature of party competition, in which issue strategies are not only shaped by voters' preferences but also by the strategic response of rival parties. The success of the disengagement strategy therefore depends on coordination across the party system, something that is difficult to achieve in competitive democracies.

It should be noted that there are both potentials and limitations to disengagement strategies. In Sweden, mainstream parties agreed to maintain a strict *cordon sanitaire* against the Sweden Democrats, refusing cooperation with the party, which helped to isolate the party and constrain its direct influence. Yet, this strategy simultaneously strengthened the Sweden Democrats' outsider narrative, enabling them to present themselves as challengers to an entrenched political establishment and thereby broaden their electoral appeal.⁶² The wider Nordic experience reinforces this point. In Denmark, Norway and Finland, mainstream parties initially avoided politicising radical-right issues but gradually shifted towards engagement strategies as electoral pressures intensified.⁶³ Comparing Sweden with its Nordic neighbours highlights the persistent challenge of maintaining consistency: Sweden sustained a strict *cordon sanitaire* yet could not prevent the Sweden Democrats' rise, whereas other Nordic parties abandoned disengagement in favour of engagement to address voter concerns more directly.

The Austrian case further demonstrates the fragility of the disengagement strategy. Although the Austrian far-right FPÖ was excluded on the grounds of protecting democratic norms, this strategy ultimately backfired: rather than reducing the party's influence, it intensified its claim to be a victim of mainstream political elites.⁶⁴ Under such conditions, disengagement may not merely be ineffective but may even bolster far-right success.

A more confrontational form of disengagement relies on demonising far-right actors, framing these actors as undemocratic. Yet evidence from the Netherlands shows the limits of demonising

approach. While demonisation initially constrained support for Wilders, once the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) became an established political actor, these tactics rapidly lost their effectiveness.⁶⁵ Comparative evidence shows that social democratic parties make only limited use of demonisation strategies.⁶⁶ When read alongside the Austrian case, a broader structural pattern becomes apparent: although exclusion and demonisation may create short-term political pressure, they rarely offer a durable containment strategy.

As noted, accommodating far-right issues, particularly immigration, may help win back some voters but risks alienating increasingly important liberal constituencies. In such situations, a consistent “hold” strategy is often more sustainable.⁶⁷ Social democrats can remain competitive by emphasising their core ideological values and issue positions, rather than adopting far-right agendas.

Another example of disengagement can be seen in several European cases. In Austria, France, Germany and the Netherlands, social democratic parties that had previously supported expanding direct-democracy measures withdrew their support once far-right actors endorsed similar proposals. Rather than contesting this ground, these parties chose to withdraw. They defended the institutional status quo and presented the proposed reforms as harmful.⁶⁸ By doing so, however, social democratic parties avoid direct confrontation by stepping back from contested issues, thereby leaving the field to the far right. Overall, our review shows that disengagement strategies are fragile and only offer short-term relief. More lasting responses require strategic consistency, ideological clarity and the confidence to challenge the far right on ground that cannot be easily conceded.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 What the literature tells us

The analysis of a corpus of 118 academic studies, based on a typology of nine far-right counter-strategies, reveals a clear and striking pattern. The literature overwhelmingly focuses on engagement strategies, particularly adoption. While 42 of the studies concentrate on adoption, all other strategies, both engagement- and disengagement-based, receive far more limited attention.

This imbalance has significant consequences. As the analysis shows, adoption is neither the only strategy available to social democratic parties, nor the most stable. Yet it dominates academic debate, partly because it has been highly visible in a number of prominent cases, most notably Denmark,⁶⁹ and partly because much of the literature treats centre-left and centre-right parties under the vague category of “mainstream” actors. This approach obscures the specific characteristics of social democratic parties, such as their value commitments, voter coalitions and the particular risks they face when engaging with far-right agendas.

While the mainstream right may indeed experience more immediate pressure, recent contributions underline that far-right normalisation challenges the political system as a whole.⁷⁰ In this policy study, we therefore shift the focus directly to social democratic and progressive forces, following the suggestion to analyse far-right politics in whatever form and from whomever it emerges.⁷¹ By considering whether social democratic parties may already have been affected, rather than assuming a delayed impact, the literature reviewed here most clearly identifies adoption as the dominant response, even among social democratic parties.

4.2 Why adoption is a strategic dead end

Our corpus’s detailed discussion of adoption strategies points to a broad academic consensus on their effects. Although adoption may provide short-term electoral benefits under specific circumstances, its negative consequences tend to outweigh the positives in the medium and long term.

Multiple studies in our analysis show that, electorally, adoption can sometimes help to retain voters or weaken competitors, as predominantly illustrated by the Danish case. However, these gains are fragile and context-dependent. Often, adoption leads to long-term losses or produces asymmetric effects, whereby the far right ultimately benefits from increased issue salience and normalised discourse. As several studies emphasise, even when social democratic parties do not immediately lose votes, they often experience eroded credibility and a weakened partisan identity.

Beyond electoral outcomes, the normative and systemic costs of adoption are even more significant. By shifting debates towards issues and frames associated with the far right, particularly on immigration and national identity, social democratic parties contribute to the normalisation of exclusionary and authoritarian discourse. As demonstrated by multiple case studies, this process erodes core social democratic principles, fosters political cynicism and undermines democratic trust. In this sense, the risks associated with adoption are intrinsic to the strategy itself, not unintended side effects.

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this study points to a clear conclusion: adoption is not a consistent or transferable response to the growth and popularity of the far right. Rather than providing a lasting

solution to declining trust or electoral competition, it frequently intensifies the marginalisation of progressive forces while bolstering the very forces it aims to contain.

Finally, our literature review can provide clear evidence that once mainstream parties – both of the left and the right – accommodate or even collaborate with the far right; this encourages far-right voting and radicalises the mainstream.⁷² The broader repercussion is the entrenchment of authoritarian discourses and practices within the political mainstream.⁷³

4.3 What social democrats should stop doing

Reading across both engagement and disengagement strategies, the literature highlights several recurring pitfalls for social democratic parties in their efforts to deal with the rise and success of the far right in Europe and beyond.

Firstly, social democratic parties should avoid allowing the far right to set the political agenda. As shown in both adoption and collaboration strategies, reacting primarily to far-right issues risks reinforcing far-right ownership claims. Even selective engagement can unintentionally legitimise these topics when debates are conducted on far-right terms.

Secondly, the literature cautions against uncritical use of euphemising labels.⁷⁴ Framing far-right actors merely as “populists” obscures the central role of nativism and exclusion in their politics and can push social democrats into defending a vague “mainstream” alongside centre-right actors, rather than articulating a distinct alternative.⁷⁵

Finally, evidence from both engagement and disengagement strategies shows the limits of purely technocratic or moralising responses. Abandoning emotions to the far right is a self-undermining stance; rationality and emotions are mutually exclusionary elements especially in politics. Moreover, demonisation, a *cordon sanitaire* or

appeals to rationality alone may generate short-term pressure but rarely provide durable containment. Over time, they can even reinforce far-right outsider narratives and deepen distrust toward the political system as a whole.

4.4 What social democrats should start doing: Lessons beyond distinct strategies

A key finding of this review is that no single strategy consistently outperforms all the others. Rather, strategic effectiveness depends on ideological clarity and consistency, as well as the context. Disengagement strategies, such as “hold” or “defuse”, can be effective when socio-economic issues dominate the agenda and coordination between parties limits the influence of far-right politicisation. However, as demonstrated by cases in Sweden, Austria and the Netherlands, disengagement remains fragile and challenging to maintain when far-right issues gain salience.

Throughout the literature, one absence stands out: none of the strategies discussed offers a fully articulated counter-hegemonic vision for social democracy capable of reshaping the political terrain itself. This gap is particularly striking given the repeated emphasis in the literature on the erosion of social democratic identity caused by both engagement and disengagement strategies when they lack a broader political project. The challenge of constructing a compelling progressive alternative without reinforcing right-wing narratives remains crucial. For this reason, this section examines ideas for how progressive actors can articulate a counter-strategy that not only effectively counters the far right but also reaffirms democratic and progressive values.

At a minimum, our findings suggest **three strategic orientations** for social democratic parties:

1. *Social democratic parties need to invest systematically in understanding why far-right narratives resonate with voters, without adopting their arguments or frames. This involves*

analysing the social grievances, emotional appeals and discursive strategies mobilised by far-right actors to identify where progressive narratives fail to connect. Such an understanding should serve as the basis for contestation, not accommodation, and for developing alternative interpretations of social conflict that remain consistent with social democratic values.

2. *Social democrats must reclaim agenda-setting capacity by foregrounding issues where they retain long-standing credibility, in particular welfare provision, redistribution and economic justice.* Rather than primarily responding to topics introduced by the far right, like migration, parties should seek to shift political debate towards policy areas that reflect their core ideological strengths. Louis and de Lagasnerie suggest the “principle of refusal”,⁷⁶ namely, the need to escape imposed debates, to refuse to recognise the validity of certain figures as counterparts and to reject certain problems as relevant. Where engagement with far-right-owned issues is unavoidable, this must be done without accepting far-right framing to avoid reinforcing their ownership claims and legitimising exclusionary discourses.
3. *Social democrats must articulate a positive, forward-looking political vision that moves beyond reactive strategies.* Such a vision needs to describe the society that progressive forces want to build. Two pillars can be central to this attempt: the construction of an inclusionary collective identity for the European peoples and a radical agenda of economic justice in an era of increasing inequalities. By connecting ideas to collective emotions and inclusive forms of identification, social democratic parties can mobilise support, rebuild trust and credibility, and re-establish a sense of democratic purpose, without ceding the affective terrain to the far right.

While these orientations cannot be translated into a single blueprint applicable across all European contexts, since national contexts and actual social and political challenges must be taken into account, they do point towards a common strategic direction. Instead of oscillating between reactive engagement and fragile disengagement, social democratic parties must rebuild their political credibility by offering ideological clarity and viable alternative visions. Social democrats need urgently a counter-hegemonic vision; a project that involves both the discursive and the policy level. This is not only electorally relevant, but also essential for countering the normalisation of far-right politics and strengthening democratic resilience in Europe.

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In 2021 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung launched its competence center for Climate and Social Justice, based in Brussels. Climate and social policies must be two sides of the same European coin in the future. We need to develop climate-neutral energy systems and industries. Simultaneously, we need to safeguard and strengthen the welfare state, local participation and workers' rights.



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This policy study investigates the strategies employed by European social democratic parties in response to the rise of far-right political parties since the 2010s. By building on well over 100 academic studies, we draw clear strategic implications for progressive actors facing far-right competition.

After looking at scientific research on how to fight the far right, a minimum of three strategic orientations emerge:

Social democrats must systematically understand why far-right narratives resonate – examining social grievances, emotions and discursive strategies – without adopting far-right frames.

They must reclaim agenda-setting power by foregrounding areas of long-standing credibility – notably, welfare, redistribution and economic justice – and by refusing debates imposed on far-right terms.

Social democrats need a positive, forward-looking vision that combines an inclusive collective identity with a credible agenda for economic equality, reconnecting policy with collective emotions.

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