Donald Trump’s admirers and critics would probably agree on one thing: he is different. One of his chief Republican supporters, Newt Gingrich, describes him as a “unique, extraordinary experience.” And of course, in some ways—his celebrity, his flexibility with the facts—Trump is unusual. But in an important sense, he is not: Trump is part of a broad populist upsurge running through the Western world. It can be seen in countries of widely varying circumstances, from prosperous Sweden to crisis-ridden Greece. In most, populism remains an opposition movement, although one that is growing in strength; in others, such as Hungary, it is now the reigning ideology. But almost everywhere, populism has captured the public’s attention.

What is populism? It means different things to different groups, but all versions share a suspicion of and hostility toward elites, mainstream politics, and established institutions. Populism sees itself as speaking for the forgotten “ordinary” person and often imagines itself as the voice of genuine patriotism. “The only antidote to decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong,” Trump wrote in The Wall Street Journal in April 2016.

Norbert Hofer, who ran an “Austria first” presidential campaign in 2016, explained to his opponent—conveniently, a former professor—“You have the haute volée [high society] behind you; I have the people with me.”

Historically, populism has come in left- and right-wing variants, and both are flourishing today, from Bernie Sanders to Trump, and from Syriza, the leftist party currently in power in Greece, to the National Front, in France. But today’s left-wing populism is neither distinctive nor particularly puzzling. Western countries have long had a far left that critiques mainstream left-wing parties as too market-oriented and accommodating of big business. In the wake of the Cold War, center-left parties moved much closer toward the center—think of Bill Clinton in the United States and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom—thus opening up a gap that could be filled by populists. That gap remained empty, however, until the financial crisis of 2007–8. The subsequent downturn caused households in the United States to lose trillions in wealth and led unemployment in countries such as Greece and Spain to rise to 20 percent and above, where it has remained ever since. It is hardly surprising that following the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the populist left experienced a surge of energy.

The new left’s agenda is not so different from the old left’s. If anything, in many European countries, left-wing populist parties are now closer to the center than they were 30 years ago. Syriza, for example, is not nearly as socialist as was the main Greek socialist party, PASOK, in the 1970s and 1980s. In power, it has implemented market reforms and austerity, an agenda with only slight variations from that of the governing party that preceded it. Were Podemos, Spain’s version of Syriza, to come to power—and it gained only about 20 percent of the vote in the country’s most recent election—it would probably find itself in a similar position.
Right-wing populist parties, on the other hand, are experiencing a new and striking rise in country after country across Europe. France’s National Front is positioned to make the runoff in next year’s presidential election. Austria’s Freedom Party almost won the presidency this year and still might, since the final round of the election was annulled and rescheduled for December. Not every nation has succumbed to the temptation. Spain, with its recent history of right-wing dictatorship, has shown little appetite for these kinds of parties. But Germany, a country that has grappled with its history of extremism more than any other, now has a right-wing populist party, Alternative for Germany, growing in strength. And of course, there is Trump. While many Americans believe that Trump is a singular phenomenon, representative of no larger, lasting agenda, accumulating evidence suggests otherwise. The political scientist Justin Gest adapted the basic platform of the far-right British National Party and asked white Americans whether they would support a party dedicated to “stopping mass immigration, providing American jobs to American workers, preserving America’s Christian heritage and stopping the threat of Islam.” Sixty-five percent of those polled said they would. Trumpism, Gest concluded, would outlast Trump.

WHY THE WEST, AND WHY NOW?

In searching for the sources of the new populism, one should follow Sherlock Holmes’ advice and pay attention to the dog that didn’t bark. Populism is largely absent in Asia, even in the advanced economies of Japan and South Korea. It is actually in retreat in Latin America, where left-wing populists in Argentina, Bolivia, and Venezuela ran their countries into the ground over the last decade. In Europe, however, not only has there been a steady and strong rise in populism almost everywhere, but it has deeper roots than one might imagine. In an important research paper for Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris calculate that since the 1960s, populist parties of the right have doubled their share of the vote in European countries and populists of the left have seen more than a fivefold increase. By the second decade of this century, the average share of seats for right-wing populist parties had risen to 13.7 percent, and it had risen to 11.5 percent for left-wing ones.

The most striking findings of the paper are about the decline of economics as the pivot of politics. The way politics are thought about today is still shaped by the basic twentieth-century left-right divide. Left-wing parties are associated with increased government spending, a larger welfare state, and regulations on business. Right-wing parties have wanted limited government, fewer safety nets, and more laissez-faire policies. Voting patterns traditionally reinforced this ideological divide, with the working class opting for the left and middle and upper classes for the right. Income was usually the best predictor of a person’s political choices.

A convergence in economic policy has contributed to a situation in which the crucial difference between the left and the right is cultural.

Inglehart and Norris point out that this old voting pattern has been waning for decades. “By the 1980s,” they write, “class voting had fallen to the lowest levels ever recorded in Britain, France, Sweden and West Germany. . . . In the U.S., it had fallen so low [by the 1990s] that there was virtually no room for further decline.” Today, an American’s economic status is a bad predictor of his or her voting preferences. His or her views on social issues—say, same-sex marriage—are
a much more accurate guide to whether he or she will support Republicans or Democrats. Inglehart and Norris also analyzed party platforms in recent decades and found that since the 1980s, economic issues have become less important. Noneconomic issues—such as those related to gender, race, the environment—have greatly increased in importance.

What can explain this shift, and why is it happening almost entirely in the Western world? Europe and North America include countries with widely varying economic, social, and political conditions. But they face a common challenge—economic stasis. Despite the variety of economic policies they have adopted, all Western countries have seen a drop-off in growth since the 1970s. There have been brief booms, but the secular shift is real, even including the United States. What could account for this decline? In his recent book, *The Rise and Fall of Nations*, Ruchir Sharma notes that a broad trend like this stagnation must have an equally broad cause. He identifies one factor above all others: demographics. Western countries, from the United States to Poland, Sweden to Greece, have all seen a decline in their fertility rates. The extent varies, but everywhere, families are smaller, fewer workers are entering the labor force, and the ranks of retirees swell by the year. This has a fundamental and negative impact on economic growth.

That slower growth is coupled with challenges that relate to the new global economy. Globalization is now pervasive and entrenched, and the markets of the West are (broadly speaking) the most open in the world. Goods can easily be manufactured in lower-wage economies and shipped to advanced industrial ones. While the effect of increased global trade is positive for economies as a whole, specific sectors get battered, and large swaths of unskilled and semiskilled workers find themselves unemployed or underemployed.

Another trend working its way through the Western world is the information revolution. This is not the place to debate whether new technologies are raising productivity. Suffice it to say, they reinforce the effects of globalization and, in many cases, do more than trade to render certain kinds of jobs obsolete. Take, for example, the new and wondrous technologies pursued by companies such as Google and Uber that are making driverless cars possible. Whatever the other effects of this trend, it cannot be positive for the more than three million Americans who are professional truck drivers. (The most widely held job for an American male today is driving a car, bus, or truck, as The Atlantic’s Derek Thompson has noted.)

The final challenge is fiscal. Almost every Western country faces a large fiscal burden. The net debt-to-GDP ratio in the European Union in 2015 was 67 percent. In the United States, it was 81 percent. These numbers are not crippling, but they do place constraints on the ability of governments to act. Debts have to be financed, and as expenditures on the elderly rise through pensions and health care, the debt burden will soar. If one secure path to stronger growth is investment—spending on infrastructure, education, science, and technology—this path is made more difficult by the ever-growing fiscal burdens of an aging population.

These constraints—demographics, globalization, technology, and budgets—mean that policymakers have a limited set of options from which to choose. The sensible solutions to the problems of advanced economies these days are inevitably a series of targeted efforts that will collectively improve things: more investments, better worker retraining, reforms of health care. But this incrementalism produces a deep sense of frustration among many voters who want more
dramatic solutions and a bold, decisive leader willing to decree them. In the United States and elsewhere, there is rising support for just such a leader, who would dispense with the checks and balances of liberal democracy.

FROM ECONOMICS TO CULTURE

In part because of the broader forces at work in the global economy, there has been a convergence in economic policy around the world in recent decades. In the 1960s, the difference between the left and the right was vast, with the left seeking to nationalize entire industries and the right seeking to get the government out of the economy. When François Mitterrand came to power in France in the early 1980s, for example, he enacted policies that were identifiably socialist, whereas Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan sought to cut taxes, privatize industries and government services, and radically deregulate the private sector.

The end of the Cold War discredited socialism in all forms, and left-wing parties everywhere moved to the center, most successfully under Clinton in the United States and Blair in the United Kingdom. And although politicians on the right continue to make the laissez-faire case today, it is largely theoretical. In power, especially after the global financial crisis, conservatives have accommodated themselves to the mixed economy, as liberals have to the market. The difference between Blair’s policies and David Cameron’s was real, but in historical perspective, it was rather marginal. Trump’s plans for the economy, meanwhile, include massive infrastructure spending, high tariffs, and a new entitlement for working mothers. He has employed the usual rhetoric about slashing regulations and taxes, but what he has actually promised—let alone what he could actually deliver—has been less different from Hillary Clinton’s agenda than one might assume. In fact, he has boasted that his infrastructure program would be twice as large as hers.

This convergence in economic policy has contributed to a situation in which the crucial difference between the left and the right today is cultural. Despite what one sometimes hears, most analyses of voters for Brexit, Trump, or populist candidates across Europe find that economic factors (such as rising inequality or the effects of trade) are not the most powerful drivers of their support. Cultural values are. The shift began, as Inglehart and Norris note, in the 1970s, when young people embraced a postmaterialist politics centered on self-expression and issues related to gender, race, and the environment. They challenged authority and established institutions and norms, and they were largely successful in introducing new ideas and recasting politics and society. But they also produced a counterreaction. The older generation, particularly men, was traumatized by what it saw as an assault on the civilization and values it cherished and had grown up with. These people began to vote for parties and candidates that they believed would, above all, hold at bay these forces of cultural and social change.

In Europe, that led to the rise of new parties. In the United States, it meant that Republicans began to vote more on the basis of these cultural issues than on economic ones. The Republican Party had lived uneasily as a coalition of disparate groups for decades, finding a fusion between cultural and economic conservatives and foreign policy hawks. But then, the Democrats under Clinton moved to the center, bringing many professionals and white-collar workers into the party’s fold. Working-class whites, on the other hand, found themselves increasingly alienated by the cosmopolitan Democrats and more comfortable with a Republican Party that promised to
reflect their values on “the three Gs”—guns, God, and gays. In President Barack Obama’s first term, a new movement, the Tea Party, bubbled up on the right, seemingly as a reaction to the government’s rescue efforts in response to the financial crisis. A comprehensive study by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, however, based on hundreds of interviews with Tea Party followers, concluded that their core motivations were not economic but cultural. As the virulent hostility to Obama has shown, race also plays a role in this cultural reaction.

For a few more years, the conservative establishment in Washington remained focused on economics, not least because its most important financial supporters tended toward libertarianism. But behind the scenes, the gap between it and the party’s base was growing, and Trump’s success has brought that division into the open. Trump’s political genius was to realize that many Republican voters were unmoved by the standard party gospel of free trade, low taxes, deregulation, and entitlement reform but would respond well to a different appeal based on cultural fears and nationalist sentiment.

NATION VS. MIGRATION

Unsurprisingly, the initial and most important issue Trump exploited was immigration. On many other social issues, such as gay rights, even right-wing populists are divided and recognize that the tide is against them. Few conservative politicians today argue for the recriminalization of homosexuality, for instance. But immigration is an explosive issue on which populists are united among themselves and opposed to their elite antagonists.

There is a reality behind the rhetoric, for we are indeed living in an age of mass migration. The world has been transformed by the globalization of goods, services, and information, all of which have produced their share of pain and rejection. But we are now witnessing the globalization of people, and public reaction to that is stronger, more visceral, and more emotional. Western populations have come to understand and accept the influx of foreign goods, ideas, art, and cuisine, but they are far less willing to understand and accept the influx of foreigners themselves—and today there are many of those to notice.

Immigration is the final frontier of globalization.

For the vast majority of human history, people lived, traveled, worked, and died within a few miles of their birthplace. In recent decades, however, Western societies have seen large influxes of people from different lands and alien cultures. In 2015, there were around 250 million international migrants and 65 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Europe has received the largest share, 76 million immigrants, and it is the continent with the greatest anxiety. That anxiety is proving a better guide to voters’ choices than issues such as inequality or slow growth. As a counterexample, consider Japan. The country has had 25 years of sluggish growth and is aging even faster than others, but it doesn’t have many immigrants—and in part as a result, it has not caught the populist fever.

Levels of public anxiety are not directly related to the total number of immigrants in a country or even to the concentration of immigrants in different areas, and polls show some surprising findings. The French, for example, are relatively less concerned about the link between refugees
and terrorism than other Europeans are, and negative attitudes toward Muslims have fallen substantially in Germany over the past decade. Still, there does seem to be a correlation between public fears and the pace of immigration. This suggests that the crucial element in the mix is politics: countries where mainstream politicians have failed to heed or address citizens’ concerns have seen rising populism driven by political entrepreneurs fanning fear and latent prejudice. Those countries that have managed immigration and integration better, in contrast, with leadership that is engaged, confident, and practical, have not seen a rise in populist anger. Canada is the role model in this regard, with large numbers of immigrants and a fair number of refugees and yet little backlash.

To be sure, populists have often distorted or even invented facts in order to make their case. In the United States, for example, net immigration from Mexico has been negative for several years. Instead of the illegal immigrant problem growing, in other words, it is actually shrinking. Brexit advocates, similarly, used many misleading or outright false statistics to scare the public. Yet it would be wrong to dismiss the problem as one simply concocted by demagogues (as opposed to merely exploited by them). The number of immigrants entering many European countries is historically high. In the United States, the proportion of Americans who were foreign-born increased from less than five percent in 1970 to almost 14 percent today. And the problem of illegal immigration to the United States remains real, even though it has slowed recently. In many countries, the systems designed to manage immigration and provide services for integrating immigrants have broken down. And yet all too often, governments have refused to fix them, whether because powerful economic interests benefit from cheap labor or because officials fear appearing uncaring or xenophobic.

Immigration is the final frontier of globalization. It is the most intrusive and disruptive because as a result of it, people are dealing not with objects or abstractions; instead, they come face-to-face with other human beings, ones who look, sound, and feel different. And this can give rise to fear, racism, and xenophobia. But not all the reaction is noxious. It must be recognized that the pace of change can move too fast for society to digest. The ideas of disruption and creative destruction have been celebrated so much that it is easy to forget that they look very different to the people being disrupted.

Western societies will have to focus directly on the dangers of too rapid cultural change. That might involve some limits on the rate of immigration and on the kinds of immigrants who are permitted to enter. It should involve much greater efforts and resources devoted to integration and assimilation, as well as better safety nets. Most Western countries need much stronger retraining programs for displaced workers, ones more on the scale of the GI Bill: easily available to all, with government, the private sector, and educational institutions all participating. More effort also needs to be devoted to highlighting the realities of immigration, so that the public is dealing with facts and not phobias. But in the end, there is no substitute for enlightened leadership, the kind that, instead of pandering to people’s worst instincts, appeals to their better angels.

Eventually, we will cross this frontier as well. The most significant divide on the issue of immigration is generational. Young people are the least anxious or fearful of foreigners of any group in society. They understand that they are enriched—economically, socially, culturally—by
living in diverse, dynamic countries. They take for granted that they should live in an open and connected world, and that is the future they seek. The challenge for the West is to make sure the road to that future is not so rocky that it causes catastrophe along the way.