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**ARTICLE**

# Back to the Future? The Electoral Breakthrough of Far-Right Parties

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**Abstract**

In contemporary Europe, far-right parties threaten liberal democratic principles such as pluralism, media freedom and minority rights. Despite the stigma they normally face, far-right parties have experienced electoral breakthroughs even in countries where they remained electorally marginal such as Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. We advance the idea that this happened because the level of stigmatization faced by these parties decreased before their electoral breakthrough. Therefore, we form a theoretical framework based on a threefold mechanism: far-right parties manage to reduce the stigma they face because of a reputational shield or by moderating their message; the media help the far right gain visibility and legitimacy by accommodating its views; established parties accommodate far-right parties without ostracizing them. Then, we test the framework by looking at the electoral breakthroughs of four parties: the results confirm the expectations except for the role of established parties, which is inconclusive.

**Keywords:** far right; stigma; electoral breakthrough; Western Europe; media

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, liberal democracy seemed to have become the only game in town (Linz and Stepan 1996). This, however, was a brief illusion; just a few years later – in 1994 – the third wave of autocratization began (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Today, the main challenges to liberal democracy do not come from old-style fascist coups as they did a century ago, nor from Communism, as was the case until the 1980s, but from the results of free and fair elections where illiberal actors can legitimately compete for power (Boese et al. 2022). In Europe, liberal democracy is mostly challenged by the far right, a party family that includes both radical and extreme right parties. Radical-right parties propose a model of democracy that is at odds with liberal principles such as minority rights, checks and balances, free and independent media, rule of law and separation of powers. Extreme-right parties, on the other hand, reject popular sovereignty and majority rule altogether (Mudde 2007).

The tragedy of World War II stigmatized European far-right parties because of their ideological association with past authoritarian regimes (Manucci 2022). The stigma, in turn, made them struggle electorally (Rydgren 2005). During the far right's third wave (1980–2000), far-right parties had already started entering parliaments and achieving a prominent role in European politics, but it is with the fourth wave – from the beginning of the 21st century – that they became the 'new normal' (Golder 2016; Mudde 2019). In the last decades, previously stigmatized far-right discourses became accepted political wisdom for mainstream political parties and the media, thus normalizing them (Krzyżanowski 2020). Moreover, far-right actors and discourses gradually changed what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate, thus becoming mainstream (Brown et al. 2023). This confirms that not even the most established democracy can avoid with absolute certainty that a leader or a political party with authoritarian tendencies will win the elections and attack the rule of law (Bermeo 2016).

In contemporary Europe, it is possible to observe how the electoral success of far-right parties poses a risk of autocratization without resorting to violent coups: when it reaches positions of power, the far right – as well as other illiberal actors – generally preserves the existence of democratic institutions, but undermines their open, competitive and pluralistic character (Pirro and Stanley 2022; Rosenfeld 2023). Not all far-right parties oppose liberal democracy in the same systematic way and it is possible that once in power a far-right party follows a process of moderation to reach a compromise with its coalition partners (Capaul and Ewert 2021). Despite these caveats, it is important to highlight that every far-right party poses a concrete danger for liberal democracy (Freeden 2015) and every single case of democratic backsliding in Europe currently comes from the far right (Katsambekis 2023). The danger is not always perceived as immediate and clear because, paradoxically, the far right presents itself as a liberal champion of freedom of speech. This, however, does not make far-right parties liberal, because 'these parties tend to pick and choose the most appropriate and useful aspects of liberalism and refashion them for ends that are ultimately illiberal' (Moffitt 2020: 87). Therefore, illiberalism 'is facilitated by democratic principles – with illiberal parties able to legitimately win democratic elections' (Laruelle 2022: 318). This is happening in several European countries, including those where, since the end of World War II, the far right used to be electorally insignificant.

It is therefore crucial to understand under what conditions far-right parties are electorally successful. So far, the literature has pointed to different explanatory factors such as economic anxiety, cultural backlash, political-institutional factors, psychological mechanisms, collective memory and the role of the media (Golder 2016; Mudde 2019). This study sets out to analyse the recent electoral breakthrough of far-right parties in four countries where the far right had until recently remained taboo: Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. Compared to previous studies, the approach we adopt offers three advantages.

First, it focuses on the moment that *precedes* the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties, when they leave the system's periphery and go from electoral irrelevance to increased visibility and impact, paving the road for future mainstreaming and normalization processes. Studying the mechanisms that allow far-right parties to achieve an electoral breakthrough illuminates a critical phase in the growth of the

far right, making it possible to elaborate strategies to preserve liberal democratic principles across Europe. Indeed, once far-right parties enter national parliaments, the process of normalization might be irreversible (Art 2007; Valentim 2021). Second, studying countries where the far right was electorally marginal for much longer than in the rest of Europe can provide important lessons about the processes of erosion of this stigma and illuminate how far-right parties manage to obtain their electoral breakthroughs under seemingly unfavourable conditions. A theoretical framework that works in countries where the far right struggled electorally much more than in the rest of Europe is particularly generalizable and suitable for comparative purposes. If the theoretical framework works for far-right parties facing extreme stigma, it is safe to assume it will work for far-right parties that face moderate stigma.

Third, in the literature, the mechanisms behind the presence/absence of stigma of far-right parties are often taken for granted and not analysed systematically. We therefore construct a theoretical framework that explicitly addresses this issue by combining several approaches and factors. We look at the relatively unexplored mechanism that brings parties previously stigmatized to achieve credible democratic credentials and an electoral breakthrough. Therefore, we offer an innovative framework of analysis that considers several aspects of the normalization of far-right parties by combining previous studies that focused on single factors or a single case.

How can far-right parties experience an electoral breakthrough even in countries where they were previously stigmatized and demonized? To answer this question, the article proceeds as follows. First, it describes when and how the far right obtained its first electoral breakthrough in Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden, explaining why these four countries are ideal for implementing a *most different systems design*. Then, it builds a theoretical framework about the key mechanisms that are expected to lower the stigma these parties face, thus forming pathways for their electoral breakthrough. The following section applies the theoretical framework to four far-right parties: Alternative for Germany, Chega, Sweden Democrats and VOX. The results show that these parties experienced their electoral breakthroughs for two reasons. First, they enjoyed a reputational shield that made them appear acceptable or they had to build a respectable façade to distance themselves from extremist roots. Second, the media played a crucial role in giving them visibility prior to their electoral breakthrough. The conclusions address the implications and limitations of these findings and propose new lines of research.

## The end of exceptionalism in Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden

Stigma can be defined as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' (Goffman 1963) and a party experiences stigma if it is regarded as socially unacceptable (Harteveld et al. 2019). In Western Europe, because of the historical experiences with fascism and institutionalized racism, far-right parties have been highly stigmatized and often treated as pariahs (Eatwell 2003; Ignazi 2003; Manucci 2022; Minkenberg 2013; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007). The lack of media freedom and minority protection, together with attacks on the rule of law and the separation of powers, characterize both far-right parties and past authoritarian regimes. It is precisely the

partial continuity between contemporary far-right parties and the fascist past that has made the far right the most stigmatized party family in Western Europe (Dinas and Northmore-Ball 2020).

Contrary to the rest of Europe, where the far right had been mainstreaming for decades (Hainsworth 2000), far-right parties in Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden were electorally unsuccessful until recently (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015; Art 2007; Marchi 2013; Rydgren 2004). However, after 2010, this exceptional condition came to an end in each of these countries (Arzheimer 2015; Heyne and Manucci 2021; Rydgren and Van Der Meiden 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). The far-right parties that obtained a first electoral breakthrough in the four countries mentioned above are Alternative for Germany, Chega (Portugal), VOX (Spain) and Sweden Democrats. All four can be classified as populist radical right parties because of their populism, nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007). As the far right includes both radical and extreme right parties, these parties therefore belong to the far-right party family (Rooduijn et al. 2023). Before analysing the reasons for their electoral breakthroughs, it is necessary to briefly trace the political trajectories of these four parties in the respective political contexts.

The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna – SD) were considered for a long time 'beyond the pale' because of their association to neofascist ideas and organizations. They participated in every election since 1988, failing to enter the Riksdag six consecutive times until their breakthrough in 2010. In 2022, the SD became the second most-voted party in the country and granted external support for a right-wing government. The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD) was founded in 2013 and failed to gain electoral representation at the elections of the same year. However, in 2014 it entered three regional parliaments in the east (Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg) as well as the European Parliament. In 2017, when its transformation into a far-right party was complete, it finally entered the Bundestag as the third most-voted party in the country before losing some seats in the 2021 elections. VOX too was created in 2013 and initially failed to enter the Cortes Generales. VOX first entered the regional parliament of Andalusia in 2018, then gained national representation for the first time at the April 2019 elections, further improving its performance in the November snap elections, thus becoming the third most-voted party in the country (and confirming the performance at the 2023 elections). Finally, Chega experienced the most rapid growth: created in April 2019, in October of the same year it entered the Assembleia de República with only one MP (the leader, André Ventura). Then it came third in the 2021 presidential elections, consolidating its role in the 2022 and 2024 elections when it became the third-largest party in parliament.

Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden are suitable cases for a most different systems design, which identifies points of similarity between otherwise different cases and thus identifies the independent variables that are causing the outcome (Przeworski and Teune 1970). The four countries share the same dependent variable because the electoral failure of far-right parties continued for much longer than in the rest of Europe. They were considered exceptional or negative cases because far-right parties were demonized, stigmatized or ostracized from the

political space and electorally irrelevant. This remained true until the 2010s, much later than in the rest of the continent (Eatwell 1998; Hainsworth 2000). The common trait of these cases, or their shared dependent variable, is therefore that they witnessed the electoral breakthrough of a far-right party for the first time in the decade 2010–2020. We consider 'electoral breakthrough' to be the moment in which negligible challenger parties become key political actors.[1] While sharing a common trait, these four countries are also sufficiently different from each other in a variety of dimensions (see Table 1), forming an ideal case selection for a most different systems design.

The first difference across our four cases concerns the stigma of the authoritarian past and the far right. Sweden is a first-wave democracy featuring no direct authoritarian legacies and strong stigmatization of the fascist past (Rydgren 2002; Trägårdh 2002). Germany belongs to the second wave of democratization and has developed an extremely strong stigma of the Nazi past and the far right, especially in the West (Art 2006; Herf 1997). Portugal initiated the third wave of democratization via a revolution that in 1974 clearly broke with the Estado Novo dictatorship and highly stigmatized the far right (Mendes and Dennison 2021; Pinto 2006). Finally, Spain decided to 'forget' Franco's regime and let bygones be bygones by approving a 'pact of forgetting' that did not provide official stigmatization of the authoritarian past (Aguilar Fernández 2001; Encarnación 2014). For these reasons, the level of stigmatization of the far right can be classified as high in all countries apart from Spain, where the democratic transition produced an average or medium level of stigma.[2]

The four countries also have different media systems; this is relevant because we know that the media can play a key role in the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties (Ellinas 2018). According to Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004), Portugal and Spain feature a Polarized Pluralist Model typical of Mediterranean countries, characterized by low newspaper circulation, high political parallelism, weaker professionalization and deregulation. Sweden and Germany, on the other hand, are based on a Democratic Corporatist Model typical of northern and central Europe, characterized by, among other things, high newspaper circulation, external pluralism, strong professionalization and strong state intervention but with protection for press freedom.

Finally, the two 'crises' at the origin of the success of far-right parties in Europe in the 2010s had different effects and impacts across the four countries (Mudde 2019). In the Great Recession, Spain and Portugal were severely hit by welfare cuts and youth unemployment, while Sweden and Germany were not affected in the same way and their economies remained strong. As a result, bailout countries such as Spain and Portugal witnessed levels of satisfaction with democracy much lower compared to non-bailout countries such as Germany and Sweden (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso 2017). As regards the so-called refugee 'crisis', in Spain and especially in Portugal migrants did not become a very politicized issue (González-Enríquez 2017; Mendes and Dennison 2021). To the contrary, in Sweden and especially in Germany the refugee 'crisis' became highly politicized (Grande et al. 2019). Crucially, the refugee 'crisis' had different effects on democracy, party systems and existing cleavages in the north and the south of Europe (Hooghe and Marks 2018).

**Table 1.** Differences and Similarities between the Four Cases.

| Country | Germany | Portugal | Spain | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Democratic transition | Second wave | Third wave | Third wave | First wave |
| Stigma | High | High | Medium | High |
| Media system | Democratic Corporatist | Polarized Pluralist | Polarized Pluralist | Democratic Corporatist |
| Impact of Great Recession | Low | High | High | Low |
| Impact of refugee 'crisis' | High | Low | Medium/ low | Medium/high |
| Far-right breakthrough 2010–2019 | Yes (2017) | Yes (2019) | Yes (2019) | Yes (2010) |

## Pathways for electoral breakthrough

How did the parties under investigation here manage to achieve their electoral breakthrough in countries where the far right was highly stigmatized and electorally unsuccessful? This study contributes to the literature on far-right parties by formulating a unifying theoretical framework of the mechanisms that can increase or lower the level of stigma of the far right. Before proceeding, however, it is essential to clarify why we focus exclusively on the factors that affect the stigma that far-right parties face and why some variables that might affect the electoral performance of far-right parties have not been considered.

First, to obtain an electoral breakthrough, a party must be a credible political contender that articulates a political message matching an existing demand in the electoral arena in which it operates (Manucci 2024). This, however, is true for any type of new party and not a specific characteristic of far-right parties. Second, differentiating between the various phases of a party's development is important when trying to explain divergent electoral fortunes (de Jonge 2021), since breakthrough and persistence are distinct processes (Mudde 2007): the role of the media and mainstream parties are both considered particularly relevant in the phase that *precedes* the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties (Ellinas 2010). Third, we lack a clear consensus about the effects of factors such as the electoral system (and thresholds), corruption scandals or the levels of polarization, hence these factors were not considered.

Therefore, we focus exclusively on factors that influence the stigma associated with a far-right party that has not yet achieved an electoral breakthrough. Indeed, in most of Europe, managing to be perceived as a 'normal' party with credible democratic credentials is a necessary condition for far-right parties to achieve an electoral breakthrough.[3] Moreover, by building a comprehensive and systematic model that explicitly deals with the mechanisms behind the reduction of stigma for these parties, we fill a relevant gap in the literature. A review of the literature that deals with the stigma faced by far-right parties suggests three interconnected factors that can contribute to decrease the stigma far-right parties face.

First, it is regularly acknowledged in the literature that far-right parties must project a respectable façade to make sure that they are not associated with

undemocratic or illiberal ideals that might make them perceived as 'beyond the pale' (Akkerman et al. 2016; Bjånesøy et al. 2023; Eatwell 2003; Harteveld et al. 2019; Mammone 2009; Meléndez and Kaltwasser 2021; Van Spanje 2010). If they maintain a very radical or extremist agenda and aggressive rhetoric, far-right parties run the risk of being associated with undemocratic ideals and consequently demonized and ostracized. Hence, for far-right parties, we argue that showing a democratically respectable image is the key to an electoral breakthrough.

A classic example of a party trying to reduce the stigma it faces is Le Pen's Front National (now Rassemblement National) in France. This process, which in French is called *dédiabolisation* – literally, 'undemonization' (Mayer 2013) – started in the 1980s and continued with Marine Le Pen when she took over as party leader from her father in 2011 (Dézé 2015). The process of *dédiabolisation* aimed at challenging the stigma that the party faced in an effort to be perceived as a normal political actor, distancing itself from anti-Semitic tropes and switching to modern narratives such as the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (Rueda 2023). The literature indicates several options for parties that need to offer a moderate image to achieve their own *dédiabolisation*. They can moderate their policy proposals, but this is not a common strategy (Wagner and Meyer 2017), de-toxify their rhetoric and symbols (Brown et al. 2023), or be protected by a reputational shield granting them democratic credentials (Ivarsflaten 2006).[4]

Second, the role of the media in giving visibility to far-right parties has been proven to be crucial in determining their legitimacy and significantly enhancing their chances of electoral breakthrough by a well-established strand of literature (Bos et al. 2011; Eatwell 2000; Ellinas 2018; Manucci 2017; Mazzoleni 2008; Moffitt 2022; Van Heerden and Van Der Brug 2017). The media can lift smaller parties from obscurity and push them into the political mainstream by granting them exposure (Mondon and Winter 2020; Mudde 2019), especially in their pre-breakthrough phase (Ellinas 2010). Recent studies show that the media contributed to present political views that were previously treated as radical and extreme becoming increasingly normal and uncontroversial elements of public political discourse, thus normalizing them (Krzyżanowski 2020; Wodak 2021). The fact that the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties is closely linked to the strategies adopted by the media has been proven in several cases, from the Freedom Party of Austria (Ellinas 2010) to Vlaams Belang in Belgium (de Jonge 2019).

Following Léonie de Jonge (2019), we consider three possible media strategies that have different impacts on the stigmatization of the far right: demarcation, confrontation and accommodation (from the most to the least stigmatizing). Demarcation indicates the presence of a cordon sanitaire *médiatique*: far-right parties are excluded from the public debate, and the far-right's rhetoric is not considered part of an official or legitimate discourse. This seems to be the most effective strategy to prevent the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties (de Jonge 2021). Confrontation means that the media give space to the ideas of far-right actors, but in a critical manner or to emphasize their lack of democratic credentials. Accommodation means to give visibility to far-right actors in non-critical ways, thus offering them a platform to spread their views. It might also involve the legitimization of far-right parties and their policies through favourable news coverage.

Third, established right-wing parties also play a crucial role in legitimizing the far right (Art 2007; Bale et al. 2010; Heinze 2022; Katsambekis 2023; Minkenberg 2013).[5] Party responses are crucial when dealing with the threat that far-right parties pose to liberal democracy as they contribute to shaping their legitimacy, democratic credibility and room for manoeuvre. Building on Anna-Sophie Heinze (2022) and her systematization of previous literature, but only considering the possible interactions *before* the far right's electoral breakthrough (therefore not considering the potential parliamentary cooperation), we assume that established parties operate on both formal and policy levels when dealing with the far right, and have at their disposal three strategies with different effects on the stigmatization of the far right: exclusive, adversarial and accommodative (from the most to the least stigmatizing).[6]

Exclusion is used when established parties erect a cordon sanitaire and refuse to collaborate and form alliances with the far right, demonizing and ostracizing it (Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; Heinze 2022; Riera and Pastor 2022; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007). If the cordon sanitaire is not explicit, or established parties remain 'agnostic' about it, the cordon simply does not exist. Moreover, whether or not the far right is excluded via cordon sanitaire, the question remains of what to do concerning the topics owned by the far right – most typically immigration and security. When engaging with the far-right's agenda, established parties can adopt an adversarial strategy – meaning that they oppose the far-right party and stand on a radically different position – or they can rely on accommodation, meaning that they try to 'own' the issue by removing it from the control of the far right (Downs 1957; Meguid 2005).[7]

The effects of these strategies are not always uniform and their efficacy is still debated (Bale et al. 2010). For example, Teun Pauwels (2011) shows that the decline of the Belgian Vlaams Blok can be understood as a consequence of the cordon sanitaire, but other studies show that strategies of isolation and demonization might prove surprisingly ineffective (Downs et al. 2009; Van Heerden and Van Der Brug 2017). Not only do ostracized parties sometimes obtain relevant electoral results (Van Spanje and Weber 2019), but at times demonization can attract protest voters (Meguid 2008), especially those who are already dissatisfied with the establishment. For example, the decision to prosecute the far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders for hate speech did increase its electoral support (Van Spanje and de Vreese 2015).

Similarly, the effects of accommodation seem contradictory. Accommodation is supposed to decrease the far-right's electoral support by adopting its core policy issue position (Meguid 2005). However, accommodation reduces support for the far right only if it is ostracized at the same time (Van Spanje and de Graaf 2018): in fact, accommodation alone can lead to even greater legitimacy for far-right parties and boost their electoral performance (Bale 2003; Krause et al. 2023; Minkenberg 2013). For these reasons, we consider a combination of exclusionary and adversarial strategies as the most stigmatizing strategy, while accommodation is the least stigmatizing one.

Overall, as illustrated in Figure 1, we expect that far-right parties can obtain an electoral breakthrough via three interconnected mechanisms. Far-right parties can reduce the stigma they face either by moderating their message or by enjoying a
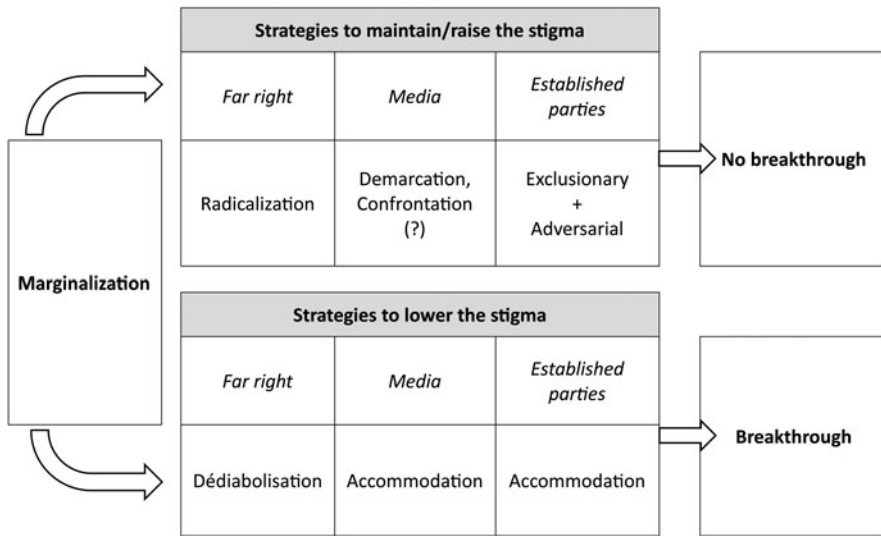
**Figure 1.** Strategies to Reduce or Increase the Stigmatization of Far-Right Parties.

reputational shield; the media help the far right gain visibility and legitimacy by accommodating its views; established parties accommodate far-right parties without ostracizing them. Once the stigma they face has been reduced, we expect them to obtain an electoral breakthrough. We now test this theoretical model on the electoral breakthroughs of Alternative for Germany, Chega, Sweden Democrats and VOX (see Figure 2).

### Alternative for Germany

In terms of stigma, the relevant literature shows the existence of a reputational shield that allowed Alternative for Germany (AfD) to avoid the extreme toxicity surrounding the Nazi past. The presence of this reputational shield sets AfD apart from any previous German far-right party and explains why AfD was the first to obtain an electoral breakthrough at the national level after World War II. As suggested by de Jonge (2021), it is possible to see AfD as a Trojan horse: when the party entered the political arena it was a relatively moderate party with a focus on Eurozone politics. AfD had a reputational shield because it was initially perceived as a party of professors, lawyers and doctors, combining soft Euroscepticism with market liberalism and socially conservative policies (Arzheimer 2015). From 2014, however, AfD exploited its democratic credentials and started using a very harsh rhetoric about the EU and, from 2015, it started focusing on anti-immigration discourses.[8] Hence, AfD fully transformed into a classic far-right party after it had achieved an electoral breakthrough at the regional level and, over time, both the party and its electorate progressively radicalized and turned fully to nativism (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). The presence of a reputational shield made it possible for AfD to project a very different image compared to classic anti-immigration parties with authoritarian tendencies, at least in the first

|  | **Far Right** | **Media** | **Established Parties** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **AfD** | Reputational shield | Confrontation | Exclusion & Adversarial |
| **Chega** | Reputational shield | Confrontation | Adversarial |
| **SD** | Rhetorical moderation | Demarcation (until 2006); Confrontation (from 2006) | Exclusion & Adversarial |
| **VOX** | Reputational shield | Confrontation | Adversarial |

Figure 2. The Electoral Breakthrough of Four European Far-Right Parties.

phase of the party's existence. Overall, the more moderate beginnings – distant from any extremism or possible associations with the Nazi past – allowed AfD to build a reputational shield that played a key role in its electoral breakthrough.[9]

The media further contributed to providing AfD visibility and legitimacy since the early stages of the party's existence. During the months of the financial crisis in 2013, Bernd Lucke, a professor of economics and one of the party founders, received ample coverage in the German media (Goerres et al. 2018). Moreover, in 2015 the media helped AfD to set the agenda by increasing the salience of the so-called migrant 'crisis', making it easier for AfD to be in the spotlight and offer a controversial 'solution' to the arrival of immigrants (Chase 2018; Knight 2018). Michael Haller, former senior editor at *Die Zeit*, published a report (2017) about how the German media dealt with the migrant 'crisis', finding that the coverage was so one-sided and uncritical of Chancellor Angela Merkel that it even reinforced people's mistrust in the media, thus creating a fertile terrain for AfD. Although academic studies on the topic are still scarce and future research should focus on the strategies that German media adopted towards AfD, it seems plausible to argue that the main media strategy towards AfD before the party's electoral breakthrough was confrontation.

Concerning the role of established parties, AfD faced exclusion and adversarial strategies at least until its electoral breakthrough in 2017. Now that AfD represents an important political force in the Bundestag, the cordon sanitaire (in German *Ausgrenzung*) is much more difficult to maintain (Heinze 2022); however, there is no doubt that it existed until the party's breakthrough. Initially, AfD faced a high level of stigma and a cordon sanitaire of all other parties (Art 2018). At least until its electoral breakthrough at the national level in 2017, the contact between AfD and other parties was restricted to a minimum while the initiatives

of AfD were routinely voted down (Arzheimer 2019). Moreover, the established right (Christian Democratic Union – CDU) did not parrot AfD's policy on immigration, indicating that the CDU adopted an adversarial strategy (Art 2018). Overall, we can conclude that in Germany the established right adopted an exclusionary strategy, at least until the party's electoral breakthrough, combined with an adversarial strategy that mostly continues today.

## Chega

The Carnation Revolution in Portugal created high levels of stigmatization towards the authoritarian past, and every far-right party before Chega remained electorally irrelevant (da Silva and Salgado 2018; Pinto 2001). Populist, racist and anti-immigration attitudes already existed in the country and simply needed to be activated (Santana-Pereira and Cancela 2021), confirming that the Portuguese far right was electorally marginalized because of the effect of its stigmatization (Manucci 2020). Crucial for Chega's electoral breakthrough was the fact that the party has enjoyed a reputational shield since its early days. Indeed, the party's leader, André Ventura, emerged from the rank and file of the moderate and established Social Democratic Party (PSD), thus giving Chega a lower degree of stigmatization than previous radical and extreme-right parties (Marchi and Lisi 2021; Mendes and Dennison 2021).

Similarly, Chega benefited from a degree of media visibility that was unprecedented for a party to the right of the PSD (Lisi 2015; Marchi 2013). The reason is that when Chega achieved its electoral breakthrough in 2019, André Ventura was already an established presence on Portuguese television as a football commentator (Carvalho 2022). As soon as he decided to leave the PSD, Ventura was portrayed in the media as the new spokesperson of the far right. Riccardo Marchi and Marco Lisi (2021) argue that, thanks to the visibility that the media gave him, Ventura managed to launch Chega and eventually enter the parliament as Chega's leader. In their content analysis of Portuguese newspapers between 2000 and 2019, Mariana Mendes and James Dennison reveal that Chega, compared to all Portuguese far-right parties before it, enjoyed more visibility in the media and on average better coverage (2021). Confrontation is therefore the strategy adopted by Portuguese media.

Concerning the role of established parties, the time that passed between Chega's creation and its electoral breakthrough has been so brief – merely six months – that the formation of an official cordon sanitaire was never formally discussed. Shortly after the party's breakthrough in 2019, it had already become clear that Chega was not ostracized like its predecessors: indeed, in 2020 Chega provided its confidence and supply to a right-wing government in the Regional Assembly of Azores in exchange for a series of demands (Mendes 2022). Then, before the 2022 elections, PSD leader Rui Rio first declared that they were not going to form a government with Chega, but a few days before the elections the party made a U-turn: first the vice-president then Rui Rio himself stated that 'PSD has no red lines' when it came to possible alliances with the radical right (Lopes 2023). In his analysis, João Carvalho (2022) argues that one of the reasons behind Chega's electoral breakthrough was the convergence of mainstream parties towards the centre in economic

terms, especially with the PSD abandoning its neoliberal stance, thus opening up a political space for Ventura's party and therefore excluding the option of accommodation. Overall, we can conclude that in Portugal the mainstream right adopted an adversarial strategy.

### Sweden Democrats

The Sweden Democrats (SD) have roots in neofascist and extremist groups and ideas (Rydgren 2004). Due to this compromising past, the party lacks a reputational shield that would protect the democratic credibility of its activities and policy proposals (Bolin et al. 2023). For decades, the media as well as the centre left have accused the SD of being undemocratic and racist (Hellström and Nilsson 2010). Even though it moderated its message and rhetoric over time, especially from the second half of the 1990s (Widfeldt 2015), the party has been highly stigmatized and ostracized, especially during the 2014 elections (Aylott and Bolin 2019). However, in the long run, the efforts the SD made to distance itself from its neofascist past and to build a more respectable façade might have facilitated its electoral breakthrough in 2010. This process included, for example, what the SD called 'zero tolerance for racism': although mostly cosmetic, this type of change helped *destigmatize* the party in the eyes of many voters (Rydgren and Van Der Meiden 2019). Compared to the other cases, the SD is the only party that had to moderate its rhetoric to avoid stigma, because it was not protected by a reputational shield.[10]

The literature shows that the media have certainly contributed to the party's electoral breakthrough and subsequent normalization. In the first phase (1988–2006) the media system tried to restrict the party's visibility. However, following the 2006 elections, this attitude changed because of concerns over freedom of expression (Oja and Mral 2013). Jens Rydgren and Sara Van Der Meiden (2019) show that the media attention devoted to the SD has increased substantially over the past two decades, especially in the period between 2006 and the party's electoral breakthrough in 2010. Nowadays, the Swedish media tend to legitimize the political views of the party. Interviews with SD members are not adversarial and often provide a platform for the legitimization of the party while the SD's nationalism and nativism are not subjected to critical scrutiny within the interviews. As a result, 'extreme and previously unacceptable political views have become normalized elements of mainstream political discourse' (Ekström et al. 2020: 480). Therefore, the main strategy followed by Swedish media was demarcation until 2006 and then became confrontation.

The SD has been subject to a strict cordon sanitaire for much of its existence (Rydgren 2004), a situation that continued even after its electoral breakthrough in 2010. Indeed, the exclusion of the SD peaked at the 2014 elections (Aylott and Bolin 2019) and was still in place at the 2018 elections (Heinze 2018). However, after 2014, a gradual relaxation took place among some of the centre-right parties, and cooperation at the local level began (Bolin et al. 2023). Like in the German and Portuguese cases, the increased convergence towards the centre of established parties could explain the fact that there was a political space viable for the SD (Loxbo 2014), which excludes accommodation. Moreover, on specific policies (including immigration) the established parties used an adversarial strategy,

although it is not clear what effects this strategy had on the electoral performance of the SD (Rydgren and Van Der Meiden 2019). We can conclude that, until the electoral breakthrough of the SD in 2010, the established Swedish parties adopted an exclusionary strategy combined with an adversarial strategy.

## VOX

In Spain, given the democratic transition based on a 'pact of forgetting', the stigmatization for the authoritarian past and far-right parties is relatively low. For this reason, Spain is also the only country under examination to feature a successor party (Loxton and Mainwaring 2018). The predecessor of the established right-wing Partido Popular (PP) was Alianza Popular, a party founded in 1977 by seven ministers of the Franco regime. Despite this relatively low stigma, every radical and extreme-right party remained electorally irrelevant for decades after the democratic transition (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). VOX features a type of rhetoric and messages that draw from traditional Spanish far-right topics and shares several illiberal elements with the Francoist legacy (Martín et al. 2022; Ribera Payá and Martínez 2021). However, VOX does not have fascist roots and it benefits from a reputational shield because it is an offshoot of the PP, Spain's main conservative party, in terms of its voter base and many of its founding leaders (Barrio et al. 2021; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022; Mendes and Dennison 2021). It helped, in this sense, that VOX did not insist solely on anti-immigration issues: for example, the *raison d'être* of the party is its nationalism and opposition to the Catalan secession (Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020).

VOX enjoyed a media visibility that previous radical or extreme-right parties never experienced in Spain. Before the 2018 elections in Andalusia, when the party entered a regional parliament for the first time, VOX organized a large gathering that attracted the attention of the media and turned the spotlight on Santiago Abascal's party. A content analysis of Spanish newspapers between 2000 and 2019 shows that previous parties with a far-right agenda received very little visibility and mostly negative media coverage, while VOX received much more attention and a more positive one as well (Mendes and Dennison 2021). Overall, confrontation is the strategy adopted by Spanish media towards VOX.

Before its national breakthrough in 2019, an institutionalized cordon sanitaire around VOX was never officially in place. When VOX entered the regional parliament of Andalusia in 2018, the PP immediately showed it was ready to negotiate and collaborate, and in 2022 the two parties formed a government in the autonomous community of Castilla y León. This suggests that entering regional parliaments is a step towards electoral breakthrough at the national level, because once they enter institutions – even if at the subnational level – far-right parties can no longer be ignored or ostracized (Heinze 2022). In their analysis of parties' discourses, Jakob Schwörer and Belén Fernández-García (2021) show that before the 2019 European elections, the PP referred to VOX more as an ally than as a political opponent, suggesting the existence of a certain degree of accommodation. Indeed, now that VOX is a relevant actor in the Spanish political system, the PP will probably govern with VOX at the national level whenever necessary (Field and Alonso 2023). Overall, the relevant literature does not fully clarify the strategy

that the PP has adopted towards VOX so far, but it seems plausible to conclude that until the electoral breakthrough of VOX in 2019 it was an adversarial one.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on the far right by forming a theoretical framework that accounts for the reduction of the stigma faced by far-right parties and their subsequent electoral breakthrough, then by testing this framework on four empirical cases. Two main mechanisms account for the lowering of the stigma associated with AfD, Chega, the SD and VOX. First, these parties enjoyed a reputational shield that made them appear acceptable or, in the case of the SD, they moderated their positions to build a respectable façade. Second, the media played a crucial role, providing visibility and legitimacy to these parties prior to their electoral breakthroughs. The role of the established right, on the other hand, remains unclear. VOX and Chega might have benefited from the absence of a formal cordon sanitaire, which could explain why they achieved an electoral breakthrough. However, the combination of exclusionary and adversarial strategies that should have prevented the electoral breakthrough of AfD and the SD proved to be insufficient.

This study has two main limitations. First, the role of stigma should be combined with supply- and demand-side factors to fully explain the electoral breakthroughs of far-right parties. Second, in some contexts, the role of left-wing parties should also be considered. Third, this study cannot provide useful lessons for cases in which the far right's electoral breakthrough has already taken place. However, the analytical framework developed in this study can be applied even in countries where the far right has already experienced an electoral breakthrough, because new far-right parties keep emerging across Europe. For example, it is increasingly common to have more than one far-right party in the national parliament and multiple far-right parties can coexist in a single political system, as is currently the case in Italy, France, the Netherlands and Greece.

The findings presented have several implications concerning the role of established right-wing parties. First, none of the generally studied strategies seems to be successful in avoiding the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties, probably because once the stigma of far-right parties has been reduced (by the media, for example, or by the far-right parties themselves), established parties are no longer able to effectively curb the far-right's breakthrough. Therefore, it might be time to imagine entirely new strategies, including the (re-)politicization of issues and topics that far-right parties struggle with, such as measures to combat climate change and poverty. Second, a cordon sanitaire – both political and from the media – can be very effective, but only if it is airtight. If it is not explicit from the beginning, or if it is lifted as soon as it becomes strategically advantageous for the established right to form an alliance with the far right, it does not prevent the electoral breakthrough of far-right parties (Backlund 2022).

In conclusion, a fifth wave of the far right might be looming because the assumption that the far right is stigmatized more than other party families might no longer be accurate. The fact far-right parties obtained unprecedented electoral breakthroughs even in countries traditionally 'immune' to the far right is a powerful reminder. Future research should measure levels of stigmatization of far-right parties

at the individual level and in the media. For example, as younger people with no experience of authoritarianism join the body of voters, the political environment might become less hostile to far-right parties. This means that the effect of the 'vaccine' against the far right might fade over time and that the electoral breakthrough of the far right might be a result of generational replacement (Frantzeskakis and Sato 2020).

The far right puts Europe at risk of autocratization; once started, this process almost always leads to autocracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Therefore, it is increasingly necessary to develop tools that allow researchers to distinguish between radical and extreme parties as well as their commitment to democratic and liberal principles, together with tools for democratic resilience.

## Notes

1 An electoral breakthrough takes place when parties cross the 'threshold of relevance' (Sartori 1976) and achieve 'national political relevance' (Ellinas 2010). There are several approaches to operationalizing it. For example, parliamentary seats (Mudde 2007) or a specific percentage of votes (Norris 2005; Van Kessel 2015). Other indicators can be coalition potential and blackmail potential. We describe in detail the electoral breakthrough of each party under investigation, and we believe that we can safely conclude that each of them crossed the threshold of relevance as demonstrated by their subsequent evolution, regardless of the approach chosen (seats, votes, relevance, coalition potential and so on).

2 In 2007 the Spanish socialists approved the law of historical memory, re-politicizing the past (Aguilar Fernández 2008). VOX has expressed highly critical positions towards the law and proposes to reverse it (Villamil and Balcells 2021).

3 Rarely, far-right parties can experience an electoral breakthrough *because* of their extremism; for example, Golden Dawn in Greece (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022).

4 A far-right party has a reputational shield when it has full democratic credentials protecting it against other actors' attempts to undermine the credibility of its policy proposals. A party's ideological imprint and historical legacy that is far from extremism can protect it against allegations of racism and intolerance. This is possible when the party has solid democratic roots and when the party does not focus exclusively on proposing a restrictive platform on immigration issues (Rydgren 2005). On the other hand, when a far-right party is 'toxic' it will trigger normative concerns about its democratic credentials and it will have no shield (Blinder et al. 2013).

5 According to Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser (2021) a mainstream party adopts moderate positions and supports liberal democracy. However, far-right parties can become 'mainstream' without necessarily embracing moderate positions or endorsing liberal aspects of democracy. Therefore, we use the term *established parties*.

6 The reaction of left-wing parties matters too (Krause et al. 2023). However, we do not consider this aspect for two reasons. First, the reaction of right-wing parties has a much more profound effect on the electoral chances of the far right. Second, the four countries under investigation present high levels of stigmas towards the far right, and the mainstream left played no role in facilitating its electoral breakthrough (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2021). Nevertheless, whenever possible and relevant, we mention the role of left-wing parties.

7 In adopting a *dismissive* strategy, established parties ignore issues 'owned' by far-right parties to reduce their salience (Meguid 2008). However, not only is it difficult for a party to avoid taking a position on a

highly salient topic, but it is hard to empirically demonstrate to what extent established parties adopt this strategy. Therefore, we do not consider this strategy.

**8** AfD had already started experimenting with nativist messages in the east in 2014 because nativist attitudes are much higher among eastern Germans (Arzheimer 2023). The data presented in the Supplementary Material show that, over time, AfD became increasingly radical, authoritarian and conservative.

**9** The party's radicalization is confirmed by the data presented in the Supplementary Material.

**10** The data presented in the Supplementary Material show mixed evidence: while the SD clearly moderated its manifestos between 2010 and 2018 (Supplementary Material, Table 2), the CHES expert survey does not point at any moderation between 2010 and 2019 (Supplementary Material, Table 1).

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