Why Political Volatility in Europe Is Here to Stay

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Introduction — the Aim of the Essay

Europe is experiencing considerable political change. In broad terms, over recent years established political parties in the mainstream have come under new electoral pressure, outsider or populist parties have attracted higher levels of public support, and political systems have become more volatile. One recent study estimates that between 2004 and 2015 the share of the vote for mainstream parties dropped by 14 points to 72% while the share of the vote going to challenger parties on either the left-wing or right-wing more than doubled to 23%. These developments in turn reflect the way in which deeper currents in Europe (and across the West more generally) are reshaping the dynamics of political competition in important ways. Overall, the political arena in Europe is today more fragmented, polarized and less predictable than at any other time in the postwar era. This essay explores these shifts as well as some of the key deeper currents that are contributing to this volatility and reshaping the reality of contemporary politics in Europe.

Four Key Developments in European Politics

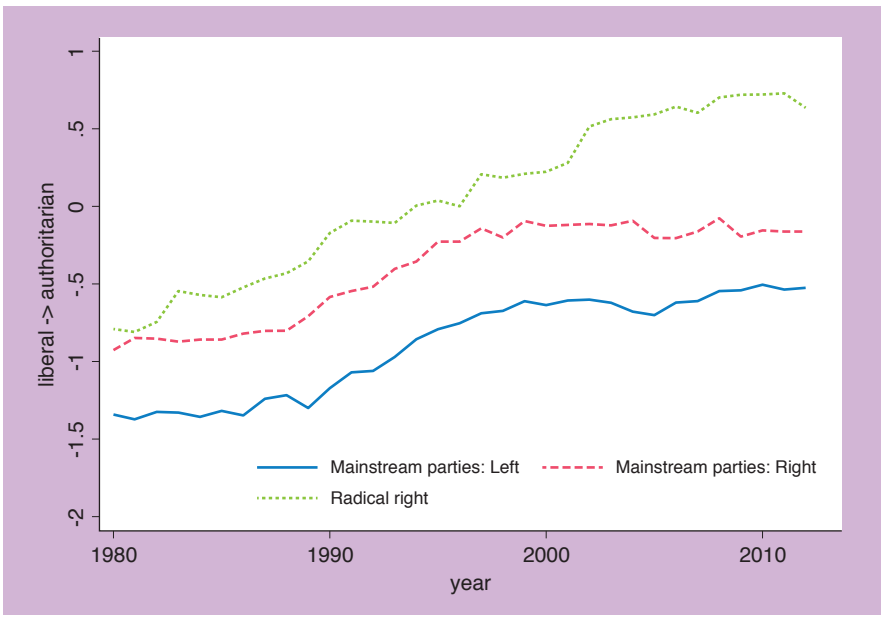
In recent years, four developments in Europe have been especially striking. The first has been major breakthroughs by young or in some cases entirely new political movements, such as Emmanuel Macron's *En Marche!* in France (founded in 2016), the Alternative for Germany (AfD, 2013), the Czech ANO (2011), and Five Star in Italy (2009). Despite their short life-cycle these parties have managed to mobilize major levels of support and have had a considerable impact not only in the electoral arena but also in wider public and policy debates. They have also emerged alongside the arrival of other politicians like Sebastian Kurz in Austria, who have sought to rebrand their established mainstream party as a "new" party.

The second development has been strong and in some cases record results for national populist parties that are rooted in a backlash against the social liberalism that commenced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though it is frequently overlooked, national populism was on the rise long before the post-2008 Great Recession and the post-2014 refugee crisis, although these events created further space for these parties. National populism — as we argue in a forthcoming book (*National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* by Roger Eatwell and Matthew J. Goodwin, Penguin, 2018) — prioritizes the culture and interests of the nation, and promises to give voice to a people who feel that they have been neglected, even held in contempt, by distant and often corrupt elites. Thus, national populists advocate more restrictive policies on immigration and the integration of refugees and minorities, and are often more sceptical if not hostile toward transnational organizations that are seen to undermine the interests of the nation, like the European Union. National populist parties have enjoyed strong and typically increased support in a large number of Europe's democracies. Examples include the Lega in Italy, the "Freedom parties" in Austria and the Netherlands, Marine Le Pen's Front National (recently renamed National Rally), the Sweden Democrats, Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and the UK Independence Party, which played a major role in the campaign for Brexit (on Brexit and UKIP, see "The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result" by Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, *The Political Quarterly* 87(3), 2016, pp. 323-332). They have not been successful in every state but they have become a major force in Europe. These parties have mainly connected with voters who feel deeply anxious over immigration, are opposed to Islam, and are also very distrustful of the established political parties in the mainstream. Over the past 30 years most studies of national populist voters have identified opposition to ongoing immigration and political distrust or dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties as the two most important drivers.

The rise of national populism should also be seen within the context of a third development, namely the broader "rightward drift" of political parties and policy. As shown in the *Chart*, though much of the public debate focuses solely on the populists, the reality is that Europe's party systems have been moving rightward. This is reflected, for example, in the positioning of Britain's Conservative Party or the Austrian People's Party that have adopted tougher positions on immigration, the integration of ethnic minorities and asylum-seekers, the refugee crisis or European integration. It is also reflected in more recent debates (led by countries in Eastern Europe, as well as the Austrians and Italians) to significantly strengthen Europe's external borders in order to defend the continent from refugees. The emergence of a new alliance between national populists like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini in Italy and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz reflects how a larger number of states want to push back against the more "liberal" conception of Europe favored by the likes of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and instead pursue a more

CHART

The drift of Europe's parties away from liberal positions



Source: "The Radical Right as Niche Parties? The Ideological Landscape of Party Systems in Western Europe, 1980–2014" by Markus Wagner and Thomas M. Meyer, Political Studies 65 (1), 2016

"conservative" vision that seeks to prioritize the interests of the nation state and (at least in the case of Orban and Salvini) more proactively assert the Christian aspects of European history and culture.

Europe's rightward drift is also reflected in the positioning of some social democratic parties on the center-left, like those in Austria, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden, which compared to earlier years have adopted more restrictive positions on immigration, integration and/or refugees. This has partly been an attempt by these parties to halt their electoral decline and reconnect with more traditionally social conservative working-class voters who have defected to other parties (see below). For example, ahead of a national election in Sweden in 2018 the center-left Swedish Social Democrats pledged to halve the number of refugees, restrict social support for failed asylum-seekers, strengthen identity checks, ban failed asylum-seekers from ever returning to the country if they do not leave voluntarily and only enabling refugees and migrants to fill jobs that cannot be filled by native Swedes. In the UK, the Labour Party has not advocated these kinds of policies but it is worth noting that in the aftermath of Brexit the center-left accepted that the freedom of movement of EU nationals into the UK had to be reformed.

There is also broader evidence for the rightward turn. One recent study analyzed more than 500 party manifestos from nearly 70 parties in Europe and found that since 1980 there has been a clear drift away from liberal policies and toward more socially conservative or "authoritarian" positions — a trend that has affected both mainstream center-right and mainstream center-left movements. We often focus heavily and also narrowly on individual elections or individual parties, but when you step back and look at the broader trend it is clear that parties in Europe have drifted toward a more conservative position.

The fourth striking development has been the remarkable decline or in some democracies near total collapse of center-left social democratic parties. At a broad level, it appears that a key question facing social democracy is not so much how to return to government but how to survive over the long term. Consider a few results in recent years: in Italy, the center-left slumped below 20% for the first time since it was formed; in France, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands the shares of the vote for social democrats have fallen to single digits; in Germany, the Social Democrats fell to their lowest share of the vote since 1933 and subsequently fell behind the populist AfD in the polls; in Austria, social democrats have been reduced to the lowest number of seats in the entire postwar era; and in Sweden, where an election is due in September, support for the Social Democrats in the opinion polls would hand the party its worst result since 1908. At the turn of the millennium there were 15 social democratic parties in power across the EU area. Today there are fewer than half a dozen.

This too was a long time coming. It has now been more than 30 years since Adam Przeworski published *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, in which he set out a core dilemma for social democrats and one that has faced them ever since: in order to be successful at elections they need to attract votes from beyond their traditional working-class supporters, yet in the process — by redirecting their appeals to the more socially liberal, university-educated middle-class and ethnic minorities — they weaken their appeal to workers. Today,

however, the fundamental dilemma that was noted by Przeworski has been exacerbated by the arrival of new issues that have divided the more socially conservative working-class and lower middle-class from the more socially liberal and university-educated middle class.

As issues like immigration, terrorism and the refugee crisis have become more central to political debates, they have exposed clear value and attitudinal differences between these groups and made these identity-focused conflicts just as important if not more so than the traditional "left-wing versus right-wing" divide. Thus, conservative and also national populist parties in Europe have often found themselves polling stronger among the working-class and non-graduates, whereas parties on the left have often recorded stronger gains among the socially liberal middle-class and university graduates, all of which has left societies more polarized and electorally volatile. Even before the Great Recession, one study found that working-class voters were already twice as likely as the middle-class to support national populists in Austria, three times as likely in Belgium and France, and four times as likely in Norway. Though workers made up half of these electorates, they delivered around two-thirds of the support for national populists. Similarly, many in Europe celebrated the election of liberal Macron in 2017, yet closer observers noted how the only group to give the national populist Marine Le Pen majority support were manual workers. Likewise, in the UK some noted after the vote for Brexit how two-thirds of Labour politicians were now representing districts where a majority of people had turned out to vote for Brexit. This too reflects the underlying tension and what is arguably an irreconcilable tension in the views of the center-left's socially liberal middle-class voters and its more socially conservative blue-collar supporters. Unlike earlier decades, the latter group is now being targeted by new challengers or a revamped center-right that is more willing to go after the center-left's traditional supporters on issues like immigration and the refugee crisis.

How Deeper Currents Have Been Reshaping Politics Over a Longer Period of Time

Many observers have struggled to make sense of these broader shifts. One general problem is that many of our debates about the changing nature of politics in Europe are incredibly narrow, focusing heavily if not exclusively on short-term factors. Typically, the rise of new challengers like national populists or the decline of older established movements like social democratic parties is traced to current or recent events, such as the post-2008 Great Recession, sovereign debt crisis and, from 2014, a major pan-European refugee crisis that also coincided with increased public concerns over terrorism and security. These external "shocks" are clearly important but looking only at these recent developments also leads us away from appreciating how deeper currents have been reshaping politics over a longer period of time.

It has now been shown that rising volatility in Europe began long ago, starting in the 1970s, accelerating during the 1990s and then increasing again amid the post-2008 financial meltdown and recession. By the time the financial crisis began to move into Europe's rearview mirror the continent was experiencing some of the highest rates of volatility in the entire history of mass democracy. This refers to the willingness of citizens to switch their votes from one election to the next, and which helps us to understand how new parties like Five Star in Italy can rise to win a national election less than a decade after being formed, or why older challengers like the national populists have in some democracies been enjoying record returns.

This volatility also conceals deeper trends that are paving the way for future disruption and political shocks. Breaking bonds between political parties and voters (or what political scientists call "dealignment") has created a far more fluid political marketplace but also a more welcoming one for populists. A larger number of voters no longer display the strong partisan allegiances that were seen in earlier years, while the percentage of voters who do not identify with the mainstream parties has risen in most democracies. At the same time, party memberships have declined over time and the capacity of the older established parties to inspire loyal support from the public has diminished. This has further pushed open the door to new challenges. When fewer people identify with the main parties it becomes much easier for new parties to attract votes and make breakthroughs at elections.

In Germany, for example, the populist AfD polled strongest among traditional "non-voters" (people who had not voted in recent elections), while the party was also strongest in the eastern half of the country where levels of identification with the main parties are weaker and there is a weaker legacy of strong and competitive party politics (due to the communist legacy). Similarly, in the UK around two million voters who had not participated in the previous general election mobilized at the 2016 referendum and most of them sided with Brexit. This underlines how the rise of populism and moments like Brexit are also bringing some voters back into the political system amid generally higher rates of dealignment.

Another longer-term trend concerns the changing issue agenda in

Europe that has exacerbated those divisions already mentioned. According to the latest results of the Eurobarometer survey, which tracks public opinion across the continent, at the EU level citizens are now mainly preoccupied by the issues of immigration and terrorism, whereas economic concerns are often in a distant third or fourth place. This not only reflects the impact of the refugee crisis and the experience of terrorist attacks but also underlines the broader challenges facing Europe. At a broad level the populations of Europe are ageing and shrinking over time, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe where states like Bulgaria and Hungary are forecast to reduce significantly in population size over the coming decades. Meanwhile, Europe will likely continue to experience considerable demographic pressures as a consequence of rising immigration, ongoing refugee arrivals and the fact that many societies in Africa are not only growing more quickly but are typically younger than those in Europe. It seems likely, therefore, that public anxieties over demographic change as well as the perceived effects of immigration on national identity, culture and ways of life will not only remain visible but may sharpen over time. This appears likely if the EU remains unable to deliver a clear, coherent and effective reply to the refugee crisis. EU member states are divided over the issue, while voters are clearly looking for an effective response. Should citizens continue to feel as though their societies and communities are not secure and are under "threat" then they will continue to search for more radical political options.

Is Current Volatility in Europe a Sign of the Beginning of a New Period?

One final question worth exploring is to ask whether the current volatility in Europe signals that the continent is *leaving* a period of political flux or, instead, is entering a new period of churn and change. The former view is implicit in arguments which frame the likes of Brexit or votes for national populists like Marine Le Pen in France or Salvini in Italy as movements that are dependent on finite support; that their challenge to the mainstream is ultimately limited because they rely on "angry old white men" and a working-class that is shrinking over time. These arguments are fashionable because they distract observers from engaging with the grievances that are motivating the supporters of populism.

Yet it is clear from this essay that the latter view seems more convincing; that if you take a step back and consider the deeper and longer-term shifts in Europe, then it is clear that political systems look set to experience ongoing and rather profound change. Seen from this perspective, relatively recent changes like the emergence of national populism or the decline of some mainstream movements are best seen as symptoms of much longer-term currents that have been swirling below the surface of our day-to-day political debates. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that many of the current challengers to the mainstream, like national populists, are actually drawing the bulk of their support from young voters.

In France, Marine Le Pen was strongest among voters aged under 40 years old, while in other countries like Hungary and Italy populists have drawn their votes relatively evenly from across the different generations. Similarly, in Austria the Freedom Party has been most successful among young men without degrees. This is also especially true in Eastern Europe where younger people either lack opportunities or feel resentful toward the model of liberalism that is offered in the West, and which appears determined to advocate "open borders". Such models clash directly with the more conservative traditions in Eastern states like Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary and Bulgaria. These findings suggest that the potential support for national populism looks set to remain on the landscape for a long while yet, as younger generations of citizens who feel "left behind and left out" in their own way reject the established mainstream.

In conclusion, therefore, many political observers explain political change in Europe through the prism of incredibly short-term or "surface-level" factors. But it is clear that our debates about current political turbulence are failing to take into account the deeper currents that are reshaping our political world from below — and which include the crucial role of value divides, dealignment and a long-term rise in volatility and support for new movements. The decline of social democracy and the rise of national populism were both a long time coming and are clearly rooted in structural changes that began long before the Great Recession. Given the long-term nature of these shifts, you would be hard pressed to find many political scientists who would predict the return of strong and stable mainstream governments over the immediate short term. On the contrary, it appears likely that Europe will continue to experience significant volatility and great change over the coming years. JS

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