

>THE RISE AND RISE OF POPULISM?



Share

Image: Why is populism a threat to democracy?



Jan-Werner Müller is a professor of politics at Princeton University. Before that, he was a fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. His books include *Constitutional Patriotism*, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* and *What is Populism?*, which has been translated into sixteen languages. Müller writes frequently for *The Guardian*, *The London Review of Books*, *NYRBDaily*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Le Monde*.

>THE RISE AND RISE OF POPULISM?

The chapter¹ argues that populism should not be understood as primarily a form of anti-elitism. Rather, the hallmark of populists is that they claim that they, and they alone, represent the people (or what populists very often refer to as “the real people”). Populists deny the legitimacy of all other contenders for power and also suggest that citizens who do not support them can have their status as properly belonging to the people put in doubt. The chapter also analyzes the behavior of populists in power – arguing that we can see the emergence of a distinctive pattern of authoritarian governance where populists have large enough majorities and countervailing forces are too weak. Finally, the chapter suggests a number of strategies of how populism can be countered.

Today, the deeper meaning of every election in Europe (or perhaps even around the globe) appears to be exhausted by the answer to one question: “Is it a win or a defeat for populism?” Until the Dutch vote in March 2017, an image of an irresistible populist wave – or, as Nigel Farage put it, a populist “tsunami” – dominated the public conversation; especially after Emmanuel Macron’s big wins in both the presidential and the legislative elections in France in spring 2017, we are frequently told that we are already living in a “post-populist moment.” Both diagnoses are wrong and merit the very label which is usually stuck on populism itself: “simplistic.”

This chapter propose a proper understanding of populism and lay out the reasons why populism is dangerous for democracy (and not, as some observers hold, a useful “corrective” for democracy’s flaws).² Against this background, I explain why the narratives of “inevitable triumph” and “it’s all already over” are both so misleading. I shall also offer some hypotheses about the likely “causes” of populism and point to some possible strategies to counter populist actors.

Is Populism The Same As “Being Anti-Establishment”?

The notion of an unstoppable wave took it for granted that both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump were triumphs for populism. To be sure, both Farage and Trump are populists, though not because, as the clichéd phrase goes, they “criticize elites.” Not everyone who criticizes elites is automatically a populist. After all, any civics textbook would instruct us to be vigilant with the powerful; keeping a close eye on elites can in fact plausibly be seen

as a sign of good democratic engagement by citizens. Of course, when in opposition, populists criticize governments. But, crucially, they also claim that *they and they alone* represent what populists often call “the real people” or “the silent majority.” As a consequence, they denounce all other contenders for power as fundamentally illegitimate. At stake is never just a disagreement about policy or even values, for that matter – which is of course completely normal (and, ideally, productive) in a democracy; rather, populists immediately personalize and moralize political conflict: the others, they insist, are simply “corrupt” and “crooked.” They allegedly do not work for “the people,” but only for themselves (i.e. the establishment), or multinational corporations, or the EU, or what have you. In this respect, Donald Trump’s rhetoric during the 2015-2016 presidential campaign was an extreme case – but he was not really an exception. All populists in one way or another engage in the kind of talk we heard from Trump about Hillary Clinton.

“NOTE THAT POPULISTS CAN DO SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE TO A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL CULTURE EVEN IF THEY NEVER GOVERNMENT.”

Less obvious is that populists insinuate that all citizens who do not share their conception of “the people” and hence, logically, do not support the populists, should have their status as belonging to the proper people put into doubt. Think of Farage claiming, during the night of the fateful referendum, that Brexit had been a “victory for real people;” he implied that the 48 per cent who voted to stay in the EU might not be quite real – which is to say: not part of the real British people at all. Or think of Trump announcing at a campaign rally last year: “The most important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything.” In other words, the populist decides who the real people are; and whoever does not want to be unified on the populist’s terms is completely and utterly excluded – even if they happen to have a British or an American passport.

So the crucial indicator, if that’s the right word, of populism is not some vague “anti-establishment sentiment;” criticisms of elites may or may not be justified, but it is not automatically something problematic for democracy. Rather, what matters is populists’ anti-pluralism. They always exclude at two levels: at the level of party politics they present themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the people, and hence all others are at least morally excluded; and, less obviously, at the level of, if you like, the people themselves, those who do not share the populists’ symbolic construction of the “real people” (and, as a consequence, do not support the populists politically) are also shut out. Put differently: populism inevitably involves a claim to a moral monopoly of representing the supposedly real people – and also inevitably results in exclusionary identity politics.³

Note that populists can do significant damage to a democratic political culture even if they never government. After all, populist parties that do not do so well at the polls have to face an obvious contradiction: how can it be the case that the populists are the people's only morally legitimate representatives and yet fail to gain overwhelming majorities at the ballot box? Populists do not all opt for what might seem the easiest way out of this contradiction – but plenty do, when they in effect suggest that one should think less of a *silent* majority and more of a *silenced* majority. By definition, if the majority could express itself, the populists would always already be in power – but someone or something prevented the majority from making its voice heard. Put differently: populists more or less subtly suggest that they did not really lose an election at all, but that corrupt elites were manipulating the process behind the scenes. Think again of Trump: when he left it open whether he would accept an election victory by Hillary Clinton, he effectively called into question the integrity of the US election system. Plenty of supporters understood well enough what he really meant: according to one survey, 70 per cent of his followers thought that if Clinton became president, the outcome must have been “rigged.”

To be sure, anyone can criticize the US election system – in fact, there's clearly plenty to criticize. And, once again, such criticisms can be a sign of good democratic engagement. What is not compatible with democracy is the populists' claim which comes down to saying: “Because we did not win, our system must be bad and corrupted.” In this manner, populists systematically undermine the trust of citizens in their institutions – and thereby damage a given political culture, even if they never get anywhere close to the actual levers of power.

The presidency of Donald Trump was not only a victory for populism. Trump also had the support of Republicans and conservative elites in the United States.



I do not mean to suggest that all populists will necessarily resort to conspiracy theories to explain away their failures. At the very least, though, they will be tempted to make a distinction between the *morally* and the *empirically* correct outcome of an election (think of Hungarian right-wing populist Victor Orbán claiming after losing the 2002 Hungarian elections that “the nation cannot be in opposition”; or think of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, arguing, after his failed bid for the Mexican presidency in 2006, that “the victory of the right is morally impossible” – and declaring himself the only “legitimate president of Mexico”).

“IN MANY SITUATIONS, POPULISTS WILL PLAY OFF SENTIMENTS AGAINST NUMBERS – NOT RECOGNIZING THAT, IN THE END, NUMBERS, AND THE PROCESS OF CORRECTLY COUNTING, ARE ALL WE HAVE IN A DEMOCRACY.”

Populists will thereby keep invoking an amorphous “real people” who would have made a different political choice. For instance, the losing candidate in the 2016 presidential elections in Austria, far-right populist Norbert Hofer, claimed about the winner, the Green politician Alexander Van der Bellen that the latter had been “counted correctly, but not elected” (*gezählt, aber nicht gewählt*); in other words, he insinuated that his opponent had indeed received more votes – but that nevertheless he had not really been chosen (as if a real choice could somehow happen by acclamation or some other process not involving the secret ballot). As the German constitutional lawyer Christoph Möllers has put it, there is a difference between *counting* majorities and *feeling* majorities. In many situations, populists will play off sentiments against numbers – not recognizing that, in the end, numbers, and the process of correctly counting, are all we have in a democracy.

Let me illustrate this populist sleight-of-hand with another recent example. In October 2016, Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán held a referendum on the question whether the EU could settle refugees in Hungary without the consent of the country’s parliament. He received the answer he had hoped for: 98 per cent of those who participated said “no.” Still, Orbán faced a problem: not enough citizens had voted to meet the quorum; technically, the result was invalid. Now, the prime minister could not have claimed what other losing populists often claim, namely that the system had been rigged. After all, as many observers have pointed out, Orbán and his party Fidesz have been creating a political, economic, and even cultural system purely to their own taste since 2010, when Fidesz gained a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian parliament. In addition, the government had literally spent millions of Euros on billboards and glossy brochures sent to each household to warn Hungarians of the dangers of an influx of Muslim terrorists posing as refugees, all in order to generate the one morally correct referendum result. No matter – in this case the government

could simply pretend that those who had stayed away from the vote were actually a silent majority in favor of “No;” hence, nothing would prevent Orbán from asserting that, at last, the people themselves had been allowed to speak on the question of European refugee policies – and that they did not like the proposals by the “liberal nihilists” in Brussels (Orbán) one bit.

An Unstoppable Rise...?

This understanding of populism as a particular form of anti-pluralism should help to avoid lazily repeating the image according to which supposedly everywhere “the people” are rising up against “the establishment.” This is not an innocent, let alone neutral, description of political developments; it is actually populist language. It accepts that populists really are the authentic representatives of “the people.” But in fact figures like Farage or the Dutch far-right populist Geert Wilders are not even close to being successful among a quarter of the electorate.

Yet, strangely, politicians and journalists often switch from one extreme perspective on populists – namely assuming that they are all demagogues whose utterances can automatically be discounted – to another, which is to say: they all of a sudden concede that populists ultimately articulate people’s “real concerns.” Giving the populists a monopoly on telling us what really worries citizens betrays a deep misunderstanding of how democratic representation works. It should not be thought of as a mechanical reproduction of objectively given interests and identities; rather, the latter are dynamically formed in the process of politicians (as well as civil society, friends, neighbors, etc.) making political offers of representation and citizens responding. So it’s not that everything that populists say is necessarily fictitious – but it is a mistake to think that only they know what is truly happening in society. Trump, for instance, undoubtedly succeeded in making some Americans see themselves as part of something like a white identity movement. But citizens’ self-perceptions can also change again.

It would be a mistake, then, to think that populists reveal to us the ultimate objective truth about society. Yet many non-populist actors precisely work with this assumption. Think about how some socialists and Social Democrats in Europe these days seem essentially to be saying to themselves: “The working class simply doesn’t like foreigners, as the success of right-wing populists demonstrates. Nothing we can do about it.”

There’s another mistake when thinking about the electoral successes of populists. One should not just assume that all voters for populist parties are themselves necessarily populists, which is to say: share the anti-pluralist views of populist leaders. For instance, a voter of the French National Front might not at all agree with Marine Le Pen’s criticisms of the other parties as effectively immoral and betraying France – and yet prefer the FN because they offer what that voter considers the most attractive policies on agriculture. Granted, a bit a stretch – but the point remains that we cannot simply take it for granted that those who cast a ballot for a populist

politician or party are necessarily on board with an anti-pluralist program. This is a basic empirical point – but it is also one with implications for political strategy. Just remember how Hillary Clinton's remark about “deplorables” backfired. She could have just relentlessly criticized her opponent – without generalizing about those attracted by him.

Still, is there not something to the notion of a wave of populism – even if it might be receding for the moment? In fact, the image has always been deeply misleading. After all, Nigel Farage did not bring about Brexit all by himself. He needed the help of established conservatives such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove (both now serve in Theresa May's cabinet). It was Gove who infamously told a British TV audience in spring 2016 – in the face of many dire warnings about Brexit by experts – that the British people had had enough of experts. The irony was that Gove himself had long been seen as a kind of intellectual among Tories. In other words, it wasn't just anybody who told the people that expertise was overrated – it took an expert to do so.

Trump, of course, did not become president as the candidate of a grassroots protest movement of an angry white working class; rather, he represented a very established party and needed the blessing of Republican heavyweights such as Rudy Giuliani, Chris Christie, and New Gingrich. It was the latter who told a CNN reporter in summer 2016, during the Republican convention, that he did not trust statistics on crime, but believed in what people feel. In other words, he did the trick Gove had performed in the UK: whatever else one thinks about Gingrich, he is considered a sort of intellectual among American conservatives. So, just as the in the UK, it took an established expert to devalue expertise.

What happened on November 8th 2016 was not a free-standing triumph for populism, but a confirmation of how partisan US politics has become: 90 per cent of self-identified Republicans voted for Trump; they clearly could not fathom voting for a Democrat, even if many Republicans in surveys registered deep doubts about candidate Trump. Clearly, the demonization of Hillary Clinton by many Republicans had something to do with this outcome – and that demonization had started long before Trump – in fact it had started when members of the American Right began to refer to Bill Clinton as “your president” in the 1990s, denying his legitimacy (Hillary Clinton already then spoke of a “vast right-wing conspiracy” against the Clintons – it wasn't a conspiracy, but it's hard to deny that many on the Right have dedicated their lives to discrediting the Clintons). The fact remains: to this day, no right-wing populist has come to power in Western Europe or North America without the collaboration of established conservative elites.

After the Dutch and the French elections, many observers were quick to declare a “post-populist moment;” what had become the supposed “new normal” of one populist triumph after another was already declared *passé*. Such a perspective fails to see the distinction between populism as a claim to a moral monopoly on

representing the real people and particular policy positions which have an affinity with right-wing populism – think of restrictions on immigration – but which are not populist as such. In other words, anti-pluralism and particular policy content are analytically different.

In the Netherlands, Wilders, who really is a populist, did less well than expected – but his officially “mainstream” competitor, the right-liberal prime minister Mark Rutte, adopted very Wilders-like rhetoric – telling immigrants that they should leave the country if they do not want to behave “normally.” Rutte has not become a populist – he is not claiming to be the only representative of the authentic Dutch people. But he is doing something unusual and, I would say, unacceptable: it is not for the Dutch prime minister to define cultural “normality” in the Netherlands (with the implication that there is a “real” Dutch people and then those who behave “abnormally”). As a consequence of such opportunistic concessions to populists, political culture is shifting to the right, without any kind of proper democratic authorization by citizens. Rather than seeing a post-populist moment, we might be witnessing populists winning, even though they are nominally losing; after all, conservatives, rather than officially collaborating with them, are now simply copying their ideas. This dynamic was also evident in the spring 2017 general election campaign of Theresa May who bet that she could destroy Farage’s UK Independence Party through imitating it.

Finally, apart from collaboration or copying, there is an option for conservatives effectively to condone right-wing populism. Think of how the European People’s

Pro-government demonstration in support of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro. Even in power, “Chavism” blames the deposed oligarchy and US imperialism for the country’s critical situation.



Party (EPP), the very mainstream supranational party family of Christian Democrats and moderate conservatives, have effectively protected Viktor Orbán from outside criticism (including criticism by the EU Commission). Orbán has been the pioneer of populism in power in Europe; he could never have built his by now in many ways authoritarian regime without the de facto cover provided by the EPP. Again, it is not that EPP members have become populists themselves – far from it. But strategic choices, mostly to do with wanting to keep the EPP the largest party in the European Parliament, have made conservatives the enablers of right-wing populism.

In this context it is also worth remembering a recent election before which many conservatives decided against collaboration. Arguably, the whole image of an unstoppable wave had already been called into question empirically with one counter-example: Austria, where the victory of Norbert Hofer had been widely predicted. Many conservative politicians explicitly came out against Hofer; this was especially true for local mayors and other provincial heavyweights who had credibility with rural Austrians in ways Green bobo leaders dropping in from Vienna clearly could not have mustered. Contrary to an emerging conventional wisdom, a complete split between the countryside going populist and cities committing to cosmopolitan liberalism is by no means inevitable.

“RATHER, WE MUST HOLD ELITES WHO COLLABORATE WITH POPULISTS OR COPY THEIR IDEAS OR EFFECTIVELY CONDONE THEIR CONDUCT AND SHIELD THEM FROM CRITICISM ACCOUNTABLE.”

As the political scientist Daniel Ziblatt has argued, the consolidation of democracies in Europe depended crucially on the behavior of conservative elites. During the interwar period, they opted for working with authoritarian and even fascist parties – in many places democracy died as a consequence. After the war, they chose to stick to the rules of the democratic game even if what they took to be core conservative interests were not faring well. We do not live in anything comparable to the interwar period and today’s populists are not fascists – but the lesson still holds that the destiny of democracy is as much a matter of the choices of established elites as insurgent outsiders. As Larry Bartels, one of the leading scholars of US politics, has pointed out, it is also empirically highly dubious just to assume an increase (let alone a “tsunami”) of right-wing populist sentiment; what can be shown, though, is that both political entrepreneurs and more established actors have decided either to defuse or mobilize and exploit such sentiments over time.⁴ It is crucial not to remain fixated on populists in isolation (and regularly over- or underestimate their strength). Rather, we must hold elites who collaborate with populists or copy their ideas or effectively condone their conduct and shield them from criticism accountable.

Populism in Power

Hopefully it has become clear enough that I do not mean to suggest that somehow populism is not real or does not pose a threat to democracies. It might have seemed from what has been said so far that populists all live in a kind of political fantasy world and hence are bound to fail in practice. Many liberal observers think that populists only offer very simplistic prescriptions which will quickly be exposed as un-workable, or even that populists, deep down, are afraid of actually winning, because they are clueless about what to do next (an impression confirmed by Nigel Farage's flight from political reality after the referendum). Conventional wisdom has it that populist parties are primarily protest parties and that protest cannot govern, since, logically, one cannot protest against oneself: anti-politics cannot generate real policies. More specifically still: if populists are all about anti-elite rhetoric, they will by definition have to cease being populists once they have acquired power and themselves become the political elite.

The notion that populists in power are bound to fail one way or another – or that they will necessarily moderate – is comforting. It is also an illusion. For one thing, while populist parties necessarily protest against elites, this does not mean that populism in government will become self-contradictory. All failures of populists in government can still be blamed on elites acting behind the scenes, whether at home or abroad (here again we find the not so accidental connection between populism and conspiracy theories). Many populist victors continue to behave like victims; majorities act like mistreated minorities. Hugo Chávez, for instance, would always point to the dark machinations of the opposition – that is to say, the officially deposed “oligarchy” – and to the US trying to sabotage his „twenty-first century socialism“. Turkish president Erdoğan would present himself as a plucky underdog; he'd forever be the street fighter from Istanbul's tough neighborhood Kasimpaşa, bravely confronting the old, Kemalist establishment of the Turkish republic – long after he had begun to concentrate all political, economic, and, not least, cultural power in his own hands. One side-effect of the summer 2016 military putsch has been to reinforce this self-presentation as struggling with the people against the visible and invisible forces of evil – the military and the shadowy Gülen network – as opposed to the face of a sultan-in-the-making, holed up in his pompous presidential palace, which Erdoğan had been showing in the past few years.

More worryingly still: when populists have sufficiently large majorities in parliament, they try to build regimes that might still look like democracies, but are actually designed to perpetuate the power of the populists (as supposedly the only authentic representatives of the people). To start with, populists colonize or “occupy” the state. Think of Hungary and Poland as recent examples. One of the first changes Orbán and his party Fidesz sought after coming to power 2010 was a transformation of the civil service law, so as to enable them to place loyalists in what should have been non-partisan bureaucratic positions. Both Fidesz and Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (PiS) also immediately moved against

the independence of courts. Media authorities were captured; the signal went out that journalists should not report in ways that violate the interests of the nation (which were equated with the interests of the governing party). Whoever criticized any of these measures was vilified as doing the bidding of the old elites, or as being outright traitors (Kaczyński spoke of “Poles of the worst sort” who supposedly have “treason in their genes”). The end result is that political parties create a state to their own political liking, and in their own political image: a PiS state and a Fidesz state, if you will.

Such a strategy to consolidate or even perpetuate power is not exclusive to populists, of course. What is special about populists is that they can undertake such state colonization openly: why, populists can ask indignantly, should the people not take possession of their state through their only rightful representatives? Why should those who obstruct the genuine popular will in the name of civil service neutrality not be purged?

Populists also engage in the exchange of material and immaterial favors for mass support – what political scientists often call “mass clientelism.” Again, such conduct is not exclusive to populists: many parties reward their clientele for turning up at the voting booths, though few would go so far as Austrian arch-populist Jörg Haider, who literally handed out hundred-euro bills to “his people” on the streets in his Austrian state of Carinthia. What – once more – makes populists distinctive is that they can engage in such practices openly and with moral justifications: after all, for them, only some people are really *the* people and hence deserving of the support by what is rightfully their state. Without this thought it’s hard to understand how Erdoğan could have politically survived all the revelations about his regime’s corruption, which had started to come out in 2013.

Some populists have been lucky to have the resources to build up entire classes to support their regimes. Chávez benefited crucially from the oil boom. For regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, funds from the European Union have been equivalent to oil for some Arab authoritarian states: governments can strategically employ the subsidies to buy support or at least keep citizens quiet. What’s more, they can form social strata that conform to their image of the “real people” – and that are deeply loyal to the regime. Erdoğan continues to enjoy the unshakeable support of an Anatolian middle class that emerged with the economic boom under his AK Party (and that also embodies the image of the ideal, devout Turk, as opposed to Westernized, secular elites, and as opposed to minorities such as the Kurds). Hungary’s Fidesz has built up a new group which combines economic success, family values (having children brings many benefits), and religious devotion into a whole that aligns with Orbán’s vision of a “Christian-national” culture.

There is one further element of populist statecraft – or what one might even call a populist art of governance – that is important to understand. Populists in

power tend to be harsh (to say the least) with non-governmental organizations that criticize them. Again, harassing civil society is not a practice exclusive to populists. But for them opposition from within civil society creates a particular symbolic challenge: it potentially undermines their claim to exclusive moral representation. Hence it becomes crucial to argue (and supposedly “prove”) that civil society is not civil society at all, and that what can seem like popular opposition on the streets has nothing to do with the real people. This explains why Putin, Orbán and PiS in Poland have gone out of their way to try to discredit NGO’s as being controlled by outside powers (and also legally declare them to be “foreign agents” – or tweet about them as “paid-up activists,” as Trump did when millions came out against his proposed “Muslim travel ban”).

If nothing else, populists have used protest to prolong and deepen the culture wars on which all populists thrive: they point to a minority of protesters that is allegedly not part of the real people – in fact, the protestors are actively betraying the homeland, according to the populists – and reassure their own supporters that they are the real, righteous people. The lesson here is of course not that citizens should refrain from going out on the streets to protest; it is only that one has to be aware of how swift and sophisticated populists are when it comes to incorporating protest into their own narratives to justify their exclusionary identity politics.

In a sense, populists try to make the unified people in whose name they had been speaking all along a reality on the ground: by silencing or discrediting those who refuse Putin and Orbán’s representative claim (and, sometimes, by giving them every incentive to exit the country and thereby to separate themselves from the pure people: 500 000 Hungarians have left in recent years). Thus, a PiS government or Fidesz government will not only create a PiS state or a Fidesz state – it will also seek to bring into existence a PiS people and a Fidesz people. In other words, populists create the homogeneous people in whose name they had been speaking all along: populism becomes something like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is a tragic irony in all this: populists in power often end up committing the very sins of which they had been accusing “the elites” when the populists had been in opposition: excluding citizens and usurping the state. What the establishment supposedly has always done, populists will also end up doing. Only with what they think is a clear moral justification and, perhaps, even a clean conscience. Hence it is a profound illusion to think that populists can improve our democracies. Populists are in the end different elites who try to acquire power with the help of a collective fantasy of political purity.

Causes

Political purity might be a fantasy – but the success of populists has been all too real (just think of their result in the 2017 elections in Germany, so far considered

somehow “immune” to populism); and that success is not just based on fictions or conspiracy theories. Asking about the underlying causes of populism is urgent – but many of the answers given to that question have, again, been surprisingly simplistic. In fact, it is striking how often liberal observers on the one hand claim that populists in effect are all liars, or at the very least *terribles simplificateurs* – but, on the other hand, the same analysts always seem ready to buy the explanation that populists offer up when it comes to their own victories. If the latter are telling us that it’s all about “losers of globalization,” we simply repeat that assertion. For it appears that, in the end, we want to have an easy life, too. And to have that, it’s much easier to repeat such one-liner explanations as opposed to grappling with populism as a highly complex phenomenon. To be sure it is tempting to think that if populism is similar everywhere in involving a claim to a moral monopoly of representation, then the underlying causes must also be similar. But, in fact, that does not follow at all.

“WHAT THE ESTABLISHMENT SUPPOSEDLY HAS ALWAYS DONE, POPULISTS WILL ALSO END UP DOING.”

So how should one think about the causes of populism in a more complex way? First of all, it is important to recognize that national contexts matter. The reasons for the emergence of a Haider are not the same as those for the success of a Le Pen, which in turn are not the same as the reasons for Trump’s completely unexpected triumph. As many studies have shown, economic grievances can play an important role, but nowhere is populism reducible to something like “the socialism of fools;” the quick answer “It’s all about neoliberalism” is indeed all-too-quick. Instead of immediately having such mono-causal explanations ready, one should pause to remember the actual central claim by populists: they tell us that they are the only ones who represent the real, virtuous people, and all the others are corrupt elites. It follows that it helps populists if they can plausibly conjure up the image of a homogeneous (and self-serving) elite. And that is easier in some contexts than others (for instance, it is *prima facie* easier in France than in Germany, which is not to say that the latter is somehow more egalitarian).

Secondly, it can help populists if a country has already been experiencing something like a “culture war.” Populists will try everything to confirming their supporters in the belief that they, and they alone, are “the real people” and that those on the other side of the “war” do not truly belong and/or are fundamentally immoral. This is not to say that perceived cultural differences, or diversity in general, will always necessarily give rise to populism; conflict around such issues can be addressed without engaging in exclusionary identity politics. In fact, it would be wrong to suggest that talk of “peoplehood” is always automatically pernicious and likely to strengthen populists; on the contrary, having to offer

a vision of who “we the people” want to become – or, put differently: the direction in which the country as a whole should move – is virtually part of the “job description” of a professional politician. Such visions should be treated as calls to follow a “vision,” or, if you prefer, as fallible hypotheses; the populist, by contrast, will assume that he and only he knows the true voice of the people and that there is only one direction in which to go. Witness a remark by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that he was “merely the medium” and that “it is the people whose voice is resonating.” This is not offering the people different visions of different principles on the basis of which they might live together in the future; rather, it is pretending that the people have always already spoken and that the populist is actually just following their lead.

Thirdly, and at the risk of stating the obvious: there need to be grievances. Populists will not get an oppositional narrative about elites going, if there’s seemingly nothing to complain about. However, as hinted above already, it is a mistake to take these grievances as somehow objectively given: who gets blamed for what when and how depends on the representational offerings by politicians, by civil society, family, etc. Moreover, the further framing of these grievances will be conditioned by a government’s initial response to them. It would be foolish to argue that, let’s say, Turkey had been a perfectly pluralist democracy and society until Erdoğan came along and wrecked it; it would be ridiculous to argue that Venezuela had been a wonderfully egalitarian democracy until Chávez and Maduro messed it all up. For all we know, they might have taken their countries in an authoritarian direction no matter what. But we also have to allow for the possibility of an escalation of populist rhetoric (and ensuing practices) because legitimate concerns were simply rebuffed by the powerful in what were less than perfect liberal democracies.

Fourthly, there is the dynamic of what, for shorthand, one might call liberal technocracy strengthening populism. Technocrats – again, this is a crude characterization but also not a complete caricature – will hold that there is only one rational solution to a particular policy challenge (think of the German government’s stance during the Eurocrisis). Citizens, and parliaments, can only really consent to such solutions; there is simply no room for reasonable debate. Whoever opposes such policies reveals themselves to be irrational. This stance makes it easy for populists to exclaim: “Where are the people in all this? How can there be a democracy without choices?” To be sure, as has hopefully become clear enough in this chapter, populists are not really advocates of more participation by “ordinary people.” And if citizens actually flock to populists under such circumstances, technocrats will feel further justified in taking as many decisions as possible away from the people. A vicious circle ensues.

What might be less obvious is that technocracy and populism seem like two extremes opposed to each other – and yet they share an important characteristic: they are both forms of anti-pluralism. Technocrats hold that there’s only one correct policy solution; populists claim that there is only one authentic will of the people

(and only they represent it); whoever disagrees with them, reveals themselves as traitor to the people. For both sides, there is no point in exchanging arguments, no space for debate, and, in the end, no real need for an institution like parliament. In short: both pose dangers to democracy, and the fact that they can perversely reinforce each other compounds the peril.

Lastly, let me at least gesture to a more fundamental conflict of our time which does not in and of itself “cause” populism, but which facilitates the role of populists in democratic politics. Our era is characterized by an increasing conflict between two sides: on the one hand those who want more openness – which takes the clichéd versions of economic and cultural globalization, but can also mean the recognition of ethnic, sexual and religious minorities in one’s own country – in other words, it doesn’t have to be something to do with the international, and it does not neatly map onto a conceptual distinction between globalism and localism.⁵ On the other hand, of course, are those who want more closure. In this conflict, the populists appear as actors who have answers ready; after all, they always do identity politics and they have an account of who the real people are, about who belongs and who doesn’t. This does not mean that they are right, but this is an issue where they can say something.

Counter-Strategies

Arguably, it has become clearer what does not work – in particular two extremes of how to deal with populists. One is complete exclusion – not least the kind of moral exclusion which populists themselves practice (along the lines of: “We good democrats won’t even appear on TV together with populists” or “when populists ask a question in parliament, I walk out,” etc.). This is a mistake both on a strategic and, less obviously, on a normative level: it is bound to fail as a strategy, because it in fact confirms populists in what they have been telling their supporters all along: namely, that the corrupt elites never listen or are afraid to debate certain subjects (and not least, that these elites will all unite against the populists to preserve their undeserved privileges: “one against all, all against one”).

There is also a distinct problem from the point of view of democratic theory: especially when these parties are already represented in parliaments, excluding them from debate means effectively excluding all the citizens who voted for them. And, as said above, not all voters of populist parties can be assumed to be committed anti-pluralists who have not truly accepted the rules of the democratic game.

Then there is the other extreme: instead of excluding or at least ignoring them, one starts to run after populists. But no matter how fast you run, you will of course never quite catch them. Whatever you say or do about immigration as a supposed “mainstream politician,” you are unlikely to satisfy, for instance, the Danish People’s Party or the “Alternative for Germany.” But here as well, the

problem is not just on the strategic or, if you prefer, instrumental level; there are also normative issues: after all, copying populists can be based on the mistaken view of democratic representation discussed above. It is simply assumed that the populists have at last revealed many citizens' true political preferences, instead of realizing that representation is a dynamic process. Think, once more, of Trump: quite a few Europeans may well have felt with a certain Schadenfreude that, on November 8th last year, at least a long-held suspicion about the US was officially confirmed: it's a country with 63 million racists! As some social scientists were quick to point out, while there are plenty of racists in the US, racism cannot be the explanation of the entire Trump vote – at least some citizens opted for Trump after having voted for Obama twice.

“NOT ALL VOTERS OF POPULIST PARTIES CAN BE ASSUMED TO BE COMMITTED ANTI-PLURALISTS WHO HAVE NOT TRULY ACCEPTED THE RULES OF THE DEMOCRATIC GAME.”

There is no alternative to engaging with populists. But talking with populists is not the same as talking like populists. One does not have to adopt their descriptions of political, economic, or social challenges in order to be credible in a debate with them. At the same time, it is important to recognize that a whole range of policy positions that liberals find highly problematic are nevertheless permissible in a democracy – and that one has to argue against them with the best arguments and evidence available, not with the polemical charge of “populism.” However, when populists reveal themselves as specifically populist – which is to say: when they try to deny the legitimacy of their opponents or the membership of certain citizens, or when they fundamentally question the rules of the democratic game – it is crucial that other politicians *draw the line*. For instance, if a populist asserts that Angela Merkel is pursuing a secret plan to replace the German *Volk* with Syrians, it is imperative that other parties to the debate signal that the territory of normal, legitimate democratic conflict has now been left behind decisively. Of course, the populist is unlikely then to recoil and apologize for propounding conspiracy theories suggesting democracy as Germans know it is only a façade; but the hope inspired by democratic theory – and it may well turn out to be a pious hope – is that citizens watching such a debate might well be put off by the populists. Perhaps they will conclude that they do indeed share some of the policy positions of the populist party – but still rather not be in the same boat with conspiracy theorists.

And the role of what is often patronizingly referred to as “ordinary citizens”? Think back to the first occasion when the “wave” did not sweep away “the establishment:” Austria. The campaign of the winning candidate mobilized many citizens by making it clear that they did not have fully to agree with a Green party

program; all they had to agree with was the proposition that the far-right populist candidate posed a genuine threat to Austrian democracy. More important still, the campaign encouraged citizens to leave behind their accustomed circles and milieus, and instead enter conversations with people they would not normally meet – and, above all, it encouraged them not to deploy accusations of “racism” and “fascism” after the first five minutes of such conversations. Again, this might be a pious hope on the part of democratic theorists; much social science research claims that the “contact hypothesis” is too good to be true, i.e. it is not enough to meet people very much not like us in order to foster tolerance and a respect for pluralism. But anything that can pierce the populist fantasy of a fully united, homogeneous people might be of help. Contrary to what liberals like to believe sometimes, not everything populists say is necessarily demagogic or mendacious – but, ultimately, their self-presentations *is* based on one big lie: that there is a singular people of which they are the only representatives. To fight them, one needs to understand, and undermine, that core claim.

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on the paperback edition of my book *What is Populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017) and the article “Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy,” in: *The Guardian*, 2nd September 2016.
- 2 I shall concentrate in this piece on right-wing populism, but in no way wish to suggest that there cannot be any left-wing populism. Left-wing populists also claim a moral monopoly of representing the people; however, the content with which they try to substantiate this claim is drawn for leftist sources. The most obvious examples of our time are Chávez and Maduro.
- 3 Which is not to say that all identity politics has to be exclusionary, let alone populist.
- 4 Larry Bartels, “The Wave of Right-Wing Populist Sentiment is a Myth,” *Washington Post*, 21 June 2017, at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/21/the-wave-of-right-wing-populist-sentiment-is-a-myth/> [last accessed 24 September 2017].
- 5 While this cleavage has been much discussed recently, it is important to distinguish different forms of “openness”: clearly, being in favor of free trade is not the same as being in favor of open border, which in turn is not the same as open-mindedness vis-à-vis minorities at home and abroad. Moreover, “openness” is not a first-order political value like liberty or equality.

Follow us on social media



How to cite this article

Müller, Jan-Werner (2017), *The Age of Perplexity: Rethinking the World we Knew. The Rise and Rise of Populism?* Madrid, BBVA, OpenMind, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial.

Related Articles



José Luis Pardo



Simon Springer



Diana Owen

ALL THE TITLES PUBLISHED IN THE OPENMIND COLLECTION.