Europe's Center-Right Is on the Wrong Track with "Good Populism"
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Often post-election days feel like groundhog day: after every election in which a far-right party has won a "shock" victory, voices from the left to the right will argue that established parties should be more "realistic" about immigration, and the "problems" of multiculturalism, because "the people" (read: white people) have legitimate concerns about the changing world around them. The latest iteration of this nativist whispering happened after the recent Austrian and German elections, but they can be traced back to, at least, the breakthrough of the Front National in the Dreux byelection of 1983.

The centre-left's embrace of neoliberalism … made them redundant in the long term After the short wave of euphoria in the wake of Emmanuel Macron's victories in the French presidential and parliamentary elections earlier this year, the German and Austrian elections have thrown the European political establishment, including journalists and pundits, back into a self-defeating narrative of "if you can't beat them, join them". This is the lesson particularly being drawn from the Austrian and Dutch elections, in which, according to the victors themselves, the "good populism" of the mainstream right defeated the "bad populism" of the radical right. This is contrasted with the German elections, in which the non-populism of Angela Merkel lost ground to the bad populism of the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

There is so much wrong with this interpretation that it is amazing it has become so dominant. First of all, in the Netherlands, the "good populism" of prime minister Mark Rutte, which, incidentally, was nativism (ie xenophobic nationalism) rather than populism, did not "defeat" the radical right. His People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) lost more than 5%, compared to the 2012 elections, when Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) won 3%. Moreover, together with the new radical-right party Forum for Democracy (FVD), "bad populism" almost matched the PVV's record score of the 2010 elections.

Second, in Austria, the opportunistic wunderkind Sebastian Kurz did pull the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) out of a slump in the polls, largely at the expense of the radical-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), but this happened at a time that all radical-right parties in Europe were losing support. The reason was simple, these parties had peaked as a consequence of the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2016 and were returning to their "normal" score once that crisis had been allegedly solved by the EU-Turkey. Moreover, Kurz only really changed who would lead the next coalition, the ÖVP rather than the FPÖ, but not the composition of it.

Third, in Germany the picture is much less clear than is generally presented. Yes, Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost votes, while the AfD won them, but the latter won, in absolute terms, most people from the group of non-voters and, in relatively terms, from the mostly eastern German party The Left: the AfD scores in the new states of the former East were twice as high as in the old states of the West. Moreover, the

Christian Social Union (CSU), the CDU sister party in Bavaria, has been one of the loudest critics of Merkel's *Willkommenspolitik* (welcome politics) and a vocal supporter of Hungarian premier Viktor Orbán, the main opponent of Merkel's pro-refugee politics within the EU. This notwithstanding, the CSU lost even more than the CDU in the 2017 elections, and the AfD score in Bavaria was higher than its average score in the other states of the former West.

This is all not to deny that immigration and integration are issues of concern to a sizeable group of voters, not only among the electorates of rightwing parties. They are. But so are many other issues, most notably education, employment, health care, and pensions. The point is that a sizeable part of the electorate of populist radical-right parties are not only motivated by authoritarianism and nativism, but also by very strong anti-establishment sentiments, which make them sceptical toward all promises by establishment parties, even authoritarian and nativist ones.

But if there is one lesson we can learn from the past 25 years, it is that rightwing turns of mainstream parties, be they of the centre-left or the centre-right, have at best only short-term successes for these parties. Often helped by internal weaknesses of the populist radical right, such as the party split of the FPÖ and the ageing of Jean Marie LePen, mainstream rightwing leaders such as Wolfgang Schüssel and Nikolas Sarkozy temporarily eclipsed their radical-right rivals. In the longer term, however, the populist radical right not only bounced back, but also the political spectrum moved even further right, making the substantial differences between the mainstream and radical right increasingly difficult to ascertain.

There is an instructive parallel to the centre-left's embrace of neoliberalism to be drawn here. While Britain's "third way" and France's "new centre" led to a temporary resurgence of social democratic parties in several west European countries, it made them redundant in the long term, as is evidenced by the massive centre-left losses in almost all European elections in recent years. If centre-right parties make the same mistake regarding socio-cultural issues, they run the risk of meeting the same fate. By pushing politics more and more to the right, they will have only one choice left: stay somewhat true to their (own) ideological core, and face the rage of the radicalised electorate, or give them what they want and become a radical right party. We can see how that looks currently in the US. It is imperative that European mainstream rightwing parties do not make the same mistake.