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Populism in Europe

Erik Jones

Populists are making headway across Europe and from all points on the political spectrum. Their success is symptomatic of the weakness of European political parties and party systems. Some of these populists seek to reinvigorate European democracy and yet most—with their xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric—seem intent on making matters worse. The challenge in Europe is to reconstitute national party systems as effective institutions for representing the popular interest. Such a challenge can be met only over the long term. For now, Europeans must deal with those populists who emerge at the national level. Some of these can be dealt with safely and others cannot. So far Europeans have succeeded in keeping the most unsavory populists from power. However, such success is not guaranteed. Indeed, failure to restrain European populism may be just a matter of time.

To get a sense of populism in Europe today it is easier to start with illustrations than ideal types. One example might be an Italian prime minister with a vast fortune built on a media empire who centers his reelection campaign around the thesis that an unlikely alliance of communists, journalists, and big-business people are out to take control over the country. Another could be a Hungarian prime minister having just won reelection who holds a meeting with his parliamentary party to curse about how he lied day and night about the state of the economy. A third might be a flamboyant media firebrand who organizes an eponymous political movement to protect Dutch cultural identity by enforcing its intolerance of intolerance. The Italian is on the right, the Hungarian is on the left, and the Dutchman is best classified as “none of the above.” All are populist.

Populism is widespread in Europe. It is most obvious on the right among the extremists, the separatists, and the cultural conservatives. There you find figures like Vadim Tudor, Umberto Bossi, or the Kaczynski twins. But populism can also be found on the left among the greens, the grassroots movements, the syndicalists, and the no-global protestors—figures like Joshka Fischer, Gregor Gysi, José Hain, and José Bové. This populism is personal rather than institutional. Parties are not populist, people are. Some populists rise to prominence within political parties, like Gianfranco Fini, Jörg Haidar or Oskar Lafontaine. Others, like Silvio Berlusconi, Pim Fortuyn or Simeon II, come from outside of politics. European populism is also more opportunistic than ideological. Populists can be either radical

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or conservative depending on the context. Some promise a new future, like Guy Verhofstadt or Tony Blair. Others appeal to an imagined past, like Filip Dewinter or Jean-Marie Le Pen.¹

What European populists have in common is a rejection of the cartel-like power of entrenched political elites. Their call to arms is a critique of those responsible for the status quo and their goal is procedural more than programmatic. What European populists offer is a change of who is in power, how power is wielded, and for whom. European populists organize movements and not parties, they appeal to voters and not activists, they focus most of their attention on

discrete issues and they seem to care less about how their programs hang together.²

Taken as an ensemble, European populists pose a fundamental challenge to European democracy. Where Europe once consisted of structured “consociational” democracies or at least an orderly competition between left and right, now populists threaten to usher

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in a disorganized pluralism within which political entrepreneurs compete to catch any voters rather than relying on established political parties to catch them all. The result goes beyond a transformation of European party systems and raises the possibility of their collapse.³

Why Now?

This is hardly the first time that European politics has experienced widespread populism. The interwar period was a time of populist political mobilization as well. The question is why populism has resurfaced. The answer has to do with opportunities for entrepreneurship in politics.

Although entrepreneurship is used here as a business metaphor in a political context,⁴ there are at least some European populists who bring the metaphor to life. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is a good example. Berlusconi built his fortune in the private sector and through the private competition for public contacts. His strong political ties to the Italian Socialist Party (and Bettino Craxi in particular) played an obvious role in his success, but they did not make Berlusconi a politician. It was only the breakdown of the Italian political party system in the early 1990s that made it possible for Berlusconi to foray into politics. The collapse of the Italian Christian Democrats was particularly important, because it opened up a huge swathe of voters who could be mobilized on the center-right. Berlusconi saw this opportunity and launched his political movement, *Forza Italia*, to exploit it.

Berlusconi’s approach to entrepreneurship in politics was much the same as in business. He surrounded himself with an array of media advisors

and consultants to make sure the marketing was right. He picked a popular slogan, attractive colors, and a beloved mascot—his own Milan football team. Most important, he promised to break with the established group of ruling elites by opening up politics to the interests of the small shopkeepers and everyday people. The entrepreneur in politics was not just a business metaphor come to life, he was a dramatic illustration that the rules of power in Italy had changed. The pitch has not always worked and it has won Berlusconi at least as many enemies as friends. Even so it would be hard to deny his impact. Despite having lost the last general election, *Forza Italia* is still the largest political movement in the country and Berlusconi remains the leader of the political center-right.⁵

Bulgaria's Simeon II is another illustration of the entrepreneur in politics. Simeon II was the boy-king of Bulgaria at the end of the Second World War who was sent into exile by the communist party. He grew up in Spain as a displaced royal, where he developed solid business contacts and a close relationship with the Spanish throne. He was not an entrepreneur of Berlusconi's type, but he did win positions on respectable boards and he acquired a solid reputation for business acumen along the way. At the end of the cold war, Simeon II went back to Bulgaria to reclaim some of his family's assets and to explore the possibility of making some sort of official return. When he tried to stand for president, however, Bulgaria's political elites resisted and barred his candidacy because he failed to meet the necessary residency requirements. In response, Simeon II declared his intention to stand for parliament and he organized his own national movement in order to do so.

The national movement for Simeon II was modeled loosely on Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* but without Berlusconi's showmanship. Instead, Simeon II played to his own strengths and based his appeal on an outward display of personal integrity and managerial competence. His timing was propitious. The center-left Bulgarian socialist party was tarred with allegations of corruption and with widespread recognition that it had done little to bolster the country's poor economic performance. Meanwhile, the center-right Union of Democratic Forces labored under the austerity measures that it had undertaken to pull Bulgaria from the brink of economic crisis. Voters reasoned that their established elites—both right and left—were too incompetent to be permitted to stay in office and so Simeon II was worth a try. Within just weeks, the national movement for Simeon II emerged as the largest political force in the country and came within just a few percentage points of winning the 2001 parliamentary elections outright.

Entrepreneurship is not limited to business people who take a turn in politics. As a metaphor, it applies with equal facility to professional politicians. Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt is an example. Verhofstadt began his political career in the small Flemish branch of the liberal party—which was always the third or even fourth political force in the northern part of the country, behind the Christian democrats, the socialists, and at times even the moderate Flemish nationalists. Nevertheless, Verhofstadt planned to overtake the Christian democrats and to challenge Prime Minister Wilfried Martens in particular.

Verhofstadt's opportunity came in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the end of a long period of fiscal austerity and inter-regional conflict between the Flemish and French-speaking parts of the country. In the 1991 parliamentary elections Verhofstadt even out-pollled Martens in his own constituency in Ghent. Nevertheless, Verhofstadt's liberal party was unable to form a government. As a result Verhofstadt turned his attention inward. He democratized the liberal party's internal selection procedures and re-branded it as a mass movement of explicitly *Flemish* Liberals and Democrats. In doing so, Verhofstadt was able to draw many of those voters who would otherwise support the moderate Flemish nationalist parties and he was also able to present a credible alternative to the Christian Democrats as the largest party in Flanders. Verhofstadt's success was immediate but not overwhelming. It was only toward the end of the 1990s, that Verhofstadt's drive for political renewal delivered a victory in national elections. When Verhofstadt came to power he removed the Christian Democrats from national government for the first time in almost fifty years.

Another example is Britain's Tony Blair. Blair rose to the top of the British Labour Party in the early 1990s after Neil Kinnock's surprising electoral defeat at the hands of John Major and the untimely death of Kinnock's successor, John Smith. Blair took advantage of his own party's internal confusion to launch a radical overhaul of its ideological commitments, organizational structure, and external face. He abandoned Clause IV of the Labour party constitution which committed to party to strive for social control over the means of production and so undermined its appeal to elements of the center and center-right. He also fought against the party's dependence on trade union financing and he worked to limit the influence that the trade unions could exercise in the form of their block vote. Finally he crafted a strong media coordination team to discipline the party's "message" and to accelerate its responsiveness to current events.

New Labour was not the work of Tony Blair acting alone. Like any good entrepreneur he depended upon a closely coordinated team of advisors and operators. Nevertheless, New Labour is as much a vehicle for Tony Blair as the Flemish Liberals and Democrats is for Guy Verhofstadt

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and as *Forza Italia* is for Silvio Berlusconi. Indeed, as a national movement, New Labour has often appeared to be at odds with the more traditional elements in the Labour Party. To its critics within the party, New Labour is too personal and not institutional enough.

These examples of European populism are easy to cite because the opportunities for political entrepreneurship in Europe are greater now than at any time since the end of the Second World War. The reason is simple enough: it is because the political parties themselves are weaker—both or-

ganizationally and in their control over the electorate. The point to note is that while the emergence of populists is often a sudden, dramatic event, the weakening of political parties has progressed slowly across time. The forces at work can be traced back to the “end of ideology” and the rise of consumerism in the 1950s, the “silent revolution” that accompanied the prosperity of the 1960s, the decline of the Fordist industrial model and its replacement by post-industrial society, the growth of persistent mass unemployment and the breakdown of the Keynesian consensus about what should be done about it. Each of these factors is the subject of a vast literature and their precise influence is debated. But for many Europeans the results are obvious. Established political parties no longer seem so relevant today as they did in the past, the differences between them seem much smaller, and the incentives to participate beyond a periodic casting of votes are close to non-existent. Hence voters are more inclined to shift their allegiance from one election to the next, they are more likely not to vote, and they are more willing to use their votes to send messages to the political class as a whole.

Of course such a bold characterization of the European electorate demands qualification, and there are many qualifications to make. The first is that social scientists have been expecting an increase in electoral volatility in Europe for quite some time—mostly in vain. In 1990, Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair published an analysis of the previous 100 years of European electoral competition which showed no substantial increase in electoral availability over time.⁶ Even so, the data may be changing. More recent evidence from the voting booth shows a much higher degree of net vote change from one election to the next, lower levels of participation, and a greater incidence of protest-voting. Such patterns are not universal and there are exceptions both within countries and across them. Hence a second qualification must be that the forces that have weakened political parties in Western Europe do not have a uniform effect and for large numbers of Europeans party-political identification remains strong.

Such qualifications do not dilute the argument. Populists may try to appeal to all the voters, but they only need to reach between 10 and 20 percent to have a major impact. Jean-Marie Le Pen had fewer than 20 percent of the votes when he reached the second round of the May 2002 presidential elections in France—leaving the French to choose their president between candidates from the right and the extreme right. The political movement launched by the Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn became the second largest force in the Netherlands with only 17 percent—forcing its way into the first government of Jan-Peter Balkenende and then triggering a parliamentary crisis.

The effects of party weakening are not just evident at the polls; they are institutional as well. Whatever the level of party identification or voter

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alignment, what is clear in Europe is that party membership has shrunk as the costs of electoral competition have increased. In the 1960s almost 15 percent of European voters were also party members. By the early 1980s membership accounted for only 10 percent; today it is just less than 5 percent.⁷ Caught between these two forces—declining membership and rising costs—political parties have changed organizationally to become more professional and less popular, and they have become ever more dependent on financial support from the state. These “cartel” parties may retain the voters’ affections but they have lost their commitment.⁸

European populists exploit the weak attachment to and low membership in the national party systems as and when a suitable opportunity arises. The successful campaigns of Berlusconi, Blair, Fortuyn, Simeon II, and Verhofstadt are all cases in point. Moreover, this list does not take into account the reality that not all populists are successful. The British Conservative William Hague tried to follow in Tony Blair’s footsteps by reforming the Conservative Party in order to compete with New Labour. Although he did manage to change his party’s internal election procedures, he nevertheless failed to broaden its electoral appeal. Hague is not alone in being a failed populist. Entrepreneurship is as risky in politics as in business. But there is a survival bias in our understanding of European populism. Analysts tend to pay more attention to success than failure—and they underestimate the spread of populism in Europe as a result.

So What?

It is tempting to dismiss the resurgence of European populism as a necessary corrective for Europe’s political sclerosis. In this happy intuition, the decadence of the old Europe is overturned by the dynamism of the new. Now all we need to do is wait for the new Europe to settle down to predictable patterns of alternation between government and opposition. Whether this alternation has roots in underlying social cleavages or whether it fits within a traditional characterization of left and right hardly matters. All Europeans need for democratic stability is the opportunity to “throw the bums out” and the ability to put someone else who is at least as competent in their place.

There are at least three reasons why such complacency is unwarranted. The first is the possibility that public policy is failing for reasons other than political incompetence. The second is the recognition that long-term political mobilization depends upon programs more than problems. The third is the inescapable nature of political interdependence and the vulnerability of ‘Europe.’

At the core of populist appeal lies the thesis that change is good because status quo elites are bad. In turn, that thesis rests on the assumption that someone new could do better—usually in terms of economic performance but perhaps also in terms of income equality and social welfare. Yet what if the constraints on economic performance are structural and not policy-related, and so any improvement can only be garnered through

a long, slow process of structural adjustment and institutional reform? Political change in this context may be counterproductive no matter how well-intended. Both adjustment and reform require momentum and not just impetus. By kicking politicians out too soon, populists risk slowing down any improvements to economic performance however measured. This seems to be the case in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s, where incumbents virtually always lost elections to upstarts claiming to know how to do things better. At a minimum, such volatility in power resulted in piecemeal reforms among even the best performing countries. At its worst, the threat of volatility convinced politicians to abandon long-term reform efforts in favor of quicker palliatives that gave only the illusion of better performance. Indeed, this has been the fate of Hungary.

Even where the populists are right and a change of national leadership is warranted, populism by itself cannot hold onto the affections of the voters. Once in power, victorious populists have to deal with the issues they have raised. While doing so, it is difficult for them to come up with a new set of concerns for the future. On the contrary, the fact that populists are in power implies that they have at least as much ownership of the problem as of the solution. Hence it is unsurprising that populist support fades quickly while they are in office—witness the dramatic declines of the List Pim Fortuyn, the National Movement for Simeon II, and the Austrian Freedom Party. Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* is the exception that proves the rule. During his first term in office, in the middle 1990s, Berlusconi learned the fleeting nature of his support. Since then he has refashioned his movement to become the representative force for the small shopkeepers and the other self-employed. It is this program—and not Berlusconi's populism per se—that explains the durability of his support.

When populist political movements wax and wane and when they cause national economies to stagnate, the effects of this volatility and poor performance are not limited to the national arena alone. The countries of Europe are too interde-

pendent both economically through integrated markets and politically via the institutions of the European Union (EU) for any one country to be immune from shocks emanating from the rest. The French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in May and June

of 2005 are two dramatic illustrations of this point. Although much has been made about the role of immigration and EU enlargement as motivating factors behind the large vetoes in both countries, it is worth considering who brought such issues to the fore and why they have achieved such salience.

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Political scientists in both countries have long argued that immigration is not the problem per se. Rather immigration is the symbol to which many other problems—of poverty, insecurity, and alienation—have been attached by populists like Jean Marie Le Pen and Pim Fortuyn.⁹

It would be too easy to say that the European Constitutional Treaty would have won support in both countries had populists like Le Pen and Fortuyn never existed. Indeed it is probable that immigration and enlargement would have been important issues in the ratification debates in

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any event. European populism is as much a symptom of problems as it is a problem in itself. The point is that populist political mobilization around immigration made matters worse. So too did the sense of instability that developed out of Le Pen's surprising performance in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections and out of the rise and fall of the List Pim Fortuyn. Moreover the

consequences have reverberated well beyond the borders of France and the Netherlands, bringing the EU into a period of prolonged soul-searching and institutional crisis.

What Can Be Done?

The re-emergence of European populism represents two distinct challenges for European democracy. The first is to strengthen the representative mechanisms that connect politicians and governments back to individual voters and wider electorates. Successful political party systems must offer a limited number of options that are at the same time mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive—meaning voters need to be offered real choices and the ranges of choices should have enough reach to bind national electorates within the democratic process. If the phrasing of this challenge sounds overly idealistic and abstract, that is because it is. At the moment, a truly representative party system is just an aspiration in Europe. The research challenge is to come up with the precise institutional or policy suggestions to bring a more effective representation into being. This work is being undertaken, *inter alia*, by the Council of Europe as an integrated project on the "Future of Democracy." At the moment that project is still in its early stages and while it is considering an impressive array of potential solutions, there is no reason to believe that Europe's representative challenge will be met soon.

The second challenge for Europe is how to deal with specific populists who arise in the interim. Of course some of these individuals will have a positive impact. Tony Blair and Guy Verhofstadt fall into this camp. Others are more clearly ambivalent. Although it appears that neither Simeon II nor Silvio Berlusconi has done lasting damage to democracy in their respective countries (and many believe they have had a positive impact), the symbolism of seeing government fall into the hands of a former monarch or the

country's richest individual is awkward to say the least. Reasonable people can disagree about how seriously to regard such symbolism—particularly with respect to Simeon II. Even so it is clear that a populist overthrow of democracy is something to guard against.

The hard cases are those populists whose very presence in government is problematic, whether or not they work to undermine democracy as a whole. Here the focus is on the extreme right and particularly on those more xenophobic elements of this group. When such individuals come to power they challenge the underlying conception of society by attacking vulnerable minorities and by legitimating political differentiation and social exclusion. European elites are well-aware of the danger that this represents for social stability and yet they have no sure-fire method for handling the threat. Instead political elites in Europe have tried three different formulae—diffusion, containment, and cooption—both singly and in combination. None has proven entirely successful.

European elites have tried to diffuse populist political mobilization on the far right by stealing away their issues, immigration in particular. Now almost all political parties in Europe are tough on immigration and tough on immigrant crime. Indeed it is commonplace for mainstream political parties to compete to out-tough one another on the issue. The result is mixed at best. The far right has not gained ground in France or the Netherlands to name two examples, but it has not lost ground either. Meanwhile the mainstream political parties have risked losing their souls. The bizarre confrontation between two anti-immigrant Dutch liberal politicians, Rita Verdonk and Hirsi Ali, is a case in point. While Ali, a Muslim, waged a crusade against the treatment of women in Islamic society (and therefore by Islamic immigrants to the Netherlands), Verdonk decided to make an example of Ali for gaining asylum and therefore citizenship in the Netherlands under false pretenses. The conflict bordered on farce but for the fact that it resulted in the collapse of the government in which Verdonk was minister for immigration. Now the Netherlands must go into early elections for the second time since Fortuyn's populist campaign.

Containment has not been more successful. In both Slovakia and Belgium, politicians have tried to freeze unsavory populists out of government by forming whatever alliance is necessary among other political parties. The principle object of containment in Slovakia was Vladimir Meciar, and in Belgium it is Filip Dewinter. The Slovaks wanted Meciar out of power so that they could join the European Union. The Flemings want Dewinter out because he is unacceptably xenophobic. Whatever the reason, any reprieve has been only temporary. If anything, the strange political coalitions forged to isolate right-wing extremists have only fueled their rhetoric about cartel-like elites. Meciar's party returned to government after the 2006 Slovak parliamentary elections, by which time Meciar himself no longer seems such a threat. As many observers have noted, there are many even more objectionable members of the new coalition. Similarly, Dewinter's party remained in check during the Flemish local elections held in October 2006, neither waxing nor waning in strength. By contrast, the other Flemish parties have

seen their support fluctuate wildly and in the competition between these groups the future of containment into doubt.

Cooption has been more successful—though it is clearly a high-risk endeavor. When the conservative Austrian People’s Party agreed to form a coalition with Haider’s Freedom Party in 1998, the other EU member states recoiled in horror. Over time, however, it became clear not only that the Freedom Party was under control but also that the discipline of government would undermine its internal cohesion and its external support. Eight years later, the Freedom Party is greatly weakened having been abandoned by Haider and by much of the Austrian electorate as well. Another even more successful case of cooption can be seen in the evolution of Gianfranco Fini’s National Alliance (which is a successor to the neo-fascist *MSI*) through the five years of Berlusconi’s center-right coalition. By the end of his time in office, Fini emerged as one of the most respected politicians in Italy—both at home and abroad.

Such examples should not encourage too much enthusiasm for cooption, however, if only because the cost of failure is so high. Haider’s old Freedom Party may be down, but it is not out of parliament and Haider managed to retain his position with a newly formed movement of his own. Meanwhile, Balkenende’s cooption of the List Pim Fortuyn ushered in a political crisis alongside one of the Netherlands’ worst economic downturns. And these are only the best cases of failure. In the worst-case scenario, xenophobic populists would be even more unpleasant in the government than they are outside. So far this has not occurred. It may be just a matter of time.

Notes

¹Not all of these names will be familiar to all readers. In compiling this list of illustrations, I have tried to draw from a wide array of countries to underscore that it is a wide-ranging phenomenon. Going back through the list: Jörg Haider is from Austria; Filip Dewinter, José Happart, and Guy Verhofstadt are from Belgium; Simeon II is from Bulgaria; Joshka Fischer, Gregor Gysi, and Oskar Lafontaine are from Germany; José Bové and Jean-Marie Le Pen are from France; Umberto Bossi, Gianfranco Fini, and Silvio Berlusconi are from Italy; Pim Fortuyn is from the Netherlands; the Kaczynski twins are from Poland; Vadim Tudor is from Romania; and Tony Blair is from Britain.

²The features described in this paragraph define populism.

³This paragraph is riddled with citations from and allusions to Otto Kirchheimer’s famous essay on the transformation of the West European party systems. In that essay, Kirchheimer describes the replacement of ideological parties of mass integration with non-ideological ‘catch-all’ parties. My argument is that Kirchheimer’s catch-all parties have now run their course and the current transformation of European party systems is toward a more open (less structured) competition between populist political entrepreneurs. See Kirchheimer, Otto. “The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems.” in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner, eds. *Political Parties and Political Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, 177–200.

⁴Classic writers like Joseph Schumpeter would probably object to the sort of concept stretching that places the entrepreneur in democratic politics. Indeed for Schumpeter, democratic politics is one of the mechanisms responsible for undermining the entrepreneurial spirit in capitalist society. See Schumpeter, Joseph. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (Third Edition)*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1950.

⁵Although the center-left narrowly won the April 2006 elections in Italy, its unity as a political force remains very much in doubt. The alliance of Socialist ‘left democrats’ (DS) and left-leaning Christian Democrats (Margherita) has yet to develop into a coherent social movement to challenge *Forza Italia*. Instead, the ruling coalition is fragmented and—many believe—unstable. Moreover, this instability was anticipated well before the polling took place. See Jones, Erik. “After Berlusconi.” *Prospect* 121 (April 2006): 44–47.

⁶See Bartolini, Stefano and Peter Mair. *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: The Stabilization of European Electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁷See Mair, Peter and Ingrid Van Biezen. “Party Membership in 20 European Democracies, 1980–2000.” *Party Politics* 7, no. 1 (2001): 5–21.

⁸See Katz, Richard S. and Peter Mair. “Changing Models of Party Organizations and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party.” *Party Politics* 1, no.1 (1995): 5–28.

⁹This point, and indeed much of this essay, is taken from joint research undertaken with Catherine Fieschi. That research is available on my website at <http://www.jhubc.it/facultypages/ejones>.