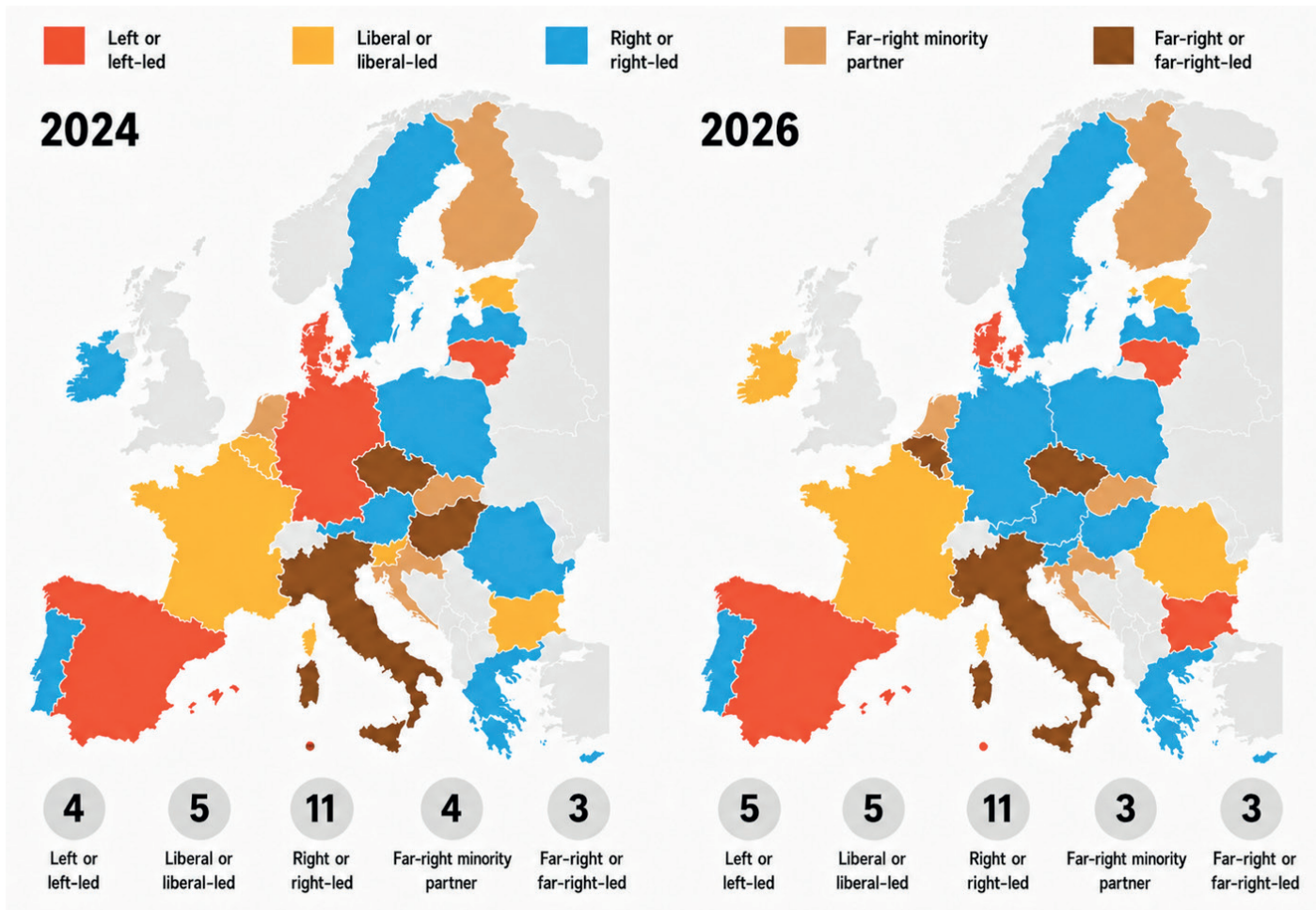


Two years on: Why Europe's far right keeps growing

Javier Carbonell
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Levente Kocsis



Credit: Created by Javier Carbonell using AI Tools based on own analysis.

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Executive summary

Two years after the 2024 European Parliament elections, the main trends of that moment remain intact. Mainstream parties continue to lose ground, anti-establishment forces continue to grow and the reversal of far-right fortunes has so far failed to materialise. This paper tests four optimistic narratives regarding the far right's decline and explores why they have all failed.

The first narrative holds that participation in government damages far-right parties, as voters observe the consequences of their policies and reject them. The evidence is mixed: minority partners do tend to suffer electorally, but far-right-led governments have largely maintained or increased their support. Even where individual far-right parties lose support, other anti-establishment or far-right actors often appear to capture the same electorate.

The second narrative argues that the far right's internal divisions would become an electoral liability. While far-right groups remain deeply divided – particularly on defence, trade, and foreign policy – these contradictions have not translated into electoral costs. Pro-democratic parties have not pressed the attack forcefully enough, and voters have remained largely indifferent.

The third narrative focuses on the Trump effect, suggesting that European far-right parties' association with the new American administration would become

a liability. Far-right leaders have indeed distanced themselves publicly – on Greenland, the Venezuela raid, the Iran war, and trade – and successfully repositioned themselves without alienating their base, while pro-democratic forces have failed to exploit the opening. Trump appears to have shaped far-right behaviour more clearly than far-right electoral support.

The fourth narrative concerns Ursula von der Leyen's strategy of normalising the ECR group while excluding PfiE and ESN. In electoral terms, this strategy has not been successful: the EPP has lost support, the excluded groups have gained the most, and the ECR has not clearly benefited from its closer association with the mainstream.

The far right's continued growth reflects deep structural drivers – inflation, distrust in political institutions, immigration, and global economic competition – that short-term political strategies have so far failed to address. The one cautiously positive note is that far-right polling has stabilised since late 2025, suggesting a possible plateau. Whether this holds will depend on whether pro-democratic parties are willing to move beyond reactive tactics and confront the underlying conditions driving the anti-establishment wave. Two years on, that shift remains overdue.

1. Introduction

This June marks the second anniversary of the 2024 European Parliament elections. With another crucial electoral year approaching in 2027, this study asks what has changed since Europeans last went to the polls. Much has happened over the past two years: Donald Trump has threatened the EU with a trade war and raised the prospect of taking Greenland; elections were cancelled in Romania due to foreign interference; Viktor Orbán lost the government to a former member of his own party; and the United Kingdom has signalled interest in a closer relationship with the EU.

This study examines the political consequences of these developments. Many observers expected the post-2024 political cycle to expose the electoral vulnerabilities of Europe's far right. Participation in government, internal divisions, association with Trump, and attempts to normalise parts of the far right within the EU mainstream were all expected to weaken anti-establishment forces over time. Two years later, however, these expectations remain only weakly supported by the available evidence.

This paper assesses the current state of the far right and considers four narratives that have been used to explain a possible decline in far-right support before and since the European Parliament elections.

The first narrative argues that far-right parties would be punished electorally once they entered government, as voters would increasingly see them as part of the

establishment. According to this view, voters would observe the consequences of their policies and reject them. The second narrative holds that far-right parties are divided on many issues beyond their core messages on immigration and national identity, and that these divisions would become an electoral liability over time. A third narrative focuses on the Trump effect, suggesting that his return to prominence would strengthen anti-Trump forces, as seen in Canada and Australia. More recent threats over trade and Greenland could also create problems for far-right parties associated with Trump.

The final narrative concerns Ursula von der Leyen's strategy since the 2024 European Parliament elections. Her approach has been to move closer to, and normalise, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group while continuing to reject Patriots for Europe (Pfe) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). This strategy appears designed to divide the far right and normalise some of its ideas and parties, while making others appear less acceptable.

Using polling data from Politico's Poll of Polls and EU Elects projections, as well as data from Eulytix, this study tests whether the expectations and arguments that circulated after the 2024 European Parliament elections still hold. The evidence presented provides limited support for the main narratives predicting a weakening of the far right.

2. What has happened

EU PARLIAMENT

Which political groups have benefited from the events of the past two years, and which have lost ground? Have there been major changes since the last European Parliament elections?

According to EU Elects projections (Figure 1), if elections were held today, the resulting European Parliament would look broadly similar to the current one.¹ Political groups are projected to win roughly the same number of seats as they did in the previous elections. Similar coalitions could still be formed, and the traditional, pro-European majority formed by the Socialists and Democrats, Renew Europe and the European People's Party would still hold, although only by a narrow margin. However, several important trends present before the elections have continued after.

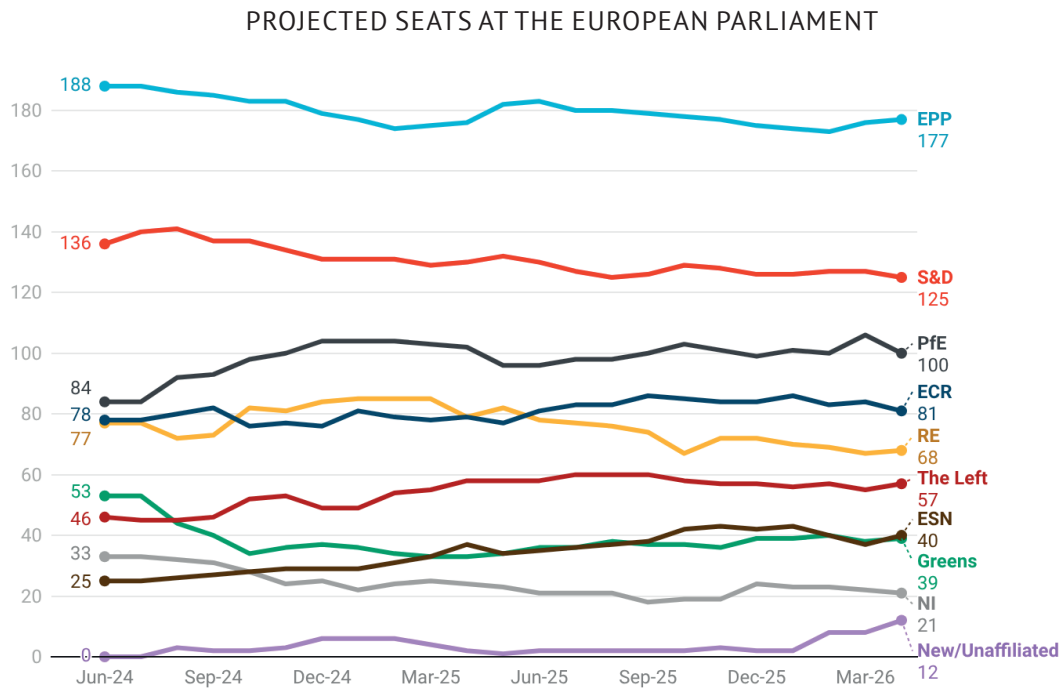
First, both mainstream political families continue to lose ground. The anti-establishment sentiment affecting much of Western politics² is also weakening the EPP and the Socialists and Democrats, which are each projected to lose around 10 MEPs each.

Second, the left has not managed to recover from its recent electoral defeats. Taken together, The Left, the Greens, and the Socialists and Democrats are also projected to lose around 10 seats. Interestingly, this decline is driven mainly by losses among the S&D and the Greens. By contrast, The Left appears to be gaining modestly, suggesting that it may be capturing some of the discontent among voters dissatisfied with mainstream politics.

If elections were held today, the resulting European Parliament would look broadly similar to the current one.

Third, the far right continues to grow. Current projections suggest that far-right groups could gain more than 30 additional MEPs. However, most of these gains are

Figure 1



Source: Created by Javier Carbonell using Datawrapper with EU Elects seat projection data.

not expected to go to the European Conservatives and Reformists, which is projected to gain only a few seats. Instead, the main beneficiaries are the more radical and anti-establishment far-right groups: Patriots for Europe, projected to rise from 84 to 100 seats, and Europe of Sovereign Nations, projected to increase from 25 to 40 seats.

It is important to note that far-right groups have not increased their vote share since around November 2025. Most of their polling gains occurred shortly after the European Parliament elections and during the 2024–2025 academic year. It is still too early to determine whether this stability is temporary or whether the far right has reached a plateau.

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GOVERNMENTS

What has happened with governments over the last year? Have the heads of state followed a different trajectory than the other parties?

The picture emerging from the national governments is also one of overall stability. Figure 2 summarises a great variety of governments, political systems and specifics into five broad categories, but the overall results show more or less the same number of countries governed by the left, right or liberals in 2024 and 2026.³

On the left, following the defeat of Olaf Scholz, only Spain, Malta and Denmark are led by Social Democratic coalitions. However, while the president of Lithuania has remained the same, the prime minister’s government has changed from one led by the centre-right to one led by the centre-left. Moreover, although it is much more difficult to classify given his populist and pro-Russia stances, Radev recently won the elections in Bulgaria on the platform of “Progressive Bulgaria”.

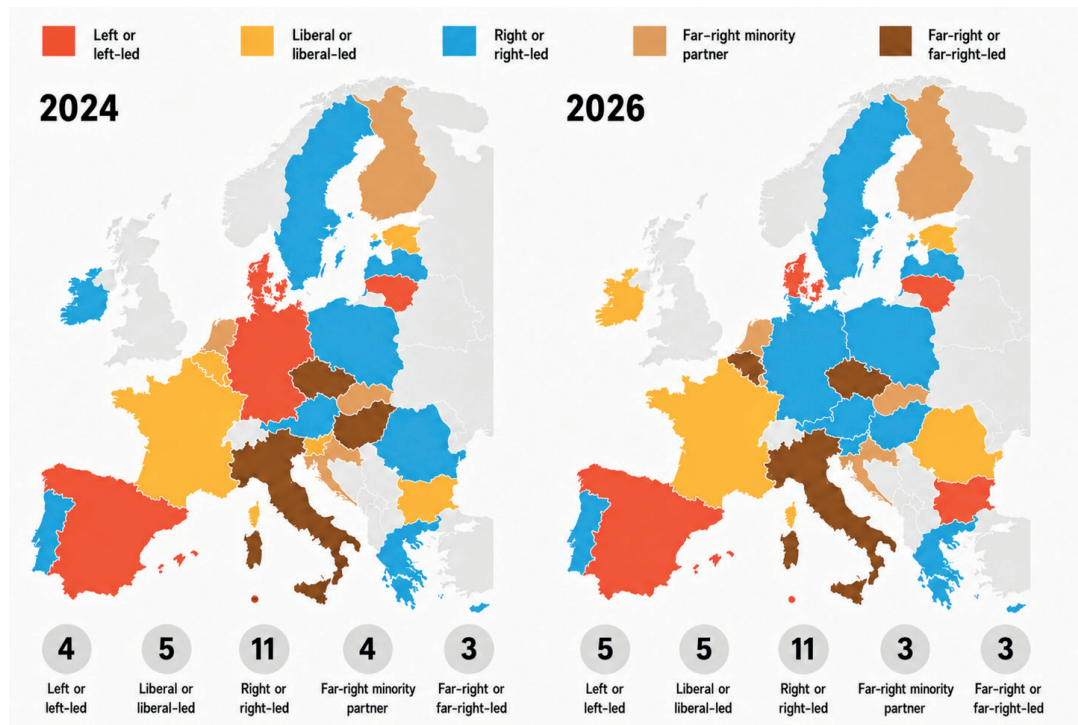
As for the liberals, they continue to govern in France and Estonia, as they did in 2024, but they have lost the head of government in Belgium, Slovenia and Bulgaria. By contrast, centrist figures close to the liberals have won in Romania and Ireland, while in the Netherlands, the more liberal-conservative VVD (with the far right as their junior partner) was replaced by the more liberal-progressive D66.

The EPP, of course, continues to be the political family with the highest number of governments. It has retained countries such as Portugal, Greece and Poland, and has added two very important countries to its list: Germany and, more significantly, Hungary.

The far right is present in EU national governments in a variety of ways. In some countries, such as Sweden, while it is not part of the government, it is the largest partner in the governing parliamentary coalition. In other countries,

Figure 2

THE POLITICAL LEANING OF EU GOVERNMENTS



Source: Created by Javier Carbonell using AI Tools based on own analysis.

such as Slovenia, while the new prime minister, Janez Janša, is formally affiliated with the EPP, he is widely considered to be ideologically closer to the far right.⁴

In three countries, the far right participates in the cabinet as a minority partner: Finland, Croatia and Slovakia. These countries have had a stable situation since 2024, and no major changes have occurred. In the Netherlands, the far-right PVV formed part of the independent-led Dick Schoof cabinet between July 2024 and February 2026 but was not part of the following Jette cabinet.

There has been a shift from having a very vocal but single disruptor in the figure of Viktor Orbán to having a broader group of populist heads of government, including Babiš, Fico, Janša, Radev and Magyar.

The most important changes regarding the far right have taken place in the governments it leads. In 2024, only one country was led by a PöE politician, Orbán, while Italy and Czechia were coalition governments led by ECR members. In 2026, only Meloni remains in power, and she has been joined by Belgium’s Bart De Wever as one of the only two leaders of ECR-led governments. The biggest

changes, however, have taken place in Czechia and Hungary. Petr Fiala’s ECR government was swept away by Andrej Babiš,⁵ who represents a much more pro-Russia and far-right government and belongs to Patriots for Europe. Orbán has been removed from office by Péter Magyar, who, while formally a member of the EPP,⁶ was previously a member of Orbán’s government and agrees with him ideologically on many issues. Therefore, as in 2024, Europe has two governments led by members of the ECR and one led by a PöE leader.

Thus, the stability of the system is visible, but some interesting trends in the polling data are also reflected in national governments. The Social Democrats are losing ground: from four governments, they now have three. At the same time, anti-establishment forces are gaining ground: they have won in Slovakia and Bulgaria and are close to winning in Romania.

The most important point in this regard is the shift from having a very vocal but single disruptor in the figure of Viktor Orbán to having a broader group of populist heads of government, including Andrej Babiš, Robert Fico, Janez Janša, Rumen Radev and Péter Magyar. Although these actors differ significantly from one another, many share scepticism towards elements of the EU’s liberal and integrationist policy agenda. While their confrontation with the EU is not as significant as Orbán’s, their growing number may create a more diffuse and structurally persistent challenge for EU cohesion and decision-making. Thus, the EU has substituted one large boulder blocking the road for a field of smaller stones that may prove harder to clear.

3. Narratives around the far right

PARTICIPATING IN GOVERNMENT WILL DAMAGE THEM

A common narrative surrounding the far right is that participation in government inoculates voters against it.⁷ The idea is that far-right parties are uniquely unprepared to hold office and thus, their time in government will put off voters.⁸ This argument was widespread when Trump lost the 2020 elections and when Macron called early parliamentary elections in 2024. One common interpretation was that the move was designed to produce a Rassemblement National (RN) prime minister, which would then lead citizens to reject the party in 2027.⁹ While a detailed causal study is beyond the scope of this paper, we can examine examples of countries that have had far-right parties in government and assess whether their polling has been negatively affected. The evidence is mixed.

It seems that belonging to a government as a minority partner is not particularly beneficial for far-right parties. In Finland, the Finns Party obtained 17% of the vote in the 2023 elections and has been part of the governing coalition since then. However, the party is now polling at around 13%.¹⁰ In Croatia, the Homeland Movement has been part of the cabinet since the 2024 elections, in which the party won nearly 10% of the vote. It is now polling at around 3%. Similarly, Lega in Italy won around 9% of the vote share in the 2022 Italian elections and is now polling at around 7%.¹¹ It should be noted, of course, that Lega was also part of the previous Conte and Draghi governments, and that it reached more than 30% in polling in 2019. In the Netherlands, the PVV went from winning the Dutch elections with a 23% of the vote in 2023 to falling second with 16% in 2025 and is now currently polling at 12%.¹² It is important to note that this is not unique to the far right, but rather reflects a well-known trend whereby minority partners tend to suffer electorally in subsequent elections.¹³

The evidence from far-right-led governments is more mixed. Belgium's N-VA does not seem to have lost support; if anything, it has reached slightly above 25% in Flanders. Moreover, Giorgia Meloni's party, while winning 26% of the vote in the Italian elections, has been polling at around 29% ever since. In addition, Babiš's polling has also increased since he took office in September 2025. Of course, Orbán lost the elections in 2026, but he nevertheless managed to maintain a high level of support for 16 years.

In many countries, there are replacement effects: when one far-right party declines, another rises.

Moreover, there is evidence of both replacement and rebound effects. Replacement effects occur when a far-right party in government loses some electoral support, but this does not mean that the far right overall loses support, because other far-right parties outside government gain relevance. This is what is happening, for example, with the newly created *Futuro Nazionale* party in Italy¹⁴ or with the growth of The Republic Movement (ESN) in Slovakia. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the PVV's decline has coincided with a surge in support for another far-right party, JA21, which is now polling at around 11%, up from just 6% in the most recent election. To a certain extent, it is also what has happened with Tisza in Hungary or ANO in Czechia, where parties defending similar positions to those in power came to replace the incumbents. In all these cases, the parties change, but overall far-right support remains similar or even increases.

The evidence does not suggest that governing is uniquely electorally toxic for the far right. Participating in government seems to affect the far right in a similar way to other parties.

There are also cases where clear rebound effects can be observed. In Austria, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) became a junior partner in the Kurz government. However, when that government collapsed due to a corruption scandal, the party declined significantly in the 2019 snap elections. Nevertheless, in the 2024 elections, the party became the largest, with 29% of the vote. The most impressive far-right rebound case internationally is, of course, the re-election of Donald Trump.

Overall, the evidence does not suggest that governing is uniquely electorally toxic for the far right, or that participation in office systematically inoculates voters against it. Participating in government seems to affect the far right in a very similar way to other parties.¹⁵ Being a junior coalition partner tends to carry electoral costs, as the cases of Finland and Croatia illustrate, and parties that have held power for a prolonged period while presiding over economic mismanagement and corruption will eventually face a reckoning – as Orbán ultimately did in Hungary. However, the far right in government also benefits from leadership, agenda-setting powers and the possibility of controlling the state.

In sum, the far right has become a “normal” party family in relation to how government affects it electorally.¹⁶ Pro-EU forces should not assume that a far-right government works as an antidote against them.

Figure 3

LEVEL OF COHESION AMONG EUROPEAN POLITICAL GROUPS



Source: Created by Javier Carbonell using Datawrapper with Eulytix data.

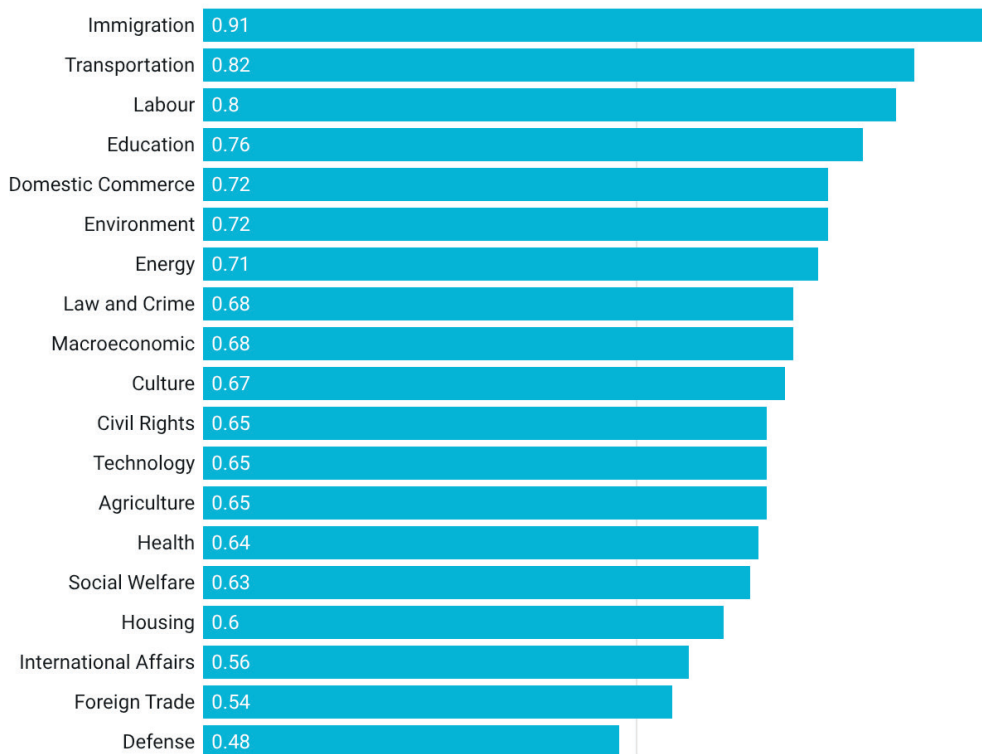
Far-right division will damage them

Traditionally, the far right has been seen as having little cohesion beyond a small number of core issues.¹⁷ The results show that this remains the case. Far-right groups are the least cohesive in the European Parliament, while groups on the left display the highest levels of voting cohesion (Figure 3).¹⁸

Among far-right groups, the highest level of agreement is, unsurprisingly, on migration policy (Figure 4). However, they are much more divided on defence, international relations and international trade. These issues have been salient in recent years due to trade conflicts with Trump, increased defence spending, the rethinking of relations with China, negotiations over the MFF and the Mercosur agreement.¹⁹ Other areas where the far right is more divided include housing and social policies.

Figure 4

LEVEL OF COHESION AMONG FAR-RIGHT MEPS BY POLICY TOPIC



Source: Created by Javier Carbonell using Datawrapper with Eulytix data.

It does not seem that (limited) efforts to highlight divisions within the far right have so far produced results. In recent years, defence, foreign trade and international relations have become central issues in public debate. Yet the far right’s unclear or contradictory positions on these questions have not translated into electoral costs. One possible explanation is that voters continue to prioritise immigration, economic insecurity and anti-establishment sentiment over policy coherence on international affairs, trade or defence. It remains unclear whether this line of attack is inherently ineffective or whether pro-democratic parties at the national and EU level have failed to make it forcefully enough. What is clear is that, to date, this strategy has not delivered.

Ties with Trump will negatively affect the far right

There is abundant anecdotal evidence that Trump has influenced elections in other countries. This effect was strongly felt in the Canadian and Australian elections, where his return to office boosted forces on the left that were seen as opposing him.²⁰ In Europe, many far-right parties that maintained close ties with Trump from the onset of his second presidency have started to publicly distance themselves from his administration.

The reasons for this distancing are strategic, not ideological. European far-right parties are built on national sovereignty as a core organising principle, which made Trump’s more aggressive foreign policy moves – his threats to seize Greenland, his administration’s kidnapping of Maduro, his trade tariffs and strikes on Iran – difficult to defend domestically. Aligning too closely with an administration that disregards the sovereignty of allied and third states, and whose “America First” policy places European producers at a competitive disadvantage, risks undermining the very ideological foundations these parties stand on. National leaders adapted accordingly. Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, once widely regarded as Trump’s closest European partner, recalibrated after her defeat in a constitutional referendum – partly attributed to her association with

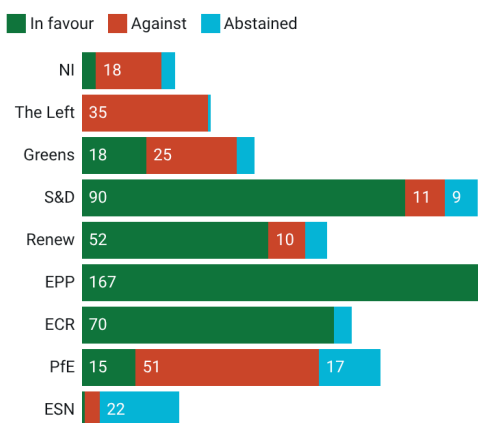
Washington – subsequently criticising Trump’s attacks on the Pope and refusing US forces access to an Italian air base for Iran strikes.²¹ The RN followed a more deliberate trajectory, managing its proximity to MAGA strategically ahead of the 2027 French presidential election, opposing Trump on trade and on the Venezuela raid in the name of national sovereignty,²² before Le Pen broke more openly with Trump over Iran, describing his conduct as “erratic”.²³

At the EU level, this distancing was most clearly showcased by the European Parliament vote on the EU–US trade deal in March (Figure 5). While the agreement passed with a majority, several far-right parties withheld support or opposed the deal outright. PfiE members voted predominantly against (51), while ESN was largely split between opposition (4) and abstention (22), with only one member voting in favour. Simultaneously, the PfiE family remains split, with 15 votes in favour and 17 abstentions, in contrast to 51 against. Yet the picture was not uniform across the far right. The ECR voted almost unanimously in favour, with 70 of its 75 members supporting the deal and none voting against.²⁴

Yet polling data does not support the conclusion that Trump’s association has cost the far right electorally. Research found that far-right support across Europe remained broadly stable between October 2024 and April 2025, with no evident impact of key US political events – including Trump’s inauguration – on voting intentions.²⁵ Several explanations may account for this. First, European voters may simply be less responsive to foreign policy and transatlantic dynamics than to domestic concerns such as immigration or the cost of living. Second, the far right has been largely successful in managing its distance from Trump – publicly recalibrating without alienating its core base. Third, and relatedly, pro-democratic parties have not done enough to exploit the divergence: the contradictions within the transatlantic far right have been visible but have not been converted into a sustained political attack. Thus, it can be said that Trump shapes far-right *behaviour* more than he shapes far-right support.

Figure 5

EUROPEAN POLITICAL GROUPS’ VOTE ON THE EU-US DEAL



Source: Created by Javier Carbonell using Datawrapper with EP roll call voting data.

Von der Leyen's strategy

One of the main political strategies of the second von der Leyen Commission has been to move closer to certain parts of the far right while continuing to exclude others. This has been particularly the case with members of the ECR group, as opposed to Pfi and ESN. The motivation behind this strategy was the recognition that ECR parties held power in several important governments, such as Italy's, and that cooperation with them would give the EPP more leverage vis-à-vis the Socialists and Democrats by allowing it, at times, to vote with the so-called "Venezuela coalition".²⁶

Although electoral concerns were not the primary driver, the strategy also reflected an effort to incorporate some anti-establishment forces into the EU mainstream without accepting the most anti-EU or pro-Russian actors. The expectation was that this would respond to some of the concerns of far-right voters and make them less likely to support more radical far-right parties.

What has been the electoral consequence of this strategy? The results show that the EPP has lost some support, thus, it has not been able to gain back far-right voters. Moreover, the two groups kept outside this normalisation strategy, Pfi and ESN, have seen the strongest increases in vote share. Nor does the strategy appear to have significantly benefited the ECR, whose projected number of MEPs has remained broadly stable. As a result, there is little evidence that the more "moderate" far right is emerging as the dominant force within the wider far-right camp. If anything, being part of the establishment has negatively affected ECR more than positively affected the EPP, resulting in a reinforcement of the anti-establishment strategy of Pfi and ESN.

WHY HAS THE FAR RIGHT CONTINUED TO GROW?

Why have these four narratives not had the expected effect? One reason may be that they have not been applied thoroughly enough. For example, divisions within the far right are well known, but mainstream parties have not stressed them sufficiently in their discourse.²⁷ Moreover, it is difficult to use the Trump card against the far right while also trying not to provoke the US president's anger and even praising him on some issues.²⁸

4. Conclusion

The main picture that emerges from current projections is one of stability in the next elections. Political groups would receive a very similar number of MEPs today as in the last European Parliament elections. However, some of the trends already visible then have continued. Mainstream parties keep losing MEPs, while anti-

A second explanation is that some of these factors may have had an effect, but not by causing the far right to decline. Rather, they may have prevented it from growing even further. In this sense, they could help explain why the far right has reached a plateau over the past six months. It is, of course, difficult to know the counterfactual. The evidence presented here is necessarily limited and does not allow for strong causal conclusions.

A third explanation is that the effects of these factors are very small. Even if far-right parties suffer some costs from being in government, the broader anti-establishment wave, or citizens' concerns about migration, may offset the negative effects of cabinet participation. Moreover, while association with Trump appears to have become a liability, far-right parties have reacted by distancing themselves from him, and voters rarely seem to be strongly influenced by international politics.

While association with Trump appears to have become a liability, far-right parties have reacted by distancing themselves from him, and voters rarely seem to be strongly influenced by international politics.

However, the failure of these narratives points to a focus on more structural causes as the reasons to explain the far right's rise.²⁹ The great increase in far-right support after the 2024 elections suggests that the wave of anti-establishment politics that, in 2024, swept away many incumbents facing elections across the world had a strong effect on the far right's gains in 2024 and 2025. While a complete picture of the far-right growth is beyond the scope of this study, it seems that looking at deeper structural problems, including inflation, dissatisfaction with the political system, immigration, and growing international competition,³⁰ seems more promising than putting hope in naive expectations based on far-right divisions or government responsibility. Therefore, if pro-democratic and pro-European forces wish to counter the far right more effectively, they may need to focus less on short-term tactical responses and more on addressing the structural drives of political dissatisfaction.

establishment parties benefit, particularly the far right, which continues to grow. Moreover, none of the expected problems for the far right has thus far materialised.

Being in government does not particularly affect far-right parties' electoral fortunes; it presents both risks

and opportunities as it does for any other party family. Although defence, trade and international relations have become central issues, the far right's vague or contradictory positions have not hurt its electoral prospects so far. Either because the far right has been able to distance itself from him or because EU voters simply do not care that much about the US president, the reality is that Trump does not seem to have significantly affected the far right's prospects in Europe. Lastly, even if the strategy may serve non-electoral goals, von der Leyen's tactic of cooperating with the ECR while excluding PfiE and ESN appears electorally unsuccessful, as the EPP has lost support, the excluded groups have gained the most and the ECR has not clearly benefited.

The only positive note is that far-right groups have not increased their vote share since around November 2025. Most of their gains took place in the year and a half following the European Parliament elections, which could mean that they have reached a plateau.

In sum, two years after the European Parliament elections, the decline of mainstream parties and the growth of the far right remain visible trends. While the centre still holds for now, at this pace the centrist coalition may struggle to survive after the next European Parliament elections. Although the major thorn represented by Orbán has been removed, new anti-establishment actors have emerged across the European political landscape.

None of the main counter-strategies or political bets have been successful so far. These expectations may, in retrospect, have underestimated the structural depth of contemporary anti-establishment politics. The rise of the far right must be understood as the result of deep structural problems, and it is by addressing those problems that real strategies for combating the far right can be found. Two years on from the 2024 European Parliament elections, pro-EU forces may need to reassess whether reactive short-term strategies are sufficient to confront the structural problems of European politics.

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- ² Kriesi, Hanspeter (2025), "[The rise of populism and the new cleavage](#)", *West European Politics*, pp. 1–34; Burn-Murdoch, John, "[Democrats join 2024's graveyard of incumbents](#)", *Financial Times*, 2024.
- ³ The graph summarises a great variety of systems and parties. While several heads of government or state are formally independent, we have included them into the closest party family. Given the main focus of the analysis, we have prioritised far-right participation over other affiliations. While the definition of "far right" is highly contested, this paper defines it as formal membership of one of the three far-right groups in the European Parliament: ECR, PFE, or ESN. In most presidential countries, we have prioritised the political leaning of the president. However, in the case of Lithuania, where the president is an independent with little party affiliation, we have reflected the change of prime minister from a right-wing leader to a left-wing one.
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- ¹⁷ Rovny, Jan, and Jonathan Polk (2020), "Still Blurry? Economic Salience, Position and Voting for Radical Right Parties in Western Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* volume 59, number 2.
- ¹⁸ The explanation on how this measure is calculated can be found in Stratulat, Corina and Kocsis, Levente (2024) "[The European Parliament elections 2024: Getting more jitters from the mainstream than the far-right](#)", European Policy Centre.
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