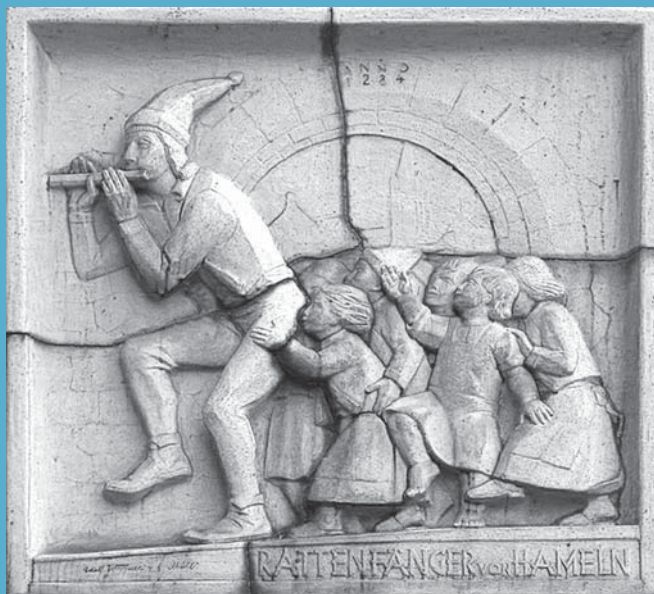


# Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties

A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015

edited by

Günther Pallaver / Michael Gehler / Maurizio Cau



Società editrice il Mulino  
Bologna



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# Preface

Hardly any other subject has had such a comparable meteoric career in political debates and academic discussion in European countries, the American continent, and beyond as the concept of populism. This boom is strongly connected to a deep uncertainty in and shock to the democratic systems, which, after the euphoric invocation of the “end of history” in the 1990s, has been linked to a crisis syndrome of various forms and shapes, spanning from the financial and refugee crisis to the crisis of the European Union as well as the all-encompassing globalization crisis. Within such heated debates, there is a need for cool-headed analysis and diagnosis. It is important to clearly differentiate between the polemic use and the scientific use of the concept, to study the politicians, movements, and practices subsumed under this concept in an interdisciplinary dialogue especially between political science and the humanities, and to create international comparisons. In this way, isolated phenomena can be placed into a comprehensive framework in order to identify typologies and similarities as well as in particular differences in the context and dynamics of development.

An interdisciplinary approach, historical depth, and international comparison—these central postulates of current research on populism formed the starting point for and a major focus of the international conference held at the Austrian Institute in Rome (ÖHI) in the autumn of 2015. Special thanks go to Michael Gehler for initiating this project as well as to Günther Pallaver for planning and organizing the conference together with Michael Gehler, the Istituto Storico Austriaco a Roma, the Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma, and the Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, which also accepted publish the proceedings.

Looking at Austria, Italy, and Germany has proven to be a fruitful and stimulating comparison due to their geographical proximity as well as their differences. These are due to the virulence and prominence of the populism phenomenon in the new millennium, which offers abundant material for analysis and raises a series of questions, and to their

different national and regional forms and developments of populism. The focus of the conference, the results of which are presented in this publication, once again confirmed the cooperation between the Istituto Storico Austriaco and the Istituto Storico Germanico, two institutions connected by a long and often interwoven history.

As the conference has furthermore shown, the city of Rome is especially suited as a starting point for interdisciplinary research since it is home to international institutes of the humanities with widely developed networks. We sincerely hope that this extraordinary potential for transnational research in the humanities will continue to be exploited in the future.

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Rome, November 2017

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# Introduction

by *Günther Pallaver, Michael Gebler, and Maurizio Cau*

The last decades have witnessed a renaissance and a new boom in the concept of populism. What was decisive for this trend was the electoral success of various populist political parties and leaders. Scholars of history and social sciences have attempted to define, delineate, and categorize populism, which has resulted in different theoretical approaches and explanatory models. One approach understands populism as a “thin centered” ideology, i.e. one that is slim and unfinished. A second approach views populism as a strategic concept for political mobilization primarily concentrated on three strategic aspects: policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization. A third approach describes populism as a form of communication based on the dichotomy between the positively perceived collective and the negatively perceived elites.

In public discourse, populism has become a catch-all term often understood as an expression of the uneasiness which a part of society feels toward representative democracy. Whenever a part of the population feels unrepresented or excluded, the various reactions evoked by this are today vaguely called “populism”. There are different types of exclusion, too, such as the exclusion of civil and fundamental rights (e.g. the right for non-citizens to vote) or social exclusion (e.g. unemployment and poverty).

Within these processes of societal “exclusion”, which can be traced back to various causes, political parties play a pivotal role. Yet, as a constitutive element of representative democracy, they have been under pressure for many years. Taken as a whole, we can observe a functional loss of parties due to changing societal, social, political, and economic frameworks, as well as a loss of their political legitimization to some extent. In addition to growing vertical mobility (e.g. social mobility or access to higher education) and horizontal mobility (e.g. regional

*Translation by Greta Pallaver*

mobility), the socioeconomic foundations are eroding, a fact that is associated with an increasing loss of political loyalties.

Parties are confronted with the dramatic erosion of traditional bonds caused by changes in the social structures, the electorate, and the value system which, in turn, has intensified competition. Furthermore, parties are increasingly exposed to public criticism, higher political dissatisfaction, and fluctuating protest voters. Although parties are gaining more power in the political system, at the same time they are more and more losing their legitimacy. They are losing their patina, no longer representing dedication, passion for the *iusta causa*, commitment, and principles, but instead displaying the aging signs of a complex and seasoned organization complete with material and personal interests.

Political parties are organizations, which guarantee that the structure of political systems works. However, the organizational models of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which political parties are a part, have undergone deep transformations. The changes are visible in the metamorphosis of companies and their organizational dynamic within standardized mass production based on the logic of “Fordism”. The classic political parties understood as embodiments of traditions and values, identities, class, a sense of belonging, and conflict regarding a social order that corresponded to the “Fordist” organizational model align with each other today more and more in their respective party programs. This is shown by the Manifesto Project Database, which has collected and codified all party programs from the post-war period until today. It can be demonstrated that since the 1960s, the polarization on the left-right axis has decreased by almost 40%. As a consequence of this alignment in contents, parties face the criticism of increasing uniformity and detachment from “the population”. The reproach of the “forgotten person” alleges that parties and their representatives no longer take responsibility either for the institutions’ performance and effectiveness or for the wellbeing of the population, thus accusing the privileged “caste” of neglecting the interests of the “real people”.

With the end of the East-West conflict and of the system competition between capitalism and communism in 1989/90, systems and structures of social security and the welfare state were gradually dismantled. The years that followed saw deregulation, neoliberalism, outsourcing, etc. and led to a shrinking public sector as a source of employment while

simultaneously witnessing a surge in precarious employment conditions. The privatization of education and research, of the health, communication, and administrative sectors—to name a few—, as well as the market logic and profitability dominating these areas led to disorientation, transformations, and insecurities of societies. The established parties and the governments that they formed could not find relevant answers to the various crises and increasingly lost political representation and legitimacy. The consequences were a growing proletariat made up of academics and service workers, an increasing socially endangered middle class, and a disillusioned lower class. New poverty strengthened the perceptions of a society of “downward mobility”.

In some countries this resulted, among other things, in the massive loss of trust by citizens in parties and political institutions. At this interface, we see the appearance of populist parties which, in their own heterogeneity, address the uneasiness of the excluded people, or their perceived exclusion.

Populist parties of different types arose in Europe after 1945 in various waves, but mainly in the 1970s. The beginning was marked by the Swiss People’s Party (1971), followed by Front National (1972), the Danish People’s Party (1972), and the Norwegian Progress Party (1973) as well as Vlaams Bloc (1979) in Belgium. These were citizens’ protest parties, right-wing and anti-taxation parties. A second wave occurred at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. The Swedish Democrats were founded in 1988, the right-wing nationalist “Republicans” (1983) in Germany had some success, the Lega Nord in Italy (1989) became part of the government in the early 1990s.

The Union Treaty of Maastricht (1991/92) sped up the project of the European Single Market, the economic and monetary union, as well as competition, and spurred modernization. The deepening European integration elicited defense mechanisms, caused fears of social decline, and gave rise to national independence movements. The Anti-Federalist League opposing the Maastricht treaty was formed in 1991 in Great Britain and later developed into the United Kingdom Independence Party, the driving force behind the trend to Brexit consolidated with the 2016 referendum. In 1995, the populist party The Finns was founded. The banking, financial, and economic crises (2008/09) as well as the “refugee crisis” (2015/16) spurred a third wave of populist parties. The