

Nationalism, Populism, and Fear.

Donald T. Critchlow¹,
donald.critchlow@asu.edu

1) Katzin Family Professor
Faculty of History, Arizona State University,
Director for the program for Political Thought and Leadership.

Abstract

In the last decade and half, Europe and the United States have witnessed the rise of populist parties and political candidates using populist rhetoric to mobilize voters in their respective countries. This mobilization has challenged traditional political formations and established political and economic elites. Critics of populism have expressed profound anxieties that these political formations mark a trend toward fascism. This essay challenges this view by positing that these nationalist formations are not uniform; experience internal tensions; operate broadly with the democratic system; and nationalism, in itself, is a double edged sword.

★ Keywords: populism, nationalism, democracy, European Union, Trump.

Introduction

The 2008-09 economic crisis, followed by mass immigration from the Middle East and Africa into Europe, created conditions for political upheaval as nationalist/populist parties rose and made significant gains throughout Central and Western Europe. These parties—the Alternative for German (AfD), France’s National Rally, Netherland’s Freedom party (PVV), Hungary’s Fidesz party, Poland’s Law and Justice Party, Italy’s Lega party, Finland’s the Finns Party, and Austria’s Freedom Party—made significant gains within their respective countries and in the recent European Union Parliament elections. At the same time, Tories in the United Kingdom replaced a moderate pro-Brexit Prime Minister Theresa with hardline Brexiter Boris Johnson. In 2016 Donald Trump, running as an anti-elitist and against illegal immigration (“Build the Wall”), won election to the White House.

The rise of the populist/nationalist right sent shockwaves through established political circles. The world appeared to have been turned upside down and did not appear to be about to turned right side up. In this environment, progressives began to make gains, especially in Green parties in Western Europe, they continued move left under Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, and in the United States, the Democratic Party swung further to the left.

In this polarized environment, great consternation manifested itself among established political leaders and the media about the rise of populist nationalism. Fears of the rise of fascism expressed itself in political rhetoric and in the media, as racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, nativism, and homophobia were denounced—and often with just cause. There is no question that some of the parties on the ultra-right in Europe have historical and current association with neo-fascism. These ultra-right parties and formations, however, should be distinguished from populist rightwing parties, which operate within a legal framework and whose candidates have been duly elected.

Populist nationalist parties—as well as the Greens in certain countries—are on the rise, attracting large number of voters. The losers in this polarized political climate have been, in general, centrist parties, in particular social democratic parties. Yet in this acrimonious political atmosphere, objective opinion becomes problematic, even to defining what populism and nationalism actually means. What do these parties share in common and how much of a threat to these parties pose to the established political order? Do these far-right parties even share much in common?

The Rise of Anti-Globalism in Europe

Any answers to these question must begin with an understanding that following the global crash of 2008-09 and the emergence of the immigration problem, many voters across Central and Western Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States expressed deep anger at their respective established parties. Expressions of political discontent took different forms and occurred at different times. These populist movements revealed strong anti-establishment feelings. Although populist/nationalist parties shared opposition to immigration and multiculturalism, populism was first and foremost about the perceived degeneration of representative democracy. An “us” versus “them” mentality was expressed in these movements, found in opposition to global elites, globalization, and international institutions such as the European Union, the European Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Anti-immigration sentiment prevails in these populist-nationalist parties. Yet aside from general similarities, most of these parties are racked with internal tensions, often over winning elections, which means a pragmatic compromise, and ideological principle. Added to internal debates over the future of their parties in the political arena, many confronted incompatible

currents internally: economic liberalism, national-conservative, and right-wing populism. For example, AfD faces today is rift with regional factionalism between its hard-core nationalist wing, based heavily in East Germany, and the more pragmatic Bavarian moderate faction, anxious to appeal to center voters.

Furthermore, these parties have sharp difference between them. For example, in 2016 the German populist-nationalist party AfD did its utmost to be included in the EU conservative parliamentary caucus and avoid any association with the hard core European rightwing populists hardcore that included France's National Rally, Italy's Lega party, Austria's Freedom Party, Flemish Interest, or the Dutch Party for Freedom. Following the recent EU parliamentary elections AfD joined the newly established nationalist group in the parliament. Yet AfD enjoys little respect within this caucus. Furthermore, within this caucus members are deeply divided over basic questions over the Euro. During the first press conference following the elections, Jussi Halla-Aho of the Finns Party called for abolishing the euro common currency, while Harald Vilimsky, Austria's Freedom Party, insisted that "we need the euro for our prosperity." This suggests that a united front of far-right parties sweeping into power in Europe, i.e. a continental fascist movement, is quite unlikely. National differences do matter.

National differences are apparent in origins of these far-right parties. These parties reflect the unique histories and political circumstances that gave rise to political formations. While pundits like to lump far-right parties together, these parties express distinctive political cultures unique to their countries. The distinctive nature of populist nationalist parties is readily apparent in differences between the European continental right and UK's Brexit movement and Donald Trump's election in 2016 as a populist-nationalist. While some British elites worry about right-wing nationalism in Britain, and some of Trump's opponents accuse him of being a fascist in intent or policy implication, neither Britain nor the United States has a fascist tradition. Oswald Mosely, head of the British Union of Fascists during World War II did not attract much of a following; and Lincoln Rockwell's neo-Nazi party in the United States that emerged in the 1960 had more magazine articles written about it than it had followers. The same might be said of the Ku Klux Klan(s)—with all their separate factions and would-be Hitlers—who get more media coverage than their numbers deserve.

Differences on the European Populist Right: AfD and National Rally Party

These internal/external divisions within the European continental right, Britain's right, and the right in the United States give rise to the larger question over the meaning of nationalism itself. Before looking at nationalism itself, let's first provide a brief walk-through of the far-right today in Europe in order to understand its divisions, before turning to the debate over nationalism within the United States.

The rise of populist-nationalist parties have transformed European politics. Two of the most significant parties, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the National Rally party in France have made significant gains without achieving at this point national power. Both parties are affecting political alignments in their countries. Both AfD and Marine LePen's National Rally party express anti-global, anti-elitist, and anti-immigration positions. The rhetoric of both parties is anti-Islamic and war that malicious elites have benefitted from globalization for their own benefit. These parties warn that the moral foundations of their country are being subverted by massive immigration and multiculturalism, which has endangered their nations. At the same time, AfD and National Rally have tried to distance themselves from their extreme right anti-Semitic factions. Surveys of their party supporters show that they have drawn broad

support from skilled workers, farmers, students, middle class professionals from young and older voters.

In the 2016 elections, the recently founded AfD won seats in 10 of the 16 local German parliaments. In Berlin, the party obtained 14 percent of the vote, the best score made by a far-right party since the Second World War. Founded in 2013, the AfD defined itself as shutting down EU's external borders to immigration, a strong anti-Islam platform, and opposition to EU's supranational policies. AfD's public rhetoric accuses Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Party of having opened the flood gates of more than 1 million refugees entering the country. This open borders policy has placed, the party declares, the nation under seize culturally and economically. The party pledges itself to maintaining traditional family cultural values and German identity, language and culture. Multiculturalism and Islamic values clash with these values.

The emergence of the AfD has thrown German politics into a turmoil. Germany, haunted by its fascist past, lagged behind much of Europe in seeing the new party formations. The AfD seemed to have come out of no-where, although on closer inspection euroskeptic groupings in Germany as evidence in the appearance of organizations and small parties such as the Hayek Society, Initiative for a New Social Market Economy, Alliance of the Citizens Will, and the Christian fundamentalist Civil Coalition. The AfD fused the ideological outlooks of these groupings into a politics of economic liberalism and socially conservative/nationalism. The party's strong free market position differ from other European nationalist-populist parties that tend to espouse more protectionist positions. Although economic liberalism and social conservatism are not incompatible in the abstract, ideological tensions between free markets and nationalism have created internal discord and bitter factional warfare within the party. These tensions go to the heart of whether the AfD can expand its base of support. Economic liberalism—deregulation, less government interference in the economy, anti-bureaucratic sentiment appeals more naturally to middle-class professionals and small business owners, not necessarily to Christian conservatives who place greater importance on social values.

Similar tensions are apparent within the National Rally party. Marine LePen, the party's leader, has tried to move the party away from its anti-Semitic roots, even going so far to expel her father, the founder of the party, for his anti-Semitism. The party from the outset was nationalist and anti-immigrant, but lacked generally a domestic economic or foreign policy program. In seeking to expand its voter base, party developed a domestic program around trade protectionism and withdrawing from the EU. The party found a star in LePen and a slick 23 year old Parisian Jordan Bardell who entered as one of the youngest ever members of the European parliament. Although Bardell ran as a Euro-skeptic, LePen no longer wants to leave the EU (Frexit) or to leave the euro currency.

Nationalism in Italy, Poland, and Hungary

While the populist nationalist right seeks to extend its influence in Germany and France, populist-nationalist parties have succeeded in Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Tensions within these parties reveal problems with maintaining fragile coalitions around populism, and the results of the March 2018 parliamentary elections “turned Italian politics on its head when the Five Star Party, led by Luigi Di Maio, won more than 30 percent of the vote, leaving the party in the driver's seat to form new coalition. The Five Star Party is decidedly anti-EU and nationalistic.”

Along these same lines, the League, another anti-EU and anti-immigration party, received 18 percent of the vote. Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister of Italy, and his Forza Party gained a measly 14 percent of the vote. Of particular importance, the League

(once known as the Northern League) made a stunning comeback under Matteo Salvini. Under his leadership, the League won nearly 18 percent of the vote to triple its parliamentary representatives, thus, according to the Mindszenty Report,

tripling its representation in parliament. This was a dramatic comeback for a party that won only 4 percent of the national vote in the parliamentary elections in 2013. Italy is on the front lines of Europe's migration crisis. A staggering 750,000 seaborne migrants have landed on Italy's shores since 2011. Italy's foreign population has doubled since 2000. The League's anti-immigration message resonated in its stronghold in the north, where resident foreigners are heavily concentrated, but also picked up strength in the south. The message sent by Italian voters is that they are sick of globalism, the European Union and mainstream politics as usual. The message of the populist parties—the Five Star Movement and the League—is that Italy needs to be rechristened and Italy-first economic policies pursued.¹

This coalition fell apart in the EU Parliamentary elections this Spring. Candidates for the Five Star Party collapsed under the weight of Lega party candidates who swept into parliament. Voters had turned against the ruling Five Star party in favor of the harder-right, more nationalist and more pro-Christian Lega party. In short, the right coalition in Italy fell apart in less than a year.

Discord is typical Italian politics, but populist nationalists parties in Hungary and Poland face similar internal problems. In parliamentary elections in 2018 Hungarian voters affirmed its support of the Viktor Orbán's ruling Fidesz party and his allies Christian Democratic Party. Voters gave the coalition an overwhelming majority of 133 of the 199 seats in the national assembly. Coming in second though to the neo-fascist and anti-Semitic Jobbik party. Since coming to power, Orbán has increasingly turned to emphasizing Christian values and the Christian roots of Hungary. Following the election, Orbán celebrated his victory with a picture of his family and message, "Glory to God alone." He is a Protestant in the Calvinist tradition and he is pro-traditional marriage and anti-abortion.

Standing in the wings is the Jobbik party, a far-right, anti-Semitic formation. Jobbik "emerged in 2003 with the creation of the Movement for a Better Hungary," commonly known as Jobbik, a play on Hungarian language meaning both "better" and "to the right."² One of the founding leaders of the party, Gábor Vona, in 2007 former the Magyar Gárda, or the Hungarian Guard, a direct action, self-defense group in "which members sported black boots, forage caps, and bandanas of red and white stripes."³ The Metropolitan Court of Budapest disbanded the organization in 2009, but the group has since reorganized three times under the banners of other groups with roots in paramilitary organizations tracing their origins from as early as the inter-war period. In its early stages, Jobbik proclaimed that Hungarians were descendants of Turks and aligned itself with the Erdogan government in Turkey.⁴ As it sought to reach a larger base, Jobbik changed its position on Turkey, but its anti-Semitic and anti-Roma positions remain. Furthermore, the party has close financial connections with the governments of Russia and Iran. Indeed, in the EU Parliament, Jobbik representations are regarded as lobbyists for Russia. Jobbik leadership continues to hold that civil war is imminent

1 "Immigration and the Rise of the European Right," Mindszenty Report, vol 60, no. 4, April 2018, <http://www.mindszenty.org/PDFs/2018/April2018.pdf>

2 Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, "The Rise of Jobbik, Populism, and the Symbolic Politics of Illiberalism in Contemporary Hungary," The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs, 2, 2015, p. 88, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/132612357.pdf?>

3 Murer, 88.

4 Murer, 88.

in Hungary and stands opposed to the Orbán government. By 2014, “Jobbik demonstrated that it had nation-wide support finishing second in 18 of 19 counties in the elections.”⁵ It has attracted a strong youth vote. At present, Orbán ruling Fidesz party dominates Hungarian politics, but Jobbik continues to remain a threat on the far right.

Also rising to power as a populist-nationalist party is Poland’s soft Euro-skeptic Law and Justice Party. In recent EU parliamentary elections, the Law and Justice party came out clear victors, even taking votes in the nation’s more liberal capital, Warsaw. The Law



and Justice party emerged out of the 2015 “refugee crisis.” As the refugee crisis emerged, Poland joined Hungary and the Czech Republic in refusing an EU quota of refugees. The Law and Justice party does not fall easily into right-left categorization. Organized in 2001 as a centrist party, the Law and Justice party has formed various coalitions with various nationalist parties, but these coalitions proved unworkable. In 2015, the Law and Justice party won a clear majority in Poland’s parliament by drawing support among working-class constituencies and union members. The party declares itself standing for a Christian nation, but its economic approach is on the left in strong support of social welfare programs. At the same time, the party promotes Christian family values, including opposition to abortion and LGBT rights.

Image 1: Viktor Orbán of the Fidesz Party (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Viktor_Orb%C3%A1n_Tallinn_Digital_Summit.jpg)

What is the Threat of Europe Going Fascist?

These populist-nationalist political formations in Europe today suggest three major conclusions, before there is panic that Europe is about to go fascist. First, all of these parties face internal tensions within their own parties. Second, these parties, while falling into a category of populist-nationalist, differ significantly ideologically. Some are more liberal economically; others more protectionist and social welfare oriented. While all bewail EU hegemony, they vary in opposition to Brussels. France’s National Rally party is opposed to ending the euro, and Poland’s Law and Justice party does not want the dismantling of the EU. Third, these differences—and many others—reveal that these parties, as might be expected, represent national differences and the unique politics and histories of in their own countries. Nationalism is a two-edged sword and cuts both ways, rallying voters in their own countries but making close cooperation among the parties in the EU parliament or European politics, in general, difficult. Of course, a global economic or major political crisis in Europe might change this, but as of now, the well-organized fascist take-over of Europe seems highly unlikely.

Measuring the Fascist Threat in America Today

If fascism does not appear to be an immediate threat in Europe today, is fascism a threat in America in the age of Trump? To hear Trump’s leftwing critics, or to watch Antifa protesters in Portland and a few other cities, the United States is but one step away from fascism. Since the 1930s, the American left has been obsessed with a fascist takeover.

⁵ Murer, 87.

Sinclair Lewis's, *It Can't Happen Here*, published in 1935, is a tale about a political candidate who plots a takeover of the government. More recently the TV series "A Handmaid's Tale," based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, depicts a fundamentalist Christian regime.

For all this angst on the left, United States does not appear to be on the verge become fascist. President Trump employed nationalist language to win the 2016 presidential election and, as president, his administration has placed "America First" as its primary foreign policy perspective. This has been translated into aggressive actions through sanctions on North Korea and Iran to force denuclearization of both countries, and tariffs on China to force a "fair trade" agreement. Critics might differ as to these tactics and goals, but these policies should not be translated as incipient fascism. On the domestic front, Trump—for all his rhetoric—has followed basic Republican Party policies of pro-business, low taxes, and deregulation. In this way, the Trump presidency has been no different than if another Republican had been nominated and elected in 2016.

Trump, though, tapped into economic, social, and cultural resentment—and deep patriotic sentiment—among the white working class. These were the voters who did not believe globalization was working for them. They believe China had been eating America's lunch for years. They saw American politicians and corporate leaders were self-serving and too willing to kowtow to external forces for their own political and economic gain. These voters were fed up. They wanted a strong president willing to stand up for them and American interest. They were willing to forgive Trump his eccentricities, his vulgarity, and divisive tweets. Indeed these voters cheered such rhetoric. Seeing this groundswell of nationalism and support of Trump, critics on the left and the right saw passion overcoming principle, and when the passions of the people replace reason, and when demagoguery is substituted for civil discourse—the critics warned—fascism is around the corner. This seems a bit hysterical for people who claim that they are reasonable, but this is the age of political polarization we find ourselves in.

Nationalism a Double-Edged Force

This does raise the question of whether nationalism is a good or bad force politically. Any answer to this question rests, at least in part, on the definition of nationalism. The standard dictionary definition of nationalism is placing one's nation first; spirit and aspirations to the nation as a whole; and devotion and loyalty to one's nation. Nationalism is closely associated with patriotism. The nation-state arose late in European history. The nation-state was a social constructed political organization to bring diverse people and regions together into a political entity as a means of protecting the people from foreign invasion and internal disorder. Nationalism, per se, should be distinguished from ethnic nationalism (white or Aryan supremacy), xenophobia, nativism, or imperialism. These tendencies can be found within nationalism, just as patriotism can be translated into a hyper-patriotism that does not allow dissent.

One way of thinking of a healthy nationalism and patriotism is to look at Abraham Lincoln's nationalism and patriotism. As a young Whig congressperson, Abraham Lincoln opposed the Mexican American War as a war of aggression. In his opposition, he continued to proclaim his nationalism and patriotism. The Whig Party, under Henry Clay and the American System, stood above all else as a nationalist party. Lincoln's nationalism continued into the Civil War. The war was fought, as Lincoln declared, over preserving of the nation. In this sense, he stood as a nationalist. How else can Lincoln's opening lines of the Gettysburg address in 1863 be read other than a healthy nationalism: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated

to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.”

Lincoln understood that a healthy nation—a healthy nationalism, if you will—needed to rest on higher principles, universal principles. For this nation, the American nation, it was that “all men are created equal.” The American Civil War was fought to preserve the Union and to uphold the belief that all men were created equal. Lincoln’s was a healthy nationalism.

When nationalism is used to promote racial or ethnic superiority at the exclusion of citizens of the nation, it subverts the nation itself. When populism—a distrust of elites—degenerates into anti-Semitic conspiracy, it misdirects a healthy suspicion of centralized power. When patriotism is used to suppress legitimate dissent, or to rally people for wars of aggression, national values are translated into dictatorships. By nature democracies are fragile, always on the verge of disorder. From disorder can come chaos, and out of chaos, tyranny. The demand for order, since the dawn of history, is a driving force among all people and societies. Only in modern history have people concluded that the rule of law, the respect of human rights, and placing sovereignty in the people is the best way of providing social order.

Democracy emerged slowly in the West. The United States provided the first example of how a democratic system might succeed. Democracy has spread. Often the demand for democratic governance paralleled the rise of nationalism. Democracy and nationalism are not contradictory, but they rest in uneasy tension. This is where we stand today.



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