

# How to counter exclusionary far right politics with a progressive inclusionary agenda on equality

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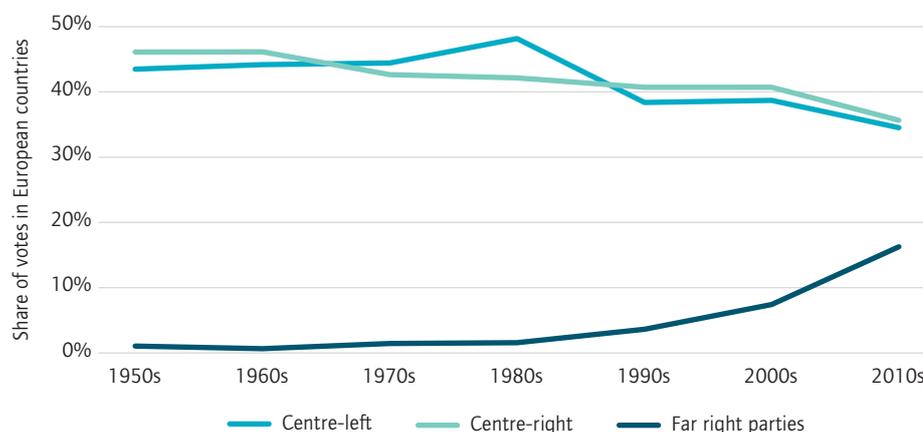
## **Policy recommendations**

- Co-opting the policy agendas of far-right parties is not a winning strategy for social democrats and trade unions because in most cases accommodation will probably alienate a large proportion of their traditional left-wing supporters.
- ‘Copycat’ strategies that extend well beyond ‘ownership’ issues are rarely successful: policy accommodation increases the salience of the immigration issue, thus running the risk of further inflating support for the far right.
- The percentage of voters in the centre-left supporter pool with exclusively cultural immigration concerns is low in most countries. Centre-left voters worried about immigration instead tend to be driven primarily by economic considerations. These supporters will likely abandon left-wing parties and organisations if they adopt far right populist positions.
- Left-wing governments and trade unions should focus on addressing economic grievances by reducing labour market insecurity, promoting economic growth and ensuring effective welfare protection. They should reclaim ownership of issues they are associated with, most notably equality. Successful strategies galvanise the centre-left’s core supporter base and mobilise beyond it by addressing the (economic) grievances that concern large parts of the electorate.

## Introduction: the far-right problem

Far right political parties have been on the rise across Europe since the 1980s, with a sharp uptick since the 2000s (Figure 1). These parties represent a threat to democratic stability, social cohesion and multiculturalism, economic growth and security, as well as efforts to address climate change.

Figure 1 The rise of far right parties since the 1950s



Source: Unless otherwise stated, figures are reproduced from Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2022), where more information about sources can also be found.

Their success can be observed across three dimensions:

- (i) Strong (though varied) electoral performance: parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), National Rally (RN) in France, Vox in Spain and Chega in Portugal have performed very well in recent electoral contests.
- (ii) Entry into government: a number of far right parties have held governmental positions either alone or in coalition, including the Brothers of Italy (Fdi) and Lega (Lega Nord) in Italy, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, Poland's Law and Justice party (PiS), Fidesz in Hungary, the People's Party (DF) in Denmark and the National Alliance (NA) in Latvia.
- (iii) Breakdown of the 'cordon sanitaire', the policy of marginalising extreme parties and their legitimacy as credible opposition. In many European countries, far right parties have become progressively embedded in the political system as credible opposition parties able to influence other parties' policy agenda. The RN, the DF and the UK Independence Party (UKIP), for example, have all successfully competed in their domestic systems, permeating the mainstream and prompting their competitors to adopt accommodative strategies. The 'cordon sanitaire' has broken down even in countries where it has traditionally been effective. In 2022, for the first time Swedish parties negotiated with the Sweden Democrats (SD).

Our analysis of who supports the far right and why suggests that the economy plays a much more central role than is sometimes assumed. First, many far right voters are driven by economic or other protest considerations, such as distrust of institutions. Immigration – sometimes thought of as an exclusively cultural concern – is in fact also an economic concern. Second, far right parties are pursuing mobilisation strategies that draw on economic insecurity and a particular type of welfare chauvinism. Third, social policies can mitigate the insecurities that drive far right support.

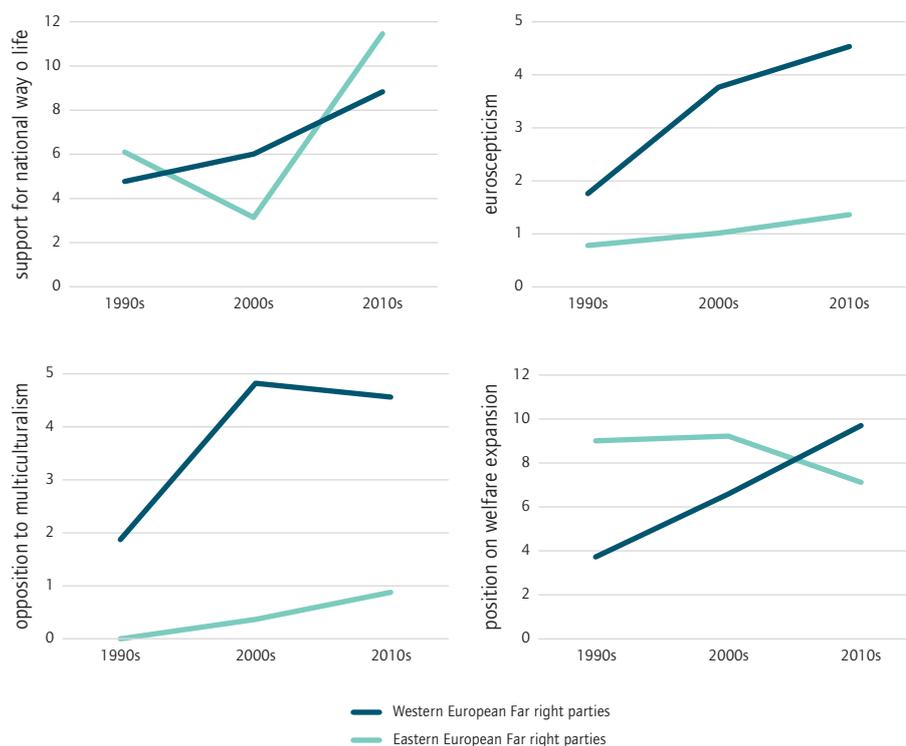
We argue that co-opting far right parties' policy agendas is not a winning strategy for social democrats and trade unions. Indeed, the latter have so far been reluctant to pursue this strategy. 'Copycat' strategies that extend well beyond 'ownership' issues are rarely successful. All this type of policy accommodation will do is increase the salience of the immigration issue, thus running the risk of further inflating far right parties' support. At the same time, accommodation is likely to alienate a large proportion of left-wing supporters. The percentage of voters with immigration concerns among the centre-left supporter pool is rather low. The few that do have such concerns are still primarily driven by economic considerations. These supporters would probably abandon left-wing parties and organisations if they adopted such positions. Instead, a better strategy for social democrats and trade unions is to reclaim ownership of the issue they know best: equality. Successful strategies will galvanise the centre-left's core supporter base and mobilise beyond it by addressing the (economic) grievances that concern large parts of the electorate.

## **1. Far right party mobilisation strategies**

Which parties may be categorised as far right and what type of strategies do they adopt to mobilise voters? We adopt the term 'far right' to describe parties that share a focus on sovereignty, propose nationalist solutions to a variety of socio-economic problems and 'own' the immigration issue (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022). The 'far right' is an umbrella term that captures both extreme and radical variants, in other words parties that have a wide range of relationships with democracy. While both extreme and radical right parties oppose fundamental democratic values, extreme right variants oppose both procedural and substantive democracy whereas radical right variants oppose liberal democracy and question key aspects of the constitutional order (Mudde 2010; Golder 2016). In practice, however, extreme right variants often use democracy and run for elections as a means of achieving their goals (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2023). While any umbrella term inevitably subsumes a broad range of parties and groups that differ in agenda and policy, scholars are increasingly arguing that the term 'far right' captures both the differences and similarities that make these parties comparable (Golder 2016).

All far right parties employ nationalist narratives and compete along the national identity axis. As Figure 2 (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022) illustrates, both western and central and eastern European far right parties are increasingly referring to the 'national way of life' in their programmatic agendas.

Figure 2 Far right party manifesto emphases of National way of life (top left), opposition to multiculturalism (bottom left), welfare expansion (bottom right), and Euroscepticism (top right)



Western and central and eastern European far right parties, however, differ in the ways they employ nationalism. On one hand, far right parties in western Europe make multi-faceted nationalist appeals by employing a civic nationalist normalisation strategy (Halikiopoulou et al. 2013) that allows them to offer nationalist solutions to all types of insecurities that drive voting behaviour. This strategy has two features: first, it presents culture as a value issue and justifies exclusion on ideological grounds; and second, it focuses on social welfare and welfare chauvinism to appeal to economically insecure voters (Figure 2; see also Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2022). The majority of successful western European far right parties – including, for example, the RN and the AfD – implement this strategy in their programmatic agendas. Notable exceptions include certain far right parties in southern Europe – for example, Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece – which can be classified as an extreme right, neo-Nazi party which employed violent tactics.

Eastern European far right parties, on the other hand, remain largely ethnic nationalist, focusing on ascriptive criteria of national belonging and mobilising voters on socially conservative positions and a rejection of minority rights. Their welfare positions are ‘blurry’ and ambivalent, partly because of constraints related to the region’s socialist past. While they are generally welfare chauvinist, their support for welfare expansion is linked to ‘national’ priorities, such as the protection of native families. They also employ anti-West narratives, focusing on ‘Western exploitation’ and the importance of empowering domestic businesses.

Examples include Hungary's Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), which have gradually become radicalised while in government.

Our analysis illustrates the following general trends. First, far right parties are making significant attempts to normalise their narratives and appear legitimate and non-extreme, which makes them more difficult to fight. Second, they are making significant attempts to attract voters with economic insecurities. Third, we also see significant differences between European regions.

## **2. Economic drivers of far right party support**

Who supports the far right and why? While a large body of academic literature initially emphasised the importance of cultural values in shaping far right voting behaviour, economic explanations have increasingly gained prominence (e.g. Baccini and Sattler 2023). Indeed our analysis shows that in order to understand the drivers of far right party support, it is important to focus on the heterogeneity of the far right electorate. A range of factors, including both cultural and economic, increase the likelihood that someone will vote for a far right party.

We may distinguish between core and peripheral far right voters. Core voters are more likely to be ideological and fully committed to far right parties' policy positions, while peripheral voters are more opportunistic and less loyal, often motivated by their desire to express their discontent and/or to protest against dominant parties and institutions. This latter group is often driven by economic considerations. Economic insecurity creates political dissatisfaction. Even within the context of a new transnational cleavage – a new or emerging societal cleavage that divides societies along value-based lines – there are good reasons to continue to focus on the impact of material factors and self-interest on party choice and perceptions of labour market competition with immigrants (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2019). The important distinction between galvanising the core constituency and mobilising a broader public explains why individuals with different preferences may vote for the same party. As successful political parties often obtain electoral support from a broad range of voters (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020), major far right electoral potential is associated with a mobilisational capacity beyond these parties' core voting groups (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2023).

More specifically, we distinguish between the following core versus peripheral far right voter groups: (2.1) ideological core voters who have cultural concerns about immigration whom we call 'the culturalists'; and (2.2) peripheral or protest voters who include voters we call 'materialists', 'welfarists' and 'decliners'. Far right party success can be understood as the ability to forge coalitions between different voter groups with different concerns. Figure 3 shows two hypothetical situations. In the first (left-hand side), far right parties (coloured black) attract some of their core voters but no peripheral voters, who vote for the Greens, the left, far left and/or centre-right parties (all coloured grey). As shown on the right, successful far right parties attract these other voter groups by emphasising materialist, declinist and/or welfare chauvinist messages. As we argue later, left-wing parties and organisations seeking to

capture core far right supporters by ‘copying’ the far right might struggle to do so because they lack ownership of far right issues. They may also antagonise other, larger groups of peripheral voters, however, as well as their own left-wing supporters.

Figure 3 **Hypothetical electoral coalitions of unsuccessful and successful far right parties**

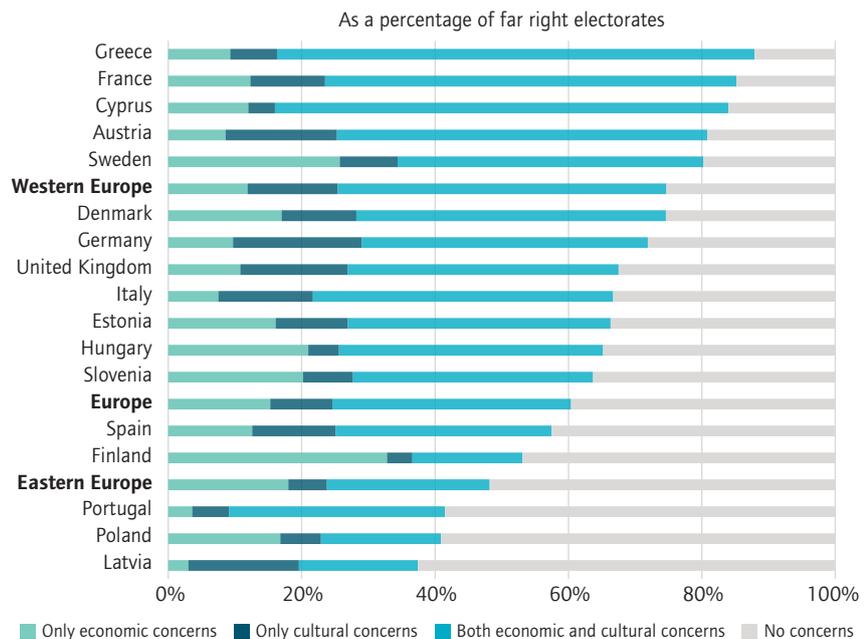
Voter groups		Unsuccessful Far right parties	Successful Far right parties
CORE	<i>Culturalists</i>	██████████	██████████
PERIPHERY	<i>Materialists</i>	██████████	██████████
	<i>Welfarists</i>	██████████	██████████
	<i>Decliners</i>	██████████	██████████

Source: Authors’ own conceptualisation.

## 2.1 Ideological or core voters

The ‘culturalists’ are voters who identify fully with the far right parties’ traditional positions, most notably nationalist-xenophobic platforms. They tend to have strong nationalistic attitudes, accompanied by unfavourable attitudes towards immigrants and opposition to multiculturalism, and sometimes also traditional conceptions of gender roles and the family. While these core voters constitute the prime far right party constituency, they only make up a small share of the far right electorates in most European countries.

Figure 4 **Distribution of immigration concerns in the far right electorate**



For instance, Figure 4 shows that most far right voters do not have exclusively cultural concerns about immigration (see also Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022), which we discuss in the next sub-section.

## 2.2 Peripheral or protest voters

Peripheral or protest voters identify only partially with the far right platform. As such, their support is more contingent and their affinity with the far right is less strong. They tend to be motivated by economic concerns about their material positions (*materialists*), dissatisfaction with insufficient protection afforded by welfare states (*welfarists*), and experiences of downward class and status mobility (*decliners*). Our research indicates that these peripheral voter groups may have to some extent been driven to the far right in some countries and in the following paragraphs, we distinguish between materialists, welfarists and decliners.

First, the ‘materialists’ are voters with economic concerns about the economic impact of immigration. A wealth of voting behaviour literature documents a strong association between economic insecurity and far right party support, showing that low educated males with poor labour market prospects are more likely to be far right supporters (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016). This can be explained by labour market insecurity: individuals experiencing economic marginalisation are more likely to vote for far right parties because they worry about wage pressures and competition with immigrants for jobs and benefits. The lower social strata are often referred to as the ‘losers of modernisation’ who experience such pressures because of economic globalisation and trade openness. Greater exposure to labour-market competition is likely to reinforce prejudices against immigrants, which therefore may have material economic foundations. In sum, economically insecure individuals are more likely to support parties with an interest in limiting immigration because of (perceived) labour market competition. These voters are likely to support the prioritisation of the in-group on economic grounds but do not necessarily identify with the other nationalist elements of far right agendas. Because their concerns are related to a weaker form of immigration scepticism and their out-group attitudes are not principled, they may be catered for by a number of other parties. As Figure 2 above illustrates, they constitute a much larger share of the far right electorate in most (but not all) countries.

Second, the ‘welfarists’ comprise economically insecure groups exposed to high social or economic risks. Their far right voting propensity can be mediated through social policy compensation and protection mechanisms. In our earlier research (Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2022) we have specifically focused on six social risk groups, each understood in a loose non-exclusive sense as comprising individuals who share a characteristic that exposes them to particular risk, including: (a) the unemployed; (b) pensioners; (c) the permanently sick or disabled; (d) low-income workers; (e) workers on permanent contracts; and (f) people with children. The ways in which these different social groups face distinct risks may depend on the degree to which they are compensated and/or protected by various welfare state policies in the country where they reside. The more generous the policies, the less economically insecure these groups may

be; and by extension, the less likely they are to express discontent by voting for the far right.

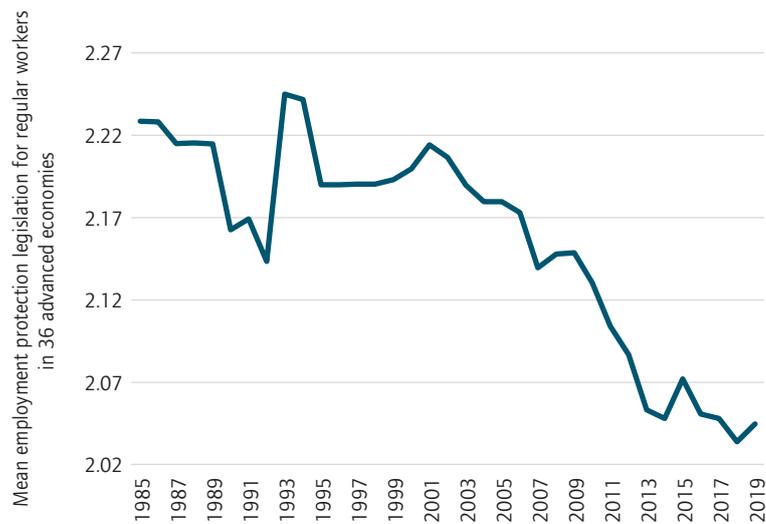
Third, the ‘decliners’ are people who have experienced social status or class decline. Our research shows that those falling from the upper (salaried) to the lower (working) classes are more likely to vote for the far right (Gugushvili et al. 2023). Indeed, working class voters whose parents come from higher social classes experience both relative and absolute deprivation, and are, as such, the most likely supporters of the far right. The strong association between class decline and far right party support does not necessarily drive the electoral success of these parties. While individuals from salaried origins and a working-class destination are the most likely far right supporters, they constitute only a small percentage of the far right electorate. Together with other ‘materialists’, however, they contribute to the pool of peripheral voters who allow far right parties to mobilise beyond their secure ‘core’ voter base.

### **3. The role of social policies**

What can the left do? While ‘core’ far right supporter groups (culturalists) differ considerably from centre-left voters and hence beyond the remit of the left, far right ‘peripheral’ supporters with predominantly economic concerns do constitute a potential left-wing target. Indeed, our research suggests that ‘insecurity is not destiny’; instead the widespread grievances that drive the decision of materialists, welfarists and declinists to turn to far right parties emerge from a complex interaction between long-term, structural changes in the international and domestic spheres of advanced capitalist economies, on one hand, and a series of policy choices (or lack thereof) on the other. Since the end of the so-called ‘Golden Age of Economic Growth’, advanced capitalist democracies have experienced substantial liberalisation, financialisation and internationalisation of their markets, against the backdrop of deindustrialisation and the turn, initially, to so-called service, and more recently to knowledge, economies. While parts of electorates have benefited from at least some of these changes, these structural transformations have generated widespread insecurities among other parts of the electorates: unemployment, precarious and atypical employment have become a reality for many previously protected (especially low and medium skilled) workers; inequality has risen, just as upward class mobility has stalled; and new social risks have appeared.

These transformations would ideally have required the expansion and innovation of so-called consumption and social investment policies within the welfare states. Instead, many governments, in several cases led by the left, have chosen to deregulate employment protection legislation (Figure 5), retrenched and/or activated their unemployment and social assistance benefit systems, and/or allowed wage bargaining and public sector institutions to be undermined. Thus, successive policy decisions have exacerbated the economic insecurities that longer term transformations had brought about. In many instances, these policy decisions represented, to a varying degree a consensus between centre-left and centre-right parties, thereby opening up space for other more radical parties to offer alternative policy positions, at least rhetorically.

Figure 5 The deregulation of employment protection legislation for regular workers



A large literature in comparative political economy and social policy demonstrates that the right regulatory and policy responses can decrease economic insecurity. In line with this logic, we have shown empirically that the probability of individuals facing certain social risks voting for far right parties is crucially moderated by social policies. Thus, for instance, the unemployed, the sick and disabled, and people with large families are less likely to vote for far right parties when unemployment, sickness and family benefits are more generous, respectively (Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2022). Thus, centre-left parties can effectively challenge far right parties, not just by choosing a different message and distinct positions, but also by implementing different policies. Specifically, social policies that address the insecurity of at-risk groups, for instance in unemployment, can effectively reduce the likelihood of these groups turning to far right parties. Similarly, trade union membership has been shown to reduce individual likelihood to support far right parties (Mosimann et al. 2019), suggesting that left-wing parties should also pursue policies that protect trade union rights and foster membership resilience.

## Conclusion

Overall, our analysis suggests that in most cases co-opting right-wing populist policy agendas is not a winning strategy for the centre-left as this will likely alienate a large proportion of their traditional, left-wing supporters. This finding is consistent with recent literature which suggests that centre-left repositioning towards far right restrictive immigration policies may attract a small number of far right voters but alienate a much larger proportion of their own voters (Chou et al. 2021). Instead, left-wing groups should appeal to the economic insecurities that concern a broad range of voters, including peripheral far right voters driven by protest considerations and economic discontent. They should do so by focusing on issues the left 'owns': first and foremost, equality.

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