



2016

# Kathleen Montgomery

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*WGLT*

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## Recommended Citation

Schlenker, Charlie, "Kathleen Montgomery" (2016). *Interviews for WGLT*. 29.  
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Kathleen Montgomery: WGLT Sound Ideas Interview June 6, 2016

**Mike McCurdy:** This is Sound Ideas. I am Mike McCurdy. The question of the moment among some political observers is this “Does the rise of Donald trump signal a new developing fascism?” For an Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist, the answer is no. Kathleen Montgomery tells GLT’s Charlie Schlenker fascism is a full ideology that Donald Trump does not have. Though some similarities exist in scapegoating immigrants, elites and women, Montgomery says she prefers the term “right wing populism.”

**Kathleen Montgomery:** Usually when we talk about those parties that began to emerge in Europe, in the 1980’s, they’re seen as not fascist or neo-fascist but a kind of new far right.

**Mike McCurdy:** Nationalist...far right.

**Montgomery:** Nationalist far right. They don’t overtly call for the abolition of democratic institutions but they are certainly illiberal. They are certainly ant-pluralist. It certainly has the elements of scapegoating and these binary oppositions of “us” and “them.” But they also claim to be the most democratic. Because they want to install rule by the people, that has been usurped by these corrupt elites. They say we want to keep democracy, but we want to improve democracy by making it for the people. Now, when you scratch past that surface, you see that how they define the people is narrow and exclusionary. The parallels with those parties and what we’re hearing from Donald Trump. Very striking...very striking.

**McCurdy:** Does Trump flow from people like Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Geert Wilders in Holland, The People’s Party in Switzerland, the recently near-miss Freedom Party in Austria...

**Montgomery:** Sure.

**McCurdy:** The Progress Party in Norway. All sorts of them.

**Montgomery:** Jobbik in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland, Golden Dawn in Greece.

**McCurdy:** So does he flow from them or does he arise from unique things that are happening here?

**Montgomery:** I think that’s a great question. I don’t think he exists in a vacuum. I don’t think American politics is so exceptional that this is just a unique phenomenon here. I wouldn’t frame it as quite as he... that Trump is borrowing from the radical right European playbook. I think that the far right Populist parties in Europe and Trump emerge from the same broad trends that are happening across advanced industrial, post-industrial countries and those include an electorate that has changed... that, through communications and education has become much more cognitively mobilized, more elite challenging, less comfortable with taking cues from party leaders. I think that we’ve seen with globalization, fair trade, Europeanization, integration, a tremendous sense that the status quo elites have had a cozy consensus to outsource jobs, to bring in mass immigration, we’ve seen demographic shift across the advanced post industrial economies where we have shrinking

fertility rates and we have better life span prospects due to improved health care. That's creating a shrinking workforce population, aging or greying populations, and that's making it more difficult for any political party to make good on the post war social contract of the welfare state. And so we're seeing these challenges and the ways in which parties of the left and the right have dealt with those challenges, has really been very similar. It has been to embrace free trade and globalization. It has been to embrace austerity measures in order to try to particularly make good on pension and health. Those are the huge expenses for all of our welfare states and often times citizens feel that they've been left out. They have not been asked if they accept multiculturalism...whether they accept mass labor migration...whether they accept the outsourcing of jobs. And so what I think is emerging is grievance-based populism and I think the grievances are very similar. When we talk about the Trump electorate, it sounds like the electorate for Jobbik, it sounds like the electorate for you know any number of these parties.

**McCurdy:** Does the time lag between the European rise of right wing populism as you mentioned in the 80's and the rise of Trump now, show anything about the respective positions of the countries?

**Montgomery:** Yeah um, I think...

**McCurdy:** Why so much later here?

**Montgomery:** Why so much later here? When we first started to see these parties emerging in the 80's, there was great scholarly concern about this...this rhetoric of "us" versus "them," the growing intolerance, the backlash against multiculturalism. But for a long time, these parties were really small and in fact they weren't a "**Spector-hunt**" in Europe. Even though there was a lot of talk about that...

**McCurdy:** A lot of angst.

**Montgomery:** A lot of angst. But in reality throughout the 90's, the parties sort of hung around, but they really were not taking control of European governments in any large way.

**McCurdy:** 49% in Austria though...

**Montgomery:** Right. But by the 2000's...by the 2000's...these parties start to be more of a real threat. And in our European systems, who mostly use proportional representation...these emerge as political parties. Anti-establishment challenger parties. We started to see them in places we never expected them. In Sweden. You know, in the Netherlands. Doing very... very well. You know, the Freedom Party in Austria has its roots in the 80's with Jörg Haider and there was huge concern about him. But that party has risen and fallen in terms of its popularity. But what happens in the 2000's is that we start to get a confluence of a number of these grievances and certainly the 2008 global financial crisis brought to a head a real sense among portions of the electorates and the advanced democracies a real sense of having been sold out by the cozy consensus of the political elites. A real embrace of the kind of outsider anti-establishment parties...started to see some

of those parties, not only getting into parliament, getting into European parliament and in some cases getting into government. Now for me, I think a big difference with the United States is our electoral system. We use a first “past the post” majoritarian system that urges...along with our political culture...urges us towards a pretty consolidated two party system. So where we started to see the rumblings of a kind of an insurgency, we have seen it take place really differently in the United States. We see this populism being played out with in the primaries for both major political parties and I want to stress here using the label “populism” for Bernie Sanders and Trump...does not mean that they are in any way the same, in terms of the content of their ideas.

**McCurdy:** Your mileage may vary.

**Montgomery:** Exactly. So where the populism is fusing with nationalist and xenophobic ideas, for Trump and his supporters it's fusing with a different set of left wing ideas for Bernie Sanders.

**McCurdy:** So these sentiments can be harnessed in either direction?

**Montgomery:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**McCurdy:** And how will that conversation eventually turn out in the West do you think?

**Montgomery:** I'm deeply concerned about Mr. Trump. I am concerned that partly because of our two party consolidated system, rather than simply forming a political party that gets you know “x” percent, that he pulls the entire Republican party with him and he becomes the one option for them. And I think that there are many conservatives within the Republican Party who are equally appalled by a Trump presidency, as any one on the left.

**McCurdy:** Some political scientists though argue that the GOP establishment will take back the party and that Trump is going to be a “one-off.” History in Europe suggests that might not be the case, which you're hesitant to take.

**Montgomery:** Yeah...I hate to gaze into the crystal ball. I think that there will be some lasting consequences whatever happens with Trump. I think that this campaign has expanded what Pippa Norris would call the zone of acquiescence. What we will tolerate within our discourse and what we will come to treat as normal or mainstream. I think what Trump does is he has reshaped the discourse in a way that has empowered people to feel that they can say things that in previous electoral cycles were simply taboo. You could not say them. People are now saying those things and we're seeing a widening of what becomes acceptable or normal discourse in terms of intolerance and xenophobia...what I see are strong parallels in terms of the grievance-based identity politics, the grievance based populism, the anti-establishment sense... that in fact our parties have not been articulating, have not been addressing some of these grievances and we see that through the Sanders campaign as well. I think for a long time we thought that in Europe that the far right was this kind of protest. It was just protest voting and so we would see it flash and recede. In Europe, what we have seen is that these parties have in many countries, they have set up

very firm roots. And in some cases now, they are now top parties. Jobbik in Hungary is now, depending on which polls you look at, it's the second or third most popular party. And the largest party is itself a populist nationalist party. In Poland, the mainstream right is Populist, Nationalist and far right. So I do think that it is context specific for the country. I don't want to be overly pessimistic, but I would say based on, what I've seen in Europe, I am not overly hopeful either. I am concerned.

**McCurdy:** Part of the rise of this kind of population has been, as you've mentioned, the idea that elites have been serving themselves and not the rest of the population by relying on more on the market place for education, for transportation, for health care, even employment with the rise of the gig economy. They all throw these sectors into competition rather than framing them as consensual goods.

**Montgomery:** Right.

**McCurdy:** The argument is that it increases tensions between groups and undermines solidarity in a social order, and triggering resentment...

**Montgomery:** Absolutely.

**McCurdy:** You...you buy that? How is populism right wing or left wing to address that divisiveness?

**Montgomery:** Well I think right wing populism feeds on that divisiveness. It frames the world in mannequin, "good-evil", "friend-foe" kinds of terms. So I don't see much potential in right wing populism to overcome those divisions, given that the bread and butter of right wing populism is to exacerbate those differences. To do this kind of "who are the people?" "We are the people" and "these people don't fit..." It creates some kind of unity but it is an exclusionary identity-based unity. On the left, perhaps there is potential to create solidarity, a sense of community and to fight for public goods that will be for everyone.

**McCurdy:** And the left hasn't been winning.

**Montgomery:** Well, and you're seeing that far right in Europe is picking up a lot of the natural constituency of the left, so a lot of working class base of the left is actually migrating to those parties. The populist right wing parties.

**McCurdy:** And is that a permanent shift?

**Montgomery:** Well, we don't always have a long timeline on these parties; they may be fairly young to the extent that we have timeline date. We do find that the electorate of these parties is really consistent. Across time and across both halves of Europe. Whether its post-communist Eastern Europe, or Western Europe, North or South. The electorate tends to be white, male, not especially religious, even though often these parties in their rhetoric claim to be religious value parties and they tend to pick up blue collar...and those kinds of occupational backgrounds...that feel most displaced by the industrialization. So this is sounding very much like the Trump constituency and one of the things I think is really

interesting when we look at...they're predicting in a Trump vs. Clinton race that will have the largest gender gap since records have been kept of gender gaps. And I think the instinct is to say that is because Hilary Clinton is a woman and women are going to vote for her because she is a woman. But in fact, I think part of what's going on with that gender gap is the overwhelming attraction of a Trump or a far right Populist to white males. To the extent that some research in Europe has described the constituency as angry white males. And a lot of those angry white males come out of the working class constituency that historically we've expected to go with the left. A sense that the left is no longer really fighting for the working class, for jobs, for certain lifestyles, that you could work in a factory and that you could send your kids to school. All those kinds of upper mobility kinds of issues, the same thing is being expressed as a grievance in our European pool as well.

**McCurdy:** Is there an argument then...that the Democrats are in danger in this country... of losing their core as well to this right wing populist?

**Montgomery:** The concern is that it is not just Donald Trump, but that somebody would follow after him and pick up on that mobilizational point. Where are the establishment left and right? In terms of articulating a response to new authoritarianism, articulating a response to these grievances that could be a response that is not pandering to the lowest common denominator. I think, you know, for the populist radical right there is a kind of "Teflon factor". No matter what they say, they can simply cry while I'm not being PC and it becomes really hard for intellectuals and cultural figures to critique or make fun of the movement because what strengthens that movement more than the very "pin-head" elites that are being criticized than coming after. So I think in addressing Trump and in addressing the far right, it is very important it not be done in a way that is dismissive of supporters or pokes fun, or takes a sort of arch approach. I don't think that is helpful. I think to combat that new authoritarianism were not going to do it by dismissing his base as ignorant or dismissing his base as just not understanding our interests. Coming at that from an intellectual perspective or from an elite perspective...I think only gives fuel to his fire and the same thing is true...far right populist groups in Europe.... they absolutely love being attacked by intellectuals.

**McCurdy:** In a quixotic sort of way then, is the fall campaign going to be policy heavy? Rather than personality heavy? Is that going to play well with either side?

**Montgomery:** One of them is very...very good at policy light, heavy on personality. The other candidate, well presuming that Hilary Clinton becomes the democratic nominee and the fight is still going on, but if we assume that is the pathway and that she will be the nominee she will want to turn it to policy. That is her strength. If we are looking at qualification, background, experience-articulated policy platforms, that's what she has. But does that then brand her as the establishment politician that is appealing?

**McCurdy:** But you were just making an argument for addressing voter anger with policy, and not with matching the vitriol ridicule.

**Montgomery:** Right.

**McCurdy:** So, that's a catch 22.

**Montgomery:** But that. Right. That's an argument or it whether that sells in terms of votes. I mean that I think the candidates will try to do obviously what will be vote garnering. For the Clinton campaign, the very things that are her strengths seem to be not playing well with the electorate right now. I'm nervous because I...when I look at the far right in Europe, definitely gaining, you know continuing to gain traction across this decade.

**McCurdy:** Kathleen Montgomery is an Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist who studies right wing Populism in Europe. She spoke with GLT's Charlie Schlenker. You are listening to Sound Ideas.