

Introduction

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This book is based on a collection of essays authored by a group of international scholars who participated to the third edition of the seminar series “Populism and Far-Right”, organized in 2024 by Polidemos, the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan.

2024 has marked a pivotal moment in global politics, as two major elections, the European Parliament elections and the U.S. presidential election, took place, shaping the future trajectory of their respective regions and had far-reaching consequences for global dynamics. In Europe, the European Parliament elections held in June 2024 confirmed a trend: Far-right and nationalist parties, although divided, are gaining ground across the continent. There is a deepening rift between pro-European Union (EU) forces and those advocating for greater national sovereignty and resistance to EU governance. Populist Radical-right and Far-right parties capitalized on growing concerns about immigration, economic inequality, and national identity, presenting themselves as the protectors of traditional European values against the perceived erosion of those values by Brussels and international elites. The outcomes solidified the far-right’s foothold in the EP, strengthening their voice in shaping EU policies on contentious issues such as migration, security, and economic reforms. At the same time, the results exposed a broader disillusionment with the EU, complicating

its political dynamics and signaling a period of uncertainty in European integration.

In the United States (USA), the 2024 presidential election marked the return of Donald Trump, following a contested race that underscored the deepening political and social divides in the country. Trump's victory confirmed that populism, nationalism, and a rejection of traditional political norms continue to resonate with a large portion of the American electorate. His rhetoric, long centered on themes of (the return to) American exceptionalism, anti-immigration policies, economic protectionism, and cultural conservatism, proved effective in mobilizing voters who feel alienated by the political establishment and threatened by the changing demographic landscape. With Trump the USA is poised for an intensification of these populist policies, which are likely to deepen existing social divisions and heighten political polarization. Trump's victory also has profound implications for America's role on the global stage. As the USA retreats further into an "America First" stance, its relationships with traditional allies and international institutions are set to shift, influencing global trade, security alliances, and diplomatic strategies. The victim will be the US-led post WW2 liberal world order.

While the outcomes of the 2024 European and USA elections have had a transformative impact on their respective regions, it is essential to acknowledge that Europe and the United States are not the only places grappling with the rise of far-right populism and the erosion of liberal democratic norms. Indeed, the political shifts occurring in these two regions are part of a broader global wave of political instability, rising nationalism, and challenges to the liberal democratic order. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, countries are facing comparable dynamics, with the rise of strongman leaders, populist movements, and an increasing rejection of traditional

democratic frameworks. Nonetheless, Europe and the USA remain especially prominent in this global shift, due to their historical roles as defenders of liberal democracy and their central place in the international political system. The rise of authoritarian leaders and populist movements in these two regions signals not just a regional challenge to liberal democracy but also a broader, interconnected global phenomenon. The radical-right and far-right's growing influence in both Europe and the USA points to the possibility of a future where liberal democratic values are under siege, with far-reaching consequences for global governance, security, and human rights.

At the very heart of this political crisis are the personalization of politics and the crisis of political parties: features that clearly emerged as a defining feature of contemporary governance in both Europe and the United States. Transgressive leaders, such as Donald Trump in the USA and various populist figures across Europe, have increasingly transformed political systems into highly personalized forms of governance, with the leader often overshadowing traditional party structures: These leaders present themselves as the sole true representatives of the people, positioning themselves against political elites and framing their opponents as out-of-touch with the needs of the populace. As the focus shifts away from party ideology to individual personalities, political discourse becomes increasingly dominated by the leader's image, rhetoric, and personal appeal, rather than by policy debate. This shift undermines the role of political parties in holding power accountable and formulating coherent policy platforms. Additionally, these leaders often disregard institutional checks and balances, consolidating power within the executive branch and weakening democratic processes. The transgressivity of these figures, who openly flout established political norms, has become a hallmark of modern populism: anti-establishment figures, promising to

disrupt the status quo. Furthermore, the performativity of politics has come to the forefront, with political actions becoming more about spectacle and media visibility than substantive policy discussion. A media-driven, theatrical approach to politics, appealing to emotions, nationalism, and populist sentiments, is exacerbating the erosion of democratic norms and threatening the foundations of representative democracy. In this sense, the far-right and populist radical-right movements explored in this book are not confined to the USA and Europe; rather, they are part of a global crisis of liberal democracy. Although Europe and the USA have been particularly visible in this shift, the underlying causes, economic discontent, cultural anxiety, distrust in democratic institutions, and the perceived failure of liberal elites, are shared across many regions of the world. As populist movements rise in both the Global South and the Global North, they challenge established democratic norms and international cooperation. Europe and the USA with their historical prominence in shaping the liberal international order, are particularly critical in this global shift. As these regions increasingly turn inward, rejecting internationalism and prioritizing nationalism, the global political order is being reshaped. Populist leaders across Europe and the USA often share common ideologies, rhetoric, and objectives, amplifying their impact on global political discourse and reinforcing divisive forces in other regions. The erosion of democratic institutions and the rise of nationalist movements in these regions point to a global trend that is reshaping international politics and challenging the international liberal order that has defined much of the post-World War II era.

The far-right's rise in both Europe and the USA has been fueled by economic inequality, and a sense of cultural dislocation among large sections of the population. As mentioned above, the re-election of Donald Trump and the success of far-

right parties in the European Parliament elections in 2024 signal a shift in the political landscape of the West that has been taking place since at least a decade. These movements represent a direct challenge to the liberal democratic order that has characterized much of the post-Cold War era, as they increasingly dominate political discourse and policy agendas. The polarization within societies and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions are not confined to individual nations but are part of a broader global trend that demands attention. What about the future? As populist and far-right ideologies gain traction, they will undoubtedly reshape not only domestic policies but also the relationships between these regions and the rest of the world. The alliances forming between far-right leaders across Europe and the USA have the potential to redefine global geopolitics, with profound implications for international peace, security, and human rights.

Indeed, the political shifts witnessed in Europe and the United States are not isolated incidents, but part of a larger, interconnected wave of populism and far-right ideology that is reshaping the global political landscape. The far-right's rise in both these regions is not merely a transient political moment, but a powerful signal of the broader, deeper, crisis of liberal democracy that spans continents and transcends national borders. The current political moment is marked by a fundamental reordering of the ideological and political structures that have long defined the Western world: From the resurgence of nationalist sentiments to the erosion of traditional party systems, these movements reflect widespread disillusionment with the prevailing political order, an order that many perceive as having failed to address pressing issues such as economic inequality, cultural fragmentation, and growing mistrust in democratic institutions.

These far-right and populist movements are more than just a challenge to the existing political parties and ideologies; they represent a profound shift in the way politics is conducted. The focus has moved from political platforms, policy debates, and collective decision-making to the charismatic authority of individual leaders, whose personal appeal and rhetoric now drive much of the political discourse. This personalization of politics has blurred the lines between leadership and ideology, creating a highly individualized form of governance that undermines traditional democratic structures and processes. The increasingly performative nature of politics, amplified by the media, reinforces this shift, prioritizing spectacle over substance and amplifying nationalistic, anti-elite rhetoric. In this context, political discourse is no longer about thoughtful deliberation or policy compromise, but about projecting strength, defiance, and a rejection of the status quo. The rise of these movements is also part of a broader global trend, where countries across the world are grappling with similar challenges. The factors driving far-right populism are not unique to Europe and the United States. Economic discontent, cultural anxiety, fears about immigration, and the loss of national identity are driving political shifts in countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Yet, the political dynamics in Europe and the USA are particularly significant due to their historical role as proponents of liberal democracy and the international liberal order. As these regions turn inward, rejecting globalism and prioritizing nationalism, they set a precedent that influences political movements around the world, triggering a chain reaction that may destabilize the existing international system.

The consequences of these shifts extend far beyond the national borders, as the alliances being formed between far-right leaders across these regions create a transnational network of populist ideologies that reinforce one another, amplifying

their impact globally. Alliances, based on shared goals such as anti-immigration policies, economic protectionism, and national sovereignty, represent a challenge not only to regional political stability but to the broader liberal international order that has underpinned global governance for decades, with policies likely to disrupt long-standing international agreements on trade, security, climate change, and human rights; the rejection of multilateralism in favor of unilateral decision-making could create a more fragmented and less predictable global political environment, with potentially dangerous consequences for global peace and security. An increasingly divided world where the principles of cooperation and collective action are increasingly sidelined in favor of competing nationalist agendas may be looming, with implications for global governance are profound. Traditional mechanisms of international cooperation, which have helped to address global challenges such as climate change, trade disputes, and geopolitical tensions, may become less effective in an era dominated by populist leaders who prioritize national interests over global solidarity. This shift towards unilateralism threatens to unravel the progress made in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and international security, leaving the world more vulnerable to the forces of instability and conflict.

Ultimately, the rise of the far-right and populist movements in Europe and the United States signals the beginning of a new era in global politics, one in which liberal democracy is no longer guaranteed as the prevailing political order. These movements represent a direct challenge to the values of democracy, freedom, and equality that have been the cornerstone of Western political philosophy for centuries. As these ideologies gain ground, they erode the trust in democratic institutions, creating fertile ground for authoritarian leaders who promise to restore stability by dismantling democratic norms.

This raises crucial questions about the future of liberal democracy not just in the West but globally. How will democracies respond to these challenges? Will liberal democracy survive this moment of crisis, or are we witnessing the beginning of its decline?

In this context, the global political order is at a crossroads. If the rise of far-right populism in Europe and the U.S. is a symptom of deeper structural changes within societies that have been overlooked or neglected for decades, with political and social divisions fueling these movements are not easily resolved, and the challenges they pose to liberal democracy are profound, the future is not predetermined, and we should see what liberal democracy would demonstrate to be resilient.

Structure of the book

In Chapter 1, *Selcen Öner* discusses the concept of a ‘New Europe’ championed by far-right leaders. Instead of advocating for the EU’s dissolution, they emphasize the vision of a ‘Europe of Nations,’ particularly since the 2019 European elections. Öner analyzes their ‘Parochial Europe’ vision, the factors shaping the collaboration between far-right parties ahead of the 2024 European elections, and how issues such as migration, foreign policy, and relations with Russia contribute to this evolving political landscape.

In Chapter 2, *Vera Tika* offers a comparative framework for understanding the far-right in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. By employing multiple methodological approaches, Tika examines how historical legacies, political institutions, and socio-economic conditions shape far-right movements in Southeastern Europe. The chapter distinguishes between radical and

extreme right actors, exploring the ideological narratives and electoral strategies that drive their success.

Chapter 3, by *Giacomo Finzi*, shifts focus to Latin America, exploring the emergence of new populist movements and their connections to the political legacy of the 20th century. Finzi analyzes contemporary left-wing and right-wing populist regimes, examining their structural causes and theoretical underpinnings, and comparing them to earlier populist movements. The chapter also considers the role of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and libertarian ideologies within these movements.

In Chapter 4, *Alexander Reid Ross* examines the legacy of Caesarism as a political concept through the lens of the 2017 controversy surrounding Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at Shakespeare in the Park. Ross explores how Caesarism, Bonapartism, and the politics of personalized authority have shaped contemporary populist movements. Drawing on historical and philosophical perspectives, the chapter critically assesses the interplay between popular sovereignty and dictatorship in modern politics.

In Chapter 5, *Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe* traces the evolution of far-right parties in Germany and Italy, focusing on the intersection of traditional and contemporary far-right ideologies. Cubbe analyzes the historical influence of fascism and Nazism on these parties and examines their adaptation to modern political climates, particularly the rise of populist radical right movements that blend nationalism, anti-globalization, and anti-immigration rhetoric.

In the last chapter *Valerio Alfonso Bruno* explores the influence of the Trump administration and its potential impact on European far-right politics. Bruno analyzes the rise of the Meloni government in Italy and its evolving relationship with transatlantic far-right actors, including figures like Elon Musk.

The chapter examines how external constraints such as NATO, the EU, and financial markets may both hinder and facilitate the rise of a radical political model within the EU, with potential ramifications for the future of European integration.

Finally, we cannot conclude this introduction without acknowledging the efforts of those scholars whose extremely important research and dissemination efforts made both the second edition of UCSC international seminars' "Populism and Far-Right" and this book possible. Genuine thanks also go to all the students and scholars whose valuable participation made the debates both challenging and productive. Finally, a special acknowledgment goes to my colleagues at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Damiano Palano, Antonio Campati, Luca G. Castellin and Samuele Mazzolini who actively supported and contributed the organization.