

Populism is a Symptom Rather than a Cause:

The Decline of the Center-left and the Rise of Threats to Liberal Democracy

Sheri Berman, Barnard College

Populism is on the rise throughout the West and Europe in particular. In Germany a far-right populist party (the AfD) now sits in the German parliament for the first time since the Second World War and populists received their largest vote shares ever in the 2017 elections in France and the Netherlands. Even in stable Scandinavia, right-wing populists have become very popular, even participating in the government in Norway. How can we understand this phenomenon?

Perhaps the most common approach is to look at the “demand side,” i.e. the grievances motivating citizens to vote for populists. Here the debate is between those who stress economic vs social and cultural factors. Most research now seems to point to the indirect or “contextual” effects of the former, the somewhat more direct influence of the latter, and the toxic power of the interaction between the two. But while examining the “demand side” is important, understanding the “supply side” causes of populism is critical as well. Populism is more a *consequence* than a *cause* of democratic dysfunction: it is a sign that democratic institutions are not working well, i.e. responding actively (and hopefully successfully) to the challenges their societies face. This has been true of populist and anti-system parties more generally throughout European history.

For example, if we look back at the last great wave of populism, which occurred during the late 19th century, this dynamic is very clear. This was a period of intense globalization. The

spread of capitalism dramatically reshaped Western societies, destroying traditional communities, professions, and cultural norms. This was also a period of immense immigration. Peasants from rural areas, which had been decimated by new agricultural technologies and the inflow of cheap agricultural products, flocked to cities, and the citizens of poorer countries flocked to richer ones in search of better lives.

Then, as now, these changes frightened and angered many people, creating fertile ground for new politicians who claimed to have the answers. Prominent among these politicians were right-wing nationalists, who vowed to protect citizens from the pernicious influence of foreigners and markets. Such movements arose in almost all Western countries from Argentina to Austria and from France to Finland. Such movements became disruptive forces in some countries and influenced policymaking in others, but they did not fundamentally challenge existing political orders before 1914. Their appeals and policies alone, in other words, did not make them truly dangerous or revolutionary. It would take World War I to do that.

That conflict killed, maimed, and traumatized millions of Europeans and physically and economically devastated much of the continent. The war ended in 1918 but the suffering did not. Europe's continental empires—Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman—collapsed during or after the conflict, creating a variety of new states that lacked any experience with democracy and featured mixed populations that had little interest in living together. Meanwhile, in many of Europe's older states, like Germany or Spain old regimes also collapsed and a transition to democracy occurred during the interwar years. But like the new states, most of these countries also lacked experience with popular rule—and thus the habits, norms, and institutions necessary for making it work.

Making matters worse, the end of the war, rather than ushering in a period of peace and reconstruction, brought with it an unending stream of social and economic problems. New democracies struggled to reconstruct economies that had been distorted and disrupted by the fighting, reintegrate millions of soldiers back into society, and, in Germany and Austria, respond to the humiliation of a lost war and a punitive peace. Across the continent, lawlessness and violence quickly became endemic as democratic governments lost control of the streets and parts of their territories.

Despite these and other problems, right-wing nationalists at first remained marginal forces. In Italy, the fascists received almost no votes in the country's first postwar election. And in Germany, Hitler's 1923 Beer Hall Putsch flopped, ending with him and many of his co-conspirators in jail.

As more time passed, however, problems mounted. In Germany, for example, violent right and left wing uprisings plagued the Weimar Republic, forcing democratic governments to send in troops to recapture cities and regions from rebels. After the war Italy, meanwhile, suffered through almost two years of factory occupations, land seizures and armed conflicts between left and right-wing militias. And in Spain, anarchist insurrections, assassinations, church burnings and other forms of street level violence became endemic during the Second Republic. In France, communists and right-wing extremists staged protests and street brawls, and demographic and economic stagnation made much of the population feel that the country's best times were behind it. Hyperinflation hit Germany, Austria and other European countries at the war's end. And in many areas, most notably in the new states of Central and Eastern Europe, ethnic and religious conflict grew. By the late 1920s, in short, many Europeans' faith in democracy had been badly shaken. And then the Great Depression hit. What proved so

catastrophic about it was not merely the economic suffering it caused—although that was bad enough—but the failure of democratic institutions to respond to it. To understand the difference, compare the fates of Germany and the United States. These two countries were the hardest hit by the Depression, with the highest levels of unemployment, rates of business collapse, and drops in production. But in Germany, the Weimar Republic then fell to the Nazi onslaught, whereas in the United States, democracy survived—despite the appearance of some pseudo-fascist leaders such as the Louisiana politician Huey Long and the radio preacher Father Coughlin. Why the different outcomes?

While there are certainly many factors underpinning these two countries' different political paths, a crucial one was the two governments' divergent responses to the economic crisis. German leaders did little to ease their society's suffering; in fact, they essentially pursued austerity, which exacerbated the economic downswing in general and the horrifically high rates of unemployment in particular. Strikingly, even the main opposition party, the Social Democrats, sat meekly by, offering little in the way of an attractive alternative program. In the United States, meanwhile, President Franklin Roosevelt's insisted that the government could and would help its citizens, undertaking a huge range of initiatives, including of course laying the foundations of the modern American welfare state, designed to show that democracy could be even more pro-active and effective than European dictatorships.

Indeed, in much of democratic elites and institutions were not as forward-thinking or politically perspicacious as Roosevelt. By the early 1930s, most European liberal parties had been discredited as their faith in markets, unwillingness to respond forcefully to capitalism's downsides, and hostility to nationalism struck voters as completely out of synch with interwar realities. With the exception of Scandinavia's, meanwhile, most socialist parties were also

flummoxed, telling citizens that their lives would improve only once capitalism had fully collapsed—and that they could do little to help them in the interim. (Socialists were also indifferent or hostile to concerns about national identity and the evisceration of traditional norms—another unwise political stance during a period of immense social upheaval.) The communists did at least offer a strong criticism of the prevailing order, as well as a powerful alternative to it. But their appeal was limited by an almost exclusive focus on the working class and their hostility to nationalism.

And so in all too many European countries, it was the fascists who were able to take advantage of the declining faith in democracy that accompanied the Depression. Fascists offered a powerful critique of the reigning order as well as a powerful alternative to it. They criticized democracy as inefficient, unresponsive, and weak, and promised to replace it with a new system that would end unemployment and use the state to protect citizens from capitalism's most destructive effects by creating jobs, expanding the welfare state (for "true" citizens only, of course), eliminating "unscrupulous" capitalists (often Jews) who exploited "the people" and funneling resources instead to those businesses that instead served the "national interest." They promised to end the divisions and conflicts that had weakened their nations—often, of course, by ridding them of those viewed as not truly part of it. And they pledged to restore a sense of pride and purpose to societies that had for too long felt battered by forces outside their control. These appeals enabled fascism in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere to attract an extremely diverse constituency that cut across classes. Although fascist parties received disproportionately high support from men, the lower-middle class, and ex-soldiers, they enjoyed a broader base of support than any other type of party in interwar Europe.

Democracy Today

The problems facing Europe and the West today are not nearly as dire as in the interwar period or the 1930s. But contemporary economic and social/cultural challenges are real and serious and democratic institutions and elites have not responded forcefully or effectively to them. In Europe in particular, long-standing problems of economic stagnation, high unemployment, and growing inequality were aggravated by a financial crisis widely viewed as caused by neoliberalism, deregulation, and government coziness with bankers and the wealthy. The crisis sharpened the sense that the economic fate of countries was being determined by forces outside of their control—markets, international corporations and banks, EU technocrats—and that democratic elites and institutions were unable or unwilling to respond to the suffering dislocation experienced by citizens. Similarly long-standing discomfort with the erosion of traditional norms, values and identities caused by the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and growing immigration were aggravated by the recent refugee crisis. This crisis sharpened fears and concerns about the erosion of traditional norms and values and identities, heightened conflicts between a “globalized” elite focused on fate of “foreigners” and domestic populations that preferred attention be paid to their own pain and suffering, and between an EU built on “burden sharing” and citizens uncomfortable with a technocratic, Brussels based elite controlling their borders and social development. In short, significant economic and social challenges combined that national governments have seemed unwilling or unable to forcefully or successfully address created in a space (or “political opportunity structure” as political scientists like to call it) that right-wing populists—claiming to speak for “the people” and reassert national sovereignty—could fill.

Making this situation worse, is the decline of the social democratic or center-left. This process too has its roots in the late 20th century, but these parties' collapse—as evinced most recently in the German, French and Dutch elections—has accelerated over the past years. Historically the social democratic or center-left has acted as the champion of workers, the poor, the uneducated, those more generally who felt “left behind” by an ever-changing and disruptive capitalist system. The social democratic and center-left also historically championed social solidarity and a strong sense of national unity, and could legitimately claim to be speaking for the “small man,” the “people,” and the common good. Over the course of the last decades, however, it has lost this role, contributing greatly to the rise of the populist right in particular and the declining legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy more generally. The most obvious connection is simply via voters themselves—in many parts of Europe the inability of social democratic and center left parties to come up with distinctive and convincing responses to contemporary economic and social/cultural challenges sent their traditional voters fleeing to populist parties, of both the left and right-wing varieties. The decline of the social democratic/center-left had also made it more difficult to form majority governments in Europe. During the postwar era European voters were offered some version of center-left or center-right governments, anchored by a party large enough to set a fairly coherent policy agenda and pass it through parliament. But, as the outcome of the recent German elections makes clear—where even a coalition between the SPD, the far-left and the Greens would not be able to garner a majority—the center-left's demise has rendered it unable to form stable governments—which makes it more difficult to deal with problems, which makes voters more alienated from and frustrated with traditional parties and democratic institutions. And finally, the decline of the center-left has furthered dangerous centripetal tendencies. During the postwar period European

politics was dominated by the competition between a center-left and center-right that offered real policy differences but agreed on the basic framework of liberal, capitalist democracy. The decline of a distinctive and attractive center-left has allowed populists to claim that they now are now the real “alternative.” This too was clearly on show in the recent German elections where the AfD promoted itself as the true “alternative” to the status-quo; even many within the SPD acknowledged the party had at best offered “tweaks” to the current system and lacked a clear vision of Germany’s future. In politics you can’t beat something with nothing and if the SPD and other center-left parties are unable to offer voters distinctive and attractive solutions to contemporary challenges their decline will continue, populism will flourish, and democracy will continue to decay.