

How Mainstream Parties Can Defend Democracy by Adopting Parts of the Populist Agenda

Vít Novotný

The German parliamentary election of 23 February reopened the question of how the political mainstream should deal with far-right agitation on immigration and identity. Recent examples show that where traditional parties create their own narratives, voters in the EU sometimes prefer a mainstream 'copy' to the far-right 'original'.

Should European centre-right parties copy the far-right strategy of campaigning on the issues of immigration and national identity? Conventional opinion, as presented by most academic commentators and journalists, is clear: it should not.

The 'copy-versus-original' formula

This conclusion tends to be based on a formula which posits that voters will always prefer 'the original' to 'the copy'. This popular rule of thumb holds that where the far-right attempts to legitimise people's fear of immigrants and globalisation, mainstream parties should withstand the temptation to copy far-right narratives, lest these strengthen the far-right, shrink their own support base, encourage attacks on minorities and immigrants, or slowly pour liberal democracy down the drain.

The academic Jan-Werner Mueller has articulated this formula in the language of political science. He was [correct](#) to criticise the European centre-right for tolerating for far too long the anti-system Hungarian Fidesz party, which has instrumentalised the failings of EU immigration policy to attack Europe's liberal democratic consensus. However, his argument in [this](#) article for Project Syndicate is more problematic. Mueller warns against normalising far-right parties by

entering into coalitions with them, and against mainstreaming them, which he defines as copying the rhetoric of the far-right, calling attention to an issue and framing it in 'the way the far-right wants it to be framed'.

The problem with the formula

What Mueller and others, such as Rosa Balfour [in this article](#), overlook is that calling attention to an issue is not the same as framing it in a particular way. Giving a platform to public concerns about illegal immigration and the crimes perpetrated by immigrants is not the same as promoting the conspiracy theory of the 'great replacement'. Acting on people's worries about healthcare facilities and schools in their village being overwhelmed due to the number of new arrivals, or about feeling unsafe when travelling on public transport, is not the same as calling for 'remigration', the far-right idea of removing all non-European immigrants and their descendants to their assumed areas of ethnic origin.

Unfortunately, this distinction has eluded many of the critics of the mainstream parties' acknowledgement of immigration and security issues. The proponents of the 'don't-go-there-or-you-will-lose-at-the-polls' innuendo simply tend to blame the centre-right, and sometimes the centre-left, for following the far-right agenda, without understanding that political demagogues can play a useful role by signalling changes to public sentiment that the mainstream has not picked upon. When it comes to suggesting an alternative course of action, many commentators limit themselves, at best, to vaguely suggesting that the traditional parties 'change the narrative'. At worst, the

critics' implicit advice is to ignore the problem. With the unfortunate defeat of Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election in the US and the decline of Europe's classical social democracy, it is becoming clear that such suggestions are not particularly constructive or useful.

Campaigning on immigration issues

It is striking how far most opinion-makers will go to ignore evidence that does not conform to their preconceived notions, instead hanging on to a few select examples that prove their point. One oft-cited example is the 2023 Dutch parliamentary election, in which the centre-right liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of Mark Rutte lost to the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, after the former misjudged the public mood. Dutch voters simply did not trust the VVD campaign on the issue of family reunification for people with asylum residence permits.

By contrast, examples abound in which the centre-right, and sometimes the centre-left, has campaigned on immigration issues and won without strengthening the national populists or the far-right, or the long-term prospects of groups belonging to the latter. These traditional parties have successfully mainstreamed immigration issues without framing them in a xenophobic manner, won elections while addressing these issues, prevented the far-right from obtaining a place in government, adopted stricter laws against illegal migration and, often, opened new channels for legal migration. All of these actions have allowed the centre-right and the centre-left to keep their countries' political systems anchored in the principles of constitutional democracy.

In Denmark, support for the xenophobic Danish People's Party (DPP) was [steadily rising](#) in the 1990s. It increased rapidly in 2015 due to the party's exploitation of Europe's ongoing immigration crisis. However, in that year's parliamentary election a centre-right government came to power. In response to the DPP's agitation, this government tightened the laws on asylum and immigrant integration, a policy that was then essentially adopted by the Social Democrats when they came to power in 2019. Thus, while the national populists had managed to put immigration on the agenda, this became a self-destructive strategy as the political mainstream

appropriated the issue, appealing not to identitarian sentiments but to the need to preserve societal cohesion. While these changes were happening, Denmark continued to rank near the top of the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. In the 2024 ranking, Denmark [ranked](#) seventh worldwide.

Greece's centre-right New Democracy (ND) party easily won the May and June 2023 parliamentary elections after taking a restrictive stance on illegal immigration which aligned with the preferences of centre-right and far-right voters. New Democracy's positioning helped to keep the country's far-right marginalised while also allowing the government to invite non-EU workers to fill the gaps in the labour market.

In Poland's parliamentary election in October 2023, it was the pro-European centre-right Civic Platform (PO) and centrist Third Way that defeated the national populist Law and Justice (PiS) which had been in power for eight years. Although immigration was not the dominant issue in the electoral campaign, PO scored points by criticising the inconsistencies in the government's immigration policy, including its admission of 130,000 migrants from Muslim countries during the year 2022. The newly elected centrist government led by PO has subsequently stopped the autocratisation of Poland's political system and is now among those EU members that can be counted on to valiantly defend liberal democracy vis-à-vis a belligerent Russia and the EU's domestic authoritarians.

Immigration also played a significant role in Portugal's parliamentary election in March 2024. By focusing on public concerns about the effects of immigration on crime, societal cohesion, housing and the economy, the centre-right Democratic Alliance managed to slow down the rise of the right-wing populist Enough (Chega) party.

Finally, in Germany's early parliamentary election in February 2025, it was the two Christian Democratic parties that prevented the xenophobic Alternative for Germany (AfD) from capitalising more than it did on the population's discontent with the rising numbers of refugees and its angst over the incessant terrorist attacks perpetrated by people who should have been removed from the country. Like the Danish DPP, the

AfD received a popularity boost in 2015, with its leader Alexander Gauland [viewing](#) the migration crisis as a gift to the party. Although it cannot only be attributed to immigration issues, the AfD has been on the rise ever since, despite some blips in its electoral results.

With the exception of the DPP in Denmark, the far-right parties mentioned above continue to receive considerable public support. Despite this, the traditional parties are managing to keep the far-right out of power. Whether the Danish experience of marginalising the xenophobes can be replicated elsewhere remains to be seen. What is clear though is that indices such as the Democracy Index or [Freedom House](#)'s measures of civil liberties and political rights continue to assign high scores to the countries mentioned above without any noticeable repercussions from electoral campaigns that include discussions on immigration.

Naming the issues

There is nothing noble, or democratic, about mainstream parties excluding themselves from debates on burning societal issues. On the contrary, allowing the political extremes to identify the changes in public sentiment and be the first to frame their answers leads to the extremes cementing their hold on these issues. This only cedes the political space to the enemies of liberal democracy.

So far, copying 'the original' has worked well for the European mainstream in those contexts where it has managed to adopt tougher immigration positions without xenophobic undertones. Nevertheless, it would be preferable for the centre-left and the centre-right to be the first to highlight issues of public concern, including immigration, and to be the first to formulate the requisite policies. This might prevent the national populists and far-right extremists from rising in the polls in the first place. In any case, a political party has yet to be created that has retained its voter base or even expanded it by disregarding citizen concerns.

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The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and likeminded political values.

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

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