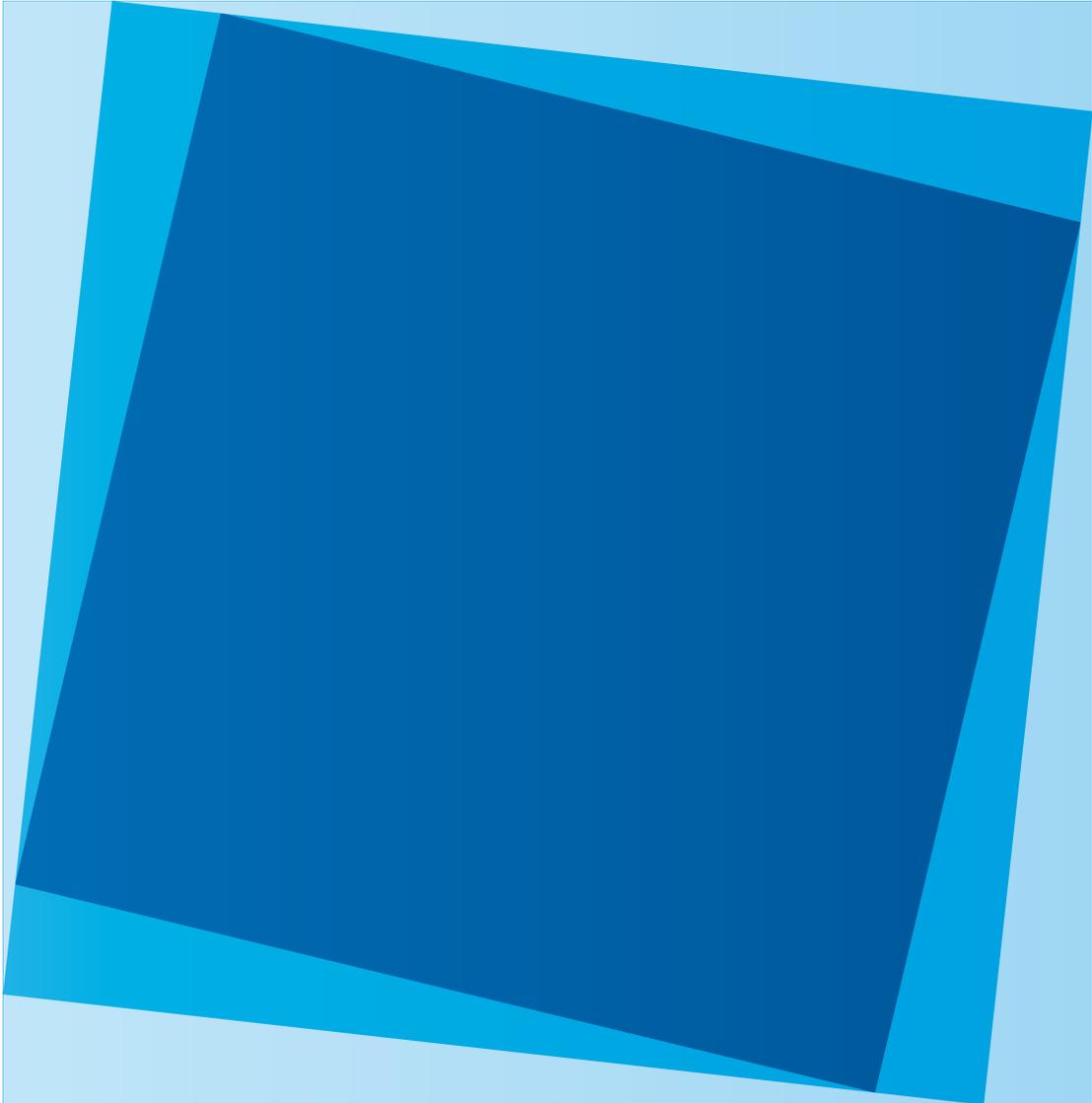


# **Towards a New Enlightenment? A Transcendent Decade**



**The Past Decade and the Future of  
Governance and Democracy: Populist  
Challenges to Liberal Democracy**

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Recommended book: *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, Crown, 2016.

**Not everything in this “transcendent decade” is taking us toward a New Enlightenment. Governance and democracy face particular challenges from the election of populist leaders. The voices of dissent may speak in different languages, but they convey the same sets of messages, draw from the same range of sources, and articulate their outrage in similar ways, using rhetorical strategies that reject experts, excoriate the media, and demonize conventional policies, politicians, and parties. These dissenting voices, long isolated on the margins, now constitute an existential threat to the long-standing consensus on how to conduct politics and manage the economy in liberal democracies. They challenge the institutional commitments of political liberalism to tolerant, balanced governance and the ideational preferences of economic neoliberalism for open borders and free trade.**



Not everything in this “transcendent decade” is taking us toward a New Enlightenment. Governance and democracy face particular challenges. The rise of what is often called “populism” constitutes the biggest challenge to political stability and democracy seen since the 1920s or 1930s (Müller, 2016; Judis 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Eichengreen, 2018).

The British vote to exit the EU followed by the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency took mainstream politics (and pundits) by surprise. And this was only the beginning of the tsunami that has since swept across continental Europe. Emmanuel Macron’s victory in the French presidential election turned out to be only a momentary reprieve, as the populist extremes became (part of) governing majorities in central and eastern Europe, Austria, and Italy, while gaining ground everywhere else. In some countries, most notably Hungary and Poland, populist governments are undermining the basic institutions of liberal democracy. And in so doing, they seek to emulate the anti-democratic, authoritarian drift of their neighbors to the East, including Turkey and Russia.

The voices of populist dissent may speak in different languages but they convey the same sets of messages: against immigration and open borders, globalization and free trade, Europeanization and the euro. They draw from the same range of sources: the economics of those feeling “left behind,” the sociology of those worried about the “changing faces of the nation,” or the politics of those who want to “take back control.” Most also articulate their outrage in similar ways, using rhetorical strategies that deploy “uncivil” words and “fake news” to create “post-truth” environments that reject experts, excoriate established media, and demonize conventional political elites and parties. These dissenting voices, long isolated on the margins, now constitute an existential threat to the long-standing consensus on how to conduct politics and manage the economy in liberal democracies. They challenge the institutional commitments of political liberalism to tolerant, balanced governance and the ideational preferences of economic neoliberalism for open borders and free trade.

In short, over the past decade, what had long looked like disparate groups of dissatisfied citizens marginalized on the sidelines of mainstream politics, supporting motley crews of anti-establishment leaders and small extremist parties, has coalesced into an all-out assault on liberal democracy and democratic capitalism. The main question to answer therefore is: why and how have populists succeeded today in channeling public fear and anger in ways that have gained them unparalleled influence and even propelled some of their anti-system parties into power?

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Potential answers abound. For some, “it’s the economy, stupid,” especially following the 2008 US financial crisis and the 2010 EU sovereign debt crisis. For others, it is the “cultural backlash” of citizens clinging to their social status and worried about rising immigration. For yet others, it follows from the hollowing out of mainstream political institutions and party politics, accompanied by the political frustration of citizens who feel their voices are not heard and their complaints ignored by national politicians and supranational technocrats. So which is right?



All, in fact, offer valuable insights into the many different reasons for the populist tsunami. But although these analyses help us understand the sources of citizens' underlying anger, they cannot explain why populism has surfaced today with such intensity and in so many different forms in different national contexts. For an answer to why now, in these ways, with this kind of populism, we need to delve more deeply into the nature and scope of populism. This means taking seriously the substantive content of populist leaders' ideas and discourses championing "the people" against the elites while contesting institutionalized expertise. It requires investigating populists' discursive processes of interaction, such as their strategies of communication using new media to consolidate activist social movements and party networks as well as traditional media to disseminate their messages more widely. But any explanation of populist success also demands consideration of the electoral promises generally long on anti-system complaints but vague on policies (at least when outside power); investigating how populist electioneering may affect mainstream politics; and, of course, examining what happens if and when populists gain power.

This article begins with a discussion of the sources of populist discontent, economic, socio-cultural, and political, along with the precipitating role of recent crises. It follows with an analysis of the defining features of today's populism, and how these have constituted existential challenges to liberal democracy. These include the style of populist leaders' discourse, the post-truth content and processes of populist communication, and the connections between populists' promises and their actions. The conclusion asks whether this is a momentary phenomenon, or a new moment in history, and asks what forces may determine the future possibilities.

## The Sources of Populism

How do we explain the meteoric rise of populism over the past decade? For this, we need first to consider the sources of discontent. These are economic, resulting from rising inequalities and socioeconomic deprivations since the 1980s; sociological, related to concerns about status, identity, and nationhood in a context of increasing levels of immigration; and political, generated by citizens' growing dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and policies and loss of trust in government and political elites.

**Economic Sources of Discontent** The economic sources of populism are wide-ranging. They include the rise of inequality due to the accumulation of capital by the "one percent," famously investigated by Thomas Piketty (2014), accompanied by an increase in poverty due to regressive taxation plans and cost-cutting that transformed the postwar welfare state into a less generous system, with lower pensions and less security (Hacker, 2006; Hemerijck, 2013). Moreover, globalization has created a wide range of "losers" in de-industrialized areas, while generating a sense of insecurity for the middle classes, worried about losing jobs and status (Prosser, 2016), or joining the "precariat" (Standing, 2011). The economic disruptions from globalization, in particular the shift of manufacturing from advanced to developing countries, have led to more and more people feeling "left behind" (Hay and Wincott, 2012), and produced a "race to the bottom" of lower skilled groups, especially of younger males (Eberstadt, 2016).

Underpinning these socioeconomic problems is the resilience of neoliberal ideas (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013). These began by promoting global free trade and market liberalization in the 1980s and ended with the triumph of financial capitalism and "hyper-globalization"



(Stiglitz, 2002; Rodrik, 2011). The financial crisis that began in 2007/08 did little to moderate such ideas, while in the euro crisis, the EU's "ordo-liberal" ideas promoting austerity policies have had particularly deleterious consequences, including low growth, high unemployment (in particular in southern Europe), and rising poverty and inequality (Scharpf, 2014).

The economic sources of populist discontent are many, then. But they leave open a number of questions. For example, why did populism rise in eastern Europe despite an unprecedented economic boom powered by globalization and EU integration? Why in Sweden did populists not emerge after the drastic 1992 crisis but over the course of one of Europe's most remarkable recoveries? And Italy has seen worse economic crises before, so why now? Finally, the new "losers" of globalization have been angry about their loss of income and status ever since the triumph of neoliberalism since the 1980s, so why has their unhappiness translated itself into this set of political attitudes and/or political action today? Why, holding these views, did the challenge of populist parties not come sooner?

**Socio-Cultural Sources of Discontent** Explanations for the rise of populism are not just economic; they are also socio-cultural. The populist backlash has been fueled by another aspect of neoliberal globalization: cross-border mobility and the increases in immigration. Nostalgia for a lost past along with fear of the "other" has resulted in the targeting of immigrant groups (Hochschild and Mollenkopt, 2009). Certain groups feel their national identity or sovereignty to be under siege in the face of increasing flows of immigrants (Berezin, 2009; McClaren, 2012). And this is often accompanied by rising nativist resentments tied to perceptions that "others"—immigrants, non-whites, women—are "cutting in the line," and taking the social welfare benefits they alone deserve (Hochschild, 2016). Welfare "patriotism" or "chauvinism" has been rearing its head not only on the right side of the spectrum in the US, the UK, or in France but also on the left, in Nordic countries, notably in Denmark.

## **The populist voices of dissent may speak in different languages, but they convey the same sets of messages: against immigration and open borders, globalization and trade, Europeanization and the euro**

Discontent over immigration may undoubtedly also stem from the socioeconomic problems of those "left behind," worried about loss of jobs to immigrants, and unwilling to reward them with welfare benefits. But the socioeconomic can easily be conjoined with the socio-cultural, as worries about loss of jobs combine with fears of loss of status (Gidron and Hall, 2017). These are the people—older, less educated, white, male—whose worldview is threatened by changing demographics resulting from rising immigrant populations. Often, these are the very same people who are equally troubled by intergenerational shifts to post-materialist values such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). They can be people who are well off financially, but subscribe to socially conservative philosophies and/or oppose socially liberal policy programs. These are the people who, while they may remain in favor of economic liberalism, focused on ideas about individual responsibility in the economic realm, reject social liberalism.

Social liberalism underpins ideas about individuals' rights to self-determination, which include the expectation of respect for differences not only involving race and ethnicity but



Thousands of emigrants are escorted by the police as they march along the Slovenian-Croatian border on the way to a transit camp in the Slovenian town of Dobova, in October 2015. That year, Europe suffered the greatest refugee crisis since World War II





also gender, and which have been accompanied by expectations of “political correctness” in language. Particularly contentious have been questions of women’s rights when related to abortion and LGBT rights when involving gay marriage and child adoption. Such questions have played themselves out in the US in particular, including the “bathroom” wars in high schools (about which bathrooms transsexuals and non-gender-identifying may use). Such “identity politics” of the left has sometimes been blamed for right-wing conservatives’ openness to populism on the extreme right (for example, Lilla, 2017).

The various socio-cultural counter-politics of identity provide another plausible explanation for the rise of populism. But here, too, the question of “why now?” remains. This kind of politics has been around for a very long time, fed by ethnocentric definitions of “us” versus “the other,” most notably theorized by Carl Schmitt. After all, particular fears and negative perceptions related to immigration have been around for decades, and more recently at least since the advent of demographic decline, the rise of terrorism, and the mass migration of millions of poor east Europeans (including almost a million Muslims from Bosnia and Albania). And further, why is the socio-cultural demand for populism so acute in some countries affected by mass migration (for example, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, France) but not in others (such as Spain)?

**Political Sources of Discontent** Finally, the discontents are also political, as people feel their voices no longer matter in the political process. In some cases, citizens feel that they have lost control as a result of globalization and/or Europeanization—that powerful people at a distance make decisions that have effects over their everyday lives that they do not like or even understand (Schmidt, 2006, 2017). These include not just global or regional decision-making bodies but also big businesses able to use the political system to their advantage, whether in not paying taxes (for example, Apple) or to get the regulations they want, regardless of their effects on social and environmental policies (Hacker and Pierson, 2010).

Popular disaffection is also locally generated, related to national political systems. Some issues are related to policies. Political parties have increasingly appeared to be unresponsive to their constituencies’ concerns, delivering policies that are seen to serve the elites rather than the ordinary citizen (Berman, 2018). Others stem from structural changes in political institutions. Citizens’ ability to express their disenchantment has, ironically, been amplified by the “democratization” of the electoral rules. By opening up access through primaries and referenda, where the most dissatisfied tend to be more motivated to turn out to vote, party leadership contests have largely brought victory for representatives of more extreme positions. This has in turn weakened political parties as representative institutions at the same time that it has made it more difficult to forge alliances “across the aisle” (Rosenbluth and Shapiro, 2018). Additionally, the supranationalization of decision-making in global and/or European institutions has also had its toll on mainstream party politics, by hollowing it. Political leaders find themselves with the predicament of being forced to choose between being responsive to citizens, as their elected representatives, or being responsible by honoring supranational commitments (Mair, 2013).

Politics pure and simple also matters, of course. Mainstream political parties have seemed at a loss with regard to how to respond to populist challengers on the right and on the left. The center-right’s political strategy has until relatively recently entailed a refusal to govern with the extreme right at the same time that it has often taken up their issues in attempts to reclaim their constituencies, in particular with regard to immigration. And while the center right has thus appeared to chase after the extreme right on the hot-button issues, the center left has frequently seemed to chase after the center right on those self-same issues.

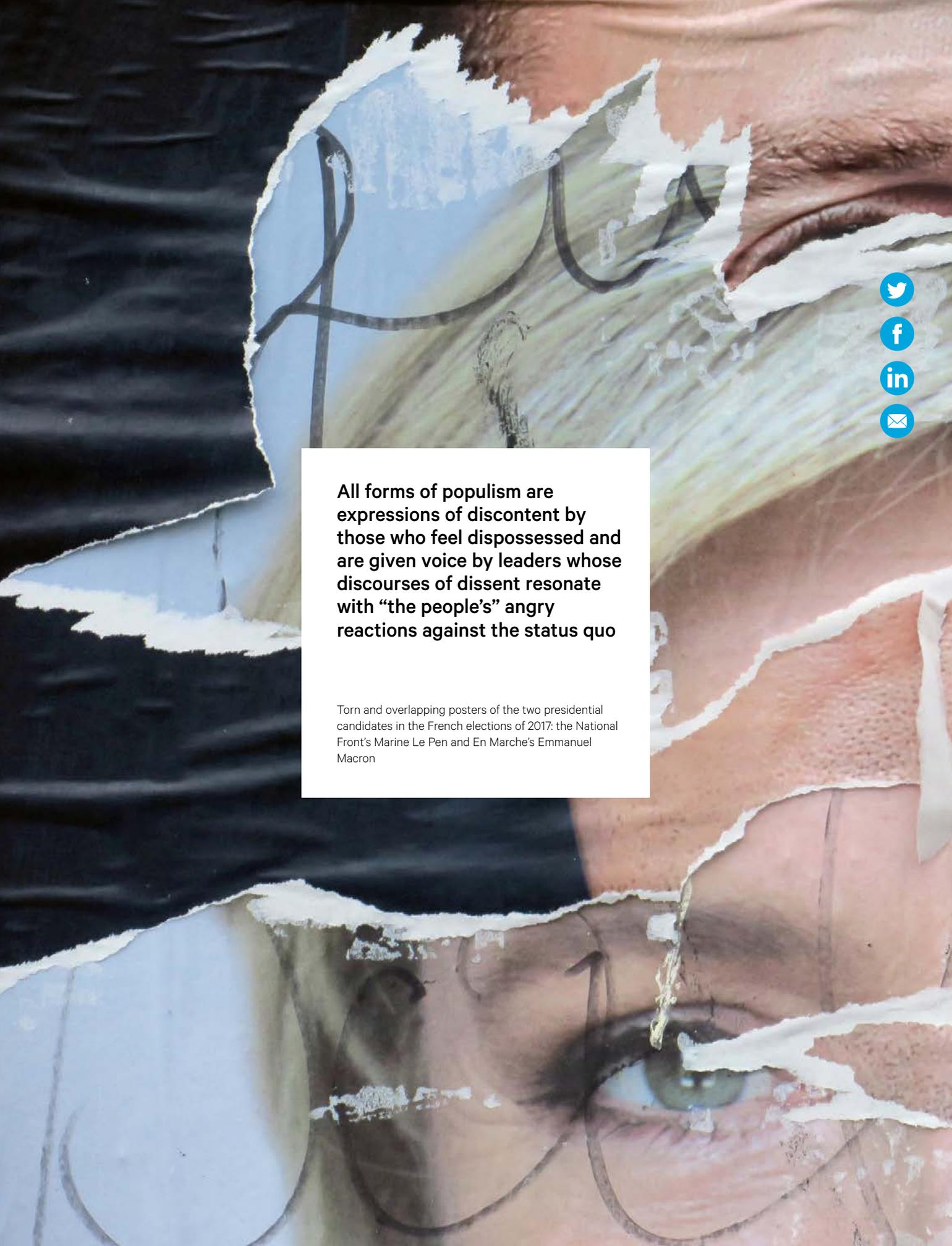


Complicating matters for the European Union is the supranational nature of decision-making, and how this has affected national politics. A major shift in the structure of national politics across Europe has occurred as a result of new electoral divides. These involve crosscutting cleavages between traditional political divisions based on adherence to right/left political parties and newer identity-related divisions based on more closed, xenophobic, and authoritarian values versus more open, cosmopolitan, and liberal values (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2012). The issues most in focus for the xenophobic/authoritarian side of the division began with immigration. But increasingly over the years, the European Union has become an equally politicized issue, as citizens have gone from the “permissive consensus” of the past to the current “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Public opinion surveys and polls clearly chart citizens’ loss of trust in political elites and of faith in their national democracies, let alone the EU (Pew and Eurobarometer polls, 2008–18).

## **Citizens’ ability to express their disenchantment has, ironically, been amplified by the “democratization” of the electoral rules. Primaries and referenda, where the most dissatisfied tend to be more motivated to turn out to vote, have largely brought victory for representatives of more extreme positions**

In the European Union, multilevel governance puts great strain on member-state democracies, albeit each for different reasons of history, culture, and politics (Schmidt, 2006). Note, however, that the citizens’ feelings of disenfranchisement (and the realities) are not only due to the EU’s multilevel political system. While Brexit was probably the *sumum* of the EU’s populist revolt (until the Italian election of March 2018, when Eurosceptic parties gained a governing majority), Trump’s election in the US was fueled by very much the same sentiments. They are in large part a consequence of the growing supranationalization of decision-making in an era of globalization, where governments have exchanged national autonomy for shared supranational authority in order to regain control over the forces they themselves unleashed through national policies of liberalization and deregulation (see, for example, Schmidt, 2002; de Wilde and Zürn, 2012). And with liberalization and deregulation, fueled by neoliberal philosophies (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013), also came technocratic decision-making, which promoted the depoliticization of policies and processes, along with the downgrading of politics (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Fawcett and Marsh, 2014). As a result, mainstream politics has found itself under attack from two sides: the rise of populist parties on the one hand, the rise of technocracy on the other (Caramani, 2017). The only thing these two forces hold in common is their rejection of mainstream party politics, their increasingly negative impact on such politics, and their deleterious effects on liberal democracy (Hobolt, 2015; Kriesi, 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). The danger, as Yascha Mounk argues, is that liberal democracies may end up either with illiberal democracies run by populist demagogues or undemocratic liberalisms governed by technocratic elites (Mounk, 2018).

In sum, the depoliticizing effects of the supranationalization of decision-making, together with the weakening of representative party institutions, offer equally powerful explanations for how and why populism has emerged as a major challenge to mainstream parties and politics. But again, the question is why, given that this has been a long-term process, aggrieved citizens



**All forms of populism are expressions of discontent by those who feel dispossessed and are given voice by leaders whose discourses of dissent resonate with “the people’s” angry reactions against the status quo**

Torn and overlapping posters of the two presidential candidates in the French elections of 2017: the National Front's Marine Le Pen and En Marche's Emmanuel Macron



did not vote for populist parties on the right-wing extremes sooner. Cas Mudde suggests this may be a problem on the supply-side, that is, the absence of charismatic leaders attractive to the general voter for whom to vote (Mudde, 2017, p. 615) (despite the “coterie charisma” of some leaders felt by hard-core activists; Eatwell, 2017) But, if so, then the further question is why such populist leaders—some new but many still around after many years—have taken the world by storm only now.



## **Populist leaders articulate many more anti-system complaints about what is wrong than spell out proposals about how to fix it, at least until they gain access to power, at which point they may either row back or fast-forward on anti-liberal policies**

But in order to answer this question, we need to focus in on populism itself. Up to this point, we have looked at the sources of populist discontent by delving deeply into the causes of citizen’s discontent in three different areas—economic, social, and political. By focusing on the sources of the problem, the discussion tends to take populism as a given. Only by taking the ideas and discourse of populist movements and leaders seriously, however, can we come closer to understanding why populist forces have been able to exploit the current rise in citizen discontent for their own purposes.

### **Conceptualizing Populism and Its Effects**

Public and scholarly interest in the development of populism has spawned a veritable cottage industry of books and articles on the topic. Conceptually, scholars have provided important insights into the nature and scope of populism in Europe and America (for example, Mudde and Kalwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016; Judis, 2016; Mudde, 2017). Empirically, analysts have charted the rise of populism on the extremes of the left and the right, although the large majority are focused on the anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, anti-euro, and anti-EU parties of the far right (for example, Kriesi, 2014, 2016; Mudde, 2017). Commentators have additionally shown that the problems generated by populism can be seen not just in the policy proposals that go counter to long-agreed principles of human rights, democratic processes, and the liberal world order but also in the new “uncivil” language of politics (Mutz, 2015; Thompson, 2016), the politics of “bullshit,” and the dangers of “fake news” circulating via the media to create a “post-truth” world (Frankfurt, 2005; Ball 2017; D’Ancona, 2017).

The high number and wide range of such works suggests that there is no one agreed-upon approach to understanding populism but many possible, most with negative connotations. Some take us all the way back to Richard Hofstadter’s depiction in the 1960s of “agitators with paranoid tendencies” (Hofstadter, 1964). Although that purely negative view of populism can be critiqued, in particular by differentiating left-wing from right-wing versions, all populism has one thing in common. It is the expression of discontent by those who feel dispossessed, given voice by leaders whose discourses of dissent resonate with “the people’s” angry reactions against the status quo. But beyond this, populism can follow many different avenues, depending upon the political, social, historical, institutional, and cultural context.



In taking account of this complexity, we can identify four key features of populism: first, populist leaders claim sole representation of “the people” against elites and other “threats.” Second, they engage in all-out assaults on expertise and unbiased “facts” and truth with “uncivil” language and “incivil” conduct that constitute a challenge to liberal tolerance and commitment to impartial information and scientific knowledge. Third, they get their messages out through new strategies of communication, facilitated by the new social media such as Twitter feeds and Facebook as well as the traditional broadcast and print media. And fourth, they articulate many more anti-system complaints about what is wrong than spell out proposals about how to fix it at least until they gain access to power, at which point they may either row back or fast-forward on anti-liberal policies.

**Populist Leaders’ Style of Discourse** Much attention in the literature on populism focuses on the first characteristic of populism, the appeals to “the people” by leaders whose discourses blame “corrupt” elites and unfair institutions for all their problems while enumerating a wide range of threats to national well-being, however that may be construed (Canovan, 1999; Weyland, 2001; Albertazzi and Mueller, 2017; Mudde, 2005, 2017). Most recent theoretical analyses of populism portray such discursive leadership as a danger for liberal democracy. Jan-Werner Müller, for example, defines populism rather narrowly as a dangerous anti-elitist, anti-democratic, and anti-pluralist political philosophy, in which leaders claim an exclusive representation of “the people”—with only some of the people counting as the “true people” for whom populist leaders claim to speak in the name of the people as a whole (Müller, 2016). This definition is close to that of Pierre André Taguieff, in his classic study of the National Front as a “national-populist party” in which the discourse of the demagogic leader is defined by a rhetoric that identifies with “the people,” claiming that their ideas are his, his ideas are theirs, with no concern for the truth, but rather to persuade through propagandistic formulas (Taguieff, 1984; see also discussion in Jäger, 2018).

## **According to Laclau, populism is identifiable by its conceptual anchor, which stands as a universal representation for all other demands to which it is seen as equivalent. Examples might be slogans such as Brexit supporters’ “Take back control”**

A similar such approach from another philosophical tradition is that of Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 39). He argues that populism is identifiable not so much by the contents or even the identification of an enemy as by its conceptual anchor (“empty signifier”), which stands as a universal representation for all other demands to which it is seen as equivalent (see also Panizza, 2005). Examples might be a general issue such as “globalization,” or phrases or slogans such as Brexit supporters’ “Take back control” and Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” (Schmidt, 2017). However, it could even consist of a string of words that indicate a particular set of values, as in the speech by Italian Interior Minister and head of the League, Matteo Salvini, at a rally in Pontida, who declared: “Next year’s [EP] election will be a referendum between the Europe of the elites, banks, finance, mass migration and precariousness versus the Europe of peoples, work, tranquility, family and future” (*Politico*, July 19, 2018).

For many, populism is an unqualified negative phenomenon: anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, and moralistic in extremely dangerous ways. This is particularly the case where the focus



Fifty-two year old Wink Watson of Lincoln, England, celebrates the result of the Brexit referendum outside the Britannia Pub on June 25, 2016





is on the rise of the “new populism” of extreme-right parties and their links to xenophobic nationalist ideas (for example, Taggart, 2017). These include far-right parties with reasonable longevity, such as France’s National Front (now National Rally), Austria’s Freedom Party, the Danish People’s Party, and the Dutch Party for Freedom (Elinas, 2010; Mudde, 2017); relative newcomers such as the Finns Party (formerly True Finns), the Sweden Democrats, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in northern Europe; as well as the variety of populist parties, new and old, across central and eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Minkenberg, 2002; Mudde, 2005); along with, of course, the illiberal governments of Hungary and Poland (Kelemen, 2017).

For others, populism can have a more positive side to it. This includes the left-wing populist governments of Latin America (especially in the 1990s and early 2000s) and the inclusionary populisms of southern Europe, most notably in Spain and Greece (Weyland, 2001; Panizza, 2005; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). As some philosophers of the left such as Chantal Mouffe have argued (Mouffe, 2018), and many figures in the radical left political formations themselves (for example, Spain’s Podemos and France’s France Insoumise) have stressed, some radical left parties embrace the term populism as a technique for acquiring power. They see this as representing the only forceful and effective alternative on the left to the “surrender by consensus” carried out by a discredited social-democracy transformed by the Third Way.

## **Populism’s positive effects include giving voice to underrepresented groups, mobilizing and representing excluded sections of society, and increasing democratic accountability by raising issues ignored or pushed aside by the mainstream parties**

Populism’s positive effects include giving voice to underrepresented groups, mobilizing and representing excluded sections of society, and increasing democratic accountability by raising issues ignored or pushed aside by the mainstream parties. The extremes on the left in particular, by mobilizing on bases of social justice and human rights as well as against the inequalities caused by the increasing predominance of financial capitalism and its accompanying booms and busts, or by the lack of progressive taxation, can serve as a positive pull on mainstream parties—on the right as much as the left. The Occupy Movement is a case in point. However, there are many fewer extreme-left parties with a significant popular following than extreme-right parties, and they are often in EU countries that have less political pull or economic weight, in particular those which were subject to formal conditionality for bailouts during the euro crisis (that is, Greece; Vasilopoulou, 2018) or informal conditionality (most notably Spain). On balance, parties of the extreme right are the ones that appear to have exerted the most influence on political debates and the policy agenda so far, by pulling center-right mainstream parties closer to their positions, especially with regard to opposition to immigration and freedom of movement or minority rights.

The existence of different kinds of populist movements on a spectrum from left to right, whatever their relative strength, thus suggests that populism is more than just a discursive style with an anti-elite message. Although the style of populists may be similar—such as speaking in the name of the people against elites—the content does matter. If it is more progressive and inclusive, it can exert a positive influence on mainstream parties that serves



to reinforce liberal democracy. If more regressive and xenophobic, it can exert a negative influence. All populists are not the same, even if their styles may be similar. Ideological divides of the left and right remain of great importance, as a recent Pew study of citizens' support for populist versus mainstream parties of the left, right, and center concludes (Simmons et al., 2018).

**Populist Post-Truth** The next characteristic of populism in our list involves valuing personal experiences over knowledge and technical expertise. Populists tend to discredit experts, intellectuals, and those who have traditionally claimed to rely on “facts” and truth. This fight against experts is also at the origins of the many discussions of post-truth and fake news, both populists' accusations against mainstream news outlets of fake news any time the truth gets in their way and populists' own dissemination of fake news through social media as well as the traditional media (Ball, 2017; D'Ancona, 2017). Note, however, that this approach seems to apply much more to contemporary right populists than left populists.

Populists' contestation of expertise refers to the fact that they are prone to engage in the negation of the scientific/academic knowledge used by established political parties and generate their own “alternative” facts and sources of expertise, often by valuing personal experiences over “technocratic” expertise. To take but one example, Hungary's Jobbik has its own “institutes” that hybridize uncontested statistical facts on immigration with political myths from conspiracy theories lifted from anonymous producers on YouTube.

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The problem with this blurring of the lines between fact and fiction, as psychologists have pointed out, is that it undermines people's very sense of truth or falsehood, as lies repeated many times are believed as “true” even when people know they are not. Here, we can learn a lot from the work of psychologists who focus on the ways in which framing and *heuristics* can affect people's perceptions (for example, Kahneman, 2011; Lackoff, 2014), including when exaggeration or hyperbole, say, of the number of migrants entering the EU or the cost of the EU per day to the UK, leaves the impression on listeners that a very large number is involved, even if not as high as alleged. Even speech patterns, such as incomplete sentences and repetitions, can serve as effective discursive mechanisms to reinforce a message, whether by creating a sense of intimacy as audiences complete the sentence in their heads, or appealing to unconscious cognitive mechanisms that serve to reinforce people's acceptance of what is said, even (or especially) when they are lies and exaggerations (Lackoff, 2016—see discussion in Schmidt, 2017).

This kind of post-truth approach to the world is part and parcel of the combative “uncivil” language and style of discursive interaction, in which bullying, shouting, and blatantly



violating the rules of “political correctness” through intolerant language contribute to the sense that it is not just what you say but how assertively you say it, regardless of the validity of the claims, that counts. The danger here is that it undermines the very values—of tolerance, fairness, and even-handed reporting—that have been at the basis of liberal democracy since the postwar period. As Diane Mutz argues, the incivility in the mass media, in particular on confrontation “in-your-face” news programs, is particularly detrimental to facilitating respect for oppositional political viewpoints and to citizens’ levels of trust in politicians and the political process (Mutz, 2015).

**Political Coordination through New Social Media** Contemporary populism also goes hand in hand with the new ways in which populists have learned to use new social media to circulate their messages and broaden their networks of support and resource base. Indeed, new media have been invaluable to populists’ creation of networks of dissent. Facebook posts alone, for example, create echo chambers of support, in particular because large numbers of people get their news (fake as well as real) from their “friends” sharing posts. Populists rely more on new media (for example, YouTube and blogs) and social media (for example, Twitter and Facebook) than traditional parties do. For example, in Spain, Podemos faced down the hostility of newspapers and television outlets with extreme reliance on hyperactive Facebook posts and YouTube channel streaming. Social media facilitates the discovery of like-minded people across the country and the world—enabling populist activists and parties to exponentially increase the number of their “followers” and potential supporters. Transnational networks of communication enable the spread of populist ideas, reinforcing anger and anti-establishment sentiment. Crucially, however, this happens not only virtually but also “in the flesh,” for example, when extreme-right leaders meet in Europe to set strategies for EP elections or parliamentary groupings. A recent case in point is when President Trump’s “organic intellectual,” Steve Bannon, traveled throughout Europe to meet with and support other populist leaders in their electoral battles, such as Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen, and plans to set up a foundation to provide advice and financial support.

Populism finds support from activists and social movements on both the left and the right. While it is commonly assumed that the activist networks are primarily engaged in left-leaning causes, right-wing networks have also been active. In the US, the Tea Party is the clearest example, managing to unseat enough incumbents in primaries and to win elections so as to transform the Republican party (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). In the UK, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was able to set the agenda for the Conservative party and, ultimately, the entire nation through the referendum on UK exit from the EU. In some European cases, as in Denmark (Rydgren, 2004) and Germany (Berbuir et al., 2015), social movements have been instrumental in propelling and normalizing right-wing populism (see also Bale et al., 2010). All of this said, populism has also been useful to left-wing activists seeking to enliven their support base (March and Mudde, 2005). Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries of 2016 has sometimes been called a populist because of his ability to energize youth via social media, despite or perhaps because of promises that mainstream Democrats claimed were unrealistic.

**Political Communication via the Traditional Media** The dissemination of populist views does not come just from new social media that create new channels of coordination by activists’ networks, however. Populists have also exploited the old media to get their messages out beyond their “true believers” to the more general public. While Twitter feeds provide a post-modern way for populist leaders to speak directly to “the people,” the traditional media also help



spread their messages of distrust of mainstream parties and politics as well as the media itself. As linguist Ruth Wodak shows, with the “politics of fear,” right-wing populist parties have gone from fringe voices to persuasive political actors who set the agenda and frame media debates via the normalization of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, and anti-semitic rhetoric (Wodak, 2015). That said, dissemination of the populist discourse does have its limits, since some things do not translate—as when US alt-right activists sought to use “Freddie the Frog” to reinforce extreme-right sentiment in France in the run-up to the presidential election—not realizing that “frog” has long been a negative stereotype applied to the French, and therefore would not resonate.

In many countries, the traditional media has become so fragmented that people listen to different news programs with completely different slants on the news. And, here again, it is mostly the extreme right that largely wins over the left with regard to broadcasting presence, whether in terms of talk radio or cable news, whether Radio Maria in Poland or Fox News in the US. Moreover, even the mainstream press and TV conspires to favor the extremes on the right, if only inadvertently. They magnify the audience of populist leaders whose political “incorrect” tweets become the news story of the day, or they reinforce right-of-center messages when in efforts to appear “balanced” they bring on someone from the extreme right and someone from the center—without any airtime for the extreme left (Baldwin, 2018). Naturally, where the populists are in government and control the traditional media, then the populist message is the main one heard—as is the case of Hungary, but arguably even in Italy under Berlusconi’s more benign version of populism.

Media communication has also changed in ways that benefit populist messaging. The short news cycles, combined with the push to speak in thirty-second sound-bites, privileges simpler messages that “sell,” and this in turn favors populists with their simple “solutions” to complex problems, easy to articulate without explanation: such as “build a wall” to solve the immigration problem, reverse free trade to protect jobs in the country, and so forth. It takes much longer for mainstream leaders to explain why certain kinds of policies are in place, and often these explanations are complex and boring, especially when compared to the snappy slogans of the populists.

## **Populist discourse focuses more on listing grievances and injustices than on laying out policy prescriptions and detailed policy programs. As such, it tends to work best for populists in opposition**

This “mediatization” of political communication generally poses significant problems for mainstream party politics and government, primarily by undermining mainstream party control of the public sphere and mainstream parties’ ability to set the political agenda. Beyond the fact that many other non- or anti-establishment voices are now heard through a multiplicity of channels, mainstream leaders have created their own problems as a result of their own more populist styles of communication, while the media have only added to these through their tendency to focus on leaders’ personality traits while turning the news into entertainment. Beyond this, the social media, social movements, and out-groups have also been increasingly subverting the political agenda-setting function of political parties (Caramani, 2017). Political communication, then, in the dissemination of populist ideas and



Occupy Wall Street supporters attending a street concert by the group Rage Against the Machine at Foley Square, New York, during the celebration of the first anniversary of the citizens' movement, which was born on September 17, 2011



discourse through the “bullshit” of fake news and post-truth in a fragmented media landscape is another key element of populism today.

**Connecting Populist Discourses to Actions** Our last dimension of populism is leaders’ tendency to focus more on denouncing the status quo than suggesting remedies, until they gain political power. Populism most often entails, as mentioned above, an ideologically thin discourse characterized more by the ardent expression of resentment than by the consistency of the programs (also termed a “thin-centered ideology”—Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 8). The populist discourse is therefore more likely to focus on listing grievances and injustices rather than laying out policy prescriptions and detailed policy programs. As such, this tends to work best for populists in opposition. Being in government has long entailed compromise or even turn-around on cherished policies (Mudde, 2017)—as in the case of the left-wing Syriza in Greece. But recently, such turn-arounds have become less frequent.

As more and more populist parties have been joining mainstream party coalitions (for example, Austria), or even governing on their own (in Italy, Hungary, and Poland), they have been designing and implementing policy agendas that put into effect their anti-liberal ideas, often with only the courts to safeguard the rule of law. Moreover, as the chances of election are increasing for populists across Europe, all such parties have become more specific about their policies and programs. And they do this even when (or especially when) such policies cannot easily be implemented under the existing political order because they violate assumptions about sound economics (for example, promising a high guaranteed income *and* a flat tax—as in the program of the new populist coalition government in Italy) or liberal politics (for example, expelling refugees—the pledge of all right-wing populist parties).

So, exactly what are the potential dangers when populists gain power? David Art has argued that the political strategy of “tamed power,” by bringing populists into government to force them to take on their responsibilities via compromise, can backfire, by “normalizing” their ideas and thereby opening the way for illiberal ideas to gain sway in liberal democracies (Art, 2006; see also Mudde, 2017). Müller goes farther, to contend that rather than encouraging a more participative democracy, populists in power will “engage in occupying the state, mass clientelism and corruption, and the suppression of anything like a critical civil society” (Müller, 2016, p. 102). Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt echo this analysis, insisting that “democracies die” at the hands of elected populist leaders who then subvert the very democratic processes that brought them to power (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). But even short of populist victory, when populists are not in power *yet*, the dangers also come from contagion. Mainstream leaders are themselves increasingly guilty of introducing populist styles of discourse into normal politics, with the “electoralism” of political parties’ increasing emphasis on short-term electoral goals while responding to the public mood as gauged through polling instruments (Caramani, 2017). This suggests that it is not enough to track leaders’ discourses and the ways in which their ideas circulate. We also need to see whether and/or how they influence liberal democracies.

## Conclusion

We are left with a number of questions. Is this a moment of great transformation, in which a new paradigm will emerge out of the ashes of the liberal order, with neoliberal economics, social liberalism, and political liberalism succumbing to the closing of borders to immigrants, rising protectionism, social conservatism, and illiberal democracy (itself an oxymoron)? Will



the more balanced and tolerant institutional commitments of political liberalism prevail, along with a perhaps modified economic liberalism in which open borders and free trade are moderated by more attention to those left behind? For the moment, we cannot know. What we do know is that when populist leaders gain power, they try to make good on their promises, to the detriment of the liberal democratic consensus.

So, what is the alternative? The big question for progressives who seek to maintain liberal democracies is how to counter the populist upsurge with innovative ideas that go beyond neoliberal economics while promoting a renewal of democracy and a more egalitarian society. But this requires not just workable ideas that can provide real solutions to the wide range of problems related to economics, politics, and society. It also demands political leaders with persuasive discourses that can resonate with an increasingly discontented electorate, more and more open to the sirens of populism. For the moment, we continue to wait not so much for the ideas—in many ways we know what they are—but for the discourse of new political leaders able to convey progressive ideas in uplifting ways that offer new visions of the future able to heal the schisms on which the populists have long thrived. Without this, hopes of any “New Enlightenment” will be dashed on the shoals of illiberalism.



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