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The Causes of Populism in the West

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Abstract

The global ascendance of populism has produced an explosion of research, bringing together scholarship on American and comparative politics as well as encouraging intellectual exchange among political scientists, economists, and sociologists. A good way to get a handle on what is now a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary literature is to focus on the key debates characterizing it. This article reviews the literature on the causes of populism, and in particular right-wing populism, in the United States, Europe, and other advanced industrial nations generally, but much of this literature draws on and refers to research on other parts of the world as well. This review analyzes the nature as well as the strengths and weakness of demand- and supply-side explanations of populism, economic grievance–based and sociocultural grievance–based explanations of populism, and structure- and agency-based explanations of populism.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1970s, a "third wave" of democracy (Huntington 1991) began sweeping the globe. Before it began, there were more than twice as many dictatorships as democracies in existence. By the wave's high point around 2008, that relationship had flipped, and the number of democracies had reached an all-time high. Moreover, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1990, democracy faced no ideological competitors for the first time since the modern struggle for democracy began in 1789 with the French Revolution. Francis Fukuyama's (oft-misunderstood) concept of the "end of history," when the world had reached "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government"—captured the euphoric, even triumphalist zeitgeist of the era (Fukuyama 1989, p. 3).

Yet only a decade or so after democracy reached its high point, the euphoria and triumphalism have crumbled. In Latin American and Eastern Europe, democracy is eroding and has even collapsed in some countries. In Asia, democratic backsliding has taken place in the Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, and even India, the world's largest democracy. In the United States and Western Europe, places where democracy has long been taken for granted, significant democratic decay has occurred. Reflecting these trends, rather than celebrating the "end of history," scholars and commentators today worry about democratic deconsolidation and autocratization (Diamond et al. 2016; Foa & Mounk 2016, 2017). Capturing the contemporary zeitgeist, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's current prime minister, whose political career began in 1989 as an opponent of dictatorship but who then morphed into an opponent of democracy, recently proclaimed (Santora & Bienvenu 2018): "The era of liberal democracy is over."

Although all previous democratic waves have been followed by undertows, democratic backsliding today is distinctive in at least one critical way: Contemporary democracies are more likely to decay gradually than to die quickly. Populists, who come to power via the ballot box, rather than dictators, who come to power via coups, are the main threat to democracy today (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Reflecting this, many scholars have begun referring to our time as the "age of populism" (Krastev 2011, Nandy 2019, Ricci 2020).

How did we get from there to here? How can we understand why democracy is floundering and populism flourishing? What are main causes of the populist wave threatening democracy today?

DEBATES ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF POPULISM

The global ascendance of populism has produced an explosion of research, bringing together scholarship in American and comparative politics as well as encouraging intellectual exchange among political scientists, economists, and sociologists. A good way to get a handle on what is now a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary literature is to focus on the key debates characterizing it (Mounk 2018). These debates reflect long-standing theoretical divides or divergent perspectives on understanding political life in the social sciences, so examining them in the context of populism provides an opportunity to assess their nature as well as their advantages and disadvantages more generally. This article examines the literature on the causes of populism, and in particular right-wing populism, in the United States, in Europe, and more generally in the advanced industrial world, but much of this literature draws on and refers to research on other parts of the world as well.

The term populism is currently so prevalent in scholarly and popular discourse that it is important to define it before proceeding further. For the purposes of this article, populism, particularly its right-wing variant, is a political movement or party emphasizing a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview in which the "us" refers to the "people," defined often in ethnic or communal terms and seen as engaged in a zero-sum battle with "them," defined most often as liberal elites, the

establishment, and minorities and/or immigrants. Populists, moreover, claim to be democratic—indeed, much of their rhetoric is based on the idea that the existing political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the interests of the people—but democracy is understood in majoritarian and illiberal terms. This paradox leads us to another important quality of populists, their disdain for many of the basic norms and institutions of liberal democracy, such as free speech, freedom of the press, recognition of the legitimacy of opposition, and acceptance of the separation of powers in general and limits on the executive in particular.

One critical debate about the origins of populism is between demand-side and supply-side explanations. The former term refers to arguments that locate the main cause of populism in the changing grievances or demands of citizens. Demand-side explanations could thus also be considered bottom-up explanations, since they focus on society or individuals in their analyses of populism. Supply-side explanations, in contrast, locate the main cause of populism in changes in the nature of democracy itself, in particular the growing inability or unwillingness of elites and institutions to supply responses to citizens' demands. Supply-side explanations could thus also be considered top-down explanations, since they focus on the failures of governments, politicians, policy makers, parties, and other actors in their analyses of populism.

DEMAND-SIDE EXPLANATIONS OF POPULISM

Within the demand-side camp, a division exists between scholars prioritizing economic demands and those foregrounding sociocultural demands in their explanations of populism.

Economic Grievances

Perhaps unsurprisingly, economic explanations have figured prominently in research by economists and political economists (Pastor & Veronesi 2018, Rodrik 2018, Sandbu 2018). Such explanations focus on how globalization, neoliberalism, technological change, and so on have generated discontent and divisions among citizens by making life more insecure for the working and middle classes and privileging already highly-educated, urban dwellers over less-educated and rural ones.

Numerous scholars, but perhaps most influentially Piketty (2017) in his best seller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, have documented dramatic increases in income and wealth inequality over the last decades of the twentieth century. During this period, a disproportionate share of the economic gains, particularly in the already developed world, have gone to the wealthy and the highly educated. In the United States, an admittedly extreme example, in 2019 inequality reached the highest point since the Census Bureau began tracking it (Telford 2019), and the top 1% controlled more of the nation's wealth "than the combined wealth of the entire American middle class" (Tankersley 2019; see also Blanchard & Rodrik 2021). Making matters worse, scholars such as Hacker (2019, p. xi) have argued that beginning in the late twentieth century, "the volatility of family incomes had gone way up. . . . Family incomes rose and fell ever more sharply. In fact, the volatility of household incomes nearly doubled from the early 1970s to the early 2010s," and the "distance that people slip down the ladder when they lose their financial footing" increased (Hacker 2019, p. 6). This insecurity has made citizens more uncertain about their futures and those of their children. Rising inequality has also been accompanied by declining social mobility—a relationship Krueger (2012) termed the "Great Gatsby curve"—which threatens to turn "have" and have-not" into hereditary categories and bring an end to the American dream (Reeves 2018). Today's "have-nots," moreover, are not only more economically distant from the "haves" and more likely to stay that way than in the past but also more likely to lead shorter lives, suffer from physical and mental health problems, fall prey to alcoholism and other addictions, and live in broken communities.

Case & Deaton (2020) famously refer to the causes of declining life expectancy among working-class whites as "deaths of despair" because they are attributable to pathologies accompanying rising inequality and other economic changes that have made life harder for low- and even middle-income citizens over the recent decades (Louis 2019, Putnam 2016, Wilkinson & Picket 2009).

Scholars of populism focusing on economic causes argue that economic developments have created deep divisions within many societies between rich and poor, elites and so-called average people, rural and urban areas, the highly and less educated, etc. (Cramer 2016; Iversen & Soskice 2019; Judis 2016, 2018). In addition to creating divisions within societies, economic development has also created deep divisions between countries, since it is not only certain groups in the developed world that have disproportionately benefited from divisions over the past decades but also developing countries, particularly China. Economic "losers" in the developed world thus blame countries such as China as well as the "winners" within their own societies for their and their countries' problems (Milanovic 2019, 2016). Cumulatively, these economic trends have made many voters resentful and thus susceptible to populists who scapegoat and vilify elites and the establishment in their own countries as well as successful rising powers (e.g., China). Summing up this perspective, Martin Wolf, chief economics commentator for the *Financial Times*, argues that we need to focus on the "economic origins of the populist surge" (2017). "It is no accident that the US and UK, long-stable democracies today succumbing to demagogy, are the most unequal of the western high-income countries" (Wolf 2019b). "[S]omething has gone very wrong" with Western capitalism. "If one listens to the political debates in many countries, notably the US and UK, one would conclude that the disappointment is mainly the fault of imports from China or low-wage immigrants, or both" (Wolf 2019a). But the real problem, argues Wolf (2019a), is that capitalism has become "rigged." We must change the way our economic system works or it will "perish" under attacks from populists.

Scholars in the economic-grievance camp often note that the financial crisis of the late 2000s accelerated the political fallout of these decades-long divisive and destabilizing economic trends because economic downturns tend to hit the already suffering or left-behind particularly hard (Stephens 2018). This experience led many such voters to find populists' message that the system was rigged and that others were benefiting at their expense even more convincing. For example, based on their analysis of voting data and economic crises from the 1870s through the present day, Funke et al. (2016, p. 232) find that "politics takes a hard right turn following financial crises. . . . This pattern is visible in the data both before and after WWII. . . . The gains of extreme right-wing parties were particularly pronounced after the global crises of the 1920s/1930s and after 2008."

Economic grievance–based explanations have obvious strengths, most notably their intuitive nature. At the macro level, there is a clear connection between the divisive and destabilizing economic trends of the last decades and rising support for populism. More particularly, many studies document a significant rise in vote shares for parties that could be consider populist in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. As one such study concludes,

> The main insight from [our research] is that financial crises of the past 30 years have been a catalyst of rightwing populist politics. Many of the now-prominent right-wing populist parties in Europe, such as the Lega Nord in Italy, the Alternative for Germany, the Norwegian Progress Party or the Finn's Party are "children of financial crises," having made their breakthrough in national politics in the years following a financial crash. We also find that the 2008 crisis triggered a wave of governments in which right-wing populists gained power, often as a coalition partner. (Funke & Trebesch 2017, p. 8; see also Eichengreen 2018, Rodrik 2011, Schäfer & Streeck 2013, Sprong et al. 2019)

At the micro or individual level, however, despite the plausibility that individual economic setbacks and/or insecurity would lead voters to support populists, the evidence linking individual

economic grievances to populist voting is not particularly strong. Scholars have not been able to establish consistent connections between individuals' particular economic circumstances—for example, their income, wealth, or employment status—and their propensity to support populism (Mijs & Gidron 2019). Kates & Tucker (2019, p. 494) directly tested "whether individuals concerned about their personal economic situation [were] more likely to identify with far-right ideological beliefs during economic crises. . . . Ultimately, we find little evidence to support the claim that the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and its aftermath shifted the determinants of support for far-right ideology."

Rather than focusing on individuals' particular, current, economic circumstances, some scholars argue that fear of the future is more consequential. If individuals are worried that their financial situations will worsen over time, perhaps because the industries they are employed in are threatened or in decline as a result of automation, foreign competition, and so on, then they may be susceptible to the antiestablishment, scapegoating populists (Emmenegger et al. 2012, Häusermann et al. 2020, Im et al. 2019, Kriesi & Bornschier 2012, Rovny & Rovny 2017). Other scholars argue that, rather than focusing on individuals' assessments of their current or future economic or financial circumstances, what really matters in determining support for populism is the individual's assessment of how the broader society or economy is doing currently and is likely to do in the future. (Social scientists refer to such macro concerns as sociotropic.) Here too, however, the evidence is mixed at best (Colantone & Stanig 2018, Dehdari 2018, Steenvoordena & Harteveld 2018, Stokes 2018).

Sociocultural Grievances

Within the demand-side camp, explanations emphasizing sociocultural grievances are the main competitors of economic grievance–based explanations. Rather than focusing on economic trends, these types of explanations argue that social and cultural trends over the past decades—most notably rising immigration, the decline of traditional values, and the mobilization of women and minority groups—are the main cause of populism. Such trends, these scholars argue, have challenged ethnic and gender hierarchies, generating a counterreaction. Particularly among white men, the counterreaction has led to support for right-wing populists, who promise to defend their interests. Sociocultural grievance–based explanations are popular among political scientists studying the advanced industrial world and particularly American politics, as well as among sociologists.

The foreign-born share of the population has reached historic heights in the United States as well as many European countries. In Europe, the political impact of immigration was aggravated by the refugee crisis of 2015 and the fear generated by high-profile terrorist incidents, such as the November 2015 Islamist attacks in Paris that killed over 100 people and injured over 44 and the December 2016 Islamist attack in Berlin that left a dozen people dead. That recent immigrants, particularly in Europe, come largely from nonwestern and non-Christian backgrounds has fed fears about the decline of European culture and identity (Caldwell 2009, Murray 2017), leading some voters to support populist politicians and parties that loudly proclaim a commitment to defend them. In the United States, meanwhile, historically high levels of immigration have been accompanied by growing discussion of broader demographic trends likely to lead the country to become majority nonwhite by the middle of this century (US Census Bur. 2018). Numerous political scientists and political psychologists have documented the power and pervasiveness of group-based identity threats and how they can lead voters to support politicians and parties that promise to protect their group's status and identity. Craig & Richeson (2014a) found that simply making white Americans aware that they would soon be a minority increased their propensity to favor their own group and become wary of those outside it. Similar effects were found

among Canadians. Indeed, although white group-based identity threat is the focus of populism scholars—since this is the group most likely to vote for populists—researchers consistently find that the propensity to favor one's own group and/or demonize out-groups increases alongside the perception of threat (Outten et al. 2012, Tajfel 1970).

The election of the first African American president in the United States highlighted the shifting power dynamics in the country generated by this long-term demographic change, leading even more white voters to feel resentful and threatened (Gest 2016, Tesler 2012). Abramowitz & McCoy (2019, p. 137), for example, argue that "[t]he empowerment of new minority groups in the form of Barack Obama's election reinforced a sense of loss and disempowerment by white working-class voters whose economic base was shifting in a globalized economy and whose previously dominant social status was being challenged by the growing diversity of the country in terms of race and ethnicity, gender roles, and sexual orientation." And many scholars emphasize that in both the United States and Europe, alongside the long-term demographic changes caused by immigration and the growing size and mobilization of minority groups, an assault on traditional values had been perceived since the 1960s, leading many, particularly white citizens, to feel that their identities and values were being threatened. Cumulatively, these trends generated a nativist, nationalist, populist backlash as growing numbers of citizens, particularly white males, came to feel like strangers in their own countries (Craig & Richeson 2014b, Dodd et al. 2017, Hochschild 2018).[1]

Sociocultural demand-based explanations have the opposite strengths and weaknesses of economic ones. On the micro level, scholars consistently find strong connections between individuals' views on sociocultural issues and right-wing populist voting. In Europe, for example, "immigration policy preferences are close to a perfect predictor" of right-wing populist voting (Ivarsflaten 2007, p. 15; see also Arzheimer 2008, Dancygier 2010). In the United, States scholars consistently find that "racial animus," or attitudes regarding "blacks, immigrants, Muslims" are the best predictors of support for President Trump (Sides et al. 2018). On the macro level, however, sociocultural explanations have problems.

Empirically, there is little cross-national correlation between levels of racist or anti-immigrant sentiment and populist success (Diamant & Starr 2018). Examining long-term voting data, Bartels (2017a) found "no clear relationship between levels of populist sentiment and actual support for right-wing populist parties." Swedes, for example, score low on measures of racism and anti-immigrant views, yet the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats are the country's second or third largest party. The Irish and the Spanish, meanwhile, score relatively high on such measures, yet right-wing populism has not been particularly potent in either country. And from a temporal perspective, while right-wing populists have become more politically successful over time, racist and anti-immigrant sentiments have decreased in Europe and the United States during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Dennison & Geddes 2018, Gonzalez-Barrera & Conner 2019, Hopkins & Washington 2020). Relatedly, since racism and xenophobia are deep seated and longstanding, reference to such sociocultural attitudes or grievances alone (more on this below) makes it difficult to understand right-wing populism's changing fortunes—for example, in the United States, the differences between Presidents Obama and Trump, the differences between Trump and the two previous Republican nominees on race and immigration, and the dramatic exacerbation of social and communal tensions since the 2016 elections (Berman 2018a).

[1] Although this backlash has been particularly pronounced in the advanced industrial world, observed especially in Europe and the United States, it is not limited to that setting (Polakow-Suransky 2017).

The Interaction of Sociocultural and Economic Causes

Because both economic and sociocultural demand-based explanations have strengths and weaknesses, growing numbers of scholars have tried to combine aspects or insights from both to construct more complex, but potentially more causally convincing, explanations of populism. Based on analysis of decades of World Values Survey data, Inglehart & Norris (2017, Norris & Inglehart 2019) argue that sociocultural grievances are the proximate cause of right-wing populist voting, but the growing importance and prevalence of such grievances are the consequence of increasing economic insecurity and the erosion of traditional values that have been going on over the past few decades. Others have linked changing economic conditions to populism via status anxiety. Such explanations stress that as blue-collar jobs have become unable to guarantee economic security or a middle-class lifestyle, the social standing of manual workers has declined and their sense of social marginalization has increased, creating fertile ground for "a politics of collective status-threat—a powerful, emotional and moral (but by no means irrational) politics that can be mobilized on the basis of deep resentments toward professional elites and minorities" (Bonikowski 2017, p. 202). For example, Gidron & Hall (2020, p. 1029) argue:

> On one side [of the debate about populism's origins] are scholars who suggest that support for candidates of the radical right or left is strongest among people facing adverse economic circumstances. . . . On the other side are scholars who argue that rising support for radical right parties in particular is inspired by shifts in cultural frameworks that have led social and political elites to embrace postmaterialist and multicultural values, generating a counterreaction from voters attached to more traditional attitudes associated with opposition to immigration and to greater racial or gender equality. . . But economic and cultural developments often interact and, instead of debating which is more important, we need better frameworks for understanding how the two types of developments might combine to generate the discontent fueling support for radical parties. . . . We find that people who feel more socially marginal—because they lack strong attachment to the normative order, social engagement, or a sense of social respect—are more likely to be alienated from mainstream politics and to support radical parties. We also find an association between indicators for recent economic and cultural developments often said to affect social status and feelings of social marginalization, especially among people with low incomes or educational attainment.

More generally, political scientists consistently find that xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, resentment of out-groups, and so on tend to rise during difficult economic times when low-income, low-education citizens in particular are worried about unemployment and future job prospects and concerned about competition for scarce public resources, such as housing or welfare benefits. For example, in her influential study *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, Dancygier (2010, p. 7) finds that economic scarcity crucially influences immigrant–native conflict:

> When governments encourage (or tolerate) immigration but do not take steps to help localities absorb the inflow of migrants, differences in economic conditions across cities and towns within countries will prove crucial [in determining levels of immigrant–native conflict]. . . . Simply put, natives are much more likely to turn against their immigrant neighbors, and immigrants are much more prone to engage in confrontations with state actors, when each group faces economic shortages. Resource scarcity—not ethnic difference—is the key driver of immigrant conflict.

Economists have also found that economic shocks can trigger the sociocultural grievances and resentments that lead to support for populism. One influential study finds that adverse economic conditions increase support for nativist or extreme politicians by intensifying resentment against out-groups and attachment to in-groups (Autor et al. 2017). A similar causal chain linking economic shocks to increased in-/out-group sentiment and populist voting was found in Europe as well (Colantone & Stanig 2018).

SUPPLY-SIDE EXPLANATIONS OF POPULISM

Although explanations of populism that focus on social or economic change and grievances, or on some mix of them—the demand side of politics—have been very useful in helping us understand the causes of populism, they have some limitations or at least biases worth noting. Most obviously, economic and/or social changes alone are not problems—they only cause citizens to become angry, resentful, and susceptible to the appeal of populists if established mainstream politicians, parties, and governments fail to recognize and respond to them. Accordingly, some scholars of populism focus their attention on the supply side of politics, trying to understand why democratic institutions have become less responsive to citizens, less able to deal with societies' problems over time, and hence susceptible to the type of populist backlash threatening them today.

Supply-side explanations reject the conveyor-belt view of politics built into demand-side explanations—the assumption that broad economic and/or social trends directly or straightforwardly influence citizens' political demands and choices (Evans et al. 1985). Instead, supply-side explanations draw on the insights of institutionalist scholars and argue that economic, social, and other structural trends are filtered through institutions that determine how they are translated into political outcomes (Hall & Taylor 1986, Steinmo et al. 1992). Supply-side explanations, as noted, locate the main cause of populism in the decline of responsiveness and effectiveness of political institutions, which has made many citizens willing to vote for politicians and parties with antiestablishment, anti–status quo messages. These types of explanations have become popular in recent years among scholars of the advanced industrial world, but they have a long history among students of the developing world, dating back at least to Samuel Huntington's seminal *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968).

Huntington argued that political disorder stemmed from a disjuncture between the challenges countries faced and the strength of their political institutions. As he put it, "The primary problem of politics. . .is the lag in the development of political institutions behind social and economic change" (Huntington 1968, p. 5). "The larger, more complex, more complicated and diverse" the demands emanating from society, the more political stability "becomes dependent on the existence of strong political institutions" capable of responding to them (p. 6). As described in Berman (2017), Huntington observed that the same challenges that were easily handled in countries with strong and responsive political institutions—e.g., ensuring employment opportunities for an increasingly educated populace, providing avenues of political participation for newly mobilized social groups—caused political disorder and even violence in countries lacking them. This, Huntington argued, was the source of the problems facing many Asian, African, and Latin American countries in the 1950s and 1960s: They were experiencing rapid social and economic change—urbanization, increases in literacy and education, industrialization, mass media expansion—that increased their citizens' expectations and demands, but they lacked political institutions capable of satisfying them. Although Huntington focused on the challenge of developing strong, responsive political institutions in Third World countries, he also recognized that already-developed political institutions could decay over time, causing a political system to become less responsive and effective and thereby generating increasing dissatisfaction and even disorder. Such a process of institutional decay or corruption is essentially what supply-side explanations of populism argue has been going on in the United States, Western Europe, and other parts of the advanced industrial world over the past decades.

For example, as described in Berman (2018b), scholars of the United States have focused on how gerrymandering, the Electoral College, the Senate, and other institutions have increasingly warped the translation of voter preferences into political outcomes (Ingram & Wills 2017, Lieberman et al. 2019). Other Americanists have examined the increasing role of money in politics

and how it has skewed who politicians pay attention to and who controls the agenda-setting process (Drutman 2015). In addition, scholars note that as the private funding of campaigns has grown, private donors, as opposed to party establishments or voters, are increasingly able to influence who runs for office, who gets elected, and what issues candidates respond to (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019). Particularly noteworthy, perhaps, is that the need for candidates to raise their own campaign funds may discourage lower-income people from running for office (Carnes 2013). This distorts economic debate, in particular, since research shows that politicians with working-class backgrounds are dramatically more likely than others to take progressive or proworker positions, even when researchers control for partisanship, district characteristics, and other factors (Carnes 2019). The American voting system also discourages some groups from voting, particularly the poor and minorities, also distorting what voices are heard at election time and within the political sphere more generally (Norris et al. 2018). Relatedly, many political scientists argue that the interests of economic elites and the organized groups representing them powerfully shape government policy while less well-off Americans and the mass-based interest groups that represent their interests have much less influence (Bartels 2017b, Gilens 2012, Gilens & Page 2014, Hacker & Pierson 2011, Schlozman et al. 2012). Some political scientists have even found that senior staff members in Congress—the people who help their bosses decide what bills to pursue and support—have "no clue what Americans want." The more time they spend talking to big business rather than mass membership groups, the more clueless these congressional staffers become (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019). Cumulatively, these trends have made American democracy less responsive to large numbers of citizens, generated dissatisfaction with the establishment and the status quo, and deepened divisions between those seen to be on the winning and losing sides of these trends—all of which have helped create fertile ground for populism.

Alongside similar trends, Europeanists have identified other developments that have diminished the responsiveness and effectiveness of democratic institutions. Europeanists' most common focus of attention is the European Union. As ever more policy-making areas fell under the purview of the European Union during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, perhaps most notably monetary policy, there was no corresponding increase in European citizens' control over them. Meanwhile, the policy options that national governments—over which voters do have more direct control—can offer their citizens have diminished, particularly in the economic sphere. As Nanou & Dorussen (2013, p. 90) note, the "process of European integration. . .undermines one of the primary functions of the domestic electoral process—namely to offer voters a broad range of policy alternatives. In essence, the more decisions derive from the EU as currently designed the less distinct are the policy choices on which parties compete." The growing power of the European Union has also been fed by the increasing judicialization of politics—the tendency for crucial decisions to be made by European courts rather than national governments (Scicluna & Auer 2019). As one critic mused, at what point does the ever-growing number of EU rules and laws go from "civilizing" politics "to undermining democracy" (Kundnani 2018)? In addition to limiting the powers and policy options available to democratic governments, some scholars of Eastern Europe have argued that the EU accession process helped prepare the ground for populism by limiting the range of policies that could be offered by governments, empowering executives over legislatures, and undermining the power and responsiveness of domestic democratic institutions more generally. Grabbe (2006), for example, argues that the EU accession process favored a concentration of resources and power in the executive while the legislature was marginalized. She also argues that in Eastern Europe, the accession process involved the EU determining policy outcomes in a wide range of areas from "judicial reform" to "prison conditions" to "pension reform, taxation, social security systems, and corporate governance" that would normally be considered the prerogative of democratically elected governments. She concludes that the "technocratic approach"

to integration in Eastern Europe created "a democratic deficit in the whole eastern accession process. Accountability was lacking on the EU side owing to the Commission's control of much of accession policy [and] there was also little democratic participation" by East European nations themselves. "Because of the lack of debate about accession requirements, [East European] policymakers were often constrained more by EU conditions than by their domestic policies" (Grabbe 2006, p. 196).

Another factor often stressed in explanations of the causes of populism in Europe is the growth of technocracy at the domestic and European levels. (Technocracy refers to decision-making power being transferred to nonelected bureaucrats and international organizations.) One problem with transferring power to technocrats is that their preferences often diverge from those of ordinary citizens (Svalfors 2017), contributing to a disjuncture between citizens' demands and the policies supplied. The epitome of this is central banks—and particularly the European Central Bank, which was granted increasing power over the past decades, purchasing sovereign debt, intervening in commercial debt, real estate, and mortgage markets and being granted oversight over financial systems. As Tucker (2019) pointed out in his influential study of the European Central Bank, traditionally, policies with such immense distributional impact were left to elected leaders, but no one elects a central bank. The problem, of course, is that central bankers, like other technocrats, tend only to ask whether a policy is effective, when equally if not more important is whether it is legitimate, since citizens are more likely to tolerate the "inevitable disappointments and frustrations of" policy (Tucker 2019, p. 547) when they can vote out those whose decisions they disagree with (Berman & McNamara 1999). Cumulatively, these trends have boosted the appeal of populists who promise to protect national sovereignty and, as the slogans put it, take back control from Brussels bureaucrats and restore power to the people.

Another crucial problem in Europe is the decline of mainstream political parties. During the postwar era, political parties were generally stronger in Europe than in the United States. They had high membership and loyalty levels and strong ties to civil society. More than in the United States, in Europe citizens became involved in and mobilized for democratic politics via political parties. But during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, European political parties became weaker. Membership declined, ties to civil society organizations dissolved, and activist networks withered (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002, Mair 2013, van Biezen et al. 2012). In his now classic study of the decline of European political parties over the past decades, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Mair (2013, p. 1) argues: "The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form." Some scholars view the decline of social democratic parties as particularly important, since historically these parties identified as the champion of the disadvantaged and disempowered. Berman & Snegovaya (2019), for example, argue that their inability or unwillingness to play this role over the past decades thus contributed to creating a pool of voters susceptible to populists' claim to be the champion of society's voiceless.

Supply-side explanations of populism, in short, present populism as a *symptom* of institutional decay. Populism's primary cause is citizens' growing dissatisfaction with mainstream, established political institutions that appear unwilling or unable to respond to their grievances and demands (Berman 2017, 2016; Foa et al. 2020).

VOLUNTARIST EXPLANATIONS OF POPULISM

Although demand- and supply-side explanations differ in where they locate the main causes of populism—broad economic, social, and cultural trends versus institutional decay—they are similar in that neither pays much attention to how the choices and behavior of key political actors

influence the rise of populism. The populism literature, in other words, has embedded in it another classic political science debate: between structural and agency-based or voluntarist explanations.

Voluntarist explanations of populism focus on the choices and behavior of politicians and parties. For example, Meguid (2005, 2008) argues that whether mainstream, established parties adopt dismissive, adversarial, or accommodative strategies when populist parties first appear on the scene critically shapes populism's chance of success (see the sidebar titled How Mainstream Parties Respond to the Emergence of Populist Parties). Other scholars focus on the choices and behavior of populists themselves. For example, many European populist parties have their roots in the 1970s and 1980s and began as neo-fascist or antidemocratic movements. As such, they received little electoral support (van der Brug & Fennema 2007). They were only able to increase their vote share after moderating their policy positions—becoming xenophobic rather than neofascist and accepting, indeed in some cases claiming to be champions of, democracy (Ignazi 2003). Also crucial was right-wing populists' decision to mobilize voters around such issues as immigration, so-called traditional values, and Euro-skepticism, to which mainstream parties were responding either with silence or with alternatives that did not correspond to many voters' preferences (De Vries & Hobolt 2020). More generally, scholars have found that populism tends to thrive when

HOW MAINSTREAM PARTIES RESPOND TO THE EMERGENCE OF POPULIST PARTIES

Established mainstream parties may adopt dismissive, adversarial, or accommodative strategies when populist parties first appear on the scene (Berman 2019). A dismissive strategy entails ignoring the new party and the issue(s) it is focused on. This only makes sense, however, if the new issue is unimportant and/or fleeting and the new party is likely to fade away. Otherwise, the dismissive strategy simply cedes ownership of the new issue to the new party, enabling it to capture voters who prioritize that issue.

The second strategy is adversarial, which involves clearly and vociferously opposing the new party. When mainstream parties adopt an adversarial strategy, they raise the salience of the new party's issue—since they contribute to keeping it at the forefront of political debate and competition—and therefore help entrench the new party's ownership of it. This only makes sense, therefore, if mainstream parties are confident that most voters, and their own voters in particular, do not agree with the niche party's position on the issue and are therefore unlikely to defect to it. An adversarial strategy could theoretically also make sense if a mainstream party believed its main competitor would lose more votes to the niche party than it would itself. A left party, for example, might calculate that by vociferously opposing the populist right on immigration, it would raise the issue's salience and the populist right's ownership of it, which would lead anti-immigrant voters to abandon the center-right for the populist right. Center-right parties might play a similar game with environmentalism, to strengthen a green party at the expense of social democrats. This approach has, however, evident dangers and down sides—most obviously, miscalculating the consequences of raising the salience of a new issue and its electoral consequences.

The third strategy is accommodative, which requires mainstream parties moving their policies closer to those advocated by new parties. By bringing their policies in line with those of new parties, mainstream parties hope to limit defections to them. The problem is that this works best early on—once a new party comes to own an issue, it is likely to backfire.

When a new issue, such as immigration, appears on the scene, if mainstream parties believe it is important, unlikely to fade away, and strongly of interest to a significant number of their supporters, it makes sense to try to prevent a new niche party from gaining ownership of the issue and thus being able to attract voters who prioritize it. There is some evidence, for example, that in countries where mainstream right parties quickly shifted to more restrictive immigration parties and openly placated nationalist concerns, the populist right was less successful.

mainstream center-left and center-right parties fail to offer clear alternatives to voters on important contemporary issues. Grand coalitions, which further blur the differences between mainstream center-left and center-right parties, tend to boost populism's fortunes, since they enable populists to claim to offer the only real alternative to the status quo. Berman & Kundnani (2021), for example, argue that "if voters become dissatisfied with the status quo and parties fail to offer clear alternatives on the issues that concern them, convergence is likely to generate extremism and democratic decay by creating or deepening a 'representation gap'—a mismatch between voters' preferences and the alternatives offered by mainstream parties." In her study of the rise of populism in Europe, Grzymala-Busse (2019, p. 35; see also Arzheimer & Carter 2006) similarly stresses that

> [t]he failure of mainstream political-party competition fueled the rise of populism in Europe. Popular anxieties about immigration, economics, or cultural change are not sufficient to explain the surge in populist support. Mainstream parties on both the center-left and the center-right have failed to represent constituencies, to articulate their needs, and to propose distinct policy solutions. The center-left has abandoned its traditional social-policy commitments, and the center-right has often failed to contain xenophobes and nativists. For voters, these failures validated populist claims that the political status quo amounted to rule by a corrupt, self-serving elite cartel and that only radical solutions could ensure real representation of "the people."

Another way in which the choices and behavior of politicians and parties matter is via their influence on issue salience. As noted above, scholars have found that preferences on immigration policy or racial issues are the best predictor of support for the populist right, but since these preferences do not change quickly, there is some problem linking them to populism's changing political fortunes from election to election. (This is a version of the "constant can't explain a variable" problem.) A focus on salience can help solve this causal problem. Whereas preferences refer to an individual's view of an issue, salience refers to the intensity of or importance attached to that view. Individuals have many political preferences, but only those which are salient decisively influence political behavior. Many factors can shape salience, including external shocks like terrorist attacks or a wave of refugees, or intense media attention (Walgrave et al. 2009). But the choices and behavior of politicians and parties are also crucial (Budge 2015).

As Riker famously argued, political outcomes depend on political manipulation (1986) and agenda formation (1993). Successful politicians "structure the world so they can win" (Riker 1986, p. ix). They understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not, emphasizing the former and sidelining the latter. That right-wing populists benefit when the salience of social and cultural issues, such as immigration and national identity, is high explains why they spend so much time trying to keep such issues at the forefront of debate: demonizing immigrants and minorities by blaming them for rising crime and eroding national values (Abdou-Chadi 2016, van der Brug et al. 2000). However, it is not only the choices and behavior of populists that have made social and cultural issues like immigration and national identity more salient. The choices made by center-left parties and politicians played a role as well.

During the postwar period, political competition, particularly in Europe, pivoted primarily around economic policy differences (Berman & Snegovaya 2019). But by the late twentieth century, economic differences between left and right diminished as the former accepted much of the neoliberal agenda. In Europe, as the economic profiles and appeals of mainstream center-left and center-right parties converged, the tendency to emphasize, and hence raise the salience of, social issues rather than economic issues increased. As Kitschelt et al. (1999, p. 267) concluded, where parties of the left embraced promarket, neoliberal reforms, "politicians could not polarize electoral competition around economic issues and were accordingly incentivized to construct 'a single

powerful socio-cultural divide on which to display meaningful programmatic differences and employ those to attract voters.'" Similarly, another cross-national study of parties' shifting economic profiles found that as parties became increasingly similar in terms of economic policy, an attractive "survival strategy" was politicizing noneconomic issues: "The strategy of shifting competition to a new issue domain allows parties to better distinguish themselves from one another and thereby avoid losing voters to indifference" (Ward et al. 2015, p. 1233). A somewhat similar dynamic occurred in the United States during the 2016 election campaign. Scholars found that not only did Trump emphasize immigration and racial/identity issues more than other Republicans but Clinton focused more attention on these issues than her predecessor as well. The campaign was thus particularly focused on social and cultural issues and the candidates particularly divided on them, raising the salience of these issues and thus their impact at the ballot box (Sides et al. 2018). Studies of the United States and Europe show that the increasing salience of social and cultural issues plays a particularly important role in shifting workers and voters without college degrees into the populist camp (Mutz 2018, Rydgren 2013). These voters often have economically left-wing but socially conservative views, and so the more salient social and cultural issues (as opposed to economic issues) are, the more likely they are to vote populist (Bonikowski 2017, Spies 2013).

CONCLUSION

Albert Einstein once said, "Politics is more difficult than physics." Einstein was referring to the difficulty of coming up with solutions to pressing political problems, but his quip is equally applicable to merely understanding political phenomena. Understanding populism and democratic backsliding is perhaps the most crucial challenge facing political scientists and other students of democracy today. The "scientific" aspirations of political science lead many of its practitioners to search for simple causal explanations—single variables that can explain particular dependent variables, relatively simple models or theories that can account for particular political outcomes over time and space. Although parsimony is intellectually and psychologically satisfying, understanding the causes of populism and the current problems facing liberal democracy requires embracing complexity and bringing together insights from a variety of perspectives. Accounts of populism variously focus on how social and economic trends and problems interact, on the demand side and supply side of politics, or on the crucial role played by political parties and other political actors in shaping the issues and interests that define political competition and influence the functioning and legitimacy of liberal democracy. Such explanations can provide a fuller understanding of the political dynamics of our era as well as insights into the strengths and weaknesses of different perspectives on explaining political phenomena overall.

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Errata

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