GLOBAL POPULISMS AND THEIR CHALLENGES

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Populism poses several threats to democracy, and requires political solutions. This paper by the Project on Global Populisms at Stanford University explains the source and nature of the threats, and identifies several solutions.

The weakness of mainstream political parties has left democracies vulnerable to populist influence. Populist parties and politicians, for their part, divide societies into the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and argue that politics should express the general will of the people.

Populism threatens democracies in three ways:

- Populists undermine formal institutions such as the courts, legislatures, and regulatory agencies as creations of the 'corrupt elite.' As winners of democratic elections, they fail to constrain themselves and instead hollow out and politicize formal institutions of liberal democracy.

- Populists redefine the people, often by excluding vulnerable ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants, and marginalized economic groups. The result is majority rule without minority rights.

- Populists erode the informal norms of democracy. They question the loyalty of the opposition and decry criticism as fake news. Rather than tolerating the free press and political opposition, they instead try to undermine its legitimacy.

Mainstream political parties, the backbone of representative democracy, have so far largely failed to address these threats. Voters perceive that these parties are not responsive, do not offer clear alternatives, and are not accountable. The center-left has abandoned its traditional constituencies, and the center-right has failed to contain extremist rhetoric on the right. Some center-right parties have *become* populist instead.

To respond to populists, mainstream political parties now need to:

- Use political rhetoric to mobilize voters and defend democratic institutions, attack electoral interference, and reclaim the rule of law.

- Engage in new coalitional politics that respond to voters *and* exclude anti-democratic forces, mutually policing each other.

- Commit to institutional reforms that improve the integrity of electoral competition by improving electoral security, depoliticizing election administration, and considering more ambitious choices such as Ranked Choice Voting (RCV).

Global Populisms and Their Challenges

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Populism poses several threats to democracy. This white paper first explains the nature of the threat and then identifies potential solutions, informed by the findings from the Global Populisms project at Stanford University.[1]

In the wake of the Brexit vote in 2016, the election of President Donald J. Trump, and the rise of self-proclaimed populists in Europe and elsewhere, "populism" has claimed enormous press attention and popular interest. But what exactly is populism? Is populism in Poland the same phenomenon as in the United States? Does populism have the same set of universal causes, or are there many paths to populist resurgence?

Cas Mudde crisply defines populism as an ideology "that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."[2] Beyond this shared common core, populism takes a variety of guises. Instances of populism range from the nativist right, such as Fidesz in Hungary or the Lega in Italy, to the redistributionist left, as with Syriza in Greece or the vast majority of populist movements in Latin America.

It is this chameleon-like nature of populism, its ability to articulate a variety of demands from nativism to redistribution, that makes populist arguments so appealing to many politicians—and so powerful and convincing for many supporters. Populist parties assume that "the people" have a common shared interest, a "general will" that ought to be the aim of politics. Accordingly, they emphasize popular sovereignty and direct democracy, rather than the mediation and articulation of interests through democratic institutions such as parliaments or parties. As we discuss in detail below, the implications are deeply worrying for democratic governance.

The rise of populist parties is a political phenomenon that requires political solutions. Economic inequality or crises exacerbate popular grievances, but they alone do not translate into a surge of support for populists, much less the collapse of democracy. Similarly, immigration levels do not necessarily or precisely predict populist success: populist parties have done well in countries that

resisted taking in refugees during the 2015 immigration crisis in Europe, as in Poland, Czechia, or Hungary. Instead, it has been the failure of mainstream parties to represent constituencies, to articulate their needs, and to propose distinct policy solutions that permitted populists to rise – to claim that the status quo is a corrupt, self-serving elite cartel which must be disrupted or overthrown to allow true representation of "the people." These weaknesses of mainstream political parties have created the permissive conditions for populist politicians to emerge and thrive.

New Democratic Vulnerabilities

Democracies are vulnerable to populists in three ways. First, democracy relies on buy-in from both the electoral winners *and* the electoral losers to respect election results. *Winners* have to constrain themselves: they cannot use the law to persecute their opponents or blatantly skew the rules of the game in their favor. They limit themselves because they recognize that democracy requires it—and because they accept that one day they may lose office and do not want their opponents to legislate them out of existence. The electoral *losers* have to accept that their loss was legitimate—the result of the wrong appeals or campaigning, rather than electoral fraud. They do so because if the rules are fair, they can still gain office in the future. In other words, parties and politicians have faith in the democratic process, even if they are uncertain about the electoral outcomes. This twin commitment lies at the heart of functioning democracies. But when populists do win elections, they tend to disregard their end of the bargain and work both to undermine the opposition's very survival and to ensure their own future victories. In Hungary, for example, Victor Orbán's government changed the electoral law, the party funding formulas, and parliamentary rules to ensure its long-term incumbency and to insulate itself from electoral competition. Once confidence in elections is undermined, democratic governments have greater difficulty relying on electoral outcomes as a way of gauging public preferences over policy.[3]

Second, democracies depend on the *free flow of information, speech, and opinion*. These are among the fundamental rights of liberal democracies—and they are an essential prerequisite for impartial voting, representation and accountability, and policy decisions.[4] Yet the essential role of a free press and free speech for successful democratic governance is threatened by the populists' deployment of misinformation, disinformation, and false conspiracy. Social media aids and intensifies these efforts, through anonymous bots, fake accounts, foreign influence operations, and the release of hacked emails or documents.[5] Additionally, deception operations—the spread of knowingly false information—are increasingly able to effectively target everyday citizens. Information warfare is likely to worsen with sophisticated advances in AI-enabled fake audio and video.[6] When populist leaders further sow mistrust by questioning intelligence agencies, election results, and census operations, the result is a spiral of distrust in democratic institutions that becomes self-fulfilling. Without comprehensive media literacy and civic education on a multi-generational level, democratic populations remain highly vulnerable to malign influence.

Third, contemporary democracies are particularly susceptible to *gradual* erosion. Democracies these days rarely succumb to coups or even outright electoral fraud.[7] Rather, as Nancy Bermeo has underscored, democracies are more likely to suffer from executive aggrandizement or the manipulation of elections that falls short of outright fraud.[8] Coups today occur chiefly in the transition from one autocracy to another. Democracies are far more likely to fall prey to democratically-elected rulers who then slowly and stealthily undermine liberal norms and democratic institutions, gradually removing one guardrail of democracy after another.[9] As a result, the decline of established democracies poses a far greater challenge to global democracy than authoritarian coups or takeovers.[10]

How Populism Threatens Democracy

Populists take advantage of these vulnerabilities to threaten democracy in three distinct ways: by eroding formal institutions, by redefining "the people," and by undermining the values and norms that underpin successful democracies. In the words of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, the goal is to "build an illiberal new state on national foundations." These threats to democracy follow directly from the very thin, but intense, ideological commitments of populists—to dismiss the status quo elites and to (allegedly) represent the people.

First, populist movements and politicians tend to disdain formal democratic institutions, such as courts, legislatures, regulatory agencies, and oversight. These are the critical features of the rule of law that can hold populists accountable or remove them from power. In contrast, populists view this architecture of the state as unnecessary and obstructive creations of corrupt and self-serving elites. As a result, they openly disparage and try to undermine these institutions. One example is the unwarranted questioning of the impartiality and professionalism of the courts, as President Trump repeatedly did in November 2018 when the Ninth Circuit ruled against his immigration policy. More extreme is the removal of judges using new age limits, packing national courts with new partisan appointees, and changing the rules on the appointment of judges through constitutional referendums and amendments, as populist governments in Hungary and Poland have done. In all of these cases, politicians criticized the courts as not serving the "national" interest (which, remarkably, often coincided with the partisan interests of the politicians).

Another example is gratuitous allegations of electoral fraud and corrupt elections. In the United States, President Trump repeatedly claimed that 3 million fraudulent votes were cast in the 2016 election—even though the estimates for the total for fraudulent votes between 2000 and 2016 range from 31 (Justin Levitt and the Brennan Center)[11] to 1,259 (the Heritage Foundation)[12], or at most, 0.0002% of votes cast. It does not help that the United States still maintains a partisan and decentralized system of election administration, a patchwork set of ballot-counting technology and procedures, and voting on a workday, all of which create barriers to electoral integrity.

In Hungary, Orbán and his allies made similar allegations to justify sweeping changes to the electoral law, which then served to entrench the governing Fidesz party in power and make it far more difficult for the opposition.[13]

Populists also denounce the independent press and media organizations – institutions that traditionally have been considered central to liberal democracy. In the United States, President Trump has frequently called the mainstream media the 'enemy of the people', a term once popularized in the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin. Through Twitter, Trump has cultivated a new means to communicate directly with his followers. Elsewhere, populist governments have directed funding to government-allied media and starved independent newspapers and radio of advertising revenue, as they did in Hungary, or simply commandeered the state broadcast media to serve as a government propaganda machine, as they did in Poland.[14]

Second, to represent "the people," populists first have to define them—and, by default, also label and exclude others.[15] In practice, this designation paves the way for attacking and discounting vulnerable groups, such as ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants, or lower-income populations. The result often produces a populist conception of democracy as majority rule without minority rights. Further, those who disagree with a populist representation of "the people", such as civil society groups, are criticized as not comprising the "real" nation. The opposition (whether elite or popular) is thus by definition treasonous, treacherous, and alien. In Europe, the United States, and Russia, this technique has produced highly divisive attempts to divide society into "good" party loyalists and the traitorous opposition. President Trump has called for Congressional critics to "go back home" and leave the country, suggesting that they are aliens, not members of the "the people." Polish party leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński openly denounced his critics as the "worst sort of Poles." Vulnerable ethnic minorities and immigrants both come under increased scrutiny when portrayed as neither truly belonging to the nation nor being worthy of the legal protections and civic rights of democracy. A spate of anti-Semitic, racist, and anti-immigrant verbal and physical attacks has followed in both the United States and Europe.

This need to define "the people" and circle the wagons is why immigration is such a powerful weapon for populists. A focus on historical grievances toward immigrants allows populists to redefine "the people" to suit their political ends – and in particular, to argue the narrative that they are defending the cultural, political, and economic interests of their nation and citizens as victims of injustices brought about by an onslaught of immigrants.[16] Strikingly, where immigration is more stringently regulated, as in Canada or Japan, populists struggle to use it as fodder for mobilization.[17] As a result, opposition to immigration has been dropping steadily in both the United States and in Canada over the past 20 years, but the topic of immigration

status remains a major political issue in the United States, but not in Canada.[18] In Europe, the refugee crisis in 2015 raised fears and benefited the populists. In Italy, for example, the rise of Matteo Salvini and the Lega nativist party was directly related to the closing of the Balkan route for immigrants from the Middle East, which subsequently channeled large numbers of immigrants into Italy. Even in countries where politicians openly refused to admit their quota of immigrants (most of Eastern and Central Europe), populists benefited from their purported defense of "national purity." In addition to espousing welfare chauvinism, right-wing populists in Europe further claim to defend women's and gay rights against the threat of Muslim cultural conservatism.[19]

Addressing immigration challenges requires political debate, creative policymaking, and principled leadership. On this score, mainstream parties in both Europe and the United States are seen as having failed to address public fears and concerns about immigration. They struggle to articulate precisely the potential tradeoffs associated with immigration. For example, supporters of increased immigration point out that immigrants are more likely to be more entrepreneurial than to commit crimes, but opponents maintain that immigrants are more likely to rely on welfare services. Neither side addresses the other's contentions. Immigrants are then blamed for the current grievances of the working class, who feel that immigrants "cut in line" and obtain jobs, schooling, and other opportunities that rightfully belong to others. This "us-versus-them" framing of legitimate public policy issues impedes genuine reform. Further, while racism and xenophobia can drive anti-immigrant sentiment, so does the perceived flaunting of immigration laws. If liberal democracies claim to observe the rule of law, then their failure to legally and formally regulate immigration belies these commitments. Countries like Canada and Australia that have admitted much larger number of immigrants proportionally than the United States nonetheless have not experienced serious populist movements, because there is virtually no illegal immigration to either country.[20]

Underlying domestic opposition to immigration is the anticipation of rapid cultural change. A common theme among right-wing populist parties is fear of "replacement," or the notion that non-white immigrants will overwhelm longstanding cultural traditions. This issue is particularly neuralgic in the United States, where race has always been a critical aspect of party politics. Following the Southern realignment after the Civil Rights movment in the 1960s, the Republican Party has increasingly become the party of white voters, while the Democratic Party has evolved into a coalition of minorities and white liberals.[21] The 2008 election of Barack Obama symbolized the shifts in American demographics that will soon turn the United States into a "majority-minority" society.

Third, populists undermine the informal norms and values critical for liberal democracies to flourish. As identified by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, two of these norms are forbearance (i.e., restraint in exercising institutional prerogatives) and tolerance (i.e., the acceptance of opposition and criticism).[22] As discussed above, for democracies to work effectively, electoral winners must act with control and self-restraint. Losers of the elections must continue to support the political process, because they trust that the winners will not tilt the playing field by changing the rules of the game or attacking them.

Yet instead of exercising this self-discipline, populists erode the informal norms of democracy: a free press becomes "fake news," the opposition is dismissed as "traitors", and the courts are attacked as "the bastion of everything … that is bad" since "our actions could be questioned."[23] Such statements erode popular trust in democratic institutions — and directly threaten the opposition's faith in the democratic rules of the game. Worse yet, the power grabs that are implied and justified by this rhetoric serve to polarize politics further: supporters rejoice, but the rest of the population is appalled and therefore oftentimes willing to move to extremes. As Venezuela demonstrates, the result is a radical hollowing out of the political center, increased polarization, and the further abandonment of democratic norms. As a result, populists thrive where we see either a policy consensus among elite parties or where polarization has made policy debate impossible.

The result of these three main threats – the erosion of formal institutions, the divisive vision of who belongs and does not belong in the polity, and the undermining of informal democratic norms – results in what Larry Diamond has termed the "autocrats' twelve-step program" — a playbook that populists follow all too well. Democracies become illiberal, and then stop functioning as democracies altogether, as would-be autocrats demonize the opposition as illegitimate or enemies of the state, undermine the independence of the courts, and attack independent media.[24] As Hungary, the Philippines, and Turkey remind us, these politicians then gain control of public broadcasting, the internet, civil society, and the business community. They enrich a new class of cronies and assert political control over the civil service and the security forces in the name of eradicating the "deep state." In final blows to democracy, they rig the electoral rules and rewrite the constitutions to consolidate their hold on power. With varying degrees of success, populist governments in Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, and Turkey have followed this template, while their counterparts in other countries aspire to achieve the same in the future.

The result is a gradual slide into authoritarianism, each step justified by the need to better root out "disloyal" elements and better serve the "people" (read: the partisan interests of the incumbents). Populists are not inherently or even consciously anti-democratic. But once in office, precisely because they lack the commitment to either the formal institutions or the informal norms that have constrained their predecessors, they begin to institute as many elements of this autocratic program as they can.

Exacerbating Factors

Two factors magnify these threats. The first is foreign interference, whose goal is sometimes the achievement of particular electoral results, but more often the destabilization of both advanced Western democracies and the international organizations they have formed, such as NATO or the EU. Specifically, Russian President Vladimir Putin has "invested in several powerful instruments of influence…including traditional media, social media, the weaponization of intelligence (doxing), financial support for allies, business deals for political aims, and even the deployment of coercive actors abroad, including soldiers, mercenaries, and assassins. In waging this fight, Putin seeks to court ideological allies and weaken ideological foes. With regards to the United States, he has pursued both strategies in parallel."[25] The Putin administration has interfered in U.S. elections,[26] paid for Brexit "leave" campaigns, attempted to hack the campaign of French President Emmanuel Macron (while funding the campaign of Marine Le Pen, his competitor), and prompted Dutch officials in the 2018 elections to conduct their campaigns via paper ballots in fear of Russian manipulation.

In striking parallel to the authoritarian template for eroding democracy at home, Putin's government has developed an authoritarian toolkit for eroding democracy abroad. This plan includes covert support for powerful interest groups (such as the National Rifle Association), energy investments, cyber and information warfare (through the Internet Research Agency and other actors), and overt support and alliances with favored political actors in Austria, France, Hungary, and Italy.[27] Putin's aim in the 2016 U.S. elections was not only to help Trump, but also to undermine the integrity of the election and American democracy more generally. Because democracies challenge Putin's regime by counteracting its corruption and supporting increased liberties within Russian society, undermining Western values and disrupting democratic processes through championing populist parties and agendas is a key priority. The former First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration and current advisor to Putin has openly declared, "foreign politicians ascribe to Russia interference in elections and referendums around the globe. In fact, the matter is even more serious – Russia interferes in their brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness."[28]

Such support and interference sow discord and confusion, undermine trust in formal institutions, and justify the erosion of informal norms. They frequently make use of, and interact with, genuine grassroots political movements and online activists, further magnifying the impact to their advantage.[29] For example, the Kremlin was found to have pursued a sophisticated strategy of online engagement rather than offline response or online restriction of access to content, namely by relying on local news sources and sharing links to both liberal and conservative American media to exacerbate existing tensions, shape domestic online conversations, and appear reliable to different portions of the electorate.[30] These views are further emphasized with the chaos of disinformation, as hostile actors are increasingly able to blend in with legitimate

media outlets and sources of information.[31] These networks further Russian foreign policy goals and interests by destabilizing European and North American democracies and transatlantic ties. When politicians or parties deny these efforts exist, they amplify them further. Populist movements ultimately benefit from globalization through these specific instances of foreign interference, as well as new transnational media environments and flows of information networks, and political connections more generally.[32]

Another enabler of the populist threat to democracy is the weakness of mainstream parties on *both* the center-Left and the center-Right.[33] The center-Left in Europe and the United States has made two controversial moves. First, starting in the 1990s, these left-of-center parties pursued "third way" economic policies. Such policy shifts left trade unions behind and created an elite consensus on the desirability of international economic integration with far less focus on the losers of globalization, who face economic uncertainty and demographic changes.[34] Since unions and other civil society organizations were once a critical way to get citizens involved in politics, this abandonment by the center-Left meant many voters could no longer directly demand accountability and responsiveness. The decline of unions and manufacturing jobs has left many communities bereft of economic opportunities. Income and wealth inequality have risen, while low- and middle-income laborers face greater risk and precarity. By insufficiently addressing these frustrations, center-Left political parties are providing a political opening for populist forces who prioritize questions of basic material security.[35] Second, populist critics have charged that the center-Left has focused on identity politics, which can sometimes privilege increasingly rarefied group demands at the expense of a uniting language of equal rights and opportunities for all. Emphasis on identity politics can be especially damaging to solidarity between groups based on common economic concerns.

In parallel, the center-Right in Europe and the United States has allowed illiberal and extremist voices to speak in its name. Some center-Right parties, in fact, have *become* populist and authoritarian, as was the case in Hungary. Many center-Right parties (notably the Conservatives in the United Kingdom) have seen a split between more cosmopolitan, free-trade and globally integrationist wings, and more nativist, protectionist, and isolationist coalitions. The result is that right-of-center parties were unable to stop a candidate that the party elites did not want (the United States), relied on feckless promises of plebiscitary democracy (the United Kingdom), and failed to stop the rise of more extreme right-wing parties (Italy and France). The combination of blurring of programs and policy alternatives, and the irresponsibility of certain politicians, meant that the only critics who would articulate popular concerns and skepticism were the populist parties.[36]

Consequently, many voters have concluded that the mainstream political parties simply do not care about people like them. One of the main reasons for populist success is the perception that parties only work for the benefit of the politically and economically powerful, rather than average citizens. In the United States, populist rhetoric lambasts "the swamp": lobbyists, special interests, and politicians. In Europe, populism has thrived on Euroskepticism and the demonization of unelected technocrats who wield significant influence over policy areas such as trade, economics, and migration. Nor is this a popular complaint alone: an emerging scholarly consensus is that democracy in America, for example, benefits the wealthy at the expense of low- and middle-income citizens.[37] The donor class in politics is more economically conservative and socially liberal than the bases of each party,[38] and Congressional staff often wrongly estimate their constituents' preferences.[39] On some issues, such as gun safety, the preferences of narrow interest groups have clearly trumped the will of the majority.

In some cases, electoral systems help to limit representation and polarize party politics; majoritarian elections of the kind in the United States and United Kingdom tend to limit the partisan landscape to two major parties, since voters do not wish to "waste" their votes on third-party candidates that have little chance of winning. The surge in popularity of the Liberal Democrats in the December 2019 elections in the United Kingdom, followed by their poor electoral showing, illustrates this dynamic. Even when third parties receive a large portion of votes across the country, there is little chance they will win seats in Congress or capture the presidency. They also inadequately represent voters, since primary voters tend to be more ideologically extreme than general voters. Given the very low rates of turnout in primary elections, candidates tend to be more extreme–on both the left and the right–than their constituents. In the last two U.S. presidential elections, two candidates with tenuous relations to their respective parties (Trump and Sanders) have performed exceptionally well. Populists can thus link liberal policies to so-called out-of-touch elites, globalists, and bureaucrats, when they themselves benefit from lower barriers to entry for political competition and increased political resources and opportunity.[40]

These patterns are not uniform throughout the democratic world. Some left-of-center and right-of-center parties have fared better than others. Liberals in Canada and conservatives in Germany have not experienced a similar degree of collapse as some of their ideological counterparts in the United States and Europe. Populists in Croatia, Slovakia, and Greece have experienced recent electoral reversals, and presidential and party candidates firmly committed to liberal democracy won instead. The range of outcomes regarding populist movements suggests that nothing is inevitable regarding the fall of democracy and the rise of illiberalism. Structural factors shape the battlefield, but individuals, policies, and ideas also matter.

What to Do about the Populist Threats

In formulating solutions to reduce populist threats to democracy, we focus on political parties as the critical actors. Mainstream political parties have been the pillars of democracy, as the main actors who run candidates, articulate policy programs, represent constituents, and compete in democratic elections. Parties need to reclaim their role as the mainstays of democratic competition to ensure their own survival and to protect the formal institutions of democracy and the rule of law, the informal values that underpin them, and the representation of broad society. The rise of populism not only erodes democracy—it also poses a major threat to the political parties that are the pillars of liberal democratic representation.

Political party strategies can be divided into three distinct groupings:

a) *political rhetoric* that is used to mobilize voters and to signal commitments,

b) *coalitional politics* that build broad coalitions and cooperate with other elites to exclude anti-democratic forces, and

c) *institutional reforms* that improve the integrity of electoral competition and restore trust in democratic systems.

The alternative is conceding the competitive field—and eventually governance—to anti-democratic forces that will eventually eliminate democratic politics.

Changing Political Rhetoric

The public rhetoric of political parties powerfully frames policy problems and articulates the array of solutions. It identifies priorities and shared commitments—and it mobilizes voters. As a result, what political parties prioritize, how they frame it, and how they couch potential policies are critical to reassembling a democratic consensus. This is all the more important since voters evaluate democratic institutions and government performance through the prism of ethnicity, community, and identity – lenses that political parties provide.[41]

First, democratic leaders need to vociferously defend democratic institutions, both formal and informal. The criteria here are that elections are free and fair, government agencies such as courts, the civil service, regulatory agencies, and the diplomatic corps are treated with respect, and that losers will concede elections peacefully, just as winners will treat their opponents fairly. Violations of informal norms of democracy, such as toleration, forbearance, and equality before the law, must be called out and condemned.

Second, parties and leaders need to publicize and punish foreign interference in elections.[42] The growing threat of foreign interference and disinformation raises the stakes for all parties to make elections more secure, since hostile foreign actors benefit from destabilizing democracy

per se. National governments should report instances of interference publicly, outlaw campaign contributions from abroad, publicize transgression, and commit to improving election security.[43] Parties committed to democracy need to reclaim the term "sovereignty" and insist that only the people of their nation – with no help from foreign governments – independently select their government leaders.

Third, mainstream parties on both the center-Left and the center-Right also need to reclaim the rule of law, especially in the sphere of immigration. This approach means open and public efforts to secure fair and efficient immigration systems and ensure the dignity and human rights of immigrants and refugees — as well as pushing for legal reforms and parliamentary oversight, rather than ignoring the flaunting of laws. Building walls does not address immigration—but neither does proclaiming sanctuary cities.

Broadening—and Listening to—Electorates

There are two elements of coalitional politics that parties must embrace: voters and other parties. First, parties in both Europe and in the United States need to redefine the nation and reaffirm their support for the rule of law. The Left needs to reclaim patriotism, security, and the nation, and acknowledge that national identities are not only compatible with, but can buttress, liberal democracy and its emphasis on pluralism and minority rights.[44] The Right has been much more effective in playing on ordinary people's longing for a sense of community; this is an issue that the Left should not concede to them. Instead, what is necessary is an emphasis on mutual obligations and responsibilities, the need for solidarity and respect, and serious attention to addressing popular concerns. Conversely, the Right needs to reclaim the rule of law, its traditional mainstay of individual and minority rights, the formal procedures of democracy, and informal rules regarding conflicts of interest and the balance of powers among the branches of government. This is the natural party of restraint, rather than revolution. Without this moral authority, it will have little grounds to cry foul when it finds itself in the opposition.

Political parties on both sides of the center need to offer meaningful alternatives and distinct policy visions that address popular needs and concerns, rather than generate either false consensus or partisan polarization. Given the populist exploitation of mainstream party complacence, mainstream political parties need to take voter concerns regarding economic dislocation from globalization and automation seriously. Addressing the issue of immigration means simultaneously acknowledging that immigrants are necessary for the continued success of aging economies and that they are likely to rely on the state for both assistance and basic services such as education or health care. Organizational change may help parties to articulate their new responsiveness: parties in many Western European countries have been experimenting with new benefits to members in order to restore formal party membership, for example, and scholars have laid out ways to strengthen state and local parties in the United States.[45]

Political parties also need to build coalitions with each other. These can be tactical and short-term, as when mainstream parties erect a cordon sanitaire around extremist politicians. French politicians across the spectrum did so when Marine Le Pen came in second in the French presidential runoff in 2017: nearly all other candidates called on their supporters to vote for Emmanuel Macron, to protect French democracy and the rule of law. Similarly, the 5 Star Movement and the Democratic Party in Italy formed an alternative coalition to sideline Matteo Salvini when he tried to grab power in September 2019.

Mutual policing needs to be institutionalized. For example, the authoritarian slide of Hungary has been tolerated by the European Union largely due to partisan politics: the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament, led by Manfred Weber, actively defended Orbán and shielded Fidesz from any condemnation or sanction, so that Fidesz would remain in the fold and maintain the EPP as the largest faction in the parliament. Once Weber ran for Commission President, he condemned Fidesz. Such inconsistency needs to be penalized, not ignored. In the United States, one way to develop such oversight is through the development of new ethics and campaign finance guidelines for politicians, particularly the office of the executive. The current president maintains foreign business interests and dealings that may present conflicts of interest. Both parties need to recognize the grave dangers that result from the use of public office for private gain, and to prevent it through adoption of robust ethics laws.

Undertaking Institutional Reforms

Institutional reforms are critical—and given the vested interests in a given status quo, also very difficult to implement. Yet several institutional reforms could enhance accountability and responsiveness. They would help to inoculate political parties and democratic representation from the potential damage of populism.

First, improving the cybersecurity of electoral infrastructure and personal data will establish clearer rules about fair democratic competition and strengthen overall legitimacy within democratic institutions.[46] For example, in the aftermath of the German 'Advent Calendar' case in late 2018 when a hacker published the private data of over 1,000 German politicians and celebrities, a strong legal and political debate on cybersecurity followed. Consequently, several measures have been proposed and should be adopted by democracies worldwide, including enhancing the protection of personal data in digital services, improving the reactions of government and private organizations following doxing releases, and increasing the capacity of security agencies in order to address doxing attacks and similar discrediting threats to democracy.[47] A well-documented paper trail of votes is critical: in the 2017 Dutch election, fears of potential Russian interference led officials to run the entire electoral process via old-fashioned paper ballots, ensuring integrity. In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the United States still has not introduced many basic refoms that would enhance election security.[48]

Second, in the United States, reforms to depoliticize election administration and enhance ballot access can help both parties commit to election integrity. Two presidential commissions on election administration have advocated reforms such as automatic (or online) voter registration, better management of polling places, and expanding the period of voting before Election Day.[49] These reforms will ensure that more Americans can participate in their democracy and shore up the legitimacy of election institutions. Making Election Day a holiday is another simple reform that would increase voter participation.

Reforming election administration also includes the currently highly partisan redistricting process. This is a popular move: a bipartisan poll commissioned by the Campaign Legal Center found that over 71% of Americans want to limit the ability of lawmakers to draw districts, even if it means their party would lose seats.[50] Fourteen states have now adopted redistricting commissions to draw district boundaries; six of these commissions were created by citizen initiatives. Where gerrymandering attempts arise, the vociferous criticism of civil society organizations and opposition parties is critical; in Poland, for example, public outcry and ridicule shelved efforts in 2017 to gerrymander the area around Warsaw and to dilute support for the opposition parties.

Third, changes to the electoral laws would also increase representation and accountability while moderating polarization. For example, ranked-choice voting (RCV) allows voters to rank-order candidates in order of preference, instead of having to choose only one. It gives voters the opportunity to support independent candidates and creates incentives for candidates to reach across party lines in order to capture as many first-preference votes as possible.[51] RCV is compatible with the existing party system, it is constitutional, and it works: Maine was the first state to use it in federal elections in 2018.

In the United States, Electoral College reform could also improve the process for presidential selection, although reform is both controversial and difficult. Since 2000, the Electoral College has twice delivered victory to a presidential candidate who received fewer popular votes. Public opinion surveys show that a majority of American voters wish to choose the president by popular vote, although Democrats are much more in favor of reform. Amending the constitution to eliminate the Electoral College is nearly impossible, but a popular vote de facto could be achieved through the National Popular Vote, an interstate compact that would circumvent the need for a constitutional amendment if states totaling 270 electors committed to voting for the winner of the popular vote.

Finally, greater transparency is critical in campaign finance. Undisclosed donations, and mysterious third-party donors, are highly problematic in both the European and U.S. contexts.[52] The lack of transparency means that conflict of interest norms and rules can be easily overcome, and foreign interference can go largely undetected. For example, Marine Le Pen received a "loan"

of over 9 million euros (over 12 million U.S. dollars) from an obscure Russian bank that is believed to be a front for the Russian government.[53] The growing importance of social media only makes reform more urgent, as ever-smaller and obscure constituencies are being targeted by campaigns funded by covert sources, including foreign ones.

Conclusion

Global populisms present three challenges to democracy: the erosion of formal institutions, a narrow and exclusionary notion of the polity, and the undermining of the informal norms of democracy. These are exacerbated by international interference in the democratic process, and magnified by the mainstream parties' failure to respond meaningfully to global economic and political challenges.

To address these, we need to end the erosion of formal institutions, informal values, and the very integrity of our democratic process. Political parties are the critical actors here. They can and should change their rhetoric and electoral strategies to emphasize the importance of community, rule of law, and the integrity of the electoral process. The necessary reforms of parties and political institutions will not be easy—the status quo benefits incumbents in the short run, even as they undermine democratic processes in the longer term.

Currently, developed democracies run the risk of erosion by domestic populists and successful attacks by international authoritarians. To protect our democracy, we need to reclaim the rule of law, emphasize the importance of a broad national community, and underscore informal democratic values and norms.

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