**RESEARCH NOTE**

# Far right: The significance of an umbrella concept

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**Abstract**

This contribution makes the case for a shift in boundaries between the (populist) radical right and the extreme right, arguing for the systematic use of the term 'far right'. The significance of a deliberately generic but fundamentally meaningful concept such as 'far right' is motivated by the growing links between illiberal-democratic ('radical right') and anti-democratic ('extreme right') collective actors. This begs considering the conceptual grounds for differentiation among far-right collective actors, their underlying dynamics, and why it is important to look at what they do to tackle this phenomenon in practice—that is, to extrapolate their ideological essence and their varying allegiances to democracy. The complexity of far-right politics questions the long-standing conceptual distinctions internally defining it. The use of an umbrella concept may thus enhance precision in the discussion of this phenomenon, at the same time highlighting the unfolding of a new phase in nativist politics.

**KEYWORDS**
democracy, extreme right, far right, illiberalism, populism, radical right

# 1 | INTRODUCTION

The global evolution of the far right is a reminder of how far these political parties, social movements, and groups (henceforth, collective actors) have gone in straddling the space between democratic illiberalism and all-out opposition to democracy. While the far right has become a mainstay of contemporary politics, developments in its midst reflect various forms of ideological and/or organisational osmosis. On the one hand, far-right collective actors might proclaim themselves committed to democracy on paper, but practically act in breach of its dictates. The growing occurrence of far-right parties in power is testimony to the damage that can be wreaked to democratic systems worldwide. On the other hand, the far right might abide by democratic rules of contestation within the institutional arena, but nurture links with anti-democratic actors outside of it. Such links, which often represent the backbone of far-right grassroots activism and organising, regrettably remain at the margins of social scientific enquiry and continue eluding public scrutiny. Both scenarios signal the intrinsic fluidity and complexity of far-right politics and question the long-standing conceptual distinctions internally defining it. When the boundaries between the extreme right and the (populist) radical right start to blur, resorting to a more abstract genus is not a suboptimal solution. The use of the umbrella term 'far right' may thus better delimit this phenomenon and enhance conceptual precision through its aggregative power. In this contribution, I discuss the use of the term 'far right', providing a rationalisation of the concept and making the case for its systematic use.

The scholarship on the contemporary far right has undergone relatively little sweeping change at the conceptual level.[1] Against an incredibly voluminous corpus characterising the study of this phenomenon, 'definitions have become more parsimonious and more similar over the last 20 years' (Carter 2018, p. 175)—a welcome advancement after the little definitional consensus of the 1990s (Carter, 2005). The argument has been made and rehearsed that the contemporary far right epitomises a radical interpretation of mainstream values (Mudde, 2019) or a radicalisation of the mainstream (Minkenberg, 2013) and, as such, might not pose an inherent threat to democratic values. But with the unfolding autocratisation under far-right rule (Vachudova, 2020) and the mounting relevance of far-right mobilisation at the grassroots level (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2021), there is now a drive to make sense of, and capture, the *essence* and *evolution* of this phenomenon. Are we simply confronted with a radicalisation of the political mainstream and a normalisation of far-right ideas? Or are we rather witnessing a penetration of extremist elements into those radical-right politics we have come to regard as 'normal'?

Until recently, the debate within the social sciences has centred on discerning '(populist) radical right' collective actors (mostly parties) abiding by the rules of the democratic game from 'extreme right' ones (mostly movements and groups) seeking to overthrow the democratic system. As distinctions have come to dim among these actors, the more general term 'far right' not only highlights ongoing changes within this phenomenon, but also flags potential issues related to democratic compliance. This holds particularly true for the (populist) radical right, which is only interpreted *in tension* with *liberal*-democratic precepts. This begs considering the conceptual grounds for differentiation and why it is important to look at what far-right collective actors do to tackle this phenomenon in practice.

We first ought to treat the far right as a collective actor made up of multiple parts—some geared towards elections, others towards grassroots mobilisation—acting in concert and complementing each other. For the most part, there is simply no empirical justification to consider the far right as a purely electoralist phenomenon operating exclusively within the institutional arena (Blee, 2007; Castelli Gattinara, 2020; Pirro & Castelli Gattinara, 2018). Even the most institutionalised far-right party relies on a—by and large hidden—production structure (the 'backstage') and operates within a network of networks that might also pose a threat to the democratic status quo. We must train our eye to move beyond the institutional 'frontstage' and start looking for anti-democratic signs.

In order to do so, I will explain the significance of the term 'far right' and make a plea for its use. I will first overview the concept and problematise the neat distinctions among its constituent parts. Such a critique is based on an ideational approach giving prominence not only to the ideology or set of ideas advocated by far-right collective actors, but also the way these shape their political action. According to this view, organisational choices to team up with extremist actors or resort to violence to challenge opponents squarely fit an ideational understanding of the

political. This line of argumentation is supported by outlining the increasingly porous borders and growing links between the illiberal-democratic and anti-democratic far right. Indeed, while we have gone relatively far in attaining rigour in the study of the far right, we have generally failed to acknowledge *exchanges in its midst*. As we shall see, constituent concepts such as 'extreme right' or '(populist) radical right' assume that anti-democratic and illiberal-democratic entities remain distinct and operate within separate domains. The reality of the far right is however more complex than that and might make these distinctions untenable. This is why I argue for the use of a deliberately generic but fundamentally meaningful concept such as 'far right', factoring in non-institutional manifestations that remain, to this day, often neglected.

## 2 | 'FAR RIGHT' AS AN UMBRELLA CONCEPT

The term 'far right' is an umbrella concept used to refer to the '(populist) radical' and 'extreme' variants of right-wing politics. It is, by definition, a generic term used to identify and bring together collective actors located on the rightmost end of the *ideological* left–right spectrum, but it is not devoid of meaning because of this aggregative property. Although the term evokes position and spatial location, it is also substantive as it refers to constituent parts (i.e. radical/extremist collective actors) discernible on the basis of their democratic/anti-democratic outlook (cf. Carter, 2005). For the sake of this discussion, the far right includes all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview—predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria—yet varying allegiances to democracy.

As this discussion is prompted by the difficulty in *delimiting* the current manifestations of this phenomenon, it is important to take stock of the conceptual debate in the scholarship. Therefore, I will first dissect and reconstruct the concept, defining what is 'right' as opposed to 'left'; 'far right' as opposed to 'moderate right'; and finally, distinguishing between the subordinate categories of the far right, that is, '(populist) radical right' and 'extreme right'. The first goal of this threefold distinction is to set boundaries helping differentiate between these phenomena on the basis of three foundational aspects: equality, liberal constitutionalism, and democracy (Table 1). The second and foremost goal is to show that these distinctions might be easier to make at the abstract level, but appear ever more difficult as we translate these concepts into practice. We are increasingly confronted with a phenomenon that straddles the conceptual space between the 'extreme' and '(populist) radical' right. The plea advanced here is to appreciate the complexity in delimiting this phenomenon and resort to the most precise concept to qualify it. Classification should nonetheless consider *what far-right collective actors do* to extrapolate their ideological essence—an aspect often overlooked in the assessment of their profile.

### 2.1 | Left versus right

The location in terms of left and right is the oldest distinction used to make sense of party-political competition. Without underplaying the existence of multiple conflicting interests in society or the emergence of new cross-cutting concerns over the last century, the *ideological* left–right distinction preserves a major heuristic power, helping

**TABLE 1** Concepts and grounds for differentiation

| Concepts | Dimensions |
| --- | --- |
| Left vs. right | Equality |
| Moderate right vs. far right | Liberal constitutionalism |
| (Populist) radical right vs. extreme right | Democracy |

classifying political actors across time and space.[2] In ideological terms, the underlying distinction between left and right concerns the notion of *equality*, which can be considered the founding principle of the democratic order, under which other issues like liberal freedom can be subsumed (Sartori, 1987).

According to Norberto Bobbio (1994), the left can be defined on the basis of its egalitarian drive. Its credo is to remove—also through state intervention—all those barriers that make people unequal, advocating equal rights and opportunities for all. Conversely, the right is described as non-egalitarian, precisely because its models of political and social order are rooted in the necessity and legitimacy of institutionalised inequality (Saalfeld, 1993). The right seeks to maintain a status quo whereby differences between people are entrenched; it promotes or enacts policies that make people less equal and believes that the state should not be called on to redress standing inequalities in society. From an axiological perspective, the right defines people's diversity as the standard for a good community (Bobbio, 1994).[3]

It is not too far-fetched to argue that, for the left, all should be ideally equal. For the right, some are more equal—or, better, deserving—than others. Criteria for such primacy vary and may for example hinge on a person's belonging to the native group. Referring to the left–right distinction is not only crucial because the classification of far-right collective actors has consistently privileged ideology as an identifying criterion (Mudde, 2007). It is also important because the far right—unlike the moderate right—is *radically exclusionary* as far as the general principle of egalitarianism is concerned. The far right objects to pluralism and equality.

## 2.2 | Moderate right versus far right

The nation and the national community tend to be common concerns to both the moderate right and the far right, just as their subscription to a broad notion of social conservatism. But while the moderate right encapsulates a 'desire to conserve', it also endorses *liberal constitutionalism*, which provides the main ground for differentiation between the moderate and far right. Liberal constitutionalism is based on the conviction that, within the democratic framework of action, one or more authoritative documents should define and defend individual rights and freedoms, commitment to the rule of law, and a series of checks and balances—among which the cardinal separation between legislative, executive, and judicial powers (Ginsburg et al., 2018). Such constitutional *garantisme* variously derives from moral principles, natural rights, and rights-based ethics, and resolves in citizens' freedom from state oppression (Sartori, 1987).

*At the very least*, the far right bears a strained relationship with liberal constitutionalism; it is nothing less than *illiberal democratic*, in that it is indifferent or hostile to liberal democracy.[4] The 'illiberal democratic' attribute can be appended to those political actors that acknowledge the procedural vestiges of democracy such as elections, but then hollow out its liberal content, contesting or violating political rights and civil liberties. Democratic illiberalism is a backlash against the excesses of cultural liberalism (Laruelle, 2022; Smilova 2021, p. 178). Authors like Jan-Werner Müller (2016, pp. 55-56) argue that liberal principles and democracy cannot be separated and that the 'illiberal democratic' attribute is an unwarranted concession to those far-right governments that set their countries on an auto-cratic trajectory. Even within processes of autocratisation, we should think of illiberal policy change as a 'playbook' involving different gradations of non-compliance with the liberal-democratic script instead of a single package of illegal moves (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). While the deeds of the far right should remain at the heart of our classification efforts, we should not qualify all far-right actors as anti-democratic, as this would neglect the substantial process of renewal that the far right has undergone since the end of World War II (Carter, 2005; Minkenberg, 2000; Mudde, 2007).

Although 'liberalism' and 'democracy' have come to converge in contemporary Western polities, they remain distinct concepts and phenomena (Sartori, 1987). Political actors can contravene either of the two, or both. Yet only those acting in breach of democratic principles shall be defined as anti-democratic. Even within the holistic aspiration of the ideational approach, we must thus distinguish the ideology of these actors from the way this informs their

political action. Should a probe into illiberal democrats' or anti-democrats' deeds fail to deliver unequivocal answers, the researcher must always turn to the more general concept 'far right' in order to avoid misclassification. In essence, while all far-right actors are fundamentally illiberal, not all of them are necessarily anti-democratic.

Therefore, we better consider the far right's illiberalism as socioculturally anti-individualist and anti-pluralist: neither the interests and rights of the individual nor those of minorities can supersede those of the ethno-national community (e.g. Smilova, 2021). The far right's problem with liberalism rests with its individualism, humanitarianism, universalism, and cosmopolitanism. Illiberals impugn the notion of individual liberty and blame liberalism for the crisis of modern society: 'Human beings need roots and togetherness, but liberal society pulls them apart and condemns them to an agitated and rootless mobility' (Holmes, 1996, p. 6). The far right thus seeks to replace a model based on minority rights and the rule of law with one based on ethno-national majoritarianism (Laruelle, 2022; Merkel & Scholl, 2018). The subscription to nativist and authoritarian principles goes a long way in substantiating it.

The combination of *nativism and authoritarianism* represents the ideological core of the far right. Nativism is a radical exclusionary form of nationalism, according to which states should be solely inhabited by members of the native group. According to the far right, all non-native elements pose a fundamental threat to the homogeneity of the nation-state (Mudde 2007, p. 19) and must be thus subdued. In its dualistic worldview, the far right frames society as divided between a virtuous native ingroup ('us') and a treacherous alien outgroup ('them') (Mudde, 2007: Ch.3). On the one hand, natives are the dominant national or cultural group. On the other, non-natives (i.e. aliens and enemies of the nation) are often defined by exclusion or through a system of difference, and include: ethnic, linguistic, or religious minorities, migrants, cultural and political opponents, various 'deviants', and so forth. The criteria for exclusion are defined in sociocultural terms; belonging to the 'cultural nation is treated as pre-politically settled and not open to contestation' (Wolkenstein 2019, p. 334).

Because of the exclusionary convictions outlined above, non-natives should submit to authority; any contravention of norms and values should be condemned. Elisabeth Carter (2018, p. 169) suggests that 'some mix of conventionalism, submission, and aggression is found in the ideologies of all right-wing extremist/radical parties'. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2020, p. 8) argues that 'all far-right ideological beliefs share exclusionary, hierarchical, and dehumanising ideals that prioritise and seek to preserve the superiority and dominance of some groups over others'. Whether through verbal attacks or actual policy measures, the far right targets 'non-natives' in ways that, at the minimum, run counter the liberal constitutional principle of rights and freedoms for all, defy the rule of law, and contravene the separation of powers. As nativism and authoritarianism represent the common ideological denominator of the far right, they also provide the ideological base for its constituent parts.

## 2.3 | (Populist) radical right versus extreme right

Within the far-right set, we find two constituent subsets or subordinate categories—the (populist) radical right and the extreme right—whose main distinguishing criterion is their stance towards *democracy*. The ideal area of contempt covered here ranges from *illiberal democratic*—the bare minimum laid out above—to *anti-democratic* positions (Figure 1).

The distinction between 'radical' and 'extreme' draws on the Federal Republic of Germany's Basic Law—which entrenches a system of protection of the liberal-democratic constitutional order—and the subsequent rulings by the German Federal Constitutional Court (Capoccia, 2013).[5] Despite their specific origins, the connotations of 'radical' and 'extreme' are not culturally bound and in fact present us with universally applicable principles to restrict the activities of extremist actors within democratic regimes. On the one hand, *(populist) radical-right* collective actors reject the established sociocultural and sociopolitical order; they challenge the liberal foundations of contemporary advanced democracies but do not participate to destroy the democratic system. For the (populist) radical right, the struggle between natives and non-natives is 'merely' political, which leads it to challenge opponents within the bounds of democratic rule. These collective actors qualify as *illiberal democratic*, as per the specifications above. *Extreme-right* collective
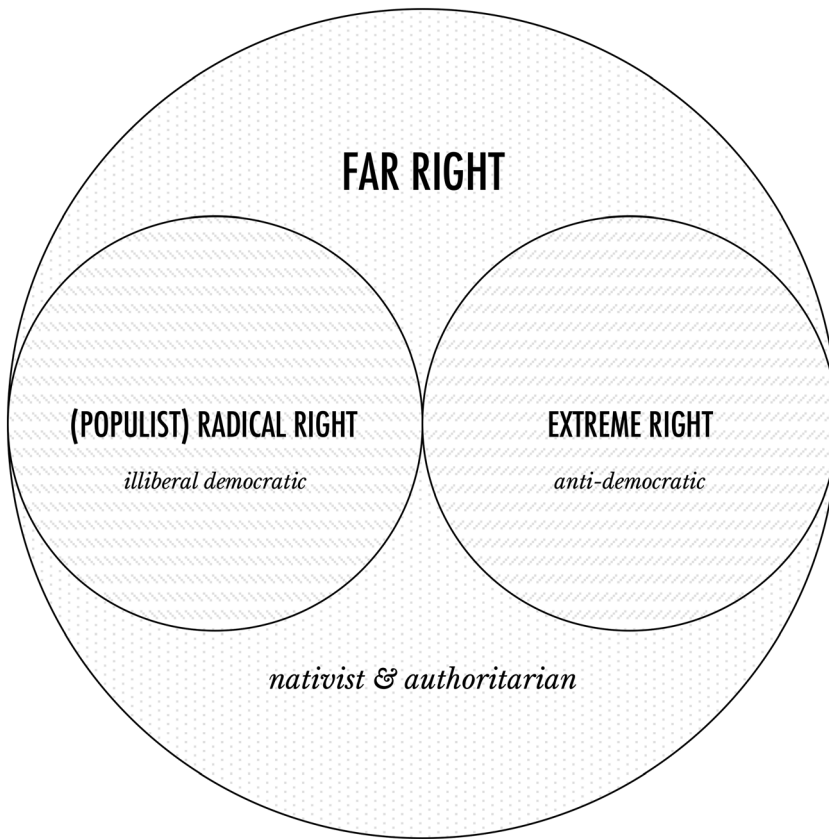
**FIGURE 1** Visualisation of the 'far right' set, its constituent subsets, and their defining characteristics

actors, on the other hand, are those that reject the constitutional order outright and aim at subverting the democratic status quo. The extreme right conceives the struggle between natives and non-natives as vital; it is prepared to elevate conflict beyond the political sphere and annihilate its enemies.[6] They participate to destroy and play an altogether different game. The extreme right is thus *anti-democratic*.

To be sure, the adoption and translation of notions of radicalism or extremism to other systems does not automatically entail that contemporary extreme-right (e.g. neo-fascist, neo-Nazi, etc.) collective actors will be outlawed whenever they are identified as such. For one, wherever they are in place, such provisions are not consistently implemented. This is all the more evident in relation to the German case, where an automatic banning mechanism is not established. The recent (failed) attempts to outlaw the extreme-right *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (National Democratic Party of Germany) in 2012 and 2016 demonstrate that the decisions of the Constitutional Court can be indeed discretionary and dependent upon specific contingencies. Still, these concepts have proven to travel well across time and space.

The far right's stance towards democracy is relevant for yet another reason. The majority of contemporary radical-right collective actors also tend to be populist (Mudde, 2007), meaning that, through their anti-establishment profile, they glorify 'the people' and consider it the linchpin of any rightful political goal and decision, at the same time criticising 'the elite' as responsible for all the ills of the world. However, not all radical-right collective actors are necessarily populist (see, for example, the Czech *Republikáni* or the Latvian *Nacionālā Apvienība*)—hence the use of the populist adjective between brackets throughout. Populism is nonetheless essentially democratic: it endorses a 'populist democracy' uninhibited by liberal constraints, but stops short of proposing to abolish free elections and

install dictatorship (Canovan, 1999). As the extreme right is inherently anti-democratic, and often elitist and racist,[7] it cannot qualify as populist. In theory at least, extreme-right politics and populism cannot intersect.

## 2.4 | Delimitation: From theory to practice

The scholarship has so far considered the '(populist) radical right' and 'extreme right' constituent subsets as touching but not overlapping (Figure 1). These two variants of the far right are treated as conceptually separate, as any simplification of real-world phenomena would allow. However, ongoing developments within the far-right camp raise evident problems of delimitation, which make distinctions between extremist and radical variants difficult to operate.

In order to get this phenomenon right and avoid 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori, 1970; e.g. calling a borderline or outright extremist collective actor 'populist/radical'), the use of the more abstract genus 'far right' enhances precision.

> In this case a more "general," or more inclusive, concept can be obtained without any loss of precision. The larger the class, the lesser its differentiae; but those differentiae that remain, remain precise. Moreover, following this procedure we obtain conceptualizations which, no matter how all-embracing, still bear a traceable relation to a collection of specifics, and—out of being amenable to identifiable sets of specifics—lend themselves to empirical testing. (Sartori 1970, p. 1041)

The majority of scholars use the term 'far right' as a step up in the 'ladder of abstraction' (Sartori, 1970), that is, a more general concept to capture both (populist) radical and extremist variants of right-wing politics. Moving up and down the ladder of abstraction comes with an intrinsic trade-off: the higher the range of cases to which a concept applies (extension), the lower the number of defining attributes (intension), and vice versa. With the 'far right' concept, we broaden the extension compared with '(populist) radical right' and 'extreme right' (both nativist and authoritarian), but reduce its connotation without taking into account these actors' fundamental attitude towards democracy. As we shall see, such trade-off cannot be easily resolved in the face of prima-facie (populist) radical-right collective actors bearing extremist elements in their midst, nurturing links with the anti-democratic extreme right, and/or acting—even occasionally—in breach of the constitutional order.

## 3 | RATIONALE FOR THE USE OF 'FAR RIGHT'

The chief rationale for the use of a more general concept relates here to the increasingly porous borders and growing links between (populist) radical-right parties, on the one hand, and extreme-right movements and groups, on the other. I suggest that much more attention should be devoted to what far-right collective actors actually do, on top of what they usually say or publicly claim to stand for. A few examples should suffice to get the point across.

Between 2014 and 2015, the Italian populist radical-right *Lega* (League, formerly known as Northern League) nurtured links with the extreme-right *CasaPound Italia* (Brusini, 2015). The two collective actors held a joint event on 28 February 2015 in Rome's central Piazza del Popolo, where their leaders Matteo Salvini and Simone Di Stefano shared the stage under the banner 'Us with Salvini' and 'Sovereignty'. At the peak of the so-called migration crisis in 2015, moreover, the same *Lega* and the extreme-right *Forza Nuova* (New Force, FN) shared a common repertoire of action at the grassroots level (Castelli Gattinara, 2018), hinting at a much deeper and less visible sphere of cooperation between the two collective actors—at least, at the local level. The FN leadership and its members have incidentally infiltrated and spearheaded anti-lockdown/mask/vax protests during the COVID-19 pandemic, culminating in the assault on the national headquarters of the main Italian trade union on 9 October 2021—an attack closely reminding those perpetrated by fascist militias in the early 1920s. The Hungarian populist radical-right *Jobbik*

*Magyarországért Mozgalom* (Movement for a Better Hungary, Jobbik) mobilised in the protest arena with extreme-right movements and groups—even amid attempts to rebrand itself and moderate its public discourse (Pirro et al., 2021). While now committed to cooperation with Hungarian liberal forces to unseat Viktor Orbán, Jobbik's ties to the extreme right could earlier question its subscription to the rules of the democratic game. Another populist radical-right actor like the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has undergone significant organisational and discursive change after the 2016 Brexit referendum. Between 2018 and 2019, the party opened up to extreme-right grassroots activists (Klein & Pirro, 2021), suggesting that osmosis within the far right is far from occasional. In a similar vein, the populist radical-right *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest, VB) has made investments to rejuvenate its brand by targeting young voters (Cerulus, 2019). This strategy is best exemplified by the election of Tom van Grieken to party chairman in 2014 or the decision to field Dries van Langehoven as part of the VB list in the 2019 Belgian election. Van Langehoven, at the time of writing MP for the VB, is the founder of the youth movement *Schild & Vrienden* (Shield & Friends), which is part of the broader transnational extreme-right Identitarian movement. The youth section of the populist radical-right *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* (Conservative People's Party of Estonia, EKRE), *Sinine Äratus* (Blue Awakening), serves as breeding ground for party elites. *Sinine Äratus* was affiliated to the now-defunct Swedish extreme-right *Nordisk Ungdom* (Nordic Youth) and plays a key role in organising the annual torchlight march on Estonia's Independence Day as well as the Etnofutur conference—an event attracting Identitarians and far-rightists from across the globe (Saarts et al., 2021). Finally, the populist radical-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) has ostensibly attempted to keep the inbred *völkisch* '*Flügel*' ('Wing') at bay over concerns on its compliance to democratic principles (Müller, 2020). The eventual dissolution of the *Flügel* did not curb the relevance of the case for the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which pledged to put the whole AfD under surveillance on charges of right-wing extremism (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

The German authorities' decision seemingly echoes Sartori's understanding of the internal functioning of political organisations: 'it is very meaningful to say that the nature of a party is in the nature of its fractions' (Sartori 1976, p. 75). Accordingly, I subscribe to the notion that, wherever present, extreme-right elements are constitutive parts of the whole; these elements should be brought to the fore to grasp the essence of these collective actors and get this phenomenon right. Hence, while the 'populist radical right' label might still adequately denote the *general tendency* of the AfD, EKRE, *Lega*, Jobbik, UKIP, and VB *at given time points*, most would probably feel more at ease classifying them as 'far right' in light of outlined developments. In such cases, the term 'far right' clearly enhances precision instead of reducing it.

These examples—neither marginal, nor uncommon—show the symbiotic relationship between the (populist) radical right and the extreme right, and that the distinction between these subtypes is a matter of empirical enquiry. To this end, very little research has engaged with the width and depth of these ties or their consistency over time and space. The key question therefore relates to the extent to which we are confronted with *a single far-right collective actor* spanning the (populist) radical and the extreme right. Can we speak of a stable alliance structure within the far right? And what is the partition of labour within it? Recent pleas to shift the focus of attention beyond institutions and to the protest arena (Castelli Gattinara, 2020; Greskovits, 2020), and to take an internalist perspective on the far right (Blee, 2007), respond to the concerns raised until this point. The far right's engagement in the protest arena shows how central the embeddedness in larger organisational networks (i.e. comprising extremist and radical collective actors) can be for their grassroots mobilisation and that even (seemingly) radical-right parties may at times indulge in confrontational and violent actions (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2021; Pirro et al., 2021). Besides a first categorisation on the basis of the ideological stances of these collective actors, there should be a continuous back-and-forth with the empirical reality of far-right politics. The deeds of the far right—in and out of the institutional arena—are likely to reveal more about their essence than their words normally do.

This observation also speaks to the prevalent concerns about how to tell a (populist) radical-right collective actor from an extreme-right one. In a way, most of the pressing questions about far-right collective actors' commitment to (liberal) democracy could be answered by analysing their organisation and strategies (i.e. their 'production structure'), and understand what is unfolding inside them and around them. But there is also an ultimate test for their

compliance to the democratic credo: see what far-right collective actors do once they acquire power that need not be shared with others. In this regard, the governmental experiences of once-moderate right-wing parties like Fidesz in Hungary and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) in Poland not only prove that it is possible to move along the left–right ideological spectrum and radicalise ideologically over time, but also reveal the scope of erosion that democratic architectures can undergo once far-right parties sit in power.

Bicephalous and variously assorted alliances can emerge within the far right, and do so even beyond fringe political circles or the scope of oppositional political action. The storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 by a group of Trump supporters certainly resonates with the conception of a common production structure within the far right, intended to calibrate and diversify strategies depending on the arenas in which it operates. In the case of Trump, we would be thus confronted with a nativist administration—that is, an illiberal (radical-right) portion in force at the highest institutional level—backed by a plethora of anti-democratic (extreme-right) groups mobilising at the grassroots level. This would effectively amount to the various strategies of a single far-right collective actor.

One final reflection pertains to the questions of relationality and mutability. Collective actors are inherently bound to represent something specific to their context of belonging. For example, the far right in Serbia will display certain traits uncommon to the far right in Spain. The aspects of nativism and authoritarianism subtending the far right provide the conceptual toolkit to account for, and elaborate on, these idiosyncrasies. At the same time, far-right collective actors are bound to change over time. For several organisational and strategic reasons, the *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats, SD) of today (radical right) differ from the SD of the early days (extreme right), but labelling them as 'far right' throughout would not make us lose any relevant information about their subscription to nativist and authoritarian ideas. Inasmuch as possible, our conceptual decisions should take into account what these collective actors do as well as the context and period within which the phenomena we study occur—and this holds particularly true for far-right collective actors and their elusive relationship with (liberal) democracy.

Pragmatically then, the added value of the term 'far right' is that, should misgivings arise about the classification of nativist and authoritarian collective actors at a particular point in time or in relation to their context of belonging, it will still address primary classing and measurement purposes without incurring in 'definitional gerrymandering' (Collier & Levitsky, 1997) or the frequent pitfalls of large-scale comparative endeavours. Anti-democratic collective actors should not be mistaken for illiberal democratic, just as nativism should not be whitewashed as populism. The most obvious remedy to doubt is turning to the more abstract genus, 'far right'. The lessons drawn from the problem-fraught concept of populism demonstrate that an accurate use of terms is a *desideratum*, not only to nurture an informed public sphere, but also alert the democratic citizenry about the possible risks of erosion of civil liberties or, even, autocratisation.

## 4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this contribution, I endorsed the use of the term 'far right' to gain conceptual precision, acknowledging that the continued differentiation between the (populist) radical right and extreme right is not only legitimate if adequately applied and empirically substantiated, but also encouraged if capable of revealing something about these collective actors' stance towards democracy. Empirical practice has however shown that conceptual boundaries between these two variants may be more labile than commonly theorised. While the study of (populist) radical-right parties has thus been crucial in anticipating the normalisation of illiberal democratic politics, the term 'far right' should alert us to their growing flirtation with anti-democratic elements. The use of the term 'far right' responds to these concerns, preserving all necessary qualities to identify nativist and authoritarian collective actors, but leaving their contentious relationship with liberal constitutionalism and democracy up to empirical scrutiny.

The significance of this concept is therefore meant to highlight, rather than obfuscate, the unfolding of a new phase in nativist politics—a phase in which the (populist) radical right and the extreme right are increasingly

converging in different arenas and sharing common repertoires of action. It goes without saying that getting the far right *right*, and unearthing more or less stable alliance structures within it, has broader implications not only for specialists in parties and movements, political participation, and democracy, but also the citizenry at large. While the first ought to develop and deploy instruments to cast light on the far right's production structure, the latter deserves to see clearly through less visible forms of politics.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] The same cannot be said for the partly related concept of populism (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). While populism is rather central to the discussion of one of the variants of the far right—that is, the radical right (Mudde, 2007)—I consider it here only tangentially. Despite the undoubted relevance of this term and related scholarship, the discussion of populism has often underplayed the primacy of the nativist element in the ideology of radical-right collective actors (Art, 2020). Here, I seek to reinstate the role of nativism (and authoritarianism) in the ideology of these actors and treat less contested—academically speaking—but more important aspects of far-right ideology as the main foci of attention.

[2] This view has been challenged through the unfortunate conflation of ideological (equality vs. inequality) and economic (statist vs. pro-market) left–right dimensions. The two planes should remain distinct and, among the two, the ideological criterion should be privileged to classify far-right actors.

[3] In an extreme articulation of this view, the metapolitical project of the French *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) *celebrates* ethnic diversity and difference (Griffin, 2000), denouncing the 'egalitarian utopia' as a threat to European civilisation. The 'ethnopluralist' view espoused by its adherents sets the basis for a right-wing theory of differentialist multiculturalism (i.e. the right to difference) as opposed to liberal multiculturalism (Spektorowski, 2003).

[4] On 'illiberalism' and its genealogy, see Sajó et al. (2021) and Laruelle (2022). The term 'illiberal democracy' has been rationalised and praised (Pappas, 2019) as well as criticised (Müller, 2016) within the adjacent study of populism.

[5] The German case is often cited as the prototype of post-war 'militant democracy' (Capoccia 2013: 211). Just as the Basic Law defined the antibodies to safeguard the German democratic system from its opponents, the work of the Federal Constitutional Court provided the vocabulary and criteria to tell democratic actors from anti-democratic ones (Backes, 2009, Ch. 7). Reference to the German praxis is thus historically grounded.

[6] One such example is the Greek *Chrysí Avgí* (Golden Dawn). In October 2020, the leadership of the party was convicted of the charges of forming and running a criminal organisation for a series of murders, physical attacks, and other crimes perpetrated between 2008 and 2013 (Ellinas, 2020).

[7] Both views understand society as hierarchically ordered on the basis of given qualities; in the case of racism, these boil down to biological/hereditary differences.

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