

The Reactionary Right is Losing the Culture War

Teun A. van Dijk

Digitally published on the Centre of Discourse Studies Blog

URL: <https://www.discoursestudies.org/the-reactionary-right-is-losing>

28/07/2023

With the continued influence of trumpism in the USA, bolsonarism in Brazil, illiberal Orbán in Hungary, Meloni in Italy, the Demokrats in Sweden and the growth of Far Right parties in many other countries, there are reasons to be pessimistic about the future of liberal democracy in Europe and the Americas. And yet, there are also grounds for moderate optimism when we examine the causes and nature of these political developments. Let's look at the facts of decades of cultural and political changes since the 1960.

Since the Civil Rights Movement until Black Lives Matter, African Americans have steadily conquered rights and successfully combated discrimination and many forms of systemic racism. Guided by feminist ideas and action, women have been able to challenge patriarchy in most domains of society. LGBT+ movements garnered recognition of gay marriage and diverse families among majorities in many countries. The right of merciful euthanasia is increasingly recognized. Despite opposition of the Supreme Court, the majority of U.S. citizens defend the right of abortion, as has been the case in Europe since decades and beginning to overcome conservative views in Latin America. Most countries of the Global North have witnessed exponential growth of migrants and refugees and need experts and other workers from abroad to compensate for their demographic decline. Strong green movements and parties in many countries are an expression of the widely shared concerns about climate change and its consequences.

These steady increases of democratic rights, liberal attitudes and demographic changes since the 1960s have been called a cultural revolution, also observable in many domains of everyday life. As might be expected, this progressive cultural change also caused a counter-revolutionary backlash since the 1980s and especially after 2000 among conservative politicians and citizens worried about their diminished social hegemony (see Norris & Inglehart's book *Cultural Backlash*, 2019). This reaction has favoured the creation of Far Right parties and movements, such as the Front National in France, Afd in Germany, UKIP in the UK, Vox in Spain, and the Tea Party, the Alt-Right and a trumpist Republican Party in the USA, among many others. We may call these parties and movements the Reactionary Right, because their populist programs, aggressive discourse and authoritarian Law and Order norms largely consist of radical reactions against socially liberal attitudes that have become widespread and even dominant in many countries in Europe and the Americas.

Despite its lack of original ideas and policies, and despite its electoral minorities, the Reactionary Right still has much power, due to its influence on the policies of mainstream parties, especially with respect to immigration, the manipulation of the fear and insecurity of many citizens, especially among older, less educated, white men to lose their job and masculine or “racial” respect, among religious people worried about the popularity of “unchristian” values and practices, or rural populations resenting the attraction of the cities and the popularity of urban values.

Despite its continued power and influence, the radical nature of the Reactionary Right and the populist polarization and insults of its discourse are reliable symptoms of its political, social and cultural defeat in democratic societies. Their electoral or legal successes, such as the anti-abortion decision of the Supreme Court in the USA, should also be interpreted as desperate rear-guard manoeuvres of conservative forces losing the cultural war against the growing influence of democratic values, practices and institutions based on equality, diversity, pluralism and justice. Some politicians may still get votes among an older, conservative and provincial electorate with anti-Woke rhetoric and the control of liberal textbooks, but soon will be ridiculed by their own daughters and granddaughters.

Analysis of the electoral programs and political speeches of the Reactionary Right in Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden, shows their diminished cultural clout. Whereas in Spain Vox may still be anti-feminist, religion and abortion have become mere footnotes in their talk and text (still dominant at the Reactionary Right in Chile). In the Netherlands and Sweden, the Reactionary Right parties don't even mention cultural attitudes in their programs, because they know they can't get votes, and hence power, against the dominant cultural consensus. Hence, they focus on nativist attitudes about immigration and ethnic minorities, with tribal slogans such as Our Own People First, the celebration of national language, culture, history and symbols such as the flag, and the opposition against globalism and supranational entities.

The liberal consensus is here to stay and grow. It is widely practiced among the current younger generation. It is more widespread among women and ethnic and gender minorities, under the higher educated and in the increasingly diverse cities, and dominant in science, literature, the arts, education and most of the media. Yet, the counter-revolution of the Reactionary Right, desperate to maintain its power and privileges, still has damaging influence in many domains of society in many countries, especially also in politics. Extremist members of the Reactionary Right may even become violent, as was the case in the attack at Congress and other democratic institutions in the USA and Brazil, or the aggression against immigrants and ethnic minorities in many countries. Hence, liberal democracy can't take its prevalence for granted, and needs to remain vigilant against its detractors.

Teun A. van Dijk is founding director of the Centre of Discourse Studies, Barcelona. His last books are *Antiracist Discourse. Theory and History of a Macromovement* (Cambridge U.P., 2022), and *Social Movement Discourse. An Introduction* (Routledge, 2023, in press).
E-mail: vandijk@discourses.org. Internet: www.discourses.org.