

CHAPTER 17



Vulnerable Groups, Protections and Precarity

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Abstract

This chapter examines how impoverishment, inequality and precarity have become defining features of contemporary societies in Europe and the United States, reshaping domestic politics and altering the foundations of the transatlantic relationship. Poverty persists despite overall affluence, with COVID-19 reversing earlier gains in Europe and entrenched racialized and generational disparities characterizing the United States. Inequality follows divergent patterns: Europe experiences wide variation shaped by austerity and structural barriers facing migrants, while the United States is marked by extreme wealth concentration and systemic racial gaps. Yet inequality alone does not fully explain public discontent. Instead, precarity – politically produced vulnerability across class, gender, age and status – emerges as the central grievance. Expanding temporary and platform work, weakened labour protections and strained welfare systems expose women, youth, migrants and racial minorities to compounding risks. The chapter argues that rising precarity undermines trust in governance and shifts transatlantic cooperation toward transactionalism, requiring renewed social investment and stronger labour and environmental standards.

Keywords: poverty; precarity; inequality; employment; insecurity; populism

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Europe and the United States have faced intensifying social vulnerabilities stemming from economic shocks, political realignments and labour market transformations. Transatlantic EU–US relations are increasingly shaped by internal socioeconomic pressures, especially the precarization of labour and the rise of populist politics responding to widespread physical, economic, social and cultural insecurity. These forces are subtly but significantly reshaping cooperation across trade, security and global governance. The domestic pressures driving change have especially to do with deteriorating employment conditions – marked by low wages, gig work, weakened unions and eroded social protections. This trend is evident in both the United States and the EU, although with different institutional buffers. Economic insecurity – especially post-2008 and post-COVID-19 – has fuelled resentment toward globalization, trade liberalization and perceived elite consensus, which have historically underpinned transatlantic cooperation. To this adds cultural and physical insecurity – including migration anxieties, demographic shifts and perceived threats to national identity – which have intensified populist narratives that challenge liberal internationalism. In what follows, we review three interlinked trajectories in domestic developments – poverty, inequality and precarity – to highlight structural patterns, policy responses and emerging fault lines that are likely to affect domestic political attitudes and, consequently, transatlantic relations.

Poverty: Persistent risks and shifting demographics

Europe: The fragmented landscape of poverty amidst wealth

After the 2008 financial crisis, poverty rates in Europe slowly declined. However, COVID-19 disrupted this trajectory, leading to a renewed increase in poverty risk across many EU countries. The ‘Europe 2020’ strategy aimed to lift 20 million people out of poverty by 2020 – a goal that went unmet, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating vulnerabilities and deepening the scarring effects of poverty across the continent (Mussida and Sciulli 2022). The pandemic increased the risk of poverty, particularly for already vulnerable groups and widened disparities between countries due to differences in policy responses. Southern European countries (e.g., Italy, Spain, Greece) experienced sharper increases in poverty risk due to weaker welfare systems and higher reliance on tourism and service sectors.

Northern and Western European countries, with stronger social safety nets, were better able to cushion the impact.

In 2024, 21% of the EU population – approximately 93.3 million people – were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, according to Eurostat's AROPE indicator, which combines income poverty, severe material deprivation, and low work intensity (Eurostat 2025a). Rates remain highest in Bulgaria (30.3%), Romania (27.9%), and Greece (26.9%). Notably, in-work poverty is rising: 10.9% of employed individuals are still at risk of poverty.

Gender disparities persist: overall, women face a higher risk of poverty (21.9%) than men (20.0%), largely due to wage gaps and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities.

The United States: Structural poverty and policy gaps

According to the OECD, the United States has one of the highest relative poverty rates among member countries, with income inequality and poverty deeply entrenched (OECD 2024). The bottom quintile earns less than 3% of national income, while the top quintile earns over 50%.

Racialized poverty remains a defining feature: Black, Hispanic and Indigenous populations face disproportionately high poverty rates, compounded by housing segregation and educational disparities. Child poverty is particularly acute, with 16.1% of children living below the federal poverty line in 2023 (Guzman and Kollar 2023). Elder poverty is rising due to healthcare costs and insufficient retirement savings (Scott 2024).

Despite solid economic growth, real income gains have been uneven, and intergenerational mobility remains low (Kochhar and Sechopoulos 2023; Kochhar 2024). Impoverishment – both absolute deprivation (inability to meet basic needs) and relative poverty (living below a certain percentage of median income in a given society) – has been on the rise in Europe and the United States. This rising poverty has fuelled grievances about affordability, as households struggle to cover essential costs such as housing, food, utilities and debt repayments. Affordability grievances have been prominent in anti-establishment mobilizations, which have placed cost-of-living issues at the centre of national elections. In Europe, this has led to challenging EU integration, migration policy and austerity legacies – which are perceived as causes of impoverishment. In the United States, public anxiety over



purchasing power and declining real incomes have driven support for populist candidates who frame globalization and liberal elites as threats to national sovereignty and working-class dignity.

Inequality: Structural divides and policy responses

Europe: Between convergence and divergence

Income inequality in Europe varies widely. The Gini coefficient ranges from 23.8 in the Slovak Republic to 39.5 in Bulgaria (World Bank Group 2023). Post-2008 austerity widened inequality in Southern and Eastern Europe, with long-term effects on youth and low-income workers (Oxfam 2013).

The protective role of higher education has diminished, while employment stability and childcare provision have become more important in mitigating poverty and inequality (Mussida and Sciulli 2022). Migrant populations often face structural barriers to income parity, with limited access to housing, education, and labour protections (ETUC 2024).

The United States: Polarization and policy stagnation

The United States has seen a dramatic rise in income and wealth inequality. Households in the top 10% of the wealth distribution own 79% in the United States (OECD 2024, 86). Tax expenditures disproportionately benefit high earners, exacerbating inequality and reducing fiscal space for redistribution. Coastal urban centres show high income levels but also high living costs, while rural and post-industrial regions face stagnation. Racial disparities in educational attainment, access to capital, and exposure to environmental hazards deepen inequality (Beard et al. 2024). While impoverishment in absolute terms (i.e., reduced purchasing power) has often been expressed in social discontent, inequality (relative impoverishment) has not been reliably traced to social discontent, even as it has been at the centre of academic research and public debate.

Precarity: Labour market insecurity and social dislocation

Precarity – politically produced vulnerability caused by social threats to lives, livelihoods, and lifeworlds (2020; 2023) – has recently been identified as a critical condition afflicting contemporary democracies, cutting across class, gender, age, educational attainment, professional attainment and even income levels.

Europe: The rise of precarious work

Precarity has intensified through non-standard employment. Eurostat data show that young workers aged 30 or younger are disproportionately represented in temporary and low-paid jobs (Eurostat 2025b). Women are more likely to be in part-time or informal work, often linked to caregiving responsibilities.

Sectors such as hospitality, retail and care show high levels of precarity, with limited union coverage and weak protections. Platform work has expanded, but regulatory frameworks lag behind. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has called for the full implementation of the EU's directive on platform work and for universal social protections (ETUC 2023).

The pandemic disproportionately affected workers in precarious employment, temporary contracts, and low-income service sectors. This disproportionate impact has reinforced the link between insecure labour markets and the persistence of poverty (Mussida and Sciulli 2022).

The United States: Fragmentation and Flexibilization

The US labour market is characterized by high flexibility but low security. Gig economy workers often lack health insurance, paid leave, or retirement benefits (Human Rights Watch 2025). Union membership has fallen to historic lows, around 10% (BLS 2023). Frequent job changes, layoffs and contract work contribute to income volatility and psychological stress. Employer-based health insurance ties security to employment, making job loss a significant risk factor for medical debt and coverage gaps. Policy debates over universal basic income, portable benefits and labour classification have gained traction but remain politically contentious.

COVID-19 intensified poverty in Europe and the United States by exposing the precariousness of households and labour markets, undoing part of the progress made since the Great Recession. It significantly worsened mental health globally, with sharp rises in anxiety, depression, and stress (WHO 2022), while lockdowns and social isolation also triggered a surge in gender-based violence, often described as a 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women 2020).

Overall, even as societies on the two sides of the Atlantic have returned to economic growth, economic and social precarization has persisted. Labour market insecurity and cost-of-living concerns are diminishing public trust in existing



systems of governance and driving an upsurge in anti-establishment, populist mobilizations.

Vulnerable groups: Intersectional risks and policy blind Spots

Across both regions, certain groups face compounded vulnerabilities, resulting from impoverishment and precarization:

- **Women:** Gender pay gaps, caregiving burdens, and exposure to part-time work increase risks (UN Women 2023).
- **Migrants and refugees:** Legal status, language barriers, and discrimination limit access to services and stable employment (ETUC 2023)
- **Youth:** Entry-level job insecurity, student debt and housing unaffordability create long-term precarity.
- **The elderly:** Fixed incomes, rising healthcare costs, and social isolation contribute to poverty (Tornton and Bowers 2024).
- **Racial and ethnic minorities:** Structural racism, residential segregation, and unequal access to education and healthcare deepen inequality (Bailey et al. 2017; Mirza and Warwick 2024; Clark et al. 2022; Yearby et al. 2022; Kisa and Kisa 2025)

Thus, while precarity is becoming the overarching grievance in Western democracies, it is strongly stratified and is most acutely felt among the poor and socially marginalized. However, as economic and social insecurity are becoming ubiquitous across income levels and educational attainment, precarity is increasingly being identified as the key factor driving social discontent and fuelling anti-establishment, populist mobilizations (2004, 2020, 2023; Apostolidis 2020; Zhirnov et al 2024; Scheiring et al 2024; Rodríguez-Pose 2020).

Protections: Welfare states, labour rights and emerging models

Europe: Welfare retrenchment and innovation

European welfare states offer a range of protections, but austerity and demographic pressures have strained their capacity. Some of the key developments include:

- **Minimum income schemes:** These vary widely across countries, with some offering robust support (e.g., France's Revenu de solidarité active (RSA)) and others providing minimal assistance.
- **Universal healthcare:** This remains a cornerstone of European social protection, although access and quality vary.
- **Labour market policies:** Active labour market programs (ALMPs), vocational training and unemployment insurance help mitigate precarity.
- **EU-level initiatives:** The European Pillar of Social Rights and the Recovery and Resilience Facility aim to strengthen social cohesion post-COVID-19.

However, gaps remain in coverage, adequacy and enforcement, especially for non-standard workers and migrants.

The United States: Fragmented safety nets and policy innovation

The United States lacks a comprehensive welfare state, relying instead on a patchwork of federal, state and local programs. Key features include:

- **Means-tested programs:** SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) provide targeted support but face eligibility barriers and stigma.
- **Tax-based transfers:** The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit offer income support, although coverage is uneven.
- **Healthcare reforms:** The Affordable Care Act expanded coverage but left millions uninsured or underinsured.
- **Local innovations:** Cities like New York and San Francisco have piloted guaranteed-income schemes, tenant protections and worker cooperatives.

Despite these efforts, systemic gaps persist and political polarization hampers federal reform.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that poverty is not only cyclical but also deeply tied to structural vulnerabilities in employment and welfare systems. It revealed how poverty dynamics are shaped not only by economic shocks but also by institutional resilience. Emergency measures (short-time work schemes, income support, moratoria on evictions) mitigated some effects, but structural weaknesses in welfare systems left many households exposed. Recent policy shifts in the EU that have placed a higher priority on competitiveness and defence spending risk weakening social investment and deepening employment insecurity.



Comparative reflections and policy implications

Since the turn of the century, the combined effects of labour market liberalization, automation and the radical opening of national economies have generated widespread employment insecurity and wage depression, fuelling fears of real, perceived and anticipated losses of livelihood. More broadly, political attitudes have been shaped by anxieties linked to physical insecurity, political disorder, cultural estrangement and economic precarity driven by flexible labour markets, outsourcing and competition with immigrant workers. Together, these four sources of anxiety constitute the core of a new antiprecarity public agenda centred on demands for order and security. This agenda of public concerns cuts across the left-right divide and tends to replace the left-right vectors of electoral competition with a new risk-opportunity divide shaped by the social impact of the new economy of open borders and information technologies (2020, 68–69, 140; See also 2004, 2011).

Although these developments are tangible in both the United States and Europe, the transatlantic comparison reveals that Europe's welfare states offer more robust protections but face demographic and fiscal pressures. The United States exhibits higher inequality and precarity, with fragmented safety nets and racialized vulnerabilities. Both regions struggle to adapt protections to non-standard work and intersectional risks. Policy innovation is emerging at subnational levels, but national coherence is lacking.

Social exasperation resulting from ubiquitous precarity is fuelling both economic and cultural xenophobia and undermining solidarities within countries and between the EU and the United States. This is expressed in adversarial foreign economic policy and in the undermining of the traditional EU-US political and economic partnership. Populist movements in Europe (e.g. the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement national in France) and the United States (especially under Donald Trump) often frame transatlantic institutions as out of touch with 'ordinary people'. These actors tend to be sceptical of multilateralism, critical of NATO and hostile to EU regulatory frameworks, which complicates traditional alliance structures.

Populist governments or pressures can lead to policy volatility, weakening long-term commitments to shared goals such as climate action, digital regulation and democratic norms. Indeed, trade tensions have resurfaced, especially around subsidies, digital taxation and industrial policy. The EU's Green Deal and the United States's Inflation Reduction Act have created friction over protectionism

and competitiveness. While security cooperation remains strong on Ukraine and NATO, it diverges on China, Middle East policy and defence spending expectations.

Fundamentally, institutional trust is eroding. The EU increasingly hedges against US unpredictability by deepening internal defence and tech strategies, while the United States questions European burden-sharing. Under populist demands for short-term stabilization measures, a shift is underway from normative alliance-building to interest-based transactionalism. This shift means cooperation is increasingly contingent on short-term domestic political gains rather than shared values. The EU is recalibrating its strategic autonomy, while the United States – especially under populist leadership – prioritizes sovereignty and unilateralism.

Countering precarization as the root driver of reactionary populism would require a systematic effort for building a ‘political economy of trust’ (2020) that provides economic and social stability along two trajectories: domestic and global. In terms of domestic policies, this means replacing the current focus on competitiveness in the global economy (which is prompting governments to cut job security and social investment) with an industrial policy that generates good jobs, as well as increased investment in the commons (public services and social insurance). In terms of global market integration, the logic of pursuing competitiveness, which is prompting governments to weaken labour and environmental standards, should be replaced by a more rigorous implementation of labour and environmental standards of production, trade and consumption.

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