

The Rise of Far-right Politics in Europe: Examples from Italy, Hungary and France

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Abstract. Over the years, far-right politics has plateaued in terms of support in different parts of the world. The increasing acceptance of right-wing political agendas, such as in the US, Brazil, and New Zealand, has opened a conduit for the growth of far-right politics, especially in the European scene. The transformation of these politics to fighting an unfair system has gained resonance among the electorate, thus increasing its popularity. This essay studied the rise of far-right politics in Europe, exploring the recent wins of far-right parties in Italy, the case of Hungary's decade-long right-wing political agenda and France's recent election. The study relied on news articles, online data, and relevant literature to explain the topic. The findings suggested that economic inequity, the decline of democracy, immigration, multiculturalism, and opposition to the European Union were the primary factors leading to the rise of far-right politics in Europe. It was also evident that a far-right future would lead to the disintegration of liberal democracy, isolation due to nationalist policies, and cultural intolerance. Based on the findings, it was concluded that economic inequity was the driving factor, and far-right political parties were gaining momentum by proposing radical solutions to address this problem.

Keywords: far-right politics, Italy, Hungary, France.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Far-Right Politics

As contextualized in the political spectrum, the far-right ideology represents adopting extreme right-wing politics. In this case, far-right politics advocates for native tendencies and nationalist and conservative perspectives. Far-right politics has been considered the basis of Nazism and fascist ideologies [1]. In the modern context, these extreme political ideologies have morphed into neo-Nazism, neo-fascism, and alt-right. Far-right politics has remained controversial as it idealizes nationalism, including racist, homophobic, and anti-global perspectives [1]. Essentially, the ideology is based on protecting national interests leading to the realization of a functional and closed society free from external influence.

Given that this political ideology has existed for a long time, its re-emergence in various parts of the world threatens the functions and existence of democracy. It is essential to study the rise of far-right politics in Europe because the call to radical views may not be in the interest of the majority. As such, it may end up creating more devastating results. While several publications touch on the topic of far-right politics, this report will illuminate the rise of political ideology in Europe, primarily focusing on the causes of this phenomenon.

1.2. Topic and Methodology

This paper will focus on the rise of far-right politics in Europe by sourcing information from relevant literature, online resources, and news articles to explain the topic. The guiding objectives of this report include the following:

- To study political elections of major European nations in the past decade
- To explain the context of the far-right mentality in Europe
- To analyze the causes of far-right acceptance in Europe
- To predict the future development of far right and its implications

2. Far Right Politics in Europe

2.1. The Context of Far-Right Politics in Europe

In the wake of globalisation and multiculturalism, Europe has witnessed a new breed of politics that seems to lean toward nationalism and racial pride, which undermines efforts to genuine cosmopolitanism and cultural integration in the region. Arguably, far-right politics in Europe is based on the memory of a robust and ideal European past where several European countries exhibited military awe and took pride in nationalistic ideas [2]. Essentially, leaders of far-right parties in Europe allude themselves as the chosen individuals to lead Europe back to its former 'glory.' Far-right politicians in France have suggested that the country is undergoing 'replacement' and that people should act to protect the native race in France [3]. Far-right politics in Germany and Britain suggest that the military prowess of the two countries during both World Wars should be celebrated and showcased for the world to see.

From a broad perspective, far-right politics in Europe appears to call for past practices that cultured racism, ethnic intolerance, sexist views, and nationalism. Since the end of the cold war, European countries have been primarily running on democratic principles that have fostered economic growth, relaxation of immigration rules, multiculturalism, and liberal mindsets [4]. However, this appears to be a threat to a section of Europeans and, thus, the rise of extremist far-right policies.

In order to elaborate on the influence of the far-right political ideology, some recent elections in Europe point to the ideologies securing victory in national elections. For instance, Giorgia Meloni, under the party, The Brothers of Italy (a known far-right party with neo-fascist roots), won the Italian elections to become the first female Prime Minister [5]. In Sweden, a far-right party, Sweden Democrats, secured a large section of political seats, thus placing the party in an influential position in the country's national agenda [6]. In Hungary, the far-right political ideology has been dominant since Victor Orban, under the Fidesz party, assumed power as Prime Minister in 2010 [7]. In France, the far-right party, the National Front, has been gaining traction, having secured the second position in France's 2022 general election [7]. These instances illustrate the rising influence of far-right political ideology in various parts of Europe. In this regard, the emerging political ideology is capitalizing on the gaps created by the leftist wing by suggesting direct political policies that side with the people.

2.2. Factors Contributing to Far-Right Politics in Europe

2.2.1 Economic Inequality

Global economic inequality has been steadily rising in the last three decades, with more than 70% of the global population being affected [8]. The phenomenon is no different in Europe. As Figure 1 shown, for instance, in Germany, 10% of the wealthiest people in the country control more than 67% of the country's wealth [9]. Similarly, in France, 10% control 55% of the country's wealth, while the middle class making up 40% of the country, control 38% of the wealth [10]. These statistics indicate a clear gap between the wealthy, middle, and lower classes. Far-right politics have become popular amid economic inequality as the majority controlling limited wealth see it as the most logical and appropriate way to deal with the problem [11]. In this regard, European populations constituting middle and lower-income classes have continuously been sidelined in terms of economic growth and hence are retaliating by accepting far-right policies amongst themselves. Inequality in Europe has risen since 1980 due to changing patterns of income and insecurity [12]. Essentially, incomes for middle and lower-income classes have stagnated while those of the wealthy have rapidly risen during this period. In this regard, people who consider themselves economically stunted have become susceptible to far-right politics. Research findings indicated that far-right politics is prevalent among people with less economic power and lower levels of education [13]. This compounds the fact that far-right politics has arisen from inequality and is rapidly being accepted as a solution to reduce the gap.

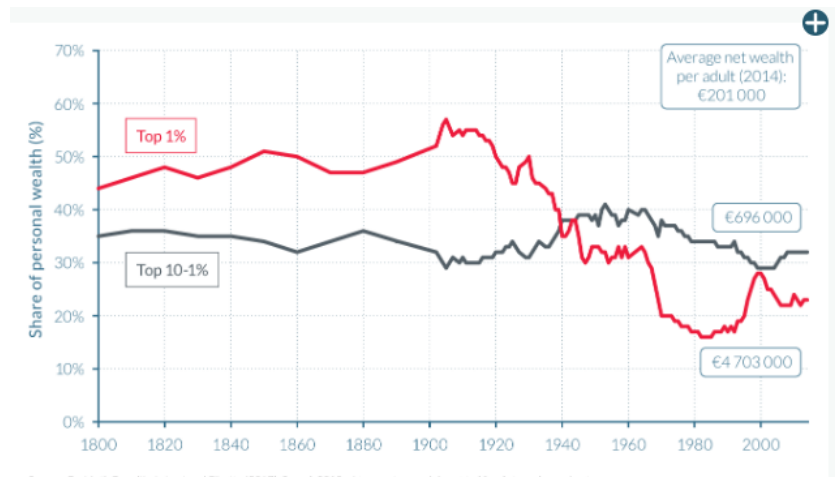


Figure 1. Wealth Control in France [10]

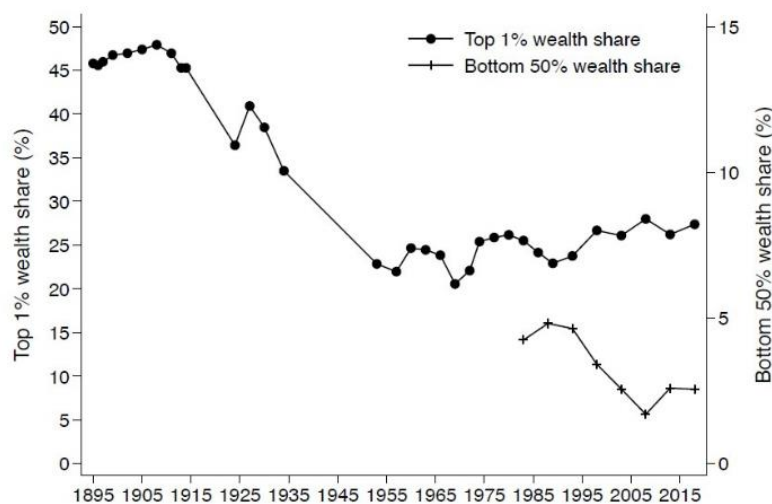


Figure 2. Wealth Distribution in Germany [9]

In the wake of financial crashes, people have also chosen to accept far-right politics. European right-wing parties recorded a 30% increase in vote share after a financial crash was experienced [12]. This can be attributed to people perceiving them as ‘human-induced disasters.’ Arguably, far-right supporters believe that financial meltdowns are created and used to make the rich even richer [14]. This is because wealthier individuals do not lose wealth despite challenging economic times. In contrast, most middle-class and low-income earners end up losing their jobs and livelihood. For instance, the European debt crisis caused massive financial woes in European countries such as Greece, which had debt accounting for more than 100% of the GDP [12]. In addition, people blame elites for not acting to prevent financial crises. As such, the loss of faith in political systems to protect citizens has opened an avenue for right-wing politicians to explore. In this scenario, far-right politicians frame their agenda to put regular working-class citizens against the ruling elite. In most instances, far-right politics has dwelled on liberal policies adopted by the ruling elite that has allowed people outside Europe to work and live in the region, thus limiting income-generating opportunities for Europeans. Winkler argues that this occurs due to fear among social groups that opt for far-right policies that appear to address their concerns in protecting wealth and reducing the economic inequality gap [15]. It is evident that financial turmoil is another indicator of economic inequity that fuels the rise of far-right politics.

2.2.2 The Decline of Democracy

Democracy represents a state of government through which people of a nation participate in the design and formulation of legislation relevant to their states [16]. In Europe, conventional democracy

has slowly declined over the years, creating gaps for far-right politics to fill. In this case, far-right leaders in Europe argue that current democratic systems lean toward elitism (benefits the wealthy minority) and hence offer no economic value to citizens [17]. Essentially, democratic institutions have lost the meaning and significance that they once had. This has created the political rhetoric that democratic institutions have become ‘toothless dogs’ in the fight against corruption and the misappropriation of public funds. In addition, democratic entities have failed to regulate multinational corporations that appear to influence policy outcomes in favour of their business activities. Corporate entities have invaded democracies through intensive lobbying occurring behind closed doors [18]. Arguably, for the electorate, their participation becomes nothing but a formality to reiterate that democracy was involved in the process. Due to this, far-right politics has taken centre stage in Europe, advocating for the shift into direct political participation through populist leaders. In this case, far-right politicians are firmly convinced that they form the crucial link in hearing and addressing the concerns of ordinary citizens. The political purge against modern democracy has increased following among far-right factions, thus enabling its growth across Europe.

Another perspective states that the messaging used by far-right politicians are having an effect on the electorate [19]. As discussed earlier, far-right leaders in Europe have been convincing people to ditch the corrupted democracy that is controlled by the invisible elite. Even though the messaging does not directly shift support for far-right politics, a section of liberal supporters agree with the criticisms fronted by far-right leaders. This has been the case in France’s political scene. In 2017, the liberal side (Emmanuel Macron) won the election in the first round with 51%, while the far right side (Marie Le Pen) came second at 41% [20]. In the recent 2022 election, the liberal side won with a very narrow margin in a run-off to the first election [21]. This indicates a rise in support for far-right politics as more people are shifting from liberal to right-wing perspectives on the grounds of failed democratic institutions. Another avenue that is fueling the rise of far-right politics is the shift from ordinary politics. In this case, far-right populists have increased mistrust in democratic systems, thus causing an overall decline in faith in systems [22]. For instance, Britain pushed for the controversial exit from the European Union without a clear action plan of what would happen next [7]. As reported by media outlets at the time, the push for Brexit was based on hardline nationalist policies that reduced the overall trust and faith in political systems.

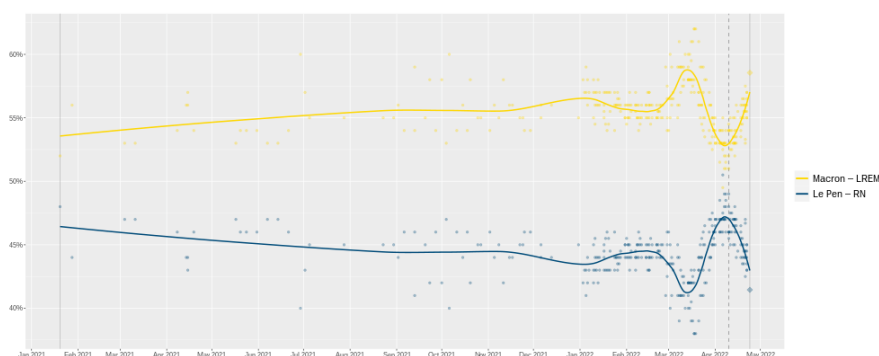


Figure 3. France Election Results 2022 [21]

2.2.3 Immigration

Europe has generally experienced a rise in immigration, with most countries accepting immigrants from war-torn regions in the middle-east and North Africa. Immigration populations have averaged 10% of the total population in several European countries [23]. Due to high levels of immigration, new policies and structures have been formulated to accommodate and integrate immigrants into European systems in terms of education, healthcare, and employment opportunities [24]. In light of this, far-right political parties have adopted anti-immigrant perspectives championing the closure of borders and, in some instances sending local immigrants back to their origin countries. The findings indicated that regions with higher populations of immigrants recorded increased voting for far-right political parties [23]. This was attributed to increased competition for resources such as education

and employment opportunities. Consequently, a majority of those who shifted to far-right political parties were ‘fearful’ that their opportunities were being handed to foreigners. Unemployment rates in Europe contribute to anti-immigration policies supported by far-right parties [25]. As such, European regions showing characteristics of high immigration and high unemployment rates contribute support for far-right politics. In this case, unemployed Europeans believe their situation is a result of jobs handed to immigrants hence a denial of fair opportunities by the government to their citizens.

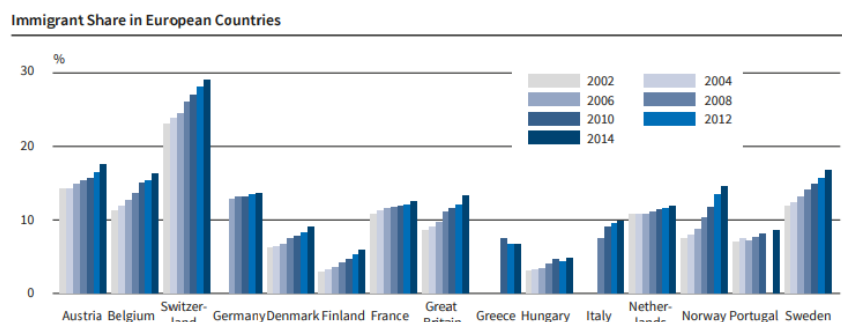


Figure 4. Immigrant Populations in European Countries [23]

Additionally, the negative perception of immigration was linked to lower levels of education and misinformation to the public [25]. As such, far-right politics remains vague on how European populations remain disadvantaged due to the presence of immigrants in their countries. This becomes readily accepted by persons who may not look further into the allegations, reinforcing anti-immigration policies in far-right politics.

The stance on anti-immigration has taken centre precedence in Europe due to strong far-right political leaders in the political arena. In Hungary, Viktor Orban stated that the country would only accept ‘true refugees,’ which by definition included native Europeans from Germany, France, and Italy, among other European countries [26]. In this case, the far-right politician would lock out immigrants from other countries on the basis that they did not represent the ‘lost European culture.’ The anti-immigration narrative has increasingly solidified across Europe, thus fueling the rise of far-right politics. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni, a far-right politician, secured the Prime Minister’s position due to some of her policies toward stopping immigration to Italy [27]. Arguably the influx of immigrants to Europe has contributed to the shift into far-right politics due to the threat of political, economic, and social structures [23]. However, the link between anti-immigration varies from country to country based on internal economic and social structures, as some regions in Europe remain accepting of immigrants.

2.2.4 Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism denotes the existence of diverse ethnic communities which are perceived as politically relevant [28]. As discussed in the topic of immigration, the opening up of Europe allowed people from various ethnic backgrounds to move and settle in various European countries. This has allowed the existence of various ethnic groups that have become integrated into European communities. Between 2011 and 2012, a number of European leaders claimed multiculturalism had failed in the region amid the rampant terrorist acts in Europe in the previous years [29]. The comments made by leaders at the time did not help to solve the challenge of cultural integration but instead created a gap to blame a single minority group. The significant decline in cultural tolerance has enabled far-right politics to become prevalent because ideologies in this politics serve to further widen the gap between different ethnic groups in Europe. In essence, it becomes easier for the far-right agenda to penetrate the European population.

In another comparison of collectivism and individualism among European cultures, it was apparent that far-right political views had taken shape in collectivist cultures. Individualistic countries such as Sweden and Denmark had fewer shifts into far-right political stances because people in individualistic societies were less attached to ethnic and religious concepts [23]. As such, the existence of

multiculturalism in their respective countries was more or less tolerated. In contrast, collectivist cultures exhibited a higher leaning toward far-right politics. In this case, people in collectivist cultures were more concerned about their social constructs, including values, practices, and beliefs [30]. The existence of new cultures in Europe was, therefore, a threat to pre-existing European cultures hence an intolerance of multiculturalism. Xenophobic attacks and cultural intolerance are likely to persist in Europe because it will be harder for people from different cultures to shed their own beliefs and fully accustom to European culture [31]. The 'European Identity' as framed by far-right politics will continue to remain a hindrance to realising cultural integration [32]. Cultural intolerance is one of the main factors driving far-right politics in Europe since far-right politics champions preserving European culture over other cultures in the region.

2.2.5 Opposition to the European Union

The European Union, formed in 1993, was initially designed as a neutral ground for politics where both left and right political wings would remain neutral. In this case, the organisation has strived to create a neutral economy and political state that always works. For instance, the free movement in EU countries and the use of a single currency, the Euro, were adopted to lessen economic restrictions between European nations. The strategy adopted by the European Union relies on the coalition setup whereby political parties and groups work together to achieve a common goal [33]. As much as this has worked in favour of the region since its formation, the organisation has come under criticism by far-right politicians for its disconnect from policies that favour ordinary Europeans [34]. In this regard, the system has contributed to the growing economic inequality between the wealthy minority and other classes of society. For most citizens in the EU, direct political policies, such as those captured in far-right manifestos, have contributed to people shifting their stance against the EU. This has resulted in an overall decline in interest and commitment toward the EU. A survey revealed that about 68% of Europeans support the EU, but 50% have an issue with the policies and general direction of the organisation [35]. This open gap is currently being filled with far-right politics, thus increasing opposition to the organisation.

Another perspective by far-right politicians in Europe is that the EU's policies have led to some of the problems experienced in Europe. For instance, the open borders have allowed an influx of illegal migration between countries, causing a problem for citizens [36]. This has also contributed to poor security measures (screening at borders may not be as thorough as required) to curb acts of terrorism that have been witnessed in the region many times [36]. In addition, the far-right politicians have alleged a lack of transparency in the organisation leading to unclear rules and regulations for staying in the organisation. The failure of the EU to address some of these issues has led to far-right politicians capitalizing on them and swinging citizens to support right-wing politics. As such, if the organisation continues to ignore some of the problems within, it is likely it will face significant opposition in the future.

2.3. The Future Effects of Far-Right Politics in Europe

Borrowing from the factors that are contributing to the increase of far-right politics in Europe, it is evident that a majority conversion of Europe's citizenry to this political wing will lead to more devastating effects than good.

Firstly, the adoption of far-right policies could lead to the failure of democracy. In Hungary, the leadership of Viktor Orban has prevented the EU from acting on the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war [37]. In addition, the regime has muffled academic and media voices from offering opposing opinions. Following this trajectory, the hardline mentality often seen in far-right parties will likely create political spaces that only support the government [37]. In this scenario, the democracy that offers freedoms to all persons to express and participate in the affairs of the country will be heavily restricted or nonexistent in some instances.

Secondly, the adoption of far-right policies will lead to cultural intolerance and ethnic conflict. As discussed earlier, Europe has been grappling with illegal immigration and high intolerance of multiculturalism. In this regard, implementing far-right policies will only serve to alienate non-

European cultures making the grounds potent for other worse outcomes such as ethnic and racial wars through ‘cleansing’ [38]. This will lead to the decline of European institutions, and unnecessary conflicts will erode systems and economic gains made in the past. Arguably, multiculturalism has increased access to new information and knowledge in tackling problems facing Europe.

3. Conclusion

3.1. Key Findings

In defining and explaining far-right European politics, it was evident that the political ideology is linked to past systems focused on nationalistic views and cultural intolerance. In this sense, this ideology goes against the strides in realizing globalisation and cultural integration in Europe. As such, some populist far-right politicians such as Victor Orban have called for anti-immigration and anti-refugee policies that effectively lock out immigrants from other countries from entering Europe. Elections in Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and France have illustrated the rising influence of far-right political ideology in the national politics of European nations. The rise of this political ideology has primarily been linked to economic inequity that has taken shape in Europe since the 1980s. In this regard, a few wealthy individuals have remained in control of most of the wealth held by European nations. Arguably, the far-right ideology has gained momentum using the ‘the elites versus the people’ analogy, thus pitting high criticisms of liberal democracy. This has extended into anti-globalisation, opposition to the European Union, and the decline of neo-liberal democracy in European countries as more people feel disconnected between their economic challenges and government priorities. However, the acceptance of this ideology presents challenges in the future. It was evident that the hardline stances taken by far-right political leaders could disintegrate liberal democracy, increase ethnic conflicts and cultural intolerance and isolate European nations from the global agenda.

3.2. Impact and Influence of the Study

This report will be useful to the general public and academic institutions as it offers a comprehensive outlook to understanding far-right European politics. It will be useful in enlightening people about why it is happening, and the likely outcomes should it become a reality in the future. This report will be an essential starting source for further research into European far-right politics.

3.3. Outlook for Future Research

The information presented in this report covers a portion of far-right politics in Europe. The report has primarily focused on likely causes for the rise by drawing information from various literature and articles. The main limitation of this report is that it did not cover all European countries and hence may not give a full picture of far-right politics in the entire region. Following this, it is recommended that further research covering more countries in Europe be conducted to give a more comprehensive picture of the origin and rise of the political ideology.

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