

THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE AND THE US

The International Relations Committee began a study of populism in 2017 to better grasp what is propelling its rise in Europe and how it relates to United States (US) Foreign Policy and to our own elections. A better understanding of populism helps to deepen our understanding of democracy. In this Fact Sheet we will: define populism as it is understood today by political scientists; provide a historical context for its rise; document how it has manifested in major European nations and in the US; and clarify its impact on US foreign policy.

I. DEFINING POPULISM: FIVE IMPORTANT FACTS

From the Latin for people, “populous,” populism was based on the belief that average citizens have the right to control their government rather than a group of political insiders or wealthy elite. Populism is a movement, not a form of government, and a product of the democratic process whose candidates win through legitimate elections. Why then is populism today viewed in largely negative terms? According to leading authorities on the subject, populist movements have the following in common:

Populism is anti-elite. Populists tell their supporters elites are uncaring and alienated from the average citizen. Their core claim is to a privileged understanding of who the “real” people are.

Populism is anti-pluralist. Modern democracy is a system based on pluralism—on the idea that different groups with different interests and values are all legitimate. Populists condemn political contenders outside their “chosen” demographic as illegitimate and seek to exclude them.

Populists thrive on conflict and encourage polarization. They reject compromise. They are not actually interested in the will of the people but in using a symbolic representation of the “real” people (i.e., the silent majority) as a basis for creating policy.

Populist parties often have a strong and charismatic leader. Populist leaders appeal to emotion over reason. Given enough power, they often become autocrats, damaging democratic institutions and declaring their views the only correct ones.

Populists use Social Media to bypass democratic institutions like the free press. Populists were early users of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, which have direct access to the public and encourage the creation of like-minded groups and individuals. Taking advantage of this largely unregulated, direct and cheap medium to reach their voters, populists capitalize on voter distrust of mainstream media, devaluing the relevance of facts and fact checking.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND – EMERGENCE OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND THE EU

Prior to World War II the US played a minimal role in the global balance of power. The huge cost of World War I, the failure of President Wilson's international ambitions and the devastating impact of the Great Depression turned America's attention inward. Though the rise of dictatorships threatened world peace, many European nations tried to ignore the conflict through appeasement and the US, by then a rising economic power, saw no value in providing resources toward global goods. When it was finally drawn into World War II, the US extended all efforts into helping defeat the Axis powers. But far-sighted leaders also saw an opportunity to construct a different, better world—one that in theory would allow like-minded nations to enjoy peace and prosperity in common.

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The Liberal International Order that emerged after 1945 was organized around several guiding principles: open markets, multi-lateral institutions and liberal democracy, all under the leadership of the US and its allies. The Bretton Woods Institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) were intended to provide a rules-based structure for international commerce. All promoted the belief that open, transparent markets with minimum government intervention would lay the foundation for economic growth and lead to the spread of democracy and democratic values: rule of law, freedom of the press, transparency and accountability and separation of powers. Aided by the US Marshall plan, Europe's war-torn nations made an economic recovery and democracy was re-vitalized. NATO was formed as a common defense agreement between the US and European nations against the perceived threat of communism. The European Economic Community – begun with six European states pledging economic cooperation – gradually expanded into the multinational institution that in 1993 became the European Union (EU).

Today the EU includes 28 states pledged to a single market with no international tariffs and no passport control among most member states; it is the second largest trading block in the world. The Eurozone, consisting of 19 member nations that share a common currency (the EURO), operates within the Eurosystem. But the EU is much more than a trading block. Its leaders aspire to a unified foreign policy and cooperation among members in the areas of immigration, asylum and judicial affairs; states must have a stable democracy and the rule of law in addition to a free market economy to qualify for membership.

Continued cooperation between the US and Europe's democracies both as trading partners and as proponents of democratic values worldwide has been a mainstay of the Liberal International Order. This alliance has remained close as the threats of the Cold War lessened – and as democracy spread into Central and Eastern Europe as well as Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite partisan differences, debates over military intervention and other foreign policy issues, the Order has been successful in helping secure and stabilize the world over the past seven decades. There is strong consensus that defending and extending this system continues to be the central task of U.S. foreign policy - and that of its European counterparts.

III. POPULISM AND POPULIST PARTIES IN EUROPE

From France and Germany to Italy and Sweden, parties that ruled from the center for decades are being fragmented and pushed aside by the divisive rhetoric and tactics of populists. Since 2000, populist parties have more than tripled their support among European voters; populist leaders now hold government posts in eleven European countries.

What has contributed to the rise of populism? Globalization. As its economy slowed, wages in Europe stagnated. Competition with cheaper goods and labor shrank the industrial sector; new technologies replaced jobs. As a result, the working class was marginalized and unemployment rose in all sectors, stretching benefit schemes and increasing socio-economic inequality. Already traumatized by economic upheaval and technological disruption, European nations experienced three crises in succession: the global financial crisis of 2008; a huge influx of refugees and immigrants fleeing conflict in the Middle East and Africa in 2015-2016; and a series of terrorist attacks in major European cities. Whether they blamed the EU, for failing to control immigration, for its onerous regulations and policies that seemed to favor the wealthy elite over the average citizen, or their own governments for failing to protect their interests, people were angry and fearful and wanted change.

The stage had been set for the rise of populist parties. In the more prosperous Western Europe, right-wing parties burgeoned, espousing nationalism and exploiting fears about immigrants and cultural identity.

Economic crises in Southern Europe increased the appeal of new leftist parties that spoke to the poor and dispossessed.

Western Europe: Germany, France, the Netherlands, & Austria

Germany: For over a decade the center-right/center-left coalition forged by Chancellor Angela Merkel has lent stability to Germany. As Europe's strongest economy, Germany has also taken the lead in EU policies—especially with regard to maintaining stability within the Eurozone – and in defending liberal values. But in the last election Merkel struggled to form a new government and support for her has been waning in the ex-communist East and in Bavaria.

Nationalist German parties profited from Merkel's 2015 decision to open Germany's doors to over one million refugees from Syria and other Muslim countries. Chief among them is **Alternative for Germany (AfD)** — launched in 2013 as an anti-EU party. AfD has altered its message, recasting itself as militantly anti-Islam and promising to “protect” Germany from an “invasion of foreigners.” In the September 2017 elections, the AfD won almost 13% of the vote and entered parliament for the first time. AfD's anti-immigrant message has traction with many voters. The CSU (Christian Socialists), one half of Merkel's coalition, with its largest support in Bavaria, are distancing themselves from Merkel as the AfD threatens to draw CSU supporters away. A proposed EU deal that stops asylum seekers from entering Germany may not be enough to satisfy many German citizens. Merkel will retire after this term and has named a successor, but many predict that her coalition may not survive 2019 national elections.

France: While it is Europe's third largest economy, France's growth is stagnant and unemployment remains high. Concerns about the growing population of “unassimilated” Muslims and terrorist attacks have combined with economic insecurity to make many citizens fearful and ready for change.

Long an ardent nationalist presence in France, The **National Front (FN)** has fed citizens' fears with gusto. As the immigration crisis developed, FN's leader, Marine Le Pen, began vehemently targeting Islam. She also increased her appeal to working class voters in the Catholic provincial south and working class north by calling for protectionist policies against unfair competition from other EU countries and the reintroduction of tariffs and quotas. A re-invented FN now presents itself as the party of the forgotten little people. Many expected it might even win the 2017 national election. Instead, Emmanuel Macron's young liberal centrist coalition, **En Marche!**, won a landslide victory with promises to mend the French economy and a divided populace, while the FN got a robust 33% of the vote. The ruling Socialists got only 7%.

It is an open question whether Macron's government can overcome the challenges of improving the French economy and convincing the populace of the merits of unity. When he raised the gasoline tax in November of 2018, it incensed many French citizens who were already in economic duress; calling themselves **The Yellow Vests**, thousands of people began waging violent protests against Macron's policies. What ties these uprisings together? It appears to be a rejection of existing parties, unions and government institutions that are seen as incapable of responding to their grievances. The Yellow Vests movement seems to be waning but it has been a fertile ground for agitators – especially those of the extreme right. As the political climate in France grows more unstable and divisive, numerous racist attacks have been directed at Jews and people of color, including cabinet members. Ironically, Macron, only recently elected as an agent of change, has come to represent the uncaring “elite” to many citizens. His calls for a stronger EU and return to liberal values often fall on deaf ears.

Netherlands and Austria: Like France's FN and Germany's AfD, rightist parties in the Netherlands and Austria embrace anti-immigration rhetoric and identity politics. In the Netherlands—which used to support

immigration and the ideal of a multi-cultural Holland—the anti-EU **Freedom party (PVV)** is now the second largest party. In Austria, Sebastian Kurz of the **Conservative People's Party** now leads a nationalist government that includes the right-wing populist Freedom Party, which has links to anti-Semitism and Nazism.

Southern Europe: Spain, Greece, Italy

Spain and Greece: Emerging populism took a different turn in Southern Europe as the “Eurozone or Sovereign Debt” crisis erupted in the wake of the global financial crisis. Unable to re-pay or finance government debt or bail out their banks, Greece and Spain were on the verge of default. As their economies teetered, unemployment reached record highs and protesters took to the streets. With the help of the European Central Bank (ECB), IMF and EU Commission, France and Germany struggled to support these member nations with stability measures. But so-called bailouts came with a price - extreme and sometimes draconian austerity measures. Greeks blamed their own government for acceding to these bailout terms. The Spanish, though their economy righted without a strict bailout, also blamed their government for continued unemployment and corruption. Citizens of both countries blamed the EU. The extreme divide between the haves and have nots and intense distrust of government gave birth to **Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left)** in Greece and to **Podemos (we can)** in Spain.

Syriza's charismatic leader promised to stand up to Eurozone leaders and their bailout terms and in 2015 became the leader of a coalition government in Greece. Podemos, with its promises to counter austerity measures and to speak for the dispossessed, became the second largest party in Spain. Both were successful in addressing society in typical leftist/populist terms – differentiating the real people from the uncaring elite - and have made clever use of social media to spread their message. Today, disgruntled Greeks are turning away from Syriza, which has lost some of its populist energy as it attempts to govern by compromise. Podemos, while it still has a stronghold in urban areas in Spain, is also losing ground. One possible explanation: as immigrants seek new routes into Europe, immigration is on the upsurge in Spain and anti-immigration sentiment on the rise. The new far-right party, VOX, is targeting many of the same voters as Podemos, but with the message that they should be worried about immigrants taking their jobs, not anti-austerity policies. This is the first time a rightist party has developed a following in Spain since Franco was ousted in 1975.

Italy: Like Spain and Greece, Italy has a troubled economy and has been on the Eurozone's watch list as it grapples with high sovereign debt. As the first stop for people fleeing N. Africa, Italy also bore the brunt of continued immigration as other EU nations refused to take in refugees. Both these issues played into the 2018 election results in which both center-left and center-right parties did poorly. The new **Five Star Movement**, a left-leaning anti-austerity party that has promised a citizenship income and touts its egalitarian internet voting scheme, got over one-third of the votes, mostly in the poverty-torn south. The **League**, a right-wing, anti-immigrant party with its roots in fascism, took 18%, mostly in the wealthy north.

Despite the stark differences between them, the League and Five Star formed a coalition government and the leaders of both parties took ministerial positions. But Five Star's milder platform has been overshadowed by the League's anti-immigrant and anti-EU platform and by its outspoken leader, Matteo Salvini. Aided by daily, and homey, appearances on Facebook, his popularity among Italians has soared even as his message gets harsher and more divisive. Not satisfied with just turning immigrants away, Salvini pledges to form a Euro-skeptic (and anti-pluralist) Italian-Polish axis within the EU and has repeatedly threatened to secede from the Eurozone because of their budget requirements. There is speculation that he may push Five Star out of the coalition, leading to another crisis of governance that will increase instability and move Italy farther right. Salvini as Deputy Prime Minister and his Prime Minister Conte have done little to address the very real

structural problems in Italy's economy. As recession looms, investors fear that as Europe's third largest economy, Italy could collapse and take down the entire Eurozone.

United Kingdom (Brexit): Anti-EU rhetoric became not a threat but a fact in the United Kingdom (UK) when it made the decision to leave the EU in the 2016 popular referendum. While anti-EU sentiment was common in the UK – it never joined the Eurozone and a number of Conservatives considered themselves apart from continental Europe, one populist party can take a lot of credit for the vote. The **United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)**, a rightist conservative party, exerted immense pressure on the government to hold the referendum, then took the lead in convincing citizens to vote Leave by capitalizing on their economic insecurity and concerns about immigration – a classic populist tactic- pitting “the people” against the establishment. There is evidence that both UKIP's leader and another campaign organization, Leave.EU, were aided in their social media campaigns by Russia.

Three years into Brexit, many UK citizens are questioning the decision to leave the EU, taking to the streets in millions, while Brexit supporters form their own parades and demonstrations in support of the decision. Complications of the proposed exit are all too apparent – businesses hampered by tariffs, broken supply chains and transportation logistics between Ireland (an EU member) and the UK. If the break with the EU is complete, people would also lose the benefits of education, travel and jobs as EU citizens, a possibility not lost on those who voted Stay. As the new Prime Minister Theresa May tries to negotiate an exit, she is encountering resistance within her own Conservative party and from a resurgent Labor. Parliament cannot (or will not) agree on any of the exit plans that have been proffered. The recent extension provided by the EU gives the UK until October 31, 2019, to provide the EU with an exit plan or leave without one. The UK is Europe's second largest economy. Exiting the EU with or without a negotiated deal, will have a profound effect on both UK citizens and the Union.

Central Europe: Hungary, Poland

Hungary and Poland, both accepted into the EU in 2004 after an arduous process verifying their democratic credentials, are today governed by populist parties with large majorities - Hungary's **Fidesz** and Poland's **Law and Justice (PiS)**. Both governments have taken a hard line on immigration and emphasized a nationalism based on soil, blood and culture, casting their parties as the only ones capable of defending “true” citizens against invented threats. The result has been the continued diminution of the rights of minorities, including Roma, homosexuals and, more recently, anyone who disagrees with the regime.

Since taking power in 2010, Fidesz' leader Orban has been systematically dismantling key democratic institutions: placing party loyalists in control of the Constitutional Court, National Election Commission and much of the judiciary and gradually replacing public media and TV with state-sponsored media. Poland's PiS—guided by its shadow leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski—has followed in Fidesz' footsteps: bills are pushed through without review by parliament and the justice minister doubles as chief prosecutor. A recent judicial reform has hobbled the constitutional tribunal, seriously undermining the separation of powers.

Why are EU leaders so concerned about Hungary and Poland? With Hungary's Orban in the lead, they have declared open rebellion against the EU's principles and values. Hungary's Orban rails at both the EU and the UN for “interfering” with Hungary's sovereignty and touts his own brand of illiberal democracy as a viable alternative to the liberal democracy valued by the EU. Hungary has managed to form a bulwark with Poland to help it avoid rule of law sanctions from the EU Commission and is itself under investigation for such violations. Thus far, the EU has been unsuccessful in its attempts to discipline either nation.

IV: POPULISM IN THE UNITED STATES: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

From the founding of the United States to the present day, images of conflict between the powerful and the powerless, the “haves and have-nots” have been part of our civic life. In every campaign season, scores of politicians—both liberal and conservative—vow to fight for “middle-class taxpayers” against a variety of “bureaucrats” and “fat cats.”

An early example of a xenophobic political movement in the U.S. was **The Know-Nothings**, which arose in the 1840s as a reaction to the arrival of large numbers of Irish Catholic and German immigrants. In 1855 this group became the **American Party**, demanding immigration restrictions and a 21-year residency requirement for citizenship. Left-wing populism developed in the 1880s as a response by farmers to plummeting cotton prices and drought: farmers, labor unions and their sympathizers formed the **People’s Party**, commonly known as the **Populists**. The Populists wanted to nationalize railroads, break up big trusts and abolish the gold standard. They also advocated an eight-hour workday, women’s suffrage and a progressive income tax. Many of these core ideas were absorbed by the Democratic Party and were the foundation of FDR’s New Deal.

But during the Cold War, anti-elitism took a hard-right turn, led by the efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and this strain of anti-elitist populism has appeared in various political fringe groups, most recently The Tea Party, fueled in part by the 2008 financial crisis. While this crisis also sparked left-wing populism as seen in the Occupy Wall Street movement, this movement lacked clear leadership and faded from the scene. It is President Trump who has taken the old nativist message and turned his movement into a cult of personality.

V. HOW MIGHT POPULISM AFFECT LONG-TERM ALLIANCES BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE U.S.?

As president, Donald Trump has become the leading critic of the transatlantic ties that all presidents since the end of WWII have espoused. Some of his early gambits, tariffs on steel and aluminum, attempts to drastically cut the Foreign Service budget and demote EU ambassadors’ status, were reversed. But after two years in office, it is clear that Trump does not listen to seasoned advisors and will twitter his nationalist message with or without their go-ahead. Trump has called NATO, the backbone of US-Europe security relations, a “foe” to US interests and has bitterly voiced his resentment at the failure of European member nations to contribute their share to NATO’s military spending goals. He is openly derisive of both Chancellor Merkel and President Macron as well as Europe’s mainstream parties on both the center-right and left. He terms the EU “obsolete.” It is no secret that Trump supports Euro-skeptic forces. He speaks well of Le Pen and has celebrated Brexit.

In a larger sense, Trump has also abandoned the US role as an upholder of efforts to make the world a better place. In the name of “protecting” American interests, he has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran Nuclear Agreement and the International Commission on Refugees. His silence regarding the methodical destruction of democratic institutions in Hungary and Poland has emboldened their leaders to continue to violate the rule of law. Trump’s preference for strongmen leaders like Hungary’s Orban and Turkey’s Erdogan sends the message that he values autocrats more than the centrists who have held Europe together for generations.

Allies’ Reaction To U.S. Policy: What have European leaders done in response to the US’s new “go it alone” foreign policy and Trump’s disregard for multi-national institutions like the EU? Germany’s Chancellor Merkel and France’s President Macron have been pro-active in defending European unity and values. They recently renewed their friendship vows, promising to deepen economic, military and cultural ties between Germany and France while standing up to the rise of populism. Macron has urged the EU to uphold the “authority of democracy” and promised to work with other western countries to strengthen the EU’s powers to enforce EU laws violated by Hungary and Poland.

But most populist parties in Europe will have found a welcome voice in Trump. For the most part they, too, are against the EU, reject free trade and globalization and perceive migration (in their case from non-Christian countries) as an existential threat. Despite its recent takeover of the Crimea and the continuing stand-off in Ukraine, many European populists (including The UK's UKIP, Austria's Freedom Party, Germany's AfD, France's National Front, the Danish Peoples' Party and Italy's League) support closer ties with Russia and oppose the current sanctions against it. France's FN and Italy's League have party compacts with Russia and both have received funding from it. There is ample evidence that Russia interfered in both US and European elections, particularly in the UK and in France, by using fake news and social media to control, mislead and divide the populace.

CONCLUSION

Will we one day view populism as only a blip in the history of 21st century Europe/the US? Several pundits predict its surge in Europe might fade as the threats of financial crises, immigration and terrorist attacks recede. A group of 30 writers, historians and Nobel laureates seems to differ. In January, they published a manifesto stating their concern that "Europe faces a challenge not seen since the 1930s and we must act now or Europe will perish under waves of populism." The signatories were particularly concerned about upcoming EU elections, which may end the dominance of the mainstream within the EU itself.

QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think populism is and what are the causes of its growing popularity?
2. What is the liberal order? What are the liberal values that the press so often speaks of?
3. How is populism counter to those liberal values?
4. What are some of the strategies populists use to achieve their goals?
5. In many European countries a party can be viable with as little as 7 percent of vote. How does this help populists? What is difference between US model of populism and European?
6. What changes do you see in U.S. foreign policy in light of populism in both Europe and the US?
7. What do you see for the future of the liberal order vs the growth of populism?

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This Fact Sheet was prepared by members of the International Relations Committee: Judy Whiton, Diane Hibino, Elaine Apter, Elissa Kramer, Nancy Bliss, Barbara Hankins, Mary Burnet, Judy Newman, Marcia Bond, Linda Yangas, Connie Tonat, and Eleanor Norwood