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Has neoliberal globalisation contributed to growing levels of nationalism across Europe?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the contribution of neoliberal globalisation to the growing popularity and prevalence of nationalist movements in the past decade. The world has seen rising levels of populism and nationalism in recent years and Europe is no exception. Several European member states have seen parties of the far-right move from the outskirts of the political spectrum to the mainstream and into positions of leadership. To highlight the nationalist response to neoliberal conditions three emergent movements in founding EU member states will be analysed in detail: France's Rassemblement National (RN), Italy's Lega Nord (LN) and Movimento 5 Stelle (5SM) and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). This paper will argue that the conditions of neoliberal globalisation have contributed to the rise and prominence of nationalist movements in Europe.

Keywords: nationalism; neoliberal globalisation; populism; Italy; France; Germany

Introduction

There has undoubtedly been an increase in populist movements and waves of nationalism across the globe in recent years. Nationalism can arise as a defence to globalization (Delanty, 2006; Bonikowski, 2016) and is thought by some academics to be a product of industrialisation, globalisation and capitalism (Greenfeld, 2006; 2012). 2016 has been described as a watershed year in global politics for many reasons including the UK referendum result to leave the European Union (EU) and the election of Donald Trump to the Whitehouse (Mascitelli, 2018). These results, while surprising and dramatic at the time, display the feelings and thoughts of those 'left behind' and who have lost trust in the elite pushing the neoliberal orthodoxy. The Brexit crisis is considered to have initiated a new era for the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). These political outcomes and public nationalist movements raise questions on the current global order (Mascitelli & Brunazzo, 2020). Adding to these questions is the suggestion that it is no longer clear what the benefits are of being in the EU or by working together in the union (Vasilopoulou, 2012). Further evidence of nationalism's prominence can be seen by the emergence and popularity of right-wing populist parties across Europe moving from the outskirts of the political spectrum to the mainstream. This paper will argue that the conditions of neoliberal globalisation have contributed to the rise and

prominence of nationalist movements across the globe, with specific focus on the nationalist movements present within the EU.

The link between neoliberalism and nationalism

Brown (2019) states neoliberalism is the undoing of the Keynesian welfare state for the substitution of free market and free trade policies. Similarly, Connolly (2013) asserts neoliberalism encompasses all those who celebrate the impersonal rationality and self-organising powers of markets while limiting state and political involvement. Neoliberalism and nationalism are often thought to be in dichotomy (Krupa, 2004). The rapid expansion of globalization and neoliberal principles, in which the world is viewed in market terms, gained momentum in the 1980s with the support of leading politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, has seen a strong backlash in the form of nationalist movements. Neoliberalism as a global economic hegemony has been successful in lifting many out of poverty but it has also seen an increase in wealth inequality across the globe (Meier, 2019). This backlash or swell of opposition is most strongly seen in those not holding the wealth. Goodwin and Heath (2016) found that the poorest households of the UK were much more likely to support and vote for Brexit. The same was found for those who held lower levels of education. Similarly, Hobolt (2016) found that the winners and losers of globalisation affected voting behaviour with the poorer, less educated and older more likely to support leaving the EU. These results indicate that those who do not embody the 'homo economicus' principal and are 'left behind' by the conditions of neoliberalism are more likely to support a nationalist policy or movement.

Brown (2015) argues that neoliberalism's economisation of political life reduces contemporary liberal democracy. This view can be applied to the European Union when observing the nationalistic uprising in several member states and the Brexit result. Europeanization has led to a new structural conflict between the winners and losers of globalisation (Vasilopoulou, 2012). The democratic deficit that had once been a marginal concern has now been pushed into the limelight with rising levels of Euroscepticism, right wing nationalism and questions of further European integration (Mascitelli, 2018). Mercille and Murphy (2015) argue neoliberalism is a set of ideas and actions whose objective is to restore, expand and maintain the power of economic elites relative to ordinary people. This idea feeds into traditional populist divisions of "us V them" and "the elite V the people" and fuels the narrative of "Bureaucratic Brussels" handing power to the unelected representatives of the European Commission (EC) and away from the people (Popivanov, 2020). Political and economic elites responded to the GFC with self-interest at the expense of the people to ensure they maintained their power, status and wealth in society (Mercille and Murphy, 2015). This power dynamic is entrenched within neoliberalism and as such has fuelled the rise of nationalism in both public and political spheres. The challenges presented by globalisation, rising levels of populism and disgruntlement with the democratic deficit across many member states has been a growing concern for the European Union. The White Paper published in 2017 is written specifically to tackle the misgivings, conflicts and doubts polarising the bloc and to address the inequality and perceptions of an elitist Europe (European Commission, 2017). The paper suggests the remaining 27 members together carve a united vision for the future of Europe and offers five alternative scenarios for the bloc to move forward and address the damage caused from recent crises,

The GFC challenged global economies and led to governments implementing policies and reforms to address the widespread turmoil across market, industries, and nations. Baimbridge (2017) contends the impact of economic policy can be seen to directly or indirectly affect and influence levels of Euroscepticism. In the EU, the economic policies to combat the GFC and the following sovereign (European) debt crisis were those of austerity (Baimbridge, 2017). Austerity policies have been linked to increased levels of Euroscepticism and a loss of support for the EU (Verney, 2017). Powell (2017) contends austerity policies as a measure to maintain or restore ideal neoliberal conditions, further intensified divisions, and inequalities already in existence due to the neoliberal consensus. Within the EU the discontent with strict austerity policies led to disgruntlement of the public and a backlash against the EU (Mascitelli, 2018). New parties who openly oppose EU integration and promote nationalism have emerged in domestic politics following the crisis and have received a growing level of support (Vdovychencko, 2018). This theory is supported Hobolt and De Vries (2016) who found that a citizen's view of how effectively the EU handled the sovereign debt crisis affected voting behaviour. Their research into voter perceptions showed that people who disapproved of the EU performance in the crisis, were more likely to vote for a hard-Eurosceptic party in the 2014 European Parliamentary (EP) elections. The EP elections of 2014 (Mascitelli, 2018) and 2019 (Popivanov, 2020) have been viewed as pivotal in the development of European integration. The results marked an advancement and subsequent consolidation of radical populist and right-wing nationalist representation in the EP. The changing political landscape as a result of, or reaction to austerity measures can be viewed as a move away from current standards towards a new economic and political consensus.

In the EU democracy was in crisis following the GFC (Mascitelli, 2018) and the political elite were no longer able to freely set European policies as publics had proven able to inhibit European integration (Vasilopoulou, 2012). This shift away from further integration and an "ever closer union" (Rome Treaties, 1957) can be viewed as a push against globalism and towards nationalism. Hooghe and Marks (2018) have found Europe to be transformed by a new divide caused by the perforation of nation states by trade, immigration and integration. All three are integral elements of neoliberal globalisation. This cleavage is transnational and at its core is a political reaction against immigration and integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Further supporting this theory is the widespread nationalist movement across many Member States and right across the political spectrum. Cleavage theory suggests that political parties are programmatically inflexible, and that party system change comes from rising political parties (Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

Case study: The rise of nationalism in the founding states of the European Union

To highlight the nationalist response to neoliberal conditions three emergent movements will be analysed in greater detail: France's *Rassemblement National* (RN), Italy's *Lega Nord* (LN) and *Movimento 5 Stelle* (5SM) and Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). These movements have been chosen as all three are in founding member states of the EU and all three participate in the EP political group Identity and Democracy (Popivanov, 2020).

RN, alternatively known as Front National (National Front) was first established in 1972 but has been under the leadership of Marine Le Pen since 2011 (Ray, n.d.). The Eurosceptic RN has surged in popularity in the last decade with significant electoral results (24.9%) in the 2014 EP vote (Mascitelli, 2018). The election saw a surge in support for parties who outwardly rejected the EU or called for strong reform with RN becoming the most popular party in France (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). RN campaigns heavily against the effects of globalisation and uncontrolled capitalism and suggests a different Europe, one that defends the border, protects the 'Fatherlands' and its citizens (Popivanov, 2020). It further contends that the EU seeks to destroy the most important political asset of modernity: the nation state. This narrative displays an outright rejection to the conditions of neoliberal globalism. The desire to restrict free movement within the EU and therefore remove access to social benefits threatens European integration and would thus change the trajectory of Europe (Milton, 2018). The agenda of RN exemplifies that of a traditional populist party who overemphasises the negative effects of globalisation and seeks to take advantage of a very divided Europe (Fuest, 2017).

LN and M5S formed the first elected Italian all populist coalition in 2018 receiving 17.69% and 32.22% of the vote respectively (Quirk, 2020). The parties had significant electoral success on the back of nationalist campaigning and Eurosceptic rhetoric. Matteo Salvini the leader of LN has claimed the party is not on the extreme right but rather is an extremist of common sense (Lorimer, 2020). Taking over as leader he transformed the party from a regional to national in line with Marine Le Pen in France (Viviani, 2019). The party pushes for a Europe where MS can protect and control their borders and traditions (Popivanov, 2020). The nationalist agenda is shown most prominently by the campaign "Basta Euro" where Salvini vehemently criticised the European Monetary Union (EMU) and EU apportioning blame on those institutions for Italy's economic woes (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2021). The M5S is 'anti-establishment' and anti-elitist with the party claiming it is of neither the left or right and has talked of exiting the Euro to protect Italian interests (Mascitelli & Brunazzo, 2020). The party was created to address a complete dissatisfaction with the entire political class, exploiting the anger and resentment towards austerity policies enacted post GFC (Viviani, 2019). The economic neoliberal direction of the EU, most evident by the single currency framework, has led to a process of content wide deflation (Baimbridge and Whyman, 2015) and Italy having little to show for 15 years of membership in the EMU (Baimbridge, 2017). The coalition (LN-M5S) had campaigned heavily against supply side economic policies proposed by the previous government and against the menace that greater European integration allegedly represents for Italian sovereignty (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2021). The popularity of these parties in Italy indicates a disgruntlement and rejection of the neoliberal conditions in recent years, and the frustrations of a nation whose inequality continues to grow. In short, those 'left behind' are pushing back against the current framework.

The AfD has grown rapidly in popularity since its creation in 2013 and continues to move further into a far-right position (BBC, 2020). Germany, as in France and Italy, has seen an increase in success of populist parties and a swell of nationalism (Lai, 2019). Popivanov (2020) has found AfD hold the position that the EU unduly interferes with national issues thus endangering German sovereignty. Further, the party states the single currency and migration policies adopted in recent decades incite conflict between Member States. The party's greatest success has come as a result of Chancellor Angela Merkel's immigration policy to allow approximately 1.3 million refugees to settle

during the 2015 migration crisis (BBC, 2020). The party became the third largest in Germany following the 2017 national elections (Breeze, 2019). The nationalist tone is demonstrated not only through Eurosceptic rhetoric but through promises to abandon the euro, much in the same way as LN. The anti-migrant and anti-EU stance pushes forward the nationalist movement and aims to highlight the discontent with the current status quo (Breeze, 2019). The encouragement of open and free trade, migration and multiculturalism that are conditions of a neoliberal globalised world allow for movements such as AfD to link those conditions to a loss of culture and position.

Conclusion

The rise and popularity of nationalism is evident through a number of political outcomes and movements seen within the last decade. The implications of Brexit and populist right-wing nationalists being elected to key coalitions, as members of the EP or governing outright in the EU are significant. They not only create questions for the future of European integration but create a potential pathway for a future world that focuses more on nationalism than cosmopolitanism and globalism. The current world conditions have elicited a defence in the form of a nationalist movement, one that moves away from deregulation, free trade, austerity policies and greater migration. The irony is that the conditions of neoliberal global world have contributed to the increased interest in protecting national sovereignty, identity and culture. Further exacerbating the wealth inequality as a result of neoliberalism have been the numerous crises experienced in the EU over the past decade. The GFC, sovereign debt crisis and migration crisis have greatly contributed to public anxiety over the stability and prosperity of their future. It is these factors along with education levels that have influenced support for populist parties embodying a nationalist agenda. RN, LN, M5S and AfD have all capitalised on the newly formed Eurosceptic cleavage and have pushed and continue to push for a Europe that allows for a protection of sovereign rights, of borders and of national culture, values and language. The political landscape in Europe highlights the prominence of the nationalist movement in the continent but it is a by no means solely a European phenomenon. Rather, the current global climate is one of nationalism in response to the conditions of neoliberal globalization.

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