

Islamophobia as a Vehicle for the Rise of European Populist Movements

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The relationship between nativist sentiment and the rise of populism is well documented. The spread of right-wing populist movements throughout Europe in recent years has been seen alongside growing Islamophobic rhetoric in public discourse. As based on trends in current European populist movements, it appears that leaders of these movements may be tapping into the public rise in existing Islamophobic sentiment as strategy to gain political traction. Cases of populist parties in France, Germany, and Italy highlight the need for future research examining Islamophobia as a significant enabling factor for the rise of right-wing populism in Europe.

Over the course of the past 20 years, there has been a marked increase in both right-wing populism and Islamophobia in the European Union (Bell, 2018; Wodak et al., 2013). The tendency of far-right populist movements to employ Islamophobic rhetoric is well documented (Hafez, 2014), and many scholars have attempted to analyze the association between the rise of both ideologies (Akbaba, 2019; Kaya, 2020). Some may assume that the rise of far-right populist movements, and their use of Islamophobic rhetoric, is the cause of growing Islamophobia. I challenge this idea, however, and argue that the more important relationship to address between Islamophobia and right-wing populist

movements actually goes in the other direction. There is much evidence suggesting that the rise in Islamophobia has enabled the rise of right-wing populism in the European Union.

I examine the relationship between Islamophobia and right-wing populism through a theoretical lens which conceptualizes populism as a form of “political strategy,” based on the scholarly arguments outlined by Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski (2013: 12). They describe several ways in which scholars define the variety of populist messaging that they categorize as a “political strategy.” They point to several examples of the features of “political strategy populism, including ‘personality politics’, the use of populist style as a way of signaling that they will defend their voters’ wishes, or for the attainment of direct, unmediated support, and the creation of political polarization that incites large movements, to garner support” (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013: 11-12). One of the core features of “political strategy” populism is the ideological flexibility of populist parties’ platforms. Ultimately, Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) argue that different varieties of populism tend to overlap. However, I suggest that some of the aspects of the “political strategy” style of populism may be present in the current wave of right-wing populism in Europe.

The growth of Islamophobic sentiment throughout the EU should be examined further as, at bare minimum, having *de facto* enabled the rise of populist movements. Such sentiments are being exploited by right-wing populist leaders as a political strategy. Islamophobia has provided populist movements with a simplistic model to adopt that unifies “one issue voters” and, in turn, expands electoral support for populist parties. I use the examples of France, Germany, and Italy to support this argument and I contend that future research should examine Islamophobia as a significant enabling factor for the rise of right-wing populism in Europe.

The Symbiotic Relationship between Populism and Nativist Sentiment: A Theoretical Outline

Populism, despite taking many forms, tends to present a few basic features. Generally, commonalities between populist movements do not lie within the issues being argued, but within the logical origins of such arguments. Most academic descriptions make note of simplistic language, political mobilization, charismatic leadership, and a rhetorically framed binary placing the members of the movement in the category of “the people,” who are the victims of actions taken by “the elite,” and are now choosing to take back their rights (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012: 8). At their core, the motives of populist movements are usually simple and easily understood. The origins of such movements are usually based on existing, valid issues, and promise very straightforward solutions. Solutions usually circle back to putting a stop to the suppression of the united and homogeneous “people,” which in extreme cases, calls for elimination of their oppressors (the “elite”). The oversimplified nature of populist movements is what tends to give them their widespread appeal.

While individual populist movements can be very diverse, these components are usually central to their rise. In the case of anti-immigrant, nativist populism, the simplistic nature of these movements, such as the simplistic “people vs. elite” or “hero vs. villain” binaries, provides a framework within which anti-immigration sentiments can very naturally fall. The reason that nativism and populism coexist so organically makes logical sense, as both are rooted in the assumption of group homogeneity. Nativist movements assume a homogeneity of the people of their nation, in diametric opposition to “outsiders” or immigrants. Anti-immigrant movements are fed when the homogeneous “people” of a populist movement becomes rhetorically intertwined with the “people” of a nation (Plattner, 2010: 88). The overlap between the two not only makes theoretical sense, but also has become a reality in many different instances throughout history. The methods used to exploit anti-immigration sentiment within populism, most notably seen as the “tools” of demonization and scapegoating (Berlet, 2011: 18), are

commonly aimed at immigrants when the populist movement in question leans to the right of the political spectrum.

There are many examples of major populist movements with key goals being based upon the concept of the preservation of a national people. This tends to present itself in the promotion of isolationist policies. While this can take the form of trade protectionism, populist movements are more likely to benefit from the rise of black-and-white opposition to open immigration, and sometimes even violent opposition to the presence of ethnic “outsiders” as a result of their simplistic nature (Brown, 2008: 785). More often than not, anti-immigration sentiment born out of populism is transparent in its demonization. The populist leaders most closely linked to intolerant rhetoric do not simply argue that immigration is an economic burden for their nation. Rather, the tendency of these leaders is to villainize immigrants from one specific region, or of a particular background, utilizing language referencing cultural or ethnic purity. In the case of Islamophobic rhetoric being used in populist movements, the language is often built off previously established biases that have been normalized (Hafez, 2014: 479). While it may be true that some variation in levels of anti-immigration sentiment are affected by the rise of right-wing populist movements, it is very hard to prove that such populist movements are the sole cause of significant levels of growth in anti-immigration sentiment. In most cases, the rise of anti-immigration sentiment actually begins before populist parties start to gain traction, and the populist movement benefits from the momentum being gained from more loosely unorganized anti-immigration sentiment (Hafez, 2014: 479).

The subject of anti-immigration rhetoric gaining traction, as well as the growth and spread of populist movements, is particularly relevant now because of the effects of globalization (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). Globalization tends to take the most significant toll on “regular people,” rather than corporations or governments, who are often perceived as its beneficiaries (Jensen, 2011; Berlet, 2011). This contrast likely contributes to a sense of powerlessness, and a feeling that the only place to turn is toward

populist arguments. In addition to the harsher economic realities brought about by globalization, a globalized economy has the additional effect of making other groups more visible, supplying populist groups with more options for demonization and more “enemies” to their nativist platforms.

In addition to the political climate created by economic globalization and the contagiousness of anti-immigration sentiment, social media provide new platforms through which populist movements are in a unique position to gain popularity (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). People are able to make connections with one another at a rate that has never been seen before; likewise, false information is able to spread just as quickly. Online discourse can facilitate the growth of populism at an unprecedented rate, making the virulent dangers associated with it all the more urgent to address. These conditions help lay the groundwork for populist movements, but without a straightforward platform that unifies a homogenous group, movements will struggle to take root. This peak in political tension is where I argue Islamophobia has come into play and has become the catalyst in cultivating electoral support for populist parties.

Islamophobia and European Right-Wing Populism: France, Germany, and Italy

Major right-wing populist parties in France (The Front National), Germany (Alternative for Germany), and Italy (the Northern League) have been gaining legitimacy since the turn of the century, but especially in the last decade. Italy’s national populist party, the Northern league, was able to establish its legitimacy in 1993 following a national economic crisis (Patriarca, 2016). The party’s platform tends to advocate for strengthening regional representation, while also focusing on renationalization and national identity. The Northern League has been accused of racism and xenophobia, often due to its dissemination of Islamophobic imagery (Patriarca, 2016). Alternative for Germany, founded in 2013, is standard by most measures of right-wing European populist movements, as its support base shares concerns about general political distrust, fear of personal economic decline, and immigration (Goerres et al., 2018).

France's Front National is a longer standing political party, having been established in 1972, but its electoral support has also seen a spike in recent years (Reynié, 2016). Daniel Stockemer (2015) attributes the party's recent success to the new party president, Marine Le Pen, and her attempts to give the party a more "respectable" image by self-categorizing the group as an established Republican institution. Additionally, while the party has maintained its focus on immigration and "anti-Islamification" policies, there has been a shift towards embedding "racist statements within a republican discourse that stresses the concepts *laïcité* and sovereignty" (Stokemer, 2015: 320). Le Pen's subtle choices for repackaging old messaging, which appear to have boosted the party's legitimacy and secured an upswing in political support, are likely derived from the political experimentation and adaptive retooling possible over time in longer standing, more established political parties. Similar internal adaptations may or may not be less likely observed in the younger populist movements that have arisen in Italy and Germany.

The common denominator in most right-wing European populist movements would appear to be cohesive support for nationalistic policies, specifically those targeted towards Muslim immigrants and refugees (Hafez, 2014: 479). While other themes are present, anti-immigration and nationalistic policies provide populist supporters with the most tangible and immediate results. The interconnectedness of the European Union and the contagious nature of nativist movements in general (see Van Spanje, 2010: 578) have created a densely propagating situation in which it is hard to definitively establish singular central origins of Islamophobia in Europe. However, Germany, Italy, and (most notably) France are a few key areas where increased activity linked to this phenomenon appears to be occurring. These points of activity suggest that Islamophobia is not solely the result of misplaced anger over political or economic hardship, but that it is a culturally reproduced feature of certain societies, making it a more flexible point of exploitation for politicians, especially those using the populist "political strategy" outlined by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013). France (Bell, 2018), Italy (Spena, 2010), and Germany (Sirgy et al., 2019)

have dealt with a considerable amount of Islamophobia, which may appear to have been left in the wake of populist movements. While there are several populist movements throughout the European Union that often reflect nativist sentiment, a comparison of populism in Germany, Italy, and France is salient because of the social, economic, and political differences between the three nations.

According to very general data published by the World Bank (n.d.b) on the influx of refugee populations and net migration in Germany, Italy, and France, the populations within have each individually increased since 2010, but there are inconsistencies in migration trends between the three nations over the last ten years. Overall, the percentage of total population made up of refugee populations and immigrants in general is comparable between Germany, Italy, and France. However, there are notable differences. Germany has the largest percentage of refugees making up its total population, and has seen the most variation overall in refugee population, as it is the only nation of the three that has not seen a steady upward trend. However, Germany's general refugee immigration trends very closely mirror those of the European Union as a whole. The general refugee immigration trends in Italy and France resemble each other, but within Italy there has been the largest percentage increase in refugee population while the percentage of the total population made up by refugees is the smallest, and France has had the smallest percentage increase in refugee immigration between the three nations I am comparing.

Additionally, a comparison between these three countries based on GDP data provided by the World Bank (n.d.a.) since 2010 shows Germany ranks highest, followed by France and then Italy. In general, there has been a great deal of variation in GDP per capita in each country over the past few years, with Italy being economically hit the hardest of the three by far. It is the only one of these nations whose GDP per capita is lower than that of the EU as a whole in the last few years. Considering the migration data noted above, one possibility is that a more in-depth statistical analysis could highlight an observable negative correlation between overall economic well-being and immigration rates. Assuming

the presence of this correlation, this could create an environment that is conducive to scapegoating if citizens of each country incorrectly interpret correlation as causation.

Based on my rough analysis of the differences between Germany, Italy, and France, it is reasonable to assume that anti-immigration movements would gain the most support in either Germany or Italy, as changes in immigration trends would be most visible to the “everyday person” to whom populists are attempting to make their appeals. Further, Italian politics would be most susceptible to the threat of populism because of the economic struggle that Italy has faced in recent years. However, when examining electoral support for nativist movements between the three nations, France’s Front National party has support from about 14% of its general population, while Germany’s Alternative for Germany party and Italy’s Northern League have approximately the same level of support, coming in at 4.7% and 4% respectively (Sardar et al., 2019: 91). In Italy, the lower level of support for the Northern League may be in part due to the rise of other factions, such as the Five Star movement splitting support (Sardar et al., 2019). However, support for the Front National alone in France is still stronger even when compared to the total growth of all of the minor populist movements in Italy, supporting the concept that Islamophobia is rooted in cultural reproduction, rather than actual observable differences for national measures of economic wellbeing or quality of life. This, in turn, makes Islamophobia easier to adopt as a simplistic political platform, as it will garner more enduring support regardless of political climate.

When examining this support next to the support for the Front National in France, it is clear that there are other underlying factors contributing to the general support for each movement. Based on these facts, it is apparent that one of the most significant factors that go into the success of a right-wing populist movement within Europe is the prevalence of Islamophobia within the nation in question predating the movement's inception, and the movement’s ability to unite its followers through this bias. The case of the Front National is consistent with my argument; the relative success of the Front National would appear to be unrelated to exceptional economic hardship when compared to its neighboring

countries. The peculiarity in France is that while the majority of Europe saw a very rapid increase in the presence of Islamophobia as a result of terrorist attacks such as 9/11 and increasing refugee immigration (Bell, 2018; Mattes, 2017), Islamophobia in France has a historical record dating back to the colonization of Algeria (Ware, 2014). Additionally, France has a history of some of the most aggressive legislation targeting Muslims, but establishing any formal tracking or regulation of discriminatory practices is challenging because France's government does not distinguish between different racial or ethnic backgrounds on their census (Ware, 2014).

While France is not the only nation in the EU with a complicated history regarding its relationship to Islam, the nature of the relationship between a colonial power and its colonies is one that requires the indoctrination of the idea that there is an inherent hierarchy in order to legitimize the colonial power's authority. The legacy of this relationship has had a profound cultural impact. Islamophobia in Italy and Germany resembles the trend discussed by Bell (2018), in that it has seen a much more rapid surge and lacks a basis in recent or long-term colonization.

Limitations and Future Research

This overview of the relationship between right-wing populism and Islamophobia has only provided a very brief discussion of the very nuanced issues that are arising in Europe currently. My claim that Islamophobia is the societal feature that is facilitating the present wave of populist movements is mainly based on theoretical considerations and lacks the grounding that could be applied by an economist or political scientist. Additionally, this argument has been presented as a theoretical framework. Empirical data collection for the purpose of addressing these questions are required to make a stronger claim of direct causality.

However, much of the scholarship to date on the subject of Islamophobia and right-wing populism provides enough evidence in support of the claim that a society's level of Islamophobia should

be examined as both a mediating and moderating variable in the success of individual right-wing populist movements. Many factors go into fueling populist movements, but the social, political, and economic trends associated with the new European populist wave have yet to be examined fully. In the coming years, future study of populism will be heavily based on the findings associated with the rise and fall of the European populist parties that are presently growing.

It is vital to have a good understanding of environmental determinants of these movements' successes and failures in order to respond to future populist movements in the most effective way possible. Whether or not it is discovered that the current right-wing populist movements would be inert without the pre-existing factor of Islamophobia, the findings will have larger implications for understanding the role of socially reproduced ideologies in populist success, and will ultimately help researchers and policy makers adequately address the threats associated with future populist movements.

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