

Political insurgents

Learning from Europe's populists

There is lots to dislike in Europe's populists, but also something to study



Print edition | Leaders

Feb 3rd 2018

THE European Union must feel as if it has seen off the populist horde. Economic growth is at its strongest in a decade. Emmanuel Macron has defeated the National Front and is transforming France. Although just 41% of citizens trust the EU, that is more than trust their national governments—and is fully ten points up on the lows after the financial crisis.

Get our daily newsletter

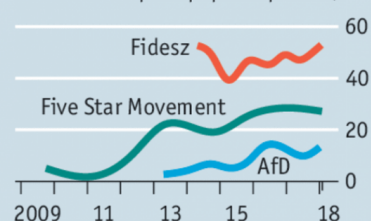
Upgrade your inbox and get our Daily Dispatch and Editor's Picks.

Email address

Sign up now

Voting intention

Selected European populist parties, %



Economist.com

Latest updates

Prescriptions for fighting epidemics

Retail sales, producer prices, wages and exchange rates

Foreign reserves

See all updates

Yet populism is not vanquished (see [article](#)

<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21736137-they-and-their-ideas-are-both-being-picked-up-established-parties-europes-populists-are>). Insurgents are in office in Poland, Hungary and Austria and won last week's vote in the Czech Republic. In Italy the Five Star Movement could sniff power in next month's elections. In the years to come the influence of populist parties is likely to grow.

PUBBLICITÀ

An advertisement for Omega watches. On the left, the Omega logo and 'OFFICIAL TIMEKEEPER' text are shown above the Olympic rings. Below this is a close-up of a blue Omega watch with a red and blue strap. On the right, a blurred action shot of a winter sports event is shown, with three red digital timing boards displaying '16', '17', and '18' in green. A red button with the text 'DISCOVER MORE' is at the bottom right of the image.

inRead invented by Teads

Rather than declare victory and return to politics as usual, the establishment needs to learn from populists. That means adopting the best of what they offer and discarding the rest.

The far-from-medium is the message

There is plenty to discard. Hardline populists pursue an antagonistic politics, imagining society to be simplistically split between people and elites that have sold them out. They claim a direct connection between politician and citizen that leaves little room for an independent judiciary or free press, for assertive minorities or for facts that contradict voters' gut feelings.

But though populism has included plenty of demagogic swindlers, it also contains reformers and democrats. The European revolutionaries who animated opposition to absolute monarchy in 1848 bore populist traits. So did the late 19th- and early 20th-century statesmen who laid the foundations of Western welfare states, and anti-regime movements behind the Iron Curtain, such as Solidarity, in the 1980s. In the right hands, and distilled from their poisonous ingredients, populists' habits can be useful even to their opponents.

Populists vividly communicate ordinary voters' discontent. A lot of populism is driven by rage at a political establishment that is guilty of crass selfishness: moving from the public sector to lucrative posts in private business, scratching each other's backs, applying open competition to working-class jobs while shielding their own from threat. Recent history is littered with examples of mainstream politicians failing to confront emotive political issues in public, including even Angela Merkel in her handling of Germany's refugee crisis. Instead they either hide or employ technocratic arguments, with the subtext that there is "no alternative".

Communication is empty unless it heeds voters' concerns. Where grievances are justified, they deserve attention and remedy. Today support for full-blown populists is often bound up with the dislocation of globalisation, including rapid industrial change, mass immigration, shifting social values and a declining sense of community. To ignore those issues for fear of raising their salience will only cede them to the rabble-rousers.

That requires political enterprise. Populists are structural innovators. This was true in the past when, for example, the searing inequalities of the late 19th-century "Gilded Age" spawned new Marxist parties and the agrarian-populist People's Party in America. And it is true today, evident in the Five Star Movement, founded in 2009, and the far-right Alternative for Germany party, founded in 2013. Their opponents, by contrast, carry a burden of loyalty to dusty old identities and institutions. It is no coincidence that the most successful forces for liberal pluralism in recent years have included Spain's Ciudadanos, founded in 2006 and currently leading polls, and Mr Macron's En Marche! in France, founded in 2016.

All of which calls for a new way of viewing populists. They can be a danger, but their rise is a call for renewal. That was the insight of the late 19th- and early 20th-century reformers, who kept the Marxists and the agrarian populists at bay by judiciously borrowing from them. Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson took

on oil and rail cartels, and advocated social insurance on behalf of the man in the street. Otto von Bismarck's introduction of old-age and health insurance in Germany and David Lloyd George's "People's Budget" in Britain in 1909 similarly annexed the populists' political territory.

Today's reformers have no shortage of ideas to mine. Mass immigration demands better integration that promptly imparts language skills, jobs and Western values to newcomers. Where recorded crime is rising, as in Germany and Sweden, politicians should admit it and set about tackling the problem. Expanded retraining and relocation, portable benefits and action against tax evasion can help spread the appreciation of free trade. Galloping automation and digitisation invite a remaking of education systems and should prompt reformers to take on tech giants like Google and Amazon in the name of competition and consumer protection. Canada combines immigrant integration, an effective safety-net and economic liberalism better than other major Western countries—and has been the least affected by the recent populist wave.

Fragmenting societies and polarised politics make it unlikely that populism's rise will be reversed soon. But its excesses can be contained by seeing it as the impetus for change. Because solving people's problems will bear fruit, populism is as much an opportunity as a threat.

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "Threat and opportunity"