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Title: *A Tale of Two Rights: Distinguishing European Radical and Extreme Right Parties via Ideology, Political Behavior, and Computational Analysis*

Assessment of the state of the art

In recent years, radical and extreme right movements have gained unprecedented visibility and influence across European politics, as evidenced in the most recent European Union and national elections. This renewed prominence has intensified a long-standing debate: why have these parties gained such relevance over the past decades? What drives political actors in Europe toward nativist and radical ideologies? Are these dynamics rooted in enduring ideological commitments, cultural-historical legacies, or rather in a diffuse rejection of the political establishment? These questions motivate the present research project, which seeks to disentangle the differences between radical-right parties (RRPs) and extreme-right parties (ERPs), both in terms of ideology and political behavior.

The first challenge is conceptual. Public discourse and even some streams of political science scholarship tend to include all right-wing outsiders under the broad label of “far right.” Yet, are all these political actors truly part of the same family, or do they differ significantly in their ideological profiles, political strategies, and systemic roles? Can the radical and the extreme right be treated as a unified political bloc, or must they be analyzed as distinct formations with diverging aims and trajectories? Over the years, attempts to classify and conceptualize these parties have produced overlapping and sometimes contradictory results.

Early efforts to define radical-right ideology, such as those by Betz (1993; 1994), emphasized the mixture of nationalism, xenophobia, and liberal economic orientations. Kitschelt and McGann (1997) extended this framework by combining socio-economic neoliberalism with socio-cultural authoritarianism, while Ignazi (2003) proposed a nationalist versus non-nationalist divide within the far right. Yet the conceptual imprecision in the use of “nationalism” weakened the analytical leverage of this typology. Della Porta and Diani (1999) adopted an even broader lens, describing the “extreme right” through the prism of social movements, networks, and mobilization practices—an approach that proved too abstract to capture the specific ideological distinctions among European parties.

Subsequent research began shifting attention from traditional fascist legacies toward contemporary phenomena such as “new populism” (Caiani & Della Porta, 2011). This perspective allowed scholars to analyze parties like *Fratelli d’Italia* and Matteo Salvini’s *Lega* in Italy, or the *Front National* in France, as expressions of the normalization and partial institutionalization of radical-right and extreme-right currents (Bruno, 2022). At the same time, scholars like Golder (2016) suggested that the extreme right constitutes a narrower subset of the radical right, comprising only those parties and movements whose ideological tenets and political practices place them explicitly outside the democratic system.

Cas Mudde's body of work (1996; 2000; 2007) remains the most influential reference in this debate. Mudde distinguishes, inside the broader label "far-right", between radical-right actors, who embrace authoritarian values and nativism but operate within democratic institutions, and extreme-right actors, who are openly anti-democratic and frequently excluded from parliaments due to their marginal electoral support. In his more recent formulations, Mudde (2007) identifies nativism—the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and that non-native elements threaten the nation-state—as the ideological core of the radical right. Authoritarianism and populism complement this profile. By contrast, the defining feature of the extreme right is its anti-democratic and anti-system stance.

The most recent contributions (see Gattinara 2020; Pirro 2023; Gattinara & Pirro 2024, or also Mudde, 2019) advocate for the use of "far right" as a broad umbrella term that encompasses both radical and extreme formations, without distinctions. While analytically inclusive, this approach risks blurring the critical distinctions between the two families, thereby obscuring why certain actors achieve electoral legitimacy while others remain marginalized, or more often, politically ostracized. Importantly, many of these labels are not merely analytical tools: parties themselves strategically adopt or reject terms like "radical" or "extreme" as part of their identity construction.

The debate is therefore not only about theoretical classification but also about political practice and empirical observation. As noted by the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUCM, 2004), the organizational landscape of the radical and extreme right in Europe is highly fragmented, encompassing parties, movements, and groups divided by internal rivalries, ideological cleavages, and strategic disagreements. Unsurprisingly, their electorates are also heterogeneous, making it difficult to identify a single ideological framework or uniform political strategy.

Against this background, the present thesis adopts Mudde's distinction as a first guiding framework while also acknowledging the broader scholarly debate. The project proceeds from the assumption that distinguishing between radical and extreme right actors is both theoretically necessary and empirically possible. The task, however, is not limited to ideology: it requires examining the full range of political behavior, institutional positioning, and textual articulation through which these parties operate.

By systematically classifying parties and movements across the European Union—whether parliamentary or extra-parliamentary—the thesis seeks to identify their ideological, electoral, and behavioral features. Comparative analysis will then assess both inter-category differences (radical versus extreme) and intra-category variation (within radical-right or extreme-right families). Although these two families share ideological commonalities, they diverge in their relationship with democracy, their strategic opportunities, and their patterns of systemic integration.

These foundational debates set the stage for the empirical studies that constitute the core of this research project. Building on the state of the art, the thesis advances five interlinked studies that together investigate the ideological boundaries, systemic opportunities, electoral trajectories, and programmatic articulations of radical and extreme right parties in Europe.

Research Questions & Tentative Hypotheses

This project investigates the European radical and extreme right through five interrelated studies, each designed to build on the other in order to construct a coherent doctoral thesis. The central concern is whether radical-right parties (RRPs) and extreme-right parties (ERPs) should be understood as two distinct political families or whether, as some scholars suggest, they form a continuum that justifies the use of the umbrella term “far right.” Cas Mudde’s conceptualization (1996; 2000; 2007) provides the starting point for distinguishing radical from extreme, but recent attempts by Gattinara and Pirro (2024) to collapse both into the broad label of “far right” risk blurring analytically meaningful boundaries. Thus, the overarching question of the thesis is: can radical and extreme right parties in Europe be considered distinct political families across ideology, programmatic content, systemic opportunities, parliamentary behavior, and organizational networks, or are they better understood as a continuum?

The five studies that compose the dissertation answer this question progressively. The first study provides the theoretical foundation; the second examines programmatic distinctions in manifestos; the third analyzes systemic and institutional conditions for ERP breakthrough in national assemblies; the fourth investigates how ERP presence shapes RRP behavior in parliamentary arenas; and the fifth explores organizational and transnational networks. Each study stands as an independent article, but together they form a cumulative research agenda that advances our understanding of radical and extreme right parties in Europe.

The first study addresses the conceptual problem that lies at the heart of the project: how to define and distinguish radical from extreme right parties. While both share a terrain of dissent—anti-elitism, nationalism, rejection of pluralism—they diverge fundamentally in their relationship to democratic legitimacy and public reason. Radical-right parties distort elements of liberal thought, adopting exclusionary nativist interpretations of community and authority, but remain formally committed to democratic procedures. Extreme-right parties, by contrast, reject democracy outright.

- **RQ1.1:** How can we conceptually and normatively distinguish radical-right parties from extreme-right parties, and why is the umbrella term “far right” inadequate?
- **HP1.1:** Radical-right and extreme-right parties diverge fundamentally in their relationship to democratic legitimacy and public reason in Western liberal democracies.

This theoretical clarification provides the conceptual criteria necessary for empirical distinction and sets the stage for the second study, which examines whether these differences translate into distinct programmatic content in party manifestos.

The second study focuses on electoral manifestos as the main vehicles through which parties articulate their ideological positions. It asks whether RRPs and ERPs display systematically different programmatic profiles, or whether their similarities challenge existing classifications. Computational text analysis using multilingual embeddings (e.g. cosine similarity), topic modeling and Large Language Models (LLMs) enables systematic comparisons across countries and languages, while longitudinal data make it possible to trace shifts within parties over time.

- **RQ2.1:** To what extent do radical-right parties (RRPs) and extreme-right parties (ERPs) differ in their electoral and political manifestos, and how similar are their ideological profiles in practice?
- **HP2.1:** Parties adhering to the European Conservative and Reformist Group will display lower level of similarity in topics compared to ERP manifestos compared to those in the Patriots for Europe Group, while parties in the Europe of Sovereign Nations Group will be the most similar to ERP reference manifestos.

Additional tentative hypotheses can be drawn to test the internal validity of this text-based approach through within-party developments:

- **HP2.2:** The split in well-known extreme right parties will be coherent to the distinction in topics between RRP and ERP, with the hardliners inheriting the ERP profile.
- **HP2.3:** For former well-known ERPs which have moderated over time, early manifestos will be closer to ERPs positions and later ones resembling RRPs.
- **HP2.4:** New ERPs will mirror previous ERPs profile in the same countries, explaining the latter public endorsement to the new formations.

This study thus explores whether ideological distinctions have programmatic expression, providing the bridge toward the third study, which shifts the focus from ideology to systemic opportunity structures.

The third study examines the systemic and institutional factors that create or constrain openings for ERP parliamentary entry. While manifestos reveal what parties claim, systemic structures determine where these claims can translate into parliamentary presence. Here, the focus is on party system type, proportionality, polarization, and militant-procedural-democratic provisions across European democracies (see Loewenstein, 1937; Müller, 2018; Kelsen, 2013).

- **RQ3:** Under what systemic and institutional conditions do extreme-right parties (ERPs) succeed in entering national parliaments across EU member states?
- **HP3.1:** ERP representation occurs only in multiparty systems.
- **HP3.2:** The farther an election is from the ideal multiparty configuration in Golosov's RST triangle, the less likely ERP entry becomes.
- **HP3.3:** Higher political polarization increases ERP parliamentary success.
- **HP3.4:** Stronger militant-democratic provisions (constitutional or legislative restrictions) reduce ERP entry.

This study clarifies the external conditions for ERP success and logically sets up the fourth study, which examines what happens once ERPs do—or do not—enter parliament.

The fourth study explores the behavioral consequences of ERP presence for RRPs. If ERPs are absent, RRPs may adopt more extreme positions to occupy the “rightest” space in parliament; if ERPs are present, RRPs may instead moderate, positioning themselves closer to the mainstream right. This

dynamic of centrifugal or centripetal shifts directly links the ideological and systemic levels analyzed in the previous studies to the behavioral strategies observable in parliamentary arenas.

- **RQ4:** How does the parliamentary presence or absence of ERPs influence the ideological and parliamentary positioning of RRP_s?
- **HP4.1 (Centrifugal):** If ERPs are absent, RRP_s will adopt more extreme positions, occupying the furthest-right space.
- **HP4.2 (Centripetal):** If ERPs are present, RRP_s will moderate their positions, shifting toward the center-right.

The behavioral implications traced here connect naturally to the fifth and final study, which expands the scope from parliamentary politics to the organizational field in which these actors operate.

The fifth study reconstructs the networks surrounding RRP_s and ERPs using protest event data and Social Network Analysis. The aim is to uncover how organizational linkages—both national and transnational—facilitate ideological diffusion and collaboration between parties and movements. This perspective shifts the analysis from electoral and parliamentary arenas to the broader ecosystem of radical-extreme-right mobilization.

- **RQ5:** How do organizational and protest networks link RRP_s and ERPs, and what does this reveal about ideological homophily and risks of democratic backsliding?
- **HP5.1:** RRP_s and ERPs participate in overlapping networks, facilitating ideological diffusion.
- **HP5.2:** ERP presence in RRP-dominated networks (or vice versa) signals the infiltration of anti-democratic elements, raising concerns for democratic quality.

Taken together, the five studies offer a comprehensive examination of radical and extreme right parties in Europe. They move from conceptual and theoretical clarity (Study 1) to programmatic expression (Study 2), to systemic opportunity structures (Study 3), to parliamentary behavior (Study 4), and finally to organizational networks (Study 5). Each article stands independently, but collectively they answer the central research question: radical and extreme right parties are not reducible to a single “far-right” family. They differ conceptually, programmatically, structurally, behaviorally, and organizationally. Yet they also interact dynamically, influencing one another across arenas. The thesis thus demonstrates both the necessity of distinguishing them and the importance of studying their interconnections to fully understand the contemporary European right.

Research Design

Building on the conceptual, programmatic, and systemic debates outlined in the preceding chapters, this research project investigates radical-right and extreme-right parties in Europe through five interlinked studies that together form a coherent empirical strategy. Each study examines a distinct dimension—ideology, programmatic content, systemic opportunities, parliamentary behavior, and organizational networks—while collectively addressing the central question of whether radical-right parties (RRP_s) and extreme-right parties (ERPs) constitute two distinct political families or form a continuum subsumed under the broad “far-right” label. Conceptual distinctions established in the first study are operationalized empirically in subsequent studies, linking theory, programmatic analysis,

institutional constraints, behavioral dynamics, and network structures into a cumulative research design.

Radical-right and extreme-right parties often converge on themes such as anti-elitism, nationalism, and majoritarianism, yet they diverge fundamentally in their relationship to democratic legitimacy and public reason within Western liberal democracies. The first study addresses this definitional and categorical dilemma by proposing a new analytical perspective grounded in political philosophy and ideology theories. It examines how core values—liberty, authority, identity, and democracy—are reinterpreted and contested by these two party families, demonstrating that while the radical-right operates within democratic frameworks—even if at times illiberally—the extreme-right fundamentally rejects them. This distinction provides the conceptual foundation necessary to move beyond surface-level similarities and the overly broad “far-right” umbrella label, offering analytical tools that enhance empirical research and comparative analysis in political science. Establishing these theoretical and ideological boundaries is crucial, as they inform the criteria used to classify parties and evaluate their behavior in the subsequent empirical studies.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the second study operationalizes these distinctions by examining whether ideological divergences are reflected in programmatic and manifestos’ content. While existing scholarship frequently groups radical and extreme-right actors under the “far-right” label, their manifestos suggest systematic divergences in ideology, positionality, and thematic focus. This study employs multilingual computational text analysis of over 280 party manifestos across 25 EU member states (Malta and Luxembourg excluded) from the early 1990s to 2025, using text analysis methodologies (e.g. sentence-transformer embeddings, cosine similarity metrics and/or LLMs) to assess alignment with a reference corpus of ERP manifestos. The analysis should reveal that parties affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group are generally more distant from ERP manifestos than those in the Patriots for Europe (PfE) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) groups, suggesting varying degrees of ideological coherence across European Parliamentary groups. Case studies could further illustrate party evolution, for example Jobbik’s moderation and the emergence of Hungary’s MHM in 2018, or as well as the alignment between Greece’s Spartans and Golden Dawn, demonstrating measurable shifts in programmatic positions. The study draws on party manifesto data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP, now MARPOR), enriched with European Parliament group affiliations and manually incorporated ERPs which are not present in CMP, including Jobbik, Kotleba, VMRO, Golden Dawn (XA), Cyprus’ National People’s Front (ELAM), and newer ERPs formed through splits or endorsed by prominent extreme-right actors. To accommodate cross-linguistic comparison while maintaining feasibility, the study will employ a multilingual semantic approach rather than full translation (Plenter, 2023). With the implementation of computational and text analysis techniques (such as document embedding techniques, cosine similarity metrics and topic modelling) we can assess linguistic and thematic proximity, providing a scalable and language-independent method to track ideological development and differentiate RRP from ERPs across time and space.

While programmatic content reveals what parties claim, systemic and institutional factors determine whether these claims can translate into parliamentary success. The third study examines the presence—or persistent exclusion—of ERPs in national parliaments across the 27 EU member states between 1998 and 2025, encompassing 205 legislative elections. The study investigates the influence of party system characteristics, ideological polarization, and democratic defense mechanisms on ERP

success. Party system geometry is operationalized using Golosov's Relative Size Triangle (RST) (Golosov, 2010; 2011), identifying the three largest parties by seat share to calculate coordinates and Euclidean distance from the ideal balanced multiparty system. ERP presence is coded as a binary variable, supplemented with the number of ERPs, MPs elected, and parliamentary seat share. Constitutional and legal provisions for party bans are captured on a three-tiered scale, ranging from absence of explicit restrictions (0), general principles potentially restricting extremists (0.5), to comprehensive legal instruments banning parties that threaten democratic order (1).

Polarization is measured using the Manifesto Corpus (Manifesto Corpus, 2024-a), Dalton's Party System Polarization Index (2008, 2010; 2017), and the Party System Ideological Polarization dataset by Emanuele and Marino (2023). CMP's original left-right (RiLe) scale is replaced with a recalibrated 0–10 scale (0 = extreme-left, 10 = extreme-right) derived from expert surveys, following recommendations to improve reliability and reduce bias (Armstrong, Stephenson & Alcantara, 2023; Mikhaylov, Laver & Benoit, 2008; Gemenis, 2013; Mölder, 2016). ERPs are classified using a historical-ideological threshold (fascist lineage or explicit rejection of democracy) and behavioral indicators (Ignazi, 1992), with Golden Dawn serving as a paradigmatic full-score ERP (Ellinas, 2016; Ellinas, 2021; Smith, 2020; Malkopoulou, 2021). This approach captures both classical neofascist-lineage ERPs and newer anti-democratic actors while maintaining a consistent focus on xenophobic nationalism and rejection of liberal pluralism.

Having identified systemic and institutional conditions for ERP success, the fourth study investigates how ERP parliamentary presence influences RRP ideological positioning. Parties are mapped in a two-dimensional space covering economic preferences and socio-cultural positions, including anti-democratic stances (Kitschelt, 1992, 2004; Laver & Hunt, 1992; Hooghe et al., 2002; Benoit & Laver, 2006; Marks et al., 2006; Vachudova & Hooghe, 2009). Established categorizations of radical and extreme-right parties (Mudde, 1996, 2007, 2019; Bustikova, 2014) are complemented with computational classifications from manifesto text analysis and large language models. A regression discontinuity (RD) design leverages electoral thresholds as exogenous cut-offs, creating natural experiments to identify the causal effect of ERP presence on RRP ideological shifts. Treatment, assignment, and outcome variables correspond to ERP parliamentary presence, ERP vote share near the threshold, and RRP policy shifts measured via CMP/MARPOR data. This design accounts for the exogenous nature of thresholds and the strategic threat posed by ERPs' parliamentary resources, offering a rigorous method to capture the centripetal or centrifugal shifts in RRP positioning (Taagepera, 2002; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Dinas, Riera, & Roussias, 2015). This approach extends previous research on mainstream party reactions by focusing specifically on interactions between RRPs and ERPs (van Spanje, 2010; Han, 2015; Abou-Chadi, 2016).

Finally, Study 5 examines the organizational and protest networks linking RRPs and ERPs through Social Network Analysis (SNA), in particular we aim to replicate the study proposed by Gattinara and Pirro (2024, Chapter 5), addressing methodological limitation and concerns not resolved by the authors. Using the FARPE dataset (Castelli Gattinara, Froio & Pirro, 2022), this study reconstructs protest events involving far-right collective actors in 12 European countries from 2008 to 2018. The actor-centered approach captures participation of political parties, movement parties, and social movement actors. Methodological refinements address limitations in prior studies (Gattinara & Pirro, 2024), such as the treatment of party branches and offshoots as independent nodes and reliance on static networks. A panel SNA approach is adopted to capture changes over time, tracing ideological

and relational evolution, network centrality, and the infiltration of anti-democratic elements, linking organizational dynamics to the broader trajectories of radical and extreme-right parties.

Taken together, these five studies progress from conceptual clarification to programmatic analysis, systemic opportunity, parliamentary behavior, and organizational networks, forming a cumulative research agenda. Each study is designed to stand independently while being conceptually interlinked, allowing the dissertation to distinguish RRP_s from ERPs across ideological, programmatic, systemic, behavioral, and organizational dimensions. At the same time, the research captures the dynamic interplay among these actors, demonstrating how radical and extreme-right parties could interact and influence each other across European political arenas, thus offering a comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary European radical and extreme-right politics.

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