

Populism, Partisan Convergence, and Mobilization in Western Europe

Julia Lynch, University of Pennsylvania

What is the link between changing economic and social circumstances and the rise of populism in Western Europe? And what does the rise of populism tell us about the political economy of mobilization at a time when party systems are changing before our eyes? A political economy approach to populism must be attentive to the long-term changes in politics and society that help to explain: what kinds of people are mobilized by what kinds of parties; the changing role of place in fostering political mobilization; the new networks of mobilization that underlie populist success; trajectories and pathways of mobilization; and the effects of the eclipse of class by risk, inequality, and austerity as mobilizing experiences.

Keywords: populism, inequality, social democracy, neoliberalism, technocracy, Europe

Electoral successes for populist parties of both the left and right across Western Europe—from the U.K. Independence Party in Britain to the Finns Party in Finland and Podemos in Spain—have coincided with the economic disruption unleashed by the global economic crisis of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis beginning in 2010, and with an increase in migration to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. At the same time, mainstream parties of the center-left are collapsing: the French Socialist Party, the Italian Democratic Party, and the German Social Democratic Party posted catastrophic losses in recent elections, and center-left parties that are faring better are nevertheless receiving record-low vote shares. Center-right parties have done somewhat better, but to survive, they have had to adopt policy positions—particularly on immigration—that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. And where the center has held—for example, where two-round presidential voting makes extreme party successes less likely—the space has been filled by new political actors like Emanuel Macron’s *La République En Marche!* (Republic on the Move!) movement.

What is the link between changing economic and social circumstances and the rise of populism in Western Europe? And what does the rise of populism tell us about the political economy of mobilization at a time when party systems are changing

Published online September 26, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/705569>

Polity, volume 51, number 4 (October 2019), pp. 000–000. 0032-3497/2019/5104-00XX\$10.00.

© 2019 Northeastern Political Science Association. All rights reserved.

before our eyes? Fears of weakening national identity, loss of cultural heritage, and eroding national sovereignty clearly play a role; see Vachudova's contribution to this symposium.¹ So too does economic anxiety. However, to understand the current electoral success of populist parties, political scientists must go beyond analysis of recent public opinion data. We need to recognize that longer-term changes in politics and society help to explain what kinds of people are mobilized by what kinds of parties. A new political economy of mobilization should be attentive to these longer-term changes. It must also consider: the changing role of place in fostering political mobilization; the new networks of mobilization that underlie populist mobilization; trajectories and pathways of mobilization; and the effects of the eclipse of class by risk, inequality, and austerity as mobilizing experiences.

Contextualizing the Association between Economic Distress and Populism

Economic distress is associated with support for populist parties. Worsening economic conditions after the Great Recession were associated with declining trust in traditional political parties and institutions and with increased support for populist parties,² leading some observers to conclude that the rise of populism is caused by economic dislocation. Others note, however, that cultural factors, such as concern over integration of Muslim immigrants and refugees and fears that the (white, Christian) European way of life are vanishing, also play a role in generating support for populism.³ Clearly, though, neither the rapid increase in non-European immigration

1. Milada Anna Vachudova, "From Competition to Polarization in Central Europe: How Populists Change Party Systems and Change the European Union," *Polity* 51 (2019): xxx-xx.

2. Yann Algan et al., "The European Trust Crisis and the Rise of Populism," European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Working Paper No. 208, February 22, 2018, at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3128274>; Christian Dustmann et al., *Europe's Trust Deficit* (London: CEPR Press, 2017); Chase Foster and Jeffrey Frieden, "Crisis of Trust: Socio-Economic Determinants of Europeans' Confidence in Government," *European Union Politics* 18 (2017): 511–35; and Luigi Guiso, Helios Herrera, and Massimo Morelli, "Demand and Supply of Populism," 2017, Einaudi Institute for Economics and Finance, Working Paper, Rome.

3. See e.g. Tjitske Akkerman, "Immigration Policy and Electoral Competition in Western Europe: A Fine-Grained Analysis of Party Positions over the Past Two Decades," *Party Politics* 21 (2015): 54–67; Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," 2016, Harvard Kennedy School Working Paper, Cambridge, Mass.; Rogers Brubaker, "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (2017): 1191–1226; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Andrej Zaslove, "The Populist Radical Right: Ideology, Party Families and Core Principles," *Political Studies Review* 7 (2009): 309–18; and Guiso, Herrera, and Morelli, "Demand" (see previous note).

in Europe nor the economic effects of financial crisis constituted a natural experiment—the way that the crisis affected voters in Western European countries was very much related to previous policy decisions, which were in turn endogenous to political configurations in these countries. The effects (or non-effects) of the economic crisis and of the surge in immigration on public support for populist parties are thus impossible to disentangle from the effects of longer term political, economic, and social trends.

Populist parties and movements in contemporary Europe, whether of the right or left, claim to represent the interests of a homogeneous, pure, and virtuous people as against an evil, corrupt elite. They appeal to unifying sources of identity (e.g., nationalism and ethnicity) as against both pluralism and the potentially cross-cutting class cleavage in postwar European party systems. They hold a mixed attitude toward markets (general support for markets at the national level, suspicion of global and European markets, and support for welfare protections for “the people”). And they propose policy solutions that offer short-term protection from economic and cultural dislocation, but do not address the underlying structures (e.g., economic change, institutional and policy failures, and corruption) that produce this dislocation.⁴ These definitional characteristics are related to how the economy and society in Western European societies have changed since the so-called golden age of the 1950s to the 1970s,⁵ and to the behavior of mainstream political parties in confronting these changes. Long-term political and economic trends have contributed to a sense among voters that established parties are not equipped to protect “the people,” and in turn to the recent success of populism in Western Europe.

From the Postwar Settlements to Neoliberalism

The postwar settlements between capital and labor resulted in most countries in a period of consensus on Keynesian or statist economic policies that promoted growth and employment and kept social inequality within manageable bounds.⁶ The oil shocks of the 1970s and intensification of international trade competition led to economic stagnation. In some countries, compensatory social policies, coordinated

4. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*; Zaslove, “The Populist Radical and Right” (see previous note for both sources); and Guiso, Herrera, and Morelli, “Demand” (see note 1).

5. In reality, this was a golden age for heterosexual male workers, who experienced wage growth and increased social protection; women, sexual minorities, and migrants often experienced lower levels of social protection and less access to the labor market; see, for example, Daniel Wincott, “The (Golden) Age of the Welfare State: Interrogating a Conventional Wisdom,” *Public Administration* 91 (2013): 806–22, at 809.

6. Charles S. Maier, “The Two Postwar Eras and the Conditions for Stability in Twentieth-Century Western Europe,” *American Historical Review* 86 (1981): 327–52.

wage setting, and tripartite social pacts buffered the effects of these macro-level changes. This resulted in cross-national (and even within-country) differences in the degree to which working- and middle-class voters were exposed to the economic changes induced by globalization of production and finance, the shift to a service-based economy, and the construction of a single European market. Nevertheless, the overall trend beginning in the 1990s in Western Europe has been toward less protection from markets than was enjoyed by most citizens of West European countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Aggregate per capita social expenditure has declined little since 1990, reflecting the fact that wholesale and immediate retrenchment of the costliest social transfers (old-age pensions) and services (health care and education) has been rare. But throughout much of Western Europe, the welfare state has become more conditional and less generous for working-aged people. Labor markets have been deregulated, increasing the share of workers on insecure or sub-standard contracts, and wage bargaining has been effectively decentralized, resulting in downward pressure on wages in less profitable sectors. State aid to workers, firms, and industries undergoing economic restructuring has been tightened, and public sector employment has declined. All these economic changes, which predated the global financial crisis, the Eurozone crisis, and the austerity that followed, have left the bulk of Western Europe's working and middle classes more exposed to market forces than they were during the region's so-called golden age.

At the same time, mainstream center-left and center-right parties have, starting in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s, converged on a policy agenda that supports the relatively free movement of goods, capital, and people, particularly within an enlarging European region. While free movement and liberalized markets may or may not have economic and political benefits in the aggregate, they have objectively resulted in the rollback of economic security described above and in striking increases in socioeconomic inequality. They have also contributed to substantial migratory flows from the Eastern part of the region to some countries in the west (the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, and former West Germany), at the same time as broader global developments have led to increasing migration from outside of Europe. The convergence of mainstream center-left and center-right parties on the liberalizing policy agenda in the 1990s, as well as on shorter-term belt-tightening after the global financial and Eurozone crises, has created political openings on both the left and right for alternative forms of political mobilization.

Changing Parties, Changing Policies, Changing Representation

Parties have always promoted policies that seek to compromise between the different constituency groups that they represent and to meet the requirements of

coalition partners and other veto players in government. However, the ability of mainstream parties to stake out positions that are radically distinct from the economic and social interests of their main constituencies is a relatively new phenomenon in Western Europe. From the end of the Second World War until the late 1980s, democratic competition in most of the region was a highly institutionalized process. Parties—and in some cases even organized currents within parties—had stable constituencies that were anchored by coherent ideological traditions and a network of auxiliary organizations that ensured membership and loyalty. While there was broad agreement on the fundamental economic policy model in most countries, and while the mass-class parties of the interwar years gave way to more centrist catch-all parties, the distinctive social bases and ideologies of parties nevertheless generated relatively clear-cut policy alternatives. On the left, social democratic, socialist, and (nominally) communist parties offered an agenda of welfare state growth and expansionary macroeconomic policies that appealed to industrial and public-sector workers. On the right, conservative, liberal, and Christian democratic parties appealed to capitalists, professionals, and the self-employed in agriculture and commerce by promising to lower taxes and protect the sanctity of private property, church, and family. Under these circumstances, a vote for a center-left or center-right party may not have meant deciding between distinct models of social and economic organization, but it did imply that, at least at the margins, the interests of the main socioeconomic groups represented by the different parties would be protected.

With the convergence by the 1990s of mainstream parties on similar liberalizing economic and social policies, however, alternation of the major parties in government has produced less distinct macroeconomic policy outcomes, and mainstream parties have provided less clear representation of societal interests.⁷ Center-left and center-right parties have staked out minor differences on key policy issues ranging from the relative priority to be placed on employment versus inflation to the proper degree of regulation of international financial or migratory flows. But from the point of view of both major political tendencies, “there is no alternative” to neoliberalism (to borrow Margaret Thatcher’s famous phrase). To

7. See, for example, Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party,” *Party Politics* 1 (1995): 5–28; Chris Howell, “The End of the Relationship between Social Democratic Parties and Trade Unions?,” *Studies in Political Economy* 65 (2001): 7–37; and Johannes Karreth, Jonathan T. Polk, and Christopher S. Allen, “Catchall or Catch and Release? The Electoral Consequences of Social Democratic Parties’ March to the Middle in Western Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (2013): 791–822.

be sure, the space for policy alternatives is also constrained by more or less exogenous forces, including increased capital mobility and the delegation of significant macroeconomic and policy responsibilities to the European Union level. The fact that party convergence was a choice made under some constraints does not alter the outcomes of that choice, however. For the purposes of understanding the rise of populism, the main outcome of interest is that many voters now perceive that their own or their nation's prosperity and security is harmed by neoliberal policies, and they have abandoned the mainstream parties that espouse these policies.⁸

The Supply Side: A Hobson's Choice between Neoliberalism and Populism

In Western Europe today, then, left- and right-wing populist parties are mobilizing discontent against the consequences of the mainstream parties' convergence on neoliberalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This explains some of the demand for populism, as well as for other alternatives to the mainstream parties. In moral economy terms, society is reasserting its need for protection against the economic and cultural forces unleashed by market liberalism that are currently wreaking havoc on the traditional relationships of social reproduction.⁹ But while a grievance is a necessary precondition for political mobilization of any kind, Polanyi observes that society's urge for self-protection can take a variety of political forms. Attention to the supply side of politics helps to explain why populist parties are currently reaping the rewards of the electorate's discontent. Indeed, a central concern of the substantial and rich political science literature on populism in Western Europe in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the conditions that create a supply of populist options. This literature suggests that the behavior of party elites and macro-level features of party systems can explain both the conversion of diffuse attitudes and grievances into support for populism rather than something else, and why populist parties succeed or fail.¹⁰

8. For example, see Abby Innes, "Draining the Swamp: Understanding the Crisis in Mainstream Politics as a Crisis of the State," *Slavic Review* 76 (2017): S30–S38; and Jonathan Hopkin and Mark Blyth, "The Global Economics of European Populism: Growth Regimes and Party System Change in Europe," *Government and Opposition* 54 (2019): 193–225.

9. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1991).

10. See, for example, Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: Springer, 1994); Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Mudde, *Populist*

The behavior of mainstream parties in the system creates openings that populist parties may or may not be able to exploit; without these openings, minor parties are unlikely to gain more than marginal levels of support. Even so, the institutional rules of the game—electoral systems, thresholds for representation in legislative bodies, and rules governing ballot access—affect the likelihood that new parties will form and gain enough votes to win representation and, eventually, participate in government. And decisions that populist politicians (party leaders and activists) make—which aspects of populism or other issues to emphasize, whether to position themselves as left- or right-wing populists, how to organize their parties, and how to mobilize potential voters—affect whether they will attract supporters, convert support into votes, and form effective coalitions with other parties to achieve their policy goals.

Where alternatives to the mainstream parties have been available and viable for the reasons discussed above, the rise of populism can be explained partially in terms of classical Downsian reasoning. But the extent of the recent collapse of European center-left parties, in particular—and even in the absence of viable alternatives—requires further explanation. Two aspects of center-left parties' electoral appeal in recent decades seem particularly relevant. Neoliberalism implies a turn away from using the power and resources of the state to protect working-class and (many) middle-class voters. When center-left parties made this turn beginning in the 1990s, it was natural for them to de-emphasize class rhetoric. One result was a decline in class voting.¹¹ But when center-left parties cease to try to mobilize voters on class lines, this makes their voters available for recruitment by other parties on the basis of other identities and preferences—such as nationalism, regional identity, and ethnic identity—that are compatible with populism. A second important consequence of the center-left's neoliberal turn in the 1990s was its adoption of a new vocabulary for discussing the problem of socioeconomic inequality. In place of redistribution or collective control over aspects of economic life, center-left parties in the 1990s shifted to forms of egalitarian discourse that were better suited for a neoliberal age: social investment, activation, and even health inequalities.¹² As I

Radical Right (see note 2 above); and Bonnie M. Meguid, *Party Competition between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

11. See, for example, Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, "The Depoliticization of Inequality and Redistribution: Explaining the Decline of Class Voting," *Journal of Politics* 74 (2012): 963–76.

12. See, for example, Jane Jenson, "Redesigning Citizenship Regimes after Neoliberalism: Moving towards Social Investment," in *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies, Challenges*, ed. Nathalie Morel and Bruno Palier (Bristol, U.K.: Policy Press, 2009), 27–44; Christopher Deeming and Paul Smyth, "Social Investment after Neoliberalism: Policy Paradigms

argue in my forthcoming book, this change in vocabulary surrounding inequality resulted in shifting the range of politically viable policy responses away from tax, transfer, and regulatory policies aimed at controlling socioeconomic inequality in the short term, and toward instruments requiring complex policy coordination and long lag times in order to generate positive results.¹³

Toward a Political Economy of Populist Mobilization

A fully developed political economic theory of populist mobilization needs to recognize the major changes in both the economic and cultural substrate and the political-mobilizational landscape since the 1990s. In addition to the changes in society and economic policy and outputs that I have described above—rising immigration, inequality, and the individualization of risk—deindustrialization has accelerated, leading to intensified geographic concentration of extreme economic deprivation and advantage. Since 2008, moreover, austerity policies have been introduced in many West European countries. Politically, changes include not only the decline of mass class mobilization by parties and policy convergence of mainstream parties, but also the transfer of much social and economic policy authority to supranational, non-elected bodies, decreasing membership in unions and churches, the rise of media-driven politics, and the emergence of social media as agents of mobilization.¹⁴

Where might researchers hoping to develop a new political economy of mobilization look for landmarks in what has come to seem a relatively unstructured party-political space? First, we could do more to investigate the role of collections of factors that are clustered in places—sub-national regions and localities—in generating economic and cultural experiences that are the bases for political mobilization,¹⁵

and Political Platforms,” *Journal of Social Policy* 44 (2015): 297–318; and Julia Lynch, “Reframing Inequality? The Health Inequalities Turn as a Dangerous Frame Shift,” *Journal of Public Health* 39 (2017): 653–60.

13. Julia Lynch, *Regimes of Inequality: The Political Economy of Health and Wealth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, in press, 2019).

14. For example, see Russell Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg, eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).

15. See, for example, Gilles Van Hamme, Christian Vanderमotten, and Pablo Medina Lockhart, “The Electoral Geography of the Left in Western Europe Since 1945: Permanencies and Changes,” *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 109 (2018): 274–94; and Kathleen R. McNamara, “Explaining the New Class Cleavages: Geography, Post-Industrial Transformations and Everyday Culture,” November 10, 2017, unpublished manuscript, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3059222>.

and in playing host to networks of mobilization that may be either thriving, like mosques, or collapsing, like unions and mainstream party organizations.¹⁶ Second, we should invest in understanding the workings of new networks of mobilization, for example among minority co-ethnics and via social media.¹⁷ Third, we ought to take a page from the book of demographers and pay attention to multiple trajectories of mobilization—that is, the paths traveled by voters who arrive at supporting populist parties or movements. For this, political scientists will need to stop relying on aggregate vote flows, and demand better panel data.

We will also need to invest more of our intellectual energy in understanding how inequality, risk, and austerity function as political issues, which is unlikely to be identical to the politics of class. At the micro level, what are voters perceiving about their economic situations, and how does this affect their political views? Is inequality a non-issue because distributions are difficult to see? We know that fairness can be a powerful driver of political and policy preferences, but inequality is not always perceived as unfair.¹⁸ Does relative deprivation matter more for political behavior than absolute deprivation? And how do individuals calculate and act on risk? At the meso level, we need to understand how potential mobilizers—parties, movements and individual politicians—are using (or not using) issues of inequality, risk, and austerity; whether it works for them; and if so, among which groups.

Finally, we need to pay attention not only to populists, who may be able to mobilize successfully in a permissive environment, but also to what mainstream parties are doing to try to mobilize voters in this new environment. In this symposium, Roberts outlines the political space available to be occupied by populist parties.¹⁹ How far will center-right parties move in this space to capture right-populist discontent with internationalization and with immigration? And will center-left parties abandon their technocratic discourses and continuing support for cosmopolitanism, or move back to the left on the economic dimension to meet left

16. See, for example, Jens Rydgren, “Social Isolation? Social Capital and Radical Right-Wing Voting in Western Europe,” *Journal of Civil Society* 5 (2009): 129–50; and Jonathan Rodden, “Geography and Gridlock in the United States,” in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, ed. Nathaniel Persily (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 104–20.

17. See, for example, Rafaela M. Dancygier, *Dilemmas of Inclusion: Muslims in European Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

18. See, for example, James R. Kluegel and David S. Mason, “Fairness Matters: Social Justice and Political Legitimacy in Post-Communist Europe,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 56 (2004): 813–34; and Julia Lynch and Sarah E. Gollust, “Playing Fair: Fairness Beliefs and Health Policy Preferences in the United States,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 35 (2010): 849–87.

19. Kenneth M. Roberts, “Bipolar Disorders: Varieties of Capitalism and Populist Out-Flanking on the Left and Right,” *Polity* 51 (2019): xxx-xx.

populists on their own terrain? Technocracy—government by technical decision-making—involves the delegation of policy making to persons with highly technical expertise, and the removal of key policy decisions from the public eye. It also involves a shift in language. To the extent that the left has attempted to reconcile social protection with neoliberalism in recent decades, it has often quite explicitly replaced the language of redistribution and class conflict with terminology calculated to resonate with the new market ethos. But if technocratic egalitarianism does not result in real social protection, it becomes discredited, and the disaffected search for other options.

Julia Lynch is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research concerns the politics of inequality and social policy in the rich, industrialized democracies, particularly Western Europe. She has published widely on health inequalities as well as socioeconomic inequality. In her latest book, *Regimes of Inequality: The Political Economy of Health and Wealth* (Cambridge University Press, 2019, in press), Lynch examines how the discursive construction of the problem of inequality by center-left politicians since the 1990s has tied their hands and prevented them from enacting the policies that could significantly reduce social inequality. She can be reached at jflynch@sas.upenn.edu.