

# The Populist Surge: Causes and Consequences of New Nationalisms in Europe

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# Introduction

Across Europe, populist movements have transformed political landscapes, reconfiguring party systems, reframing national debates, and testing the resilience of liberal-democratic institutions. What began as a series of national surprises has matured into a durable feature of European politics: a populist surge with distinctly national colors yet common transnational threads. This book examines the new nationalisms animating that surge—how they arise, why they resonate, and what they do once they wield influence over policy and governance.

Our central claim is that populism in Europe is best understood as the product of intersecting cultural, economic, and institutional forces. Cultural conflict over identity, migration, and social change interacts with economic insecurity rooted in inequality, regional decline, and labor-market precarity. These dynamics unfold within institutional arenas—electoral systems, party rules, judicial constraints, and multilevel governance—that channel grievances into particular organizational forms and policy outcomes. By taking institutions seriously alongside culture and economics, we move beyond single-cause explanations and toward a comparative account that travels across cases.

Methodologically, the book combines cross-national analysis with carefully selected case studies from Western and Eastern Europe. Quantitative indicators help trace broad patterns in party support, media ecosystems, and policy outputs, while qualitative chapters unpack how leaders, narratives, and organizational choices convert discontent into political power. We follow the populist life cycle from movement to party to governance, attending to variation across national contexts and levels of government—from municipalities and regions to national executives and the European arena.

Not all populisms are alike, and their nationalisms are neither uniform nor static. Some emphasize ethnic exclusivity and cultural protectionism; others foreground economic sovereignty, social protection, or anti-corruption crusades. The pathways through which these projects gain traction differ: in some countries, major parties fracture and open space for insurgents; in others, outsiders capitalize on crisis, scandal, or institutional reform. Throughout, the book distinguishes rhetoric from results, asking when incendiary campaign messages translate into measurable policy change—and when they are blunted by coalition constraints, legal checks, or administrative capacity.

A distinctive contribution of this book is its systematic analysis of mainstream party responses. We assess strategies ranging from cordon sanitaire approaches to selective accommodation and programmatic renewal. These choices carry consequences: they can demobilize extremist appeals, legitimize illiberal frames, or unintentionally boost challengers by validating their issue priorities. We also consider the roles of courts,

oversight bodies, and the media—actors that can either safeguard democratic standards or become arenas of partisan contestation.

The policy chapters evaluate the concrete impact of populist parties across welfare, labor, immigration, environmental, and security domains. We ask whether promises of redistribution materialize, how citizenship and integration regimes shift, and what trade-offs emerge between border control and civil rights. Attention is paid to subnational governance, where many policy experiments begin, and to foreign policy, where national sovereignty claims meet European and transatlantic commitments. The comparative evidence clarifies when populists reshape the policy status quo and when institutional friction or coalition arithmetic limits their imprint.

Finally, the book is guided by a normative concern: how to counter democratic erosion while addressing legitimate grievances that fuel populist appeal. The concluding chapters advance practical recommendations—strengthening representation in left-behind regions, improving the quality and reach of public services, enhancing transparency and accountability, reforming party finance and internal democracy, and investing in civic and media literacy. The goal is not to restore a vanished status quo but to renew European democracies so they are more responsive, fair, and resilient.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Populist Surge: Concepts, Definitions, and Debates**

The term "populism" has become the ubiquitous buzzword of our political age, tossed around in newsrooms, lecture halls, and dimly lit taverns with equal measure of familiarity and imprecision. It describes everything and, consequently, sometimes feels like it describes nothing at all. Before embarking on a grand tour of Europe's populist landscape, it's crucial to first map the conceptual terrain. What exactly are we talking about when we invoke "populism"? Is it an ideology, a political strategy, a discourse, or simply a particularly bad mood afflicting the electorate? The answer, as with most things in political science, is a bit of all of the above, and then some.

At its core, populism generally involves an appeal to "the people" against "the elite." This seemingly straightforward dichotomy, however, quickly unravels into a fascinating labyrinth of interpretations. Who constitutes "the people"? Is it a homogeneous, virtuous mass, or a diverse collection of disgruntled citizens? And who are "the elites"? Are they the political establishment, economic magnates, cultural trendsetters, or a shadowy cabal orchestrating global affairs? The specific content of these categories is where populism gains its distinctive national flavors, moving beyond a mere academic abstraction to become a potent force in everyday politics.

One influential perspective views populism as a "thin ideology." This doesn't mean it's flimsy or insubstantial, but rather that it lacks the comprehensive worldview of a full-fledged ideology like liberalism or socialism. Instead, populism attaches itself to existing ideologies, acting like a political parasite, drawing sustenance and specific policy prescriptions from its host. A populist movement on the left might rail against economic inequality, blaming corporate greed and a neoliberal establishment, while a populist movement on the right might focus on national identity, immigration, and a perceived cultural decay orchestrated by metropolitan elites. The common thread is the anti-elite, pro-people narrative, but the specific grievances and proposed solutions can vary wildly.

Another lens through which to examine populism is as a political strategy. From this viewpoint, populism is less about a fixed set of beliefs and more about a particular way of mobilizing support and wielding power. It's a performance, a communicative style that bypasses traditional intermediaries like political parties and established media, aiming for a direct connection with the public. Think of the charismatic leader, often an outsider, who speaks in plain language, directly addressing the concerns of "ordinary people" and framing complex issues in simple, often Manichean, terms. This strategic approach often thrives on a sense of grievance and victimhood, cultivating an "us versus them" mentality that can be remarkably effective in galvanizing a base.

Then there's the discursive approach, which sees populism as a particular way of constructing political meaning and identity. Here, the focus is on the language used, the narratives spun, and the symbols deployed to create and reinforce the populist distinction between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite. This perspective emphasizes how populist leaders articulate and give voice to widespread disaffection, even if those disaffections are diverse and sometimes contradictory. It highlights the power of storytelling in politics, where carefully crafted narratives can transform diffuse anxieties into a coherent political movement. The constant repetition of certain phrases, the vilification of specific groups, and the evocation of a glorious, often imagined, past are all hallmarks of this discursive strategy.

The debates surrounding these definitions are not merely academic squabbles; they have profound implications for how we understand and respond to the populist surge. If populism is primarily an ideology, then countering it might involve offering alternative, more compelling ideological visions. If it's a strategy, then the focus shifts to understanding its tactics and developing more effective counter-strategies. And if it's a discourse, then the battleground is language itself, the framing of issues, and the construction of political realities. Our task in this chapter is not to definitively settle these debates, but to acknowledge their complexity and to select a working framework that allows us to navigate the intricate European landscape.

For the purposes of this book, we will adopt a comprehensive understanding of

populism, one that acknowledges its multifaceted nature. We see populism as a political phenomenon characterized by: first, a core ideological appeal that pits "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite"; second, a political strategy that seeks direct communication and mobilization of "the people" outside traditional political channels; and third, a distinctive discursive style that employs simplified language, moralistic rhetoric, and often a degree of antagonism. This framework allows us to capture the unifying elements of populism across diverse national contexts while also appreciating the significant variations in its specific manifestations.

One of the most persistent challenges in studying populism is avoiding the trap of circular reasoning. Is a political party populist because it uses populist rhetoric, or does its rhetoric merely reflect an underlying populist sentiment among the electorate? This "chicken and egg" problem is not easily resolved, but by examining both the supply side (parties, leaders, and their strategies) and the demand side (voter grievances, cultural shifts, and economic anxieties), we can gain a more nuanced understanding. Our comparative approach across Western and Eastern Europe will be particularly illuminating in this regard, revealing how different historical trajectories, institutional configurations, and societal cleavages shape both the emergence and the appeal of populist forces.

Another crucial distinction to make is between populism and related, but distinct, concepts such as nationalism, nativism, and authoritarianism. While these often intersect with populism, they are not synonymous. Nationalism, at its broadest, is a belief in the distinctiveness and unity of a particular nation. Populism often co-opts nationalist sentiments, particularly when defining "the people" in ethnic or cultural terms, but not all nationalism is populist. Similarly, nativism, which prioritizes the interests of native-born inhabitants over immigrants, frequently fuels populist movements, especially those on the right, but it is a specific dimension, not the entirety, of populism.

Authoritarianism, characterized by a rejection of democratic norms and a concentration of power, is a potential outcome or companion of certain populist movements, but populism itself is not inherently authoritarian. Many populist parties operate within democratic frameworks, participating in elections and forming coalitions. However, the anti-elite rhetoric and the often-expressed disdain for checks and balances can, in some instances, pave the way for more authoritarian tendencies. Understanding these conceptual boundaries is essential to avoid oversimplification and to accurately assess the unique threats and transformations posed by the populist surge.

The historical lineage of populism is also worth briefly considering, as it helps to contextualize the current European wave. The term itself originated in the late 19th century with the People's Party in the United States, a movement of farmers who felt exploited by industrial and financial elites. Latin America has also a rich history of

populist leaders, from Juan Perón in Argentina to Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, who often combined charismatic appeals with social welfare programs and nationalist rhetoric. While these historical examples offer valuable insights into populist dynamics, it's important to recognize that contemporary European populism operates in a vastly different political, economic, and technological landscape.

The rise of social media, for instance, has fundamentally altered the communicative strategies of populist actors. The ability to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly address supporters, often through emotionally charged messages, has accelerated the spread of populist narratives and amplified their reach. This technological shift, coupled with the erosion of trust in established institutions and the fragmentation of traditional social structures, creates a fertile ground for populist mobilization. Understanding these modern enabling conditions is critical to grasping the unique character of the current surge.

Furthermore, the European context presents its own specific set of challenges and opportunities for populism. The existence of the European Union, a supranational entity often perceived as a distant and unaccountable elite, provides a convenient target for many populist movements, particularly those on the right. Debates over national sovereignty versus European integration, immigration policies, and economic austerity measures have all become potent vehicles for populist mobilization, allowing leaders to tap into a wellspring of discontent with both national and supranational governance.

Distinguishing between left-wing and right-wing populism is also crucial. While both share the core anti-elite, pro-people narrative, their substantive policy platforms and the "people" they claim to represent often differ significantly. Left-wing populism typically emphasizes economic grievances, advocating for greater redistribution, social justice, and often a critique of neoliberal capitalism. Their "people" are often the working class, the economically marginalized, and those exploited by corporate power. Right-wing populism, on the other hand, tends to focus on cultural and identity issues, prioritizing national sovereignty, immigration control, and traditional values. Their "people" are often defined in ethnic or cultural terms, set against external threats and internal "unpatriotic" elites.

However, these distinctions can sometimes blur. Some populist movements skillfully combine elements of both left and right, appealing to a broad spectrum of grievances. For example, a party might advocate for social welfare programs while simultaneously promoting strict immigration policies, thereby attracting voters who feel economically left behind but also harbor anxieties about cultural change. This "hybrid" populism presents a particular challenge to mainstream parties, as it effectively corners multiple segments of the electorate, making it harder to develop a coherent counter-strategy.

Finally, it's worth noting the often-fluid nature of populist movements. What begins as

a protest movement can evolve into a formidable political party. Leaders can emerge from unexpected backgrounds, tapping into existing discontents and shaping them into a coherent political force. The institutional context—electoral systems, party funding rules, media regulations—plays a significant role in determining whether these movements can successfully transition from the fringes to the mainstream and, eventually, to positions of power. The journey from street protest to government office is a complex one, fraught with challenges and opportunities, and understanding this lifecycle is central to our comparative investigation.

In the subsequent chapters, we will delve deeper into the specific causes and consequences of the populist surge, examining the cultural, economic, and institutional triggers that have propelled these movements into prominence. We will explore how different conceptualizations of "the people" and "the elite" play out in various European contexts, shaping policy agendas and impacting democratic institutions. By meticulously mapping the conceptual terrain in this introductory chapter, we lay the groundwork for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of this transformative political phenomenon.

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