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Journal of Contemporary European Studies

ISSN: 1478-2804 (Print) 1478-2790 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjea20

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To cite this article: Luke Shuttleworth, Katy Brown & Aurelien Mondon (21 Aug 2025): The pretence of the cordon sanitaire: non-collaboration as a distraction from discursive congruence, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2025.2549800

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2549800

Published online: 21 Aug 2025.

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2549800

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The pretence of the cordon sanitaire: non-collaboration as a distraction from discursive congruence

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about how mainstream parties respond to far-right challengers in liberal democracies. Whereas some mainstream parties have become more open to forming coalitions with far-right parties, in many countries collaboration with the far right remains ruled out. Often, the metaphor of the *cordon sanitaire* is used to highlight how mainstream parties form a bulwark against the far right. Yet whilst mainstream parties often exclude far right parties from government, they are more open to adopting some of their reactionary policies and discourses. We analyse these dynamics in the French, German and British cases. These give insights into how *cordon sanitaires* can be transgressed in policy and discourse in different political contexts. We argue that the concept itself should be scrutinised more closely and question whether parties can claim to be adhering to the cordon sanitaire if they simultaneously push far-right policies and discourses. Focusing primarily on electoral collaboration ignores processes of mainstreaming and normalisation in which the legitimation of far-right politics is chiefly driven by the mainstream itself. Where public outrage often emerges when mainstream parties formally collaborate with the far right, we argue that discursive dynamics are equally crucial and yet underestimated.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 22 August 2024
Accepted 13 August 2025

KEYWORDS
Far right; mainstreaming; normalisation; populism; discourse

Introduction

The metaphor of the *cordon sanitaire* is much used in public debates and academic discourse to paint a strict boundary between reviled far-right politics and the norm/mainstream. Whether using this term precisely, or more context-specific forms such as Republican Front (*front républicain*) or Firewall (*Brandmauer*), all suggest that established mainstream parties are expected to form a bulwark in defence of liberal democracy (Mondon 2024). This view is particularly visible during election campaigns where mainstream politicians routinely vow to never collaborate with the far right (Axelsen 2023). Despite such grandstanding, this commitment has come under scrutiny in recent years as mainstream parties in several liberal democracies become more open to including far-

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right parties in governing coalitions (Bichay 2023) and accommodating far-right policies and discourses (Wodak 2020). Accordingly, there has been significant academic interest in the effectiveness of collaboration and non-collaboration strategies, their rationale and implications.

While certainly important considerations, we propose to move away from viewing the cordon sanitaire in purely strategic terms towards problematising it as a concept. We argue that, if used uncritically, it can serve to reify the idea of a strict boundary between the mainstream and far right. Under this logic, the mainstream stands apart from and in contradistinction to the far right and takes on the duty of forming a protective barrier against it, with the benchmark for its effectiveness lying almost exclusively in electoral results. As prior work has shown (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2022; Schneider 2023; Wodak 2020), such assumptions are problematic because they ignore the fuzzy boundaries between the mainstream and far right and neglect wider discursive normalisation. There is a risk of feeding into mainstreaming processes by exceptionalising the far right and legitimising the idea of the mainstream as a bulwark. In this way, critical reflections on the cordon sanitaire allow us to address wider questions within the field about the way that we approach these topics.

Taking our cue from more critical research on far-right politics, which places an emphasis on discursive dynamics, we first take a look at existing literature on the *cordon sanitaire*, where important work has explored its implementation and transgression across different contexts, but where a preoccupation with strategic questions has narrowed the field of view somewhat. We present some key challenges to the concept, particularly regarding the implied division and the focus on elections as a benchmark for success. Drawing on case studies from France, Germany and the UK, we show how claims of formal non-collaboration can mask shared discourses and policies between the mainstream and far right, undermining the premise that the mainstream and *cordon sanitaire* necessarily protect against exclusionary politics. Our choice of case studies derives from the differing histories and contemporary status of far-right politics in each country, as well as the varied political systems and contextual factors that shape their socio-political dynamics.[1] Ultimately, we argue that the overt strategic drawing of lines between the mainstream and far right does not equate to a consistent barrier between them and that our analyses must always take a more holistic approach to counter the mainstreaming of the far right.

Establishing the 'cordon sanitaire'

The *cordon sanitaire* is generally defined as a dismissive (Meguid 2008) or disengagement (Downs 2002) strategy in which mainstream parties refuse 'to collaborate with a political party on principle' (Axelsen 2023, 1). Non-collaboration is usually understood as the refusal to form governing coalitions with far-right parties to block their path to political office (Heinze 2018). However, this is the more formal and basic level and, in some cases, it also extends to wider forms of collaboration such as refusing the support of the far right to pass legislation.

There is a lively debate about the effectiveness of the cordon sanitaire, with many calling for a more inclusive approach. Setting the tone, Downs' (2002) early influential piece 'How effective is the cordon sanitaire?' contends that mainstream parties' refusal to engage with far-right groups has backfired and increased far-right success. He calls for so-

called 'constructive engagement' and criticises 'clean hands' strategies (Downs 2002: 32) aimed at simply 'doing the right thing' (the principled refusal to engage with the far right) to please 'anti-racism groups', as he puts it, suggesting that far-right parties do best where they are actively boycotted. Whilst empirical research contradicts these claims (De Jonge and Heinze 2023), assessing the strategic effectiveness of non-collaboration has become a dominant preoccupation in the field.

To engage or not: collaboration and accommodation

Two key arguments have been put forward to argue against non-collaboration and advocate instead for collaboration. First, proponents of the *taming effect* argue that including far-right parties in government incentivises them to moderate their politics (Downs 2002; Szöcsik and Polyakova 2019; van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007). Second, it is suggested that far-right parties face an *electoral penalty* in government, whereby their inexperience and unsuitability for government mean they will lose votes and no longer pose an electoral threat (Downs 2002; Riera and Pastor 2022). Both arguments are disputed empirically. Far-right parties in government are no more likely to moderate their politics compared to ostracised ones (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016, Akkerman and Rooduijn, 2014; Minkenberg 2013), whilst empirical evidence for an *electoral penalty* is mixed at best (Akkerman and de Lange 2012). It consequently appears that Downs' assessment came too early in the current phase of mainstreaming, as many of the parties who were faltering at the time have since risen again to prominence (Faury 2021; Kauppi 2022).

Besides formal collaboration in governing coalitions, scholars have examined alternative strategies for responding to the far right. In the party competition literature, Bonnie Meguid (2008) holds that mainstream parties can counter the electoral threat of the far right by accommodating some of their political demands. In most cases, this means 'going tough' on migration to appeal to voters attracted by the far right. The theoretical argument is that accommodation allows mainstream parties to assume ownership of the far right's core issue and consequently swallow their support. Although this strategy is widely used, there is scant evidence that accommodation improves mainstream parties' electoral performances (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023). Instead, accommodation is more likely to normalise the far right and boost their electoral performances (Down and Joon Han 2020; Hutter and Kriesi 2021). Accommodation also mainstreams and normalises far-right politics by framing it as 'legitimate', 'popular' concerns (Mondon 2022).

A promising line of inquiry examines not only whether *cordons sanitaires* are effective but rather how their institutional design and implementation shape their impact (De Jonge 2020; van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009). There are many ways in which *cordons sanitaires* can be set up. Next to non-collaboration in coalitions, they can also include media exclusion, formal denouncements of reactionary politics, and a refusal to co-opt far right parties' policies and discourses (Downs 2012). For De Jonge (2020), the effectiveness of the Wallonian *cordon sanitaire* lies in its combination with a formalised *cordon sanitaire médiatique* limiting media exposure of the far right. The idea that non-collaboration extends to fields beyond electoral competition is further developed by Heinze and Lewandowsky (2023, 91), who distinguish between three arenas in which mainstream parties can respond to the far right: parliament, party competition, and

media, with each being 'clearly distinguished from one another in institutional terms, and each has its own logic'. It follows that responses differ depending on the arena(s) in which exclusion is enacted. We argue that electoral *cordons sanitaires* are undermined and bound to fail when mainstream parties simultaneously accommodate and mainstream far-right parties' policies and discourses. The *cordon sanitaire* can therefore be broken even if formal collaboration does not take place.

The limits of the 'cordon sanitaire'

Building on existing literature, we suggest that focusing on the strategic implications of the *cordon sanitaire* directs attention towards far-right electoral successes to the detriment of other political consequences. For example, the *taming* and *electoral penalty* arguments seem to neglect the wider implications of inclusion. As junior partners, far-right parties can influence economic, foreign, and immigration policy (Röth, Afonso, and Spies 2018; Verbeek and Zaslove 2014), undermine civil liberties (Bichay 2022) and attack migrants' rights (Römer, Röth, and Zobel 2023). Moreover, even if accommodation were effective electorally, it legitimises far-right politics in the mainstream (Mondon and Winter 2020). For example, research shows that being exposed to reactionary rhetoric by political elites erodes democratic norms and encourages Islamophobia and hostility towards migrants (Czymara 2019; Valentim, Dinas, and Ziblatt 2023).

Discussions on engagement/disengagement should therefore not only consider whether far-right parties lose votes or comparatively moderate their demands but also the impact that inclusion has on the mainstream and for communities at the sharp end of far-right politics. In short, we must broaden our view of what far-right success and mainstreaming look like. While we must certainly fight against electoral successes, it is paramount to consider discursive implications in their own right (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023), particularly from the perspective of those who are targeted by the far right's exclusionary politics.

Moreover, the idea that shared discourses between the mainstream and far right 'break' a discursive *cordon sanitaire* problematically places the mainstream as naturally opposed to such positions, only adopting them for short-term electoral gains or when under threat. Such a view frames mainstream actors as passive agents responding to far-right challengers and masks their considerable political agency to shape policy and set the agenda in public debates (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023). Liberal democracies have always produced inequalities and discrimination, e.g. towards women or non-citizens – and these have historically largely been sustained both discursively and in policy by mainstream actors (Kauth and King 2020; Mondon 2024). By exceptionalising far-right politics as outside the norm, we neglect how far-right parties rely on existing inequalities, and social exclusion to mobilise support. We therefore argue that the uncritical use of the *cordon sanitaire* metaphor risks exaggerating the distinction between mainstream and far-right politics by obscuring the discursive overlap between the two.

Breaking down the 'cordon sanitaire'

Whilst the formal *cordon sanitaire* has been broken in a variety of European contexts over the past decade, with far-right parties included in coalitions in countries such as Austria,

Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway (Bichay 2023; Heinze 2018; Minkenberg 2013), we focus this next section on cases where such clear-cut collaboration is largely yet to emerge. Our decision to focus on France, Germany and the UK derives from the differing histories and contemporary status of far-right politics in each country, as well as the varied political systems and contextual factors that shape their socio-political dynamics. In particular, the constructed memory of the Second World War plays a key part in the way each has constructed its version of the *cordon sanitaire*, whether it is what Rousso (1991) has called the Vichy Syndrome in France, *Kollektivschuld* in Germany or the construction of the myth of 'Britain Alone'. Despite these differences, we note how the apparent formal distancing from the far right belies significant discursive congruence. As such, we argue that non-collaboration cannot be limited to coalition formation. Instead, it must extend to the discursive realm and engage with the role of mainstream actors in the mainstreaming of far-right politics. This means that to understand the resurgence of far-right politics, we must look beyond far-right parties themselves and explore the wider context in which these ideas are allowed to thrive. This is particularly important given that discursive congruence oftentimes precedes more formal collaboration and the eventual inclusion of far-right parties in coalitions (Ekström, Krzyżanowski, and Johnson 2023), but equally that targeted communities face the consequences of normalised exclusion regardless. For each case study, we provide a short overview of the history of the relationship between the mainstream and far right in this context, before illustrating how claims of physical separation are undermined by shared exclusionary agendas.

France and the comfortable illusion of the Republican Front

Electoral level: the weakening of the Republican Front

As the Front National (FN) became a political force to contend with in the 1980s, a tacit agreement developed amongst mainstream parties. What is often called the 'Republican Front' strategy culminated in the 2002 presidential election when Jean-Marie Le Pen caused a shockwave by reaching the second round. All bar one of the candidates in the first round, from the right to the extreme left[2] called for their supporters to vote for Jacques Chirac. The rather unpopular outgoing president had received the lowest share of the registered vote for any incoming president in the first round and yet won the second with 82% of the vote as voters turned up with gloves and pegs on their nose to express their lack of support for the candidate and yet their duty to vote against the far right (Mondon 2013). Tellingly, the turnout increased drastically between both rounds, from a record low 71.6% to 79.7%, showing voters' commitment to opposing far-right politics despite a clear disillusionment with mainstream parties. When his daughter Marine Le Pen reached the second round in 2017, the 'Republican Front' had clearly weakened but held, with Emmanuel Macron increasing his vote from 24% to 66.1%. Yet the lower turnout in the second round (74.6% vs 77.8%) already pointed to parts of the electorate no longer willing to vote for anyone to block the FN. Breaks were also appearing amongst parties: only centre-right François Fillon (20%) and centre-left Benoît Hamon (6.4%) called on people to vote for Macron; most others gave no instructions or recommended blank votes, and far-right Stand Up France Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (4.7%) encouraged

supporters to vote for Le Pen. In 2022, the 'Republican Front' was weakened further as Le Pen progressed in both rounds (23.15% and 41.45%) and turnout continued to falter (73.7% and 72%). While the centre-left and -right still called on people to vote for Macron, their vote share dwindled. Others on the left encouraged voting 'against Le Pen' or spoiling ballots, while on the far right, Dupont-Aignan (2.1%) and Eric Zemmour (7%) backed voting for Le Pen.

In the National Assembly, the picture is also dire as the 'Republican Front' collapsed in 2022. Until then, the FN or Rassemblement National (RN) had struggled to get its candidates elected to the Assembly: in previous elections, it was common that when FN/RN candidates reached the second round, all other parties would support the best placed candidate to defeat them, even if that meant withdrawing their own. Until 2022, the FN/RN only managed to get one candidate elected in 1988 and 1997, two in 2012 and eight in 2017. The first exception to the rule was the 1986 election, which saw Socialist President François Mitterrand change to a proportional system in a failed attempt to split the right-wing vote and keep control of the National Assembly. In 2022, the RN's performance took everyone by surprise, including Le Pen herself who had been downplaying the party's prospects. For the first time, several mainstream candidates refused to withdraw to block the path to victory for the RN in 'triangulaires'. There were 89 RN candidates elected and the consequent hung parliament gave the RN a key role in passing laws. This reinforced its increasingly mainstream status and provided ample funding to professionalise the party further. Macron's decision to call a snap election in 2024 following the RN's hyped victory at the EU elections led to another earthquake, with the RN winning the first round with 33.2% of the vote. However, a revived 'Republican Front' appeared under the impulse of the left's Popular Front leading to the RN's defeat, albeit with a new record of MPs (142). Overall, while formal non-collaboration remains the norm until now, de facto opposition is no longer obvious, as demonstrated by the split in the Républicains party, with some joining a coalition with the RN in 2024.

Discursive-level: long-term hype and normalisation

While an electoral study of the 'Republican Front' could point to a gradual weakening, a discursive approach shows that the mainstreaming of far-right politics has much deeper roots (Alduy et al. 2023; Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015). Le Pen's fortunes started to rise under Mitterrand. The combination of a shift to a proportional system and increased media coverage led to the first phase of normalisation (Mondon 2013; Tissot and Tevanian 2010). It is during this period that the FN was infiltrated by Nouvelle droite theories, moving away from crude illiberal articulations of racism toward more liberal ones (Mondon and Winter 2020).

The 2002 'earthquake' provided new impetus to the strategy. While Le Pen's vote had been stagnating since 1988, the widespread misreading of the election, which hyped the FN's results while ignoring much more serious symptoms such as abstention, led to the normalisation of its discourse. Again, this was seen through the actions of mainstream actors such as Chirac who centred the campaign on 'insecurity'. This process accelerated further in the 2007 presidential election, with Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy pushing the mainstreaming of far-right discourse and politics further (Mayer 2007; Mondon 2013; Pierre 2007). His stint as President reinforced these trends and the

mainstreaming of Islamophobia in particular (Delphy 2006; Hajjat and Mohammed 2016; Zia-Ebrahimi 2020), paving the way for Marine Le Pen's takeover. On the night her father fell from 16.86% to 10.44% in the first round of the 2007 election, Le Pen stated that it was not a defeat, but a victory for their ideas. In 2011, her leadership was accepted at face value as a moderate move away from her father's legacy, something which was reinforced by his eventual expulsion in 2015. This was despite the fact that the process of normalisation had started under him, that many key far-right tenets of the programme remained, albeit disguised, and that links with the more extreme right persisted (Alduy and Wahnich 2015).

Socialist François Hollande's presidency (2012–2017) was a continuation of the process of mainstreaming as exemplified by the appointment of Manuel Valls as Minister of the Interior (who would eventually find common ground with the far right in Spain). When elected in 2017, Macron vowed he would be a response to the far right and yet has continued mainstreaming such politics, so much so that Le Pen claimed the passing of his 2024 anti-immigration bill as 'an ideological victory' (Brunet 2023). Beyond elections, far-right politics has also gained traction in the media, both through absorption within the mainstream media and further shifts in the right-wing media under the influence of billionaires Vincent Bolloré (Lévrier 2023) and Pierre-Édouard Stérin. It is therefore no surprise that many far- and extreme-right moral panics such as Islamo-gauchisme have become mainstream in recent years (Louati 2021; Beaman & Mondon, 2023).

Crumbling Brandmauer in Germany?[3]

Electoral level: gradual legislative collaboration?

In 2017, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) became the first far-right party to enter national parliament in Germany since 1957. Until then, Germany was deemed an 'exceptional "negative case"' (Weisskircher 2024b, 1) in Western Europe due to the absence of a successful far-right party. Whilst parties including NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), Republikaner (Republicans), and DVU (German People's Union) previously managed sporadic successes at regional and European elections, none established themselves long-term (Arzheimer 2015). Rather than a lack of demand, Germany's exceptionalism reflects the strength of militant democracy (Minkenberg 2006), including coercive state measures (Art 2024), anti-far-right activism (Zeller 2022), and containment strategies of mainstream parties, media, and civil society (Art 2018).

In Germany, the so-called *'Brandmauer'* (firewall), evokes a similar metaphorical barrier between the far right and mainstream as *cordon sanitaire*. The *Brandmauer* not only covers coalition formation but also legislative collaboration in parliament where even procedural collaboration and support for AfD proposals and candidates provoke backlash. However, the AfD's parliamentary representation makes full exclusion difficult without risking deadlock and providing opportunities for the AfD to weaponise accusations of elite corruption (Heinze 2024a, 2024b). In state parliaments, mainstream parties therefore employ a strategy of *ad hoc toleration* (Heinze 2022, 336) entailing occasional abstention or even voting for AfD initiatives and candidates – mostly on procedural grounds.

Recently, non-collaboration has become more challenging for mainstream parties, as the AfD's electoral strength, especially in the eastern states, complicates the

formation of governing coalitions. The conservative CDU (Christian Democratic Union) struggles the most as they can no longer form a centre-right majority with the economically liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party) and formally rule out collaborating with the Left Party. The alternative is to form unpopular and/or unstable coalitions with the Greens and SPD (Social Democratic Party) (Wurthmann 2023). This has led to conflicts within the CDU as particularly the eastern branches have suggested tacit collaboration with the AfD (Decker, Ruhose, and Adorf 2024). Yet when challenged, the CDU has publicly reiterated its formal commitment to the *Brandmauer*, for example, by expelling members supporting collaboration with the AfD (Art 2024).

These challenges were evident during the *Thuringian government crisis* in February 2020, where after the 2019 regional elections the FDP's candidate for the regional head of government (Ministerpräsident), Thomas Kemmerich, was surprisingly elected with votes from CDU, FDP, and AfD. After two unsuccessful rounds of voting where the incumbent candidate of the Left Party failed to win an absolute majority, the AfD unexpectedly voted for the FDP candidate instead of their own. This was the first time that a regional head of government was elected with votes from a far-right party and provoked instant condemnation. Protests took place across Germany whilst Chancellor Angela Merkel called Kemmerich's decision to accept the vote 'unforgivable'. Kemmerich eventually resigned with Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) elected in a minority government with the SPD and Greens. The crisis exposed considerable conflicts within the CDU and FDP over how to deal with the AfD, even prompting CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer's resignation. The episode highlights growing contestation over non-collaboration with the AfD.

Concerns have grown over the gradual bottom-up erosion of the *Brandmauer* whereby ad-hoc informal collaboration on municipal and regional levels become more commonplace and pave the way for future collaboration on the federal level. Schroeder et al. (2024) document 484 occasions where parties collaborated with the AfD on the municipal level. In an unprecedented move in October 2023, the CDU and AfD introduced a joint legislative initiative in the city council of Cottbus to limit the intake of refugees. Similar tendencies have emerged regionally, for example, even after the Thuringian government crisis, with the CDU periodically relying on the FDP and AfD to outvote the minority government. Heinze (2024a) warns that parliamentary collaboration, even at municipal level, allows the AfD to portray itself as a normal party, thus overcoming ostracisation.

On the federal level, the most controversial transgression of the *Brandmauer* occurred during the 2025 election campaign. On 29 January 2025, the CDU relied on AfD votes to pass a resolution for its restrictive 5-point plan on migration. This marked the first time in post-war Germany that a motion in federal parliament was passed with far-right party votes. The law eventually failed to pass in a second vote days later after public backlash and resistance from within the CDU. The move followed a period in which CDU leaders seemed to soften their approach towards the AfD. On 24 January, CDU General Secretary Carsten Linnemann stated that *'the Nazi-bashing against them and the firewall rhetoric need to stop. This party is on the ballot'* (Mendgen 2025). The statement is unprecedented as it implicitly legitimises the AfD as a democratic actor (by being on the ballot) and questions the necessity of its full exclusion. The episode has fuelled concerns that the CDU will increasingly rely on AfD votes in federal parliament, further normalising them and

opening the door to more regular and systematic cooperation as seen at the municipal and regional levels.

Discursive level: increasing accommodation

In the late 1990s and 2000s, various heated policy debates on migration took place, especially on the Nationality Act (2000) and Immigration Law (2005), as well as wider discussions on Germany's so-called 'leading culture' (*Leitkultur*) (Gessler and Hunger 2024). Unlike in many other liberal democracies at the time, far-right parties such as NPD, DVU, and REP failed to capitalise significantly on these debates with both the SPD and CDU wary of emphasising migration too much in their campaigns and communication (Gessler and Hunger 2024). This changed in 2010 when SPD politician Thilo Sarrazin's best-selling book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany abolishes itself) 'brought anti-immigration views to the forefront of the national debate' (Weisskircher 2024b, 9). The normalisation of anti-migration attitudes accelerated with the emergence of PEGIDA in 2014 (Herold and Schäller 2024) whilst the temporary suspension of the Dublin Regulation in 2015 further increased the salience of migration (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). The AfD exploited these discursive opportunities by targeting voters with anti-migration attitudes (Arzheimer 2024) and those fearing status loss amid economic uncertainties (Cohen 2021).

The CDU's attempt to win back AfD voters by 'going tough' on migration has been accelerated since the leadership of Friedrich Merz from January 2022. In September 2023, Merz claimed that German citizens are unable to get dentist appointments because asylum seekers are having their teeth done for free (Die Zeit 2023). In October 2024, CDU Vice Chairman Jens Spahn stated that 'irregular migration has made Germany more homophobic, misogynistic, and prone to violence' (Die Welt 2024). Both claims mirror the AfD's welfare chauvinism and racism. Whilst less extreme, the SPD has employed a similar accommodative logic. In November 2023, SPD leader and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was on the cover of Spiegel, one of Germany's most widely circulated magazines, claiming that '[w]e must finally deport on a grand scale'. Similarly, SPD Home Secretary Nancy Faeser proposed regulations to deport members of 'criminal clans' even if they have not committed a crime. Faeser's proposal feeds into racist 'Arab clan' discourses that are prominently used by far-right actors (Özvatan, Neuhauser, and Yurdakul 2023). These claims preceded the implementation of tougher migration and asylum policies (Pro Asyl 2024).

The UK and the limits of 'exceptionalism'

Electoral level: no far right to speak of?

In the UK, there has long existed the idea of 'British exceptionalism' when it comes to far-right politics. This can be traced back to perceived immunity and active resistance to the extreme right in the inter- and post-war years. For instance, Ignazi (2003, 173) argues that 'fascist leanings in Britain were easily kept under control' during this period. Furthermore, common narratives around Britain's role in the Second World War paint the country heroically standing alone against Nazism (Colley 2017, 9). Clearly, such a notion relies

on the erasure of the concurrent brutality of empire as well as longstanding systemic and institutional inequality (Gopal 2019), yet it has proved a powerful narrative. These ideas have also permeated into contemporary interpretations of the extreme and far right in the UK, with the failure of the British National Party (BNP), for instance, seen as further evidence of its rejection. Until 2024, the strongest performing far-right party in recent years was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), whose largest result in a general election came in 2015, registering 12.64% of the total vote but only seeing one MP elected. The performance of Reform UK in 2024, taking over UKIP's mantle, was only marginally better than UKIP in 2015 in terms of share and number of votes (Brown 2024), yet they managed to gain five MPs in parliament. Despite both UKIP and Reform UK's clear credentials as far-right parties, they were and are often excluded from the category in academic and public discourse, whether on account of UKIP's emergence as a single-issue 'eurosceptic' group (Tournier-Sol 2015, 134) or Reform UK's protestations about the label, seeing the BBC apologise for referring to them as such (Naughtie 2024).

This narrative of exceptionalism has arguably acted as a substitute for the *cordon sanitaire*. However, although notions of establishing a clear *cordon sanitaire* are limited, discussions around Brexit echoed some of them. The approach of the official campaign groups during the 2016 British referendum on EU membership (Brexit) is illustrative of this kind of framing, where formal collaboration with the far right was (mostly) avoided, but where similar discourses were widely conveyed. Before the referendum, various groups formed on either side of the debate, but a few months before the vote, two of them became the officially designated Leave and Remain campaigns: Vote Leave (VL) and Britain Stronger in Europe (BSE). These groups remained almost completely separate from UKIP and other far-right organisations during the campaign,[4] emphasising this distinction in key moments. Following the referendum result, former CEO of VL, Matthew Elliott (cited in Foster 2016), stated that 'it was essential that Vote Leave was a non-UKIP based campaign', claiming that swing voters and smaller campaign groups were more comfortable being associated with a 'non-UKIP, mainstream' alternative. Less surprisingly, BSE also made a point to criticise key far-right figures like Nigel Farage in their campaign materials (Brown 2022). In this way, there was an attempt to maintain a formal boundary and distinction between the official and far-right groups.

Discursive level: when the exceptional is quite unexceptional

While the notion of an absent far right on a wider scale and explicit distancing during the Brexit referendum create an apparent line of separation in UK politics, we should certainly be wary of taking these claims at face value. Starting with Brexit before returning to the broader national context, we can see that far-right actors do not have to be the ones driving exclusion. During the referendum, shared discourses of colonial nostalgia/amnesia, racism, a pathology of greatness, hegemonic masculinity and populism transcended the campaign groups (Brown 2022), where it was not just the far right, nor just the Leave campaign, to draw on these repertoires. Take the following quotes, one from UKIP, one from VL and one from BSE (Brown 2022, 203):

> Ours is a great country. Not just a great country in the history books, although it surely is that. But a great country right now, with the promise of becoming even greater tomorrow.

> When push comes to shove, the great British people always make the right decision. [. . .] we are a nation of dreamers. We are a nation of men and women who have never been afraid of the dark, nor the unknown. We are a nation of pioneers in politics and democracy.
>
> this country's instincts and institutions, its people and its principles, are capable not just of making our society freer, fairer and richer but also once more of setting an inspirational example to the world.

Without attributing them to their respective group (in order: BSE, UKIP, VL), it would be difficult to ascertain their origin, such are their similarities. We can see in each of these nationalist calls how lines are drawn between a supposedly heroic past, tapping into ideas of colonial nostalgia and amnesia (El-Enany 2020; Saunders 2020), and a prosperous future should the correct decision be made. As such, even though there was physical dissociation from the far right, especially with BSE arguing the opposing referendum position, this offers a misleading picture of the discursive links between them.

One of the clearest examples of the limitations around non-collaboration as a benchmark for establishing the unacceptance of far-right politics is the reaction to UKIP's now-infamous *Breaking Point* poster in June 2016 (see Figure 1). The poster was widely reported on in the media, with various outlets commenting on its likeness to Nazi propaganda and charges of inciting racial hatred. It therefore became a major talking point, one that VL actively sought to distance themselves overtly from. Key VL figure Michael Gove claimed to have 'shuddered' upon seeing it, while on the official VL website, Gisela Stuart was quoted, stating: 'We could not be clearer: Nigel Farage's posters are not ours and we don't agree with them' (Brown 2022). However, from an examination of VL campaign materials, we can see that this construction of difference masks significant similarities, including in the use of visuals (see Figures 2 and 3).

The VL graphics here convey a similar image of large numbers of people and their implied Muslim identity, which matches the far-right poster. It is clear how this outward veneer of antagonism belies significant congruence between the ideas that were being expressed.

Figure 1. UKIP's 'Breaking Point' Poster (June 2016).

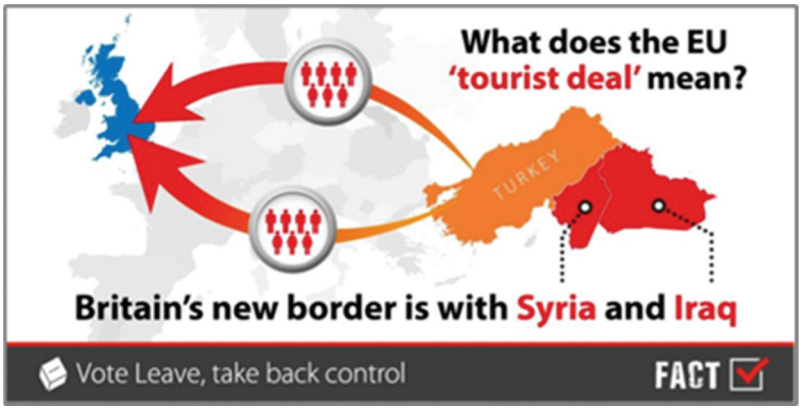

Figure 2. Vote Leave's 'Take back Control' Campaign I (June 2016).

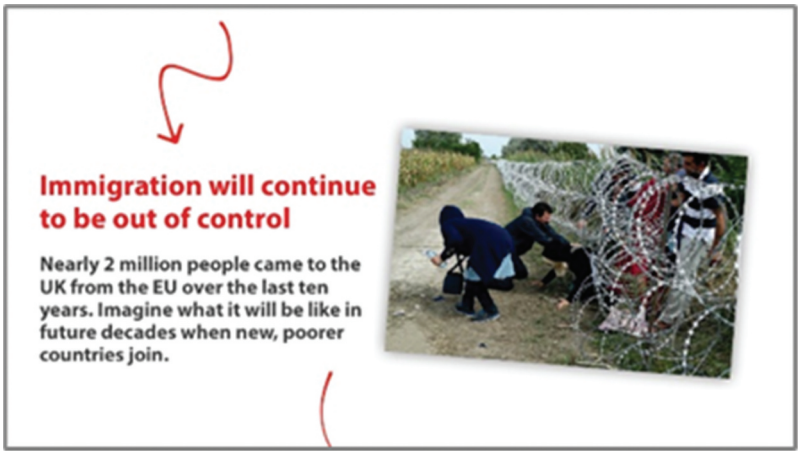

Figure 3. Vote Leave's 'Take back Control' Campaign II (June 2016).

These considerations are crucial when we look at post-Brexit UK politics where we must of course be concerned about Reform UK's presence in parliament, yet our attention should not simply be drawn to them. The previous government's policy and discourse around immigration, notably in relation to channel boat crossings and plans to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda, bears all the marks of a far-right agenda (Behr 2023). Labour in 'opposition' criticised the feasibility of these schemes rather than their racist and deadly consequences, calling instead for more deportations (Findon 2022) and framing itself as the 'true party of law and order' (BBC 2023). Since coming to power, Labour's Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has stated that border security is her key priority (Brown 2024) and the Home Office boasted that nearly 19,000 removals had taken place in their first six months in office. Both major mainstream parties are therefore advocating for ever-stronger anti-immigration approaches, without even the pretence of needing to do so

to keep the far right out. As such, it is crucial that we move away from far-right parties' success as an indicator of the *cordon sanitaire* keeping the far right out, and instead consider how the mainstream itself can be responsible for pushing far-right politics.

Conclusion: moving beyond the cordon sanitaire

The analysis presents three cases in which mainstream parties commit to non-collaboration with far-right parties. They show that depending on the political context, this commitment varies in its implementation. Under the backdrop of Germany's fascist past, even tacit and informal collaboration in parliament falls under the *Brandmauer*, whereas in France, the *Republican Front* mainly focuses on the second round of elections. The UK has the least formalised *cordon sanitaire* which reflects the repeated failures of far-right parties to challenge the mainstream electorally. On the electoral level, we raise concerns over the bottom-up undermining of the *Brandmauer*, cracks appearing in the *Republican Front*, as well as the emergence of Reform UK. We also highlight how despite the electoral *cordon sanitaire*, in each country both established centre-right and -left parties mainstream far-right politics. We contend that an electoral *cordon sanitaire* is ineffective if it is simultaneously undermined in policy and discourse. This echoes abundant research showing that once mainstream parties accommodate or even collaborate with the far right, this encourages far-right voting, radicalises the mainstream, and encourages hostility towards marginalised groups.

Overall, we have sought to bring into question the overly strategic emphasis that has dominated approaches to the *cordon sanitaire* and the mainstreaming of far-right politics more broadly. This is not to say that such questions are unimportant, nor are we advocating for the principles of the *cordon sanitaire* to be discarded altogether. There must continue to be an uncompromising commitment to excluding the far right from government, not giving them media platforms and ensuring that such ideas do not become normalised. What is in need of scrutiny, however, is how we understand the role of the mainstream in processes of mainstreaming and normalisation. If we take the *cordon sanitaire* at face value and accept without question the separation that underlies it, we risk exceptionalising the far right as beyond the norm and presenting the mainstream, regardless of the form that it takes, as the automatic opposition. As the case studies attest to, the pursuit of exclusion and inequality is certainly not limited to far-right parties, and indeed, the considerable power that comes with the label 'mainstream' means that it is often mainstream actors themselves who are responsible for implementing these policies and sedimenting such discourse. Thus, by focusing only on maintaining a formal barrier, we may well be physically excluding far-right *parties* and *groups* from various arenas, but that certainly does not equate to an exclusion of far-right *politics* and *ideas* more broadly. In fact, claims of dissociation and separation from the far right by mainstream actors can play a key role in normalising exclusionary politics through contradistinction (Brown 2024; Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023). By furthering the logic of the strategic *cordon sanitaire*, there is a risk of reifying such a distinction and playing into the accompanying narrative.

Consequently, it is crucial that we move beyond the *cordon sanitaire*, understood strategically, to take a more holistic approach to these issues. While we must continue to guard against any progress made by far-right parties themselves, our attention must equally turn to the role of the mainstream beyond the notion of it forming a physical barrier. In so doing, we can take a more comprehensive approach to its position in

processes of mainstreaming and normalisation, where it can act as a vector and key driver of exclusionary politics. This involves a decentring of far-right parties from our analysis towards a more rounded take on far-right politics, in whatever form and from whomever it emerges.

Notes

1. France presents an original case through the strengths of one particular far-right party (the Front/Rassemblement National) who has played a central part in French politics for over four decades. The two-round electoral system is also interesting here as it was often argued to be a bulwark against the far right as mainstream parties could coalesce in the second round should the FN/RN get through first. Germany was chosen for its long-time status as an 'exceptional "negative case"' (Weisskircher 2024b, 1) in which the anti-pacting norm against collaboration with the far right is strongly institutionalised and reinforced across society. Finally, the UK was chosen for its seeming immunisation to far-right politics as parties such as the BNP, Ukip or Reform struggle to find roots.
2. Apart from Arlette Laguiller of the Trotskyist Lutte Ouvrière who called her voters to abstain.
3. This section draws extensively from the recently published edited volume of Weisskircher (2024a) which offers a comprehensive overview of the fourth wave of far-right politics in Germany.
4. Only Douglas Carswell's involvement in VL muddies the water somewhat on this point. However, as UKIP's only MP and a former representative of the Conservative Party, he can be viewed as almost a hybrid figure.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Irish Research Council.

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