

We Need to Talk About Europe

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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Last week [Counterpoint](#) released the short film *We need to talk about Europe* on the risks of populism in Europe. The film is part of our project [Recapturing Europe's Reluctant Radicals](#), a combination of quantitative and qualitative research aimed at identifying the different layers of support for populist parties across Europe. The project has challenged the common assumption that support for populist parties comes exclusively from those considered the 'usual suspects' – male voters who tend to be young and unemployed and who have openly racist views. Instead, we argue that the vote for populist parties has increased over the last decade as a result of the support of other groups within the electorate who find populist parties attractive. These groups of voters can and should be brought back to the fold.

The film, released on Tuesday 29 April, includes interviews with leading academics, journalists and commentators on politics and populism from many European countries. It discusses the main traits of Europe's populist parties and reinforces the importance of engaging with 'reluctant radicals', the reluctant supporters of populism. It analyses the threat that populism poses to liberal democracies and the significance of bringing out the vote for the European Parliament elections in May this year.

Who are the reluctant radicals and what motivates them? A brief summary of our findings:

For the first stage of the 'reluctant radicals' project, we conducted an in-depth analysis of electoral data on voters for populist parties, including the European Social Survey and national election studies from UK, France, Netherlands and Italy. The ensuing report, 'Recapturing the Reluctant Radical: how to win back Europe's populist vote', showed that support for populist parties comes from three main groups: committed radicals (those who vote for populist parties and identify with them), reluctant radicals (supporters of populist parties who do not identify with them) and potential radicals (those who have not voted for these parties but who find some of their ideas appealing). We found that reluctant radicals make up a large proportion of the support for populist parties: often at least half of the supporters of right wing populist parties are reluctant.

Our study included the following countries: Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK and Italy. Some of our results confirmed earlier assumptions by other experts, but other findings departed from the consensus. For instance, we found that the gender gap is narrower than one might think. In our study, men are more likely to be reluctant radicals than women only in Germany and Finland. But in countries like the Netherlands and Norway the gender gap is small. In France, women are more likely to be potential radicals than men.

In line with other research, we found that in nearly all countries in our study, anti-immigration views increase the likelihood of being a reluctant radical. Distrust in parliament is also an important factor in Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands and Norway.

Contrary to what has been suggested by parts of the media, the economic crisis has not uniformly triggered more votes for populist parties. We found in our study that there is a relationship between reluctant support for populist parties and unemployment only in Germany. Across all countries, education, rather than gender, age or unemployment, is the most consistent predictor of reluctant radicalism. Education appears to be the feature that distinguishes the reluctant radicals most reliably.

So how can the risks posed by populist parties be averted? Based on our research findings and the citizen engagement work that we have carried out in the second phase of our project, we are convinced that this endeavour requires the involvement of both policy makers and politicians on the one hand and, on the other, of

citizens themselves. The former should listen carefully to the concerns of reluctant radicals, focus in particular on addressing educational inequalities, and seek to regain trust among their electorate. And policy-makers need to reach out to citizens and provide the space and time to have difficult conversations, whether it is in the form of public consultations or other modes of deliberative democracy. Our project involves producing and disseminating a series of tools to help policy makers, politicians and citizens be aware of the current situation and take the necessary actions. [We need to talk about Europe](#) is part of this strategy.

Lila Caballero is head of projects and a senior researcher at [Counterpoint](#). She holds a PhD in Government and an Msc in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics. During her postgraduate studies she focused on the underlying power dynamics of institutions, which are deeply rooted in culture and traditions. At Counterpoint she has been able to continue exploring the 'hidden wiring' and cultural complexities of European institutions, mainly through her work on populism. Lila has authored, co-authored and commissioned various pieces on the hidden wiring of populism within the Reluctant Radicals project, and often writes short pieces on current events for the Counterpoint website.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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