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# Far-Right Illiberalism in the European Parliament

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## Abstract

The rise of illiberalism has become a global concern, especially since the establishment of far-right illiberal regimes in countries such as Hungary, India, Poland, and Turkey. When in power, far-right parties tend to promote democratic backsliding, leading to a proliferation of studies of the illiberal regimes established by the far-right. Less attention has been paid so far to the embrace of illiberal ideas by these parties. Although studies of these parties' populism, nativism, and authoritarianism are ubiquitous, we know little about the way in which these three ideological pillars become integrated into an overarching illiberal agenda. This article aims to analyze the extent to which European far-right parties embrace illiberal ideas, irrespective of whether they are in power. To pursue this objective, we focus on parliamentary speeches given by far-right parties in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2019. Methodologically, we employ a dictionary-based content analysis to identify which speeches by far-right members of the European Parliament contain illiberal ideas. Subsequently, we measure the percentage of far-right illiberal speeches per year. Our study shows that although illiberalism has always been a relevant feature of the far-right, illiberal ideas have become more prominent in speeches of far-right members of the European Parliament since 2017, after Brexit and the election of Trump.

## Keywords

European Parliament; far-right; illiberalism; liberal democracy

## 1. Introduction

Liberal democracy faces serious challenges across the globe (e.g., Fukuyama, 2020; Mounk, 2020). Many countries witness a protracted process of democratic erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 77), during which multiparty elections remain in place, but become less meaningful through weakening of the rule of law and

checks and balances, restricting media freedom, and reducing the space for civil society (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). One of the main causes of the decline of liberalism has been the rise of far-right actors, with many illiberal transformations happening under the administration of far-right parties (e.g., Plattner, 2021; Rupnik, 2016; Vachudova, 2020). Illiberal reforms have been implemented by the far-right in, for example, Brazil (e.g., Milhorance, 2022), Hungary (e.g., Rupnik, 2022), Italy (e.g., Baldini, 2024), Poland (e.g., Pirro & Stanley, 2022), and the United States (e.g., Mudde, 2022).

Research on illiberal democracy has first and foremost centered on what far-right parties do when they gain power. Comparative studies have not yet extensively explored whether far-right parties embrace illiberalism as a consistent set of ideas, and if yes, whether these ideas are also advocated by far-right parties that are not in power. After all, even parties in opposition can potentially erode democracy through their discourse and actions (e.g., Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). Hence, to fully understand the nature and extent of the challenge that far-right parties pose to liberalism, it is important to assess whether they promote illiberal ideas when in government *and* opposition.

Existing scholarship shows tensions between far-right ideology and the principles of liberal democracy (e.g., Mudde, 2007) and how the far-right politicizes the liberal political system (e.g., Engler et al., 2023). However, few studies have studied whether illiberalism, understood as a consistent set of ideas rejecting the ideas that are central to liberalism, is present in far-right discourse. We address this gap by empirically investigating the extent to which the far-right propagates illiberalism in parliamentary settings. Thus, our study explores the question: *To what extent do far-right parties embrace illiberal ideas?* To answer this question, we use recent conceptualizations of illiberalism as a coherent set of ideas (e.g., Enyedi, 2024b; Kauth, 2024; Laruelle, 2022; Smilova, 2021), in which the democratic notion of popular sovereignty as a legitimate source of power is combined with the rejection of liberal rights and freedoms, including of the institutions that safeguard those principles.

We investigate far-right illiberalism by conducting an automated content analysis of parliamentary speeches given by far-right actors in the European Parliament (EP) between July 1999 and April 2019. At the core of our analysis lies the assumption that speeches contain crucial messages as they "create meaning over social and physical phenomena and can eventually shape political decisions" (Wunsch & Chiru, 2024, p. 7). To assess the presence of illiberalism in far-right speeches, we develop a carefully validated multi-dimensional dictionary that builds on the conceptualization of Smilova (2021) and measures the presence of a preference for unrestrained popular sovereignty, ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism in speeches by far-right members of the European Parliament (MEPs). This allows us to descriptively explore the frequency with which far-right illiberalism occurs in their parliamentary speeches and whether this frequency has changed over time. Since illiberalism has become politicized more recently, most prominently through Viktor Orbán's promotion of the illiberal state, we would expect to see an increase over time.

We analyze the content of speeches of far-right parliamentarians in the EP because it represents the only formal arena in which far-right parties from different countries deliver messages under similar conditions. Speeches in national parliaments are shaped by local customs, issues, and regulations. By contrast, speeches delivered in the EP can be more readily compared, as they are all given within the same institutional context. While we acknowledge that the EP represents an environment in which far-right illiberalism is less likely to

occur than in national parliaments, we also observe that the politicization of the EU makes it likely that illiberalism is present. On the one hand, we recognize that contestation over EU policy issues has been characterized by limited politicization (e.g., De Bruycker, 2017; Hurrelmann et al., 2015), that debates in the EP have generally not been closely followed by EU citizens, and that the connection between MEPs' legislative behavior and citizen behavior is weak (e.g., Chiru, 2024). On the other hand, EU politicization has increased considerably, and EU issues have become more salient to citizens, parties, and the media (Braun, 2021; C. E. de Vries, 2018; Maier et al., 2021). Consequently, studies of the politicization of liberal democracy have increasingly focused on the EP as arena (e.g., Coman, 2022; Wunsch & Chiru, 2024). Focusing on the role of the far-right in this process is particularly relevant, given that their MEPs tend to make strategic use of their mandate to appeal to the wider public to increase the visibility of their ideas and agenda at the national level (Brack, 2015). As noted by McDonnell and Werner (2020, pp. 9–10), studying the far-right in the EP can tell us a great deal about where these parties are going, both nationally and internationally.

Our results show that far-right MEPs have always advocated for illiberal ideas in their speeches in the EP, in contrast to MEPs belonging to mainstream groups such as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). More importantly, the relative number of speeches given by the far-right that include illiberal ideas has overall increased over time. In 2017 and 2018, almost 5 percent of far-right speeches in the EP contained illiberal ideas, suggesting that illiberalism is a relevant feature of far-right ideas. Our expectation is that far-right illiberalism is even more prevalent in more politicized contexts, such as national parliaments, or in arenas in which the far-right can communicate its ideas more freely, such as on social media.

## 2. The Fourth Wave of the Far-Right and Its Tension With Liberal Democracy

Far-right parties have become important players in European politics, often polling above 15 percent of the vote. Moreover, they have assumed national office in many European countries, including Austria, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. As a result, many studies have examined the impact these parties have on liberal democracy, especially when in office (e.g., Bichay, 2024; Pirro, 2024; Plattner, 2021). When investigating this impact, research has typically focused on nativism and authoritarianism as the two ideological cornerstones of both subtypes of the far-right, namely the extreme and the radical right (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023). In addition, several studies have also examined the impact of far-right parties' populism on liberal democracy (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Below, we discuss the tension between these three ideological elements and the principles of liberal democracy.

### 2.1. Nativism and Liberal Democracy

Nativism consists of a combination of nationalism and xenophobia and nativists propagate the idea that states should be "inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native (or 'alien') elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). The distinction between natives and non-natives is predominantly based on cultural, ethnic, or racial criteria, with "the nation [being] narrated as one continuous and unified community of people, despite the overwhelming evidence against such notions" (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019, p. 590). Far-right parties emphasize the need for cultural homogeneity, sometimes even advocating for an ethnocratic political regime as a far-right utopia (Mudde, 2007). Far-right parties employ the doctrine of

"ethnopluralism," according to which ethnic groups are not superior to one another, but incompatible to such an extent that they should stay separated to preserve diversity and pluralism (e.g., Mudde, 2019). Hence, while far-right parties pretend to be true defenders of difference, they denounce social or ethnic pluralism as being fundamentally threatening to the native culture and the internal homogeneity of the polity. Moreover, they are also hostile towards minority rights.

## 2.2. Authoritarianism and Liberal Democracy

Authoritarianism reflects a preference for a strictly ordered society, claiming that authorities must be followed and that disobedience should lead to severe punishment (Mudde, 2007). However, this adherence to law-and-order-policies reflects only one particular aspect of authoritarianism, which represents a broader "desire for in-group conformity at the expense of personal autonomy, represented by deference to authority and intolerance towards those who violate in-group norms, activated under perceived threat" (Praet, 2024, p. 2). Since the content of in-group norms and authority depends on a party's host ideology, right-wing authoritarianism often finds its expression in moral conventionalism, that is, the exaltation of traditional values and customs, such as traditional gender roles (Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023). Authoritarianism also aggressively denounces and discredits those who deviate from in-group norms, embracing the communitarian notion of a legalized morality and the submission under a prescribed and singular authority. Hence, authoritarianism creates tension with the liberal-democratic principles of pluralism and minority rights (Praet, 2024).

## 2.3. Populism and Liberal Democracy

Populism is a thin-centered ideology focused on the distinction between the "corrupt elite" and the "pure people" as a key societal divide and contends that politics must reflect the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism is monist as it assumes "the people" to be the only legitimate group, with homogeneous interests, preferences, and values. The distinction between people and elite is drawn on a moral basis and not according to objective socioeconomic criteria or societal position (Mudde, 2021). Although not prevalent amongst all far-right parties, the tension between populism and liberal democracy has received the most scholarly attention (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016). Some scholars describe a specific populist understanding of democracy that can be distinguished from a liberal one (Caramani, 2017; Urbinati, 2013; Vittori, 2022), based on populists' preference for unconstrained majority rule, which is defended in the name of "true democracy," as well as their political anti-pluralism, which rejects a diverse distribution of political power amongst elites. Moreover, the belief in a homogeneous general will, shared by all "true" members of the in-group as the only legitimate foundation of politics is at odds with the principles of pluralism and minority rights (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

On the basis of existing studies, it has been shown that there are inherent tensions between nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, on the one hand, and the principles of liberal democracy, on the other hand. Scholarship has pointed out how each of these three ideological cornerstones of the far-right can individually negate pluralism and constrain minority rights. However, liberalism is often understood as a broader set of ideas, and until recently, it has remained undertheorized how the far-right promotes a fundamental rejection of liberalism, and embraces a consistent illiberal vision of society, politics, and economy.

## 2.4. Illiberalism as a Set of Ideas

While the term illiberalism has been first and foremost used in the context of political regime studies, recent research has focused on different facets of illiberalism, such as illiberal practices, governance, or constitutionalism (e.g., Kauth & King, 2020; Laruelle, 2023; Sajó et al., 2021). Most significantly for this study, illiberalism has recently been conceptualized as a set of principles or ideas, or more specifically a (thin-centered) ideology (e.g., Coman et al., 2023; Enyedi, 2024b; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Laruelle, 2022; Smilova, 2021). Central to this conceptualization of illiberalism is the parties' opposition to the central tenets of liberalism, which can be summarized as consisting of the principles of limited power, state neutrality, and the open society. Illiberalism therefore advocates for "power concentration, a partisan state, and a closed society" (Enyedi, 2024a, p. 4) and can accommodate various types of illiberalism based on distinct ideological traditions, such as traditionalist, religious, paternalist, or libertarian illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024a; see also Freeden, 2015).

In this article, we focus on one specific type of illiberalism: far-right illiberalism. The general definition of Enyedi (2024a) should therefore be tailored to our object of study. Smilova (2021) has undertaken such an endeavor, explicitly relying on the accounts of right-wing thinkers and on examples of far-right actors when developing her conceptualization of illiberalism. Smilova describes illiberalism as an alternative model for politics and society that aims to substitute liberal rights and freedoms with illiberal values and to dismantle those institutions that safeguard it. Illiberalism is nominally integrated into a discourse that accepts the notions of popular sovereignty and procedural democracy as legitimation of political power, and is, hence, not necessarily anti-democratic (Kauth & King, 2020; Waller, 2024). However, illiberal actors often stretch the boundaries of democracy, creating "the conditions of stepping beyond democratic procedures" (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1314). This makes their true adherence to democracy questionable.

Smilova (2021) conceptualizes illiberalism along three dimensions that correspond to elements of far-right ideology, namely those of (a) unrestrained popular sovereignty, (b) ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and (c) anti-liberal anti-globalism. This way of thinking about illiberalism is in line with that of Laruelle (2022, p. 309), who argues that illiberalism "proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity," and that of Guasti and Bustikova (2023, p. 131), who characterize it as a "set of principles opposed to pluralism, minority accommodation, and ideological heterogeneity."

The first principle of illiberalism, which Smilova (2021, p. 193) labels as "Unrestrained popular sovereignty," identifies "the people" as the only legitimate source of power and therefore promotes unrestrained majority rule. It is built on Rousseau's idea of absolute majoritarianism, stating that popular sovereignty as the fundamental principle of democracy shall in no way be constrained and that politics must be an expression of the *volonté générale*, that is the collective judgment about the common good (Held, 1996). In line with this, illiberalism considers institutions or laws that safeguard minority rights or limit popular sovereignty, such as the rule of law, fundamentally illegitimate and undemocratic, thus rejecting political liberalism. While the main reasoning for opposing constraints on popular sovereignty is this majoritarian understanding of democracy, a second objection is articulated from the perspective of efficiency, claiming that only a strong and unhindered state can establish security and prosperity (Smilova, 2021, pp. 182–183).

The second principle of illiberalism, which Smilova (2021, p. 193) labels as "Ethno-nationalist 'common good' anti-pluralism and anti-individualism," focuses on the ethno-nationalist "common good" that contains its concept of the polity, who should be part of it, as well as its central values, and who gets to define them. Ethno-nationalism emphasizes the meaning of shared ethnicity or origin—either conceptualized as "racial" or "cultural" kinship—for the harmonious functioning of a political community and thus advocates a pre-political definition of nationhood and belonging (Brubaker, 2009). The illiberal notion of the common good promotes traditional values and stresses the primacy of the collective and its "shared identity, common interests, and collective duties" (Smilova, 2021, p. 193), subordinating the individual under traditional hierarchy and authority structures such as God, the family, or even nature. Social and cultural liberalism are rejected as they allegedly pervert society into an aggregate of atomized individuals lacking cohesion and identity, threatening "the natural order" and destroying the very foundation of democracy (Smilova, 2021, p. 193). Instead, an anti-individualist and anti-pluralistic vision of society is promoted, with collectively defined and legalized values that substitute the diversity of individual preferences and conceptions of a good life, advocating "hetero-normative sexuality and ties of solidarity formed around a communitarian view of nationhood and sovereignty" (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023, p. 131). This socio-cultural dimension of illiberalism can be found in the work of several scholars that emphasize the importance of, for example, illiberal conservatism and civilizationalist ethnocentrism (Enyedi, 2024b), the rejection of multiculturalism (Laruelle, 2022), the promotion of cultural conservatism and ethnic nationalism (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023), or the attempt to install exclusion and a hierarchy between in-group and out-group (Kauth, 2024).

The third principle of illiberalism, which Smilova (2021, p. 193) labels "Anti-liberal anti-globalism," rejects the integration into global markets as well as supranational institutions. It defines national prosperity as the dominant criterion for economic governance following the idea of "Our Nation First." Different economic doctrines are compatible with this guiding principle, such as protectionism of the national economy, or an ethnicized economic redistribution and social benefits in favor of the autochthone community to foster cohesion (Smilova, 2021, p. 193). While Smilova conceptualizes illiberal anti-globalism in a rather narrow, exclusively economic manner, we suggest including also the rejection of an integration into supranational institutions, such as the EU and the liberal international order more generally, including a negative position towards political globalization and US-American dominance within a unipolar world (Zürn, 2018). Within real-world messages, political and economic globalization are often hard to disentangle, as the integration into supranational institutions and the corresponding transfer of sovereignty are depicted as harmful for national prosperity, decreasing the possibility for national economic governance. We also think that it is important to highlight that the term globalism often contains a notion of conspiratorial thinking that works as an anti-Semitic dogwhistle, blaming an alleged elite—"the Globalists"—for all hardship in an increasingly complex world (Rensmann, 2011). In sum, illiberal anti-globalism emphasizes the absolute priority of the national (economic) interest and the importance of national sovereignty to achieve this. This broad definition of anti-liberal anti-globalism as a rejection of the integration into global markets as well as into supranational and multilateral institutions is in line with other definitions of illiberalism, emphasizing that both components play a role in illiberalism (Laruelle, 2022, p. 309).

While we have acknowledged that nativism, authoritarianism, and populism challenge the liberal democratic principles of pluralism and minority rights, the study of illiberalism accounts for a broader rejection of liberal principles and a particular pattern of polity-based contestation. Illiberalism provides a useful perspective to study the co-occurrence and integration of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism into a consistent

set of ideas, which needs to be considered to fully understand the challenge that far-right parties pose to liberal democracy.

## 3. Data and Methods

To assess the extent to which far-right parties embrace illiberalism, we conducted an automated content analysis of both written and spoken debate contributions to the plenary in the EP. Analyzing those contributions, which we refer to as speeches in the remainder of this article, comes with several advantages over other types of sources. First, speeches contain messages that are to a certain extent influenced by ongoing political developments, unlike more static sources like party manifestos that are only issued around election time (e.g., Hunger, 2024). Second, they are used to strategically set the agenda by focusing on issues that are later amplified and debated on social media (Poljak, 2024). Third, focusing on speeches allows for a better analysis of ideology than, for example, roll-call votes, given that speeches are not equally subjected to party or group discipline and cover a broader scope of issues, including issues that are not voted on. Although parliamentary speeches can have a symbolic or strategic character with few consequences for real behavior, they provide nuanced information about a party's ideology and policy positions (Proksch & Slapin, 2010, pp. 588–589).

### 3.1. Studying the Far-Right in the EP

We focus on far-right speeches in the EP because it is the only formal political setting where far-right parties from many different countries are represented (e.g., McDonnell & Werner, 2020). This environment offers an opportunity to systematically study speeches given in a single institutional setting. Focusing on speeches delivered in national parliaments would be more challenging as they diverge significantly across countries due to specific institutional, political, and cultural differences.

Our data consists of speeches by far-right MEPs given in plenary debates between July 1999 and April 2019. We include speeches by MEPs belonging to parties that have been classified as far-right in The PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2024). In addition, we add far-right parties that gained representation in the EP but are not included in The PopuList because they failed to meet its selection criteria (i.e., at least 2 percent of votes or one seat in national parliamentary elections). Mainstream parties that have turned into far-right parties during the period of 1999–2019, such as Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland, have been included for the entire time frame to be able to observe whether their entry into the far-right party family coincides with their adoption of illiberalism. However, we perform two robustness checks, excluding these parties from the analysis prior to their radicalization and excluding them entirely from the analysis (see Section S4 of the Supplementary Material). Far-right parties that gave fewer than 10 speeches in the EP between 1999 and 2019 were excluded from the analysis. An overview of the parties included in our study is provided in Table 1.

To collect the speeches given during this period we make use of an already existing corpus of officially translated speeches that covers the period from July 1999 till January 2018. These speeches have been annotated with additional information about the speakers, such as their national party affiliation or their EP group affiliation (Karakanta et al., 2018). However, due to changes in the general translation regulations of the EP, few speeches given after November 2012 have been officially translated and therefore are not part of this corpus. To account for this, we extended our corpus by downloading all speeches in their original

**Table 1.** Far-right parties in the EP 1999–2019.

| Party Name | Country | N of speeches |
|---|---|---|
| Alternative for Germany (AfD) | Germany | 1,074 |
| Attack (Attack) | Bulgaria | 228* |
| The Brexit Party (BP) | United Kingdom | 55 |
| British Democratic Party (BDP) | United Kingdom | 81 |
| British National Party (BNP) | United Kingdom | 267 |
| Brothers of Italy (FdI) | Italy | 72 |
| Congress of the New Right (KNP) | Poland | 110 |
| Croatian Conservative Party (HKS) | Croatia | 1,030 |
| Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) | Croatia | 441 |
| Danish People's Party (DF) | Denmark | 366 |
| Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance/Christian Democratic People's Party (Fidesz) | Hungary | 7,156 |
| Finns Party (PS) | Finland | 244 |
| Flemish Interest (VB) | Belgium | 837 |
| For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK (LNNK) | Latvia | 290 |
| Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) | Austria | 6,835 |
| Greater Romania Party (PRM) | Romania | 136 |
| IMRO – National Bulgarian Movement (VMRO) | Bulgaria | 1,023 |
| Independent Greeks (ANEL) | Greece | 108 |
| Italian Social Movement/Tricolor Flame Social Movement (MSI/TF) | Italy | 443 |
| Jobbik (Jobbik) | Hungary | 1,342 |
| New Hope (KORWiN) | Poland | 146 |
| Law and Justice (PiS) | Poland | 4,135 |
| League of Polish Families (LPR) | Poland | 333 |
| National Alliance (AN) | Italy | 625 |
| National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) | Germany | 168 |
| National Front/National Rally (RN) | France | 15,732 |
| Northern League/The League (LN) | Italy | 6,209 |
| Nova Slovenija – Krščanski demokrati (NOVA) | Slovenia | 276 |
| Party for Freedom (PVV) | Netherlands | 656 |
| Popular Association – Golden Dawn (XA) | Greece | 3,518 |
| Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) | Greece | 723 |
| Real Slovak National Party (SNS) | Slovakia | 563 |
| Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) | Slovenia | 2,615 |
| Social Alternative: Lista Mussolini (AS) | Italy | 28 |
| Sweden Democrats (SD) | Sweden | 199 |
| United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) | United Kingdom | 8,690 |
| United Poland (SP) | Poland | 959 |
| *N* | | 67,713 |

Note: * includes also speeches from the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB).

language from the EP website, beginning in December 2012 and ending in April 2019, and translated them with Google Translate. While human translation is expected to be more accurate than machine translation, research has shown that the latter yields at least satisfactory results and should therefore constitute an appropriate basis the analysis (E. de Vries et al., 2018).

Table 1 also provides an overview of the total number of speeches given by each party in the EP between 1999 and 2019. Our corpus consists of a total of 67,713 speeches delivered by far-right MEPs from 37 parties. There is enormous variation in the number of speeches given by individual far-right parties, with the highest number of speeches given by the National Front/National Rally (RN; almost 16,000 speeches) and the lowest number by the Social Alternative: Lista Mussolini (AS; 28 speeches). The variation in the number of speeches from party to party reflects the growing success of the far-right in the EP. Parties that have been in the EP for a long time have seen their seat share increase significantly, leading to more MEPs and more speeches. However, other far-right parties have only made it into the EP more recently, sometimes with smaller seat shares, and therefore have given fewer speeches.

To contextualize our analysis, it is important to highlight that the number of far-right parties in the EP has grown from 8 in 1999 to 22 in 2014. Moreover, the number of MEPs has risen exponentially from 30 in 1999 to 124 in 2014 (see Figure 1). Consequently, the number of speeches given per year has also increased substantially, from 330 in 2000 to 1,696 in 2018, and two years have a particularly high number of far-right speeches—2015 and 2016 (see Figure 2).
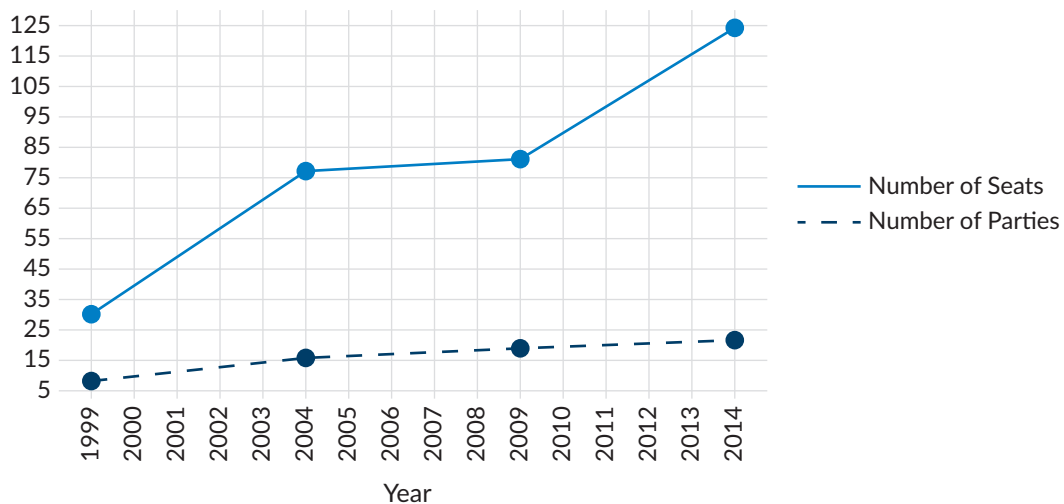


**Figure 1.** Far-right representation in the EP.

### 3.2. A Dictionary Approach to Measuring Illiberalism

Methodologically, we rely on a dictionary-based approach, which has been extensively used to study far-right messages in the EP and in national parliaments, as well as in party manifestos and social media content (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Borbáth & Gessler, 2023; Engler et al., 2023; Gründl, 2022; Hunger, 2024; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). Dictionaries are an efficient way to assess the prevalence of a theoretical concept in a document, following a simple logic: A list of keywords indicative of a particular concept is developed and applied to a corpus of text documents. The results are frequency counts of the number of

correspondences with the dictionary in a given document, which can then be subjected to further analysis, depending on the research aim. Two potential shortcomings of dictionaries are that they often fail to recall all relevant terms and that they must be tailored to the specific research purpose, since "the scores attached to words must closely align with how the words are used in a particular context" (Grimmer et al., 2022, p. 181). To account for both potential biases, keywords must be chosen carefully and an extensive validation of the dictionary and the results is required (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Potential validation methods range from human coding to unsupervised machine learning methods, which recently emerged in the field (Maerz & Schneider, 2020).

Taking these potential shortcomings into account, we construct the dictionary in a four-step procedure. First, we developed an initial list of keywords indicative of illiberal ideas, based on the theoretical considerations in the literature and the existing illiberalism dictionary constructed by Maerz (2019). Second, we qualitatively analyzed a sample of 500 speeches given by far-right MEPs between February 2018 and April 2018 to inductively detect additional keywords and take the particular discursive context of the EP into account. Third, we analyzed a second, randomly drawn sample of 15 speeches per year (total number of 315 speeches) to detect keywords that are specific to the societal or political context at a particular moment in time. Fourth, we made use of our validation strategy to find additional illiberalism keywords. The validation approach is discussed below.

Instead of restricting our dictionary to single-word terms, we followed Gründl's (2022) approach and included terms that span multiple words and regular expressions. This approach should result in a more precise and comprehensive list of keywords that is better able to capture illiberalism. For example, the expression "will of the majority" seems like an appropriate indicator for a preference for unconstrained majority rule, while both "will" and "majority" are generic and ambiguous words that carry a high risk of confusion. Using regular expressions that match specific patterns in textual data allows us to detect instances of illiberalism along a variety of adjectives, like "our people" or "Italian people," which should result in a more precise measure. It also allows us to exclude specific word combinations that do not match illiberalism adequately. We conduct the steps of the dictionary analysis using Gründl's (2020) R package "multidictR." We further employed an extensive validation strategy for our list of keywords. Since automated content analysis can only augment, but not substitute, human coding (e.g., Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), we qualitatively assess if a word is sufficiently indicative of illiberalism. This also lowers the risk of including words that can be used in both a liberal and an illiberal way. For each term in our dictionary, we analyzed a randomly drawn subset of up to 20 speeches containing the keyword and assessed its relevance for our illiberalism dictionary, as suggested by Bonikowski and Gidron (2016). This resulted in a total number of 2,655 speeches. To properly apprehend the meaning of a keyword, we read the relatively short speeches in their entirety, taking the context of each keyword into account. For each speech, the validation procedure was executed by two independent coders. In the last step of our dictionary validation, we built on a random sample of 105 speeches of our corpus that was assessed by two of the authors and an independent coder. Based on that, we also calculated interrater reliability. Our results suggest a sufficient agreement of 88 percent between the three raters, resulting in a Fleiss Kappa value of 0.78. Table S1 in the Supplementary Material gives an overview of the full list of keywords after validation; Table S2 reports basic performance metrics of the dictionary. Even though the validation shows that the keywords in general capture the phenomenon of illiberalism adequately, it also demonstrates that it is difficult to assign the keywords unambiguously to one of the three dimensions of illiberalism identified by Smilova (2021). This is partly due to our focus on the EP, in which many speeches contain an anti-globalist

stance directed against the EU when addressing substantive policy issues. The following example for the keyword "democratically elected" illustrates this:

> Madam President, this attachment to democracy throughout the world is remarkable, but here, in the European Parliament, it seems to me a priority to be concerned about democracy in Europe and, for my part a fortiori, in France. In Europe too, freedoms are violated. The democratically elected Hungarian and Polish governments defend the identity of their people, you threaten them. The Italians bring to power two parties concerned about the interests of their people, the Eurocrats call for their will not to be respected. (French MEP Marie Christine Arnautu, National Rally (RN), 12.06.2018)

While this observation empirically corroborates our argument that far-right illiberalism consists of a consistent set of ideas, it makes it difficult to establish how frequently the individual dimensions are discussed. We therefore primarily focus on a summative measure of illiberalism in our results section, while occasionally referring to scores on the three individual dimensions.

To obtain this summative illiberalism score, we apply the final dictionary to our corpus, counting the frequency of illiberal keywords for each speech. A speech is classified as illiberal when it contains at least two terms included in our list of keywords. While this is a rather restrictive measure, it avoids taking a single correspondence with our dictionary as evidence for an illiberal speech, as for many terms a certain ambiguity remains. The employment of this strict criterion is also theoretically motivated, since we are interested in the analysis of coherent far-right illiberalism. For this reason, we also calculate an even more stringent measure that classifies speeches as illiberal when they contain at least two keywords from two different dimensions.

## 4. Results

To assess the extent to which illiberalism is present in far-right speeches in the EP, and whether we can observe an increase in illiberalism over time, we analyze the percentage of far-right speeches per year that can be classified as illiberal. To obtain the percentual values, we take the number of speeches containing at least two keywords in a particular year and divide it by the total number of speeches given by far-right MEPs in that year. However, before examining the evolution of far-right illiberalism over time, we briefly examine the general distribution of keywords over the three dimensions of illiberalism, as well as the absolute number of speeches that can be classified as illiberal.

### 4.1. Descriptive Results

Of the 67,713 far-right speeches that we analyzed; 5,010 speeches contain at least one illiberal keyword (see Table 2). If we look at the three dimensions of our illiberalism measure, the political dimension, which captures unconstrained majority rule, is present in 1,892 speeches, the cultural dimension, which captures ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, is found in 1,590 speeches, and the economic dimension, which captures anti-liberal anti-globalism, can be observed in 2,015 speeches. The higher prevalence of the economic dimension when compared with the political and the cultural dimensions could be due to the EU's traditional focus on economic integration and the fact that economic policies fall within the ordinary legislative procedure, closely involving the EP since 2009 (Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2018; Wallace

**Table 2.** Frequency of dictionary matches across dimensions.

| Category | Number of speeches |
|---|---|
| Only unconstrained majority rule | 1,572 |
| Only ethno-nationalist anti-individualism and anti-pluralism | 1,303 |
| Only anti-liberal anti-globalism | 1,687 |
| Unconstrained majority rule & ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism | 120 |
| Unconstrained majority rule & anti-globalism | 161 |
| Ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism & anti-globalism | 128 |
| Total number of matches on one dimension | 4,562 |
| Total number of matches on two dimensions | 409 |
| Total number of matches on three dimensions | 39 |
| Total number of speeches with a match on one dimension or more dimensions | 5,010 |

et al., 2021). Additionally, this could be a consequence of the inclusion of words that identify a rejection of supranational integration into the EU.

A total of 925 speeches contains two or more keywords from our illiberalism dictionary and in about half of these speeches there is a co-occurrence of at least two dimensions of illiberalism. Unconstrained majority rule & ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism co-occur 120 times, unconstrained majority rule & anti-globalism 161 times, and ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism & anti-globalism 128 times. An additional 39 speeches contain keywords from the three dimensions of the dictionary.

Given that our total corpus consists of 67,713 speeches, only 7 percent of far-right speeches contained at least one keyword from our dictionary. When using our more restrictive criterion of the occurrence of at least two keywords, irrespective of the dimension they belong to, the total number of speeches that can be classified as illiberal is 925 or 1.4 percent of the corpus. When we restrict our measure further to the co-occurrence of at least two keywords from two separate dimensions, the number of speeches that qualify as illiberal drops to 448 or 0.7 percent of the corpus. While these percentages might seem rather low, they reflect the strict criterion for inclusion we applied and correspond to similarly low frequencies for populism in the EP. Hunger (2024), for example, concludes that 3.2 percent of speeches by populist parties in the EP contain a populist message, while Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) measure an even lower share of 2.5 percent. This is corroborated by other studies analyzing the occurrence of populist ideas in electoral manifestos (Rooduijn, 2013).

### 4.2. Analysis Over Time

Even with these relatively low absolute numbers and percentages, an increase in illiberal speeches over the years can be observed (see Figure 2). While in 2000 only 15 illiberal speeches were given by far-right MEPs, this number gradually increased over time. Initially, the increase was modest, with the absolute number of illiberal speeches peaking in 2008 at 46. Subsequently, the number increased much more rapidly, with a second peak in 2015 and 2016 with 153 and 176 speeches qualifying as illiberal. In these two years, the high number of illiberal debate contributions coincides with a peak in the absolute number of speeches given by far-right actors in the EP. After 2017 and a change in the Rules of Procedure of the EP (see Sorace, 2021), both the
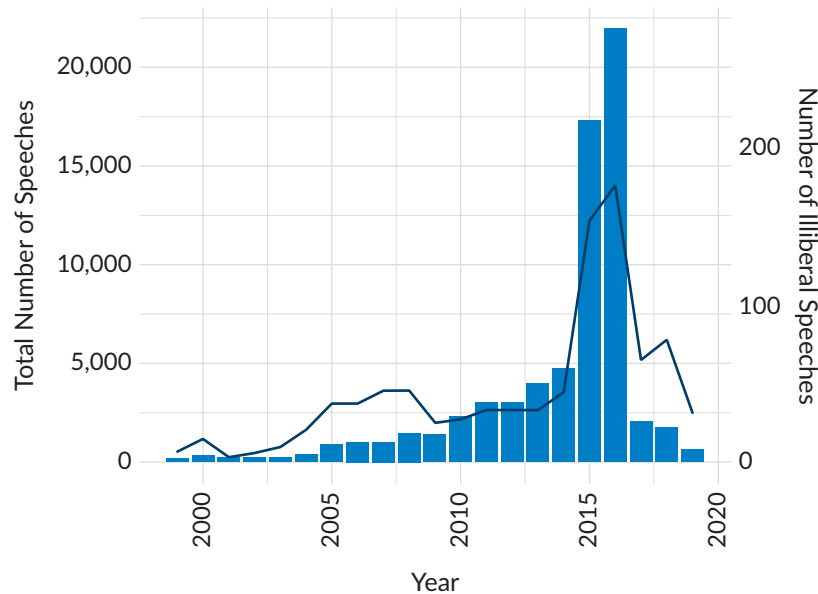
**Figure 2.** Absolute number of illiberal speeches over time.

number of illiberal speeches and the absolute number of speeches given by far-right MEPs decrease again. For 2019, the data collection concluded in April 2019, when the 8th term of the EP came to an end. This automatically results in fewer speeches, since the time period under investigation is much shorter.

As indicated in the methods section, the increase in illiberalism in speeches of far-right MEPs should also be considered in light of the growth of the number of far-right parties and MEPs in the EP. Hence, it is essential to analyze any developments over time by looking at the way in which the percentage of speeches per year that can be classified as illiberal has changed. Figure 3 (left panel) shows that from 1999 to 2008, when few far-right parties were represented in the EP (eight in the 5th parliamentary term) and the total number of far-right MEPs (30 in the 5th parliamentary term) was still relatively low, our illiberalism measure fluctuates quite strongly, and no over-time trend can be observed. While the share of illiberal speeches was relatively high in 1999 and 2004 with 4.8 percent and 5.7 percent respectively, it dropped significantly in 2001 and 2006 to 1.2 percent and 3.7 percent respectively. We suspect that these fluctuations are due to the fact that our measure is sensitive in this period to the actions of individual MEPs, who can impact our measure with only a few illiberal speeches.

From 2009 onwards, when 19 far-right parties and 81 of their MEPs are represented in the EP, a clear pattern emerges (see Figure 3, right panel). While the share of illiberal speeches is low from 2009 to 2016, a strong growth in such speeches occurs in the second half of the 8th term of the EP between 2017 and 2019. From 2013 to 2016, fewer than 1 percent of far-right speeches contain at least two references to our keywords and therefore qualify as illiberal. Between 2017 and 2019 this percentage increases quickly to almost 5 percent of speeches. Hence, Figure 3 suggests a considerable growth of illiberal speeches over the course of the 8th EP term. A regression analysis performed for the effect of time on illiberalism scores from 2009 onwards using a quadratic function confirms this suggestion. The exact results can be found in Table S3 in the Supplementary Material.
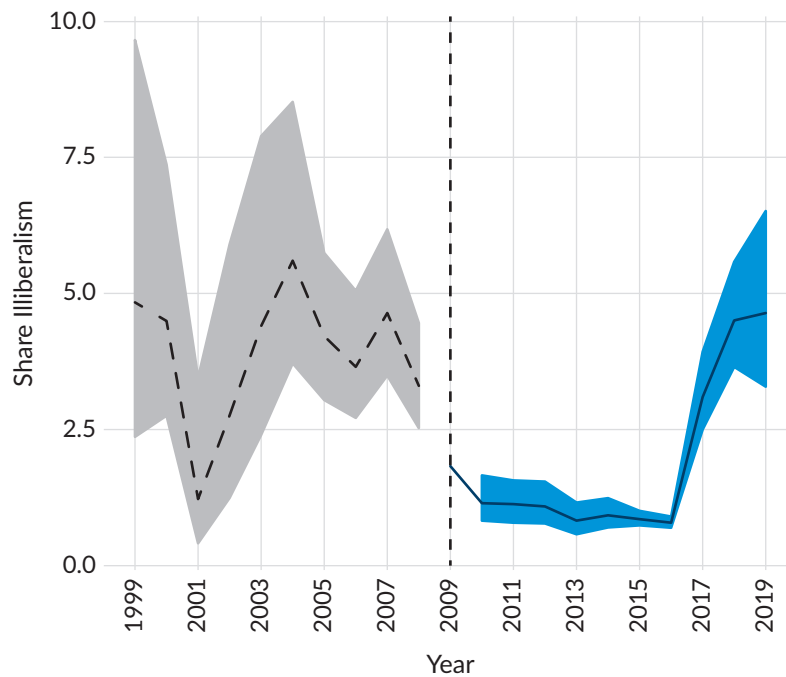
**Figure 3.** Share of illiberal speeches per year. Notes: The left-hand panel represents illiberalism in far-right speeches between 1999 and 2008, when the measure was more sensitive to individual cases; the right-hand panel represents illiberalism far-right speeches between 2009 and 2019, after a more stable trend evolved.

The findings of this analysis over time can possibly be explained by key events at specific moments in time. For example, a possible explanation for the comparatively high values in the early 2000s, such as the rise in illiberalism after 2001, could be the result of a general increase of culturally illiberal stances in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This interpretation is supported by the fact that during this period, the increase in illiberalism is primarily due to high scores on the ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism anti-individualism dimension (see Figure 4). Similarly, the peak in 2003 and 2004 could also be due to the high salience of EU enlargement, as well as debates about the draft of a European constitution. Previous research has established that far-right parties justified their predominantly negative position towards the accession of new countries mostly in identity-related and sovereignty terms (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022).

The prolonged period of low levels of illiberalism between 2010 and 2016 coincides first and foremost with the aftermath of the eurozone crisis. On the one hand, it is surprising that this crisis did not generate more speeches that contained anti-liberal anti-globalist ideas (see Figure 4). After all, far-right parties are assumed to have capitalized on the grievances related to the Great Recession and the EU's handling of the crisis (e.g., Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). On the other hand, we see it as an indication that the articulation of illiberal ideas might be contingent upon the topics that are debated in parliament. Existing research shows that the far-right is less likely to engage in economic debates (e.g., Cavallaro et al., 2018; Otjes et al., 2018; Pirro & van Kessel, 2017), which seems to be also the case in our data.

Surprisingly, the debates around the humanitarian crisis (the so-called refugee crisis), which took place in 2015 and 2016, did not lead immediately to a higher share of speeches with illiberal ideas. While it could have been expected that far-right actors would have promoted such ideas given that immigration is the core issue of the far-right, no clear increase in ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism can be observed during
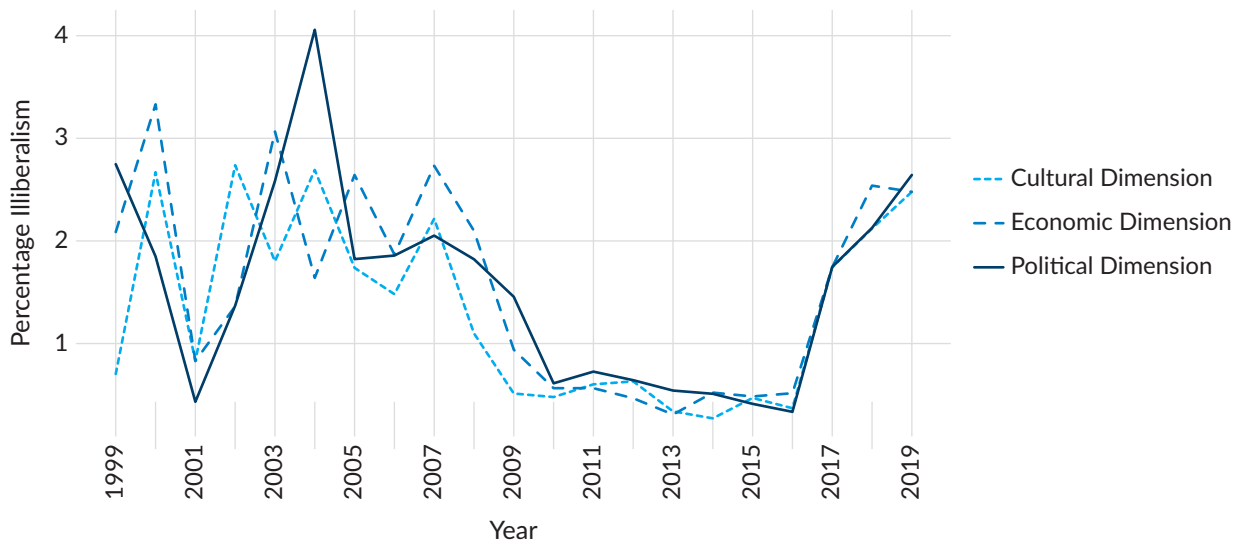
**Figure 4.** Share of illiberalism over time and across dimensions.

this period (see also Figure 4). This result is especially surprising, given that the far-right gave its highest number of speeches in the EP in 2015 and 2016, suggesting that they did address the crisis, and potentially also the looming Brexit. Why these contributions did not contain more illiberal ideas requires more research, probably of a more qualitative nature to examine the exact content of the speeches that were given.

Since 2017 the prevalence of illiberal ideas has significantly risen across all dimensions (also see Figure 4), occurring in over 4 percent of speeches in 2017 and 2018. This trend suggests the spread of illiberal ideas, particularly following Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016, which have contributed to the global diffusion of far-right ideology (Ramos & Torres, 2020). Surprisingly, the increase did not follow directly after Viktor Orbán promoted the idea of an illiberal state in his 2014 speech at the 25th Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp. Even though existing research has demonstrated that Orbán has emerged as the role model for the far-right in Europe by actively offering himself as an ideological example other far-right politicians can imitate (Mos & Macedo Piovezan, 2024), our findings suggest that it might have taken the far-right a couple of years to adopt his model of an "illiberal state, a non-liberal state" (Rupnik, 2022).

Finally, we compare our results for far-right messages to speeches given by mainstream politicians to assess whether we are measuring something truly particular about the far-right. For that reason, we chose the least likely case for illiberalism, which is the ALDE group (now Renew, former Group of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party). Figure 5 shows the share of illiberal messages for the liberal party family, next to the results for far-right parties to facilitate the comparison. Our results show a substantive difference between both party families: Illiberal messages are almost completely absent in the speeches of ALDE MEPs. Moreover, the percentage of illiberal speeches never crosses the 1 percent threshold. This stands in stark contrast with the results for the far-right, for which the percentage is higher than 1 in 17 of the 20 years studied. The comparison also serves as an additional check on the validity of our dictionary. Since the illiberalism values for ALDE members are close to zero, we are confident that the list of keywords is identifying illiberal ideas, rather than measuring the salience of themes that can be discussed in an illiberal and a liberal way.
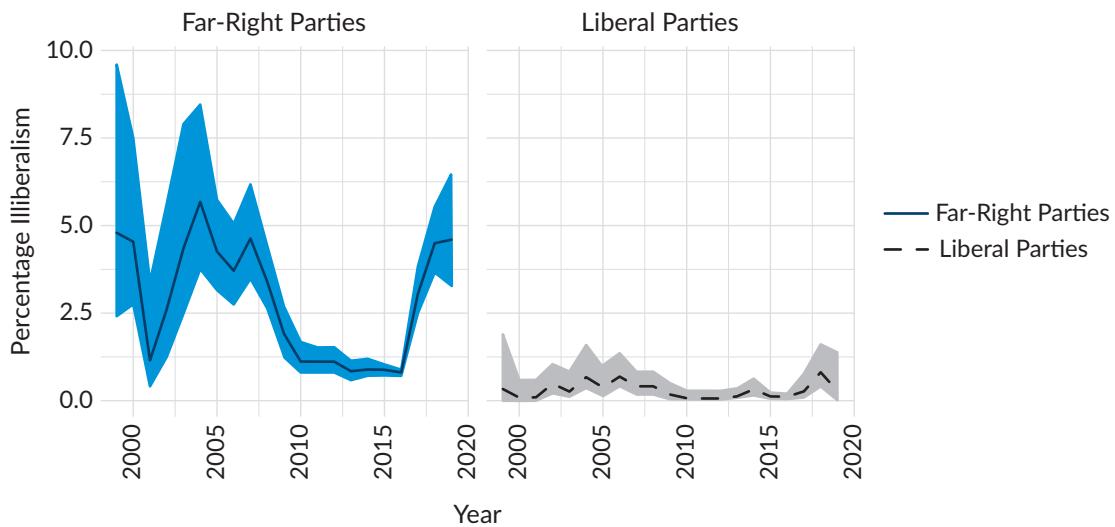
**Figure 5.** Share of illiberalism over time for far-right parties and liberal parties.

Overall, our findings demonstrate that illiberalism is present among the far-right in the EP and that it has increased significantly in recent years. The increase in the absolute number of speeches containing illiberalism is mostly due to the steady increase in far-right parties and their MEPs, which has risen from 30 in the 5th term to 124 in the 8th term. The relative increase since 2017, however, takes place after Brexit and the election of Trump, which are generally considered to be watershed moments in the development of the far-right. Given that illiberalism is present in at least 1 percent of far-right speeches in almost all parliamentary years under investigation and makes up 1.4 percent of the far-right speeches between 1999 and 2019, we conclude that illiberalism forms an important ingredient of far-right ideas. Moreover, our results show that far-right illiberalism constitutes a coherent set of ideas, with references to unconstrained majority rule, ethno-national anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism occurring at similar rates, trending together over time (see Figure 4), and co-occurring in almost half of the speeches that contain two references to keywords indicative of illiberalism. These results are in line with previous studies that observe growing discursive cohesion among far-right actors in the EP (e.g., Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

This article has focused on the extent to which European far-right parties promote illiberalism, which we conceive of as a set of ideas that coherently integrates the far-right's nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Building on a dictionary-based text analysis of far-right speeches given in the EP between 1999 and 2019, we show that illiberal ideas have been present in these speeches as early as the turn of the century, demonstrating that far-right illiberalism is not a new phenomenon. While the far-right's illiberalism remains limited throughout the financial and humanitarian crises of the early 2000s, we observe a marked increase from 2017 onwards. This increase follows directly after the Brexit referendum and the election of Trump in 2016 and occurs in the midst of a parliamentary term, which suggests it is not related to campaign dynamics or an electoral power shift in the EP.

Our analysis also reveals that the three dimensions of illiberalism that we distinguish on the basis of Smilova (2021)—(a) unrestrained popular sovereignty, (b) ethno-nationalist anti-individualism and anti-pluralism, and (c) anti-liberal anti-globalism—reflect a coherent set of ideas among far-right parties. The three dimensions are mentioned in the speeches more or less equally often, and trend together over time. All in all, our findings suggest that illiberalism is an important element of far-right ideology and thereby also plays a role in the growing discursive cohesion among the far-right in the EP (Wunsch & Bélanger, 2024).

Because the EP represents a parliamentary context in which politicization of political issues is lower than in national parliaments, we did not expect to find large shares of illiberalism in far-right speeches. Yet, even with our restrictive measurement that requires multiple illiberal keywords to be present, we find relevant levels of illiberalism of up to 5 percent. This percentage is somewhat higher than for example the level of populism reported in previous studies. Given the context in which we have measured illiberalism, we expect it to be even more pervasive in far-right speeches in national parliaments, or in their communication on social media or at party rallies.

Our article constitutes one of the first attempts to operationalize, measure, and analyze empirically the relatively new conceptualization of illiberalism as a set of ideas, using a dictionary approach. With the illiberalism dictionary that we have developed and validated, scholars will be able to analyze illiberalism in a multitude of settings and sources, such as in national parliamentary debates, in speeches given at party conferences, in newspaper interviews, or in online talks. The dictionary can be adapted to different contexts and be combined with other methods of content analysis, such as large language models, as recently shown by Röth et al. (2024).

Our article may have important policy implications. Research on the policy consequences of the far-right's rise has often focused on the specific issue of immigration. This is understandable given that immigration is their absolute core priority. Our analysis, however, indicates that these parties are more than "just" nativist (as well as authoritarian and populist); they also endorse an overarching illiberal set of ideas that extends beyond this single issue and influences their broader stance on democracy. The rise of the far-right may therefore have more severe policy implications than commonly assumed—even in countries where these parties are not in power. The more successful these parties are in promoting ideas incompatible with liberal democracy, the greater the threat to the liberal democratic system itself.

Although our study advances our knowledge of far-right illiberalism, it comes with several limitations. Firstly, our analysis ends in April 2019 and does not include the 9th EP term, in which the far-right has further expanded its number of MEPs. We would expect that illiberalism has become even more prominent in far-right speeches after 2019, given the increasing politicization of illiberal reforms in Hungary and Poland, and the themes of democratic quality and the rule of law more generally. Secondly, our validation strategy only compared the illiberalism of far-right and ALDE MEPs, arguing that ALDE was the least likely case to find illiberalism. In future research, the illiberalism scores of the far-right could also be compared to those of other EP groups to examine whether they differ between the far-right and, for example, the European People's Party (EPP). Thirdly, while we showed that illiberalism increases along each of its constitutive dimensions, we cannot identify the specific policy domains or debates that drive the increase in illiberal far-right speeches.

Our limitations also link to avenues for future research. Firstly, a more in-depth investigation into the drivers of the frequency with which the far-right gives illiberal speeches, and changes therein, is necessary. While the patterns identified in this article provide valuable insights, our interpretation of what causes the increase in illiberalism over time remains tentative. A study that systematically explores the context in which debates that feature illiberal speeches occur, along with a closer examination of the policy issues fueling illiberalism, could offer a deeper understanding of the rise of illiberalism. Such an analysis would also allow a differentiation by policy areas, which might accommodate different articulations of illiberalism. Secondly, the far-right in the 9th and 10th EP terms is more heterogeneous than ever, with new far-right parties having gained representation. These parties come from countries without prior far-right representation, such as Spain and Portugal, or represent extremist strands of thinking, such as Konfederacja from Poland or Motoristé sobě from Czechia. This heterogeneity might be reflected in the extent to which individual far-right parties embrace illiberalism and can potentially be explained by party-level factors, such as electoral strength in the national and EP arenas, governmental status, and office-, policy-, and vote-seeking strategies, as well as country level factors, such as historical legacies, or length of EU membership. Thirdly, research has shown that mainstream parties can co-opt far-right ideas for strategic reasons (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Han, 2015). It is possible that an increase in illiberalism combined with a growing presence of the far-right in the EP may produce a contagion effect. This might be particularly pronounced amongst center-right parties, given that they are the ones who lose most voters to the far-right (Bale & Kaltwasser, 2021) and have incentives to form alliances with the far-right in the EP to increase their influence (Brack & Marié, 2024). Fourthly, future research should study whether the illiberalism that far-right parties promote in their speeches also translates into illiberal voting on policy proposals and amendments. Finally, future research could investigate intragroup dynamics on the far-right to provide us with more information about the role of specific parties in the development and dissemination of illiberalism in Europe. It could explore how these ideas travel from country to country and from level of governance to level of governance and thereby form a building block for the cooperation of the far-right in Europe. While liberal democracy seems increasingly threatened, understanding illiberalism, its pervasiveness, and the role it plays in actors' behavior and communication might give us tools to protect liberal democracy.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

Data is available upon request to the corresponding author.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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