

Five views: Is populism really a threat to democracy?

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, the UK's decision to leave the EU, and the rise of anti-establishment parties across Europe have prompted discussions over the role of 'populism' in modern politics. But is populism really a threat to democracy or is the term simply used by mainstream politicians to dismiss the legitimate concerns of citizens? We asked five academics for their views.

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Zsolt Enyedi: Populism is indeed a threat to democracy – and the positive case for it is rather feeble

Populism is a threat to democracy primarily because it holds the potential of providing the state with a moral status that it otherwise lacks. Once the state turns into the embodiment of the virtuous people the defense mechanisms developed against tyranny, such as freedoms, checks and balances, the rule of law, tolerance, autonomous social institutions, individual and group rights, or pluralism, are inevitably under threat. Populism has no programme for self-limitation once the liberation of the oppressed people is achieved.

The second, and in advanced democracies more relevant, negative aspect of populism is that it undermines the civility of the relations among citizens. It erodes the respect for the dignity of political opponents and of minority groups and weakens the culture of reasoned debates.

The positive case for populism is rather feeble. It is true that many populists are democrats. It is also true that their appeal to the popular will is not intrinsically less rational and empirically less testable than the appeal of non-populist actors to financial necessities, human rights, or political stability. Finally, it is correct to say that the rise of populism can have positive (side-)effects.

But none of these claims and observations need to change the overall negative assessment. Consider the argument of positive effects. First, this objection would carry real weight only if one could prove that in order to mobilise and emancipate the marginalised social groups, to politicise new issues or to question the privileges of the establishment, one needs to resort to a crude dichotomy of virtuous people vs. corrupt elites. This is obviously not the case. It is, of course, true that technocratic rule, elitism or censorship disguised as political correctness, need antidotes. But populism is not the only alternative. The direct input of citizens can be promoted without projecting homogeneity onto them.

The second problem with the positive effects argument is that it implicitly assumes that the populists are a progressive and transitory force. The metaphor at hand is insurgency: a revolt that helps the society to get rid of sclerotic structures. But populism is better conceptualised as a constantly available item on the ideological and cultural menu of modern societies. Its popularity fluctuates, but there is no reason to expect its disappearance once certain social problems are solved. It can even engulf the entire party system and become thereby the default option for political entrepreneurs. And its transformative potential, at least in Europe and North America, is often compromised by the conservatism of its values. Contrary to the classical depiction of populism by Margaret Canovan, today's populist parties rarely mobilise against "the dominant ideas and values of the society".

To conclude, the size of the negative impact of populism on democracy varies, but it is always more than zero.

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**Chantal Mouffe: The only way to save democracy is to promote a ‘progressive populism’**

It is necessary to conduct a serene analysis of the problems faced by our democracies in order to visualise ways to revitalise and strengthen democratic institutions against the dangers to which they are exposed. These dangers are real and they result from the abandonment by the parties presenting themselves as ‘democratic’ of the principles of popular sovereignty and equality that are constitutive of democratic politics. With the rise of neoliberalism, these principles have been relegated to zombie categories, and our societies have entered a ‘post-democratic’ era.

The effect of neoliberal hegemony was the establishment, on the socio-economical and political levels, of a truly ‘oligarchic’ regime. It is this oligarchisation of European societies that is at the origin of the success of right-wing populist parties. They are often the only ones who denounce this situation and promise to give back to the people the power that has been confiscated by the elites. In many countries, by drawing a political frontier between ‘the people’ and the ‘establishment’ they managed to articulate in a xenophobic vocabulary the demands of the popular sectors which were ignored by the parties of the centre because they were incompatible with the neoliberal project. To stop their rise, it is vital to address the issues that they have put on the agenda and to offer them a progressive answer.

The only way to do this is by promoting a progressive populism that, through the construction of another ‘people’ would be able to mobilise common affects towards equality and social justice. What is at stake is the establishment of a political frontier between us and them that does not pit some dominated groups against others, as does right-wing populism which presents immigrants as being responsible for the problems of the popular classes, but instead constructs an ‘us’ that articulates resistance against the post-democratic regression caused by the hegemony of neo-liberalism.

The objective of a ‘left populism’ should be to establish a synergy between a variety of social movements and progressive political forces, and federate the multiplicity of democratic aspirations in order to orientate them toward the recuperation and radicalisation of democracy. Contrary to the view of populism as a perversion of democracy, that all the forces defending the status-quo are trying to impose, left-wing populism constitutes in today’s Europe the most adequate political force to recover and expand democratic ideals.

Chantal Mouffe – *University of Westminster*

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**Yannis Stavrakakis: Anti-populism may be the real threat to democracy**

Whether populism can be considered to be a threat to democracy or a source of democratic renewal obviously depends on how one defines populism. Today, in populism research, an emerging consensus is slowly moving beyond anti-populist stereotypes in order to define populism in a more reflexive manner. Thus, populism is primarily understood as a specific type of discourse or ideology that claims to express popular interests and demands (the ‘will of the people’) against an ‘establishment’ or elite, which is seen as undermining them and forestalling their satisfaction.

Accordingly, populist discursive representations typically articulate a polarised *framing* of the socio-political field in a bid to inspire and mobilize excluded social groups. The latter are called to establish links of unity, which will enable them to effectively challenge the established power structure and influence decision-making. Thus, the main criteria forming a minimal definition of populism comprise: (a) *People-centrism*: a political priority attributed to 'the people'; and (b) *Anti-elitism*: a dichotomic representation of the socio-political field between *Us* (the marginalised, the underdog, the many, 'the people') and *Them* (the establishment, the 1%, the elite, the few).

Apart from recasting populism as a legitimate democratic expression in times of skyrocketing inequality and structural uncertainty and precarity, this orientation highlights the emancipatory potential of certain populist discourses in representing excluded groups and facilitating social incorporation and democratic representation against oppressive and increasingly unaccountable power structures. Relevant examples range from Bernie Sanders to some versions of Latin American populism and from Podemos to Syriza. At the same time, it remains alert to the fact that, due to the irreducible *impurity* of every relation of representation, due to the sliding capacity of signification, even genuine popular grievances and demands can end-up being hijacked by illiberal and anti-democratic forces or becoming hostages of authoritarian institutional dynamics.

Instead of embracing the former and marginalising the latter – and it will be impossible to do the second without doing the first – mainstream political, media and academic discourses often adopt an *a priori* anti-populist attitude. Such a rejection may involve a legitimate suspicion towards the specific ways through which popular demands are formulated and the political actors (parties, leaders, etc.) that promote them. But it may also signal an elitist foreclosure of popular sovereignty as the foundation of a democratic polity. Thus, both populist and anti-populist discourses can acquire 'progressive' or 'reactionary', democratic or anti-democratic forms.

If this is, however, the case, then, while populism may or may not be a threat to democracy, depending on its inclusionary or exclusionary character, unequivocally denouncing populism as a threat to democracy, sometimes as the only threat, clearly constitutes a threat to a truly pluralist and agonistic democracy. This is not only because it neglects the immense variety of progressive populist projects, but also because by demonising them and sabotaging their egalitarian political impact, institutional anti-populism indirectly allows fake authoritarian variants to present themselves as the only force able to ostensibly challenge an increasingly unequal, unjust and disconnected status-quo.

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Ruth Wodak: Right-wing populist parties pose clear short and long-term dangers

As a first step in assessing whether populism is a threat to democracy or not, it is important to distinguish between left-wing and right-wing populism as both populisms are political ideologies, manifested in specific programmes and practices. Here, I focus on right-wing populist parties (also labeled as far-right or radical right parties). There is no one-size-fits-all characterisation of, or explanation for the success of right-wing populist parties. Nevertheless, four dimensions are salient for all parties in this group: nativist/ethno-nationalism, anti-elitism, authoritarianism and 'law-and order-politics', and conservative values in some specific context-dependent combination; moreover, significant differences between Western European and Eastern European right-wing populist parties exist (e.g., in respect to gender and identity politics).

Right-wing populist parties claim that *they and only they* represent the '*real people*' in a *nativist and culturalist sense*. This ideology manifests a deeply *authoritarian mindset*. They tend to construct and reinforce threat and danger scenarios – a *politics of fear* – caused by arbitrarily defined scapegoats. The party leaders promise to solve these problems and *create hope* – they will save '*the people*', protect *our* borders, and attempt to turn the clock back – as an *apocalyptic future* (of decay, failure and destruction) [is predicted](#) if such changes would not be implemented.

Historically speaking, experiences with right-wing populist parties in Central Europe since 1989 – the date which marks the fall of the Iron Curtain and the meteoric rise of parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party – allow important insights into their political ideologies and practices. Indeed, exclusionary politics propagated in the 1990s against migrants from former Eastern European Communist countries are similar to current exclusionary discourses directed against ‘others’, both inside and outside of the respective nation states. Appeals for more ‘*direct democracy*’ by figures such as Jörg Haider in the 1990s challenged the principles of representative democracy. The intentionally *provocative breaking of taboos* in order to set the agenda in the media, and a *politics of denial* (post-truth) have always been part and parcel of the strategies of right-wing populist parties.

But do these parties actually pose a threat to democracy? Various short-term and long-term threats can be distinguished: In opposition, right-wing populist parties also address – apart from their exclusionary agenda – some cases of elite-corruption and obvious needs of ‘the man and woman on the street’. In this way, they sometimes contribute to a more vibrant political culture. However, their exclusionary agenda is quickly appropriated by the mainstream parties, because the latter fear losing voters. In this way, their ethno-nationalist and law-and order politics become part of mainstream government (the UK, Austria, Netherlands and Switzerland provide recent examples). This long-term process can be labelled as the *normalisation of right-wing populist parties*.

Where right-wing populist parties have actually succeeded in becoming the junior partner of a government, they have usually lost out at the next election because their continuous negative campaigning was not deemed fit for governmental responsibilities. However, their policies were nevertheless implemented and had a long-term effect. Where right-wing populist parties have actually won the majority of votes (e.g. in Turkey, Poland and Hungary), they have immediately attempted to destabilise salient democratic institutions (in the media, justice and education spheres) and distance themselves from constitutive democratic principles such as the separation of powers, and human rights conventions.

Thus, we have to conclude: right-wing populist parties pose both short-term and long-term threats to democracy.

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John Fitzgibbon: Populists are not anti-democratic, they are anti-liberal democracy

The debate over the rise of populism has often focused on economics, in particular the impact austerity has had on support for traditional social democratic parties. Such arguments focus on how the centre-left, mostly in Western Europe, has been co-opted by neoliberal economic ideas that have let the forces of global capitalism loose in the domestic sphere with resultant deindustrialisation and dramatic underfunding of the social welfare safety net. The result of this ‘race to the bottom’ has been voter rejection of the political mainstream and the embrace of populists.

While there is no doubting this line of argument, it is also critical to appreciate that populists have carefully exploited the globalisation issue beyond the economy. I loosely generalise three issues that are the most explicit examples of this populist critique of a globalist ‘culture’: immigration, liberal social values, and liberal democracy. Populism has long been associated with opposition to immigration and liberal social values such as gay marriage. More recently, as they have grown in influence populists have come to focus their opposition to the ‘elite’ on the range of ancillary institutions and actors – such as the judiciary, media, academia – at the core of liberal democracy.

As [Cas Mudde](#) has pointed out on many occasions, populists are not anti-democratic, they are anti-liberal democracy. This point may seem pedantic, but it is extremely incisive in understanding the precise nature of the populist ‘threat’ to democracy. Populists see liberal democracy and its core values of the rule of law, representative democracy, and protection of minorities as the root cause of their bête noir: perceived national degradation. Whereas previous less sophisticated incarnations of populism were indiscriminate in their labelling of who, and what, was part of the elite; the success of contemporary populism has been in its more precise identification of the critical institutions of liberal democracy as the elite.

There has been a slew of recent high profile examples of this ‘threat’ to liberal democracy. President Trump has increased his rhetoric against the “fake news” media outlets he accuses of not reporting the truth on his Presidency. Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary has attempted to shut-down the country’s leading academic institution, the Central European University. Brexit supporters in the media have railed against “[11 unaccountable individuals ... many with links to the EU](#)”, or against justices of the UK Supreme Court who forced Theresa May to refer Article 50 to a vote in Parliament.

Populists are taking these actions not only because they perceive them as a roadblock to their power, but also because they are hugely symbolic for their supporters. Judges, journalists, and academics are targets for populism as they are embodiments of the pro-globalisation elite that populists and their voters revile. Whereas some perceive their work as intrinsic to the functioning of a modern and prosperous state, populists view them as closeted, overpaid, wastrels facilitating the demise of the state with their subservience to a globalised elite.

In short, there is growing cultural gap across democratic states being exploited by populists that transcends economic divides. The narrative of populism has moved into opposition to the institutions and actors who they perceive facilitate policies – austerity, immigration, pro market reforms – that they oppose. It remains to be seen if these liberal democratic institutions have the wherewithal to galvanise public support to counter this populist ‘threat’.

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