

POPULISM: MYTH AND REALITY

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What is populism? A vehicle for the grievances of those who feel bypassed by progress? A tool for unscrupulous politicians (pardon the obvious redundancy)? Fake news? A hoax? Or something that needs to be addressed seriously and thoughtfully?

Populism emphasizes the role of “the people” and places them in opposition to roles played by “the elite.” The people are defined as morally good and are endowed with large reservoirs of common sense. They want only what is best for the country in which they live. The elite is corrupt and self-serving, wanting only what is in its own interests. It controls the politics, economy, media, and culture of the country, and places the interests of other groups, such as foreign countries or immigrants, above those of its own country, because it profits from such placement.

The term is often used pejoratively to discredit opponents, who are generally accused of being demagogues or opportunists. Populism occupies no single space on the left-right political spectrum, with right-wingers like Peru’s Alberto Fujimori and left-wingers like Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez both being characterized as populist (to say nothing of Argentina’s Juan Domingo Perón). Populism is less programmatic than it is moralistic; it divides the world into friends and foes along binary lines, and its foes are not simply wrong-headed but evil. Any effort at compromise would sully the moral purity of the people and would therefore be unacceptable.

Of course, when populists take power, they become by definition members of the elite. But even then, they contend that they are targeted by the economic, cultural, and media elite. They assert that real power is not held by the government, but by a “deep state” composed of powerful forces that seek to undermine the will of the people. In left-wing populism, these claims resonate because populist governments are actually opposed by powerful corporate interests that seek to stifle leftist economic reforms. The Tea Party movement in the USA argues that big business, and its allies in Congress, seek to undermine the free market and kill competition by stifling small business.

Populism often carries overtones of racism. In Bolivia, Evo Morales contends that an overwhelmingly European elite seeks to marginalize and impoverish mestizos and indigenous peoples. In Europe, populists allege that elites put the interests of the EU and its hordes of refugees over the interests of their own nations. Populist parties in Hungary and Bulgaria assert that the elites favor Israeli and Jewish interests above those of their own people.

While populists condemn elites and exalt the people, elites often agree with the characterization while reversing it. Elites consider the people to be vulgar, immoral, ignorant, and dangerous, while the elites themselves are morally, culturally, and intellectually superior. Like Mitt Romney, they want politics to be an exclusively elite affair for the rich and well-born. These attitudes feed into the populist critique.

This sort of dualist framework is rejected by *pluralists*, who view society as a broad array of overlapping social groups, each with its own ideas and interests. They view diversity as a strength, while both elites and populists view it as a weakness. They encourage government through compromise and consensus in order to accommodate as many of these overlapping interests as possible. “Populism, understood as a strategy for winning and exerting state power, inherently stands in tension with democracy and the value that it places on pluralism, open debate and fair competition.” (Kurt Weyland)

What are some possible explanations for the surge of populist politicians and movements in the second decade of the 21st century?

- ✓ Since the late 1960s, improved education has encouraged citizens to expect more from their politicians and to feel increasingly competent to judge their actions.
- ✓ Since 1991, the absence of backward, repressive Communist societies in Eastern Europe has deprived democracies of foils. This in turn has enabled citizens to compare the actual performance of democracies against the theoretical advantages of democratic models, and find the former unsatisfactory.
- ✓ Globalization has seriously limited the powers of national elites, which find it difficult to resist populist currents. Simultaneously, globalization has created genuine grievances among millions of people who have lost their hopes for improved living standards.
- ✓ Since the late 1960s, the increasing diversity of television offerings around the world has led to an increase in sensationalistic reporting and the propagation of conspiracy theories.
- ✓ People who hold progressive values often find it incredible that large numbers of their fellow citizens think of progress as dangerous and de-stabilizing. The more that progressives demean and ridicule such people, the more likely such people are to support populist candidates and parties.

QUESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Q-1. How does populism get mixed up with religion?

Populism tends to appeal to horizontal religions that don't have hierarchies. Why? Because hierarchies are by definition elitist. In USA, Bible-based evangelical congregations without well-defined authority structures outside the congregation are more susceptible to populist arguments than mainstream Protestant churches or Roman Catholicism.

Q-2. With the success of Trump and Brexit, do you predict other European countries will exit the EU?

God, I hope not. Brexit is an unmitigated disaster, and those who propagated it suffer from one of two conditions: (a) the desire to obtain power in a weakened Britain outside the EU; or (b) incurable amnesia, forgetting everything that happened to Europe before it united.

Q-3. How does Trump, a member of a billionaire elite, become a populist leader?

Most populist leaders are elitist themselves, and if they aren't elitist when they take power, they quickly become elitist. Trump, in my view, offered a blend of racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, paranoia, and genuine economic grievances to voters who felt marginalized or forgotten by Obama. Mitt Romney's insufferable, condescending televised rant in the spring of 2016, when he called Trump a fraud and a charlatan, simply confirmed such voters in their belief that Trump was *not* an elitist at all, but a man of the people.

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