Everyone can see that European politics is changing. In January, the British Parliament delivered a stinging defeat to Prime Minister Theresa May’s plan to take the United Kingdom out of the European Union, despite there being no obvious alternative. In France, a grassroots “yellow vest” movement is organizing sporadically violent demonstrations against President Emmanuel Macron. The German Social Democrats have lost their followers, while the Christian Democrats have lost their leaders as Angela Merkel’s final term as chancellor winds down. The Dutch parliament is splintering, the Spanish and Portuguese governments lack majorities, the Italian government lacks opposition, and the Greek government keeps threatening to fall apart. Farther to the east, the situation only gets more complicated. Polarization in Poland, demonstrations in Hungary, and corruption in Romania all add to the general uncertainty. And that is just a quick survey of developments at the national level.

When you imagine this set of developments coming together in elections for the European Parliament, due to be held in May 2019, the whole of European politics appears even less familiar than the sum of its parts. Europe was the birthplace of three great political movements—Liberalism, Christian Democracy, and Social Democracy. Now these movements seem much less important. Polling suggests that the mainstream political groupings will command a majority of seats in the next European Parliament only if all three of the largest ones—the European People’s Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats—are on board. It will be the first time that the two largest groups—the EPP and S&D—have not been able to command a joint majority.

On the surface, this divides European politics into the mainstream versus “the rest.” Beneath the surface, the mainstream is not so mainstream anymore. And “the rest” includes the largest political party in Belgium, the governing party in Poland, both governing parties in Italy, and what looks likely to become the largest political movement in France.

The question is how to explain this transformation. The easy answer is to point the finger at “populism.” Globalization left many Europeans behind while others prospered, unrestrained migration threatened identities and livelihoods—and populist rabble-rousers took advantage of this wellspring of discontent to launch new political movements that could challenge elites and overturn the status quo.

As with most easy answers, this one has a lot of truth to it. Globalization has created losers as well as winners. People tend to fear migration, particularly when they are told that migration is unchecked. Rabble-rousers want to mobilize discontented voters against the ruling elites (particularly when those elites insist on referring to discontented voters as a rabble). And the status quo, where the same political parties and the same personalities either trade or share control over institutions from one election to the next, is untenable over the medium-to-longer term.

The problem is that all this adds up to only part of the story. Yes, there are populist parties and populist politicians. The phenomenon they represent—populism—is important. Serious schol-
ars have invested time and effort in researching what populism is and where it comes from. But no, populism is not the reason why European politics is changing so rapidly both in general terms and, more often than not, on a case-by-case basis. Worse, by trying to use populism to explain everything, we run the risk of losing the insights that the wider community of scholars working on populism has to offer.

Populism is not a sufficient explanation; it may not be necessary either. We can explain a lot of what is happening right now without reference to populism, by considering three different causal mechanisms. They relate to the gap that tends to grow between the way democratic institutions function and how voters feel represented by those institutions; the way democratic politicians have tried to move controversial policy areas outside of the political domain; and the way democracies interact with one another in this context, and specifically how Europe has developed within a wider Atlantic community.

To be sure, these things all connect with the populism that lies at the heart of scholarly inquiry, but that connection does not tell us what is happening to European politics or why. Moreover, there is no reason to believe this argument should be limited to Europe (while there are many reasons to suspect it should not). The same forces are at work in the United States and other countries.

**MIND THE GAP**

The basic problem for European democracy today is that people change while institutions remain the same. This is a recurrent problem for any form of government. It is a particular challenge for Europe, insofar as European democracy has always been playing catch-up with popular aspirations for democratic representation.

To understand why this is so, you need to go back to the nineteenth century—when, in many ways, European democracy started out as an elite project. The ruling classes in different parts of Europe extended political power and voting rights only reluctantly and in order to stave off popular unrest. As they did so, they set up strong guardrails in the form of political parties, mass media, and constitutional arrangements. These were designed to channel the electorate through the political process, to make sure that “the people” did not turn into a mob and that democracy did not devolve into ochlocracy (or mob rule).

If this sounds condescending, it was—and self-consciously so. Most elite projects are. When the great Italian political theorist Gaetano Mosca set out what he believed to be the basic elements of political science toward the end of the nineteenth century, he called his treatise *Elementi di scienza politica*; the English translator retitled the work *The Ruling Class*.

Despite the guardrails, those early versions of European democracy proved unstable. Sometimes would-be political leaders organized mass movements to capture national institutions and bend them to a new design. Italian fascism is a good example. At other times, political parties lost their self-discipline and representative bodies fell into disarray. One example of this might be the Third Republic in France (1870–1940), when a progressively fragmented parliament descended into stagnation. The common denominator across both types of situations is that somehow political leaders and their followers managed to come together in sufficient numbers to exercise power without working through traditional institutions like parties and the media, or observing the norms of discourse and deliberation that discipline democratic politics.

Whether the goal of these new actors was to capture the system or to disrupt its performance, the result was that when the guardrails came off, democratic politics broke down. Hence the challenge for European elites has been to strike the right balance between institutions that are strong enough to discipline politicians and fend off would-be revolutionaries, and institutions that are flexible enough to make sure that the people find adequate representation. Indeed, the difficulty of finding that balance was the main theme in Mosca’s book. His operating assumption was that European democracy always would be a work in progress.

Europeans got better at that balancing act after World War II than they were during the interwar period. The horrific violence and destruction unleashed when democracy collapsed into dictatorship provided an unforgettable teachable moment. But better is not perfect, as the French Fourth Republic (1946–58) amply demonstrated with a string of unstable and ineffective governments.
The Fifth Republic was not perfect either (French constitutionalists are still looking for ways to improve its performance). The new leadership under President Charles de Gaulle managed to strengthen political institutions by introducing the direct election of the president and instilling parliamentary self-discipline through an electoral process that encouraged voters to choose between left and right. But it could not make those institutions adequately flexible to represent emerging interests in French society at the same time.

**Cycles of Rebellion**

De Gaulle’s presidency ended with the 1968 street demonstrations, and his departure ushered in a crisis of governability that lasted more than a decade. French citizens, both young and older, refused to be bound by traditional political parties. They sought new ways to express their ideas beyond the mainstream media, showed little respect for the norms of discourse and deliberation, and represented a fundamental challenge to the constitutional order of the state.

Now many people look back on 1968 as a celebration of liberty and self-expression rather than something more sinister or subversive. They are right to do so. European democracy needed change, and that change brought important ideas like gender equality and environmental protection along with it.

Nevertheless, what happened in France that year is important for two other reasons. The first is that it started at the top of the business cycle during a period of full employment, when the main complaint was not that key groups in French society had been left behind but rather that they had been prevented from surging ahead. In other words, economic crisis is not a prerequisite for social unrest.

The second reason for focusing on 1968 is that what happened in France was happening across Europe, East as well as West, at much the same time and for much the same reason. Europeans rebelled against traditional institutions because they believed them to be too constraining and unrepresentative. This rebellion was indifferent to whether the “democracy” in question was liberal or communist. The goal in either case was to tear down the guardrails in order to be heard. Mosca referred to this kind of process as “the circulation of elites.”

Of course, this time is different—but probably not in the way commentators focusing on contemporary populism would expect. The rebellion against democracy today is much less violent and destructive, in no small measure because political leaders across Europe have learned to exercise greater self-restraint and flexibility. Moreover, there is little evidence that Europeans are tired of democracy; the evidence suggests only that they do not like the way democracy represents their interests and aspirations.

There is another difference worth noting as well. Whereas the rebellion in the 1960s and 1970s took place on the left, the rebellion that has been growing over the past two decades is more clearly established on the political right. Even so, it would be a mistake to draw too clear a distinction between the two periods. You can find right-wing voices in the earlier period and left-wing voices today.

Neither side has a monopoly on violence in its expression of discontent with democratic institutions. The images of German Green activist Joschka Fischer kicking a policeman in the 1970s are iconic. The very constructive role Fischer played as foreign minister and Green party leader in the late 1990s and early 2000s demonstrates that not all rebellions end in disaster; some may even be necessary to ensure that institutions adapt to address legitimate grievances.

European democracy did not emerge from the crisis of governability in the 1970s without scars. The political left was irreparably divided between an old-style traditional left focused on working-class interests and a new-style left more concerned with quality-of-life considerations, grassroots participation, and civil and human rights. This schism weakened left-wing political institutions, especially political parties, and tilted the balance in European politics toward the center-right.

Fast-forward to the present, and the social democrats have all but vanished in many countries. Where they remain, the divisions between traditional and new-left political groupings are still fresh. Even where the end of the Cold War bequeathed huge institutional advantages to the former communist parties, the political left has found it hard to survive. Just look at Poland and Hungary.

If the new rebellion against democratic norms and institutions is taking place on the right, that is probably because democratic politics has shifted in that direction. Nevertheless, Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise, and Jeremy Corbyn’s British Labour Party show that the demand for po-
itical transformation can emerge at just about any point on the spectrum. What these parties have in common is that they want to reinvent the rules of politics and break open institutions they believe are unrepresentative. The difference between them and the more right-wing alternatives that have captured so much attention in the media is in the rhetoric they use to mobilize popular support.

Mélenchon and Corbyn appeal to class; Podemos and the Five Star Movement focus on younger, more educated voters who feel locked out of economic opportunity. The more right-wing groups tend to focus more narrowly on identity politics. Commentators are justly concerned about the possibility that such appeals to exclusive national, ethnic, or racial identities could fuel violence. But identity politics has always existed and does not cause right-wing mobilization; the political right succeeds with appeals to identity only because the more traditional democratic institutions no longer hold the allegiance of large parts of the population. This is a perennial problem for democracies.

**EXTERNAL CONSTRAINT**

European politicians are well aware of the problems that emerge when voters no longer perceive institutions as representative. Greater self-restraint and flexibility were a lesson born of harsh experience—but not the only lesson Europe’s political leaders took from the periodic breakdown in democratic performance. Twentieth-century European elites looked at the problem of stabilizing democracy from a slightly different perspective. The experience of World War II made them recognize the fragility of their domestic political arrangements, so they sought to shore them up—from outside.

The European embrace of multilateralism is a good illustration of this. When national governments negotiate with one another, they implicitly place constraints on domestic politics. Anything that must be done to honor international commitments is no longer fair game for political contestation at home. From this standpoint, if protectionism led to conflict in the interwar period, national governments should commit to trade liberalization even though domestic interests demand protection. If access to crucial raw materials like coal and steel creates tensions, national governments should negotiate some arrangement for sharing those resources. When Europeans say their integration project was designed to harness the dangerous forces of nationalism, this is what they mean.

Of course, democratic electorates should be involved in the decision to participate in such arrangements. European elites worked hard to sell the integration project to skeptical voters in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. But once the bargains are struck, the role of national democracies becomes more complicated and less responsive to domestic political interests or idiosyncrasies. This is what Europeans mean when they say that their common European project has a “democratic deficit.” The introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 only shifted the focus for democratic aspirations, without making the problem of European responsiveness to national considerations go away.

The promise European leaders made to their electorates was that these concessions at the national level were necessary to improve the quality of policy making across Europe as a whole, so that everyone could benefit from the increase in efficiency for the collective and the decrease in conflict among participating countries. The late Irish political scientist Peter Mair argued that removing some areas of policy making from the national arena was also part of a deliberate attempt by European elites to strengthen and safeguard democratic politics.

As the twentieth century wore on and democratic politics became more unruly, European political leaders began to shift ever larger and more important policy-making authorities out of the domestic political arena. Sometimes they shifted these competences up to the European level through the “deepening” of European integration. Sometimes they simply fenced them off with legislation to ensure “political independence,” which happened progressively with monetary policy and central banks. The goal in these situations was not to strip democratic politics of meaning or consequence; it was to prevent democratic polities from injuring themselves and each other through policy choices that might damage economic performance and fuel political instability.

The relaunching of European integration in the 1980s was the high-water mark in this process. The Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty on European Union transferred significant amounts of regulatory, exchange-rate, monetary, and even fiscal-policy authority into negotiated frameworks that constrained the scope for domestic democratic choice. The monetary framework even included a requirement to give political independence to national central banks.
The justification in each of these cases was to improve economic policy making and performance by placing constraints on democratic politics. This was not a hidden conspiracy; on the contrary, national leaders openly celebrated the trade-off between national choice and European efficiency. Italian politicians made great efforts to explain the economic advantages of tying one’s hands, embracing European integration as a vincolo esterno or external constraint.

European voters were not entirely thrilled with this transfer of policy authority out of the realm of domestic politics. Many saw European integration as an elite project. Some were even willing to pay an economic cost, in terms of poorer policy outcomes and macroeconomic performance, to put a brake on European unification. For many European elites, this pushback came as a surprise.

The Danish referendum on the Maastricht Treaty in June 1992 was the first sign of unrest. The Danish parliament was overwhelmingly in favor of the treaty and yet the electorate voted against it, even knowing that doing so would hurt the economy. The French referendum that followed was also controversial. President François Mitterrand called it in hopes that it would bolster support for his government through a display of national unity, only to discover that European issues split both sides of the French political spectrum: the treaty was approved with just 51 percent of the vote. These episodes did not prevent the establishment of the European Union, but they did signal a growing tension between the transfer of policy authority outside domestic politics and the stabilization or strengthening of democratic institutions.

The recent economic and financial crisis dramatically increased the tension between popular political aspirations and nondemocratic policymaking institutions. European institutions held together well during the early stages of the crisis, and politically independent central banks responded reasonably effectively to the financial instability that spread from the United States to Europe. Within a matter of months, however, the differential impact of the crisis across European countries became more important politically than any success at the European level—or within what the political scientist Juliet Johnson refers to as the “wormhole” community of central bankers who are more connected to one another across Europe than they are to national politics.

As banks failed in wealthier countries, politicians blamed losses on foreign investments; when asset prices fell in poorer countries, politicians put the blame on foreign banks. The language of “lenders and borrowers” cemented the division between the two perspectives. Common European institutions found it almost impossible to generate solidarity.

The trade-off between national responsiveness and European effectiveness lost much of its luster as a consequence of the breakdown in European solidarity into a more straightforward identification of winners and losers. Paul Tucker, a former deputy governor of the Bank of England, argues in his recent book Unlected Power that the justification for giving political independence to domestic policy institutions like central banks lost considerable force as well.

With hindsight, it is clear that attempts by European politicians to shore up democracy by shifting key areas of policy making outside the realm of domestic political contestation—either transferring that responsibility to the European level or enshrining it in politically independent institutions—created a hostage to fortune. So long as things went well, voters were willing to go along. When things went poorly, that calculus changed.

Now European voters are turning against the whole framework for policy making. Usually this shows up in idiosyncratic challenges to specific arrangements. In 2016, the regional parliament of Wallonia in Belgium briefly blocked an EU trade agreement with Canada; in a referendum that year in the Netherlands, voters rejected a treaty meant to underpin trading relations between the EU and Ukraine; the Italians have complained bitterly about European banking regulations.

As when the Danes first vetoed the Maastricht Treaty, the shift in emphasis from European solidarity to national responsibility is palpable, even if voters recognize that such a shift could be economically costly. In the extreme case, a majority of the British electorate voted in 2016 to take their country out of the EU.

**Hanging together?**

This discontent with European integration should not be exaggerated. Nor should it be read
as an indictment of the European project. The EU is a remarkable achievement that has brought peace and prosperity to tens if not hundreds of millions, and political elites are not the only ones to recognize this. The base level of popular support for the EU is very high across Europe. Meanwhile, the divisions within the UK over its future relationship with the EU indicate that Europeans have not turned against their common project entirely, even where it is deeply unpopular with many.

Popular frustration with central banks should not be taken out of context either. Europe’s economies perform much better now that politicians are kept away from the monetary printing press. Even economists who argue for greater national autonomy in monetary policy making do not mean to imply that central banks should become the playthings of democratic politics. As Tucker points out, there are aspects of central banking that should be publicly accountable in particular circumstances, but that is no justification for overturning the whole policymaking framework.

The problem for Europeans is that their relationships are so intertwined that any discontent with democratic institutions or undemocratic policy frameworks tends to spill across national borders in terms of both perceptions and performance. So even if we concede the great achievements of the EU and the underlying logic of central bank independence, and even if we accept that democratic electorates sometimes get frustrated with the performance of their political institutions, we need to take into consideration a new element of tension that arises from the depth and intensity of European interdependence. This point is best made through the examples of the Netherlands and Italy.

The current Dutch government has a one-seat majority in a deeply divided parliament. It faces staunch opposition from groups on the right of the political spectrum that complain about the unresponsiveness of Dutch democracy to what they argue are legitimate popular grievances about migration and economic performance. These groups also complain about the constraints implied by European institutions and other shared policy arrangements, particularly when those institutions compel the Dutch government to make financial contributions in support of other EU member countries. These are the groups that pushed the government to hold a referendum on the ratification of the EU’s relationship with Ukraine—not so much to prevent that relationship as to embarrass the government.

The current Italian government has a much larger majority than its Dutch counterpart. It comprises two political parties—the Five Star Movement and the League—that came to power on the back of a strong critique of Italian democracy. They also criticized the EU. Their arguments sound more like the Dutch opposition’s than the Dutch government’s.

In office since June 2018, this Italian coalition has already picked a number of fights with European institutions, particularly over the unresponsiveness of those institutions to what the coalition partners argue are legitimate concerns related to migration and economic performance. The coalition partners wanted to redistribute more resources to those they believed were hardest hit by the crisis, to lower taxes and simplify fiscal institutions, and to increase spending on infrastructure while at the same time protecting the environment. They complained that European fiscal rules prevented them from achieving these objectives, and they argued that European institutions and their unelected leaders were responsible for any turmoil in Italian sovereign debt markets.

The problem for the Italian government is that the Dutch government refuses to countenance any effort to make European institutions more responsive to Italian concerns. The Dutch are hardly alone in this position; governments across the European Union stand with them. The problem for the Dutch government and its allies is that they cannot afford to make any concessions to Italy—that would provoke even stronger criticism from their domestic political opposition. Yet by pushing back against the Italian government, the Dutch government only strengthens the arguments made by politicians in the Five Star Movement and the League that the rest of Europe is unresponsive to legitimate Italian concerns.

There is no obvious solution to this conflict. Meanwhile, reforms that would strengthen the European financial system and the euro as a single currency remain stymied because of such fundamental disagreements between EU member states.
The Dutch-Italian illustration is only one among many. Nor are such tensions limited to Europe. Democratic structures in the United States are also under challenge. Many American voters no longer feel represented by their institutions. Many also feel uncomfortable with the way significant policy authorities have been placed beyond domestic political influence and so have become unresponsive to what they contend are legitimate expressions of grievance. New politicians like Donald Trump have emerged to represent these concerns and to challenge both democratic institutions and what they characterize as undemocratic policy arrangements.

Given the way democracies interact within the wider Atlantic community, the parallelism between developments in Europe and the United States is a profound source of anxiety and not reassurance. By challenging the Atlantic alliance and criticizing (or even working to undermine) the European project, the Trump administration is making it harder for Europeans to work together. By throwing its support behind the critics of democratic institutions within European countries, the administration is making it harder for European politicians to adapt.

This is not to say that Trump is somehow responsible for the political challenges Europeans are facing. Those challenges are homegrown, they are recurrent, they have been developing for a long time, and they would have risen in intensity no matter who occupied the White House. But the forces pushing for changes in American democracy are exacerbating an already challenging situation in Europe.

Of course populism is playing a role in Europe’s current political transformation. You cannot understand the texture and tenor of the changes taking place without looking carefully at what scholars of populism have to say. Nevertheless, if the question is why European (and American) democracies are struggling at the moment, populism is not the answer. Instead, the answer is that European (and American) democracy is a work in progress. That work is complicated by the challenge of building a prosperous and stable global economy. Without detracting from the importance of populism as a political phenomenon, commentators should take note of that underlying reality. They should also focus on explaining why rising to the challenge is worth the effort—not only in Europe, but also in the United States.