

## Democracy at Risk from the Rise of Far-Right Parties in the European Union and the Abstention of Voters from the Respective Electoral Processes

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**Abstract:** The democratic principle is the basis and foundation of the state. In recent years, democracy seems to be threatened, on the one hand, by the emergence and rise of far-right parties at the national and European level and, on the other hand, by the abstention of voters from the respective electoral processes both for the election of representatives of their national parliaments and for the election of their representatives in the European Parliament. Specifically, the rise of far-right parties at the European level can be attributed to various factors, such as the economic crisis and social insecurity, illegal immigration, the ever-growing dissatisfaction and disappointment with traditional political parties and the rapid spread of social media. Typical examples of far-right parties in the European Union are the National Rally (Rassemblement National) in France, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, the League (Lega) in Italy, Fidesz in Hungary, the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) in Sweden, the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in Austria, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) in Denmark, the Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and the Swiss People's Party, Switzerland

**Keywords:** Democracy, Democratic Power, people, elections, abstention from electoral processes.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is considered the most ideal system of governance worldwide, as its basis is the people. The electorate, through its vote, elects its representatives in Parliament and Local Government. In recent years, democracy and political institutions at the European level have been faced with the discrediting and indifference of voters, which favors the birth of far-right parties with dominant ideologies of nationalism, protectionism, social conservatism, sovereignism, Euroscepticism, anti-globalization and opposition to immigration.

### 2. THE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE AS THE BASIS AND FOUNDATION OF THE POLITY

The democratic principle, by placing the people at the center of the polity, whose will constitutes the foundation of democracy, makes it clear that popular sovereignty is the strongest guarantee of a democratic regime<sup>1</sup>. Whenever a democratic system operates without the people's will holding a primary role, the very essence of democracy is called into question.

Consequently, in this sense, the democratic principle plays a decisive role in the voting process within a democratic system, given that the most crucial means of expressing the people's opinion is their vote. The vote is the people's most powerful weapon, enabling them to express their views and actively participate in the exercise of state power—approving, disapproving, and electing. Therefore, through voting, the people are practically given the opportunity to fulfill their central role and, in this way, become the very foundation of the political system.<sup>2</sup>

The democratic principle, also manifesting in the form of political pluralism, is crucial for the functioning of a democratic system. Specifically, the presence of multiple political forces and combinations ensures that a broader range of citizen groups can be represented. Otherwise, large

<sup>1</sup> Kasimatis, G. (1986). *Constitutional Law II: The Functions of the State*. Athens-Thessaloniki: Sakkoulas, pp. 29-51

<sup>2</sup> Post, R. (2005). Democracy and Equality. *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 1(2), pp. 142–153.

segments of the population would inevitably be left without the possibility of representation. This becomes particularly significant when considered in conjunction with the principle of representation<sup>3</sup>.

If Parliament were not composed of multiple political forces, only one group of the people would be represented, making it impossible to speak of popular sovereignty. Furthermore, with regard to voting, political pluralism is crucial, as without it—and in the case of a single political force—the conduct of any form of voting would be meaningless<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, any discussion on the fundamental importance of the democratic principle in its various forms for democracy and the electoral process would be incomplete without special reference to the protection of minority rights. Indeed, the absolute necessity of representing all groups within the population to uphold the essential democratic principle of popular sovereignty and the expression of the people's will directly implies the need to safeguard the rights of minorities. This includes their right to express their views and beliefs, as well as their indisputable right to representation.

The minority of citizens is also an integral part of the people and, as such, falls within the scope of popular sovereignty, contributing to the formation of the people's will<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, the protection of minority rights is of paramount importance, particularly in the voting process within a democratic system. Only through such protection can the true expression and determination of the people's will be ensured, as it is shaped by both majority and minority perspectives<sup>6</sup>.

### **3. THE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE AND THE RISE OF FAR-RIGHT PARTIES**

The rise of Far-Right parties in Europe can be attributed to several factors<sup>7</sup>:

- **Economic Crisis and Social Insecurity:** Economic recession, unemployment, and inequality create discontent, which far-right parties exploit by promoting nationalist and populist rhetoric.
- **Immigration Issue:** The increase in migration flows has led to xenophobic and racist narratives, often promoted by far-right parties as a means of political empowerment.
- **Discontent with Traditional Parties:** Citizens' disappointment with dominant political parties and elites leads to the search for alternative options, often in extreme political forces.
- **Spread of Social Media:** Digital media have facilitated the spread of propaganda and extreme ideas, strengthening the influence of far-right parties.

### **4. EXAMPLES OF FAR-RIGHT PARTIES IN EUROPE**

#### **• National Rally (Rassemblement National) - France**

The National Front was founded in 1972, renamed the National Rally in March 2018, and is one of the most prominent far-right parties in France. The party's president is Jordan Bardella, while a prominent leader and parliamentary leader is Marine Le Pen. The party's main policies are economic protectionism, zero tolerance for law and order issues, and strict control over immigration. Since the 1990s, the party has become increasingly Eurosceptic. Under Le Pen's leadership, the party has sought to distance itself from its more extreme past in order to appeal to a wider audience<sup>8</sup>.

#### **• Alternative for Germany (AfD) - Germany**

The AfD (Alternative for Germany) was founded in 2014 by Bernd Lücke with co-chairs Alice Weider and Tino Kruppala. It began as an anti-EU and anti-austerity party, but has evolved into a far-right, nationalist movement, focusing on strict immigration policies and criticism of Chancellor

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<sup>3</sup> Hague, R. & Harrop, M. (2011). *Comparative Politics and Governance* (G. Christidis, Trans.). Athens: Kritiki, pp. 57-139

<sup>4</sup> Evans, M. (2010). Electoral Reform and Political Pluralism in Local Government. *Party Politics*, 16(3), pp. 394-413

<sup>5</sup> Clark, S. (1998). A Populist Critique of Direct Democracy. *Harvard Law Review*, 112 (2), pp. 434-482

<sup>6</sup> Kolodny, N. (2014). Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 42(3), pp. 195-229

<sup>7</sup> Aktas, M., et. al. (2024). The rise of populist radical right parties in Europe. *International Sociological Association*, 39(6), doi.org/10.1177/02685809241297547

<sup>8</sup> Ivaldi, G. & Lanzone, M.E. (2016). 5 The French Front National: Organizational Change and Adaptation from Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen. In book: *Understanding Populist Party Organisation*, pp.131-158

Merkel's refugee policy. The party has gained significant support, especially in East Germany, and has emerged as a major player in German politics. Its dominant ideology is nationalism, national conservatism, anti-immigration, economic liberalism, economic nationalism, Euroscepticism, conservatism, anti-Islamism, and climate change denial.

- **Lega – Italy**

The Northern League was founded in 1989 by Umberto Bossi and renamed the Lega under Matteo Salvini. It began as a regional party, representing Northern Italy, but has evolved into a far-right, nationalist party with a strong anti-European and anti-immigration stance. The League has become a major force in Italian politics, participating in coalition governments with other far-right and conservative parties. Its dominant ideology is national conservatism, opposition to immigration, mild euroscepticism, protectionism, free market and anti-globalization.

- **Fidesz - Hungary**

Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, was founded in 1988 and is the ruling party in Hungary. While it started out with more centrist positions, it has shifted to a far-right stance with an emphasis on nationalism, strict immigration policies, and criticism of the European Union. The Orbán government is known for its authoritarian tendencies and attacks on democratic institutions<sup>9</sup>. Its dominant ideology is conservatism, sovereignty, economic nationalism, anti-immigration, and Euroscepticism.

- **Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) - Sweden**

The Sweden Democrats are a far-right party, founded in 1988. Its leader is Jimmy Åkesson. The party has gained significant influence in Sweden in recent years, despite its origins as a more fringe group<sup>10</sup>. Its ideology is economic nationalism, national and social conservatism, opposition to immigration, Euroscepticism, and criticism of multiculturalism.

- **Party for Freedom (PVV) - Netherlands**

The PVV, led by Geert Wilders, was founded in 2006 and is one of the most prominent far-right parties in the Netherlands. It is known for its strong stance against Islam, immigration and the European Union. Its ideology is nationalism, social and liberal conservatism. Wilders has called for a "Nexit", similar to Brexit, advocating the Netherlands' withdrawal from the EU.

- **Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) - Austria**

The FPÖ is a far-right party in Austria, founded in 1956 and currently led by Herbert Kickl. It has gained significant influence in recent years in Austrian politics, with its dominant ideology being nationalism, national and social integrationism, mild Euroscepticism, immigration restrictions and national liberalism.

- **Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) - Denmark**

The Dansk Folkeparti is a far-right party in Denmark, founded in 1915, currently led by Søren Pape Poulsen. Its dominant ideology is conservatism, economic liberalism, nationalism, anti-immigration policies and Euroscepticism. The party opposes multiculturalism and supports a more restrictive approach to immigration and asylum seekers<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Enyedi, Z. (2023). Illiberal conservatism, civilisationalist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism in Orbán's Hungary. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(4), doi:10.1080/13569775.2023.2296742

<sup>10</sup> Vahter, M. & Jakobson, M.L. The moral rhetoric of populist radical right: the case of the Sweden Democrats. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 30(3), doi:10.1080/13569317.2023.2242795

<sup>11</sup> McManus, I.P. & Falkenbach, M. (2022). A Hollow Victory: Understanding the Anti-Immigration Shift of Denmark's Social Democrats. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 18(1), doi:10.30950/jcer.v18i1.1161

- **Law and Justice (PiS) - Poland**

PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - Law and Justice) is a right-wing to far-right political party in Poland, founded in 2001 by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński. The party is known for its nationalism, conservatism, economic interventionism, and Euroscepticism.

- **Swiss People's Party, Switzerland**

The Swiss People's Party, founded in 1971, is led by Albert Resty, whose dominant ideology is nationalism, conservatism, economic liberalism, Euroscepticism and anti-immigration. In fact, the party appears to be recording significant quotas in the Swiss political scene.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

It is evident that the various aspects of the Democratic Principle highlight its critical role in democracy and in voting, the primary mechanism for expressing the people's will and ensuring popular sovereignty.

The rise of far-right parties in the EU is a complex political and social phenomenon, directly linked to the insecurity of European citizens. Factors such as the economic crisis, social inequalities, immigration, the fear of losing national identity and distrust of traditional parties and European institutions strengthen their potential. Far-right parties often exploit populism to appear as “anti-systemic” solutions. Their strengthening poses serious challenges to democracy, human rights and social cohesion in Europe, which is why addressing the phenomenon cannot be limited to political confrontation, but requires substantial social policies, strengthening trust in institutions and promoting education and social inclusion. Only in this way can the influence of extremism be limited and democratic values be strengthened.

The abstention of European voters from elections is a sign of a deeper crisis of trust in the political system and institutions. Many citizens feel that their vote has no substantial impact on decisions taken at national or European level, while the distance between citizens and politics is reinforced by the lack of transparency and the inability of parties to express real social needs.

The discrediting of political institutions weakens the democratic legitimacy of institutions and leaves room for minority but organized forces to determine political developments. Tackling the phenomenon requires active citizen participation, a renewal of political discourse, substantial information and strengthening democratic education, so that elections regain their meaning and importance for European society.

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