The rhetorical use of the threat of the far-right in the UK Brexit debate

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While attention has been given to understanding support for the far-right, there is a lack of focus on the way in which a threat of the far-right can be used for political ends. This paper addresses this using the UK Brexit debate as an illustration. The question therefore is: What is talk about the far-right used to do in discussions about Brexit? A discursive psychological approach addresses a sample of newspaper reports containing both 'Far-Right' and 'Brexit', from the first quarter of 2019 ($n = 45$). The analysis identifies a range of uses of talk about the far-right: (1) An opponent of Brexit is called a Nazi by pro-Brexit protesters, who are labelled far-right; (2) A lack of Brexit is presented as fuel for the far-right; (3) Remain supporters reject the idea that a lack of Brexit fuels the far-right; (4) A link with the far-right is rejected by a prominent Brexit supporter; and (5) Support for Brexit is again linked with the far-right. The far-right can be used as a strategic tool by opposing sides of the Brexit debate and – significantly – the supposed threat of the far-right can be used to placate far-right ideas, rather than to genuinely challenge them.

In this paper, it will be argued that the threat posed by the far-right can be used by different voices in political debates as a strategic tool to draw upon to forward their own arguments. Within social psychology, much attention has rightly been given to understanding both the appeal of the far-right and the threat that they pose. This research will be reviewed here. However, it will be shown that while the far-right does indeed pose a real threat to both minorities and the wider population in any society, that the threat itself is drawn upon rhetorically in a way that supports a range of political views. Worryingly, the threat of the far-right can be used to placate the demands of the far-right and result in a shift towards the position that the far-right advocates, while simultaneously presenting damaging ideologies and policies as designed to stop the far-right. This means that the threat of the far-right can perform a useful function for those seeking to support illiberal policies such as reducing migration. The analysis presented here shows how the threat of the far-right is used in the Brexit debate in the United Kingdom, where the decision to leave the European Union was especially controversial and divisive.

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Understanding support for the far-right

The current political era is becoming known as one of far-right 'populist' successes in Europe (e.g., Mudde, 2016) and around the world, with examples including the governments of India, Brazil, Hungary and Poland, as well as the success of Trump in the United States and to some extent the 'Brexit' decision in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Mudde defines populism as 'an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and that holds that politics should be an expression of "the general will" of the people' (2016, pp. 25–26).

Social psychologists have a long history of attempting to understand the far-right with early classic studies, such as the Authoritarian Personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and its 'Fascism scale', designed to understand support for the far-right. Definitions of the far-right are not common in the literature that addresses it, but Ravndal and Bjørgo state that 'the *far right* share an *authoritarian* inclination, that is, an inherent need for sameness, oneness, and group authority, resulting in intolerance towards diversity and individual autonomy, and some form of *nativism* or ethnic nationalism' (2018, p. 6, emphasis in original) and Lee uses a more concise definition of 'A narrative of racial and/or cultural threat to a "native" group arising from perceived alien groups within a society'. (2019, p. 2, emphasis in original) and also draws on Ravndal and Bjørgo's distinction between the radical and extreme right where the former is democratic and the latter is not. Today, numerous explanations for far-right support exist; those explanations are reviewed now.

Mayer (2014) suggests that men, people from lower incomes and lower educational backgrounds are most likely to support far-right parties. Pettigrew (2017) supports this, in his review of explanations for Trump's success, adding that there are five key social psychological explanations for his support: (1) authoritarianism, (2) social dominance orientation, (3) outgroup prejudice, (4) the absence of intergroup contact, and (5) relative deprivation. Authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950) is characterized by a strong admiration for authority and hierarchy, a lack of openness to experience, and a dislike of other groups. Social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), similarly includes a strong support for hierarchy and the belief that strong groups should dominate weaker groups in society. Outgroup prejudice can therefore be seen as related to this. Pettigrew also points to an absence of intergroup contact between Trump supporters and minorities. Finally, relative deprivation, the extent that people feel that they are poor relative to others around them (rather than absolute deprivation) also links with support for Trump. Building on the idea of relative deprivation, Jay, Batruch, Jetten, McGarty, and Muldoon (2019) provide compelling evidence for the link between inequality and support for the far-right.

These findings are shown to be relevant in support for the far-right across countries, with van Assche, Dhont, and Pettigrew (2019) demonstrating how there are similarities among supporters of the far-right across the United Kingdom, the United States, and continental Europe. In particular, they show how the first three of the factors Pettigrew (2017) identified (authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and prejudice) are the underpinning predictors of far-right support in the United States, the United Kingdom and across Europe. A common thread in all of these studies is anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g., Kellner, 2016). There is some debate about the extent to which fear and anger fuel support for the far-right, with Vasilopoulos, et al. (2019) arguing that public anger predicts support for the far-right, whereas fear reduces support, while others (e.g., Jost, 2019) suggest that both anger *and* fear among voters predicts support for the far-right.

Social psychologists have also illustrated how damaging the far-right can be, documenting the associated rise in hate crime and racist assaults following electoral success of the far-right including following Trump's success in the United States (Reilly, 2016) and following the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (see Burnett, 2017, although he points to the influence of the wider political context in which the referendum took place). In addition to this, some success among the far-right can have the effect of making such extreme beliefs appear more normative, allowing far-right views to come to be perceived as mainstream, shifting cultural norms towards extremist ideology (Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016) and emboldening those with far-right beliefs (Drury, 2019).

The rhetoric of the far-right

Together, this body of work demonstrates that social psychologists have gathered a strong evidence base for a number of psychological factors that may mediate support for the far-right and how an increase in support for the far-right can lead to increased hate crimes. The far-right therefore constitutes a serious threat that should be challenged, and this is precisely why many researchers have focussed attention on the talk of the far-right. In particular, rhetorical and discursive analyses focus on what is accomplished through talk and texts (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992). The seminal study in this field is Billig's (1978) *Fascists*, which investigated the far-right National Front's arguments, showing them to be anti-Semitic, despite attempts to present them as reasonable. More recently Atton (2006) showed how the far-right British National Party (BNP) removed overt references to race, referring instead to 'culture', in an attempt to move away from being viewed as racist; something Copsey (2007) called 'fascism recalibration', an attempt to discursively distance the far-right from negative racist and fascist connotations. Further, Wood and Finlay (2008) and Johnson and Goodman (2013) demonstrated how the BNP presented white people as the 'true' victims of racism, in (largely unsuccessful) attempts to present their own position as actively anti-racist. Burke (2018) shows how a more recent British far-right group, Britain First, draws on (supposed) support for Jewish people while criticizing Muslim terrorists, in an attempt to distance itself from appearing racist, even though this is used in the service of Islamophobia and simultaneously works to 'other' both Muslims *and* Jews.

The rhetorical use of the far–right

All of this work shows that even among the far-right, there exists an interactional requirement to present policies as reasonable, non-racist, and grounded in reality, rather than irrationally prejudicial. This means that in some cases (e.g., Burke, 2018) far-right ideas are presented as designed to actively challenge prejudice. However, there is a lack of research addressing the ways in which talk about the far-right can be used by others, which this current paper aims to address. There is now a small body of work that is beginning to suggest that talk *about* (rather than *by*) the far-right can also be used for political argumentation, and it is this area that is addressed now.

Goodman (2008) showed how taking a harsh stance against immigration in the United Kingdom was presented by a range of politicians and political analysts as being designed to stop support for the far-right; citing examples from the then migration minister (for the centre-left Labour party) Beverly Hughes saying 'the main political parties must respond to it or they leave the field wide open to the extremists' and the BBC analyst Andrew Marr

saying 'if the Tories don't talk about it there's a whole lot of people to their right who will and are talking about it'. This demonstrates that explicit references about the far-right, and specifically opposing it, can play a rhetorical role in placating far-right ideas, here based on the idea that a failure to do what the far-right want may lead to increased support for the far-right. This is borne out in policy, as the UK's integration policy for migration (Ager & Strang, 2008) was developed in response to action by the far-right that led to civil unrest, that came to be blamed on the migrant groups that were targeted (Mulvey, 2010) rather than the actions of the far-right.

Burke and Goodman (2012) demonstrated how references to Nazis, arguably the main exemplifier and threat of the far-right, were used in Facebook discussions about asylum seekers. They showed how three distinct arguments about Nazis were being used: First that opposition to asylum seeking is akin to the Nazis, second that accusations of being like Nazis (the first argument) were being used to curtail legitimate discussions about asylum seekers and third, support for Nazis (and specifically Hitler) was used to bring about extreme anti-asylum arguments. Durrheim et al. (2018) demonstrate how accusations of racism directed towards a group can be used by the leader of that group to build an alliance with its supporters, based on the shared (supposed) victimization of the group and its leader. Johnson and Goodman's analyses of the (then) leader of the far-right British National Party showed him to be doing just this (2013), but also positioning himself as moderate in comparison to those to the right of the party as a way of presenting the party as reasonable and as offering a barrier against (supposedly more threatening) far-right groups (Goodman & Johnson, 2013). What these very different references to the far-right, Nazis, and racism show, alongside the different arguments used by politicians debating migration, is that the far-right, embodied by the Nazis, can be used rhetorically in attempts to support a range of differing arguments.

It can therefore be assumed that talk about the far-right can be found to be used in a range of debates for specific ends. Given the prevalence of the controversial and polarized topic of 'Brexit', the debate about the United Kingdom leaving the European Union (EU) following a referendum in which the option to leave the EU narrowly beat the option to remain (52–48%), it can be expected to find talk about the far-right being used in this debate. The relationship with the far-right is particularly important in the Brexit debate given the rise in hate crime following the Brexit referendum outcome (Burnett, 2017) and the parallels with support for Brexit and the far-right in Europe (e.g., van Assche et al., 2019). The aim of the current research is therefore to address the question: What is talk about the far-right used to do in discussions about Brexit?

Material, background, and analytical approach

Data for this analysis were generated by searching the 'Lexis Library News' database for all newspaper articles that contained both the search terms 'Far-right' and 'Brexit' during the first quarter of 2019. This was a time of continuing intense debate about how the country should proceed with Brexit in the final run up to what was going to be the day that the UK left the EU (29th March 2019) although this deadline was missed and an extension to the UK's membership of the EU was agreed before this date, making the period under investigation a particularly important part of the debate. Both search terms were used together to ensure that the newspaper article contained a reference to the far-right in the context of Brexit. This search, which focussed on UK national newspapers (therefore omitting local papers and Internet news sites) with duplicate matches removed, returned a total of 45 newspaper articles.

At the point of data collection, Theresa May was the leader of the centre-right Conservative party which had a small parliamentary majority meaning that May was the Prime Minister. The government was committed to leaving the EU, but this position was controversial with many MPs in the party advocating remaining in the EU and others claiming that the deal to leave the EU that Prime Minister May had agreed was not a good enough version of Brexit. This mean that there was considerable opposition to the deal, which eventually failed to get parliamentary support, leading to the extension to the UK's membership of the EU before it eventually left in early 2020. Throughout this period, there was consistent talk of a potential second referendum on the issue, although this never transpired.

The approach used for analysis is informed by rhetorical (Billig, 1987) and discursive (Edwards & Potter, 1992) approaches to discourse, similar to those used by Gibson (2009) and more recently Verkuyten and Nooitgedagt (2019). This approach includes a detailed analysis of the action orientation of language, which means that attention is paid to what is accomplished in the talk in terms of how concepts and identities are constructed and given meaning, rather than making judgements about what speakers or writers are thinking. At the same time, this approach also includes a focus on 'the social and political consequences of discursive patterning' (Wetherell, 1998, p. 405), so the talk and texts are understood both in their local context (in this case the newspaper articles) and the broader social context in which they exist. The analysis also draws upon the notion of the dialogical network (Leudar & Nekvapil, 2004) which shows how seemingly unconnected texts and talk are part of a wider conversation, so that newspaper articles (like any other texts) can be seen as responding to, and anticipating, other parts of this wider network. Extracts presented below are those that best illustrate the points being made. As the data are from newspapers, no transcription was necessary. The name of newspaper, the headline, publication date, and relevant text are presented. The articles are *not* included in full. Instead, URLs to the online version of the newspaper articles are included. Line numbers have been added to aid reading the analysis, and otherwise, the text is unchanged.

Analysis

The analysis identified arguments about Brexit that drew on the far-right in some way. For clarity, and to demonstrate how the arguments unfolded, these are presented in chronological order, although the arguments are connected and can overlap. They are as follows: (1) An opponent of Brexit is called a Nazi by pro-Brexit protesters who are labelled far-right; (2) A lack of Brexit is presented as fuel for the far-right (an argument used by both leave and remain supporters); (3) Remain supporters reject the idea that a lack of Brexit fuels the far-right; (4) A link with the far-right is rejected by a prominent Brexit supporter; and (5) Support for Brexit is again linked with the far-right. Each of these arguments is now be addressed in turn.

An opponent of Brexit is called a Nazi by pro-Brexit protesters, who are themselves labelled far-right
The first significant reference to the far-right during the period of analysis occurred when pro-Brexit protestors, known as the Yellow Vests (following the 'gilets jaunes' in France), interrupted a news interview with the (then) anti-Brexit Conservative MP Anna Soubry and called her a Nazi. This was widely reported, including in the following example from the Independent.

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Extract one, The Independent, 8th January 2019
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https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-yellow-vest-protests-far-right-parliament-commons-anna-soubry-abuse-video-a8717241.html
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Brexit campaigners condemn 'far-right'
yellow vest protesters for abuse of MPs outside Commons: 'Utterly unacceptable'
Police investigating whether insults directed at pro-Remain MP is criminal
offence
1. Pro-Brexit campaigners have condemned the harassment of
2. MPs and journalists by 'far-right' demonstrators outside
3. parliament.
4. Leave Means Leave said abuse shouted at Remain supporters
5. including Tory MP Anna Soubry was 'utterly unacceptable'.
6. A group calling themselves 'Yellow Vests UK' have been
7. returning to Westminster almost daily to confront and
8. heckle pro-EU demonstrators who gather at College Green.
9. [lines omitted]
10. On Monday, they chanted 'Soubry is a Nazi' as the MP
11. did television interviews before following her along
12. the street shouting abuse.
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This article reports on a situation where both sides are associated with the far-right. An anti-Brexit campaigners (Soubry) is called a Nazi (line 10), which is the most serious type of far-right label available and arguably the main reason that the identity of the far-right can be so damaging. While the exact reason for calling Soubry a Nazi is not given, it is presumably because of her opposition to Brexit, as the protestors were campaigning for Brexit. While the accusation of being a Nazi is reported, this is presented as 'abuse' (12) and 'unacceptable' (5) rather than having any credibility. Instead, those who called Soubry a Nazi are themselves presented as far-right (in the headline and line 2), although this label is put in quotation marks or 'scare quotes' which questions whether or not they really are far-right.

In the report, the far-right label is associated with those calling their opponent a Nazi, rather than the person labelled a Nazi herself. This shows that accusations of being a Nazi are deemed unreasonable (Burke & Goodman, 2012) and in this case can also be used to present those making the accusation as being far-right themselves. It is noteworthy that both 'sides' of this debate are associated with the far-right because this demonstrates the use of the far-right as a way of discrediting opponents' characters and arguments, relating to their position on Brexit. It suggests that, in this specific context, accusations of being a Nazi are presented as unreasonable and unwarranted to the extent of actually constituting abuse. By contrast, accusations of being 'far-right' do require delicacy, as evidenced by the use of quotation marks placed around the term, but are presented as potentially warranted and reasonable. In the following extract, the event reported here is referred to again, alongside a new argument, showing how the events are connected in the dialogical network.

A lack of Brexit is presented as fuel for the far-right
This argument claims that a failure to deliver Brexit would lead to an unwelcome move towards the far-right. This argument is interesting because it was made by speakers from a range of different political backgrounds on both sides of the Brexit debate and featured in very different publications. In this first example, the pro-leave government minister Justin Grayling's argument, which makes references to the incident where Soubry was called a

Nazi, is put on the front-page headline of the Daily Mail. This story was also featured in other newspapers that day.

`Extract Two: Daily Mail, 11`[th]` January 2019`

https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6583091/Ministers-grave-warning-poll-shows-Tory-voters-support-PMs-deal-Brussels.html

`Wrecking Brexit will let in the far-Right: Minister's grave warning as poll`
`shows more Tory voters now support PM's deal With Brussels`

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1. Britain will witness a surge in neo-Nazi extremist groups
2. if MPs block or weaken Brexit, a Cabinet minister warns
3. today
4. [lines omitted]
5. In a chilling intervention, Mr Grayling said blocking
6. Brexit could end the 350 years of 'moderate' politics
7. Britain has enjoyed since the bloody English Civil War.
8. Doing so would provoke more 'nasty' incidents such as
9. this week's 'Nazi' taunts at pro Remain Tory MP Anna
10. Soubry outside Parliament, he argued.
11. It would also play into the hands of 'disturbing'
12. extremists such as ex-English Defence League leader
13. Tommy Robinson, who has been tipped to take over Ukip.
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The headline, in the form of a 'warning', given credibility because it is attributed to a government minister, is that the far-right will benefit from a lack of Brexit. It starts with a very clear 'if x, then y' formulation (Lerner, 1991) where x is 'wrecked Brexit' and y is the far-right coming to power. This is not presented as a threat, but as a fact ('will'). The headline refers only to 'far-right' before upgrading this to the more specific 'neo-Nazi extremist groups' (line 1). In this case then, the far-right refers to groups that may be ready to 'surge' (1) and be active, rather than, for instance, simply a political ideology. Such 'groups' are presented as being militant and capable of violence. The threat posed is presented as extremely serious, with words like 'grave', 'chilling', 'disturbing', and 'bloody', suggesting that a lack of Brexit could lead to violence and extremism, with the incident where Soubry is called a Nazi (extract one) presented as evidence for this (8-10). Linked to this threat of extremism is the UK independence party (UKIP) and the far-right activist and figurehead Tommy Robinson, referred to as a ''disturbing' extremist' (11-12), so both UKIP and Robinson, along with the English Defence League are presented as akin to neo-Nazis and with it extremely threatening and dangerous. In this example then, the far-right is presented as encompassing dangerous and potentially violent neo-Nazis. Success for the far-right is presented as the logical outcome of any measures taken against Brexit, with the implication that Brexit must be allowed to happen.

The far-right therefore are drawn upon and used by the article and the cabinet minister in support of their argument against any blocking of Brexit. The same argument can be seen being used by someone claiming to oppose Brexit, this time in a left learning anti-Brexit newspaper, the Daily Mirror, which reports on comments made by Dave Ward, the left wing General Secretary of the Communications Workers Union. The article was published ten days after the previous one, despite the criticism of the argument (featured in extract four).

`Extract Three: Daily Mirror, 21`[st]` January 2019`

https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/dave-ward-second-brexit-referendum-13886562

`Dave Ward: Second Brexit referendum would damage democracy and give space to`
`the far right'; A People's Vote is not the answer to Brexit and will only`
`inflame a divided country, writes CWU general secretary Dave Ward`

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1. ...As someone who voted Remain, the major problem I have
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2. with the People's Vote campaign is how it has elevated
3. staying in the EU over every other issue.
4. [lines omitted]
5. We cannot face away from this simple truth.
6. Those who live and breathe a second referendum are saying
7. to millions of people: let's fight for the status quo,
8. the establishment knows best and we should continue on
9. our current course.
10. I can think of nothing that would do more damage to our
11. democracy and give more space to the far right than that.
12. Amidst the Brexit chaos, nothing has been done in the
13. last three years to address the problems that helped to
14. fuel the vote for Leave.
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As with the previous extract, the headline makes a direct reference to the far-right, who here are presented as being given space in the event of a second referendum on EU membership. This gaining space is a weaker version of the 'letting in' seen in the previous extract, with no references here to violence or specific groups or individuals, but, in common with extract two, presents the far-right as a threat that can be realized if Brexit is prevented. This extract begins with the author making an explicit claim about his initial support for remaining in the EU. This works as a stake inoculation (Potter, 1996) which makes what he says following this as not directly influenced by his stake. Ward then sets out his opposition to another referendum in the form of a three-part list (lines 7-9; Jefferson, 1990) which is explicitly presented as factual ('simple truth' 5). This is the groundwork that allows him to state why this is harmful: alongside being anti-democratic, it offers more space to the far-right.

Both extracts in this section therefore present the far-right as a serious threat that are waiting for the right opportunity to flourish. While extract two is more dramatic in how it presents that risk, both suggest that there is one. Extract two refers to far-right organizations and an individual, which shows that they are already in existence. In extract three, Ward refers to giving 'more' (10) space to the far-right, which also implies that they already have space and that giving them more would be a serious problem. It is certainly of note that both headlines in this extract pick out the reference to the far-right, which at least in extract three, does not appear to be the main focus of the argument. Nevertheless, in both cases the far-right is used by the speakers and by the articles as a threat to suggest that a certain course of action must be taken. There is little discussion of the far-right itself.

The following section shows this linking of the far-right with stopping Brexit being challenged.

Remain supporters reject the idea that a lack of Brexit fuels the far-right
The day following the reporting on the comments made by Grayling in extract two, a number of newspapers reported on criticism of the strategy that is identified in the previous section. This was brought about by David Lammy, a Labour MP and opponent of Brexit. The following extract, in the anti-Brexit Independent newspaper, is one such example of this report, which includes comments by Lammy and some requoting of Grayling's comments that are included in extract two.

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Extract Four: The Independent, 12th January 2019
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https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-delay-block-far-right-extre
mists-surge-grayling-criticism-a8724281.html
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Brexit: Minister prompts anger for warning of far-right surge in event of MPs
blocking EU exit
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1. A cabinet minister has been accused of engaging in
2. 'gutter politics' after warning MPs that blocking Brexit
3. could trigger a surge of far-right extremism.
4. [lines omitted, including quotes from Grayling]
5. His comments drew condemnation from Labour MP David
6. Lammy, who described it as a 'desperate attempt to use
7. a tiny far-right minority to hold our democracy to
8. Ransom'.
9. [lines omitted, including quotes from Grayling]
10. Mr Lammy, who backs the Best for Britain campaign, said:
11. 'This is a desperate attempt by a government minister to
12. use a tiny far-right minority to hold our democracy to
13. ransom. It is gutter politics.
14. 'History shows us appeasement only emboldens the far
15. right and impoverishing the
16. country through Brexit will only increase resentment'.
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This article is in direct response to the previous day's reports, of which extract two is one example. This demonstrates that the articles are part of a dialogical network (Leudar & Nekvapil, 2004) where this extract is clearly linked to others. Grayling's claim is presented as prompting anger, which in turn is used to present the relationship between stopping Brexit and helping out the far-right appear especially problematic. The article then begins with a restating of the headline including an upgrading on the far-right to 'extremism' alongside the criticism of Grayling for engaging in 'gutter politics' (repeated in the article) to further highlight the criticism of the comments about the far-right. The article goes on to include quotes from Grayling's original comments and the new comments made by Lammy.

Lammy's comments are highly critical, with the use of 'desperate' (6) suggesting that Grayling's comments are unfounded and 'tiny … minority' (7) to downgrade the supposed threat caused by the far-right. Finally, 'hold[ing] our democracy to ransom' (7-8) is used to return the accusation of being anti-democratic back to Grayling, and therefore to those supporting, rather than opposing, Brexit. Lammy goes on to imply that Grayling's comments amount to appeasing the far-right, through his comment about history showing that appeasement 'emboldens' (14) them. This combination of the far-right, 'history' (14) and 'appeasement' (14) could be indicating the appeasement of the Nazis before the second world war and therefore serves to link the modern far-right with the Nazis. By attempting to hold democracy to ransom, Lammy also implies that the far-right are themselves not democratic, which is one of the features of the extreme right (Ravndal & Bjørgo, 2018). Lammy then turns Grayling's argument around again, by suggesting that Brexit will be harmful and that it is this harm that will lead to 'resentment' (16) which implicitly suggests that the far-right may benefit from Brexit going ahead. This means that, like in the previous posts, Lammy too suggests that the far-right (despite being a minority) are a threat ready to emerge under certain circumstances. The repetition of the argument that preventing Brexit may strengthen the far-right (shown in extract three) after Lammy's criticism, suggests that his comments were not very effective.

A link with the far-right is rejected by a prominent Brexit supporter

By this point, it has been shown that 'Nazi' has been used to describe an anti-Brexit MP and 'far-right' has been used to describe the people that did this. Next, increased support for the far-right has been used as a threat in the event of Brexit being stopped, a claim that was then rejected. The far-right have been linked to Nazis explicitly by a government minister

(extract two) and implicitly by an opposition MP (extract four). In this next extract, Boris Johnson, who at the time was a Conservative MP and prominent pro-Brexit figure (who later that year became Prime Minister), argues explicitly against the idea that those supporting Brexit are far-right, in his regular column in the pro-Brexit Telegraph.

Extract Five: The Telegraph, 24ᵗʰ February 2019

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/02/24/brexiteers-not-far-right-zealots-just-ask-younger-tony-blair/ (this article has a paywall, but is also available freely here: https://www.facebook.com/borisjohnson/posts/i-dont-know-about-you-but-i-am-getting-sick-of-the-constant-suggestion-that-anyo/10156263076841317/)

Brexiteers are not far-Right zealots. Just ask the younger Tony Blair

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1.  I don't know about you, but I am getting sick of the
2.  constant suggestion that anyone who sticks up for Brexit
3.  must have far-Right tendencies. I can't understand why
4.  people are suddenly claiming that anyone who wants to get
5.  out of the EU - and follow the instructions of the
6.  British people - is a zealot, or an extremist, or Ukip,
7.  or Blukip, or some kind of ultra-conservative bigot.
8.  [lines omitted]
9.  Now that we are coming out, we are not fated to behave as
10. zealots, or bigots, or foaming Right-wing nutters. If we
11. get Brexit right, and if we genuinely control our own
12. laws, we Conservatives will have the chance to be more
13. liberal, more humane and more compassionate than ever
14. before.
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This column is written in response to those that make a connection between supporting Brexit and the far-right. Whereas previous extracts have made reference to specific preceding events, Johnson is more general and refers instead to the 'constant suggestion' (2-3) that Brexit and the far-right go together. That such claims are made 'suddenly' (4) and to such a large group of people, including the very broad 'British people' (6) works to present this connection as ungrounded and unreasonable, which together are offered as an explanation of why he 'can't understand' (3) such an argument. Johnson offers a whole range of negative categories that go with this far-right pro-Brexit identity. First, having 'far-right tendencies' (3) suggests that someone may hold elements of a political persuasion; this is very different from the violent extremist that is portrayed as being a typical far-right extremist by Grayling (extract 2). Next, Johnson offers a five part list, which is so long that it sets up all the categories that are offered immediately as ironic: 'zealot' (6), 'extremist' (6), 'Ukip' (6) (a right-wing anti-Brexit party), Blukip (7) (a play on words on Ukip, presumably including Conservative party supporters) and 'ultra-conservative bigot' (7). All of these are presented as parody, all to be rejected in favour of the preferred suggestion that these are unrealistic and unwarranted categories, with the implication being that supporting Brexit is perfectly reasonable and should have broad appeal, signalled with the opening 'I don't know about you' (1).

This article is directed towards other Brexit supporting Conservatives (11) who are therefore positioned as the very opposite to the far-right categories that are (according to him, unfairly) directed at all supporters of Brexit ('anyone', line 2). At the end of the article, Johnson finishes by rejecting the idea that opposing Brexit has anything to do with the far-right (this time by offering a new list of far-right categories in line 10) and goes further by suggesting that Brexit will offer the very opposite of what the far-right want, in the form of liberalism, being humane and compassionate (13). Brexit supporting Conservatives are constructed as already having these qualities, signalled through the use of 'more'. This distinguishing of (generally ironic) far-right labels from what are presented as

Conservative values, works to move the Conservatives even further from the position of the far-right so that they are set up as direct opponents of the far-right.

Support for Brexit is again linked with the far-right

In this final section, it can be shown that the association between Brexit and the far-right continues, despite attempts such as the one featured in the previous extract to reject it. This time the association is made as the leader of the pro-Brexit Brexit Party resigned after racist Tweets that she had previously made came to light. The following report of this is taken from the anti-Brexit Guardian.

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Extract Six, the Guardian, 20th March 2019
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https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/20/leader-of-pro-brexit-party-cathe
rine-blaiklock-resigns-over-anti-islam-messages
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Leader of Nigel Farage's party resigns over anti-Islam messages
Catherine Blaiklock sent racist posts and retweeted those of far-right
figures before joining Brexit party
1. The leader of the new pro-Brexit party backed by Nigel
2. Farage abruptly resigned on Wednesday after the Guardian
3. asked her about a series of deleted anti-Islam Twitter
4. messages sent before she took on the role.
5. Catherine Blaiklock, the leader of the Brexit party,
6. repeatedly retweeted posts from far right figures
7. as well as sending her own messages. Among the messages
8. she shared was one by Mark Collett, a former British
9. National party (BNP) activist, referring to 'white
10. Genocide'.
11. [lines omitted]
12. The news will call Farage's judgement into question after
13. he left Ukip because of its 'fixation' on Muslims and
14. its alliance with far-right activist Tommy Robinson.
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The explanation for the Brexit Party's leader's resignation is presented as the sharing ('retweeting' 6) of 'anti-Islam Twitter messages' (3-4). While the most offending messages are not deemed to be her own, it is the sharing of those associated with the far-right (6) that is presented as especially serious. The article includes explicit references to the far-right (by-line, 6 and 14) and people associated with it, including someone from the British National Party and Tommy Robinson, who was referred to as a threat in extract two. Here the far-right is associated with racism, which is referred to in the headline, and Islamophobia, which is presented as the reason for the Brexit Party's former leader leaving his previous anti-Brexit Party, UKIP. UKIP was also referred to as a potential threat in extract two, and as an extremist party by Johnson in the previous extract. As it is the leader of the Brexit Party that has had to resign, this article therefore has the effect of, once more, linking those supporting Brexit (and here the leader of a pro-Brexit political party) with the far-right and those holding Islamophobic and racist views. The association of Brexit and the far-right therefore persists, despite attempts to severe this link, such as that seen in the previous extract.

Discussion

This analysis has shown that there were a range of different ways in which the far-right was written about, from both supporters and opponents of Brexit. The first reference to the far-right came in the form of pro-Brexit protestors calling an anti-Brexit supporter

a Nazi. These protestors were then labelled as far-right themselves. Next, a pro-Brexit member of the government argued that if Brexit were to be blocked, then this would 'fuel' the far-right, and he cited the calling of the anti-Brexit a Nazi as evidence for this. This claim was rejected by an opponent of Brexit. A similar argument about stopping Brexit leading to support for the far-right was also shown to be used later by someone claiming to have opposed Brexit. The linking of the far-right with Brexit was then ridiculed and presented as unreasonable by a prominent pro-Brexit figure, before the final extract which again linked Brexit supporters with the far-right after the leader of the Brexit party was shown to have shared racist and Islamophobic content online. The final extract presented, at the end of the data collection period, shows that despite any attempts to separate the far-right from Brexit, the idea that there is a connection persists.

Taken together, this illustrates that talk and texts about the far-right in relation to Brexit played multiple roles in the debate and were used by people on either side of the debate to further their differing political ends, even in cases where those ends are similar to those of the far-right themselves. The main specific uses of the far-right were as an insult (e.g., calling the anti-Brexit MP a Nazi), as a threat (e.g., stopping Brexit will help the far-right), to devalue claims made (such as calling an MP a Nazi), and to cast doubt on the intentions of those supporting Brexit, so as to make them appear unreasonable (as with the leader of the Brexit party and other pro-Brexit organizations that were referred to). Some of these associations with Brexit and the far-right were overtly challenged, such as Lammy rejecting the idea that stopping Brexit will help the far-right and Johnson rejecting the idea that support for Brexit and the far-right go together. This shows that what counts as far-right is itself contentious, although there was limited discussion within these extracts of what actually constitutes the far-right, which helps in positioning the far-right as a vague and amorphous threat. Future research could address how participants in debates themselves construct what counts as far-right. Many negative attributes are associated with the far-right, including racism and Islamophobia, violence, and extremism. This means that the label far-right is one to be avoided and rejected (as Johnson attempted in extract five).

Where there does seem to be agreement is that the far-right is presented as a bad thing, although it is not always clear exactly why this might be the case. It is only in the final extract that white supremacy and Islamophobia are referred to, although Johnson suggests that the opposite of the far right is being humane and compassionate, which implies that this is what the far-right lack. What is not explicitly referred to in any of these arguments is the overtly anti-migration nature of much of the pro-Brexit rhetoric (e.g., van Assche et al., 2019), which shares many similarities with the rhetoric of other far-right movements (Jay et al., 2019) or the similar spike in hate crime that followed the outcome of the Brexit referendum matching the spike in hate crime that follows other far-right success (Rees, et al., 2019).

Explanations for why people may support the far-right include anti-immigrant sentiment (Kellner, 2016). A major part of the pro-Brexit argument was that it would offer the UK an opportunity to 'control' (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017) and reduce migration into the country. While migration was not explicitly referred to in the extracts featured here, support for Brexit and opposition to migration therefore go together. This means that the far-right, which may receive its support due to anti-migration sentiment, is being used as a way of arguing for Brexit because of its potential to curb migration, which seems to be a circular argument.

Anger has been argued to be a feature that may explain support for the far-right (Jost, 2019; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). It is therefore notable that talk of anger does feature in the extracts featured in the analysis, however the anger here is deemed (in the newspaper article) to come from the response to someone else saying that preventing Brexit will support the far-right, rather than as a feature that may help support the far-right. However, while anger is not explicitly mentioned in the argument that stopping Brexit will fuel the far-right, it is certainly implied that there will be anger if Brexit is blocked (extracts two and three) and illustrated through the references to pro-Brexit demonstrators (extract one). This means that anger is drawn upon as explaining support for the far-right in the newspaper reports by some of the speakers featured in them, echoing the social psychological literature. It does appear to be the threat of anger, rather than any tangible anger, that forms the basis of the argument that failure to bring about Brexit will lead to a rise in the far-right. This means that talk about anger, like the far-right, can potentially be used to support illiberal policies.

The use of the search term 'far-right' is likely to have impacted on the data collected. The analysis has demonstrated that far-right is a pejorative term so it may be that more positive terms would have yielded different data, however, the term often occurred alongside others such as 'Nazi' and 'extremist', so it seems unlikely that different search terms would have significantly changed the dataset; however, this is something that future research could address.

A worrying feature of some of the examples included in the analysis is that references to the far-right often work to justify the demands of the far-right (i.e., Brexit and curbing migration), meaning that the argument is circular and that what is presented as opposition to the far-right may actually enable it. This leads to the conclusion that talk about the far-right can simultaneously present the speaker as liberal (as Johnson does in extract six) while also pushing for a right-wing agenda, such as opposing migration, isolationism, and a small state. This means that as well as the far-right offering a threat in its own right, talk about the *threat* of the far-right can be used to bring about a shift towards far-right ideology by politicians and political advocates. These speakers are then able to present themselves as not only reasonable and liberal, but as actively challenging the far-right, who's agenda they may be placating and pursuing. This perhaps represents a bigger threat than the far-right itself.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Simon Goodman, Ph. D (Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – original draft).

Data Availability Statement

All data included in the analysis are available in the public domain. Links to the data source are provided, with an alternative source included where one article is behind a paywall. Details on how to identify the full data set using a Lexis Library search are included.

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