

# Time to reset!

# How can we revitalise European democracies?

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## The vicious cycle of far-right success in Europe

Tarik Abou-Chadi

Across Europe, far-right parties have achieved remarkable and sustained electoral success in recent years. This trend has sparked extensive debate among scholars and policymakers about its causes and consequences. Many explanations focus on demand-side factors, such as public discontent with immigration, social status anxiety and perceptions of cultural threat. While these explanations offer valuable insights, they do not fully capture the speed and nature of far-right gains across different contexts.

Far-right success has been rapid in many countries. In Germany and Portugal, for example, the far right only needed a few elections to gain more than 20 per cent of the vote. If we want to understand these dynamics, we need to look beyond public opinion and demand-side factors.

Here, I outline one crucial factor on the supply side, namely the response of established parties to the rise of the far right. This brief outlines a vicious cycle that helps to explain the rapid advance of the radical right in many West European countries.

The cycle unfolds in four stages:

1. mainstream parties react to the success of radical right parties by shifting rightward on immigration;
2. these strategic shifts fail to win back voters effectively;
3. these shifts in turn influence public opinion and normalise far-right parties;
4. observing this shift in public opinion, parties move even further to the right and thus perpetuate the cycle.

### Reactions to the initial success of radical right parties

The first step in this cycle occurs when radical right parties achieve significant electoral breakthroughs, especially gaining seats in parliament. Their success makes established parties reconsider their strategies. Our research shows that when radical right parties receive more votes,

established parties move toward more anti-immigration positions and emphasise the immigration issue more strongly (Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). This is true not only for parties on the mainstream right, but also for those on the mainstream left.

Our research indicates that such moves are not just a response to shifting public opinion, but rather mainstream parties seek to act strategically to counter the success of the radical right and win back voters. The underlying logic is simple: if radical right parties are winning on an anti-immigration platform, then surely moving right on immigration would help to win these voters back.

### **Anti-immigration positions do not win back voters from the radical right**

The crucial question then is, does this approach work? When mainstream parties take more anti-immigration positions, does it in fact weaken the radical right? We have researched this question extensively (Abou-Chadi, Cohen and Wagner 2022; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023) and our conclusion is clear: moving right on immigration does *not* help to win back voters from the radical right.

We analysed electoral survey data in 13 countries from 1989 to 2017, which includes information on how people voted in the most recent and in the previous election. This allows us to test how vote switching between mainstream parties and the radical right is affected by mainstream party positions on immigration. We find that when mainstream parties position themselves more to the right on immigration, this does not help to win back more voters from the radical right. Generally, it increases the volume of vote switching between the radical right and mainstream parties, but if anything, the radical right is the net winner of this exchange.

European mainstream parties have strategically shifted to more anti-immigration positions. However, this has not helped them to weaken the radical right.

### **Indirect consequences: public opinion and normalisation of the radical right**

Shifting right on immigration does little to win voters back, then. But it has important indirect effects that fuel the rise of far-right parties and their ideology.

First, the positions of mainstream parties on immigration affect public opinion. When mainstream parties highlight immigration issues, they make these topics more salient in the public debate. This heightened visibility amplifies public concerns and encourages citizens to evaluate politics through an immigration lens.

And the effects are not limited to salience. Political science research demonstrates that party positions shape the attitudes of their supporters (Lenz 2012). When mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration rhetoric, their voters tend to follow suit, gradually shifting public opinion in a more restrictive direction. This does not mean that some voters do not have real concerns about immigration. Nevertheless, elite behaviour matters immensely for public opinion on political issues. When people constantly hear that immigration is a problem, it should not surprise us that they start to believe it.

Second, by shifting their stance on immigration, established parties contribute to the normalisation of radical right parties and their ideology (Valentim, Dinas, and Ziblatt 2025). Ideas that were once considered fringe or extremist begin to seem part of legitimate political discourse.

By moving right on immigration, then, mainstream parties shift public opinion more toward the radical right and at the same time normalise radical right parties and their ideology.

### **Reaction to public opinion: the cycle continues**

In the final stage of the cycle, mainstream parties respond to the very shifts in public opinion they helped to bring about. When polls show rising hostility or »scepticism« toward immigration, parties tend to interpret this in terms of a public demand for even tougher policies. They react by moving further right, thus deepening the cycle.

Thus what began as a tactical manoeuvre becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic: political competition circles around immigration and how to reduce it. This cycle brings radical-right parties and their ideology in from the margins to the very heart of our democracies.

### **Breaking the cycle**

Breaking this vicious cycle requires rethinking political strategy. Instead of mirroring the rhetoric of the radical right, mainstream parties need to address the grievances arising from the socio-economic transformations of our time with a focus on their own vision and agenda. Progressive parties in particular need to stop being reactive and instead to embrace the transformative power of an agenda based on decommodification, inclusion and sustainability. When parties see themselves only as managing and solving problems, they leave the field clear for other parties to shape the agenda of issues, ideologies and identities. On issues such as housing, cost of living and the climate crisis, progressive parties need to develop bold agendas to break the vicious cycle of immigration as the dominant issue in politics. Progressive parties

also need to fight the so-called culture wars. Questions of equality and inclusion are fundamental questions of social justice. Too often, social democratic parties in particular shy away from these questions. They wish they would just go away and believe that if politics was only about pensions, labour markets and minimum wages, they would start winning elections again. In the meantime, they let anti-feminist, anti-queer and »anti-woke« positioning dominate the agenda. But unless political actors fight the fight, how are civil society organisations supposed to do it? Without arguments and clear stances in favour of diversity and inclusion, how can we expect young people to embrace progressive politics? Progressive parties need to change existing institutions and start believing they can change minds again. The only way to reverse the vicious cycle of radical right politics is to set in motion a virtuous cycle of progressive politics.

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## About Brussels Democracy Dialogue

The Brussels Democracy Dialogue (BDD) is a high-level platform for exchanging progressive ideas and proposals to address the many challenges facing democracies today. Organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, it was originally held in Hambach, Germany, as the Hambach Democracy Dialogue (HDD). Since 2024, the conference has taken place in Brussels, bringing together around 100 progressive democracy experts from politics, academia, trade unions, and civil society across Europe and beyond. Its aim is to challenge our established explanations and to offer new and innovative solutions that enable progressive actors to successfully confront the recent global trend of democratic backsliding and to defend social democracy.

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