

Populism as a Challenge to Political Stability and Globalization

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Populism is not a new phenomenon. It is a form of direct democracy that arises when people think that they are not being represented by their mainstream parties. The discourses of populism are divisive: juxtaposing us with them, friends with enemies, and the common public with corrupted elites. Populists tend to refuse compromise and instead demand radical solutions. What is distinctive about populism in Europe and the United States today is that it threatens conventional democratic politics. Despite lacking a coherent political ideology, populist parties and movements are adept at appealing to people with provocative messages. Consequently, these actors have been quite successful, emerging either as major parties or successfully pressing the government for changes to trade or migration policies.

The Surge of Populism

Globalization is not the sole culprit behind the rise of populism. While many of the negative social changes attacked by populists stem from globalization, there are other economic, cultural, and political explanations for the rise of populism. Global market integration and technological developments have sped the flow of goods, money, and people across national borders. The integrative and innovative forces of globalization have intensified competition and broadened economic inequalities between the skilled and adaptable labor forces and the unskilled and less adaptable

remainder. Therefore, a majority of people currently feel insecure about their jobs; their incomes are insufficient to support their families. Convinced that migrants inside their country or workers abroad are taking their jobs, insecure workers support reducing or even halting immigration and enacting other protectionist measures.

Two new developments – increasing terrorist attacks and the Syrian refugee crisis – are adding to the fear surrounding this economic insecurity. Right-wing populists, in particular, have come to identify ethnic and religious diversity as a threat to national security and a homogeneous cultural identity. Politically, deepening globalization means decisions are increasingly made by transnational organizations. The European Union (EU), the world's most successfully integrated regional organization, has tried to balance transnationalism with member-country sovereignty.

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However, both the euro crisis and the refugee crisis have made EU citizens resentful of policy decisions coming from Brussels. The rise of left-wing parties in Greece and Spain, the strengthened right-wing populist parties in Austria and Hungary, and the British vote to leave the EU all stem from and share in this resentment of Brussels, whether in response to imposed fiscal austerity or refugee quotas. For those who believe the distant EU authority compromises their local interests, national autonomy is gaining favour at the expense of multilateral cooperation.

The failure of mainstream political parties to account for the social discontent is a more immediate cause of the rise of populism. Disenchantment with the government or major parties is not a new phenomenon. Political scientists have observed a mistrust of political elites and the establishment since the 1980s. What distinguishes recent years from the past is that populism is more focused and effectively mobilized to influence politics. Right-wing populists have founded new political parties that have gained substantial support. Furthermore, new political parties tend to weaken support for the existing majority parties. Even in the United States, where two major parties dominate, the Tea Party movement and the rise of Donald Trump embody the intra-party populism of the Republican Party, just as the rise of Bernie Sanders reflects the populism in the Democratic Party.¹

In an article for *Foreign Affairs*, Michael Bröning points out that mainstream liberal and conservative parties in Europe alienated traditional supporters as they moved closer to the ideological center in the last decade, which left their disenchanted supporters as easy targets for populists.² The white male working class in economically declining areas is turning away from the Democratic Party and toward Donald Trump in the United States and to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain. In the recent Australian elections, the far right won working-class areas that used to side with the Social Democrats. Around the world, the more ideologically charged traditional party supporters of the

older generation believe that they have lost their place in the leftist parties, which have tended to move toward the center by embracing lower taxes, free trade, and immigration – for example, Tony Blair’s New Labour, Gerhard Schröder’s *Neue Mitte*, and Barack Obama’s liberal social policies. Conservative parties have also moved toward more liberal policies to attract more voters, such as Angela Merkel’s giving up of nuclear energy and adoption of a more open immigration policy. While this shift to the center has allowed major parties to achieve some success, a significant chunk of their traditional supporters feel disconnected and are ready to embrace the appeals of populism.

Populism across Countries and Regions

Populism in the twenty-first century began in Latin America with the 1998 election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Later, the post-euro crisis in southern Europe joined this leftist populism. In Latin America, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela have all been led by presidents who adhere to varying degrees of leftist ideology and populist styles of governance. Jonathan Bissell writes that while 64 percent of Latin American presidents were from a “right” or “right-center” political party in the early 1990s, 71 percent – fifteen out of twenty-one countries – were from a left or center-left political party by the beginning of 2009.³ Bissell diagnosed this leftist shift as rooted in historical social inequality and a desire for a political reversal from the previously failed conservative governments. Despite their anti-American rhetoric, leftist populist leaders promoted regional institutions, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, the Union of South American Nations, the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), and the Andean Community of Nations. Accordingly, Bissell advised the U.S. government to use soft power and the West to deliver development and improve social inclusion.



The leftist populism of southern Europe is rooted in the belief that the recent economic crisis was poorly managed by the EU institutions; therefore, it is more critical of multilateral transnational institutions. Both Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain emerged amid the euro crisis. Their leaders, Alexis Tsipras and Pablo Iglesias, respectively, are critical of the EU's austerity and neoliberal policies. They believe they speak in the name of the people, and that two groups of illegitimate elites stand opposite the people: the corrupt Greek political-economic elite and the international and European political-financial elite. Even as they oppose austerity, they want to receive ongoing financial support from the EU to distinguish themselves from euroskeptics.

Compared to the leftist populism that exists in Latin America and southern Europe, the populism in western and eastern Europe is right-wing and remains more concerned with cultural identity than economic insecurity. For decades, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front pushed an extreme right-wing message with anti-Semitic elements. To broaden the party base, his daughter, Marine Le Pen, shifted the party toward an anti-immigration, anti-Islam stance and embraced anti-EU nationalism. Austria's old right-wing party, the Freedom Party, took on an anti-immigration, anti-EU agenda under the leadership of Jörg Haider. Newly founded right-wing parties are even adopting openly racist positions. Nigel Farage, the leader of the UKIP, founded in 1993, uses race-baiting rhetoric and blames immigrants for increasing crime and stealing British jobs. The Alternative for Germany party, founded in 2013 to protest the EU's bailout politics in the euro crisis, has increased anti-establishment, anti-immigration, and anti-Islam populist messages under the new leadership of Frauke Petry. Conservative populist parties have been moving toward authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland as well. In the United States, Trump's Mexico-bashing rhetoric and anti-immigration supporters share similarities with right-wing European populism.

While populism operates differently depending on the national context, it can be divided into two political views. Right-wing populism in Europe tends toward nationalism with a focus on immigration and identity issues. Left-wing populism in southern Europe and Latin America is opposed to austerity and other neoliberal policies of international institutions. However, populist movements, regardless of ideology, attack the political establishment as illegitimate and destabilize democracy based on mainstream parties.

Challenges to International Order

The leftist populism in Latin America is not threatening multilateral cooperation itself; rather, it challenges the liberal values of the existing international economic order. Leftist leaders in Latin America have pursued intra-regional cooperation that can assist the region's economic development. They have also shown flexibility in working with the United States. They are neither a threat to security nor are they anti-immigration. While their protectionist tendencies of leftist leaders have the potential to diminish free trade, supporters of leftist populism can adapt rather easily when populist rule leads to poor economic performance. The real threat is to the consolidation of liberal democracy in the region. For example, Mitchell Seligson writes that nearly all surveys of Latin America have found that citizens hold their national legislatures and judiciaries in low regard, and the younger generation is more likely to support populist measures at the expense of liberal democracy.⁴

On the other hand, populism in Europe seems to be more focused on challenging multilateral cooperation. Both leftist and rightist populists in Europe oppose multilateral cooperation. They are critical of the EU and want to strengthen their own governments' power vis-à-vis EU decision-makers in order to steer their country from the economic crisis. While sharing an antagonistic relationship with the EU, right-wing



populists in western and eastern European countries are more concerned about their cultural identities and homogeneity. Accordingly, their political discourses are not simply limited to opposing refugee quotas imposed by EU leaders or existing immigration policies. Their messages are extreme and visceral and threaten cultural diversity and the rights of minorities, including Muslim immigrants. Racial prejudice has declined in Europe, but the current hostility accompanying the influx of new refugees is rekindling it. The exclusionary attitudes of rightists against Muslim communities isolate young Muslims and push them toward terrorist groups. As a result, terrorist attacks in Europe are committed increasingly by Muslim immigrants, not just by foreign terrorists.

Steps to Address the Backlash against Globalization

The economic insecurity that accompanies globalization can only be ameliorated by international institutions better managing economic crises and national governments creating more inclusive economic policies. Unfortunately, the number of jobs will likely continue to shrink and the costs of welfare will rise. As countries grow more concerned about their domestic problems, European integration is likely to be weakened. If the United States falls for the “America First” slogan, the liberal international order will be seriously destabilized. Rather than dismissing populists as demagogues, smarter responses are needed. Changing both mainstream party politics and global governance seems to be the best option.

First, mainstream parties should change strategies for curbing the surge of populism. In a 2011 Chatham House report, Matthew Goodwin suggests that strategies of “engagement” (countering populist campaigns at the grassroots level) and “interaction” (supporting contact and dialogue between different ethnic and cultural groups within a given community) are more effective and sustainable than “exclusion” (blocking

populist parties), “defusing” (shifting the focus to the issues where mainstream parties have an advantage), “adoption” (embracing more restrictive politics on immigration and integration), and “principle” (debating with populist parties using evidence).⁵ Mainstream parties need to operate at the grassroots level in ways suitable to their national contexts in order to more directly weaken the anti-establishment sentiment of the supporters of populism. Inviting a populist party to join a coalition government is a risky but worthwhile option. Countries with proportional representation systems will have more chances to form a coalition government with a populist party than countries with majoritarian systems. Inviting populist parties to participate in governing exposes their performance to judgment from the voters. For example, after bringing down the Dutch government in 2012, Geert Wilder’s Freedom Party lost nine of its twenty-four seats.

Second, international institutions need to be more flexible and accommodating to the political atmosphere in member states. This need is particularly acute for countries experiencing economic crises. Left-wing populist parties oppose particular policies rather than the roles of international institutions themselves. Nationalistic populism is salient in the case of right-wing populism. On immigration and integration issues, right-wing populists are more anti-EU than leftist populists. As seen in the case of Brexit, right-wing populism can be more of a threat to the EU. To counter this disintegrative force, the EU needs to be more flexible in its immigration policies and allow member states greater discretionary power.

Third, international institutions should act more vigorously to solve the root causes of populism. The current wave of populism has strengthened due to failures of global governance. For example, if the Syrian crisis had ended quickly, the refugee crisis would not have occurred. If financial monitoring were more effective, the euro crisis could have been prevented. There is no way to counter the forces of globalization,



but it is possible to manage its dark sides. For that reason, international institutions and forums should continue to make efforts to reform global governance so that it is more democratic and effective. ■

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⁴ Mitchell A. Seligson, “The Rise of Populism and the Left in Latin America,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3, July 2007,

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⁵ Matthew Goodwin, “Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe,” Chatham House,

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Notes

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³ Jonathan Bissell, “The Rise of Leftist Populism: A Challenge to Democracy,” *Military Review*, January-February 2016,

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