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# Democracy and discontent: institutional trust and evaluations of system performance among core and peripheral far right voters

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## ABSTRACT


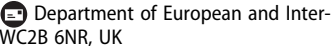
This article contributes to the debate about democratic discontent and far right party support taking into account the heterogeneity of the far right voter pool. Distinguishing between peripheral far right voters driven by discontent, and core far right voters driven by nationalism, we argue that citizens' evaluations of the democratic process are associated with their electoral behaviour; but this relationship varies depending on their immigration attitudes. Using data from 9 waves of the European Social Survey (2002-2018), we confirm that whereas among the general population positive evaluations of the democratic process may serve as a deterrent for far right party support, the same assessments are unlikely to deter the far right's core ideological voters. In some circumstances, they might have a galvanising effect, prompting a backlash among some core voters. Our findings add nuance to voting behaviour theories, and illustrate why scholars should pay more attention to far right intra-partisan heterogeneity.

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**KEYWORDS** Far right; voting behaviour; democracy; immigration; ESS; trust

## Introduction

Democracies are spaces of reciprocal interactions between citizens and state institutions. Citizens experience politics through these interactions, and therefore evaluate the democratic systems within which they live on this basis. These appraisals of the extent to which institutions fulfil individuals' expectations are

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the subject of a substantial body of literature on voting behaviour focusing on institutional legitimacy, performance, and responsiveness, as well as policy outcomes (Easton, 1965; Hetherington, 1998; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Positive evaluations of the democratic process are indicators of stability and the overall health of the political system (Craig *et al.*, 1990). On the contrary, negative evaluations are thought to represent a threat to the established democratic order and as such tend to be associated with the rise of radicalism (Miller, 1974). Theoretically, therefore, literature expects discontent with the democratic process, institutions, and their policies to result in support for the far right (Betz, 1994; Vrakopoulos, 2022). These 'anti-system parties' (Golder, 2016) challenge the establishment, both in terms of their populist component, which questions the legitimacy of elites (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014), and their anti-liberal democratic component, which questions the existing mechanisms of democratic representation (Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2018).

Empirically, however, findings are conflicting: while some research confirms a positive association between low trust in institutions and far right voting (Akkerman *et al.*, 2017; Denmark & Bowler, 2002; Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Hooghe *et al.*, 2011; Lubbers *et al.*, 2002), other scholars suggest that this relationship is not consistent across cases and across time (Norris, 2005; Rooduijn, 2018; Santana *et al.*, 2020; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018; Vrakopoulos, 2022). In sum, there is a debate in the literature about the extent to which negative evaluations of the democratic process help understand far right party support, especially within the context of some empirical findings that certain individuals who evaluate the democratic process positively, for example by reporting high levels government satisfaction (Norris, 2005), may also vote for the far right.

This article adds nuance to this debate by offering a theoretical and empirical reassessment of the association between evaluations of the democratic process and far right party support taking into account the heterogeneity of the far right voter pool. We suggest that citizens assess two components of the democratic process (Dahl, 1998; De Vries, 2018; Easton, 1965; 1975). First, the *diffuse*, which refers to broad support towards the democratic system, expressed through trust in institutions; and second, the *specific* which refers to satisfaction with system performance and policy outputs. Using data from 9 waves of the European Social Survey (2002-2018), we show empirically that, first, voters' evaluations of these two components are associated with their electoral behaviour. Those citizens who trust institutions and positively evaluate system performance and policy outputs are less likely to vote for a far right party. Conversely, voters discontent with the democratic process are more likely to opt for the far right. Second, we also show that for those voters with strong anti-immigrant sentiments who may be identified as the core nationalist far right constituency (e.g., Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Ivarsflaten, 2008) results differ.

Whereas on the one hand we confirm that among the general population, indeed positive evaluations of the democratic process may serve as a deterrent for far right party support, on the other hand we show that the same assessments are unlikely to deter the far right's ideological voters. In some circumstances, they might even have a galvanising effect, prompting a backlash among some core voters. In sum, our findings indicate that for some individuals with strong anti-immigrant attitudes, evaluations of the democratic process may even be positively associated with far right party support.

Our contribution is twofold. First, the article contributes to voting behaviour scholarship, and in particular the emerging literature on far right intra-partisan heterogeneity (Damhuis, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Steiner *et al.*, 2023; Stockemer *et al.*, 2021), by showing that evaluations of the democratic process have a different effect on sub-groups of the far right electorate. By theorising core and peripheral far right voters, we show that that evaluations of the democratic process are likely to be associated with the way people vote in different ways. This adds value to our understanding of far right party success and responds to calls for challenging the underlying assumption that there is a single far right voter profile (see Mudde, 2007; Stockemer *et al.*, 2021). Second, empirically, we test the association between evaluations of the democratic process and far right party support using high quality comparative data. The examination of multiple ESS waves allows us to discern generalisable patterns across countries and across time. The employment of a series of sophisticated modelling techniques and robustness checks gives us confidence about the strength and validity of our findings. Overall, the article adds an interesting and highly relevant nuance to the debate around democratic discontent and the vote for far right parties, and illustrates why scholars should pay more attention to intra-partisan heterogeneity.

## **Evaluations of the democratic process and far right voting behaviour**

Citizens and the state are equally bound in a contractual relationship of dual obligation. The former agree to pool their individual resources, and in return expect the latter to provide a framework of social opportunities and access to collective goods, including education, employment, welfare, health, and social security. In other words, organised democratic society is best understood as a framework of collective cooperation, which involves a trade-off between individual freedoms and collective pay-offs (Slater *et al.*, 2014; Wimmer, 1997). Citizens, therefore, experience democracy through their everyday interactions with institutions: public benefits, the quality of local hospitals and schools, corruption, neighbourhood crime levels or the conditions determining employment security. Their perceptions of how state resources are extracted and utilised, and what makes decisions as per the

use of these resources legitimate, are inextricably interwoven with their perceptions of their interactive experiences. Their approval or disapproval of these institutions is expressed through elections, designed to legitimate the social contract and define the type of contract voters want (Canache *et al.*, 2001; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Miller, 1974; Norris, 2017).

The literature theorises the concept of political support as multi-dimensional. Easton (1965; 1975) distinguishes between *diffuse* and *specific*, each referring to different objects of support. Diffuse support is directed towards fundamental aspects of the political system; specific support is closely related to performance and outcome (Pequito Teixeira *et al.*, 2014). There is much debate, however, on the meaning and interpretation of these concepts (e.g., Canache *et al.*, 2001; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017). Part of this debate relates to the concrete operationalisation and measurement of each component. For example, on the one hand, diffuse support can be operationalised as support for the political system in the abstract (Pequito Teixeira *et al.*, 2014), but is also often measured in terms of institutional trust (De Vries, 2018; Easton, 1965; 1975). Citizens should be able to trust democratic institutions as part of a transparent and accountable process, regardless of whether they agree with the outcome. On the other hand, specific support tends to be operationalised in terms of citizens' evaluations of system performance and policy outputs (Pequito Teixeira *et al.*, 2014). The literature is divided about whether 'satisfaction with democracy' is an indicator of diffuse or specific support, but there is an increasing tendency 'to treat democratic satisfaction as capturing an instrumental or performance-based appraisal of the regime' (see also Canache *et al.*, 2001; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022, p. 872; Linde & Ekman, 2003). Citizens evaluate the way democracy works (Akkerman *et al.*, 2017; Norris, 2005), and assess policy formulation, implementation, and outcome in areas such as the economy, health, and education (Agerberg, 2017; Norris, 2005; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018).

The extent to which citizens trust institutions and expect effective policies is likely to shape their voting preferences. Declining institutional trust and negative evaluations of system performance are likely to damage mainstream parties, which become associated with the poor policy choices that negatively impact on citizens' personal everyday experiences. Voters with low or declining levels of trust, as well as those voters who negatively evaluate system performance and policy outputs, are likely to reward political parties that challenge the establishment and existing political norms (Voogd *et al.*, 2019).

Far right parties could be considered among the prime beneficiaries of these processes.<sup>1</sup> These parties offer nationalist solutions to *all* socio-economic problems (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). They centre on a purported conflict between in-groups and out-groups and put forward policies

that always prioritise the in-group over the out-group in a quest to forge and maintain the homogeneity of the nation. The far right umbrella term covers parties that belong to both the 'extreme' and 'radical' right categories (Mudde, 2010; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015; Vrakopoulos, 2022). Traditional scholarship suggests that all far right parties are 'inherently anti-system' (Golder, 2016, p. 478) and have an antagonistic relationship with democracy as both radicalism and extremism oppose fundamental democratic values (Mudde, 2010). Far right variants, however, differ, in the *type* of democracy they oppose. While extreme right parties oppose both procedural and substantive democracy, radical right parties oppose liberal democracy and question key aspects of the constitutional order (Golder, 2016; Mudde, 2010). In practice, however, extreme right variants often use democracy, and run for elections, as a means for achieving their goals (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015).

Given their antagonistic relationship with democracy, both variants of the far right party family are likely to benefit from negative evaluations of the democratic process, including low or declining levels of trust, dissatisfaction with system performance and policy outputs. Indeed, research has shown that both extreme (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015; Vrakopoulos, 2022) and radical right (Agerberg, 2017) parties are often electorally successful in contexts of low quality of government and democratic discontent. The key ideological features of this party family draw upon trust, performance and policy-related grievances over elites, institutions, the government and, overall, the existing mechanisms of democratic representation. The mechanism here is discontent, as the prime motive behind this vote is to express dissatisfaction with the democratic process (Betz, 1994; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2000; Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007). Indeed, some studies have confirmed an empirical positive association between distrust and system dissatisfaction on the one hand, and far right voting on the other (Akkerman *et al.*, 2017; Denmark & Bowler, 2002; Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Hooghe *et al.*, 2011; Lubbers *et al.*, 2002). In line with this literature we hypothesise:

H1(a): Individuals with high levels of trust in institutions are less likely to vote for the far right.

H1(b): Individuals who positively evaluate system performance and policy outputs are less likely to vote for the far right.

Despite, however, the strong theoretical reasons to expect political distrust to be associated with far right party support, empirically, some research highlights the counter-intuitive finding that, under certain circumstances, citizens who positively evaluate the democratic process may vote for the far right (Norris, 2005; Santana *et al.*, 2020). In other words, voting for the far right is not exclusive to discontent voters. Consistent with the idea that political

parties often receive electoral support from a broad range of voters (Damhuis, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Steiner *et al.*, 2023), and that large electoral potential is associated with mobilisational capacity beyond a party's core voting group (Stockemer *et al.*, 2021; Tilley & Evans, 2017; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2005), it is both theoretically and empirically possible that far right core voters behave differently to peripheral voters. On the one hand, core voters are more likely to be ideological – or principled (Rydgren, 2008), while, on the other hand, peripheral voters are often motivated by their desire to express their discontent (Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007; Voogd *et al.*, 2019). The important distinction between galvanising the core constituency and mobilising the broader public (Sniderman *et al.*, 2004, p. 36) could explain why individuals with different preferences may vote for the same party, and also the counter-intuitive finding that voters of anti-establishment parties are not always critical of the democratic process (Norris, 2005).

Who are the core far right voters? There is an emerging literature that focuses on the heterogeneity of the far right electorate (Damhuis, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Steiner *et al.*, 2023; Stockemer *et al.*, 2021). This literature suggests that the far right electorate consists of 'multiple sub-groups of supporters varying in terms of social, normative and evaluative characteristics' (Damhuis, 2020, p. 19). While these different subgroups may range socio-demographically, they tend to be united by some of their attitudes. For example, Steiner *et al.* (2023) focus on perceptions of being left behind and feelings of lacking societal recognition; Stockemer *et al.* (2021) focus on negative attitudes towards immigrants. We adopt a similar approach focusing on attitudinal characteristics, specifically anti-immigration attitudes, which we relate directly to the core far right party ideology.

Far right party ideology combines nationalism with xenophobia (Bonikowski, 2017; Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou *et al.*, 2013; Lubbers, 2019). Both radical and extreme right variants view society through the prism of a purported conflict between insiders and outsiders, pledge to prioritise – and always protect – the interests of the former over and against the latter. Through an identity-based discourse (Bonikowski, 2017), far right parties emphasise differences between cultures, and suggest it is imperative to keep them apart in order to preserve their unique features intact. Far right parties may define in-groups and out-groups with reference to ascriptive criteria of national belonging – hence employing an explicitly nativist narrative; or on the basis of ideological criteria of national belonging – hence employing a predominately civic nationalist narrative (Halikiopoulou *et al.*, 2013). These parties centre their programmatic agendas on the issue of immigration, which they view as harmful to the nation-state and its identity. They compete by emphasising extreme positions on immigration (van Spanje, 2010; Wagner & Meyer, 2016) and frame immigrants as a threat to various dimensions of



national cohesion, including economic and value-cultural (e.g., Rydgren, 2008). They also advocate discrimination in access to welfare services based on native citizenship (Afonso & Rennwald, 2018; Magni, 2021). The increasing association of far right parties with the immigration issue can be attributed both to the ideological compatibility between nationalism and immigration scepticism (Lubbers, 2019), as well as the far right party strategy to emphasise various dimensions of immigration, including the legal status of immigrants, multiculturalism and social integration, jobs and welfare access, public services and entitlement criteria (Rydgren, 2008).

The primary far right party target constituency includes voters who identify fully with the far right parties' nationalist-xenophobic platforms. These voters tend to have strong nationalistic attitudes, including national identification, national pride, and an ethnic conception of nationhood (Lubbers & Coenders, 2017). Their nationalistic attitudes are accompanied by unfavourable attitudes towards immigrants who they view as a threat to the homogeneity, security, and prosperity of the nation-state (Lubbers, 2019). These voters identify the need to protect the homogeneity of the nation-state from outsiders as their key priority (Lubbers, 2019; Rydgren, 2008). Empirical literature agrees that, at the individual level, opposition to immigration is the greatest predictor of far right party support (Golder, 2016; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Lubbers & Güveli, 2007; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017; Rydgren, 2008; Stockemer *et al.*, 2018).

Therefore, we may define voters with strong anti-immigration sentiments as the core far right party constituency. The mechanism here is nationalism. These voters prioritise the protection of the in-group from the out-group and vote ideologically on the basis of a principled endorsement of far right party agendas. The voting behaviour of these individuals is likely to hinge on questions of deservingness and selective solidarity (Magni, 2021) – i.e., questions about entitlement to the collective goods of the state (van der Waal *et al.*, 2010; Wimmer, 1997). To theorise this, we borrow from nationalism literature, which conceptualises the nation as an 'imagined community of solidarity' (see also Singh & vom Hau, 2016; Wimmer, 1997, p. 29; Wimmer, 2016). The doctrine of nationalism is one of the modern world's foundational principles, which has offered a solution to democracy's boundary problem by legitimising the rule of a nationally-defined people and limiting public good access to the members of the nation (Wimmer, 2019). Given that states provide citizens with public goods, such as education, health, and physical infrastructure (Mann, 1984; Soifer & vom Hau, 2008; Wimmer, 2016), nationalism creates a perceived competition between insiders and outsiders for access to these goods. Individuals with strong nationalist attitudes are more likely to oppose sharing public goods with ethnic others. Wimmer (2016) terms this the 'ethnic egotism' mechanism. Voters with strong anti-immigrant attitudes are likely to have a narrower perception of deservingness because they are

more likely to see the state and its institutions as benefitting the native majority. In other words, access to the collective goods of the state can be understood as an 'element of a political struggle about who has the right to be cared for by the state and society' (Wimmer, 1997, p. 17). We may, therefore, expect nationalist voters to be more likely to see the nation as a social solidarity pact, endangered by outsiders.

The concepts of selective solidarity and ethnic egotism, therefore, help us understand why natives with strong nationalist attitudes are more likely to prioritise the provision of public goods such as health, education, and other welfare services in their policy preferences (Arndt & Thomsen, 2019; Wimmer, 2016). Nationalist voters are likely to support a conditional version of the welfare state that differentiates access between immigrants and natives (Bay *et al.*, 2013). These individuals often evaluate specific redistribution policies (and subsequently government involvement) on the basis of whether they benefit the in-group (e.g., see Busemeyer & Neimanns, 2017). Therefore, positive evaluations of the democratic process among some individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes are likely to translate electorally to voting for parties that emphasise restricting institutional access to the in-group. As such, we hypothesise that:

H2(a): Higher levels of trust in institutions are likely to be associated with far right party support among core far right voters.

H2(b): Positive evaluations of system performance and policy outputs are likely to be associated with far right party support among core far right voters.

## Data and methods

To test the above expectations, we rely on individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2020) for twenty-three European countries. Similarly to literature that uses data from multiple ESS waves (see e.g., Benedetto *et al.*, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018), our dataset includes nine waves, carried out every two years from 2002 to 2018. We use the term 'far right' in line with a growing body of literature (Golder, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Mudde, 2019; Stockemer *et al.*, 2021) to describe parties that use nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism in their programmatic agendas (Golder, 2016; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2022). These parties place the prioritisation of the in-group at the top of their political agenda (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012) and propose 'nationalist solutions' to all socio-economic problems (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). To operationalise far right parties, we use the classification offered by the PopuList (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2019). The PopuList is a widely referenced database, peer reviewed by experts and used extensively in the literature to classify parties, including the far right. Our *dependent*

*variable* is measured as 1 if an individual voted for a far right party in the last national election and 0 if they did not. Our sample includes 15,045 individuals who declared having voted for the far right (7.37 percent). It excludes non-voters. For an overview of the selected far right parties, see Appendix Table 1.

### ***Independent variables***

Our rationale for operationalising our independent variables is based on the need to empirically capture the different facets of support for the democratic process discussed in the literature. As noted above there is debate about how to measure each component of political support (Canache *et al.*, 2001; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017). We acknowledge this debate and follow established literature as follows. First, to operationalise the diffuse dimension of the democratic evaluation process, we focus on institutional trust (De Vries, 2018; Easton, 1965; 1975). Specifically, we use a battery of items that capture an individual's level of trust in a number of domestic institutions, including the parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians and political parties (see also Zhirkov, 2014). We generate a single measure of institutional trust that ranges from 0 to 10 ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Higher values indicate high levels of trust.

Second, to operationalise the specific dimension of the democratic evaluation process, we rely on literature that focuses on two different components: (a) system performance and (b) policy outputs (Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Pequito Teixeira *et al.*, 2014). The operationalisation of system performance includes treating 'satisfaction with how democracy works' as a performance indicator (Claassen & Magalhães, 2022). Specifically, we rely on three performance satisfaction variables (see also Zhirkov, 2014): (1) satisfaction with the present state of the economy; (2) satisfaction with the way the national government is doing its job; and (3) satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country. We combine the three items by taking the average where higher values indicate satisfaction on a 0-10 scale ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). This combined indicator captures overall performance satisfaction.

To operationalise the policy outputs component of the specific dimension of the democratic evaluation process we use an additional two indicators. Our rationale here is to capture evaluations of the performance of specific policy outputs (Norris, 2005; Pequito Teixeira *et al.*, 2014), based on citizens' interactive experiences with public services as outlined in our theoretical framework. Along the lines of Norris (2005), we distinguish between different policy areas in order to identify whether they have substantively different effects on far right voting. We choose our policy areas drawing on literature on nationalism and state infrastructural power (Mann, 1984; Soifer & vom Hau, 2008; Wimmer, 2016). The conceptualisation of the nation as a community of solidarity suggests that in addition to trust (diffuse dimension), and system

performance (specific dimension, system performance), citizens also evaluate the democratic process on the basis of the ability of the state to develop and implement policies for the provision of public goods (specific dimension, policy outputs). Literature on state infrastructural power specifically highlights three types of policies: education, health and physical infrastructure (Wimmer, 2016). This is because these policies are directly related to questions about who has the right to be cared for by the state and society (Wimmer, 1997), which underpin the struggle for access to the collective goods of the state and are thus key for measuring the presence of an 'ethnic egotism' mechanism (Wimmer, 2016). Following this literature, and given ESS availability, we choose two of these policy areas, i.e., education and health. These are two prime areas of individuals' day-to-day interaction with the state and affect most citizens. We employ two items, i.e., 'what you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays' and 'what you think overall about the state of health services in [country] nowadays'. These range from 0 to 10 where high values indicate positive evaluations of the state of education and health services.

We operationalise core far right voters with reference to anti-immigration attitudes. As noted in our theoretical framework, we do this following literature that defines core voters in terms of their attitudinal characteristics in line with the key tenet of the far right ideology (e.g., Stockemer *et al.*, 2021). We assess an individual's attitude towards immigration through responses to three questions: 1. 'Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries?'; 2. 'Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?'; and 3. 'Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?'. We combine responses into a single measure, ranging from 0 to 10, where high values indicate pro-immigration attitudes ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ). In light of the theoretical framework discussed above, we interact this with the variables capturing the diffuse and specific dimensions of the democratic evaluation process.

Our selection of immigration as the defining feature of a far right supporter is also confirmed empirically in our data. We have tested the core individual predictors of the far right as identified by Stockemer *et al.* (2018), including immigration attitudes, employment status, age, education and gender, in a model predicting far right party support. We have standardised all variables using z-scores to assess the relative explanatory weight of different predictors. Our results confirm that immigration is indeed the strongest predictor of far right party support (see Appendix Figure 4). This suggests that immigration attitudes constitute an appropriate proxy for operationalising core far right voters.

## Control variables

The models are estimated with a number of individual-level variables that have been shown to impact on far right party support (e.g., see Golder, 2016 for an overview). We include standard socio-demographic variables, such as gender (1 = male), age, years of education, the area of domicile (1 = urban), and employment status (1 = unemployed). We also measure subjective economic well-being through a question that asks individuals to report how they feel about their household's income nowadays. This variable ranges from 1 to 4 where high values indicate finding it very difficult on their household's present income. We include respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale (1-left; 10 = right). For descriptive statistics, see Appendix Table 2.

## Models

Our data have a hierarchical structure with individuals nested in country-years. Similar to previous studies employing ESS data (Benedetto *et al.*, 2020; Caughey *et al.*, 2019) and because we are substantively interested in individual level variation, we employ fixed effects modelling statistical techniques, which allow us to remove variation between higher-level units from the parameter estimation. This modelling choice has the advantage of removing all potential unobserved confounding variables at the country-year level from the analysis (Allison, 2009). Due to the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we estimate logistic fixed effects models. Our statistical tests indicate that multicollinearity is not a concern (VIF: 1.01-2.27; Tolerance: 0.44-0.98).

## Results

We commence with a descriptive analysis comparing far right to non-far right voters (Figure 1) to identify how the former score vis-à-vis the latter on their evaluations of the democratic process. Overall, this analysis illustrates that, on average, far right voters are not substantially more discontent compared to non-far right voters. With regards to the diffuse component, differences between far right and non-far right voters are small (Trust in institutions: Far right voters:  $M = 4.44$ ;  $SD = 2$ ; Non-far right voters:  $M = 4.89$ ;  $SD = 2.1$ ). These differences are even less prominent when it comes to the specific dimension (Performance satisfaction: Far right voters:  $M = 4.76$ ;  $SD = 2.17$ ; Non far right voters:  $M = 5.05$ ;  $SD = 2.13$ ; State of health: Far right voters:  $M = 5.23$ ;  $SD = 2.58$ ; Non far right voters:  $M = 5.72$ ;  $SD = 2.49$ ; State of education: Far right voters:  $M = 5.76$ ;  $SD = 2.34$ ; Non far right voters:  $M = 5.876$ ;  $SD = 2.3$ ). Interestingly, a significant share of far right voters perceives the framework of



**Figure 1.** Comparison of evaluations of the democratic process between far right and non-far right voters (0 = low; 10 = high). Source: ESS 2002-2018.

collective cooperation to be working well. Yet, the mean differences of these evaluations between the two groups are statistically significant ( $p < 0.00001$ ), which suggests that the effects of these measures on voting behaviour might also differ.<sup>2</sup>

Next, we have hypothesised that the likelihood to opt for a far right party is lower among those individuals who show more trust in institutions (H1a) and positively evaluate system performance and policy outputs (H1b). To test these assumptions, we estimate a series of logistic fixed effects regression models (Table 1). We commence by examining the association of each measure with far right party support in models that also include the control variables (Table 1, Models 1-4). We then proceed with incrementally inserting the additional measures in each model (Table 1, Models 5-7).

Our results suggest that evaluations of the democratic process are indeed significant in understanding the far right vote. First, in line with H1a, we find that those individuals who trust their domestic institutions are less likely to opt for a far right party in a national election. Second, in support for H1b, we find the same to be true for citizens who positively evaluate system performance and policy outputs. Those satisfied with the present state of the economy, the way the national government is doing its job, and the way democracy works in the country, as well as those who are optimistic about the state of the health services and education in their country are less

**Table 1.** Logistic fixed effects models estimating support for the far right.

|                                     | Model 1            | Model 2            | Model 3            | Model 4            | Model 5            | Model 6            | Model 7            |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Trust in institutions               | −0.126*** (0.006)  |                    |                    |                    | −0.0797*** (0.007) | −0.0740*** (0.007) | −0.0777*** (0.007) |
| Performance Satisfaction            |                    | −0.128*** (0.006)  |                    |                    | −0.0820*** (0.007) | −0.0735*** (0.007) | −0.0806*** (0.007) |
| State of Health                     |                    |                    | −0.0664*** (0.004) |                    |                    | −0.0257*** (0.005) | −0.0326*** (0.005) |
| State of Education                  |                    |                    |                    | −0.0368*** (0.005) |                    |                    | 0.0238*** (0.005)  |
| Income: Coping                      | 0.151*** (0.024)   | 0.145*** (0.024)   | 0.171*** (0.024)   | 0.192*** (0.024)   | 0.136*** (0.024)   | 0.133*** (0.024)   | 0.137*** (0.024)   |
| Income: Difficult                   | 0.135*** (0.033)   | 0.103*** (0.033)   | 0.167*** (0.033)   | 0.208*** (0.033)   | 0.0941*** (0.033)  | 0.0869*** (0.033)  | 0.0971*** (0.034)  |
| Income: Very difficult              | 0.0118 (0.056)     | −0.0393 (0.056)    | 0.0592 (0.056)     | 0.119** (0.057)    | −0.0511 (0.056)    | −0.0597 (0.056)    | −0.0409 (0.057)    |
| Unemployed                          | −0.0681 (0.047)    | −0.0743 (0.047)    | −0.0397 (0.047)    | −0.0548 (0.047)    | −0.0765 (0.047)    | −0.0697 (0.047)    | −0.0784 (0.048)    |
| Immigration                         | −0.258*** (0.005)  | −0.258*** (0.005)  | −0.280*** (0.005)  | −0.288*** (0.005)  | −0.249*** (0.005)  | −0.248*** (0.005)  | −0.250*** (0.005)  |
| Age                                 | 0.00467*** (0.001) | 0.00481*** (0.001) | 0.00454*** (0.001) | 0.00478*** (0.001) | 0.00481*** (0.001) | 0.00473*** (0.001) | 0.00526*** (0.001) |
| Years of education                  | −0.0165*** (0.003) | −0.0184*** (0.003) | −0.0199*** (0.003) | −0.0198*** (0.003) | −0.0176*** (0.003) | −0.0186*** (0.003) | −0.0183*** (0.003) |
| Male                                | 0.343*** (0.019)   | 0.360*** (0.019)   | 0.367*** (0.019)   | 0.351*** (0.020)   | 0.353*** (0.019)   | 0.361*** (0.020)   | 0.366*** (0.020)   |
| Urban                               | −0.0802*** (0.022) | −0.0808*** (0.022) | −0.0794*** (0.022) | −0.0868*** (0.023) | −0.0814*** (0.022) | −0.0809*** (0.022) | −0.0807*** (0.023) |
| Left-Right                          | 0.318*** (0.005)   | 0.325*** (0.005)   | 0.312*** (0.005)   | 0.307*** (0.005)   | 0.326*** (0.005)   | 0.326*** (0.005)   | 0.323*** (0.005)   |
| Constant                            | −3.374*** (0.146)  | −3.397*** (0.146)  | −3.467*** (0.148)  | −3.593*** (0.150)  | −3.245*** (0.146)  | −3.142*** (0.148)  | −3.168*** (0.151)  |
| Observations                        | 173589             | 173538             | 172968             | 168215             | 173397             | 172662             | 167432             |
| Country-Year fixed effects included | Yes                | Yes                | Yes                | Yes                | Yes                | Yes                | Yes                |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.1869             | 0.1871             | 0.1837             | 0.1823             | 0.1884             | 0.1886             | 0.1891             |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses, \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Income reference category: Living comfortably on present income. Source: ESS 2002-2018. See Appendix Table 8 also reporting  $p < 0.001$ .

likely to vote for the far right. Broadly speaking, our findings suggest that positive evaluations of the democratic process can act as a deterrent to the far right vote. When the broad framework of collective cooperation is perceived to be working well, then citizens are less likely to resort to the far right in order to voice their concerns against the system (for predicted probabilities, see Appendix Figure 3).

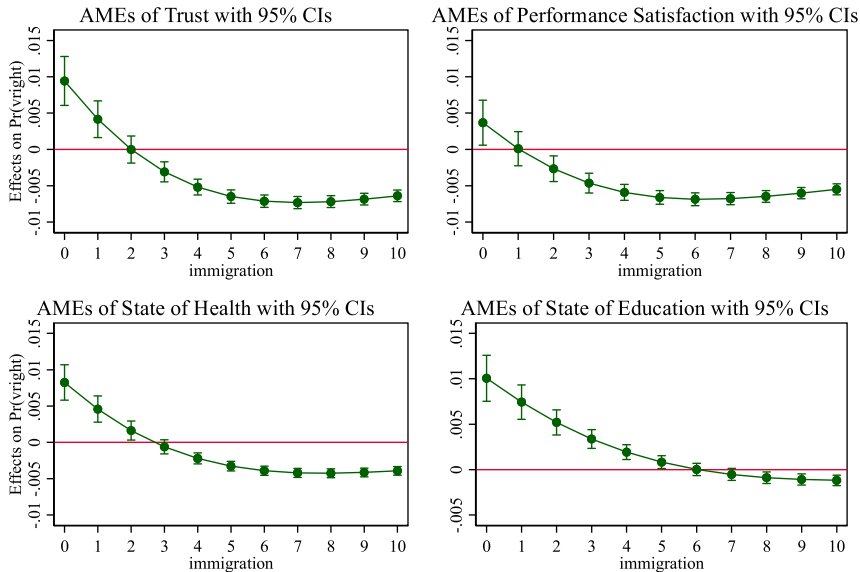
Turning to our control variables, our results indicate that employment status does not affect the probability to vote for the far right.<sup>3</sup> Subjective economic grievance indicators on the other hand yield mixed results. Those in the middle categories, i.e., those who are coping and those who find it difficult on their present income, are more likely to opt for the far right compared to those living comfortably. However, there is no difference between those who live comfortably on their present income (reference category) and those who find it very difficult. When the variable is standardised, the coefficient is close to zero. This suggests that the far right vote is mostly related to perceptions of relative rather than absolute deprivation. Self-identified right-wing individuals are more likely to vote for the far right. Socio-demographics also play a role, with older, less educated, male individuals living in rural areas being more likely to vote for the far right.

We now turn to Hypotheses 2a and 2b according to which we expect positive evaluations of the democratic process to be associated with far right party support among core far right voters. Indeed, our models show that anti-immigrant individuals are significantly more likely to vote for the far right. While there is no clear cut-off point for the core far right party supporter, the predicted probability to vote for the far right sharply drops around immigration scores 3-4 (see Appendix Figure 5). It is noteworthy that approximately 29.62 per cent of far right voters have scored 0-3 on immigration (for the frequency distribution of immigration attitudes among far right voters see Appendix Figure 6).

Next, we interact immigration attitudes with institutional trust (diffuse); and satisfaction with system performance, and evaluations of education and health services (specific) (Appendix Table 3). All interaction terms are negative and statistically significant, suggesting that positive evaluations of the democratic process continue to be negatively associated with far right party support. Appendix Figures 1a-b present the mean values of the four measures at different levels of immigration attitudes, comparing far right to non-far right voters. As immigration attitudes become more positive, respondents tend to evaluate the democratic process more positively both among the far right and non-far right electorate. Yet, this trend tends to be more prominent among non-far right voters.

However, plotting the average marginal effects of each measure on far right party voting behaviour at different values of immigration gives us a more nuanced picture (Figure 2). Recall that low scores on the immigration





**Figure 2.** Average marginal effects of evaluations of the democratic process conditional on immigration attitudes. Immigration: 0 = anti-immigrant; 10 = pro-immigrant.

Note: Estimates from multilevel logistic random-intercept models (Models in Appendix Table 3). Source: ESS 2002 to 2018.

scale signify anti-immigration attitudes. Trust in institutions remains negatively associated with far right voting at immigration values 3-10 (top left panel in Figure 2). Within this value range, one unit change in trust is associated with lower probability to vote for the far right. In line with H2a, we observe a positive and statistically significant relationship at immigration values 0 and 1 i.e., a one-unit change in trust results in higher probability to opt for the far right. Interestingly, there is no statistically significant relationship at immigration value 2.

With regards to system performance satisfaction (top right panel in Figure 2), while it is negatively associated with far right voting at immigration values 2-10, it is not statistically significant at immigration values 0 and 1, thus not showing support for H2b for this specific measure. With regards to the two remaining measures of the specific component, i.e., evaluations of the state of health and the state of education in their country, we find a similar pattern to that of trust in institutions. In line with H2b, we note a positive and statistically significant association among anti-immigrant respondents, i.e., at immigration values 0-2 regarding evaluations of the state of health and at immigration values 0-4 regarding evaluations of the state of education. Compared to institutional trust, the relationship here is more prominent among a broader range of immigration sceptics. There is no statistically

significant relationship at immigration value 3 for health and 5-7 for education. We observe a negative association at immigration values 4-10 for health and 8-10 for education. We also plot the predicted probabilities for each of the values of immigration (Appendix, Figure 2a-d). We similarly observe that the association between the diffuse and specific components of the democratic evaluation process and far right support varies at different values of immigration.

Overall, our findings confirm that while among the general population the 'discontent' mechanism is in place (H1a and H1b), among core anti-immigrant voters there is a 'nationalism' mechanism at play, supporting our theoretical premise that core voters behave differently in comparison to peripheral voters. Specifically, our findings confirm that, in line H2a and H2b, at specific values of immigration, evaluations of the democratic process are positively associated with voting for the far right. For some nationalist voters, as evaluations of the democratic process improve, their likelihood to opt for the far right increases, revealing a potentially galvanising effect among some anti-immigrant voters.

### Robustness checks

We are confident about the strength and validity of our findings. The examination of multiple ESS waves allows us to discern broad over-time patterns less dependent on period effects, using comparable and high-quality data across time and across countries (Davidov *et al.*, 2015). The ESS provides 'an excellent source of data to analyse broad attitudinal patterns in Europe' because of the consistency of questions across countries and survey rounds (Maxwell, 2019, p. 459).

To account for the possibility of response bias, and for potential problems arising from the fact that ESS fieldwork does not always coincide with national elections, we have also run models with 'feel close to a far right party' as an alternative dependent variable. This captures potential time-lag issues. Results remain the same (see Appendix Table 5). We are unable to capture vote switching as the ESS only includes questions about voting in the last national election.

With regards to the independent variables, we run models with different operationalisations of trust to account for the possibility that voters might not treat non-majoritarian institutions, such as the police and the legal system similarly to other political actors. Specifically, as an additional robustness check, we have operationalised trust excluding the legal system and the police ( $\alpha = 0.9$ ). Rerunning the models with this modified operationalisation of trust yields similar results (see Appendix Table 10). We also run our models using satisfaction with democracy only instead of the composite measure of performance satisfaction. Our analyses yield similar results (see

Appendix Table 11). Finally, we estimate a solution with three factors (trust, performance, and policy) and run the models accordingly. The results remain the same (see Appendix Table 13). To account for the possibility that individuals' responses within surveys are not independent, we also employ an alternative modelling method. We have estimated multilevel random-intercept models (see Appendix Table 6), yielding similar results.

This article is primarily interested in individual level variation and so far we have provided evidence for the stability of our findings over time and across countries. However, we acknowledge that our sample includes a broad range of parties of different sizes and experience in government. To increase confidence about the strength and validity of our findings therefore, it is also important to consider the role of evaluations of the democratic process in relation to the position of the far right in the respective political landscape. This is particularly relevant given that in some of the countries in our sample the far right has had some degree of government responsibility. To address this issue, we have run robustness checks selecting countries on the basis of three criteria: size of party; government experience; and availability across ESS rounds. Robustness checks in Norway, Austria, Switzerland, France and Belgium yield broadly similar results (See Appendix Tables 7a-e). Robustness checks in Poland (Appendix Table 7f) yield different results, which may be explained by country-specific dynamics and interaction between government status and other domestic factors. We run additional models in Hungary (ESS-Round 9) with voting for Fidesz as the dependent variable to capture potential differences in voting for a formerly mainstream party that has radicalised in government (Appendix Table 7g). Results here also differ. Next, we run additional robustness checks for countries with a far right party in government during the ESS fieldwork (Appendix Table 12). Results here are also mixed, indicating that there is no clear positive or negative relationship between our four indicators of the democratic evaluation process and support for the far right in government. To account for potential regional differences and historical experiences, we have re-run our models including only countries from Western Europe. Results remain the same (see Appendix Table 4).

## Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have developed and tested a series of hypotheses about the extent to which citizens' evaluations of the democratic process influence support for the far right and how this may vary among different individuals. In particular, using nine waves of ESS data, we have shown, first, that those individuals who trust the domestic political institutions in their country, and positively evaluate system performance and policy outputs, are less likely to opt for a far right party in a national election. As their approval of

institutions improves, these individuals distance themselves from the far right. Second, we have found that evaluations of the democratic process are positively associated with far right party support among some core anti-immigrant voters. In short, political trust and system performance matter: when the broad framework of collective cooperation is perceived to be working well, then citizens are less likely to resort to the far right. But for those core far right supporters with extreme views on immigration the mechanism is different.

Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on far right intra-partisan heterogeneity (Damhuis, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Steiner *et al.*, 2023), and help explain the counter-intuitive appeal of far right parties to voters who increasingly approve the status quo. In sum, we identify two routes to far right voting: discontent and ideology. On the one hand, discontent voters who negatively evaluate the democratic process are more likely to be motivated by the desire to express their dissatisfaction and vote primarily *against* the system as opposed to *in favour* of the far right. This mechanism is in line with the empirical literature that finds a strong association between levels of distrust and far right voting (Akkerman *et al.*, 2017; Denmark & Bowler, 2002; Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Hooghe *et al.*, 2011; Lubbers *et al.*, 2002). On the other hand, voting for the far right is not exclusive to discontent voters (Norris, 2005; Rooduijn, 2018; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). The mechanism we propose in this case is ideology: 'nationalist' core voters are principled and support the far right because they identify with the entirety of its platform which centres on prioritising in-groups over out-groups in every policy domain (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Lubbers, 2019; Rydgren, 2008; Stockemer *et al.*, 2021). Whereas positive evaluations of the democratic process make it unlikely for the far right to expand its appeal, they may intensify support among some segments of its core electorate. Interestingly we have shown that among voters with extreme negative views on immigration, positive evaluations of the democratic process are associated with far right voting. In the case of evaluations of the state of health and education, this association is prominent among a broader range of immigration sceptics. This hints to the possibility that perceptions of policy output components that relate to the provision of public services are directly linked to the question of deservingness and selective solidarity. It is possible therefore to see how positive evaluations of the democratic process can both *limit the mobilisational* capacity of the far right by deterring discontent voters, and simultaneously have an unintended *galvanising* effect among some nationalist voters.

In summary, our article has examined the relationship between evaluations of the democratic process and far right voting, focusing on individual-level variation across country and across time. Future research can extend our framework by examining various additional dimensions that we

have not covered due to space, scope and/or data limitations. First, our correlational analysis of individual-level voting patterns has strong external validity. However, our design is not tailored towards causal inference or the identification of country-specific dynamics. Future research employing experimental methods could strengthen the internal validity of the mechanisms that we suggest. Additionally, new research could focus on explaining patterns within individual countries and/or parties in greater depth. For example, our analysis has revealed an important variation between large far right parties in government. While our findings hold for Western European governing parties, they differ for some Central European governing parties. Interestingly, however, there is also variation *between* Central European governing parties, for example the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish PiS, suggesting no clear-cut pattern. This could be the result of country-specific dynamics and interaction between government status and other party-specific or domestic factors, which future research could examine more systematically.

Second, the focus of this article has been specifically on the far right electorate in Europe. However, the rise of anti-system politics is a much broader phenomenon. Electorally successful political parties and actors which challenge liberal democracy range from populist to extremists and authoritarians, whose positions vary on the left-right dimension and attract different types of voters, across Europe, the US, Latin America, India, and Australia. Already a growing body of literature examines this democratic backsliding across the globe. Indeed, a focus on the relationship between evaluations of the democratic process and support for populism broadly defined across different world regions could provide an interesting avenue for future research. Third, our argument focuses on subjective evaluations of the democratic process, as we have suggested that voters' decisions are impacted by perceptions (see also Stockemer, 2016). Scholars could match perceptions with structural data to examine the extent to which the latter are also influential in determining voting behaviour. Finally, our article has focused on voters. Future studies focusing on the programmatic agendas of far right parties could research the extent to which grievances are used as mobilising tools, taking into account the differentiated appeal such a rhetoric would have on different individuals.

Our study aspires to set a novel research agenda of interest to scholars of electoral behaviour, political trust and immigration. One of its main implications is that research focusing on these various dimensions of democratic politics (e.g., Bojar *et al.*, 2022; Wuttke *et al.*, 2022) – especially in an era of sustained levels of distrust and the simultaneous rise of anti-system politics in Europe and beyond – should pay more attention to intra-partisan voter heterogeneity. This is significant for our understanding of patterns of far right

party success, as it highlights the multifaceted nature of the far right appeal to voters with different preferences and incentives.

## Notes

1. For a comparison between far right and far left parties see Rooduijn et al. (2017) and Rooduijn (2018).
2. Trust in institutions: mean difference: 0.45;  $t(204238) = 25.04$ ;  $p < 0.00001$ . Performance satisfaction: mean difference: 0.29;  $t(203770) = 16.21$ ;  $p < 0.00001$ . State of health: mean difference: 0.49;  $t(203305) = 22.91$ ;  $p < 0.00001$ . State of education: mean difference: 0.1;  $t(195773) = 5.21$ ;  $p < 0.00001$ .
3. We have ran the models without the subjective economic wellbeing control variable. In some models unemployment is statistically significant at 10% level (see Appendix Table 9).

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## Data and replication files

Available online at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YGVORS>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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