

Why populism is a threat to electoral integrity

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*Following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President, a great deal of political commentary has focused on the rise of populism and its possible impact on Western democracies. **Pippa Norris** argues that populism heightens the risk of electoral malpractice in three distinct ways: by damaging public trust in democracy, by undermining international standards of electoral integrity, and by increasing the potential for collusion with foreign governments.*



Credit: [Gage Skidmore](#) (CC BY SA 2.0)

Since the earthquake of Brexit in June last year, and Trump's victory four months later, the news has been dominated by stories about populism, including whether European elections suggest that populist support is either rising or stalled.

The media has also been fascinated simultaneously by problems of electoral integrity. This includes Trump's repeated claims of millions of fraudulent votes cast for Clinton, leading him to establish the new [Presidential Advisory Commission on Electoral Integrity](#). Problems of cyber security continue to be investigated by the U.S. Congress following intelligence reports of Russian interference in the U.S. elections.

A coincidence? I don't think so. [A new Harvard report](#) suggests that populists typically heighten risks of electoral malpractices through three main mechanisms: damaging public trust in democratic processes, undermining international standards of electoral integrity, and colluding with Russian interference in Western contests.

Damaging trust in democratic institutions

Firstly, in terms of the consequences for democratic cultures, populism is likely to erode public faith and confidence in the fairness and integrity of the electoral process. [My work with Ronald Inglehart](#) found that populists

characteristically attack 'the establishment' and fuel mistrust of the core institutions of liberal democracy, including elections as well as mainstream parties, parliaments, the media, and the judiciary. During and even after the U.S. presidential election campaign, for example, President Trump [repeatedly alleged](#) that the contest was rigged and there was massive voter fraud, claiming 3-5 million people voted illegally, and calling for a 'major investigation'.

Trump supporters, [especially if hostile towards immigrants and anti-government](#), are particularly prone to believe in rampant electoral fraud. Populist leaders typically gain support from mistrust of elites and they seek to further undermine faith in the legitimate role of the media ('enemy of the people'), the independence of the courts ('so-called judges'), and the legislative procedures in Congress. Where people lose faith in political institutions, this [depresses turnout](#) and catalyses protest politics. This does not imply that popular support for liberal democratic values has been greatly weakened by populists – since so far there is [little evidence](#) of this alarmist claim in Western societies. But in the longer-term, public trust of politicians, parties and parliaments, already at record lows in many countries, is likely to be further damaged by populist rhetoric.

There are other ways that public confidence in government can be eroded if populists are elected to office. When campaigning, populist rhetoric frequently raises exaggerated expectations which are hard to meet, potentially deepening disillusionment among their followers. Populists also advocate extreme policies, dividing the electorate and strengthening social intolerance. Their leaders characteristically make vague and sweeping promises through simplistic sound-bite slogans with broad appeal ('Make America Great Again', 'Build a Wall', 'Choose France', 'Take Back Control'). Demagogic speeches emphasise potential threats from 'outsiders' and criticise elites, but avoid presenting detailed policy platforms.

If elected to power, as neophytes, populist leaders may [lack the political skills and experience](#) to implement their promises and make government work effectively. Extreme policy positions hamper their capacity to build working coalitions across multiple parliamentary parties, or require major compromise to get things done. In the longer-term, all of these characteristics mean populist politicians are likely to disappoint their supporters and weaken faith more generally in representative institutions.

Violating international standards of electoral integrity

Populists also use practices directly violating international standards of electoral integrity and domestic laws. In the worst cases, populist authoritarians reinforce their power through fraud and corruption, undermine human rights, and restrict the playing field for party competition.

Thus Venezuelan elections under both Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro have been plagued by corruption, the misuse of state resources, and clientelism, triggering massive street protests. Venezuela ranks 118th worldwide in the [Perception of Electoral Integrity](#) index and ranks near the bottom of [Transparency International Corruption Index](#). Meanwhile in the Philippines, the 2016 campaign of the populist Rodrigo Duterte saw [observer reports](#) of vote-buying, malfeasance, and election-related violence.

Under President Erdogan, Turkey's constitutional referendum on 16 April 2017 was strongly criticised by [OSCE](#) observers due to the imprisonment of thousands of citizens, state control of the media, and limits on civil society organisations. Malpractices are common in Viktor Orban's Hungary, including unfair electoral laws, gerrymandering, and the lack of a level playing field in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Since the election of populist leaders, both Turkey and Hungary have declined in Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#).

These problems typically generate contentious elections marked by opposition party appeals against the results, mass protests, and problems of unstable governance. They are especially common in 'hybrid' regimes, which are neither fully democratic nor autocratic, with the trappings of competitive elections but which lack a level playing field for all parties and candidates. Problems are exacerbated in polarised party systems with winner-take-all presidential executives.

Even in Western democracies, several populist leaders have violated specific electoral and anti-corruption laws when campaigning. Systemic corruption is a breeding ground for populism, and leaders claim to fight this problem, although in practice they often succumb to illicit practice.

In Britain, for example, the first-ever UKIP Member of Parliament was [charged with electoral fraud](#) (submitting false signatures on nomination papers). Nigel Farage and seven other UKIP MEPS have been [under investigation for the misuse of EU funds](#).

In Australia, the leader of One Nation, Pauline Hanson, and the party co-founder, David Ettridge, were [jailed in 2003](#) for dishonestly taking electoral reimbursements. In Austria, support for the far right Carinthia Freedom Party plummeted in 2013, and many elected leaders resigned, after a massive [corruption and patronage scandal](#) including accusations of bribery, passing on insider information, accepting money to influence European Union law-making, nepotism, money laundering and kick-backs connected to the state bank.

The French Front National was sanctioned for the misuse of 340,000 euros in campaign funds in 2011 and Marine Le Pen is currently under investigation for spending 5 million euros in EU funds on fake jobs. Problems of [public ethics](#) have also plagued Trump's White House, from a lack of transparency with the President's tax returns, breaking decades of tradition, to [conflicts of interest](#) over Trump's business interests at home and abroad, and the resignation of Michael Flynn over his Russian consultancy fees.

Of course, cases of corruption, crony capitalism, and malfeasance occur with many other types of parties and politicians, not just populists. But [Transparency International](#) reports that populists are particularly prone to stepping over the line by engaging in unethical behaviour. In speeches, ever since the rise of populists in America's Gilded Age, such leaders commonly rail against 'corrupt elites' ('Drain the Swamp'), to gain popular support from disaffected voters. In practice, however, populists often appear willing to transgress the law to gain power and enrich themselves and their supporters, rolling back anti-corruption laws and flagrantly violating ethical standards of public life.

Colluding with Russian interference

Finally, authoritarian regimes ('black knights') have actively sought to undermine democratic forces abroad. The clearest evidence concerns Russia, accused of using several techniques to put its thumb on the electoral scale in favour of populists.

One is to supply resources: Russia has helped to fund populist parties; for example, Marine Le Pen borrowed 9 million euros from a Russian bank in the party's 2014 campaign, and she visited Putin seeking further support during the 2017 election. The Dutch Freedom Party signed a "[cooperation agreement](#)" with Putin's United Russia party. Other techniques use propaganda, misinformation, and cyberattacks. Russian interference has long been suspected in elections in post-Soviet states, notably in attempts to disrupt contests and undermine democratic forces in neighbouring [Ukraine](#).

The intelligence and cyber security communities report active Russian interference in Western elections, including the attack on the [Bundestag computers](#) in 2015, well before [the security breaches of the DNC computers](#), and attempts to hack into voting registers in several state offices during the 2016 campaign. Russian misinformation through social media campaigns is generally designed to undermine support for moderate parties and bolster populist candidates, as well as casting confusion and doubt about the general integrity of democratic processes.

Persistent questions about Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election, which are under investigation, continue to plague the Trump administration. In France, it remains to be determined who exactly the culprits were behind the massive hacking attack on Emmanuel Macron, with fake and genuine documents leaked two days before ballots were cast. But the fingerprints allegedly point towards both Russia and the American far right.

Western governments have sought to counter these efforts; in the Netherlands, for example, in the run up to the

general election, the government decided that [all paper ballots in the Netherlands](#) would be counted by hand, ditching its counting software on the grounds that it was vulnerable to hacking. Similarly, the [head of German intelligence](#) has warned that they are on the alert for Russian cyber espionage, disinformation campaigns and fake news, including repeated phishing attacks on the CDU/CSU. But it has become more and more difficult for large campaign organisations to maintain cyber-security against increasingly-sophisticated attacks.

Populists are not directly responsible for Russian interference. But they need to speak out loud and clear to denounce these acts or else, as the main beneficiaries, they become guilty by association. Trump's casual dismissal of the threats ("this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story") has only made investigators more suspicious.

Therefore, further systematic evidence needs to be gathered to determine the impact of each of these practices. Populists are far from alone in engaging in electoral malpractices. But assembling pieces of the puzzle leads to the conclusion that populists are particularly prone to heightening serious risks to free and fair elections, by further eroding public confidence in the electoral process and democratic institutions, using practices violating international standards of electoral integrity, and potentially colluding with authoritarian allies seeking to interfere in democratic contests.

In this regard, Trump is not exceptional but part of a broader syndrome. It remains to be seen whether and how these challenges can be addressed most effectively to restore public trust, strengthen electoral integrity, and thereby safeguard democracy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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