

## Why Right Populists Beat Left Populists (in the West)

The rise of populism is the most important global political phenomenon of the last half-decade. We focus on a curious, underappreciated fact about this phenomenon: in the wealthiest part of the world, Northern Europe and North America, right-wing populism is systematically outperforming left-wing populism. Right populists tend to have larger and more committed bases than their left-wing counterparts.

Outside the advanced West, the opposite is often true. In contemporary Southern Europe<sup>i</sup> and Latin America,<sup>ii</sup> populism is a predominantly left-wing phenomenon, and Latin America's recent crop of left populists “command[ed] more solid, durable support” than did the right-wing populists of the 1990s.<sup>iii</sup>

But across Northern Europe and in North America, right populist figures, movements, and parties have attracted unusually committed followings and won larger national vote shares and more national political victories (e.g., Brexit, Trump) than left populists. Populists currently lead the right in the United States, France, the UK, Switzerland, and Finland, and new right populist parties have recently emerged in unexpected places (e.g., Canada). By contrast, no advanced Western country has a left populist faction or party leading the left. We therefore ask: *why, in the advanced West, is right populism outperforming left populism?*

Our question clearly matters. Democracies today tend to die at the hands of elected executives, not militaries or invading forces. Populist executives pose a particular threat, especially if they garner public support that is both widespread *and* intense – as they do on the political right in parts of the advanced West today (e.g., the US).

Further, the answer to our question is not immediately obvious. In recent decades, elites in the advanced West, like elites around the world, have shifted to the right economically, toward

free market capitalism or “neoliberalism.”<sup>iv</sup> This neoliberal turn may help to explain the predominance of left-wing populism in places like contemporary Latin American and Southern Europe. One might have expected neoliberalism to trigger a disproportionate left populist response in Northern Europe and North America, too. But it has not. Despite this, few scholars have addressed, or even formulated, our question.

In this essay, we argue that right populists in the advanced West have key demand-side and supply-side advantages over left populists. On the demand side, electoral support for left populism is limited because of the West’s relative prosperity and welfare largesse, while support for right populism is high due to demographic change and advancing social progressivism. Also, right populist voters reject both left-wing social trends (i.e., social progressivism, demographic change) *and* right-wing economic trends (i.e., free market capitalism or “neoliberalism”). This makes them a uniquely alienated, committed constituency, and it gives their populist representatives supply-side advantages. Right populists, following their base, attack both social progressivism *and* neoliberalism, enabling them to stand out from their mainstream counterparts in internecine contests, and to attract voters outside traditional right constituencies.

The essay is organized as follows. We begin by defining populism and very briefly identifying some of its key antecedent conditions. Then we present the demand and supply sides of our argument, fleshing out the thesis and using survey evidence and concrete examples to illustrate it at work. We conclude by discussing implications for democracy.

### **Populism and its Antecedent Conditions**

We define populism as a style, not an ideology.<sup>v</sup> Populists are politicians who centrally pit the “people” against the “elite” or “establishment,” identify with the former, and attack the

latter. The term is value-neutral, and we do not use it to refer to short-sighted economic policies or right-wing extremism. One can deploy populism in the service of almost any ideology or program, left or right, moderate or extreme.<sup>vi</sup> Hugo Chavez and Donald Trump differ radically in ideological terms, but both are quintessential populists. Similarly, populist parties in Europe run the gamut from hardline nationalists in Hungary and Greece to eclectic supporters of direct democracy in Italy.<sup>vii</sup>

Numerous factors facilitate populism's rise. Inequality, economic crisis, corruption, and deficient public services contribute to anti-elite sentiment. Electronic and social media allow populist entrepreneurs to bypass party organizations and directly appeal to voters (e.g., via television, Twitter). But the key explanatory factor, on which we will focus, is the "depoliticization" of divisive policy issues.<sup>viii</sup> Depoliticization occurs when elites are so united around a given issue that discussing that issue falls outside the bound of regular political debate. When elites depoliticize divisive issues, segments of the public, predictably, may come to feel unrepresented by, and thus antagonistic toward, them.

Why, then, are right populists beating left populists in the advanced West?

## **The Demand Side**

We argue, first, that there is more electoral *demand* for right populism than for left populism in the advanced West. In short, this is because (1) demand for left populism is relatively low, and (2) demand for right populism is relatively (a) high and (b) intense. Let us flesh out each claim.

### *Low Demand for Left Populism*

Over the last generation or two, a Western elite consensus has emerged in support of free market capitalism, or neoliberalism. Stated in the above terms, neoliberalism has become an area of depoliticized elite consensus. By “free market capitalism” and “neoliberalism,” we mean economic policies such as free trade, market liberalization, deregulation, and limited taxation and social spending.

Parties and figures on the political right (e.g., Reagan, Thatcher) led the neoliberal turn, and established left-wing forces accepted and helped to consolidate it. Before the turn, left parties were social democratic and heavily redistributionist, with strong bases of public support among workers and trade unions. Today’s left-wing parties are less heavily redistributionist and more widely embrace free market policies than their predecessors. Increasingly, they rely on highly educated voters rather than workers for electoral support. In the US and Britain, for example, the Democratic and Labour Parties moderated their redistributive and trade policies in the 1990s. In France, the Socialist government of Francois Hollande substantially liberalized the national labor code through the “El Khomri” law.<sup>ix</sup> All three have come to rely more heavily on college-educated voters and less heavily on working-class voters.

Left populist voters are economically driven. Their primary subjective political grievances are the neoliberal turn, economic hardship, and perceived economic injustice. They believe that they no longer have a “dog in the fight” – i.e., that there is no longer an established political force that opposes neoliberalism and advocates for the working class. Left populists enter this vacuum, placing central programmatic emphasis on rejecting or reversing free market capitalism. They focus on economic pain and unfairness; lament the decline of labor unions and the middle class; highlight the perceived insufficiencies of redistributive systems and social safety nets; and criticize established left forces for capitulating to neoliberalism.

We argue, though, that in the advanced West, voter demand for left populist politicians and parties is comparatively limited. Why? In short, poverty, inequality, economic rent-seeking, and corruption are (almost by definition) less extreme in the developed world than in the developing world. As a result, voters in the advanced West suffer less absolute and relative deprivation, and regard their economies as less unfair, than do voters in developing countries. More voters in the advanced West belong to the middle class, or to what Seymour Lipset might have called the “relatively well-to-do working class.” It follows, we posit, that they place more emphasis on the promotion and protection of their core values and culture, and less emphasis on advancing their absolute or relative economic position, than voters in developing countries.

They are also less susceptible to class-based appeals and economic tribalism. After all, where the gap between rich and poor (economic and otherwise) is smaller, and where the middle class and “relatively well-to-do” working class are larger, fewer voters are liable to define themselves as lower-class, or to identify themselves in opposition to the rich or economic elite. Even in countries like the US, where inequality has become an important political issue, a large majority of citizens self-identify as middle-class and express hopes of becoming wealthy. In such contexts, there is limited demand for left populist rhetoric emphasizing class solidarity and an economy “rigged” by elites. When such demand does arise, it is often in response to cyclical – and hence temporary – downturns like the Great Recession.

Advanced Western countries also have larger welfare states and have used these welfare states to materially compensate the less well-off. In Northern Europe and North America, if a citizen loses her job, she can receive unemployment insurance and public health care. If he falls below the poverty line, he may qualify for supplemental cash transfers. The EU provides economic support to its poorest subnational regions. Over the past three decades – the very time

period in which free market policies have proliferated – mean per capita social spending has increased across Northern Europe and North America. Some programs, such as the American “Trade Adjustment Assistance” fund, explicitly compensate those dislocated by free market policies.

This set of arguments, of course, should not be overstated. In the advanced West, problems of poverty, inequality, and economic rent seeking and corruption exist, and welfare states do not solve all the problems of the less well-off. Of particular note are inequality rates, which have risen considerably over the last generation or two. Moreover, economic elites have to some extent converted their growing economic dominance into political dominance,<sup>x</sup> further tilting the economic playing field in their own favor (e.g., in the realm of tax policy). Often, they have not followed through on Pareto-optimal promises to compensate the losers of globalization.<sup>xi</sup> Citizens of advanced Western countries who are stagnating or only marginally improving in material terms perceive themselves (correctly) as falling behind in a relative sense. Add to this the growing number of individuals who, because they cannot find stable, high-quality jobs, suffer a loss of dignity, status, and self-worth.

We do not wish to ignore or downplay any of these issues. Indeed, these problems help to explain why left populists have achieved considerable success in some advanced Western countries. In the United States, for example, where poverty and inequality rates are high by the standards of the developed world, left populist Bernie Sanders seriously contended for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination in 2016 and 2020. His campaign heavily focused on the US’s high rates of inequality, its “rigged” economic system, and the depredations of the “one percent.” Our argument is simply that economic suffering and grievances are less extreme, and welfare states more generous, in developed countries than in developing ones. Thus, electoral

demand for left populism is comparatively limited. In sum, then, *Northern Europe and North America have larger welfare states and lower levels of poverty, inequality, and corruption than most developing countries. This has lowered the costs of the neoliberal turn in the advanced West, limiting electoral demand for left populist critiques of free market capitalism (Demand-Side Argument 1).*

### *High and Intense Demand for Right Populism*

What about electoral demand for right populism? Here, the story is different. Neoliberalism is not the only area of depoliticized elite consensus in the advanced West. Social progressivism, we argue, is a second (and highly consequential) one. By social progressivism, we mean skepticism of traditional values, religious beliefs, and “retro norms”;<sup>xiii</sup> openness to multiculturalism and immigration; and greater attention to the rights claims of marginalized groups such as women and racial and sexual minorities.

Precisely because advanced countries have achieved high levels of economic development, their cultures have shifted – some would say that they have “modernized.” For decades, large numbers of citizens have taken material security for granted. They have become less religious, developed “progressive” values, and often made post-materialist issues (i.e., individual autonomy and self-expression) their top political priorities. These societal changes have led to significant policy shifts. Over the last generation or two, most Western polities have loosened restrictions on abortion and drug use and legalized same-sex marriage. They have also significantly loosened immigration restrictions, which is critical because advanced Western countries, given their relatively stability and prosperity, have received masses of immigrants and asylum seekers in recent decades and years, unlike most developing countries.

Just as the political right led the neoliberal turn, the political left led this socially progressive turn; and just as established left forces accepted the neoliberal turn, established right forces have largely accepted the socially progressive turn. In recent decades, conservative establishments across the Western world have shifted considerably on specific policy questions such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and immigration, and with respect to broader social trends such as changing gender roles, racial and sexual diversity, and multiculturalism. An increasing proportion of “establishment” Republican elites and opinion leaders in the United States, for example, support same-sex marriage and (at least prior to the rise of Donald Trump) immigration reform.<sup>xiii</sup> Germany’s Christian Democratic Party, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, famously oversaw the “welcoming” of nearly one million migrants in 2015. Under David Cameron, British Conservatives “modernized”<sup>xiv</sup> their policies on same-sex marriage and other hot-button cultural issues. Across Europe, parties of the mainstream right now advocate a minimalist nationalism and embrace the quasi-supranational vision of the EU. In short, on the divisive social questions of recent decades, major pre-populist parties of the right sued for peace.

In contrast to left populist voters, right populist voters are socially and culturally driven. They are social conservatives, and their primary subjective political grievances are social progressivism and mass immigration. Like their left populist counterparts, they believe that they no longer have a “dog in the fight” – i.e., that there is no longer an established political force that opposes social progressivism and mass immigration. Right populists (e.g., Trump, Germany’s AfD) enter this vacuum, placing central programmatic emphasis on rejecting or reversing social progressivism. They focus on social and cultural grievances; lament the erosion of traditional values and national identities;<sup>xv</sup> and criticize established right forces for capitulating to social progressivism and demographic change.

The shift to social progressivism in the advanced West, both culturally and politically, has alienated social conservatives, creating significant electoral demand for right populism. Traditional values and religious beliefs have fallen out of the mainstream and are increasingly regarded as outdated. Formerly homogenous communities have been disrupted by mass immigration, and new ethnic cleavages have emerged (e.g., between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe; between Spanish-speaking Latin Americans and English-speaking Euro- and African-Americans in the United States). Social conservatives in Northern Europe and the US report an increasing sense of cultural erosion and dilution, of feeling less “at home” in their countries.

The situation is different outside the advanced West. In less wealthy countries, post-materialism is a weaker political force, and crucially, mass immigration is uncommon. Hence, in the developing world, socially conservative citizens have less cause for concern or alienation. It is no coincidence that one of the only highly developed countries in the world without a strong right populist force – Japan – has had virtually no immigration in recent decades.<sup>xvi</sup>

Two additional points bear mention in this context. First, because many immigrants and refugees in advanced Western countries are low-skilled workers, their growing presence in the population has made native-born low-skilled workers less susceptible to broad class-based appeals. Native-born workers often do not identify culturally or ethnically with these immigrants and refugees, and to some extent they compete with them for jobs. The result is fragmentation rather than solidarity among the working class. This further limits electoral demand for left populism, which depends on class appeals.

Second, there have not been – and arguably, there cannot be – policies *compensating* social conservatives for mass immigration and the rise of post-materialism. In other words, there is no analogue of the welfare state in the more “zero-sum” sociocultural domain.<sup>xvii</sup> If same-sex

marriage or abortion is legalized; if a country changes demographically and becomes more culturally plural due to increased immigration; if traditional gender norms and roles erode, politicians cannot, at the level of national policy, provide compensation to citizens who oppose these shifts. They can only roll back the socially progressive policies themselves (e.g., reimpose bans on same-sex marriage or abortion). In areas like immigration, this would require extreme measures (e.g., mass deportation) regarded as unthinkable or infeasible.

In sum, then, *at the same time that Western polities have shifted rightward economically, they have shifted leftward socially to a greater degree than developing countries. Increasingly, Western laws and cultural norms tend toward secularism, cosmopolitanism, support for minority rights, and tolerance of multiculturalism and large-scale immigration. This has generated significant electoral demand among social conservatives for right populist critiques of the sociocultural status quo (Demand-Side Argument 2a).*

We also argue that within advanced Western countries, right populist voters have a deeper sense of alienation and grievance – and hence a more intense political commitment – than left populist voters. Western social conservatives do not just oppose social progressivism; they tend to oppose unfettered free market capitalism, too (even if the former is more salient to them). These social conservatives tend to be white, working-class, and non-urban. For them, relative (although not absolute) material conditions have declined significantly in recent decades. This relative decline has occurred, in part, due to neoliberal policies such as trade liberalization and lower taxes on the wealthy. Many right populist voters therefore support policies designed to reverse or soften neoliberalism such as trade protectionism and higher taxes on the wealthy.

The reverse is not true. Economically progressive voters (upon whom left populists depend) tend to support social progressivism. Many of them are young, and a disproportionate

number are college-educated; both youth and college education correlate with ideological support for progressive social causes. Economically progressive voters also include a relatively high proportion of women and racial and sexual minorities, many of whom credit social progressivism with improved conditions and expanded opportunities for their demographic groups.

Consider the United States. Much of Donald Trump's core support comes from the non-college-educated white population, which, according to survey data, has a mixed and often negative view of free market capitalist policies. Nearly half of Trump's supporters favor raising the income tax rate on the top one percent of American earners to 70 percent. A majority of Trump supporters distrust economic elites, support tariffs on foreign economic competitors, and favor an expanded government role in healthcare and poverty alleviation.<sup>xviii</sup> By contrast, Bernie Sanders' core supporters overwhelmingly hold progressive positions on social issues such as immigration, abortion, and same-sex marriage.

Economically progressive voters display similar patterns in the UK and France. In the UK, for example, Labour voters under the moderately left populist leadership of Jeremy Corbyn tend to oppose Brexit and support same-sex marriage, women's rights, and immigration. Most express positive opinions of the stridently socially progressive, anti-Brexit Green and Liberal Democratic parties (see appendix). In the second round of France's 2017 presidential election, economically left-wing voters overwhelmingly supported the socially progressive Emmanuel Macron against the nationalist, socially conservative National Front (under Marine Le Pen), and they have continued to support him since his victory.

Why does all of this matter? It matters because right populist voters, unlike left populist voters, are *doubly* alienated. They reject the prevailing social *and* economic orders. They do not

feel comfortable with the social and cultural changes around them, and they are suffering, or at least falling behind, economically. This combination of factors, in our view, generates a more extreme sense of grievance, dissatisfaction, and alienation among right populist voters, helping to explain the intensity and commitment that they have exhibited in certain electoral contexts.

Take Brexit, for example. Supporters of the Leave campaign were willing to risk recession and the loss of Scotland to achieve a British exit from the EU,<sup>xix</sup> and in a poll following the 2019 EU elections, they rated the Brexit Party more positively than any other subgroup rated any other party (see appendix). In the US, supporters of Donald Trump in the Republican primary election demonstrated more enthusiasm than supporters of any other candidate,<sup>xx</sup> and Trump and other scandal-afflicted right populist candidates (e.g., Austria's Strache) have retained loyal support through public embarrassments that would have severely damaged most mainstream politicians.

*In short, not only have social progressivism and mass immigration generated a comparatively large number of right populist voters in the advanced West, these right populist voters are more subjectively aggrieved than left populist voters. Right populist voters reject both the left-wing social status quo (i.e., social progressivism, demographic change) and the right-wing economic status quo (i.e., neoliberalism). By contrast, left populist voters only reject the economic status quo, tending to support social progressivism. Thus, whereas left populist voters only feel economic alienation, right populist voters feel social and economic alienation, making them an especially committed and combustible electoral constituency. Consequently, electoral demand for right-wing populism is not only higher but also more intense and persistent than electoral demand for left-wing populism (Demand-Side Argument 2b).*

## The Supply Side

Having presented our demand-side argument in full, we now turn to the supply side of the equation. Populist parties and figures do not primarily compete with parties on the opposite side of the political spectrum; they primarily compete with the political establishment on their own side of the spectrum. That is, right populists primarily compete with the mainstream right, left populists with the mainstream left. This is particularly true in two-party systems. Donald Trump's most significant and unlikely victory, for example, was his triumph in the Republican Party primaries, which delivered him a base of committed and negatively polarized partisans.

This is not to deny that populists can draw votes from across the political spectrum; they can, and their ability to do so may constitute a key advantage, as we discuss below in reference to right populists. But the bulk of populist support comes from the traditional bases of programmatically similar mainstream parties.

As we have noted, right populist voters tend to oppose major elements of free market capitalism, whereas left populist voters tend to support social progressivism. An important consequence is that right populists, even though they *focus* on attacking social progressivism, can attack free market capitalism, too, without alienating their base. By contrast, left populists can only attack free market capitalism; if they attack social progressivism, they will hemorrhage supporters, who react negatively to socially conservative rhetoric (e.g., critiques of rapid mass immigration or evolving gender roles).

We argue that right populist parties and figures benefit, in two ways, from taking right-wing positions on social issues but *left*-wing positions on economic issues. Let us address them in turn.

## *Internecine Contests*

Right populists have a clear advantage over left populists in *internecine* electoral contests (i.e., in electoral contests between mainstream forces and new populist entrants on either side of the political spectrum). Why? *Very simply, right populists are more programmatically distinct from their mainstream rivals than are left populists. Right populists differ from the right-wing establishment socially and economically; by contrast, left populists only differ from the left-wing establishment economically. Consequently, right populists have a clearer, more effective brand vis-a-vis their mainstream<sup>xxi</sup> counterparts and can siphon more votes from them (Supply-Side Argument 1).*

Consider some examples on the left. Figures like Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, and Jean-Luc Melanchon argue that the mainstream left has capitulated to free market capitalism, and they often make significant electoral inroads by doing so. But on social and cultural issues, they have rarely criticized their mainstream counterparts. Indeed, mainstream left candidates, in the face of populist competition, often have effectively competed by emphasizing or drawing upon their (or their parties') socially progressive track record. Bernie Sanders, for example, arguably lost the 2016 and 2020 Democratic Party primary elections because his mainstream opponents, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, were more trusted to carry the Democratic Party's established mantle of social progressivism; both Clinton and Biden significantly outperformed Sanders among minorities and women. Jeremy Corbyn faced substantial opposition within his own Labour Party due to his unwillingness to take strong pro-EU stances; indeed, during his tenure, increasing numbers of Labour voters defected to the stridently pro-EU Liberal Democrats.<sup>xxii</sup> Left populists in the advanced West, then, despite the frequent popularity of their anti-neoliberal

policies, have limited appeal in internecine contests because large segments of the left-leaning electorate care deeply about – and are bonded to the mainstream left by – social progressivism.

By contrast, there is a remarkably consistent pattern in advanced Western democracies of right populists attacking the mainstream right not only for capitulating to social progressivism, but also for capitulating to free market capitalism – and, more specifically, for sacrificing the economic well-being of the working class, especially the native-born working class.<sup>xxiii</sup> Trump's major economic policy difference with his mostly mainstream Republican rivals, for example, was his willingness to loudly oppose free trade deals and cuts to social insurance programs. Similarly, Marine le Pen and Nigel Farage distinguished themselves in recent electoral campaigns by opposing key tenets of mainstream free market capitalism (respectively: cuts in public sector jobs, and free trade).<sup>xxiv</sup> Broadly, right populist parties in Northern Europe tend to support a strong welfare state (for the native-born population), a policy at odds with free market capitalism. All these positions have proved effective.

This argument, of course, should not be overstated. Right populists are not economic progressives. Farage and Trump, for example, favored low tax rates on corporations and the wealthy. But right populists do reject key aspects of the free market consensus, which, over the last generation or two, has animated much of the mainstream right. This, again, gives them an advantage in seizing control of, or siphoning votes from, major establishment parties of the right.

### *Open, Nationwide Elections*

Right populists also hold an advantage over left populists in open, nationwide elections. Why? *From the perspective of ordinary voters, left populists are more radical than the mainstream left on economic issues and roughly indistinguishable on social issues. By contrast,*

*right populists are more radical than the mainstream right on social issues but more moderate on economic issues. This has two effects. First, right populists can more easily attract former left-wing voters than left populists can attract former right-wing voters. After all, they hold some anti-neoliberal economic positions, whereas left populists do not hold any conservative social positions. Second, because right populists mix right and left positions, ordinary voters perceive them as, on balance, more programmatically moderate than left populists – although not necessarily more moderate in their attitude toward democracy. Consequently, right populists can also more easily attract moderate, centrist voters – at least those primarily concerned with programmatic issues. Both dynamics advantage right populists in open, nationwide elections (Supply-Side Argument 2).*

The data bear out this set of arguments . Before the 2016 US presidential election, for example, American voters regarded Donald Trump as the most moderate and least partisan GOP nominee in a generation.<sup>xxv</sup> Trump’s winning electoral coalition included a plurality of moderates and independents, and his popularity with both groups substantially exceeded that of previous Republican nominees. France’s National Front and Germany’s AfD, despite drawing most of their support from traditional constituencies of the mainstream right, made crucial inroads with formerly non-right voting blocs. The National Front performed well in France’s “Socialist strongholds,”<sup>xxvi</sup> and the AfD siphoned nearly a million votes from the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) and far-left Left Party (Die Linke) in the 2017 German elections.<sup>xxvii</sup> In the 2019 EU Parliament elections, Britain’s right populist Brexit Party drew 13 percent of its support from erstwhile Labour Voters, while the Labour Party, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, did not draw significant support from the Conservative Party.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In short, right populists draw more support from *outside traditional right-wing constituencies* (i.e., from left-wing voters, moderates, independents) than left populists draw from outside traditional left-wing constituencies. This gives them an advantage in open, nationwide elections such as presidential elections and referenda. In our assessment, it certainly helps to explain why right populists have won more such elections in recent years (e.g., the Brexit referendum; the 2016 US presidential election).

### **Conclusion: Implications for Democracy**

What are the implications of our argument for democracy? As noted in the introduction, contemporary democratic breakdown rarely occurs via coup or invasion; today, democracies tend to die when illiberal (often populist) figures win elections and use the state to weaken the opposition. Populist strongmen have subverted democratic governance in Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela, and elsewhere, contributing significantly to the much-discussed “democratic recession.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Broadly, then, our argument reinforces the fairly standard view that the political right, not the left, currently poses the greatest threat to democracy in the advanced West, at least in the short term.<sup>xxx</sup>

But our argument suggests a more nuanced version of the standard view. Most politicians employ a degree of discursive populism – even, haltingly, a figure like French president Emmanuel Macron. Opposition politicians, in particular, almost invariably incorporate populist elements into their campaigns. Some measure of populism is not just normal but a healthy corrective to elite isolation from the public. Further, even *radical* populists pose only a limited threat to democracy if they are electorally marginal or lack a committed base that will stick with them through policy changes and personal or political scandals. Populism only becomes

dangerous when it is thoroughgoing and aggressive, and when public support for it is widespread, intense, and robust.

To be sure, such populism can exist and threaten democracy on both the left (e.g., Hugo Chávez) and the right (e.g., Viktor Orbán). We are emphatically *not* suggesting that right populism poses a greater inherent risk to democracy than left populism. Globally, left populists are as likely to subvert democracy as right populists,<sup>xxxii</sup> and in Latin America, contemporary left populists have undermined democracy to a greater degree than the right populists of the 1990s, in part because of their more committed followings.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

But in the advanced West, the most dangerous form of populism exists on the right. We have attempted to show that right populist voters are not only more numerous, but also more alienated and committed than left populist voters. Thus, not only are they more capable of putting their leaders in power, they demand (or at least countenance) an angrier, more full-fledged brand of populism in these leaders. This confluence of factors – not merely the greater electability of right populists – makes right populism the biggest threat to democracy in the advanced West today.

Trump is the best example. He practices a broadly targeted, combative populism that has generated widespread, intense support – enough to win him the Republican nomination and presidency and immunize him from scandal. No comparable figure exists on the left in Northern Europe or North America.

Indeed, on the left, *non*-populist forces may gain preeminence in the coming years. Forecasts of this nature are speculative and highly fraught, but there is a growing body of evidence supporting our forecast. Take, for example, the strong performance of Green parties and the Liberal Democrats (UK) in the recent EU elections;<sup>xxxiii</sup> Corbyn's unsuccessful tenure as

Labour leader; and Joe Biden's impressive defeat of Bernie Sanders in the 2020 Democratic primary elections. When Emmanuel Macron defeated Marine le Pen in 2017, it was a stunning repudiation of the mainstream parties that had long governed France. It may, too, have been a template for a transnational political realignment. In this new alignment, the left and right will differ not just in policy, but in their use or rejection of the populist style.

Such a realignment would not necessarily be good for democracy. While street fights between opposing populist camps undoubtedly threaten democracy, so too does a status quo in which the most alienated, dissatisfied sectors of the population belong (or flock) to one side of the partisan divide (e.g., the side of Le Pen in 2017). Concentrated anger and grievance – whether in or out of power – presage instability and should worry democratic advocates.

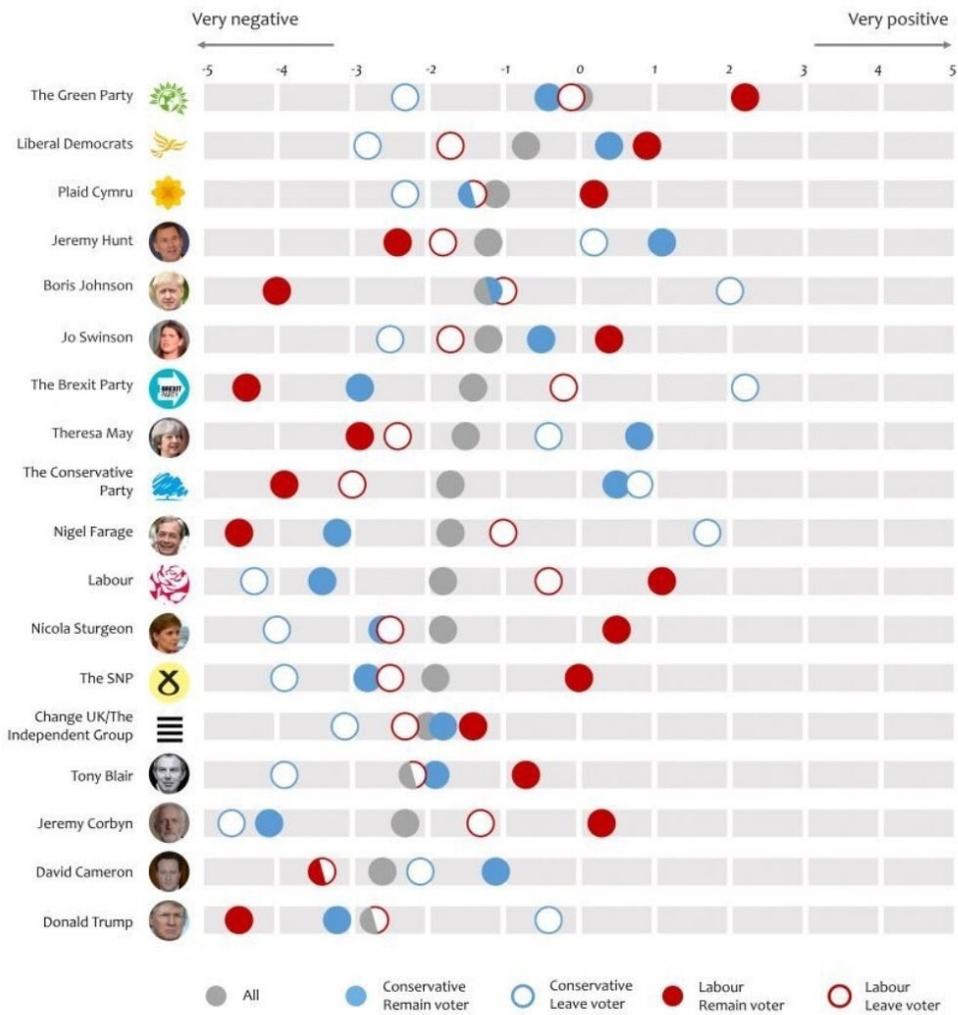
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## Appendix<sup>xxxiv</sup>

How positively or negatively do you feel about each of the following, where -5 means you feel very negative indeed and +5 means you feel very positive indeed?  
NET score



## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> Roberts forthcoming
- <sup>ii</sup> Weyland (2013).
- <sup>iii</sup> Weyland (2013, abstract).
- <sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Berman and Snegovaya (2019).
- <sup>v</sup> Weyland (2001); Moffitt (2016).
- <sup>vi</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017).
- <sup>vii</sup> Kyriazi (2016); Gerbaudo (2014); see also Ivaldi et al. (2017).
- <sup>viii</sup> Bickerton and Accetti (2017).
- <sup>ix</sup> Milner (2017, 430).
- <sup>x</sup> Gilens and Page (2014).
- <sup>xi</sup> Rodrik (2018).
- <sup>xii</sup> Inglehart and Norris (2016: 13).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Parker, A., & Martin, J. (2013, June 27). Senate, 68 to 32, passes overhaul for immigration. *The New York Times*, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/us/politics/immigration-bill-clears-final-hurdle-to-senate-approval.html>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Dorey (2007, 138).
- <sup>xv</sup> Mutz (2018, 4330).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Zakaria (2016).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Berman and Snegovaya (2019).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Hill-HarrisX (2019).
- <sup>xix</sup> YouGov (2019).
- <sup>xx</sup> Salvanto, E., Backus, F., De Pinto, J., Dutton, J. (2016, February 18). CBS News poll: Trump maintains commanding lead over GOP field. Accessed at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-gop-race-trump-remains-on-top-hell-get-things-done/>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Lupu (2014, 2016).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Grynberg et al. (2019).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Right populist parties whose origins predate the 2008 financial crisis have updated their policies to appeal to the economically disaffected (Ivaldi 2015, De Koster et al 2013).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> See, for example, Mayer (2013).
- <sup>xxv</sup> Enten, H. (2018, January 05). “Voters Used To See Moderation In Trump. Not Anymore.” *FiveThirtyEight*, accessed at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/voters-think-trump-has-moved-to-the-right/>.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> BBC News (2014, May 14). “How France's National Front captured Henin-Beaumont.” *BBC*, accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27387204>.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Bernard, S. (2017, September 25). “Germany’s election results in charts and maps.” *Financial Times*, accessed at <https://www.ft.com/content/e7c7d918-a17e-11e7-b797-b61809486fe2>.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Lord Ashcroft Polls. A somewhat similar phenomenon occurred in Italy, where the broadly left populist Five Star Movement lost support, while the *non*-populist but right-wing League surged.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Diamond (2015).
- <sup>xxx</sup> Plattner (2019, 5); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Mounk (2018).
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Mounk (2018); see also Weyland (2013) on Latin America.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Weyland (2013).
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> See also Henley, J. (2019, May 26<sup>th</sup>). “Greens surge as parties make strongest ever showing across Europe.” *The Guardian*, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/26/greens-surge-as-parties-make-strongest-ever-showing-across-europe>.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Lord Ashcroft Polls, accessed at <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/EAB2oVuXUAAmMEP.jpg:large>.