Introduction: Donald Trump's Populism

What Are the Prospects for US Democracy?

Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid

In November 2016 populist Donald Trump unexpectedly won the US presidency. Not since Andrew Jackson has the United States had a populist leader as chief executive.[1] Therefore, observers were at a loss what to expect: how would Trump govern, and with what consequences? Above all, would the new president persist with his polarizing, confrontational strategy, try to win personal predominance, and establish political hegemony? With this domineering approach, would Trump's populism end up doing serious damage to liberal democracy in the United States, as observers have feared?[2]

Given the United States' fortunate inexperience with populism in government, American politics specialists had difficulty answering these questions.[3] But many other nations, especially in Europe and Latin America, have recently had ample experiences with populism, which may offer important insights on the prospects of the Trump presidency and its repercussions for US democracy (see de la Torre 2017a). This volume examines a number of salient cases of populist movements and

[1] Donald Trump has indeed invoked Jackson as his presidential role model (Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann 2017b: 119). Even if one follows Tulis (1987: 87–93), who counts Andrew Johnson as a populist, the United States did not have a populist president for almost 150 years before Trump.

[2] See, e.g., Illing 2017; Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018; and Sunstein 2018, especially the chapters by Ginsburg and Huq, by Holmes, by Posner, and by Strauss.

[3] For instance, a number of observers have gone so far as to invoke the specter of interwar fascism (see, e.g., Connolly 2017; Snyder 2017: 18–20, 23–25, 39–44). We, however, agree with Berman's (2016) forceful rejection of this analogy (see Weyland and Madrid 2018: 24–25).

governments in foreign countries, especially those headed by Alberto Fujimori, Carlos Menem, Rafael Correa, and Hugo Chávez in Latin America (Chapter 1, by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser); by Vladimír Mečiar and Viktor Orbán in Eastern Europe (Chapter 2, by Kevin Deegan-Krause); and by Silvio Berlusconi and Geert Wilders in Western Europe (Chapter 3, by Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove). Considering the differences in national context, what light do these experiences with populism shed on the contours and likely consequences of the Trump administration?

The analysis of this book focuses on three main questions. (1) Under what conditions can populist leaders achieve political success? (2) What options does the opposition have for containing these overbearing leaders? (3) Is democracy in the United States likely to emerge intact from the challenge of Trump's populism?

The Main Argument

The editors derive relatively sanguine conclusions from the comparative experiences examined in this book (see preview in Weyland and Madrid 2018). We believe that liberal democracy in the United States will prove resilient, although some contributors to this volume are more pessimistic (see the chapters by Kevin Deegan-Krause and Kenneth Roberts). As Western European cases of populism suggest, institutional constraints and the strength of the partisan opposition and of civil society will probably limit President Trump's room for maneuver and will thus preclude serious infringements on liberal safeguards, a skewing of the competitive arena, and a lasting deterioration of democratic norms. Consequently, the country is likely to avoid the more far-reaching and profound efforts to strangle liberal democracy that have proceeded in some East European and Latin American countries, such as Hungary and Venezuela, where counterweights were absent or weaker. Trump may well do serious damage in policy areas where the president has a great deal of decision-making latitude, such as environmental and foreign policy, but he is unlikely to achieve the institutional transformations that populist leaders in other countries used to undermine democracy.

The comparative investigations of this book highlight the importance of four types of obstacles that will probably protect liberal democracy in the United States from the deleterious effects of populism. First, the federal and presidential system of government enshrines a firm separation of powers, unlike parliamentary systems, for instance. The legislature and

the judiciary, in addition to independent federal agencies and state and local-level authorities, all have considerable influence in the US system, including the power to block or modify presidential initiatives. Therefore, President Trump will face difficulty in seeking to concentrate power, overhaul democratic institutions, and infringe upon liberal safeguards and fair competition. The narrow legislative majority of the Republican Party does not pave the way for unfettered political hegemony and a battery of rule changes that push the country in an illiberal direction, as happened in Hungary, where Orbán enjoyed a large parliamentary majority. Moreover, in contrast to populist executives in Latin American countries, such as Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador, a populist leader in the White House cannot revamp the venerable US charter through a constituent assembly nor simply bend, disrespect or override its well-entrenched procedural rules. US institutions are not just strong, they are also stable (see Levitsky and Murillo 2009). Thus, unlike his populist counterparts in East-Central Europe and Latin America, President Trump faces a set of rather firm institutional constraints.[4]

Second, the US party system is stronger and more cohesive than was the case during the emergence of populism in most European and Latin American countries. Consequently, Donald Trump did not form a new party, which he could easily control and use to gain power, as Berlusconi did in Italy, Fujimori in Peru, and Chávez in Venezuela. Instead, the US populist could rise only by taking over an established party. While his victories in the contest for the Republican presidential nomination and in the general election give Trump considerable clout and while he can draw fervent support from the party's radical mass bases, he does not control the GOP establishment, which views this political outsider and amateur with concern and distrust. Thus, Donald Trump has a much weaker political position than populist leaders such as Fujimori and Chávez, whose domination of their parties facilitated their assault on liberal democracy.

Instead, President Trump's situation is similar to that of Carlos Menem in Argentina, who captured the presidential candidacy of the long-established Peronist party in a primary yet never won full control over this massive organization.[5] Although the Argentine populist managed for years to keep intra-party rivals at bay, eventually another Peronist

[4] The contrast with Latin America, where institutions are often weakly enforced and easy to change (see Weyland 2002a: 66–68), highlights the importance of US institutions, which serve as serious constraints on political behavior.

[5] The party's official name is the Justicialist Party (Partido Justicialista: PJ), but it is better known by its founder's name, Juan Perón.

leader insisted on his own bid for the chief executive office and thus blocked Menem from winning a third term, which might have done serious damage to Argentine democracy.

Third, the social and political cleavage structure of the United States does not favor a populist leader's quest for overwhelming influence. As Kenneth Roberts highlights in Chapter 5, the US case is unusual in that a populist leader came to power during a time of pronounced partisan and ideological polarization. Typically, populist politicians win office after preexisting parties have lost touch with many voters because they have undergone programmatic convergence, which leaves many citizens feeling unrepresented. In Latin America, for instance, the widespread enactment of neoliberal market reforms made the positions of many mainstream parties virtually indistinguishable; and, in Italy, the end of the Cold War buried the cleavage caused by Communism, around which the traditional party system had revolved. In these countries, party dealignment and voter fluidity allowed populist outsiders to mobilize "the people" and win over broad swaths of voters.

In the United States, by contrast, partisan polarization and ideological fervor run high, especially on the right side of the political spectrum. On the one hand, this divisiveness provides fertile ground for the confrontational strategy typically employed by populist leaders. If President Trump were to encroach on opposition rights or put illiberal pressure on critics, he could probably count on unconditional support from his core base among the right-wing movements associated with the Republican Party (see Diamond 2018). In this way, party polarization creates risks for liberal democracy, as Roberts argues. But, on the other hand, these deep divisions and the extremism of Trump's hard-core backers, with their resentments and thinly disguised prejudices (see Donovan and Redlawsk 2018: 197–201), seriously limit the chances of this populist leader to win broader-ranging support, not to speak of the massive approval that allowed Peru's Fujimori and Venezuela's Chávez to trample on liberal democracy. Stuck in an ideological ghetto, and reinforcing this self-enclosure with his stream of confrontational rhetoric, Donald Trump seems unable to achieve the endorsement of a majority.

Social cleavages in the United States also make it difficult for Trump to achieve commanding popular support. In Latin America the lower classes represent a large majority of the population, and they have provided disproportionate support for populist leaders. By contrast, the middle classes predominate in the United States, and their educated segments have maintained their distance from Trump. Moreover, ethnic and racial

minorities, especially African Americans and Latinos, constitute a significant share of the electorate, and they have massively opposed Donald Trump. The new president has used exclusionary ethno-nationalist appeals to solidify backing from some of his most loyal white supporters, but at the cost of lower overall approval ratings.

How powerful can a populist be who is not broadly popular? Because mass support is the crucial political asset of populist leaders (Weyland 2001), President Trump is unlikely to gain the political preponderance required for seriously bending, if not breaking, liberal democracy. His hard-core following, which may well back such efforts (see Diamond 2018), is simply too limited in a competitive democracy that has strong institutions, a robust opposition party, a vibrant civil society, and critical public opinion.

Fourth, a crucial factor that – paradoxically – helps to keep President Trump's popularity ratings low is the absence of an acute, profound crisis that he could quickly overcome with determined countermeasures. This kind of severe yet resolvable challenge has been crucial for the political rise and governing success of right-wing populist leaders, especially Latin America's neoliberal populists of the 1990s. Fujimori in Peru, Menem in Argentina, and Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil (1990–92) drew striking political benefits from hyperinflation, which imposed enormous socioeconomic costs on the population, discredited the established "political class," and thus opened the path for their electoral victories. Upon taking power, these populist market reformers managed to end skyrocketing price rises with drastic adjustment packages. The seemingly miraculous success in averting a full-scale catastrophe and the resulting relief for the mass citizenry induced large majorities of people to back their populist saviors (Weyland 2002b: chap. 5).

This overwhelming groundswell of support allowed the three leaders to concentrate enormous power and move in an illiberal direction. Fujimori and Menem managed to change the constitution and win consecutive reelection. Fujimori, who won additional backing by defeating another dangerous enemy, namely the Shining Path guerrilla movement, even got away with a direct assault on Peruvian democracy via an authoritarian palace coup in April 1992. In sum, international experiences, especially from Latin America, show how acute problems can offer auspicious political opportunities to populist leaders – and thus jeopardize liberal democracy.

President Trump, by contrast, lacks the opportunity to turn adversity into advantage. Because his predecessor left the US economy in good

shape, this populist leader cannot easily become his country's savior. The problems that fueled Trump's rise, such as deindustrialization and the loss of well-paid jobs, do not allow for a quick resolution, especially in a market economy, which precludes massive employment programs. The cultural value shifts that many of Trump's core supporters decry are even harder to reverse. The US president therefore does not have the chance to effect a stunning turnaround that would earn him overwhelming popular support and in this way enable him to distort, hollow out, and perhaps suffocate liberal democracy.

In conclusion, we are confident that these four impediments will protect US democracy from the populism of Donald Trump. While international experiences show that this type of plebiscitarian leadership can undermine and destroy democracy from the inside, systematic efforts by elected chief executives to abuse their power have succeeded only under conditions that do not seem to prevail in the United States. Thus, this book suggests that typical populist strategies and tactics are unlikely to achieve resounding political success in the United States and to do substantial, lasting damage to liberal democracy. President Trump's impulses certainly seem worrisome, but he is hemmed in by a web of obstacles and cannot cut these fetters due to his lack of overwhelming mass support. Contrary to the fears expressed in a recent essay title (Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2017), "America *is* still safe for democracy" (our emphasis).

Yet, although the strength of the checks-and-balances system in the United States and his limited popular and party support will prevent President Trump from concentrating power and undermining democratic institutions, he can singlehandedly violate liberal democratic norms. In fact, the populist in the White House has delighted in committing such transgressions by employing harsh, hostile rhetoric, ignoring financial conflicts of interest, questioning the legitimacy of elections, and intervening in traditionally non-partisan institutions. These deviations from long-established rules of proper behavior have not seriously affected the functioning of US democracy, however.

In particular, President Trump's degradation of democratic norms is exceedingly unlikely to undermine and limit democratic competitiveness, the core principle and engine of liberal democracy, which stimulates popular participation, guarantees the government's accessibility, and induces its accountability and responsiveness (Schmitter 1983: 889–891). The populist leader's insults and threats, verbal attacks on politicians and the press, and violations of transparency and accountability have certainly not succeeded in intimidating civil society and the partisan opposition or

skewing the electoral playing field in a significant way. Instead, the new president's brash and impulsive behavior has had the opposite effect, energizing his adversaries and prompting a wider range of citizens and political groups to counteract his initiatives and to contest him and his supporters in elections. Thus, rather than distorting or suffocating democratic competitiveness, as populist leaders such as Fujimori, Chávez, Orbán, and Erdoğan have managed to do (see, in general, Levitsky and Way 2010), Trump has inadvertently mobilized the opposition, fomented electoral contestation, and thus – paradoxically – strengthened democratic competitiveness.

Because President Trump has failed to win over the majority of the citizenry or garner numerous legislative achievements, future US leaders are unlikely to emulate his confrontational style. The president's unpredictable, incoherent behavior and the corresponding chaos in the White House do not offer attractive role models for ambitious politicians. To the contrary, the new president's transgressions may well prompt a pro-democratic backlash, similar to the reassertions of liberal democracy that have occurred in Latin American countries such as Brazil and Peru after the downfall of their populist leaders. Rather than serving as a paragon for imitation, this populist leader has already turned into an example to avoid, both inside the United States and on the global scene, where the backlash against Donald Trump contributed to Marine Le Pen's striking defeat in France's presidential election of 2017.

A Pragmatic Conceptual Basis

Liberal, Pluralist Democracy

To assess the probable consequences of Donald Trump's populism for US democracy, this volume employs a conventional definition of democracy, which highlights the centrality of electoral procedures in a liberal institutional framework and a pluralistic society. This concept, explained best by Robert Dahl's classic study (1971: chap. 1),[6] guided the literature on democratic transitions in the 1980s (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: chap. 2) and has since turned into the standard notion employed in the field of comparative politics. Dahl's concept essentially conceives of democracy as comprising two dimensions. "Public contestation" means

[6] Writing shortly after the student revolt of 1968, at the tail end of the direct democracy upsurge of the 1960s, Dahl (1971) pragmatically avoided normative debates about the true meaning of democracy and employed the neologism of "polyarchy" for what political science has subsequently called liberal, pluralist democracy.

fair political competition in a setting of pluralistic debate and open criticism, while "inclusiveness" or "participation" denotes the extension of political citizenship: is most of the adult population entitled to take part in political competition?

These two dimensions reflect the historical emergence of liberal, pluralist democracy (Held 2006: chap. 3; Keane 2009: 159–169). This model of rule arose from a marriage of the majoritarian principles derived from the maxim of popular sovereignty ("rule of the people") and the liberal quest to guarantee political freedom. This latter goal requires firm safeguards against the potential abuse of power, even if government power is exercised by the popular majority. To prevent a "tyranny of the majority," liberalism insists on tempering majority rule with protections for minority rights. In sum, liberal democracy rests on a compromise between partly complementary, yet partly divergent, criteria for minimizing political domination. The majority gets its way, as long as it does not infringe on core concerns of minorities.

The double-sided nature of liberal, pluralist democracy has crucial implications for assessing the repercussions of populism (see recently Mounk 2018: 25–28). As discussed below, populism can bring advances on the dimension of inclusiveness and participation, especially during the early stages of democratic development, when one of the crucial conflicts centers on the extension of suffrage. As regards the dimension of contestation, by contrast, populism, with its strong majoritarian impetus and power-concentrating tendencies, creates problems and risks. Indeed, as we discuss below, populism is inherently opposed to the liberal side of democracy (see recently, on "good" versus "bad" populism, Diamond 2017: 4–6). Yet, before discussing these normative questions in greater depth, it is crucial to clarify the meaning of "populism."

The Concept of Populism

Populism has long been a heavily contested concept. Despite decades of discussion and innumerable contributions, including by some contributors to this volume (see, e.g., Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Madrid 2008; Roberts 1995; and Weyland 2001), no consensus has emerged on how to conceptualize populism. Instead, scholars have continued to use a wide variety of definitions. The brand new *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017), for instance, features three distinct conceptual approaches.

Because this volume focuses on a specific research question, it can avoid these thorny and perhaps interminable conceptual debates. Instead,

we employ a pragmatic approach. Many authors escape from conceptual swamps by settling on "working definitions." In a similar spirit, this study adopts a "working list" of broadly consensual cases. Interestingly, despite the continuing definitional disagreements, scholars largely agree on the political movements and leaders that count as populist.[7] This working list, which will serve as a comparative reference for elucidating the Trump presidency, includes the following.

(1) In Europe:
- Austria, Jörg Haider
- France, Marine Le Pen
- Greece, Alexis Tsipras (chief executive 2015–present)
- Hungary, Viktor Orbán (2010–present)[8]
- Italy, Silvio Berlusconi (1994–5, 2001–6, 2008–11)
- the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders
- Slovakia, Vladimír Mečiar (1990–1, 1992–4, 1994–8) and Robert Fico (2006–10, 2012–18)
- Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003–14, 2014–present)

(2) In Latin America:
- Argentina, Juan Perón (1946–55, 1973–4), Carlos Menem (1989–99), Néstor Kirchner (2003–7), and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–15)
- Brazil, Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–2)
- Ecuador, Rafael Correa (2007–17)
- Peru, Alan García (1985–90) and Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000)
- Venezuela, Hugo Chávez (1998–2013)

President Trump as a Populist

Given that this volume focuses on Donald Trump, we take this pragmatic approach to the conceptualization of populism one step further by demonstrating that the new US president qualifies as a populist under all the main definitions. For this purpose, we briefly analyze the Trump administration in light of the crucial criteria and indicators of populism.

[7] There is the exceptional borderline case. Due to his grounding in a movement-based party, Bolivia's Evo Morales does not count as a full-scale populist in Weyland's political-strategic approach (Weyland 2017b: 66), whereas he qualifies under the ideational approach of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013: 148, 156), and, for Madrid (2008; 2012), he constitutes a prototypical case of "ethnopopulism."

[8] Orbán also served as prime minister from 1998 to 2002 but did not employ a populist strategy at that time.

One of the most widely used definitions frames populism as a personalistic political strategy (Barr 2009; Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Weyland 2001). Weyland (2001: 14), for example, defines populism "as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers." This definition has a couple of key components. First, it stresses the top-down, personalistic, and uninstitutionalized nature of populist leadership. Populism concentrates power in individuals, rather than in institutions. Second, it emphasizes the direct linkages that populist leaders seek to establish with their supporters. Populist leaders are often charismatic individuals who seek to communicate directly with the populace rather than working through intermediaries or party organizations. Populist leaders may preside over political parties, but they tend to circumvent party rules and bypass party organizations, governing in a personalistic, unmediated, and top-down manner. According to some scholars, populists are typically political outsiders who are not beholden to the traditional parties and the political establishment (Barr 2009; Levitsky and Loxton 2013). Weyland (2017b: 56–57) also stresses that the power of populists rests on their popular support – the sheer number of people supporting them – rather than on coercion, elite support, or economic clout. Populist leaders therefore often resort to mass rallies, elections, and plebiscites to strengthen their hold on power and intimidate the opposition.

President Trump certainly fits this definition of populism. The real estate magnate and media celebrity is very much of a political outsider and a personalistic leader who ran for president with little organized support. During the campaign Trump largely dispensed with organization, preferring to concentrate decision-making authority in his person. Since taking office he has continued that trend, wielding power in a personalistic manner, while marginalizing governmental and party bureaucracies. Although Trump won the presidential nomination of the Republican Party, he has kept party leaders at a distance and has not hesitated to attack them, including the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, and the Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan. Trump has staffed his Cabinet mostly with a variety of business and military leaders, rather than with powerful GOP politicians. Moreover, the most prominent Republican Party leader in his initial Cabinet, Reince Priebus, the former head of the Republican National Committee, was forced out of his position as chief of staff after only six months and replaced with a military general.