



## **Populists on the March Worldwide: Seven Steps to Keep Donald Trump and European Nationalists Out of Power**

Doug Bandow

April 8, 2016

Donald Trump continues to lead the Republican primary race. He could take the GOP presidential nomination. More important, he could be America's next president.

The public symbol of American liberty and exceptionalism. The international exponent of American principles and values. The world's most powerful person.

It's a sobering thought.

But Trump is not alone. Europe is filled with populist parties, old and new. For instance, the three-year-old anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany recently won enough votes to enter three state parliaments. In Saxony-Anhalt the AfD came in second with an astonishing 24 percent of the vote. Both large mainstream parties—the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats—lost heavily.

One-time liberal Viktor Orban has taken Hungary in an authoritarian, nationalist direction. Indeed, he openly admires Russia's Vladimir Putin. The xenophobic and conspiratorial right took power in Poland's recent elections. Ireland and Spain face political paralysis after inconclusive contests. Portugal's divided left won that nation's election but only with great difficulty organized a coalition to oust the conservative government. In Slovakia the governing party came in first but lost heavily, forcing another ungainly coalition.

In France the National Front's Marine Le Pen could edge out the Left and make the run-off in next year's presidential election. Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom has roiled Dutch politics. Great Britain's United Kingdom Independence Party won 12.6 percent of the vote in last year's parliamentary election and the British people may vote in June to exit the European Union. If other European nations seek the same "carve-outs" negotiated for the UK in an effort to prevent

“Brexit,” the entire EU could be at risk. Separatism, nationalism, and populism are stirring in many other nations, including Finland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Italy, and even Sweden.

It’s too simple to decry a proto-fascist wave, as feared by some alarmists. Argued Markus Feldenkirchen, Veit Medick, and Holger Stark in *Der Spiegel* online, “nothing would be more harmful to the idea of the West and world peace than if Donald Trump were to be elected president.” Actually, most of his Republican competitors, such as Sen. Marco Rubio, before his electoral implosion the establishment’s favorite anti-Trump figure, were far more aggressive, irresponsible, and warlike than Trump. The latter’s bark may be worse than his bite.

In fact, there’s no apparent Adolf Hitler on the political scene, nor even a Benito Mussolini. Many of the new political characters are disturbing but not quite frightening. The political center beneath many traditional governing parties appears to be collapsing. Average working people, those most buffeted by economic liberalization, angered by social change, and disenfranchised by political elites, are turning to ambitious and demagogic simplifiers. Normal folks are understandably tired of being viewed as problems to be solved rather than citizens to be engaged.

In the U.S. it doesn’t much matter who people vote for. Government will expand. New regulations will be issued. More tax dollars will be spent. Traditional mores will be trashed. Additional immigrants will enter. More Americans will be sent to fight more wars in more countries. The only certainty is that the views of those who vote will be ignored.

Hillary Clinton and most of this year’s GOP presidential wannabes supported the welfare/warfare state. So did George W. Bush, John McCain, Bill Clinton, and Mitt Romney. Barack Obama may talk like a realist in his recent *Atlantic* interview, but his policies aren’t much different. Even Bernie Sanders doesn’t depart dramatically from the welfare/warfare state consensus, preferring only to emphasize the former over the latter. Even worse, whatever these candidates say, history suggests that government policy will end up essentially looking the same on the vast majority of policies.

Much the same governing consensus dominates Europe. National elites have united behind austerity policies which maintain expensive, low-growth welfare states increasingly subject to arbitrary dictates from Brussels. The latter is dominated by a coalition of Eurocrats, made up of politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, businessmen, academics, and others. They all support creating an intrusive, continental government and imposing deracinated modernist values. With the terrorist strike in Paris, these elites appeared ready to sacrifice even their citizens’ life and limb to advance their ideological agenda.

At the same time, the governing class protects itself. Political and business leaders are surrounded by security details. Top bureaucrats enjoy munificent salaries and job security. Those with money can afford to live in safe neighborhoods and send their children to private schools. Many elites long ago celebrated their escape from the strictures of traditional cultural norms. Noted *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan: “Because they are protected they feel they

can do pretty much anything, impose any reality. They're insulated from many of the effects of their own decisions."

The response of this ruling class to public challenge only increases popular anger and frustration. For instance, in the U.S. the symbol of the conservative establishment, *National Review*, published a special issue reviling Trump. The failed 2012 GOP nominee Mitt Romney, who sought the endorsement of businessman Trump, reemerged to denounce candidate Trump. In the eyes of many, such efforts make Trump look even more like the man to overturn today's failed governing consensus.

Much the same phenomenon is evident across Europe, where populist parties have flourished. Daniel Sachs of the Stockholm Daniel Sachs Foundation complained that "mainstream parties ... show a reluctance to address the difficult, value-laden and often controversial issues around which populist extremists are rallying support."

When the French and Dutch rejected the proposed European constitution a decade ago, the Eurocrats simply repackaged the measure as the Lisbon Treaty, which did not require popular approval. When the Irish voted no, the EU insisted upon another poll, which yielded the desired result.

In Greece and other financially strapped nations, left-wing movements campaign to continue irresponsible spending, to be financed by someone, anyone else. Yet when these groups take power they support previously negotiated austerity programs. Both Le Pen and Wilders have been charged with hate crimes for articulating what many Dutch and French believe.

The leading German parties all back accepting large numbers of Middle Eastern migrants—1.1 million last year alone—over the objection of most Germans. Chancellor Merkel plans to move forward despite sharp electoral reverses the recent state elections. Apparently she will allow nothing, certainly not the German people's opinion, to change her policy.

This doesn't mean the principles under attack are illegitimate. I rather like advanced industrial capitalism, globalization, diversity, immigration, and much (though certainly not all) of the modern liberal catechism. At issue is the ruthless campaign to not just defeat political opponents but delegitimize contending viewpoints. Protected elites feel distaste and disdain for their lesser neighbors.

Yet to support local community, worry about immigration, advance tradition, and fear cultural decline is understandable and at times even laudable. In a detailed study Matthew Goodwin of the University of Nottingham noted that many people have "the feeling that immigration and rising diversity threaten their national culture, the unity of their national community and way of life." Real tolerance requires hearing and debating ideas despite disagreeing with them. While there are some beliefs which appropriately fall beyond the bounds of normal discourse, the

number in that category must be kept extraordinarily small. Fear of economic and cultural change does not qualify.

If opinions are barred from civil debate, they will emerge in uncivil action. If no respectable politician will address unpopular views, disreputable politicians will advance such positions. If it proves impossible to debate issues in the usual political channels, advocates will push their views more loudly and offensively in other ways. The result has been Donald Trump in America and a gaggle of dubious, ambitious hacks, jerks, and creeps across Europe.

Moreover, the problem won't go away. Contrary to those who imagine the parties will die off along with their older supporters, Goodwin noted that "There is evidence that those who vote for populist extremist parties, like voters more generally, are also influencing the voting habits of their children." Under 35-year-olds provide 37 percent of supporters of France's National Front.

What to do now, after the forces of populism, nationalism, and more have been unleashed?

First, popular concerns need to be acknowledged and addressed. While globalization, immigration, and trade are economically beneficial, the advantages are not shared equally. The cosmopolitan and well-educated young rapidly adapt to change. Older, blue-collar workers are more vulnerable. While the young are rapidly adopting new moral values, many older Americans define their lives in terms of traditional mores, often rooted in religion. All have a stake in what their nation is and what it becomes.

Second, the political process needs to be made more responsive to popular concerns. While populism tends to be undemocratic in its expectation of overriding all competing interests, it arises at least in part in response to the normal political system's refusal to consider disfavored interests. That doesn't mean turning republicanism into majoritarianism, but protecting republicanism from elitism.

One of the strengths of Great Britain's UKIP, explained Goodwin, is offering greater face-to-face voter contact than the Conservative and Labor parties. While grassroots campaigning may seem less cost effective than reliance on television or other mass media, the former may offer important social benefits. Deprofessionalizing political campaigns might help save democracy.

Third, parties within the legitimate realm of debate—say populist, not fascist—should be brought into government when appropriate. Goodwin found that stigmatizing disfavored parties discouraged moderation and compromise. In contrast, "parties that were not excluded but were allowed to participate in the wider party system tended, over time, to move away from more extreme positions."

Fourth, policies should be adapted to assuage strong public pressures without abandoning fundamental principles. For instance, to encourage public acceptance of immigration "reform" compromise is necessary, such as mixing tougher restrictions on illegal immigration with

liberalization of legal immigration, legalizing work by undocumented aliens but setting aside citizenship as an option, or approving more business visas in return for reconsidering birthright citizenship.

Fifth, issues should be depoliticized and withdrawn from the electoral process. People should be left alone whenever possible. Government should not be used as a tool to remake a recalcitrant public. Society is likely to end up more tolerant and diverse when such values are not crammed down people's throats in an attempt at social engineering.

Sixth, expanded economic opportunity is essential. In Europe, noted Goodwin, "Support for these parties is strongest among members of social groups that are economically insecure, mainly the petite bourgeoisie and working classes, and from citizens who are less educated than the average voter." Trump similarly appears to draw most heavily from America's white lower middle class and working class. Lesser educated and skilled people are suffering. American policymakers must confront public schools which don't teach, revamp federal taxes which cut U.S. competitiveness, and eliminate business subsidies which reward political rather than economic entrepreneurship.

Seventh, people need to find new venues for dialogue. As the center disappears from politics and contending parties grow more estranged, people need to be reminded of their common humanity. Goodwin calls for more "activities that encourage contact and interaction." Such efforts need to go well beyond government policies. Building greater understanding would help defuse the tensions and fears which spur support for populist parties.

No one knows when the latest populist political wave will break. Maybe not before Donald Trump is elected president in America. The best way to reduce that possibility, however, and the influence of populist parties in Europe, is to respond to the concerns animating the angry middle. And that requires seriously and honestly dealing with causes, not symptoms.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.*