



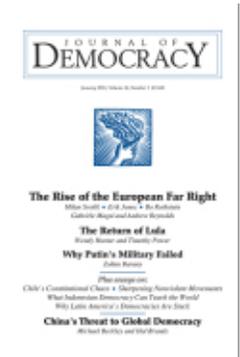
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# IN EUROPE, DEMOCRACY ERODES FROM THE RIGHT

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Suppose a politician gains prominence by promising to redress a widely held political grievance. But to do so, he declares, as Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić did, that the country needs to rid itself of "lying," "treacherous" journalists that act as "foreign mercenaries."<sup>1</sup> And, he insists, just like Poland's governing Law and Justice party did, that his government must first replace judges who have been deeming his party's policies unconstitutional.<sup>2</sup> Or he suggests, inspired by Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán, that the government closely monitor NGOs that receive funding from abroad—and also happen to criticize his party's misuse of public resources.<sup>3</sup> Who will vote for him? Will he garner enough support to subvert democracy from within?

Answering these questions is key to understanding the nature and magnitude of threats to democracy today. In an age of democratic backsliding, those threats arise primarily from actors within democracy itself—from elected politicians and their political parties. These politicians rarely present voters with the straightforward choice between democracy and dictatorship. Rather, trajectories of democratic decline typically include an electoral juncture at which voters face a choice between two valid but potentially conflicting considerations: a candidate

or party that champions their interests but also exhibits authoritarian tendencies, and one that may be more democratic but is also less appealing. To diagnose the vulnerabilities of contemporary democracies, we must therefore ask: When faced with a choice between democracy and partisan loyalty, policy priorities, or ideological dogmas, who will put democracy first?

In order to assess the resilience of democracy in Europe, we presented representative samples of citizens from seven European countries—Estonia, Germany, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, and Ukraine—with precisely such dilemmas.<sup>4</sup> Our study's participants made a series of choices between two hypothetical candidates for their country's legislature, each described by a party affiliation and a set of economic, social, and foreign policies. Crucially, a subset of these candidates—chosen at random—also endorsed a measure that violates a key democratic principle. By comparing the vote shares received by undemocratic candidates with those of democratic but otherwise identical candidates, we obtain a measure of a country's democratic resilience: its electorate's willingness to punish a preferred party or candidate for undermining democracy.<sup>5</sup>

A large decline in the vote share received by candidates who exhibit undemocratic behavior indicates a resilient electorate. Little or no change is a sign of tolerance for authoritarianism. By virtue of being counterfactual, this diagnosis is also prospective: It allows us to probe citizens' willingness to condone democratic transgressions not only by politicians from parties or countries that have already experienced democratic erosion, but also in those that have *not* yet experienced real-world attempts to subvert democracy. It allows us to diagnose an electorate's authoritarian potential—both overt and hidden. It is a stress test.

We found that the Europeans who perform worst on our democratic stress test come from two subgroups of their electorates. Voters in the first group have a few conspicuous, closely related characteristics. They support parties that have been alternately referred to as the extreme, populist, radical, or nationalist right:<sup>6</sup> The Conservative People's Party (EKRE) in Estonia, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany; Law and Justice and Confederation in Poland; Vox in Spain, the Serbian Progressive Party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, and Dveri in Serbia; and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden. Accordingly, these voters want to reduce immigration, weaken the rights of minorities, preserve the traditional family, and safeguard national sovereignty. In sum, these voters stand for Europe's illiberal right.

But in most of these countries, there is a second, distinct group that also exhibits a marked lack of concern about candidates who violate key tenets of democratic politics. When asked about their past or future voting intentions, rather than naming a political party, citizens in this group simply say that they did not or would not vote—they are disengaged. In Estonia, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, this group shows as

much acceptance of authoritarianism as do illiberal-right voters. In fact, when the disengaged do reengage in politics, they often gravitate toward their electorates' least democratic enclaves—the illiberal right. For the disengaged citizen, disaffection with specific parties or politicians appears to go hand in hand with disregard for democracy in general.

In Europe, these two groups of citizens represent a reservoir of tolerance for authoritarianism—a reservoir that politicians with authoritarian ambitions can and do draw on. To be clear, neither subset of voters actively embraces authoritarianism, certainly not for its own sake. But they are notable for their tendency to turn a blind eye to a candidate's undemocratic inclinations. More than any other subset of the European electorate, these citizens are willing to sacrifice democratic principles to elect candidates and parties that champion their interests. In Europe, democracy erodes from the right.<sup>7</sup>

### Europe's Reservoirs of Tolerance for Authoritarianism

In order to comprehensively diagnose Europe's tolerance for authoritarianism, we probed our subjects' resistance to assaults on a range of democratic freedoms. To assess respondents' willingness to compromise on electoral fairness, for example, we presented them with the option of voting for a candidate who promised to “direct infrastructure spending to districts that voted for his party.” To assess commitment to judicial independence, respondents had the option of backing a candidate who suggested that “the government discipline judges who publicly criticize it.” And to assess openness to the erosion of civil liberties, respondents could opt to support a candidate who proposed that “the government monitor politically critical posts on social media.”<sup>8</sup>

Across the seven countries in our study, candidates who endorsed an undemocratic position lost 7.8 percentage points on average. In a competitive, evenly balanced contest, this amounts to roughly one in seven Europeans defecting from a candidate they otherwise would have voted for—had that candidate not violated democratic principles. We detect the highest levels of democratic resilience in Sweden, where such electoral punishment reaches 10 percent. In Spain and Ukraine, by contrast, transgressions against democracy hurt a candidate's electoral prospects by only about 6 to 7 percent. Electorates in the remaining countries punished candidates with authoritarian tendencies at rates between these two extremes, with undemocratic candidates losing roughly 7.6 percent of the vote in Germany, 7.8 percent in Serbia, 7.9 percent in Estonia, and 9.2 percent in Poland.

Yet the most conspicuous differences in resistance to authoritarianism are not between but *within* countries. Consider Figure 1, which partitions each country's electorate by the party that a citizen would vote for, if an election were held at the time of our survey—autumn of 2021.

Each left-pointing arrow summarizes the decline in a candidate's vote share that can be causally attributed to their adoption of an undemocratic platform. The length of each arrow is, in effect, a measure of the punishment that this subset of voters is willing to dispense in defense of democracy.

We see a much larger variation in that punishment within countries than we see across countries: The least forgiving partisan subgroups punish candidates with authoritarian tendencies at rates several times higher than the most lenient ones. Clues about the sources of tolerance for authoritarianism appear to be in factors that vary primarily within—not between—countries.

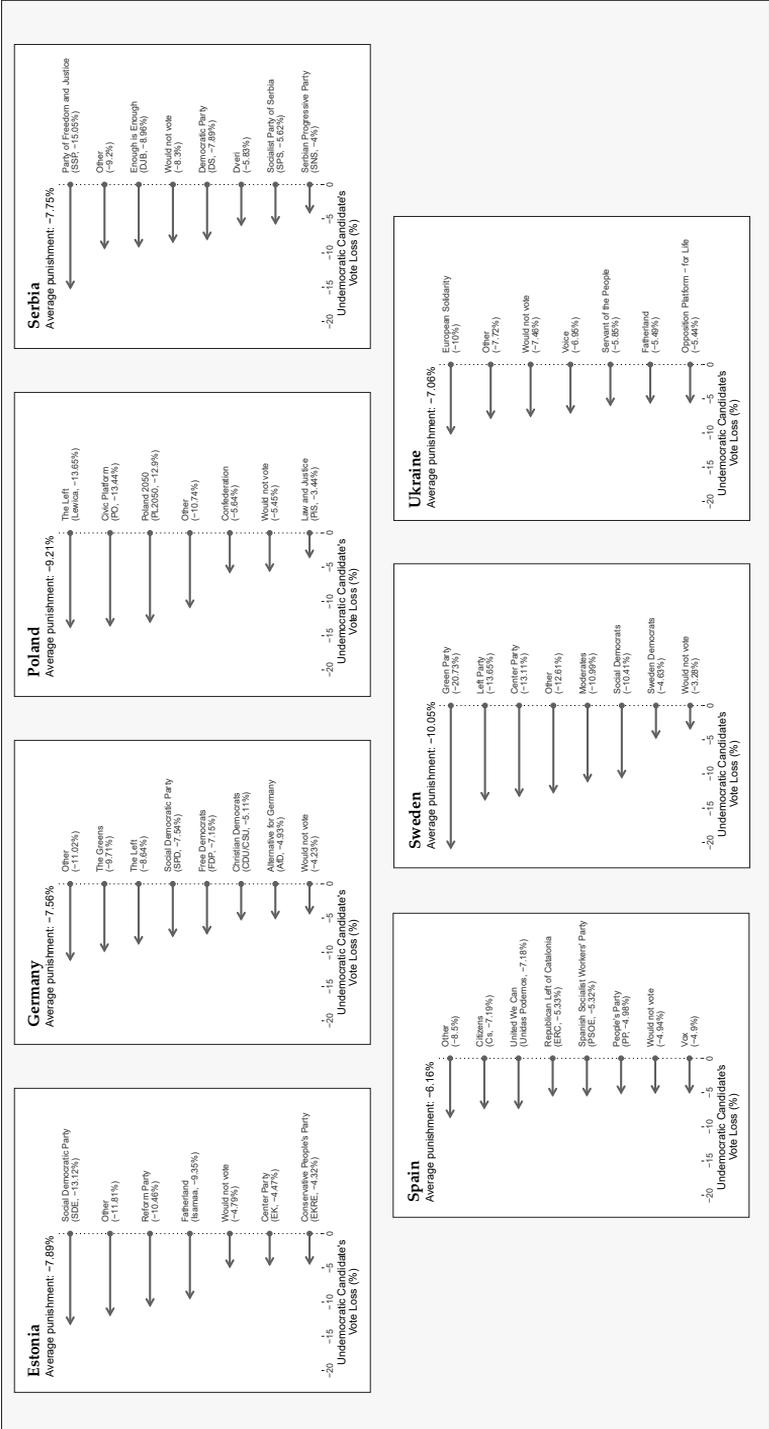
As Figure 1 shows, the citizen most willing to tolerate candidates with authoritarian aspirations almost always comes from one of two distinct subsets of European electorates: the illiberal right and the disengaged. Voters in the first subset support parties on the extreme, populist, radical, or nationalist right: the EKRE in Estonia, the AfD in Germany, Law and Justice and Confederation in Poland, Vox in Spain, the Sweden Democrats in Sweden. In Serbia, those least concerned about transgressions against democracy are split between the misleadingly named Serbian Progressive Party, led by Serbia's sitting president, nationalist Aleksandar Vučić; the Serbian Socialist Party, a party once led by the ultranationalist Slobodan Milošević; and the right-wing populist Dveri.<sup>9</sup>

Those in the second group, the disengaged, by contrast, do not vote. But when asked how they *would* vote—as our candidate-choice experiments did—the disengaged exhibit a distinctive disregard for democracy. In Estonia, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, they show as much lenience toward candidates who undermine democracy as do voters on the illiberal right.

The seven countries in our study encompass a range of democratic histories, political institutions, and levels of economic development. This is one reason why we have diagnosed each country's "worst democratic performers" by that country's own standard. And yet, across this diverse set of countries, the within-country patterns are strikingly similar. Take Sweden, the country with the least tolerance for authoritarianism of the seven in our study. Even in Sweden, illiberal-right voters—supporters of the nationalist Sweden Democrats—show just as little concern for democracy as do their counterparts in Estonia, Germany, or Poland. And so do Sweden's disengaged citizens. To paraphrase Tolstoy, while citizens in each country may resist autocracy in their own way, those who tolerate it tend to all be alike: They either belong to the illiberal right or are alienated from politics.

Crucially, in no case do we see evidence that Europe's illiberal-right voters or the disengaged actually reward politicians' undemocratic tendencies. In each country and each partisan subset, the arrows point left—violations of democratic principles are indeed being punished.

**FIGURE 1—PARTISANSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN EUROPE**



Even the least democratically minded groups—Law and Justice voters in Poland, supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party, and the disengaged in Sweden—do not appear to be seduced by autocracy. They are, at worst, drifting toward indifference to democracy. In other words, when Europeans vote for candidates who undermine democracy, they are not voting for them because of their authoritarian tendencies, but in spite of them. The question, then, is why?

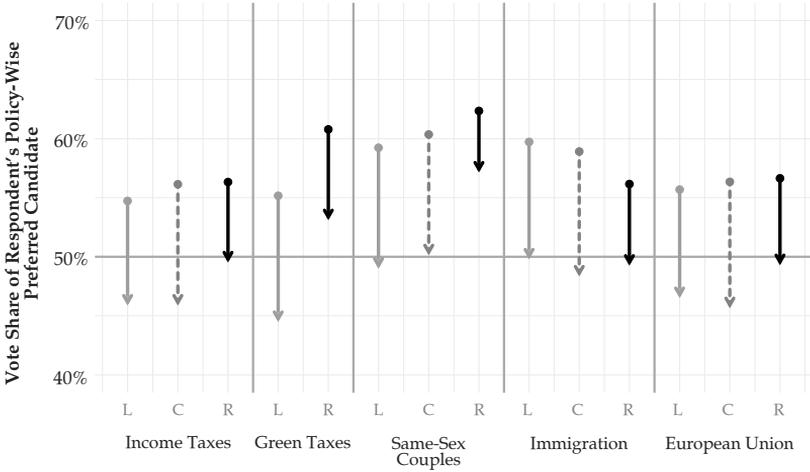
### What Trumps Civic Virtue?

“Make Sweden great again” is how the nationalist Sweden Democrats summarized their party’s platform during the 2022 Swedish parliamentary election.<sup>10</sup> They campaigned on promises to “restore the rule of law,” to lower taxes while also increasing welfare benefits for those “who have contributed to Swedish society,” to defend Swedish sovereignty against encroachments by the European Union, and—foremost—to limit immigration.<sup>11</sup> Or, as the party used to put it before cleaning up its rhetoric to become more palatable to mainstream voters, they would “keep Sweden Swedish.” Far-right parties across Europe agitate on a very similar set of issues, if with somewhat different emphases from country to country: Europe’s East tends to be more concerned than the West about protecting the traditional family—and the East also tends to be less politically correct about it.<sup>12</sup>

Could it be that the illiberal right’s political priorities—reducing immigration, preserving the traditional family, safeguarding national sovereignty—simply take precedence over its concern with democracy? In other words, is it possible that the illiberal right does indeed care about democracy, but values other political priorities even more? To find out, we must examine how voters act when faced with a choice that pits democracy against such alternative priorities—precisely what our experiments were designed to do.

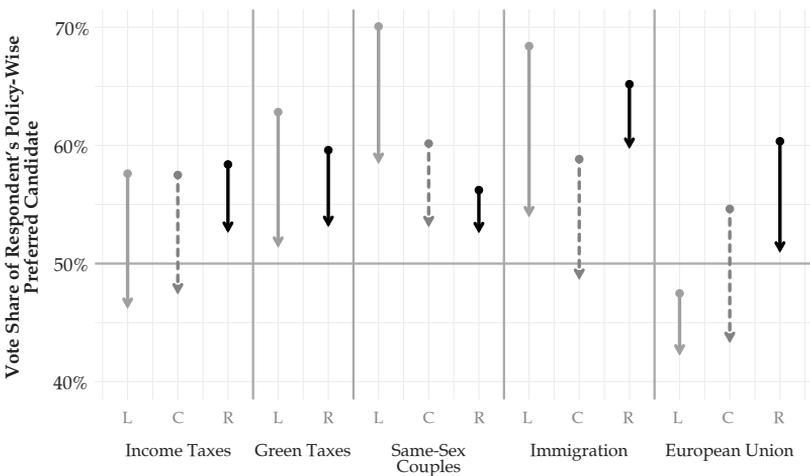
Consider Figures 2 and 3, which are based on evidence from Poland and Sweden, respectively. We presented each respondent with two candidates—one the respondent favored because the candidate proposed their favorite policy and one who did not. The horizontal axis in each figure differentiates between policy issues on which these candidates competed, including income taxes, green taxes, rights for same-sex couples, immigration, and the European Union. For each issue, we divided respondents into three groups—left, center, and right—based on their preferred policies. On immigration, for instance, those on the left believed in allowing “immigration regardless of the country of origin”; those in the center favored “immigration from the EU but only family-based immigration from outside of the EU”; and those on the right wanted to either “ban immigration from outside of the EU” or “ban all immigration regardless of the country of origin.”<sup>13</sup>

**FIGURE 2—DEMOCRACY VS. POLICY PRIORITIES: POLAND**



Note: L, C, and R correspond to voters with ideal policies on the left, center, and right of each issue area.

**FIGURE 3—DEMOCRACY VS. POLICY PRIORITIES: SWEDEN**



Note: L, C, and R correspond to voters with ideal policies on the left, center, and right of each issue area.

For each policy, the circle at the beginning of the arrows marks the vote share that a candidate who endorsed the respondent's preferred policy on that issue would receive against one who did not—and crucially, when both candidates complied with democratic principles. The length of each arrow, in turn, corresponds to the electoral punishment that respondents are willing to dispense when their preferred candidate undermines democracy. Both figures, in effect, summarize our respondents' answer to the question: When faced with a choice between democratic

principles and your policy priorities, which of the two will you put first?

To get a measure of what those priorities are, consider where each arrow in Figures 2 and 3 begins: The higher that point, the greater the electoral payoff for the candidate who proposes that position. In both countries, the most profitable policy issues are social—those concerning same-sex couples and immigration. A candidate stands to gain much more by appealing to voters on these issues than on income taxes or defending the country's sovereignty against the European Union.

With some qualifications, the primacy of social issues holds in all seven countries in our study. In countries with significant ethnic-minority populations, such as Estonia, Serbia, Spain, and Ukraine, respondents also reward candidates for supporting their preferred position on whether those minorities should be allowed to use their language. In Serbia and Ukraine, neither of which belong to the European Union, policies concerning their relations with the EU and with Russia are electorally salient as well.

Social issues are also where the illiberal right's electoral policy priorities are most evident.<sup>14</sup> In line with conventional wisdom, supporters of far-right parties are more right-leaning than the electorate overall, and this tendency is particularly pronounced on policies concerning same-sex couples, immigration, and national sovereignty.<sup>15</sup>

What happens when defending democracy comes at a price? Do illiberal-right voters care so much about their signature issues that they would rather vote for an undemocratic candidate who champions their policy preferences than one who does not—but acts democratically? The answer is yes, at least in part.

As Figure 2 shows, in Poland, those with right-leaning preferences on green taxes, national sovereignty, and especially policies concerning same-sex couples place higher priority on those issues than do voters in the center or on the left. A candidate who endorses the right's preferred policy on same-sex couples ("same-sex couples should not have the right to marry or adopt children") obtains a higher vote share among those who favor that stance than a candidate who endorses the left's favored policy ("same-sex couples should have the right to marry and adopt children") obtains among left-leaning voters. In turn, when faced with a choice that pits their policy priorities against democracy, siding with the latter entails a higher price and many on the right are, unsurprisingly, not willing to pay it.

But this occurs only in some countries and across a small set of issues. Consider Sweden: Swedes disagree about immigration above all, with 37 percent and 36 percent of the general population favoring left and right positions on this issue, respectively, and only 27 percent in the middle. And as Figure 3 demonstrates, this disagreement is intense: Each side rewards candidates who propose their preferred policy with a correspondingly large electoral margin. Figure 3 also reveals the dan-

gers of such polarization: Sizeable sections of the Swedish electorate—on both the left and the right—are willing to compromise on democratic principles to achieve their policy priorities.

And yet, Sweden exhibits the least tolerance for authoritarianism in our study. How come? The answer has two parts. First, one group of citizens—the centrists—systematically rejects politicians who undermine democracy at higher rates, even when the price of doing so amounts to giving up on their preferred policies. On immigration, these are the Swedes who want to “allow immigration from the EU but only family-based immigration from outside of the EU.”

Centrists are a prodemocratic force because they combine several qualities. By virtue of their location on the political spectrum, centrists are pivotal: They are in a position to tip the scales in favor of democracy. But to do so, they must care about democracy enough to put it first when their favored candidate threatens it. Centrists are willing to do so because they are not only centrists; they also tend to be moderates. On immigration, Sweden’s centrists are not as fervent as partisans of either stripe and are, in turn, willing to compromise on their preferred policy when democracy is at stake. When the center holds, aspiring autocrats fail.

The second part of the answer concerns a notable asymmetry between the right and either the center or the left. The magnitude of punishment for transgressions against democracy—the share of voters willing to abandon their favored candidate when that candidate acts undemocratically—tends to be smaller on the right. In Figures 2 and 3, these are the differences in the length of the arrows. Even when the center or the left do not punish enough to emphatically reject undemocratic candidates, on most issues they still punish such candidates more than do those on the right.

This pattern is particularly pronounced where the illiberal right’s signature issues are concerned: the rights of same-sex couples in Poland and immigration in Sweden. When faced with a choice between these policies and democratic principles, supporters of the illiberal right see democracy as less of a concern than do voters of other political persuasions. For the illiberal right, democracy appears to be more dispensable.

### **Illiberal Democracy for the Illiberal Right?**

Contemporary conceptions of democracy are unmistakably liberal. To score high on political scientists’ measures of democracy, a country must not only hold fair elections, it must also respect judicial and legislative checks on the executive and safeguard an array of civil liberties, such as the freedom of expression and association. Accordingly, we examined European electorates’ resilience to assaults on a range of democratic freedoms.

The set of democratic transgressions that we explored was richest in the context of civil liberties, primarily because it is this set of freedoms that aspiring authoritarians in Europe target the most. One such transgression, for instance, described a candidate as proposing that “the government monitor politically critical posts on social media;” another as having said that “the government should prosecute journalists who accuse the president of corruption;” and yet another as suggesting that “Muslims should not be allowed to pray during their breaks at work.” A pair of positions featured candidates who wanted to, alternately, ban foreign funding for either nongovernmental organizations or labor unions “critical of [their] party’s policies.”

Civil liberties also exemplify a facet of democracy in which the liberalism embedded in its contemporary conceptions is most apparent. Even political scientists might disagree over which of the above infractions aim at the heart of democracy and which are objectionable but mostly benign.<sup>16</sup> And so might democratically minded citizens.

Could it be that contemporary conceptions of democracy have a liberal bias—one that is too liberal for the illiberal right? After all, the issues against which the far right agitates the most—immigration, gay rights, globalism—do lean liberal. Guarantees of gender equality or of rights for ethnic and religious minorities are rarely the products of democracy’s electoral component, but rather its liberal one; these rights were often granted not by plebiscites, but by a conjunction of civil rights activism, and judicial fiat, and sometimes against a majority opinion. In many countries, the granting of such liberties preceded popular consensus by decades. In some, including Poland and Serbia, that consensus appears to be eroding or has yet to materialize.

Could it be that the illiberal right is just that—illiberal but otherwise prodemocratic?<sup>17</sup> This subset of the European electorate indeed shows a much greater openness than the mainstream toward candidates who would ban prayer for Muslims or foreign funding for critical NGOs and labor unions. Illiberal-right voters punished such candidates at a fraction of the rate of mainstream voters—between 11 and 45 percent.<sup>18</sup> It might therefore be that the illiberal right’s supporters see such positions not as undemocratic but as overly multicultural, globalist, or simply leftist.

Yet this is *not* where the primary difference between the illiberal right and the European mainstream is. The average European also resisted violations of electoral fairness more than those targeting constitutional checks or civil liberties. The mainstream voter, too, seems to care more about democracy’s electoral features than its liberal ones.

Instead, the main difference between the illiberal right and the European mainstream is that the former is simply more open to authoritarianism. Across the board, those on the illiberal right punish undemocratic candidates at rates that are, at best, 50 to 70 percent of those of the mainstream. Consider two transgressions against democracy that were

among the most severely punished by electorates across the countries in our study: candidates who either encouraged their supporters “to violently disrupt campaign rallies” of their political opponents or suggested that the government “prosecute journalists who accuse it of corruption.” The fact that these positions were rejected at some of the highest rates is reassuring: These items represented some of the most blatant attacks on democracy that our candidates could endorse. Even here, however, the illiberal right rejected such candidates at a rate that was 30 percent lower than the rate among mainstream voters. The illiberal right’s electoral punishment of other items on our menu of manipulation was even lower—around half of the mainstream’s.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, apart from a few outliers, the illiberal right is just as unmoved by violations of electoral fairness as it is by those concerning checks and balances and civil liberties. Its argument is not with liberalism alone. Rather, the illiberal right is simply more open to authoritarianism overall.<sup>20</sup>

## Dilemmas of Democratic Disengagement

When political scientists assess the health of a democracy, one indicator they often employ is electoral participation. An active, politically engaged citizenry is understood as fulfilling the ideals of democratic citizenship and thus as a sign of a healthy democracy. An inactive, apathetic one, by contrast, is symptomatic of democratic malaise or, at a minimum, indifference to some of the best that democracy has to offer, such as accountability and representation.

Our findings illuminate a different, darker side of political disengagement. As we previewed, those participants in our study who said that they “did not vote” or “would not vote” exhibited as much tolerance for authoritarianism as did the illiberal right. Perplexingly, it is in the more democratic countries of the study where the disengaged are the *least* discriminating. In Estonia, Germany, Poland, and Sweden, they reject undemocratic candidates at only a third to half the rate of the political mainstream, with somewhat higher rates in Spain. By contrast, in Serbia and Ukraine, two countries that have, since the fall of communism, teetered within a range of diminished forms of democracy, the disengaged are just as discerning as mainstream voters.

One plausible interpretation for this divergence is that the underlying causes of political disengagement in the two sets of countries are different. In Serbia and Ukraine, the disengaged may have withdrawn from electoral politics precisely because of its authoritarian distortions, while remaining fundamentally committed to democracy. Just as some opposition parties in these countries have boycotted elections, the disengaged may be boycotting the electoral process not out of disdain for democracy but because it fails to live up to democratic standards.

By contrast, the disengaged in Estonia, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Sweden appear to be entirely different in character. Unlike in Serbia and Ukraine, these citizens can choose from a rich menu of partisan alternatives and most of those—with the notable exception of Poland’s Law and Justice—are perfectly democratic. Rather than a symptom of their party systems’ deficiencies, the reluctance of the disengaged to participate in politics may be a reflection of how they view democracy itself. In this set of countries, the disengaged may be accepting of authoritarianism not because they are dissatisfied with specific political parties, but because they have either become or have always been disillusioned with democracy as a system.

Our data lend credence to this interpretation: When we examine who the disengaged support when they reengage in politics, we find that some of their most frequent electoral destinations tend to be on their party systems’ far-right flanks. In Estonia, this is the far-right EKRE; in Poland, the illiberal Law and Justice and radical Confederation parties; in Sweden, the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats. In Spain, the nationalist Vox is the second-most popular party destination among past nonvoters. Only in Germany does the right-wing AfD’s popularity among the disengaged roughly match its acceptance in the electorate overall. In sum, when they do reengage in politics, the disengaged often gravitate toward their electorates’ least democratic enclaves.

This pattern suggests an uneasy perspective on the wisdom of reengaging this type of voter in electoral politics. In our experimental scenarios, the disengaged in Estonia, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Sweden are just as unperturbed by candidates’ authoritarian inclinations as the illiberal right. Fortunately, the disengaged also behave like nonvoters: Even in hypothetical election scenarios, the disengaged indicated turnout rates that are only about half those reported by mainstream or illiberal-right voters. The risk is that, once reengaged—when voting has political consequences—this voter will condone real-world candidates who flirt with autocracy just as much.

### **Europe’s Authoritarian Potential: Overt and Hidden**

For a democracy to erode, two conditions must obtain: There must be a politician willing to act undemocratically and there must be a sizeable pool of voters willing to tolerate such actions. Thus a diagnosis of democratic vulnerabilities may start with politicians but it must end with voters. An appraisal that would focus on political elites alone misses a key point: The mere emergence of politicians or parties with authoritarian inclinations is not a symptom of democratic fragility but rather a feature of democracy. Precisely because of democracy’s ideals, the door to politics is open to all kinds of candidates—including those who may want to subvert the democratic process to accumulate power or save

their careers. But even such politicians will not succeed when faced with an electorate that refuses to turn a blind eye to their authoritarian tendencies. In a democracy, the voter has the last word.

An explanation for how democratically elected politicians succeed in subverting democracy must therefore answer the question: Why did voters let them get away with it? Across Europe, we identified two reservoirs of authoritarian potential: the disengaged and the illiberal right.

Some aspects of these vulnerabilities are readily apparent. In Poland and Serbia, two countries that have, respectively, either experienced democratic decline or never fully democratized, the illiberal right's tolerance for authoritarianism is in plain sight. Instead of being resoundingly rejected for attempts to dismantle their democracies, the leader of Poland's ruling party, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić have been cheered on and reelected by sizeable portions of their countries' electorates.

Yet there are facets of Europe's democratic vulnerabilities that are just as significant but less obvious. Detecting them required exposing representative samples of Europe's electorates to transgressions against democracy that are plausible, but which they have yet to experience in their real-world politics. This approach probed voters' ability to recognize and punish such attempts—even when doing so comes at the price of other political priorities. Once faced with this stress test, the illiberal right revealed a readiness to condone candidates that disregard democracy not only in Poland and Serbia, but also in countries that have not recently faced threats to democracy: Estonia, Germany, Spain, and Sweden. Across much of Europe, reservoirs of tolerance for authoritarianism—both overt and hidden—are located on its electorates' far-right flanks.

This stress test also allowed us to discern the root cause of the illiberal right's democratic deficit. We saw that the principal difference between the illiberal right and the rest is not in how much each camp cares about its signature issues; both ends of the political spectrum can be passionate about their political priorities. Instead, the key contrast appears to be in how little the illiberal right cares about democracy in the first place. When the price of one's policy priorities amounts to compromising on democratic principles, those on the illiberal right simply do not see it as too high a price to pay.

If we were to rely instead on political scientists' conventional measures of commitment to democracy—for example, the question “How important is it for you live in a country that is governed democratically?”—we might erroneously conclude that differences between the political mainstream and the illiberal right are minor. When asked to answer this question on a scale that ranges from 1 for “not at all important” to 10 for “absolutely important,” the responses in our study ranged from an average of 8.5 in Estonia to 9.1 in Sweden. Ratings given by the

illiberal right were only 3 to 9 percent lower. Yet as we saw earlier, illiberal-right voters punish candidates who violate democratic principles at rates that are about 50 percent lower than those of the mainstream voter. Rather than measuring commitment to democracy, direct questions like this one may mostly be picking up the fact that supporters of the illiberal right—as politically incorrect as they may be—still prefer not to present themselves as such.<sup>21</sup> When we focus on actions rather than words, as our candidate-choice experiments did, the locus of Europe’s democratic vulnerabilities becomes much clearer: In Europe, democracy erodes from the right.

The disengaged, by contrast, do not hide their disdain for democracy. When asked directly “how important democracy is” for them, their answers place them among the bottom 25 percent of their country’s distribution of answers to this standard question. And they act accordingly: Except for Serbia and Ukraine, the disengaged exhibit as little opposition to candidates that transgress against democracy as do illiberal-right voters. At least, one would hope, the disengaged do so without leaving an electoral footprint. And yet, as we have discussed, large shares of the disengaged are dormant supporters of the illiberal right: When they do reengage in politics, they gravitate disproportionately toward their countries’ most authoritarian enclaves.

Electoral successes of the far right justifiably raise concerns about the future of liberal democracy, even in quiet times. But in an age of democratic backsliding, when elected incumbents have been successfully undermining democracy from within, understanding whether and how much those who vote for the far right tolerate politicians with authoritarian tendencies takes on a renewed urgency. Based on their leaders’ rhetoric—especially in the more polished iterations of the Sweden Democrats, Brothers of Italy, and France’s National Rally—one might believe that the illiberal right’s only quarrel with democracy is about what it considers to be its unnecessary liberal embellishments. After all, far-right parties often claim to advocate for not less but more democracy—especially in its direct and majoritarian varieties.

Our findings highlight the risks involved in taking far-right parties—and their supporters—at their word. When we confronted the illiberal right’s supporters with candidate-choice scenarios that indirectly probed their openness to a range of transgressions—against not only civil liberties or constitutional checks but also democracy’s electoral components—we discovered that their critiques of contemporary democracy simply mask a greater acceptance of politicians who depart from democracy in all directions. The illiberal right’s disagreement with democracy is not confined to its liberal components; it is all-encompassing. Across Europe, voters who sympathize with the far right hide an untapped authoritarian potential: They are open to rolling back democracy much further than their elites have dared. All they have to do is ask.

## NOTES

Findings and data in this essay are drawn from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's project "Identity, Partisanship, Polarization: How Democratically Elected Politicians Get Away with Autocratizing Their Country."

1. See Phoebe Greenwood, "As Serbia Climbs Press Freedom Rankings, Opposition Journalists Still Fear Abuse," Euronews, 14 May 2022. Vučić admits calling journalists "liars" but denies calling them "foreign mercenaries"; see "Serbian PM Repeats Criticism of BIRN Investigation," *BIRN*, 7 March 2016.

2. See "Poland's Ruling Law and Justice Party Is Doing Lasting Damage," *Economist*, 21 April 2018.

3. See Helene Bienvenu and Palko Karasz, "In Anti-Soros Feud, Hungary Adopts Rules on Foreign-Financed Groups," *New York Times*, 13 June 2017.

4. These samples were nationally representative, with 1,000 respondents in Estonia, Serbia, and Sweden; 1,500 in Poland, Spain, and Ukraine; and 2,500 in Germany. Each respondent saw twenty experimental candidate scenarios, resulting in 200,000 candidate choices in total.

5. For other examples of this approach, see Michael Albertus and Guy Grossman, "The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs?" *Journal of Democracy* 32 (April 2021): 116–31; Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114 (May 2020): 392–409; Jennifer McCoy, Gábor Simonovits, and Levente Littvay, "Democratic Hypocrisy and Out-Group Threat: Explaining Citizen Support for Democratic Erosion," working paper (28 July 2021); John Carey et al., "Who Will Defend Democracy? Evaluating Tradeoffs in Candidate Support Among Partisan Donors and Voters," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 32, issue 1 (2022): 230–45.

6. See, for example, Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

7. This phrase is inspired by the title of Larry M. Bartels's 2020 working paper "Democracy Erodes from the Top: Public Opinion and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe."

8. In total, the candidates in our experiments could endorse up to eight distinct undemocratic positions. The remaining positions read "encouraged their supporters to violently disrupt campaign rallies of their political opponents," "laws should be passed without parliamentary debate if criticized by the opposition," "said the government should prosecute journalists who accuse the [prime minister/president] of corruption," "said Muslims should not be allowed to pray during their breaks at work," and "supported a ban on foreign funding for [domestic nongovernmental organizations/labor unions] critical of the government."

9. The one outlier is Ukraine, where those most tolerant of authoritarianism come from not only the supporters of the pro-Russian nationalist (and now banned) Opposition Platform–For Life and the Ukrainian nationalist Fatherland, but also from President Volodymyr Zelensky's Servant of the People.

10. Charlie Duxbury, "'Make Sweden Great Again': Far Right on the Cusp of Power," *Politico*, 8 September 2022.

11. Danielle Lee Tomson, "The Rise of Sweden Democrats: Islam, Populism and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism," Brookings Working Paper, 25 March 2020.

12. “Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues,” Pew Research Center, 29 October, 2018. For an example of a far-right party campaigning on positions that are openly homophobic and anti-Semitic, see Daniel Tilles, “Polish Far-Right Party to Propose Anti-LGBT Law Plus Limits on Jewish Property Restitution and Abortion,” *Notes from Poland*, 28 October 2019.

13. On green taxes, our experimental candidates could adopt only two positions, left and right. On immigration, candidates could adopt up to four positions; we group the two rightmost positions, both of which proposed to ban immigration, under the “right” subgroup.

14. In our analysis, these are the supporters of the following parties: Conservative People’s Party (EKRE) in Estonia, Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, Law and Justice (PiS) and Confederation in Poland, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), Dveri in Serbia, Vox in Spain, and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden.

15. For instance, the rightmost policy on same-sex couples is preferred by 29 percent of the Polish electorate overall; the corresponding share is 44 percent among the illiberal right. In Sweden, the rightmost policy on immigration is preferred by 36 percent of the electorate overall; the corresponding share is 68 percent among the illiberal right.

16. For two contrasting perspectives, see Adam Przeworski, “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense,” in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon, eds., *Democracy’s Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Staffan I. Lindberg et al., “V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 25 (July 2014): 159–69.

17. Or, to paraphrase Cas Mudde, could it be that the illiberal right’s critique of democracy is an illiberal but democratic response to undemocratic liberalism? See Cas Mudde, “Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism,” *Government and Opposition* 56, issue 4 (2021): 577–97.

18. Averaging across the countries in our study, the illiberal right punished candidates proposing to ban critical NGOs at a rate of 11 percent of the mainstream; the corresponding rates are 34 and 45 percent for banning workplace prayer for Muslims and banning critical labor unions.

19. When it comes to the remaining undemocratic positions, the illiberal right punished candidates who proposed to pass laws without parliamentary debate at a rate of 58 percent of the mainstream; the corresponding rates are 54, 51, and 50 percent for monitoring politically critical posts on social media, disciplining judges who criticize the government, and directing infrastructure spending to districts that voted for the candidate’s party.

20. For a complementary set of findings on the illiberal right’s openness to authoritarianism, see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and Ariel Malka et al., “Who Is Open to Authoritarian Governance Within Western Democracies?” *Perspectives on Politics* 20, issue 3 (2022): 808–27.

21. For a related critique of conventional measures of support for democracy, see Andreas Schedler and Rodolfo Sarsfield, “Democrats with Adjectives: Linking Direct and Indirect Measures Of Democratic Support,” *European Journal of Political Research* 46, issue 5 (2007): 637–59.