

TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index 2017: A Summary

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The 2017 TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index is the only Europe-wide comprehensive study that aims to shed light on whether populism poses a long-term threat to European liberal democracies. The Index explores the rise of authoritarian populism in Europe by analysing electoral data from 1980 to the summer 2017.

As data show, Authoritarian-Populism has overtaken Liberalism and has now established itself as the third ideological force in European politics, behind Conservatism/Christian Democracy and Social Democracy.

Hungary, Poland and Greece are the European countries where anti-establishment parties are the strongest. At the same time, nine European countries (including seven EU Member States) have populist parties in government.

On average, around a fifth of the European electorate now vote for a left- or right-wing populist party. In other words, 55.8 million people voted for this parties during each European country's latest general elections.

Introduction

The 2017 TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index is the only Europe-wide comprehensive study that aims to shed light on whether populism poses a long-term threat to European liberal democracies. The Index, whose first edition was published in summer 2016, explores the rise of authoritarian populism in Europe by analysing electoral data from 1980 until today.

In order to better investigate the emergence of right-wing and left-wing anti-establishment parties at both the national and European level, the study includes results for all parties in all general elections. However, European Parliament elections as well as regional and local consultations are not included in the report. In total, all European countries with consolidated democratic systems – countries considered “free” by Freedom House – are included in the Index: EU-28 Member States, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Serbia and Montenegro.

What is Authoritarian-populism and why does it matter?

In the report, the term authoritarian populism is used as a collective word for the parties that challenge the so-called European consensus that has dominated the continent’s politics since the end of WW2.

Although anti-establishment parties vary greatly from each other, the study groups together these different political forces by focusing on the significant overlap in their voter base: 1) the self-image that they are in conflict with a corrupt and crony elite; 2) a lack of patience with the rule of law; 3) a demand for direct democracy; 4) the pursuit of a more powerful state through police and military on the right and nationalisation of banks and big corporations on the left; 5) highly critical of the EU, immigration, globalisation, free trade and NATO; 6) the use of revolutionary language and promises of dramatic change.

The total number of European voters who supported a populist party in their latest general elections amounts to 21.4%. In Italy, for example, over 11.4 million voters supported a populist party in 2013. In France, instead, more than 6.3 million people casted a vote in favour of either left- or right-wing anti-establishment parties during the latest Presidential elections. This equates to a vote share of 28.1%.

On average, around a fifth of the European electorate now vote for a left- or right-wing populist party. Support for these parties has increased steadily since 1980 in all European countries. However, whilst between 1980 and 2000, the average vote share of anti-establishment parties increased by only 1 percentage point, from 10.1% to 11.3%; 2016 and 2017 were their most successful years with a vote-share of 18.4%. Indeed, the 2009-2012 double-dip recession and the ongoing refugee crisis have helped authoritarian-populist parties gain momentum, attract new voters and establish themselves as a permanent threat to European liberal democracies. Looking at the last round of general elections which took place in each of the 33 European countries analysed, a total of 55.8 million people voted for these parties.

Observing these long-run trends, there are no signs that support for anti-establishment parties will decrease in the short run. More importantly, it is not even particularly likely that the percentage increase will slow down. Following the latest Dutch and French general elections, the vote share for authoritarian-populist parties increased in both countries. Between the TIMBRO 2016 Index

and this year's report, we can record a vote share increase of 6.4% in France (from 21.7% in 2016 to 28.1% in 2017) and an increase of 6.8% in The Netherlands (from 10.1% to 16.9%). Thus, despite the electoral victory of Prime Minister Mark Rutte and President Emmanuel Macron, left- and right-wing populist candidates main important gains.

The rise of the right-wing populists, the comeback of the radical left and the relative decline of mainstream ideologies

Hungary, Poland and Greece are the three countries where support for authoritarian-populist parties are the strongest.

Populist parties have the least amount of support in Malta Montenegro, Luxemburg and Iceland – interestingly, Europe's four least populous countries.

The Authoritarian Populism Index seeks to avoid the common shortcoming of focusing only on right-wing national-authoritarian parties. Contrary to the vast majority of academic research on European political trends, the TIMBRO report examines both left- and right-wing populism.

Although less strong than their right-wing counterparts, left-wing anti-establishment parties are nonetheless gaining ground. The vote share of the so-called "radical left" declined sharply between 1980 and the late 2000s, moving from a record high of 9.9% in 1981 to a record low of 3.7% in 2010. However, over the last 7 years, left-wing populist parties have made a definitive comeback and their average vote share reached 6.3% in

2017. As the 2017 Index demonstrates, in some EU Member States such as Cyprus, Italy and Spain, left-wing anti-establishment parties have now a vote share of 25.7%, 28.2% and 21.2%, respectively. In Greece, the radical left has a vote share of 45.1%, up from 12.3% in 1980.

By contrast, right-wing populist parties have seen their vote share constantly increasing between 1980 and today. Their vote share moved upwards, from a record low of 1% in 1982 to an historical high of 12.3% in 2016. However, in 2017, their vote share has stabilised at 12.1%. According to this year's TIMBRO Index, right-wing nationalist-authoritarian parties report their highest vote shares in countries like Hungary (65.2%), Poland (46.4%), Switzerland (30.8%), Austria (24%) and Denmark (21.1%).

The recent rise of left- and right-wing populist parties have also led to a decline in more centrist and mainstream ideologies. In 1997, 59.7% of European voters favoured ideologies such as Conservatism and Christian Democracy (32.6%) and Social Democracy (27.1%). At the same time, only 11.9% of them supported Liberalism, 7.9% Authoritarian Populism, 2.2% Green ideas and 1.2% left and right wing extremism. Two decades after, support for Conservatism and Christian Democracy has declined by 4.7 percentage points, to 27.9%; backing for Social Democracy has decreased by 4.1 percentage points, to 23%; while support for Liberalism have remained constant at 12%. Simultaneously, Green ideas have increased to 3.1%; support for left- and right-wing extremism has risen to 2.9%; and backing of Authoritarian Populism had jumped to 15.4% (a +7.5% compared to 1997).

The storming of national parliaments

In the 33 countries included in this Index, there is a total of 7843 seats in national parliaments. At the time of writing, parties that have been classified as authoritarian-populist hold 1342 of these. In other words, representatives of illiberal and/or anti-democratic parties today hold 17.5% of all seats within European national parliaments.

Anti-establishment parties are also beginning to successfully translate voter demand into political influence. As of July 2017, authoritarian parties are in government in nine European countries: Hungary, Poland, Greece, Norway, Finland, Latvia, Slovakia and Switzerland. Compared to the TIMBRO 2016 index, the only difference is that the TT party is no longer part of the Lithuanian government, while the three nationalist parties ATAKA, VMRO and NFSB are now part of the governing coalition in Bulgaria.

In 1980, only one anti-establishment party held power. This party was the left-wing populist Finnish People's Democratic League. At the time, left- and right wing populist parties controlled only 53 parliamentary seats at national levels.

Conclusion

Finally, it is interesting to note that in the 1980s, authoritarian parties were rarely part of governments and from 1985 to 1988 they were never in power. This picture has now changed dramatically. In fact, anti-establishment parties are today holding power in a quarter of EU Member States (7 out of 28). The number of left- and right-wing parties in government is also likely to increase in the near future as countries such as Austria and Italy will soon head to the polls.

As the 2017 TIMBRO Authoritarian Populist Index suggests, left and right-wing anti-establishment parties are here to stay. Whether or not their authoritarian and illiberal ideas will spread too remains an open question.