Radical Right Populism's Strategies for Success and the Road Ahead

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Populist radical right parties have gained support in Europe using convincing messaging based on nationalism, nativism, and promises of returning to a "better" past. They have seemed to leverage people's frustrations with the current challenges by offering simple solutions: a stronger state, traditional values, and security from perceived threats. This leads us to question whether we are headed for a reactionary future.

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The populist radical right parties analyzed in this series share several features in their strategies to become popular. These features relate to specific political ideas and discourses. Consequently, we have tried to

elucidate what exactly has worked so well in their processes of ascendance and how they have managed to normalize such radical reactionary ideologies. Does this mean we are doomed to a reactionary future? My short answer is no.

The Rise of Nationalism and Nativism

Firstly, it is evident how nationalism and nativism play a crucial part in these parties' discourse, together with an obsession with a safe and secure past. The idea of returning to the past offers, in fact, a quick and easy escape from the challenges of the present day. This fixation on the past manifests through narratives advocating for an increasingly centralized state, as seen in Vox's push for a powerful executive, and in Fratelli d'Italia's leader's attempts to establish presidentialism. These parties paint a picture of a state where the "true" people, their traditional values and norms, are threatened by outsiders, "immigrants," and more in general people representing the "Other."

Mainstream Elites and Immigrants as Scapegoats

The nostalgia of an imagined past intertwines with dissatisfaction with the current societal and political worlds. Indeed, "immigrants" – the people that, according to these parties – do not belong and do not have the right to belong, are not the sole scapegoats in this rhetoric. Mainstream elites – the moderates and the leftists in other cases – have ruined the status of the national state, a rhetoric that very much aligns with the populist feature of the parties analyzed.

Mainstream elites and immigrants are two potential societal groups that these parties view with distrust. Their success seems to rely on a profoundly distrustful society where individuals are suspicious of one another and struggle to build and develop supporting communities. Most of these parties' leaders are obsessed with the idea of perceived threats directed at themselves (as exemplified by Geert Wilders) or at their nation-state, its core values and its "true" people. As a result, they are all highly concerned with bringing back security.

Populist Leadership

The leaders of these parties play a lot on the cult of their personality, a primary characteristic of populism, where the party matters but only to a certain extent, and the leader is the person that really distinguishes themselves in their effort to solely work for the will of the "true" people. Restoring traditions and values, for most of these parties, is strictly connected to reclaiming what they see as a lost sense of security. Their obsession with security translates into a strong support for the military and police forces, which they view as the pillars of the modern state.

In a world where change occurs rapidly and disruptively, a promise of security, and a return to an inexistent past where these countries' populations were thriving, reassure people with their daily, overwhelming challenges. Emotions, we showed, can play a key role in the political realm and studying them can help us better understand specific trends.

On the other hand, while many of these populist radical right parties' strategies are now clear to us, the strategies of the challengers of such political discourse and ideology, however, are less clear. The lack of engagement from political elites has allowed radicalism to become normalized leaving democracies without a united and coherent alternative vision.

Countering Radical Right Populism

To conclude, this series has zoomed in on some of Europe's most popular populist radical right parties across different contexts: a) Italy, a country whose recent developments have become a model for radical right populism beyond Europe; b) the Iberian peninsula, once resistant to the populist radical right but recently proving otherwise; c) the Netherlands, long seen as exemplary in European liberalism, yet recently electing one of the most reactionary figures in Europe; and lastly, d) Germany, where the rising popularity of radical right populism is particularly worrisome given its distinctive 20th-century history.

These popular figures and their parties have a lot in common and teach us a hard lesson about the European continent and its history: right-wing reactionary powers have been central in European historical development. Moreover, while there is debate amongst experts about the fascist nature of the current radical right populism, evidence increasingly shows these ideologies take inspiration from the European reactionary and fascist traditions.

Amidst passionate conceptual academic debates, it is important to remember that "older ideas [can] return in new configurations." And if this is valid for radical reactionary political perspectives, it might as well then be valid for revolutionary and progressive ideas and forces concerned with the advancement of human rights, equality and social justice. Indeed, if we pay attention to the recent protests and demonstrations against those figures, we will notice an opposition that is still making its presence felt.

Reference: Nexon, D. (2023, January 21). *Is Reactionary Populism a Form of Fascism? Does it Matter?* The Duck of Minerva.

Note: This contribution stems from a blog post which is part of a series on the rising populist radical right. It has been edited by Robin Stähli.

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