

The Populism Index: Measuring a Growing and Transforming Force in Politics

Dr. Stephen Davies, Head of Education, Institute of Economic Affairs

Populism is both a style of politics and an ideology with a stipulated division of politics and society between a corrupt, exploitative elite and a united and virtuous people.

Right populists have come to support a dirigiste national economic policy, strong assertion of traditional national identity, and the assertion of a European identity against the non-European world.

The 2019 Authoritarian Populism Index shows an increase in support for populist parties across Europe, with populists of right and left in power – either alone or in coalition – in 11 EU countries.

There are several possibilities for the future of populism, the most likely being that the emerging ideology and politics of national collectivism will become more explicit. It's probable that politics in most European countries will align around a new division between nationalism and globalism.

What is Populism – at least for now?

Populism as the term is used both commonly and in compiling the index is both a style of politics and an ideology. The common element to both is a stipulated division of politics and society between a corrupt, exploitative and venal elite and a united and virtuous people. The second category is typically identified with the whole of a historic nation and is seen as the present embodiment of that historic people (Hungarians, French, Finns etc). People who for one reason or another do not fit into that historically conceived people are viewed as a potential threat. If you reject the identity put forward by the populists you are ipso facto not a part of 'the people'. This ideology, as explicitly articulated by some of its leading figures such as Viktor Orban, is an explicitly anti-liberal (in the widest sense) ideology, which aims at the creation of a post-liberal democracy.

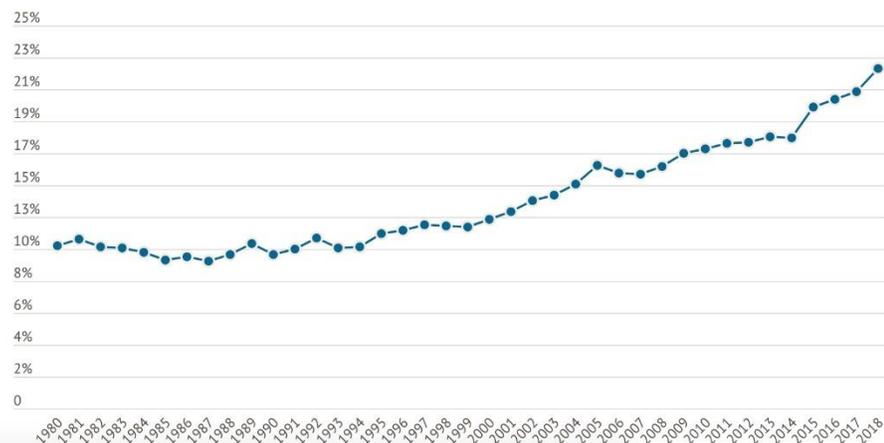
In addition however the parties identified as right-wing populist typically have other, more substantive beliefs that translate into concrete policy proposals. These may be described as national collectivism. Among the common elements are these: hostility to economic globalisation and cosmopolitanism; strong opposition to the migration of people; strong support for national welfare states; belief in the need for a strong national state to uphold a traditional culture and set of values and cultural norms; rejection of global free market capitalism and especially international finance and large multinationals – this can take the form of a policy of 'capitalism in one country' but increasingly means support for a dirigiste national economic policy; strong assertion of traditional national identity but also increasingly the assertion of a European identity that is contrasted to the non-European world – the non-European category includes the United States but not (for many) Russia.

How Popular is Populism?

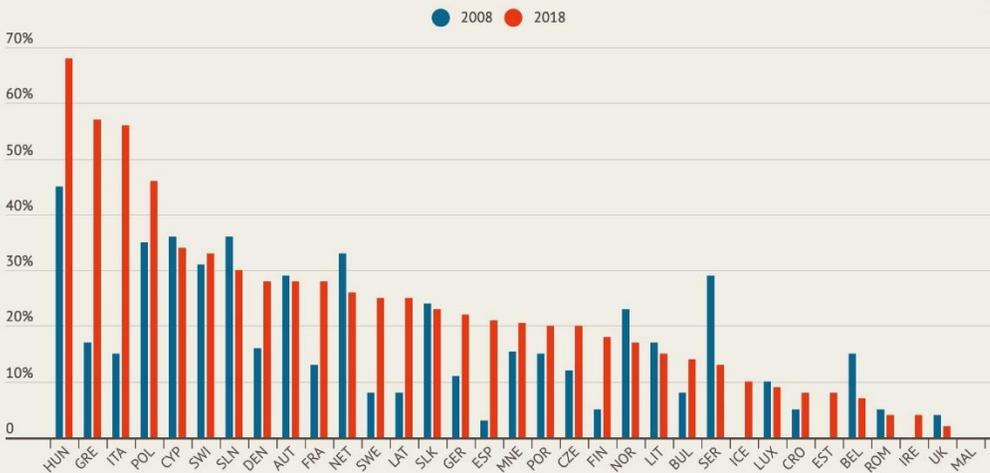
The Index [clearly shows](#) that the trajectory in most European countries is of increasing support for populist parties. (There are local reasons for major exceptions such as the UK). Support has increased in all six elections held in Europe in 2018. The graphs show that there was slow growth until the last six years after which there is a sharp rise. The rise in Europe as a whole is most rapid in the last four years with an increase in support overall of 33% over that period. Clearly this conceals major variations in support with a sharp decline in the UK for example and an equally dramatic rise in Italy and impressive increases in Germany and Sweden. Obviously, this rising trend will not continue indefinitely and it will almost certainly provoke a response as voters who reject the populist ideology rally around a party or coalition that openly advocates what we may call cosmopolitan liberalism or progressivism. The Greens appear to be filling this role in Germany for example. However, in many countries, growth is likely to continue and when it plateaus will do so at a level that makes such parties important political players.

FIGURE 1

Average share of votes for populist parties 1980–2018



Percent of votes for populist parties 2008 and 2018



Percent of votes for populist parties in the latest election as of 2018, compared to the latest election as of 2008.

What is the Trajectory?

The information in the Index shows clearly that the trajectory in most European countries is for support for populist parties to be increasing. (There are local reasons for major exceptions such as the UK). Support has increased in all six elections held in Europe in 2018. The graphs show that there was slow growth until the last six years after which there is a sharp rise. The rise in Europe as a whole is most rapid in the last four years with an increase in support overall of 33% over that period. Clearly this conceals major variations in support with a sharp decline in the UK for example and an equally dramatic rise in Italy and impressive increases in Germany and Sweden. Obviously, this rising trend will not continue indefinitely and it will

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Populists in Power – At national Level and the European Parliament?

Populists of left and right are now in power either alone or in coalition in 11 EU countries (in majority power in four – Greece, Italy, Hungary and Poland). The evidence of Hungary and Poland is that if in unchecked power such parties are a serious threat to liberal rights. In Finland being in power has apparently checked the growth of populism but the same is not true in other countries e.g. Denmark. There is also currently a prospect of a major advance for right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament. In the elections to the European Parliament in May it is probable on current polls that parties of the populist right will gain significantly (particularly in Italy) and rise from 21.5% of seats in 2014 to around 35%. In France current polls show the RN ahead of En Marche by 21% to 19%. Gains are also predicted in several other countries such as Germany and Spain. The situation is even better for the populist right than these figures suggest because undoubtedly populist parties such as Fidesz sit in the mainstream centre right bloc so those figures understate their likely support in the Parliament after the elections

What Might Right Wing Populism Become?

There are a number of possibilities. The most likely is that the emerging ideology and politics of national collectivism will become more explicit. In that case what of the structure of politics? What we are seeing before our eyes is a realignment of politics in every EU country except Ireland and Portugal. It seems likely that politics in most European countries will align around a new division between nationalism and globalism. Existing aligning divisions such as between more or less pro-market positions will continue but become less significant. (Poland has already reached this point). It may be that populist right parties will replace existing centre right parties as the dominant force on one side of the new divide. More probable, as the Netherlands and Germany suggest, is that their support will level off but only because the centre right moves towards some of their positions. In that case they will have brought about a significant change in the nature and orientation of the centre right. Parts of the left may also move in a more nationalist direction. The examples of France and Germany suggest that we will also see a response in the shape of a coalition supporting cosmopolitan globalism. In any case it is likely that the basic divisions in European politics will have taken on a new pattern.

References

TIMBRO (2019), *Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index*. Available at: <https://populismindex.com/>