

The Effects of Nationalism and Populism on Political Participation

By Grace Waldee

The rise of nationalism and populism in recent years has caused a rift in economics, environmental factors, issues regarding income, and governments globally. Nationalism is the belief that nations would benefit from acting independently rather than collectively, emphasizing national rather than international goals. Indeed, nationalism has historically amalgamated governments and sparked revolutions because of its unifying tendencies. In addition to this, populism is a philosophy directed to the needs of the common people and advocating a more equitable distribution of wealth and power. These two ideologies have proven to be both beneficial and detrimental to countries and the overall well-being of citizens; however history ultimately indicates more detrimental trends. Furthermore, an increase in both nationalism and populism has emerged globally during about the last 75 years, but specifically in Europe. Research indicates that the recent rise in populism and nationalism has had a negative effect on the extent to which citizens trust in their governments and contributed to the weakening of representative democracy.¹

According to the anonymous journalists at *The Economist*, “All societies draw on nationalism of one sort or another to define relations between the state.”² Arguably, many consider the birth of modern nationalism to be during the unification of Germany in the mid-1800s, and thus this quote indicates that the spread of nationalism was originally due to countries maintaining ties with Germany. Additionally, the rise of nationalism has caused not only a political mistrust, but a global mistrust. The exponential rising and spreading of both nationalism and populism is on a much larger scale than just Europe. A recent example of this in the United States is the election of President Trump. Essentially, Trump ran his campaign around chauvinism and the promise to further isolate America by blocking southern immigration. Indeed, it has been seen that Trump’s victory through such assured and bold moves has sparked

¹ Soto, Jorge. *The Weakening of Representative Democracy*, par. 4

² *League of Nationalists*, par. 2

interest in other nations. Authoritarian populism is on the rise in the west especially³. In France, extreme patriotism is demonstrated in the presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who has centered her campaign around isolation as well. She has proposed the French repudiation of the euro and adoption of a solely French economic system. Additionally, a nationalist party in Sweden recently aired an ad on television depicting that an influx of Muslims will negatively affect the country's stable but possibly overly generous welfare system. While these tendencies do not appear nationalistic to voters, they ultimately lead to the toleration of populism which expands both the populist and nationalist ideologies⁴.

Populism and nationalism have been on the rise. According to a staff writer at the *Harvard Gazette*, the election of Trump in the 2016 presidential election has sparked populist tendencies in right-leaning European politicians. Indeed, recent American political moves have stirred interest in other nations looking to participate in progressive politics⁵. Sources suggest that the Trump-Brexit issue was essentially an economic and cultural revolt against globalization, and an unpredictable thing to be tied into⁶. Furthermore, according to *Foreign Policy Magazine*, citizens of the United States have attempted to find contrast between patriotism (a word that inflicts healthy national pride) and nationalism (a word that has earned disdain from Americans for decades). Historically, however, patriotism and nationalism have proven to ultimately become equated, as patriotism easily becomes extreme resulting in a government driven by nationalism and essentially a nationalistic population. This reliance on other governments illustrated in the Trump-Brexit issue falsely suggests international cooperation and globalization, ideas favored by the general population the opposite of nationalism; seemingly against populist ideals. On the contrary, these similar political moves ultimately indicate a lack of national confidence causing governments to attempt to cover up their reliance on other nations (in an act of pride) and resulting in a decrease in the extent to which citizens are in favor of the above political moves⁷.

³ Foster, Chase, and Jeff Frieden. *Europeans Have Lost Faith in Their Governments and Institutions. Why? We Did the Research*, par. 6-7

⁴ *League of Nationalists*, par. 1-7

⁵ Pazzanese, Christina. *In Europe, Nationalism Rising*, par. 4-5

⁶ Miliband, Ed. *Trump, Brexit - the West in Crisis*, par. 6

⁷ Pei, Minxin. *The Paradoxes of American Nationalism*, par. 1-6

Indeed, governments have contributed to the rise of nationalism and populism in recent years. As stated above, the reaction of other nations in regard to the Trump-Brexit issue has resulted in inconsistent national pride and a faint governmental requirement for a more populist society. In addition to this debate, in general the increase in the success of European populist and nationalist parties has been caused by a series of economic crises and has been illustrated in voting records; assuredly, research indicates that populist leaders were elected after economic deterioration in Europe. Alternatively, *The Washington Post* suggests that the current minimal extent to which people trust their governments has actually resulted in the rise in populism and not vice versa. Certainly, sources indicate that powerful European nations demonstrate a sense of national superiority, but the populist rise is a bit more complex. Populism stresses the concern for the population at an individual level, however combining this with nationalism forms a sort of political paradox⁸.

It has been established that the comprehensive adoption of nationalism in governments globally has resulted in a decrease in majority government support and suggested that populations have then turned toward populism, however sources indicate that the rise in populism was not a result of decreasing trust in institutions, but rather the two ideas have emerged concurrently. According to voting records, people in recent years have been less reticent to vote for populist candidates merely because they oppose the radical nationalist candidates. In regard to the political paradox mentioned above, nationalism stems from patriotism, which ultimately cannot be without a unified country. However, introducing populism creates a disruption in the hypothetical previously unified nation. Populism's tendency to escalate and turn the once valued individual into an impediment to the majority will bring rise to the question of whether or not populism and nationalism can ultimately coexist without backlash. Furthermore, these polarities illustrate the proposed recent reduction of support, participation, and essentially faith in governments⁹.

Other sources suggest that the recent weakening of the representative democracy¹⁰ is unrelated to the rise of populism and nationalism but rather the increase

⁸ Foster, Chase, and Jeff Frieden. *ibid.* par. 1-6

⁹ Roth, Kenneth. *The Dangerous Rise of Populism*, par. 1-9

¹⁰ Soto, Jorge. *ibid.* par. 4

of electronic voting and the technologized government¹¹. However, further research reveals that while this electronic revolution is a contributor to the decrease in government participation and support, it is more indicative of the largest age group involved in the lacking of involvement. In recent years, young people statistically have not exactly been less inclined to participate, but rather more inclined to support non-governmental groups with the intention of getting the attention of the government. According to media, this seemingly counterproductive attempt at igniting political change has been on the rise especially since the 2016 United States election; however the recent media interest has simply brought attention to an age group which has for decades been one of the largest in quantity according to recent U.S. population pyramids, smallest in voter age distribution, yet the loudest participators. With populism on the rise, governments tend to cater towards people who make more money which generally is the older generations. This causes young people in particular to lessen their reliance on, or more relevantly their trust in their government body. Indeed, voter demographics related to age indicate how age plays a role in the dwindling of government trust at hand¹².

Indeed, specifically in Europe, the variation of these demographics from country to country and by political association suggests a serious emphasis on nationalism and populism in Europe as opposed to other nations. According to *The Washington Post*, more conservative populists gained low percentages of the vote in most European countries, Hungary being the most right leaning (significantly) and the average vote percentage around 15%. However, left-leaning populists in Spain and France have received over a quarter of the electorate. Interestingly, research has illustrated that in France, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Spain, and Finland the tendency for citizens to vote for an extreme party has risen dramatically from around the year 2005. In France particularly, the percentage of extremist party votes cast increased by more than 25% in less than five years. Furthermore, graphs indicate that the population of the European Union is more trustful of the Union as a whole than of their individual national

¹¹ Potier, Beth. *Trust, Transparency, Democracy*, par. 6

¹² Newton, David E. *Youth and Political Participation*, par. 3-5

governments. This statistic demonstrates the evident globalization ideal of the people and yet nationalistic priorities within individual governments.¹³

Additionally, global voter distribution of these demographics suggests more about the correlation between the rise in populism and nationalism and the extent to which citizens trust their governments. In the 2014 United States midterm election, only 42% of all registered voters participated and of that 42% less than 30% were between the ages of 18 and 24. This voter turnout is only 7% higher than in the U.K. but almost 50% lower than in larger European countries. Despite this small glimmer of hope for political participation in Northern Europe, global democracies have seen a decline in poll attendance since the 1990s¹⁴. Thus, the correlation between voter age distribution and government trust, while significant, does not account entirely for the dangers of populism and nationalism recognized by citizens globally. Furthermore, this rise has affected governmental trust predominantly in Europe and the effects in citizen trust are concentrated in high density areas (particularly in capital cities). Currently, democracies are at high risk for the consequences that arise from populist or nationalist leaders because of the tendency for citizens with limited trust because of nationalism to elect populist leaders¹⁵.

While the implications of a nationalist or populist government suggest that it can be avoided, the current global abundance of countries reliant on democracies does not indicate a possibility for a change¹⁶. Political leaders seem to be unaware of their growing nationalist and populist views, furthering the mistrust of the citizens¹⁷. According to sources, the efficacy of democracies is cooperative to a fault; citizens will always be wary of their governments and their quickness to elect radical leaders to buffer out extensive ideals is a cycle that cannot be stopped if a fair democracy is maintained. Thus, the rise of populism and nationalism is responsible for the decline in voting. If there is global increase in nationalistic or populist ideas, then people running for office will be more opinionated on these two issues thus lowering the population's readiness to vote.¹⁸

¹³ Foster, Chase, and Jeff Frieden. *ibid.* par. 4-9

¹⁴ McPhillips, Deidre, editor. *Across the World, Where Are the Voters?* par. 6

¹⁵ Roth, Kenneth. *ibid.* par. 32-61

¹⁶ Pei, Minxin. *ibid.* par. 5-9

¹⁷ Trump, Donald John. *Remarks by President Trump at 2017 Values Voter Summit*, par. 36-60

¹⁸ Pei, Minxin. *ibid.* par. 5-9

Conclusively, due to false political pride because of not recognizing the growth of patriotism, increased media bias, unequal age distribution, and decreased voter participation, it becomes evident that the extent to which the majority of citizens support their government is declining. Demographic graphs in countries especially in Europe indicate that the unification of Germany and the need for neighboring countries to maintain ties with the newly amalgamated country in the mid-1800s contributed to the spread of nationalist and consequently populist ideas. The rise of nationalism and populism has influenced economics and environmental factors in addition to governmental factors. Furthermore, increase in these ideologies has indeed inflicted national unity and the separation between the population and government seems to be growing continually. With a decrease in voter participation, voters channel their energy toward anti-governmental groups in attempt to lower the support of nationalism and populism. Media bias causes this to be blown out of proportion and ignites interest in neighboring nations, ultimately resulting in the declining and deteriorating trust citizens hold in their institutions.

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