



# Moving Beyond “Us vs. Them” Politics

How Progressives Should Respond  
to the Rise of Right-Wing Nationalism

Matt Browne and John Halpin      September 2016



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# Introduction and summary

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, right-wing populist, nationalist, and anti-establishment movements have steadily gained strength across Europe and in the United States. This expanding influence is evident most recently with the presidential election in Austria, the Brexit vote in favor of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, and the Republican presidential nomination of Donald Trump in the United States. Although populist movements of the left have also grown to influence mainstream politics in important ways, these efforts have yet to produce as strong an effect as right-wing nationalist movements have in recent elections.

Donald Trump's success in taking over a libertarian-leaning national Republican Party and turning it into a vessel of white-nationalist resentment, anti-globalism, and authoritarian impulses is one of the most substantial developments in recent U.S. political history. Although most polls indicate Trump may have hit a ceiling of support short of a national majority, the possibility of an openly xenophobic leader serving as chief executive of a nation as diverse as the United States is alarming.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the outcome of this year's election, the social and ideological forces driving Trump's rise will not go away anytime soon, particularly given his base of support among white working-class voters, a partisan media landscape favoring his brand of populist politics, and a fractured and leaderless Republican Party incapable of restoring discipline over Trump's unruly forces.

Likewise, after years of relatively stable center-left or center-right coalitions across Europe, cross-national polls show that current support for far-right and nationalist parties has steadily risen across the region, with support for nationalist parties ranging from 10 to 20 percent in Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark and 25 percent or more in the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Poland.<sup>2</sup> The rise of right-wing parties in Europe has yet to fully take over politics in the region, but progressives can no longer assume long-term stability of the postwar European social and institutional order built on transnational cooperation, social solidarity, and peaceful economic and diplomatic exchanges.

There are bright spots for progressives in Western democracies, however, as particularly evidenced by the two successful terms of President Barack Obama; the solid first two years of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's tenure in Italy; the election of London Mayor Sadiq Khan as the first Muslim leader of a major European city; and the very promising start of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's leadership in Canada. These examples highlight how a policy agenda focused on investing in economic opportunities for all people, promoting social tolerance, and taking on vested interests can create rising prosperity and greater equality. When combined with a new political approach that is more open, inclusive, and transparent, these strategies also help to improve democratic participation and thereby solidify electoral strength.

Yet progressive parties and movements remain targets of rising economic and social backlash across multiple nations. Confronting and turning back these challenges requires an exploration of how these political movements have gained strength, as well as considering coordinated actions progressives might pursue to help fight these movements and expand progressive political coalitions.

# The origins of right-wing nationalism

Recent studies of voting behavior and attitudes offer important insight into the multiple causes of right-wing nationalist support in distinct national contexts.<sup>3</sup> Although researchers differ on the relative importance of different factors, it is clear that an interaction of economic, cultural, and anti-institutional grievances among primarily—but not exclusively—older, white segments of Western societies are driving much of the anti-establishment, nativist, and authoritarian movements worldwide.

As formerly stable white working-class and middle-class communities have experienced declining economic mobility and security over the past two decades, along with more recent increases in immigration and cultural diversity, their allegiances to mainstream political parties have steadily diminished.<sup>4</sup> Building on the frustrations of these voters, right-wing movements are promising to reverse globalization, reduce immigration, fight cultural diversity, and maintain a social welfare system that primarily benefits the majority white, so-called native communities. This is clearly the case with both Trump and the pro-Brexit “leave” campaign in the United Kingdom. Trump’s campaign kick-off infamously denounced Mexico for sending “people that have lots of problems ... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, at the end of the “leave” campaign, the U.K. Independence Party, or UKIP, used out-of-context imagery of migrants—many of whom were Syrian refugees—crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border and declared in its poster: “We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.”<sup>6</sup>

Many of these movements and parties espouse explicit racist or nativist language, such as the neo-Nazi targeting of Jews and others by Jobbik in Hungary and Golden Dawn in Greece. For example, after Jobbik members honored a former national leader who was a Nazi ally, the U.S. embassy had to denounce the organization as a “Hungarian political party identified with ethnic hatred and anti-Semitism.”<sup>7</sup>

Golden Dawn's leaders have read passages from the forged, anti-Semitic document "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" in the Greek Parliament and openly denounced "Jewish influence over Greek political issues."<sup>8</sup> Others, such as the Finns Party—formerly known as the True Finns—the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Danish People's Party, tactically avoid the most offensive public face while tapping into underlying resentment of immigrants among majority white populations. For example, a Finns Party document from 2015 on immigration policy uses inflammatory rhetoric about "Jihad-tourism" and "free riders" to tap into xenophobic attitudes about foreigners.<sup>9</sup> Austrian presidential candidate Norbert Hofer of the Austrian Freedom Party exemplified this dog-whistle approach during his campaign by defending gun ownership as a "a natural consequence" of immigration and the refugee crisis and publicizing images of himself and his children at shooting ranges.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the exact source of voter anxiety and anger among white working-class voters—whether economic dislocation, racial animus, or anti-elitism—the result is the same. White voters fed up with traditional politics and the results of neoliberal economic policies are fleeing their party homes for more appealing alternatives, ones that promise to shake up the status quo, defend national interests against global intrusion, and provide greater cultural and economic protections for their communities.

The long-term erosion of trust in government and political leaders in many Western democracies is also contributing to rising support for nontraditional parties on both the right and the left. In a large study of trust in government conducted last year by the Center for American Progress, American voters—across political and ideological lines—expressed deep misgivings about politicians and agreed strongly with the notion that the federal government in the United States was stacked in favor of wealthy and powerful interests.<sup>11</sup> Comparative studies in Europe show similar declines in trust in national governments. Four years after the financial crisis of 2008, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reported that only 4 in 10 voters across member countries expressed confidence in their national government.<sup>12</sup> Although it may not be the primary factor in the rise of right-wing nationalist parties, voters attracted to these forces or leaders are clearly angry at the failures of traditional institutions and disenchanted with political and economic elites who place their own needs and agendas above the public interest.

## A new path forward

The importance of racial resentment and nativism in the success of right-wing nationalist movements is often debated and presents an obvious dilemma for progressives. Progressive leaders cannot accept these values and policy positions; but neither can they ignore these attitudes and expect things to work out politically. Unfortunately, the alternatives frequently presented—for example, more economic populism or more identity-based politics—seem inadequate to successfully address the threat from the right and make headway in reducing class and racial antagonisms in Western societies.

Issues such as inequality, wage stagnation, corporate power, and diminishing social mobility are critical ones for progressives, and solutions to these problems should be pursued. An exclusive focus on economic populism, however, is unlikely to blunt the nationalist drift, nor will it bring back white working-class voters in droves to progressive parties.

Better trade policies or higher taxes on the wealthy, as desirable as they may be, also will not solve the issue of rising white nationalism and widening racial resentments. Anyone familiar with the politics of the Republican Party over the past three decades or the rise of UKIP in the United Kingdom knows this all too well. Mainstream conservative forces have spent years honing racial backlash politics, and now nationalist and xenophobic forces across the globe are pursuing much more open and harsh racial politics focused on stoking white fear and victimization narratives.<sup>13</sup> Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton recently gave a searing speech outlining how the once-marginal ideas of white fringe groups associated with the so-called alt-right movement and the Breitbart media universe have essentially been normalized by Donald Trump's campaign. "So no one should have any illusions about what's really going on here. The names may have changed. Racists now call themselves 'racialists.' White supremacists now call themselves 'white nationalists.' The paranoid fringe now calls itself 'alt-right.' But the hate burns just as bright," described Clinton in her Reno address.<sup>14</sup>

The worst elements and leaders in these parties must be aggressively challenged and their ideas and policies soundly defeated by progressives across the political spectrum. Progressives must strongly defend equality, tolerance, and economic opportunity for all people against forces that seek to marginalize and punish racial and ethnic minorities, migrants, and vulnerable communities of all kinds. The movement toward full inclusion in society, equal rights, and self-determination for all people is the central goal of progressive politics and should never be pushed to the side simply because the politics are thorny.

At the same time, other dimensions of white anxiety—distinct from overt racism based on beliefs about the inferiority of racial and ethnic minorities—need to be better understood if progressives are to develop viable strategies for bringing more working-class whites into cross-racial and ethnic alliances in order to advance economic and social justice. Progressives are not surrendering their values by listening to and considering the questions many working-class white voters have about the economic and social effect of increased immigration or about the policies of the European Union, for example. These issues were clearly of concern for the more than one-third of Labour voters and the 3 in 10 Liberal Democratic voters who endorsed the Brexit referendum.<sup>15</sup> Voters who have questions about the policy impacts of migration, global trade, and the free movement of people are not all proponents of white nationalism, state-sponsored attacks on minority rights, or harsh treatment of refugees. Progressives would be foolish to simply leave these voters open to the nativist appeals of Donald Trump, the National Front, Jobbik, or UKIP without a forceful explanation of progressive values and ideas for dealing with people's legitimate social anxieties. An approach that simply dismisses these voters as racists and xenophobes only serves to further fuel populist disdain of mainstream politicians and drive greater support for right-wing parties. Former U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown learned this lesson clearly after he dismissed an elderly Labour supporter as a “bigoted woman” when she challenged him about his debt and immigration policies; the incident became national fodder in his failed re-election campaign in 2010.<sup>16</sup>

Progressive parties throughout history have existed to represent the interests and values of all working people, across racial and ethnic lines, and to give voice to people who are often overlooked in society. This history is built on principles of mutual empathy rather than sectarian or tribal political divisions between people of different origins. The goal should be to reduce racial and ethnic societal tensions by actively engaging both racial minority and white populations and listening closely to the grievances and concerns facing all of these communities.

This will not be easy given the political and media forces driving people into self-reinforcing social groups that see others as their enemies rather than as potential partners facing similar, if distinct, economic and social challenges.

Unlike the nationalist right, which appears to actively support exclusionary politics, progressives must strive to overcome the false premise that progressive parties and movements care only about one segment of society over another. Progressives in the United Kingdom, for example, are perfectly capable of representing the interests and values of both white workers in former industrial strongholds of the country and new immigrant communities seeking better life chances for themselves and their families. Both groups need new investments in jobs and schools, solid health care, and secure retirement options. Likewise, there should be no political dissonance when progressives in the United States work for the rights of young African Americans demanding criminal justice reform and also take steps to help young whites facing chronic joblessness and opioid addiction in rural areas.

It comes down to rejecting zero-sum political calculations that pit divergent groups against one another. Instead, progressives must fulfill the duty to help all marginalized people of all races and ethnicities to overcome barriers to personal success, happiness, and economic security. This will also require some difficult conversations with voters about the benefits of rising diversity. Progressives should not shy away from these political discussions. In the modern world, the truth is not that societies can be strong in spite of diversity but that diversity itself is actually a necessary source of strength. Diverse cities and towns are well-positioned to understand people in other nations and are often better than more homogenous societies at producing the products and services that emerging markets need and want. As Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau recently stated, “Diversity isn’t just sound social policy. Diversity is the engine of invention. It generates creativity that enriches the world.”<sup>17</sup> The key is to make sure shifting population changes are coupled with economic policies that are inclusive and beneficial for all people—people of all races and ethnicities, all social and economic classes, and all nations of origin.

For more policy-focused progressives, the necessary work of reaching out to voters who may be susceptible to nationalist pitches requires getting outside of existing comfort zones of facts and figures and instead focusing on a simpler presentation of policy ideas conducted in a more approachable tone and with wider empathy with voters who are suffering in their own ways. This is the political reality of today. Technocratic policy solutions will not solve the problem of people fleeing mainstream parties for harder-edged nationalist and populist forces. Voters

are gravitating to these parties and leaders precisely because they do not represent traditional policy recommendations and ideas put forth by experts often perceived as the source of national decline. Michael Gove’s quip for the “leave” campaign that “people in this country have had enough of experts” exemplifies the current era of “post-factual” politics.<sup>18</sup> In the end, a majority of voters in the United Kingdom simply rejected the “remain” campaign’s consensus argument among elites that leaving the European Union would cause Britain grave economic harm—no matter how many esteemed leaders and detailed studies were trotted out to make the case.

Progressive parties are not going to engage in irresponsible or extremist politics. But they can and should begin to reinvigorate their ranks with new members and new ideas that may not be part of their coalitions or policy manifestos today. Voters are desperate for genuine leaders who say what they believe and stand by their commitments and principles. Traditional center-left parties can absorb and learn from like-minded progressive movements to generate new forms of issue-oriented and community-based approaches that are typically better at connecting with people at an emotional level. The hard work of creating policy cohesion between the Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton campaigns provides a recent example of how more mainstream party leaders can learn from and work with more ideologically forceful left-wing movements focused on economic inequality.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, progressives who want to actually reach disaffected white voters and persuade them to support progressive policies and candidates must develop stronger values-based politics that genuinely show they understand and care about these voters’ concerns; that they want them to participate in progressive movements; and that they want to find ways to work together to improve our communities—for everyone.

Sound and far-reaching policy solutions will still be critical in attracting white working-class voters, however, and there are good ways for progressives globally to promote more engaging and electorally viable policy agendas. Progressive parties will need to be more aggressive in their economic proposals and much more serious about political and institutional reforms. Progressive leaders must convince voters that they have concrete ideas to fix voters’ specific, localized economic problems and a real commitment to meaningful institutional changes that prove the government is focused on the needs and interests of working people overall. An exhaustive policy overview is beyond the scope of this report, but in broad strategic terms, these efforts might include the following.

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## Concentrated government action to promote economic opportunity and stability in distressed communities

Progressive leaders need to fight for better jobs, wages, and social benefits overall, plus targeted efforts to redevelop industrial and rural areas hardest hit by globalization. Although both Donald Trump and the U.K. “leave” campaign have drawn support from white voters who have been hardest hit economically, such as the unemployed or chronically underemployed, both campaigns also have received decent support from voters higher up the income scale who have more stability.<sup>20</sup> For this latter group of mostly middle-income whites, economic anxiety is often more about fears of declining social mobility than about direct economic distress. This is particularly true for middle-income parents looking at the diminished life chances of their children and grandchildren and the devastating effects of low wages and reduced wealth-building opportunities on their families and communities.

Progressive parties should not make impractical promises to bring back manufacturing jobs or industries that have been permanently transformed by modern technology and international trade. But policy teams can craft economic strategies that recognize and address the distinct challenges many rural and former industrial areas face in terms of economic and social stability. In addition to fair and sustainable trade practices, they should consider developing and highlighting comprehensive economic proposals to specifically rebuild the areas of Western countries hardest hit by globalization.

In the current environment, small-bore education and training initiatives and slightly better benefits simply will not produce the level of economic change necessary to actually help people in these communities. Instead, these plans—most likely funded by national governments and philanthropies with state-level and nongovernmental organization cooperation—could focus on investments in transportation, technological infrastructure, and expanded access to college-level education or apprentice jobs, plus a range of tax and regulatory incentives and partnerships, to bring in new businesses and industries to overlooked regions and towns. Hillary Clinton’s campaign agenda provides a good model for this type of approach with a specific \$30 billion plan to help rebuild and transform Appalachian communities hit hard by the transformation away from coal and toward other forms of energy production.<sup>21</sup>

These efforts should focus on both small-town and rural areas in addition to more diverse urban environments that have been equally hard hit by shifts in the global economy. Members of these communities need to be a part of the planning and development of these strategies from the start. In political terms, the goal of these efforts should be to promote both family-level economic opportunities and community-level stability and security.

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Strong promotion of social inclusion, tolerance, and diversity coupled with new projects and policies focused on racial, ethnic, and class integration

In conjunction with new economic and community renewal projects, progressives should take the lead in promoting greater social integration and cooperation across diverse groups. Although no one approach is perfect, Sweden's refugee policy provides a good model of how to use social welfare systems to integrate new members of society more fully into local employment networks, schools, and other cultural environments.<sup>22</sup> The goal with this integration model is to break down the social isolation many refugees face and to encourage newcomers to become full members of their new local communities and establish roots and bonds across ethnic lines. There are many thorny issues around employment of lower-skilled refugees in a high-skilled economy such as Sweden's, but at a time of rising disdain for migrants across much of Europe, Sweden on the whole remains committed to a humane and sensible approach built on attempted integration.

Likewise, new steps to break down residential and school segregation in local communities also would be of tremendous benefit in terms of social justice and social cohesion. Continued physical distance and unequal treatment of different groups in Western societies will only breed further distrust between groups—and more hostility in politics. It is not surprising that racial conflict and white backlash politics in the United States have risen together in recent years, given recent trends in residential segregation. Many of the cities with recent protests and clashes between African Americans and police—such as Ferguson, Baltimore, and Milwaukee—are starkly segregated regions where whites and people of color often experience vastly different life opportunities.<sup>23</sup> This situation is not dissimilar to some cities in Europe, where Muslim immigrants live in socially isolated environments disconnected from wider employment and cultural opportunities.<sup>24</sup> In many cases, this is a deliberate outcome of governmental housing, transportation, and zoning policy.<sup>25</sup> Progressives should examine all of these policies closely, remove the worst laws contributing to segregated neighborhoods, and develop ambitious efforts to create more integration in our cities and towns as they seek economic revitalization.

Progressives should also consider new projects focused on community-based and national service aimed at bringing together younger people across racial and ethnic lines to solve common challenges—from cleaning up cities and fixing schools to helping the poor and caring for the elderly. Again, none of this is easy, but the alternative is further balkanization and more fear-based politics that exploit differences between groups.

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Serious political reforms to decrease the power of economic and political elites, produce greater transparency and effectiveness in government, and increase democratic participation and input

Progressive efforts to fight extremist, right-wing parties will likely fail as long as large percentages of voters continue to believe that political systems are broken or corrupt. The issue of trust of government and the repair of democracy must be seen as vital to the long-term success of progressive politics. Progressive leaders cannot promote new social democratic policies—supported by many voters, even in the United States—without also fixing the problems of governance that drive people away from public action and toward cynicism, anger, and apathy.

This will require serious efforts to address two systematic failures—deficiencies in democratic inputs and deficiencies in management. Many nations have now reached a point where voters are convinced that governments exist primarily to serve a favored class of political and economic elites rather than regular citizens.<sup>26</sup> Undisclosed and unrestricted lobbying; laws designed to advance the interests of the wealthy and powerful; insider dealing by politicians; the misuse of public funds for private gain; and the outside funding of parties and campaigns by corporations and special interest groups contribute greatly to this distrust. As a result of so-called captured government, voters believe that politicians are not addressing their concrete problems and are instead spending the majority of their time fighting one another or spending public money on wasteful projects and policies.

These problems will not be resolved overnight. Progressives must take the lead in creating a more responsive, honest, and ethical government that serves the interests of the people. Likewise, political parties themselves are too often viewed as vehicles for elite advancement rather than democratic voice and expression. Some political parties are making good strides to include more people, open up decision-making, and represent divergent communities, but much more could be done to restructure party politics to bring in new voices and ideas.

The use of new technologies will be crucial to all of this, both to make political parties more accessible and to make information more readily available. But progressives must also focus on new platforms that will allow people and communities to empower themselves and create their own public goods. Ironically, to date, the rise of digital media and social media seems to have led to an ever more disaggregated and polarized society. Now progressive leaders, the media, and party technologists need to turn their attention toward finding avenues for leveraging these technologies in ways that foster democratic participation, social learning, and cohesion.

# Conclusion

In order for the progressive left to defeat the nationalist right and create more space for values of equality and social solidarity to take hold, it must recognize that doing so will require coordinated action across different political parties, social movements, and activist communities in order to be successful. No one party or leader or movement can fully capture the attention of enough people to harness long-term political power.

However, progressives can begin by identifying common challenges in fighting right-wing populist, nationalist, and anti-establishment parties and movements. It is essential that progressives learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses in order to advance smarter political strategies.

Progressives ultimately will succeed only by embracing, rather than ignoring, the desire for change among voters. Progressive leaders must offer serious economic solutions for people left behind by globalization; create new forms of cultural cohesion that seek to bring people together around common challenges; and pursue real political reforms that create more trust in public life and government.

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## Our Mission

The Center for American Progress Action Fund is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute and advocacy organization that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

## Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

## Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, The Center for American Progress Action Fund can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

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Center for American Progress Action Fund

