

Eurosceptic or Euro-ambivalent? Understanding the positions of far right parties on Europe



Most contemporary far right parties oppose European integration, but is Euroscepticism a natural complement to far right ideology? [Marta Lorimer](#) writes that while we now tend to see far right parties as Eurosceptic, this was not always the case. Drawing on an analysis of the Italian Social Movement and French Front National, she demonstrates that ambivalence is an important part of the far right's approach to Europe.

Far right parties are well-known for their opposition to European integration. Their Euroscepticism is usually presented as a natural feature of their ideology: after all, why would strongly nationalist parties support a transnational construction such as the EU?

In a [recent study](#), I argue that the depiction of far right parties as 'naturally' Eurosceptic is misleading. In fact, far right positions on Europe are characterised by long-standing ambivalence rather than straightforward opposition.

The far right's ideological ambivalence on Europe is rooted in three factors. First, political ideologies are notoriously flexible: while one might expect some degree of continuity, they are also deeply contextual and can evolve over time and depending on historical and national circumstances.

Second, the European Union is a complex construction in constant evolution. Whereas it started as a small economic union of Western European countries, it has evolved into a deeply political construction encompassing a large part of the European continent. Political parties may then be expected to adopt different positions depending on which aspect of the EU they are looking at, and at what phase of its historical development.

Finally, for as much as the EU tries to equate the two, 'Europe' and the EU remain two different constructions. The EU is but one embodiment of the idea of Europe, and political parties may be able to swear allegiance to 'Europe' while rejecting the political construction of the EU.



Marine Le Pen at a Rassemblement National campaign event in February 2020, Credit: [Rassemblement National](#)

An analysis of the positions on Europe developed by the Italian Social Movement (MSI) and the French Front National (now Rassemblement National) between 1978 and 2017 offers a helpful illustration of this ambivalence. The two parties adopted rather different positions on Europe and the EU, both over time and across countries.

Founded in 1946 from the ashes of the Italian Fascist party, the MSI was for a long time the only successful far right party in Europe. Influenced by the ideas of former fascist diplomat Filippo Anfuso, in the 1970s and 1980s, the party was favourable to the creation of a 'Nation Europe.' Viewing 'Europeanism' 'the ancient and always alive aspiration towards European unity, in the conscience of a community of interests and destinies, of history, of civilization, of tradition among Europeans', the party thought it necessary to equip Europe with a strong defence and make it into a 'Third Way' between the United States and the USSR.

The view of Europe as a primarily foreign policy force also informed the party's critical assessment of the EU. Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, they criticised its insufficiently 'political' character, and even after the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, they primarily lamented the Treaty's failure to transform the EU into a strong foreign policy actor, as well as its negative implications for national sovereignty. However, the MSI never turned to full-fledged opposition of the EU: coming from a pro-European country, and unsure of Italy's clout, the party always remained broadly '[compromising](#)' in its stances towards the EU.

The Front National followed a rather different trajectory. While starting from a broadly positive stance towards the EU in the 1980s, over time, it developed a '[pro-Europe, anti-EU stance](#)' that persists in the party to this day. The early FN held positions similar to those of the MSI: [viewing](#) Europe as 'a historic, geographic, cultural, economic and social ensemble', it supported the creation of a European defense and further European collaboration aimed at making the EU into a strong, confederal, 'Europe of the Nations'.

The evolution of the EU following the introduction of the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty led to a radical change in the party's stance. As the EU became something different from what the party had hoped it would be and began impinging strongly on national sovereignty, the FN changed radically its assessment of the EU. While maintaining its claim to be pro-European insofar as 'Europe' was approached as a distinct civilisation, it became strongly anti-EU, going so far as claiming the need for Frexit in its 2002, 2012 and 2017 manifestoes.

One reason why the MSI and FN diverged was their differing conception of their nation's power. Unlike the MSI, which doubted Italy's ability to be strong on its own, the FN was confident that France could pursue its national interest independently of the EU. Thus, while the former thought that Italy needed Europe, the latter was persuaded that France could make it on its own.

Summing up, while today we tend to see far right parties as Eurosceptic, this was not always the case, and neither does the term fully capture the complexity of their positions. Ambivalence about Europe is an important part of the far right's approach to Europe, and this can help us understand why far right parties can collaborate transnationally in the name of 'another Europe' different from the EU.

For more information, see the author's accompanying paper at [Ethnic and Racial Studies](#)

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