Symposium on Global Populisms and the European Experience

Introduction

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The introduction to this symposium provides a working definition of populist parties and movements and then examines the rise in their support in Europe and the implications of populist rule. As does the symposium as a whole, it highlights the diversity of populisms, identifies the crisis of representation as a root cause of the populist rise, and examines the consequences of populist rule for formal institutions, informal norms of democracy, and representation itself.

Keywords: populism, representation, United States, Europe, Latin America, authoritarianism

The specter of populism is again haunting Europe—and North America, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. These movements and parties argue that the elites are untrustworthy, the people are unrepresented, and the political system is corrupt. Yet while populist parties are increasingly prominent and worrisome participants in liberal democracies, scholars know less than they would like about the causes of their rise and their diversity. Worryingly, only now are scholars discovering the consequences of populist rule, and perhaps what to do about it. How can one make sense of the rise of populism across developed and developing democracies?

This symposium seeks to address these gaps 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 the failure of these organizations to defend themselves); and how, once in power, populist governments erode the formal institutions and informal norms of liberal democracy. Our empirical focus is on the developed and post-communist European democracies, with reference to the United States and Latin America.

Who Are the Populists?

Populist parties and movements are defined by their rejection of the political elites as corrupt and unable to serve the people, and by their claim to represent what they
claim is an organic people or nation, rather than specific interests or groups. As Cas Mudde crisply defined it, populism is a “thin-centered” ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.” Rather than seeing class or economic interest as the relevant cleavage, then, populist parties assume that the people have a common shared interest, a general will that ought to be the aim of politics. Accordingly, populists emphasize demands for popular sovereignty and direct democracy, rather than the mediation of interests through democratic institutions such as parliaments or parties.

Populist parties recently have risen in popularity in developed democracies: in the older democracies of Europe, they have more than doubled their support in parliamentary elections, from a steady average of 5% before 1990 to more than 15% by 2017. In the most recent French presidential election, populist candidates (le Pen and Mélenchon) took over 40% of the first-round vote. In the newer post-communist democracies, populist support began at much higher levels: an average of 15% of parliamentary votes in 1990, soaring to well over 30% by 2017. Populists

1. Other scholars have focused on populism as a form of discourse or rhetoric that pits the people against the elites in a Manichean moral struggle or as a mode of political expression; for a review, see Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, “Varieties of Populism,” Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Working Papers, No. 13-0004, Harvard University, 2013. In this view, there are populist modes of expression, or populist moments, rather than populist political parties or actors; populism is a language that can be used by many, instead of a defining aspect of specific political actors. As Deegan-Krause and Haughton point out, political parties may have some populist characteristics but not others, and may combine them to varying degrees with other appeals; hence, populism represents a spectrum rather than being a binary category. See Kevin Deegan-Krause and Tim Haughton, “Towards a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism,” Politics and Policy 37 (2009): 821–41. Yet if any actor can use populist discourse, identifying the impact of populism becomes more difficult. Defining populists as those who consistently articulate the populist ideology makes their identification and the tracing of their impact easier.

Populism is also sometimes defined as a specific political strategy that advocates redistributive politics and relies on personalized, top-down, and largely uninstitutionalized popular support; see Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” Comparative Politics 39 (2001): 1–34. This definition has been especially useful in the study of Latin American populist movements, but does not travel easily to Europe or North America, where many parties have made redistributive appeals and populists have not relied on particular organizational forms.

A final variant views populism as characterized by the “politics of personality”; see Paul Taggart, Populism (London: Open University Press, 2000), 101. That said, personalism is certainly not sufficient for populism, nor is it clearly necessary.

have won parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

In Europe, there are three notable aspects to this rise. First, electoral support for populist parties has increased across the continent over time. Figure 1 reports democratic election results for countries in the European Union, showing that populist support has risen in both Eastern and Western Europe, or in the new and the old E.U. member countries (those that joined in 2004 or later and those that joined before 2004, respectively.)

Second, there was an increase in populist support after E.U. accession within individual countries. In both old and new member countries, voters embraced populist parties around the time the country joined the European Union. The data from Figure 1 also show that the support for populist parties within individual countries doubled, on average, after a country entered the European Union; since different countries have entered the E.U. at different times, it is evident that these shifts have occurred apart from the secular rise in support. Third, support for populist parties has been consistently higher in the newer post-communist democracies in the European Union. From the very first elections in those countries, there were higher levels of support for populist parties than in the old, Western members.

Given this support, it is not that surprising that populist parties have entered governments. In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) was part of the governing coalition from 1983 to 1986, 2000 to 2003, and again since 2017. In Italy, the populist parties Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement) won the most votes in the March 2018 parliamentary elections, and Lega Nord took the most seats. Earlier, both the Lega Nord (1994–95, 2001–06, and 2008–11) and Forza Italia (2001–06 and 2008–11) took part in governing coalitions. The List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands was also part of the government in 2002–03. Several of these parties also governed in the newer E.U. member countries, including Fidesz in Hungary (1998–2002 and since 2010), Law and Justice (the PiS) in Poland (2005–07 and since 2015), the National Movement of Simeon II (NDSV,4 2001–09) and GERB,5 (2009–13) in Bulgaria, and the Labor Party (DP,6 2004–06 and since 2012) in Lithuania. In Slovakia, nearly every post-communist government has included a populist party. And here, defying

4. Nacionalno dvijenie za stabilnost i vazhod.
5. Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria.
6. Darbo Partija.
the anti-incumbent bias in the region, some populists not only retained, but gained, electoral support, including ANO in the Czech Republic, Fidesz in Hungary, Smer in Slovakia, and the NDSV in Bulgaria.

Why Do They Matter?

Populist representation has three deeply worrying implications: first, the “people” must be defined, a definition that necessitates the exclusion of some groups. In practice, this often means that specific (and often already vulnerable) ethnic, religious, or economic groups are left outside the boundary of the “people,” and are seen as undeserving of the concomitant rights, privileges, and obligations. The result is a populist conception of democracy as majority rule without minority rights.

Second, according to populists, those who disagree with the populist representations of the people are obviously not part of the “real” nation. The political opposition (whether elite or popular) is thus by definition treasonous and treacherous. Rather than representing different points of view or different interests, opponents are seen as working to undermine and betray the people. Hence, opponents’ views

Note: New members joined the European Union in 2004 or later.
Source: Global Populisms Database, Global Populisms Project, Stanford University.

7. Akce nespokojených občanů (since 2017).
can be summarily dismissed, or in a more extreme scenario, actively silenced. Another shared appeal of populism and populist parties is the dismissal of establishment “elites” as corrupt, amoral, and self-serving. Such elites include other politicians, top government officials such as central bankers, the media, and what populists like to call the “chattering classes.” These elites are seen by populists as distant from the concerns of “real” people, and cannot understand, represent, or address the people’s needs. The result is an emphasis on the division between a popular, positively-valued “us” and a corrupt, elite “them.” Many politicians resort to this sort of elite differentiation and argue that they, unlike other politicians, feel the people’s pain and can respond to it. But the repeated invocation of a corrupt and monolithic elite both delegitimizes democratic legislatures and judiciaries and lays the foundation for undermining formal institutions.

Third, because popular rule is seen as unmediated and direct, populist movements have a strong anti-institutionalist predisposition. This bias undermines the formal rules of the game, such as by refusing to give the parliamentary opposition its due representation or voice, attacking the judiciary, or packing the courts in the name of the people. It also erodes the informal norms of transparency, accountability, and deference to precedent that underlie democratic rule by making electoral victory the primary justification for action (or non-action), such as by refusing to make tax returns public, to follow conflict of interest laws, or to give political minorities representation in parliamentary committees. As we will see, once in government, populist parties have enacted their electoral promises—and, in the process, have eroded liberal democracy.

**Symposium Themes**

This symposium, based on contributions to the *Global Populisms* conference held at Stanford University in November 2017, addresses three main themes: the diversity of populisms, the critical role of elite competition, and the impact of populism on domestic and international polities.

First, we emphasize the diversity of populisms. We know too little about why populisms take the form they do, or why their supporters span the demographic spectrum. Yet populism takes very different forms across the world. In Latin America, left-wing populists have sought redistribution and state control of the economy.

In Southeast Asia (e.g., in Thailand and the Philippines), populism has taken the form of a backlash against perceived corruption and disorder. In East Central Europe, in contrast, right-wing populism claims to protect these countries from what are seen as the twin cultural and political external threats of immigration and E.U. regulations. In much of Western Europe (e.g., in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, and Finland), populists are nativist, criticizing immigrant and minority populations for diluting and undermining the people and their well-being. In the United States, the populism of Donald Trump takes the form of explicitly anti-elitist appeals (“drain the swamp”), economic protectionism (“America First”), and taking advantage of economic and cultural grievances, embodied in the exploitation of fears about immigration (“American carnage”). In Spain and Greece, by contrast, new populists tend to take a traditional left-wing form.

The manifestations of populism can also vary over time within one political system, as in the United States. Here, agrarian populists sought economic relief for beleaguered farmers in the 1880s and 1890s, culminating in the rise of the People’s Party in 1892 with its criticism of elite theft and corruption and its pursuit of a government that would “actively combat economic injustice.” William Jennings Bryan continued the anti-elitist, pro-agrarian message of the People’s Party. Huey Long and his Share our Wealth campaign were the populist avatars of the 1920s, seeking massive redistribution from the rich to the poor, including a guaranteed basic income. Yet after World War II, populism in America took a very different ideological form: a backlash against civil rights legislation and the segregationism of George Wallace (which also included conservative policies on poverty). Many of his supporters wound up as Republican voters, and then supported both the candidacies of Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot in the 1990s and the Tea Party insurgency of the 2000s. The ascendancy of Donald Trump, then, is part of a broader thread of historical support for populists of various stripes in American politics.

In his symposium contribution, Kenneth Roberts explores the political economy of this diversity, and finds that where welfare states are generous and inclusive, as in northern Europe, new challenges of immigration and economic malaise lead to the eruption of exclusivist populist movements that want to preserve these benefits to the nation rather than to newcomers. In contrast, where such state provisions are few, as in Latin America, populists call for an inclusive and expansive

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11. That said, Wallace was hardly consistent: on other economic issues, he favored spending on education, welfare, and infrastructure. See Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 34 (see note 10 above).
understanding of the people—and demand benefits for this constituency. Roberts offers a nuanced explanation for a peculiar aspect of populist partisanship: the prevalence of inclusive and redistributive left-wing populism in some countries, and of exclusionary and nativist right-wing populism in others. He argues that the former is the result of austerity policies imposed by left parties and a labor market duality, with large swaths of the population outside of the formal economy and welfare state provisions. Where the standard pattern of left opposition to right-wing austerity persisted, populists did not arise to capitalize on the dealignment and confusion of partisan competition. But where the center-left shifts to promoting neoliberal market policies, and where a previously generous and inclusive welfare state is embattled as a result, the outcome is right-wing populism, with its focus on preserving welfare states for the deserving beneficiaries, such as the real Poles and the true Finns.12

Second, this symposium thus also emphasizes a common root for the most recent populist upsurge: the perceived failure of the center-left parties in the democratic West, the traditional representatives of vulnerable classes and sectors, as explored in Sheri Berman’s contribution.13 These center-left parties have made two controversial moves: first, starting in the 1990s, they pursued “third way” economic policies. These left trade unions behind and created an elite consensus on the desirability of international economic integration with far less focus on those left behind. Second, center-left parties have focused on identity politics that, in the eyes of their critics, privilege increasingly rarefied group demands at the expense of a uniting language of equal rights and opportunities for all. On the center-right, in contrast, elite politicians have often been slow to notice the rising nativism and xenophobia that has been brought about and intensified by the perception that minority immigrant groups exploit the welfare state and labor markets while refusing to integrate culturally. Hence, Berman argues that democratic competition needs to respond to voter concerns with clear and credible alternatives as a precondition of electoral accountability and responsibility; when parties failed to do so in the 1930s, the result was fascism. Under the milder crises of economy, identity, and welfare in the twenty-first century, when center-left parties failed to play their traditional role of uniting the working class through welfare state provisions and economic

growth, the outcome has been populism. These changes have left the competitive space open for populist elites, who have not hesitated to use economic anxiety, xenophobia, and threats to national sovereignty to amass political power, often benefiting from massive disinformation campaigns—first online, and then in the state-owned media that eventually came under the control of populist governments.

Yet, as Julia Lynch argues, it is also important to understand the demand side of the electoral equation: the electorate. Lynch emphasizes deep structural conditions that underpin populist mobilization: the economic transformation of Europe, which changed the life chances, economic standing, and very policy choices of voters, especially those in the working class. She calls for a new “political economy of mobilization”\(^\text{14}\)—a reexamination of the historical roots and collective channels of voter discontent, rather than a simpler focus on contemporary public opinion polls. Both the Berman and Lynch essays argue against a false dichotomy between economic and cultural explanations for the resurgence of populism. Immigration, for example, is presented by its populist opponents as a threat in the labor market, a strain on the welfare state, and a massive cultural challenge.

A third argument made in this symposium is that the consequences of populism both undermine democratic representation and further reinforce the weaknesses of institutions and competition that produced populism in the first place. One source of the centripetality of political competition in Europe has been the European Union, both directly and indirectly. The E.U. had directly demanded that new members accede to a raft of institutional and regulatory chapters imposed on them, with little room for negotiation or concessions—or domestic policy debates. Now many of these regulations are challenged by populist governments, both as threats to national sovereignty and as barriers to the personal self-enrichment of the new governing elites. While it held up democratic commitments and moderation as part of the qualification for accession, the European Union also has indirectly led to an elite consensus within these countries on the benefits and advantages of membership, leaving criticism of the project to the political margins.\(^\text{15}\) This has meant that populist and extremist parties have been the only critics of the European project, critics who grew in popularity as other elites failed to engage popular concerns.

Anxiety about national sovereignty and identity, and how both the European Union and immigration impinge on it, is a common thread in European populism.


As Kate McNamara details in her symposium contribution, the European Union began as a project designed to overcome (or at least avoid) domestic politics but grew into a target of highly politicized debates and fury. Even as its powers increased, the E.U. failed to engage in public debate and was unable to articulate a new, alternative identity that could complement (if not supplant) national loyalties. The result was an international institution that, in McNamara’s felicitous phrase, “was designed to govern, rather than represent”—and whose responses are at best ineffectual and at worst actively counterproductive.16

Another catalyst for European populists has been the rise in immigration. In contrast to earlier waves, immigration to Europe in the twenty-first century has come in multinational waves (including from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, and Iraq), and individual countries have been less able to manage it using the regulatory tools previously available to them. E.U. integration has meant greater labor mobility, and not just immigration from outside of the European Union, but from within; for example, an estimated one million Poles live in the United Kingdom. It also has meant far greater backlash against a perceived impotence of domestic governments to manage and control this immigration.

Another consequence of elite consensus and muted competition concerning the European Union was the empowerment of vociferous populist critics, who gained votes and credibility. The E.U. is a favored scapegoat among many populists, who have successfully exploited the 2015 immigration crisis, the resentment of technocratic rule, and the purported threat it poses to national sovereignty. 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 needs. Electoral data shows that populists gained sharply in European countries as European integration took off, with another peak when the negotiations over the post-communist expansion began. As Milada Vachudova argues in this symposium, the result is not only that populist parties gain support by opposing the European Union, but also that the European Union loses coherence and loses out to Russia’s influence in the region.17

Furthermore, once in government, populist parties undermine the formal institutions of democracy, which they dismiss as the corrupt creations of the liberal

elite cartel that the populists sought to defeat. They further politicize and constrain institutions of oversight and accountability, in the name of making courts, the media, and the law reflect the will of the people. These consequences of their rule are examined in the final essay in this symposium, by Anna Grzymala-Busse. Here, the critical distinction is between populists in the opposition and their actions once in government. Populists view the formal institutions of liberal democracy as the creations of a self-serving and unaccountable elite. Accordingly, these need to be brought under what they refer to as “popular” (read: partisan) control—which has meant the subordination of independent judiciaries, attacks on the freedom of the media, and restrictions on universities and civil society organizations, all in the name of serving the people.18

Conclusion

As the contributions in this symposium argue, neither the sources nor the consequences of populism are simple. Yet one can discern important patterns that have emerged: the critical interaction of elite competition with the political economy of neoliberal economic reforms and globalized labor flows, the role played by mainstream political parties that gave the populists their opportunity to distinguish themselves in their critique of democratic representation, and the corrosive consequences of populist rule, consequences that are embedded in the parties’ thin but nonetheless trenchant ideology.

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