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Challenges to Democracy
Session 13: The Far-Right Challenge to Democracy

Mirko Wegemann

Universität Münster
Institut für Politikwissenschaft

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Plan for today's session

- first half of the session: far-right and the threat to democracy
- second half of the session: wrap-up and feedback

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The Far Right

Figure: Video: Democracy under threat? The rise of the far-right in Germany — DW Documentary Link

Intro
○

The Far-Right
●○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
Münster

The Far Right

Is the far-right a threat to democracy?

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Münster

A conceptual clarification

What do we mean by far-right? What is the difference to the
radical right? And why do we often speak about populists?

A conceptual clarification

Radical right-wing populist parties are **radical** *in their rejection of the established sociocultural and sociopolitical system and their advocacy of individual achievement, a free marketplace, and a drastic reduction of the role of the state. They are* **right-wing** *in their rejection of individual and social equality, in their opposition to the social integration of marginalized groups, and in their appeal to xenophobia, if not overt racism. They are* **populist** *in their instrumentalization of sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment and their appeal to the common man and his allegedly superior common sense. (Betz 1993, p. 433)*

A conceptual clarification

Since Betz' definition, a lot of work has been done, e.g. by Cas Mudde who outlines three key features...

- key feature: **nativism**: 'states should be inhabited exclusively by the members of the native group'; non-natives constitute a threat (Mudde 2007, p. 22)
- **authoritarianism**: belief in ordered society which punishes deviant behaviour
- **populism**: society as differentiated into the 'good' (common people) and the 'evil' (the elite/outsiders of the people)

A conceptual clarification

...and re-conceptualizes the terms *right* and *radical*:

- **radical**: opposition towards key features of liberal democracy (political and civil rights)
- **right**: belief in natural inequalities in society

Extreme right parties are anti-democratic, they oppose democracy. [but recently, some radical right parties have challenged the conceptual boundaries]

Intro

The Far-Right

Wrap-Up

Feedback

References

Universität
Münster

Social Transformations - The Root of Far-Right Success?

How do social transformation relate to far-right success?

Social Transformations - The Root of Far-Right Success?

Globalization has had profound implications for our labour markets and societies. According to Kriesi (2008) these processes created...

- **winners**: those who benefit from globalization through increased mobility of their skills
- **losers**: those who perceive globalization rather as a threat (e.g., because of increased labour market competition)

Far-right parties capitalize on grievances with the nativist ideology.

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Explanations of far-right success

Scholars have often distinguished between three factors explaining far-right success:

1. demand-side determinants: how voters' preferences and attitudes shaping their voting behaviour (Ivarsflaten 2007; Kitschelt and McGann 1995)

2. supply-side factors: how the radical right party itself and its competitors contribute to their success (Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2022; Meguid 2005; Valentim and Widmann 2023)

3. contextual factors: how the socio-economic context creates opportunity structures far right parties can mobilize on (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer et al. 2024)

Often, these factors are inter-related (cf. Bolet 2021; Ziblatt et al. 2023).

Culture and Economic Reasons

A long-standing debate is whether far-right support is about the **economy** or **culture**...

- identity loss (Bolet 2021; Hochschild 2016; Lucassen and Lubbers 2012)
- status loss anxiety (Abou-Chadi and Kurer 2021; Gallego and Kurer 2022)

Who's right? Probably both sides.

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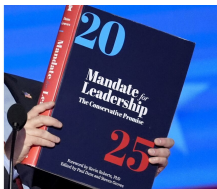# And why is the far-right a threat to democracy?

Figure: The Project 2025 in the US

"The authors have made many suggestions here that, if implemented, could bring that bureaucracy more under control and enable it to work more efficiently and responsibly" (Dans and Groves 2023, p. 83)

And why is the far-right a threat to democracy?

Figure: Storm on the Capitol in 2021

An Empirical Example by Haas et al. 2025

Figure: Case: LGBT-Free Municipalities

Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○●○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

An Empirical Example by Haas et al. 2025

Under Law and Justice government, local governments introduced anti-LGBTQ resolutions.

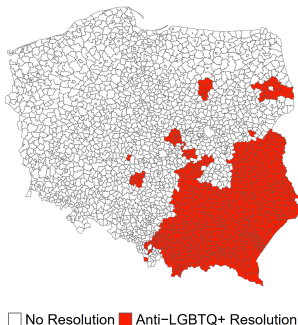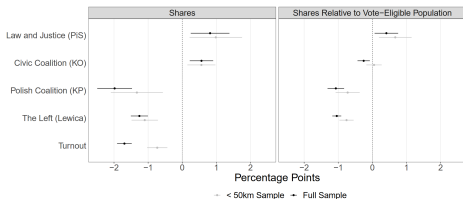□ No Resolution ■ Anti−LGBTQ+ Resolution

Figure 1: Geographic distribution of municipalities with anti-LGBTQ resolutions before the 2019 parliamentary election.

Intro
The Far-Right
Wrap-Up
Feedback
References

Universität
Münster

An Empirical Example by Haas et al. 2025

These resolutions are often not legally binding, but aim to create an unwelcoming atmosphere for the LGBTQ-community (e.g., by banning LGBTQ events and emphasizing heteronormative models of family).

Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○●○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
Münster

An Empirical Example by Haas et al. 2025

What were the implications of these resolutions?

The far-right actors benefit electorally; turnout decreases.

The Role of Mainstream Parties in Far-Right Success

When explaining the success of the far-right, scholars have also turned towards the role of the political mainstream. Meguid (2005) has outlined three strategies they can follow:

- ignoring the far-right's political demands
- countering the far-right by presenting policy alternatives
- accommodating the far-right, i.e., copying their anti-immigrant stances

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The Role of Mainstream Parties in Far-Right Success

Which of these strategies is more successful is the subject of a long-standing debate that comes to mixed results

- accommodation does not work (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2022)
- accommodation does work (Hjorth and Larsen 2022)

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The Role of Mainstream Parties in Far-Right Success
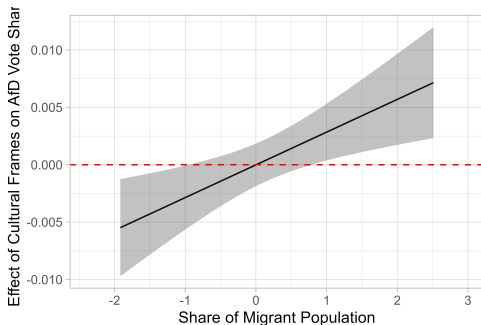
My hunch: maybe it depends on the local context:

Figure: Effect of Cultural Frames on AfD Vote Share Conditional on the Cultural Context

So, should parties accommodate the far-right?

Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○●○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
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The Role of Mainstream Parties in Far-Right Success

According to my research: no.

1. Even if the strategy pays-off, what would be gained? The far-right is a threat for democracy.
2. And there may be better, more viable options.

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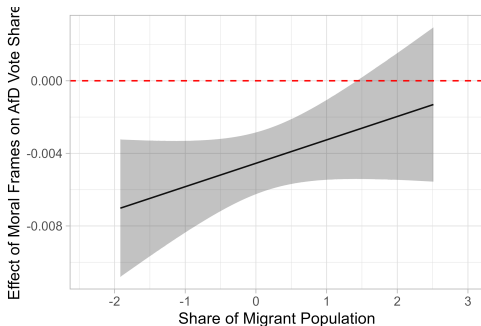# The Role of Mainstream Parties in Far-Right Success

Figure: Effect of Moral Frames on AfD Vote Share Conditional on the Cultural Context

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Conclusion

What we have learned from today...

- A definition of the far-right
- How their success is explained
- A practical example of how they constitute a threat for democratic regimes

What did you learn?

Write down two bullet points: one which you share, the other you keep for yourself: what did you take out of this seminar?

What we did...

- conceptualization of democracy
- evaluation of the current state of democratization
- internal and external threats to liberal democracies
- solutions to democratization

Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○●○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
Münster
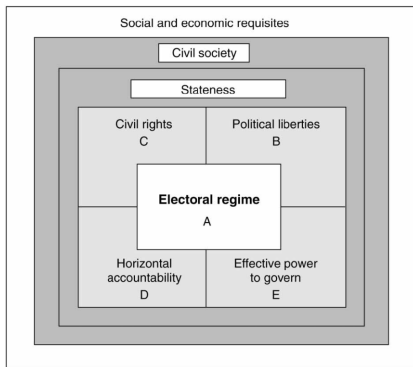
Conceptualization of Democracy

Figure: Healthy democracies are not only about elections... (cf. Merkel 2004)

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Current State of Democratization

Figure: Erosion of liberal democracies worldwide (cf. Boese et al. 2022)

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Current State of Democratization

New wave of autocratization is not mainly caused by traditional coups, but more by gradual erosion of democratic principles (cf. Bermeo 2016)

1. **promissory coups**: often justified with emergencies or (ironically) the state of democracy, executives promise to give back power to people but fail to do so

2. **executive aggrandizement**: at the expense of checks and balances, executive gradually dissolves checks and balances and weakens other partial regimes of democracy; follows legal frameworks; democracy beaten by its own safeguards

3. **strategic election manipulation**: weakening of opposition, suppressing media freedom, so that elections lose their fair appeal

Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○●○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
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Challenges to Democracy

The challenges for democracies are manifold...

- attacks on the institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018)

- erosion of democratic norms and polarization (Broockman et al. 2023; Graham and Svolik 2020)

- more and more super-wicked problems such as climate change (Cerkez 2024; Mittiga 2022)

- challenges from the far-right (Haas et al. 2024; Mudde 2019)

Intro
○
The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○
Wrap-Up
○○○○○●
Feedback
○○○○
References

Universität
Münster

Solutions to Democratization

Demokratie-Update Münster

Figure: Citizen assemblies as a democratic innovation

Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
●○○○

References

A Deliberative Poll of Your Attitudes?

Figure: Please join the survey through this link: https://pingo.coactum.de/991788

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Feedback

Please go to the course page on Learnweb and finish the
evaluation.

Intro

The Far-Right

Wrap-Up

Feedback

References

Universität
Münster

Last words...

- Thank you for your participation and your great input!
- If you want, join the seminars by our chair next term:
    - 'The key challenges our societies are facing and how to address them: from climate change to inequality' by Prof. Daniel Bischof
    - 'Voices of Change? The Political Effects of Protests' by Elena Leuschner
    - 'Party Competition in Western Europe: Voters, Strategies and Institutions' by myself
- Apart from that, we'll launch a seminar series (with Diane Bolet and others as guests), please join!

Any further questions?

Intro
The Far-Right
Wrap-Up
Feedback
References

Universität
Münster

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Intro
The Far-Right
Wrap-Up
Feedback
References

Universität
Münster

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Intro
The Far-Right
Wrap-Up
Feedback
References

Universität
Münster

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Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
Münster

Literature

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Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
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Literature

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Intro
○

The Far-Right
○○○○○○○○○

Wrap-Up
○○○○○○

Feedback
○○○○

References

Universität
Münster

Literature

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Intro
The Far-Right
Wrap-Up
Feedback
References

Universität
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Literature

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