

# MAJORITARIANISM AND THE RADICAL RIGHT



The success of far-right parties is often treated as an inevitability if they can gain representation but in reality they can be diluted, exposed or effectively shut out from power in PR systems. In this briefing we show how PR provides the opportunities to do this, whereas a majoritarian system such as Britain's can hand them absolute power on unrepresentative proportions of the vote.

## HOW THE WESTMINSTER SYSTEM HELPS THE RADICAL RIGHT: WARNINGS FROM MAJORITARIAN SYSTEMS

### FRANCE: A RADICAL RIGHT SUSTAINED UNDER A MAJORITARIAN SYSTEM

The largest and most notorious radical right party in Europe is France's Front National<sup>1</sup> (FN). France is the only other country in Europe besides Britain to use a non-PR voting system. It uses the two-round system to elect MPs (which incidentally, is considered better for keeping out fringe views than Westminster's system). If the Front National can reach a tipping point of electoral success, France's majoritarian system may allow it to quickly gain seats.

The Front National's inability to gain representation under this system has enabled it to develop an image of the party representing a powerful and legitimate voice - without the responsibility of political power. This growing support on the outside of politics has allowed it to professionalise and grow; In 2017 Marine Le Pen almost doubled Jean-Marie Le Pen's second-round score in 2002.

As a result of the Front National's powerful outsider status, established parties have been pulled further right. The chief party of the mainstream right, the Republicans, has radicalised, with the party's new leader, Laurent Wauquiez describing Donald Trump as an "inspiration". Responsibility and the harsh light of day may well have led to the threat of the Front National being dealt with sooner and more directly.

### CANADA: REGIONAL RADICALISM ENCOURAGED BY A MAJORITARIAN SYSTEM

One of the effects of majoritarian electoral systems is that they can overrepresent regional parties. The Reform Party in 1990s Canada was opposed to Canadian multiculturalism, dismissive of Quebec and wanted to dismantle support for aborigines. The party won 52 seats - all of the seats in Western Canada - on just 19% of the vote in its first electoral outing in 1993 and became official opposition in 1997. It eventually merged into the Conservative Party in 2003.

### USA: PARTY CAPTURE UNDER A MAJORITARIAN SYSTEM

Trump was, of course, elected through majoritarian structures. And indeed won the Presidency despite gaining less votes than his opponent. Trump successively captured the Republican Party remaking it in his own image. But he is not the only populist to succeed in capturing a major party in a majoritarian system. The populist Doug Ford was elected Premier of Ontario, Canada's biggest province in June this year.

Party capture on the right could easily happen in Britain due to the Conservative Party's way of electing leaders. MPs whittle down candidates to two, the membership then vote. The small, highly Eurosceptic Conservative Party membership may well elect a radical leader if given the opportunity.

There real risk with party capture in a majoritarian system is that, once the party leadership is seized, power can easily be gained under electoral systems that allow for governing majorities on a minority of the vote. And once gained, it can be maintained.

**JUNE 2018**

 [POLITICSFORTHEMANY.CO.UK](http://POLITICSFORTHEMANY.CO.UK)  
 [/POLITICSFORTHEMANY](https://www.facebook.com/POLITICSFORTHEMANY)  
 [POLITICSFORTHEMANY@GMAIL.COM](mailto:POLITICSFORTHEMANY@GMAIL.COM)

<sup>1</sup> The Front National recently changed its name to 'National Rally'

---

# THE RADICAL RIGHT UNDER PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Concerns about proportional representation rewarding or aiding the radical right are frequently exaggerated. The share of the vote won by far-right parties is often unrelated to the electoral system used. Rather, it is linked to specific issues and grievances that can manifest themselves in increased support for and representation of the radical right - even in a majoritarian system.

Yet, unlike majoritarian systems, proportional systems offer various mechanisms and strategies for preventing or moderating the far-right's impact on the electoral process. The conciliatory and compromising nature of proportional systems can make it easier to moderate or counter the effects of the far-right.

## INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

Most systems of proportional representation adopt some form of electoral threshold – usually around 4%–5% – which determines the share of the vote a party must obtain in order to gain representation in parliament. Such thresholds are one of the simplest ways of preventing far-right parties from gaining access to the legislature. Other constitutional mechanisms might entrench liberal values or help to guarantee political stability - which Britain's winner-takes-all political system lacks.

## POLITICAL STRATEGIES

Two broad approaches have been taken by mainstream parties towards the far-right: exclusion and inclusion. The choice for either depends on a country's political and cultural context, and history of political extremism.

**Exclusion:** this approach consists in parties deliberately boycotting radical right parties. An exclusionary strategy can prevent a radical right party gaining access to executive authority.

Since 1989 all established parties in Belgium have voluntarily agreed not to actively co-operate with the Flemish Interest party – a practice which has been termed 'cordon sanitaire'. Similarly in the Netherlands, since 2012, mainstream parties have refused to collaborate with the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV).

The effect of a cordon sanitaire can be to put people off wasting their vote for a party unlikely to govern and may contribute to the public stigmatisation of extremism. After years of failure to reach government, Flemish Interest was eventually supplanted by the more moderate New Flemish Alliance. From 12% of the vote in 2007, the party has fallen to less than 4%.

**Inclusion and moderation:** a second strategy consists in mainstream parties collaborating in a legislature or sharing executive power with the radical right. This approach seeks to co-opt extremist parties into the mainstream to moderate their positions.

To work within established institutions, some far-right parties decide to adopt office-seeking strategies, proposing more pragmatic and feasible policies, or toning down their extremist rhetoric. The Norwegian Progress Party, for example, has adopted a more moderate and conciliatory approach after entering government in 2013. Inclusion in legislative or executive power may decrease the far-right's 'outsider' appeal. Since entering government, the Norwegian Progress Party's electoral support has slightly decreased in parliamentary elections – from a peak of 22.9% in 2009 to 15.3% in 2017. In other cases right-populist parties may simply prove unready for the realities of power as when the Pim Fortuyn list dramatically imploded over a period of six months in power in the early 2000s.