

Policy diversification without ideological attenuation: the programmatic changes of Western European far-right parties (1990-2025)

(Accepted version)

Belén Fernández-García (bfgarcia@ugr.es)¹

Published version (Available access): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321726141962>

Abstract

This research examines the programmatic transformations of the far right in Western Europe through two hypothesized mechanisms: the diversification of their agendas, including increased competition on socioeconomic issues, and ideological attenuation, reducing the importance given to their authoritarian and nativist positions. Using data from the Manifesto Project Database (1990–2025), the findings reveal that far-right parties have strengthened their authoritarian and nativist profile in recent decades, particularly during crises related to security and migration. Nevertheless, these parties also have diversified their agendas and placed greater emphasis on socioeconomic issues. As for factors explaining the differences within the far right, participation in national governments is associated with ideological attenuation and thematic diversification, though this effect is not lasting and is limited to contexts in which far-right parties participate as minority partners in governing coalitions.

Keywords: far right, political parties, electoral manifestos, radicalism, radical parties, niche parties

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Administration, University of Granada (Spain).
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1000-1504>

Introduction

The far right has emerged as one of the most successful party families in Western Europe over the past few decades. It has moved from postwar ostracism to occupying central positions within contemporary party systems. Especially since the 1990s, the far right has increased its institutional presence in national parliaments and, more recently, in government institutions. Far-right parties have become acceptable coalition partners for many center-right parties and even some left-wing parties (e.g., Syriza). Fewer and fewer mainstream parties maintain a *cordon sanitaire* towards the far right (e.g., Germany). Likewise, their discourses have been normalized by the media (e.g., De Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Ekström et al. 2020) and some mainstream parties (Abou-Chadi 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2017), increasing in this way the power of these parties to set the political agenda.

In light of these developments, this research examines the evolution of the programmatic profile of Western European far-right parties in recent decades, and more specifically, the extent to which the electoral consolidation of the far right and its growing participation in democratic processes and institutions are associated with programmatic changes within this party family.

The article is structured as follows. First, it describes the ideological and electoral evolution that the far right has undergone in recent decades, emphasizing the hypothetical mainstreaming process it has experienced in the latest wave, and the two possible approaches to study this process. Second, it explains the possible programmatic transformations of this party family in relation to their growing participation in democratic processes and institutions. Specifically, this research analyzes two programmatic changes within the far right: ideological attenuation -reducing the emphasis on their core positions (nativism/authoritarianism)- and the thematic diversification of their agendas. While previous research has addressed this indirectly by analyzing the salience of socioeconomic issues (Akkerman et al., 2016; Wagner and Meyer, 2017), this study also incorporates a specific measure that captures the thematic diversity of far right's electoral manifestos.

As for the factors that may drive the mentioned programmatic transformations of far-right parties, this research assesses the influence of their institutionalization and participation in democratic institutions (e.g., parliamentary experience, government participation, etc.),

as well as broader contextual factors (e.g., the agenda of political competitors, the proportionality of electoral systems, etc.). Whereas earlier studies have primarily used case-based comparisons to explore the effects of some of these factors, especially government participation (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2016; Capaul and Ewert, 2021), this research takes a quantitative approach, employing statistical models to evaluate how these variables explain patterns of programmatic changes among far-right parties. This research also contributes to the field by capturing the most recent developments within this party family (1990-2025), particularly the electoral surge these parties experienced following the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and their growing presence in governmental institutions.

The analysis section outlines the main findings, revealing that far-right parties have significantly diversified their agendas and increased their attention to socio-economic issues in the last years while they have reinforced their authoritarian and nativist positions, particularly during crises related to security and migration. This article concludes that the ‘mainstreaming hypothesis’, understood as programmatic changes in the direction of the mainstream, only applies to far-right parties in office. In this regard, participation in national governments is related to the ideological attenuation and thematic diversification of far-right parties’ agendas, though this effect is not lasting and is limited to contexts in which far-right parties participate as minority partners in governing coalitions. The research also highlights the importance of the political context in which far-right parties compete, especially the agendas of their political competitors.

The evolution of the far right in Western Europe and its hypothetical ‘mainstreaming’

Specialized literature has described the ideological and electoral development of the European far right from the postwar period to the present through the metaphor of waves (Mudde, 2019; Newth et al., 2025). The first wave (1945–1955) was marked by the electoral weakness and the isolation of the far right, operating in a hostile legal and political climate that prevented its advance, with the Italian Social Movement as the main exception (Mudde, 2019: 13). During this wave, research predominantly used the category ‘neo-fascism’, highlighting these actors’ continuity with fascism, their explicit rejection of pluralism, and the use of political violence. In the second wave (1955–1980), some movements and parties -such as the French Poujadists or the German NPD- began

adopting a populist profile that challenged the postwar political elite consensus, leading to the use of the less stigmatizing label ‘right-wing populism’ (Newth et al., 2025). This period was shaped by the doctrinal renewal promoted by Nouvelle Droite intellectuals, who shifted the discourse from biological racism to cultural racism or ethnopluralism, projecting exclusion without relying on biological hierarchies. The third wave (1980–2000) marked an electoral turning point for the far right: parties such as the Flemish Bloc and the Front National achieved significant results, bringing issues like immigration, security, and national identity into public debate. Scholars began to distinguish between the old, openly anti-democratic extreme right and a new radical right that, while maintaining an exclusionary agenda, accepted the formal rules of democracy. The fourth wave began in 2000, marked by the normalization or ‘mainstreaming’ of the far right (Mudde, 2019). Far-right parties have become acceptable governing partners for mainstream right-wing -and even some left-wing- parties, and their exclusionary ideas now shape the political agenda.

As noted, the dominant terms to describe this ideological sector have evolved across waves. One of the most widespread in the latest wave is ‘radical right populism’, identified by Mudde (2019) as the dominant far-right ideology after the turn of the century. This label describes actors who combine three core elements: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. However, the use of ‘populism’ has drawn criticism - either because its distinctiveness for this ideological sector is questioned (e.g., Rydgren, 2018), or because it is seen as a euphemism that has aided far-right normalization by linking their discourse to the ‘people’s’ interests (e.g., Newth et al., 2025). To address the diversity of actors within this ideological spectrum, the term ‘far right’ has become the most widely used in the specialized literature (Mudde, 2019; Newth et al., 2025), becoming an umbrella term that encompasses all movements, actors and ideas at the far end of the right-wing spectrum, whether they are considered ‘extremist’, ‘radical’ or ‘populist’.

In sum, the European far right has moved from post-fascist isolation to a central role in contemporary politics. As various studies show, this process may be blurring the boundaries between traditional parties and the far right, in what has been described as a process of mainstreaming (Akkerman et al, 2016; Mudde, 2019; Newth et al., 2025).

The term *mainstreaming* is used to refer to related but distinct processes. On the one hand, it can refer to the movement of previously marginal ideas or actors into positions of

political or social dominance. For instance, Brown et al. (2021: 9) define mainstreaming as ‘the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts.’ Similarly, Wodak (2021) uses the concept of *normalization* to describe how marginal ideologies and discourses are incorporated into the mainstream, making previously fringe views and practices socially acceptable. According to these authors, political and media elites play a fundamental role in this process, as they have the capacity to shape what is considered socially acceptable or legitimate in public debate. Understood in this way, this process does not require ideological or programmatic changes on the part of the far right; rather, it is the political [and media] elites who shift towards far right’s ideas, thereby altering what is considered acceptable and legitimate in politics. In this case, the participation of the far right in government institutions is considered as an indicator of this mainstreaming process, as they become respectable and legitimate governing forces (Mudde, 2019).

On the other hand, *mainstreaming* can also describe a process in which actors deemed marginal or radical adopt discursive, programmatic, organizational, or stylistic changes to align themselves more closely with the political mainstream (e.g., Wagner and Meyer, 2017). Akkerman et al. (2016: 7) define this as ‘a process in which radical parties change to become more like mainstream parties.’ Such changes may stem from a strategic calculation, where radical or marginal actors seek to expand their electoral appeal by presenting themselves as respectable participants in democratic politics. Alternatively, this process may result from the institutionalization of marginal or radical parties; through exposure to democratic processes and institutions, their behaviors and discourses are gradually mitigated and shaped, aligning them more closely with those of mainstream actors –those who ultimately define acceptable standards of political competition-. Unlike the previous approach, it is marginal or radical parties that adopt changes in order to align themselves with what is considered normal and acceptable in politics. In this case, the participation of radical parties in democratic institutions, such as the government, is addressed as a factor that may facilitate this process, either because institutions exert a socializing effect on radical actors or because these actors strategically adjust their ideology and discourse to gain access to them. In this research, we adopt this specific meaning of the term ‘mainstreaming’.

But what is the ‘mainstream’? Research addressing the ideological and discursive shifts of the far right toward the mainstream considers that this category includes those parties that adopt centrist positions on the traditional left–right ideological scale (Social Democratic, Christian Democratic, Liberal and Conservative parties), that compete mainly on the socioeconomic dimension, respect ‘the rules of the political game’ and maintain a stable and majority position in the party system (Akkerman et al., 2016; Wagner and Mayer, 2017). According to Akkerman et al. (2016), the category of ‘mainstream parties’ is thus used in contrast to radical, niche and anti-establishment parties.

This conception of the mainstream has faced criticism for equating it with ‘centrism’ or ‘moderation’ and for treating it as a static category that fails to capture the dynamics of contemporary politics. In response, new approaches highlight its fluid and contextual nature, acknowledging that what counts as mainstream may shift if new actors achieve sustained political dominance, thereby establishing a ‘new mainstream’ (Brown et al., 2021; Crulli and Albertazzi, 2025). In this regard, the bidimensional conceptualization proposed by Crulli and Albertazzi (2025) offers a valuable framework for assessing the mainstream status of the different party families across various historical periods and contexts. These authors argue that mainstream status is achieved when both (1) parties (i.e., actors) and (2) ideas become firmly established in politics (p. 7), integrating both supply and demand side dimensions. Their empirical comparative analysis concludes that, despite the electoral gains of the far right, Liberal, Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Conservatives continue to hold mainstream status due to the enduring appeal of their political ideas among public opinion and their established roles within the political system. In the debate over whether the far right has already become ‘mainstream’, this study concludes that it can be defined ‘as “established but not mainstream” in contemporary European politics (...). While this sub-family is part of the establishment in terms of being seen as a potential governing partner by other party families (...), it remains at the margins of the attitudinal mainstream – at least for now.’ (p. 23). This conclusion challenges that of Neath et al. (2025), who suggest that the far right has indeed already become the new mainstream, in what could be considered a fifth wave of the far right.

Explaining programmatic changes in far-right parties

According to Mudde (2007) and Rydgren (2018), the ideological core of the contemporary far right is nativism or ethnonationalism, an ideology that ‘holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state’ (Mudde, 2007: 19). Thus, the far right is primarily aimed at strengthening the nation by making it more ethnically homogenous. The ideological core of the far right is also ‘embedded in a general sociocultural authoritarianism that stresses themes such as law and order and family values’ (Rydgren, 2018: 23). For these actors ‘order is the basis of freedom. It believes that society should be structured according to strict rules and that the rule of law should be upheld at all costs’ (Mudde 2007: 145). With respect to democracy, however, the far right comprises different subfamilies with distinct positions. According to Mudde (2019), the dominant ideology of the latest wave is radical right-wing populism, which emphasizes popular sovereignty over the institutional checks and constitutional constraints of liberal democracies. Other strands, however, may be considered openly antidemocratic, as they reject the very essence of democracy -namely, popular sovereignty and majority rule (ibid.).

The above refers to the core ideology of the far right, that is, the set of values and beliefs that ‘goes right to the heart of a party’s identity’ (Mair and Mudde, 1998: 220). This study, however, focuses on potential transformations in the programmatic profile of this party family, understood as the positions and issues that parties choose to emphasize at a given moment (Lourenço, 2024). Although this profile derives from parties’ ideological outlook, it is a more contextual, strategic, and volatile aspect (ibid.). Within the various approaches to examining parties’ programmatic profiles, this study builds upon the literature on issue competition, which argues that parties not only compete by adopting different positions in specific ideological dimensions or policies, but also by selecting and emphasizing issues that are electorally advantageous. In doing so, they seek to influence the political agenda and attract voters by highlighting topics on which they are perceived as competent (issue ownership) or by politicizing issues ignored by their competitors (issue entrepreneurship) (Bergman and Flatt, 2019; Meguid, 2005; Rovny and Polk, 2020).

Therefore, this study examines programmatic transformations in the far right through changes in the emphasis placed on different positions and issues. As Bergman and Flatt (2019) note, changing position entails altering the party’s substantive stance -for example,

adopting a more restrictive immigration policy- whereas emphasis-based changes involve modifying the prominence given to particular issues. Nevertheless, even indirectly, ‘the emphasis of certain issues also alters how voters perceive the ideological positions of parties’ (Bergman and Flatt, 2019: 711). In this way, when a party increases the visibility of crime and security issues, it may be perceived as more right-leaning. Similarly, a political party may broaden the set of issues on its agenda to blur or soften its ideological profile, integrate internal factions, or strategically attract voters with heterogeneous preferences (Bergman and Flatt, 2019; Rovny and Polk. 2020). Thus, the selection and emphasis of different issues can shape how the public perceives the party’s overall ideological positioning.

From a programmatic point of view, the far right has been characterized as radical and ‘niche’ parties (Abou-Chadi, 2014; Akkerman et al., 2016; Meguid, 2005; Bergman and Flatt, 2019; Wagner y Meyer, 2017). Niche parties compete through a specialized and differentiated programmatic profile, emphasizing a restricted number of non-socioeconomic issues (Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2011). As Meguid (2005: 348) argues, ‘the issues raised by the niche parties are not only novel, but they often do not coincide with existing lines of political division.’ In this regard, the increasing salience of non-redistributive or economic concerns among the public opinion, particularly those related to immigration and EU integration, have contributed to the emergence of a cultural or transnational dimension in European political contestation that crosses traditional partisan alignments (e.g., Jackson and Jolly, 2021). As many authors argue, the far right clearly competes in this cultural dimension, politicizing issues such as European integration, immigration or multiculturalism. Accordingly, socioeconomic issues are secondary for the far right, adopting diffuse and ambiguous positions on this matter (Rovny and Polk, 2020). This niche profile allows them to differentiate themselves from the political mainstream by mobilizing new issues ignored by the political elites, but also by challenging the traditional economic left-right dimension.

Considering this characterization of the far right, the programmatic transformations of this party family in the direction of the ‘mainstream’ can take place through different ways. First, by attenuating the visibility of the issues that constitute its core identity (i.e., nativist and authoritarian issues). Second, by expanding the issues that constitute its political agenda, mainly by placing greater emphasis on socioeconomic issues but not only. By broadening the diversity of issues on their agenda -incorporating not only

economic issues but also others related to governance (e.g., foreign policy, public administration, etc.)- these parties can signal to the public that they are capable of addressing a wider set of problems without compromising their core preferences (Rovny and Polk. 2020).

Having explained our approach to far-right programmatic changes, we now focus on the factors that can drive it. As Akkerman et al. (2016) argue, the basic logic that explains the programmatic mainstreaming of radical actors is the inclusion-moderation thesis, ‘which holds that participation in democratic institutions and procedures will amend the radical nature and ideology of political parties’ (p. 268). A first explanation behind this thesis comes from Downs’ median voter theorem which, assuming a normal distribution of voters on the ideological scale, states that parties need to appeal to the median voter to attract an electoral majority. If this normal distribution were to occur and far-right parties were aiming to maximize their electoral support, they would have to moderate their ideological positions to appeal to the median voter. Ideological moderation, however, carries electoral risks: moderating the positions that distinguish the far right to broaden their electoral support risks alienating their most radical and loyal voters (Adams et al., 2006). Alternatively, the literature on issue competition suggests that parties can broaden their appeal by diversifying their agendas beyond their core identity without jeopardizing their loyal voters. Incorporating new issues into their agendas while preserving their core preferences can expand the parties’ base without causing defections among their voters (Bergman and Flatt, 2019; Rovny and Polk. 2020). Thus, although the electoral incentive for ideological attenuation is less clear, the first hypothesis posits that:

H1. Thematic diversification and attention to socioeconomic issues are positively associated with the percentage of votes for far-right parties.

A second explanation based on the inclusion-moderation thesis focuses on the socializing effects that participation in democratic institutions and processes may have in radical parties. Prolonged exposure to democratic norms and processes, such as participation in elections, is expected to affect radical parties’ agendas. In this regard, the institutionalization of far-right parties within democratic political systems could facilitate the ideological attenuation and diversification of their policy agendas, especially in comparison to new parties. Newcomers can be expected to adopt more radical, challenging, and specialized agendas on a few issues to build a unique identity that differentiates them from existing parties and attracts media and public attention. Zons

(2016) also argues that the passage of time may affect the distinctiveness of niche parties. His study suggests that the positive electoral effects of programmatic concentration may decrease as parties grow older and encounter different challenges than those in their initial phase. Thus, our second hypothesis states that:

H2. Ideological attenuation and the diversification of far-right parties' agendas are positively related to party seniority.

According to this approach, parliamentary representation is also expected to favor the moderation and diversification of far-right parties' agendas by exposing them to institutional routines, negotiations with other parliamentary groups, and similar processes. Specifically, we argue that parliamentary representation is more likely to facilitate programmatic changes of far-right parties when sustained over time, as this normalizes their presence within parliamentary institutions. Thus, our third hypothesis states that:

H3. Ideological attenuation and the diversification of far-right parties' agendas are positively related to their parliamentary seniority.

The inclusion–moderation thesis also suggests that the far right must moderate their ideological positions to attain governmental power (Akkerman et al., 2016). This dynamic is particularly relevant in European multiparty systems, where forming a government typically requires coalition-building among several parties. In such contexts, parties must find common ground to cooperate effectively. Since far-right parties have generally entered government as junior coalition partners in Western Europe² -with the notable exception of Switzerland- it is expected that they will be the ones to temper their radical stances to enhance their viability as coalition partners (Capaul and Ewert, 2021). This line of reasoning suggests that when far-right parties have realistic prospects of entering government, they may preemptively attenuate their stance in order to pave their way into power. A further implication of the inclusion–moderation thesis concerns the potential impact of governing experience on the agendas and positions of far-right parties. Once in office, these parties must engage with a wide range of actors -including coalition partners, representatives of other states and international organizations, public officials, and the

² At the time of data collection, data for the latest elections in Italy and the Netherlands—where the dominant party is radical right-wing—were not available.

media- which may temper their more radical and confrontational posture. Thus, ideological attenuation may also arise as a consequence of the governing experience itself.

In addition to that, the study by Cavalieri and Froio (2022) reveals that the governing status of populist parties -including the populist radical right- attenuates their niche profile, as they have additional incentives to portray themselves as ‘competent’ policymakers. In contrast, ‘when in opposition, populist parties adopt a more concentrated agenda, arguably to signal their difference from other “elite” parties’ (p. 2). Therefore, participation in government may not only attenuate the core positions of far-right parties but also encourage a diversification of their agendas. This includes the incorporation of socioeconomic and other governance-related issues to signal to voters that they are capable of handling the responsibilities associated with governing. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is as follows:

H4. Ideological attenuation and policy diversification are more likely to occur when far-right parties achieve or have government experience.

Different studies also suggest that the political agendas of the far right are permeable to what happens in the national political context. That is, although niche parties are often seen as less responsive to shifts in public opinion (Adams et al., 2006), the far right seems to respond to the terms of the national political debate. For example, studies by Schwörer and Fernández-García (2023, 2024) show that the far right addresses the climate issue and animal rights when they are salient in the agendas of their political competitors. Thus, although parties normally prefer to compete by emphasizing those issues that they ‘own’, they also must respond to issues that are prominent on the party system’s agenda (Abou-Chadi, 2014). For the sake of clarity, the fifth hypothesis is articulated as three separate sub-hypotheses:

H5a. The degree of thematic diversification in far-right parties’ agendas is associated with the degree of thematic diversification in their party systems.

H5b. Far-right parties’ attention to socioeconomic issues is associated with the degree of visibility of these issues within their party systems.

H5c. Far-right parties’ emphasis on nativist and authoritarian positions is associated with the degree of visibility of these positions within their party systems.

We will also analyze other environmental factors that may influence the programmatic profile of the far right. The country's economic situation may affect the salience of economic and non-economic issues in the political debate, and consequently, in the far-right parties' agendas. As Spoon et al (2014) argue, during times of economic hardship, economic issues are likely to dominate the political debate while during more prosperous times, voters might be more receptive to non-economic issues. However, far-right parties may also see times of uncertainty and hardship as an opportunity to intensify the blaming of other groups, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities or political elites, as other studies have shown in the context of the Covid-19 crisis (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2022). Therefore, although we cannot establish a clear hypothesis in this regard, we will explore the role that the economic situation plays in the programmatic transformations of this party family.

In addition to that, we will control for different time periods to assess whether they have a specific effect on the programmatic transformations of this party family. Especially since the turn of the century, a series of crises have occurred that may have influenced the nativist/authoritarian profile of the far right, as well as the socioeconomic references and issue diversification in their platforms. To account for this, the 36-year span covered by this study will be divided into six periods of six years. These periods allow us to capture the impact of key crises or political conjunctures while maintaining a balanced distribution of years: i) 1990–1995 (the Maastricht Treaty and first wars following the breakup of Yugoslavia), ii) 1996–2001 (entry into force of the Schengen area, preparation for monetary union, and war in Kosovo), iii) 2002–2007 (impact of 9/11 and jihadist attacks in Madrid and London), iv) 2008–2013 (the Great Recession), v) 2014–2019 (refugee crisis and renewed wave of jihadist terrorism in Europe), vi) 2020–2025 (Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine).

The institutional context may also offer different incentives to parties to concentrate or diversify their political agendas. While majoritarian electoral systems tend to punish minority parties that compete by emphasizing marginal issues, niche parties may have a better chance in highly proportional electoral systems (Spoon et al., 2014). In this line, Akkerman et al. (2016) also argue that the Downsian logic and its moderating effect only applies to far-right parties that compete in non-proportional electoral systems that give them little choice but to aim at a majority of voters. Although the institutional framework is a rather stable variable that could explain differences between countries rather than the

evolution of far-right parties over time, we will also explore the role that the proportionality of electoral systems plays in the mainstreaming of this party family.

Finally, scholars have long argued that the political exclusion of far-right parties by mainstream actors -the so-called *cordon sanitaire*- limits their ideological moderation. Van Spanje and Van der Brug (2007) find that moderation is more likely when mainstream parties do not impose such exclusion. Yet more recent evidence questions this effect: Akkerman and Rooduijn (2015) show that non-ostracized far-right parties are just as radical as their ostracized counterparts. In this regard, far-right parties seem to respond differently to exclusionary contexts. For example, while the National Front of Marine Le Pen has pursued a de-demonization strategy to counter political isolation (Ivaldi, 2016), the Flemish Interest has sometimes leveraged the *cordon sanitaire* as an electoral asset, appealing to the most disaffected voters (Lucardie et al., 2016). Given recent findings and the difficulty of measuring exclusion consistently across countries and elections (especially when far-right parties are electorally marginal), this variable is excluded from the research design.

Research design

This research analyzes the programmatic evolution of the far right in Western Europe³ from 1990 to 2025.⁴ We select far-right parties according to ThePopuList classification (Rooduijn et al., 2023). We have also classified the List Pim Fortuyn and the Federal Democratic Union of Switzerland for holding nationalist and anti-immigration positions. The full list of parties included in the study can be found in Annex 1.⁵

As noted in the theoretical review, this research analyses programmatic transformations in the far right through changes in the emphasis placed on different positions and issues. First, we analyze the degree of thematic concentration/diversification of the electoral programs of the far right. In addition to attention to socioeconomic issues, we also use a specific indicator to assess the degree of thematic diversification of the electoral

³ The study includes Western European countries with relevant far-right parties from 1990-2025: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

⁴ The study includes elections held up to 2025 that were available in the Manifesto Project database as of November 2025, during the data collection.

⁵ The appendices are available in the online version of the article.

manifestos of these parties. In this way, we can capture whether the far right has diversified their agendas by paying more attention, not only to socioeconomic issues, but also to other issues such as foreign policy, public administration issues, environmental protection, and so on. To do this, we will use the Manifesto Project Database (Lehmann et al., 2025), an authoritative source to study the programmatic profiles of political parties in longitudinal and comparative terms. To calculate the thematic concentration/diversification of far-right agendas, we used the Shannon's H Information Entropy formula, a measure of information entropy that has been used in political science and communication to study institutional agenda setting and policy agendas (Boydston et al., 2014; Cavalieri and Froio, 2022; Fernández-García, 2024). Shannon's H is calculated by multiplying the proportion of attention each issue receives in a document or speech [$p(x_i)$] by the natural logarithm of that proportion [$\ln(x_i)$], and then taking the negative sum of those products (Boydston et al., 2014: 182). The standardized formula divides the calculation of Shannon's H by its maximum value, the natural logarithm of the maximum number of possible issues ($N =$ the 56 categories of MAPOR's codebook). The result varies from 0, indicating total concentration (a single issue dominates the entire agenda) to 1, indicating maximum possible dispersion (all issues receive the same level of attention).

$$\text{Shannon's } H^* = \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^n (p(x_i)) * \ln p(x_i)}{\ln(N)}$$

Second, we calculate attention to socioeconomic issues as the sum of the Manifesto Project's economic categories (per401-416) plus the per504-507 categories, which refer to the welfare state and state investment in education. This variable does not differentiate between left or right-wing economic positions since we are interested in knowing whether the far right increased attention to the socioeconomic dimension regardless of the position they adopt. In the results section, however, we will delve deeper into the socioeconomic positions to illustrate the evolution of the far-right's ideological economic profile.

Third, to analyze the possible ideological attenuation of the far right, we rely on the Wagner and Meyer's (2017) authoritarian/nationalist scale (per601, 608, 305, 603, 605, 606) adding two other categories that also allude to the nationalist profile of the far right

(per109 and 110). Our variable thus captures the nationalist/nativist⁶ profile of the far right (per109: negative references to international cooperation and favorable mentions of national independence and sovereignty; per110: European Community/Negative; per601: National Way of Life/Positive; per608: Multiculturalism/Negative), as well as its authoritarian profile (per305: Political Authority, which includes favorable mentions of the desirability of a strong and/or stable government; per603: Traditional Morality/Positive; per605: Law and Order/Positive; and per606: Civic Mindedness/Positive, considered as an indicator of social harmony by Wagner and Meyer (2017)).

The measurement conducted by the Manifesto Project of these variables indicates the salience of negative or positive positions towards those issues in parties' electoral manifestos. Therefore, it provides a limited view of party positioning from a spatial point of view. However, as shown in Figure 5, this set of variables clearly distinguishes the nativist and authoritarian profile of the far right from other party families. The prominence of negative positions towards multiculturalism, European integration and international cooperation, as well as positive positions towards traditional morality, law and order, etc., in the electoral manifestos of far-right parties allows for a reasonable approximation of the authoritarian/nativist profile of this party family. In this sense, these variables are not merely a measurement of thematic salience, as they differentiate between positive and negative positions.

As shown in Figure 1, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Rovny et al., 2025) provides a clearer picture of the spatial positioning of far-right parties. However, this dataset does not cover the entire period under examination of this study. In addition to that, the stability of CHES spatial measures over time -together with the highly homogeneous values across far-right parties in their core issues (e.g., on immigration, the average position is 9.6 with a standard deviation of only 0.3)- makes it more difficult to capture the temporal and cross-party variation sought in this analysis.

Figure 1. Positioning of far-right parties on their ideological core issues (1999–2024).

⁶ We prefer the term 'nativist' because it better reflects the exclusionary, culturally defined view of the nation held by the radical right (it includes negative references to multiculturalism).

Another important clarification regarding the dependent variables concerns the relationships between them. The thematic diversification indicator captures the degree of thematic dispersion of the manifestos, considering all the topics included in the MAPOR database. The variable measuring attention to socioeconomic issues reflects the visibility that parties give to all socioeconomic topics included in MAPOR, regardless of the position taken. Finally, the variable measuring the authoritarian/nativist profile of the far right reflects the prominence of negative or positive positions on these issues, aligned with their ideological orientation (e.g., a negative stance on multiculturalism). The visibility these positions have in the manifestos is not necessarily influenced by changes in attention to socioeconomic issues, as shifts in focus may instead affect other topics, such as the environment, foreign policy, corruption, territorial organization, etc.

As for the independent variables of the study, we include the percentage of votes and seats obtained by far-right parties in parliamentary elections, the seniority of the parties calculated as the difference between the year of the elections and the year of foundation of the party, and the seniority in parliament. We code as ‘government status’ those parties that have entered government after the reference elections OR those that had been in government in the immediately preceding legislature. In this way, both the expectations of being part of the government that can be derived from the electoral polls or pre-election negotiations and the recent government experience are captured. In the pre-tests, we separately analyzed the influence of immediate experience in government and participation in government after the elections on the dependent variables. Across the three dependent variables, immediate government experience showed greater explanatory power than the expectation of achieving office. However, when both aspects are analyzed together, the model fit for ideological attenuation improves, so the expectations of being part of the government also seem relevant.

Regarding the party system agenda, we calculate the weighted average (by percentage of votes) of thematic diversification of the electoral manifestos of the party systems for each election -excluding each far-right party- and the weighted average attention to socioeconomic issues and to authoritarian/nativist positions in the party systems. We also explore the role played by the country’s economic situation, using the OECD percentage growth rates for the election year.⁷ Finally, we also consider the proportionality of the

⁷ <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=60703#>

electoral systems using the least squares index (LSq) as calculated by Gallagher and Mitchell (2008), which measures the disproportionality between vote and seat distributions.⁸

As for the analysis, we compare the distribution of the dependent variables between far-right parties and the mainstream parties. We adopt the approach of Crulli and Albertazzi (2025: 25), who do not conceive ‘mainstream status’ as an attribute of individual parties but rather ‘as an attribute of political families/ideologies, dependent on both actors (i.e. parties) and ideas (i.e. public opinion).’ In particular, we classify as mainstream those party families that, according to their study, retain this status of mainstream: Social Democrats, Liberals, Christian Democrats, and Conservatives. We also compare the issue attention and thematic diversification values of far-right parties with that of other non-mainstream party families, namely far-left parties (following *The Populist* classification) and Green parties, the latter being the niche parties par excellence in European party systems.

Analysis

We first assess the degree of thematic diversification of electoral manifestos of the far right (Figure 2). Far-right parties show lower diversification values (0.709) than the mainstream parties (0.721). The Independent-Samples T Test indicates, however, that these differences are not statistically significant. Compared to the other party families, the far right exhibits lower levels of issue dispersion than Christian Democratic parties (0.723), Social Democratic parties (0.720), Liberal parties (0.720), and Conservative parties (0.718) (these are grouped under the category of ‘mainstream’), but higher levels than the far left (0.687) and Green parties (0.694).

Figure 2. Thematic diversification of election manifestos by type of political parties.

The evolution of Shannon’s H indicator (Figure 3) shows an oscillating trend in the levels of thematic dispersion of the far right. Since 2008–2013, however, the far right has consistently increased the number of issues that make up its agendas. In the most recent

⁸ We used the index for the election in which each manifesto was issued. Source: https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf

period (2020–2025) the far right (0.761) even surpasses the thematic diversification levels of mainstream parties (0.741). This development calls into question the characterization of far-right parties as niche parties in terms of thematic concentration.

Figure 3. Thematic diversification of far-right parties and mainstream parties' election manifestos over time (1990-2025).

As for the factors that may influence the diversification of far-right policy agendas, the bivariate analysis indicates that the percentage of votes (Pearson's $r = 0.181$, p -value < 0.05) and seats (0.135) and party age (0.108) are positively correlated with the diversification of far-right policy agendas, in line with the theoretical expectations. However, these are not strong or statistically significant correlations (only the percentage of votes is statistically significant, in line with the first hypothesis). Government status, on the other hand, seems to make a difference: parties in office show higher mean values of diversification (0.73) than opposition parties (0.70) in line with the fourth hypothesis. However, these differences are only statistically significant at the 90% confidence level according to the Independent-Samples T Test (p -value = 0.08). Parliamentary seniority is not correlated with this indicator (0.076).

Regarding contextual variables, the thematic dispersion of far-right party programs is positively correlated with electoral system disproportionality (0.125), suggesting that more disproportional systems encourage these parties to address a wider range of issues, in line with theoretical expectations. Thematic diversity also increases during periods of economic growth (0.114). Nevertheless, these correlations are neither strong nor statistically significant. Finally, the average level of diversification in the respective party systems shows a positive and intense correlation with this indicator (Pearson's $r = 0.466$; p -value < 0.01), so the degree of thematic diversification of far-right parties' agendas is correlated with the number of issues that dominate the national political debate, supporting the hypothesis 5a.

The regression analysis (Table 1) supports the findings of the bivariate analysis, even controlling for the different periods, which are not statistically significant. The agenda of the party system is by far the strongest and most consistent predictor in the model, indicating that far-right programs respond to the competitive environment in which they operate: the broader the range of issues addressed within the party system, the more

diversified far-right agendas become. Government status and the disproportionality of electoral systems reach statistical significance only at the 90% confidence level ($p < 0.10$) in the third model, while disproportionality is also significant at this level in the second model. However, when only immediate government experience is considered (excluding the expectation of entering government), this variable becomes statistically significant at 95% (p -value = 0.036).

Table 1. Multiple Linear Regression Models (OLS). Dependent variable: Thematic diversification of the far-right parties' election manifestos.

	(a)	(b)	(c)
Party seniority	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
% Votes	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Government status	0.014 (0.002)	0.026 (0.018)	0.032* (0.019)
Disproportionality of electoral system		0.003* (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)
% GDP growth		0.002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)
Average thematic diversification in the party system (far-right parties excluded)		0.741*** (0.135)	0.715*** (0.138)
1996-2001			-0.033 (0.028)
2002-2007			-0.003 (0.025)
2008-2013			-0.011 (0.027)
2014-2019			-0.009 (0.024)
2020-2025			0.024 (0.034)
Constant	0.683*** (0.016)	0.135 (0.096)	0.16 (0.098)

Observations	125	125	125
R-squared (adjusted)	0.014	0.236	0.224

Note: Standard errors in brackets. *p-value<0,1; **p<0.05, *** p<0.01, **** p<0.001. ANOVA p-value >0,05 (a); p-value <0.001 (b, c). Collinearity diagnosis (tolerance >0.5; VIF <2). Durbin-Watson = 2.285. 1990-1995 is the reference period.

Figure 4 shows the proportional attention devoted to socioeconomic issues by the different types of political parties. As expected, the far right devotes less attention to the socioeconomic dimension (30.32% on average) than mainstream parties (38.26%), these differences being statistically significant according to the Independent-Samples T Test (p-value <0.001). All party families classified as ‘mainstream’ show higher levels of attention to socioeconomic issues than the far right: Conservatives (41.8%), Social Democrats (37.9%), Liberals (37.3%), and Christian Democrats (37.3%). It is not surprising either that the far left (36.91%) devotes more attention to economic issues than the far right, although also below the mainstream parties. Also, Green parties pay more attention to socioeconomic issues on average (32.66%) than far-right parties, so they behave as niche parties in this regard.

Figure 4. Attention to socioeconomic issues (%) by type of political parties.

As for factors that may influence the attention to socioeconomic issues by the far right, the bivariate analysis shows a positive correlation, in the expected direction, with the percentage of seats (Pearson’s $r = 0.109$), but not in a strong or statistically significant way. The party age (-0.03), the parliamentary seniority (0.08) and the share of votes (0.096) are not correlated with this indicator. Government status is the only variable that makes a significant difference (p-value < 0.01): far-right parties with government status pay on average 35.6% of attention to socioeconomic issues compared to the 28.4% of attention of far-right parties in opposition. Regarding the contextual variables, the average attention given to socioeconomic issues by political competitors correlates positively and significantly with the degree of attention given to these issues by the far right (0.178, p-value < 0.05), in line with hypothesis 5b. The disproportionality of electoral systems (0.001) and the economic growth (0.061) are not correlated at all.

The regression model confirms the results of the bivariate analysis, with government status being the only significant variable in the three models, so only the fourth hypothesis is fully supported in this aspect. The party system agenda is only statistically significant in the second model (p -value < 0.05) but not in the third model, when controlled for time periods. The analysis further indicates that none of the time periods exert a statistically significant influence on the degree of attention to socioeconomic issues in far-right programs — not even the one corresponding to the Great Recession (2008-2013).

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Model (OLS). Dependent variable: Attention to socioeconomic issues in the far-right parties' election manifestos.

	(a)	(b)	(c)
Party seniority	-0.069 (0.075)	-0.055 (0.074)	-0.039 (0.077)
% Votes	0.072 (0.166)	0.027 (0.166)	-0.033 (0.171)
Government status	7.208*** (2.503)	8.165*** (2.52)	9.406**** (2.627)
Disproportionality of electoral system		0.011 (0.214)	-0.026 (0.219)
% GPD growth		0.665 (0.498)	0.589 (0.574)
Saliency of socioeconomic issues in the party system (far-right parties excluded)		0.297** (0.14)	0.217 (0.164)
1996-2001			-2.283 (3.956)
2002-2007			-1.496 (3.653)
2008-2013			0.300 (4.01)
2014-2019			0.764 (3.706)
2020-2025			6.865 (4.958)
Constant	29.092***	16.527***	19.597***

	(1.978)	(5.78)	(6.118)
Observations	125	125	125
R-squared (adjusted)	0.056	0.081	0.075

Note: Standard errors in brackets. *p-value<0,1; **p<0.05, *** p<0.01, **** p<0.001. ANOVA p-value <0.05 (a, b, c). Collinearity diagnosis (tolerance >0.4; VIF <2.5). Durbin-Watson = 1.953. 1990-1995 is the reference period.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of authoritarian/nativist references. Compared to mainstream parties (16.05%), the far right devotes on average more than twice as much attention (32.2%) to this set of positions, these differences being statistically significant according to the Independent-Samples T Test (p-value <0.001). The nativist/authoritarian references of the far right are greater than in any of the families classified as ‘mainstream’: Christian Democrats (20.21%), Conservatives (17.42%), Liberals (15.71%), and Social Democrats (12.12%). With respect to the far left (12.02% on average) and Green parties (8.38%) the differences are even larger (more than 20 percentage points).

Figure 5. Authoritarian/nativist references (%) by type of political parties.

As for the factors that may explain differences in authoritarian/nativist references among far-right parties, the percentage of seats (Pearson’s $r = -0.134$) and votes (-0.100), as well as parliamentary age (-0.101), show a negative correlation in the expected direction, although none of these relationships is statistically significant. Party age shows no correlation whatsoever (0.024). Participation in government has a significant effect: this factor reduces the visibility of these positions by almost 10 percentage points (25%) compared to far-right parties in opposition (34.9%) (p-value <0.001).

The prominence of authoritarian/nativist positions within far-right parties is also positively associated with the extent to which these positions are present in the agendas of their competitors (Pearson’s $r = 0.246$; p-value < 0.01). In other words, the more salient authoritarian/nativist positions are within the broader party system, the more prominently they appear in the agendas of far-right parties, and vice versa. The other contextual variables -disproportionate electoral systems (-0.048) and economic growth (-0.026)- show no correlation with the nativist/authoritarian references of the far right.

The linear regression model confirms these results, supporting in this way hypotheses 4 and 5c. Government status and the party system agenda remain statistically significant

even when controlling for the different time periods. The analysis further reveals that the periods 2002–2007 (which captures the context of jihadist attacks in Europe following 9/11) and 2014–2019 (marked by the refugee crisis and a new wave of jihadist terrorism) are significantly and positively associated with the levels of nativist/authoritarian references made by far-right parties. These findings illustrate how security and migration-related crises are leveraged by the far right as opportunities to advance their authoritarian and nativist agendas. Compared to the reference period (1990–1995), the years 2008–2013 are also positively associated with this profile, although it is not statistically significant. This finding suggests that the economic crisis might have slowed down the radicalizing trend of the far right (Figure 5), a trend that would intensify again in 2014–2019. Similarly, the period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine also appear to have tempered the increase in nativist/authoritarian references among the far right.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Model (OLS). Dependent variable: Authoritarian/nativist references in the far-right parties' election manifestos.

	(a)	(b)	(c)
Party seniority	0.082 (0.095)	0.099 (0.093)	0.088 (0.094)
% Votes	-0.083 (0.211)	-0.005 (0.208)	0.005 (0.212)
Government status	-9.744*** (3.178)	-10.538*** (3.158)	-11.422**** (3.224)
Disproportionality of electoral system		0.014 (0.279)	0.034 (0.283)
% GDP growth		-0.523 (0.629)	-0.533 (0.713)
Authoritarian/nativist references in the party system (far-right parties excluded)		0.688*** (0.248)	0.722*** (0.254)
1996-2001			3.838 (4.943)
2002-2007			10.159** (4.367)
2008-2013			7.185* (4.626)

2014-2019			10.992*** (4.025)
2020-2025			5.265 (5.686)
Constant	33.944**** (2.512)	23.144**** (5.761)	15.987** (6.238)
Observations	125	125	125
R-squared (adjusted)	0.064	0.110	0.144

Note: Standard errors in brackets. *p-value<0,1; **p<0.05, *** p<0.01, **** p<0.001. ANOVA p-value <0.05 (a), p-value <0.01 (b, c). Collinearity diagnosis (tolerance >0.5; VIF <2). Durbin-Watson = 2.116. 1990-1995 is the reference period.

To clarify the direction of the relationship between government participation and thematic diversification and ideological attenuation of the far right, a binary logistic regression model (Annex 2) was estimated using the probability of far-right parties entering government as the dependent variable. The model shows that the percentage of seats is statistically significant (p-value < 0.001) as is the percentage of nativist/authoritarian references, although the latter is only significant at the 90% confidence level (p-value = 0.054). This variable is negatively associated with the likelihood of entering government, suggesting that the more attenuated the authoritarian/nativist profile of the far right, the higher their chances of participating in government. The other programmatic indicators are not significant variables in the model.

Considering this result, along with the pre-test analyses outlined in the methodology section, we can conclude the following: the likelihood of far-right parties entering government is strongly associated with their parliamentary strength and, to a lesser extent, with their nativist/authoritarian profile. In contrast, neither their attention to socioeconomic issues nor the degree of thematic diversification in their agendas shows meaningful association with the probability of entering government. Nonetheless, recent experience in government appears to influence these programmatic indicators. Therefore, ideological attenuation may increase the likelihood of entering government institutions and be used as a strategy accordingly, but the analysis also indicates that immediate experience of government explains programmatic transformations in this party family as well, not only reducing their nativist/authoritarian references, but also increasing their attention to socio-economic issues and thematic diversification.

Figure 6. Authoritarian/nativist references (%) and attention to socioeconomic issues (%) in the election manifestos of far-right parties and mainstream parties over time (1990-2025).

Regarding the evolution of nativist and authoritarian references in far-right programs, the analysis shows that their prominence has increased over time, contradicting the expectations of the mainstreaming thesis (Figure 6). In the 1990-95 period, these positions occupied on average 26% of their manifestos, peaking in 2014-2019 (35.2%), coinciding with the so-called refugee crisis in Europe. In the last period, nativist/authoritarian references dropped to 31%. Attention to socioeconomic issues, on the other hand, has increased steadily since the 1990s (+8.8%).

As for the distance from mainstream parties, we find that since the beginning of the 21st century, the gap between these actors has widened on those issues central to the far right—namely, authoritarianism and nativism. This trend is largely due to an increase in authoritarian/nativist references in far-right manifestos and the slight decline in such references in mainstream party manifestos from 2002-2007. Considering the spatial positions provided by CHES (Annex 3), we can observe the relative stability of mainstream parties' positions on the core issues of the far right. We only observe a slight shift toward more libertarian/post-materialist positions over time, but also a modest increase in restrictive stances on immigration in the two most recent waves (2019 and 2024). Like the far right, mainstream parties have also increased their socioeconomic references in recent decades, consistently remaining at higher levels than the far right across all periods considered.

Taken as a whole, the trajectory of far-right parties over the full period studied reflects a process of radicalization, primarily in response to security and refugee crises. At the same time, there has been a steady increase in both socio-economic references and thematic diversification of far-right parties' manifestos (in the latest indicator, since 2008-2013), raising questions about their classification as niche parties in this regard.

Figure 7. Attention to socioeconomic issues (%) in far-right parties' manifestos over time (1990-2025).

Figure 7 shows a more detailed analysis of the evolution of socioeconomic issues in the electoral programs of far-right parties. Variables indicating a more right-wing economic profile are shown in black, while those indicating a more left-wing or interventionist profile are shown in grey. The main change in the far right in the socioeconomic dimension has been the steady increase in references supporting the expansion of the Welfare State: these have grown by 6.1% since 1990–1995. Except for the increase observed in 2014–2019, this trend has coincided with a decline in calls to limit the welfare state, which reached their minimum during the Great Recession (0.6%). Another significant change is found in the Free Market category, which dropped from 4.9% in 1990–1995 to 1.7% during the economic crisis, later recovering slightly to 3.5%. In contrast, positive references to protectionism have steadily increased, reaching a peak during the Great Recession (1.5%). Orthodox economic positions (e.g., deficit and public spending reduction) have followed a downward trend (-1.6% from 1990-1995 to 2020-2025), as have favorable mentions of business-oriented economic policies (incentives) since 2002-2007. Therefore, as previous research has shown, the economic profile of the far right has progressively evolved from a more neoliberal stance to a more interventionist (De Lange, 2007) and diffuse profile (Rovny and Polk, 2020).

Figure 8. Authoritarian/nativist references (%) in far-right parties' manifestos over time (1990-2025).

Regarding the defining positions of the far right, Figure 8 shows that this party family has become more nativist over time, with a sharp increase in positive references to the national way of life (+5.1% from 1990-95 to 2020-2025) and negative references to multiculturalism (+1.4%). Criticism of the EU has followed a fluctuating pattern, reaching its peak during the Great Recession (5.1%) and declining thereafter. Another major shift within the far-right is the sharp decline in positive references to traditional morality until 2008–2013 (-4.8%), when they began to increase slightly again. With respect to the authoritarian profile of these parties, positive references to law and order have increased significantly (+3.4%) while positive references to political authority follow a cyclical trend. Therefore, the attention devoted to authoritarian/nativist positions has not only increased over time in the electoral manifestos of these parties but has also changed in content: it has evolved from defending an orderly society based on traditional

morality to prioritizing the defense of a culturally homogeneous nation where the law is strictly enforced.

Conclusions

This research aimed to analyze the programmatic transformations of the far right, considering its growing participation in democratic processes and institutions. Results show that compared to mainstream parties, the far right continues to maintain a niche and radical party profile by devoting less attention to socioeconomic issues and distinguishing itself through its nativist and authoritarian positions. However, far-right parties have considerably diversified their agendas since the Great Recession, surpassing the levels of thematic diversification showed by mainstream parties in recent years. This finding calls into question the characterization of these parties as a niche party family based on thematic concentration. Attention to socio-economic issues by far-right parties also has followed a growing trend since the turn of the century, but so has that of mainstream parties.

These programmatic changes towards the 'mainstream' contrasts, however, with the evolution of the authoritarian and nativist profile of the far right. In line with previous studies (Akkerman et al, 2016; Wagner and Meyer, 2017), the analysis reveals that far-right parties have followed a process of radicalization whereby the salience of nativist/authoritarian references has increased over the last three decades. This study further shows that this process of radicalization has been driven by security and migration crises (jihadist attacks in the early 20th century and the so-called refugee crisis, as well as the attacks that occurred between 2015-2019) and has been slowed down during crises that were not related to its nativist ideological core (the Great Recession, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine).

Regarding factors related to the institutionalization of far-right parties, party age or parliamentary seniority correlate only partially with the ideological attenuation and diversification of their agendas, but not in a statistically significant way. These findings are consistent with the literature on party change (Harmel and Janda, 1994), which suggests that political parties are conservative organizations that adopt changes only when they perceive clear gains from doing so (e.g., participation in government). In this sense, the percentages of votes and seats correlate positively with both ideological

attenuation and issue diversification, but the electoral incentive is statistically significant only for the latter indicator. Considering the programmatic evolution described above, this finding suggests that the far right may expand its electoral base by incorporating new issues into its agendas without compromising its core preferences (e.g., nativism/authoritarianism), in line with what theories of issue competition suggest (e.g., Rovny and Polk. 2020).

Results also illustrate that the thesis of the ‘mainstreaming’ of the far right, understood as programmatic transformations in the direction of the mainstream, only holds consistently for those who have recent experience in national governing institutions. Far-right parties in office tend to present, on average, more diversified thematic agendas; compete more actively in the socioeconomic dimension; and place significantly less emphasis on authoritarian/nativist positions compared to far-right parties in opposition. Therefore, in line with the ‘inclusion-moderation’ thesis, the results show that participation in government is associated with ideological moderation and thematic diversification in far-right agendas, but only in the short term. The broader pattern of radicalization across the party family suggests that the growing participation of these parties in democratic institutions, including government institutions, does not produce lasting changes in their nativist–authoritarian profile.

In addition to that, it is important to note that, except for Switzerland, all far-right parties included in the analysis that have participated in government have done so as junior coalition partners, typically in governments led by mainstream parties (with the exceptions of Lega in 2018 and ANEL in 2015). In such cases, the incentives to attenuate their ideological profiles and diversify their agendas may be greater than in situations where far-right parties themselves lead the government or do not depend on the support of mainstream parties to govern. In this regard, the radicalization of the SVP (Annex 4), despite its regular presence in government institutions, calls for a more nuanced assessment of the role that participation in government plays. The SVP’s participation in the Federal Council does not depend on agreements reached with other parties but rather on its electoral performance. As a result, it has little incentive to moderate its positions as long as it continues to receive sufficient popular support to maintain its seat in the Council. It has also been argued that Switzerland’s system of semi-direct democracy allows the SVP to maintain a dual role as both a governing and opposition party (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013). Several examples outside Western Europe also challenge

the expectation that participation in government leads to moderation. The most illustrative cases are the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice, two ‘radicalized mainstream parties’ while in office (Bustikova, 2018). The PopuList classifies Fidesz as ‘far right’ since 2010, the year it secured an absolute majority and initiated sweeping illiberal reforms. Law and Justice was coded as an ambiguous far-right case in 2005, after its first stint in government, and as clearly far right in 2015, when it won an absolute majority. The future trajectory of Brothers of Italy may shed further light on this dynamic in Western Europe.

Finally, this study also shows that the programmatic profiles of far-right parties are influenced by the political context in which they compete. In this regard, the analysis revealed that the thematic diversification of the electoral programs of far-right parties correlates positively and significantly with the range of issues dominating the agendas of their respective party systems. Likewise, the attention that far-right parties devote to their authoritarian/nativist positions correlates significantly with the visibility of these positions in their party systems. Therefore, political competitors themselves -especially those with greater electoral weight- can contribute to the radicalization or moderation of these actors.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the mainstreaming of the far right cannot be conceived as a linear process in which far-right parties progressively attenuate their ideology and diversify their agendas as their participation in democratic institutions increases and extends over time. The only factor that consistently shows a significant influence in this regard is participation in national governments. However, this analysis captures only its short-term effects and appears to be limited to cases in which far-right parties participate as junior partners in governing coalitions. In such contexts, the incentives to moderate and broaden their agendas may disappear when far-right parties themselves lead the government, or when institutional settings allow them to govern without the support or approval of other political parties (e.g., Capaul and Ewert, 2021). Incentives to adopt programmatic transformations by the far right may also be altered by the political context in which they compete: the co-optation of their core issues by mainstream parties or the emergence of new contenders on the far right may discourage these actors from attenuating their ideological profiles. In addition, crises related to security and migration provide opportunities for these parties to advance their nativist and authoritarian agendas.

Methodologically, the study is limited by its reliance on a salience-based indicator to capture ideological moderation: by measuring shifts in the salience of nativist and authoritarian references rather than changes in parties' spatial positions, the evidence for 'mainstreaming as moderation' remains partial. Moreover, the associations identified in this research cannot be interpreted in terms of causality. Further work employing research designs such as event history models could help clarify the causal direction of these relationships and their evolution over time.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

About the author

Belén Fernández-García is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Granada. She was a visiting scholar at the University of Amsterdam, Sciences Po Paris, the University of Lisbon and the Heinrich-Heine University Düsseldorf. Her research focuses on political parties, populism and the far right in Western Europe.

Ethical Approval Statement

The research is in line with the journals' ethical standards.

ORCID iDs

Belén Fernández-García <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1000-1504>

References

Abou-Chadi T (2016) Niche Party Success and Mainstream Party Policy Shifts—How Green and Radical Right Parties Differ in Their Impact. *British Journal of Political Science* 46 (02), 417–436. DOI:10.1017/S0007123414000155.

Adams J, Clark M and Ezrow L, et al. (2006) Are Niche Parties Fundamentally Different From Mainstream Parties? The Causes and the Electoral Consequences of Western European Parties' Policy Shifts, 1976–1998. *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (3), 513–529. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00199.x>.

Akkerman T, De Lange SL and Rooduijn, M (Eds.) (2016) *Radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe: Into the mainstream?* New York: Routledge.

Akkerman T. and Rooduijn M (2015) Pariahs or partners? Inclusion and exclusion of radical right parties and the effects on their policy positions. *Political Studies* 63 (5), 1140-1157.

Albertazzi D. and Mueller S (2013) Populism and liberal democracy: Populists in government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland. *Government and Opposition*, 48 (3), 343–371.

Bergman, M. E., & Flatt, H. (2019). Issue Diversification: Which Niche Parties Can Succeed Electorally by Broadening Their Agenda? *Political Studies*, 68 (3), 710-730. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719865538>.

Boydston AE, Bevan S and Herschel, TF (2014) The Importance of Attention Diversity and How to Measure It. *The Policy Studies Journal*, 42(2), 173-196. DOI: 10.1111/psj.12055.

Brown K, Mondon A and Winter A (2021) The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: towards a heuristic framework. *Journal of Political Ideologies*. DOI: 10.1080/13569317.2021.1949829

Buščíková L (2018) The Radical Right in Eastern Europe. In Jens Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*. Oxford Handbooks. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.013.28>.

Cavalieri A and Froio C (2022) The behaviour of populist parties in parliament. The policy agendas of populist and other political parties in the Italian question time. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 52 (3), 283-296. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.25>.

Capaul R and Ewert C (2021) Moderation of Radical Right-wing Populist Parties in Western European Governments—A Comparative Analysis. *Swiss Political Science Review* 27 (4), 778-798. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12491>.

Crulli M and Albertazzi D (2025) The ‘mainstream’ in contemporary Europe: a bi-dimensional and operationalisable conceptualisation. *West European Politics*, 48 (7), 1515–1544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2359841>

De Jonge L and Gaufman E (2022) The normalisation of the far right in the Dutch media in the run-up to the 2021 general elections. *Discourse & Society*, 33 (6), 773-787. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221095418>.

De Lange S (2007) A New Winning Formula?: The Programmatic Appeal of the Radical Right. *Party Politics* 13 (4): 411–435.

Ekström M, Patrona M and Thornborrow J (2020) The normalization of the populist radical right in news interviews: a study of journalistic reporting on the Swedish democrats, *Social Semiotics* 30 (4), 466-484, DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2020.1762984.

Fernández-García B (2024) The Parliamentary Behavior of Populist Parties: The Spanish Case. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 187, 65-86. DOI: 10.5477/cis/reis.187.65-86.

Gallagher M and Mitchell P (eds) *The Politics of Electoral Systems*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Harmel R and Janda K (1994) An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6 (3), 259-287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692894006003001>.

Ivaldi G (2016) A new course for the French radical-right? The Front National and ‘dedemonization’. In Akkerman T, de Lange, S and Rooduijn M (Eds.), *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe. Into the Mainstream*. New York: Routledge, pp. 225-246.

Jackson D and Jolly S (2021) A new divide? Assessing the transnational-nationalist dimension among political parties and the public across the EU. *European Union Politics* 22(2), 316-339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116520988915>.

Lehmann P, Franzmann S, Al-Gaddooa D et al. (2025) *The Manifesto Data Collection. Manifesto Project* (MRG/CMP/MARPOR). Version 2025a. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB) and Göttingen: Institut für Demokratieforschung (IfDem). <https://doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.mpps.2025a>

Lourenço P (2024) Programmatic change in Southern European radical left parties: The impact of a decade of crises (2010–2019). *Mediterranean Politics*, 29 (2), 186–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2022.2129191>

Lucardie P, Akkerman T and Pauwels T (2016) It is still a long way from Madou Square to Law Street: The evolution of the Flemish Bloc. In Akkerman T, de Lange S and Rooduijn M (Eds.) *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe. Into the Mainstream*. New York: Routledge, pp. 208-224.

Mair P and Mudde C (1998) The party family and its study. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 1 (1), 211–229.

Meguid BM (2005) Competition Between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success. *American Political Science Review* 99 (03), 347–359. DOI:10.1017/S0003055405051701.

Mudde C (2019) *The far right today*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mudde C (2007) *Radical right-wing populist parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Newth GH, Brown K, Mondon A. (2025). Researching and Understanding Far-Right Politics in Times of Mainstreaming. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*. 10 (3):814-837. doi:10.1017/rep.2025.32

Rovny J and Polk J (2020) Still blurry? Economic salience, position and voting for radical right parties in Western Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 248-268. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12356>.

Rooduijn M, Pirro A, Halikiopoulou D et al. (2023) *The PopuList 3.0: An Overview of Populist, Far-left and Far-right Parties in Europe*. www.popu-list.org. DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/2EWKQ.

Rovny J, Bakker R, Hooghe L, et al. (2025). The 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on political party positioning in Europe: Twenty-five years of party positional data. *Electoral Studies* 97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102981>

Rydgren J (Ed.) (2018) *The Oxford handbook of the radical right*. Oxford University Press.

Schwörer J and Fernández-García B (2022) Populist radical right parties and discursive opportunities during Covid-19. Blame attribution in times of crisis. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 16(3), 545-570. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12286-022-00540-W>

Schwörer J and Fernández-García B (2024) Understanding and explaining Populist Radical Right Parties' commitment to Animal Welfare in Western Europe. *Environmental Politics*, 33 (5), 820-842. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2023.2293435>.

Schwörer J and Fernández-García B (2024) Climate Sceptics or Climate Nationalists? Understanding and Explaining Radical right-wing populist parties' Positions towards Climate Change (1990–2022). *Political Studies* 0 (0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231176475>.

Spoon JJ, Hobolt SB and De Vries CE (2014) Going green: Explaining issue competition on the environment. *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (2), 363–380. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12032>.

Van Spanje, J and Van Der Brug W (2007) The Party as Pariah: The Exclusion of Anti-Immigration Parties and its Effect on their Ideological Positions. *West European Politics* 30 (5), 1022-1040. DOI: 10.1080/01402380701617431.

Wagner M (2011) Defining and measuring niche parties. *Party Politics* 18(6), 845–864. DOI: 10.1177/1354068810393267.

Wagner M and Meyer TM (2017) The radical right as niche parties? The ideological landscape of party systems in Western Europe, 1980–2014. *Political Studies* 65(1_suppl), 84-107.

Wodak R (2021) *The politics of fear: The shameless normalization of far-right discourse*. SAGE Publications.

Zons G (2016) How Programmatic Profiles of Niche Parties Affect Their Electoral Performance. *West European Politics* 39 (6): 1205–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1156298>.

Zulianello M (2020) Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From State-of-the-Art to the Application of a Novel Classification Scheme to 66 Parties in 33 Countries. *Government and Opposition* 55 (2): 327-347. doi:10.1017/gov.2019.21

Annex 1. Far-right parties included in the analysis.

Country	Populist radical right parties
Austria	Austrian Freedom Party; Alliance for the Future of Austria
Belgium	Flemish Bloc/Flemish Interest; People's Party
Denmark	Progress Party / Danish People's Party; The New Right
Finland	True Finns
France	National Front
Germany	Alternative for Germany
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally; Independent Greeks; Greek Solution; Golden Dawn
Italy	Italian Social Movement; National Alliance; Northern League/League; Brothers of Italy
Norway	Progress Party
Portugal	Enough
Spain	Voice
Sweden	Sweden Democrats
Switzerland	Federal Democratic Union; Freedom Party of Switzerland; Geneva Citizens' Movement; Ticino League; Swiss Democrats; Swiss People's Party
The Netherlands	Centre Democrats; List Pim Fortuyn; Party of Freedom; Forum for Democracy; Right Answer
United Kingdom	Reform UK; United Kingdom Independence Party

Annex 2. Binary logistic regression. Dependent variable: participation in government of far-right parties after the elections.

	B	Sig.	Exp(B)
Party seniority	0.000 (0.02)	0.982	1
Percentage of seats	0.202 (0.049)	<.001	1.224
Thematic diversification	-4.823 (3.764)	0.200	0.008
Authoritarian/nativist references	-0.056 (0.029)	0.054	0.946
Attention to socioeconomic issues	0.002 (0.029)	0.947	1.002
Constant	0.721 (3.089)	0.815	2.057
Observations = 126	Hosmer and Lemeshow test: p-value = 0.932		
Nagelkerke R-squared = 0.447	Percentage of cases correctly classified = 83.3%		

Note: Standard errors in brackets.

Annex 3. Positioning of mainstream parties on far-right ideological core issues (1999–2024).

Annex 4. Evolution of attention to socioeconomic issues and to authoritarian/nativist references in the SVP electoral manifestos (1991-2019).