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Five far right voter groups progressives can sway

A core-periphery strategy for winning back voters

The challenge: winning back voters from rising far-right parties

Far-right¹ – or »nation-first« – parties have been making significant electoral gains across Europe and have come to wield growing influence over policymaking. Their success is not limited to winning votes or seats, however. Far-right parties are increasingly shaping political agendas, reframing policy debates and pushing key elements of their platforms into the mainstream. As a result, long-standing strategies of isolation or institutional exclusion – the so-called »cordon sanitaire« – have weakened or collapsed.

Far-right parties now benefit from greater parliamentary legitimacy, stronger organisational and financial resources, denser transnational networks and a more moderate public image. In several countries, they have entered government

or become dominant governing forces, while at the European level they have expanded their representation and agenda-setting power.

This has created a dual challenge for mainstream progressive actors: not only do they have to compete electorally with far-right parties, but they also have to counter their growing ability to define political priorities. In these circumstances, many mainstream parties and politicians are trying to win back voters who have »defected« to the far right. If they are to manage this so effectively, however, they require a more precise understanding of who those far-right voters are and why they support such parties.

¹ In this brief we use the umbrella term »far right« to refer to political parties and groups that resort to nationalism to justify their positions on all socioeconomic issues. These parties also adopt authoritarianism and populism in their ideologies and programmatic agendas to different degrees but may vary in their extremism and relationship to democracy (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022).

A misconception: far-right voters are as radical and identity-driven as the parties they support

Progressive actors tend to rely on an oversimplified image of far-right voters when attempting to get a handle on the far-right electorate. This image is typically derived from the discourse, rhetoric and public positioning of far-right party leaders, which generally emphasise nationalism, cultural exclusion and opposition, even hostility to immigration.

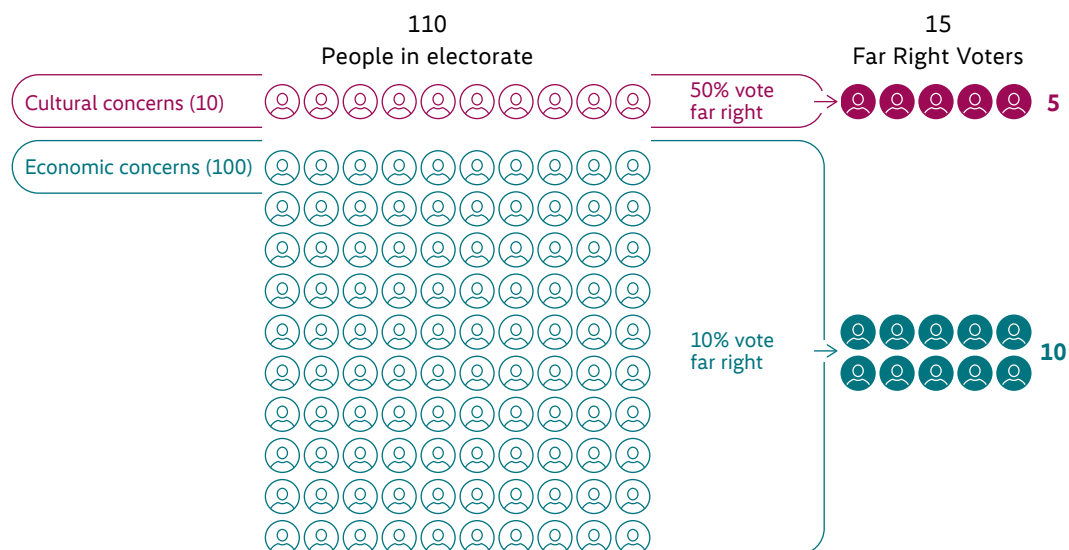
This gives rise to two analytical and strategic problems. First, it encourages the assumption that far-right voters form a relatively homogeneous group, driven primarily by ideological and cultural motivations. This is suggested by the »cultural backlash« thesis.² Second, it leads to an over-emphasis on cultural conflict, particularly regarding immigration, when attempting to diagnose far-right success and design political responses.

While anti-immigration attitudes are indeed a strong predictor of individual-level support for far-right parties, this focus obscures the composition of the far-right electorate as a whole. While groups that are highly likely to support far-right parties are numerically small, larger groups with weaker ideological attachments may be electorally decisive. In simple terms, a particular individual may have a high probability of voting for a far-right party, but a group of individuals with that characteristic may make up only a small share of the party's electorate.

Consider a hypothetical electorate of 110 people. Ten of those voters may have concerns about immigration that are primarily cultural, while the other 100 have primarily economic concerns. If five of the culturally concerned voters support a far-right party, compared with ten of the economically concerned voters, then 50 per cent of the former group, but only 10 per cent of the latter, will vote far right. In absolute terms, however, the economically motivated voters matter more for national electoral success.

Why 'higher share' doesn't always mean 'more votes'³

A small group may show stronger far-right support in percentages, but the larger group can decide the election in absolute numbers.



Misunderstanding who far-right voters are may therefore lead to the development of ineffective responses, including attempts to mimic far-right rhetoric or compete on issues that far-right parties already »own«. This may well have limited electoral payoff and entails significant political risk.

The solution: targeting voters on the periphery

A more effective response requires moving beyond the notion of a single, archetypal far-right voter. This brief proposes a core-periphery voter framework to help progressive actors identify which voters are swayable and where elections are actually won.

What are core and peripheral voters?

Core voters form a relatively small but stable group. Their support for the far right is ideological and rooted in deeply entrenched nationalist and exclusionary worldviews. Their opposition to immigration is principled rather than conditional, and their loyalty to far-right parties is long-term. Because their preferences are highly resistant to policy concessions or reframing, they are largely unreceptive to progressive appeals.

Peripheral voters, by contrast, constitute a much larger and more diverse group. They are less ideologically attached to the far right and more politically volatile. Their support is

² Norris and Inglehart (2019).

³ Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2022).

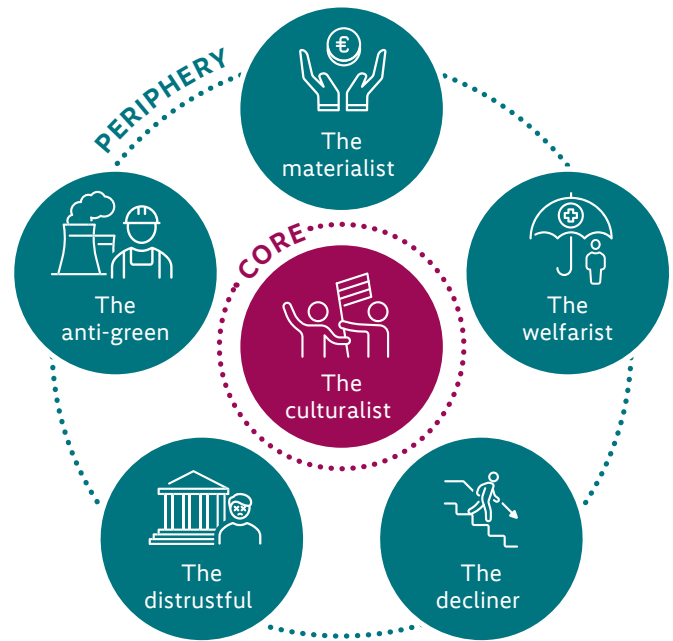
often protest-driven and shaped by economic insecurity, exposure to social risk, dissatisfaction with public services and negative assessments of government performance. For many peripheral voters, immigration is a secondary or conditional concern linked to material pressures rather than cultural identity. These voters are more opportunistic than ideological and are less loyal to far-right parties.⁴

Far-right parties have been electorally successful not because their ideological core has expanded, but because they have been able to mobilise broad coalitions of peripheral voters. Elections are therefore won – and can be lost – on the periphery.

Five peripheral far-right voter groups

The second step is to disaggregate the peripheral electorate by identifying distinct voter profiles with different motivations, grievances and levels of political volatility. In this brief five peripheral voter groups are identified alongside core »culturalist« voters. Together, these profiles capture the diversity of the far-right electorate and clarify which groups may potentially be responsive to progressive strategies.

Core and peripheral voters in the far right electorate



The culturalist (core voter)⁵

»Culturalists« are core far-right voters who are driven primarily by fears that immigration threatens national culture, identity and social norms. They tend to be male, lower educated and living in rural or economically marginal areas. They view politics through a strong in-group versus out-group lens and support policies that prioritise natives across all areas of public life.

Their attachment to far-right parties is ideological and stable rather than protest-driven. What defines this group is not socio-economic position, but the centrality to them of the perceived cultural threat. Culturalists are the most loyal segment of the far-right electorate, but they represent a relatively small share of that electorate in countries in which far-right parties have been electorally successful. Because their preferences are deeply entrenched, they are largely unreceptive to progressive messaging or targeted policy interventions.



The materialist (peripheral voter)⁶

»Materialists« are motivated by economic insecurity and real or perceived labour-market competition linked to immigration. Their concerns centre on jobs, wages, welfare, housing and access to public services. Their support for the far right is typically contingent and protest-driven, reflecting a dissatisfaction with mainstream parties rather than a strong ideological alignment.

⁴ Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou (2023).

⁵ Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2020).

⁶ Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2020).

Materialists make up a larger and more politically volatile share of the far-right electorate. Unlike culturalists, they do not necessarily endorse the full nationalist agenda and may shift their support elsewhere if credible economic alternatives are offered. Progressive strategies that reduce insecurity, strengthen public services and address distributional conflicts are most likely to resonate with this group.



The welfarist (peripheral voter)⁷

»Welfarists« are exposed to high social and economic risks and strongly emphasise welfare protection and state support. Their political behaviour tends to be driven by concerns about job security, income stability and exposure to social risks throughout the life course.

They are particularly prominent in Western Europe, especially in countries with generous welfare regimes, where far-right parties have managed to reframe social protection as a zero-sum resource. Welfarists form a large and electorally important segment of the far-right electorate. Their support is usually contingent, however, and reflects frustration with mainstream parties' perceived failure to deliver economic security. They remain potentially responsive to progressive strategies that strengthen universal welfare provision and reduce perceptions of competition over social benefits.



The decliner (peripheral voter)⁸

»Decliners« have experienced downward social or economic mobility, often sliding from a previously secure position into precarity. Their political behaviour is shaped by experiences of loss, instability and unmet expectations.

This group is most visible in countries in which levels of class decline are relatively low overall, making downward mobility particularly disruptive for its victims. While decliners alone represent a smaller share of the far-right electorate, they amplify far-right support when mobilised alongside other peripheral voters. Because their support is rooted in economic trajectories rather than identity-based grievances, they may be especially responsive to progressive policies that improve job security, strengthen public services, reduce barriers to welfare and housing, and promote upward mobility and collective representation.



The distrustful (peripheral voter)⁹

»Distrustful« voters express deep scepticism toward political institutions and dissatisfaction with how democracy works in practice. They evaluate government performance, economic management and political representation negatively.

⁷ Vlandas and Halikiopoulou (2022).

⁸ Gugushvili et al. (2025); Halikiopoulou et al. (2025).

⁹ Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou (2023).

Their support for the far right is driven less by ideology than by frustration with a perceived lack of political response. This group is widespread across Europe and electorally significant. Their behaviour is volatile and protest-oriented, making them sensitive to visible improvements in governance and public service delivery. However, improving institutional performance may have limited or mixed effects on the far-right's ideological core.

The anti-green (peripheral voter)¹⁰

»Anti-green« voters oppose environmental policies they perceive as threatening jobs, incomes and even the economic viability of their communities. They tend to live in rural or peripheral regions and work in sectors directly affected by climate and energy transitions.

For these voters, economic security takes precedence over environmental concerns. Their support for far-right parties reflects feelings of neglect and the perception that green policies are being imposed by distant elites and distributing costs unfairly. Progressive strategies must therefore focus on local economic conditions and the uneven territorial impacts of environmental regulation. Just transition strategies are essential, but compensation alone is insufficient; they must be paired with credible investment in alternative employment, regional development and long-term economic security.



Tab. 1

Core and peripheral far-right voters: a summary

	Voter profile	Core driver	Typical locations	Size within far right electorate	Progressive policy leverage
Core voter	The Culturalist	Cultural and identity-based threat perceptions; in-group vs out-group worldview	Across Europe (esp. Austria, Germany, Italy)	Small	Very low – preferences are entrenched and ideological
Peripheral voter	The Materialist	Economic insecurity and perceived competition linked to immigration	Across Europe (esp. Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary)	Large	High – address economic insecurity, services, housing, jobs
	The Welfarist	Exposure to social and economic risks; demand for welfare protection	Western Europe; strong in Nordic/Scandinavian welfare states	Large	High – strengthen universal welfare and reduce zero-sum competition
	The Decliner	Downward class mobility; job, income, and life dissatisfaction	Countries with low overall class decline (e.g. Greece, Italy, Austria, Belgium)	Small (but mobilised in coalitions)	High – mobility, job security, services, unions
	The Distrustful	Dissatisfaction with institutions, democracy, and policy performance	Across Europe	Large	Medium-high – improve institutional performance and policy delivery
	The Anti-Green	Opposition to environmental policies perceived as economically costly	Western Europe (esp. Germany, France); rural/peripheral regions	Medium	Medium – just transition, regional investment (compensation alone insufficient)

¹⁰ Halikiopoulou et al. (2025).

The recommendation: addressing far right voters progressives can actually sway

This framework offers clear strategic benefits for mainstream progressive parties. By moving beyond an oversimplified view of the far-right electorate, it identifies where electoral competition actually takes place: among peripheral voters whose support is contingent rather than ideological.

Successful parties are those that expand into their potential periphery without alienating their existing core voters. Far-right parties have done this by building broad coalitions around shared grievances. Progressive parties can do the same by offering targeted, credible responses to the material and performance-based concerns driving peripheral voter behaviour.

Recommendation 1: What progressives should avoid

Progressives should not prioritise persuading core far-right voters. Culturalists constitute a small but stable group whose support is rooted in deeply entrenched identity-based worldviews and is largely impervious to policy concessions. Mimicking far-right rhetoric or competing on cultural terrain risks legitimising far-right frames without delivering electoral gains.

Recommendation 2: What progressive communication should focus on

Progressive strategies should instead prioritise peripheral voters whose support for the far right is protest-driven and responsive to policy performance. The goal is to weaken far-right coalitions while mobilising disengaged and disillusioned voters.

Recommendation 3: Progressive policy responses

Progressive policies must address the underlying grievances of distinct peripheral voter groups and be tailored to national and regional contexts. Priority areas include material insecurity, distributional conflict, economic vulnerability, and dissatisfaction with government performance. This involves protecting public services, strengthening welfare provision, reducing job and income insecurity, and addressing trade-offs between different counter-strategies—recognising that measures effective for peripheral voters may not weaken, and may sometimes reinforce, support among the far-right core.

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