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The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: towards a heuristic framework

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ABSTRACT

The study of far-right parties and politics is one of the most high-profile research areas in political science and related disciplines. Far-right parties have been the subject of vast amounts of varied scholarship since their turn-of-the-century resurgence. However, as the far right has become a mainstay, with Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 blurring the boundaries between mainstream and far-right politics, it has become crucial to pay attention to the process of mainstreaming. Beyond a focus on far-right electoral success, studies of mainstreaming, as well as a critical account of the concept and role of the 'mainstream', have proved elusive. This article provides a heuristic framework to understand these concepts and the mainstreaming of the far right. Key to our approach is a more holistic analysis, extending beyond traditional approaches which focus mostly on the electoral outcomes of far-right parties, positioning the mainstream as a relatively inert target or bulwark against them. To achieve this, we seek to reframe the focus towards the centrality of discourse both in the process, and as an outcome, of mainstreaming. Only by doing so can we account for the significant role played by the mainstream in this process.

Discussion and debate about the far right, its rise, origins and impact have become ubiquitous in academic research, political strategy and media coverage in recent years. One of the issues increasingly underpinning such discussions is the relationship between the far right and the mainstream, and more specifically, the mainstreaming of the far right.[1] This is particularly clear around elections when attention turns to the electoral performance of these parties. When they fare as well as predicted, catastrophic headlines simplify and hype what is usually a complex situation, ignoring key factors which shape electoral outcomes and inflate far-right results, such as trends in abstention and distrust towards mainstream politics.[2] When these parties do not perform as well as predicted, the circus moves on to the next election and the hype starts afresh, often playing a role in the framing of, and potentially influencing, the process.

This trend is not entirely new,[3] and there is no denying that far-right parties and politics have played a significant role in shaping the current political landscape in Europe. Some strong electoral performances attest to this: most recently, the Lega and Austrian Freedom Party formed part of coalition governments in Italy and Austria (if only briefly),

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the Finns Party came a close second in the 2019 parliamentary elections in Finland, and Marine Le Pen of the Rassemblement National (formerly Front National) reached the second round of the French presidential election with a record percentage of the vote. Some academic punditry has interpreted this phenomenon as a shift away from the politics of convergence and the old left–right opposition. Instead, they argue, often using the language of so-called 'populists', that there has been a move towards what they define as elite cosmopolitan liberals versus the 'left behind', or 'anywhere' versus 'somewhere'.[4] Beyond the far right itself, the 2016 campaigns of Donald Trump for President of the United States and Brexit in the UK referendum on EU membership received the support of and emboldened various far-right factions and movements.[5] While not far-right victories in and of themselves, these events helped to legitimize and operationalize a number of its ideas about race, culture, immigration and national identity. Often, they are represented by commentators as symptoms of the same anger, resentment and 'populist' backlash as the far right.

In this context, electoral performances and their potential impact merit significant research, analysis and scrutiny, and this is partly why many approaches to understanding the mainstreaming of the far right have been based in political science with a focus on electoral politics and/or public opinion surveys. However, this focus is often limited to the analysis of voter behaviour, policy interests, party support and strategy, as opposed to wider discourse and societal impacts, including ironically, that on public opinion, which is only instrumentalized in such studies for further electoral and party analysis. We argue that the predomination of a narrow focus on elections and opinion polls has been to the detriment of more diverse, interdisciplinary, and crucially more holistic, conceptualizations which would lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. More precisely, the overwhelming focus on electoral competition creates a normative standard for measurement and brings misperceptions about the extent and form of mainstreaming. This can lead to five inter-related issues: (1) the reification of the mainstream as moderate, legitimate or positive; (2) the treatment of the mainstream as objective and not itself hegemonic or contingent, except when something external impinges on it; (3) the representation of non-establishment parties as a threat to the mainstream, not because they are reactionary, but because they can threaten the hegemony of mainstream parties and consensus; (4) the understanding of the rise of the far right as a corrective democratic 'populist' push forcing mainstream parties to accept its demands as if originating from 'the people'; and (5) a harmful complacency when electoral success does not correspond with the initial hype.

Tackling the issue more holistically, as we argue here, does not only allow for more comprehensive analysis that addresses diverse factors, manifestations and implications of far-right ideas and politics, but is much-needed in order to challenge some of the harmful discourses around the topic peddled by politicians, journalists and academics. With a predominant focus on how far-right parties have (to varying levels) closed the electoral gap on their so-called 'mainstream' counterparts, mainstreaming has largely been characterized as a unidirectional process in which the far right adopts a strategy of superficial moderation to move closer to mainstream norms. Viewed from this perspective, research has naturally tended to centre on the far right itself, addressing a form of mainstreaming 'from within'.[6] If the reverse is acknowledged, mainstream actors are often said to be simply responding to the far-right threat and thereby public opinion, portrayed as helpless bystanders reacting to what 'the people' want, rather than playing an active role in shaping the context in

which such ideas can flourish. To address this, we propose a framework which not only acknowledges that the mainstreaming of the far right is a process which sees both the far right and the mainstream as agents and subjects, but also focuses on discourse as key to understanding how both actors and ideas become mainstream.

The aims of this article are threefold: first, it seeks to clarify the meaning of the 'mainstream', which despite its common usage is often left undefined and unproblematized. Second, it provides a much-needed survey of the literature on the mainstreaming of the far right, a growing yet still relatively understudied and unchartered area of interest. Finally, building on this literature, it offers a more holistic and heuristic framework to engage with the process of mainstreaming in a reflective and critical manner, ensuring that multiple, crucial aspects are examined.

What is the 'mainstream'?

Before we go on to discuss approaches to the process of mainstreaming and present our framework, it is critical to clarify the scholarly context, some of the issues that arise and what we mean by the concept of the 'mainstream'. What is fascinating in much of the literature originating in the field is that while many scholars have developed precise, compelling and useful definitions and analyses of the parties and politics themselves, the concepts of the mainstream and mainstreaming often remain vague or uncritical. Even in books where they are posited as essential, as clearly expressed by their titles, such as the cases of Paul Hainsworth, Cynthia Miller-Idriss or Aurelien Mondon, the meaning of these concepts is either taken for granted or given little attention.[7] As Aristotle Kallis states, 'the term is deployed in everyday and academic discourse with a laxity that is uncharacteristic for our analytical, definition- and classification-obsessed modern mind.'[8] Of course, this does not mean that these books do not contribute to our understanding of the process of mainstreaming, but they simply do not help us operationalize it with enough precision. This can become particularly problematic as research in the field often ignores that the conceptualization of the far and radical right vis à vis the mainstream carries heavy ideological (specifically neo-conservative and liberal) baggage, influenced by the foundational work of Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab on the 'radical right', 'extreme-right' and 'politics of unreason', and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. on 'the vital center'.[9]

This approach can be witnessed in the recent work of Uwe Backes which provides a fascinating study of the concept of political extremes and suggests some useful leads on how to define extremism, building on the work of Norberto Bobbio.[10] While it is certainly convincing for Backes' purpose, the positioning of what he terms 'the constitutionally democratic spectrum', sitting in the middle of the anarchic/totalitarian and extreme egalitarian/extreme anti-egalitarian axis does not provide us with the necessary nuance and flexibility to understand the process of mainstreaming if we consider the mainstream as contingent and fluid.[11] The same goes for traditional types of political compasses where axes between authoritarian/libertarian and economic left/right point to an intersection and suggest the existence of a political centre. Similarly, articles discussing a dichotomy between niche and mainstream parties often place strong emphasis on defining niche parties, but fail to devote similar, if any attention to characterizing their counterpart.[12] Overall, the mainstream is often defined by what it is not, rather than what it is.

This issue is highlighted by Kallis who contends that extreme and mainstream 'exist in relational terms to each other; they are equally important in giving meaning to each other and in mapping the largely overlapping, hybrid political space that lies between them.'[13] While there is some truth in this assertion because the categories are contingent on one another, this alleged 'equally important' role in reciprocal meaning-creation is questioned here, and indeed, Kallis's previous work more effectively characterizes the relationship between the two:

> One exists by virtue of the recognition of the other; in theory, however, it is the latter [the mainstream] that draws the lines of admissibility regarding the former [the extreme] and formalizes the distinction. These boundaries have both fixed and mutating contours.[14]

Here, the mainstream is acknowledged to have a powerful role in determining its own delineation of relational differences with the extreme. It is self-perpetuating, active in defining itself and therefore plays a critical role in determining the acceptability of certain ideas/discourse. We argue that it is essential for work on the topic to acknowledge the contingency of our conceptual choices: it is clear that political families and ideas are not ossified and evolve with their time and context. Of course, this does not mean that scholars should take a fully relativist approach either and shy away from heuristic analysis and definitions, but simply that they must engage with and reflect on their own, unavoidably normative, positioning.

Despite its contingent nature, some scholars have attempted to identify core features of the mainstream and have focused on the characteristics of parties within this construct. Often, definitions are based on two components: the (perceived) ideological positioning of the parties and their electoral performance. For example, Bonnie Meguid provides the following definition, which emphasizes repeated electoral success and a centrist position:

> Mainstream parties are defined as the electorally dominant actors in the center-left, center, and center-right blocs on the Left-Right political spectrum. In this classification, the center-left parties explicitly exclude left-libertarian parties, whereas the center-right categorization excludes right-authoritarian, or right-wing, populist parties. The criteria generally yield three mainstream parties per country, one in each category.[15]

Grigore Pop-Eleches takes a similar approach, distinguishing between a strategy of moderation over extremity to attract a broad electorate:

> A political party is classified as mainstream if its electoral appeal is based on a recognizable and moderate ideological platform rather than on the personality of its leader and/or extremist rhetoric. In other words, a mainstream party represents an ideological orientation that can be mapped with reasonable accuracy onto the mainstream ideological spectrum of established Western democracies.[16]

Equally, Liubomir Topaloff regards the mainstream as 'positioned in such a way relative to the power centre that it captures the support and represents the interests of a major part of the voters'.[17] These definitions certainly go some way towards providing a rough framework from which the identification of mainstream parties could proceed, but there is limited reflection on the constructed nature of the category and on the capacity of the centre to evolve discursively and ideologically.

We argue here that the elusiveness of the 'mainstream' as a concept is partly due to the difficulty of pinning it down because of its contingency (as a reality and normative concept) and status as a functional floating signifier: what is being referred to may be different bodies and sites in society and politics (e.g. government, media, parties, policies, or discourses) or based on the subjective positioning of the scholars and experts.

We identify two key points that must be considered when engaging with the concept of the mainstream, based on establishing its contingency and challenging essentialized qualities. The first of these points is therefore that *the mainstream is constructed, contingent and fluid*. As outlined by Jason Glynos and David Howarth, and the Essex School of Discourse Theory more broadly, there is an 'inherent contingency that inhabits social systems'.[18] In any system, the construction and positioning of the mainstream necessitate the construction of an extreme, which is just as contingent and fluid. These are neither ontological nor historically fixed phenomena and seeing them as such, which is common, is both uncritical and ahistorical. What is mainstream or extreme at one point in time does not have to be, nor remain, so. The second point is that *the mainstream is not essentially good, rational or moderate*. While public discourse in liberal democracies tends to imbue the mainstream, 'centre' or more broadly 'liberalism' with values of reason and moderation, the reality can be quite different as is clearly demonstrated by the simple fact that what is considered mainstream one day can be reviled as extreme the next. As such, the mainstream is itself a normative, hegemonic concept that imbues a particular ideological configuration or system with authority to operate as a given or naturalize itself as the best or even only option, essential to govern or regulate society, politics and the economy:

> When discourses successfully become hegemonic, the social practices they structure can appear so natural that members of a society fail to see that they are the result of political hegemonic practices. Discourses then reach the level of 'common sense', in that their origins and intrinsic contingency are forgotten.[19]

One of the main problems with the lack of clarity over the definition of the mainstream is that its contingency is masked through the assumption that it is common sense to know what it signifies, thus contributing to its reification as something with a fixed identity. Most people (including academics) feel they have a clear idea of what is mainstream; they position themselves according to what they feel/think it is and see themselves in relation to it. We argue that a critical approach to the mainstream, which challenges its status as a fixed entity with ontological status and essentialized 'good' and 'normal' qualities, is crucial for understanding the processes at play in the mainstreaming of the far right. These considerations have yet to be fully engaged with in current conceptions of mainstreaming, leading to some problematic assumptions and simplifications, which we turn to now.

A linear view of mainstreaming

While there have been varying approaches to the mainstreaming of the far right in the literature, we identify the way in which many of these contributions combine to form a linear narrative of the process (see Figure 1). Through dominant understandings of the interactions between electoral outcomes, the electorate and discourse, as well as unproblematized assumptions about the 'mainstream', mainstreaming has come to be conceived in fairly narrow terms. This is not to say that all the contributions we discuss below actively reinforce
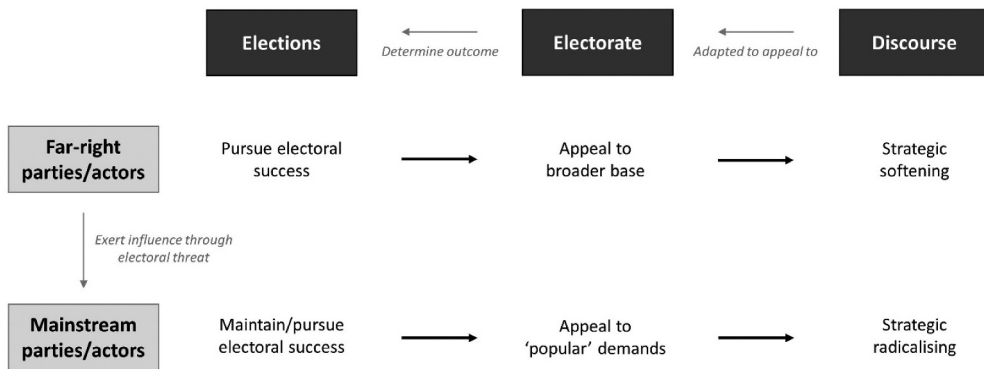
Figure 1. The linear narrative articulated in current literature on mainstreaming.

all elements of this narrative, but that without a more holistic account, some factors are harmfully prioritized over others. We outline here how various approaches fit into this linear view, before discussing the potential implications and how this leads us to propose our framework, with the aim of reconfiguring an understanding of the process to account for aspects that have often been overlooked.

One of the main trends we identify has seen mainstreaming conceptualized through far-right electoral success. In this view, mainstreaming forms an internal party strategy 'designed to promote the pursuit of office, policy or votes, or a combination of these goals'.[20] Research has therefore often sought to account for this electoral success, either by placing its origins within the electorate (a theme we return to below) or by analysing the discursive strategies implemented by far-right parties themselves. A number of important studies have addressed the discursive 'softening' or reconstruction implemented by far-right parties, tapping into new registers and adapting, discarding or concealing old ideological beliefs no longer viable in the current post-racial context and providing a veneer of moderation to the same, or similar, exclusionary ideals. This type of research has been particularly well developed in France with regard to the FN/RN and its process of 'de-toxification'.[21] Some of this research has gone a step further, looking at the intellectual roots of the process and engaging with the discursive reconstruction which found its source in a counter-hegemonic struggle devized by the *Nouvelle Droite* in particular.[22] Beyond France, Critical Discourse Analysts have played a key role in expanding such knowledge. Ruth Wodak has been at the forefront of the study of what she termed the 'politics of fear' and 'Haiderization of Europe', named after the former leader of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPO) in the 1990s as his ascension marked 'the threshold when right-wing populist parties started to become acceptable'.[23] While these studies have proved critical to our understanding of the shifting position of the far right, the overwhelming focus in the literature on far-right parties means that mainstreaming may be commonly perceived as a unidirectional process in which the far right evolves to move closer to the mainstream. We can therefore see how this conception may lead to the ossification of the 'mainstream', with others moving towards or further from it, while it remains in stasis.

This does not mean that important work has not been done on the so-called mainstream, and indeed many authors above acknowledge its potential to also shift, but this phenomenon has been much less commonly studied and when it is, the far right (and its supposed 'popular' support base) is often placed in a position of power through the notion of contagion.[24] In this

view, mainstream parties shift to the right and borrow anti-immigration politics when a far-right party rises. As mentioned briefly above, much of the literature on the electoral rise of the far right has placed the responsibility for its success in the hands of the general population, typified by the meteoric rise of 'populism' as a concept and signifier, often wrongfully used as a synonym (and euphemism) for the far right.[25] The depiction of such phenomena as bottom-up movements is linked to wider developments in political science, where psephology has become a particularly popular benchmark for research, and has often limited the field of political science to elections and opinion survey.[26] In the worst case scenario, this has led to studies based on a skewed and uncritical reading of data arguing that shifts in public opinion were responsible for the rise of the far right and that it is popular demand which drives the mainstream towards more extreme positions. According to this logic, tougher immigration stances and racist dog-whistling tap into latent social or cultural demands which have been (re)activated and should thus be addressed by mainstream politicians.[27] This has been witnessed in some of the literature on the Brexit referendum, feeding the 'left-behind' argument, which has ironically had a dramatic impact on the process of mainstreaming as it legitimized key far-right issues, such as Islam and immigration, and turned them into popular/democratic demands.[28] Other studies of the mainstream have been far more nuanced, addressing various levels of mainstreaming, such as research on policies and manifestos, culture and consumption and the media.[29] In particular, work which accounts for the role of the mainstream itself in shifting discourse is critical because it begins to challenge the essentialized notion of the mainstream as good and moderate.[30] However, these contributions often remain marginal and limited in scope compared to the volume of studies focusing on the far right itself, and some of these accounts continue to place the mainstream in a position of follower, as simply reacting to an electoral threat.

We identify three main problems that arise from this linear view, prioritizing certain features of mainstreaming at the expense of other critical factors: (1) the exaggerated focus on far right parties and actors, (2) the predominance of bottom-up explanations, and (3) the minimization of discourse.

(1) First, the far right is centralized as the driving force in both carving out its own electoral success and pushing the mainstream towards more radical positions. While it is certainly important to account for the far right's role in this process, the overwhelming focus on this actor serves to obscure the considerable agency of its mainstream counterparts. For instance, the framing of 'contagion' places the mainstream in a position of object, or even victim, rather than subject, simply being infected by and reacting to the far right, rather than having control and agency over mainstream public discourse. It is therefore critical to acknowledge and account for the significant power possessed by mainstream actors in their access to public discourse, reputational identity and agenda-setting capacity. These actors are not forced by the far right to make concessions but often actively choose to do so. This underpins the importance of challenging common perceptions of the mainstream as fixed and moderate because it is this precise idea that allows actors to enact discursive shifts to the right with minimal scrutiny, or under the guise of a 'necessary evil' to protect what is 'good' in democracy in a counter-intuitive move argued to be against the far right.

(2) The second problem we identify links closely to the first, as it emphasizes the role of the electorate in pushing the agenda, thereby similarly minimizing elite agency. We argue

that this not only ignores top-down processes of agenda-setting but also relieves those in control of much of the public discourse and politics from responsibility, as if the shift towards far-right politics and policies is simply guided by the people qua *demos*. For example, in their otherwise useful chapter on whether there has been a convergence in the characteristics and attitudes of voters for mainstream and non-mainstream parties, Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah de Lange and Matthijs Rooduijn only briefly acknowledge that 'citizens often look for elite cues and adjust their views based on the information that they are exposed to'.[31] Furthermore, the proliferation of 'populism' as a signifier has reinforced this idea of people-led reaction and at the same time obscured core ideological characteristics such as nativism, racism and even at times fascism, which in turn has made them more palatable to the mainstream. Thus, we argue that we must move away from purely electoral accounts which privilege bottom-up explanations, because they do not accurately reflect the power structures at play.

(3) Finally, through this hype around the far right and electorate, we identify a third problem which relates to the minimization of discourse in these accounts, often excluded altogether or limited to strategic functions. By relegating discourse to a subordinate position, the significant power it holds in its own right, beyond purely electoral consequences in terms of votes, is downplayed. For instance, in the works of Meguid, Tim Bale and João Carvalho,[32] who seek to explore the strategic options of mainstream parties when faced with niche- or far-right party threats, their discussion of accommodative strategies in terms of policy and discourse largely centres around the electoral implications of such tactics, i.e. whether or not this will encourage voters away from far-right parties and towards mainstream alternatives. However, this ignores the effect of discourse itself as a site of significant power, with the capacity to articulate, reinforce and reconstruct hegemonic ways of conceiving societal phenomena. Furthermore, we argue that it is crucial to acknowledge that this is not just about electoral competition, as such politics and political shifts have violent and real effects for those at the sharp end of these discourses. Without such consideration of the wider implications of discourse, mainstream electoral success is implied to be the antidote regardless of whether this means that deeply harmful discourses and policies are normalized. Therefore, if we are truly to counter the mainstreaming of the far right, discourse must be centralized in our accounts of the process because closing the gap discursively does not mean defeating but legitimizing the far right.

Below, we seek to reframe our understanding of mainstreaming in light of these problems. The aim of our framework is therefore not so much to reinvent the wheel, but to tie together many approaches in the study of the mainstreaming of the far right to ensure that none are hyped, while others are obscured. For the purpose of this article, we do not aim to provide a guide to all potential applications, combinations and reactions, but rather explain how this framework operates, can be deployed and why it must be engaged with fully. Our hope here is to make it usable by other researchers and encourage others to apply, challenge and refine it so as to ensure that our understanding of one of the key phenomena of the early twenty-first century is better understood.

Towards a holistic framework of mainstreaming

We define mainstreaming as the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts. Figure 2 articulates our framework for reconceptualizing the process of mainstreaming, which moves away from the linear view towards one that accounts for the multifaceted and multi-directional features at play. Before we elaborate on the features of this framework, there are a few critical considerations to take into account when we approach mainstreaming. First, shifts in one of these dimensions does not necessarily entail shifts in the others, but we must keep in mind their interconnected nature and crucially the power structures at play between them. In so doing, we centralize the role of mainstream elite actors in discursive normalization, with its wide-ranging implications. Second, since we posit the mainstream as constructed and contingent, it is critical to stress that this process has no normative aspects. Manifestations of the mainstream and mainstreaming processes can thus only be made sense of in a precise time and space and within the coordinates of a particular political moment. Finally, and crucially, we must understand these discourses in their historical
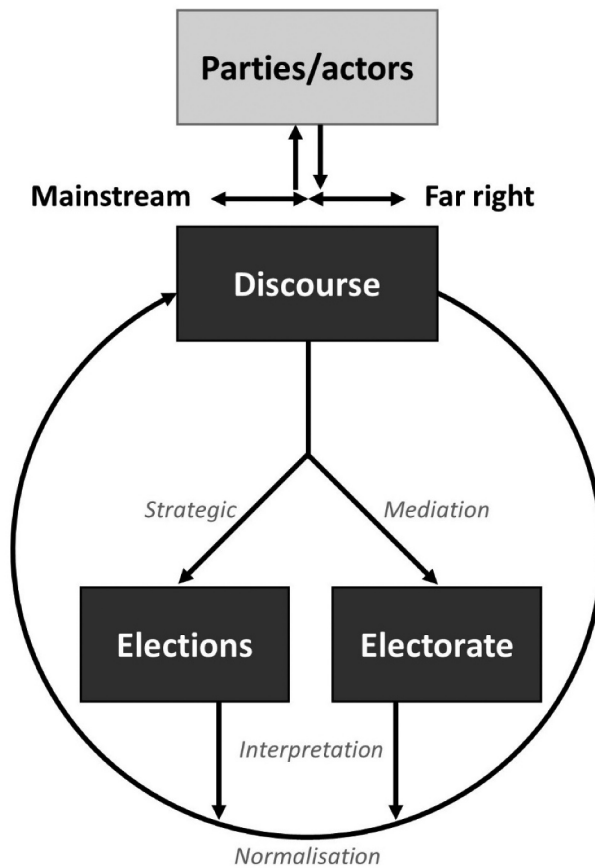
Figure 2. A framework for understanding the mainstreaming of the far right.

context, emphasizing that their structural embeddedness allows actors to tap into them with ease. Many of these ideas are not alien to the mainstream, imported from the far right, but have been key in the formation of the liberal democratic order.

Through reworking the key features in the linear narrative into one that is more cyclical and reciprocal, we draw attention to the varied interactions between each of the elements. Here, parties and actors from both the mainstream and far right have the capacity to shift their discourse both independently of and in relation to one another. These discursive shifts can feed into strategic implications for elections and mediatory effects in terms of the electorate and 'public opinion'. However, we must not view these facets as the end point of the process, instead considering how their interpretation may contribute to wider discursive normalization. Discourse, therefore, is not simply a means to an electoral end, but is itself evolving and changing, altering the norms of acceptability and feeding into what is further possible at the party/actor level. By highlighting the circular nature of this process, we underscore its enduring relevance and the need to continuously re-evaluate its effects. We now go into greater depth about the key features of the model.

Parties/actors

The first aspect we draw attention to here is the agency of parties and actors in the matter. While the rise of the far right is often looked at through a bottom-up approach, whether in relation to voters bringing about seismic shifts or outsiders managing to break out of the margins, we argue that a more top-down approach must also be acknowledged and particular attention paid to the ways in which far-right ideas and actors have been allowed to enter or be subsumed in current hegemonic structures rather than challenge them. Beyond the necessity to combine more traditional political science methods based on elections and opinion surveys with a focus on discourse in both the mainstream and far right (to which we turn next), we argue that an understanding of positionality is essential when discussing the process of mainstreaming. The position of actors is indeed crucial inasmuch as it is not always clear who decides what is mainstream or not: 'theoretical practices are themselves partly constitutive of (and shaped by) the social worlds in which the subjects and objects of research find themselves'.[33] In order to adequately reflect the role of certain actors in the mainstreaming of the far right, we must account for power dynamics in this relationship. The field of Critical Discourse Studies is useful in this regard because of its orientation towards analysing elite discourse, acknowledging wider power structures and identifying how power 'relates to an asymmetric relationship among social actors who assume different social positions or belong to different social groups'.[34] Elites are identified through their ability to access discursive platforms and resources,[35] which allows them to exert influence on dominant modes of constructing certain topics. This perspective not only challenges exclusively bottom-up approaches which are common in mainstreaming, but also implies that we must consider hierarchies within elite groups to identify those with the greatest capacity to invoke change.

As already highlighted, far-right actors are often positioned as agents, either unlocking their own success through internal strategies or pushing the mainstream to adopt positions that would otherwise be considered 'unnatural' to it. While we do not wish

to dismiss the potential power of far-right actors to exert influence, it is essential to reflect on the capacity of the mainstream to shift the goalposts. What we highlight as particularly important here is that shifts can take place independently and that the far right is not the sole actor which matters in understanding the process of mainstreaming. A far-right party can feel pressured or see an opportunity to become more extreme by mainstream parties moving rightward and thus encroaching on its territory – think of UKIP turning to unmistakably far-right actors such as Tommy Robinson after Brexit. However, a far-right party can also be made more extreme without changing itself, but because the mainstream moves away from its ideas and politics. The issues associated with the assumed immovability and moderation of the mainstream have led towards a lack of engagement with the role of the mainstream in this process. It is therefore imperative to challenge these assumptions and capture the influence of mainstream elite actors, particularly with regard to discourse, in holistic accounts of mainstreaming.

Discourse

This leads on to one of the core tenets of our framework, which places discourse as a central feature with significant influence across other elements. We derive our understanding of the importance of discourse in the construction of the social world through the fields of Discourse Theory and Critical Discourse Studies. Too often, discourse has been swallowed up within elections, seen solely as the means through which party success might be achieved, but we argue that it can stand alone and that the mainstreaming of far-right ideas is not something only of interest and concern when it is matched by electoral success. Our framework highlights the capacity of parties and actors from the far right or mainstream (though the latter has greater influence) to enact discursive shifts that bring far-right and mainstream discourse closer or further from one another. Beyond more immediate instrumental effects in terms of elections and the electorate (to which the following two sections are dedicated), we draw on Michal Krzyżanowski's conception of discursive shifts and change to account for the way that discourse merits scrutiny in its own right with regard to mainstreaming.[36] Indeed, through normalization, which Krzyżanowski regards as the final phase of a discursive shift entailing 'deeper change of norms of public expression',[37] we see how ideas that may once have been deemed radical can enter mainstream discourse and vice versa. Thus, ideas which are at one time unacceptable can become not only acceptable, but actually normal and even common sense through the process of mainstreaming.[38] We can see this in the way that British National Party (BNP), and later UKIP, narratives about immigration and white working-class opposition to it became accepted political wisdom for mainstream political parties and the media. In Figure 2, we place this in a cyclical frame because of the ongoing nature and contingency of establishing norms,[39] thereby serving to highlight the continued importance of a commitment to combatting mainstreaming regardless of electoral outcomes. We continue to expand on the role of discourse in the following two sections on elections and the electorate.

Elections

As stressed in our critique of the linear view of mainstreaming, discourse has often been seen in terms of its strategic effects for electoral outcomes. While we do not deny its importance in this regard, we suggest that discursive shifts may not always be connected

in the ways we might expect with elections, and that the interpretation of electoral results can itself feed into the process of normalization. First, changes at the discursive level do not always lead to a similar electoral trajectory: the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and narratives (including policies) does not always mean greater electoral success for far-right parties. For example, the FN's setback in the 2007 presidential election in France was precisely because its ideas and discourse had entered the mainstream through Nicolas Sarkozy's candidacy and campaign.[40] This therefore did not mark the defeat of the far right, as a purely electoral account would encourage, but rather signified the normalization of such discourse. Furthermore, the result in the following 2012 presidential election, which saw the FN achieve the highest share of the vote in its history at that point, underscores the way in which such discursive shifts among mainstream elite actors can serve to legitimize far-right parties in the future.

This feeds into the second key point about elections, in that the way they are interpreted can further contribute to normalization, either through celebrating the perceived defeat of the far right (as in the example above) or through hyping the position of far-right parties as democratic contenders, either in anticipation of results or in subsequent analysis. For instance, we have highlighted elsewhere how the *Guardian* gave significant space to Steve Bannon's attempt to create a far-right network in preparation for the European parliamentary elections (despite its failure to mobilize)[41] or how its coverage of local elections in Thuringia centred around the second-place finish of the far-right AfD as opposed to the winners Die Linke.[42] Through such hype from mainstream sources, these actors are given a platform from which their ideas may be diffused, and their implied success lends them greater legitimacy and coverage in a vicious circle. Certainly, this does not mean that we should not interrogate the reasons behind examples of increased electoral success among far-right parties, but that we must do so in a nuanced and critical manner. We must therefore guard against simplistic conclusions drawn from electoral, but also survey, data and instead take a more holistic approach to mainstreaming.

Electorate

In a similar vein, we have seen how accounts of the electorate, often referred to through notions of 'the people' or 'public opinion', have skewed understandings of mainstreaming towards bottom-up explanations in which this group is portrayed as a collection of votes made outside the influence of elite actors. Through our framework, we seek to challenge these assumptions and instead underscore the critical role of discourse through mediation in constructing voter knowledge of the political context. Furthermore, like in the case of electoral outcomes, the way in which we interpret and report on public opinion data feeds into processes of discursive normalization. First, to address the relationship between discourse and the electorate we turn to the concept of mediation. Building on Roger Silverstone, we see mediation as 'the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the World Wide Web and social media) are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life. That circulation no longer requires face-to-face communication though it does not exclude it.'[43]

Knowledge of our political context is always based on a mediated process. It would simply be impossible for any of us, no matter our level of education and access to

knowledge to hold an objective and complete view of all matters pertaining to local, national and/or international policy and politics. Political decisions must therefore be based on the limited and selective knowledge we acquire through others, whether these be politicians, the media, religious communities, trade unions, the workplace, family etc. Of course, different sources of knowledge play varying roles in people's perceptions, but through agenda-setting theory, we can see how the media can be a crucial actor in this process. This does not mean that the media tells us what to think, but it can certainly impact on what we think about: 'journalists focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day'.[44]

One simple example to highlight the impact of mediated knowledge on our understanding of public opinion is a series of questions tested in the Eurobarometer. In this Europe-wide survey, respondents are asked to identify the two most important issues facing their country, the EU and themselves personally. When comparing responses, we can witness a large discrepancy between the macro and micro levels. Graph 1 demonstrates clearly that while immigration appears to be a particular concern at the macro level of the nation in the UK, it appears to be a much more minor concern at the individual level. The level of concern for immigration also responds to particular events and crises, rising for example during the Brexit campaign, which coincided with the so-called 'refugee crisis', and receding swiftly thereafter, even though immigration levels remained stable.

It should not be surprising to find out that respondents have more pressing concerns than immigration in their day-to-day lives: cost of living, health and social security, pensions, education and even 'none' all scored higher when it came to personal issues in 2016 when immigration as an issue was at its highest point. And yet, voters are constantly reminded that immigration is indeed a concern worth having or at least thinking about, even though it is not one that they have themselves personally. While disproportionate focus on immigration in the media is well-researched, it was made particularly clear during the
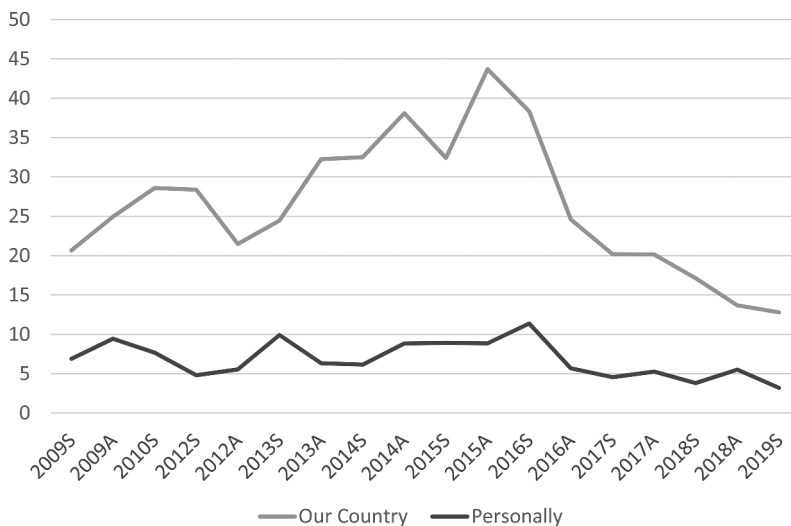
Graph 1. In percent: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY/ME PERSONALLY) at the moment? (Source: Eurobarometer). S = spring, A = autumn. Y-axis: percentage of people who placed 'immigration' in top two concerns.

UK referendum on EU membership. As demonstrated by Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay's extensive survey of media reporting during the referendum campaign, 'Coverage of immigration more than tripled over the course of the campaign, rising faster than any other political issue', and while the economy was the most covered issue, immigration was the most prominent 'based on the number of times it led newspaper print front pages'.[45] Therefore, it is not just how parties and political actors more generally act or talk, but also how they are reported on, how positively or negatively, how often, how much, in opposition to what or whom. What this example illustrates is that, while what we argue here is not original, it is nonetheless absolutely essential if we are to understand the process of mainstreaming: democratic decisions for individuals do not happen in a vacuum and are in fact constantly and thoroughly mediated by top-down processes.[46]

Finally, we must account for how popular interpretations of survey data can contribute to discursive normalization, by justifying the actions of elite actors in the name of 'the people'. As the role of public opinion and psephology has developed, the mediated aspect of knowledge has been downplayed or even at times ignored. Instead, public opinion has become uncritically reified as the voice of the people and ultimate democratic legitimizer.[47] It is common to hear that coverage of certain issues simply satisfies the public's needs and interests. If the far right rises, it is regularly assumed that it is because their politics resonate with the electorate. As a consequence, we have seen mainstream parties justify their borrowing of far-right discourse and ideas on the basis that they are democratic, portraying their choices as a response to the demands of 'the left-behind', to rising concerns regarding immigration or to the resurgence of cultural nationalism. We must acknowledge the simple fact that those who have the ability to impact on this mediated process and craft the way we construct our 'imagined communities' also have the ability to influence public discourse, the public and in turn our democratic process.[48] As with anything in politics, power must be central to our contextual approach. Of course, it does not mean that the public does not have any power or agency to react and fight back, but it is certainly misguided to assume similarly that the elite simply respond and follow the wish of 'the people', even if that wish were to go against their very interests.

Conclusion

This article offers the first critical mapping of the subfield on the mainstreaming of the far right. We have highlighted that key to understanding and analysing the process of mainstreaming is the precise and critical engagement with both the concept of the mainstream and its meaning in a given time and space. To avoid normative assumptions and conclusions, understanding mainstreaming requires a prerequisite acknowledgement that the mainstream is not only constructed, contingent and fluid, but that it is not essentially good, rational and moderate in and of itself. To emphasize this contingency and the role played by discourse in constructing hegemonic structures, we propose a framework of mainstreaming which challenges the linear narrative that has developed, with its problematic emphasis on far-right agency, the reification of public opinion and minimization of the importance of discourse. Instead, our framework underscores the value of engaging with the interconnectedness of different elements and acknowledging the power structures at play. Critically, this illuminates the role of mainstream elite actors

in shaping public discourse, with strategic effects for elections and a mediatory role with the electorate, but also entailing a cyclical process of normalization which changes what is and is not acceptable in the 'mainstream'.

Far from a prescriptive framework or approach, our aim here is to ensure that future engagement with the concept, process and implications of mainstreaming is based on a more critical, rounded approach. This does not mean that each aspect of our framework needs to be engaged with in great depth, but they should be considered to ensure criticality and rigour, as well as avoid both the uncritical reification of an essentially good mainstream against the far right and the normalisation and mainstreaming of the far right and its ideas. We believe it is our responsibility as researchers to avoid the harmful effects of narrower interpretations of political phenomena which present an incomplete yet buzzword-friendly picture (i.e. 'populist' or 'left behind'), often taken up in political and media discourse, in turn feeding into further discursive normalisation.[49]

This brings us to the more epistemological, methodological and political reason for the intervention and framework proposal, some of which has already been pointed to: the need for a more reflective and critical approach from researchers, particularly where power and political influence are an issue. It is imperative that researchers reflect on their own role in contributing to the discourse around mainstreaming through their interpretations of related phenomena. This is important in the context of political and social sciences where, despite unavoidable assumptions, interests and influence, objectivity and neutrality are often proclaimed. Building on Michel Foucault, Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen pointedly noted that knowledge is not 'a neutral speech position [and] humanities and the social sciences in particular are inseparable from moralizing projects; [they] do not simply elucidate the world but establish regimes of knowledge and truth that regulate our approach to ourselves, each other and our surroundings respectively.'[50] Necessarily, this demands from researchers an acknowledgement of their own positionality not only as researchers, but also as subjects within well-established and yet often invisibilized racialized, gendered and classed power structures, notably those within and reproduced by our institutions, disciplines and fields of study.[51] We must also address our inherent subjectivity, particularly important in relation to what is called the 'mainstream', because it provides the underlying assumptions, operating logics and rationale for much of our work. Further engagement in this regard is critical in a field where researchers often defend the hegemonic system and structures, status quo and establishment parties that define the mainstream, as well as legitimize more 'moderate' mainstream versions of racist immigration policies, for example, under the auspices of objective research, methods and quantitative data. As such, it is our hope that this contribution helps to ignite a discussion that will not only develop and refine this area of study further but encourage researchers to engage critically with their own mediated subjectivity and mediatory role in the process of mainstreaming.

Notes

1. Literature on the far right and all its variants has exploded since the turn of the century. Indeed, in the past five years, there have been more publications on the topic than in the first 70 years recorded on the *Web of Science* database. While most of such research has focused on the far right itself, a significant amount of attention has been dedicated to its relationship with the mainstream. Indeed, it was back in 2000 that Paul Hainsworth published his

influential edited collection, *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*. Since then, a number of studies have attempted to make sense of the reasons behind the resurgence of the far right across much of the west. P. Hainsworth, *The politics of the extreme right: from the margins to the mainstream* (London and New York: Pinter, 2000).

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3. See Hainsworth, *The politics of the extreme right, op. cit.*, Ref. 1.

4. D. Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: C. Hurst, 2017).

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