

## *Democratic Expeditions*

# Arenas of far-right threat and democratic resilience

Daphne Halikiopoulou

### Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for comparing and assessing the far-right threat. It takes into account different combinations of potential changes across three dimensions: (i) voters, (ii) parties and (iii) institutions. By mapping the ways in which distinct combinations of changes across these three dimensions may lead to a series of different potential outcomes, we identify different scenarios of far-right democratic backsliding across different countries. This framework suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and enables the identification of a range of counterstrategies tailored specifically to each configuration. It also highlights a potential trilemma of trade-offs: countering the far right in one dimension may simultaneously strengthen it in another. Policymakers may therefore tailor counterstrategies to the specific configuration of threats in different contexts, focusing on the main source of vulnerability while weighing the potential benefits of targeting the far right in one dimension against the risks of empowering it in another.

### Introduction

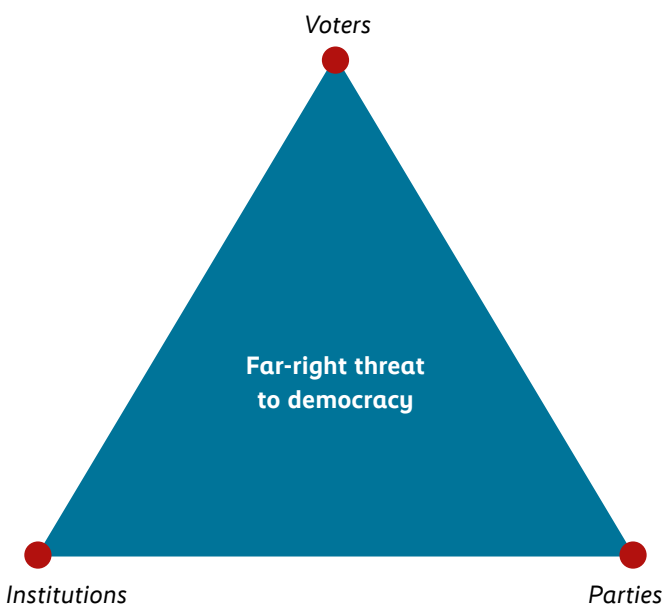
The far right is a global phenomenon. Parties and leaders with agendas promoting national sovereignty, prioritising the in-group over the out-group and claiming to speak in the name of »the people« have increased their electoral support in many countries in Europe, the Americas, Asia and beyond. Given the emergence, consolidation and proliferation of these parties and leaders, as well as their entrenchment in their respective systems, there is a pressing need to develop effective contestation strategies. However, the global reach of this phenomenon makes contestation difficult. To understand how to address this phenomenon we therefore need to identify what drives it in different contexts and time-frames. But cross-regional comparisons are challenging as they require striking a balance between in-depth case specificity and generalisability. What works in one case might not work in another. Different contextual characteristics and patterns of far-right success might call for different responses. The need for a broad and generalisable comparative framework therefore is needed for the development of comprehensive responses.

## A comparative framework

This paper proposes a framework for comparing and assessing the far-right threat, which takes into account different combinations of potential changes across three dimensions: (i) voters, (ii) parties and (iii) institutions (see Figure 1). Each of these dimensions represents a specific arena of political contestation that can determine far-right party success: demand, namely the grievances that make far-right parties appealing; supply, that is, factors related to parties and party systems; and institutions, in other words, the configurations of state authority and societal organisation that shape democratic outcomes. By mapping the ways in which distinct combinations of changes across these dimensions may lead to different potential outcomes, we identify different scenarios of far-right democratic backsliding across different countries. This may enable policy-makers to develop a range of counterstrategies tailored specifically to each case, depending on the configuration of the far-right threat across the different dimensions.

### Conceptual framing

Figure 1



#### (i) Voters

This dimension captures the resilience of the voter base. Far-right party success depends partly on the breadth of these parties' electorates. We know from voting behaviour literature that major party electoral potential is associated with a mobilisational capacity beyond core voting groups (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2023). To visualise the breadth of the far-right electorate, one might imagine two broad types of voters: those driven by ideology (core voters), who support the far right on principle; and those driven by protest (peripheral voters) who tend to support the far right as a way of expressing their discontent and punishing the establishment (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022). Given that peripheral voters are the largest group of far-right voters, the most successful far-

right parties are those that broadly mobilise peripherals. To measure the »voter« dimension we need to examine indexes that capture the breadth of the far-right voter base and offer information about the size of the peripheral groups.

#### (ii) Parties

This dimension captures the resilience of the party system. Far-right party success also depends partly on the parties themselves and the ways in which they operate in their domestic political arenas. To understand it therefore we need to consider both internal (party normalisation) and external (party system permissiveness) supply-side dynamics. In terms of internal supply, we know from the literature that far-right parties themselves may largely determine their own electoral fortunes (Mudde 2004) by presenting themselves in a palatable way as legitimate political actors. The literature has shown that far-right party normalisation (Valentim 2024) and »civic« nationalist normalisation (Halikiopoulou et al. 2013; Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2025) have facilitated this process across a broad number of countries in Europe and beyond. In terms of external supply, far-right party success depends on available political opportunity structures, the permissiveness of the system within which these parties operate (Golder 2016), as well as party system institutionalisation, as institutionalised systems may both enable far-right breakthroughs and condition their durability. To measure the »party« dimension we need to examine indexes that capture far-right party normalisation, party system permissiveness and party system institutionalisation.

#### (iii) Institutions

This dimension captures the resilience of democratic institutions. Far-right party success ultimately depends on the ability of these parties to take over institutions. For example, entrenched far-right parties specifically target democratic checks and balances, such as the legislature and judicial safeguards, as well as civil society organisations and the media. To measure the »institutions« dimension we need to use indexes that consider the robustness of a broad range of democratic institutions at both the starting and end points within a designated time-frame, such as the V-DEM (Coppedge et al. 2023) indexes.

### Scenarios of democratic backsliding

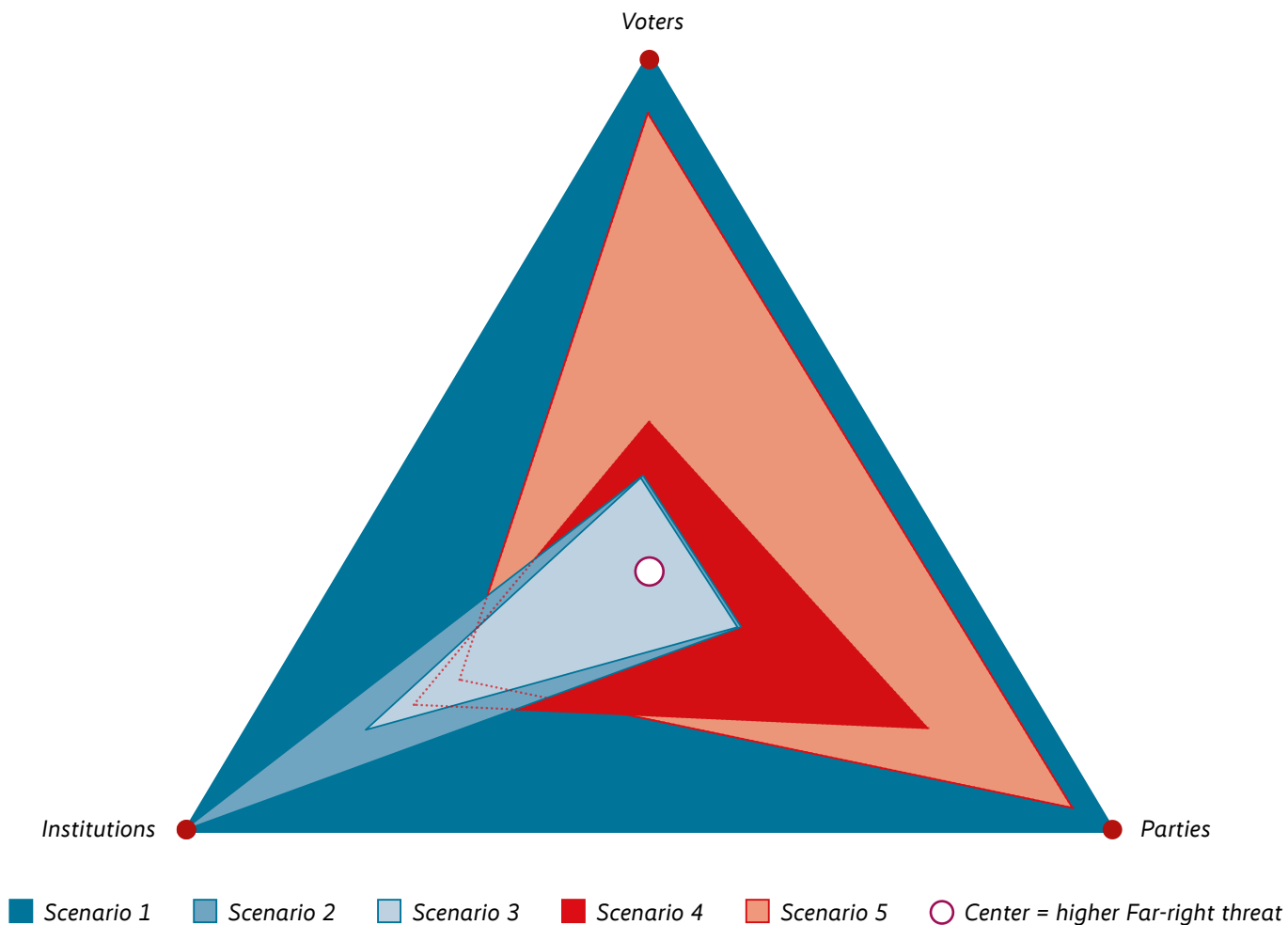
Distinct combinations of changes across these three dimensions may result in a variety of different scenarios of far-right democratic backsliding. Figure 2 presents a five-scenario hypothetical nested-triangle visualisation with variable angles. Each scenario distorts toward the vertices (voters, parties, institutions). This lets us see which force is most dominant in each threat scenario, and where the main source of vulnerability lies. Each corner represents an »index« of resilience: voter-base resilience, party system resilience and institutional resilience. Higher scores on each dimension

and greater proximity to the edges of the triangle indicate a lower far-right threat. Lower scores on these dimensions and greater proximity to the middle of the triangle indicate a greater far-right threat.

Multiple combinations of changes across the three dimensions are *theoretically* possible but not all are *empirically* possible. We focus briefly on three examples (see Figure 3).

### Hypothetical nested-triangle visualisation of multiple scenarios

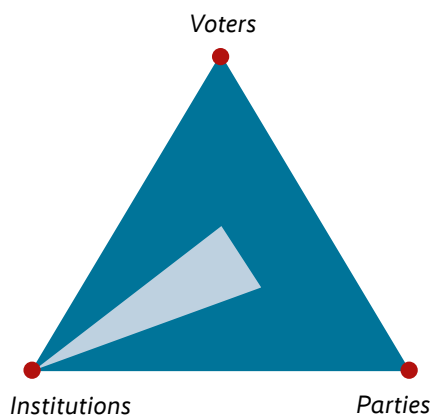
Figure 2



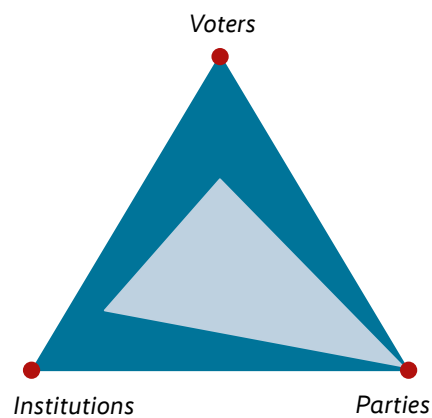
### Three hypothetical scenarios

Figure 3

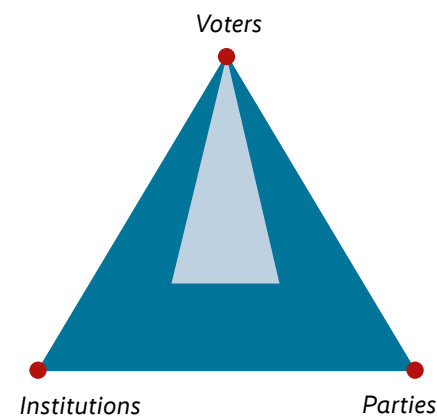
(a) Institutions hold



(b) Party system holds



(c) Voter base holds



Scenario (a) shows a case of resilient institutions despite widespread far-right party demand and party system permissiveness. Much of Western Europe, with its long-standing democratic institutions, potentially fits this scenario (hitherto), despite increasingly widespread support for far-right parties.

Scenario (b) shows a case of party system resilience, despite weaken(ed) institutions and latent far-right party demand. Some cases in Southern Europe during the economic crisis, such as Greece, fit this scenario.

Scenario (c) shows a case in which the far-right voter base is not as broad and rejection rates are high despite weak(ened) institutions and party system permissiveness. This could be a case in which the far right enjoys disproportionate power as a coalition partner or its performance has been amplified by the electoral or presidential system, but there is still a large group of opponents. Some Latin American countries, such as Brazil, fit this scenario: opposition to Bolsonaro was high and there was substantial mobilisation of non-far-right voters (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2024).

## What counter-strategies may be effective?

This framework helps us to identify specific strategies in accordance with each dimension, as summarised in Table 1.

### A counter-strategy trilemma?

However, there may be trade-offs to consider when deciding which dimension to prioritise, as a particular strategy might help to strengthen one dimension while simultaneously weakening another. For example:

- Galvanisation of non-far-right voters (voter dimension): this strategy might help to weaken the far-right voter base but could backfire if the far right is in power (party-system dimension) and it responds by further strengthening its executive power or proceeds with faster constitutional/ judicial reforms (institutional dimension). Examples include Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland.
- Demonisation (party-system dimension): this strategy might help to address the issue of party system

## Counter-strategies across each dimension

Table 1

Dimension	Strategy	Details and examples
Voter dimension	Dissuasion of peripherals to »break« far-right coalitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Focus on existential issues, distributional conflicts and economic insecurities</li> <li>→ Reverse or oppose cuts to key services</li> <li>→ Tackle welfare competition, lack of access to public housing and job insecurity (e.g. Cavallé and Ferwerda 2023)</li> </ul>
	Galvanisation of non-far-right voters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Organise protests and awareness campaigns to mobilise opposition</li> </ul>
	Demonisation Isolation /cordon sanitaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Expose the far right as extremist rather than merely »right-wing«</li> <li>→ Prevent far-right parties from joining government</li> <li>→ Avoid cooperation with far-right parties as this may result in normalisation and exacerbate system permissiveness</li> </ul>
Party-system dimension	Confrontation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Avoid copying the far right on issues that it »owns« (e.g. Abou-Chadi et al. 2021; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022).</li> <li>→ Communicate party visions that are distinct from far-right messages</li> </ul>
	Organisation of parliamentary opposition across party families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Mobilise parliamentary coalitions</li> <li>→ Emphasise distinctions between the centre-right and the far right</li> </ul>
	Legislature safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Implement practices such as electoral monitoring and pursue the effective organisation of parliamentary opposition (Haggard and Kaufman 2021).</li> </ul>
Institutional dimension	Judicial responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Maximise the effectiveness of existing judicial mechanisms: legal sanctions/bans, infringement proceedings and litigation in supranational (e.g. European Court of Justice) and national courts (Blauberger and Kelemen 2016).</li> </ul>
	Civil society safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Develop early-warning systems, systematic reports and emergency-response campaigns to expose violations of individual rights (Haggard and Kaufman 2021).</li> </ul>

permissiveness but may simultaneously undermine the institutional dimension if, for example, the far right engages or threatens to engage in legal action. UK's Reform party is a case in point: in 2024 the BBC apologised to Reform UK for calling the party »far-right«. Since then, both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, journalists and media outlets have systematically refrained from using the term »far-right« for fear of legal repercussions (Hope Not Hate 2024).

- Isolation/cordon sanitaire (party-system dimension): this strategy might help to tackle the issue of party system permissiveness but may at the same time be used as a campaign strategy by the far right to mobilise more peripheral voters (voter dimension). Given the trade-offs, these strategies have broken down in most countries where they have been used, such as in the case of the Sweden Democrats (SD).
- Party bans and legal sanctions (institutional dimension): this strategy can be used specifically in contexts in which far-right parties engage in violent and criminal activities. While it can help to strengthen the institutional dimension, it may also serve to galvanise latent support for the far right (voter dimension). Greece's Golden Dawn (GD) party is a case in point. The party's leading cadres were tried and convicted for maintaining a criminal organisation and the party was subsequently outlawed. While this strategy was successful in eliminating GD, latent support (voter dimension) was later channelled into votes for other far-right parties with less extremist ideologies, including the Spartans (subsequently banned), Greek Solution, Victory and Voice of Reason.

- (iii) Assess: consider the trade-offs when deciding which dimension to prioritise, as a particular strategy might help to strengthen one dimension while simultaneously weakening another.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The framework presented here provides a structured tool for conducting cross-regional comparisons, mapping far-right success across multiple cases through a visual format, and formalising threat levels across scenarios by grounding each dimension in measurable indicators. This way we may capture not only the magnitude of the threat but also its source; in other words, whether the primary vulnerability or strength in each case stems from the voter base, the party system or the institutional framework. There are three key takeaways from this analysis:

- (i) Adapt: there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as different threat scenarios may vary according to time and/or country, depending on which dimension is stronger or more vulnerable.
- (ii) Prioritise: accordingly, we may emphasise counterstrategies, depending on whether the main source of vulnerability or strength in each case and at a particular point in time stems from voter support, party dynamics or institutional fragility.

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## About Democratic Expeditions

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FES Regional Office for International Cooperation  
Democracy of the Future  
Reichsratsstr. 13/5  
A-1010 Vienna

#### Contact

Filip Milačić  
[filip.milacic@fes.de](mailto:filip.milacic@fes.de)

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