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## Understanding the Rise of Far-Right Populist Parties in Europe

### Cover Page Footnote

This paper was originally researched and written as a project for the European Trade Union Institute in the summer of 2018. I was working as a research intern for the organization and my paper was used as a background reading for their Post-Growth 2018 Conference in September. I would like to thank my supervisor, Maria Jepsen, for her support and direction through the research process. I would also like to thank Malcolm Thompson for his counsel throughout the editing process. Furthermore, I would like to thank Professor Valerie D'Erman of the University of Victoria for advising me to submit this paper and for her generosity in helping me to contextualize and clarify my ideas. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Hans Rindisbacher of Pamona College for the constructive feedback he provided as my discussant.

# Understanding the Rise of Far-Right Populist Parties in Europe

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to answer the question: what drives the recent electoral success of far-right populist parties (RPPs) in Europe? I will argue that it is supply factors, rather than demand factors, united under the theme of mistrust, that drove the recent electoral success of RPPs. To support my argument, I will summarize the ‘losers of globalization’ theory and apply it to the financial and economic crises, the migration crisis, the polarization of politics, and mistrust in governments, and categorize them as supply or demand factors according to Matt Golder’s definitions. For the sake of this paper, I will use a broad description of RPPs: any party that appeals primarily to the middle class while intentionally ‘othering’ the elite and immigrants. ‘Othering,’ in this sense, refers to the process of alienating or excluding a group from society, creating a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them.’

## **KEYWORDS**

populism, far-right, immigration, mistrust

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The sudden rise of right-wing populist parties (RPPs) in Europe over the last 10 years has been a daunting question for political scientists, economists, citizens, workers, and politicians. This paper seeks to answer the question: what drives the recent electoral success of RPPs in Europe? I will argue that it is supply factors that drove the recent electoral success of RPPs, all of which are united under the critical theme of mistrust. To support my argument, I will summarize the ‘losers of globalization’ theory and apply it to the financial and economic crises, the migration crisis, the polarization of politics, and the mismanagement by governments, and categorize them as supply or demand factors. “Demand-side explanations focus on the grievances that create the ‘demand’ for far-right parties, whereas supply-side explanations focus on how the choices that far-right parties make and the political opportunity structure in which they act influence their success” (Golder, 2016, p. 1).

A lack of trust in national governments is dangerous because it magnifies fear of global trends, leaving citizens concerned that their governments are acting in the interest of foreign actors. This fear is the supply factor that leads the electorate to be vulnerable to the inflammatory tactics of right-wing populist parties, which present a clear plan of action for defending the nation. For the sake of this paper, I will be using a broad description of right-wing populist parties (RPPs): any party that appeals primarily to the middle class while intentionally ‘othering’ the elite and immigrants. ‘Othering,’ in this sense, refers to the process of alienating or excluding a group from society, often placing them in the position of ‘scape goat’ or ‘enemy.’ By their very nature, populist parties challenge the structure of established governance and introduce an informal, anti-bureaucratic sentiment. I will show that a combination of the economic and financial crises, the migration crisis, and the behaviour of governments resulted in a political space for RPPs to step in and fill a leadership role that could have been filled by left or centrist governments, rather than driving sentiments compatible with RPPs.

## 2. RPP MAJOR SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

In recent years we have seen a dramatic rise in RPPs throughout Europe. In Poland, the Law and Justice Party, headed by President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Beata Szydło, won 37.6% of the votes in 2015, giving them an absolute majority (Poll of Polls, 2018a). Support for the Law and Justice Party is not likely to decline, considering that they are projected to win 40% of the vote in the next election (Poll of Polls, 2018a). The Swiss People’s Party headed by Albert Rösti achieved 29.4% of the vote in 2015, making them the largest party in Switzerland (Poll of Polls, 2018b). Their popularity increased as they are expected to gain 31% of the vote in the 2019 elections (Poll of Polls, 2018b). In Italy we have a coalition government made up of the Italian Northern League (17.37%) and the Five Star Movement (32.66%) (Poll of Polls, 2018c). The 2018 election showed a 7.1% vote increase for the Italian Northern League and a 13.28% increase for the Five Star Movement (Poll of Polls, 2018c). In the upcoming elections, the League is projected to win 25% of the vote and the Five Star Movement is projected to win 31% (Poll of Polls, 2018c). This would make them the first and second largest political parties.

The Hungarian Civic Alliance, more commonly known as the Fidesz, headed by Viktor Orbán, was able to win 49.27% of the vote in 2018, achieving their third successful election (Poll of Polls, 2018d). They are expected to win 55% in the next election, giving them a total majority (Poll of Polls, 2018d). Jobbik, the Movement For a Better Hungary (a

more radical right-wing party in Hungary), won 19.06% in the 2018 election, making them the second largest party (Poll of Polls, 2018d). The Danish People's Party in Denmark won 21.1% in the 2015 elections, making it the second largest party (only 5.2% less than the largest party) (Poll of Polls, 2018e). Interestingly, they are currently projected to lose 3.1% of their support in the next election (Poll of Polls, 2018e). The Swedish Democrats went from 7.3% in the 2010 elections to 12.9% in the 2014 elections and are currently projected to win 21% in the next election (Poll of Polls, 2018f). For context, the Moderate Party is projected to win 21% and the Swedish Social Democratic Party is projected to win 25% of the votes, making the Swedish Democrats the second or third largest party, and not far from first (Poll of Polls, 2018f). The Party for Freedom in the Netherlands won 20% in the last election, making it the second largest party after the Peoples Party For Freedom and Democracy at 33% (Poll of Polls, 2018g). However, they are projected to win only 14% in the next one, putting them behind the Green Left (Poll of Polls, 2018g).

The Freedom Party for Austria won 25.97% of the votes in the 2017 elections, an increase of 5.46% from the last election, placing them as the third largest party (Poll of Polls, 2018h). The True Finns, or the Finns Party, has become the third largest party in Finland, winning 17.7% of the vote in the 2015 elections (Poll of Polls, 2018i). Support is suspected to drop to 8% in the next election, likely because the party has since split, with a portion of its members forming the Blue Reform Party (Poll of Polls, 2018i). The Finns Party is currently the third largest party. The National Rally, formerly known as the National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, currently holds third place in France with 13.2% of the vote (Poll of Polls, 2018j). This is 0.4% less than they earned in the 2012 election (Poll of Polls, 2018j). However, support is growing and they are projected to take 15% in the next election (Poll of Polls, 2018j). The Alternative for Germany party is currently the third largest party in the Bundestag with 12.6% in the 2017 elections and they are projected to take 14% of the vote in the next election (Poll of Polls, 2018k).

The Slovakian People's Party, who refer to gypsy people as “extremists” and “parasites” (Kotleba, 2018), gained 8% of the vote in the 2016 election and are projected to win 10% in the next one (Poll of Polls, 2018l). This would make them the third largest party. In the Czech Republic, the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party won 10.64% of the vote in the 2017 elections and are projected to win 9% in the next elections (Poll of Polls, 2018m). In Greece, the Golden Dawn gained only 7% in 2015, placing them third and far behind the second largest party (New Democracy at 28.1%) and they are projected to gain only 1 or 2% in the next election (Poll of Polls, 2018n). The success of various RPPs across Europe, each with unique rhetoric and policy platforms, shows a general trend that is not based on any specific policy agenda, but rather general sentiments of national populism.

### 3. THE FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISES

Right-wing populist, neo-Nazi, racist, anti-immigrant, and/or Eurosceptic parties have always existed. It is only recently that they are winning elections and experiencing high levels of support. There are outside, contemporary forces driving the success of racist and radical parties. The ‘losers of globalization’ is a leading theory that offers an explanation for the success of RPPs and can be understood as a demand or supply factor (Becker, 2010). The demand argument is that those who support the right wing populist movement were endowed with right-wing views already and have only now been given a voice to express them (Cutts, David, Ford, & Goodwin, 2009). The other, a supply argument, claims that

through globalization, job insecurity, and mistrust in governments, the citizens were left vulnerable to RPP campaigns. Citizens were left vulnerable to RPPs because the Left and Center groups that traditionally formed to represent the workers, or the lower and middle class, have embraced ideas of globalism and globalization, participating in free trade agreements and supranational governance through the EU. The Left has developed a platform that equates progressivism with cosmopolitanism, leaving a vacuum for RPPs to fill where the Left used to represent the working class. The RPPs are seen as the only parties pushing for protectionism and articulating the interests of the working class as their top priority.

By creating job insecurity, the financial and economic crises were beneficial to RPPs. For example, in Hungary between 2006 and 2010, real wages and earnings decreased by 5%, unemployment increased by 10%, inflation increased by 10%, and the share of the vote for the Hungarian Social Party dropped by 22.3% (Cutts et. al., 2009, p. 32–34). However, this cannot be the sole explanation nor can it be the most convincing, as some countries that were hit the hardest by the crises (Greece) did not see a significant rise in support for RPPs (European Social Survey, 2016). Surveys have shown that people are unsure about their financial situation (European Social Survey, 2016). They are more likely to think that it will remain the same rather than become better, and in some cases are almost as likely to think it will be worse than better (European Social Survey, 2016, p. 158). Confidence in national economies is decreasing and citizens are growing more concerned and restless. According to a European Social Survey, people who are unemployed, receive lower income, and/or have a lower level of education, are more likely to vote against immigration (European Social Survey, 2016, p. 9). Demographics that feel insecure about their job and financial future are more likely to feel threatened by a potential foreign labour force. However, the fact that they also feel that immigrants will improve quality of life in every area aside from cultural also shows that the concern is based mainly in misinformation and the presentation of immigrants by RPPs as a cultural threat (European Social Survey, 2016, p. 8). I argue that the financial and economic crises contribute to supply rather than demand forces, because those who suffer the effects of the crises do not necessarily turn to RPPs or anti-immigrant sentiments and remain open to conceptualising immigration as beneficial. However, RPPs are able to foster feelings of insecurity created by the crises in order to push their anti-immigrant agenda.

#### **4. THE MIGRATION CRISIS**

This leads me to the next possible contributing factor: the migration crisis. The migration crisis can be framed as a demand factor, with an increase in immigration resulting in an increase of anti-immigrant sentiments, which translate to support for RPPs. Overall, EU citizens do not feel positively about immigration from outside the EU (European Commission, 2017a, p. 51). Negative feelings about immigrants have increased in 13 member states since spring 2017 (European Commission, 2017a, p. 46). However, one of those member states is Greece, with an increase of 4% (total 76%), and Greece has not experienced high levels of support for RPPs (European Commission, 2017a, p. 46). The migration crisis does not serve as an effective basis for a demand argument because, with Greece as an example, the statistics show that negative opinions on immigrants do not necessarily translate to votes for RPPs. Overall, 56% of EU citizens feel negatively about immigration from outside the EU but right-wing populist parties are not getting 56% of the vote in the EU (European Commission, 2016, p. 22). Rather, I argue that the migration crisis serves as a supply factor,

due to the way that it is presented as an issue that is out of the control of current governments. It is a highly publicized phenomenon, surrounded by a rhetoric of chaos and uncertainty, leaving a political space for RPPs to join the conversation by offering a solution, no matter how radical. The fact that left-wing and centrist governments have failed to provide a concrete and unified response, due to conflicting obligations to European integration, solidarity, human rights, and public opinion, contributes to the impact of RPPs on the electorate.

## **5. INFLAMMATORY TACTICS**

This is where the RPPs contribute as a supply factor. The RPPs have successfully fostered a “culture of resentment” toward the government and immigrants (Becker, 2010, p. 31). They consolidate power by appealing to the irrational fear, hatred, and emotion in people. Historically, the left and right alike have done this under a common theme of blinding the people (Becker, 2010). The tactics being used today are similar to those used in the populist movements of the past. The right has created a narrative around immigrants and leftists that is similar to that surrounding the Jews and Communists in the 20th century (and in many cases they are still involved today). The Left has fashioned a similar narrative around the far-right, branding them as extremists and outcasts whose ideas are poisonous to society. This dynamic has created a political atmosphere in which both sides refuse to find common ground on important issues, and the ‘loudest’ party is able to draw the attention of the electorate. The fact that the people who vote for RPPs were often past supporters of socialist and left wing parties shows that they are more likely to have been vulnerable to right-wing populist movements than opponents of them (Becker, 2010). The right benefits from this polarization by inciting chaos and then offering a ‘path to order.’

When the real statistics on immigration in Europe are considered, it is clear that the severity of the threat has been overstated. I will ask you to focus on the immigrants born in a non-member country because they are the main targets of discrimination by RPPs.

Figure. 1. Foreign Born Population by Country of Birth, 2017.  
Graph from Eurostat (January 2017).

	Total		Born in another EU Member State		Born in a non-member country	
	(thousands)	(% of the population)	(thousands)	(% of the population)	(thousands)	(% of the population)
Belgium	1 876.7	16.5	876.5	7.7	1 000.2	8.8
Bulgaria	145.4	2.0	52.2	0.7	93.2	1.3
Czech Republic	465.1	4.4	181.4	1.7	283.6	2.7
Denmark	668.1	11.6	228.4	4.0	439.7	7.6
Germany	12 105.4	14.7	4 849.9	5.9	7 255.5	8.8
Estonia	192.5	14.6	20.1	1.5	172.4	13.1
Ireland	796.4	16.6	600.6	12.6	195.9	4.1
Greece	1 250.9	11.6	345.6	3.2	905.2	8.4
Spain	6 024.7	12.9	1 943.5	4.2	4 081.2	8.8
France (1)	8 155.7	12.2	2 220.7	3.3	5 935.0	8.9
Croatia	539.6	13.0	68.4	1.6	471.2	11.3
Italy(2)	6 054.0	10.0	1 837.6	3.0	4 216.3	7.0
Cyprus	173.8	20.3	113.8	13.3	60.0	7.0
Latvia	251.5	12.9	27.6	1.4	223.8	11.5
Lithuania	127.4	4.5	20.5	0.7	106.8	3.8
Luxembourg (2)	270.0	45.7	205.2	34.7	64.8	11.0
Hungary	513.6	5.2	321.9	3.3	191.7	2.0
Malta	69.6	15.1	33.7	7.3	35.9	7.8
Netherlands	2 137.2	12.5	580.6	3.4	1 556.6	9.1
Austria	1 649.0	18.8	739.6	8.4	909.4	10.4
Poland (1)(2)	651.8	1.7	220.9	0.6	431.0	1.1
Portugal	876.3	8.5	240.2	2.3	636.1	6.2
Romania	421.8	2.1	180.1	0.9	241.7	1.2
Slovenia	245.4	11.9	66.4	3.2	179.0	8.7
Slovakia	186.2	3.4	153.7	2.8	32.6	0.6
Finland	349.0	6.3	122.2	2.2	226.8	4.1
Sweden	1 783.2	17.8	540.4	5.4	1 242.8	12.4
United Kingdom	9 293.7	14.1	3 612.9	5.5	5 680.8	8.6
Iceland	46.1	13.6	31.4	9.3	14.7	4.4
Liechtenstein	24.6	65.2	8.3	21.8	16.4	43.3
Norway	799.8	15.2	351.2	6.7	448.6	8.5
Switzerland	2 391.5	28.4	1 414.2	16.8	977.3	11.6

Note: The values for the different categories of country of birth may not sum to the totals due to rounding.

(1) Provisional

(2) Break in series.

(\*) Estimate.



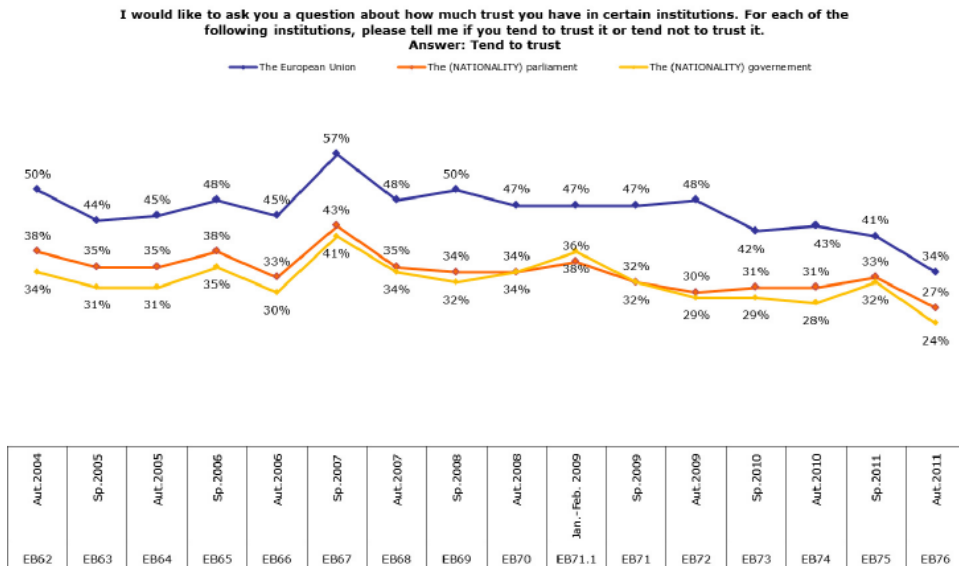
It is difficult to understand how such a small portion of the population could pose a serious cultural threat. Especially when considering countries such as Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, who have very low proportions of immigrants yet also successful RPPs. The far sides of the spectrum are growing and the center is shrinking. There are more people who believe many immigrants should be allowed to enter and more who believe that no immigrants should be allowed to enter (Richards, 2016).

It is easy for the radical right to appeal to those who are unhappy with their current situation by preaching ‘anti-establishment’ rejection of the ‘political norm’ and support for the individual (Betz, 1994). As further argued by Betz (1994), they do this by describing a superior common sense over the intellectual and prescribing a ‘new way’ that will improve the individual’s situation. With the rise of the internet/online politics, specialized media has become popular, appealing to people’s individual beliefs and values and allowing them to subscribe to a body of media that caters only to their prefixed views. This marks a decline in cleavage politics and creates a new kind of fragmentation that focuses on a political niche and creates many small and radical groups, pulling the entire spectrum away from the center. Rather than gravitating toward one side of an issue, the voters are drawn to a specific issue or body of issues and a political doctrine that surrounds them. This process has nourished a “culture of discontent” that was not properly managed by the ruling political powers. This polarization contributed to supply factors, by leaving a gap for radical right-wing parties to offer an answer and monopolize on the call for a new order (Betz, 1994).

## **6. MISTRUST IN GOVERNMENTS**

My fourth and final supply side argument is mistrust in national governments. This is how RPPs have been able to use the migration crisis to gather support (Villa, 2018). Standard Eurobarometer surveys have shown that since 2004, citizens’ trust in the EU and in their national governments have significantly decreased, as illustrated in Figure 2 below (European Commission, 2011).

Figure 2. Trust in the national government, the national parliament, and the European Union: Trend, 2004-2011. Graph from European Commission (2011).



This lack of trust in national governments has left citizens feeling vulnerable and looking for a strong leader who articulates a ‘plan of action’ with the peoples’ interests at the helm. This is what populist parties offer. In order to combat this effect, member state governments must maintain transparency on all issues, including migration and their relationship with the EU. Over the past years, public dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy has been growing (Goodwin, 2011). If it is the ‘losers of globalization’ that want RPPs in power, they still do not want a reversal of globalization or free trade, they simply want to feel that their government can be trusted to protect their interests. While many people have negative views about globalization, they also have negative views about protectionism and positive views about free trade (European Commission, 2017b, p. 144). Immigration is concerning to them because they are uncertain of what it means for their future and way of life, not because it is inherently problematic. They do not want to close themselves off to the world but they want their jobs and quality of life to be maintained. Many national governments have been hesitant in the past to share sovereignty with the EU on issues like migration and they have been concerned about presenting an image of weakness to their citizens. However, a minority of citizens trust in their national governments, and citizens are more likely to trust the European Union than their national governments (European Commission, 2017b, p. 147).

## 7. CONCLUSION

The validity of the ‘losers of globalization’ theory lies in its emphasis on feelings of vulnerability experienced by citizens in a globalized world, allowing global trends to have an impact on the electorate for this reason. However, I argue that rather than driving sentiments compatible with RPPs, this results in a political space for RPPs to step in and take

leadership roles that could have been filled by left-wing or centrist parties. RPPs have been able to rise to power by offering a concrete strategy for change and for the future, allowing the people to place trust in them. A lack of transparency, coupled with scape-goating of the European Union, has left citizens distrustful of their national governments, which renders them vulnerable to inflammatory campaign tactics framing modernization and immigration as a threat. The supply is not meeting the demand. People are not driven by racism, but mistrust and insecurity. RPPs are doing what the left is failing to do: offering an answer to their concerns, a road map to success.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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