

Are Far-Right Ballots Protest Votes?

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The recent far-right gains in the European Parliament elections came as no surprise. As the new reality sets in, an important question arises: Is voting for the far-right protest voting? The answer will have important implications for progressives in their attempts to win over dissatisfied voters.

As the recent European Parliament (EP) elections approached, there was widespread concern about the expected advance of the far right across Europe. Those expectations materialised to a large degree, with particularly significant gains by the Rassemblement National (RN) in France, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria.

These results have brought attention to one of the most customary explanations of far-right electoral gains in the European context, namely “protest voting”. Historically, European elections have often been regarded as a low-stakes vote where citizens act out against national parties’ domestic performance, and more radically so than they would in domestic votes, where the stakes are perceived as being higher.

On its own, protest voting is too vague to explain the recent far-right gains given that both political scientists and the wider public mean a variety of things by this concept. To analyse the election results through this lens, different conceptions of protest voting should be distinguished. Understanding their differences can also be helpful in assessing and developing strategies to withstand – or even successfully combat – the far-right surge.

However, employing this interpretative framework by no means provides relief when it comes to the far right’s significant advances. On the contrary, viewing the far right’s growing support as a result of protest voting leaves progressive forces with an enormous challenge.

The sceptical view

It is often agreed that what distinguishes protest voters from other voters is that the former use their ballots to vote *against* something rather than for something. In other words, their votes are not motivated by a desire to support a policy position, candidate, or political party.

The sceptical view of protest voting asserts that far-right voters cast their ballots *for* and not *against* something – i.e., they engage in good old policy voting. Through this lens, far-right voters are considered to be supporters of anti-immigration, racist, ethno-centric, and nationalistic politics, or they may be seen to harbour a protectionist vision of economic policy or care about national sovereignty. Whatever their cause, their vote is just like that of any other constituent who votes to support a party based on its policy agenda.

The sceptical view of far-right protest voting seems all the more convincing in contexts where far-right forces have been mainstreamed and gained power rather than being in opposition, such as in Italy,

Finland, Hungary, and the Netherlands. This interpretation appears even more relevant when the far-right is *re*-elected or makes further gains in the European Parliament after earlier domestic victories – i.e., when voters approve the performance of the far-right in power through their ballots.

The sceptical outlook has relatively pessimistic implications for the likelihood of holding the far-right at bay, at least in the short term. According to this view, the far-right is indeed what its supporters in this year's European elections championed. In other words, their policy views and preferences may be shaped over time, but both the centre and the left currently face grim prospects of winning them over. For this reason, the sceptical view may also reinforce a more judgmental attitude toward far-right voters: out of a variety of choices, these voters have opted to support far-right policies, thus expressing a distinctive political identity.

Still, while the sceptical view provides the least hope, it should not be forgotten that the far right offers more than one policy position. Hence, even in this reading, not all far-right voters back anti-immigration, ethno-racist politics. Many supporters could instead back a variety of other policy options that are more contingently typical of the far right, such as opposing how Europe has chosen to combat climate change. The sceptical view makes it crucial, then, to find out what exactly far-right voters stand for, and progressives should spare no effort to offer them an alternative without mainstreaming the far-right.

As recent desperate (and at once, lazy) centrist attempts show, holding the ground by mainstreaming the defining elements of the far right is not only morally reprehensible but also strategically ineffective. Far-right voters in France, for instance, were not swayed to Macron's Renaissance in the European elections after the party gave in to the temptation to double down on tightening immigration regulations. What's more, there is no guarantee that they would have, even if the sceptical view were completely true.

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The penalty perspective

A different take on what voters do when they cast their ballot for the far-right takes the protest element very seriously. According to the penalty view, the primary function that European elections serve – regardless of their intended purpose – is to test satisfaction with whoever happens to be in power in domestic politics at the time of the elections. With incumbents having low approval ratings, European elections function in practice as occasions for protest voting in a simple sense: voters use these elections to sanction parties for their domestic performance.

From this perspective, protest voting could materialise through casting ballots for the far right as well as for the left – it all depends on who is in power domestically. Compare, for instance, Sweden and Germany: the former has a right-wing coalition in government and has seen the centre-left prevail in the recent EP election, whereas the latter has a progressive governing coalition and has seen a considerable advance of the far right. In addition, in the recent European elections, Germany also witnessed the rise of a new political force, Sarah Wagenknecht's party BSW, which combines elements of socially and culturally far-right politics with an economically radical leftist agenda.

The implications of the penalty view for progressives are relatively optimistic. One suggestion is that parties in power should do better, but there is no need to be excessively worried. Alternatively, a more cynical conclusion can be drawn: since voters are typically dissatisfied with whatever they get, a (domestically) mid-term advance of the far right in the European Parliament should not necessarily mean that the same will happen at the national level.

Voting to vent

Another approach, which is a close relative of the penalty view, regards the far-right protest vote as neither about selecting the most favourable policy options and candidates nor about willfully sanctioning incumbents. Instead, this view casts protest voting as simply an expression of anger, with no further aim beyond letting off steam.

What we make of far-right protest voting based on this view largely depends on the stakes of European elections. If their stakes appear insignificant both in comparison to domestic elections and in absolute terms, the main implication for progressives may be rather limited, i.e. that domestic performance needs to be improved. Taking these assumptions into account makes it harder to judge voters: if they let the steam off where the stakes are low, they are not irresponsible, after all.

Consequently, the venting view is quite optimistic as it offers limited support for fears of a seismic pan-European shift in the political spectrum. Through this lens, the results of this month's election mostly show increased dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger. These attitudes should never be disregarded as insignificant in politics but they could very well provide an opportunity for a leftist and potentially liberal renewal.

In France, Emmanuel Macron could be seen as a believer in the venting view after calling for a snap election in the wake of Marine Le Pen's RN sweeping a record high of 31.4 per cent of the vote in this June's European elections. The French president said he believes that most voters do not "recognise themselves in this extremist fever." Moreover, as *The Guardian* reports, Macron trusts "French voters to now make a distinction between expressing anger at the ballot box in the European elections and risking having an extremist government in France that he said would destroy the cohesion of society and wreck the economy."

The hope is that voters can distinguish the different functions of European and domestic elections: venting vs. making serious decisions. The venting and penalty views thus rely on very similar expectations about voters consistently using European and domestic elections for separate purposes. However, the venting view and its optimistic implications break down if the stakes of European elections are also high and are so perceived by far-right voters; just as the penalty view offers no ground for optimism if voters also use domestic elections to sanction incumbents.

In this case, the implications are markedly different: once protest voters see European elections as both highly consequential and a proper site for expressing anger or penalising incumbents, there is no reason to assume that they would not use domestic elections to vent their frustration and punish politicians, regardless of the high stakes involved.

The true protester's way

Another view posits that while far-right protest voters are dissatisfied and angry, they are not casting their votes to merely vent their frustration. From this perspective, far-right supporters use their ballot to

communicate that they have been misrepresented – or outright left behind – as workers, farmers, youngsters, etc. by the centre and the left. Such voters are showing a middle finger to the centrist political elite, but not without a further aim: they are indeed *against* something, but not necessarily in favour of all that the far-right offers.

In other words, this view conceptualises protest voting as its name suggests: the politically engaged, purposeful protest of voters as democratic actors, rather than a mere symptomatic phenomenon in social psychology, as the venting view suggests. True protest voters need not play down the significance of European elections either. On the contrary, they may see them as more effective sites of protest that could bring wider attention to their demands precisely due to their high stakes.

Take farmers' movements, for instance: they have been actively protesting in the past six months all over Europe, including in Brussels. Some of these protests have addressed issues that arise at a European level, including agricultural subsidies or the distribution of the burdens of a Europe-wide green transition. These concerns have barely been taken up by anyone other than far-right parties and did not elicit much constructive response from EU institutions. It is unsurprising, then, if this shapes voters' motivations: "We want to do away with the status quo, and that's why many of my friends are voting for the right," a 25-year-old participant of a farmers' protest in Brussels told the *BBC* this June.

The true protester view has more optimistic implications than the sceptical view: far-right voters need not have a solid far-right identity – they voice demands and may be open to matching supplies from the left, and potentially a more open centre. Yet this view has more demanding implications than any of the sceptical, penalty, or venting views: centre-left political elites should take protest voting seriously here and now and provide viable remedies to inadequate representation. Furthermore, they should resist the urge to call protest voters irresponsible or morally corrupt because of the means they have chosen to communicate their demands.

Regardless of the moral evaluation of protest voting or the legitimacy of the means that protest voters use, the true protester view assumes that far-right voters rightly call for better representation, and that it falls on the political elite to provide it to them.

Misled protesters?

It is tempting to challenge the true protester view by objecting that far-right voters already have political representation: namely, the far right. Based on this view, these voters' protest is entirely meritless and their demands for more representation are unjustified. This perspective suggests that far-right voters are, in fact, frightfully close to becoming the majority and are far from being a marginal force left behind. "Protest" in their case is pure rhetoric: it is a right-wing populist smokescreen, the usual trope of resentment politics which aims to maximize the benefits of an alleged victim position. According to this view, there is nothing to listen to or take seriously in protest voting other than (groundless) resentment.

These insights may well hold for the right-wing populist political elite: their rhetoric as marginalised, excluded, anti-establishment voices is indeed nothing but a misrepresentation of the facts. They belong to the elite, they are anything but oppressed, and they are neither victims nor, as far as their electoral support is concerned, in a marginalised minority position relative to other political forces. Moreover, they have little substance to offer to those workers and farmers or young voters who have genuinely been left behind.

But none of this is relevant to how we should think about far-right voters. They might be misled by the

rhetoric of far-right political leaders, but that does not refute the fact that many of these supporters are calling the elite out for what they rightly perceive as inadequate representation. Alternatively, protest voters may not be misled at all: they may accurately perceive that the only means to raise the attention of the centre to their demands is to hold on to the threat of a far-right advance, hence their choice of protesting through their ballot.

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So, which view to employ?

As the above framework of different potential views shows, knowing which kind of protest voting we face on the far right is crucial in understanding the available opportunities, the best strategies, and the prospects of success for combating the threat of far-right advances across Europe. But which one of the above views is the correct one?

What ultimately motivates voters is an empirical question. The answer may vary in both space and time: the motivation(s) of far-right voters in France may not be the same as in Germany, and what was true in 2019 may not hold for voters in 2024. For example, in the 1989 European elections, Vlaams Blok voters in Belgium were found to be mostly motivated by antiimmigrant attitudes.

Other studies show that the main motivation of electoral support even for the same far-right parties can change rather quickly. For instance, while in 1994, the Front National (the forerunner of today’s RN) attracted more ideological votes, in 1999, they attracted voters with protest motivations. Then, radical right parties in several member states in the 2019 EP elections were shown to be supported by mostly policy-driven voters. Voters within each member state may also have more or less varied motives for casting a ballot for the far right in the same election.

Sufficient information about protest voters’ motivations is not immediately available everywhere (especially not for the latest European elections), and as researchers use different understandings and methods to investigate protest voting, it is currently hard to make extensive comparisons over a larger geographical space and time.

Still, the different views of protest voting also have some implications for a situation of (hopefully temporary) ignorance. First, it is irresponsible for the centre-left to build a political strategy based on the simplistic assumption that – as is the case with the venting view – far-right protest voters are toothless, angry people who will know better next time. Likewise, it is irresponsible to expect voters, with the penalty view, to avoid sanctioning the centre-left in domestic elections once they have done so in European elections.

Either of these views could be accurate, but it is reckless to simply assume them given the stakes. It is high time that parties entertained the possibility that voters cast their ballot for the far-right in European

elections not because they dismissed the vote as insignificant, but because (or despite the fact that) they were aware of its importance.

Second, it is similarly irresponsible to assume the sceptical or the misled protester views. They are both tempting perspectives for political parties on the centre-left as they enable them to avoid the responsibility of engaging with and attempting to win over far-right voters in the short to medium term.

The responsible thing to do, if sufficient information is not available on far-right protest voters' motivations, is to assume them to be true protest voters to whom it is time to offer something of substance – both in European and national politics. That cannot mean repeating the offer of the far-right.



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