Researching and Understanding Far-Right Politics in Times of Mainstreaming

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Abstract

Contemporary research on far-right politics has relied predominantly on the use of binaries between the 'far/extreme/(populist) radical right' and the so-called 'mainstream', and a 'waves' metaphor to historicise different eras of the post-World War Two far-right. In this article, we probe these categories and binaries, problematising hegemonic depictions, the consequent assumptions underpinning them, and what this means for resistance to reactionary politics. By reflecting on the current state of the field, summarising dominant approaches and their potential limitations, we arrive at our key contribution: a revised definition of the term 'far right' which shifts the focus away from categorisation towards an understanding of far-right politics as a political position. In turn, our approach also presents both a challenge to and evolution of the 'waves' metaphor which accounts for processes of mainstreaming and rests on a critical account of the mainstream itself. Our conceptualisation problematises traditional binaries while pointing to a 'fifth wave' of far-right politics in which the identities of the mainstream and far right are mutually constitutive. To illustrate our conceptual contribution, we conclude our article with a case study on the interaction between the far right and mainstream in UK politics.

Introduction

In recent years, the boundaries between mainstream and extreme/far/(populist) radical right politics have become increasingly blurred. Worse, since Donald Trump's return to power, it is no longer taboo in academia to discuss the return of fascism. These convergences have occurred on various levels, whether governmentally, electorally or discursively. Among many examples, countries like Italy and Hungary are governed by far-right parties; the EU elections have witnessed new records for far-right groups; and Trump emerged victorious again in the 2024 US elections despite his 2020 defeat leading to an attempted coup. Such forms of politics have also risen beyond the Global North where they seemed to first originate and be

contained to (Giraldo, 2024; Nisar, 2020, Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023). Since the turn of the century, countries including Brazil, India and Argentina most recently have fallen prey to similar developments. Recent inroads by far-right parties within electoral and global contexts highlight the urgency with which such dynamics must be dealt. Even when the far right's formal presence is more muted, we have seen an emboldening of exclusionary politics from those traditionally associated with the mainstream or centre, often deflecting from the need to address crises such as rising inequalities, the climate emergency or health threats such as the pandemic. Rather than strengthening democratic institutions and safeguards, we have witnessed many liberal democratic states, governed by parties considered 'mainstream' (Brown, 2024), taking increasingly authoritarian turns often associated with the far right, particularly with regard to the militarisation of borders and curtailments of the right to protest (Katsambekis, 2023).

To understand these dynamics, existing analysis has predominantly relied on binaries, whether implicit or explicit, between the 'far/extreme/(populist) radical right' and the so-called 'mainstream'. Yet current developments call into question whether they are, or ever were, helpful to understand the role of far-right politics in contemporary society. In this article, we probe these categories and binaries, problematising hegemonic depictions, the consequent assumptions underpinning them, and what this means for resistance to reactionary politics. In particular, the increased depiction of immigration as a threat to the nation-state in elite discourse illustrates increasingly blurred lines between the mainstream and far right. This includes the mainstream's adoption of the far-right framing of immigration as a 'legitimate concern' as well as its echoing of racist slogans, policy and logic to target marginalised communities.

We question whether we have reached a new stage (wave) in the mainstreaming of the far right and whether our conceptions have played their own part in this process. We contend therefore that it is essential to reflect on the terminology we have at our disposal and whether existing paradigms help or hinder our understanding of the current reactionary moment. Such reflexivity is especially pertinent when certain conceptions dominate the field and become somewhat hegemonic in their own right. Our key contributions here, therefore, are proposing a revised definition for the far right separate from party categorisation and establishing the conditions of a potential fifth wave of far-right politics.

To do this, we first reflect on the current state of the field, summarising dominant approaches and their potential limitations, which have become particularly salient in our current context. We then suggest that our understanding of the far right must move beyond party categorisations and instead be based around key discourses and positions. Such a shift enables us to identify far-right politics wherever it emerges, meaning that we must move beyond the binary based on a fantasmatic separation between the mainstream and its far-right other (Gillespie, 2024). While far-right politics feeds on many overlapping forms of oppression and inequality, building on Indelicato and Lopes (2024), we prioritise race/racism as our 'primary category of analysis for the far-right', as it has consistently been the key area of contestation and it is the 'glue' that holds together other intersecting reactionary discourses. Building on Robin (2017), we use reactionary politics as an umbrella term to describe politics which seeks to consolidate systemic hierarchies or restore them. As such, they can be

found both in the mainstream, far and extreme right, and crucially can encompass various forms of exclusions.

From here, we present both a challenge to and evolution of the 'waves' metaphor which fully takes into account processes of mainstreaming and rests on a critical account of the mainstream itself. This conceptualisation problematises traditional binaries between the mainstream and far right, instead pointing to their mutually constitutive identities (Brown, 2024). In this new wave, where the evidence for such binaries continues to deplete, so too must our reliance on them to understand the current conjuncture.[1] Finally, we illustrate our key argument with a short case study on the UK, which focuses on how since 2014, far-right discourses have become increasingly mainstream. Our diachronic approach means such analysis is rooted in a broader (mis)understanding of the far right and its relationship to the mainstream. This includes, but is not limited to, analysis of how recent discourse and policies aimed at stopping migration across the English Channel, such as 'stop the boats', the Rwanda plan and 'border security command', have contributed to the mainstreaming of far-right politics.

Far-Right Developments: Evolving Context and Conceptions

What we call 'far-right studies' in this article is by no means a precise field. Yet, despite its cross-disciplinary nature, research on the far right has boomed and become increasingly coherent in its approaches. Between 2013 and 2023, the Web of Science registers 4158 publications containing extreme/far/radical right in either the title or abstract, averaging at more than one per day (by comparison, the same search for extreme/far/radical left produced 809 articles). While of course no literature review could claim to do justice to the full extent of this work, the following sections aim to provide a panoramic view of dominant trends within the field. First, we introduce a brief outline of the 'waves' metaphor that has been employed to talk about different iterations of the far right since the Second World War (von Beyme, 1988; Mudde, 2019). We then focus on some of the predominant terms that have emerged from academic research into the 'third' and 'fourth' waves: the extreme right, (populist) radical right and far right. This overview provides crucial background to our critique of the hegemonic configuration of these different forms of the far right and their development.

Waves

While early work on the far right often traced the transition from fascism to new movements, either historically or through heuristic attempts at defining fascism (Richardson, 2017; Griffin, 2006), far-right studies has increasingly focused on more reconstructed politics which claim to be unconnected to previous historical evils and are often accepted as such by mainstream academia. A key metaphor framing this shift in focus towards reconstructed far-right parties has been what Klaus von Beyme (1988) and later Cas Mudde (2019) have labelled as 'waves' of post-war far-right politics. While the first wave (1945–1960) was defined by neo-fascism, with no successful political parties outside of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the somewhat amorphous second wave (1960–1980) was characterized by "right-wing

populist" movements and parties, ranging from the French Poujadists to the German National Democratic Party (NPD) (Wondreys and Mudde, 2022).

Although the far right was largely constricted to the margins in these first two waves, it is worth stressing that from the 1960s – during the putative 'second wave' – some intellectuals on the extreme right, such as Maurice Bardèche and Alain de Benoist, realised that should they want to escape the margins of politics, their discourse had to change, if not their politics. De Benoist and the Nouvelle Droite in particular did this by borrowing from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which has had a clear impact on the strategies of many parties (Mondon, 2013). This is best witnessed in their turn away from biological racism towards 'cultural' racism, both building on the same processes of exclusion and yet the latter affording far more mainstreaming potential in the 'post-racial' world (Lentin, 2020). The introduction of hate crime legislation, for example, has seen adapted forms of exclusion become more prominent. Awareness of the political struggles that the extreme right itself was engaged in is essential to make sense of the changes in terminology and typology over the years as they were not passive actors and played a key role in euphemisation especially. As already discussed, far-right intellectuals and politicians were influential in the shift towards 'cultural' racism and Islamophobia in particular, which made plausible deniability a key strategy (Sengul 2022). This has often taken the form of defences of 'free speech' (Kumar, 2021; Titley, 2020), where despite the racist targeting of Muslims, people claim it is simply a valid critique of the religion. Similarly, the rise of 'populism' as a descriptor found its roots in far-right actors adopting it as a replacement for more stigmatising terms and academics embracing it often for political rather than academic reasons (Collovald, 2004; Goyvaerts et al. 2024).

Indeed, these strategies began to bear fruit from at least the 1980s onwards, during the third wave, when 'parties and politicians like the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Jörg Haider as well as the National Front (FN) and Jean-Marie Le Pen became household names' (Wondreys and Mudde, 2022). This third wave (1980-2001) was characterised, according to Mudde (2019), by the growth of the so-called 'radical right' and represented the largest and longest-lasting wave since the Second World War (Mayer, 2021). It saw electoral breakthroughs for the far right, but also attempts to marginalise such politics via strategies such as 'cordons sanitaires' (De Jonge, 2019; Shuttleworth et al, forthcoming). Moving from the third to the fourth, it is suggested that the key defining feature of this final wave has been the mainstreaming of the far right (Mudde, 2019).

A rich body of work has underscored the contributing factors and effects of mainstreaming processes (Krzyżanowski et al. 2021; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Wodak, 2020; Brown et al. 2023; Schneider 2023; Gillespie 2024; Kisić-Merino 2025), entailing shifts in what is seen as legitimate within the political mainstream. Far-right actors play a key role in mainstreaming by, for instance, creating 'false imaginaries and "moral panic" around immigration' (Krzyżanowski 2020) and subsequently depicting racist anti-immigration policies as 'common sense'/'rational' solutions (Newth 2024). However, it should also be noted from the outset that there can be no mainstreaming of reactionary politics without the more or less conscious complicity of the mainstream (Mondon and Winter 2020, Brown et al. 2023). While we return to this argument, and the wave metaphor in Section 4, for now we note

that since the putative third-wave, there has been ever-increasing political, media and academic interest in the far right, leading to a proliferation of paradigms which seek to explain the politics of far-right parties and movements.

The Extreme, Far and (Populist) Radical Right

Having established characterisations for different waves, the following section turns to some of the more dominant concepts that have been used from the third wave onwards: namely, the extreme right, (populist) radical right, and far right. The rationale for focusing on these terms is three-fold. First, it aligns with recent research highlighting the prevalent role played by these three paradigms in 'framing far-right studies' (Mondon, 2023, pp.881-884). Second, these terms – in contrast to '(neo)fascism' until recently at least – are the most relevant for identifying parties and individuals who have occupied the space between the mainstream and outermost reaches on the right of the spectrum. Third, and linked to the previous point, greater scrutiny over the way that these terms share fuzzy borders with one another and the mainstream is much needed.

While the lines between extreme, radical, and far right are blurred, the following paragraphs establish some key points of demarcation. Prior to unpacking these differences, it is worth providing a succinct overview of some of the key contrasting features. In terms of extreme right, we refer to the most illiberal forms of right-wing politics, which entail forms of violence, and outright hostility to (liberal) democracy. Radical right, instead, has been used to imply forms of politics combining nativism, authoritarianism and populism. While operating within the formal parameters set by liberal democracies and contesting elections, radical-right forms of politics maintain a hostility to certain liberal democratic processes. In current literature, the term far right has been used either as an umbrella concept for both the extreme and radical right (Pirro 2022), or as an analytical concept in and of itself, which shifts the focus towards parties which promote a racist ideology by acting in the space between the extreme and the mainstream (Mondon and Winter 2020).

Amongst the most common terms surfacing in the aftermath of the Second World War were 'extreme right' or 'right-wing extremism', attempting to make sense of the resurgence of politics at the far end of the spectrum which did not embrace the term 'fascism' themselves or at least avoided replicating it in mimetic ways. While the label 'extreme right' has become less prevalent in recent years due to its association with Nazism and fascism, as noted by Brown (2023), it still helps to 'denote the more illiberal manifestation of far-right ideology, encompassing the use of physical violence, explicit verbal abuse and consequent operation outside of legal and democratic norms'.[2] For this reason, we argue that it can help us to capture more openly extreme forms of reactionary politics, both historically and currently. Different interpretations of extreme right have, over the years, placed varying emphases on features such as a hostility to democracy, physically violent expressions of racism, support for an authoritarian, strong state, and nationalism (e.g., Ignazi 1992, 2003; Hainsworth 2016; Mammone et al. 2012). Some work even emerged during the third wave already challenging the strict dichotomy created between the mainstream and extreme (Hainsworth 2000).

The first key terminological shift in the era took place in the 1990s and 2000s when 'radical right' came to replace 'extreme right' in mainstream academic literature. While the term 'radical right' became widely applied to the European context, it found its source in highly politicised debates in the US, which sought to conflate radicalism on the left and right in favour of the status quo (Bell 1963). This should have raised concerns about the appropriateness of the term as it exonerated the liberal 'centre' from its own reactionary tendencies (Mondon and Winter, 2020, pp.58-60) and created harmful false equivalences. Indeed, this term is 'less stigmatizing and less connected to fascism and Nazism' (Mayer 2021, p.18), largely reflecting the aforementioned success of the far right's Gramscian-inspired counter-hegemonic project that emerged in the second wave. Yet 'radical right' soon became established, and scholars turned their attention to developing definitions. For example, Betz and Johnson (2004) used it for parties which 'reconcile formal support for democracy as the best system for the articulation and representation of interests with a political doctrine that is profoundly anti-liberal'.

However, it was Mudde's (2007) characterisation of the party family under the label Populist Radical Right (PRR) that proved most influential. In 2007, Mudde rightly bemoaned the 'terminological chaos' that characterised the fledgeling but quickly growing field of far-right studies. As an attempted clarification, his PRR paradigm brought some relative order by establishing a minimal definition based around key recurring features of PRR parties in Europe: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). As the next section emphasises, we suggest moving away from this dominant conception based on its euphemising potential and predominant focus on electoral politics and party classification. Furthermore, we regard 'radical' as ill-suited to describing right-wing politics (Brown, 2023, p.20) as radicality is 'based on rejecting the fundamental principles that govern society and creating a new paradigm' (Andrews, 2018, p.xviii). Far-right politics does not challenge the broader capitalist system, and rather than promoting a radical break, aim at strengthening existing hierarchies or reinstating them. Furthermore, the way that far-right politics is aligned with and integrated into the mainstream, as evidenced in subsequent sections, emphasises that this political positioning is far from a radical departure from the current and historic state of play.

Most recently, the term 'far right' has become the most used in the field (Mondon, 2023). While clear definitions are rarely attached to it, it has become used as an umbrella concept for both the extreme and radical right (Mudde, 2019). This captures both faces of the phenomenon, with the extreme operating outside, and the radical (putatively) inside, democratic processes. The 'umbrella term' thesis was further developed by Pirro (2022) who used it to argue that there were increasingly shared repertoires between the radical and extreme right, thus using 'far right' to analyse how 'radical right' politicians such as Matteo Salvini had 'nurtured links with the extreme right Casa Pound and [. . .] Forza Nuova'. In this article, we build on Mondon and Winter's definition (2020) which sees it as an analytical concept in and of itself in contrast with both the extreme right and mainstream, but emphasising fuzzy and movable borders. As such, we define it as a political position which can therefore be adopted by a wide range of actors, as Section 3 explains.

From Terminological Chaos to Terminological Uniformity

While the approaches examined thus far have contributed to an understanding of reactionary politics and party categorisations, various developments since have meant that a reassessment is necessary. This will ensure that the evolving nature of the far right and reactionary politics is not misinterpreted or missed altogether. We do this here by outlining two key areas for reflection, first on the euphemising potential of the terms (right-wing) 'populism' and 'nativism', and second on how such classification systems can reify problematic binaries. In relation to the former, we underline the key issue of populist hype, which has made the term 'populism' ubiquitous to discussions of far-right politics; we also point to the limitations of nativism as a defining feature, both in euphemising and exceptionalising racism. Building on this point, we examine how both the PRR paradigm and wave metaphor have served to reinforce notions of a binary between the far right and mainstream. By drawing on recent discursive approaches to mainstreaming, we argue that an excessive focus on party categorisation and elections rather than discourse has narrowed our perceptions of what far-right politics is and is not.

Euphemisation: Populist Hype and the (Over/Mis)use of Nativism

One key trend in far-right studies is that of euphemisation, a phenomenon which has taken place, in part, through the interconnected phenomena of populist hype and the (over/mis)use of nativism in categorisations of the far right. Euphemisation denotes 'the use of less threatening terms [which] downplays the danger and harm of far/extreme-right politics' (Brown and Mondon, 2021; Shuttleworth et al. 2024, p.8). A case in point is how 'populism' has developed in many circles into a generic term for far-right politics (Glynos and Mondon 2019) this entails not only conflation with what would be more accurately described as nativist (or indeed, racist, see below) but also a proliferation of the label to dizzying levels and based on poor academic practice (Hunger and Paxton, 2022). A growing body of work has emphasised the numerous problematic implications of this self-perpetuating trend (De Cleen et al. 2018; Eklundh 2019, 2020; Maiguashca, 2019; Dean and Maiguashca, 2020; Brown and Mondon, 2021; Goyvaerts, 2021; Mondon, 2023), where the term is welcomed by the far right because of the discursive link it creates to 'the people', where highs and lows reinforce exclusionary hierarchies, and where false equivalences are created between left and right. Anthony Giddens' (1982) concept of double-hermeneutic helps to highlight how by using terms such as 'right-wing populist parties', scholars are reinforcing (consciously or not) the idea that such politics represent 'the people', when they in fact serve the interests of the elite (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado, 2024). Despite such manifest problems, it has proved extremely challenging to stop the term 'populism' from snowballing, with these warnings often going unheeded. Terms such as '(radical) right-wing populism' (Betz 1994; Betz and Johnson 2004; Zaslove 2011) neglect one of the crucial distinctions that Mudde's (2007) original conception of the PRR paradigm emphasised between nativism and populism, the latter of which was interpreted, at best, as secondary to the politics of such parties. Even though this conceptual blurring was not necessarily inherent to the original definition of the PRR paradigm, we must question how and why it has become so easy for it to be used in inaccurate, but also counterproductive, ways. While such reflection might suggest a

reinvigoration of the initial conceptualisation, we believe that the best way to approach this is a decoupling from populism, as elaborated in our third section.

A further issue of euphemisation emerges in relation to the over/misuse of the term nativism. According to several studies, nativism is taken to be the central ideology of the radical right (Mudde 2007; 2019, Betz 2019, Pirro 2020). The most widely accepted and cited definition is that of a combination between nationalism and xenophobia, an ideology 'which 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, p.19). While nativism is certainly preferable to populism in terms of identifying the far right's core ideology, it nevertheless holds euphemistic qualities when it is not viewed as a *form* of racism for two interlinked reasons. First, the claim that nativism has the potential to be 'non-racist' (Mudde, 2007, p.19) is highly problematic, neglecting the processes of racialisation core to constructing both the so-called 'native' and 'non-native' (Newth 2023a, 2023b. Such an assertion relies on limiting racism only to its 'illiberal' (Mondon and Winter, 2020) or 'frozen' (Lentin, 2020) forms, rather than acknowledging less explicit articulations and its wider embeddedness in the racialised social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p.467). The use of 'nativism' therefore has the capacity to minimise the exclusionary nature of such politics and become a 'fuzzy' word for the racism inherent to far-right ideology (Betz, 2017; 2019). If we are serious about challenging racism's wider structural and institutional embeddedness in society, then it is essential to acknowledge and precisely define the racism inherent to the far right. Closely related to this, the term places the focus on a defence of so-called 'native-born' citizens (Brown, 2023; Newth, 2023b), viewing it almost as a 'natural reaction' stemming from 'anti-immigrant attitudes' (Hervik, 2015). It therefore creates a false binary between so-called 'indigenous' white populations and racialised minorities. If we think about such an assumption in the context of the Americas, for example, it 'reinforces the core myth of settler colonialism, namely, that the lands in the North American continent were empty prior to the seventeenth-century arrival of British settlers' (Bauer et al. 2024; Veracini, 2021), thereby erasing the genocide of Native Americans. In this way, while nativism may allow us to unpick exclusionary facets of the far right, it can actually obscure more than it elucidates.

Reinforced Binaries

Further to its euphemising potential, understanding nativism (coupled with authoritarianism) as *the* core feature of such parties has often led to analyses which reinforce the apparent exceptionalism of the far right. It creates an implicit – and often explicit – binary whereby far- and radical-right actors are framed as the exclusive harbingers of nativist, authoritarian and populist politics, while the mainstream is treated as a bulwark against them (Mondon, 2025). The extent to which such forms of politics are, however, reserved solely for the far right has been the subject of significant scrutiny over recent years (Mondon and Winter, 2020; Brown, 2023). For example, Giorgos Katsambekis (2023) notes the general lack of engagement with authoritarianism in the field (despite its prominent position in the PRR triad), yet he highlights how its presence within mainstream structures has

been especially absent from analysis. If nativism, authoritarianism and populism are defining characteristics of the radical right, do we risk implying that this is where such issues start and stop? By establishing neat party classification systems, we risk syphoning off exclusionary politics from its wider embeddedness in society and its expression and defence by other key actors (Robin 2017).

Furthermore, while research on the far right has ballooned, the so-called 'mainstream' has received much less sustained attention (Kallis 2013), often defined more by what it is not than what it is (Brown et al. 2023; Brown, 2024). The relative lack of in-depth engagement with the meaning and function of the mainstream has only strengthened the binary and the notion that it naturally acts consistently in opposition to the far right. In the comparatively few attempts to define the mainstream in political science literature, these kinds of assumptions have been reinforced, where mainstream parties are seen as electorally dominant, centrist, and specifically not far/radical right, parties (e.g., Akkerman et al, 2016; Meguid, 2005; Pop-Eleches 2010). More recently, Crulli and Albertazzi (2024, pp.23–24) have proposed a bi-dimensional approach 'where each party family (and sub-family) sits in relation to government participation and public opinion'. While they incorporate a welcome reflection on the contingency of the mainstream, the framework still reinforces the prerogative of party classification.

What remains dominant in the field is an assumption of fixed and immutable categories within the realms of liberal democratic electoral competitions and political office. This establishes clear boundaries for belonging/non-belonging to the mainstream and leads to a linear approach to mainstreaming (Brown et al. 2023). The way in which we understand the mainstream has significant consequences for how we then understand the far right and its role in (re)producing daily political discourses and ideas (Mondon and Winter 2020; Goyvaerts 2021; Schneider 2023). This is evident not only in scholarly publications, but also in collaborations between academics and mainstream journalists which rely on party categorisations. Such an approach risks overlooking the ways in which mainstream parties and individuals may adopt far-right positions at any given juncture (Henley, 2024). As Liam Gillespie (2024) suggests, even in more critical approaches to mainstreaming, we can fall into similar traps by creating an artificial separation between the mainstream and far right, painting an inaccurate picture of liberalism's longstanding production and reproduction of racism, white supremacy and other forms of exclusion. In light of the challenges presented in this section, we now turn to outlining a revised understanding of far-right politics along two interlinked lines. We argue that the resurgence of reactionary politics, which has become particularly pronounced since 2016, should in fact be regarded as a *fifth* wave in which the far right is effectively mainstream.

A Revised Approach to Researching the Far Right

Consequently, we suggest a new approach to understanding the current context which entails defining far-right politics as not solely dependent on party categorisation and electoral outcomes. Instead, we argue that we must base our definitions on the actions and discourse of political parties and individuals, as well as public actors such as the media and academics. This means understanding that

being nominally a mainstream actor does not mean that one cannot support or implement far-right politics, espouse and promote far-right discourse or legitimise and embolden far- and extreme-right actors. In other words, far-right and mainstream politics are not mutually exclusive, and they can intersect in at least some of these elements. Our approach also comprises a revised interpretation of the 'waves' thesis when considering the relationship between the far right and the mainstream, which both builds on and challenges the existing metaphor.

We argue that far-right politics can be used by a variety of different actors, rather than it being solely used to define a paradigm which enables party categorisation/classification. Primarily, we identify the centrality of racism to far-right ideology, which is often thinly veiled behind covert and coded references to culture and identity (Titley 2009; Lentin and Titley 2011; Lentin 2005; Garner and Selod, 2015; Rattansi, 2020). In terms of the interconnected forms of exclusion and oppression which tie together the different ideologies of the far right, we follow Katy Brown (2023, pp.28-29) in defining the far right as:

> a position characterised by a generalised commitment to inequality, with racism at its core (Mondon and Winter, 2020). This may be accompanied by a broader 'politics of fear' (Wodak, 2020) which encompasses various forms of exclusion targeting different marginalised groups

Rather than 'populism', therefore, what is essential in the us-versus-them dichotomy in far-right politics is a process of exclusion[3] (Katsambekis, 2023, p.432). This is what is often labelled as authoritarianism, i.e. a 'tough punitive approach' or reintroduction of "moral" or "traditional" values to tackle 'social problems' (Mudde, 2019, pp.29–30)— [which] is part of a wider discourse of 'authentic civil society' (Zaslove, 2011, p.107). This often involves advocating for 'traditional values' regarding 'family, sexuality and law and order' (Zaslove 2007, 2011, p.107; Barcella, 2022, pp.84–85).

Therefore, while the wave metaphor is a useful one, these heuristic tools rarely allow for precision, and some caveats are necessary. In particular, it is crucial to note that it is impossible to clearly pinpoint when a wave ends and the next starts and doing so can lead to misunderstanding slow, subtle and intricate processes. For example, while it is tempting to link the start of the fourth wave to particular events such as 9/11 or the refugee crisis, this ignores that the process could be traced as far back as the 1970s when extreme-right intellectuals embraced the concept of right-wing Gramscianism. In practice, some prominent far-right parties implemented this strategy consciously in the 1990s (see the Front National and FPO for example). Yet we also argue that shifts can occur rapidly, and we contend that from 2016 onwards, it is pertinent to speak of a fifth wave, in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the mainstream right and far right. Indeed, several events including Brexit, the election of Trump in the USA, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, the rise of the Hindutva movement in India and Marine Le Pen's performance in France have hastened the process and moved us onto a new stage where far-right politics is increasingly accepted and reproduced by the mainstream. The genocidal war waged by Israel in Gaza or Trump's second presidency could

point to a new stage, as masks appear to have fallen and the more extreme forms of politics on the right are no longer taboo.

It is therefore crucial to consider continuities between different waves rather than viewing them in isolation. In this, we take our cue from critiques levelled at the analogy of 'waves of feminism'. Richmond and Charnley (2022 p.93), reflecting on the reactionary nature of so-called 'gender critical' feminists, state:

> Instead of an untenable "waves" approach to historicising feminism, can we look at gender critical feminism as a modernisation of imperialist forms of feminism? Conspiracy is the main unit of this reaction, but these conspiracies have proven capable of steering courtroom judgements and government policy

Similarly, Lola Olufemi (2020, pp.12-13), has noted how in mainstream historicisations of feminism 'the "waves" analogy redefines what counts as feminist work to advancements made solely in relation to rights and legislation'. This, Olufemi underlines, does not do justice to the complex and often racist history of feminism which had comprised forms of exclusion, particularly against Black feminists (see also Lewis 2025). Similar to what the above observations highlight in terms of continuities between different 'waves' of 'gender critical' (transphobic) feminism', and racism, different waves of the far right are arguably 'modernisations' of older forms of reaction, racism and exclusion. In other words, while it is true that the mainstreaming of far-right and reactionary politics has gathered momentum since 2016, it is also vital to note that history is littered with examples of intersections between the mainstream and far right, as well as the politics of exclusion originating and being maintained by the mainstream from their inception (Gillespie, 2024; Mondon, 2025).

Our approach to a 'fifth wave', therefore, draws on discursive approaches to mainstreaming which highlight that while the mainstream is certainly representative of 'the' or 'the centre', it is 'not only constructed, contingent and fluid' but also 'not essentially good, rational and moderate in and of itself' (Brown et al. 2023). A wide range of scholarly work has emphasised the role of discursive processes in changing the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable in public discourse (Wodak, et al. 2013 Krzyżanowski et al. 2018; Richardson and Wodak, 2009 Krzyżanowski, 2020; 2018; see also Wodak, and Krzyżanowski, 2017, Brown 2023). This encourages a move away from the notion of the mainstream (and indeed liberal democracy) as a bulwark against the far right (Mondon 2025) towards a more 'holistic' interpretation of mainstreaming. This entails viewing it not as a unidirectional process, but one in which 'discourses and/or attitudes' can 'move from a position of unacceptability to one of legitimacy and vice-versa' (Brown, 2023, p.59; Brown et al. 2023, p.170). We believe that such approaches are vital in analysing how elite discourse holds the potential to shift 'the mainstream' from more progressive to more reactionary positions (and vice-versa).

For instance, recent scholarly work has highlighted how mainstream depictions of anti-immigration politics as 'legitimate concerns of the people' has enabled a further euphemisation of racist discourse as 'populist' (Mondon 2022). In turn, this discursive shift entails an implicit acceptance of 'Great Replacement' conspiracy

narratives in mainstream discourse (Newth and Scopelliti 2025; Lamour 2024).[4] Increasingly, therefore, mainstream political and media discourses have centred a racialised antagonism between the putative (white) 'native' in-group(s) and 'non-native' outgroup(s) as a way of explaining society's ills (Newth 2023b). The logical conclusion is that appeals for 'strong borders', 'controls on immigration' the prioritisation of deportation and other forms of violence move from the margins to the mainstream of contemporary liberal democratic politics (Goodfellow 2020). As Omran Shroufi (2024) highlights, 'the borders between the far-right and non-far-right are fluid and permeable' by arguing that the fundamental differences between far-right and mainstream-right parties are becoming blurred to the point of indistinction. This interpretation ensures that the far right is not viewed as innately distinct from the liberal mainstream and therefore accounts for the central role of mainstream actors in the mainstreaming process. It also avoids a fantasmatic construction of an idealised past in which the mainstream was fundamentally 'good' and a bulwark against the far right (Mondon, 2025). In line with this interpretation of the fifth wave, therefore, our case study below represents not a break with the past but rather continuations of long-existing discourses which have contributed to the mainstreaming of reactionary politics.

The Far Right, the Mainstream and Mainstreaming in the UK

The following case study on the far right in the UK, while not exhaustive, illustrates our two interlinked contentions in this article: first, the necessity to understand far-right politics as a political position rather than simply a party category; and second, this notion of a 'fifth wave' of far-right politics in which it has become increasingly mainstream. By tracing the development of the far right within the UK, as well as popular narratives about its lack of formal electoral success, we illustrate how the construction of binaries masking fuzzy borders has long persisted in this context. It is through these narratives, however, that the mainstreaming of the far right has been able to accelerate at such a pace to a point of relative indistinction.

There has long existed the idea that Britain is somehow exceptional in the lack of success that extreme- and far-right groups have achieved over the years. For example, Piero Ignazi (2003, p.173) claimed that

> [t]he extreme right in Great Britain has never experienced success. Fascist leanings in Britain were easily kept under control both in the 1930s, when an avowedly fascist party was formed, and in the post-war years, when right-extremists tried in vain to acquire political relevance.

This prevailing narrative can find its source in perceptions of the country's role in defeating fascism in the Second World War, where the idea that it formed a crucial barrier against the extreme right has long been perpetuated in public discourse (Mondon and Winter, 2020, pp.40–1). These kinds of ideas are regularly evoked in memorial events, history curricular and wider political speech (Colley, 2017). They have become core to the construction of national identity, with the idea that far-right politics must be antithetical to British values.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that much of what is described as far right, 'populism' or 'illiberalism' today is neither new nor exceptional in the British context. It was part of and in fact core to the building of the British nation and the development of liberal democracy more widely. Much of the praise that places Britain as standing heroically against the rise of Nazism relies on the erasure of the concurrent brutality of empire, as well as longstanding systemic and structural inequality (Gopal, 2020). This kind of selective memory has been crucial in the creation of national myths in Britain, in what Paul Gilroy (2004) terms 'postimperial melancholia', denoting both a hungering for the colonial past and an evasion of its true character. As Stuart Hall (in Davison, Featherstone and Rustin, 2017, p.145) suggests, there is a 'profound historical forgetfulness [. . .] which has overtaken the British people about race and empire since the 1950s.' Notions of exceptionalism are a key part of this erasure, and we can see how the creation of binaries has a long history of obscuring the relationship between the mainstream and far right.

The Rise and Evolution of the 'New' Far Right and the Central Role of the Mainstream in Mainstreaming

These kinds of ideas have also permeated into contemporary interpretations of the extreme and far right in the UK, with the failure of the British National Party (BNP), for instance, seen as further evidence of its rejection. Furthermore, UKIP's historical development from a single-issue focus on Europe has seen it often avoid inclusion in the far-right category, with euphemising terms such as 'eurosceptic' being preferred, even when the party had taken a clear turn to the far right. Although there has been less reticence post-Brexit in this regard, the party's inclusion in the far right is still not well-established in field.

A key turning point in the new stage of far-right mainstreaming was the 2014 European elections. This does not mean that it marked an unexpected break, however. The roots of this new development can indeed be traced back to the tensions core to mainstream politics in the UK. In particular, they can be found in the uneasy coexistence of some areas of politics becoming increasingly liberalised both in terms of economics and culture, with some sections of the population arching back to 'the good old days' of empire and the vast majority losing out as austerity started to bite. It is no coincidence that Nigel Farage and David Cameron became leaders of their party the same year in 2006. Back then, Cameron described UKIP as 'a bunch of . . . fruitcakes and loonies and closet racists mostly' (Taylor, 2006). In fact, the rise of the more culturally liberal Cameron, who would also become one of the key architects of austerity, created space for someone like Farage. Electorally, UKIP could appeal to both those finding themselves orphaned by the demise of the extreme right, but also to the more reactionary sections of the Conservative Party who became disillusioned by the new leadership. Discursively, the combination of austerity, Labour's move away from its traditional working-class heartlands and the evolution of the working class itself meant that there was also space for a party on the right to claim the 'left behind',[5] regardless of whether there was any truth to it (Mondon and Winter 2019).

However, none of this was inevitable and mainstream elites from politics, media and academia were instrumental in paving the way for the rise of UKIP, but more

importantly in normalising far-right politics, with or without Farage. This could not be clearer than in the skewed reading of the 2014 European elections. UKIP appeared to have quickly caught a significant share of the vote in such electoral settings, receiving 15.6% of the vote in the 2004 and 16% in 2009. Yet these are second-order elections, prone to low turnout and high protest vote. They are particularly favourable to far-right parties which campaign on anti-EU messaging, as is witnessed across Europe, especially with proportional representation allowing smaller parties to make electoral gains and have more sway. The picture becomes further nuanced when accounting for the traditionally low turnout in EU elections: in 2004, UKIP received 6% of the registered vote and 5.6% in 2009. A similar pattern emerged in 2014 when UKIP achieved 26.6% of the vote, which was described as an 'earthquake' in the typical hyperbolic fashion that reporting on the far right takes (Wintour and Watt, 2014). This marked the start of the 'left behind' myth which served Farage well as it diverted attention away from his elitist politics which favours the wealthy (Mondon and Winter 2019).

While we are not contesting that UKIP won the election, it remains that Farage and his party received less than 10% of the registered vote. And yet, this was not the line taken by the mainstream elite, whether in the media, academia and politics. The following years witnessed not only the constant platforming of Farage across the mainstream media, but also that of key issues such as immigration. Even starker is the decision by Cameron to promise a referendum on the EU as part of his 2015 campaign for the general election, while no other party except UKIP had campaigned on this issue in recent years. This decision was hardly based on popular grievances but on the vote of fewer than 10% of the electorate in a setting prone to protest votes. The 2005 and 2010 general elections clearly showed the limits of UKIP's appeal. In 2005, the party received 1.4% of the vote and in 2010, it took 2%. Even in 2015, in an incredibly fertile environment where its pet issues were front and centre during the campaign, UKIP received 'only' 8.3% of the vote. This is not to deny the concerns that the rise of UKIP raises, but rather to show that at the time, it was by no means a popular party and that the decision to give it such a prominent place in public discourse was squarely in the hands of mainstream elites.

Following Brexit, UKIP lost its main raison-d'être and Farage stepped down as leader, seeing its levels of support plummet. Other parties emerged in its place, notably the Brexit Party which later became Reform UK, but it was not until the general election in 2024 that the far right started to make headlines again. Claims of another 'earthquake' emerged when Reform UK gained representatives in parliament, despite the fact that the party performed similarly to UKIP in 2015 (8.4% of registered voters against 8.3%) and came second in fewer constituencies. Yet once more, far-right politics has been allowed to clog up public discourse, with Farage able to claim victory after victory as both Conservative and Labour politicians outdo themselves in moving ever further right, even when it goes against what surveys suggest people may want or care about (Mondon 2022). The turn towards what is traditionally considered far-right politics can also be seen in the mainstreaming of Islamophobia, particularly through the Prevent policy (Abbas 2022). Again, this has not been done under the pressure of the far right or 'public opinion', but in a top-down manner where politicians of all stripes have furthered

the demonisation of Muslim communities, emboldening more extreme actors on the right to take matters into their own hands.

Fuzzy Borders

In our current reactionary moment, any pretence of a strict binary between the mainstream and the extreme has become unsustainable as borders between these actors have blurred to the point of indistinction, if they ever existed. As noted in Section 3 of our article, viewing far-right politics as a discourse/political position, rather than a distinct party categorisation, enables a sharper analysis of how the mainstream has adopted policies in line with this positioning. This, in turn, illustrates our argument that – notwithstanding the importance of the previous waves of far-right politics – it is pertinent to talk about a fifth wave of the far right. In other words, rather than a mainstreaming of the far right, far-right politics *is* in fact mainstream.

The extreme anti-immigration stance of the Conservative party while in power echoed that of many unmistakably far-right parties, both in terms of policy proposals and discourse. In 2012, the 'Hostile Environment', as then-Home Secretary Theresa May unashamedly called the brutal anti-immigration policy, was already a clear indication of the increasingly rightward direction of travel in UK politics (Goodfellow 2020; Jones et al. 2017). The so-called 'Rwanda Plan' for deporting asylum seekers devised by the Boris Johnson administration received full-throated praise from Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's far-right *Lega* Party. Later, Rishi Sunak made 'Stop the Boats' one of his 'five promises' to the electorate. Via a carefully co-ordinated and stage-managed partnership with Italy's far-right Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, Sunak pledged to stop the 'thousands of migrants' who 'cross the Mediterranean to Italy, entering Europe illegally', under the specious guise of 'stopping criminal people smugglers'. Indeed, Meloni's own 'Albania Plan', which outsources management of asylum seekers to its former Balkan colony, took its cue from the Rwanda Plan.

Rather than oppose the Rwanda Plan on humanitarian grounds, Keir Starmer's Labour Party has continuously denounced it as a 'gimmick' and a 'waste of taxpayers' money' (Al Jazeera, 2024). Starmer's 'alternative' proposal of a 'Border Security Command' to 'smash criminal gangs' as a way of stopping the boats, shows how 'stop the boats' discourse has become part of the mainstream 'common sense' in UK politics, simply expressed through another three-word soundbite. Despite his condemnation of the Rwanda Plan in one breath, in the next, Starmer maintained the UK government's close relationship with Italy's far-right administration via his endorsement of Meloni's Albania Plan (Adu, 2024), all the while saying that Sunak had been 'the most liberal prime minister we've ever had on immigration' (Malik et al. 2024). In their first year in office, the Labour Party continue to push further right, televising immigration raids and boasting about the numbers of people deported.

While this section has up until this point focused on immigration, this is not the only 'far-right' culture war issue on which the mainstream has adopted similar positions. Both parties, as well as much of the mainstream media, have fuelled the transphobic moral panics which follow the same playbook as typical far-right

politics (Amery and Mondon, 2024). Sunak and Starmer's comments on trans rights and gender have at times been indistinguishable from that of far-right figures such as Meloni and Orban. Meanwhile, the authoritarianism displayed by both Conservative and Labour governments in the face of climate protestors is a clear illustration of a mainstreaming of the authoritarian measures which have traditionally been associated with the far right (Katsambekis, 2023). Further to this, the anti-scientific and climate denialism traditionally associated with so-called 'populists' (Meijers et al. 2023) has been replicated recently by Starmer, for instance stating that he 'will not sacrifice Great British industry to the drum-banging, finger-wagging Net Zero extremists' (Starmer, 2024a). Starmer's use of the term 'extremists' depicts any dissent against his Carbon Capture and Storage policy as a security threat. Meanwhile, the Labour government's opposition to Net Zero also mimics the official discourse of Farage's Reform Party (Reform UK, 2024).

Similarly, both the 2024 Labour and Conservative Party conferences illustrate how little difference there is between these two mainstream parties in terms of their adoption of far-right discourse. For Labour, we can note the zero-tolerance shown to any form of dissent, including the violent removal of two pro-Palestinian protestors. Furthermore, the prominence of the 'Border Security Command' banner at this conference (Sparrow, 2024) and the party's conference arrangements committee (Labour Party, 2024) is again an illustration of just how hegemonic the 'Stop the Boats' discourse has become. Regarding the Conservative Party conference, a race to the bottom ensued between Kemi Badenoch and Robert Jenrick as to who could say the most reactionary thing. Jenrick's comments on Britain needing to leave the ECHR pre-empted Farage's adoption of the same discourse (Walker and Dugan, 2024). Meanwhile, Badenoch's comments in a pamphlet circulated during the conference, which stigmatised both autism and anxiety in children, further reflect a growing reactionary current in the party (Courea, 2024). In many ways, this was a continuation of reactionary discourse facilitated by the National Conservativism conference in 2023 which saw the coming together of far-right and so-called 'centre-right' figures and a mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy theories (Walker, 2023). It is telling that in recent years, we have seen the rehabilitation of Theresa May, the architect of the hostile environment, in liberal circles.

Perhaps nothing better shows this increasingly blurred state of affairs than the response to the racist attacks which took place in the UK in the weeks following the fatal stabbing of three children at a Taylor Swift-themed event in Southport. There are two issues to highlight: first, is that despite the clearly racist nature of the riots, Keir Starmer showed some hesitation in labelling these groups as 'far-right', initially opting for the euphemising term of 'thuggery' (Starmer, 2024b), a term which also holds racist origins. This was in line with wider descriptions of the attacks in the media and politics as exceptional events. This is despite the very clear link between the rioters' chants and the discourse that has been peddled by both the Conservative government and the Labour Party while in opposition. It is no coincidence that one of the main chants of the rioters (which was also emblazoned on banners) was that of 'Stop the Boats' (Savage, 2024). Rather than a passing slogan, this had in fact been for some time (and continues to be) UK government policy in the face of the so-called 'small boats crisis'.

This begs the question of who is/are 'the people' in mainstream discourse today. Is it the few hundred racists attempting to burn hotels with asylum seekers in them whose grievances are qualified as legitimate by some mainstream actors? Or is it the thousands of counter protesters organising to protect communities at the sharp end of racist violence? Or is it the hundreds of thousands of protesters peacefully demonstrating against genocide, while those are called 'hate marches' by Suella Braverman (the then-Home Secretary)? Similarly, who can claim the mantel of the 'left behind'? Is it the concerning but limited section of the electorate willing to turn to the far right, who generally does not hail from the worst off in society? Or is it the many more who have seen their livelihoods get far worse under the politics of austerity while those telling them to tighten their belt or blame their situation on immigrants have filled their pockets and become caught in countless corruption scandals? Is it the Just Stop Oil protesters given years in jail for demanding action against climate change, the racist rioters given shorter sentences, or those encouraging said racist attacks being given more platforms for their hate speech? The answers to such questions should be obvious to anybody with an understanding of far-right politics, yet the UK government's response to the spate of racist attacks and pogroms in the UK is indicative of how the mainstream continues to normalise reactionary narratives. Despite condemning what the government labelled 'far-right thuggery', Home Secretary Yvette Cooper argued that such 'disorder' should not 'silence a serious debate' on migration (Yates, 2024). These comments from Cooper, who had prior to the riots stoked the flames of racist politics by advocating for a 'blitz' against 'illegal migrants', illustrates the mainstream's key role in this fifth wave of far-right politics.

Conclusion

In his 1988 article *Right-wing extremism in post war Europe,* Klaus von Beyme outlined three 'waves' of the post-war far-right which also relied on a key binary between the mainstream and extreme. Nearly 40 years on, both the waves metaphor and binary outlined in von Beyme's work have remained hegemonic paradigms in mainstream scholarly approaches to far-right politics (Mudde, 2019; Wondreys and Mudde, 2022). The consequence has been a disproportionate focus on the categorisation of parties, an interpretation of the far right as an exception to – rather than a product of – liberalism, and a reification of liberal democracy as a bulwark against the far right. The reality is, however, that the boundaries between the mainstream and extreme, or even liberalism and fascism, have always been exaggerated or simplified. Our reactionary moment represents a critical juncture which poses a serious threat to democracy and people's lives, and particularly those at the sharp end of such politics. This demands an evolution in how we understand the nature and functioning of contemporary far-right politics.

Taking our cue from the idea of the 'double-hermeneutic', we have proposed a revised definition of the far right which helps us better analyse and interpret the current reactionary moment. Our aim throughout this article has not, however, been to discard or discredit the vital work carried out on the far right over the decades. Indeed, in order to arrive at our revised understanding, we have engaged with the various definitions and frameworks created over the years and examined

how these debates have enabled important distinctions between the ways in which ideologies of exclusion are articulated; a specific distinction between the radical/far and extreme right forms a key example of this. This is not to mention the linguistic and cultural specificities which might dictate how we analyse different forms of reactionary politics across wildly different contexts. Our key argument here is that such paradigms have often depended on an exaggerated distinction between the far right and the mainstream.

The second section of our article therefore outlined our concise revised definition of the far right which shifts the focus away from *categorisation* towards an understanding of far-right politics as a political *position*. Our definition is indebted not only to previous paradigms, but also to more recent work which has interrogated the interplay between the mainstream and far right and, most importantly, the fuzzy borders between these two entities. In doing so, we have argued for a revision/update of the 'waves' metaphor to reflect the most recent developments in reactionary politics in which the lines between the far right and the mainstream are blurred to the point of indistinction. As events unfold at a dramatic speed, it is becoming clear that it is also essential to (re-)engage with literature on fascism and question whether we may have moved to a new stage whereby liberal democratic institutions have not only proved to fail but enabled and emboldened all kinds of reactionaries (Farkas and Mondon 2025).

With the British political mainstream increasingly adopting far-right positions since 2014 despite the lack of a strong, established far right, the UK seemed a particularly relevant case study. The stoking of moral panics around trans rights and gender identity, free speech, and the 'stop the boats' anti-immigration discourse are key illustrations of this, as is the adoption of these far-right pet issues by both the Conservative and Labour parties in the UK. We can look to many other contexts to see similar dynamics play out, so we hope that through tying this case study into questions around terminology, binaries and the wave metaphor, we can provoke further debate, discussion and research on these issues. Overall, we emphasise the critical importance of such reflections on the paradigms and explanations that we develop, borrow and perpetuate in academia. These choices are not devoid of consequence so we must always look inward too in our critiques, especially when the mainstreaming of far-right politics is progressing at such a rate and scale.

Notes

1 For clarity, we use the 'far right' principally throughout and later explain our understanding of it.
2 It is worth noting here that context and language matters and our analysis is focused on research in English. For example, in France, the term 'extrême droite' remains commonly used and there is no direct equivalent for far right. While there has still been a process of euphemisation, through 'populism' for example, some more critical scholars have insisted on retaining the term recently (see Dahani et al 2023; Faury 2024).

3 We define populism as a discourse which establishes a sharp antagonistic 'opposition between "the people" and the "elite", with populists claiming to represent said 'people' while criticizing 'the elite' for not satisfying the demands or the will of 'the people'. (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado 2023). However, we stress our view that 'although far-right ideology may be expressed through the people-vs-elite antagonism, the antagonism itself is not central to their position' (Brown 2023). The antagonism is, instead, found in a broad 'us versus them' which cannot simply be explained by a populist discourse of 'the people versus the elites'.

4 This theory centres around the idea of 'the existence of white "natives" being replaced by non-white populations coming from Asia and Africa', the 'perceived decline of European civilization in different domains' and [. . .] the presentation of a desirable future based on the "Great Return" of non-European migrants to their homeland' (Lamour 2024).

5 The 'left behind' refers to a fantasised white working class who are seen as key supporters of the far right. Despite clear evidence that far-right support comes from a range of groups, this stereotype persists in political, media and academic discourse.

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