



THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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The election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency in November 2016 is expected to usher in a new phase in the country's economic and domestic governance as well as its foreign policy orientations. Trump's ascendancy to power has also fuelled debates on the global rise of populism. The populist upsurge had already gained prominence in academic and policy circles thanks to the success of populist parties in Europe, as well as in countries like Turkey, India, Thailand, and Venezuela. More recently, the referendum on Brexit witnessed the victory of a populist party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and its (former) leader, Nigel Farage, in the form of its dominance in shaping the populist debates largely devoid of facts in the period preceding the referendum. Nonetheless, despite their electoral strength or their increasing power in shaping public debates, none of these parties had yet come to power in a long-established Western democracy.¹ In that sense, Trump's election marks a turning point by making the United States the first long-established Western democracy that is currently ruled by a right-wing populist leader. It also significantly strengthens the claim that populism is no longer a regional but a global phenomenon that needs to be studied through comparative terms in a global context.

Geographically speaking, the populist upsurge is observed in both the East and the West. In economic terms, it is present in both economically affluent countries like Sweden and Denmark and countries experiencing economic problems like Greece. It is popular in both long-established Western democracies across Europe and the United States, as well as in younger democracies like Hungary in Eastern Europe, and those countries that have long had troubles in consolidating their democracies like Turkey. Hence, populism today emerges as part of a new broader global political reality that cuts across geographic, economic, and political boundaries.

Populist movements share key common characteristics, which lead us to argue that this is not a phenomenon unique to a specific country or region. Although many definitions of populism abound, the one by the prominent populism scholar Cas Mudde is widely accepted in the literature. Mudde defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and

antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté général* (general will) of the people."² He also identifies the three defining features of populism as *anti-establishment*, *authoritarianism*, and *nativism*.³

Populist parties and leaders claim to be *anti-establishment* in the sense that they represent the voice of the ordinary people against the "elites" of the establishment, be it intellectuals, big business, or elected mainstream politicians. They are also part of highly *authoritarian* movements that rely heavily on the presence of a (often) charismatic leader, promote the dominance of the executive over the legislative and the judiciary, and equate democracy with majoritarianism. As observed in the cases of Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, or Modi in India, the leader is situated above the party, often at the expense of the hollowing or weakening of the party structure, and thus leading to the personalization of politics and power.

Populism today differs from its previous articulations as witnessed earlier in places like Latin America. It does not refer to bottom-up movements that emerge as a result of popular mobility nor an ideology of national developmentalism. Rather, it constitutes a specific "mode of governance" where majoritarian instruments such as referenda are preferred over a system that prioritizes checks and balances and the protection of minority rights. By claiming exclusive representation of the "people," these movements also assume "moral superiority," which entitles them to crush any opposition for being "the enemy of the people" as well as occupy the state with their own cadres.⁴ Authoritarian tendencies seem to be bolstered in those cases where there is already existent societal polarization in a given country.⁵ As was the case in Turkey, strong leadership combined with authoritarian rule can run the risk of boosting further polarization, resulting in the building of a vicious cycle of populist rule that becomes increasingly difficult to break. Finally, populism embodies *nativism* in the sense of favoring exclusion over inclusion and closure over cosmopolitan values, best reflected in these movements' anti-immigrant attitudes in the West and hostility towards ethnic and religious minorities elsewhere.

There are competing arguments as to why populism experienced a rapid rise at the global level. It is widely accepted that economic challenges such as the global recession, increasing levels of unemployment, and inequality; security challenges such as the rise of terrorist movements; and multiple global challenges such as migration, climate change, and scarcity of natural resources are feeding into the rise of populism across the world. Populist parties and leaders seem to capitalize on the fears of the people through the discourse of “managing” and “containing” these “risks.” Hence, they play into the sense of ontological insecurity across their citizens, conveying the message that “delivery” against these “immediate” risks trumps the significance of rights and freedoms. Where there is general agreement on these points across multiple observers, disagreement is discerned concerning the significance that they attribute to different “risks” as the driving factors behind the success of these movements.

Some scholars emphasize the importance of values and identity-based factors in the recent rise of global populism. According to this perspective, also known as the “cultural backlash thesis,” the appeal of populist parties has increased due to people’s reactions to “progressive cultural change,” which brought in the rise of values such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in recent decades.⁶ It has been argued that the fear of loss of traditional values, particularly across “the older generation, white men, and less educated sectors” have made them turn to populist movements.⁷ Others have stressed the importance of “economic fears” as the key driver behind the popularity of populism. Here, the thesis is that those who feel left behind by globalization, namely those with lower levels of education, a lower income, and the older generations, are more likely to seek refuge in populist movements.⁸

However, as the proponents of both theses also attest, it is difficult to draw a strict analytical distinction between these two approaches. Economic anxieties and value-based fears may be intricately intertwined with one another. There might also be cases where one set of drivers may be more dominant in certain countries or regions than in others. For instance, it has largely been argued that

values and related identity-based fears cut across different economic classes behind the support for Trump, whereas economic fears have often been voiced as a more dominant factor in the case of the populist wave in Europe. In both cases, however, immigration seems to be an overriding factor that is connected to both drivers. In the cases of Europe and the United States, immigration raises identity fears concerning the loss of “traditional national values and identity” and heightens economic insecurity through the narrative of the “loss of jobs” to immigrants. While immigration stands out as a central issue behind populism in the West, this is not necessarily the case for populist movements in other parts of the world. For instance, in the case of Turkey, where value- and identity-based polarization predicated on religiosity and conservatism consolidates the support for Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), immigration does not emerge as a theme in the political rhetoric of the party and its leader, despite the presence of over three million Syrian refugees in the country.

Be it economic or value-based, the sources of the upsurge suggest that we are facing a new political reality that has to do with the crisis of liberal democracy. Hence, we are not only witnessing the rise of a new type of populism but also a general crisis of existing liberal democracy. While some prefer to use the term “illiberal democracy” in referring to the political state of those countries where populists are coming to power or to the political system that the populists who contend for power desire, labeling the phenomena as such might be misleading and dangerous. It is misleading because of the fact that a (consolidated) democracy is unthinkable without liberalism; hence, it is not just liberalism but also democracy that are under threat.⁹ It is also dangerous since posing the problem as a crisis of liberalism helps the populists to exploit the term “democracy” to their benefit in public debate.¹⁰ Viewing the problem as a general crisis of liberal democracy, on the other hand, implies that existing liberal democracies seem to be inept at both managing and delivering the expectations of their citizens who are faced with increasing uncertainty, anxiety, and alienation stemming from national, regional, and global risks in the areas of politics, society, and the economy. For instance, existing liberal democracies in Europe do not seem to be able to

capture the reality that European societies have increasingly become immigrant societies in recent decades and respond to the challenges associated with it, which leads an important segment of their citizens to opt for populist parties as an alternative shortcut to the resolution of complex issues raised by immigration.¹¹ In the absence of a credible and appealing agenda of reform and a vision for the “good society,” rational arguments to “correct” populist claims may not at all resonate with voters who choose to follow reactionary and emotional appeals to claim what is “theirs,” be it economic and/or cultural resources, which will only continue to bolster populist movements.

In which ways do populist movements pose a threat to liberal democracy as we know it? Perhaps most importantly, the *inclusive* institutional system and discourse that lies at the heart of modern liberal democracy is now being attacked by an *exclusive* understanding of political institutions, representation, identity, and difference. This crisis of liberal democracy is also both evident from and closely intertwined with the existential crisis that is being faced by mainstream political parties in their weakening membership base, institutional structure, and failure in determining the political agenda. Party politics as a key pillar of liberal democracy is increasingly losing its relevance for modern day politics. In a similar vein, since populist leaders detest all “intermediary powers” between the “people” and the “leader,” in addition to the political party apparatuses, they also dismiss free and professional media as well as alternative voices from civil society, in turn severely limiting public debate over policy matters that lie at the core of liberal democratic politics.¹²

Finding new modes of responding to the “interests” of citizens in effective ways would undoubtedly constitute an important step towards rescuing liberal democracy from the populist attack. Yet, this might be easier said than done and even unattainable unless it is complemented by concrete and novel mechanisms to help redefine voters’ “perceptions of how the world works” by “shape(ing) the narrative that structures voters’ interests” in a coherent fashion.¹³ This could be one way out of the economy/identity nexus, which seems to underlie much of the reactionary support

for the populists. These and other potential counter mechanisms to the populist wave can only be sought if we pose the rise of populism as the crisis of liberal democracy rather than a passing phase or a specific type of illiberalism. Only then would we be forced to get a bird’s eye view of the problems of liberal democracy, which could then help us to conceptualize novel ways of rethinking about its future and even discuss the prospects of a potential post-liberal order.

Endnotes

- 1 | For the category of “long-established Western democracies,” which excludes the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, see Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing-Out of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013) and Jan-Werner Müller, “Capitalism in One Family” *London Review of Books*, 38, no. 23 (December 1, 2016): 10-14.
- 2 | Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39 (2004): 542.
- 3 | Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 4 | Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
- 5 | Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 6 | See, for instance, Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” Faculty Research Working Paper Series, August 2016, Harvard Kennedy School, RPW 16-026, 2-3.
- 7 | Ibid.
- 8 | See, for instance, Catherine de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann, “Fear not Values: Public Opinion and the Populist Vote in Europe,” *EUPINIONS*, 2016/3.
- 9 | See Müller, *What is Populism?*, 50-55, for an in-depth discussion of this point.
- 10 | Ibid.
- 11 | This point was made by Daniel Gros in his speech at the panel on “The Trump Presidency and the Rise of Populism in the Global Context” held at the Istanbul Policy Center, Turkey, on December 6, 2016.
- 12 | Müller, “Capitalism in One Family,” 10-14.
- 13 | Dani Rodrik, “It’s a War of Ideas, Not of Interests,” October 19, 2016, accessed on January 12, 2017, http://rodrik.typepad.com/dani_rodriks_weblog/2016/10/its-a-war-of-ideas-not-of-interests.html.

