

# Is There a Populist Wave in Europe?

**BENJAMIN MARTILL**  
DAHRENDORF FORUM POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW  
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

**JOSÉ FEIO**  
VISITING RESEARCH ASSOCIATE  
LSE IDEAS

## WHITHER THE POPULIST WAVE?

Populism is an ideology—or a series of ideologies, depending on one’s perspective—based on distinguishing the will of ‘the people’ from that of the corrupt ‘elite’. Populism is on the rise across Europe and scholars and policymakers now speak of a populist wave sweeping the continent. Ian Bremmer, in 2017, spoke of a populist “wave to come”, while Jon Henley described in 2018 how “western Europe’s solid inner circle has started to succumb to the populist wave”. Among scholars, Cas Mudde has spoken of a “populist surge” in Europe, while Matthew Goodwin writes about the “wave of national populism [that] actually began decades ago”.

So well-known has the ‘populist wave’ concept become that it is frequently deployed as a rallying cry for centrist politicians seeking to galvanise liberalism in Europe in the face of what they regard as a tangible threat to individual liberty on the continent. Guy Verhofstadt, for instance, has spoken of the need to defend Europe from a “fifth column” of European populists, while George Soros has argued the key to “defending Europe from its enemies, both internal and external, is to recognise the magnitude of the threat they present [and] to awaken the sleeping pro-European majority and mobilise it to defend the values on which the EU was founded”.

Populism is indeed on the rise across Europe. In some cases this is down to the rise of insurgent parties challenging the mainstream, while in other instances established parties are themselves adopting populist rhetoric and policies. Italy is currently governed by a coalition of left and right populist parties—the Northern League and the Five Star Movement. In Britain, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was instrumental in tabling (and winning) the 2016 referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is presently the third-largest party in the German Bundestag, while in France, Emmanuel Macron faced the National Rally candidate Marine Le Pen in the second round of the 2017 presidential election.

In other corners of Europe, too, populist parties appear to be on the rise. Opposition to EU-enforced austerity measures in southern Europe contributed to the rise of a number of populist parties, including Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. In the Nordic countries and in Austria, the salience of the migration question has contributed to the rise of parties that champion ethnocentric ideals of national

### KEY INSIGHTS

POPULISM IS ON THE RISE ACROSS EUROPE, BUT IT IS MISLEADING TO DESCRIBE IT AS A ‘WAVE’.

POPULIST PARTIES HAVE VERY VARIED IDEOLOGIES AND POLICY OBJECTIVES—EVEN BEFORE CONSIDERING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT POPULISM.

THE CAUSES OF POPULISM ARE ROOTED IN INTERNATIONAL CHANGES AND LOCAL RESPONSES TO THEM RATHER THAN INTERNAL DYNAMICS WITHIN THE POPULIST MOVEMENT.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN EUROPEAN POPULIST PARTIES IS LIMITED AND AD HOC.

identity and oppose further migration. In central and eastern Europe, support for populist parties is not a new phenomenon, though their support has increased recently: both Poland and Hungary are led by populist governments under Law & Justice and Fidesz, respectively, while Czechs elected populist Andrej Babiš prime minister in 2017.

But does the rise of these movements across the continent warrant the ‘populist wave’ label with which it is so often associated? Discussion of waves is already commonplace in some fields of political science, especially in studies of democracy, where analysts speak of successive ‘waves’ of democratisation. But in this context, the term ‘wave’ has a somewhat more precise meaning. Specifically, it refers to the mutually reinforcing mechanisms through which social phenomena spread in a coordinated manner. To constitute a wave, the phenomenon in question should therefore be *homogenous, self-reinforcing, and coordinated*.

### THE RISE OF SIMILAR PARTIES IN DIVERSE NATIONAL CONTEXTS IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF PARALLEL EVOLUTION.

This Commentary argues that the notion of a populist wave is misleading, since Europe’s populist parties fail to fulfil these three criteria. Rather than a populist wave, what we are witnessing in Europe is the largely uncoordinated rise of an inchoate grouping of parties and movements

that is driven by the localised manifestations of global changes. It proceeds by discussing each criterion in turn, before offering some concluding thoughts on what is at stake in accurately understanding the rise of populism.

## A HOMOGENOUS MOVEMENT?

There are important similarities between those parties labelled as populist. They are generally defined by their outsider status and their opposition to the political mainstream, the emphasis they place on ‘the people’ as opposed to their enemies and the novelty of their political leaders, most of whom will not have held elected office. Many are also Eurosceptic, associating European integration with the decline of national autonomy and complicity in processes of neoliberal globalisation more broadly. However, the extent of Euroscepticism—and the terms in which it is expressed—differs markedly.

But these similarities are in many cases quite superficial. At the core of populism is a portrayal of ‘the people’ as

distinct from their implacable enemies, generally ‘the elite’ of some kind, although often extended to other categories, such as ‘outsiders’ or ‘external forces’. Beyond this discursive move, however, populism does not entail substantive ideological commitments, to make sense as an ideology it must therefore be stapled to commitments derived from other ideologies. Perhaps the greatest divergence in this regard is between left and right populism.

Right populists are associated with conservative values, nationalism, communitarianism, and political realism, as well as a reasonably hard-line opposition to European integration. Right populist parties undertake a double conceptual move in their construction of ‘the people’ vis-à-vis enemies above them (domestic and European elites) as well as external enemies (migrants, radical Islam), combining elements of populism and (ethno-)nationalism. Left populism, in contrast, sets its sights on rekindling support for social democratic goals, emphasising support for traditional working-class constituencies and for members of the younger generation. Insurgent parties on the left combine populism with a globalist (cosmopolitan) outlook; this simultaneously precludes the construction of external enemies—beyond the capitalist system itself—and establishes ‘the people’ as a category that extends beyond national borders.

There are also significant divergences between parties within these broader groupings, especially on the right, where a number of key differences are evident. Several rightist parties are protectionist and emphasise curtailments on free trade; others, including UKIP, espouse an essentially neoliberal, market-based philosophy. Moreover, the external enemy identified by rightist populist parties includes Europe (favoured by UKIP) and radical Islam (emphasised by the AfD and the National Rally). Foreign policy divergence is also evident. While Law & Justice and UKIP, for instance, evince a marked pro-Americanism, the AfD, National Rally, and other parties have placed considerable emphasis on anti-Americanism.

## A SELF-REINFORCING MOVEMENT?

Populist victories have seemingly followed one another in quick succession, leading to inevitable parallels and linkages between discrete cases. Much has been made, for instance, of the supposed links between the Brexit vote in the UK and the improving fortunes of populist movements across the continent in the years that

followed. Marine Le Pen herself invoked this purported 'domino effect' when she sought to draw parallels between the Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, and her own prospects in the 2017 French presidential election. Similar examples are often given by populist movements in response to claims that the task of unseating mainstream parties is unachievable.

But there is only patchy evidence that the successes of populist movements in any one country are linked to subsequent increases in support in other countries. While populist parties have sought to portray their successes in domino-like fashion, the reality is that their campaigns have been fought almost exclusively on national issues. Contact between these parties at any level is sporadic and ad hoc, limited to occasional meetings or unrequited mentions from other populist parties. This is not to suggest that lessons are not learned from populist successes, simply that the effects of these are marginal, given the absence of sustained trans-national engagement and the inward focus of most of these movements. The rise of populism is not, in any meaningful sense, modular.

Much of the existing research on these parties, moreover, suggests that the rise of similar parties in diverse national contexts is the consequence of a process of parallel evolution in response to shared external stimuli rather than an effect of populist successes elsewhere. Indeed, the determinants of the growth of populism are well understood in most national contexts. They by and large relate to a combination of international factors spurring on parallel domestic processes as well as local causes. The activities and successes of other populist movements figure in very few of these existing narratives. Indeed, it seems it is only the individuals associated with the populist movements themselves—the Le Pens and Steve Bannons of the world—who claim diverse populist movements have a self-reinforcing internal dynamic.

One major explanatory factor for the rise in populist sentiment is the emergence of a stark divide between the winners and losers of globalisation, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis and the resulting years of austerity policies. Populists have grown fat off the social discontent this breeds, since their opposition to the prevailing liberal order finds a willing audience among constituencies of losers.

Meanwhile, global technological change, including the rise of social media echo chambers, has contributed to increasing political polarisation and the amplification of radical voices. Societies are also straining under the weight of [changing demographics](#), in particular a declining

ratio of active workforce members to dependents, which is placing greater strain on already-squeezed welfare budgets. Finally, domestic political changes, including the decline of 'mass parties' and the cartelisation of politics, have contributed to citizens' lack of identification with the political mainstream, creating a vacuum that populists have willingly filled.

## A COORDINATED MOVEMENT?

Today's populist parties are a far cry from the nationalist movements that emerged in Europe in the 1930s, which sought to portray neighbouring countries as enemies and existential threats. Indeed, most of the parties in question are at pains to point out they are pro-Europe, claiming it is the EU with which they have a problem, preferring instead the return of a Europe of nations. It may even be said that efforts to coordinate with parties in other countries is a defining feature of the current generation of populists. What is clear is that the right populist parties of Europe regard each other as kin parties to a certain extent and are willing to offer rhetorical support for one another where interests and agendas collide. Nigel Farage supported Le Pen's campaign in the 2017 presidential election, for instance, as did the Liga Nord. Importantly, they cite each other favourably in interviews and appear to seek validation of their own agendas in each other's successes.

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Nevertheless, there remain a number of key impediments to populist collaboration and solidarity across Europe. The emphasis these parties place on the construction of a national 'people', however compatible with their broader vision of Europe, cannot but undermine the extent to which members feel any sense of transnational solidarity. Then there is question of the programmatic differences. These parties diverge considerably on such policy issues as immigration, the economy, and foreign affairs, and these differences erode the basis for collaborative efforts between them. Where these relate to deep-seated national identities (British Euroscepticism, German embeddedness in Europe) the divisions prove all the more fundamental. Finally, as relatively new entrants to the European political scene, these new parties find it more costly to establish trust and working relationships with

their equivalents in other countries, and to establish institutions to govern these relations.

Collaboration between populist parties thus tends to be sporadic and informal. High-level meetings do take place—such as that between far-right leaders in Koblenz in 2017, attended by Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Frauke Petry, and Matteo Salvini—but these meetings are ad hoc. Moreover, attendance is contentious even among populists. This suggests a cost to the parties in terms of social desirability, especially for those such as UKIP and the AfD which are wary of being associated with more radical movements on the far-right. Intra-populist collaboration thus tends to take the form of informal, bilateral meetings.

Importantly, cooperation between populist parties is not institutionalised. There is no Populist International to match those of the labour movement and Europe's liberal and Christian democratic parties, nor is there likely to be one in the near future. Efforts to establish a grouping of populists at the EU level, moreover, have suffered sustained setbacks from intra-populist bickering and in-fighting. At present the parties sit across a number of different groupings in the European Parliament; some populist, others more mainstream. Hungary's Fidesz, for example, is a member of the European People's Party, while other populist parties are scattered across various smaller groupings.

Moreover, the collaborative rhetoric established between these parties can be easily overblown. While Le Pen and Farage have at times referred to the 'people of Europe', these mentions are fleeting and are primarily designed to highlight the breadth of antagonisms aimed at the EU, rather than to establish a meaningful sense of pan-European solidarity. The engagement with issues that are common to parties across borders is limited to highlighting the perceived failings of elites elsewhere. For instance, Farage uses the example of southern Europe's economic woes to support his message that the EU is failing, while Le Pen used the example of Brexit to drum up support for economic protectionism. The interventions of these parties seldom resonate in the constituencies

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they use as examples, nor are they designed to, since they are aimed primarily at audiences back home.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The simultaneous rise of populist movements across Europe (and much of the world) is no coincidence, and these socio-political developments are linked by a number of common causes, not least the distributional effects of several decades of unrestrained financial globalisation. And common causes, of course, require common solutions.

But to fully comprehend the nature of these changes requires that we are clear about what the growth in populist support is and what it is not. To this end, this Commentary argued that talk of a populist wave is somewhat overblown, given the disparate nature of the populist movements in Europe, the lack of evidence their growth is self-sustaining, and the low level of coordination within the movement itself.

The populist threat has to be taken seriously, but should not be exaggerated; instead, policymakers need to understand the particularities of these diverse movements and the reasons for their increasing support. Making too much of the coherence of these movements may even help to bring about the very outcome embattled centrists worry about: a more unified and collaborative populist bloc. Talk of a populist wave turns the successes of this inchoate group of actors into something it is not.

Understanding the diversity of populist parties and the lack of coordination between them also presents opportunities for pragmatic engagement and, perhaps more cynically, for the employment of divide-and-rule strategies on the part of the political mainstream. Co-opting populist parties and bringing them into the fold may seem unsavoury, but it might prove the least-worst option in the end. Moreover, it might be easier than anticipated, given the loosely defined programmes of these parties, the extent of divergences between them, and the absence of institutional ties to be broken. ■

## FURTHER READING

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## CONTACT US

### Hallie Detrick

Editorial and Communications Associate  
Dahrendorf Forum  
LSE IDEAS  
Pankhurst House 9th Floor  
Clement's Inn  
WC2A 2AZ, London  
h.detrick@lse.ac.uk

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