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The kids are Alt right? Age, authoritarian attitudes and far-right support in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The traditional image of a far-right voter as 'pale, male and stale' is changing. The attention has shifted to younger people who are said to be less supportive of (liberal) democracy and now also more likely to vote for the far-right. But evidence has been mixed when it comes to how age is associated with attitudes towards liberal democracy and support for far-right parties. In this paper, we rely on unique cross-national data from the European Parliament elections, the European Elections Study (EES) 2024, to shed light on this relationship. We find that young people are not only less supportive of liberal democracy, they were also more likely to vote for far-right parties in the 2024 European Parliament elections. In each age group, we observe a correlation between lack of support for liberal democratic norms and voting for the far right, but only when the far right is in government. These findings thus suggest that the younger generation may not be a bulwark against democratic backsliding.

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KEYWORDS Far-right parties; age; young; liberal democracy; European Parliament elections

Introduction

We are witnessing rising support for radical right parties across European democracies, which has raised concerns about the commitment to core liberal democratic values (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2019). In some European countries, we are also seeing worrying signs of democratic backsliding

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(e.g., Bermeo, 2016; Kelemen, 2017). One question of particular interest is the role of young people in these developments. On the one hand, young people are often portrayed as more progressive and in recent elections in the United States and the United Kingdom they have come out to support liberal progressive parties in greater numbers than older voters (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). On the other hand, research has shown that young voters are more likely to be politically disaffected, less attached to mainstream parties and less committed to liberal democracy (e.g., Foa & Mounk, 2019). There is thus mixed evidence about the extent to which young people are less supportive of liberal democracy and more likely to support parties that challenge liberal democratic norms compared to older generations.

In this paper, we address these questions by examining not only intergenerational support for liberal democracy across Europe, but also intergenerational support for the radical right, and the relationship between the two. Leveraging the cross-national European Election Study conducted after the 2024 European Parliament elections (Popa et al., 2024), we study intergenerational differences in 28 different countries, unified by elections to a single legislature.

It is important to study the values and political behaviours of young people, as they may hold clues as to future developments when younger generations gradually replace older ones. Research on political socialisation has established repeatedly that attitudes and behavioural patterns that people acquire early in life, during the so-called formative years, tend to become less flexible to change later in life (e.g., Dinas, 2014; Franklin, 2004; Jennings & Markus, 1984; Sears & Funk, 1999). So, if younger generations are less supportive of democracy and more prone to vote for radical right parties, this may suggest that support for the radical right will continue to rise and support for liberal democracy will become more fragile. This is the concern raised by Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017) who present evidence of lower support for democracy among younger generations in (supposedly) established democracies in three different continents (yet, see criticism by e.g., Alexander & Welzel, 2017; Norris, 2017; Voeten, 2017).

However, when studying the political attitudes and behaviours of younger voters, the patterns are in some ways contradictory. On the one hand, research shows that younger generations are more supportive of the EU (e.g., Down & Wilson, 2013), more likely to have voted to remain in the European Union in the British EU membership referendum (e.g., Hobolt, 2016), more tolerant towards LGBTQ+ and ethnic minorities (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and more likely to support Green parties (e,g., Lichtin et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the youngest (adult) generations are more liberal and more progressive and therefore we would expect them to be more supportive of liberal democracy. On the other hand, studies of democratic attitudes point to lower support for democracy among younger citizens

(Foa & Mounk, 2016, 2017). And more recently, it has been argued that young people fuel support for far-right populist parties, such as Le Pen's National Rally in France and AfD in Germany (Nöstlinger, 2024; Tower & Gélix, 2022). This is supported by Rooduijn (2018) comparative study of the electoral profiles of far-right parties in 10 European democracies that reveal significant *negative* age effects for five parties and insignificant age effects for the other five. It thus seems that in many countries younger voters are more likely to vote for the far right than older ones (e.g., Zagórski et al., 2021). However, in an age, period and cohort (APC) study of vote choice, Rekker (2024) finds more mixed patterns in the relationship between generations and support for the far right.

In this study, we aim to advance our understanding of these contradictory patterns by focusing both on far-right support and support of liberal democracy, and the relationship between them, in a comparative European context. We also focus specifically on support for liberal democracy, since the challenge from the radical right today is not to democracy as such, but rather to the institutions designed to constrain executive power (Kelemen, 2017). These 'checks and balances' are a central feature of liberal democracy. Analysing the EES voter study following the 2024 European Parliament elections, our findings reveal that younger citizens across Europe are not only less supportive of liberal democratic values, they are also more likely to vote for far-right parties. A limitation of our study is that it does not allow us say whether differences between age groups are just life-cycle effects that will dissipate as younger generations grow older, or cohort differences that will have more enduring effects on attitudes to liberal democratic values and support for parties that challenge them. Nonetheless, these findings are concerning in times of democratic backsliding as they suggest that the youngest voters are even less likely than older ones to punish parties and politicians who do not stand up for core liberal democratic norms.

Age differences in support for liberal democracy and the radical right

What is the relationship between age and support for liberal democracy and the radical right? To address this question, we first discuss what is known so far about the relationship between support for the far right and support for liberal democracy and then we turn to the differences between age groups.

Support for liberal democracy and the far right

When citizens in democratic countries are asked whether they prefer to live in a democracy or whether authoritarian rule might be preferable, the overwhelming majority prefers to live in a democracy (e.g., Inglehart, 2003;

Klingemann, 2013). Yet, a complicating issue when studying support for democracy, is that 'democracy' is an essentially contested concept. So, saying that one supports 'democracy' may mean different things to different people. In a rather 'minimal' definition of democracy, free and fair elections are the sole defining characteristic of a democracy (e.g., Schumpeter, 1946[1976]). Obviously, elections can only be free and fair if other conditions are realised as well, most importantly freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association, including organised political opposition and protest. Moreover, it is essential that elections are competitive, so that voters have an actual choice (APSA Committee on Political Parties, 1950; Mair, 2008; Powell, 2019).

However, having competitive elections, based on the principle of majority rule may not be sufficient to make a country fully democratic, or to make sure that the country remains to be democratic in the long run. Democratically elected politicians can abuse their executive power in several ways. Some may challenge 'fundamental rights' of individuals and/or minorities. Others may try to create an unequal playing field in the run-up to a next election and still others can organise a system of corruption or clientelism to reward their supporters. A basic principle of *liberal* democracy is that society should be protected from such abuse of power. Even if the executive was elected in a fair and competitive election, institutional arrangements must be in place that limit executive power. In the literature, this is generally referred to as 'checks and balances' (e.g., Dahl, 1956). These kinds of checks and balances on executive power distinguish 'liberal democracy' from a the more minimal conceptualisation of 'electoral democracy'. The Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem) conceptualises liberal democracy as a democracy that has all features of an electoral democracy 'plus three additional components: the rule of law ensuring respect for civil liberties, judicial constraints on the executive branch, and legislative checks and oversight of the executive' (Mechkova et al., 2017). Our study builds upon this definition of liberal democracy by focusing on two central aspects of liberal democracy: (1) the rejection of authoritarian styles of political leadership, and (2) support for the principle that independent judges should be able to overrule the executive. These two aspects capture two core components of the V-Dem classification. However, as we will discuss in more detail in the methods section, it seems probable that someone who supports an authoritarian leadership style, would consequently attach less importance to legislative checks and oversight of the executive.

Populist parties, especially those on the right, have a complicated relationship with democracy. Populists tend to be in favour of majoritarian rule and majoritarian democratic instruments, such as referendums, in line with their claim to represent the 'general will' of the people (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). However, they are less supportive the institutions that are designed to

protect citizens' civil liberties and to constrain the power of the executive. Far-right parties are particularly hostile to institutions, such as independent judiciaries, that constrain executive power, and have a duty to safeguard the rule of law, in particular the rights of individuals and minorities. It is also common for populist movements to advance the idea of a strong leader who represents 'pure people' in opposition to corrupt elitist institutions. There are some clear examples of far-right parties in government in Europe who have actively tried to undermine the institutions of liberal democracy, in Europe particularly in Poland and Hungary (e.g., Galston, 2018; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Kelemen, 2017; Plattner, 2020).

While far-right parties often pose a challenge to the institutions of liberal democracy, this does not mean that voters choose them for this reason or that they necessarily agree with them. Yet, we know little about the relationship between support for (liberal) democratic principles and support for far-right populist parties. In their study of four Western European countries, Wuttke et al. (2023) find that, compared to voters for other parties, voters for the populist right are less satisfied with the way democracy works and more supportive of direct citizen involvement in politics. When it comes to other democratic principles, they find few differences. Similarly, Zaslove and Meijers (2024) find no clear relationships between support for the principles of liberal democracy and populist attitudes among Dutch citizens.

Yet, the study by Van der Brug et al. (2021a) indicates that these null-findings may be specific to the particular contexts where there are no far-right parties in office that have tried to challenge liberal democratic institutions. Van der Brug et al. (2021a) find that voters for the far right are less supportive of the values of liberal democracy than voters for other parties, *especially* when the far-right party is in power. They provide two explanations for their finding. First, grounded in the distinction between electoral winners and loser evaluations (Anderson et al., 2005: Anderson & Tverdova, 2001), they argue that those who support the party in power, are less supportive of arrangements that limit the power of the government than those who support opposition parties. The second possible reason is grounded in public opinion research since Converse (1970). The idea is that people do not develop clear structured and stable attitudes unless issues are politicised. The principles of liberal democracy and the institutions set up to safeguard these principles are very complex. When there is no political contestation on these principles and institutions, most citizens will not give it much thought. However, when a far-right party is in government, the principles of liberal democracy often become politically contested and politicised. When liberal democracy becomes an object of political contestation, people form attitudes on these matters and as a consequence these attitudes will become aligned with party preferences (see also Van der Brug et al.,

2021b). Importantly, when studying general support for democracy, Van der Brug et al. (2021a) find no significant difference between voters for far-right parties and voters for other parties. This supports our argument that it is essential to focus on support for *liberal* democracy, which is challenged by the far right.[1]

In sum, there are good reasons to be concerned that far-right parties pose a challenge to liberal democracy. Especially when they seize control over the government, they have in some cases actively tried to undermine liberal democratic institutions. However, little research has been conducted into the relationship between support for populist parties and support for the values of liberal democracy among citizens. The few studies in this field have not generated clear evidence of a strong relationship, but this might be because they have not studied the contexts in which the relationship can be expected to be strong, or because they have relied upon survey questions that are not well designed to measure support for *liberal* democracy (e.g., Claassen et al., 2024; Van der Brug et al., 2021). So, whether there is such a relationship and how strong it is, is largely unknown. Moreover, the effects may well be different among different generations, a question to which we now turn.

Life cycles, generations and political socialisation

It has long been recognised that generational replacement is an important driver of societal changes (e.g., Inglehart, 1977; Sapiro, 2004; Van der Brug & Franklin, 2018). At a relatively young age most people acquire basic values, attitudes and behavioural habits that tend to become more stable over time. Circumstances and events that occur during the time when people are young, are thus the most formative experiences. Studies have shown that events that happen when people are between the age of 15 to 25 are the most formative, at least for the development of political preferences (e.g., Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Schuman & Rodgers, 2004).[2] To the extent that political attitudes and behaviours are stable within individuals, generational replacement is an important driver of change. Obviously, the stability of individual attitudes should not be exaggerated. Some scholars have argued that individuals adapt to changing circumstances throughout their lifespan, a perspective that is often referred to as the 'lifelong openness model' (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Tyler & Schuller, 1991). If people of all ages and generations update their attitudes to the same extent in response to current events and developments, we shouldn't expect to find many differences between generations.

Yet, even when we find differences between generations, these may be the consequence of two mechanisms, which have different implications. In addition to political socialisation, and the resulting generational differences,

there might also be a life cycle (or age) effect operating. As people go through different stages in their lives, they find themselves in different economic circumstances, and they have less appreciation for all kinds of rapid changes in society. This might affect their political attitudes. Life cycle and generational effects have different consequences for support for democracy. If the age differences reflect a life cycle effect, we do not have to worry much if younger voters are less supportive of democracy than older voters, because they will learn to appreciate democracy more when they grow older. Yet, if these age differences reflect generational differences, the generation that is most supportive of democracy will gradually be replaced by a generation that is less supportive. To properly disentangle the effects of age and generation, one needs a time series of at least 20 years. Since our study focuses on a single European Parliament election in 27 countries, we cannot do so. This means that we cannot draw firm conclusions about future consequences of our findings, which is an obvious limitation of our study. Yet, the study does provide a snapshot of how young voters think about, and behave, in democratic elections across Europe.

Age, support for democracy and for the far-right

Since the youngest generation is, on average, better educated and more secularised than generations before them, one might expect them to be also more supportive of liberal democracy and less likely to support far-right parties. Moreover, recent elections in the US and the UK have also shown that younger voter are more supportive of the liberal-progressive parties – the Democrats and the Labour Party – than the conservative parties: the Republican Party[3] in the US and Conservative Party and the far-right Reform UK party in Britain (e.g., Deckman, 2024; Fisher, 2018; Jocker et al., 2024; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Twenge, 2023). So, what are the theoretical reasons for expecting that younger voters might in some contexts be less supportive of liberal democracy and more supportive of the far right? This answer to this question lies, at least partially, in how different generations are politically socialised.

When focusing on support for far-right parties, an important consideration is that far-right ideologies and far-right parties have been ostracised for a long time in most countries (e.g., Art, 2007; Minkenberg, 2013; Valentim, 2024; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007). Generations who were politically socialised in contexts in which these parties were treated as 'pariahs' (Van Spanje, 2009) or 'political lepers' (Van der Brug et al., 2005) can be expected to be more hesitant to support these parties, even when they agree with their political views (see also: Harteveld et al., 2019; Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018). However, recently there has been a 'normalisation of the far right' (e.g., De Jonge & Gaufman, 2022; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Valentim, 2024;

Vrakopoulos, 2022). So, in most countries in the EU, younger generations are socialised in a political context where there is less negativity surrounding the far-right than there was when previous generations were socialised. As a result, we might expect more support for far-right parties among younger generations.

A similar argument can be made in relation to support for liberal democracy. Democratic backsliding, also referred to as autocratisation, is a relatively recent phenomenon (e.g., Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). So, the youngest generation is socialised in a context in which it is more common to challenge the principles of liberal democracy. This could obviously lower support for liberal democracy especially among the youngest generation.[4]

All in all, there are thus reasons to believe that older generations might have more stable and supportive attitudes towards liberal democracy and may be more wary of far-right parties.

The empirical evidence, however, is so far quite limited. Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017) express concern about patterns of 'democratic deconsolidation', i.e., the fact that support for democracy is declining in established democracies. One of the indicators for why this would be the case is that support for democracy seems to be declining among younger citizens. More specifically, when asked on an 11-point scale (running from 0 to 10) how important it is to live in a democracy, younger citizens are less likely to answer 10 than older people. One might of course question this way of dichotomizing the data, but a more fundamental point of critique was raised by Alexander and Welzel (2017), who argued that these response patterns reflect mainly age differences. Younger people have less strong attitudes than people at an older age, so they are less likely to use the extreme category.

For the purpose of our study, it is important to note that the dependent variables employed by Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017) do not tap into support for liberal democracy, which is our primary focus. This is also the case for Foa and Mounk's (2019) study, in which they demonstrate that younger voters are less satisfied with the way democracy works. This finding may not reflect a rejection of liberal democracy among younger voters, but may instead indicate that younger voters are more critical of democracies' actual performance (see also Norris, 2017). Similar observations have been made about young citizens' critical views of representative democracy and political parties (Dalton, 2015; Hooghe & Marien, 2013). Grassi et al. (2024) compare attitudes towards democracy in nine European countries, measured on the basis of a five-item scale, some of which tap into aspects of liberal democracy. They find that the youngest generation is slightly more critical towards democracy than older generations, but the differences are minor. So, in sum, young people tend to be somewhat more critical towards democracy, but there is little evidence of a clear rejection of liberal democracy among them. The first question we examine in this paper is

therefore *whether younger citizens are less supportive of the values of liberal democracy*.

When focusing on support for the far right, the findings are somewhat clearer. In his study of the profiles of the electorates of 10 European far right parties, Rooduijn et al. (2019) finds significant *negative* age effects for five parties and insignificant age effects for the other five. So, it seems that (in many countries) younger voters are more likely to vote for the far right than older ones (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2019; Zagórski et al., 2021). Foa and Mounk (2019) show that millennials (the youngest generation that they study) are overrepresented among the supporters of most populist parties of the far right, as well as far left. Yet, there are also parties where there is a slight underrepresentation of millennials. Rekker (2024) also finds rather mixed patterns in the relationship between generations and support for the far right in his ambitious age, period, and cohort (APC) study of patterns of vote choice across 258 elections in 21 countries.

There are two complicating factors. First, all other things equal, young voters are more likely to support new parties, because older voters tend to be more loyal to parties that they have voted for repeatedly in the past (e.g., Dinas, 2012; Rekker, 2022). So, even if younger voters have more liberal views than older generations, they may still be more likely to vote for the far right simply because they do not have a habit of voting for the more traditional mass parties. Secondly, recent studies indicate that more recently politicised issues, such as immigration and European integration are more important for younger generations of voters than for earlier generations (e.g., Wagner & Kritzinger, 2012; Walczak et al., 2012; Gougou & Mayer, 2013; Van der Brug and Rekker, 2021; Steiner, 2024; Jocker et al., 2025).[5] As a consequence, they are more likely to vote for parties who campaign on these types of issues, in particular the Greens and the far right. So, all in all, we may expect young voters to be slightly more likely to support far-right parties, even though the pattern may not be very robust across countries. The second question we examine is therefore *whether younger voters are more likely than older voters to support the far right?*

Finally, we investigate the relationship between support for liberal democracy and support for the far right. As we argued before, the relationship between support for liberal democracy and support for the far right is complex and seems context specific. Scholars and pundits link democratic backsliding to increasing support for the far-right, but at the level of individual citizens, we know little about how support for liberal democracy and support for far-right parties are related. We found three studies on this matter, and only one of these detected that the two are related. However, for reasons explained above, support for liberal democracy and support for the far right is only related in countries where the far right is in office. In our study we therefore distinguish between countries where the far-right is

in office and countries where this is not the case. Foa and Mounk (2019) have argued that there is reason for concern because young voters are more likely to support the far right and they are less supportive of democracy. Yet, as far as we are aware, no research exists, on *whether the relationship between support for the far right and support for liberal democracy varies between age groups*. This is our third research question.

Data, measurement, and methods

To examine our research questions, we analyse data from the European Election Study (EES) 2024 (see Popa et al., 2024). The EES 2024 is a cross-national post-election survey conducted in all 27 member states with over 25,900 respondents.[6] The EES was designed to examine the determinants of electoral behaviour and political attitudes in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections, and it includes questions specifically on support for liberal democratic values. The survey was conducted by Demoscopy, with respondents being selected randomly from general access panel databases using stratification variables. In all countries, the samples are representative of national adult populations, and stratified by gender, age, region, and type of locality.

First, we start by examining support for liberal democracy across age groups. Previous research showed that citizens' support for liberal democratic values is not defined by a unitary dimension, with evidence suggesting the presence of at least two dimensions: one defined by support for an independent media and an independent judiciary and the other represented by support for the right to protest and the rejection of authoritarian leadership (Van der Brug et al., 2021b). We thus capture support for liberal democratic values using two questions that pertain to each of these dimensions. Support for an independent judiciary is measured by the item 'Independent judges should be able to overrule the decisions of democratically elected governments if these decisions violate the rights of individuals or groups in society'. Second, the principle that the power of the executive needs to be constrained by checks and balances is measured with the item 'Having a strong leader in government is good for [COUNTRY] even if the leader bends the rules to get things done'.[7] Both items are designed to juxtapose the position of the executive on the one hand with civic liberties and the role of the institutions of liberal democracy on the other, highlighting the fact that in liberal democracy the constitutional pillar should put constraints on the exercise of power and thereby safeguard citizens from abuse of power (Mechkova et al., 2017; Van der Brug et al., 2021a). Hence, together these two items capture the fundamental principle of *liberal* democracy that the power of the executive needs to be limited by checks and balances.

Second, we turn to support for far-right parties. We define support for the far-right based on the self-reported vote in the 2024 European Parliament

elections and use the *PopuList 3.0* database to differentiate between the far-right[8] and other parties (Rooduijn et al., 2019) and update the list for parties not included in the data (see Table A1 in Appendices). We further differentiate between countries where far-right parties are in government (i.e., Finland, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, and Slovakia) and those where there are no such parties in government. Given the focus of our research, we follow previous studies and choose to differentiate between young and older voters using the cut-off age of 25 as around this age political learning slows down and political preferences become more stable and crystalise (see, e.g., Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Rekker et al., 2019). Given the range of the remaining categories (i.e., individuals between 25 and 99 years) and to add further nuance, we further distinguish between those who are below and above 65. Even though the retirement age varies between countries, the age of 65 represents a rough threshold for the age of retirement.[9]

Results

We start our analysis by seeking to provide an answer to our first question, *are younger citizens less supportive of the values of liberal democracy?* Figure 1 plots the (weighted) mean support for the two items capturing support for liberal democratic values and shows that young people in Europe are significantly less supportive of liberal democratic principles. These rather simple descriptive findings are robust and statistically significant across different model specifications (see results in Table A2 in the Appendices). Furthermore, while the youngest generation is less likely to support liberal democratic values in comparison to both the middle and older categories, we do not

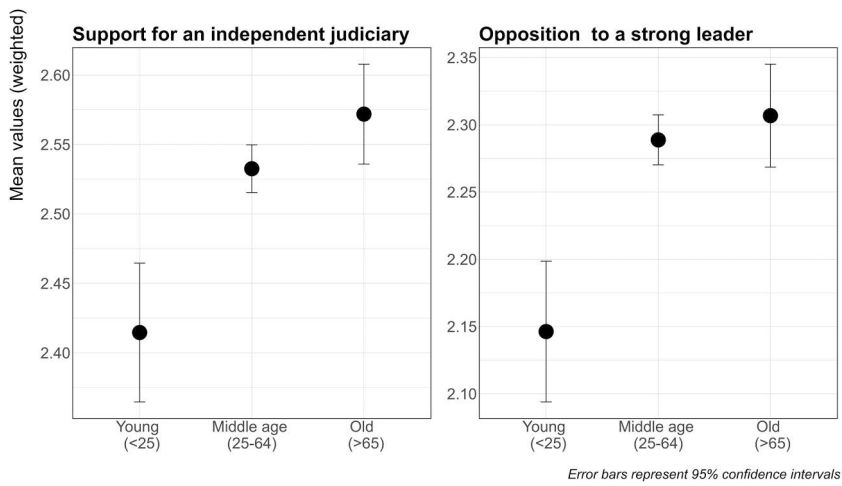

Figure 1. Support for liberal democracy by age group.

note any statistically significant differences between the older two age groups. While the magnitude of these differences (i.e., a difference in means of approximately 0.15 on a five-point scale across both variables) seems small, they do amount to approximately half of a standard deviation, thus reflecting a substantial difference. These findings build on previous results by showing that younger citizens are not only less supportive of democracy in general (Foa & Mounk, 2016, 2017) but also less supportive of liberal democratic values. Figure A1.1 and A1.2 show the results for all 28 contexts and, while there are level differences between these countries, the patterns for the differences between the age groups are remarkable robust.

Next, we turn to the difference in support for far-right parties across age groups and depending on support for liberal democracy. Given the nested structure of our data (i.e., voters nested in countries) in Table 1 we report results based on multilevel logistic regression models with random intercepts at the country level.[10] We also include a series of attitudinal (i.e., left-right self-placement, EU is a good thing, retrospective economic satisfaction and political interests)[11] and demographic controls. Across all regression models, we rescale all predictors to take values between 0-1. The results show that at the time of the 2024 EP elections, younger voters were more likely to support far-right parties but only when compared to the oldest category (see Models 1 and 2 in Table 1).

Figure 2 illustrates that the youngest group is on average about four percentage points more likely to vote for far-right parties than the oldest category.[12] The same pattern can be noted when modelling age in a non-linear manner (see Figure A2[13] in the Appendices). The non-linear analysis confirms that the effects noted in Figure 2 are not sensitive to the 25-year curt-off point

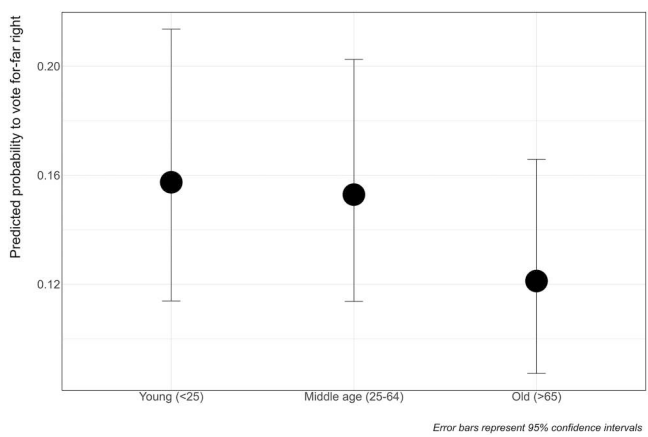

Figure 2. Support for far-right parties by age group (based on Model 2 in Table 1).

Table 1. Support for far-right parties.

	Model 1: Simple main effect	*Model 2:* Support for far-right w. controls	*Model 3:* Support for far-right, two-way interactions	*Model 4:* Support for far-right, two-way interactions	*Model 5:* Support for far-right, three-way interactions[20]
Intercept	−0.668 (0.186)**	−1.703 (0.241)**	−1.901 (0.326)**	−2.208 (0.287)**	−2.199 (0.391)**
Middle Age	0.110 (0.073)	−0.035 (0.086)	0.158 (0.254)	−0.045 (0.087)	−0.031 (0.309)
Older	−0.218 (0.083)**	−0.304 (0.119)*	0.059 (0.294)	−0.335 (0.120)**	−0.483 (0.380)
Independent judiciary (Jud)	−0.536 (0.067)**	−0.309 (0.079)**	0.463 (0.281)	0.028 (0.107)	0.499 (0.329)
Strong leader (Leader)	−0.825 (0.062)**	−0.553 (0.074)**	−1.087 (0.266)**	−0.201 (0.137)	−0.764 (0.323)*
Left-right		3.477 (0.099)**	3.474 (0.100)**	3.451 (0.100)**	3.468 (0.101)**
EU good		−1.298 (0.049)**	−1.306 (0.049)**	−1.271 (0.049)**	−1.277 (0.050)**
Economic satisfaction		−0.689 (0.088)**	−0.688 (0.088)**	−0.744 (0.089)**	−0.761 (0.089)**
Interest		0.611 (0.125)**	0.596 (0.125)**	0.616 (0.126)**	0.609 (0.127)**
Upper-class		−0.150 (0.093)	−0.143 (0.093)	−0.156 (0.094)	−0.143 (0.094)
Middle-class		−0.152 (0.069)*	−0.150 (0.069)*	−0.155 (0.069)*	−0.150 (0.070)*
Unemployed		0.102 (0.083)	0.103 (0.083)	0.103 (0.083)	0.114 (0.084)
Religious		0.019 (0.079)	0.027 (0.079)	0.041 (0.080)	0.051 (0.080)
Female		−0.191 (0.047)**	−0.189 (0.047)**	−0.197 (0.047)**	−0.198 (0.047)**
Urban		−0.092 (0.052)	−0.093 (0.052)	−0.087 (0.053)	−0.095 (0.053)
Education		−0.341 (0.102)**	−0.340 (0.102)**	−0.334 (0.103)**	−0.357 (0.104)**
Wealth		−0.298 (0.132)*	−0.307 (0.132)*	−0.277 (0.133)*	−0.271 (0.134)*
Middle age*Judiciary			−0.797 (0.295)**		−0.493 (0.337)
Older * Judiciary			−1.006 (0.333)**		−0.554 (0.390)
Middle age*Leader			0.601 (0.278)*		0.590 (0.317)
Older * Leader			0.522 (0.314)		0.724 (0.365)*
Far-right in gov				2.084 (0.549)**	1.345 (0.809)
Judiciary*Far-right gov				−1.210 (0.216)**	−0.031 (0.726)
Leader*Far-right gov				−1.433 (0.301)**	−1.723 (0.746)*
Middle age*Far-right gov					0.682 (0.655)
Older*Far-right gov					1.232 (0.761)
					−1.244 (0.750)

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

	Model 1: Simple main effect	*Model 2:* Support for far-right w. controls	*Model 3:* Support for far-right, two-way interactions	*Model 4:* Support for far-right, two-way interactions	*Model 5:* Support for far-right, three-way interactions[20]
Middle age * Jud * Right-gov					
Older* Jud*Right-gov					−1.151 (0.840)
Middle age*Leader*Right gov					0.421 (0.732)
Older *Leader*Right Gov					−0.068 (0.829)
AIC	16203.663	12367.000	12358.882	12253.226	12242.238
N (voters)	16197	15101	15101	15101	15101
N countries	28	28	28	28	28
Variance intercept	0.756	0.813	0.816	1.124	1.210
Variance judiciary				0.033	0.061
Variance leader				0.220	0.242
Variance middle age					0.141
Variance Old					0.374

Note: Table entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.
Source: EES Voter Study 2024 (Popa et al., 2024).

that we use to define the 'young' category. When modelling age in a non-linear fashion we can observe a slight decrease in the probability of voting for far-right parties up to the age of 30 after which it stabilises up until later years before substantially decreasing for older voters. These findings add nuance to previous works that point to the fact that younger voters are more likely to vote for far-right parties (Rooduijn et al., 2019; Zagórski et al., 2021), as, at least in the 2024 European Parliament elections, the differences are only meaningful and statistically significant when we compare the youngest to the oldest voters. Figure A3 in the Appendices shows that, the differences between the age groups are remarkable similar across these different countries. This is even more notable when we compare the results of 2024 with those based on the EES 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2022). The effect of age on the vote for far-right parties is not significant at the time of the 2019 European Parliament elections (see Table A12). So, there seems to have been a shift towards the radical right among young voters across EU member states in the 2024 elections.

The results presented in Model 2 (Table 1) also show that supporting liberal democracy has a statistically significant negative effect on voting for far-right parties. Those who fully oppose an independent judiciary are approximately 1.3 times more likely to support far-right parties in comparison to those who fully oppose it, and those who support a strong leader are approximately two times more likely to vote for such parties. But these effects are context-dependent, they are largely driven by countries where

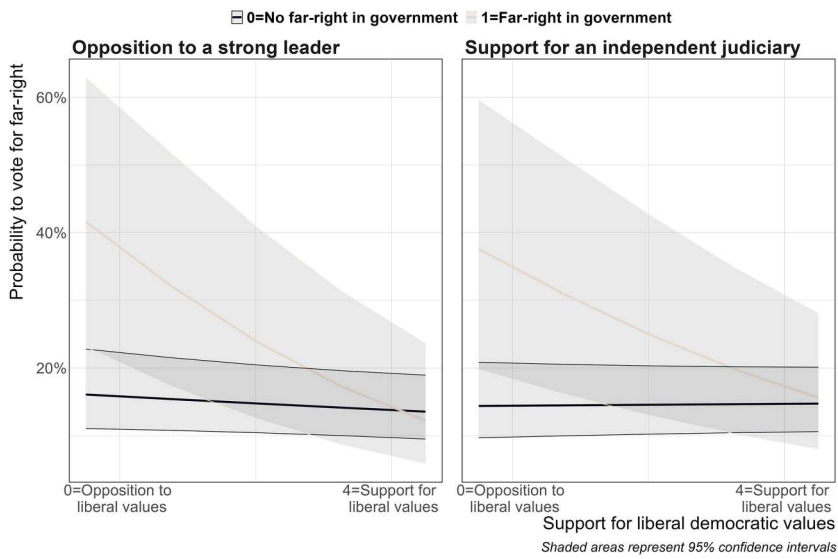

Figure 3. Support for far-right by liberal democratic values.

far-right parties are in government. As in such countries, the principles of liberal democracy are more contested and politicised (Van der Brug et al., 2021b), it is unsurprising that here we note a strong effect of liberal attitudes on supporting the far-right, as shown in Figure 3.[14] Those who hold illiberal attitudes are more than 20 percentage points (or approximately two times) more likely to vote for a far-right party in comparison to those who fully support liberal democracy. In contrast, in countries where there are no far-right parties in opposition, support for liberal democracy has basically no impact on voting for a far-right party.

In the final step of our analysis, we examine whether opposition to liberal democratic values is more likely to drive far-right support among younger voters. Since the effect of liberal democratic values is different between countries where the far right is in office and countries where they are not in office, we present the results distinguishing between these two sets of countries.[15] Figure 4 shows the effects of opposing a strong leader on support for the far-right. In the panel on the left, we see the relationships for the three age groups in countries where there is no far-right party in office. The effect of support for authoritarian leadership is strongest among young people in these countries, even though the differences in effect sizes are not statistically significant. When looking at the right hand panel of Figure 4, we see that the effect of support for an authoritarian leader is substantially larger across all three age groups in countries where the far-right is in office. In these countries, the relationship is negative and statistically significant among all three age groups. Yet, also here, the effect is strongest

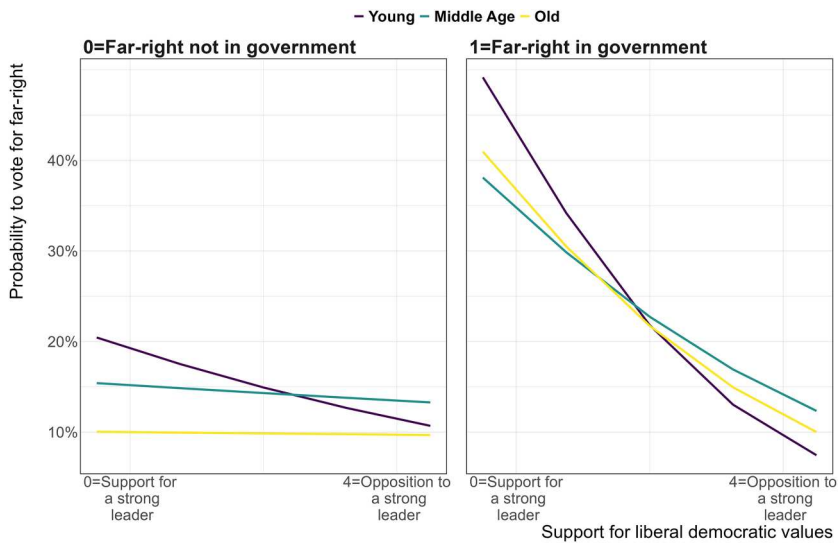

Figure 4. Impact of opposition to authoritarian leadership on support for far-right.

among the youngest group for which we can note a difference of more than 40 percentage points in the probability of voting for a far-right party between those who support a strong leader and those who oppose a strong leader. In contrast, this difference is smaller for middle age (approximately 26 percentage points) and older voters (approximately 30 percentage points). In addition, we need to note that in countries that have a far-right party in power (see Model 3 in Table A6) we only record a statistically significant difference between young and middle age voters in the effect of support for a strong leader. The differences in effect size between the youngest and the oldest group is not statistically significant. All in all, not only are the youngest citizens more likely to support strong leaders, but this preference also translates into a higher probability of voting for a far-right party (see also interaction effect in Table 1 Model 3 and Figure A5 in the Appendices),[16] especially so in countries where far-right parties are in government.[17,18]

However, in terms of opposition to an independent judiciary, no similar pattern emerges (see Figure 5). In countries where the far right is in opposition, no meaningful or statistically significant relationship exists within each of the three age groups (left-hand panel). In countries where the far right is in government (the right-hand panel), support for an independent judiciary tends to reduce far-right voting as expected, among middle-aged and older voters. However, the relationship between the independent judiciary and far-right support among young voters is not statistically significant.

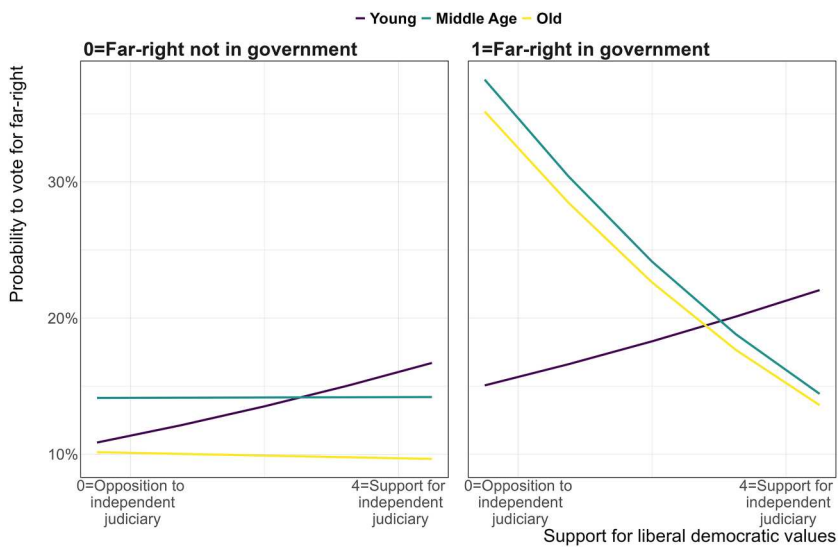

Figure 5. Impact of support for an independent judiciary on support for far-right.

The results for the item on authoritarian leadership suggests the weaker support for liberal democratic values drives young voters to the far-right. However, we must acknowledge that there might be a spurious relationship. The main effect of age and the stronger effect of liberal values among younger voters on the probability of voting for the far-right can also be driven by the fact that this demographic group has a higher affinity for 'new' issues (e.g., Jocker et al., 2025; Steiner, 2024; Van der Brug & Rekker, 2021) and a weaker connection with more 'traditional' parties (e.g., Dinas, 2012; Rekker, 2022). Hence as a robustness check, we test if these two effects hold in the case of voting for the far-left. As the results presented in Table A7 show, when it comes to support for the far-left, neither the main effect of age nor its interaction with liberal democratic values reach statistical significance. These null-findings indicate that the lower support for liberal democracy does not only drive young voters away from the mainstream traditional parties but that also specifically pushes them to choose political alternatives that specifically reject such values.

When considering the future of liberal democracy from the perspective of today's young voters, the results suggest a fairly grim outlook. Not only are they more likely to support far-right parties, but this support is exacerbated by the fact that they are more likely to reject liberal democratic values, which in turn have a strong impact on supporting far-right parties. Even more concerning is the fact that their support for strong leaders is more likely to translate into far-right party support compared to older generations.[19] This trend becomes especially pronounced when far-right parties gain power, adding further complexity to an already troubling situation, particularly in light of the recent rise of the far-right in the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Conclusion

Are the kids Alt Right? Contrary to the common assumption that younger citizens are more progressive than older ones (see, e.g., Grassi et al., 2024; Inglehart, 1981; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), recent evidence has shown that young people are in fact less supportive of democracy than their older generations (Foa & Mounk, 2019). In this paper, we examine these developments in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections, where we focus explicitly on *support for liberal democracy* and explore whether the rejection of liberal democratic values translates into higher support for the far-right. Our findings highlight a scepticism towards liberal democratic norms among young voters when compared to older generations. Our analysis of the pan-European vote study further reveals a troubling pattern: younger voters are not only less supportive of liberal democratic principles, such as checks and balances on executive power, but they are also more likely to

vote for far-right parties. This suggests that the conventional view of far-right voters as disillusioned middle age and older 'losers of modernity', who are soon to be replaced by a generation of progressive liberal young voters (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019) does not hold true across the European political landscape.

Our study also demonstrates that the relationship between support for liberal democracy and voting for the far right is complex and context-dependent. Among the youngest citizens, there is no significant relationship between support for the far right and opposition to the independent judiciary. However, our findings indicate that younger voters who favour strong, authoritarian leadership are more likely to support far-right parties, but primarily in countries where such parties are already in government (see also Van der Brug et al., 2021a). We do not know why the relationships are different for the two items. However, the findings on the effects of support for authoritarian leadership are concerning. Several scholars have recently observed a 'normalisation of the far right' (e.g., De Jonge & Gaufman, 2022; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Valentim, 2024; Vrakopoulos, 2022). On the basis of the literature on political socialisation, we would expect this to have the strongest impact on the most recent generations, and our findings are in line with this. Particularly when far-right parties are in power, there is a risk that the commitment to liberal democracy among young voters will further erode, potentially normalizing illiberal governance and accelerating democratic backsliding.

When Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017, 2019) rang the alarm bells about the lower levels of support for democracy among younger generations, their studies were met with criticism (Alexander & Welzel, 2017; Norris, 2017; Voeten, 2017). While we agree with some of these critiques, our study suggests that the general conclusion of Foa and Mounk cannot be simply dismissed. Our results are concerning in light of the broader patterns of democratic erosion observed in several European countries. If younger generations, traditionally seen as a bulwark against authoritarianism, are now more inclined to support illiberal leaders and parties, this raises broader concerns about the stability of liberal democratic institutions in Europe. As a snapshot of attitudes and electoral behaviour in 2024, we cannot disentangle whether these are age or cohort effects. However, if the current younger generation remain less committed to liberal democracy as they grow older, the worry would be that as younger voters replace older generations, their political preferences will shape the trajectory of European democracies, and the rise of far-right populism may become more entrenched. Further research is essential to learn if this is indeed the case and to deepen our understanding of why younger voters are less committed core liberal democratic norms. Ideally, future studies will move beyond the current snapshot of 27 elections to

the European Parliament and test these patterns using a longer time period while also taking into account how regional and other contextual factors may influence how attitudes toward liberal democracy shape far-right support.

Notes

1. The data employed in this study, the European Elections Study 2024, do not contain a question item capturing general support for democracy versus authoritarian systems. So, this comparison unfortunately cannot be made in this paper.
2. Developmental psychologists demonstrate that certain relevant values are formed already at a much younger age (for an overview, see Sapiro 2004). Yet, for the formation of partisan preferences, the most formative years seem to be late adolescence and early adulthood.
3. Historically, the Republican Party of the US is not a far-right party, but since the rise of the Tea Party movement and especially under the presidency of Donald Trump, the party has embraced the main characteristics of a populist right party (such as authoritarianism, nativism, populism, conspiracy theories involving ethnic minorities, etc.).
4. A complicating factor is that in many of the countries included in this study, the older generations were politically socialised in authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, one could expect support for liberal democracy to be relatively low among the oldest generations in those countries, because of their socializing experiences amd as a result of feelings of nostalgia (e.g., Neundorf, 2010). On the other hand, we could expect the opposite, since older generations have experienced the downsides of living under authoritarian rule. So, we don't have a clear expectation about the consequences of these differences between the histories of different countries. In the Appendices of this article, we present country specific results and we find that the patterns are remarkably robust across different countries.
5. However, a recent study focusing only on support for the far right, shows that older generations in Spain evaluate the far right more in terms of the issue of immigration than younger generations (see, e.g. Zagórski et al., 2024).
6. The sample size is roughly 1000 respondents in each EU country, with the exception of Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta where approximately 500 surveys were conducted.
7. Both ask respondents to indicate their agreement with these statements by means of a 5-point Likert scale.
8. Given that the impact of liberal democratic values and age on support for far-right might be influenced by factors that are specific to these second-order elections we further use the probability to vote (PTV) for far-right parties in a given country (in countries where the PTV items was asked for multiple far-right parties, we use the maximum value) as an alternative operationalisation of party support. We present the results in Table A3 the Appendices, the patterns are substantially similar to the ones presented in Table 1.
9. We further present the results of an analysis that only differentiates between young voters (i.e. age < 25) and all other voters (i.e. age > 24), see table A4 in the Appendices, and a further split of the age into six groups see Table A9 and A10 in the Appendices.

10. Given the different party-systems we "split" Belgium in Flanders and Wallonia. We further add random slopes for age and support for liberal democracy when we present cross-level interactions (i.e. Model 4 and 5).
11. The results presented in Table 1 are substantially identical when controlling for and additional five well-established attitudinal predictors of support for far-right (i.e. support for measures to fight climate change, immigration, same-sex marriage, military assistance to Ukraine, and opposition to traditional gender roles), see Table A5 in the Appendices.
12. Even though the confidence intervals overlap we note that the difference is statistically significant at $p < .05$ (95% CI : −0.07, −0.01) . We further note that this effect is robust when we move the cut-off point for "young" to the ages of 22, 23, 25, 27 and 30.
13. The figure is based on a non-linear estimation of age using a smooth term via Bayesian model (implemented by the brms package in R) that otherwise has the same specification as Model 2 in Table 1.
14. As these are models-based prediction even if confidence intervals overlap the difference between the slopes is statistically significant both in the case of "Opposition to a strong leader" (i.e. 0.25 sig at $p < 0.01$), and in the case of "Support for an independent judiciary" (i.e. 0.25 sig at $p < 0.01$). These estimation are based on "test-prediction()" function from the "ggefffects" package. Furthermore, predicting the estimated effects of liberal democratic values as a function of having a far-right government clearly shows that the confidence intervals do not overlap (see Figure A8).
15. See also Table A6 in the Appendices for the difference between countries where there is a far-right party in government and the other countries based on a split sample analysis. The results are substantially identical. We also present country-specific patterns in Figures A4.1 and A4.2 in the Appendices.
16. We further plot the non-linear effect of age depending on support for these two liberal democratic values (See Figure A6 in the Appendices). We again note a non-linear pattern, which shows that younger people who oppose strong leaders are substantially less likely to support far-right than those who support them. While based on these non-linear plots is difficult to establish a clear cut-off point for when the effect of age is no longer statistically significant we note that the joint effect between age and opposing a strong leader remains robust when moving the cut-off point for "young" below the age of 24 (i.e. 23 and 22 years) but is no longer statistically significant when we move the threshold above 24 years.
17. We note a statistically significant difference between the effect of opposing a strong leader in the case of young voters between countries where far-right is in government and the other countries (contrast 0.28 sig at $p < .05$, estimation based on "test-prediction()" function from the "ggefffects" R package).
18. We further note that the effects of "Opposing a strong leader" conditional on age hold when we only compare younger voters (i.e. age < 25) with all other voters (i.e. age > 24). See table A4 and Figure A7 in the Appendices.
19. Still as previously noted this last pattern is dependent on the cut-off point (i.e. does not hold this is moved above the age of 24) and not robust across an alternative operationalisation of support for far-right (i.e. PTV, see table Model 3 in Table A3).
20. As coefficients of the three-way interactions are hard to interpret, we also present a split sample analysis (see Models 3 and 4 Table A6 and Figures A9 and A10 in Appendices).

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

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