

Book Review: The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics by John B. Judis

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Judis, John B. *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016. 182 pages. Paperback, \$12.99.

The Populist Explosion examines the historic origins of populism in the United States and Western Europe and traces their more recent upsurge to the political fallout from the Great Recession. The United States has a long history of populist politics and politicians, from William Jennings Bryan through Huey Long and George Wallace to Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan, the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump. The book opens with what populism is and when it emerges. It is a style of politics that sets the people and the establishment in conflict or competition. As a political strategy, populism is built upon a contrast between the people and a governing elite. For clarity, there is no common ideology that clearly specifies the boundary of populism—it can be left-wing or right-wing. Similarly, there is no single constituency that comprises “the people”—it can be students burdened by loan debt, blue-collar workers or the middle class, just as “the establishment” can vary from “money power” to George Wallace’s “pointy-headed intellectuals”(p. 15).

During economic recessions, many middle-and lower-middle class people are struggling, panicky, and pessimistic. In times of despair, concerned citizens feel that the major political parties have ignored or dismissed their worries, and they respond angrily with their ballots. Furthermore, the disruptive forces of technological change, globalization, and growing inequality have sparked a surge in populist politics. The rise in populism is a signal that the status quo is failing. Populist leaders often emerge during periods of prolonged social discontent that provide opportunities to challenge a dominant elite viewed as unconcerned about the interest and complaints of the governed. Tapping into growing resentments, non-establishment politicians, through campaigns appealing to citizens’ disaffection and frustration, as well as using calls for national renewal as a wooing platform, have successfully challenged the prevailing policies and institutions. Thus, in terms of their significance, populist campaigns became catalysts for political change.

In *The Populist Explosion*, John Judis traces populist agitations for political change in the United States to the People’s Party in the late nineteenth century. The party called for government to regulate and even nationalize industries, like the railroads; to reduce economic inequality created by *laissez-faire* capitalism; and to reduce the power of business corporations in influencing election outcomes. The 1920s witnessed economic boom and the domination of politics by rugged individualism. But the 1929 stock market crash and the subsequent Great Depression, which destroyed the public’s confidence in the free market, gave rise to a populist movement “Share Our Wealth Society” formed by Huey Long, former Louisiana governor and senator. Long’s campaign greatly influenced President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs concerning inequality of wealth and power. In the 1960s, George Wallace of Alabama mobilized a right-wing crusade opposed to civil rights legislation. The 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns witnessed populism from the left/center-left, championed by Ross Perot, a Texas oil billionaire and the right, steered by Pat Buchanan, a former assistant to President Reagan. They railed against free trade deals, outsourcing of manufacturing jobs overseas, immigration, and financial regulation.

More recently, from the right, the Tea Party movement in 2010 attacked President Obama's stimulus package, mortgage relief, and health care plan passed by Congress. And from the left, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) attacked Obama for not moving aggressively against Wall Street financial captains that precipitated the Great Recession. Although OWS did not have a staying power, it had a symbolic impact in terms of bringing the issue of greed and corruption of the 1 percent, as well as growing economic inequality, to the attention of the general public. In the 2016 presidential campaign, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump led populist bandwagons. On the left, Sanders attacked the billionaire class and proposed universal health care for all and free tuition in public colleges. From the right, Trump railed against legal/illegal immigration, Islamic terrorism, corporate taxes, presented himself as a voice of the "Silent Majority," and proposed building a "beautiful" wall on the US-Mexico border. While Sanders did not clinch the Democratic Party nomination, Trump, against all expectations, won the presidential election.

The rise of European populism did not begin until the 1970s and began to flourish in the 1990s. With the 1973 oil price hike and global overcapacity in key postwar industries, economic growth slowed, government revenues declined, unemployment rose, and social welfare expenditures sharply increased. Right-wing populists blamed the elite for indulging welfare recipients, communists, and immigrants. European populists have either increased their numbers in parliament or won elections as heads of governments in several countries, including Freedom Party (Austria), People's Party (Denmark), National Front (France), People's Party (Switzerland), Progress Party (Norway), and the Party for Freedom (the Netherlands). Populists expressed grave concerns about immigration, particularly Muslim immigration, Islamic terrorism, crime, and religious practices, including the treatment of women by certain immigrant groups.

In the United Kingdom, the Independence Party (UKIP) spearheaded Brexit from the European Union in 2016. EU immigration policy was a pivotal issue that energized the Yes Campaign. Although the Great Recession did not forcefully hit Northern Europe, right-wing populism predominated as a bulwark against asylum seekers. In Southern Europe, with unemployment approaching Great Depression levels, coupled with the inability of center-left and center-right parties to revive their nation's hobbled economies, left-wing populist parties gained support in Spain (Podemos), Greece (Syriza), and Italy (Five Star Movement). They channel their anger against their country's establishment or against EU headquarters in Brussels.

Judis explores populist movements in the United States and Europe with a detached examination of the origins and recent developments in what appears to be emerging political trends in populist revolts on both sides of the Atlantic. The book, although short, is a lucid and informative examination of populism on both the left and the right. Judis's writing style is easily comprehensible. *The Populist Explosion* should be recommended reading for comparative politics scholars.

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