DAHRENDORF FORUM

Debating Europe

Why Populism Is Not Simple
Three disruptive dimensions explained

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WHAT MAKES POPULISTS 'DIFFERENT'?

Populists are often cast as 'outsiders' who challenge the 'mainstream'. In 2017, Stathis Kalyvas noted in *The Atlantic* that, not least due to their self-image as "political outsiders" who are "untainted by corruption", Syriza had been unable to succeed as a left-wing government party in Greece.

In 2018 Patrick Kingsley observed in *The New York Times* that the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, was no longer "an unruly outsider—a loud, populist voice peripheral to the mainstream, and peripheral to real power", but had possibly become the EU's "greatest political challenge".

At the same time, populism itself is generally characterised as a way of doing politics that agitates not only against 'the elite' to implement the will of 'the people', but also against (other) outgroups (e.g. 'migrants', 'business(wo)men'), who are blamed for social, political, and economic grievances.

However, many political parties linked to the recent 'populist surge' in Europe, such as the Freedom Party of Austria and the National Rally in France, were founded decades ago. Whether inside or outside government, many of them are already an integral part of their respective national political systems and the national political elite, and wield considerable power.

The outgroups identified by populists also vary from party to party, as well as across time. A generalising rhetoric that defines specific social groups as problematic is by no means specific to populism, either.

So where does the common perception that populists are 'different' from ordinary politics in western representative democracies come from? This Commentary argues that populists themselves fuel this perception as part of a broader project by doing a lot more than just pitting 'the people' against the 'elite'.

KEY INSIGHTS

POPULISTS PURSUE A COMPLEX STRATEGY TO DISRUPT REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY AND TRANSFORM IT FROM WITHIN.

THE POPULIST STRATEGY DISTORTS CORE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES: POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY, AUTONOMOUS REPRESENTATION, AND CHANGING MAJORITIES.

TO DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE, COMPETITORS NEED TO REFLECT ON THE STRATEGY'S COMPLEXITY, LONG-TERM ORIENTATION, AND PERFORMANCE IN EVERYDAY POLITICS.

Populism may appear simple—an external challenge to representative democracy that feeds on an exaggerated notion of unity (or even homogeneity) and oversimplification. In reality, this impression is part of a complex strategy for gaining and maintaining political power, which has important implications for how one may deal with populist competitors.

POPULISM AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

Populism is a question of degree. On the one hand, populism is a repertoire whose individual elements political parties draw on to differing extents and at different points in time—especially during political, social, and economic upheaval. These 'populist moments' may feature an overt emphasis on the interests and needs of the majority (majoritarianism), a call for re-politicisation of public debate, or a rejection of 'political correctness'.

On the other hand, populism can also emerge as a political project in its own right, i.e. as a distinct set of ideas that serve an overarching, long-term strategy.

> WHERE DOES THE PERCEPTION THAT POPULISTS ARE 'DIFFERENT' FROM ORDINARY POLITICS COME FROM?

This strategy plays out in everyday encounters (rather than being elaborated in electoral programmes, for example), which makes it highly adaptable to different political contexts.

The strategy's aim is to disrupt representative democracy over time and from within. It is facilitated by the fact that the link between voters and political elites has indeed come under strain in recent years, mainly due to the lack of accountability and transparency that has resulted from complex multilevel governance processes across the local, regional, national, European, and global levels.

Populist actors claim that they are the only genuine representatives capable of fixing this link. That is, they claim to be what their competitors should be in a representative system but are not (or not anymore)—namely, truly democratic. At the same time, they suggest that the system as a whole needs to be radically changed to make it democratic again.

In other words, they promise their voters a return to 'ordinary' democratic politics by conducting extra-ordinary politics. They are part of the system, and yet distanced from it. This strategic choice of being both 'in' and 'out' makes it difficult to respond to populist politics.

The populist in/out strategy is composed of three closely related dimensions that distort core principles of representative democracies: popular sovereignty, autonomous representation, and changing majorities.

THE POPULIST STRATEGY

DIMENSION 1: POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY VS. THE 'WILL OF THE PEOPLE'

The first dimension of the populist strategy builds on the relationship between elected representatives and the electorate as the democratic sovereign. Essentially, the populist argument is that existing representatives have acted irresponsibly by misinterpreting or altogether ignoring their voters' preferences, and that they therefore need to be replaced. So far, so democratic.

However, populists step out of the boundaries of legitimate democratic contestation by arguing that incumbents lack the competence to represent the 'people' as a whole; in fact, they would intentionally act against the people's interests. Here, 'the people' does not refer to the electorate, i.e. the totality of citizens who choose representatives by casting their vote, nor to a symbolic entity with a common purpose directed at the future, but to an allegedly 'silenced' majority. Because it is silent, the existence of this majority cannot be proven empirically through polls or elections.

This thwarts the very purpose of elections (and other forms of popular expressions of the political will) and makes it easy to arbitrarily exclude entire groups—whether 'non-natives', the unemployed, or landowners—from the imagined 'will of the people' that populist parties claim to represent. As a result, the appeal to 'the people' does not improve representation, but replaces the idea that majorities naturally change over time with an immovable, non-pluralist political subject.

This logic allows populist actors to balance a nominal support for democratic representation with a non-democratic idea of who exercises popular sovereignty. More often than not, this leads to their challenging (liberal) democratic institutions and practices that they perceive as obstacles to exercising this form of popular sovereignty (e.g. court decisions, minority rights).

DIMENSION 2: TRANSLATED PREFERENCES VS. MERGED IDENTITIES

The second, related dimension of the populist strategy emerges from the expectation that a democratic representative should translate his or her constituents' preferences into responsible policies. Populists claim

that their competitors have been part of the political system for too long to retain a connection to those they are supposed to represent. They have internalised, so the argument goes, the logic of the system and seek to preserve their own powerful position within it.

Populist actors themselves, by contrast, lack such professionalised ties altogether or, if they hold or have held political positions, argue they have not been corrupted by power. Consequently, they are more capable of proper representation because they can connect to 'ordinary' citizens. This argument is, above all, polemic.

It becomes a key element of the populist project to the extent that populist actors build an opposition between the (other) elites' 'self-serving ideology' and their own 'common sense' approach to doing politics that allegedly serves the interest of 'the people'.

This common sense, so the argument goes, is rooted in the populists being more like 'the people'—because they share their everyday life worlds, suffer the same strokes of fate, or are similarly nostalgic for a 'better' past—and therefore identify with the 'people's' political preferences.

This approach collapses the identities of the represented and their representatives into one to claim a higher level of authenticity, i.e. a faithful representation of 'the people's will' that does not deviate in any way from the original.

Democratic representation, however, requires that the identities of the represented and their representatives precisely do not merge. Both parties remain autonomous and responsible for their actions. It is the task of democratic representatives to translate voters' (often conflicting or competing) preferences into responsible political decision-making, which requires a willingness to compromise and comply with domestic and international laws.

Basing political decision-making on 'common sense' and building a dependent relationship between voters and representatives threatens these key principles of inclusionary representative democracy.

DIMENSION 3: DEMOCRATIC CHANGE VS. PERPETUAL CRISIS

The third dimension of the populist strategy operates with the principle, touched upon above, that democratic politics is essentially about (peaceful) change, because majorities change and citizens can vote their representatives out of office.

Populists argue that a replacement of the (old) 'elites' is necessary because they have made and/or continue to make decisions that are not supported by the majority of 'the people' (which, as mentioned earlier, is an unverifiable 'silenced majority'). The changes that have been initiated or at least welcomed by the 'elites' (such as those caused by the European 'migration crisis') would need to be revoked (e.g. by sealing national borders) in order to re-establish democratic normality.

This logic not only promotes quick, radical change by suggesting immediate action even if it violates national or international law (e.g. large-scale expropriations).

It also perpetuates itself by consistently emphasising the mistakes made by the (other) 'elites' in various policy areas due to their alleged self-serving ideology and obsession with power. It links each mistake to the next in an endless chain to create the impression of an overall 'crisis' that requires a rapid response.

Consequently, the populist project is not invested in actual problem solving. Instead it corrupts democratic politics, the purpose of which is to create political stability, by making 'crisis' a standard element of the process.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above shows that the three strategic dimensions of the populist project are interdependent and

> THE AIM OF POPULISM IS TO DISRUPT REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY OVER TIME AND FROM WITHIN.

mutually reinforcing: 'authentic' representation of the allegedly silenced 'people'; a shared identity between representatives and 'the people' that gives rise to 'common sense' politics; and the promise of a return to stability through a perpetuation of crisis.

Together, these elements do not merely challenge representative democracy; instead, they create the ground for fundamental constitutional change, because they throw into question the legitimacy of (liberal) democratic institutions, rights, and elected representatives, as well as the need for political stability.

However, because democratic principles are indeed at the core of the populist strategy, it is of little use to stigmatise populists as 'anti-democrats' in order to minimise their political influence.

By contrast, this is likely to signal to parts of the electorate that a democratic party is being excluded from political debate and procedures. Contrasting 'democracy' and 'populism' may therefore reinforce the populist strategy.

An effective response to the populist strategy should instead take into consideration how its three dimensions interact with one another in everyday political practice to enable populists to simultaneously be inside and outside the boundaries of representative democracy.

Populists need to be continuously challenged on these mechanisms. This concerns, for example, the identity that they allegedly share with their voters, and how they understand their responsibility as representatives in relation to changing, conflicting and competing preferences of the electorate.

In doing so, it is advisable to separate the strategy described here from concrete policy positions. This is because the latter shift the focus toward the ideological left–right spectrum and away from questions pertaining to

TOGETHER, THESE ELEMENTS CREATE THE GROUND FOR FUNDAMENTAL CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

the system of representative democracy as a whole.

To strengthen this system, democratic elites need to be more explicit, accurate, and transparent in relation to their rights, responsibilities, and capabilities as representatives, and concerning the workings of the democratic system more generally. They also need to emphasise voters' independence vis-à-vis their representatives, and vice versa.

In this sense, reflecting on the populist strategy is an important opportunity to engage with the changing environment of representative-democratic politics in the 21st century. ∎

FURTHER READING

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Hertie School of Governance

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

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STIFTUNG MERCATOR

PUBLISHED BY

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