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When Democracy Trumps Populism

The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election left specialists of American politics perplexed and concerned about the future of US democracy. Because no populist leader had occupied the White House in 150 years, there were many questions about what to expect.

Marshaling the longstanding expertise of leading specialists of populism elsewhere in the world, this book provides the first systematic, comparative analysis of the prospects for US democracy under Trump, considering the two regions – Europe and Latin America – that have had the most ample recent experiences with populist chief executives. Chapters analyze the conditions under which populism slides into illiberal or authoritarian rule and in so doing derive well-grounded insights and scenarios for the US case, as well as a more general cross-national framework. The book makes an original argument about the likely resilience of US democracy and its institutions.

Kurt Weyland is Mike Hogg Professor in Liberal Arts in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. His recent books include *Revolution and Reaction: The Diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America* and *Making Waves: Democratic Contention in Europe and Latin America since the Revolutions of 1848*.

Raúl L. Madrid is Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Latin America* and *Retiring the State: The Politics of Pension Privatization in Latin America and Beyond*.

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When Democracy Trumps Populism

*European and Latin American Lessons
for the United States*

Edited by

KURT WEYLAND

University of Texas, Austin

RAÚL L. MADRID

University of Texas, Austin



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To Andreas and Nikolas, and Bela and Nico

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Foreword

Anna Grzymala-Busse

Could it happen here? The election of Donald Trump in November 2016 created a cottage industry of comparisons to Weimar Germany and analogies to fascism. Compounding the anxiety was a tide of growing populism across Europe and elsewhere, as increasingly authoritarian populists took power in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Poland, and the Philippines. More sober analyses followed, but the picture they painted was anything but reassuring, with titles such as *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk 2018), *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (Frum 2018), and *Can It Happen Here?*¹ (Sunstein 2017).

Among scholars of comparative and American politics, a peculiar tension emerged. The former were alarmed – the latter were relatively sanguine. Comparativists, familiar with the pattern of democratic erosion in twentieth-century Europe and Latin America, tended to emphasize the incremental nature of the slide toward authoritarianism. They were troubled by the acceptance by both the president and his supporters of racist, xenophobic, sexist, and violent language that denigrated political opponents and divided society into patriotic loyalists and the traitorous rest. Above all, they pointed to the new president's attacks on the media, the opposition, and marginalized groups, and the willingness to flout long-held norms of transparency and accountability, whether avoiding business conflicts of interest or publishing tax returns. Such steps – the attempts to limit suffrage, to delegitimize the opposition, to

¹ *It Can't Happen Here* is the confident and deeply ironic title of the 1935 Sinclair Lewis classic, detailing the authoritarian aftermath of the election of President Buzz Windrip.

attack institutions of oversight such as courts and the media – were all too familiar for students of comparative authoritarian regimes.

In contrast, students of *American* politics, the most durable democratic republic in the world, pointed to two salient aspects of the political context. First, the electoral coalition that brought Trump to power was a typical Republican coalition: he won 89 percent of the Republican vote, with 91 percent of white Republican women and 92 percent of Republican men supporting him.² There was no discernible impact of income, and Trump did best among white voters without a college degree. This was a typical Republican electorate, rather than furious impoverished mobs with pitchforks. The campaign itself was won in red and swing states, with many observers pointing to the weakness of Hillary Clinton as a candidate as the deciding factor. Donald Trump did not win the popular vote – but, then, neither did George W. Bush. In short, the winning coalition was a typical, normal one.

Second, many observers pointed to the unique institutional structure of the United States: a relatively weak presidency ensconced within a federal system with a strong set of checks and balances. These would be the guardrails of democracy: a Congress eager to defend its prerogatives, a court system that provided independent oversight, and states that offered an alternative set of regulations and safeguards. These scholars pointed to the extension of the sanctions on Russia, the early defeats of the Muslim travel ban, and the doubling down on climate change initiatives by states such as California as evidence for the system constraining whatever authoritarian impulses the new president would try to exercise.

In short, students of comparative and American politics appear to have been speaking past each other. And it is precisely this gap in understanding that this book addresses. The analyses here are both anxious about the future of liberal democracy, and tentatively confident that the separation of powers, the greater stability of political parties and durability of formal institutions, the political polarization (instead of the convergence that leads populists to come to power), and the absence of an economic or international crisis will all work to arrest democratic erosion in the United States. Several of the authors emphasize that the United States is different: here, the powers of an entrenched system of checks and balances, a strong party system, and the lack of majority support act as constraints on the power of populism to do damage. The

² See www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-exit-polls-how-donald-trump-won-the-us-presidency.

strength and stability of these institutions, and the public criticism, will arrest the erosion of democracy.

It is undoubtedly true that the United States is unlikely to follow fully the authoritarian pattern of Poland or Hungary, for example. The numerous veto points that exist in the presidential system make either changing the constitution or bringing the judiciary under formal political control, as Fidesz and PiS have done, unlikely and implausible, respectively. But Trump has followed other elements of the authoritarian populist template: attacking the media as “enemies of the people” and his opponents and critics as “crooked” or “criminal,” dividing society into good loyalists and treasonous critics, and freely lying about everything from the size of his inauguration crowds to the costs and benefits of free trade agreements.

What Europe, Latin America, and now the United States show is that populists pose a threat to liberal democracy. This is not only, as Raúl Madrid and Kurt Weyland note, because they divide the people and attempt to override institutional constraints. Populism may disregard minority rights, promote new political divisions, and create an antagonistic political culture, as Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove also argue. I would go further: the anti-democratic implications of populism follow from its very principles.

And it is here that three lessons of comparative politics should be brought to the forefront. First, ideology matters. Second, informal institutions are as important as their formal counterparts. Third, the strength and content of political competition, and the alternatives it offers, may be orthogonal to the age and durability of the parties.

Populist Ideology: Take Them Seriously and Literally

First and fundamentally, populists in government oppose and corrode two fundamental aspects of liberal democracy: the equal representation of all citizens, and the structuring of politics by the rule of law and formal institutions. They do so because their very ideological commitments, however thin they may be, demand both the redefinition of legitimate citizens and an anti-institutional stance. As Cas Mudde has crisply defined it, populism is a “thin-centered” 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” (Mudde 2004: 543). Populist parties thus share a fundamental emphasis

on the division between a popular, positively valued “us” and a corrupt, elite “them” (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000; Stanley 2008; Weyland 2001). Such parties thus emphasize the unity and organic cohesion of the people/nation, who mistrust an equally monolithic political elite (Stanley 2008; Mudde 2004). This is not to argue that ideology is destiny – but that the actions of populists follow directly from their ideological commitments, such as they are.

Thus, populist parties and movements are defined by their claim to represent a “people” or a nation, rather than specific interests, and by their rejection of the political elites as corrupt and unresponsive to the people.³ First, however, the people or the nation have to be defined. While in Latin America this meant the inclusion and prioritization of marginalized groups, such as indigenous populations or the poor, in Europe this has meant renewed efforts to exclude vulnerable groups from the definition of the “people.” Such groups include non-citizens, ethnic minority groups, religious minorities, and other vulnerable populations, such as gays or (immigrant) children. This is majority rule without minority rights. Second, those who disagree with populist representation of “the people” are obviously not the “real” nation. The opposition (whether elite or popular) is, by definition, treasonous and treacherous – and should be summarily dealt with. Note here that Trump has successfully fused populist, authoritarian, and nationalist frames, as Bart Bonikowski points out, making defense of “the people” against the threats posed by immigrants, free trade, and international organizations a paramount priority. He has freely attacked the media, his political opponents, and those who are not

³ Other scholars have focused on populism as a form of *discourse* or rhetoric that pits the people against the elites in a Manichean moral struggle (Hawkins 2009) or a mode of political expression (Kazin 1995; Jansen 2011). Here, populism is treated as a mode of expression, or a context, rather than a way to characterize political parties or politicians. Populism serves as a language that can be used by many, instead of defining specific political actors. As Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009) point out, political parties may have some populist characteristics but not others, and combine them to varying degrees with other appeals: “populist” is a spectrum rather than a binary category. Yet, if any actor can use populist discourse, identifying the impact of populism becomes more difficult. Defining populists as those who consistently articulate the populist ideology makes their identification, and the tracing of their impact, easier. Populism is also defined as a *political strategy* that promotes redistributive politics through a personalized, top-down approach, with unorganized popular support (Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin 2011; Weyland 2001; Levitsky and Roberts 2011a). This definition applies particularly well to Latin American populist movements. In Europe and North America, many parties have made redistributive appeals and populists have not relied on particular organizational forms. Finally, other scholars see populism as the “politics of personality” (Taggart 2000: 101). Yet personalism is certainly not sufficient for populism – and it is not clear that it is necessary.

“his people” – much as Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński has spoken derisively of the “worst sort of Poles,” who do not demonstrate loyalty. In short, the need to define “the people” often results in societal division and the marginalization of vulnerable populations.

The anti-institutional stance of populists is just as corrosive. In the populist vision, the institutions of liberal democracy, whether courts, parliaments, or laws, are not to be trusted precisely because they are the products of corrupt elites who do not have the people’s interests at heart (and who actively *oppose* these interests). Therefore, these institutions need to be circumvented, or, better yet, brought under the control of “the people” – as represented, of course, by the ruling populist party. This is in keeping with the populist assumption that the “people” have a common shared interest, a general will that ought to be the aim of politics, and that the “elites” betray it. Moreover, and as a result, populists also emphasize demands for popular sovereignty and direct democracy, rather than the mediation of interests through democratic institutions such as parliaments or parties. Rallies and tweets, rather than press conferences and policy proposals, are the order of the day.

As a result of this suspicion of the institutions of liberal democracy, among the most dangerous of populism’s consequences are its erosion of *formal* democratic rules and liberal institutions. These destructive effects of populist rule include the takeover and taming of formal institutions of the rule of law and liberal democracy (such as the takeover by the ruling party of the constitutional courts in Poland and Hungary), and new legal constraints that undermine liberal norms (constitutional changes, limiting the freedom of the media, financing only loyal NGOs, etc.). These legal and formal maneuvers have been used to undermine the opposition’s legal standing as well as to limit criticism, transparency, and accountability. As the authors in this book note, institutions in new or unstable democracies are especially vulnerable to such corrosive de-engineering.

The Vulnerability of Critical Informal Institutions

Just as importantly, however, populist governments have also made a point of undermining *informal* democratic norms (conflict of interest laws, financial transparency, respect for the opposition, access and accountability to the media, and party loyalty as the basis for the awarding of tenders, contracts, and government responsibilities). Such informal institutions, unlike their formal counterparts, are not enforced by the state or written down on parchment – yet they are critical to the

functioning of any regime, since they can reinforce, undermine, or substitute for formal institutions (Carey 2000; Helmke and Levitsky 2004).

It is in the erosion of the critical informal institutions of democracy that President Trump has excelled: beginning with his refusal to publish his tax returns, as all modern presidential candidates before him have, to the opaque financial dealings with Russian partners, to his scurrilous and derisory nicknames for his political critics, to his willingness to tolerate allegations of rank corruption in his administration, as with Scott Pruitt, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. Here the damage may go deeper and be far less reversible; such norms and informal rules are the product of decades of elite and popular interactions and the shaping of expectations that govern political behavior. Once the Overton window⁴ of acceptable political discourse and behavior shifts, the unthinkable becomes normalized.

While Americanists have emphasized the strength of formal institutions, comparativists have also focused on these informal institutions, which are both critical to the functioning of formal institutions and vulnerable to failures of the consensus that underpins them. And it is here that one might disagree with Madrid and Weyland's relatively optimistic conclusion about the powers of an entrenched system of checks and balances, a strong party system, and the lack of majority support as constraints on the power of populism to do damage in the United States. Checks and balances work only when there is some degree of autonomy, or dissonance, between the various branches, and when informal norms of appropriate political behavior hold. A complicit and compliant Republican Congress has offered little constraint on the presidency so far (with the notable exceptions of federal budget spending and Russian sanctions). Without that partisan balance, the formal capacities of a system of separation of powers simply are not exercised. Further, checks and balances rely on both sides being willing to play by the same rules – the “Can they do that?” problem identified by Kevin Deegan-Krause. So far politicians in power have been unafraid to use mechanisms and instruments that the opposition could not, such as abolishing the filibuster rule for judicial appointments (Democrats in 2013) or being unwilling to even consider

⁴ The term “Overton window” – coined by Joseph P. Overton, former vice-president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy – refers to the range of politically acceptable policies and stances. For example, in the first half of the twentieth century the window included policies that were discriminatory against women and minorities; such direct and obvious legal discrimination is now outside the Overton window of acceptable policy.

a Supreme Court nominee because the vacancy occurred too late in a president's term (Republicans in 2016).

It is true that, “as long as President Trump cannot garner overwhelming popular support, his capacity for translating his mass backing into influence on decision-making seems distinctly limited” (Weyland and Madrid), in the sense that he does not have the mandate to transform the polity. But, given the lack of formal checks and balances in the Republican-held Congress, and the unwillingness of active Republican politicians to criticize the president's excesses, the calculus is simple: so long as the Republican base supports the president, the Republican majority in Congress will offer no effective brake on his erosion of democratic norms and values. And, as Ken Roberts notes, the dangers of democratic erosion “rest heavily on Trump's ability to induce ongoing Republican collaboration with his autocratic mode of governance. Trump cannot dismantle democratic checks and balances on his own; he needs partisan collaborators to help stack the courts, uphold executive decrees, emasculate and politicize investigative bodies, and manipulate electoral institutions” (Roberts). Without an informal (and externally unenforceable) commitment to liberal democratic rules within the Republican Congress, then the system of checks and balances is less than reassuring.

Party Competition and Why It Matters

This brings up a final point comparativists would emphasize: the importance of critical and strong party competition. Here, the institutionalization of party systems is not enough, since it is orthogonal to the quality and robustness of democracy (Hicken and Kuhonta 2011). After all, authoritarian single-party regimes were also ruled by long-lived and entrenched parties.

The Republican Party may be a storied and entrenched organization, while Trump is an amateur, and one whose rhetoric far exceeds his actual actions, as Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Kevin Deegan-Krause note in their respective chapters. But that makes his takeover of the Republican Party more, not less, alarming. Precisely because the Grand Old Party(!) is an entrenched and established political party, it is deeply worrying to observe its rapid transformation into a far more nativist, protectionist movement that is skeptical of formal state institutions, such as the courts or the intelligence services, and disparaging of free media and the opposition. And the party has done so not on the strength of policy successes, but by virtue of the powerful appeals of the president.

What matters instead, it appears, is the robustness of party competition. First, if it is to preclude populists from entering governments in the first place, political party competition has to offer real policy alternatives – neither polarization nor convergence, both of which have led to new opportunities for populists, as Verbeek and Zaslove note. In Europe, mainstream political parties have tended to converge on many aspects of policy – whether European Union accession in the newer post-communist democracies, the acceptance of immigration (prior to 2015), or the “third way” politics that merged left and right approaches to the economy in the 1990s (Innes 2002). The result is that populist parties became the one set of critics of this consensus: the one set of parties that would speak for popular concerns and grievances regarding this consensus. These same populists could then differentiate themselves from the mainstream consensus, as the one set of responsive and accountable political actors. In the United States, for its part, both the Republican and Democratic electorates share policy preferences; what differs is that the Republican voters are more susceptible to fear- and identity-driven appeals (Mason 2018). This meant that Trump could capture this anxious and threatened electorate, capitalizing on its worries and grievances while promising beautiful health care and endless winning. Here, partly as a result of Clinton-era economic and social policies, and partly as a result of the beholdenness of both parties to big donors, the Democratic Party could not articulate a convincing alternative to this rhetoric, nor could it persuade more voters that its proposals were different and credible enough. Had mainstream parties conducted more of a debate over policy and ideology, had they differentiated themselves more in the eyes of the electorate, populists would have had less of a field.

Once in power, political competition also matters as a constraint on populist impulses. To do so, it has to offer a credible electoral threat that keeps the governing populists in check for fear of losing office. In Slovakia, as Deegan-Krause explores, a populist authoritarian was eventually defeated precisely because the opposition *did* coordinate, offered a clear alternative, refused to enter Vladimír Mečiar’s governing coalition, and shunned him into political irrelevance. In contrast, the authoritarian populist governments of Poland and Hungary are currently aided by weak and fragmented opposition forces that neither exercise discipline in parliament nor articulate why they should govern instead. It remains to be seen how the Democratic Party in the United States will tackle the twin problems of internal cohesion and popular alternatives.

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Conclusion

Liberal democracy has been under siege, or simply defeated, time and time again in Europe and Latin America. Informed by the lessons of historical democratic collapses in other regions, many scholars of comparative politics and other observers have been sounding alarms. For all committed democrats, this volume represents a chance to evaluate these anxieties against a background of careful and sustained analyses. The message that emerges is necessarily speculative – but one that suggests a cautious optimism, if the formal institutions and the durability of the political parties can offset the ideologically justified erosion of informal democratic norms and an attenuated political party opposition.

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Donald Trump's election created a problem for US democracy, but an opportunity for political science. The unexpected electoral victory of a populist leader challenged many conventional assumptions in the field of American politics and provided a chance for specialists in comparative politics to offer insights and lessons. After all, populism has played a much more central role in Latin American and, increasingly, European politics than it has in the United States. Experts on these regions therefore had ample experiences to draw from that might shed light on the typical strategies and tactics employed by populist leaders and the political repercussions of their rise and fall.

To take advantage of this analytical opportunity, we, the editors, organized a research conference in September 2017 that gave rise to the present volume. We are grateful to Virginia Garrard, director of the University of Texas's LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, Douglas Biow, director of our Center for European Studies (CES), and Robert Moser, chair of the Department of Government, for their strong support and financial help for this initiative. We also thank the College of Liberal Arts, the Institute of Historical Studies, and the Mike Hogg Professorship in Liberal Arts for generous funding. Most importantly, we thank Sally Dickson and Nhi Nguyen of CES and, especially, Paloma Díaz of LLILAS for the excellent conference organization.

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Zeynep Somer-Topcu, and Jeffrey Tulis. Moreover, Caitlin Andrews took excellent notes of the conference proceedings.

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