

PART I

INTRODUCTION

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Excerpt
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I

Understanding Populism

Populists have disrupted long-established patterns of party competition in many contemporary Western societies. The most dramatic case is the election of Donald Trump to the White House. How could such a polarizing and politically inexperienced figure win a major party's nomination – and then be elected President? Many observers find it difficult to understand his victory. He has been sharply attacked by conservatives such as George Will, establishment Republicans such as John McCain, Democrats such as Elizabeth Warren, and socialists such as Bernie Sanders. He has been described by some commentators as a strongman menacing democracy, by others as a xenophobic and racist demagogue skilled at whipping up crowds, and by yet others as an opportunistic salesman lacking any core principles.¹ Each of these approaches contains some truth.

We view Trump as a leader who uses populist rhetoric to legitimize his style of governance, while promoting authoritarian values that threaten the liberal norms underpinning American democracy.

Trump is far from unique. Previous demagogues in America include Huey Long's Share the Wealth movement, Joe McCarthy's witch-hunting communists, and George Wallace's white backlash.² Trump's angry nativist speeches, anti-establishment appeals, and racially heated language resembles that of many other leaders whose support has been swelling across Europe. Beyond leaders, these sentiments find expression in political parties, social movements, and the tabloid press. Populism is not new; von Beyme suggests that it has experienced at least three successive waves.³ Its historical roots can be traced back to the Chartists in early Victorian Britain, the People's Party in the US, Narodnik revolutionaries in late nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia, Fascist movements in the

interwar decades, Peronism in Argentina, and Poujadism in post-war France. Authoritarianism also has a long history that peaked during the era of Bolshevism and Fascism, and has seen resurgence since the late-twentieth century.

What is populism?

Populism is understood in this book minimally as a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with ‘the people’ not the elites. It remains silent about second-order principles, concerning what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made.⁴ The discourse has a chameleon-like quality which can adapt flexibly to a variety of substantive ideological values and principles, such as socialist or conservative populism, authoritarian or progressive populism, and so on.

As unpacked fully in chapter 3, populist rhetoric makes two core claims about how societies should be governed.⁵

First, populism challenges the legitimate authority of the ‘establishment.’ It questions pluralist beliefs about the rightful location of power and authority in any state, including the role of elected representatives in democratic regimes. Favorite targets include the mainstream media (‘fake news’), elections (‘fraudulent’), politicians (‘drain the swamp’), political parties (‘dysfunctional’), public-sector bureaucrats (‘the deep state’), judges (‘enemies of the people’), protests (‘paid rent-a-mob’), the intelligence services (‘liars and leakers’), lobbyists (‘corrupt’), intellectuals (‘arrogant liberals’) and scientists (‘who needs experts?’), interest groups (‘get-rich-quick lobbyists’), the constitution (‘a rigged system’), international organizations like the European Union (‘Brussels bureaucrats’) and the UN (‘a talking club’). In Trump’s words, ‘The only antidote to decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of the popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong.’⁶ The claim is not just that members of the establishment are arrogant in their judgments, mistaken in their decisions, and blundering in their actions, but rather that they are morally wrong in their core values. This claim resonates among critical citizens – those committed to democracy in principle but disillusioned with the performance of elected officeholders and representative institutions, including parties, elections, and parliaments.⁷

In this regard, populist leaders depict themselves as insurgents willing to ride roughshod over long-standing conventions, disrupting mainstream ‘politics-as-usual.’ Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric has been strongly counter-elitist, emphasizing the need to ‘drain the swamp’ of corrupt

politicians and lobbyists, touching a chord among his supporters.⁸ The ‘fake media’ are labelled ‘enemies of the people’ and public-sector officials are seen as part of the ‘deep state’ resisting change.⁹ For Marine Le Pen, faceless European Commissioners are the enemy: ‘No one knows their name or their face. And above all no one has voted for them.’¹⁰ For pro-Brexit tabloids, ‘out of touch’ judges seeking to delay Article 50 are vilified as ‘Enemies of the People.’¹¹ In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez’s bellicose speeches berated former presidents charged with embezzlement, lambasted the Caracas elite, and attacked American imperialism (‘domination, exploitation, and pillage’).¹²

Secondly, populist leaders claim that the only legitimate source of political and moral authority in a democracy rests with the ‘people.’ The voice of ordinary citizens (the ‘silent majority,’ ‘the forgotten American’) is regarded as the only ‘genuine’ form of democratic governance even when at odds with expert judgments – including those of elected representatives and judges, scientists, scholars, journalists and commentators. Lived experience is regarded as a far superior guide to action rather than book-learning. The collective will of ‘the people’ (‘Most people say...’) is regarded as unified, authentic, and unquestionably morally right. In cases of conflict, for example, if Westminster disagrees with the outcome of the Brexit referendum, the public’s decision is thought to take automatic precedent.

On the night of the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union, for example, the leader of UK Independence Party (UKIP), Nigel Farage, crowed that ‘This will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people.’¹³ For the German protest movement Pegida, ‘We are the people’ (‘Wir sind das Volk’).¹⁴ Similarly, Trump’s inaugural address proclaimed: ‘We are transferring power from Washington, DC and giving it back to you, the American People ... The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.’¹⁵ In the 2017 French presidential elections, the National Front candidate, Marine Le Pen, campaigned to ‘free the French people from an arrogant elite.’¹⁶ A few months after Brexit, at the 2016 Conservative Party conference, Prime Minister Theresa May expressed similar views: ‘Just listen to the way a lot of politicians and commentators talk about the public. They find their patriotism distasteful, their concerns about immigration parochial, their views about crime illiberal, their attachment to their job-security inconvenient.’¹⁷ And Norbert Hofer, presidential candidate of the Freedom Party of Austria, criticized his opponent: ‘You have the haute volée [high society] behind you; I have the people with me.’ Elites questioning the wisdom of the people, or resisting its sovereignty,

are accused of being corrupt, self-serving, arrogant know-it-all who are ‘traitors declaring war on democracy.’¹⁸ There can be no turning back from the people’s decision: Brexit means Brexit.

Therefore, populist rhetoric seeks to corrode faith in the legitimate authority of elected representatives in liberal democracies. But the revolution finds it easier to destroy the old than rebuild the new. The danger is that this leaves the door ajar for soft authoritarians attacking democratic norms and practices. Strongman leaders rise to power by claiming to govern on behalf of the ‘real’ people, sanctioned by flawed elections and enabled by partisan loyalists. The concept of ‘legitimacy’ can be best understood, in Seymour Martin Lipset’s words, as ‘the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society.’¹⁹ It is the vital quality which ensures that citizens comply with the decisions of their government, not because of the law or threat of force, but because they choose to do so voluntarily. Populist leaders knock-down safeguards on executive power by claiming that they, and they alone, reflect the authentic voice of ordinary people and have the capacity to restore collective security against threats. In Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s words: ‘We are the people. Who are you?’²⁰ Leaders draw fuzzy lines between the interests of the state and their personal interests – along with that of their family and cronies. Democracy is thereby attacked, but not directly, which would raise too many red flags. No coup d’état is hatched. The military stay in the barracks. Elections are not cancelled. Opponents are not jailed. But democratic norms are gradually degraded by populists claiming to be democracy’s best friend (‘Trust me’).²¹

What is authoritarianism?

What is important for fully understanding this phenomenon, however, is not just the rhetorical veneer of ‘people power,’ but also what second-order principles leaders advocate – and thus what cultural values they endorse, what programmatic policies they advocate, and what governing practices they follow. In this regard, know them by what they do – not just by what they say. The populist words of parties such as the French National Front, the Swedish Democrats, or Poland’s Law and Justice – and leaders such as Orbán, Berlusconi, and Trump – are the external patina disguising authoritarian practices. It is the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric which we regard as potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy.

The notion of ‘authoritarian’ is commonly used in comparative politics to denote a particular type of regime and in social psychology to refer to

a particular set of personality predispositions or learnt cultural values. Following the latter tradition, in this study, authoritarianism is defined as a cluster of values prioritizing collective security for the group at the expense of liberal autonomy for the individual. Authoritarian values prioritize three core components: (1) the importance of *security* against risks of instability and disorder (foreigners stealing our jobs, immigrants attacking our women, terrorists threatening our safety); (2) the value of group *conformity* to preserve conventional traditions and guard our way of life (defending ‘Us’ against threats to ‘European values’); and (3) the need for loyal *obedience* toward strong leaders who protect the group and its customs (‘I alone can fix it,’ ‘Believe me,’ ‘Are you in my team?’).

The politics of fear drives the search for collective security for the tribe – even if this means sacrificing personal freedoms. In this regard, the ‘tribe’ refers to an imaginary community demarcated by signifiers of us versus them – our people versus the others. This is often broadly defined by bonds of nationality and citizenship (‘We all share the same home, the same heart, the same destiny, and the same great American flag’).²² Or it can be demarcated more narrowly by signifiers of social identity that provide symbolic attachments of belonging and loyalty for the in-group and barriers for the out-groups, signified by, for example, race, religion, ethnicity, location, generation, party, gender, or sex. The notion of a ‘tribe’ is therefore distinct from simply joining any loose grouping or becoming a formal member of an organization. Tribes are social identity groups, often communities linked by economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader. Tribes involve loyalty, stickiness, boundaries, and shared cultural meanings and feelings of belonging.

Authoritarian values blended with populist rhetoric can be regarded as a dangerous combination fueling a cult of fear.²³ Populist rhetoric directs tribal grievances ‘upwards’ toward elites, feeding mistrust of ‘corrupt’ politicians, the ‘fake’ media, ‘biased’ judges, and ‘out-of-touch’ mainstream parties, assaulting the truth and corroding faith in liberal democracy. Politicians won’t/can’t defend you. And authoritarians channel tribal grievances ‘outwards’ toward scapegoat groups perceived as threatening the values and norms of the in-group, dividing ‘Us’ (the ‘real people’) and ‘Them’ (‘Not Us’); stoking anxiety, corroding mutual tolerance, and poisoning the reservoir of social trust. If the world is seen as full of gangs, criminals, and fanatics, if our borders are vulnerable to drug cartels, Muslim terrorists, and illegal aliens, if liberal democracy is broken, then logically we need high walls – and strong leaders – to protect us and our nation.

Authoritarian leaders and followers seek collective strength and security because of the triumph of fear over hope, of anxiety over confidence, of darkness over light. The theme of Trump's inaugural address perfectly encapsulates this bleak vision: 'For too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.'²⁴ This discourse strikes a discordant note because it is so much at odds with the tradition of American 'can do' optimism. Not 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself' (Roosevelt). Not 'Ask what you can do for your country' (Kennedy). Not 'Its Morning Again in America' (Reagan). Not 'The Audacity of Hope' (Obama).

When authoritarian values and populist rhetoric are translated into public policies, the key issue concerns the need to defend 'Us' ('our tribe') through restrictions on 'Them' ('the other') – justifying restrictions on the entry of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and foreigners, and the use of policies such as official language requirements or bans on certain religious practices. It justifies Guantanamo Bay. It justifies 'zero tolerance' forcibly separating immigrant children from parents at the US border. This orientation underpins and vindicates the intolerance, racism, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia characteristic of Authoritarian-Populist parties. In foreign affairs, this viewpoint favors the protection of national sovereignty, secure borders, a strong military, and trade protectionism ('America First'), rather than membership of the European Union, diplomatic alliances, human rights, international engagement, and multi-lateral cooperation within the G7, NATO, and United Nations. Moreover, Authoritarian Populism favors policies where the state actively intervenes to restrict non-traditional lifestyles, typically by limiting same sex marriage, LGBTQ rights and gender equality, access to contraception and abortion, and affirmative action or quotas – unless, in some cases, these types of liberal policies are framed as a defense of national cultures against attacks by 'others.' Finally, in the public sphere, since liberal democracy has been delegitimized, authoritarian populists favor strong governance preserving order and security against perceived threat ('They are sending rapists' 'radical Islamic terrorists'), even at the expense of democratic norms protecting judicial independence, freedom of the media, human rights and civil liberties, the oversight role of representative assemblies, and standards of electoral integrity. It is the triumph of fear over hope.

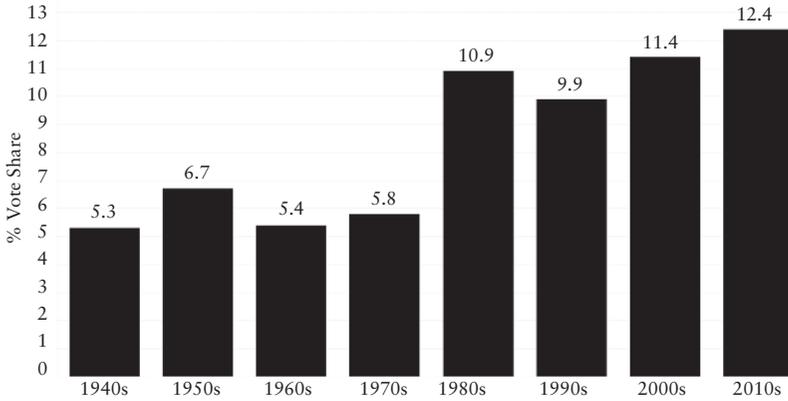


FIGURE 1.1. *Vote share for populist parties in Western societies, 1946–2017*

Notes: The mean vote share for populist parties in national elections for the lower (or single) house of parliament from 1945 to 2017 in 32 Western societies containing at least one such party. For the classification of parties, see Chapter 7.

Sources: Holger Döring and Philip Manow. 2016. *Parliaments and Governments Database* (ParlGov). www.parlgov.org/; IFES Elections Guide. www.electionguide.org/.

THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

Subsequent chapters classify and measure political parties using systematic evidence and demonstrate that authoritarian populism has taken root in many European countries.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the rising tide in the electorate. Across Europe, the average share of the vote won by these parties for the lower house in national parliamentary elections in Europe has more than doubled since the 1960s, from around 5.4 percent to 12.4 percent today.²⁵ During the same era, their share of seats has tripled, from 4.0 percent to 12.2 percent. These forces have advanced in some of the world's richest and most egalitarian European societies with comprehensive welfare states and long-established democracies, such as Austria, Norway, and Denmark, as well as in countries plagued by mass unemployment, sluggish growth, and shaky finances, such as Greece and Bulgaria.²⁶ They have won government office in Eastern and Central Europe, such as in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Poland, and have taken root in the Netherlands and Germany. They have gained in consensus democracies with Proportional Representation elections and federal systems (Belgium and Switzerland), and in countries with majoritarian rules (France) and presidential executives (the United States). By contrast, they are also notably absent, the dog which didn't bark, in several other Western

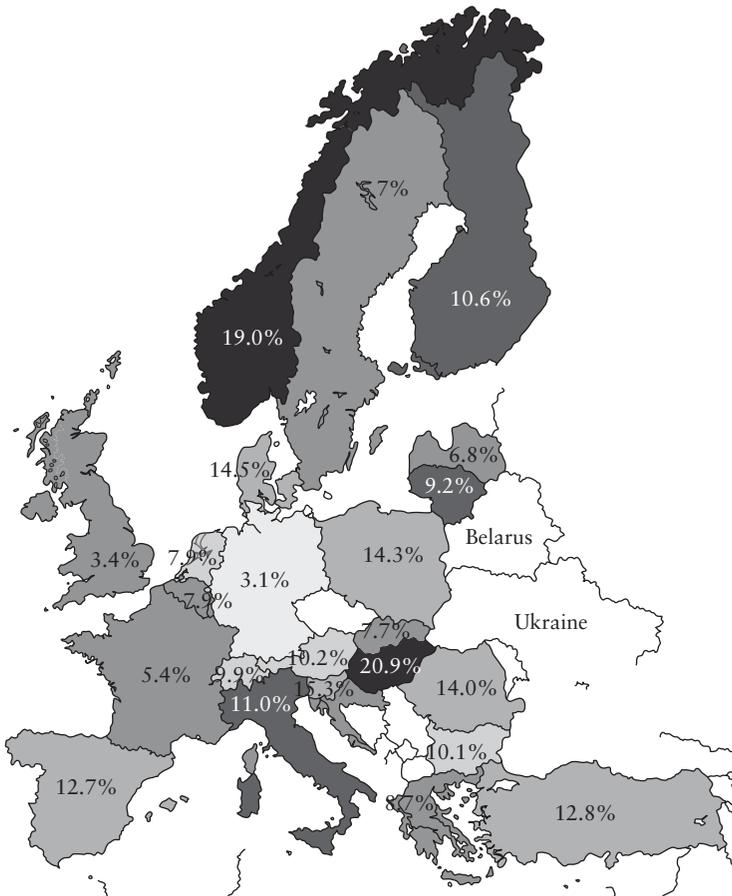


FIGURE 1.2. *Vote share for Populist parties in Europe, 2000–2017*

Notes: The mean share of the vote won by Populist parties in national elections for the lower (or single) house of parliament from 1945 to 2017 in European societies containing at least one such party. For the classification of parties, see Chapter 7.

Sources: Holger Döring and Philip Manow. 2017. *Parliaments and Governments Database* (ParlGov). www.parlgov.org/; IFES Election Guide www.electionguide.org/.

democracies which were some of the worst affected by the financial crisis, such as Ireland and Iceland.²⁷

In later chapters, using reasonable cut-off points, we identify over fifty European political parties that can be classified as ‘Authoritarian-Populist.’ These have gained a growing presence in parliaments in many countries and entered government coalitions in more than a dozen Western democracies, including in Austria, Italy, New Zealand, Norway,