

RESEARCH NOTE: CONCEPTS AND TERMS

The “far right” label and the study of party systems: problems, limitations – and a way out

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Abstract

This research note challenges the utility of the “far right” label, which groups together the extreme right and the (populist) radical right, for the study of contemporary European party systems. It argues that while extreme right parties are typically consistent with the traditional conceptualization of anti-system parties, those belonging to the (populist) radical right increasingly experience a pattern of integration without substantive ideological moderation – i.e. negative integration – which challenges the Sartorian conceptualization. Nevertheless, Sartori’s idea of disjointed space, which separates via “no coalition” points the parties that are perceived to be illegitimate players in the party system from the others, remains essential to understanding the diverging trends that characterize the extreme right and the (populist) radical right today as well as the cases that deviate from the typical pattern. The notion of disjointed space accounts for the qualitative difference between the actors that are perceived to be suitable for coalitions by the more traditional mainstream parties and, ultimately, allows us to understand why (populist) radical right parties are often integrated in party systems, while those of the extreme right are not. The analysis invites scholars to use the most precise term whenever possible rather than vaguely referring to the “far right,” as it overlooks key differences from a party system perspective. Notably, although nativist and authoritarian ideas increasingly permeate public debate, when it comes to political parties, it is more accurate to speak of the mainstreaming of the (populist) radical right rather than of the “far right” as a whole.

Keywords: far right parties; populist radical right; extreme right; mainstreaming; party systems

Introduction

In this research note I challenge the utility of the undifferentiated use of the label “far right” (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023) to encompass both extreme right and (populist¹) radical right parties for the analysis of contemporary party systems. Instead, I underline the importance of distinguishing, both conceptually and empirically, between these two party families. In doing so, I focus on how they relate to Giovanni Sartori’s classical approach to anti-system parties (Sartori, 1966, 1976, 1982) and the more recent revisitation by Mattia Zulianello (2018, 2019a, 2020).

I argue that in contemporary Europe the extreme right is typically in line with Sartori’s traditional concept of anti-system party, which refers to parties relegated to the status of permanent opposition and excluded *a priori* from coalitions at the national level. At the same time, the increasingly common integration of the (populist) radical right in the coalition game and in governing coalitions does not

¹ Although radical right parties are not necessarily populist, in practice, they often are. Therefore, my analysis applies equally to both radical right and populist radical right parties.

fit the traditional Sartorian perspective. Indeed, this party family typically experiences an apparently contradictory pattern that was not fully accounted for in the original Sartorian conceptualization: “negative integration,” that is incorporation in coalitions and/or governments without moderating its core ideology (Zulianello, 2018, 2020). While virtually all contemporary extreme right parties in Europe are non-integrated (i.e. excluded by coalitions and governments at the national level), several contemporary (populist) radical right parties are integrated *within* the system itself. To explain these different patterns, as well as the exceptions to the general trend of each party family, I rediscover a key concept of the Sartorian perspective, namely his notion of disjointed political space (Sartori, 1976), which separates the parties that are perceived as legitimate players from the others.

After an overview of the Sartorian conceptualization of anti-system parties, this research note discusses the differences between “far right,” (populist) radical right, and extreme right parties. It then assesses how the latter two party families relate to the Sartorian anti-system party and highlights the utility of analytically distinguishing between the ideology and the status of an actor in the party system, which may vary independently. Subsequently, the paper explains why the idea of disjointed political space is useful to account for the different trends characterizing (populist) radical right and the extreme right parties in contemporary European party systems. Finally, it offers some concluding remarks.

Sartori’s anti-system party

The concept of the anti-system party is a crucial component of Sartori’s path-breaking works on parties and party systems, where he suggests both a “narrow” and a “broad” definition (Sartori, 1976, 1982). The narrow definition points to an actor presenting “a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates ... that would not change – if it could – the government but the very system of government” (Sartori, 1976, 132–133). Here, “anti-system parties represent an *extraneous ideology* – thereby indicating a polity confronted with a maximal ideological distance” (Sartori, 1976, 133, *emphasis in original*). Following the broad definition, instead, “a party can be defined as being anti-system whenever it *undermines the legitimacy* of the regime it opposes” (Sartori, 1976, 132–133; *emphasis in original*). More generally, according to Sartori, the crucial criterion to identify anti-system parties is the assessment of their delegitimizing impact, primarily understood as “verbal behavior” (Sartori, 1976, 194, fn. 8, 133).

Although the concept of anti-system party has a special place in the literature on parties and party systems, major misinterpretations regarding its meaning have permeated the debate. Indeed, Sartori himself repeatedly lamented the existence of a “considerable misunderstanding” throughout his writings (Sartori, 1976, 132; see also, 1982). The most typical misinterpretation, even in recent years, is the idea that an anti-system party is the same as an anti-democratic party, suggesting they are synonyms (see Zulianello, 2019b). Nevertheless, Sartori (1982, 299–300) repeatedly underlined that the positive definition of the “system” underlying his conceptualization referred to the regime, understood as a “neutral” and “relative” term.

To identify the system and its negation, a *condicio sine qua non* is the assessment of the political-constitutional status quo, and this requires paying attention to the features of the different contexts. According to Sartori (1976, 154; 1982, 300) “anti-system” were certainly both communist and fascist parties, but also other actors that challenged the existing regime defined in political-constitutional terms but were not anti-democratic: for instance, secessionist parties – aiming to alter the essential features of the polity, the Gaullists in the Fourth French Republic – who wanted to replace such a regime with another, liberal democratic, one – and even non-party actors such as *Solidarność* and the Budapest and Prague springs – which challenged communist rule.

“Far right,” extreme right and (populist) radical right parties

Recent years have seen an explosion of works using the label “far right” (e.g. Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023) to include both the extreme right and the (populist) radical right under a so-called “umbrella term.”

The rationale behind this choice is the fact that the two distinct party families share two common ideological features, namely nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism promotes the idea that the state should be inhabited only by the native population, while non-natives (as well as their ideas) are considered an existential threat (Mudde, 2007). Authoritarianism points to support for law-and-order measures, a view of society in which violations of authority are severely punished (Mudde, 2007). To craft the more general “far right” concept, its proponents set aside a key distinction between the extreme right and the (populist) radical right: the actors’ stance towards democracy (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023). They acknowledge that while the extreme right rejects democracy *tout court*, including the very notion of popular sovereignty, the (populist) radical right accepts the core tenets of democracy as an ideal, but opposes some key features of liberal democracy, most notably pluralism and minority rights (Mudde, 2007). The proponents of the “far right” label justify overlooking this critical distinction by citing the alleged difficulty of distinguishing between extreme and (populist) radical right parties today (e.g. Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023). While it is not possible to explore this point in detail for reasons of space, I argue that although there are certainly some cases that elude a clear-cut classification, this not a sufficient reason to resort to the generic “far right” label by default, as done, for instance, by the authoritative overview by Rooduijn *et al.* (2024) and several other works published in recent years. In other words, even in the face of a more complex political reality, distinguishing between the extreme and the (populist) radical right remains, first and foremost, an empirical question, as it was in the past.

I suggest using the most precise term – (populist) radical right or extreme right – whenever possible rather than using the more general term “far right” by default for two reasons: first, the latter overlooks profound differences² between its constituent parts; second, each party family brings distinctive challenges that warn against a one-size-fits-all approach. This is particularly evident if we adopt a party system perspective, as we will see in the following pages.

Extreme and (populist) radical right parties vis-à-vis the Sartorian conceptualizations

Extreme right parties “have an intrinsically revolutionary and anti-democratic character” (Wondreys and Zulianello, 2024, 4) and, if our focus is on liberal democratic regimes, they are certainly consistent with both the broad and narrow definitions suggested by Sartori. These parties seek to undermine the legitimacy of liberal democracies (broad definition) and embody an ideology that is at odds with the crucial features of such regimes (narrow definition). More specifically, extreme right parties are both against the very idea of democracy (in general) and against liberal democracy (more specifically). Instead, although the (populist) radical right is not against the very idea of democracy (in general), it nevertheless opposes decisive features of liberal democracy (more specifically), in particular pluralism and minority rights (Mudde, 2007). Hence, in liberal democratic contexts, all these parties are certainly anti-system following both Sartori’s broad and narrow definitions, precisely because of their stance towards the political regime. The discussion would seem to end with the conclusion that all extreme and (populist) radical right parties are equally anti-system following Sartori’s conceptualization, suggesting that the label “far right” effectively identifies a common scenario for all the actors it covers. However, this is not the case.

Notably, both classical Sartorian conceptualizations were based upon an explicit assumption about the relationship between party ideology and/or verbal propaganda, on the one hand, and its status in the party system, on the other. Indeed, the anti-system parties studied by Sartori (in polarized party systems and elsewhere) were permanently excluded from national government, with the obvious exception of cases where anti-system actors took power and successfully replaced the existing regime – implying they were no longer anti-system.

²For instance, the heterogeneity of the “far right” is evident in the field of foreign policy (Wondreys and Zulianello, 2024). On the risks of terminological vagueness, see also the insights by Federico Taddei (2025).

Significantly, Sartori (1976, 124, see also 130, fn 11) clearly maintained that the anti-system party “generally coincides” with Anthony Downs’ (1957, 131–132) “blackmail party,” which is “not the kind [of actor] that aims at getting itself elected.” This point becomes of crucial importance if we recall that the Sartorian concept was first and foremost developed for the study of party systems. As Peter Mair (1997, 210–211, *emphasis added*) argued:

what matters is whether there are parties which are ... *regarded by the other parties in the system as unacceptable allies*. In this sense, anti-systemness, like beauty, here lies in the eyes of the beholder.

In this respect, empirical reality suggests that virtually all contemporary extreme right parties in Europe (for an overview, see Wondreys and Zulianello, 2024) are consistent with the Sartorian idea of anti-system parties, being relegated to the margins of the political scene and considered to be unacceptable allies by the main actors in the party system.

However, the scenario is different for an increasing number of (populist) radical right parties in the Old Continent. Notably, although they match both the broad and narrow Sartorian definitions, they have increasingly abandoned the status of permanent opposition and entered the coalition game and/or national governments in many countries, hence challenging an essential pillar of the Sartorian conceptualization. In particular, when a previously anti-system party becomes *koalitionsfähig* (acceptable for coalitions) its overall contribution to the actual functioning of the party system changes.

Distinguishing a party's features from its status in the party system

As mentioned, the Sartorian concept of anti-system party explicitly assumes a correspondence between having an ideology at odds with the existing regime and/or delegitimizing it through propaganda (Sartori, 1976, 132–133) and the status of permanent opposition – excluding the obvious cases in which they successfully changed or destroyed the regime itself.

The literature suggests that although the (populist) radical right adapts to government, there are no univocal signs of moderation of its communication nor, most importantly, of its core ideology. For instance, in their comparative overview, Tjitske Akkerman *et al.* (2016, 48) maintain that when it comes to “radical positions on core issues ... the average trends do not indicate that radical right-wing populist parties have mainstreamed.” This also applies to participation in government, which has no “moderating effect” on these parties (Vachudova, 2021, 480; see also Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015).

To tackle the possibility of integration without moderation, Zulianello (2018, 2019a, 2020) suggested that Sartori's classical conceptualization should be revisited by explicitly distinguishing two analytical dimensions: the ideology of a party and its status in the party system. In this respect, the ideological profile of both the extreme right and the (populist) radical right parties is certainly “against the system” (see above) if the focus is placed on liberal democracies. However, this *does not* necessarily mean that a party ideologically challenging the regime (or other essential features of the status quo, including the European Union for its member states) is anti-system “in practice,” that is one relegated to the status of permanent opposition – i.e. a blackmail party (Downs, 1957; cf. Mair, 1997). In fact, while virtually all extreme right parties in Europe are at the margins and stigmatized in the political scene, several (populist) radical right parties are integrated in the system they ideologically oppose. In this respect, the most evident indicator of integration is the explicit recognition of a party as a *potential* coalition partner by one or more traditional mainstream parties in the system *and* its concomitant availability to cooperate with the latter actors.³

³For an extensive overview of the scenarios in which “systemic integration” can take place, see Zulianello (2019a, 35–37).

Following the revisited approach, only the extreme right and the (populist) radical right parties that *have not* achieved integration (i.e. non-integrated) are fully-fledged anti-system actors, as they oppose the system both in theory and in practice (Zulianello, 2018, 2019a, 2020). They are at the margins of the party system and perceived and/or perceive themselves as unfit for coalitions; their exclusion from the coalition game is not due to contingent reasons, but is an exclusion *a priori*. The several (populist) radical right parties that have achieved integration are no longer anti-system because they left the status of permanent opposition, but neither can they be classified as “conventional” mainstream parties, as they typically integrate without moderation. In these cases, it is useful to speak of “negative integration” (Zulianello, 2019a, 2020), precisely because, despite the qualitatively different status acquired in the party system, there is a persistent tension between the ideological core of these parties and the essential values embodied by liberal democratic regimes. Hence, several prominent (populist) radical right parties do not qualify as anti-system because they are not on the margins of the political scene, and are instead better understood as negatively integrated given their central role in coalitions and/or governments at the national level. This is shown by many examples: the Austrian Freedom Party, the Danish People’s Party, Brothers of Italy, the Italian League, the Finns Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, Law and Justice in Poland, the Sweden Democrats and the Swiss People’s Party, just to mention the most well-known cases.

It is worth adding that, although empirically less common, extreme right and (populist) radical right parties can also undertake a process of “positive integration” in two ways (Zulianello, 2019a, 2020). The first, more apparent, path occurs when a party moderates its ideology to the point it is no longer in conflict with the political regime, making its ideological goals compatible with those of the system. In this way, the party adapts to the existing system, matching its ultimate goals, and becomes an ideologically moderate party. This is uncommon and, eventually, would imply that a party ceases to be (populist) radical or extreme right. However, there is another path to positive integration in which the party’s aims no longer conflict with those of the system, but for an opposite reason. Most notably, the party modifies the system to match its core ideas. In this respect, the most evident contemporary example is Viktor Orbán’s FIDESZ in Hungary because “its illiberal values are now fully enshrined in the national political regime” (Zulianello, 2020, 342). Notably, the establishment of a competitive authoritarianism in Hungary is consistent with the illiberal democratic credo of the radical right.

Why do they differ? Rediscovering the idea of disjointed ideological space

Despite the limitations of his conceptualizations of anti-system parties, another key concept of Sartori’s works allows us to explain the different patterns that typically characterize the (populist) radical right and the extreme right in contemporary European party systems: the notion of “disjointed space” (Sartori, 1976). In fact, the left–right dimension is, according to Sartori (1976, 340, *emphasis added*), first and foremost an “ideological space” in which “parties not only stand side by side but must also be assumed to be placed at *unequal intervals*,” meaning that they

are neither perceived by the public nor by the politicians as simply placed – with respect to the positioning of each actor – rightward or leftward. They are also perceived as being more or less “alien”, more or less “extraneous”.

This has important consequences for both the demand-side and the supply-side of politics, and when a spatial disjunction, a discontinuous political space, exists, some parties are considered to be “beyond the pale”; ultimately, they are viewed as illegitimate players in the party system.

In the past, in the vast majority of cases, a disjunction existed between (populist) radical right parties and their spatially proximate competitors, most notably centre-right parties. This was due to the substantial policy differences between the two, which typically made the (populist) radical right unacceptable for coalitions. However, over the last decades, this party family has increasingly taken part in coalitions and governments, meaning that the “no coalition point” (Sartori, 1976), one of the

defining features of the disjointed political space, has disappeared. Here, two facilitating factors played a decisive role: the success of (populist) radical right parties created the arithmetical foundations for their potential relevance to forming coalitions, and the concomitant and progressive “move to the right on cultural issues” by the mainstream centre-right made possible the formation of coalitions based on policy compatibility (de Lange, 2012, 914).

Most notably, arithmetic utility and policy convergence allowed the (populist) radical right to “escape” the barriers posed by the existence of a disjointed political space by achieving enough legitimation to be perceived as a viable coalition partner. However, some of these parties are still perceived to be “foreign bodies” in the party system in which they operate and face a disjointed political space, examples being the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Flemish Interest in Belgium, or Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in Romania. In such cases, the (populist) radical right is still at the margins of the political scene and effectively behaves as an anti-system party resembling Downs’ blackmail party, non-integrated and lacking coalition potential. This suggests the absence – at least for now – of one or both of the facilitating factors mentioned above, possibly combined with additional idiosyncratic reasons.

However, as more traditional parties (especially from the centre-right, but not only) have often shifted to the right on socio-cultural issues, making their positions more compatible with the nativist and authoritarian ideas shared by both the populist radical right and the extreme right, why is it that only the latter party family is almost invariably perceived as pariah and isolated across European party systems, typically confronting a disjointed political space? Certainly, in many cases this is due to the limited electoral relevance of such actors, but there is a more substantive ideological reason. As previously mentioned, both the (populist) radical right and the extreme right share the features of nativism and authoritarianism, but they diverge in their stance towards democracy and their transformative aspirations. Indeed, the anti-democratic and revolutionary nature of the extreme right almost invariably creates an “unequal interval” (see above), which is salient enough to result in a disjointed political space, leading to its stigmatization⁴ and isolation in the party system.

Conclusion

In this research note I assessed the utility of the umbrella term “far right” (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023), which treats the extreme right and the (populist) radical right as a single group, for the analysis of contemporary party systems. By explicitly distinguishing between these two different party families, I highlighted that while the European extreme right is typically consistent with the Sartorian conceptualization of anti-system parties relegated to the status of permanent opposition, the (populist) radical right is increasingly included in national coalitions or governments, hence challenging the key assumption in Sartori (1966, 1976, 1982) about the profile of a party and its status in the party system. In particular, I underlined that (populist) radical right parties typically move into the mainstream of national party politics without ideological moderation, a pattern that is defined as “negative integration” (Zulianello, 2020).

The Sartorian concept of disjointed political space appears crucial in the study of contemporary party systems and in explaining the different experiences of (populist) radical right and extreme right parties in Europe, differences that would be overlooked by using the undifferentiated “far right” label (Sartori, 1976). What the literature using the “far right” label generally overlooks is how the qualitatively different stances on democracy taken by (populist) radical right and extreme right parties affect their potential integration into contemporary European party systems. Albeit in opposition to core principles of liberal democracy, the (populist) radical right accepts democracy as an ideal: the

⁴It is rather telling that doubts about the authenticity of the democratic credentials of an actor can also help explain why some (populist) radical right parties in Europe are still at the margins of the political scene and non-integrated, meaning that they still face a disjointed political space (e.g. the AfD in Germany).

growing success of these parties and the concomitant policy convergence with mainstream moderate parties on socio-cultural issues has led to the disappearance of the disjointed political space for this party family in many countries of the Old Continent, although some important exceptions still exist. Conversely, virtually all extreme right parties in Europe are stigmatized and isolated in the party system, meaning that they still face a disjointed political space because their anti-democratic and revolutionary nature make them pariahs and unacceptable for coalitions, despite sharing the nativism and authoritarianism of the (populist) radical right.

Hence, although nativist and authoritarian *ideas* increasingly permeate public debate, when it comes to *political parties*, it is much more accurate to speak of the mainstreaming of (populist) radical right parties rather than of the “far right” as a whole (for a different view, see Brown *et al.*, 2023). Sartori maintained that “our fundamental problem is how to make extensional gains (by climbing the abstraction ladder) without having to suffer unnecessary losses in precision and empirical testability” (Sartori, 1970: 1041). In this respect, by treating “far right” parties as a single and undifferentiated group, we overlook the divergent patterns experienced by the (populist) radical right and the extreme right in contemporary party systems.

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