

European Civilizationism on the Far Right: Reconciling National and Supranational Identities

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Abstract

Why do far-right parties invoke “European civilization” in their discourse? Despite their well-known nationalism and Euroscepticism, far-right parties increasingly engage in civilizational discourse—particularly by highlighting Europe’s Christian heritage, secularism, and liberalism (Brubaker 2017). Yet, this emphasis on a supranational identity category threatens to undermine their otherwise indisputable nationalist profile. This study investigates how the far right reconciles its nationalism and civilizationism by exploring the discourse of four prominent far-right parties in western Europe and their leaders—in France, the National Rally and Marine Le Pen; in Italy, the League, Matteo Salvini, the Brothers of Italy, and Giorgia Meloni; and in Spain, Vox and Santiago Abascal. I find that these parties normalize civilizational discourse through the twin processes of abstraction and embedding. Through abstraction, they link European civilization to general features of a shared heritage that are nonthreatening to particular nationalisms. Through embedding, they localize European civilization by explicitly linking it to nationalist symbols and myths. I demonstrate these patterns using both quantitative and qualitative text analysis techniques on a corpus of these parties’ tweets between April 2019 and March 2021. This study contributes to the growing literature on civilizationism by assessing how the far right invokes this concept and discursively “constructs” European civilization in a way that is both compatible with, but distinct from, particular nationalisms.

Keywords: far right; nationalism; civilizations; text analysis; Twitter.

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1 Introduction

Despite their steadfast nationalism, far-right parties increasingly portray themselves as the defenders of “Western” or “European” civilization. The far right often invokes civilizational identity to stigmatize Muslim immigrants, who are characterized as threats to Europe’s Christian heritage, secular society, and liberal politics (Brubaker 2017). Nevertheless, this emphasis on supranationalism threatens to undercut the traditional primacy of national identity in far-right discourse. By praising “European civilization” and casting themselves as its loyal proponents, far-right parties run the risk of downplaying their strong Eurosceptic and nationalist profile. This apparent tension highlights the need for greater investigation into how the far right manages its dual allegiance to nationalism and civilizationism (De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini 2020).

The far right bridges the gap between nationalism and civilizationism by simultaneously abstracting European civilization as a set of universal principles and embedding it in familiar national symbols. Just as the European Union both deracinates and localizes itself (McNamara 2015), abstraction presents supranational identity as nonthreatening, while embedding casts it as complementary to nationalism. These processes of abstraction and embedding are reflected in three distinct discursive patterns: shared heritage, embedded nationalism, and adopted nationalism. In some cases, far-right parties characterize European civilization using transnational points of reference that constitute a shared heritage, such as Christianity or the legacy of the Enlightenment. Ideas such as equality, freedom, and democracy do not properly belong to any particular European nation, nor do they clearly challenge the brand of nationalism promulgated by the far right. In other circumstances, far-right parties embed

their own nationalism in civilizational discourse by presenting national myths and symbols as defining features of the wider civilization. This approach localizes European civilization by linking it to familiar points of reference in the nationalist imaginary, such as historical figures and past triumphs. Alternatively, the far right may adopt elements of other European nationalisms and recast them as representative of the wider civilization. This most commonly occurs in relation to well-known points of reference that relate to elements of Europe’s “shared heritage,” such as Notre Dame as a symbol of Europe’s Christian heritage, rather than just French history and culture.

To explore how the far right discursively maneuvers between nationalism and civilizationism, I examine the discourse of four prominent far-right parties and their leaders: in France, the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) and Marine Le Pen; in Italy, the League (*Lega*), Matteo Salvini, the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*), and Giorgia Meloni; and in Spain, Vox and Santiago Abascal. These actors’ civilizational discourse is assessed using a corpus of their tweets over two years, from April 2019 to March 2021 (N = 173,742). I employ various quantitative text analysis techniques, such as word frequency analysis and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling, to assess general trends in these parties’ and leaders’ civilizational discourse. These large-N methods are complemented with qualitative coding and analysis of the tweets to assess how the far right integrates civilizationism into its traditionally nationalist discourse.

While civilizationism is not the most prominent aspect of far-right discourse in France, Italy, or Spain, it plays a key role in parties’ boundary-making efforts by “othering” Muslim immigrants. While the far right acknowledges the plurality of nationalisms that constitute European civilization, it denies the existence of such pluralism elsewhere; instead, far-right

actors depict Islam as a homogeneous and threatening adversary and suggest the coming of a Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993, 1996). Yet, in addition to being virulently anti-Islam, far-right civilizational discourse also portrays EU and leftist elites as “co-conspirators” in the plot to undermine European civilization. Furthermore, far-right parties in France, Italy, and Spain stray from their northern European counterparts’ emphasis on secularism as a defining feature of European civilization (Brubaker 2017); instead, these parties concentrate on Europe’s Christian heritage and liberal politics. Their discourse frequently features both shared heritage and embedded nationalism, while occasionally including adopted nationalism.

This study enhances our understanding of how political actors dynamically construct the notion of “European civilization” in their discourse. Furthermore, focusing on the far right’s civilizational discourse highlights the tension inherent in a dual focus on both national and supranational identity categories, which are at once complementary and contradictory. By highlighting several discursive patterns through which far-right parties reconcile their nationalism and civilizationism, this study provides a framework for additional investigation in this area. Likewise, shifting the geographical focus from northern to southern Europe enables the identification of key similarities and differences between how parties conceive of European civilization in various parts of the continent.

The next section provides an overview of previous research on civilizationism and its role in far-right politics. The following section elaborates the theory. The research design is then presented, followed by an analysis of the data. The study concludes with a discussion of the results and their implications for scholarly study of civilizationism and the far right broadly.

2 Previous Research

The study of civilizational politics has largely converged around the proposition that civilizations in the modern world are both plural and pluralist (Katzenstein 2010). On the one hand, modernity features multiple civilizational communities that coexist and interact in various ways (Katzenstein 2010). On the other hand, civilizations themselves are not homogeneous entities, but rather they are characterized by internal diversity and difference (Katzenstein 2010). Although essentialist perspectives treat civilizations as objective realities that can be perceived and studied independently (Huntington 1993, 1996), civilizations are nothing more than supranational “imagined communities” that rely on political actors—including elites and citizens—to imbue them with meaning and continually recreate them as intersubjective realities (Anderson 1983; Brubaker 2017; Hale and Laruelle 2021). Therefore, civilizations are best conceptualized as dynamic and porous social constructions that are employed by various political actors to make sense of the social world (Hale 2008, 2014; Hale and Laruelle 2021). As such, it makes more sense to study how specific political actors understand and employ civilizational politics, rather than to search for objective measures of civilizations or empirical demarcations between them (Hale and Laruelle 2021; Hall and Jackson 2008; Jackson 2010).

In the case of the far right, European civilization is often invoked to stigmatize Muslim immigrants, who are linked to an essentialized and Orientalist depiction of Islam (Brown 2019; De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini 2020; Duina and Carson 2020; Said 2003). This discursive strategy expresses the far right’s virulent Islamophobia (Akkerman 2015; Halikiopoulou, Mock, and Vasilopoulou 2013; Jennings and Ralph-Morrow 2020; Wodak 2015;

Zúquete 2008), while simultaneously constructing European civilization as a community based on Christianity, secularism, and liberalism (Brubaker 2017). In far-right discourse, Christianity is emptied of its religious content and instead is presented as a signifier of the allegedly inherent opposition between Europe’s heritage and Islam (Brubaker 2017). Likewise, secularism is invoked to reduce Islam’s public presence and contrast Europe’s separation of church and state with the implied political ambitions of Islam (Brubaker 2017). Furthermore, liberalism is employed to suggest an alleged incompatibility between Islam and Europe’s promotion of individual rights and freedoms, including gender equality and LGBTQ rights (Akkerman 2015; Allen and Goodman 2020; Brubaker 2017; Harteveld et al. 2015; Jennings and Ralph-Morrow 2020; Lange and Mügge 2015; Scott 2007; Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Zúquete 2008). By linking civilizationism and Islamophobia, far-right parties identify the European “us” in contrast to a Muslim “them.”

There is evidence that European civilizationism manifests at both the elite and citizen levels (Adler 2010; De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini 2020; Hale 2019; Hale and Laruelle 2020). European Union leaders have adopted the view of Europe as a “civilizational community of practice” that exercises power through its normative example (Adler 2010), while Russian elites who identify with European civilization tend to believe that Russia will follow the pattern of democratic leadership turnover common on the continent (Hale 2019). Likewise, most Russian citizens view their country as part of at least one world civilization, including approximately half who identify at least partially with European civilization (Hale and Laruelle 2020). In fact, even supporters of the far right in western Europe tend to agree that Europeans share a common history and values—although they tend to balk at the proposition that Europeans partake of a common “culture” (De Cesari, Bosilkov, and

Piacentini 2020).

While the notion of European civilization has proliferated among a diverse array of political actors, questions remain as to how civilizationism relates to nationalism (Hale and Laruelle 2021) and to what extent the far right’s simultaneous invocation of both is paradoxical (De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini 2020). Brubaker (2017) suggests that civilizationism is both a reformulation of nationalism and an alternative to it. Yet, it is uncertain whether such a discursive approach is sustainable if nationalism and civilizationism pull in different directions. The far right’s strong Euroscepticism complicates the matter further, as parties must be careful to distinguish their defense of European civilization from their disdain for the European Union. Thus, further scholarly attention is needed to examine how the far right negotiates between nationalism and civilizationism and to what extent both identities fit coherently into far-right discourse.

3 Reconciling Nationalism and Civilizationism

Far-right parties reconcile the presence of nationalism and civilizationism in their discourse by engaging in the twin practices of abstraction and embedding. Through abstraction, the far right links European civilization to generalized principles that pose no threat to national identities. These principles—such as equality, freedom, and democracy—are presented as universal and “thin” enough to have multiple legitimate interpretations (e.g., references to democracy are not accompanied by endorsements of specific political institutions). By contrast, the process of embedding roots civilizationism in the nationalist imaginary through references to particular symbols and myths. This localizes and contextualizes civilizational

discourse by recasting nationalist themes as constitutive features of a supranational identity. Together, abstraction and embedding lend coherence to far-right discourse by portraying civilizationism as complementary to, and partially constituted by, nationalism.

These dual processes lie at opposite ends of a continuum, with abstraction emphasizing universalist, deracinated reference points, and embedding drawing on particularist, localized content. Three distinct discursive patterns are located along this spectrum: shared heritage, embedded nationalism, and adopted nationalism. These patterns are illustrated in Figure 1.

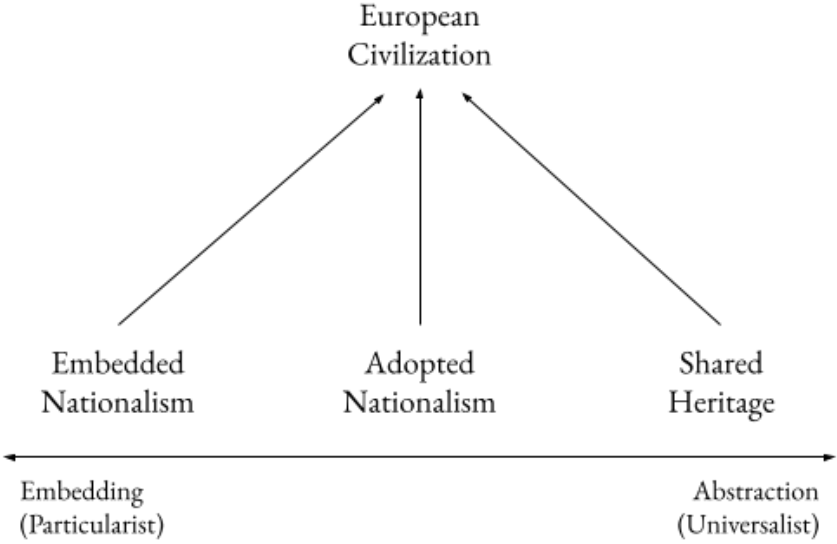


Figure 1: Discursive Patterns of Abstraction and Embedding

When abstracting European civilization, far-right parties frequently invoke elements of a shared heritage common to all European nations. These points of reference are drawn from

transnational historical moments that are not the exclusive property of any particular nation, including Greek and Roman antiquity, Christianity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the world wars (De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini 2020; Vasilopoulou 2017). For example, democracy, equality, and liberty are claimed by the far right as key elements of European civilization, while not pertaining to any specific nation. Importantly, as an exercise in abstraction, the nature of this shared heritage is left vague enough to encompass the pluralism present in European societies (e.g., regarding specific institutions), while simultaneously marking the boundary between “Europe” and alleged outsiders, such as Islam.

By contrast, the far right localizes its civilizational discourse through embedded nationalism, in which national symbols and myths are presented as constitutive elements of European civilization. For example, Italian claims regarding the impact of Columbus’s voyage on European history, or French claims about the continental repercussions of the French Revolution, embed nationalism within civilizationism. Being familiar to and cherished by far-right supporters, these reference points enhance the “fit” between citizens’ priors and the civilizational identity category (Brubaker 2017; Hale 2008; Hale and Laruelle 2021).

Between the extremes of abstraction and embedding lies adopted nationalism, in which the far right invokes specific reference points from a foreign nationalism and frames them as belonging to a wider civilizational community. Italian portrayals of Notre Dame as a symbol not just of French history and culture, but European history and its Christian heritage, is a form of adopted nationalism. Likewise, portraying foreign crime and terrorism as threats to the wider civilizational community, as occurred after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and numerous subsequent attacks throughout Europe, follows this same discursive pattern. Adopted nationalism is a close counterpart to embedded nationalism,

with the key distinction between them being the origin of the invoked reference points—embedded nationalism uses familiar elements from the nationalist imaginary, while adopted nationalism casts a wider net to incorporate less familiar features from foreign nationalisms.

At the heart of the far right’s civilizational discourse is a recognition of the pluralist nature of European civilization, which is conceived of as a “Europe of nations,” each of which is a distinct, but legitimate, expression of a shared civilizational identity. Nevertheless, this acknowledgment of pluralism does not extend to other civilizational communities, such as Islam, which are instead treated as homogeneous and monolithic entities. Invariably, this inconsistency leads to nuanced treatments of “us” and essentialist characterizations of “them.”

4 Research Design

To further explore how the far right negotiates between civilizationism and nationalism in its discourse, I analyze four prominent far-right parties in western Europe and their leaders: in France, the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) and Marine Le Pen; in Italy, the League (*Lega*), Matteo Salvini, the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*), and Giorgia Meloni; and in Spain, Vox and Santiago Abascal. Most research on European civilizationism focuses on northern Europe and Russia; extending the geographic scope southward promises to improve our understanding of how this concept is understood in a distinct corner of the continent.

To measure civilizational discourse, I leverage a collection of far-right parties’ and leaders’ tweets over a two-year period, from April 2019 to March 2021 (N = 173,742). After employing

standard preprocessing techniques, I use the dictionary method to identify tweets that relate to civilizationism.¹ These tweets are then assessed using word frequency analysis and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling.² To identify the ideal number of topics for the topic models, I use the diagnostic tests proposed by Arun (2010) and Deveaud (2014), executed with the R package “ldatuning.”

In addition to these quantitative text analysis techniques, I qualitatively code and analyze the tweets. The qualitative coding scheme identifies tweets based on the three thematic areas identified by Brubaker (2017): Christianity, secularism, and liberalism. I also code tweets based on whether they reference Europe, the nation, or a foreign European country. This qualitative analysis adds depth to the quantitative findings and enables me to trace how both abstraction and embedding—and their constitutive patterns, shared heritage, embedded nationalism, and adopted nationalism—are incorporated into far-right discourse.

5 Results

Although civilizationism is an increasingly important component of far-right discourse, it remains the exception rather than the rule. Over the two-year period under study, no party or leader mentioned civilizationism in more than one percent of their tweets, with individual leaders, such as Marine Le Pen (National Rally) and Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy), invoking the concept more frequently than the parties they represent. Yet, there is a striking similarity in how the far right employs civilizational discourse across France,

¹This step also included an analysis of tweets from the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) and Alice Weidel; however, there were too few civilization-related tweets to sustain a full analysis.

²All quantitative text analysis is carried out using the following R packages: “quanteda,” “topicmodels,” “ldatuning,” and “spacyr.”

Italy, and Spain. Table 1 displays the ten most frequently used words in parties’ and leaders’ tweets. Importantly, all mention “Europe” and all but the League mention their respective states. There are numerous attributes frequently associated with European civilization, including “value,” “culture,” “history,” “symbol,” and “statue.”

Table 1: Most Frequent Words in Far-Right Civilizational Discourse

National Rally / Le Pen	League / Salvini	Brothers of Italy / Meloni	Vox / Abascal
europe(an)	defend	europe	destroy
value	battle	today	western
all	can	italy	want
want	history	freedom	culture
france	country	culture	against
ecological	value	islamist	europe
stakes	symbol	war	statue
must	europe	battle	symbol
immigration	go	exist	spain
country	unique	below	represent

In addition to highlighting transnational commonalities, the far right’s civilizational discourse is heavily adversarial, as it suggests the existence of a Huntingtonian civilizational “clash” between Europe and Islam (Huntington 1993, 1996). This is evident in the frequent use of words such as “stakes,” “defend,” “battle,” “war,” “destroy,” and “against.” Besides demonizing Muslim immigrants, the far right also portrays leftist and European elites as a conspiratorial fifth column working to undermine European civilization from within. For

example, Spain’s Vox suggests that the country’s left-wing government conspires with the “separatist mafia” and “globalist elites” to threaten Spain’s unity, territorial integrity, and civilization.³

Diving deeper into these parties’ civilizational discourse reveals distinct patterns in how they discursively construct European civilization and link it to other aspects of their ideologies. Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 in the Appendix present the results of LDA topic models on each party’s civilizational tweets. In addition to presenting European civilization as under attack from Islam (topic 2) and immigrants (topic 5), the French National Rally also portrays globalization as an opponent of civilization (topics 3 and 6). In particular, it highlights the challenges posed by profit-seeking international businesses and their “short-term” perspective. Instead, it promotes an “ecological civilization,” which respects borders, the environment, and the plural nationalisms that define European civilization.

The League likewise devotes attention to both defining European civilization in positive terms (topics 2, 3, and 4) and identifying the challenges it faces (topic 6). It alternates between references to “Western” and “European” civilization, which are both viewed as “societies” linked by “history” and “values” (topics 3 and 4). Of particular importance is this civilization’s Christian identity, as noted in the mentions of “Christmas” (topic 4) and “cathedral” (topic 2).

The Brothers of Italy’s discourse is more thoroughly embedded with militaristic references, in which European “culture” (topics 4 and 5), “freedom” (topic 2), and “history” (topic 5) must be “defended” against “Islamist” “enemies” (topics 2 and 3). As with the League, the Brothers of Italy distinguish between positive portrayals of European civilization

³Vox (@vox_es), Twitter Post, July 29, 2020, https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1288455609126445057.

as something to be “defended” (topic 2) and “admired” (topic 6) and threats against which the response must be to “battle” (topics 5 and 6), and “declare war” (topic 3).

Vox also proposes multiple attributes as features of European civilization, including “freedom” (topic 6), “Christian” “symbols” (topics 2 and 3), and “statues” representing historical figures (topic 1). Vox also concerns itself with “globalists” (topic 5) and the so-called “progressive dictatorship” (topic 6), which is seen as a “threat” to “freedom” and “culture” (topic 6).

Differentiating tweets based on their substantive link to Christianity, liberalism, or secularism reveals an interesting pattern, as illustrated in Figure 2. Unlike their northern European counterparts, far-right parties in France, Italy, and Spain do not link European civilization to secularism in their Twitter discourse. Nevertheless, both Christianity and liberalism appear frequently in the tweets of the Italian and Spanish far right, while in France the emphasis is more solely on liberalism. Significantly, not all tweets fit neatly into this tripartite typology, as some are overly vague about the nature of civilizationism, while others are linked more specifically to national culture and identity.

As suggested by Brubaker (2017), far-right parties’ invocation of Christianity is emptied of religious content, with religious labels instead being used as a shorthand to distinguish between “us” and “them.” This is clear from Brothers of Italy leader Giorgia Meloni’s tweet regarding the appearance of religious symbols in schools: “Having the #crucifix in our classrooms does not mean imposing our beliefs on others, but being proud of the values that have founded our civilization!”⁴ This is echoed by other actors in Italy and Spain, who

⁴Giorgia Meloni (@GiorgiaMeloni), Twitter Post, October 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1181502521652715520>.

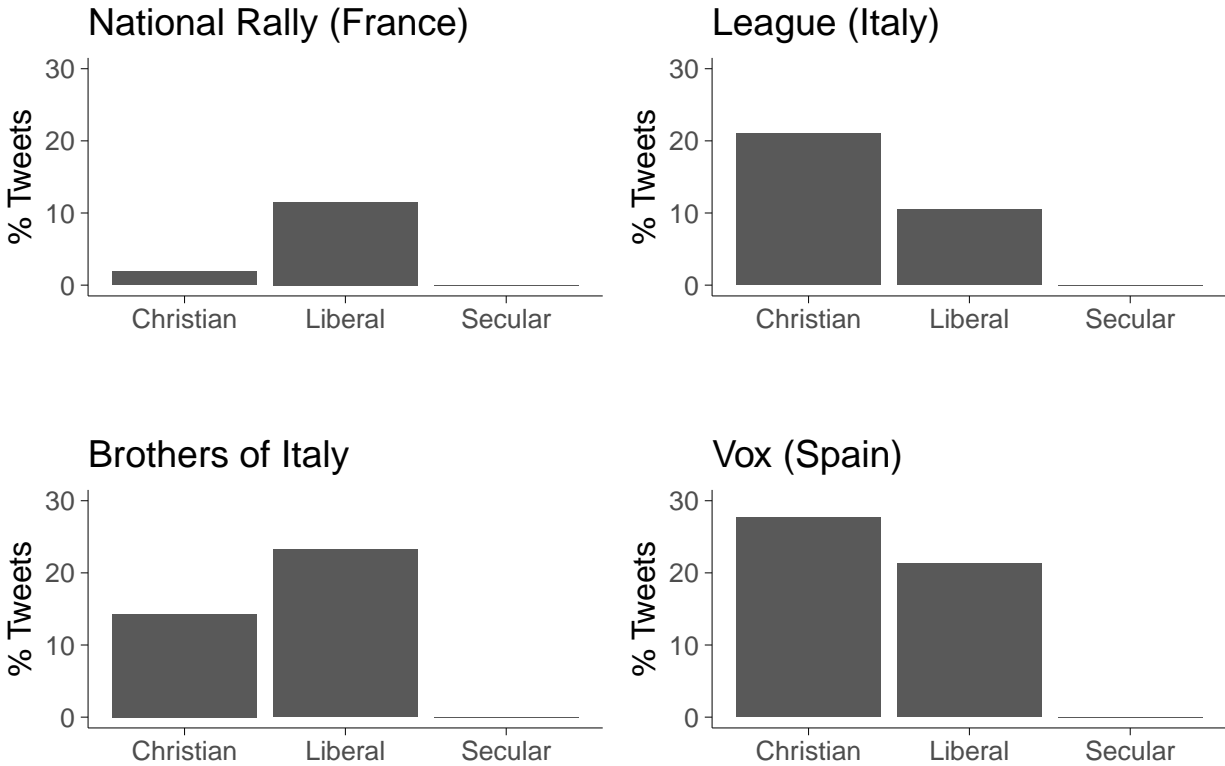


Figure 2: Christianity, Liberalism, and Secularism in Far-Right Civilizational Discourse

suggest an inherent link between Christianity and Europe’s heritage. League leader Matteo Salvini suggested that vandalism of a statue of the Virgin Mary in Tuscany represented a lack of “respect for our symbols, for our values, for our civilization.”⁵ Likewise, Spain’s Vox responded to a fire in France’s Nantes Cathedral in July 2020 by suggesting a coordinated assault on Europe’s Christian roots: “Another accidental fire? They want to destroy everything that symbolizes Western Christian civilization. We will raise back up everything that barbarism destroys. . . .”⁶ Interestingly, references to Christianity are largely absent from the civilizational discourse of France’s National Rally and Marine Le Pen, likely due to the country’s strong tradition of *laïcité* or secularism. As illustrated in Figure 3, data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2020) also confirms that the National Rally

⁵Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), Twitter Post, July 17, 2020, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1284067386933628930>.

⁶Vox (@vox_es), Twitter Post, July 18, 2020, https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1284417361622310912.

is the least explicitly religious of the four parties under study.

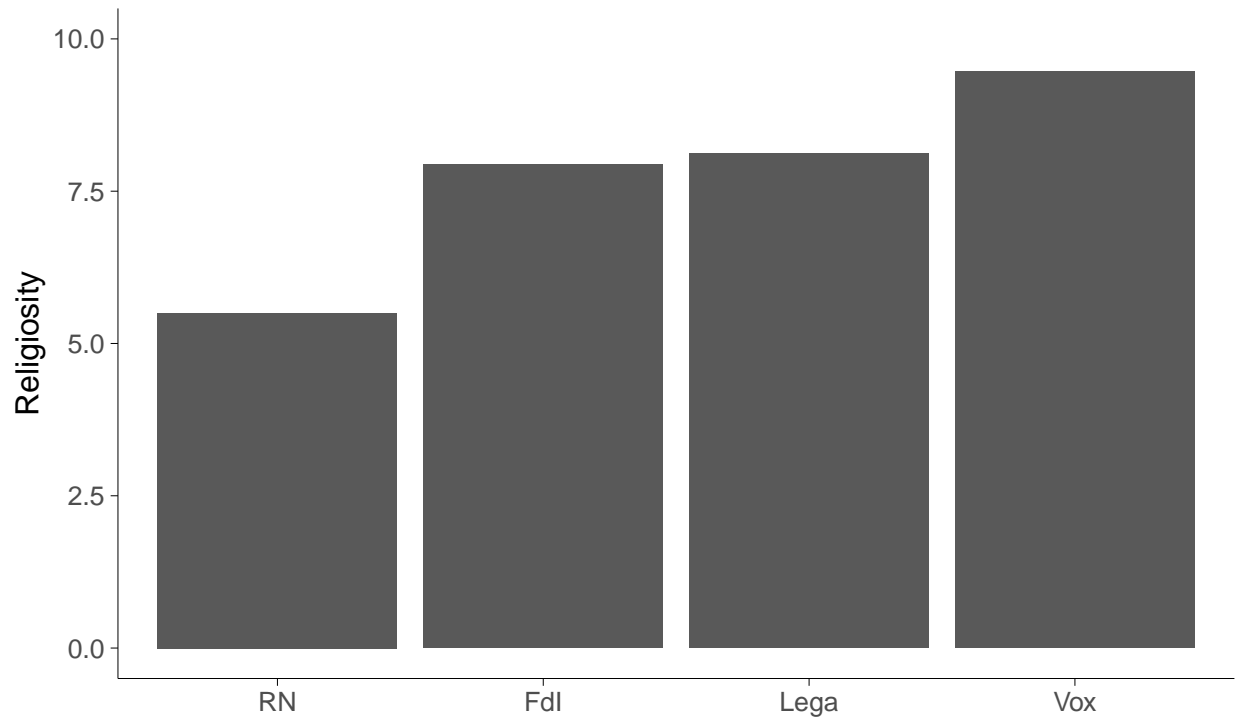


Figure 3: Religiosity Among Far-Right Parties in France, Italy, and Spain

Liberalism is also apparent in these parties’ civilizational discourse. Salvini reflects the philosemitism raised by Brubaker (2017) in his condemnation of the attack on a French Jewish writer: “Solidarity with the Jewish writer Marek Halter, attacked at home in Paris by two hooded people. Liberty, democracy, and respect cannot be up for discussion, anti-Semitism and hatred of Jewish people are unacceptable in the world and civilization.”⁷ This also arises in his defense of gender equality, which followed a tweet condemning Islamic schools: “. . . No space for extremists, for those who preach hate, who hit and discriminate against women. We are proud of our civilization and we will defend it at all costs.”⁸ Nevertheless, the most frequent type of discourse in this category links European civilization to the general notion

⁷Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), Twitter Post, February 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1360986005092921346>.

⁸Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), Twitter Post, June 15, 2019, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1139932305374490624>.

of freedom. For example, Le Pen tweeted: “Civilizational values! We dare to use the word because what is at stake are our values. . . our freedoms.”⁹ Likewise, Brothers of Italy presents Islam as a threat to freedom: “Our civilization is our freedom. Let’s defend it from Islamist hatred. . . ”¹⁰

These various themes are incorporated into far-right discourse by abstracting the notion of civilizationism to encompass a shared European heritage, while simultaneously embedding civilization in each country’s unique nationalism. Figure 4 illustrates that the far right frequently mentions Europe and national demonyms in its civilizational discourse. Furthermore, parties in Italy and Spain also tend to mention other European nations—particularly France—in their construction of European civilization.

Europe as a civilization based on a shared heritage is frequently mentioned in the far right’s tweets. Le Pen gives voice to this notion by distinguishing between the EU’s treatment of Europe as an economic market and her view of Europe as a civilizational community: “Our Europe is not only a market that must be regulated in a just manner, but a space defined by a geography, a history, a heritage, and CIVILIZATIONAL values. . . ”¹¹ National Rally vice president Jordan Bardella offers a more specific explanation of European civilization by linking it to transnational historical reference points: “. . . Europe is a well-defined geographical space, a civilization proud of its Christian, Roman, and Greek roots. . . ”¹² This sentiment is echoed by Meloni, who further asserts that Italian national identity is inextric-

⁹Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel), Twitter Post, May 11, 2019, https://twitter.com/RNational_off/status/1127239196048089088.

¹⁰Fratelli d’Italia (@FratellidItalia), Twitter Post, November 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FratellidItalia/status/1323730962283401216>.

¹¹Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel), Twitter Post, May 11, 2019, https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1127237457395834880.

¹²Jordan Bardella (@J_Bardella), Twitter Post, May 21, 2019, https://twitter.com/J_Bardella/status/1130906098096115712.

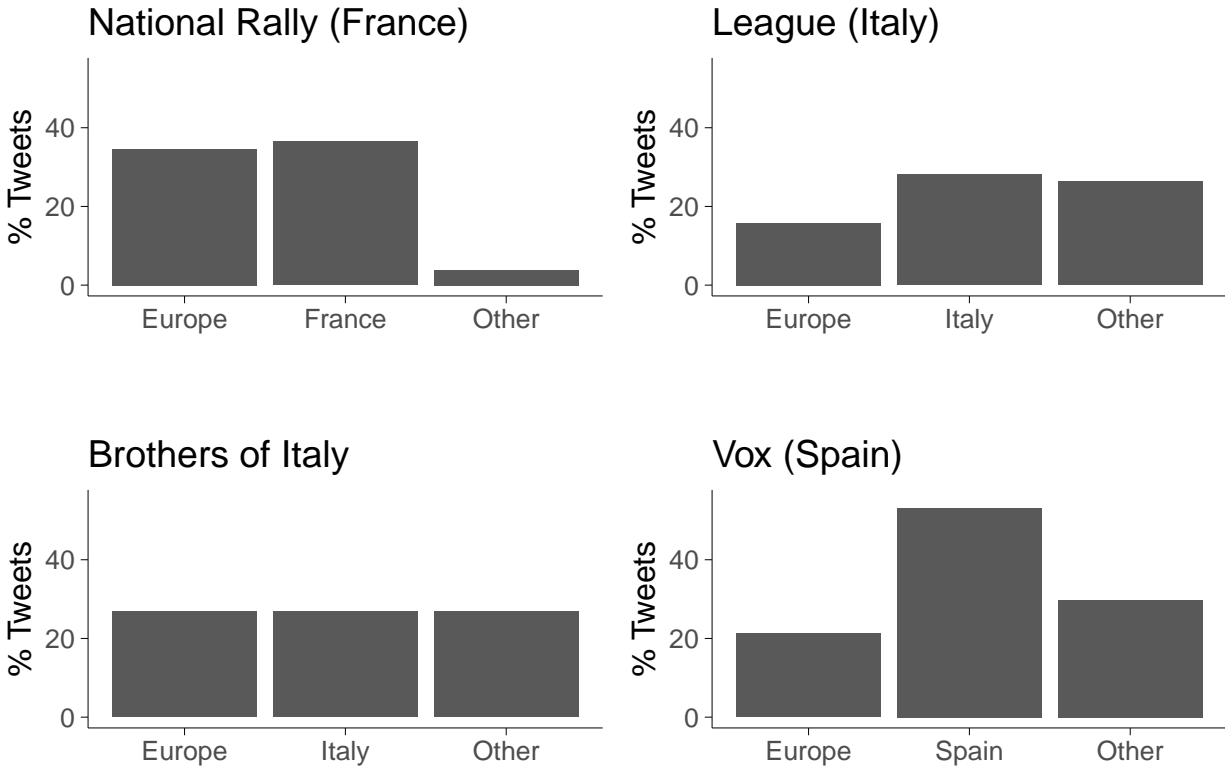


Figure 4: Supranational and National References in Far-Right Tweets

cably linked to its Europeanness, with both threatened by a so-called pending Islamization: “Our identity as Italians and Europeans is founded on the classical and Christian roots of our civilization. Let’s defend it from the Islamization... of Italy and Europe...”¹³ Furthermore, the universalizing tendency of this discursive pattern is on full display in a tweet from Brothers of Italy senator Adolfo Urso, who links the debate on statue removal to the whole of human history: “Tearing down the #statues of Western and European civilization means canceling the #history of humanity. The values of freedom and dignity of each person are expressions of that history.”¹⁴

Embedded nationalism is also frequently found in the far right’s civilizational discourse.

¹³Giorgia Meloni (@GiorgiaMeloni), Twitter Post, May 15, 2019, <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1128630119956996098>.

¹⁴Adolfo Urso (@adolfo_urso), Twitter Post, June 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FratellidItalia/status/1275037157640622081>.

In particular, the debate about the removal of statues of national figures often catalyzes discourse linking national identity to European civilization. In response to a proposal to cover nude statues, Salvini stated: “We run the risk of having to censor statues and works of art from a heritage that belongs to Italy but represents the highest peaks of Western civilization. The reason? They could conflict with the ‘sensitivity’ of other cultures, such as the Islamic one. Does this seem normal to you?”¹⁵ Likewise, Vox’s Santiago Abascal reacted with similar disdain to the toppling of a statue of Spanish missionary Junípero Serra in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park: “The debased mobs... destroy the symbols of civilization. We will defeat barbarism...”¹⁶ In other tweets, he further links civilizational decline to attempts to remove statues of other Spanish figures, such as Queen Isabella and Miguel de Cervantes. Embedded nationalism also arises when national history is recast as representative of civilizational progress. For example, Salvini presents Columbus’s voyage and the Battle of Lepanto as pivotal moments in both Italian and European history. Likewise, Abascal draws a parallel between the history of Al Andalus, the Reconquista, and the expulsion of the Moors from Spain and the alleged civilizational battle between Europe and Islam. Perhaps the starkest expression of embedded nationalism is a retweet from the Brothers of Italy in which a supporter claimed: “...without #Italy, #Europe would not exist. #Italy would exist without #Europe. History, culture, civilization, religion, economy, roots of the world...”¹⁷

Adopted nationalism is the least invoked discursive pattern, primarily arising when a

¹⁵Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), Twitter Post, September 27, 2020, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1310288393339916288>.

¹⁶Santiago Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), Twitter Post, June 20, 2020, https://twitter.com/Santi_ABASCAL/status/1274446809440702465.

¹⁷Stefano Maullu (@stefanomauullu), Twitter Post, April 6, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FratellidItalia/status/1247065670422011904>.

current event serves as a useful focal point for the far right to illustrate its opposition to Islam and immigration. For example, the terrorist attack in Vienna, Austria on November 2, 2020 catalyzed calls of civilizational solidarity from far-right leaders across Europe. Le Pen stated: “The Austrian people have been touched, in the heart of #Vienna, by an Islamist attack. Faced with a peril that threatens our civilizational values, we call on all Europeans to solidarity and to wake up. . . .”¹⁸ Likewise, Meloni tweeted: “Dismay and anger at what is happening in #Vienna. Europe is under attack from those who hate our civilization and our freedom. Wake up!”¹⁹ Meloni’s Brothers of Italy also posts similar messages on the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Salvini also recasts foreign events as civilizational moments, such as when he said: “The recent events in Vienna and Nice unfortunately show us how Europe, the heart of our civilization, is still under attack. . . .”²⁰ Interestingly, even the accidental fire at Notre Dame served as the basis for similar discourse, with Abascal tweeting: “The Islamists who want to destroy Europe and Western civilization are celebrating the #NotreDame fire. Let’s take note before it’s too late.”²¹

Thus, far-right parties reconcile their nationalism and civilizationism by both abstracting European civilization as a commonly shared heritage and embedding it in specific European nationalisms, particularly their own. While they present an essentialist and Orientalist view of Islam as a threatening civilizational adversary, they recognize the pluralism inherent in

¹⁸Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel), Twitter Post, November 3, 2020, https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1323699442533470208.

¹⁹Giorgia Meloni (@GiorgiaMeloni), Twitter Post, November 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/giorgiameloni/status/1323381625955274752?lang=en>.

²⁰Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), Twitter Post, November 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1327374332365053952>.

²¹Santiago Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), Twitter Post, April 15, 2019, https://twitter.com/Santi_ABASCAL/status/1117890168340586497.

European civilization as a community of distinct nations. This notion is reflected by National Rally spokesperson Sébastien Chenu, who tweeted: “Europe is a civilization: it was there before us and will be there after us. All countries do not have the same identifying features, but they can decide to understand each other.”²²

6 Conclusion

The far right’s incorporation of civilizationism into its rhetoric threatens to undermine its well-known nationalism and Euroscepticism. However, far-right parties reconcile the tension between nationalism and supranationalism by abstracting and embedding the concept of European civilization. Through abstraction, parties universalize the notion of civilizational identity and link it to features of a shared European heritage, such as democracy, equality, and freedom. Through embedding, the far right localizes civilizationism by linking it to familiar nationalist symbols and myths. These dual processes enable the integration of civilizationism into far-right discourse without undermining its nationalist profile.

This investigation of far-right discourse in France, Italy, and Spain demonstrates this dynamic process in action. Overall, these parties invoke both Christianity and liberalism as elements of a shared European heritage, although they do not mention secularism as frequently as their northern European counterparts. Furthermore, they frequently embed their own nationalism in civilizational discourse, while occasionally drawing on foreign European nationalisms to do the same.

Moving forward, scholars should explore the robustness of these findings using alterna-

²²Sébastien Chenu (@sebchenu), Twitter Post, May 22, 2019, https://twitter.com/RNational_off/status/1131249371612360706.

tive sources of party discourse. In contrast to the concise nature of tweets, speeches and interviews would likely provide more detailed and nuanced elaborations far-right views of civilizationism. These texts could be drawn from parliamentary interventions or party leaders' speeches at transnational gatherings of the European far right. More direct comparison of multiple actors from across the continent would also add additional support to the regional differences suggested in this study. Furthermore, scholars should turn their attention to the reception of civilizational discourse by far-right supporters themselves. In this regard, social media content and surveys promise to provide a wealth of information. As a relatively recent avenue of research touching on myriad issues, including political communication and identification, the study of civilizations promises to be a flourishing locus for future research.

Appendix

Table 2: Topics in National Rally Civilizational Discourse

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6
want	value	frame	europe	stakes	ecological
france	against	european	all	immigration	choice
value	live	ideology	nation	say	ambition
europe	european	globalist	before	country	finish
alone	defend	union	must	macron	law
history	people	contemplate	do	society	all
more	islamism	together	well	hole	want
people	life	society	recognize	black	preserve
great	must	present	deny	do	signify
fraternal	beat	daughter	idea	well	short-term

Table 3: Topics in League Civilizational Discourse

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6
defended	many	unique	can	society	battle
western	beautiful	country	symbol	value	political
salvini	europe	without	offend	establish	salvini
become	fire	defend	christmas	europe	league
each	painful	art	value	defend	position
value	cathedral	heritage	italy	columbusday	school
defend	gothic	salvini	other	go	present
italy	nantes	gondolier	culture	act	motion
normal	jewel	venice	think	debate	abusive
false	symbol	history	without	reward	legality

Table 4: Topics in Brothers of Italy Civilizational Discourse

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6
europe	freedom	meloni	islamic	europe	symbol
exist	europe	islamist	many	culture	millennial
without	hate	war	italy	battle	battle
today	attack	reject	culture	many	fasten
solidarity	under	enemy	terrorism	beyond	turn
italy	leave	declare	today	history	street
dream	vienna	defend	fdi	millennial	plaza
child	today	remain	imagine	italy	admire
christian	defend	nice	September11	root	watch
beast	shock	convention	prayer	flag	italian

Table 5: Topics in Vox Civilizational Discourse

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6
before	symbol	western	want	globalist	culture
statue	have	christian	europe	woman	dictatorship
represent	erdogan	destroy	have	destroy	progressive
kneel	western	barbarity	destroy	industry	threat
nobody	destroy	fire	spain	sector	before
craziness	islamism	accidental	beginning	primary	seizure
uncontrolled	leverage	want	western	western	progressivism
make	hate	symbolize	border	spain	make
identity	oligarchy	life	secure	violence	world
go	demolish	vox	same	jihadist	freedom

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