



Populism as a Challenge to Democracy from Within

Marc Fleurbaey, Paris School of Economics

Populism is often invoked in the press to describe recent political developments, usually with a negative undertone. But some observers see populism in a more positive light, as a form of direct democracy, while others see it as a symptom of important social problems that should not be dismissed. Today's democracies do indeed suffer from challenging difficulties, but – as this analysis explains – populism is not the remedy.

What is Populism?

Populism today has four important aspects: It flourishes in democratic political systems; it represents a radical form of majoritarian action; it flourishes amidst social distress and increasing economic inequality; and it presents a threat to constitutional democratic procedures and institutions.

Populist movements fight over the meaning of representation in democracies. Because populist politicians present themselves as leaders above party pluralism, and because populist movements make claims in the name of the allegedly unanimous “will of the people,” they challenge and strain constitutional procedures for elections and representative government. Such strains can open the door to regime change in the direction of tyranny or dictatorship.

Brands of Populism in the World

The United States was originally governed by elected notables representing the interests of dominant property owners, but the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights opened the way for a more democratized polity. After suffrage was expanded, populist movements could agitate against the “domestic enemies of the people” in the name of an allegedly pure form of popular government – and such movements have flourished periodically throughout American history.

Populism in Latin America has emerged in the age of social modernization, but much like fascism in Italy it has deployed state power to protect and empower popular classes, repress dissent, and implement expanded social-welfare programs. In Western Europe, populism appeared alongside democratization in the early twentieth century, as colonial expansion, ethnic tensions, economic distress, and militarization accompanied World War I. Populist movements pushed xenophobic ideologies that opened the door to fascist regimes.

The Current Resurgence

Today, populist movements are spreading again not only in Latin America and in poor societies struggling to modernize and democratize. Declining socio-economic wellbeing and an erosion of democratic legitimacy have combined to encourage populist leaders and movements in several European countries and the United States. In both continents, nativist opposition to immigrants is on the rise. To be sure, there are some leftwing forms of populism in both continents that claim to be inclusive of the new immigrants rather than exclusionary. But even populists on the left put forward claims as a challenge to the constitutional fabric of representative democracy.

Renascent populism expresses waning public confidence in core representative institutions such as parties, parliaments and elections. Politicians are regularly accused of having lost touch with the concerns of ordinary people. In consolidated democracies, populism can lead to electoral abstention and apathy. When elected politicians seem apart from citizens, opposition between “the many” and “the few” becomes an easily deployed catchword. When citizens experience social distress and rising economic inequality, their governing leaders and representatives can come to seem indifferent – or, worse, responsive only to the privileged. In

such circumstances, citizens can turn away from “practical politics” and seek a break from established norms.

Various conditions encourage populist rhetoric, including globalized financial capitalism that weakens the decision-making power of sovereign states and international flows of labor that undercut the social-democratic compromises between capital and labor put in place in the West after World War II. Faltering state sovereignty and the sway of global corporations can provoke citizen calls for closed borders, when people come to believe that they need protection from transnational economic forces undercutting their access to jobs, wages, and benefits. Populism links social redistribution to protectionist politics. In addition, of course, dramatic threats from terrorism associated with Islamic extremism can encourage citizens to question liberal civil rights and seek cultural and religious homogeneity as a protection against external enemies.

Populist Movements versus Populism in Power

In a globalized world, populism plays two roles: It denounces social inequality and decries the privileges of the wealthy few; and it calls for renewed national unity in the name of “the people.” By highlighting ethnic understandings of democratic popular sovereignty, it lays bare the weaknesses of many liberal-democratic norms and shows how dependent on underlying social conditions modern representative democracy can be.

Populism is parasitical on representative democracy, but it also challenges and deforms representative arrangements. To be sure, all democratic political movements and parties make somewhat populist claims – especially during contested elections – but when populists actually take over governments, they may very well abandon party pluralism, divisions of power, rights of dissenters, and other key principles of constitutional democracy. Although ingrained in the ideology of the people and the language of democracy, populism in power stretches toward an extreme and unfettered strong-man rule in the name of the majority, with attacks on minorities.

Populism in power is a project that mistakes the part for the whole with devastating effects on constitutional arrangements. Although populist leaders promise to include the excluded and overturn an elected oligarchy, once in power they usually deploy central government tools to attack the institutions of liberal democracy. They repress social movements and oppositions and limit civil liberties and media freedoms. In short, even though modern populist movements are an understandable expression of current malaise in many democratic countries, they cannot lead to any sustainable democratic remedies.

This brief is a condensed excerpt from the chapter “Inequality as a Challenge to Democracy,” coordinated by Richard Bellamy and Wolfgang Merkel, from the draft report of the International Panel on Social Progress, co-directed by Marc Fleurbaey.