

# Trumpism as a Transatlantic Phenomenon

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Donald Trump's revolt against the forces of globalization has many echoes in Europe.



Francois Pauletto/Sipa USA/AP Images

(L-R) French far-right party Front National (FN) vice-president and top candidate for the regional elections in Alsace-Lorraine Champagne-Ardenne region Florian Philippot, FN president and top candidate in Nord-Pas de Calais region Marine Le Pen, FN top candidate in Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur (PACA) region Marion Marechal-Le Pen and FN top candidate in Languedoc-Roussillon/Midi-Pyrenees region Louis Aliot during a Front National campaign meeting held ahead of the second round of the French regional election at Salle Wagram in Paris, France on December 10, 2015.

AY 8, 2017—American President Donald J. Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson sent congratulations today to Marine Le Pen of the French National Front on her election to the Presidency of France. Le Pen narrowly beat Alain Juppé of the *Républicains*, after he failed to rally enough support in the wake of a divisive primary contest with former President Nicolas Sarkozy. Juppé's fate resembled that of Hillary Clinton last year when many young supporters of Bernie Sanders, an opponent campaigning on the issue inequality, failed to turn out for her in the general election. In a victory speech, Le Pen announced that she would immediately open negotiations to alter the terms of France's membership in

the European Union to be followed by a referendum on French membership. Less than a year ago, a similar referendum took Britain out of the EU, bringing Johnson to the leadership of the Conservative Party after David Cameron's resignation.

Of course, the preceding paragraph is imaginary and not entirely likely since it anticipates three events for each of which the odds are at best 50/50. But the fact that this scenario is no longer far-fetched is revealing about some of the larger forces behind the meteoric rise of Donald Trump in the Republican primaries. Moreover, these forces are not idiosyncratically American, as some might like to think, but transatlantic in their scope and import.

Many **commentators** see Trump as something like Frankenstein's monster—the inadvertent creation of a Republican Party that has campaigned for many years against an intrusive federal government, immigration, and the Obama presidency, often in terms with **racist undertones**. On this view, Trump is simply playing a familiar tune *con fuoco* and drawing support because voters recognize in it an acknowledged anthem of the American political right.

There is undoubtedly some truth in this. But “the Donald” is also riding waves of socioeconomic and cultural change that have swept over many nations, buoyed by political strategies for which there are some important **foreign parallels**. His closest counterparts are the radical right parties of Europe, such as the National Front in France and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which campaign on platforms opposed to immigration, hostile to the European Union in its present form, and scornful of mainstream politicians as members of a political establishment.

Like Trump, all of these parties are a reaction against globalization—the master process of the past three decades that has seen large increases in flows of goods, people, and capital across national borders. Promoted almost monolithically by mainstream governments of the center left and right, globalization and technological change have been **widely presented** as the key to prosperity in the contemporary world. But there are **winners and losers** in this globalization game. As manufacturing jobs have moved offshore, the secure jobs with decent pay that many people grew up to expect have **disappeared**, leaving those with lower levels of education to hunt for low-paid, precarious positions in the service sector on which it is hard to support a family.

There is a saying “some people are paranoid; I by contrast have real enemies.” Whether or not the parties seeking their votes have any genuine solutions, these people have real grievances. In that respect, it is not surprising that Trump, like most of

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his radical right **counterparts** in Europe, secures a higher proportion of his votes from people with **lower levels of education** and **higher levels of dissatisfaction** with their financial circumstances than his competitors do, and especially high proportions from older white men who are most likely to have seen the jobs they once hoped for disappear. The exception to this rule is the French National Front, whose charismatic leader, Marine Le Pen, also attracts considerable numbers of votes from the young, perhaps because the **youth unemployment rate in France** is 25 percent.

These people ask, “What have recent governments done for me?” and the answer is generally “very little,” partly because it is difficult to create good jobs, especially for the low-skilled, amidst a technological revolution and globalized economy. But the problem is compounded by the limits of what has been tried. In most parts of Europe, governments of the center-left and center-right have **converged** over the past three decades on similar sets of policies that privilege market competition over state activism. In the context of a political establishment that looks a lot like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, elections do not seem to make a great deal of difference. Can it be any surprise that there is widespread resentment against that establishment?

In the U.S. we have not had that problem. Instead, the Republican and Democratic Parties have moved much farther apart. But, in the context of a congressional system, the result of this polarization has been gridlock—an equally potent source of resentment. **Current polls** suggest that voters who believe that people like them have no say in what the government does are 86 percent more likely to vote for Trump than those who feel otherwise. On both sides of the Atlantic, we are seeing a massive revolt against politics as usual.

Of course, there is also a cultural side to this revolt. **Scholars** of European politics find that support for the radical right is strongest among voters who hold what are often described as authoritarian values, which emphasize the importance of maintaining order and existing social boundaries relative to the goals of participation and self-realization favored by people with post-materialist values. And it turns out that authoritarian values also **predict** support for Donald Trump quite well. Moreover, age and education are closely related to these differences in values. Younger and more educated Americans embrace **various kinds of diversity**, for instance, more enthusiastically than older people or those with less education. There may be something to the observation of the anthropologist Margaret Mead that, as people age in times of socioeconomic change, they become strangers in their own land.

The focal point for this clash in values on both sides of the Atlantic has become immigration. To some extent, that is a response to real policy problems, exemplified by the dilemmas of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe. But radical right parties were running against immigration long before the current

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crisis, presenting it as yet another undesirable dimension of globalization, threatening not only jobs but national identity. And it is the last part of this message that seems to have struck home in Europe since **studies** show that hostility to immigrants is often highest in regions where there is relatively little immigration.

Now that the threat of terrorism loosely linked to Islam has been added to the mix, in the wake of attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, this is a potent brew, strong enough to summon up fears for personal safety as well as for traditional ways of life. The results are visible not only in the **74 percent of voters** in the Republican primary in South Carolina who agreed with Donald Trump that Muslims should be banned from entering the country, but also in the likelihood that the Alternative für Deutschland, a new party on the radical right, will gain an **unprecedented share** of the vote in regional elections in Germany this week.

In short, while there is much that is distinctive about Donald Trump, including the crudeness of his language and his claim to be able to make America great again, the circumstances that have given him a dominant hold on the Republican primaries are not uniquely American. His support reflects a revolt against the forces of globalization that has many echoes in Europe.

Moreover, Trump is not simply riding a set of transnational socioeconomic waves. He is also steering his campaign in directions that have proved promising for radical right parties in Europe. Those parties have always been hostile to immigrants and protective of what they imagine to be a traditional national culture, but two decades ago, they were also relatively conservative on economic issues, strongly supportive of lower taxes and leery about redistribution, much as the Republican Party has long been. This stance gave those parties a solid but small base among electorates accustomed to relatively generous European welfare states.

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In recent years, however, seeing a chance to consolidate their support among working class voters, many of Europe's radical right parties have moved to the left on redistributive issues. They have become more critical of inequality and more willing to countenance redistributive policies as long as benefits do not go to immigrants. By refusing to endorse an austerity budget, for instance, the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) **precipitated** the resignation of the prime minister in 2012; and radical right parties have been reaping benefits from such moves. They can now draw support from less-affluent voters who are attracted by anti-

immigrant appeals but used to find the parties' positions on economic issues uncongenial.

Much to the consternation of many Republicans, we see Mr. Trump making similar moves. His opposition to the favorable tax treatment of carried interest on which many hedge funds depend and his reluctance to propose sweeping reform of social security and some other benefit systems (other than the hated Obamacare) that have been mainstays of recent Republican policy reflect a well-judged effort to present himself as more centrist on economic issues than his primary opponents; and there is **evidence** that he is so perceived.

None of these considerations guarantee electoral success, of course. It may well be that Trump, Johnson, and Le Pen will all go down to defeat. But, before breathing a sigh of relief, even those who regard them as reprehensible should pause to consider the deeper implications of the economic and political developments on which current popularity of these politicians turns.

There have been parallel developments with some salient differences on the two continents. On both sides of the Atlantic, democratic governments have had difficulty delivering prosperity inclusive enough to encompass all citizens. In the U.S., rates of growth and employment have gradually improved in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, but policy regimes that sustain high levels of income inequality mean that most of the **fruits of growth** continue to go to the most affluent segments of the population. In most parts of Europe, economic growth has been slower and impeded by decisions of the European Union to privilege **budgetary balance** over growth.

As a consequence, concern is rising on both continents about the effectiveness and responsiveness of their democracies. Many Europeans feel that their fate is being determined by the European Union rather than national governments; and successive crises born of the euro and migration have **called into question** the capacity of the EU itself to respond to problems with timely or effective policies. In the U.S., a political system built on the separation of powers has ground to a halt in the face of partisan polarization in Congress and concerted attempts by the Republicans to block virtually all presidential initiatives. Not surprisingly, trust in the federal government is at **historic lows**.

In some respects, the victories of populist candidates on the political right and left can be seen as a natural response to such developments and a sign of the vibrancy of democracy. However, there is a paradox here. When anti-establishment parties get 15 percent or more of the vote in Europe, their success makes it **more difficult** for established parties to assemble coalition governments capable of decisive initiatives, thereby adding political dimensions to the diffuse sense of crisis permeating the continent. If "to govern is to choose," as the French politician Pierre Mendès France once remarked, many European governments are finding it harder to do that. Whether the American government to be elected in November will find this task any easier

also remains in doubt, given the likelihood of continuing divisions within Congress and between it and the president. In such circumstances, even President Trump may find it difficult to make America great again.

On balance, we should not let the mesmerizing reality show that the American primaries have become distract us from the underlying economic and political realities that call into question the effectiveness of democratic governance on both sides of the Atlantic. If governments cannot deliver inclusive economic growth or narratives of social solidarity rooted in something other than xenophobia, we may be living with the politics of discontent for many years to come.