

Democratic Expeditions

The scarecrow of communism: Understanding and confronting anti-communist rhetoric in contemporary politics

Carlos Meléndez

Introduction: the global return of an antiquated ghost

Far-right actors in both Europe and Latin America have conjured a familiar spectre back into being: communism. To be sure, not communism as an active political force, but rather as a symbolic scarecrow or bogeyman, invoked strategically in an attempt to delegitimise opponents, not just at the extremes, but across the political spectrum, encompassing even moderate centrist forces. And such anti-communist rhetoric is not a marginal or outdated phenomenon, but central to how the contemporary far right is framing its designated enemies, drawing on cultural trauma, ideological polarisation and the emotive power of fear.

Take Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni. At one rally she jumped around on stage, leading the chant of *«chi non salta comunista è»* (»anyone not jumping [with the implication, ›together with us‹] is a communist«), per-

haps echoing Cold War-style exclusionary fervour. In Chile, to take another example, José Antonio Kast's campaign jingle warned of so-called *«cincomunismo»*, a neologism merging his number on the electoral ballot, five (*«cinco»* in Spanish) with an anti-communist message. And these are scarcely isolated provocations. From France to Peru, anti-communism is a core discursive weapon wielded by the far right to stigmatise reformist, environmentalist, feminist or even centrist agendas.

But is it only the far right that is deploying anti-communist rhetoric? More fundamentally, what does »anti-communism« even mean today, particularly at the level of individual attitudes?

Conceptualising anti-communism: two faces of the same coin

To grasp the contemporary relevance of anti-communism, we can start by distinguishing two dimensions:

- (i) **Affective anti-communism** refers to visceral, emotional hostility towards communism. It captures symbolic rejection – encompassing distrust, disdain and hatred – that is often rooted in historical memory, cultural stigma or identity.
- (ii) **Instrumental anti-communism** refers to a pragmatic rejection of communism as a viable political or economic model. In this sense, individuals may not feel particularly hostile emotionally, but nonetheless see communist ideas as dangerous or counterproductive in today's context.

In the comparative research underlying this brief, both dimensions were measured through nationally representative surveys in **Chile** (2021), **Peru** (2024), **France** (2024) and **Italy** (2022). Affective anti-communism was operationalised using emotional scales (for example, admiration vs disdain), while instrumental anti-communism was gauged via agreement with the statement »communist ideas have something to contribute to the politics of my country«.

These measures enable a more precise understanding of how anti-communism operates, not as a historical relic, but as an enduring political attitude shaping electoral behaviour.

Who are the anti-communists? Ideological and psychological drivers

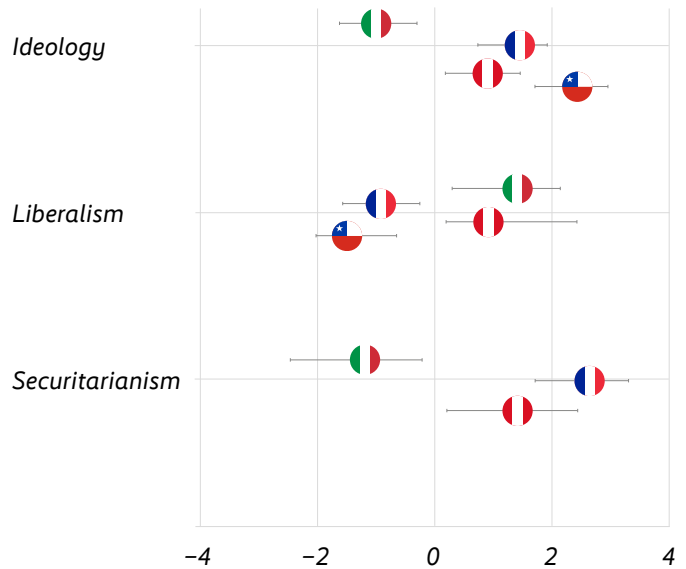
Using regression analyses across four national surveys, several patterns emerged regarding the ideological and psychological foundations of anti-communist attitudes. These findings are represented visually in figures that present the regression coefficients for both dimensions of anti-communism, affective and instrumental, across Italy, France, Chile and Peru. The values on the horizontal axis range from -4 to +4 and represent the strength and direction of association between variables. Positive values indicate a stronger relationship with anti-communist attitudes, while negative values reflect the opposite.

Affective anti-communism is associated most strongly in Chile, Peru and France with **ideological right-wing self-identification**. In Italy, however, this emotional rejection appears among **left leaners**, suggesting that the symbolic meaning of communism varies by context. It correlates positively with **conservatism** in France and Chile, and with **liberalism** in Italy and Peru. It is sometimes linked to **»securitarian«** attitudes (a worldview emphasising law and order, together with punishment), notably in France and Peru, but not in Italy.

By contrast, **instrumental anti-communism** is more straightforward. It **correlates consistently** in all four

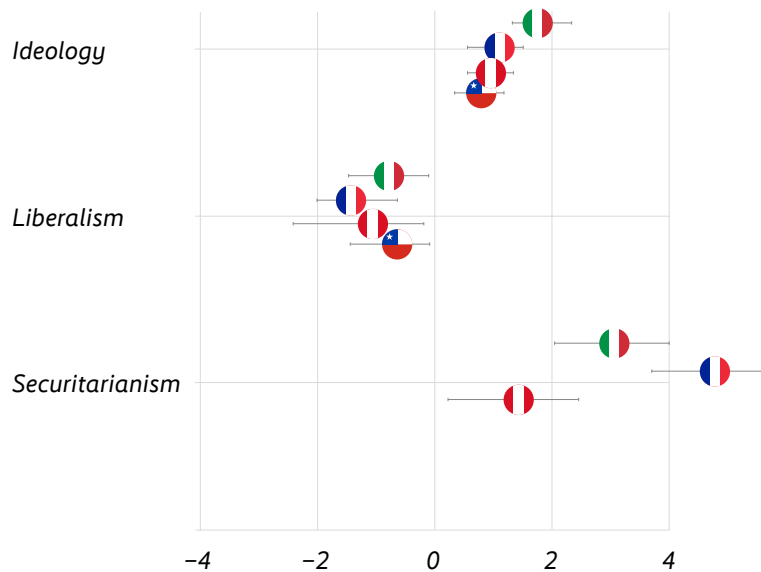
Anticommunism (affective)

Figure 1



Anticommunism (instrumental)

Figure 2



countries **with right-wing, conservative and securitarian orientations**.¹ It emerges as a particularly clear marker of far-right constituencies, more so than the affective dimension.

In other words, **affective anti-communism** – an emotional rejection of communism rooted in cultural memory, symbolic stigma or identity – tends to be broader, more ambiguous and potentially accessible to centrist or even left-leaning voters, depending on the national context. This may be because emotional aversion to »communism« can persist as a cultural reflex, even among those who support progressive

¹ In Chile, the questionnaire did not include questions on securitarianism.

or liberal policies, particularly when communism is associated with historical trauma or moral disapproval. By contrast, instrumental anti-communism – the pragmatic rejection of communist ideas as politically harmful or threatening – is more ideologically coherent and unambiguously aligned with the far right. It reflects a calculated stance against perceived leftist policy agendas and is therefore more tightly bound to conservative, securitarian and authoritarian worldviews.

Why anti-communism matters: electoral consequences

One key contribution of this research is that it shows that both forms of anti-communism predict voting behaviour, albeit in different ways.

Affective anti-communism increases the likelihood of voting not only for **far-right parties** such as Rassemblement National (France) and Lega (Italy), as well as **far-right presidential candidates** such as *pinochetista* José Antonio Kast (Chile) and Opus Dei linked ultra-conservative businessman López Aliaga (Peru), but also for **mainstream right or (economic) liberal candidates**, such as neoliberal economist Hernando de Soto (Peru) and Sebastián Sichel of Chile Vamos (Chile).

Instrumental anti-communism primarily predicts far-right voting, however. Specifically, it is a significant predictor of support for Rassemblement National in France, Lega in Italy, José Antonio Kast and the Partido Republicano in Chile, and Rafael López Aliaga and Renovación Popular in Peru. It plays a less important role in predicting centre-right or liberal preferences, which tend to be influenced more by affective anti-communism.

The key insight is that **anti-communism is not just for extremists.** While instrumental anti-communism functions as a selective filter for far-right support, affective anti-communism expands the emotional resonance of far-right rhetoric to broader conservative electorates.

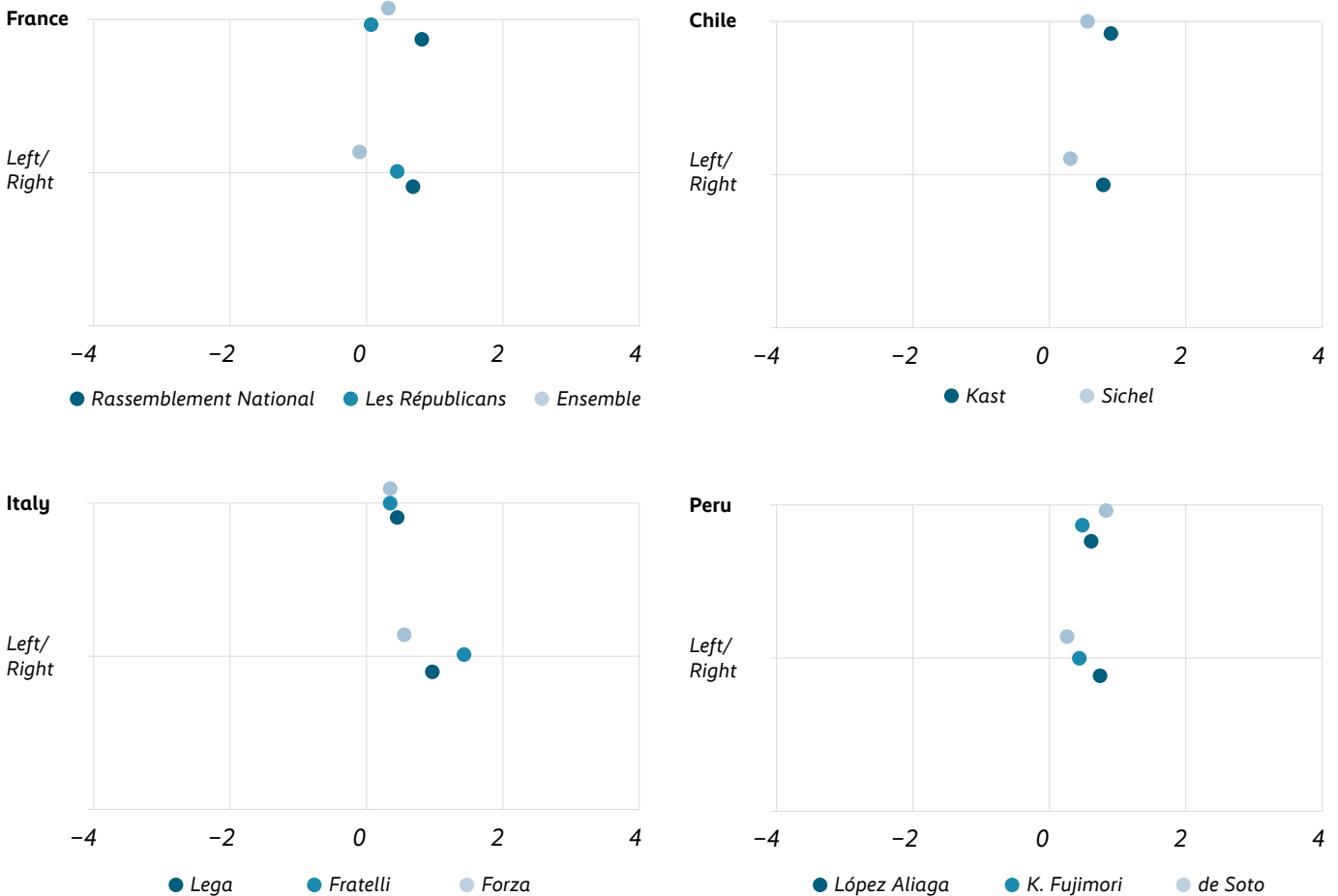
This dual mechanism – emotive resonance and pragmatic threat – explains why far-right actors persist in invoking communism, even though communists wield no real political power.

Why this matters for Europe and Latin America

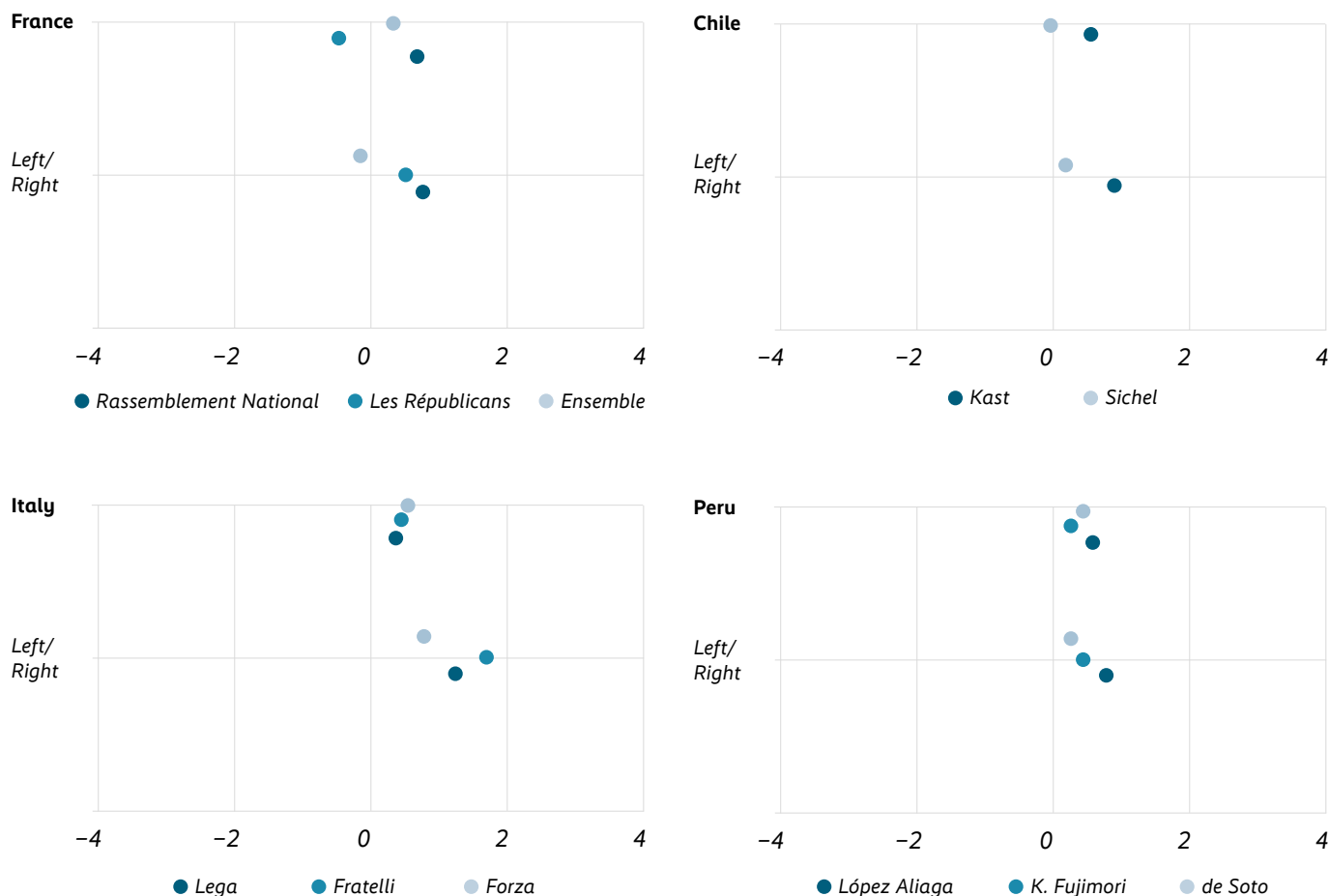
The enduring appeal of anti-communism, especially in regions in which there is no communist party or it has been domesticated (such as Italy and France) should alert progressive and centrist actors to a critical blind spot.

Anticommunism (affective)

Figure 3



Anticommunism (instrumental)



Across both continents, far-right leaders successfully use »communism« as a floating signifier, an empty label to which they attach fears of:

- state intervention and taxation (France);
- environmental (over)regulation (Italy);
- security threats and terrorism (Peru); and
- economic collapse and social chaos (Chile).

This rhetorical elasticity allows »communism« to stand in for virtually any policy that challenges neo-liberal orthodoxy, social conservatism or national sovereignty. In turn, it fuels polarisation, delegitimises reform and distorts democratic debate.

Policy recommendations

- 1. Do not dismiss anti-communist rhetoric as merely anachronistic.** The emotional and instrumental appeal of anti-communism is real, measurable and politically consequential. Progressives and centrists ignore it at their peril.
- 2. Disentangle left-leaning agendas from Cold War imaginaries.** Climate action, social justice or public health care must be defended as pragmatic, future-ori-

ented policies, not relics of a defunct ideology. Communicative strategies should pre-emptively de-link these proposals from »communist« stereotypes.

- 3. Expose the symbolic manipulation behind anti-communist discourse.** Civil society organisations, fact-checkers and public intellectuals should highlight how far-right actors use »communism« as a catch-all slur, detached from actual content or context. Counter-narratives must frame this rhetoric as a tool of fearmongering and distraction.
- 4. Recognise the heterogeneity of anti-communist attitudes.** Not all anti-communists are on the far right. Affective anti-communism may coexist with centrist or even liberal values, especially in countries such as Italy or Peru. Broad coalitions should focus on **bridging concerns** – such as security or national identity – without conceding ground to ideological stigmatisation.
- 5. Develop proactive narratives around democracy and pluralism.** Rather than go on the defensive, political actors should frame their proposals as rooted in democratic principles, civic inclusion and national renewal. This framing reduces the vulnerability of left-wing and centrist agendas to stigmatisation.

Conclusion: from scarecrow to strategy

Anti-communism remains a potent political weapon, not of course because communism poses a real threat, but because the *idea* of communism still serves as a versatile enemy. As the data show, affective and instrumental anti-communism structure voter behaviour across diverse contexts. The far right understands this and exploits it.

The challenge for democratic actors is to understand, confront and ultimately neutralise the »scarecrow« – or bogeyman – of communism not through denial or dismissal, but through strategic engagement, narrative reframing and attitudinal insight.

Ghosts may not be real but they still have the power to terrify.

About the author

Carlos Meléndez is a researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon and Research Affiliate at CEU Democracy Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, United States). He was Associate Professor at Universidad Diego Portales (Chile) and postdoctoral researcher at the Central European University's Democracy Institute (Hungary) and at the Center for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (Chile). His research explores public opinion, political identities, support for the far right, and populist demand, using survey data and experimental survey methods, with a cross-regional perspective on Latin America and Europe. His work has been published in academic journals such as the American Journal of Political Science, Democratization, Party Politics, Comparative Political Studies, Comparative Politics, Political Studies, Journal of Peace Research, Journal of Politics in Latin America, and Revista de Ciencia Política (Chile), Colombia Internacional, among others.

About Democratic Expeditions

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