

Why Right-Leaning Populism has Grown in the Most Advanced Liberal Democracies of Europe

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Abstract

Immigration and new class divisions, combined with a growing anti-elitism and political correctness, are often used as explanations for the strong gains for right-leaning populist parties in national elections across Europe in recent years. But contrary to what we might assume, such parties have been very successful in the most developed and comprehensive welfare states, in nations—such as the Nordic countries—with the best scores on economic equality and social inclusion and long established political and judicial institutions enjoying a high degree of popular legitimacy. As argued in this article, this seems to happen because a duopoly of the centre-left and centre-right political establishment has kept issues such as immigration and new class divisions off the public agenda and hence paved the way for right-leaning ‘disruptor’ populist parties with an anti-immigration agenda in times of increasing immigration.

Keywords: immigration, right-leaning populism, bipartisan politics, issue salience, political demography

WHEN CONCEPTUALISING populist parties mobilising to the left and right of the centre-left and centre-right duopoly of European democracies, the defining traits are that right-leaning populists have traditionally emphasised shared ethnicity and common descent as their main issue, while left-leaning populists have invariably defined the people in class terms, excluding those with wealth and power. Recently, however, a third definition of populism has entered the public debate: ‘the people’ as opposed to (mainly) cultural elites. Why has this distinction between the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’ become so marked in advanced democracies, and why has it occurred in some of Europe’s most developed and comprehensive welfare states now and not earlier?

One reason is increasing globalisation and immigration, which largely drove the Brexit referendum, the 2016 US presidential election, and the gains of far-right parties across Europe over the last decade. A second reason is new class divisions, owing to structural changes in the economy and what William A. Galston has called the ‘growth and consolidation of an education-based

meritocracy in government, the media, and major metropolitan areas’, which has revealed a certain kind of political correctness and exclusiveness toward voters who might be mobilised by right-leaning political parties.¹ But there could also be a third reason, indirectly linked to globalisation, immigration and new economic and cultural class divisions—that is the challenges generated by an increasing bipartisanship within advanced liberal democracies in recent times.

As will be argued in this article, with empirical examples from eight well established European democracies, it might come as a surprise that right-leaning populist parties have been on the rise in the economically most developed democracies in Europe—countries with the highest scores on economic equality and social inclusion, and long established political and judicial institutions boasting a high degree of popular legitimacy. But what these states have in common is that for the last two decades they have been governed by either centre-right, centre-left or grand coalitions, even though all eight are multiparty systems with a variety of ideological cleavages. And as Anthony Downs

told us in his economic theory of political action in a democracy sixty years ago, when competing political parties start to formulate policy 'strictly as a means of gaining votes', rather than seeking to gain votes 'in order to carry out certain preconceived policies', voters start looking for alternatives and the electorate becomes polarised.²

This seems to be particularly relevant in situations when the political system is under internal or external pressure, as shown by James Dennison and Andrew Geddes in the first issue of *The Political Quarterly* in 2019.³ Here they argue, from what they call a 'political demography' point of view, that the high salience of the immigration issue in European politics around 2015 certainly had an effect on political behaviour, but that the surge of right-leaning populist parties can't be attributed to 'a rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment in Europe'. On the contrary, 'the notion that European electorates are turning against immigration is not evidenced by survey research'. In a comparative study of fourteen European countries, using European Social Survey (ESS) data, Dennison and Geddes find that between 2002 and 2016, attitudes to accepting immigrants 'from poorer countries outside Europe' became more positive in ten countries, did not change in two and turned more negative only in two.

Hence, as concluded in this article, the recent surge of right-leaning populism in the most advanced liberal democracies of Europe is probably best understood as a political reaction against an increasing bipartisanship where 'disruptor' populist parties—with anti-immigration and anti-establishment arguments and attitudes—have managed to stand out as the right parties in the right place at the right time.

Growing support for right-leaning populist parties in Europe

The number of Europeans voting for populist parties in national elections has surged from an average of 7 per cent to more than 25 per cent since the turn of the century. Twenty years ago, only two European countries—Slovakia and Switzerland—had populist parties in government, whereas today eleven countries do. As noted by Jon Henley

in *The Guardian*, 'the number of Europeans ruled by a government with at least one populist in cabinet has increased from 12.5 million to 170 million. This has been blamed on everything from recession to migration, social media to globalization'.⁴

But if these are the main causes of rising populism, how can right-leaning populist parties do so well in the economically most developed and equal democracies in Europe, countries with high and abiding levels of trust in their governmental institutions? And why now and not earlier? To answer these questions, the focus of this article is on eight countries in which right-leaning populist parties won more than 10 per cent of the votes in the last national parliamentary election up to 2018, and where the traditional cleavage between conservative and social democratic parties—that is, the right-left political cleavage traditionally expressed as a conflict between capital and labour in European countries—has been the most dominant schism historically.

Listed from the party with the highest outcome of votes in the last national election recorded before the end of 2018, the parties included in this analysis are: the Freedom Party in Austria which got 26 per cent in 2017; the Danish People's Party which got 21.1 per cent in Denmark in 2015; the League which got 17.7 per cent in Italy in 2018; the Finns who received 17.7 per cent in Finland in 2015; the Sweden Democrats who got 17.5 per cent in Sweden in 2018; the Progress Party which received 15.2 per cent in Norway in 2017; the Freedom Party which got 13.1 per cent in the Netherlands in 2017; and Alternative for Germany which received 12.6 per cent in Germany in 2017.⁵

Figure 1 below, shows the electoral support of these right-leaning populist parties in the last four elections to the national parliaments, except for Germany and Sweden where they have participated only in the last two parliamentary elections. As we can see from this figure, right-leaning populist parties have strengthened their support in all eight countries between the two last elections, except that is for Finland and Norway where they held executive power prior to the elections.

Many countries with strong and popular right-leaning populist parties are not included in my analysis, owing to the defining criteria stated above. We can divide

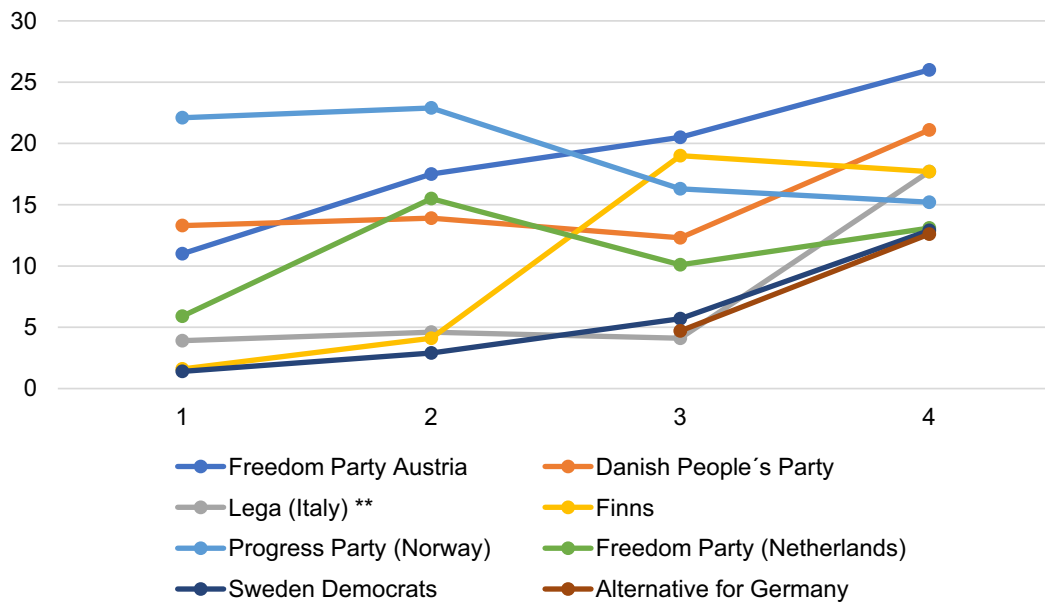


Figure 1: Support for right-leaning populist parties in Europe 2003–2018 (per cent)*

*The countries are chosen from a definition based on three characteristics: (1) parties to the right of parties in the Group of European People's Parties (EPP Group) in the European Parliament, (2) those which got more than 10 per cent of the votes in the last parliamentary election, and (3) those where the political cleavage between capital and labour, the right-left-axis in European politics, has produced what could be called traditional conservative and Christian democratic parties. The elections referred to as 1–4 are: Austria (06, 08, 13, 17), Denmark (05, 07, 11, 15), Italy (06, 08, 13, 18), Finland (03, 07, 11, 15), Norway (05, 09, 13, 17), Netherlands (06, 10, 12, 17), Sweden (10, 14), and Germany (13, 17).

**Lega is a continuation of the regional independence party Lega Nord, chaired by Umberto Bossi, who wanted to establish an independent northern Italian state under the name of Padania. Today's party leader, Matteo Salvini, has taken the party in a more nationalistic direction with stronger scepticism towards the EU than under Bossi.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2017), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), *New York Times* (2017), Norwegian Centre for Research Data (2018), and the parliaments of the eight countries (see end note 5 for all table source details).

the excluded countries and their right-leaning populist parties into three groups.

The first group consists of countries with parties left out because they got less than 10 per cent of the votes in the last national parliamentary election up to the end of 2018: the United Patriots in Bulgaria (9.1 per cent in 2017); ELAM in Cyprus (3.7 per cent in 2016); Golden Dawn in Greece (7 per cent in 2015); Our Slovakia in Slovakia (8 per cent in 2016); and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK. UKIP got 12.6 per cent of the vote in the 2015 parliamentary election but only 1.8 per cent in the 2017 election.

The second group is made up of two important right-leaning populist parties which are not on this list because the focus is on parliamentary elections. In France, presidential candidate Marine Le Pen from the National Front got 33.9 per cent of the votes in the second round of the presidential election in spring 2017, but her party received only 8.75 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary election later that year. Then there is Switzerland, where the Swiss People's Party amassed 29.4 per cent of the vote in the 2015 federal election, but the power-sharing system of government in Switzerland disqualifies it for a comparison of parliamentary democracies.

The third and final group of countries with right-leaning populist parties excluded here are those without the traditional political cleavage between centre-right and centre-left duopolies. These are all democracies that developed after the fall of the Berlin Wall thirty years ago. They are characterised by other political divisions from those in the older liberal democracies of Europe. These parties are: Freedom and Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic with 11.3 per cent support in 2017; the Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ) with 38.5 per cent of the vote; Jobbik with a 19.5 per cent vote share in Hungary in 2018; the National Alliance in Latvia with 16.6 per cent in 2014; and the Law and Justice Party in Poland with 37.6 per cent support in 2015.

Furthermore, it should be noted that populism is often linked to what has become known as the radical right, but radical right can also mean anti-democratic movements and parties, and such parties are not included here. Neither are left-leaning populist parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, even though their electoral success in the period under investigation has brought to the surface a more traditional understanding of populism that might fit today's definition of populism better than much of the theoretical literature on radical right parties.

How to understand populism?

In the book *What is Populism?*, Jan-Werner Müller argues that the core of populism is the rejection of pluralism, since populists, whether to the left or right, claim that they and they alone represent 'the people' and its true interests.⁶ Müller's argument is further developed by Cas Mudde, who sees today's populism as based on a view that considers society to be ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', with populists arguing that 'politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'.⁷ Still, populist politicians almost always combine this view of representing the general will of the people with other ideologies, such as nativism on the right and socialism on the left, and until quite recently, the consensus among European elites was therefore that populism is

inherently bad. But, as noted by Mudde, the relationship between populism and liberal democracy 'is complex and includes the good, the bad and the ugly'.⁸

It's good when it brings to the fore issues that voters care about, but the political elites keep off the agenda. In Europe lately, such concerns have been immigration for the right-leaning populist parties and austerity for those on the left—both blaming Brussels (shorthand for the European Union) or national politicians in favour of EU membership—for the misery of their own country. Of course, such views don't have to be supported by the political elites, but in an advanced democracy, they have to be respected as a legitimate part of an open debate about the basic rules of an inclusive liberal pluralism. Often, however, it's the other way around. As Mudde shows us, 'In many cases political elites have worked hand in glove with cultural and economic elites, leaving virtually no space for democratic opposition' and/or they have excluded 'controversial areas from the democratic process altogether by putting independent, technocratic institutions in charge (such as the courts or central banks)'.⁹

This might have given populists a legitimate right to argue that the elites have behaved in the same way they accuse the populists of doing when they reject the legitimacy of political opponents. Hence, a more rounded way of conceptualising populist parties could be as a vehicle for an ideology, strategy and type of communication which, both on the left and right, is rooted in a legitimate disruptive scepticism towards the political establishment of highly institutionalised European welfare states; an establishment defined by the quest of centre-right and centre-left parties to please the median middle class voter. As Anders Ravik Jupskås argues, populists crave a more participatory democracy and the use of referendums as a check and balance against bipartisan politics.¹⁰ These predispositions clearly separate them from extremist parties on the left and right, which, as noted above, are often anti-democratic and willing to use violence to promote their political ideas.

What Mudde calls the 'main bad' about populism is its monist and moralist ideology, which denies the existence of divisions of

interests and opinions within 'the people'. But what's the difference between populists claiming that they are the *vox populi*—the voice of all people—and the gridlocked centre-left and centre-right duopoly of liberal democracies which might sidestep important issues for large parts of the electorate? An uncompromising stand from political elites toward the right-leaning populist parties can only lead to a polarised political culture, 'in which non-populists turn into anti-populists', argues Mudde, and result in a situation where populism can turn ugly if it gets into power.¹¹

If we look for some common traits of right-leaning populist parties in today's Europe, seven similarities stand out. These parties: (1) criticise societal elites, in particular what they see as an integrated and anti-popular political elite; (2) claim to represent 'the people' versus 'the elite'; (3) are protectionist and hostile to immigration; (4) are critical of minority politics; (5) use rhetorical arguments which are at times extremely value-laden and biased, always blaming someone else for popular misery; (6) are nationally-minded and willing to use nationalistic rhetoric and propaganda to win votes; and (7) are against the European Union and their country's membership of the EU. It is, however, important to note that, even though many of the right-leaning populist parties in Europe fit most of the seven criteria listed above, this doesn't mean they all look the same.

There is, for instance, a big difference between the Progress Party in Norway, which at present is part of a centre-right coalition government made up of the conservative party *Høyre*, the liberal party *Venstre* and the Christian democratic party *Kristelig Folkeparti*, and Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands when it comes to their views on immigration and the rhetoric they employ. Wilders' party, which is a strange construction insofar as it is made up of only one person—Geert Wilders himself—has a much harsher way of attacking immigrants, particularly immigrants from outside Europe, than the Norwegian Progress Party, although individual politicians in the Progress Party can at times say things about immigrants that the leadership of the party, or the other parties in the government coalition it is part of, strongly condemn. But all

the eight right-leaning populist parties included in this analysis have, both in their party programmes and political rhetoric, an essentially anti-immigration approach.¹²

In the party programme of the Austrian Freedom Party it is, for instance, stated that 'Austria is not a country of immigration', and in the programme of the Danish People's Party that 'Denmark is not an immigrant-country and never has been'. In Italy, the Lega uses an election poster with the clear message *Stop Invasione* (Stop the Invasion) and in Finland the Finns produced a video for the European Parliament election campaign this spring in which they argued:

There's been a growth of many large nationalist and patriotic parties that have even formed governments. It's been a case of people being fed up with the inability of traditional political parties to solve the challenges facing Europe—with the most serious problem being the immigration crisis.

A similar criticism, which sums up much of the argument presented here about right-leaning parties being a disruptive element in today's bipartisan political environment, is presented by the Sweden Democrats in their 'view on the political situation':

For a long time, we were the only ones who warned of the problems created by the other parties. We warned of the emergence of areas of alienation, the rise in aggravated sexual assaults, organized crimes, human trafficking, honour violence, religious extremism, and galloping migration expenses—while the welfare has been wrecked. We warned at an early stage, but the other parties chose not to listen. For you as a voter, it hasn't mattered which political bloc you voted for—in the end they have made the same wrong priorities. To them, the crisis became an actuality only when their poll numbers dropped.

The tone of the Norwegian Progress Party is a bit more moderate as regards the criticism of the other political parties, but here too, immigration is linked to the development of the welfare state:

To ensure sustainable public services, Norway needs to rethink its immigration policies. For too long, Norway has admitted

more and more immigrants without thinking about the strain on integration policies and public services. The Progress Party is the only party that takes this challenge seriously and wants a fair and sustainable immigration policy.

In the Netherlands, we are back to a much tougher anti-immigration attitude with Geert Wilder's Freedom Party arguing that, 'Millions of Dutch citizens have simply had enough of the Islamization of our country. Enough of mass immigration and asylum, terror, violence and insecurity'. While in Germany, the Alternative for Germany, also argues that 'Germany is by no means a classic immigration country, least of all a target of mass migration as seen in 2015'—and makes it clear that, 'The topics of asylum and immigration are characterized by an ideologically-biased climate of political correctness'.

Does immigration spark right-leaning populism?

The most common explanation of why right-leaning populist parties in Europe have been on the rise over recent decades, is immigration. Or, to be more accurate maybe, what the authorial board of the International Association for Political Science Students calls *the rhetoric* of immigration:

the rise of populists in Europe is not really about immigrant numbers. It is about the rhetoric of immigration which exploits pre-existing social and economic inequalities to exacerbate fear and anger. Dealing with populism requires fixing these underlying structural problems ... Therefore, politicians should focus more on helping those left behind by globalization and technological change by making growth inclusive rather than decreasing immigration arrivals.¹³

The rhetoric of immigration seems to spark right-leaning populism, but it does not necessarily manifest a political cleavage on its own. As James Dennison and Andrew Geddes tell us, right-leaning populist parties have benefitted from a sharp increase in the salience of immigration amongst some voters, but aspects of immigration have in the last decade activated pre-existing opposition

to immigration amongst a shrinking segment of western European publics:

There is little evidence that there is a rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment sweeping across Europe. Rather, while there are important forms of variation, such as those between countries, attitudes to migration are remarkably stable and have actually become gradually more positive to immigration from outside and within the EU over the last decade. What matters more to voting, as we show, is the high salience of the immigration issue around 2015 and the effects of this salience on political behaviour.¹⁴

Dennison and Geddes are sceptical of those who put too much emphasis on the rhetoric of immigration and strong causal effects of negative media coverage on the rise of right-leaning populist parties in Europe. What they argue is that attitudes to migration, like attitudes to other political issues, 'are primarily formed relatively early in life and linked to key formative experiences such as education. Once established, they are difficult to shift, and are not formed and re-formed on a daily basis by various types of media coverage'.¹⁵ Hence, as we can see from Figure 2, which is based on survey data from Standard Eurobarometers 2013–2018, there was a high salience of the immigration issue around 2015, but its importance seems to have faded as the number of immigrants has gone down and many parties other than the right-leaning populist parties have adjusted their rhetoric and policies on immigration to accommodate demands from lost voters.

It should be noted, however, that the numbers in Figure 2 are based on answers given by citizens of the EU who see immigration as one of the two most important issues facing their own country. When asked the same question concerning the two most important issues facing the EU (except for 2009, when their own country was used), the numbers are quite different. As can be seen from Figures 3–6 (second column), the importance of immigration as one of the two most important political issues for the EU has clearly gone up in all countries over the last decade (Norway is not part of the Eurobarometer and therefore omitted on this variable). So has the support for right-

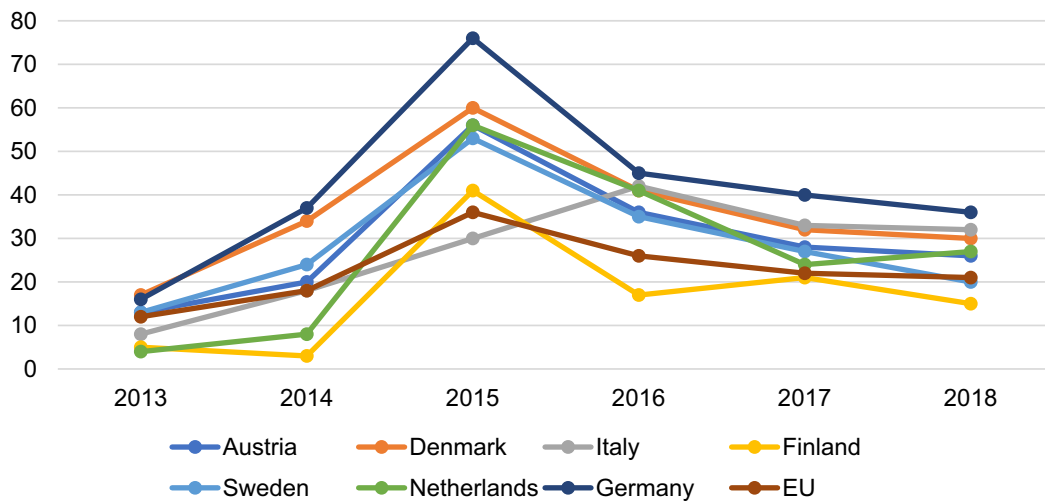


Figure 2: Citizens who see immigration as one of the two most important issues facing their country, Autumn 2013–2018 (per cent)
 Source: Standard Eurobarometers 80, 82, 84, 86, 88, and 90 (autumn 2013–2018). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

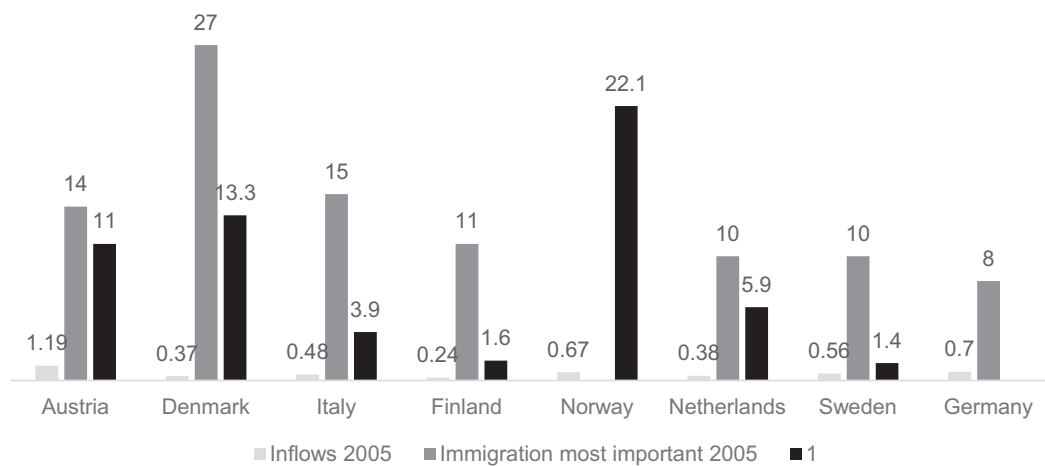


Figure 3: Total inflow of foreign citizens as percentage of total population (2005), immigration seen as one of two most important issues for the EU (2005), and support for right-leaning populist party in closest election around 2005 (per cent)*
 *The parliamentary elections were held in Austria 2006, Denmark 2005, Italy 2006, Finland 2003, Norway 2005, and Netherlands 2006. The Sweden Democrats and Alternative for Germany did not run for election in this round. Norway is not included in Eurobarometer surveys. Source: OECD.Stat (2019), Eurostat (2009), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2017), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), *New York Times* (2017), Norwegian Centre for Research Data (2018), and the parliaments of the eight countries.

leaning political parties between the last two elections recorded here (third column), with, as noted earlier, the exception of Finland

and Norway where the right-leaning populist parties were in government before the last elections recorded here.

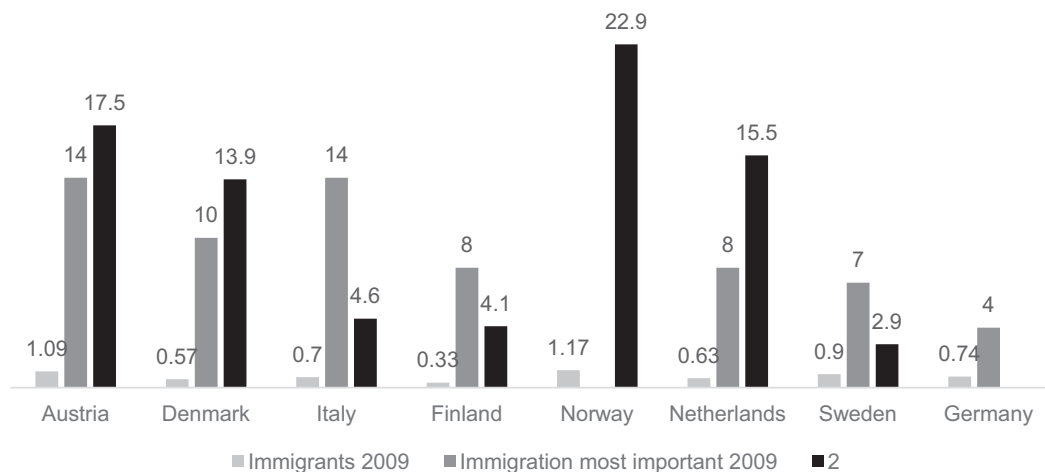


Figure 4: Total inflow of foreign citizens as per cent of total population (2009), immigration seen as one of two most important issues for 'your country' (2009),* and support for right-leaning populist party in closest election around 2009 (per cent)**

*Figures from the Eurobarometer on immigration seen as one of two most important issues were in the 2009 Standard Eurobarometer directed towards 'your country' and not 'the EU'.

** The parliamentary elections were held in Austria 2008, Denmark 2007, Italy 2008, Finland 2007, Norway 2009, and Netherlands 2010. The Sweden Democrats and Alternative for Germany did not run for election in this round. Norway is not included in Eurobarometer surveys. Source: OECD.Stat (2019), Eurostat (2009), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2017), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), *New York Times* (2017), Norwegian Centre for Research Data (2018), and the parliaments of the eight countries.

Issue salience and the rhetoric of immigration can probably explain much of this, but what about the actual number of immigrants coming to these countries? Does an increase in the number of immigrants make people more concerned about immigration as a political issue and hence incline them to vote for right-leaning populist parties with a clear anti-immigration message?

If we look at the first column in Figures 3–6, which illustrates the total inflow of foreign citizens per year as per cent of total population in the eight countries—that is, all kinds of immigrants from those seeking asylum to people with temporary working permits and their family members—the percentage is quite low but increasing from 2005 to 2017 in all countries except for Italy and Norway.

On average, there has been an increase in the per cent of total inflow of foreign citizens to these countries from 0.57 in 2005, 0.76 in 2009, 0.81 in 2013 to 1.17 in 2016, with a variation in 2016 between Italy with 0.43 per cent at the bottom and Germany with 2.08

per cent at the top. Whether there is a causal relationship between increased inflow and growing support for right-leaning political parties is of course not easy to say, but there seems to be a correlation between the three variables in Figures 3–6 indicating that—with a rising number of immigrants—people get more concerned about immigration as a political issue for the EU and the number of people who vote for right-leaning populist parties with a strong anti-immigrant attitude increases. But there might be other explanations for the rise in support for right-leaning populist parties in these countries.

Can increased inequality explain the growth of right-leaning populism?

After the French economics professor Thomas Piketty published his book *Capital in the 21st Century* in 2013, the issue of rising populism has increasingly been linked to a

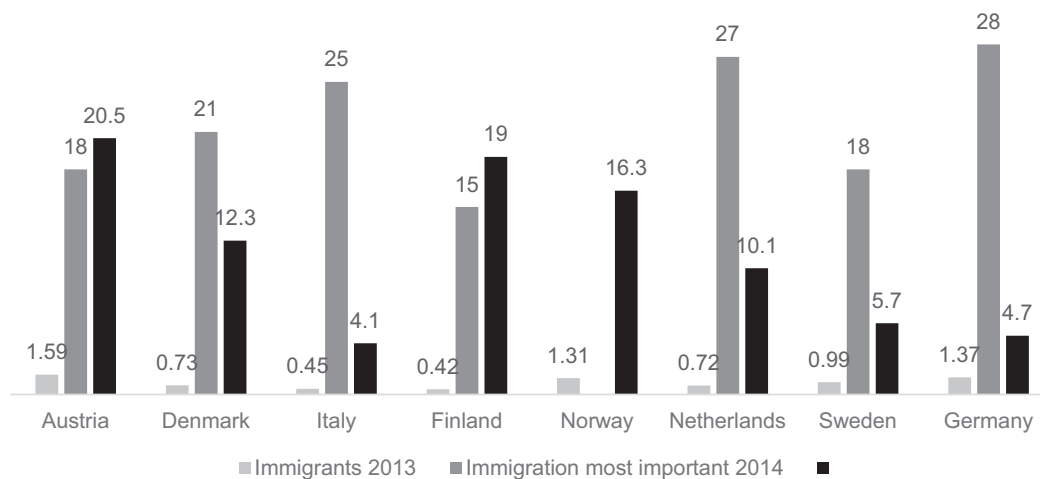


Figure 5: Total inflow of foreign citizens as percentage of total population (2013), immigration seen as one of two most important issues for the EU (2014),* and support for right-leaning populist party in closest election around 2013 (per cent)**

*Figures from the Eurobarometer on immigration seen as one of two most important issues are for 2009 based on the same question as taken from EB 81, July 2014, since this question was not asked in the Standard Eurobarometer in 2013.

**The parliamentary elections were held in Austria 2013, Denmark 2011, Italy 2013, Finland 2011, Norway 2013, Netherlands 2012, Sweden 2010, and Germany 2013. Norway is not included in Eurobarometer surveys.

Source: OECD.Stat (2019), Eurostat (2009), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2017), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), *New York Times* (2017), Norwegian Centre for Research Data (2018), and the parliaments of the eight countries.

discussion about growing economic inequality in liberal democracies.¹⁶ The main argument, particularly promoted by the political left, has been that economic inequality has risen as a result of a neoliberal turn in Western welfare states in the 1970s and '80s, which jeopardised the traditional political compromise between left and right—labour and capital—through a limitless belief in globalisation and free market ideology, and as such paved the way for populist movements.

Even though right-leaning populism has been on the rise in some of the countries scrutinised here since the 1970s and '80s, it is however difficult to find empirical support for this argument since the surge for right-leaning populist parties has come after the turn of the century, and for most people life has improved remarkably in these countries over recent decades. As can be seen from Table 1, these eight countries are among the most successful welfare states in the world,

where the inequality between rich and poor is at its lowest and gross domestic product per capita in purchasing power parity at its highest.

If we go to the first column of Table 1, the Gini coefficient—the most common way to measure inequality—shows that, in 2016, seven of the eight countries with strong right-leaning populist parties were better off than the average of the EU pertaining to inequality. Italy is the exception, with a Gini coefficient at 33.1 compared to the EU average of 30.8 (0 would be full equality; 1 full inequality). If we compare 2016—which is the latest year we have comparable figures—with 2008, Austria, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands and Germany have in fact become more equal, while Denmark, Italy, and Sweden have experienced the reverse trend.

The Gini coefficient is not the only way of measuring inequality, however, and it does not say anything about the experience of low

or moderate income/wealth groups when it comes to the effects of increasing inequality in an affluent welfare state society. But controlled for two other factors of inequality, we see from column two and three very much the same tendencies as those pertaining to the Gini coefficient, although in column two Norway and Germany are in the same camp as Denmark and Sweden, while Austria goes the other way.

In the third column, we measure changes in living standards in the eight countries, and see that they have become worse in Austria, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany, but improved in Finland, Norway and Sweden. Put together, however, the three columns do not give us any clear indications of which countries should have a special reason for favouring right-leaning populist parties—barring maybe Italy—if growing inequality has anything to do with it. With the exception of Italy, compared to the EU average, all these countries have higher GDP/capita measured in purchasing power parities at constant prices, as can be seen from column four in Table 1.

What about system de-legitimation—can that explain right-leaning populism?

As we have seen above, one of the main characteristics of right-leaning populist parties is their idea that society is ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, with populists arguing that politics should be an expression of the (general) will of the people. It should be expected therefore that right-leaning populist parties would gain more support in countries where people don’t trust societal institutions than where they do. But this is not the case if we look at the figures in Table 2.

What we see here is that—again with Italy as an exception—in all these countries, citizens have a much higher trust in the political and judicial system of their country (columns 1 and 2) than the EU average. Furthermore, trust went up in all countries, even in Italy, from 2016 to 2017, which is surprising when we consider the strong pressure the refugee situation in 2015 put on

immigration authorities and the political and legal institutions of many European countries in 2016 and 2017. Moving to column 4, this is based on an index of eight variables and shows us that people also have strong confidence in institutions related to the rule of law and democratic decision making in the eight countries.

Finally, when we discuss the degree of trust in political and legal institutions, we should also—as in column 3—look at a variable such as solidarity. Here the Netherlands is the exception when it comes to comparisons with the EU average. We do not have figures for Norway unfortunately, but for the other Nordic countries there is a strong feeling of solidarity both compared to the EU average and in general. This is particularly true for Denmark and Sweden, and to a certain extent Finland, while a country like Germany has a quite low score, although higher than the EU average. Furthermore, Germany is the only country in which citizens became less trusting from 2016 to 2017, with a decrease of 3 percentage points.

We might be tempted to explain this in light of the refugee situation in 2015, when the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, said Germans should open their arms and hearts for one million refugees, while the party Alternative for Germany argued the opposite and surged in the opinion polls. But Sweden also took in many immigrants in 2015 and the Sweden Democrats increased their support considerably, yet this hasn’t influenced the strong feeling of solidarity amongst Swedes. In 2017, 93 per cent saw solidarity as positive in Sweden, while only 82 per cent did so in Germany—although both were above the 79 per cent EU average. In Sweden there was even a growth of 6 percentage points from the year before, while Germany was the only one of these countries where people became more negative towards solidarity from 2016 to 2017 (a reduction of 2 percentage points).

Bipartisanship seems to play an important role

As we can see from Table 3, all the eight countries scrutinised here have either had a centre-right, centre-left or grand coalition in

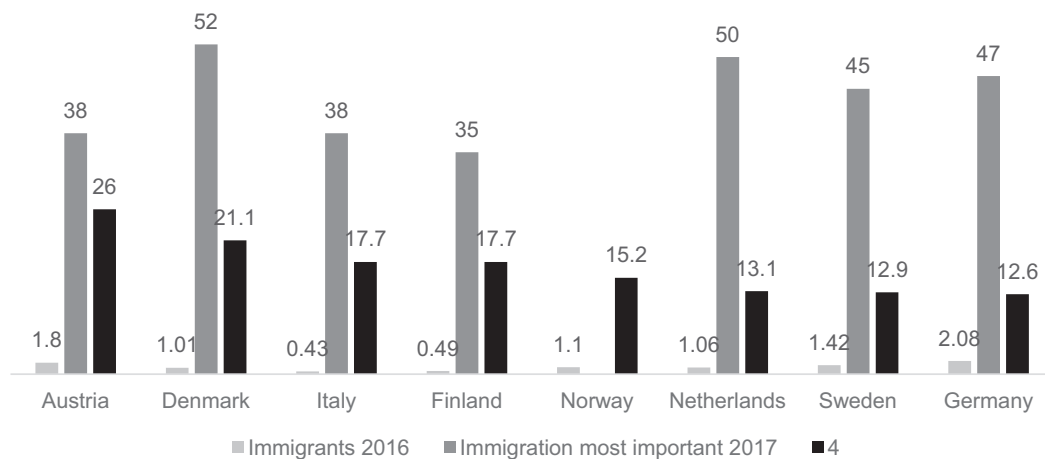


Figure 6: Total inflow of foreign citizens as per cent of total population (2016),* immigration seen as one of two most important issues (2017), and support for right-leaning populist party in closest election around 2017 (per cent)**

*Figures for total inflows from 2016 are divided as per the country's population in 2017.

**The parliamentary elections were held in Austria 2017, Denmark 2015, Italy 2018, Finland 2015, Norway 2017, Netherlands 2017, Sweden 2014, and Germany 2017. Norway is not included in Eurobarometer surveys.

Source: OECD.Stat (2019), Eurostat (2009), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2017), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018), *New York Times* (2017), Norwegian Centre for Research Data (2018), and the parliaments of the eight countries.

government in the last elections prior to the recent success of right-leaning populist parties. We might not be able to determine a causal relationship, but increased support of right-leaning populist parties correlates with the presence of a more bipartisan political landscape along the lines of Anthony Downs' argument that when competing parties start formulating policy to gain votes in the political centre, rather than seeking to gain votes in order to carry out certain pre-conceived policies, voters start looking for alternatives and the electorate is polarised.

We see this in many European countries today: traditional conservative and Christian democratic parties on the right resemble more and more their social democratic opponents on the left and vice versa. Broadly speaking, conservative parties have become more socially liberal while social democratic parties have become more market friendly, and parties to the right and left of them are growing while the electoral basis of the established parties along the left-right political division is being eroded. This is certainly true for social democratic parties, which

have in particular experienced a marked decline since the 2008 financial crisis. Conservative parties, though, have not been so badly affected.

There are many reasons for this, such as societal structural changes, declining party identification, and the evolution of new political demarcations. In the 1960s and '70s, a realignment from materialistic to post-materialistic values in the electorate changed voting patterns in most liberal democracies, while deregulation, reregulation and privatisation of public services had the same effect when they dominated the political agenda in the 1980s and '90s. Today, conflicting views on globalisation, immigration and questions related to integration of immigrants are heavily discussed, particularly in advanced liberal democracies.

There is a certain irony to this, since the success of the rights-based welfare state seems to have stripped the established parties of mobilising issues for a better society and forced them instead to pursue a Downsian catch-all strategy, emphasising the importance of the median voter's rational

Table 1: Does increasing inequality lead to right-leaning populism?

	Gini coefficient 2008–2016* (EU 31.0–30.8)	Highest 20/ lowest 20 share of income % 2007–2015 (OECD 5.5–5.5)	Change in living standards % 2008–2012***	GDP/capita PPP constant pricesUSD thousand 2008–2016 (EU 34–35)
AUSTRIA 2017				
Freedom Party 26.0 %	27.7–27.2	4.4–4.2	–0.6	43.1–43.1
DENMARK 2015				
Danish People’s Party 21.1 %	25.1–27.7	3.4–3.6	–1.3	44.9–45.0
ITALY 2018				
Lega 17.7 %	31.2–33.1	5.2–5.9	–7.6	36.5–33.5
FINLAND 2015				
Finns 17.7 %	26.3–25.4	3.9–3.7	0.8	41.4–38.5
SWEDEN 2018				
Sweden Democrats 17,5 %	25.1–27.6	3.9–4.2	5.9	42.1–45.1
NORWAY 2017				
Progress Party 15.2 %	25.1–25.0	3.7–4.1	8.7	60.1–59.7
NETHERLANDS 2017				
Freedom Party 13.1 %	27.6–26.9	4.6–4.6	–3.7	46.1–46.3
GERMANY 2017				
Alternative for Germany 12,6 %	30.2–29.5	4,3–4,4	–0.7	40.4–43.1

The Gini coefficient provides an index to measure inequality. It is measured between 0, where everybody is equal, and 1, where all the country’s income is owned by a single person.

**The average distribution of income between the 20 per cent highest and the 20 per cent lowest incomes: increasing value means increasing inequality.

***Based on what is called ‘median equivalised disposable income’, that is, the total income of a household, after tax and other deductions that are available for spending or saving, divided by the number of household members converted into equalised adults; household members are equalised or made equivalent by weighting each according to their age, using the so-called modified OECD equivalence scale. Sources: Eurostat 2018, OECD 2018, Eurostat 2018, and OECD.stat 2018.¹⁷

choice of which party to support. This is probably so because the rights-based and highly institutionalised welfare states of today’s liberal democracies are first and foremost a result of the political mobilisation of a middle class which seems not to be very interested in issues such as economic dislocation in a globalised economy and the demographic changes that—at least according to the right-leaning populist parties—challenge the traditional values of the culturally homogenous European nation states and their deep-rooted Christian/social democratic ideologies.

From a political demography point of view, immigration might frighten marginalised voters who fail to catch up with the structural changes in the labour market owing to globalisation, and a high density of foreigners in certain areas of these societies might induce cultural alienation. This again might spur such voters to support disruptor right-leaning

populist parties in opposition to what they see as an increasingly affluent middle class elite, created and nourished by the centre-right and centre-left political duopoly.

Conclusion

More research on right-leaning populist parties is needed to say anything conclusive about why they have recently become so popular in the most advanced liberal democracies in Europe. But it seems that as the established political parties (which used to mobilise voters along the traditional political cleavage between right and left, capital and labour) have become more like catch-all parties striving for a place in the political centre through the formation of centre-right, centre-left or grand coalition governments, populist political parties have substantially increased their support to the right and left of them, and opened up a kind of disruption in the

Table 2: Does lack of trust in political and judicial institutions lead to right-leaning populism?

	Trust in political system 2017 and change from 2016 (EU 40%/+9%)	Trust in legal system 2017 and change from 2016 (EU 52%/+1%)	Very and fairly positive to solidarity 2017 and change from 2016 (EU 79%/+2)	Trust in judicial and democratic institutions, score/scale (0–1), 2014–2017*
AUSTRIA 2017 Freedom Party 26.0 %	60 (+20)	77 (+4)	83 (+9)	7/.83–8/.81
DENMARK 2015 Danish People's Party 21.1 %	60 (+14)	86 (+2)	87 (+4)	1/.89–1/.89
ITALY 2018 Lega 17.7 %	27 (+12)	41 (+10)	80 (+5)	35/.64–31/.65
FINLAND 2015 Finns 17.7 %	66 (+8)	85 (+1)	85 (+2)	3/.87–3/.87
SWEDEN 2018 Sweden Democrats 17.5 %	72 (+16)	78 (+6)	93 (+6)	4/.86
NORWAY 2017 Progress Party 15.2 %	-	-	-	2/.88–2/.89
NETHERLANDS 2017 Freedom Party 13.1 %	78 (+19)	83 (+4)	67 (+6)	5/.85
GERMANY 2017 Alternative for Germany 12,6 %	64 (+13)	72 (+3)	82 (-3)	60/.83

The index is made up of eight factors based on single questions asked to a random sample of respondents. The eight factors are: (1) constraints on government powers; (2) absence of corruption; (3) open government; (4) fundamental rights; (5) order & safety; (6) regulatory enforcement; (7) civil justice; and (8) criminal justice. Surveys conducted in the following years: Austria 2014 and 2017, Denmark 2014 and 2017, Italy 2014 and 2017, Finland 2014 and 2017, Sweden 2016, Norway 2014 and 2017, Netherlands 2016 and Germany 2016. Source: Column 1–3 from Eurostat (2017) and Column 4 from World Justice Project (2018).¹⁸

bipartisanship of the countries scrutinised here.

Increased immigration does seem to be a valid explanation for the surge in support for right-leaning populist parties disrupting this bipartisanship. The high salience of the immigration issue in European politics around 2015 certainly had an effect on the political behaviour of the electorates of these countries. At a time of external pressure, the right-leaning populist parties—at least according to themselves—stood out as a political alternative to ‘carry out certain pre-conceived policies’, rather than formulating policy ‘strictly as a means of gaining votes’, as Anthony Downs once put it. And as such, they seem successfully to mobilise voters who view them as a trustworthy alternative to the centre-right and centre-left duopoly—at least in these eight liberal democracies.

With reference to Dennison and Geddes, I call this a *political demography* explanation for the surge of right-leaning populist parties in advanced democracies in Europe. It shares similarities with the cultural backlash theory advanced particularly by William A. Galston. But its main idea is that, rather than a broad cultural or structural change in the views of the voters on immigration in general, the salience of the issue of immigration at a time of increasing bipartisanship amongst the established political parties of the centre-right and centre-left duopoly is probably the pivotal factor.

Vera Messing and Bence SÁgvári have mapped European attitudes towards migration both before and after the urgent migrant situation in Europe in 2015 by using the same data set as Dennison and Geddes. Their conclusion is that ‘right-wing populist

Table 3: Type of government in the four previous elections

AUSTRIA 2017	2016	2013	2008	2007
Freedom Party 26.0 %	Grand coalition	Grand coalition	Grand coalition	Grand coalition
DENMARK 2015	2014	2011	2009	2007
Danish People's Party 21.1 %	Centre-left	Centre-left	Centre-right	Centre-right
ITALY 2018	2016	2014	2013	2011
Lega 17.7 %	Grand coalition	Grand coalition	Grand coalition	Technocratic
FINLAND 2015	2014	2011	2010	2007
Finns 17.7 %	Grand coalition	Grand coalition	Blue-green	Blue-green
SWEDEN 2018	2014	2010	2006	2002
Sweden	Red-green	Centre-right	Centre-right	Social Democrats
Democrats 17.5 %				
NORWAY 2017	2013	2009	2005	2001
Progress Party 15.2 %	Right	Red-green	Red-green	Centre-right
NETHERLANDS 2017	2012	2012	2011	2010
Freedom Party 13.1 %	Centre-left	Centre-right	Centre-right	Right
GERMANY 2017	2013	2009	2005	2002
Alternative for Germany 12.6 %	Grand coalition	Centre-right	Grand coalition	Red-green

Source: Parliaments and governments database 2018.¹⁹

parties gather and feed on that part of the population which is very negative towards migrants and migration in general'. What Messing and SÁgvári also found, however, is that 'the level to which negative perceptions of migration result in (unconditional) rejection is a function of the general norms characteristic of the country, and are brought about by political and media discourses, historical experiences and dominant social values'.²⁰ In addition to that, we might argue that the degree to which anti-migrant narratives are allowed to become the norm within a society seems to depend also on the 'rhetoric space' the mainstream centre-right and centre-left political parties are willing to give to right-leaning populist parties and their arguments in the political debate.

Notes

- 1 W. A. Galston, 'The populist challenge to liberal democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2018, pp. 5–19, p. 8.
- 2 A. Downs, 'An economic theory of political action in a democracy', *The Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1957, pp. 135–150, p. 137.
- 3 J. Dennison and A. Geddes, 'A rising tide? The salience of immigration and the rise of anti-immigration political parties in Western Europe', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 1, January–March 2019, pp. 107–116.
- 4 J. Henley, 'How populism emerged as an electoral force in Europe', *The Guardian*, 20 November 2018; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/how-populism-emerged-as-electoral-force-in-europe> (accessed 28 July 2019).
- 5 There was a parliamentary election in Finland on 14 April 2019, in which the Finns got 17.48 per cent of the votes, down from 17.7 per cent. This election is not included in the analyses of this article, since the government negotiations were not finished when this article was completed. Election results and information about governments and other data in this article are put together from a variety of sources: *The European Election and Referendum Data at the Norwegian Social Science Data Archives* (http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_data_base/about/about_data.html), *Election Guide from The International Foundation for Electoral Systems* (<http://www.electionguide.org/p/about/>), *Parline database on national parliaments from the Inter-Parliamentary Union* (<http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp>), and G. Aisch, A. Pearce, and B. Rousseau, 'How Far Is Europe Swinging to the Right?', *New York Times* 23 October 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html> (all accessed 20 March 2018). International Migration Database by OECD.Stat (<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=MIG>) (accessed 1 August 2019).
- 6 J. W. Müller, *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania University Press, 2016.

- 7 C. Mudde, 'The problem with populism', *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/17/problem-populism-syriza-podemos-dark-side-europe> (accessed 18 August 2018)
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 A. Ravik Jupskås, 'Høyrepopulisme er langt fra høyreekstremisme', *Dagbladet*, 29 September 2011; <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/hoyrepopulisme-er-langt-fra-hoyreekstremisme/63504727> (accessed 15 January 2018).
- 11 Mudde, 'The problem with populism'.
- 12 The following part of this article is based on information taken from the home pages of the eight parties: Austria: <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/partieprogramm/partieprogramm-englisch/>; Denmark: <https://danskfolkeparti.dk/politik/in-another-languages-politics/1757-2/>; Italy: <https://www.leganord.org/stopinvasione>; Finland: <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/kielisivu/in-english/>; Sweden: <https://sd.se/english/>; Norway: <https://www.frp.no/english/>; Netherlands: <https://www.geertwilders.nl/94-english/2007-preliminary-election-program-pvv-2017-2021>; and Germany: https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf (all accessed 29 July 2019).
- 13 ADV Authorial Board, 'Immigration and the rise of European populists', 2018, *International Association for Political Science Students*, 16 November 2018; <https://iapss.org/2017/11/16/immigration-and-populists/> (accessed 30 May 2019).
- 14 Dennison and Geddes, 'A rising tide?', p. 107.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 T. Piketty, *Le Capital au XXIe siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013.
- 17 Eurostat, Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income—EU—SILC survey, Brussels, Eurostat, 2018; <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/setupDownloads.do> (accessed 23 March 2018). OECD, OECD Income Distribution Database (DD): Gini, poverty, income, Methods and Concepts, Paris, OECD, 2018; <http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm> (accessed 25 March 2018). Eurostat, File: Change in median equivalised disposable income, 2008–2018, 2018, Brussels, Eurostat, 2018; http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Change_in_median_eq_uivalised_disposable_income_2008-2012.png (accessed 25 March 2018). OECD.Stat, Level of GDP per capita and productivity, Paris, OECD, 2018; http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=PDB_LV# (accessed 26 March 2018).
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- 20 V. Messing and B. Ságvári, *Still Divided but More Open. Mapping European Attitudes Towards Migration Before and After the Migration Crisis*, Bonn & Berlin, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019, p. 39.