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Can the EU Survive Populism?

Introduction

Frustrated with the status quo, economic inequality and the failure of institutions, a wave of populism has swept over the globe as the masses have rallied behind leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States and Nigel Farage in Britain who claim they represent the interests of the people better than the established political and economic elites who have controlled democratic governments for generations. Populism, it seems, has become popular. This is especially true in the European Union, where concerns grow that it could rip the Union apart. Yet scholars and experts have struggled to accurately define populism. Some consider it an ideology, a doctrine, or a tactic to help win elections. Although there is not quite a consensus, most scholars have described it as a “thin ideology” that pits the “pure people” against the nefarious and “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2017). Because of a lack of core values, populism can often be found in combination with other ideologies. It can appear in far-right, nationalistic political groups as in Hungary under Viktor Orbán or extremely left groups like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Regardless of where populist parties fall on the political spectrum, scholars generally agree that it cripples transnational institutions such as the European Union because populist leaders often pursue policies that (1) stress national sovereignty and (2) lead to the deterioration of institutions (Bryder, 2009). Examining three case studies highlights that populism is a threat to the integration of the European community, although it is unlikely to lead to its complete demise. Populist leaders in Britain, France and Hungary, for example, generally ushered in reforms that were at odds with EU objectives and they threatened to leave the European project. In the case of Britain, the country is leaving the EU *entirely*. Nonetheless, in some of the case studies, populist

leaders who demanded separation from the EU quickly lost support and pro-EU leaders took their place. Looking at Eurobarometer opinion polling underscores a similar lesson. While rising populist sentiments have impacted individual countries within the EU, they have not infiltrated the overarching Union. As a whole, Europeans remain optimistic about the future of the EU, and wish to remain members. It is evident then, that populism has likely damaged the European Union and its institutions, but is unlikely to cause its outright collapse.

Concepts and Definitions of Populism

The term populism derives from the Latin word “populus” meaning “the people,” implying a strong connection to sovereign rule by the people (Mudde, 2017). Creating an agreed upon definition for populism, however, has eluded political scientists.

The European scholar Peter Mair believed populism could best be described as something he called “respectable populism” (Stanley, 2008). Mair argued that this type of populism was best thought of as a tool or tactic that political parties used during elections to improve their own standing and enact policies with broad support from the masses. Other scholars, such as Yves Meny and Yves Surel, argue that populism is best understood as a social movement as it frequently emerges from the grassroots protests of social groups and uses similar methods to that of other protest movements (Stanley, 2008).

Most political scientists, including Cas Mudde, Tjitske Akkerman and Ben Stanley, however, subscribe to the idea that populism is best understood as a “thin ideology” which can coexist with other ideologies such as conservatism, socialism or communism (Akkerman, 2003). Populism by *itself*, in contrast to these other ideologies, does not offer a coherent world view or a traditional, concrete set of policies. Instead, at the heart of populism as an ideology is the idea of popular sovereignty. Rather than expressing their own individual beliefs, the beliefs of special

interests, or the beliefs of elites, popular sovereignty calls for elected representatives to simply express the will of the unified people. As the people, in the populist world view, are a united entity with no internal divisions (Bryder, 2009).

The Princeton Professor Jan-Werner Müller (2016) points out that there are, however, some divisions within ideological populism, such as the distinction between exclusive and inclusive varieties of populism. Exclusive populism emphasizes ending immigration and occasionally supports racial or ethnic superiority. This type of populism has manifested itself most clearly in countries led by right-wing leaders such as Orbán in Hungary. Inclusive populism, on the other hand, advocates for expanding suffrage, economic aid, or rights to working class people or some minorities (Müller, 2016). This type of populism has been featured most prominently in countries like Venezuela under Hugo Chavez (Akkerman, 2003).

Scholars believe populist movements, both inclusive and exclusive, emerge due to the paradoxical nature of democratic government. Democracy rests on two core pillars: the *liberal pillar* and the *democratic pillar*, which have incompatible logic and come from different schools of political theory (Bryder, 2009).

The first pillar, the liberal pillar, refers to the belief that the ultimate authority of the state should reside in the law. The political scientists Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens (2007) find that the indiscriminate rule of law protects individual rights and checks the power of both the state and other citizens. To ensure accountability of the executive, power is constrained by checks and balances and a system of representation that emphasizes balance between various individual and group interests.

By contrast, the democratic pillar claims that the rule of law is not as equitable as it appears, since it often favors certain groups, such as white, male property holders. Therefore, the

ultimate authority should be given to the people through participation in democratic processes. Abts and Rummens point out that this pillar has a heavy emphasis on particularism. There is a distinction between those who are a part of the people and those who are not. This legitimizes fears of tyranny through the majority and the exclusion of minorities in the democratic process.

Democracy attempts to reconcile both pillars: while there are constitutional guarantees for individual rights—in the liberal tradition—there is also some form of democratic accountability through elections (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

Populism emerges when there is an imbalance between the two pillars that leans toward a strong liberal pillar. Meny and Surel (2008), for instance, claim that growing distrust and dissatisfaction with democracy is due to a tension between the power of the people and the representation they have received from increasingly power-hungry elites (weakening of the democratic pillar). Populism, as Mudde (2017) explains, is thus an attempt by the “pure people” to take back the power from the nefarious, “corrupt” elite.

The EU and Populism

There especially seems to be an imbalance between liberalism and democratic rule recently, which many consider the primary factor that has led to a resurgence of populism. Socioeconomic inequality continues to grow. Confidence in elected elites and institutions has fallen dramatically as the public relations company Edelman found in their Trust Barometer Report (2017). The report, which polls thousands of people in 28 countries, found that trust in four primary institutions—business, government, NGOs, and media—had all fallen together for the first time since the report started tracking trust in 2012. Furthermore, the report highlights the public’s lack of trust in key figures such as CEOs and political figures, who only 37% and 29% of those polled believed were credible. When trust is this low, people lose faith in institutions

and turn towards charismatic figures to fill the power vacuum. Clearly then, it is not hard to imagine the masses turning to populist leaders like Trump and Farage who claim they will better represent the interests of the average people who feel left behind under the current system.

The European Union is certainly not immune from the populist wave. While the EU is a unified trade and monetary body of 28 member countries and not a “true” democracy, it does have many democratic elements (Amadeo, 2017). Most EU decisions require either unanimity or a super-majority to be enacted. Elections are also held. The European Parliament, for instance, has direct general elections every five years. Likewise, while leaders in the other two EU governing bodies—the European Commission and European Council—are not directly voted on, they are indirectly put in place through national elections. It is through these democratic elements that the EU experiences the tension between the democratic and liberal pillars of democracy that can lead to populism. The Union, more so than the U.S. and other democracies, has a gross imbalance between the two pillars that favors liberalism.

The technocratic, complex and seemingly inaccessible ways through which the EU operates leaves little room for the voice of the people to be heard. Consequently, many scholars and researchers contend that the EU suffers from a “democratic deficit” (Ford, 2017). A PEW Research Poll (2014) found that “majorities in seven major European countries think their voice doesn't count in the EU, including 81 percent of Italians and 80 percent of Greeks.” Even the EU itself acknowledges the popular perception that EU institutions “suffer from a lack of democracy and seem inaccessible to the ordinary citizen due to their complexity” and that “EU voters do not feel that they have an effective way to reject a ‘government’, they do not like, and to change, in some ways, the course of politics and policy” (“Democratic Deficit,” n.d.). This is reflected in lower voter turnouts for EU Parliament elections. Turnout has dropped every subsequent

election, going from a high of 61.9% in 1979 to a low of 43.0% in 2009 ("Turnout in European elections," 2017) The 2014 elections narrowly escaped the trend, with turnout stabilizing at 43.09%. When voters perceive that their voices do not count, when institutions are unresponsive to the masses, and when democratic governments favor the liberal pillar, it creates a likely breeding ground for populism.

The Threat of Populism

The particularism of populism defined by the relationship between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" is what many scholars believe is the most dangerous aspect of populism. Mudde and Stanley argue that the strong moralism inherent in populism, which denies the existence of divisions within the united people, means that the legitimacy of political opposition is rejected (Mudde, 2017). He finds that because populist leaders see themselves as the voice of the people, anyone with a different view speaks for the corrupt elite or special interests. Therefore, there can be no compromise between the two groups. Any compromise must be rejected, as it would corrupt the pure people. As political scientist Tom Bryder (2009) mentions, it is important to note that populists do not want to abolish the democratic system, but instead hope to restore the system to its fundamental principle of existence—direct, sovereign rule of the people.

The scholars Heather Grabbe and Setfan Lehne (2017) of the Carnegie Institute for Europe argue that this "ideology [of populism] is fundamentally incompatible with European integration." This is because the principles that the European Union is built on, such as shared sovereignty, supranational authority, compromises between different interests, and mutual tolerance are at odds with the return to nationalism most populists call for. Populists, Daniel Gros (2017) finds, want the will of the majority to be heard regardless of any checks and

balances in the system that prevent one-party rule. Therefore, any liberal democratic institutions that enshrine fundamental rights, protect the rights of the minorities and limit the power of the majority is likely to be targeted. The European Union—which demands near-unanimity to make decisions, rules by treaties rather than the opinions of the majority and respects the rights of minorities—is certainly one of those targets (Grabbe & Lenhe, 2017).

At a less abstract level, the divergence between populism and the EU has mainly been reflected in issues of racism, ethnic diversity and terrorism (Gros, 2017). Many populist parties espouse xenophobic narratives that create social tensions and divisions within the multicultural societies of Europe. As leaders and the citizens who elected them become increasingly concerned about violence from immigrants and terrorist attacks, Grabbe and Lenhe contend that the free borders in the Schengen Area will begin to close. When that happens, not only do terrorists and immigrants have a harder time entering a European country, but so do the traders, business people and commuters who travel from country to country and drive the free trade and exchanging of goods that is the linchpin of European Union success (Grabbe & Lenhe, 2017).

Still, a select few scholars believe that populism can be beneficial. The late Ernesto Laclau for instance, believed that populism often brought important societal issues to the forefront. Many of these issues, such as the influence of special interests in elections, are not easily discussed, especially because economic and social elites are invested in keeping their special interests in elections powerful (Kenny, Hawkins & Ruth, 2016). Similarly, the Mexican Political Theorist Benjamin Arditi believed populism behaved like a drunken guest at a dinner party. While populism, like the guest, does not respect public mannerisms, it often points out the painful problems a society faces (Kenny, Hawkins & Ruth, 2016). Nonetheless, it is important to note that scholars who believe populism is generally a good thing are in the minority. Most

research in the field has indeed demonstrated that populism has had a negative effect on democracy.

Measurements and Methods

To determine how populism has impacted the European Union, the author decided to examine three different case studies as well as public opinion polls from the Eurobarometer. Included in the case studies are the countries of Britain, France and Hungary.

All three are members of the European Union, yet they are markedly different. Britain is an island nation and one of the largest and populated countries in the Union. Economically, Britain is the world's 5th largest economy by nominal GDP and ninth by purchasing power parity. It has been a leading member of the EU (until 2016), and the second largest contributor to EU development funds behind Germany ("Timeline of the UK in the EU," 2017). Despite strong membership, Britain has had a contentious relationship with the EU: it argues it pays more into the system than it gets out in benefits. Consequently, Britain had not integrated as much as other European countries, as it did not adopt the euro as its currency nor became part of the Schengen Area (Hunt & Wheeler, 2017). France, on the other hand, is a founder of the European Project, and along with Germany, one of the two countries who truly steers the future of the EU. Thus, France has become heavily integrated into the EU: becoming a part of the Schengen Area and adopting the Euro ("France," 2017). Like France, Hungary is also a part of the Schengen Area. Unlike France, Hungary was at one time a communist, satellite state of the Soviet Union before it became a parliamentary republic. Nonetheless, it has done well modernizing, and maintains a moderately strong economy ("Hungary, 2017). Recently, Hungary has been criticized by the EU for refusing to allow immigrants in, leading to some calls for the country to have its membership revoked (McLaughlin, 2017). With these socioeconomic differences in mind, these three case

studies provide a comprehensive overview of what populist leaders can do when in power and the consequences it can have on the greater European project.

Examining public opinion polling from the Eurobarometer and from the Pew Research Center will then determine the extent to which populism has impacted the European Union. If Europeans in general remain optimistic about the future of the EU, it is likely that the populist parties who have taken root in Britain, France and Hungary (as well as other countries) have affected their own country's participation in the EU, but not necessarily led to the complete demise of the Union. If, on the other hand, Europeans across all countries are overwhelmingly negative about the prospects of the European Union, it is more likely that populism has spread from not just a few countries, but the entirety of the project, threatening its future.

Case Studies and Empirics

When populist leaders take office, regardless of their other political beliefs, evidence shows that their policies are generally at odds with the objectives of the European Union. The negative impact that populism has had on European integration despite the geographic, ethnic and economic diversity between the three countries highlighted demonstrates that populism has a near universal negative effect regardless of the particular political trends in each country that led to populist rule.

Populism in Britain

No other case has been more prominent in displaying the effects of populist rule than Britain. The country has had a strained relationship with the EU for decades, preferring to maintain its own regulations, borders and currency rather than integrate further like their continental brethren. In addition, many in the United Kingdom outside of London's posh suburbs see a British and European upper class who has grown fabulously rich, intertwined with political

elites who bend to their will. These long-running sentiments, along with a recent surge in immigrants coming from the war torn Middle East provided the spark for cutting ties with the EU. Nigel Farage, the leader of the right-wing populist UK Independence Party (UKIP), which pushed for the “leave” campaign, argued that the British identity had been stretched, their historical roots destroyed. The referendum to leave the EU then, was not about wealth, but about who the British think they are (Robertson, 2016).

The 2016 vote, 52% to 48% in favor of leaving the European Union, was a clear message that many average Brits were attempting to assert their identity, taking control from the elites in Brussels and London who they had grown disillusioned with. “Brexit,” as the referendum was called, was framed as Britain’s “Independence Day” by Farage. A day after the vote, Prime Minister David Cameron resigned, pointing to the need for “fresh leadership” to take the country in a new direction (Glaze, 2017). Theresa May, a Conservative, was elected the new Prime Minister and invoked Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty in March of 2017, beginning the process of splitting away from the European Union. For the first time in history, populist sentiments had pushed a country out of the Union.

Since the vote to leave, Britain has done better than many skeptics predicted. Instead of a job crisis, Britain has added 300,000 new jobs, and faces a lower unemployment rate, 4.3% compared to the EU average of 8.8% (Carey, 2017). Ivan Menzes CEO of Diageo, a FTSE 100 British multinational alcoholic beverages company, contends that unemployment has dropped as the labor pool from outside immigrants has shrunk (Carey, 2017). This outcome could be problematic for the European Union. As other member states see the short-term success Britain has had after leaving the Union, they too could threaten to leave the Union either for better economic prospects on their own.

Populism in France

France was supposed to be next. After the shock of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., France was next in line to elect a right-wing populist. Yet that never happened. Instead, “Emmanuel Macron, the centrist, pro-European Union candidate, demolished Marine Le Pen, the far-right populist, in a landslide victory,” capturing 66.1% of the vote (Stangler, 2017).

The result was surprising. France, after all, has suffered from double-digit unemployment for close to a decade. Of all the European countries, it has been hit hardest by terrorist attacks—perpetrated mainly by Islamic militarists, many who passed immigrant background and held French or EU passports. In the aftermath, there had been a strong wave of anti-immigrant backlash, just like in Britain. Le Pen tried her best to capture the mood of the masses, declaring that she spoke for “all people.” On immigration, she asserted that French citizenship is “either inherited or merited” and that illegal immigrants “have no reason to stay in France, these people broke the law the minute they set foot on French soil” (Branford, 2017) Most significantly, she promised that if she won the election there would be a referendum on EU membership. This certainly had appeal to some French, who had grown disillusioned with traditional elites who they believed had failed to represent their interests by struggling to curb growing inequality and allowing open borders in the Schengen Area (Haldevang, 2017). Yet Le Pen lost, partially because she could not shake the past. Le Pen’s father, who had previously led the party she now represents, the National Front, lived on the margins of public life for decades because it had a history of denying the Holocaust. While some French had new found support for her anti-Islamic sentiment, Le Pen’s overwhelming loss demonstrated that most French still rejected her racist, xenophobic version of populism.

As President, Macron has taken steps to address the problems many Euro-cynics claim plague European integration. In September of 2017, for instance, Macron set out ambitious plans to reform EU institutions. He called for a euro-zone finance minister, a tax to fund overseas development and deeper security integration through a joint defense fund to fight terrorism (Haldevang, 2017). Macron's proposals have the potential to channel the anti-EU populist sentiment and reform the EU for the better so that it can thrive in the future.

Populism in Hungary

In Hungary, the populist leader Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party came to power with great promise for the future. Orbán rose to national prominence in 1989 when he called for the Soviet Army to leave and for democratic government to rule in Hungary (Howard, 2014). By 1998, Orbán was elected Prime Minister. Under his rule, Hungary experienced economic growth, reduced debt and limited inflation. Yet it was not enough to prevent Orbán from losing in the 2002 election (Howard, 2014).

When Orbán finally returned to power in 2010, he worked diligently to consolidate his own power to ensure that he does not lose it again (Marton, 2014). He developed a strong sense of nationalism that was notably absent in his first term. He believed that the sun has set on liberal democracy and pointed to the examples of Turkey and Russia as successful, illiberal democracies that he hopes Hungary, and later the European Union (EU), will emulate (Marton, 2014).

Orbán is not content to let his authority remain only in Hungary, instead, he has directly challenged Angela Merkel as the head of the EU (Marton, 2014). Even though Hungary remains one of the poorer, smaller countries in the EU, Orbán, like Farage in Britain, has rallied the common people behind him by preaching that the people's concerns have gone unaddressed by

the elites. Orbán has promised to rectify that by cracking down on immigration from the Middle East and maintaining Europe as a bastion of Christendom (Marton, 2014).

Hungary has refused to back down on the immigration crisis. It declines to accept any part of its quota for refugees as part of the EU's open door asylum plan. Orbán further demands that Brussels pay half the bill (€400 million) for security fences that he erected along his southern border to prevent immigrants from Syria from arriving (McLaughlin, 2017). In response, European Commission spokesman Alexander Winterstein said that EU solidarity "is not some sort of an a la carte menu where you pick one dish, for example border management, while refusing another dish, like... relocation [of refugees]," (McLaughlin, 2017). The Commission is currently working on a series of infringement proceedings against Hungary, potentially suspending their right to vote in EU decisions (Logan, 2017). Consequently, if France represents the hope for how the EU can channel populist sentiments into productive reforms, Hungary represents the populist challenge to further integration.

Public Opinion Poll Data:

Public opinion polling from the Eurobarometer and from the Pew Research Center offer positive signs for the future of the European Union. **Figure 1** on the next page, is from the Eurobarometer Spring 2017 Standard Report, which found that over half of respondents are optimistic about the future of the European Union. The Standard Eurobarometer itself is a cross-national study designed to compare trends within Member states of the European Union. The goal for the report is to randomly interview 1,000 people from each country face-to-face. Some smaller countries do as few as 500, while some larger countries as large as 6,000 to get accurate, proportional results. Therefore, the Standard Eurobarometer is a good way to capture and

analyze the sentiments of Europeans from all member states over time ("The Future of the EU: optimism is on the rise – The Latest Eurobarometer," 2017).

That optimism for the future of the EU has jumped from just 50% of respondents optimistic in 2015 to 56% in 2017 is an encouraging sign for the future. The populist surge sparked by Brexit, by rising immigration, by terrorist attacks and high unemployment has begun to die out. Populism represented more of a temporary negative reaction against the EU rather than a deathblow.

1. Optimism for the future of the EU

QA19 Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?
(% - EU)

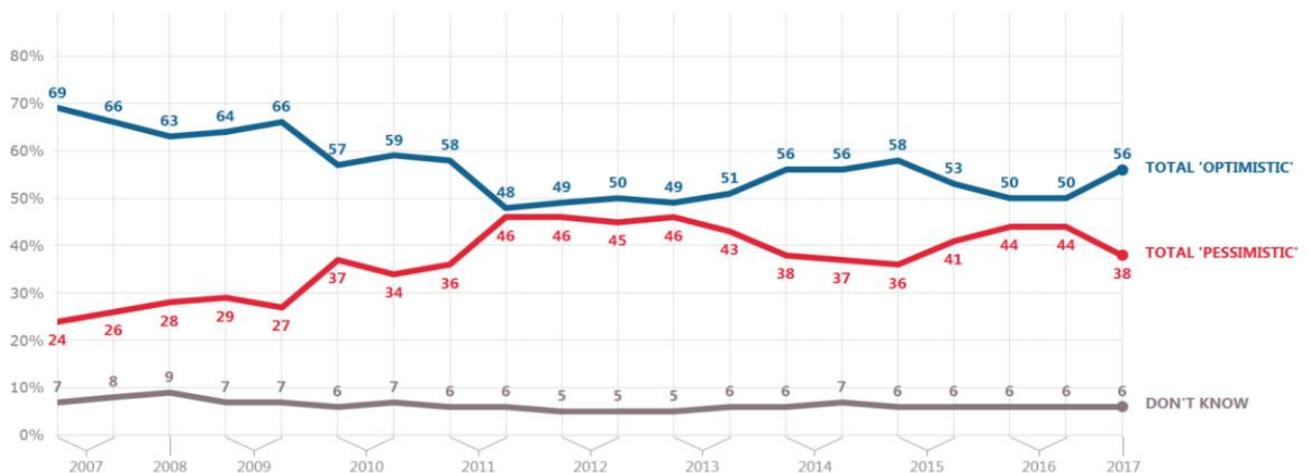
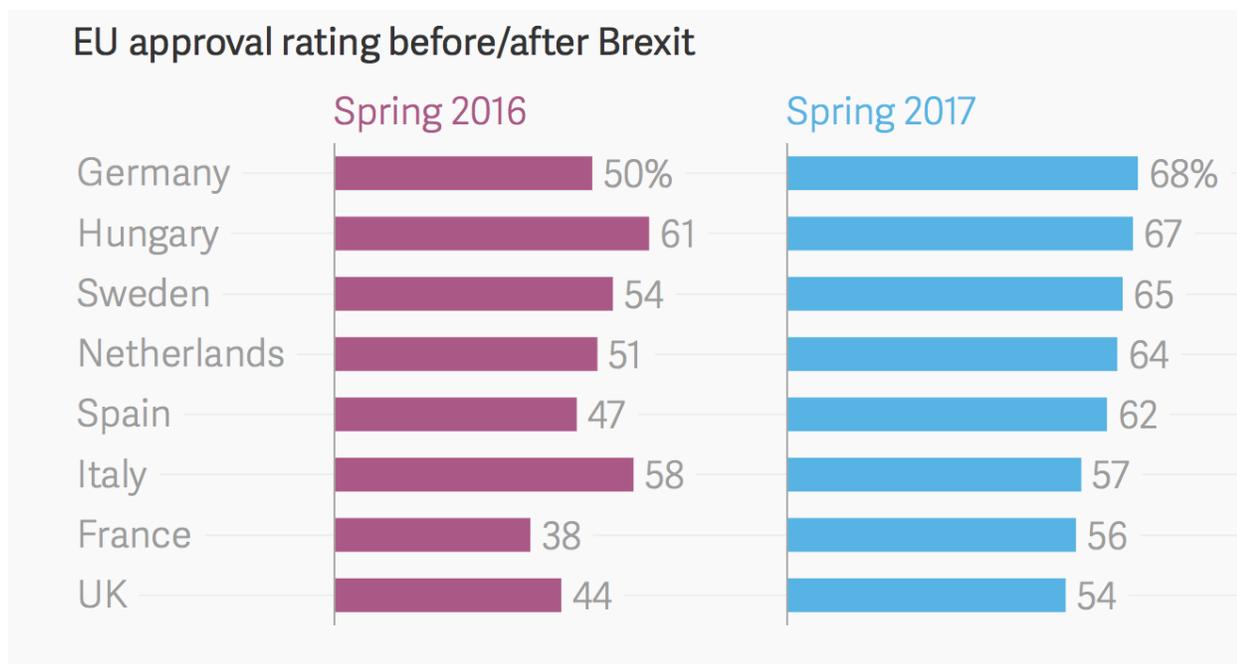


Figure 2 from a Pew Research Center survey of 10,000 Europeans living in Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France and the United Kingdom shows similar results:



Even after the seismic shock of Brexit, which could have triggered more member states from leaving the EU, “public sentiment about the European project has rebounded” (Stokes, Wilke & Manevich, 2017). Frustrations with the EU remain, especially when it comes to how Brussels has handled the refugee crisis and economic uncertainty. Yet this frustration has not increased the desire to leave the EU. PEW found that a median of just 18% of people across all countries—excluding Britain—supported leaving the Union entirely. Over half in each country supported staying in the community (Stokes, Wilke & Manevich, 2017). Most, however, agreed that more power should be transferred to national governments instead of Brussels. A median of 74% across all continental European countries believed national governments should have power over immigration issues, and a median of 51% believed preferred that their own governments, rather than Brussels, negotiate future international trade deals (Stokes, Wilke & Manevich, 2017). It is evident then, that the populist wave has delayed future European integration, but that it will not lead to its complete dissolution. Europeans are satisfied with remaining in the Union, but desire more national control over important issues.

Conclusion

Scholars remain divided on their definition of populism. Some see it as a social movement, others as a tactic that politicians use to boost their election chances. Most, however, see it as a thin ideology that pits the people against the corrupt elite. In practice, however, it is evident that populist leaders do little better than the elite they oust from power. While the initial ideas that populist leaders promote might seem beneficial for the European Union, as they promote reforms—if put in power—these leaders consolidate their own power and have enacted policies that are at odds with the stated objectives of the European Union, making integration more difficult, if not impossible. Case studies examining how populism has worked in Britain, France and Hungary underscore that populists in power will negatively affect European integration as they pursue more nationalistic policies on immigration and economics. Yet it also highlights that outside of a few countries, Europeans in general feel overly optimistic about the future of the project and wish to remain. While populism has delayed further integration, it does not threaten the existence of the European Union, especially if the EU begins to respond to the complaints of the masses through some of the innovative changes proposed by pro-EU leaders like Macron.

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