Course Description

In this Community Classroom course we will examine the rise of radical rightwing populist parties. Virtually all (West) European countries possess nowadays a rightwing populist party, defined as a political group that claims to represent the people against the elite and espouses nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-EU rhetoric. This course will explore why rightwing populism has spread in Europe since the early 2000s. We will compare the political dynamics in three West European countries: France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Special attention will be given to the domestic electoral system and how this enables (or not) the rise of anti-establishment challenger parties. In our final meeting, we will discuss whether Covid-19 has or will arrest the growth and appeal of rightwing populism.

Students do not need any prior knowledge.

Readings

All the readings will be made electronically available to all registered participants.

Schedule

OCTOBER 7 - Week 1: The end of the postwar settlement

After 1945, West European countries built substantial welfare states and pursued solidaristic economic policies that produced overall prosperity. In the 1990s, governments abandoned that framework and embraced neo-liberal policies that resulted in the fraying of the social safety net just when many countries experienced increased economic pressures. In the early 2000s, the EU accession of former Soviet bloc countries increased the movement of workers from east to west. The combination of small and large changes since the 2000s created a window for anti-establishment parties who campaigned against the ‘elite’, immigrants, and the European Union.


OCTOBER 14 - Week 2: France: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of the National Front/Rally

Of all the West European countries, France is the only one that has had a robust rightwing party since the late 1960s. This unit examines why France’s rightwing party has remained out of power in spite of its organizational resources and long history. The institutions of the Fifth Republic marginalized anti-establishment political actors (including the Community party) and helped suppress the appeal of the National Front/Rally. This situation has changed, however, as the traditional French parties have imploded and as the National Rally is now the main opposition party to the incumbent La République en Marche, the party of President Emmanuel Macron.


October 21 - Week 3: The Netherlands: The emergence of anti-immigrant movement

The Netherlands has a reputation of being a tolerant and liberal country. Yet in the early 2000s, a quixotic rightwing populist politician won a surprising share of the national vote, and since then, new nativist, anti-Islamic parties have popped up to promote an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim message. This unit will look at the Dutch electoral system, which incentivizes fragmentation and reconsolidation of political blocs and will trace the rise of challenger parties to a political system that prioritizes consensual, technocratic policy making.


October 28 - Week 4: Germany: the late arrival of a radical rightwing populist party

For a long time, Germany was considered “immune” to rightwing populism because of its symbolic association with Nazism. Yet with the appearance of the Alternative for Germany, the country has joined the club of liberal democracies with a nativist, anti-elitist, authoritarian political party. The support of the AfD is concentrated in the Eastern part of the country, something that has caused great concern. This week’s readings look at the German electoral system and the breakthrough of a rightwing party whose success is shaking up the German mainstream political class.


NOVEMBER 5 - Week 5: Covid-19 and the future of Europopulism

Will the covid-19 pandemic put a brake on populism as voters/citizens gain a new appreciation for experts and expertise to guide them through the storm? This final unit will argue that some populist leaders topped the ranks of incompetence, which would make us think that they will soon be its political victims. But other populist leaders have been able to exploit the pandemic to enforce illiberal laws and strengthen their power. Thus, it may be too premature to announce the death knell of populism. Moreover, the aftereffect of the pandemic will sow plenty of social and occupational divisions and could mean a repeat of 2010, which originally fueled the anti-elitist, populist movement.


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