

# A Global Tsunami of Populism?



Author  
Jan-Werner Mueller

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Our era is witnessing an inflationary use of the term “populism”: all kinds of political actors, on the right, but also on the left, are labelled as populists. Even Emmanuel Macron at one point was accused of being a populist; it was said that he represented a populist of the “extreme center”. Moreover, a particular image has been dominating media and scholarly commentary, one that allegedly holds the key to understanding the underlying political dynamics of our times: that of a seemingly unstoppable “wave” of populism, or, as Nigel Farage, leader of the Brexit Party (in whose eyes the metaphor of the wave apparently didn’t do justice to his own world-historical role) put it at one point: a “tsunami of populism” which, to stay faithful to the image, would now wash away elites and establishments everywhere.

Yet the image of the wave is profoundly misleading, and partly so because it is based on an over-inclusive notion of what is to count as a populist party (so that newcomers and political “insurgents” are automatically included among populists). Conventional wisdom has it that all those who, as the phrase goes, “criticize elites” or are “angry at the establishment” should be considered populists. This seems obvious; but it is actually a very peculiar thought. Up until recently any civics education teacher would have told us that keeping a close eye on the powerful is actually a sign of good democratic engagement on the part of citizens. And yet, during the second decade of the 21st century, we are constantly told that anyone who is critical of elites is somehow a populist who might pose a danger to democracy. Clearly, things cannot be as simple as that.

## What is Populism?

It is true that, when they are in opposition, populists criticize sitting governments (and also other parties) – in that sense, they are indeed “anti-establishment”. But they also do something else, and that is crucial. In one way or another they claim that they, and only they, represent what populists tend to call “the real people” or also “the silent majority”. This claim to a monopoly of truly representing the people might not sound so bad – it seems not immediately the same as racism or, let’s say, a fanatical hatred of European integration. And yet it always has two consequences which are indeed damaging for democracy: first, and rather obviously, there is the fact that populists hold that all other contenders for power are fundamentally illegitimate. Their stance here is never just about a disagreement in matters of policy, or even values – which, after all, is

completely normal in a democracy and ideally even productive (let’s not forget that democracy is not about consensus, but about constitutionally contained conflict – if we somehow magically always agreed about everything, we would not need democracy as a means of dealing with disagreements in a civil manner). Rather, populists charge that all others are essentially bad characters, corrupt and “crooked”, and fail to implement what they often refer to as “the will of the people”. The kinds of things that Donald J. Trump said about his opponent in the 2015-2016 presidential race (“Crooked Hillary”, “Lock her up!”) were in many ways extreme. But they were not truly an exception: what Trump said, is what all populists tend to say in one form or another.

Second, and less obviously, populists also suggest that all those citizens who do not share their understanding of the supposedly “real people” (and who therefore also tend not to support populists politically) might not properly belong to the people at all. Two illustrations of this perhaps less self-evident point: at the end of a momentous night for Brexit, Nigel Farage stated that the outcome should be understood as a “victory for real people” – implying, of course, that the 48% of British voters who wanted to stay inside the European Union are not quite “real” – or, rather, do not truly belong to the British people. Or consider a largely ignored claim by Trump during the presidential campaign: the candidate Trump announced that “The only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything.”

Populists incessantly talk about the unification or unity of the people – but it is always unification on their terms, and whoever does not want to be unified according to their notion of the people gets excluded in one form or another. The crucial point to grasp about populism, then, is that it is not just about “anti-elitism”. Anyone can criticize the powerful; obviously, it does not mean that they are right, but one cannot immediately condemn them as somehow dangerous for democracy. In fact, the opposite might be the case. What is crucial – and so pernicious – about populism is the tendency always to exclude others in a highly moralistic manner: obviously at the level of party politics, where all others are denounced as bad, corrupt characters; less obviously, at the level of the people themselves, where those who disagree with the populists (or, often, already vulnerable minorities) are put outside the boundaries of the real people. In short: not anti-elitism is the issue, but anti-pluralism.

This is another way of saying that populists tend to reduce political

questions to questions of belonging. Trump does not try to refute his political opponents on policy grounds, but simply calls them “un-American”. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at one point addressed critics in the country with the statement: “We are the people. Who are you?” (of course, he knew that they were Turks, too). And Poland’s de facto ruler, Jarosław Kaczyński, charged demonstrators with being Poles of the worst sort who had treason in their genes.

Populism, then, is not primarily a question of policy content: we have plenty of other concepts to capture phenomena which are nowadays routinely (and unthinkingly) subsumed under the label “populism”: think of nativism in order to describe a number of attitudes to immigration, or protectionism as the appropriate term for certain types of opposition to aspects of globalization. Notice, also, that there can be right-wing and left-wing forms of populism; for the latter, the rule of Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro is the most obvious example. At the same time, calling new left-wing parties in Europe populist simply because they are critical of the status quo, or hold that Social Democrats have been too accommodating of neoliberal policies, is hardly justified. One does not have to like the ideas of, for instance, Spain’s Podemos party, but the latter does not belong in the same category as Trump or Farage.

### How Do Populists Rule?

It is often said that, virtually by definition, populists cannot actually govern. If one holds that their main characteristic is that they criticize elites, one is inclined to think that, once in power, they themselves have become “the elite” and hence have to abandon their anti-elitist stance, which is to say: stop being populists. On another widespread view the core aspect of populism is that its representatives all have horrendously simplistic ideas about policy (essentially the argument, famously also put forward by the German social theorist Ralf Dahrendorf, that populists do simplicity, whereas real democrats deal with complexity). According to this perspective, the demagogic promises made to the gullible people will not be kept once populists are in office; the latter will have to moderate and become responsible policy-makers (or, if they don’t, their failure will be obvious to their voters: no walls get actually built, no trade agreements are successfully renegotiated, and so on). Notice how all these scenarios imply the same outcome: the problem solves itself, either because populists cease being populist or their parties will necessarily crash and burn.

Alas, all these assumptions are not only complacent – they are profoundly mistaken. We have enough examples in our time – from Hungary to Turkey to Venezuela and India – to recognize that populists can indeed govern, and, more important still, that they can govern specifically as populists, which is to say as actors who do not truly recognize the legitimacy of an opposition. It is therefore also no

accident that they denounce any criticism – be it from opposition parties or from within unelected institutions, such as the judiciary or free media – as automatically corrupt and treasonous.

Less obviously, we can recognize distinct elements of what by now we may well call a distinct populist art of governance. The populist art of governance is based on nationalism (often with racist overtones), on hijacking the state for partisan loyalists and, less obviously, on weaponizing the economy to secure political power: a combination of culture war, patronage and mass clientelism. This specificity tends to be missed by political diagnoses that equate contemporary right-wing populism with fascism, or see populism as a new, internationally successful ideology, or assume that “ordinary people” brought all this on themselves with their craving for authoritarianism.

Populists – if they have sufficiently large majorities and countervailing powers prove too weak – will try to appropriate the state apparatus itself. Which is to say: they try to replace what at least in theory should be a neutral bureaucracy with partisan loyalists. One might object that plenty of parties attempt to instrumentalize the civil service and clearly not all of them are meaningfully described as populist. True, but the difference is that populists can hijack the state quite openly, with an argument that is unique to them. Remember their core claim that only they truly represent the people; of course, the state exists to serve the people, so if they take possession of the state, it is effectively the people themselves who are appropriating what is rightfully theirs.

Of course, this appropriation does not only have a symbolic dimension; it is also about power. It has been crucial for many populist regimes to control, for instance, the office of public prosecutor, or also to staff public media with loyalists and thereby radically reduce media pluralism.

Another crucial aspect of populist rule is mass clientelism, alongside a specific form of using the economy as a political tool. Again, one might object that plenty of parties engage in clientelism, which is to say bestow benefits or bureaucratic favors on political supporters. Once again, the difference here has something to do with the core claim of populists: only some citizens are the real people. To ensure that only the real people enjoy proper governance is nothing to hide or be ashamed of; rather, from the populists’ point of view, this is how things ought to be. And, again, the symbolic dimension of rewarding the deserving real people also has a realpolitik reason: figures like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have built up their own middle class (conforming to their image of the real people: nationalist, Christian, adhering to a traditional conception of the family), and they have found reliable electoral support among those strata.

There is a further dynamic to do with the economy that deserves our attention: in general, authoritarianism tends to go hand in hand

with kleptocracy (a term coined by the Polish-British sociologist Stanislaw Andreski in the late 1960s). There is one straightforward explanation for this: the absence of legal and political constraints makes self-dealing so much easier, which in turn reinforces the need to maintain a tight grip on the judiciary and the political system in order to avoid punishment in the future. But there is also a political logic: involving others in criminality compels their loyalty to the regime.

These dynamics – going beyond traditional kleptocracy – are what the Hungarian sociologist Bálint Magyar has in mind when he refers to the rise of a “mafia state” in his native country. A mafia state does not have to involve large envelopes with cash changing hands under the table; rather, it is the use of state structures and on the surface legal means – in particular public procurement, where, strangely only one bidder shows up. A mafia state is controlled by and benefits what Magyar calls extended “political families” Absolute loyalty is given in exchange for material reward and, equally important, protection for an indefinite future. “The main benefit of controlling a modern bureaucratic state,” a Hungarian observer has noted, “is not the power to persecute the innocent. It is the power to protect the guilty.”

Here ideology can also function as a reliable indicator of political and familial submission; going along with provocations and outrageous norm-breaking by the leader becomes a litmus test for those who might otherwise be suspected of having retained a belief in proper democratic standards. What is more, since violating norms compromises members of the political family, they must stick together for mutual protection, which helps establish reliability and trust – a defining feature of the original form of the mafia.

The new authoritarian-populist states are not fascist in the familiar historical sense; in one important aspect, they actually turn the pattern of Nazi rule upside-down. As the political scientist and exile Ernst Fraenkel demonstrated, the Nazi polity was not characterized by complete lawlessness and chaos, as traditional accounts of tyranny or of totalitarianism tend to suggest; there were plenty of areas of life that proceeded in normal, predictable ways: marriages were concluded and annulled, business contracts written and enforced. Alongside these areas of relative legal normality, however, there was always the threat of the “prerogative state”, which could act in completely unpredictable, unaccountable ways. Fraenkel coined the term “dual state” to describe this split between normal, predictable life and a sphere of unpredictable repression.

What if today we are once more faced with dual states – with the difference that the realm of politics in many respects remains relatively normal but for some legal-looking manipulations, while the economy is where one is subject to the arbitrary exercise of power? Or perhaps not so arbitrary – for if it is correct that loyalty to the political family is crucial for economic success, punishments are in

fact foreseeable. Instead of sending muscle to collect the cash, the government simply alerts the tax authorities – and they can always find something. As a consequence, powerful businesspeople not obviously loyal to the regime are made offers to sell their holdings which they cannot refuse – this has regularly happened to oligarchs in Hungary who were perceived as aligned with the socialist party. As the sociologist Kim Lane Scheppele has pointed out, these patterns are not always easily discernible to outsiders, for actions that are essentially political can always be represented as having been dictated by economic necessity.

One last aspect of the populist art of governance needs to be highlighted: when there is protest, it becomes morally and symbolically supremely important for such regimes to delegitimize dissent as systematically as possible – even if the protest poses no real danger to the ruling party. The most prominent strategy is to claim that what appears, for instance, as a civil society demonstration is ultimately no such thing: everything, populist governments will allege, has been manipulated and paid for by someone on the outside. One can then trot out some usual suspects, be it George Soros or the CIA (though for the truly creative conspiracy theorist there are no limits: the Gezi Park protests, an Erdoğan adviser eventually revealed, were the doing of Lufthansa, which allegedly feared increased competition from Turkish Airlines after the opening of Istanbul’s new airport). But the basic logic is always the same: since populists claim that only they really represent the people, it can, by definition, not be the case that real people are protesting against them on the streets; in a sense, they must be proven to be “fake citizens” in the pay of a hostile outside power (this also shows that, even when they are in government, populists do not have to cease their anti-elitist discourse: there is always yet another “shadowy international elite” which is preventing the populists from implementing the people’s authentic will).

At the same time, populists might positively come to like protest: it is fuel on the fire in the culture wars on which they thrive. This is why, in the first year of the Trump administration, Steve Bannon described the “resistance” as “our friend”. The lesson here is not, of course, that citizens should refrain from taking to the streets to protest, only that we ought to be aware of how swift and sophisticated populists can be in turning dissent to their own advantage, to justify what always ends up in a form of exclusionary identity politics.

### Why Populism?

One of the great ironies of our times is this: as mentioned previously, a certain conventional wisdom identifies populism with the tendency to give simplistic answers to complex questions. Yet many who hold this view also would seem to be happy if anyone

could explain to them in a sentence or so (or 140 characters or so) the global “macro-cause” of populism, along the lines of: it’s all because of globalization, or it’s all due to “cultural anxiety” (often a codeword for racism).

But there is no simple global explanation. As pedantic as it will sound, it is imperative to study different national contexts closely and identify carefully which factors might have facilitated the rise specifically of populist parties. Obviously, there needs to be something going on that makes the claim that a homogeneous corrupt elite should be blamed for one’s woes empirically not totally ludicrous (and there need to be woes in the first place). And it clearly can help populists if a country already features something like a culture war, so that conflicts can be understood in response to the question: “who truly belongs?” But statements along the lines “the financial crisis directly caused populism” or “populism’s success demonstrates that majorities reject immigration” are not just simplistic; they are false and, in the case of the latter, also have pernicious consequences.

Politicians and journalists often switch from one extreme of regrading populists – namely assuming that they are all demagogues whose utterances can automatically be discounted – to another, which is conceding that populists ultimately articulate people’s “real concerns”. Giving the populists a monopoly on telling us what really worries citizens betrays a deep misunderstanding of how democratic representation works. It is not about a mechanical reproduction of objectively given interests and identities; rather, the latter are dynamically formed in the process of politicians (as well as civil society, friends, neighbors, etc.) making political offers of representation and citizens responding. It’s not that everything that populists say is necessarily fictitious – but it is a mistake to think that only they know what is truly happening in society. Trump, for instance, undoubtedly succeeded in making some Americans see themselves as part of something like a white identity movement. But citizens’ self-perceptions could also change again.

It would be a mistake to assume that all voters for populist parties are themselves necessarily populists, which is to say that they share the anti-pluralist views of populist leaders. And it would be a mistake to think that populists reveal to us the ultimate objective truth about society. Yet many non-populist actors make precisely these mistakes. Think about the infamous phrase “deplorables” or think about how some socialists and Social Democrats in Europe these days seem essentially to be saying to themselves: “The working class simply doesn’t like foreigners, as the success of right-wing populists demonstrates. Nothing we can do about it.”

As said at the outset of this essay, the image has always been deeply misleading. After all, Farage did not bring about Brexit all by himself. He needed the help of other established conservative politicians such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. Trump did not

become president as the candidate of a grassroots protest movement of an angry white working class; rather, he represented a very established party and needed the blessing of Republican heavyweights such as Rudy Giuliani and Newt Gingrich. What happened on Nov. 8, 2016 was not a free-standing triumph for populism, but a confirmation of how partisan US politics has become: 90% of self-identified Republicans voted for Trump; they clearly could not fathom voting for a Democrat, even if many Republicans in surveys registered deep doubts about Trump. In short: to this day, no right-wing populist has come to power in Western Europe or North America without the collaboration of established conservative elites.

As the political scientist Daniel Ziblatt has argued, the consolidation of democracies in Europe depended crucially on the behavior of conservative elites. During the interwar period, they opted for working with authoritarian and even fascist parties – in many places democracy died as a consequence. After the war, they chose to stick to the rules of the democratic game even if core conservative interests were not faring well. We do not live in anything comparable to the interwar period and today’s populists are not fascists – but the lesson still holds that the destiny of democracy is as much a matter of the choices of established elites as insurgent outsiders. As Larry Bartels has pointed out, it is also empirically highly dubious even to assume an increase (let alone a “tsunami”) of right-wing populist sentiment; what can be shown, though, is that both political entrepreneurs and more established actors have decided either to defuse or mobilize and exploit such sentiments over time. We must hold elites who collaborate with populists or copy their ideas or effectively condone their conduct and shield them from criticism accountable.

Rejecting the image of the irresistible populist wave does not mean that we should conclude that anxieties about democracy are necessarily exaggerated. We should be cautious, however, not to allow certain anxieties – especially when they become linked to “ordinary people” and their allegedly unquenchable desire for populism – to frame our political challenges the wrong way. One important research question would be just why and how exactly some conservatives have changed their stance. Presumably conservatives today are no more opportunistic, or less morally inhibited, than conservatives were 20 or even 50 years ago. Or are they?

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Jan-Werner Mueller is a professor of politics at Princeton University. His books include *What is Populism?* and *Constitutional Patriotism*; both have been translated into Japanese.