



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Understanding the Integrative Model of the European Union While Exploring the Nexus between Populism and Democracy**

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**ABSTRACT**

The European Union (EU) has been a symbol of unity in diversity which provides for a model of collective functioning of various countries while preserving their distinct identity. The historical factors leading to this integration might vary in the case of every member country but the fact goes un-denied that the model has continuously been manifesting successful functioning nevertheless the general public belonging to various member countries had different conceptions and feelings towards this integrative model. Besides, democracy has been the main spirit in strengthening the body politic of western countries which, on its part, accommodates diversity of opinions, feelings and beliefs pertaining to the society at large. In that perspective, it has recently been observed that the European people are in a moral battle against the “elite” culture and the populist ideology and its association with modern democracies have gained considerable attention therein. The main aim of this research is to identify how populism affects different models of democracies in Europe and whether or not it poses any threat to European integration. The study also examines populism under the theoretical lenses of neoliberalism and neorealism to analyze that to what extent nature of political parties and their ideologies in most of European countries play role for integration or otherwise of the Union. It concludes that because of the ever-accommodating nature of European democratic culture, these movements are not posing any considerable threat to the Union for the time being.

**Keywords:** European Union, Neoliberalism, Neorealism, Populism

**Introduction**

There is strong nexus between populism and democracy across Europe. It is associated with growing divisions between anti-establishment wings, social cleavages. It is a considerable threat to stable democratic process. Various types of trends had been emerged both in domestic and international politics such as populism, polarization. The phenomenon of polarization is hunting European integration. Despite that, increasing social division and populist behavior of political groups have been accepted as agents of polarization in most of European countries during the last decade. It is evident through upsurges of social protests such as Gilets Jaunes in Franch, Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Orban in Hungary. It is the result of denial of migrations, distrust of institutions, mistrust among neighboring countries and strong preferences to maintain law and order situation (Ginsburgh, Perelman, & Pestieau, 2021). The concept of polarization has gained popularity in recent years in respect of addressing social crisis and rise of right-wing populist parties and actors. Now it is an active subject of researchers of social science and social media. The main focus of the researchers is to analyze the attitudes and mentalities of existing behavior into politics which push the different groups of society to revolt

against status quo. For instant, an individual is said to be strongly polarized if he/she forms very positive behavior towards one specific group and very negative perception towards others (Crick, 2006). The term negative polarization was originated by the American researchers in the course of observing the behavior of political parties. For example, researchers have shown their interest that how emerging trends in political opinion and collective identity make political compromises more difficult and tight. Each supporter of political party is inimical towards the other which trend is increasing day by day (Pintsch, Hammerschmidt, & Meyer, 2022). On the contrary, theory of neoliberalism promotes democratic norms and behaviors, collectivism and internationalism as well as globalization. Moreover, liberalism along with its democratic principles is at risk. Its main objectives which included separation of power, political pluralism, rule of law and collectivism are under pressure because authoritarian norms are increasingly prevalent across the world.

The main objective of this research is to identify how populism impacts different models of democracies in Europe and pose a serious threat to European integration. The study also examines populism under the theoretical lenses of neoliberalism and neorealism to analyze that to what extent nature of political parties and their ideologies in most of European countries play their role to integrate as well as disintegrate European integrity. The research also examines the rise of populism and its impact on voting behavior in the contemporary world.

### **Literature Review**

Lochocki observes that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and French Front National (FN) are the most influential radical rightist political parties in the Western Europe. He further added the examples of various countries across the Europe that the said radicalistic tendencies have hardly changed the narrative against EU and immigration over the last twenty year (Lochocki, 2018).

Nadia Urbinati defined the populism as global phenomenon and believed that its ideological foundation is nourished by two essential entities such as people and nation. It neglects popular sovereignty and constitutionalism in the age of democratization. Basically, writer explains that populism changed the foundation and dimensions of democracy on the pretext of elections, will of majority, people and representation. The writer concluded that deviation from the democratic principles is the major cause of populist vote bank (Urbinati1, 2019).

Berman explains that populism viewed along with globalism infused new dimensions in research of political science especially scholars of comparative politics, economy and sociology. This piece of work tried to understand the causes of populism and especially right wing populism in Europe, America and democratically-advanced countries. The study highlights that how socio-economic grievances derailed the process of democracy. To understand democratic backsliding, populism is perhaps the most challenging stance for political scientist and scholars of democracy (Berman, 2021).

Bergh and Karna identify what is now understood as populism or right wing populism. They explained that not necessarily the right wing political parties have essentials of extremist ideology. In some parts of Europe, the mainstream political parties tried to weaken traditional political landscape and to make coalition with populist parties. Both the rightist and leftist have distinguished ideologies and behave differently in parliaments (Bergh & Karna, 2020).

Miljan describes the myth of populism in America into two models such as “fragment theory” and “feedback loop” theory to explain the increase of populist movements. The first one explains that fringe political groups are able to challenge

mainstream political landscape as well as gain sufficient support of citizens. As compared to that, feedback loop theory is the idea that fringe political parties and candidates have mutual relationship whereas media rely on candidate for advertisement and rhetoric. Basically, the writer focused on rise of populism in America and investigated that to what extent young people will influence the populism (Miljan, 2017).

### **Populism and Democracy**

The notion of Populism is important because it makes sense of events such as Trump presidency and Brexit Referendum. This is considered a welcome development in the study of political science and international relations. It has started a new debate in the study of comparative politics. This instant study is significant due to socio-economic and cultural anxiety and the tension between responsibility and responsiveness as well as role of political polarization. In some recent studies, philosophers have observed that some people are less supportive to democracy as compared to past. It is considered that emergence of populist ideology within somewhat advanced democracies poses a threat to allegiance of citizens towards democratic values. Accordingly, researchers of politics have warned that populism is at odds with the central underpinning of democracy all over the world. It neglects culture of mutual co-existence and mediation among political parties advocating direct relationship between common people and their political leadership. The relationship between populism and democracy is controversial due to their mutual inherent contradiction. Some theorists believe populism to be an essential part of democratic ideology but some neglect due to its radical nature

### **Democratic Backsliding and Populism**

It is a considerable thought that populism is threat to democracy. It is suggested that right-wing populist political parties pose the both long and short term threat to democracy. It is argued that populists are less anti-democrats more anti-liberal in nature. Furthermore, charismatic leadership is another responsible factor in the realm of politics which promotes the populist ideology through personality both in power and party (Rankin, 2019).

The populist Albert Fujimori is considered a prime example of successful populist regime and its ambitious nature towards authoritarianism. He remained president of Peru and after two years of his election, he suspended the both judiciary and legislature. But later, due to international pressure, he restored the respective institutions but under the limited checks and balances. Keeping in view the above discussion, the populism of Fujimori was directed against the state. During his first election campaign, he had promised that interest of common people would be protected. He justified political elite of Peru as dominant class as well as supported the political establishment which threatened the economic reforms in the country. Unfortunately, Fujimori's initial popularity declined during his second term in office due to his involvement in corrupt affairs and soon he had to fled to Japan (Bauer & Becker, 2020).

Democratic backsliding has been a recent trend in the global politics over the past decade. Although, much attention has been paid to this phenomenon yet no positive outcome could be seen in this perspective. The factors like political polarization, technological advancement and ill-practices of democracy are responsible to the rise of populism and decline of democracy. Despite that, the leaders of most of democratic countries are promoting anti-democratic norms and projects, mechanism and motivations. Historically, expansion and emergence of democracy started its successful journey after the end of Cold War but was threatened steadily at the mid of 2000s (Press, 2022).

### **Ethno-Populism at a Glance**

Basically, ethno populism is a strategy to win the election and to gain power neglecting traditional practice of liberal democracy. Erine Jenne used the term ethno-populism describing political parties that use politics for the protection of culture, nation, religion and race/ethnicity etc. According to him, immigration and neo-liberalism regarding policies pose the threat of democratic backsliding in Europe. He further added that what were the reasons that ethno populism and democratic backsliding had taken hold in most of European countries such as Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic (Lewis, 2019).

Moreover, populism in itself is a common political tool to appeal voters for political gains. On that basis, most of time the question has been raised that whether political parties from left have axis with economic competition or from the right has cultural axis. On the one hand, Southern Europe and Latin America's populism has tended from left promising betterment of the poor and powerless. On the other hand, Central and Western Europe had tended from the right which revolved around nationalism, racism and religiosity (Illing, 2017).

Ethno-populists' claims that external elements such as Muslim refugees, EU, International Organizations and immigrants had threatened economy, national security and survival of local identity. They claimed that external agents were involved in conspiracy with internal ones maligned to corrupt practices. These internal agents advocated for liberal democracy involving all walks of life including media, opposition parties, independent groups and civil society (Vachudova, 2020).

The following figure illustrates the rise of populism in Europe.

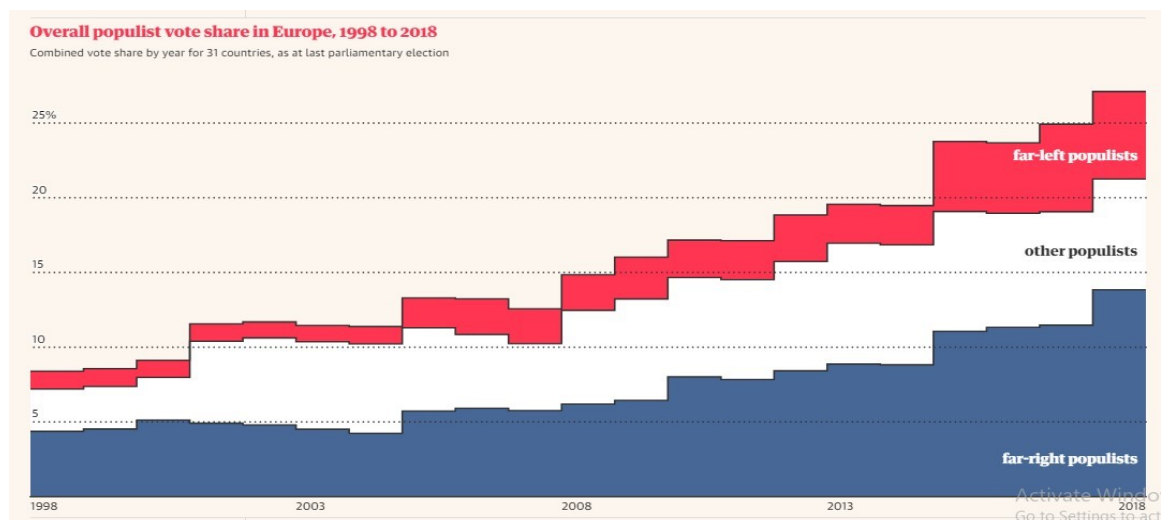


Figure 1. Populist Vote share in 2018 (Source: The Guardian)

### Observations of European Union

The EU advocates for democracy and accepts that it is being challenged in its premises since, the ruling party of Hungary eliminated the liberal institutions as well as similar practice has been done in Poland Due to the said events, member countries of EU had policy challenge regarding commitment towards rule of law and democracy. The “illiberal” right wing populists involve in such activities which limit the independence of judiciary, media and civil society. Such actions had brought direct confrontation with European Commission (Schlippahk & Treib, 2017).

The EU is bound for European integration through its documentations and stated that: “The European Union is constituted on the values to respect to humanity, democracy,

freedom, equality and the rule of law naming the rights of citizens belonging from minorities. All values are equal to the member states in their communities to promote non-discrimination, pluralism, justice, tolerance, equality and solidarity among all segments of society (TEU, 2012: Article 2).”

Both legal and political scholars agreed that rule of law safeguarding democracy was at risk across the region. The EU had serious reservations on its declining foundational principles. Due to that, the European commission revoked its Article 7. Despite that, in the ‘1000 Robes March’, judges from all across Europe marched to Warsaw to protect the Union from the transgression on the independence of Judiciary (Noury & Roland, 2020). The European Union is being taken as a sign of unity in diversity. The founding principle of EU was to promote rule of law which was the key factor of liberal democracy and independence of judiciary as both were in the phase of deterioration (Gora & Wilde, 2022).

Essentially, the key problem is associated with polarization among elites. The competing elites challenge the legitimacy defeating their opponents (Theuns, 2020).

### **Is populism a threat to the European Union?**

It is generally feared that the populists might pose threat to the integrity of EU due to their affection with democracy and rule of law. For instant, populist political parties make propaganda against union as non-democratic and oppressive institution which neglect state sovereignty and impose unhealthy policies of states (Lewis B. P., 2019). Furthermore, rising wave of populism in Eastern and Central Europe challenge and poses a considerable threat to unity and stability of European Union. Likewise, populist politics in Poland and Hungary had gained power to promote anti-immigrant policies and nationalism. The populist political parties raise issues such as climate change, migration and rule of law. The populists claimed that liberal values and institutions of EU are the future threats to the national sovereignty and cultural identity of Europe (Anthony, 2023). Despite that, there are some members in Europe who believed that EU is being undermined by the countries which give important to their own national interests rather than promoting common interest.

The efforts of EU to promote cooperation and integration have been countered various times. The rhetoric in most of countries such as East and Central Europe are also considered eroding democratic values, independence of judiciary and media which undermine the founding principles of union.

### **Populism under Theoretical lenses of Neoliberalism and Neorealism**

Although theoretical structure of both neorealism and neoliberalism had been discussed numerous times but viewing the phenomenon through the lens of populism was quite a new phenomenon. The association further impacted the value of neorealism and neoliberalism when viewed in the context of populism in Europe. Furthermore, it developed the new idea in the discipline of political science as a contributor to observe the preferences, actions and reactions of the states. For instant, Kenneth Waltz, a political scientist stated that countries survived and existed within the structure of Anarchy as well as countries had to determine their status and behavior under the international standards (Jr., 1988).

The theory of neoliberal stresses on economic values and their impact on mutual conflicts which can promote multilateral and cooperative behaviors. The theory encourages interdependence, mutual co-existence and internationalism while particularly focusing over economic values to determine the dimensions of world politics. Because of that, neoliberals ensure that internationalism would encourage states to promote

democratic norms and values while taking healthy measures to run the affairs of governance (Alhammedi, 2022).

As compare to neoliberalism, the neorealism tries to distinguish between internal factors of the state from the factors externally affecting the affairs of states. The neorealism theorists believe that states should have to behave individually isolating their regime from the impact of other states. On the contrary, theory of neoliberalism tries to emphasis on minimizing interference of states in matters of goods and market and economic reforms under the lenses of globalism

The theoretical discussion offered through the lens of neorealism and neoliberalism in the preceding paragraphs has a particular significance in context of new wave of populism which has recently been surfaced in the European states. Basically, the concept has been designed to analyze neorealism and neoliberalism and the impact of populism on it. The emerging wave of populism has raised serious concerns on both domestic and international politics. It has increased the risk of promotion of culture of religious and ethnic extremism. In other words, populism has been defined in term of extreme form of patriotic behavior of citizens towards their traditions. It is associated to create division among all segments of society and polarization in politics (Tóth, Mihelj, VáclavŠteřka, & Kondor, 2023).

The outbreak of populism scattered the government and states, threatened democracy, infused a higher level of polarization into the societies and inducted new forms of emotionalism into politics. In the literature, populism is identified into two categories: right wing populism and left wing populism. The right wing associated with anti-modern agenda and social conservatism and left wing promotes moderation and liberalism (Martinelli, 2018).

The right-wing populism has been schematic in nature that engulfed the most of part of Europe. Many political theorists observed that it is not a new trend but the present phenomenon has been seen as a global illness (Greven, 2016). For instant, political parties of Sweden and Italy had changed their orientations towards a stronger populist agenda because people of the region had romanticism towards populism like nature and the environment. Various philosophers argued that it is the need of the hour to discuss the right wing populism under the lenses of neorealism and neoliberalism to protect crisis-oriented politics and future of globalization (Bergh & Karna, 2021).

Traditionally, globalism protects expansion of economic activities and interdependence. It promotes the process of mutual understanding, increases the opportunities of economic openness and deepens the economic integration across the globe. As a consequence, expansion of globalization has been coincided with the democratic norms and values, pluralism and multiculturalism (Maggo & Kumari, 2023).

In Germany the left wing political party is promoting the anti-immigration policies as well as anti-European Union narrative (Noury & Roland, 2020). The leftist could be seen emerging in American elections in 2016, Gilets Jaunes movement in France, British referendum, as well as a number of other incidents (Islam, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The vast majority of modern theorists on populism rightly stresses that it is dangerous to democracy. According to them, it undermines the inclusiveness and tolerance to modern and pluralistic democracy. It has the potential to create differences that are deeply antagonistic to equality and globalism. It is concluded that the said rhetoric involved various essentials including history, religion and race. Such factors which contribute to the overall social environment of the body politic are nationalism, racism and

xenophobia. Moreover, technological advancement under globalization improved exchange of political ideas, services and information among nations. Recently, most of populist movements have been emerged while viewing the events under the lens of disintermediation and demassification across the Europe. On the one hand, western populism has democratic norms and values; on the other hand, it may be a syndrome of the dysfunction of democracy. It challenges the democracy due to its constitutive elements. As a result, populism is unavoidable phenomenon in the process of democratization of societies.

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