

## *Democratic Expeditions*

# Rejecting the far-right: lessons for defending democracy

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

### Summary

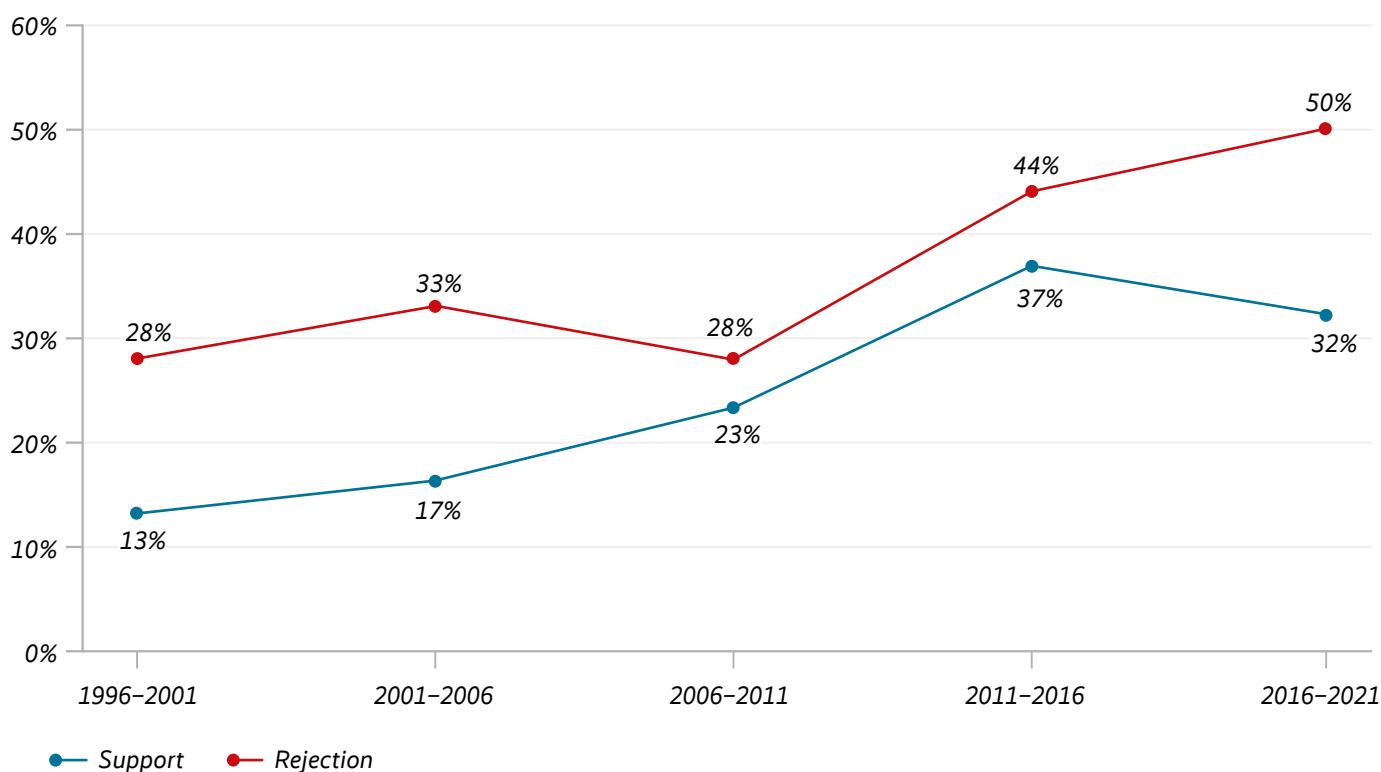
Drawing on empirical evidence from both Europe and Latin America, this contribution shows that while the far right has gained electoral ground, it also faces persistently high rejection rates. Roughly half of the voting public oppose it. This twin dynamic of growth and resistance makes the far right a polarising force. The contribution then turns to the question of how best to confront it. It advances six lessons: recognising the diversity of far-right opponents and tailoring strategies accordingly; grounding debates in empirical data rather than moralising rhetoric; avoiding reactive engagement with far-right agendas; clarifying progressive positions in accessible language; challenging the misconception that the far right grows at the expense of the left rather than the mainstream right; and consistently defending democracy against authoritarian threats from any political camp.

### The far right: loved by some, but rejected by many

The far right is scarcely new. Historically, the emblematic example is of course National Socialism in Germany, but even at that time there were other far right actors across much of Europe and beyond. From the Second World War onward, however, these actors lost ground while mainstream centre-right parties were strengthened, playing a key role in the consolidation of democracy in postwar Europe. In fact, the proper functioning of democracy requires mainstream right parties, which channel the preferences of those who share right-wing ideas and – unlike the far right – are willing to respect the rules of liberal democracy (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Ziblatt 2017). When mainstream (centre) right parties either do not exist or mutate into far-right forces, the likelihood of gradual democratic erosion increases dramatically.

Progressively, from the 1980s onward, new far-right formations began to gain ground in Western Europe and later in Eastern Europe (Mudde 2007; 2019). These new parties differ from the old far right in that they claim nominally to support the democratic system and thus do not oppose electoral competition. Nonetheless, empirical evidence

## Support for and rejection of far-right parties in Western Europe, 1996–2021



shows that they promote ideas and practices that do gradually erode the functioning of liberal democracy (Vachudova 2020; Pirro and Stanley 2022).

The fall of the Berlin Wall facilitated the recovery of democracy in Latin America and the implementation of economic policies associated with the “Washington Consensus”. With some exceptions (such as Fujimori in Peru), far-right forces did not grow in the region. Instead, moderate left- and right-wing actors operated within the framework of liberal democracy (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014). Countries as varied as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico saw the rise of mainstream right parties that governed democratically and transferred power once they lost elections.

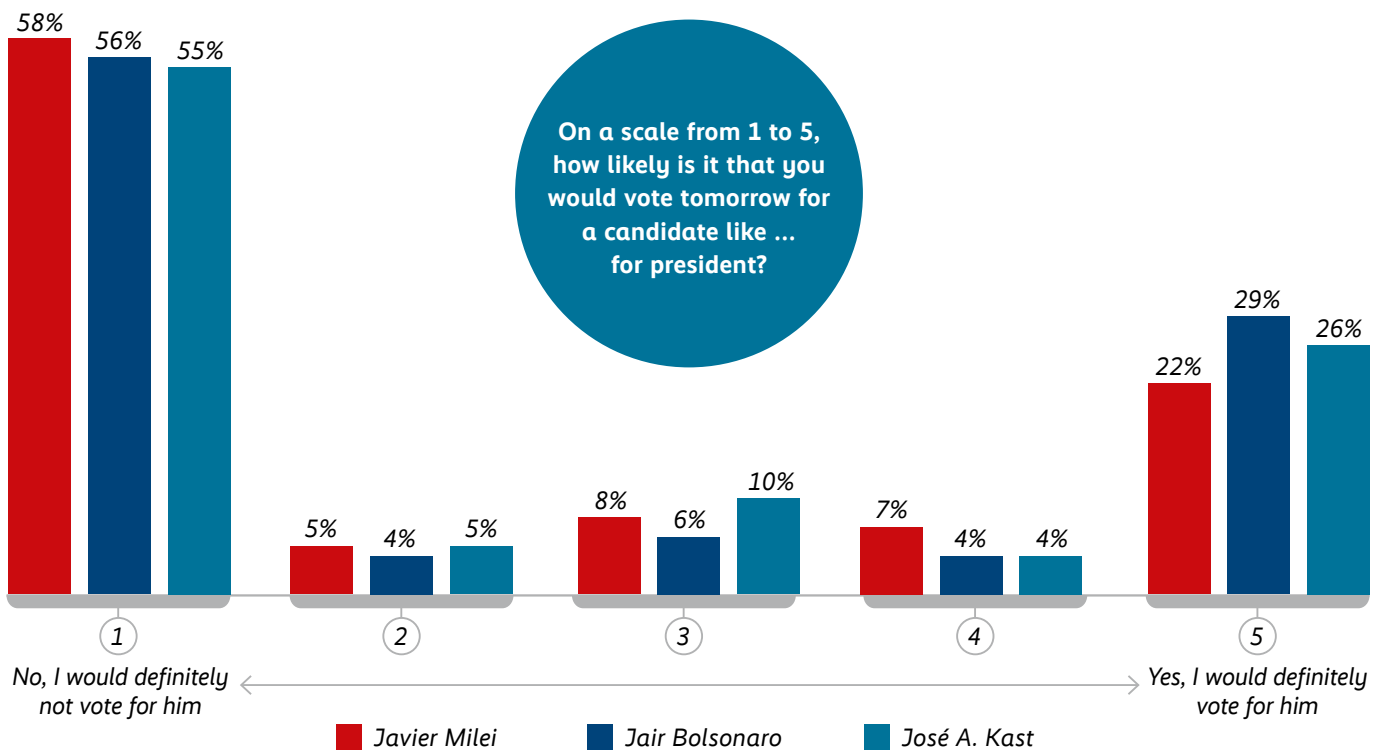
More recently, however, we have seen the rapid rise of far-right leaders with a discourse that combines “iron fist” policies against crime with a conservative moral agenda (Rovira Kaltwasser 2023a). They also typically emphasise shrinking the state and expanding the free market. This is the case with Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, José Antonio Kast in Chile and Javier Milei in Argentina. Although their political trajectories differ – Bolsonaro is a retired military officer with a long parliamentary career, Kast is a conservative politician who decided to form his own party, and Milei is a genuine outsider – they share a similar ideology that links them to

figures such as Trump in the United States and Orbán in Hungary (Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. 2026).

This brief account reinforces the idea that the far right has gone global. Today, virtually every European country has at least one far-right party represented in parliament, which on average mobilises a little over 15 per cent of the electorate, despite important national differences. In Latin America, far-right actors have also gained ground quickly, and in countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Chile they have even captured the executive. Given this global expansion, much of the debate has focused on explaining the growing support for far-right forces, but much less attention has been paid to the level of rejection they face. The available evidence reveals a similar pattern in both regions: high levels of rejection alongside the ability to mobilise a relatively small but cohesive base of supporters. For example, data for Western Europe shows that just over half of the electorate opposes far-right parties (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Wegschneider, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Van Hauwaert 2023).

To obtain a more detailed look at this topic, in a recent report we systematised public opinion data for Western Europe to analyse levels of support and rejection for different party families (Rovira Kaltwasser 2024).<sup>1</sup> This approach has the advantage of showing how many people hold both

<sup>1</sup> We draw on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and use national averages from surveys conducted in Western Europe between 1996 and 2021 for an item that asks respondents to evaluate political parties on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates strong rejection and 10 indicates strong support. To measure “support” for a political party, we sum the values from 6 to 10, while to measure “rejection” we sum the values from 0 to 4. Respondents who answer 5 are not considered in the analysis, nor are those who do not respond to this question.



positive and negative views towards the parties competing electorally. As shown in Figure 1, the evidence reveals not only growing support for the far right (from 15 per cent in the mid-1990s to 30 per cent most recently), but also a growing rate of rejection (from 30 per cent in the late 1990s to 50 per cent today). This demonstrates that, despite electoral growth and normalisation of the far right, opposition to it is also on the rise, well beyond rejection rates for other party families.

Bringing this debate to the Latin American context, we find a similar pattern. A recent study comparing Argentina, Brazil and Chile reveals that the far right polarises electorates: it generates loyal supporters but also a large group of detractors (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2024). In effect, data from 2023 on willingness to vote for far-right figures shows that while around 30 per cent of the electorate supports leaders such as Milei, Bolsonaro and Kast, about 60 per cent opposes them. Very few respondents remain indifferent to these leaders.

This evidence from Latin America may appear paradoxical because in Argentina, Brazil and Chile far-right candidates (Milei, Bolsonaro and Kast, respectively) managed to win presidential elections despite the fact that more than half of the population is at odds with them. It is important to note, however, that most Latin American countries hold a second-round runoff between the two candidates with the most votes. Under these circumstances, far-right leaders can prevail not because they enjoy broad popular support, but because many voters reject the alter-

native. Viewed in this light, it is crucial to recognise that the far right can rise to power as a result of voters' willingness to punish incumbents for their failures (for example, economic hardship in Argentina or corruption in Brazil), rather than because society has necessarily shifted to the right (Rovira Kaltwasser 2023b).

### Defending democracy from the far right

We know that the far right is growing worldwide and that this is having a negative impact on democracy. However, we still lack knowledge of how best to confront this phenomenon and which strategies work most effectively. There is no magic solution applicable everywhere but looking at the European and Latin American context, it is possible to propose six lessons worth considering when analysing this issue comparatively.

→ First, an important lesson from the empirical evidence discussed above is that, although many citizens oppose the far right, they form a highly diverse group, both socio-demographically and ideologically. This requires better mapping of who the detractors of the far right are and what ideas they subscribe to. By understanding their demands and concerns, it may be possible to foster shared sentiments that could unite them in resisting the rise of the far right. One promising approach is to defend democracy in concrete, tangible terms rather than abstract ones, thereby building a narrative capable of bringing together different constituencies opposed to the far right.

- Second, we need to sustain a dialogue on the rise of the far right and its impact on democracy that is grounded in empirical data rather than preconceptions or overly normative stances. While there are plenty of reasons to worry about the far right, we must advance understanding before condemnation. Its rise reflects transformations among voters and in political competition that require careful study, avoiding moralistic judgements on those who support these forces. In fact, one common mistake is to dismiss far-right supporters with a moralising tone. Portraying ourselves as “the good guys” attacking “the bad guys” tends to reinforce the polarising discourse promoted by the far right. It is therefore necessary to denounce the far right intelligently, exposing its blindness, radicalism and disconnect from public opinion on many issues, while avoiding pointing the finger.
- Third, it is also worth reflecting on the extent to which certain centre-left positions may unintentionally alienate segments of the electorate that are hostile to the far right but nonetheless end up supporting it anyway. For example, adopting very progressive stances can provoke animosity toward the centre-left that the far right can then exploit. The issue is not only the radical nature of some policies, but also the language used (or imposed) to defend them. Centre-left actors often rely on complicated jargon that is difficult for many to follow, which underscores the need for pedagogical clarity in explaining why certain positions matter. Take the case of migration: incorporating foreigners is not only an act of solidarity, but also an economic and social imperative to sustain welfare systems in societies with aging populations.
- Fourth, part of the progressive camp’s problem is believing that it can dominate the agenda pushed by the far right. The more attention is given to the far right’s favoured topics, the more electoral space it gains. Issues such as immigration or citizen security are difficult for the centre-left to win on politically because the far right is willing to push the boundaries of what is seen as legitimate within liberal democracy. This is a losing battle for the centre-left. Instead, progressives should try to prioritise topics more aligned with their comparative advantages, such as gender, housing, sexual diversity and social justice, which resonate strongly today and can be used to their benefit.
- Fifth, a frequent misconception in political debate is that the decline of social democracy is directly tied to the rise of the far right; that is, that the latter is simply stealing votes from the former. Available empirical studies suggest that this claim is problematic (for example, Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger and Mudde 2021). In many cases, the far right grows primarily by mobilising citizens who previously voted for the mainstream right or who abstained from voting altogether. There has long been a segment of the working class with conservative views, and these voters are increasingly being attracted to the far right. As a result, competition within the right-wing bloc is intensifying. Scholars and policymakers should therefore empirically investigate the sources of far-right support rather than assuming that the transformation of the left is the key driver of its growth.
- Sixth and finally, because the far right promotes ideas that undermine liberal democracy, it is necessary to defend democracy vigorously. Part of the challenge is to show that far-right discourse is not simply “common sense” but rather a threat to democracy. Empirical evidence shows that figures such as Donald Trump are evaluated negatively by the public worldwide, so it is useful to highlight the far right’s association with him and his programme. However, to credibly combat the far right’s authoritarian tendencies, the centre-left must actively criticise dictatorial projects of any kind. Unfortunately, some progressive actors are not always consistent on this point, which undermines the credibility of their democratic discourse.

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## About Democratic Expeditions

This essay is based on the paper presented by the author at the workshop [Contesting the Far Right, Safeguarding Democracy: Comparative Insights from Europe and Latin America](#). Convened by [Daphne Halikiopoulou](#) (University of York, UK) and [Carlos Meléndez](#) (CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest), the workshop took place at the CEU Democracy Institute in Budapest on 22 and 23 September 2025. It was the second edition of Democratic Expeditions, a series of openly sourced, carefully crafted international research workshops that shed light on underexplored issues of democratic crises and democratizing struggles. The initiative is a joint venture of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Regional Office on Democracy of the Future in Vienna, the CEU Democracy Institute, and the CEU Department of Political Science.

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