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The Evolving Radical Right in the Early Twenty-First Century

Liberty Under Siege

Edited by Ken Fuchsman and Brigitte Demeure



THE EVOLVING RADICAL RIGHT IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This book investigates the dynamics of expansion and normalization of the radical right in the early twenty-first century.

The radical right's popularity with voters dramatically increased, it even enabled twice the election of Trump as a chief executive in the United States. The main focus of this volume is on the forces in a variety of nations where this occurred, and why this phenomenon happened at this point in history. This book illustrates both the diversity and commonality of the radical right. It is multidisciplinary and international. It examines the topic of the radical right resurgence from the perspectives of history, economics, political sciences, law, sociology, and applied psychoanalysis. It is comparative in that the radical right is discussed from the national perspective of the United States, France, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Iran, and Russia. It relies on empirical and theoretical outlooks to make sense of a complex subject matter.

This book will be of interest to students and researchers of the radical right, populism, and extremism.

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This book is dedicated to
– *Roger Griffin*
– *Cas Mudde*
– *Lauren Powell*



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INTRODUCTION

Ken Fuchsman and Brigitte Demeure

The Economist reported in February 2025 that hard-right parties are now Europe's most popular (*The Economist*, 2/28/2025, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/02/28/hard-right-parties-are-now-europes-most-popular>). By 2024, seven European Union nations have radical right officeholders within the government administration (Ruth Green, *International Bar Association*, 9/30/2024). In 2022, Italy, Europe's second-largest industrial power behind Germany, brought to power rightist Giorgia Meloni as prime minister in a coalition government. Notwithstanding Europe's ascendancy, the most notable successes of this recent movement occurred across the Atlantic, in countries with long-standing electoral traditions. U.S. American Donald J. Trump was elected president in 2016 and again in 2024. Within nations possessing long-established democratic systems, he is the first radical right chief executive to attain office without coalition support. This suggests the emergence of two distinct phenomena in countries with free elections in which the radical right plays a significant role. The radical right is an evolving phenomenon.

The reemergence of the populist radical right beginning in the 1980s constituted an astounding political phenomenon, unfolding in a world still within living memory of Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. This volume contributes to the scholarship by addressing areas of radical-right research that have been insufficiently explored and by engaging with more recent developments in the right's contemporary history. It highlights the disruption that a freely elected right-wing government in the United States can generate in both domestic and international arenas.

Definitions

Several issues emerge. First, how should the terms *far right* and *populist radical right* be understood? Clarifying the defining characteristics of both populism and

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the extreme right can help shed light on the tensions among the various components of the far right. The far right, to many, is an overarching or umbrella term. Cas Mudde, associate professor at the University of Georgia, says the “*far right* . . . encompasses both the extreme right and the radical right” (Mudde, 2018, p. 1). Norwegian sociologist Lars Berntzen concurs: the far right is a “conceptual container” containing both the populist nativist radical right and the anti-democratic extreme right (Berntzen, 2020, p. 310). Another important contribution comes from British historian Nigel Copsey. In 2024, he divided

the far right into two primary subgroups. The first, the softer one, is radical right populism. Radical-right populists abstain from declarations of white racial supremacy, are Islamophobic, anti-elitist . . . The second sub-group of the far right . . . sits at the very end of the right-wing spectrum. This is what we should understand by ‘extreme right’ . . . The nationalism of the extreme right is . . . violently anti-democratic, and often, anti-Semitic.

(Copsey, 2024, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/anti-fascism/we-are-not-far-right-just-right/>)

We now turn to the populist radical right.

Cas Mudde found that the populist radical right contains at least “three features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.” Nativism combines nationalism and xenophobia. It advocates for groups perceived as natives and is hostile to so-called alien elements. Populism, to Mudde, separates the political world into two groups, “the pure people and the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2018, p. 2). Mudde’s views on the far right are likely the most cited of all academic publications on the subject.

If populism is defined as the people versus the elite, who are considered members of the people? According to Kyle and Gultchin (2018), “Populists are united by two fundamental claims, the ‘true people’ are locked into conflict with outsiders” In addition, in recent debates, right-wing populism “is often equated with nativism” (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018).

Nativism indicates that large segments of the population are not true people for populists. This notion of the people is a restrictive one. Moreover, contemporary populist radical right movements rely on “the true people” to legitimize discriminatory measures against perceived immigrant invaders thanks to the free electoral system.

In 2019, Columbia University political theorist Nadia Urbinati described populism as “an authoritarian rendering of how democracy should be implemented” (Urbinati 2019, p. 120). Authoritarianism is defined by political scientist James Loxton as “a broad umbrella term for non-democratic systems of government, including, military, single-party, and personalist regimes. It focuses of “obedience to authority” rather than “personal liberty” (Loxton, 2024, p. 1). In authoritarian societies those who infringe on the rulers are severely punished (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). Erica Frantz, another political scientist, sees authoritarian incumbents

as “slowly undermining institutional constraints on their rule, weaken those who oppose them, and sideline and splinter civil society” (Frantz, 2018, p. 94).

But this is not all. According to Australian political scientist Benjamin Moffitt, a central feature of populism is that it “resolves around an individual person. Specifically, populism rests on personalities leadership” (Moffitt, 2020, p. 18).

Adherence to a charismatic leader thus serves as the bridge between the populist and authoritarian elements of the populist radical right. In other words, populism is reinforced by the presence of a prominent political leader. This politician may likely have an authoritarian strand. Having authoritarian tendencies has certainly been said to apply to Trump 2025.

The tensions among the various elements of the contemporary populist radical right may not fully materialize when these movements remain out of power. Radical right populists may have supported a candidate who, once elected, displays greater authoritarianism in office than during the campaign. This shift can alienate supporters who fear that, rather than prioritizing “the people,” the ruler has become part of the elite, thereby betraying the populist cause.

Through much of 2025 that seems to be President Trump’s pattern. The U.S. president has been accused of not paying sufficient attention to the economic issues that helped him get elected in 2024. As 2025 ends, his approval numbers in the Gallup poll fell to the very low 36% (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/699221/trump-approval-rating-drops-new-second-term-low.aspx>)

We now turn to the extreme right.

The extreme right and the populist radical right share core features such as nativism and authoritarianism; however, they differ in that populist radical right actors retain a commitment to key elements of democracy, whereas the extreme right is driven by a fundamentally anti-democratic outlook.

Defining the extreme right requires acknowledging its historical manifestations, including fascism, neo-fascism, totalitarianism Nazism, neo-Nazism, and in the United States, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

Some of the worst things known to humanity have been enacted just within the last hundred year by totalitarians of the right and left. Distinguishing the meaning of these various movements is important in and of itself and for the ways it may be applicable to the contemporary far right as a whole.

First, fascism. Noted historian Roger Griffin writes, “Fascism is a genus of political ideology” with a “mythic core . . . of populist ultranationalism.” This core myth is utopian in imagining an “ideal state of society and civilization.” Fascists consider the present state as one of “disintegration and decadence.” Fascists “embrace an ideology” that can lead to “renewal” and “rebirth” that inaugurates “a new, revolutionary national or civilizational order” (Griffin, 2018, p. 46).

Then, totalitarianism. Simon Tormey, in accord with Griffin, writes that “what distinguishes totalitarian rule from other forms of dictatorship is the commitment of a ruling elite to fashioning an entirely new form of society” (Tormey, 1995, p. 168). According to historian François Furet, in totalitarian societies, people are

“systematically deprived of their political ties and subject to the ‘total’ power of the ideological power and its leader” (Furet, 1999, as cited in Linz, 2000, p. 4).

To political scientist Juan Linz, totalitarianism has three characteristics: (1) a monolithic power that eliminates political diversity; (2) an elaborate ideology; (3) citizens participate in carrying out the leader and party’s directives (Linz, 2000, p. 70). Authoritarians wish to concentrate power in their own hands and enforce obedience to their rule, while totalitarians want to create a revolutionary new human reality. Italian fascism under Mussolini and Hitler’s Third Reich would then be considered rightist totalitarian regimes.

In the early 2000s, the extreme right has a smaller following than the populist radical right. It takes various forms.

“Neo-Nazism” is a term applied to post-Hitler groups adhering to the German Nazi ideals. They are spread out in a number of countries. In the United States, soon after the 2016 elections, Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer gave a speech at a gathering which was described as “dripping with anti-Semitism.” Then some members of this group broke out in a Nazi salute as Spencer declared “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory” (Lombardo and Applebaum, 2016). Neo-Nazi leader Andrew Anglin wrote to the *Huffington Post*, “We support Trump because he is the savior of the white race, sent by God to free us from the shackles of the Jew occupation” (Neiwert, 2017, pp. 268, 292). At the time, these neo-Nazi extreme right men pledged their allegiance to Trump as they thought the President shared their allegiances to anti-Semitism and Hitler.

Next, we turn to the complex phenomenon of neo-fascism.

Neo-Fascism to Bennington College political scientist John Hultgren “usually includes ultranationalist, populism . . . nativism, . . . anti-communism . . . and opposition to the parliamentary system and liberal democracy” (Hultgren, 2017). To historian Roger Griffin, neo-Fascists adhere to the revolutionary aims of earlier fascists for national rebirth (Griffin, 1991, p. 167). French scholars Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg in 2017 affirmed that neo-fascists continue to believe in the pre-war worldview of adherence to “a communitarian palingenesis and . . . a conservative revolution against the modern world” (Camus and Lebourg, 2017, p. 39).

The KKK is an American phenomenon formed in the South after the civil war. It was focused on suppressing African-Americans, including lynching and dismembering them.

Anti-semitism and nativism have also long been part of the KKK arsenal. There are many different Klan groups, but their total membership is small (SPLC, 2025).

We now turn to a comparison of the populist radical right and the extreme right within the contemporary far right.

Are there primarily irreconcilable differences or much overlap between the populist radical right and the various versions of the extreme radical right? Nazis and neo-Nazis are characterized by totalitarian ideology, entrenched antisemitism, and a readiness to employ lethal violence. There is not much similarity here with the populist radical right, which can be authoritarian but is not usually totalitarian. The

KKK is anti-African American, anti-Semitic, nativist, and with a history of lynching. It has a tradition beyond resentment to hatred.

In the United States, Trump has consistently demonstrated bias toward African Americans, coupled with pronounced nativist tendencies. He has flirted with anti-Semitism, encouraged violence at his rallies, and habitually vented his fury at opponents. The Neo-Nazis inaccurately believed that Trump was completely in their corner. The European populist radical right is nativist, but does not exhibit all the same extremes as Trump does. It is contemporary Neo-Fascism that presents the most complex comparison with the populist radical right. Historian Nigel Copsey's research finds that "there is a close relationship between radical right-wing populism and neofascism" (Copsey, 2018, p. 116). "For one, they both share a distaste for liberalism, mass immigration, and being multicultural. They are both nationalist, racist." To Copsey, neofascist theorists have assisted the populist radical right grow "in sophistication . . . (neo)fascists shade into radical right populism," though "they are not identical." Overall, there is a "thorny relationship between fascism and radical-right populism" (Copsey, 2018, pp. 117–119).

Scholarship

There is, unsurprisingly, a growing body of scholarship on the radical right as reflected in the increasing number of handbooks and essay collections examining these political developments. Many of these works aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the field, covering both the broad spectrum of radical right politics and more specific subtopics. As noted earlier, the radical right manifests differently depending on political context: in countries with free elections, populist radical right leaders can come to power, whereas in other contexts they may remain outside formal government structures. This raises important questions: what enables a populist radical right leader to attain national leadership in free electoral systems, and how does the radical right behave once it controls the machinery of government? The relative novelty of populist radical right parties in power may help explain why these distinctions have received limited scholarly attention to date.

Outline of This Book

This volume primarily examines the populist radical right, while also including chapters on the extreme right. Its main focus is on the United States and Europe, with two essays addressing cases such as Iran, Russia, and Turkey. This book covers a broad ideological and geographical spectrum. Earlier literature largely treated the populist radical right as an oppositional force, whereas recent developments point to a new phase in its evolution. Both within and outside governing coalitions, there are now countries with long traditions of free elections whose elected leaders come from the populist radical right. Accordingly, we devote a full section to the United States and the far right as part of this new stage of radical-right politics.

This book also highlights the international and ideological connections among radical right movements. Moreover, it addresses the question of voter motivation for supporting these political movements from different socio-psychological perspectives. The importance of national “historical” narratives is emphasized, and their consequences at both the collective and individual levels are also examined.

Part I

Part I is an overview of the subject matter. Our contributors are political scientist Cas Mudde, likely the most cited scholar on the radical and far right, historian Roger Griffin who has transformed the definition of fascism, and sociologist Lawrence Rosenthal, founder and director of UC Berkeley’s Center for Right-Wing Studies. Prof. Mudde sees the rise in popularity of the radical right as connected to a shift from socioeconomic issues to socio-cultural issues in particular with nativism. This emergence is also connected to the failures of liberalism. Mudde sees Trump 2025 as following the populist, nativist, and authoritarian sides of the populist radical right. But to him Trump is a combination of the populist and extreme right in his long-standing racism. So to Mudde, Trump embodies both sides of the far right in one person.

In this chapter, R. Griffin presents and compares fascism and radical right-wing populism. He considers fascism as revolutionary and the populist right as illiberal democracy, showing how these movements fit into a contemporary world facing multiple crises.

According to Prof. Rosenthal, replacement theory is central to the ideology of more recent radical right populists. They perceive that the arrival of undesirable immigrants has deprived them of something they once considered theirs. It is a movement of resentment and anger. Trump’s appeal lay partly in his encouragement of opposition to both major political parties. Nevertheless, the integration of the Tea Party and other factions into the Republican Party provided them with leverage, culminating in the eventual dominance of Tea Party and MAGA allies within the Grand Old Party.

Part II

This part of this book is about the United States. There are two essays on Trump, one on the U.S. Supreme Court and another on women in extreme right racist groups. Political scientists Brigitte L. Nacos and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon write about Trump, the radical right, and the threat to democracy. Donald Trump exhibits authoritarian tendencies in that he undermines constitutional checks and balances, promotes political violence, and encourages the curtailment of civil liberties and natural rights. Lawyer and political science professor Julic Novkov turns her attention to the highly ideological and backward looking Roberts Supreme Court. It has dismantled remnants of civil rights protections. In a nation where the president has

to take care that laws are faithfully executed, John Roberts, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court since 2005, together with five other judges, ruled that a president cannot be criminally indicted when carrying out official acts. The judicial body led by J. Roberts has been described as an imperial court and as such as too ideological. Ken Fuchsman, coeditor of a 2020 book on Trump, considers what enabled Trump to be elected in 2016. On Trump 2025, Fuchsman examines Trump's backward-looking policies, the ways in which they ignored the astounding international economic stature of the U.S., and the economic well-being of his populist base. Trump in power in 2025 could be dangerous for the world and self-defeating for himself. Sociologist Kathleen Blee studies women in extreme right, racist groups. She examines the active role played by women in the KKK in the 1920s, at a time when the organization was a national force. Dr. Blee has interviewed contemporary women in extreme right racist groups. Blee finds that white supremacist Protestant groups have been active, if not always visible, through most of American history.

Part III

This part deals with international connections. A whole network is being woven at European and transatlantic level by radical right parties and movements. This part presents some little-known aspects of those connections which might help make sense of upcoming events within the globalized radical right. French historian Nicolas Lebourg shows the ideological emergence of white nationalism, the creation of transnational structures from the 1950s onward and how the twenty-first century has given rise to a new globalized ideological product with a terrorist vocation: accelerationism which does seem to represent the future of white nationalism. French politist Stéphane François proposes to trace the interplay of ideological references between the French Nouvelle Droite, the German Conservative Revolution, Nazism, and the U.S. alt-right. Marine Le Pen is trying to set in stone her "Declaration of the Rights of Nations and Peoples," which she wants to promote abroad. French Historian Brigitte Demeure aims to demonstrate how this declaration of the rights of the peoples and its notion of "Natural community" are in line with the tradition of the Anti-Enlightenment and the far right. French politist Marion Jacquet-Vaillant presents the new French radical right party *Reconquête!*, led by Eric Zemmour. Despite the small size of the party, Zemmour was the only leader of the French radical right, accompanied by his partner and only member of the European Parliament, Sarah Knafo, to be invited by the president Trump for his inauguration in January 2025. This might change the political landscape of the radical right in France.

Part IV

We have observed in the previous parts that affects and feelings play a prominent role in the voter's preference for radical right parties. In this part, social

psychological perspectives on the far right are addressed by psychoanalysts and a sociopsychologist. French psychoanalyst Roland Gori explains with a historical context related to France, how the widespread exposure of our lives to algorithms and the financialized world (which leads to what he calls «techno fascism») contributes to the rise of radical-right populism as well as to what he calls “theo fascism,” that is, religious fanaticism and terrorism. American-Cypriot psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Vamık Volkan explores the issue of large group identity, and examines the propagation of malignant propaganda that supports the evolution of contemporary far right, which leads to societal division. German psychoanalyst Hans-Jürgen Wirth examines how in Germany the radical right has used the coronavirus crisis to fuel conspiracy theories. Austrian-borne socio-psychologist Josef Berghold traces the history of Social Darwinism and how it is now permeating our social life, thus easing the way to far right opinions.

Part V

Radical right parties and anti-democratic regimes tend to glorify the nation and to distort the past of their countries. They also deny guilt and mourning feelings, which German pastor and psychohistorian Bernd Nielsen examines in the United States, Germany, and Russia with the help of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s works. Italian historian Giullia Chielli shows how G. Meloni is building an ambiguous strategy regarding the fascist past of Italy. French-Turkish historian Hamit Bozarslan, a specialist of the Middle East, compares the three anti-democratic regimes of Iran, Turkey, and Russia, and shows how the past is being manipulated by the political leaders, and the impacts thereof on individuals.

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