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What Foreign Experiences Reveal about Trump's Populism and Possibilities for Opposing It

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On November 8, 2016, Americans were surprised when a populist candidate, repeatedly written off, succeeded in winning the presidency. For many, the election outcome was upsetting and unprecedented. The United States has not elected a populist as chief executive since 1837, the end of Andrew Jackson's second term. People wondered what to expect: How would Donald Trump govern? Would he chart a clear, consistent course or "shoot from the hip," as he had done so often during the campaign, making arbitrary and contradictory decisions? How could political and societal forces effectively contain him? Would polarization and conflict increase, doing damage to liberal civility or—the worst-case scenario—undermine democracy itself?

Answers have been hard to come by, given U.S. inexperience with populism in government. But many other countries in the world, especially in Europe and Latin America, have had ample experiences with populism. Even though there are significant differences in context, the governments of Juan Perón and of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, and Victor Orbán of Hungary can help us understand the contours and likely repercussions of the Trump administration. Notwithstanding their divergent ideological orientations, these experiences shed light on four aspects of populist politics: the leader's approach to policy, his governing strategy, options for opponents, and the potential impact of populist rule on democracy.

How Populists Govern

Populist presidents tend to govern in the way they campaigned, namely without a coherent program or guiding ideology. Eager to act on their electoral promises and obsessed with demonstrating their courage to impose drastic solutions, populist presidents rashly embark on ill-considered and badly prepared initiatives. To dramatize contrasts with the political establishment, they forego careful planning and avoid consulting with experts as they try to cut Gordian Knots in today's hyper-complex world. By proceeding in this erratic way, populist leaders run a serious risk of cutting themselves. President Trump's first few months in office offer ample evidence of such utterly haphazard decision-making, which bears a striking resemblance to the tendency of Hugo Chávez to issue hasty decrees on matters such as nationalizations of business enterprises. By taking such drastic actions with the stroke of a pen, the Venezuelan populist drove his country's economy into the ground.

With their chaotic approach to policymaking, populist presidents cannot count on steady performance to maintain or build popular support. So instead they employ a strategy of stoking polarization and confrontation – deliberately making more and more enemies. Like attack dogs, they constantly criticize supposed adversaries and foes – the old "political class," social elite sectors, the mainstream media, other countries or international organizations that they claim are "enemies" of their nation. Just as Hungary's Victor Orbán criticized the European Union and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez decried American "imperialism," so President Trump points his finger at one foreign country after another. With his machine-gun outbursts, the new U.S. president resembles populist leaders in contemporary Europe, who have zeroed in on Islamic terrorists as scarecrows and on immigrants as scapegoats. In short, Trump confronts not only various elite sectors – a favorite target of populists of all stripes – but also deploys against immigrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities the exclusionary, marginalizing tactics so widespread in Europe.

Countering Populism through Institutions and Civil Society

How can the opposition effectively respond and limit the damage done by headstrong populists? The natural temptation is tit-for-tat – to counter every provocation with protest. But this understandable reflex risks

playing into the hands of populist presidents, who relish confrontation and thrive amidst conflict. To the present day, Venezuela's opposition is hampered because it originally fell into traps set by Hugo Chávez by unleashing waves of strikes and protests and, eventually, attempting an unsuccessful coup in the early 2000s. Populist leaders are masters at mud wrestling, while heterogeneous opponents are not prepared to win that way.

In the United States, where political institutions and civil society show strength and resilience, other approaches hold more promise than a simple protest strategy. Whereas Hugo Chávez, Alberto Fujimori, and Victor Orbán managed to overwhelm their adversaries electorally and achieved the virtual collapse of opposition parties, in the pluralist system of the United States, where Trump actually lost the popular vote, his backers are less likely to achieve such political hegemony. Democrats and other opponents will maintain important footholds in Congress, civil society, and public opinion. Given that President Trump has long diverged from his own party on major policy issues and has few friends inside its ranks, Congressional Democrats have some opportunities to seek collaboration with moderate Republicans to contain and block some presidential initiatives. A pure protest strategy, by contrast, could push the GOP to close ranks around its unloved president.

U.S. institutions can also limit potential harms to democracy from the Trump presidency, avoiding the sorts of slides into authoritarian rule set in motion by Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Here experiences with Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Victor Orbán in Hungary offer encouragement. Parliamentary systems have much weaker "checks and balances" than the U.S. divided powers system potentially has, because parliamentary systems facilitate the concentration of power by a party leader. Nevertheless, Italian democracy emerged unscathed from rule by its tycoon, and Hungary's drift into illiberalism does not seem to have caused irreversible damage. The US separation of powers system offers better chances for safeguarding democracy; and Americans' longstanding aversion to overreaching governmental authority offers additional insurance.

On balance, recent experiences in Europe and Latin America suggest that Trump's presidency may not do lasting damage. Policy performance will certainly decline and a steady stream of presidentially fueled confrontations will poison the political climate. Nevertheless, serious damage to U.S. democracy is unlikely – especially if opponents are smart enough to sidestep alarmism and polarization and push back through institutions and civil society networks.