



Democratic Expeditions

Tracing illiberal talk

How far-right rhetoric erodes democracy before policies change

Lisa Zanotti and Hugo Marcos-Marné

The internal structure of illiberal trends – and the words that lie behind

On 6 January 2021, a mob stormed the US Capitol. Two years later, on 8 January 2023, a similar assault unfolded in Brazil's Praça dos Três Poderes. These outbreaks did not occur in a vacuum. Rather they occurred in the wake of years of sustained rhetorical campaigns that delegitimised electoral processes, framed political opponents as existential threats, and normalised violence as a legitimate political tool. Before the assault on institutions came the assault on language. Nevertheless, democratic actors worldwide remain disproportionately focused on tracking policy changes – such as immigration restrictions, judicial appointments and media regulations – while the discursive groundwork for those policies lies in plain sight, normalised through repetition and diffused from the radical fringe to mainstream politics.

To counter the illiberal consequences of the global far-right wave effectively, we must first understand language as its primary weapon.

Why discourse matters more than we think

Contemporary far-right parties rarely advocate democracy's outright destruction. Unlike the fascist movements of the twentieth century, today's illiberal actors work within democratic systems, eroding them from the inside (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2024). Their strategies are subtler and, arguably, more dangerous because they try to hide any elements that may be unacceptable to large sectors of the population. Such an approach relies on a sustained assault on the institutions and norms that protect minority rights, ensure judicial independence and guarantee a free press. All of this is conducted in language long before tangible illiberal policies and behaviours come into place.

This matters for the simple reason that discourse does not require seizing control of the state. Opposition actors,

candidates without government power and extra-institutional entrepreneurs can deploy illiberal frames to reshape what is considered legitimate, possible and even “common sense” (Newth and Scopelliti, 2025). Rhetorical strategies, unlike policy implementation, are low-cost and high-diffusion, which helps to explain why discursive erosion typically precedes institutional change.

The “contagion effect” that far-right parties aim at is well-established. Research has documented how especially mainstream conservative parties, under electoral pressure, tend to accommodate far-right positions by adopting restrictive platforms on immigration, crime and “sovereignty” (Meguid, 2008; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). Our contribution seeks to trace it at the level of discourse, where the battle is fought first and where early intervention remains possible.

What we measured: two pillars, seven arenas

Drawing on Robert Dahl’s (1971) foundational work, we understand liberal democracy as resting on two necessary pillars: public contestation (can organised alternatives compete freely under protected civil and informational freedoms?) and inclusive participation (is suffrage broad and are elections clean?).

We translated these pillars into seven concrete institutional arenas in which leaders signal their democratic commitments, or the lack thereof:

Contestation:

- (i) civil liberties (speech, assembly, expression);
- (ii) media and alternative information (press freedom, pluralism);
- (iii) pluralism and opposition (legitimacy of rivals, acceptance of dissent);
- (iv) right to organise (unions, associations, protests);
- (v) checks and balances, and rule of law (judicial independence, horizontal accountability)

Participation:

- (vi) electoral integrity (free and fair elections, contestation of office);
- (vii) inclusive citizenship (broad suffrage, membership criteria).

Illiberal discourse thus comprises rhetoric that narrows contestation and/or restricts participation. Relevant and typical examples include delegitimising opponents, politicising courts, pressuring the media, excluding minorities and questioning electoral legitimacy.

Our analysis is based on thousands of elite interviews with political leaders spanning the ideological spectrum in Spain and Argentina. With these two cases we include variation in institutional design (parliamentarism vs presidentialism), far-right positioning (consolidated opposition vs insurgent victory) and mainstream-right structures (strong vs weak). For each leader, we measured both the intensity of illiberal cues (how extreme is the rhetoric) and their emphasis (how often deployed), enabling comparisons between and within contexts.

We used a large language model (GPT-5) to code the interview transcripts, treating each answer by a leader as one observation and identifying how often and how strongly illiberal rhetoric appeared. Each response was scored from 1 (completely liberal) to 4 (completely illiberal), across a total of 255 interviews and 2,572 individual responses.

What we found: two patterns, one playbook

Spain: a clear gradient

The importance of illiberal discourse in Spain depends strongly on ideology. Santiago Abascal’s Vox scores highest in almost all dimensions, except for the ‘alternative media’ one. The mainstream right leaders (from Partido Popular)¹ sit in the middle, noticeably elevated on alternative media but more moderate on rule of law and civil liberties. Left leaders remain consistently the most liberal across dimensions (see Figure 1).

This pattern sharpens when relative values are considered. Vox’s salience-weighted mean reaches 2.72 on contestation compared with the Left’s 1.81. Overall, approximately 84 per cent of illiberal rhetoric in Spain targets contestation (media, courts, pluralism) rather than participation. The message is clear: Spain’s illiberal playbook concentrates on delegitimising rivals, politicising courts and attacking press freedom, and these strategies are much more prevalent in far-right discourse.

Argentina: a bipolar configuration

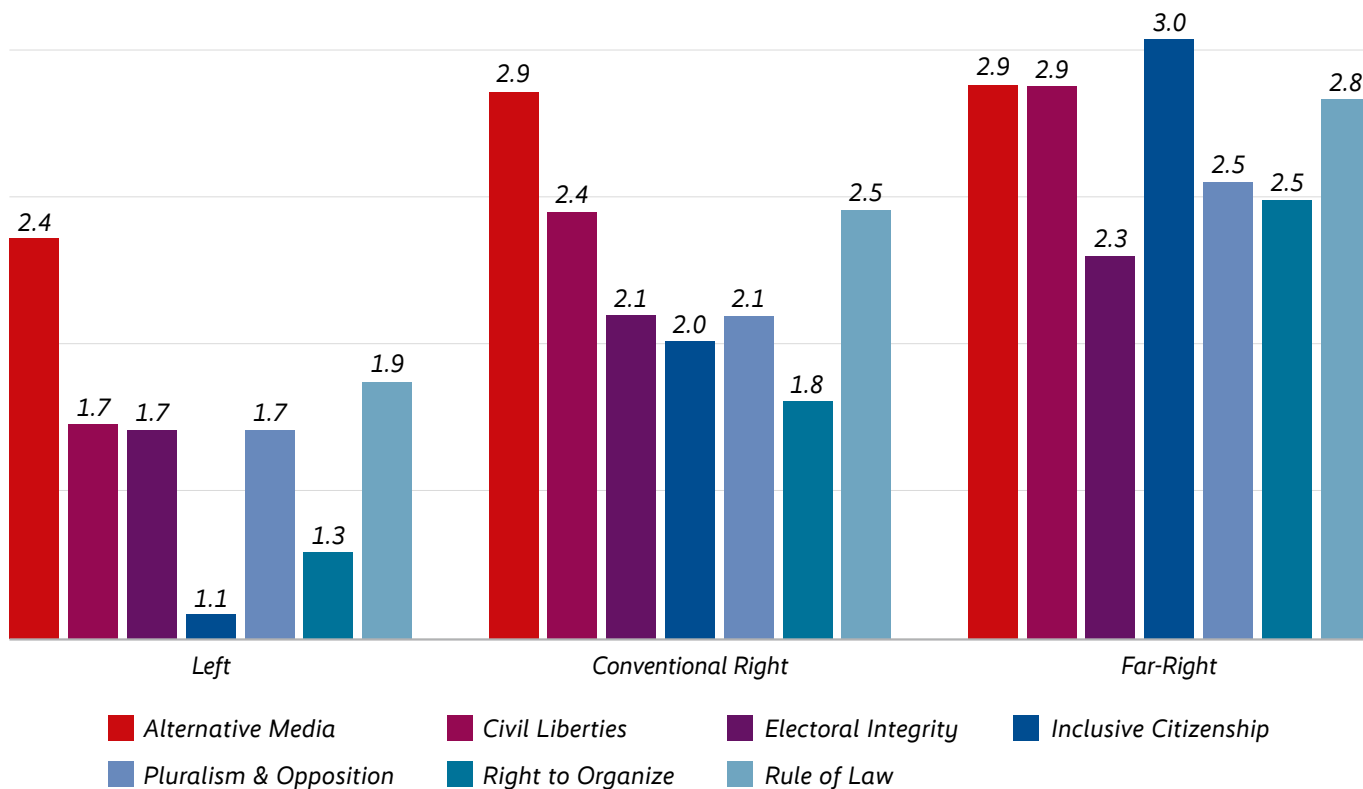
Figure 2 shows that Argentina presents a more complex picture: a U-shaped pattern in which far-right and left-wing discourses² converge at similarly high illiberal levels, while the mainstream right anchors the liberal baseline.

1 The PP’s leaders we analysed are Pablo Casado and Alberto Nuñez de Feijó.

2 In our analysis, the left-wing leader under examination is Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, whereas on the centre-right we focus on Mauricio Macri.

Figure 1

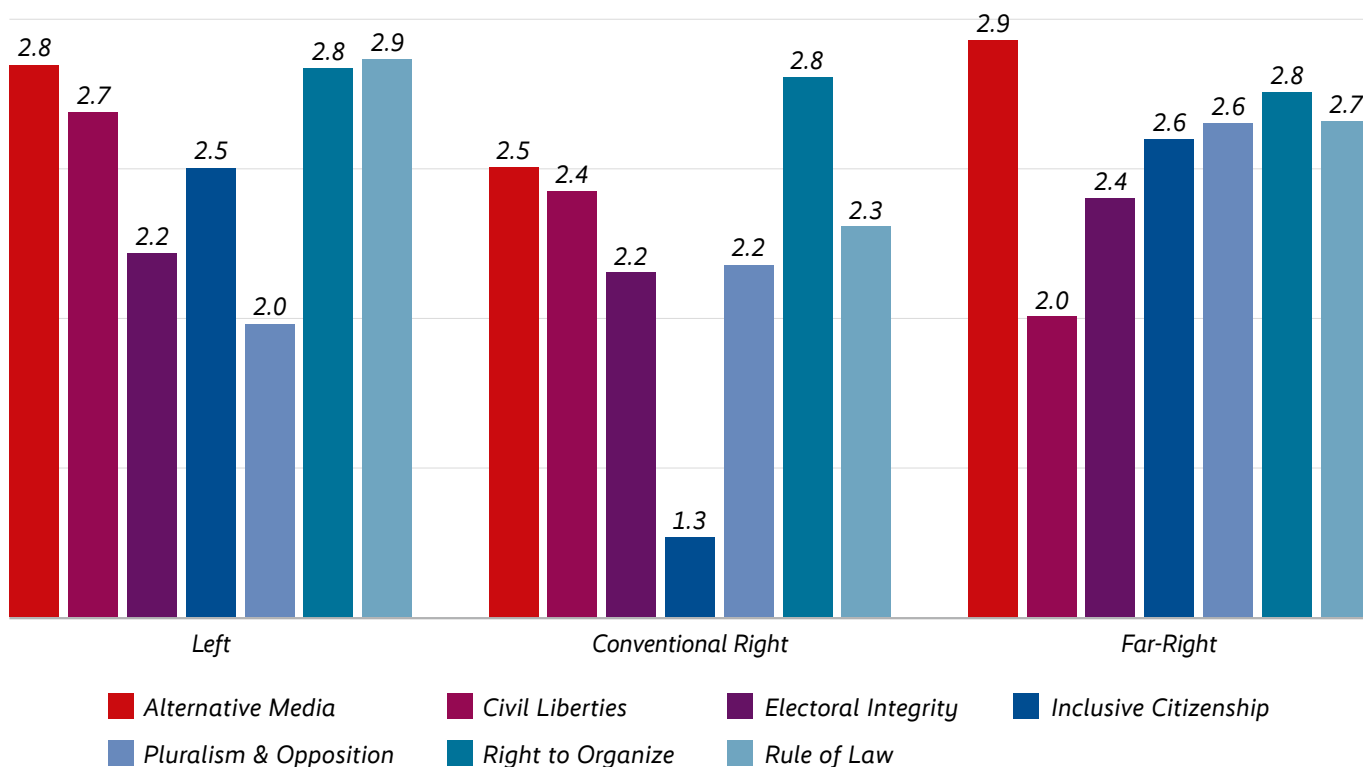
Intensity of illiberal tendency in Spanish leaders' discourse



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Figure 2

Intensity of illiberal tendency in Argentine leaders' discourse



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Javier Milei's far-right illiberalism targets mainly media/alternative information and pluralism/opposition, but also the checks and balances/rule of law dimension. This is consistent with his anti-establishment, libertarian self-presentation, which relies strongly on systematic delegitimisation of rivals.

Surprisingly, the discourse of the Argentine left exhibits the highest illiberal means on checks and balances/rule of law and alternative media, indicating a tough stance towards judicial oversight and the information sphere. The discourse of the mainstream right (Juntos por el Cambio) is comparatively more liberal, especially regarding electoral integrity and inclusive citizenship.

Weighted by emphasis, both the far right and the left reach overall levels around 2.65–2.66, driven primarily by their sustained focus on checks and balances, media and opposition. The mainstream right's lower score (around 2.3) reflects both moderate intensity and a more balanced distribution of rhetorical attention.

The common thread

Despite different configurations – Spain's linear gradient vs Argentina's bipolarity – an underlying pattern emerges here. Illiberalism is diffused through attacks on horizontal accountability and the information sphere. Leaders repeatedly advance non-trivial curbs or politicisation (scoring 2.3–2.9 on our scale) in the areas associated with contestation. These mid-range illiberal cues, deployed frequently, matter even more than rare extreme statements because they normalise pressure on the information ecosystem, judicial independence and pluralism.

Participation talk is sparse in both countries. When it appears, it contributes differently: Spain's far right deploys distinctly exclusionary rhetoric on citizenship, while Argentina's patterns concentrate illiberalism in contestation regardless of bloc.

Beyond intensity: the power of repetition

Measuring how illiberal leaders sound is only half the story. We also need to know how often they deploy these frames. A leader might score moderately illiberal (around 2.5) when discussing courts or media, but if they return to these topics repeatedly, in interview after interview, that persistent messaging shapes public discourse far more than occasional extreme statements.

We therefore combined intensity with emphasis, weighting our scores by how frequently each leader discusses each institutional arena. This reveals two crucial patterns.

First, illiberal discourse overwhelmingly targets contestation, not participation. In Spain, approximately 84 per

cent of coded mentions across all political blocs target contestation; in Argentina, the figure rises to roughly 90 per cent.

Second, frequency amplifies risk. In Spain, once we account for emphasis, Vox's weighted score on contestation reaches 2.72, compared with 1.81 for the left, a gap driven both by more illiberal content and more frequent deployment. The mainstream right sits at 2.37, suggesting some rhetorical accommodation. In Argentina, both the far right (Milei, 2.65) and the left (2.66) converge at similarly high levels when weighted by frequency, while the mainstream right remains lower at 2.30. These mid-range scores (2.3–2.9), repeated often enough, normalise pressure on democratic institutions without requiring extreme language in any single instance.

Put simply, the illiberal playbook succeeds through repetition. Mid-range attacks on courts, media and pluralism, deployed consistently across hundreds of interviews, matter more than rare incendiary statements. This is why early detection at the discursive level is essential; by the time policies change, the rhetorical battle has already been won.

Why this matters: an early-warning system

Our findings offer three critical insights for democratic defence:

1. The illiberal playbook is predictable. Far-right actors across contexts deploy remarkably similar rhetorical strategies: delegitimise rivals, politicise courts, attack media independence. This consistency makes the threat identifiable and therefore counterable.
2. Contagion is real, and traceable. Spain's gradient pattern suggests mainstream-right accommodation of far-right rhetoric, particularly on media and checks and balances. Argentina's weaker mainstream right shows how institutional fragmentation affects contagion pathways, and might even show widespread contagion effects across the ideological spectrum. Understanding these dynamics allows targeted intervention.
3. Discourse is an early-warning signal. By the time restrictive policies are passed, the discursive battle is already lost. Our framework functions as a diagnostic tool, identifying where illiberal rhetoric is being normalised before it becomes law or even has violent non-institutional expressions.

Recommendations: where to focus democratic defence

Based on these findings, we recommend that policymakers and civil society prioritise:

- Protect the information ecosystem. Media and alternative information is the most contested arena in both countries. Defend press freedom, support independent journalism and counter systematic delegitimisation of fact-based reporting.
- Safeguard horizontal accountability. Attacks on judicial independence and checks/balances feature prominently across blocs. Strengthen institutional resilience, document rhetorical assaults on courts, and build coalitions to defend the rule of law.
- Monitor mainstream accommodation. Track whether centre-right parties adopt far-right framings. Early detection of contagion enables corrective messaging and coalition-building to resist normalisation.
- Develop counter-narratives. Illiberal rhetoric succeeds by repetition. Democratic actors must proactively frame contestation and pluralism as strengths, not obstacles.

By systematically measuring illiberal discourse, this approach begins to provide democratic actors with tools to identify vulnerabilities before they become crises. Expanding this framework to Italy, Brazil and beyond represents a next step toward mapping the global illiberal playbook and directing resources where they are most urgently needed.

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