

So-called ‘populist’ parties have many different grievances. Lumping them together won’t help defeat them

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*Populism is the buzzword of the moment. But, **Takis Pappas** explains, there are three kinds of parties aggregated under the populist label: anti-democrats, nativists and ‘pure’ populists. Lumping them together is both misleading and politically perilous because they do not spring from the same source or the same set of grievances. Instead of lamenting a generic, ill-defined populism, we need to tackle these parties in different ways.*



Front de Gauche flags during a demonstration in Paris, March 2012. Photo: [Francois Landre](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

Even if the Oxford English Dictionary’s chosen Word of the Year 2016 was *post-truth* – an adjective ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ – the real buzzword was a noun referring to a closely-related phenomenon: *populism*. Over the past year, the term was popularised in the context of the EU referendum, the US presidential election in the United States and ongoing political developments in other nations currently ruled by populist leaders, such as Poland, Hungary and Greece. ‘Populism’ is bound to be just as widespread in 2017, as commentators ponder the forthcoming elections in France, the Netherlands, Germany and (possibly) Greece, in which populist leaders are expected to play critical roles.

Not without reason, recent populist successes have given rise to an almost neurotic anxiety about what comes next. Will populism become even stronger after the forthcoming elections? Even more crucially, does populism put contemporary democracy in jeopardy? Those are certainly troubling questions but, as long as “populism” remains an ill-defined concept, they are also certain to lead to mistaken conclusions.

Amid the worry, it is crucial to be clear about two things. First, “populism” is currently used as an omnibus term that embraces three different challengers to democratic politics: anti-democrats, nativists and populists. Second, the rise of each of these challengers is *not* traceable to a single cause, and hence should not be expected to prompt a single response. Ergo, parties and movements that do not belong to the same species should not to be treated as if they do – it will only make the search for causes and solutions harder. Let’s take a close-up view of those challengers.

Antidemocratic parties take part in elections as “anti-system” formations – they comply with some of the outward rules of parliamentarism, but they disdain its principles and spirit and would happily jettison them if given the chance. Such parties thrive on both the extreme right (Greece’s *Golden Dawn* or Hungary’s *Jobbik*) and left (e.g., France’s *Front de Gauche* or Greece’s unreformed communist party, *KKE*) of European politics. Irrespective of their ideological predisposition, however, these parties prefer state control of the economy to capitalism and open markets: rightists emphasise national economic autarchy, while leftists stress collectivism. Several antidemocratic parties of both the left and right have a penchant for violence and the cult of the leader.

Nativist parties represent right-wing conservative ideas – the defence of law and order, as well what has been termed “welfare chauvinism” – while being fully committed to parliamentary democracy and constitutional legality. What is important to understand about these parties is that their conviction that ethnic and national communities have a right to self-determination and exclusive statehood cannot be said to be out of step with classical liberalism. In point of fact, today’s European nativism is concentrated in the most politically liberal, economically affluent, and, at least until recently, socioculturally homogenous states – Austria, Finland, France, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and, of late, Germany.

Populist parties are those displaying two antithetical characteristics (which thus clearly set them apart from either antidemocratic or nativist parties). They harbour an allegiance to democracy, and they also endorse illiberal tactics. Parties that do not do *both* those two things, whatever else they are, cannot be populist. For decades after 1945, there were no significant populist parties in Europe. Populism’s first sustained success in modern European politics came in 1981 Greece, when the *Panhellenic Socialist Movement* (PASOK) of Andreas Papandreu won a landslide. In subsequent decades, populism, whether on the left or on the right, piled up electoral victories especially in the countries of southern and eastern Europe, such as Italy, Greece, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. In most of those cases, it has also enjoyed long periods in power.

As we enter 2017, it is crucial, especially for politicians and policy makers, to understand that the danger is not some generic and ill-defined populism. In reality, we are dealing with a range of political phenomena that have their own distinct sets of causes, normative assumptions and practical consequences. As we search for ways to meet the multiplicity of emerging threats to liberal democracy, the beginning of wisdom is to recognise that the multiplicity is just that – the threats are varied, and each calls for *specific* treatment.

Antidemocratic parties should be countered with what Karl Loewenstein once termed “militant democracy” – in other words, a resolute state that uses its available legal and constitutional means to restrict the action of extremists. Germany’s Basic Law provides a clear framework of legality that all parties, including *Die Linke*, must respect. In Belgium, the Ghent Court of Appeals outlawed the *Vlaams Blok* for inciting discrimination. More recently, the Greek Constitutional Court upheld the imprisonment and trial of top *Golden Dawn* figures, including the party’s head, for orchestrating a campaign of violence.

In order to contain nativist parties that thrive on societies’ fears regarding immigration, globalisation, and continuing European integration, their rivals must learn to rely not on court orders but on better policies. The nativist challenge can only be met in the electoral arena. Winning elections takes successful policies. There can be no doubt that solutions to the migration crisis, Greece’s debt problem and terrorism would take the wind out of contemporary nativism’s sails. If Europe’s political class cannot rise to meet these tasks, nativism will continue to be a growing force.

Populism, which is the flipside and negation of political liberalism, is by far the most menacing challenger. As empirical research shows, it thrives where political institutions – especially the rule of law and safeguards for minority rights – are weak and where polarisation and majoritarian tendencies are strong. In such environments, populist parties can be expected to win power via the ballot box and even to win re-election. Populism is so threatening because it has a contagious quality – the appearance and rise of a populist party will predictably push a country’s other parties in a populist direction – and because populism can lead to the decay of liberal institutions and the consolidation of illiberal polities. The whole of Europe should heed its successes last year.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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