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Populism: A Dangerous Change

At the end of the nineteenth century a populist movement arose in the United States in response to the industrial revolution and its accompanying rapid modernization. The Populist Party (1892) favored government intervention to quell injustices generated by the excesses of the free market. Nativist groups also opposed the Chinese immigration taking place at the time.

The final years of the twentieth century were characterized by euphoria over globalization, liberal democracy, the rule of law, and checks and balances. The great social, economic, and cultural changes this produced gave rise to both left-wing and right-wing populist movements in many parts of the world. They sprang up, once again, as reactions to accelerated changes, modernization, and immigration.

The 2008 crisis showed capitalism's ugly side, where the costs and benefits of social cooperation are not eq-

uitably distributed. As wealth became more concentrated, the crisis expelled middle and lower classes from the "American Dream." In a context of economic crisis, in addition to globalization and automation, great migrations took place in 2015 and 2016 in Europe (also due to wars) and in the Americas (due to violence), in which migrants organized large caravans, although not on the same scale on each continent.

Democracy and capitalism, which Francis Fukuyama saw as the only possible routes after the fall of the Berlin Wall, did not produce the same results for the whole of society.¹ While globalization created more wealth in the world and has reduced poverty in many places, like China and India, it has also promoted the concentration of wealth and facilitated inequality among social strata and countries, because the economic elites have acquired unbridled political power and, according to Fukuyama, have returned to a patrimonial state.

These conditions help explain Trump's election as president of the United States and England's departure

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from the European Union (Brexit). Both events signal that groups exist who feel excluded and forgotten by the current system and are nostalgic for a country they believe no longer exists. In the case of the United Kingdom, it is mainly nostalgia for the status of a great empire, for a nation without immigrants, and opposition to receiving orders and directives from the European Parliament.

In the U.S. case, the crisis is of representation: citizens feel neither reflected in nor listened to by the political parties. People perceive politics as something oblivious to their fears, their anger, and the humiliations they face. The Republican and Democratic Parties imposed the neo-liberal Washington Consensus without creating the networks needed to protect those sectors most vulnerable as a result of globalization; in other words, the political and economic elites lost their ties to the masses. Free markets, deregulation, and lower taxes for the elites facilitated greater concentration of wealth in fewer hands. Additionally, immigration has produced cultural changes. All of this has contributed to growing discontent with liberal democracy for not producing the desired results.

Unemployed white male U.S. citizens with little formal education feel a loss of identity. Their world has disappeared, and they feel excluded from the one that exists. As they were losing their jobs to automation and relocation of factories to places with lower wages, they perceived that minorities were becoming more empowered. Women's voices, with the feminist movement, the LGBTQ+ community, African-Americans, and Latinos became stronger, while white workers, particularly older ones, believed that "others" along with immigrants—with different cultures and languages—were questioning their traditional culture. They considered themselves forgotten and disrespected and that only a right-wing populist leader like Trump heard them.

Same sex marriages, LGBTQ+ rights, and multiculturalism are perceived as threats to the community imagined by white males with little formal education. In this

context, a cultural revolution was brewing as a result of identity politics. We no longer speak of citizens' rights but rather the rights of different groups or tribes; what one wins another loses, reducing things to a zero-sum struggle. These fears and the anger at being excluded are real, but people can't express them because they are immediately morally judged by Democrats who demand "political correctness."

As a candidate, Trump heard all of this and formulated an appropriate narrative, promising a return to the mythical past of an imagined all-white society that, in fact, never existed. He sought to stop immigration as a means for solving all problems; he resorted to protectionism to help manufacturing by bringing back companies that accelerate climate change, and called for a struggle against corruption and the Establishment.

The rapid changes brought on by globalization provoke reactions because there are winners but also losers. Society becomes polarized, and that creates fertile ground for movements like populism, which were thought to be part of the past, thereby generating a discourse that rejects immigration, promotes nativism, xenophobia, nationalism, protectionism, and positions that are anti-system, anti-corruption, anti-international institutions, and anti-elites.

The most problematic aspect is that many of these populisms hide behind an alleged fight against governmental corruption when, in fact, they are destroying institutions. The leaders tend to be charismatic and authoritarian, heading anti-pluralist movements, and inciting mistrust of all who hold ideas different from theirs.

The leaders present themselves as the voice of the "good" people in opposition to the elites. They speak of "us" and define the enemy as the "others." There is no willingness to dialogue, only total rejection of other positions. They speak of enemies both inside and outside the country. They simplistically exaggerate their triumphs and downplay their failures. Moreover, they blame others for their bad decisions and erroneous policies. They don't admit to their mistakes. They manipulate language to redefine their positions and lie to invent false victories. They talk about fake news trying to destroy them. They neither assume responsibility nor govern for everyone, excluding a part of society and promoting polarization.

Likewise, they attack institutions, the courts, and the enforcement of the law, to the point of justifying breaking it. They also oppose politicians, technocrats, and sci-

ence in general, and they look down on what they refer to as the “intellectual elite.”

What they present as opposition to corruption is really an attack on the system as it is constituted. Institutions are dismantled, distorted, or ignored. In this situation, democratic institutions, thought to be strong in the United States, are being tested and seem fragile.

These populist leaders are dangerous because they promote polarization, generating hate, fear, outrage, and resentment, and aiming to destroy what is established in order to impose their own criteria. Bit by bit they destroy other parties and drown out other voices, stifling the deliberation among different groups that would lead to the best solutions, and impose their own ideas so they can remain in power. This sometimes gives rise to single-party governments. A certain degree of opposition is permitted when it poses no real threat. The government does not appoint the most intelligent and best prepared, but rather the most loyal, often placing individuals with dubious capabilities in important positions.

Poland’s Law and Justice Party, Viktor Orban’s Fidesz Party in Hungary, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela are all examples of this kind of populism. They justify limiting the press’s freedom of expression and weakening institutions, arguing that the system has not been fair to them or to the people.

These types of groups—and people—promote conspiracy theories and the idea of alternate realities. They encourage mistrust of the government and of news networks. They repeat lies and spread propaganda. As a tactic, they initiate fiscal or criminal investigations of anyone viewed as an “enemy.” They speak of a revolution against the elites while, paradoxically, exercising an elitist form of government. The leaders impose what they consider to be good for the people. They exclude economic elites, underestimating their role in society. In the United States the globalizing elites are the target.

Some persons or sectors experience uncertainty in contexts of liberal pluralism, a diversity of opinions, and deliberation, so they prefer the application of authoritarian measures to give them a sense of security. When leaders promote fear of immigrants, many average citizens may not have had much contact with them, but they reject the changes they imagine immigration may bring.

We have reached the unthinkable: it is not that there are differences of opinion about the same facts, but rather

the argument that there are “other” facts. In other words, scientific objectivity is disdained or, even worse, it disappears. There are no longer references to determining the veracity or falsehood of a given event or fact.

Unfortunately, the fourth industrial revolution’s new technologies magnify the impact the Internet may have as a tool for increasing polarization. It can be used as a means for disseminating lies and conspiracy theories. Groups form social networks and create self-contained bubbles or cocoons, where only the likeminded participate and receive the same information. Hate, resentment, and disdain are permitted and exponentially reproduced. By using algorithms designed to maximize user attention, specific messages are directed to citizens who think in a similar way. Hence, they become sounding boards that intensify feelings and promote radicalization. Closed communities are formed; the public forum disappears. The leader communicates directly with his/her base or hires experts who feed them the information necessary to accomplish his/her goals. Riding on this wave of communication, the leader rapidly enhances his/her power.

It is also very disturbing that populist movements worldwide, both left-wing and right-wing, are adhering to this contempt for liberal democracy and aiming to delegitimize institutions, particularly international ones. The fear exists that Western values are losing ground and that the state, as they have imagined it, is in danger.

The young have not lived with authoritarianism and the elderly seem to have forgotten it, so they do not perceive the danger. Only active civic participation can defend democracy from populism, which can easily become authoritarian. Leaders should not exclude groups or promote polarization and resentment; nor should they ignore the “others,” but rather govern for all. This is the only way shared problems can be solved. The danger lies not only in the opposition to liberal democracy but also in the opposition to democracy itself.

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We cannot deny that the populists' diagnosis is, in part, correct. Rapid changes have caused uncertainty. Some social groups have been forgotten, but the solutions they are trying to impose can be very dangerous as they undermine liberal democracy, the result of centuries of social and political struggles. There is no doubt that this democracy should be more inclusive, but destroying it poses a great threat to our civilization.

The pandemic, the economic crisis, and social movements created a context of great uncertainty during the elections in the United States last November. Nevertheless, voter turnout was a historically high 67 percent. Some defend liberal democracy and promote deliberation and social unity in a multicultural society. Others prefer to continue with Donald Trump's populist style, imposing simple solutions to complex problems, like building a wall to stop immigration and precipitating a trade war with China, in addition to supporting white supremacist groups.

At the time this article was written, Joe Biden had 302 electoral votes compared to 232 for Trump, and over 7 million more popular votes. Despite this, the president had not recognized his defeat and has tried to delegitimize the election results. The world's oldest and most consolidated democracy is being put to the test once again, since it seems that there will be no easy transition to the new Biden-Harris administration. In spite of the law suits initiated by Trump in various states claiming that the election was fraudulent, no evidence has been found to support such allegations. At any rate, a difference of a few votes would hardly change the outcome, even though, as it is argued, 77 percent of Republicans do not think that the election was free and fair.²

We can't ignore that Trump, who is still president until January 20, received 73 million votes—the second highest number ever received by any candidate—which shows just how polarized U.S. society is today.

The populist movement has not disappeared; it has grown. Trump received 5 million more votes than he did

in 2016. Furthermore, everything seems to indicate that the Republicans will retain control of the Senate. They won ten additional seats in the House of Representatives and had victories in local legislatures as well. Paradoxically, Trump gained votes among minorities, perhaps as a result of the money they received from the stimulus package or because they perceive him to be a stronger leader more capable of handling economic issues.

Therefore, we can affirm that democracy is still under threat from populist movements that delegitimize institutions, and it will only survive if citizens actively participate to defend it.

President-elect Joe Biden inherits a very difficult situation marked by an economic crisis, a pandemic, social movements, and a deeply divided society. The circumstances demand that the most progressive wing of the Democratic Party not exert too much pressure; and the same holds for the Republicans' most conservative wing. The president of all U.S. Americans has to take back the center in order to achieve deliberation and reach consensus that will benefit all members of society in pursuit of a more inclusive democracy. ■■■

Further Reading

- Applebaum, Anne, *Twilight of Democracy. The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).
- Bremmer, Ian, *US vs. Them. The Failure of Globalism* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).
- Gessen, Masha, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020).
- Naím, Moisés, *The End of Power. From Boardrooms to Battlefields and from Churches to States. Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).
- Urbinati, Nadia, *Me the People. How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019).

Notes

- 1 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity. The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2018).
- 2 Catherine Kim, "Poll: 70% of Republicans Don't Think the Election Was Free and Fair," *Politico*, November 9, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/09/republicans-free-fair-elections-435488>.