With the commotion of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election still echoing, pundits have looked inward to understand what the weekly polls got wrong. Incomplete sample sizes, overestimated voter turnouts, and incorrect assumptions about demographic loyalties are topping recent lists of explanations for how President Donald Drumpf captured over 270 electoral votes.

Drumpf’s victory over long-time politician Hillary Clinton has already inspired countless studies, most of which give credit for Drumpf’s win to his ability to connect to working-class, rural, mostly white, mostly male Americans disillusioned with their economic plights. Working-class white women also responded strongly to his messages, propelling Drumpf to carry states that have been strongly Democratic since the 1980s. Throughout the campaign, the main motif of the Drumpf camp centered on a commitment to close American borders to both foreign goods and foreign people. Perhaps what is even more striking than solely Drumpf’s victory to students of political science is that isolationist populist democratic patterns like Drumpf’s have been erupting across the globe. In fact, this piece will discuss the two general patterns that may be contributing to the meteoric rise of populist leaders around the world and the initiatives that policymakers may pursue in the wake of these trends.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Far-right, populist, often nationalist movements are not only gaining traction in Europe, the United States, and South Africa, but also—as we saw in May of last year—in Southeast Asia. Much of the journalistic commentary on these movements has been alarmist, with good cause. Western media outlets have categorized Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, as “far worse” than Drumpf, describing Duterte as an anti-establishment figurehead with a dangerous amount of political experience. Time wrote that the wide-ranging spread of the far-right in Europe is disturbing, radical, and worrying. When the United Kingdom voted in a referendum to exit the European Union, a decision known as Brexit, the weeks following the vote were described as “the country’s most chaotic time since World War II.”

Overall, while commentaries by journalists, scholars, and veteran politicians alike reflect growing fear of these movements, voters in the Philippines, United Kingdom, and France appear to support these nationalist uprisings.

Austria’s most recent election provided yet another spotlighted stage for the far-right
movement. While the presidential position in Austria is largely ceremonial, ultimately the country’s next president will be Alexander Van der Bellen, a center-left politician, and not the populist favorite Norbert Hofer, a leader in the right-wing Freedom Party. Still, about 46% of Austrian voters supported Hofer and his Eurosceptic narrative. According to the Washington Post, this percentage of voters alone suggests the Freedom Party would have performed fairly well if this had also been the time for parliamentary elections. Italian voters, too, rejected establishment politics across the board in an embattled referendum on December 4, 2016, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

Looking ahead, one of the front-runners of the French presidential election this year is National Front leader Marine Le Pen. Populist movements have also made waves in Hungary and Poland, and such movements are now affecting even Germany, which is encountering record numbers of refugees from the crisis in Syria. The supranational European Union has received greater criticism in its perceived removal from the desires of citizens in its member states. While EU favorability varies widely between its member countries, overall favorability of the EU has gone down in key countries, including France, Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom in the past two years. In France, the EU’s favorability went down by the largest margin, falling 17 percentage points from 2015 to 2016.

As previously stated, two key patterns are affecting working and middle-class voters in United States, as well as these other nations gripped by populist, nationalist movements. These key trends point to both demographic and historical undercurrents that are moving the tides of politics today. The first pattern is a socioeconomic combination: increasing immigration and rising levels of inequality. The second pattern may be even more intriguing to political scientists: the populist, nationalist, often-bombastic leaders who are gaining traction today are able to do so because of their place in a particular political time. Populist leaders like Drumpf are not at odds with the predictive political cycles of transformation and disjunction, but rather they fit neatly within them.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INEQUALITY

The political psychology underpinning electoral support for contemporary populist movements tells a fascinating story.

The June 2016 volume of Electoral Studies includes research indicating that income inequality has different effects on voter support between different income groups, especially between different constituencies of right-wing parties in European national elections. Contrary to traditional analysis on the connection between economic status and voter
turnout, this research shows income inequality as a factor that encourages lower-income voters to participate. In past decades, social scientists have associated disenfranchisement with lower socioeconomic statuses that inhibit political participation, and have associated higher income populations with greater political participation. But now, recent findings suggest that income inequality discourages financially-stable or higher-income voters from voting. Thus, these studies suggest that political participation is influenced not only by levels of income, but also by the relative disparity between income groups. Voter support for radical right-wing parties (RRPs), particularly in Europe, is directly tied to levels of income inequality. Overall financial difficulties confronting lower income voters are not necessarily enough to drive voter support for RRPs. Rather, the notion that only some of the population (the working-class) suffers from stagnation, while other parts of the population are actually enjoying higher incomes, or the visibility of inequality, is what may cause the rupture between those who support RRPs and those who do not.

In the European case, inequality has risen quite substantially since the 1980s. The results of this trend are often expressed as fears of globalization and further as a backlash to immigration. Recent polls show strong signs that high levels of economic inequality have unequivocally led to growing support of far-right movements, especially in the French and Austrian examples. A survey by Germany’s Bertelsman Foundation, for example, showed that 55 percent of Austrians and 54 percent of French viewed globalization as a threat.

These respondents’ sentiments echo in the UK’s support for Brexit and Nigel Farage, in which the referendum vote distribution suggested that voters had both economic and cultural divides in mind. Not only was the Leave vote larger in parts of the country that have had the weakest economic growth since the 1990s, but another popular explanation was that Brexit represented “a protest by those who are inherently uncomfortable with the social changes in Britain in recent decades, particularly with immigration.” The UK remains rated among the highest in income inequality, using the Gini coefficient and other metrics among other developed countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Additionally, more than 6,000 hate crimes were committed against minority or immigrant populations in the month following the Brexit vote, suggesting a connection between the nationalist, anti-globalization rhetoric of Brexit campaigners and the anti-foreigner sentiment of Brexit’s supporters. Similar voter feelings can also be traced in Germany and Poland. Inequality and fears of immigration are leading to support for right-wing populist movements that often promote a heightened sense of protectionism and nationalism.
The current populist movements have been a long time coming. After all, although the Austrian right-wing party, whose candidate captured 46% of the national vote in 2016, was founded in 1955, and other populist parties notably gained substantive ground in the 1990s. Still, this growing support that has led to the recent meteoric rise of far-right leaders raises the question: why now? To be sure, inequality and immigration are key geographic and economic components surrounding populist parties’ rise to power. The leaders of these parties are acting in a particular point in political time that allows—and even fosters—the type of populist, nationalist figureheads that have captured domestic and international politics. Here, the term “political time” should not be taken in a general sense of a point in history, but rather it should be understood as a characteristic that influences executive leadership styles.

Stephen Skowronek is known for his analytical framework of presidents in political time, most notably in his book, *The Politics Presidents Make*. There, Skowronek argues that presidents in the United States have all existed in a certain cyclical pattern of four main types of political periods: disjunction, reconstruction, articulation, and preemption. Here we find the second important pattern that has led to the recent growth of right-wing politics, particularly in Europe and the United States: disjunctive political time.

What makes a president’s political time disjunctive? Skowronek characterizes disjunctive presidents as those who are caught between long-standing political order and current domestic issues and thus cannot fully satisfy their supporters (think: Jimmy Carter and Herbert Hoover). Reconstructive presidents—like FDR, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Jackson—are those who establish new political orders and exercise high levels of power in the presidency. Presidents who exist in periods of articulation—like LBJ and George W. Bush—follow reconstructive presidents and continue the order and vision that was established under the more transformative leaders. Finally, preemptive presidents are those who attempt to remove themselves from failed-party politics and are thus forced to be less consistent in ideology and more policy-driven. Skowronek considers Clinton, Wilson, and Obama to be preemptive presidents.

This cycle of political time—disjunction, reconstruction, articulation, preemption, back to disjunction and so on—helps to explain the rise of right-wing, deconstructive leaders like President Drumpf. President Obama arguably accomplished more policy initiatives than many other modern presidents. The Affordable Care Act, for example, has been considered one of the most important pieces of social legislation since the 1960s. Not many other preemptive presidents can claim the same success, and Obama thus represented a break
from this pattern. Still, he remains a preemptive president, in Skowronek’s terms, since the fundamental order of politics—deep partisanship, unmoving Congress, general alliance with his party—remained the same under his administration. Former U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron’s tenure was also preemptive in that it did not shatter nor drastically alter existing political orders. This preemptive period has led us into the next part of the cycle: disjunction.

Skowronek only focuses on leadership in the U.S. context, but I find that similar patterns in executive leadership in Europe and globally suggest that his framework may be helpful in understanding political leaders beyond the United States. Similarly, while he has commented on the 2016 election, Skowronek’s official writing on political time does not extend to the current date, but the following analysis demonstrates that his theory clearly applies to the contemporary moment.

This is where leaders like President Drumpf, Farage, and Le Pen come in. Drumpf’s election signaled voters’ desires to see their representatives break from establishment politics in a time when old political orders no longer seem to address their needs. Importantly, Drumpf did not win the popular vote, which suggests that he fails to have the mandate characteristic of a transformative (reconstructive) presidency. While Drumpf and Farage attempt to revive certain parts of old-party conservatism—both by invoking nostalgia of their countries’ pasts – they are doing so by rejecting traditional platform policies. That is, by taking advantage of the disjunctive nature of their political time periods, they use unorthodox positions to attempt to convince their electorates that they will bring their countries back to former glory under a better form of their party (like Reaganism).

The populist, nationalist leaders who thrive off of anti-establishment politics and are succeeding preemptive political leaders in their respective countries are the people commanding the ballots today. While right-wing parties are undoubtedly part of a broader movement based on economic disparity and xenophobia, their leaders are also fittingly assuming their places in political time. This matters because understanding this cycle of political time helps to contextualize leaders that often seem like over-the-top characters. Seeing where leaders fall in the greater political scheme may make it easier to predict these leaders’ executive policy decisions, or help us to understand why they follow certain leadership styles.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

That is not to say that right-wing parties or their populist leaders are simply an inevitable consequence of political time. As stated before, President Obama represented a break from
traditional preemptive presidencies, and most scholars would agree that President Drumpf likely won’t fit neatly into a mold based on usual democratic political behavior. Policy impacts of the other fundamental patterns bolstering contemporary right-wing parties—inequality and immigration—ought to be explored even more deeply by legislators and policymakers. Understanding an executive’s leadership style, driven in part by a disjunctive political time, may help to inform which reforms policymakers should viably pursue regarding both inequality and immigration, given the insistence of a populist agenda. The following policy recommendations are US-specific for the purpose of simplification, but these recommendations can be extrapolated to other nations in similar situations.

In order to address inequality, federal and state legislators in the United States in particular can consider improving the earned income tax credit, investing more in early and secondary education, and making the tax code more progressive. Many of these policies have already been discussed, even if superficially, by the House or Senate, with wavering support from both Democratic and Republican members of Congress. Pursuing these measures would be politically difficult, but possible: a more progressive tax code could be supported by cutting back tax expenditures that benefit mainly high-income groups (like tax-relief on mortgage interest), if indeed the populist movement seeks what it says it does, which is to benefit “ordinary” people, like those in the working or middle classes, instead of the elite. Making tax structure changes comes at a price to upper-income earners, who would lose certain tax benefits, and these individuals and groups may lobby or forgo campaign donations for members of Congress who would vote for a more progressive tax code.

Furthermore, income inequality and general economic prosperity are linked directly to anti-immigration issues. Policies that better foster immigration and incorporation of migrants into the labor force are shown globally, to reduce economic inequality. What this means for governments of developed countries like the United States is that they must better manage immigration through promotion of high-skilled immigration; fostering positive assimilation, like Canada has done; and promoting political rhetoric that values foreigners and minority populations.

There is no doubt that inequality, immigration, and our disjunctive political moment are mere parts of the complex and unpredictable policy environment that 2016 brought to the United States and the world. Ultimately, only (political) time can tell whether far-right movements and their populist leaders will continue to dominate the highest positions in government, affecting future international agendas on issues like immigration and trade. In the meantime, promoting positive policies in immigration and combating income inequality are examples of how politicians and citizens in opposition to the populism camp can push
back on the rise of the far-right.

3. Skowronek’s political time analysis is also contained in an accessible volume called Presidential Leadership in Political Time.

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