

DOI: [10.20472/SS.2016.5.4.004](https://doi.org/10.20472/SS.2016.5.4.004)

# THE POLITICAL MEANING AND THRUST OF POPULIST MOVEMENTS

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## **Abstract:**

Populist movements are abound in Europe: since the 1990s such movements and parties as Podemos in Spain, the Lega Nord in Italy, the UKIP in England or the Front National in France sprang up and attracted substantial numbers of voters and followers over time. This article restricts itself to populist movements which claim to speak for the people, oppose elites in politics and economy and large associations and demand direct democracy. The thesis of this primarily theoretical paper is that these movements and parties protest against the perceived erosion of the political status of the people as the legitimate constituent of democratic rule. According to populist views, political and social elites violate the obligation of the implicit contract between elites and the people to pursue the common good of the people in exchange for the people's loyalty to political rule. This loyalty appears to be challenged by perceived corruption, fatal governmental decisions and actions risking the wealth and the security of the nation, among which immigration politics rank highly. Immigration violates this contract because, as populists see it, only the people (that is: the legal and legitimate members of a constituency) should profit from the provisions of the state (welfare, safety, public order). The paper will illustrate this thesis by elaborating on the meaning of Pegida populism and reflect on the possible consequences of populism for representative democracy.

## **Keywords:**

populism, people, common good, membership, immigration

**JEL Classification:** D72, F52

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## **Citation:**

JOST HALFMANN (2016). The political meaning and thrust of populist movements. International Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. V(4), pp. 67-78., [10.20472/SS.2016.5.4.004](https://doi.org/10.20472/SS.2016.5.4.004)

## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the recent surge of populist movements across Europe. It starts with the story of a particular populist movement in Germany, Pegida, and then elaborates on the meaning and the thrust of populist movements in general. This primarily theoretical article picks up the assessment of political scientists and carries their findings over into a sociological reading of the relation of populist movements to democratic states. It will end with some remarks on the impact of populist movements on political rule in representative democracies.

During the last months of 2014, suddenly a social movement sprang up in Dresden in East Germany which called itself Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident). Within a few weeks the number of followers of the so-called weekly Spaziergänge (walks) in the center of the city increased from a couple of hundred to about 25 000 people in January 2015. Similar actions took place in other East German cities such as Leipzig and, occasionally, in West German cities as well. The organizers addressed their audience with fiery speeches scandalizing uncontrolled inflows of immigrants into Germany, but also criticizing the German government's alleged laissez-faire attitude toward such a development. Banners were held up which stated "Wir sind das Volk" ("We are the people"). The program of Pegida is a mixture of demands, primarily rejecting uncontrolled immigration and calling for direct democracy.

What is this movement about? And is it just a local phenomenon or rather indicative of what other European countries have experienced over the last decades vis-à-vis increasing immigration within and into countries of the European Union? In many European countries anti-immigration movements and parties have sprung up. Alone the number of more or less established anti-immigration parties is impressive: think of the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip) in Great Britain (winning almost thirty percent of the vote during the European Parliament election in 2014), the Front National (FN) in France (emerging from the 2016 elections of regional governments as second strongest party), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Danish People's Party (DPP) in Denmark, the Freedom Party (PVV) in the Netherlands, the True Fins (PS) in Finland, the Sweden Democrats in Sweden, the Golden Sunrise in Greece (gaining more than 6 % of the vote in the 2015 parliament election), the Lega Nord in Italy or the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany. In the following chapters emphasis will be laid on populist *movements* rather than on populist *parties*, whose ideological stances need to be camouflaged due to legal constraints and watered down due to the need for extending the political appeal beyond their core constituencies.

Political scientists view Pegida and similar movements (such as Occupy, Attac, Vlaams Belang (Belgium) or perhaps the Tea Party in the USA etc.) as populist movements. Populism is – according to this perspective – characterized by juxtaposing the people (for

which the movements claim to speak) to government, and by aiming at establishing a radically egalitarian direct democracy (Fenema 2004, see also Puhle 1986, Priester 2007). In addition, all populist movements have strong opinions on immigration, rejecting the influx and influence of large numbers of migrants, particularly of those with starkly different cultural or religious backgrounds. Most political scientists make a distinction between right-wing and left-wing populism; while right-wing egalitarianism has a “nativist” bend left-wing populism tends toward “multiculturalism” in questions of immigration (Fetzer 2000, Telson 2014). Such classificatory attempts operate with a normative model of the polity which conceives of representative democracy as the political ideal, and of populist movements as confronting democracy with alien agendas deviating either to the right or the left, depending on what form of direct democracy and what type of inclusion of foreigners they prefer. In addition, political scientists look at populist movements as coming from outside of the established form of the political system, questioning the institutional order of representative democracy entirely. Classificatory attempts certainly help sorting movements according to one or the other criterion; but they usually have little explanatory value. Therefore, while taking up the distinction between nativist and multiculturalist populism, I suggest to dig a bit deeper into the institutional foundations of democracy in order to understand how these movements relate to the issues of democracy and immigration.

But before embarking on that discussion I will look at Pegida and ask whether they are indeed as right wing or even extremist as their portrait in the press and in some social scientific literature suggests.

## 2. Pegida: the social structure of a populist movement

When Pegida entered the political scene social scientists appeared rather quickly on the spot to interview the participants of the walks (for an overview of these studies see Reuband 2015, Rehberg/Kunz/Schlinzig 2016). During one of the Pegida walks three different research teams showed up at the same time competing for interview partners. Here are some of the results of that research: The social structural characteristics of the demonstrators correspond more or less with the composition of the general population in Germany - with the one exception that the participants were overwhelmingly male (75 %). Other than that, the demonstrators were middle-aged (average age: 48 years), well-educated (28 % held a university degree) and employed in primarily white or blue collar professions. Hardly anyone belonged to the lower and uprooted strata of society. An additional finding which supports the results of research on populist parties and movements was that alignment with established parties was very low. Two thirds of the respondents professed not to be aligned with any of the established parties; here, however, East Germans differ substantially from West Germans (Reuband 2015, p. 140). When asked about their political position, one half of the Pegida-followers saw themselves as being in the middle of the political spectrum, almost 40 % positioned

themselves to the right of the middle. The main motive for participation in the Pegida-protests was frustration with established politics and political institutions. Interestingly, few respondents were seriously concerned about the alleged Islamization of Europe; but at the same time, they shared the fear of Islamist terrorism with the rest of the Germans (Köcher 2015). The attitude toward foreigners among Pegida adherents does not differ much from the general view in Germany: one third of the German population thinks that as long as unemployment is as high as it is, there is no need of further immigration; and one fifth thinks that there are already enough immigrants in the country (Köcher 2014). Overall, the research on Pegida did not uncover a generalized hostility, much less a racist attitude toward foreigners or immigrants (Reuband 2015, p. 142, similarly Vorländer/Herold/Schaller 2016; see for a different view Geiges/Marg/Walter 2015, pp.181-182).

### 3. Social movements and representative democracy

In view of the institutional setup of democratic states one might ask why there are social movements at all in a democratic society opposing government from the “outside”. Democratic society does not really seem to provide space for them because opposition is already built into the institutional order. Parties and their representatives are rallying for the support of the voters and then on the basis of the majority principle are either entering government or acting as legal opposition. Asking the question of populist movements' “right to exist” is certainly not farfetched since democracy in its early stages directly derived from populist movements (see the insurgents of the tiers état prior to the French Revolution, Volkmann 2015). The founding myth of modern democracy - that political rule rests on the will of the whole people – resonates in populist movements. Their claim is simply that democracy should be the uninhibited expression of the will of the people and that the political elites should either execute this will or resign from office. The quibble articulated by the press and by politicians criticizing the populist movements for not representing the whole people reflects the belief that these movements will not be strong enough to reenact the revolutionary thrust of the venerated founding movements of democracy. But why do populist movements develop such seemingly illusory ideas?

The answer is to be found in the institutional conditions of modern democracy. Sure, its main characteristics are “equality, popular sovereignty, and rule by majorities” (Dahl 1956: 34). All representative democracies guarantee, that all votes have equal weight; popular sovereignty, however, means that the main form of political participation of the people consists in the vote. Citizens vote party or independent candidates into offices based on some variant of the majority principle. These elected candidates, if they enter governmental offices, are sworn in to pursue the public good. For the citizens, voting implies that political decision-making is delegated to persons in public office; the citizens are then expected to summarily accept that these representatives will indeed act in the interest of the collective good of the country (Luhmann 1982: 32-33). The political elites,

on the other hand, expect generalized submission of the people under the rule of the elected. The loyalty of the public rests, as Max Weber stated already, on the belief in the legitimacy of democratic rule. Loyalty to political rule is directly connected to the belief of the public in the trustworthiness of the elites to pursue the general welfare. The ruling elites assume that the legitimacy of their rule rests solely on two grounds: that they have been elected and that their political decisions meet legal requirements. An advance definition of what is in the best interest of the collectivity may be laid down here and there in party programs prior to elections; but these definitions have no warranty seal. Advance self-binding cannot be expected from the ruling elites: too many divergent expectations about what is good for all are abound and too many unexpected situations emerge which require a permanent assessment of what exactly would further the interest of the collectivity. Dahl has labeled this institutional setup “polyarchy”: there are constitutions, elections, representative bodies, basic rights, free press, but no influence of the populace on the polity (Dahl 1971). In one word: democratic politics is a one-way-top-down process of decision-making at the top and acceptance of decisions at the bottom, interrupted only by the recurrent elections which temporarily reverse the power relations between the people and the government.

#### a. The informal cycle of power

From the point of view of Niklas Luhmann's sociological systems theory, this set-up describes, however, only one half of the cycle of political power, the first step being the exertion of power by the voting people, followed by the delegation of power to the elected government which hands binding decisions via the diverse branches of public administration down to the people (Luhmann 2000, 256 – 265). The second loop of the power cycle in democracies starts with the willingness of the public to follow and to accept political decisions and become loyal clients of the diverse public administrations. Representative democracies depend on the people's acceptance of the styles and contents of democratic rule which open up an informal upward power cycle. One might call this informal power cycle the Achilles' tendon of democracy. Anthony Giddens has argued that by granting participation in politics via the vote and by submitting themselves to serving the common good, democratic states have saved to some degree their former predemocratic independence from the people's will, especially in situations when the people or some of its parts develop fits of unruliness (Giddens 1985). More importantly, it is the welfare state which serves as a buffer between potential dissatisfaction of the public and the government. However, the welfare state administrations by intervening into many important areas of social life such as health, education, infrastructure or markets learn that they depend to some degree on the willingness of the welfare state clients to cooperate. This opens up many areas and topics for negotiation and interaction between providers and clients. A typical forms of public involvement is civic participation in infrastructure projects such as airports or electric power distribution grids. Here, in short, rest the chances for the general public to exert informal power. But when “explaining”

political measures by politicians (sometimes way down to the local district representatives) and administrative executives fail to rally support for political measures and administrative routines, when activists start denouncing the various forms of citizen involvement on local and regional levels as pseudo-participation, one might approach a breaking point, from which a completely different way of exerting power from below could embark.

Not surprisingly many political issues in modern society will provoke disagreement among the rulers as well as the ruled about how to serve the common interest. Consequently, loyalty to and trust in the will and the capacity of political elites that they are indeed serving the public good is scarce. Disobedience to political decisions is common in modern democracies: many citizens think that the public good of the polity and their individual good do not coincide. The expectation that political decisions are binding the collectivity over which a government rules obviously does not find unanimous and permanent acceptance, to say the least: tax evasion, insurance fraud, breach of traffic rules, theft and violence in social relations speak to that fact a millionfold.

It is, however, much more demanding to demonstrate the loss of faith in the governments' capacity to serve the common good for *collective actors* such as social movements or parties. Organizing mass protest and finding support for political programs is, therefore, another matter and a bigger task for people who think their interests are not recognized by those in political office. To become a candidate for protest movements dissenting issues need to be enlarged and dramatized beyond individual proportions. Emerging movements need to make claims which respond to a serious state of deprivation and the must draw a sharp line between themselves and government or even the rest of society in order to attract supporters (Halfmann/Japp 1993). Protest movements start from the premise, that the public good is in imminent danger and that the political elites are disregarding that danger to a degree which threatens the essence or even the survival of the polity (Halfmann 1993). Mass rejections of governmental decisions are not new in representative democracies. Ecology movements, for instance, view nature as endangered because of the excessive use of natural resources; these movements claim that governmental politics have failed to protect nature from societal abuse (Halfmann 1996). Peace movements (such as the huge support for peace campaigns in the eighties against the installation of cruise missiles in Germany in response to Soviet SS20s) believe that the government is carelessly jeopardizing peace in Western Europe and raising the risk of turning the cold into a hot war. Social movements protest against perceived governmental obstructions of the public good. Collective protest activities indicate that social problems are not dealt with adequately by politics and signal withdrawal of loyalty toward political elites. Mass protest and collective disobedience to public authority are strong indicators of a disruption of the double cycle of power in representative democracy (Nassehi 2016, 22-23).

## b. Membership and political constituency

As mentioned before, I will follow the classificatory suggestion of political science research without, however, subscribing to the normative implications of this distinction. Nativist and multiculturalist populist movements equally ask the same question: who is the people and who should belong to the people? There are two myths about how belonging to the people has come about: via contract or via kinship. The people are constituted either by agreeing on rules of belonging or by referring to descent. Obviously, such myths have arisen in the context of nation-state building, during the process of assigning people to states and territories. In that context people were defined as nations, as imagined communities of equals, as Benedict Anderson aptly named them (Anderson 1991). To cut a complex process short: Nations and democratic rule co-evolved, as Reinhard Bendix reminded us (Bendix 1964). And that is why the question of belonging to a people is also a question of legitimate political rule.

The descent-version of the foundation myth is the origin of the ethnic definitions of peoplehood in the European countries (Gellner 1992), the contract-version dominated in the creole nations (the colonist countries) (Anderson 1991). What then would be multiculturalist and nativist versions of contract and of kinship? According to the contract myth the people is constituted by way of an agreement among the would-be citizens who decide on becoming a constituency which determines who governs; the multiculturalist contract version might go back to Rousseau, the nativist one to Hobbes. A multiculturalist populist contract movement arose in post-revolutionary France for a short period: whoever subscribed to the principles of the French revolution (*fraternité, égalité, liberté*) could become a citizen of France (Lefebvre 1947: 178); an example for a nativist populist contract movement might be the Tea Party in the USA which takes an anti-immigration stance, however couched in market semantics. The Tea Party demands that welfare provisions should be restricted to those who have paid their dues for social security (Telson 2014).

According to the kinship myth, belonging to the people is determined by descent; Ernest Gellner argued that in the European context emerging nations were portrayed as huge kinship groups to make the shift from village to state communities tolerable (Gellner 1992). The nativist ethnic version would imply that only true kins should belong to the people. The multiculturalist version would welcome non-kins to the populace, based on a humanistic concept of universal brother- and sisterhood. Whichever way the question of who belongs to the people is solved, it has far reaching consequences for the question of who constitutes the polity and who provides legitimacy for the elected government. In the era of national states which control territories and populations on these territories, the definition of the people is decisive for the question of who can legitimately vote governments into office. Germany, to come back to the case of Pegida, belongs to those European countries which base membership on an ethno-cultural definition of the people

(Brubaker 1992). Article 116 of the German Basic Law states that a German is who has German citizenship. Citizenship can be acquired via descent, adoption, naturalization and – for offspring of foreigners born on German soil – via option for Germany as the country of birth or for that of the parents' country of origin; in addition, about one million people have double citizenship, the majority of them are former immigrants from Turkey. Belonging to the German people is still predominantly determined by *ius sanguinis* (that is kinship) with recent additions of *ius soli* which go back to the revised German citizenship law of 2001. The *ius soli* addition to membership refers to the aforementioned option clause for children of immigrants.

Pegida claims not only to represent the people when they show banners during demonstrations stating: "We are the people". It also reminds the polity of the ethnic core of the definition of citizenship and, consequently, of the legitimation ground for the German polity. The idea of a national basis of citizenry and of the ethno-cultural or contractual definition of a nation implies that the citizenry of any particular country acquires a privileged relationship to its state. This refers not only to the privilege of voting people into political office, it extends also to the expectation of having privileged access to public services of a nation state, in short: to the welfare state. National membership not only awards privileges, but also duties to the citizens; the most prominent one being the to pay taxes.

An empirical study conducted in the State of Saxony revealed that a large number of the survey respondents share these implications of belonging to the German people. A majority of the respondents attributed the quality of being German to people born in Germany, having German parents, living in Germany since their date of birth and speaking German fluently (Mäs et al. 2005). Anti-immigration stances of social movements or parties refer to the belief that the native population has lost its privileged relationship to their state. This impression is supported by the observation that immigrants are granted more or less the same social services of a nation-state (such as access to health, education, safety services), but that they also since recently have uninhibited access to labor markets which used to be reserved for the native population – and all this, as populist movements deplore, without contributing to the recurrent instating of a legitimate government by the vote. It is noteworthy to state that of the approximately 16.5 million persons with a migration background living legally in Germany about 7 million do not have German citizenship. By way of their unlimited residence permit these immigrants are unconditionally included in the labor markets, the educational and health systems and, consequently, in the national welfare system. To be sure, these immigrants contribute to this system with their tax and insurance payments. However, when taking refugees and foreign population together, about 20 percent of the population in Germany have not the right to vote and, therefore, are not included in the political system. This fact has been described as the "depolitization of the territory" (Stichweh 1998). This is to mean that the collectivity of citizens which provides the state with legitimate authority and

generates the loyalty to submit to state governance is significantly smaller than the totality of the population residing on the territory.

It is not by accident that anti-immigration movements spring up in Europe during the recent decade: civil wars in the direct neighborhood of Europe (post-Yugoslavia wars, Ukraine, Near East, North Africa) have prompted large numbers of people to seek asylum and residence in Europe, and particularly in Germany. The number of asylum seeking persons has been steadily growing over the last 5 years reaching about 130.000 persons seeking asylum in Germany in 2014 (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2015); in 2014 about 200.000 and in 2015 about 500.000 asylum seekers registered at the borders (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2016). Overall migration – that is balancing immigration to against emigration from Germany – has developed from a negative balance in 2009 to a steady growth over the last half decade to more than 400.000 in 2013, topping the 370.000 of 2012 (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2014). Germany has recently become the second most popular immigration country behind the USA.

Nativist populism prefers a narrow reading of what defines a people or a nation, multiculturalist populism tends toward a broad definition of peoplehood which includes those of humankind which are in need of protection. Whatever the current make-up of the citizenry or the people of a nation-state, the legitimacy of government and of political elites depends on their professed and plausible commitment to the common good of *their* constituency.

#### c. The fusion of resistance to cooperation and the struggle over membership

In a nutshell, populist movements can arise from any issue which can fuse the two critical foundations of modern representative democracy: first, the willingness to accept political decisions; and second, the question of who belongs to the people and can justly claim to act as as a counterpart of the state. When citizens are frustrated about governmental decisions and lose faith in the possibilities of influencing politics through the informal channels of power, rejecting governmental politics entirely may become the only viable option. When frustrations condenses in social movements the potential for obstructing the functioning of the constitutional and welfare state increases. And when activists and followers of social movements claim hegemony over questions of who belongs to the people and who may be part of the constituency of the democratic state, the legitimacy of acting governments is at stake.

### 3. Conclusion: The future of populism

Pegida might be just an episode of populist claims-making about whether governmental politics serve the common good and who belongs and does not belong to the people in Germany. But the question of belonging to a people invokes the core semantics which

create legitimacy for any government in representative democracies. Nativist as well as multiculturalist populist movements evocate the ethnic or contractual myth of the constitution of the democratic polity. And insofar as these democracies continue to rely on the implied provision of legitimacy for political rule based on the popular vote, protest will arise recurrently on issues referring to the collective good. It is not just the threat which immigrants pose for those segments of the native population socially and economically at risk which will induce people to protest. It is also the perceived danger to the collective good which will prompt protest by those who consider themselves the constituency and the source of legitimacy of democracy.

When populist movements target the Achilles tendon of representative democracy, that is, the readiness to accept governmental and administrative decisions in the informal cycle of politics and combine mass refusal of these decision with struggles over membership in the democratic constituency serious blockages of the political process may occur. It would uncover the latent impotence of the government to rule successfully which is already exacerbated by the overload of issues which governments believe to have to address and need to make palatable to the public.

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