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Europe's Populist Challenge

Origins, Supporters, and Responses

By Matt Browne, Dalibor Rohac, and Carolyn Kenney May 2018

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Introduction and summary

Authoritarian populism is not new to Europe. Numerous political parties on the far right and the far left have long called for a radical overhaul of Europe's political and economic institutions.

What is new is that, in the past decade, such parties have moved from the margins of Europe's political landscape to its core. As the historic memories of World War II and Soviet communism fade, so has the social stigma previously associated with advocating for policy agendas that destroy democratic institutions and human lives. What is more, the parties themselves have undergone dramatic changes and spurred a wave of political innovation. New populist movements have emerged, defying old ideological categories. Old populist groups have changed too, sometimes dramatically. Instead of stale ideological proselytizing, populists now offer excitement and rebellion—and use cutting-edge social media strategies to do so.

Although populism and authoritarianism are conceptually separate, they often go together in practice. After the global economic downturn of 2008, the vote share of authoritarian populist parties in Europe increased dramatically. Elections have ushered such parties into government—most notably in Hungary and Poland—providing the first real-world indications of how modern authoritarian populists behave when in power. The record is not encouraging. In each country affected, checks and balances and the judiciary have been weakened, and governments have sought to silence opposition voices in media and civil society.

The changing political landscape has also prompted a response from mainstream politicians. Some have tried to use elements of populist political messaging to capture the segments of the electorate disenchanted with conventional center-left and center-right politics. Others have tried to imitate the appeal of populists by adopting their substantive promises on immigration, the economy, and national sovereignty.

This report examines the drivers of populist support, focusing first on the current state of play before endeavoring to understand the reasons for populism's resurgence in Europe.

It then offers a series of policy recommendations that policymakers can use to fight back. Although the jury is still out on which political strategies work in which contexts, reconnecting European voters with mainstream politics is a critical part of addressing the challenge that authoritarian populism poses.

The report was inspired by conversations with academics, strategists, and policymakers, which were held in early 2018 at workshops convened jointly by the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in Florence and Prague under the auspices of our common project, "Defending Democracy and Underwriting the Transatlantic Partnership."

Defending Democracy and Underwriting the Transatlantic Partnership

Scholars at the Center for American Progress and at the American Enterprise Institute have often found themselves on opposing sides of important policy discussions. Yet, at a time when the fundamental character of Western societies is at stake, what unites us is much stronger than the disagreements that we have.

The threat of authoritarian populism will not recede unless a new generation of political leaders offers a credible agenda for improving people's lives that is more appealing to the public than the populist alternatives. The defense and rebuilding of democratic politics and discourse, however, requires sustained intellectual engagement. It demands a reinvigorated case for how liberal democracy, openness, pluralism, and a rules-based international order can deliver on the promise of shared prosperity and common security. (see Appendix for the full statement of aims)

The state of play

While authoritarian populism encompasses different groups from across the political spectrum, most of these groups share several characteristics: a rhetoric that divides society between good, pure-hearted ordinary people and a self-serving, out-of-touch elite; a lack of patience with the standard procedures and constraints of liberal democracies, often accompanied by demands for direct democracy; and promises of radical changes to policies and institutions—both at home and internationally. As a result, although not every form of populism is invariably authoritarian, the overlap between the two is substantial.

When judged by vote share, the radical right represents the largest segment of authoritarian populist movements and parties. Authoritarian populism is not, however, a uniquely right-wing phenomenon. A similar style of politics can be found on the left among parties of the traditional Marxist, Maoist, or Trotskyite variety as well as among those that have emerged more recently in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, whose ideological allegiances are more fleeting. Italy's anti-establishment Five Star Movement, for example, has adopted policy positions across the political spectrum.[1] Similarly, on the right, the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands has morphed from its pro-market, reformist origins into a populist force increasingly preoccupied with Islam and halting migration.

In the most recent elections, around a fifth of Europe's electorate—almost 56 million people—voted for a left- or right-wing populist party.[2] Although the vote share of authoritarian populists has been on the rise since the early 1980s, the growth of support for such movements gained strong momentum in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008. The support for right-wing populists peaked in 2016 at 12.3 percent of all votes across Europe's democracies. The largest share is in Hungary at 68.5 percent, followed by Poland, 46.4 percent; Switzerland, 30.8 percent; and Austria, 26 percent. The authoritarian far-left is still underperforming in parliamentary elections relative to the levels of support it enjoyed in the early 1980s, with an average vote share of 6.3 percent across European democracies in 2017.[3] Nevertheless, it has seen a dramatic rise in support lately—especially across Southern Europe and, most notably, in Greece, where the far-left Syriza party received 45.1 percent of all votes in the last election.[4]

While voters are becoming increasingly attracted to populists, they are also turning away from established parties of the center-right and center-left. The erosion of support has been especially dramatic in the cases of large social democratic parties that once commanded significant levels of support, especially among working-class voters. The Dutch Labour Party, France's Socialists, Germany's Social Democrats, the Czech Social Democrats, and Italy's Democratic Party all performed poorly in their most recent parliamentary elections, especially compared with their historic vote shares.

Until recently, the question of how authoritarian populists govern was mostly academic. In the abstract, such political forces face three basic options. First, they can moderate their populism and campaign promises once confronted with the reality of governing. In that case, such parties tend to deliver policies that are the same as those of conventional center-right or center-left parties.[5] Second, they can attempt to deliver on their promises, which may mean transforming not only large swaths of public policy but also political and legal institutions underpinning democracy. Third, when failing to deliver the promised change, they can choose to become confrontational and distract from their own ineffectiveness by picking fights with political opponents, media, international partners, and so forth.

European politics already offers several examples of authoritarian populist parties that arrived in power with substantial political mandates and opted for a dramatic societal transformation in an authoritarian direction, with results that have yet to play out fully. The most striking examples are the Fidesz party in Hungary and the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland.

Fidesz

Since its creation in the early days of Hungary's transition from communism, Fidesz—an abbreviation of "Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége," which translates to "Alliance of Young Democrats"—has morphed from an anti-communist, libertarian-minded youth group to a center-right, reformist, and staunchly Atlanticist party at the turn of the century into a populist nationalist party that seeks to move Hungary toward "illiberal democracy." Under Viktor Orbán's leadership, Fidesz first formed a coalition government in 1998. In 1999, the government, credited with being reformist and pro-Western, oversaw Hungary's accession to NATO.

After eight years in opposition, in 2010, Fidesz gained enough seats to form a one-party government, followed by a two-thirds majority in 2014—one large enough to allow the incoming government to change the country's constitution. Fidesz's two terms in office provide a glimpse into what can be expected from authoritarian populists who gain power. Consistent with the distrust of liberal democratic institutions characteristic of authoritarian populists, Orbán has spearheaded a political takeover of all elements of the state.[6] He outlined this in his famous speech on "illiberal democracy" delivered in Romania in summer 2014.[7]

According to economist János Kornai, "[T]he executive and legislative branches are no longer separate … Parliament itself has turned into a law factory, and the production line is sometimes made to operate at unbelievable speed: between 2010 and 2014 no less (sic) than 88 bills made it from being introduced to being voted on within a week; in 13 cases it all happened on the same or the following day." Furthermore, the entire public administration has been populated by party loyalists—from the statistical office to the state audit office to the constitutional court.[8] Thanks to Fidesz's sizeable majority, the new Hungarian constitution was approved without any attempts to reach a broad societal or political consensus, ignoring domestic and international criticisms. The large parliamentary majority has provided a cachet of legality to any government decision, even while providing favoritism to specific individuals or groups.[9] In October 2016, a financial group close to the prime minister bought the largest opposition newspaper, *Népszabadság*, and closed it down overnight.[10]

In early 2017, Fidesz officials promised to sweep out civil society organizations funded by left-wing financier George Soros.[11] The government then adopted a law requiring nongovernmental organizations receiving foreign funding to register as "foreign agents."[12] This is reminiscent of a similar piece of legislation adopted in 2012 in President Vladimir Putin's Russia. The government also passed a bill stripping the Soros-funded Central European University, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in Central Europe, of its accreditation—leaving the university in legal limbo.[13] In early April 2018, despite winning a little less than 50 percent of the vote, Fidesz returned to office with over two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Subsequently, the Soros-funded organization, Open Society Foundations, announced that it was closing its Budapest office and moving its Eastern European operations to Berlin.[14]

PiS

Since PiS' victory in parliamentary election in October 2015, Poland's experience with authoritarian populism has mirrored that of Hungary. That is not a surprise since, as early as 2011, PiS' leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, promised to "have Budapest in Warsaw."[15] Poland already had a colorful landscape of populist parties, including in government. The 2005 parliamentary election brought to power a coalition of PiS, the Catholic League of Polish Families, and the anti-establishment Self-Defense party, which was then led by Andrzej Lepper, who became known for his disruptive campaigning and wild conspiracy theories.[16] PiS combined social conservatism, inspired by Poland's Catholic traditions, with a critical view of the European Union—though never explicitly rejecting Poland's membership—and an embrace of the political traditions of prewar Poland. Still, the 2005–2009 coalition steered clear of making irreversible changes to Poland's political institutions.

Political divides in the country sharpened with the refugee crisis of 2015, which enabled PiS to adopt an uncompromising anti-immigration position in its election campaign. It did so despite the fact that Poland, which is among the most ethnically homogenous countries in the world, has not seen any significant migration inflows—in fact, quite the reverse.[17]

Following PiS' return to power in October 2015, the party enacted an almost complete takeover of the public administration, including remaking public service broadcasting with political appointees. Shortly after the election, the government introduced sweeping changes to the constitutional tribunal, which the court itself struck down as unconstitutional. The government then packed the court with political appointees, abrogating any effective judicial review of new legislation. Additional reforms have given the justice minister the ability to select, dismiss, and discipline presidents of ordinary courts.[18] The National Council of the Judiciary, a formerly self-governing body, was brought under the full control of the parliament. A new law forces nearly 40 percent of the Supreme Court's judges into early retirement and creates a retroactive mechanism for extraordinary review of final judgments. Since the average age of judges in Poland is currently around 40, attempts to bring the judiciary under the control of the majority cannot be regarded as seizing levers of power out of post-communist hands, as the PiS claims.[19]

Italy's parliament election in March 2018, populists will likely form a government in one of the founding members of the European Union. While it is too early to say which path they may take, their impact on Italy and the EU as a whole may well be unprecedented.

Understanding populism's resurgence in Europe

In recent years, authoritarian populists in Europe have seen a surge in popularity, often with deleterious effects on liberal democracies. In order to better understand that trend and respond to it, it is first necessary to understand who the voters of these parties are and why they are voting this way. It is difficult to ascertain a complete picture of populist voters across Europe—specifically, whether they were previously nonvoters and whether they came from traditionally left, right, or centrist parties. However, available country-level and survey data provide insights into specific contexts.

A study by political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris analyzed data on European political parties and European Social Surveys from 2002 to 2014. In terms of demographics, the support for populists across Europe is "greatest among the older generation, men, the less educated, ethnic majority populations, and the religious."[20] Many of such voters appear to have been previously disengaged from politics before being inspired to re-engage or to switch parties. That could be a result of increasingly weakened political parties, as populist candidates are presenting ideas and views that resonate with these voters or because voters see these candidates as a way of giving the unresponsive political elites a kick in the face.[21]

As economic and political integration in Europe progressed, some important political decisions started being made by European institutions instead of member states. Because of the EU's real or perceived democratic deficit, those decisions were sometimes seen as detached from the will of popular majorities in member countries.[22] That made such policies—ranging from questions on regulation of the single market to immigration to fiscal governance—vulnerable to attacks by demagogues. Furthermore, in some countries, a persistent gap has opened between policy positions of major mainstream parties and voters. In Germany, according to the polling agency Infratest dimap, between 1998 and 2015, all mainstream political parties, with the exception of Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU), moved to the left of the political center, which has created an opening for right-wing challengers of the status quo in the form of the Alternative for Germany (AfD).[23]

According to the policy director at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Roland Freudenstein, who participated in CAP and AEI's workshop in Florence, three main drivers are pushing people toward populist parties. First, financial and economic crises have affected people's incomes and the economic opportunities available to them. Second, culture and identity politics—fear of immigration, globalization, and "others"—have prompted a backlash as rapid social and cultural changes have taken place within societies. Third, social media and technological developments—whether post-truth politics, echo chambers, or a changing media landscape—have helped normalize populist arguments as well as make it easier for more radical groups to identify and organize like-minded individuals into movements.[24]

Economics, culture, or both?

While a growing stream of literature investigating support for right-wing populists in European countries has found that cultural and political concerns drive populist voters more strongly than economic ones, country-level data show a somewhat different picture.[25] With a data set covering 20 advanced countries since 1874, one 2015 study examined the link between the incidence of financial crises and support for political extremism.[26] The authors of the study found that the presence of a financial crisis led to an average increase of 30 percent in vote share for the far right five years after the onset of the crisis. Meanwhile, a 2012 study looked at the Great Depression's influence on voting behavior and found low growth lasting for at least three years to be linked to an increased vote share for the far right.[27] However, the effect appeared strong only in countries that either lost World War I, had no pre-existing tradition of democracy, or maintained a prior presence of radical-right parties in parliament. Slow growth thus contributed to the rise in right-wing extremism in the 1930s but only in cases where the context was fertile.[28] Notably, it is also clear that financial crises contribute to the increase in fractionalization and polarization of politics, making democracies less likely to respond to economic crises through thoughtfully crafted economic reforms.[29]

Given the magnitude of the economic and financial shock of 2008, the rise of populist politics across the Western world is not altogether surprising. In Western Europe, some identified the higher rates of unemployment during the 1970s as responsible for the rise in right-wing populism.[30] Rather than claiming a direct link between the two, the association suggests that the effect of unemployment might work indirectly, with higher rates of unemployment contributing to a climate of political dissatisfaction.[31] A 2017 study, which looked at elections across Europe between 1980 and 2016, found that there is an asymmetry in drivers of support for right- and left-wing

authoritarian populists.[32] While the right wing seems unresponsive to changes in objective economic characteristics, the support for left-wing extreme populists, such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, is sensitive both to rates of economic growth and to unemployment. The rise of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, can be viewed in a similar fashion.

However, Inglehart and Norris' findings are mixed regarding the role of economic conditions and insecurities. For instance, although populist parties had "significantly greater support among the less well-off" voters, "populist voting was strongest among the petty bourgeoisie [typically small business owners], not unskilled manual workers."[33] Additionally, they found that populist parties had significantly less support from those "dependent on social welfare benefits as their main source of household income and among those living in urban areas." Inglehart and Norris, then, promote a cultural backlash theory of populism, concluding: "[C]ultural values, combined with several social and demographic factors, provide the most consistent and parsimonious explanation for voting support for populist parties."[34] However, a strict distinction between economic and cultural factors is not tenable in light of the evidence that connects the two. Economic insecurity, after all, is a cultural factor too, as suggested by recent focus group work undertaken by the think tank Demos in the United Kingdom and the pressure group More in Common in the United Kingdom and France.

At the roundtable in Florence, Sophie Gaston, deputy director and head of international research at Demos, stressed that in many Western nations, contemporary social and political polarization is often a reflection of people seeing political capital and economic security as a zero-sum game. For example, focus groups in the United Kingdom with individuals over age 50 were dominated by two core themes: negative reactions toward perceived political correctness from liberal elites and concerns over welfare competition—particularly the idea that some groups should not have access to the welfare state.[35]

Such welfare chauvinism is clearly borne from a sense of individual economic precariousness; however, it also represents the failure of political leaders to build cohesive national narratives to match the upheaval wrought by globalization and cosmopolitanism. Similarly, Demos' focus groups revealed the extent to which the growing political agency of minorities is viewed by some citizens as eroding the settlement between them and the political classes, reflecting the fear that it could escalate toward the privileging of certain groups at their own expense.[36]

Since the roundtable, Demos has undertaken comparative qualitative research in France and Germany; its findings suggest that, in particular, white older citizens in these countries are experiencing similar anxieties regarding the scarcity of state resources and political capital. In Germany, this has formed a recurring theme in discussions regarding the integration of recent migrant arrivals and the benefits they are able to access, particularly in the East where salaries and pensions are considerably lower. At the same time, there was a palpable sense among citizens that the refugee and migration crisis has been monopolizing the political attention ordinarily given to other areas of social need—a sentiment often echoed by focus group participants in France, who frequently asked why "our own French men and women are homeless on the streets."[37]

Demos' findings were in line with those of More in Common. According to More in Common's public opinion polling on the appeal of populist sentiments in France[38] and Germany,[39] while much attention is paid to those on opposite ends of the political spectrum, the majority of the population, which identified as the "conflicted middle," has mixed views about a number of important political issues that populists have recently seized—including refugees, immigrants, and national identity—which come from across the political spectrum.[40] To better understand the conflicted middle, for both the French and German reports, More in Common segmented it into three broad groups. All three groups believed that they had failed to reap the benefits associated with their respective country's economic growth and held varying degrees of reservations about immigrants and refugees. As summarized by More in Common's Global Connection Director Jonathan Yates during the Florence workshop, those in conflicted middle groups who also live in relatively segregated communities tend to gravitate toward populist parties more than those living in more diverse settings.[41]

New media environment

The early days of the internet inspired hopes for a more egalitarian and democratic society with decentralized control over information and communications—a society in which the wisdom of the crowd would allow for the best ideas to float to the top. In part, technology has delivered on that promise by enabling new forms of social and political organization. It has also made vast stores of human knowledge accessible to anyone with a smartphone and has transformed how citizens engage with governments and how consumers engage with markets. Yet its unintended consequences, which include cyberattacks and mass surveillance, threaten to undermine the benefits of a digital society. More recently, another problem has emerged: disinformation weakening the integrity of liberal democracies.

Just as those who live in segregated communities are more likely to be attracted to populist messages, social media have helped to erode the shared narrative that once bound societies together. As research by the Berggruen Institute and Omidyar Network illustrates, within the digital space, polarization, fragmentation, tribalism, and a virulent form of populism that rejects reason and fact are now the hallmarks of contemporary politics.[42] There is no question that social media algorithms, with their ability to predict users' interests and capture their attention, provide them with information that appeals to individual biases and that can amplify them over time. Although the magnitude of social media's effect on political polarization remains uncertain, such practices risk contributing to filter bubbles and fragmenting society into isolated information and political communities.[43]

As recent elections on both sides of the Atlantic and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom have demonstrated, the new context creates novel challenges for liberal democracies. Political discourse now happens online and conforms to the internet's norms with unfortunate results. From hacks to trolls to fake news and disinformation, social media have created a platform on which nefarious agents, both foreign and domestic, have used a plethora of new tools to disrupt democracy.

During elections across Europe, including the Brexit vote, in an effort to influence beliefs and voter behavior, foreign actors used social media platforms to purchase advertising, publish content, and troll political discussions using bots.[44] At the same time, the Pew Research Center has reported that, in democracies across the West, trust in institutions—particularly in government and media—is at an all-time low, with those favoring populist parties in Europe demonstrating deeper levels of distrust in government.[45] The exact connection between the new information environment shaped by social media and the erosion of trust is hard to pin down, in part because causality is running in both directions and also because social media platforms keep information about their users and their political preferences private.[46]

The European Commission has established a pan-European task force on disinformation and the fragmenting impact of social media on public debate.[47] The expert group's report advocates for a "code of principles" that online platforms and social networks should follow. Among other principles, online platforms should explain how algorithms select the news put forward and should cooperate with European news outlets in order to facilitate users' access to real news stories.[48] It remains to be seen whether social media platforms will embrace these recommendations and, if so, whether they can make a difference.

Fighting back

There are two primary reasons why the search for a single answer to the populist challenge is misguided. First, authoritarian populists respond to various sets of concerns, anxieties, and policy preferences differently in different countries. Second, and more importantly, authoritarian populism is by its nature anti-pluralist and claims to be speaking on behalf of the people against a narrow self-serving elite. As a result, any response to the populist challenge must start with a reaffirmation of the value of political pluralism, the diversity of political ideas, and their democratic competition.[49]

During the past few years of European politics, the center-right and center-left have employed a number of different political strategies in an effort to provide an alternative to authoritarian populism. Perhaps the most closely watched alternative has been the meteoric rise of a new—some might say populist—radical centrism, which is represented by French President Emmanuel Macron and the creation of his catch-all party, La République En Marche (LREM). As the reformist minister for economy in the Socialist government under President François Hollande, Macron presented himself as an unapologetic advocate of a stronger European Union with a program for domestic economic reform aimed at revitalizing France's sluggish economy as well as an agenda for democratic renewal targeted at the sclerotic bureaucratic-political establishment in France. This allowed him to present himself as an outsider and a credible alternative to the stale mainstream candidates of the center-left and center-right—Benoît Hamon and François Fillon, respectively—who would have been regarded as the natural frontrunners in a normal presidential election.[50] Although candidates of the extreme left and extreme right performed well, Macron soundly defeated Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election and, only weeks later, received a historically large mandate in the legislative election.[51]

Earlier in 2017, leader of People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and Prime Minister of the Netherlands Mark Rutte chose a different approach, attempting to neuter the populist Geert Wilders of the Freedom Party (PVV) by beating him at his own game. In advance of the election, the Rutte-led government introduced a ban on burkas in some public places and took a generally hawkish position on immigration.[52]

Furthermore, a week before the vote, the government took advantage of a diplomatic incident concerning Turkish officials campaigning among the Dutch Turkish community for a "yes" vote in the upcoming referendum on constitutional reform in Turkey.[53] Rutte's government prevented Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, from entering the country and expelled Turkey's minister of social affairs, who had already been speaking at rallies in the Netherlands. The uncompromising position was met with popular approval and might have neutralized the more vocal anti-immigration forces.[54]

Similarly, in Austria, a young maverick foreign minister, Sebastian Kurz, made a name for himself by introducing legislation that banned foreign funding of mosques in Austria and imposed restrictions on the versions of Quran available in the country as well as on their distribution by Salafist groups.[55] In the 2017 electoral campaign, Kurz competed against the far-right, anti-immigration, and pro-Kremlin Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) on issues of asylum, immigration, and integration. At the same time, he turned his youth and a relatively short-lived presence in politics to his advantage by presenting himself, much like Macron, as an outsider. Under his leadership, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), an established political force existing since the end of World War II, showed a much more youthful and dynamic face, in part thanks to Kurz-led changes to the party's electoral lists.[56] However, his attempt to neutralize authoritarian populists worked only in part. The populist FPÖ performed extremely well in the election, and the party joined Kurz in a coalition government afterward.[57]

Interestingly, a similar neutering approach is now being adopted by center-left parties across Europe. In Denmark, ahead of the recent regional elections in November 2017, the Danish Labour Party proposed an approach to asylum and immigration that called for rapid deportation of those whose asylum requests were refused as well as the establishment of asylum application and processing centers in North Africa.[58] Similarly, in Sweden, in response to the growing threat of the populist right-wing Swedish Democrats, the Social Democratic Party has sought to adopt a tougher stance on immigrant-associated gang crime and, more recently, has promised to outlaw religious schools should it be re-elected.[59] Previously, it has been argued that the rise of identity politics paralyzed progressive parties in Europe as they desperately tried to maintain a coalition of urban values voters that favored multiculturalism and a working class more concerned with rising immigration.[60] However, the growth of concerns about immigration and identity seems to be forcing some of them to respond in a manner akin to their competitors on the center-right, namely by becoming stricter on asylum and immigration.

While the responses outlined above do not provide a blueprint for fighting authoritarian populism, six complementary approaches are emerging.

1. Change the approach to politics

There is nothing inherently virtuous about mainstream center-left and center-right politics as it has been practiced in past decades. Furthermore, it is clear that many parties have become old-fashioned in their communication, voter outreach, and engagement, especially when compared with the successful insurgent groups. At the very least, new and fresh faces, untainted by past scandals and cliches, are required to reboot traditional parties—as Kurz has done in Austria. In other contexts, such as in France, starting from scratch might be necessary. Either way, facing up to the legitimate criticisms of the political establishment will be necessary, as will transforming the way politicians communicate. As the experience of successful centrist movements worldwide shows, voters want to be valued and met on their own terms.

2. Do not go into a head-on confrontation with voters

Political platforms cannot be completely detached from the wishes of voters. Regardless of whether their beliefs are fully grounded in reality or not, European electorates see large-scale immigration as a problem and expect their elected representatives to work to address it with stronger border control and more stringent asylum policies. Even Macron, perhaps the most vocal advocate of an open society in European politics today, has proceeded to tighten France's immigration and asylum laws and to speed up deportations of those ineligible for asylum.[61] One may very well disagree with the plurality of voters on the subject of immigration and deplore how the topic has been hijacked by extremists and the tabloid press, but it is impossible to ignore—much less pretend that the public is agnostic about it.

3. Do not be condescending

Part of the attraction of cultural politics is the perception that centrist political elites are too quick to dismiss the concerns of some voters. In the U.S. context, the now-infamous remarks by then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and former President Barack Obama, respectively, about "deplorables"[62] and people who "cling to guns or religion"[63] have contributed to the belief—now shared by a significant portion of the electorate—that society is indeed divided between a condescending elite and ordinary people, just as populists claim on the right and the left. Not only is it imperative that those seeking public office avoid similar gaffes, but they also need to foster a culture of civility in public debates, especially when confronting extreme populists who forsake civility.

Arguments that some aspects of integration and assimilation are not going well in some Western societies—or that the rate of social and economic change is too rapid—should not automatically be labeled as racist and bigoted. Engagement is key; if centrist politicians do not take citizens' concerns seriously and treat them with respect, the path for demagogues remains clear.

4. Harness the power of patriotism

The sense of belonging to a political community is not bigotry. Even if authoritarian populists exploit patriotic sentiments in order to recreate a nostalgic idea of a simpler and purer past, mainstream politicians should not recoil from patriotism per se. Instead, they should seek to use the same emotion to showcase a positive, tolerant, and hopeful vision of the future accompanied by a set of policies capable of delivering on that vision, thereby redefining what patriotism means in the political conversation and recapturing the term from the nationalists.[64]

5. Solutions are local, not international

The fight over the character of European societies has to be fought in every country separately. Neither the European Union nor the Council of Europe, much less the transatlantic alliance, can be of much help in countering homegrown authoritarianism and providing an alternative. Indeed, given the divide that many authoritarian regimes draw between themselves, their supporters, and the so-called globalist elite, such measures could be counterproductive. That said, there is a case for organizations such as the European Union—a club based on adherence to democratic values—to enforce their red lines concerning rule of law and democratic governance, as the EU is currently indicating that it will do in Poland.[65] Such enforcement, however, should be consistent across countries in order to avoid double standards. An excessive reliance on international pressure, as opposed to homegrown political mobilization, can easily become counterproductive, as it enables nationalist political groups to label their opponents as agents of foreign or globalist interests.

6. Strengthen institutions, especially the independent judiciary

The most severe danger that authoritarian populism poses lies in its authoritarianism and its ambitions to use its popular mandate to change the rules of the political game irreversibly. Even in situations where such political movements are successful and candidates arrive in office, this temptation to transform the political landscape can be resisted as long as checks and balances, the judiciary, and other control mechanisms are strong and robust enough to resist political manipulation. While there is still time, the defenders of liberal democracy on the center-left and center-right need to invest in these institutions and help to create a culture in which they are seen as legitimate and are backed by the general public, regardless of who is in charge.[66]

Conclusion

As the most recent elections in Hungary and Italy illustrate, the populist challenge is growing across Europe and is going to remain a significant political force for the foreseeable future. It is more urgent now than ever for those seeking to defend liberal democracy to understand the drivers behind the populist resurgence and to find new ways to fight back. The policy recommendations presented in this report suggest ways in which mainstream political parties should seek to respond to these challenges. If implemented, these recommendations would provide ways for thoughtful leaders to re-engage disillusioned European voters and strengthen liberal democracy.

About the authors

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Appendix

CAP-AEI Project on Defending Democracy and Underwriting the Transatlantic Partnership

Statement of aims

On both sides of the Atlantic, free, open, and democratic societies are facing a challenge. An intellectual vacuum is forming in the political center, where traditional political platforms and leaders are experiencing a decline in their popular appeal. Meanwhile, authoritarian populists of various stripes, many with covert or open ties to the Kremlin, are stepping in to fill the emerging void.

Scholars at the Center for American Progress and at the American Enterprise Institute have often found themselves on opposing sides of important policy discussions. Yet, at a time when the fundamental character of Western societies is at stake, what unites us is much stronger than the disagreements that we have.

The threat of authoritarian populism will not recede unless a new generation of political leaders offers a credible agenda for improving people's lives that is more appealing to the public than the populist alternatives. The defense and rebuilding of democratic politics and discourse, however, requires sustained intellectual engagement. It demands a reinvigorated case for how liberal democracy, openness, pluralism, and a rules-based international order can deliver on the promise of shared prosperity and common security. Through this project, we aim to provide such a case, built around five ideas:

- As a system of government, ***liberal democracy has no appealing alternatives.*** People deserve to live under governments that are responsive and accountable to them and that are subject to binding constitutional and legal constraints.

- As a general rule, ***openness—both to trade and migration—makes societies more prosperous and resilient.*** Policymakers need to make sure that the benefits of openness are shared fairly, but going back to a world of autarchic, closed societies is not an option.

- ***International cooperation is valuable.*** While international organizations and alliances may require updating, an international system based on rules and cooperation between liberal democracies is vastly preferable to the zero-sum world of warfare and protectionism that was the norm throughout human history.

- ***Authoritarian regimes are not benign.*** In fact, they are actively undermining liberal democracies. Liberal democracies should not seek confrontation, but—especially after the experience provided by years of Russia's disinformation efforts in Europe and in the United States—they need to appreciate that, within the international realm, authoritarian regimes pursue different objectives than societies with governments that are accountable to the people and respect the rule of law.

- ***Ideas matter.*** The critical debates about the future of our societies are never settled once and for all. They take place in every generation. Fearless, fair, and honest debate is a crucial mechanism to advance human dignity and freedom and to achieve human potential. It is time that our generation mounts a solid intellectual defense of the cornerstones of democratic social order.

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