Conclusion: The Global Forces of Populism

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Three themes emerge from this symposium. First, populism is largely shaped by (and is influencing) mainstream party political competition. Second, it has gained opportunities because of the economic policy decisions of governments regarding market reforms and liberal flows of labor and capital. Third, it is shaped by international forces such as the European Union. The symposium calls for further analyses of immigration, the fusion of cultural and economic threats, and what some call the “illiberal international.”

Keywords: populism, political parties, Europe, immigration

What are the manifestations, causes, and consequences of the global rise of populism? This symposium sought to answer these questions by examining how populism takes on various forms, how mainstream political parties have contributed to the rise of populism, often aided and abetted by international organizations such as the European Union, and how, once in power, populist governments erode the formal institutions and informal norms of liberal democracy.

We have argued that there are multiple populisms, rather than a single phenomenon. This means that distinct conjunctures and sequences give rise to populism in particular contexts. Yet as diverse as they are, populist movements share common roots in the motives of popular economic and cultural distress, the opportunities afforded by the failures of elite competition, and the means of a steady critique and debate where mainstream parties and regional actors remained mute.

The failure of political parties to respond to popular grievances, demonstrate accountability, and offer credible political alternatives lies at the heart of the rise of populist parties and movements. In Europe, mainstream parties are perceived as colluding on economic issues, conceding both rents and sovereignty to governing elites and supra-national organizations such as the European Union, while providing little in the way of accountability and responsiveness to a populace deeply anxious about immigration, the welfare state, and the continued ability of the latter to provide for the well-being of European citizens. Ironically, partisan polarization...
in the United States is part and parcel of this same phenomenon: the parties are perceived as being very far apart on policy issues, but as being equally beholden to corporate donations and the establishment. Phrases like “the deep state” and “the swamp” resonate because they are seen as bipartisan obstacles to achieving the popular will. More broadly, in both the United States and in Europe, growing economic inequality, the demographic sorting that separates lives in rural areas from more metropolitan ones, and the growing gap between those who succeed in the global economy and those who cannot do so, lend themselves to both increasing polarization and a shared disgust and suspicion of democratic governments.

We have argued that the consequences of populist rule follow from two core features of populist movements: their claim to represent the “people,” rather than particular interests or cleavages, and their view of elites as corrupt and indifferent. The first contention leads these parties, once in office, to directly undermine liberal democracy by eroding formal and informal institutions of representation: those who disagree with populist representation of “the people” are obviously not the real nation. The opposition (whether elite or popular) is by definition treasonous and treacherous and should be summarily dealt with. The second claim is unfalsifiable and thus a pernicious, though indirect, threat to democratic politics. It calls for a wholesale politicization of the formal institutions set up and run by these elites. And these are not empty words: populists tend to implement the policies that they announce in their campaigns. We should take them both seriously and literally. Since the majority of voters continues to oppose populist parties and politicians, this makes their rise to power and subsequent erosion of democratic values and institutions all the more tragic.

Common Themes

Three themes emerge from this symposium. First, political competition is a critical factor in the emergence of populism. Specifically, the strategic choices of mainstream political parties can open up the political space for populist appeals. As Roberts notes, if these mainstream parties coalesce around neoliberal reforms, left-wing populists can credibly claim that these projects have ignored the needs of the people, impoverishing and exploiting them in the process. Conversely, right-wing populism capitalizes on the mainstream parties’ failure to engage with broader notions of national identity, and it argues for a new nativism. Populism also is exacerbated

when mainstream parties have a consensus on economic issues, as this leads political competition to shift to a cultural-national axis, where nativist claims dominate, as Vachudova analyzes. More broadly, as Berman and Grzymala-Busse argue, the failure of mainstream parties to respond to the concerns of the electorate, and their failure to articulate clear and persuasive policy alternatives, make the populists an attractive option for many voters.  

Second, the political economy of populism means that prior economic policy decisions transform the opportunities for and strategies of populist parties. As both Berman and Lynch argue, the response of governments to economic crises, whether the Great Depression or the crisis of the welfare state, is critical: the Roosevelt administration’s active response not only eased suffering, but also helped to preserve democracy. German governments’ failure to respond similarly paved the way for fascism. Modern convergence around neoliberal policies is critical to the rise of left-wing populism, as Roberts argues. That said, Lynch also points out that labor market liberalization, with new migratory flows and job insecurity, has also meant new opportunities for right-wing populist parties. In her view, the nativism of these parties is another form of response to the neoliberal consensus, exacerbated by the recent austerity policies in Europe. And once in government, populist parties respond to their voters with policies that show their responsiveness to the suffering of the electorate. Thus, populist governments in Poland and in Hungary deliver targeted welfare benefits to supporters and would-be constituencies, as Grzymala-Busse points out, and have locked in a stable base of support as a result.

Third, while populism is enacted domestically, it is shaped by international forces. As McNamara argues, the depoliticization of the European Union went hand in hand with both a deliberately weak European identity and incomplete institutionalization. This allowed the European Union to function and to navigate the shoals of competing interests and national histories, but it also made it an ideal target for populists. Populist entrepreneurs capitalized on the perceived power of nameless European bureaucrats and articulated a defense of national values and

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5. Lynch, “Populism, Partisan Convergence, and Mobilization” (see note 3 above).
identities that rejected European interference in national affairs. As Grzymala-Busse points out, subsequent European Union attempts to contain populist mobilization in Hungary and in Poland were half-hearted and resulted in a pro-populist backlash back home. Such anti-E.U. populism has spread to the Czech Republic and other countries, as Vachudova argues. Critically, it also means that the consensus over liberal democracy in the European Union has given way to a new and unprecedented contestation over regime types.

Directions for Research

The contributions to this symposium have hinted at three important additional areas for research, which I will briefly outline here.

Immigration

Immigration is a potent force in populist support and rhetoric. One salient aspect of populist rhetoric in Europe, for example, is a critique of E.U. regulations as taking away national sovereignty and failing to respect local cultural and political specificities. While electoral data shows that populists gained sharply as European integration took off, another catalyst for European populists has been the rise in immigration. When immigrants came to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, they did so from and to specific countries. The numbers were limited by the host countries (whether Algerians in France or Turks in Germany), as were the citizenship rights of those arriving. Immigration in the twenty-first century has come in multinational wave—Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, and Iraq are among the donor countries—and individual countries have been less able to manage it using the tools available to them than they were earlier. In this area, E.U. integration has meant greater labor mobility, due to immigration from within as well as outside the European Union; for example, an estimated 1 million Poles live in the United Kingdom. It also has triggered an intense backlash against the perceived impotence of domestic governments to manage and control this immigration.

Populists exclude immigrants from their definition of “the people” and see immigrants as cultural and economic threat to the people. Populists have rallied support around policies designed to limit immigration, preserve cultural homogeneity, and reduce the economic strain produced by immigrants. Concerns about the

enforcement of existing immigration laws and about the integration and assimilation of immigrants into their new home countries are shared more broadly, but populist politicians often exploit them as evidence of the corrupt elite status quo and the need to redefine the nation.

**The Fusion of Economic and Cultural Threats**

The role of immigration highlights that it may not be particularly useful, either for analytical understanding or for policy prescriptions, to draw sharp lines between objective and subjective drivers of populist sentiment, or between economic and cultural factors seen as orthogonal to each other.

Such dichotomies are often arbitrary, and they are illegible to the electorate. For example, immigration is perceived as both an economic and a cultural anxiety; whether it is a subjective or an objective threat, it has led to the rise of populist parties in the most recent wave of elections in France, Germany, Poland, and Hungary. Neither Poland nor Hungary have accepted refugees from the Middle East since the 2015 immigration crisis, yet populists regularly refer to the “Islamic threat” facing their countries. Similarly, the Montana legislature passed a law against the imposition of sharia in the state, which has the lowest percentage of Muslims in the United States (.034%, or roughly 360 Montanans.) What is critical is the lack of elite response to these anxieties. As the analyses in this symposium illustrate, broader international economic, labor, and cultural changes heighten popular worries and appear to constrain policy options. Credible, feasible, and distinctive policy alternatives are both more critical than ever—and less likely.

**Beyond the European Union**

Finally, the populist resurgence of the twenty-first century has been notable for its international linkages. It is not just that the European Union serves as a useful bogeyman for populists. Further research is also needed into the tangible efforts at coordination and mutual support among populist movements and their international sponsors. On the one hand, it is clear that Russia has been an active supporter of populist movements, whether by funding the French Front National, propagating Putinism, or attempting to influence U.S. elections. Press and government reports have noted the role of Russian money, Russian propaganda, and Russian hacking efforts. The role of misinformation, both domestic and international in origin, is a critical component of these efforts as well. On the other hand, populists are assembling international alliances. The populist leaders of Poland and Hungary, for example, have met and supported each other, and Poland has been following the Hungarian template for the deliberate erosion of democratic
institutions since 2015. These are more than simply elective affinities; these linkages and networks are organized and funded, both formally and informally. Yet the extent of these activities, and their importance, has been largely neglected empirically.

Conclusion

The populist wave has once again surged in Europe and beyond. Its intensity and its impact demand that scholars think carefully about why it appears at the times and in the ways that it does, the ways in which elite competition is perhaps even more responsible than the anger of benighted voters, and how they should analyze and try to counteract its erosion of liberal democracy. Building on the work of many scholars who have long analyzed populist parties, movements, and ideologies, we have attempted to take stock of this latest rise in populism, and we hope that the lessons we have learned will remain even if and when the wave crests.

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