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The Populist Threat to Democracy

THE SURPRISING ADVANCE OF POPULISM

Populism has disturbed and disrupted democracies for decades, in various areas of the world. But for much of this time, it was seen as a transitional or residual problem that would soon pass. In the region most affected by populism – Latin America – various personalistic plebiscitarian leaders had won government power since the 1930s and had enacted substantial socioeconomic and political transformations.¹ Yet observers regarded this upsurge of populism in the mid-twentieth century as a transitional stage of development. Newly mobilized mass groupings were falling for charismatic *caudillos*, but these irresponsible, unaccountable presidents would soon disappoint people's excessive hopes. As the citizenry learned from these bad experiences, populism would quickly lose appeal; advancing modernization would bring democratic maturation (Germani 1978).

By contrast to Latin America, where personalistic plebiscitarian leaders managed to win majority support, in Europe populism emerged as a fringe phenomenon. Diehard movements hailing from the radical right long remained marginal and looked like a moribund remnant of resentful nostalgia tinged with paleo-fascism, which generational replacement, ongoing post-modernization, and liberal value change would surely eliminate. For these reasons, early observers saw the different regional versions of populism as a temporary problem or a limited nuisance, rather than a serious threat to democracy. Developmental progress, political learning, and democratic institution building would sooner or later contain and overcome its political fallout and forestall or limit any damage to liberal pluralism.

¹ For stylistic reasons, I use “personalistic plebiscitarian leadership” interchangeably with the term populism. Later, I explain this notion, which is central to my political-strategic definition of populism.

Against all expectations, however, populism refused to disappear. In Latin America, one wave of populism followed upon the other. After the military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s had suppressed classical populism à la Juan Perón (1946–55) and Getúlio Vargas (1951–54), a new type of populism arose in the restored democracies of the 1980s and 1990s. Interestingly, several of these leaders proved populism's typical adaptability by promoting market-oriented adjustment programs, which reversed the protectionist state interventionism spearheaded by their classical forebears (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996). Soon thereafter, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership took another surprising twist: Left-wing populists came to contest this turn to neoliberalism and won massive support with a return to state interventionism in the early 2000s (Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter 2010; Levitsky and Roberts 2011). Continuing this dizzying slalom, in recent years a new, culturally conservative type of right-wing populist emerged (Kestler 2022), most prominently Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019–22) (Hunter and Power 2019).

Thus, while each version of populism did remain a temporary phenomenon, populism as a political strategy proved irrepressible and recurring; and through its rapid mutations, it demonstrated its adaptability, which boosted its chances of electoral success. With their skill in taking advantage of any opportunity and win power under variegated circumstances, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders became a frequent threat to democracy in Latin America. Just like Argentina's Perón had done in the 1940s and 1950s, neoliberal populist Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990–2000) as well as anti-neoliberal populist Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999–2013) suffocated democracy and imposed competitive-authoritarian regimes; and right-winger Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (2019–present) is pushing as hard for “eternal” self-perpetuation as left-winger Evo Morales (2006–19) did in Bolivia. In fact, with the normative delegitimation and international prohibition of military coups in Latin America, populism now constitutes the most serious danger to liberal pluralism in the region.

As populism defied expectations by continuing to haunt much of Latin America, it achieved an even more surprising feat in Europe by starting to win greater support and emerging from its extremist ghetto (Akkerman, De Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; more skeptical recently: Bartels 2023: chap. 6). Indeed, rejuvenated right-wingers or personalistic plebiscitarian leaders of a conservative orientation eventually managed to capture government power even in the highly developed, solidly democratic western half of the Old Continent, as in Italy after 1994 (Newell 2019) and Austria in 1999. In more and more countries, populism turned into a serious competitor, for instance by advancing to presidential runoff elections in France in 2002, 2017, and 2022. And in Eastern Europe, many new democracies that had embraced political liberalism with such enthusiasm in 1989 experienced a backlash that brought growing numbers of populists to power (Krastev and Holmes 2019: chap. 1). Shockingly, some of them squeezed or even suffocated democracy, most

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strikingly and consequentially in the poster children of the post-communist transition: Poland and especially Hungary.

To achieve this increasing electoral success, Europe's populist movements and parties tried hard to leave their paleo- or neofascist origins behind. They recruited fresh, young leaders and employed more attractive appeals by raising new issues that mainstream parties did not want to touch, such as mass immigration, seen as a problem by substantial segments of the citizenry. In these ways, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders left marginality behind and put mainstream parties on the defensive, challenging their dominance of the electoral arena. By invoking and normalizing widespread fears and resentments, populist challengers induced some establishment formations to modify their own message, while drawing voters away from those parties that refused to undertake such opportunistic moves. With their unsavory yet savvy campaigns, illiberal, anti-pluralist leaders turned into effective contenders for chief executive office, threatening to undermine the quality of democracy, if not jeopardize its survival.

These risks became highly acute and salient in 2016 with the shocking Brexit referendum and the stunning electoral triumph of Donald Trump. If populist movements could achieve such unexpected success in two of the oldest, strongest democracies in the world, whose unshakable consolidation nobody had hitherto doubted, then a fundamental reassessment seemed to be in order. Had observers seriously underestimated the danger posed by populism? Democracy suddenly looked fragile and precarious.

After all, populist election victories raised the urgent question whether the "really existing" regimes of liberal pluralism were being weakened by oligarchic ossification, technocratic detachment, and the resulting representational deficits (Mounk 2018). How grave was their vulnerability to attack? Indeed, liberal democracy has an inherent weakness and potentially fatal flaw: Populist leaders who win government power can, in principle, exploit their electoral mandate and institutional attributions and resolutely concentrate power, distorting and perhaps asphyxiating democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Would headstrong Trump, for instance, bend or even break the USA's corroded checks and balances, impose his will while disrespecting judicial constraints, and use all kinds of tricks to engineer a reelection victory? Would US democracy, already hollowed out by deepening political and affective polarization, totter or even crumble under the brash populist's energetic assault (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Graber, Levinson, and Tushnet 2018; Mounk 2018; Sunstein 2018; Mettler and Lieberman 2020; Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2022)?

POPULISM'S INHERENT THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

The advance of populism in Latin America and Europe during the early twenty-first century, which helped to feed a global wave of populism that reached Asia as well (Mizuno and Phongpaichit 2009; Kenny 2018), was problematic and

worrisome because populism by nature stands in tension with liberal pluralism and democracy (Urbinati 2019; Sadurski 2022; Issacharoff 2023). This danger arises from the core of populism, namely personalistic plebiscitarian leadership, which is anti-institutional, polarizing, and confrontational. This book adopts a political-strategic definition, which is best suited for assessing populism's effective impact by examining the political and institutional repercussions of populist governance; the section on "Central Concepts" later in this chapter comprehensively discusses and justifies this definitional approach.

The political-strategic definition conceives of populism as revolving around personalistic, usually charismatic leadership that is sustained by direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized connections to a heterogeneous, amorphous, and largely unorganized mass of followers (Weyland 2001, 2017, 2021b; Carrión 2022: 9–14; Kenny 2023, forthcoming). Personalistic leaders are dominant and domineering, surround themselves with personal loyalists, and run their movements at will. They attract their main support from followers who fervently believe in their redemptive mission – a direct emotional connection that avoids intermediation and organization and is averse to institutionalization, which would supplant total dedication to the charismatic savior with a "mechanical" relationship (Andrews-Lee 2021). Consequently, personalistic plebiscitarian leadership constitutes the main axis of populism.

Both of these principal features – personalism and plebiscitarianism – stand at cross-purposes with liberal pluralism. Personalistic leaders are strong-willed and constantly seek to boost their own autonomy and power. No wonder that they see liberal institutions, especially checks and balances, as obstacles to overcome. They try to undermine or suspend the separation of powers by imposing their unchallengeable dominance and hegemony. They try to capture all independent institutions and suffocate oppositional forces. Where they succeed, they erode political liberty, skew electoral competition, and engineer their own self-perpetuation, for years if not decades. With its anti-institutional bent, populism is pushing democracy toward backsliding; if it manages to operate unchecked, it moves toward competitive authoritarianism.

Plebiscitarianism reinforces and exacerbates these deleterious tendencies. By basing their quest for and exercise of power on direct, unmediated, and uninstitutionalized connections to amorphous, heterogeneous, not very well-organized masses of followers, personalistic leaders lack a solid base of political sustenance. Because their support is potentially fickle, they try to strengthen it through deliberate confrontation and polarization. By turning politics into a war against supposedly craven and dangerous enemies, they want to induce their followers to rally around the leader and develop fervent emotional attachments. This conflictual strategy, however, entails disrespect for tolerance and pluralism. It turns democratic competitors, who have legitimate rights to win elections and then govern, into total foes that must be combated with all means and definitely blocked from gaining control of the state. Claiming the monopolistic representation of "the will of the people,"

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while denouncing their opponents as corrupt, selfish elites, populist leaders employ an ample set of machinations and tricks to preclude any alternation in power – suppressing political competitiveness, a core principle of democracy (Schmitter 1983: 887–91).

With these pernicious tactics, populism poses serious threats to democracy. What makes this risk especially acute is the cunning strategy of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders, who seek to exploit a congenital vulnerability of liberal pluralism: Political freedom protects even those who intend to undermine or abolish this freedom. Accordingly, where populist leaders triumph in democratic elections, they can use their legitimately won attributions to dismantle democracy from the inside; and they can employ formally legal mechanisms for this illegitimate purpose. In institutional settings that are particularly open to change, power-hungry populists have strangled liberal pluralism without violating any laws or constitutional provisions, as Viktor Orbán (2010–present) managed to do in Hungary (Scheppele 2018, 549–52; Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020: 79–90). Where the institutional framework is firmer, populist presidents can appeal to popular sovereignty and invoke their electoral mandate to push aside legal obstacles and engineer power concentration in para-legal ways (Brewer-Carías 2010; Weyland 2020: 392–99).

Because populism inherently challenges democracy, its wave-like advance in the early third millennium seemed to endanger liberal pluralism in a wide range of countries. In fact, personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have asphyxiated a number of Latin American democracies over the decades; more recently, they have done increasing damage in Europe, particularly the post-communist East; and in 2016, Donald Trump won office in the paragon of liberal democracy, whose institutions had been designed to forestall the rise of demagogic outsiders. If even this “least likely case” fell to populism, where was liberal pluralism still safe? Would democracy crumble under the pressures of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders?

HOW SEVERE IS THE POPULIST THREAT?

The shock of Trump’s election, the most striking instance of populism’s world-wide spread, unleashed an outpouring of concern and fear about democracy’s fate, indicated in the black cover, scary title, and bestselling success of Levitsky and Ziblatt’s (2018) *How Democracies Die*. Many other volumes painted dire pictures as well (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Graber, Levinson, and Tushnet 2018; Mounk 2018; Sunstein 2018; Mettler and Lieberman 2020). Indeed, some commentators went so far as to raise the specter of “tyranny” (Snyder 2017) and even “fascism” (Connolly 2017; Stanley 2018).

Arguably, however, these initial observers were overly impressed by the fearsome possibilities that populist agency can, in principle, hold; shell-shocked, they did not examine how likely such a deleterious outcome was. They highlighted “*how* democracies die,” but did not analyze under what conditions

democracies actually die, and how easy or difficult it is to kill them. Indeed, the focus on the possibilities of democratic death made observers overestimate the probabilities of democracy's downfall. By outlining all the potential ways in which democracies *can* die, scholars suggested that democracy can die rather easily.

This book presents a more balanced picture by systematically assessing the probabilities of democracy's death. The exact risk depends on the conditions under which populist leaders actually manage to impose their hegemony and dismantle liberal pluralism from the inside. For this purpose, I not only examine cases in which this outcome has occurred, as initial observers tended to do (Ginsburg and Huq 2018b; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Kaufman and Haggard 2019), but consider a comprehensive set of populist governments and probe their regime impact:² Why did democracy fall in some settings and situations, yet not in many others? This analytical procedure, which avoids the methodological problem of "selection on the dependent variable" (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 129–37, 141–49), immediately yields a clear result: Not all populist chief executives managed to sate their power hunger – far from it; instead, democracy survived populist governments in many cases.

In fact, wide-ranging statistical studies find that only in about one-third of cases have populist chief executives done substantial damage to democracy; and they have truly suffocated liberal pluralism only in approximately one-quarter of all instances (Kyle and Mounk 2018: 17; Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, and Grahn 2019: 9–10).³ My earlier investigation of thirty cases of personalistic plebiscitarian governance in contemporary Latin America and Europe, the two regions with particularly large numbers of populist governments, yielded an even lower death rate, namely 20 percent (Weyland 2020: 397–99; see also Weyland 2022a: 12–14). Thus, the probability of democracy's downfall, not to speak of its lasting replacement by competitive authoritarianism, has actually not been very high. Instead, liberal pluralism has demonstrated considerable robustness.

Populism's danger has been limited because sustained efforts to asphyxiate democracy have succeeded only under fairly restrictive conditions: The coincidence and intersection of distinctive institutional weaknesses and unusual conjunctural opportunities were necessary prerequisites for the populist strangulation of democracy in Latin America and Europe after the end of the Cold

² All the populist chief executives examined in this book are men, with one exception, Argentina's Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. With apologies to her, this book therefore uses male pronouns to avoid cumbersome expressions such as "s/he" or the grammatically problematic neosingular "they." See similarly Matovski (2021: 4, n. 3).

³ Focusing on average effects at the level of statistical aggregates, Kenny (2020: 268–70) finds that populist governments reduce press freedom – but only to a limited extent. In a brand new study, Cole and Schofer (2023: 19, 23, 25) report "substantial" effects, but do not clarify their exact magnitude.

War (Weyland 2020: 399–402). Thus, assaults by personalistic plebiscitarian leaders do not advance easily; populists cannot dismantle democracy at will but depend on favorable preconditions to realize their nefarious designs. This important finding can alleviate recent fears. Populism is far from universally lethal.

Instead, a differentiated picture emerges. Democracy is very safe in advanced industrialized countries such as the USA, where institutional strength and high levels of socioeconomic development cushion against the severe, acute crises that populist leaders can use to win overwhelming mass support. In less consolidated democracies, personalistic plebiscitarian chief executives have greater room for maneuver. But even in systems of middling institutional strength, they still face substantial constraints, which they can shove aside only under unusual circumstances, when they benefit from extraordinary windfalls or – paradoxically – confront exceptional challenges. Overall, then, liberal pluralism displays considerable, albeit differential resilience in facing the threat that populism undoubtedly poses.

MAIN ARGUMENTS

Populism's Threat: Institutions and Conjunctural Factors as Crucial Conditions

This book offers a realistic assessment of the danger arising from populism by systematically analyzing the specific conditions under which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders actually manage to dismantle democracy and install competitive authoritarianism. By demonstrating that this deleterious outcome prevails only under certain restrictive circumstances, the investigation overcomes earlier observers' preoccupation with deleterious *possibilities* and provides an empirically based estimate of real *probabilities*. While possibilities appear open-ended and can therefore look scary, an assessment of probabilities yields much more relevant information about effective risks, which are significantly lower than often feared.

My analysis starts from the political-strategic definition of populism, which revolves around personalistic plebiscitarian leadership. Accordingly, democracy faces the most acute danger where headstrong, overbearing leaders find the greatest room of maneuver, and where unusually strong and broad mass support boosts their political clout and enables them to push through their undemocratic aspirations. By contrast, where populist chief executives encounter firm and resilient constraints, especially an entrenched institutional framework, or where they lack the chance to garner overwhelming popular backing, liberal pluralism has a great deal of immunity against their machinations and depredations.

Heuristically, the political-strategic definition thus suggests two types of factors as crucial preconditions for the populist destruction of democracy. First,

some type of institutional weakness is a necessary prerequisite for power-hungry chief executives to establish and cement their hegemony, undermine the partisan opposition, squeeze civil society, and seriously skew the electoral arena: Only brittle fortresses can be breached. Second, because even weak or medium-strong institutions hinder or impede populist assaults, there is a second necessary condition for these power grabs to succeed: Only if personalistic leaders encounter unusual conjunctural opportunities for boosting their plebiscitarian support to sky-high levels can they achieve their undemocratic goals. Under normal circumstances, they may do some damage, but do not command the clout to smother liberal pluralism definitively.

As Chapter 2 explains in depth, institutional weakness in contemporary Europe and Latin America can take three forms. First, the Old Continent's parliamentary systems, with their attenuated separation of powers, are relatively open to legal transformation; consequently, populist prime ministers may manage to disfigure democracy from the inside. Second, many of Latin America's presidential systems have been habituated to para-legal infringements: Transgressive presidents go beyond formal rules, arrogate attributions, and impose changes with impunity, trying hard to push aside objections and opposition from the legislative and judicial branch (Levitsky and Murillo 2009, 2013; Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2019). Third, some Latin American countries have suffered from high instability, with institutional frameworks rocked and battered by serious conflicts, as evident in irregular evictions of presidents or violent coup attempts. Such precarious institutional settings have especially low resilience.

These three types of institutional weakness provide different openings for populist leaders, and they diverge in their degree of institutional debility. High instability makes a democracy particularly fragile, whereas more stable presidential systems constitute the least propitious settings for personalistic plebiscitarian leaders; after all, para-legal impositions provoke considerable resistance and friction. With their attenuated separation of powers, which facilitates the legal asphyxiation of democracy, parliamentary systems are intermediate in this ranking of institutional weakness.

The conjunctural opportunities for boosting plebiscitarian mass support also come in three different types. First, populist chief executives who reap enormous resource windfalls, primarily from voluminous hydrocarbon exports, obtain a flood of revenues that allows for the widespread distribution of enormous benefits; the grateful citizenry reciprocates with intense backing. Thus, exceptionally good times play into the hands of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders. Interestingly, exceptionally bad times *can* have even higher political payoffs. Deep, pressing crises give bold chief executives the chance to avert a catastrophe, lift the population out of worsening misery, and earn especially profound and widespread appreciation. By frontally combating and miraculously overcoming huge problems, the courageous leader glaringly proves his charisma and turns into the heroic savior of the people. Therefore, as the

second and third type of conjunctural opportunities, acute, severe economic crises or massive threats to public security can also be crucial for personalistic plebiscitarian chief executives to demonstrate their unique prowess and vault to unchallengeable predominance.

Democracy's fate then depends on the ways in which these three types of institutional weakness and three forms of conjunctural opportunities come together and interact. Interestingly, my study finds three distinctive alignments and patterns, as the next section explains.

Three Narrow Paths toward the Populist Strangulation of Democracy

The limited number of instances in which populist chief executives have in fact destroyed democracy have depended on three distinctive coincidences in which one type of institutional weakness has interacted with a specific combination of conjunctural opportunities. Thus, the necessary conditions for the actual downfall of liberal pluralism have aligned in three different bundles. Accordingly, there have been three different paths along which personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have managed to impose competitive authoritarianism. Interestingly, these different processes of undemocratic involution have largely corresponded to three different types of populism that the expert literature has long distinguished, namely neoliberal populism in Latin America, the subsequent wave of Chávez-style, “Bolivarian” populism in the region, and conservative, traditionalist populism in Europe. As this striking correspondence suggests, my empirically based analysis yields results that are conceptually valid and theoretically meaningful.

What are these three paths and their underlying combinations of necessary conditions? First, populist prime ministers in Europe have managed to take advantage of parliamentarism's openness, with its limited number of institutional veto players, under one condition: If an antecedent economic collapse has discredited the political establishment, partisan veto players have been decimated (cf. Tsebelis 2002), and personalistic leaders have won lopsided parliamentary majorities, which have given them free rein for pursuing their autocratic designs. This process played out quickly in Hungary under Viktor Orbán (2010–present), and along a more sinuous and rockier road in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003–present).⁴

Second, populist presidents in Latin American countries subject to paralyzing impositions have faced greater constraints, given the separation of powers enshrined in presidentialism. Consequently, they have succeeded in asphyxiating democracy only when encountering a truly unique constellation of conjunctural opportunities, namely a simultaneous double crisis: a devastating economic downturn and a fearsome challenge to public safety.

⁴ As explained in Chapter 5, Erdoğan faced an additional, extraconstitutional veto player, namely Turkey's historically powerful and coup-prone military.

This extraordinary coincidence of disasters paved the road toward competitive authoritarianism in Peru under Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) and recently, in a somewhat less drastic manifestation, in El Salvador under Nayib Bukele (2019–present).

Third, high instability facilitates populist assaults on democracy; after all, a tottering house is easier to overthrow. Consequently, the enormous popularity boost emerging from the successful resolution of crises is not required for completing the wrecking job. Instead, in these precarious settings, the massive distribution of benefits enabled by a huge hydrocarbon windfall played the crucial role. Thus, in these battered presidential systems of Latin America, this exogenous factor provided the necessary conjunctural opportunity for personalistic plebiscitarian leaders to promote undemocratic power concentration, as Hugo Chávez did in Venezuela (1999–2013), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006–19), and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–17).

In sum, my theory emphasizes the crucial importance of combinations of distinct institutional weaknesses and specific conjunctural opportunities as necessary preconditions for the populist asphyxiation of democracy. These causal factors are derived from the political-strategic definition of populism: Institutional weakness provides room for maneuver to personalistic leaders, who incessantly seek to concentrate power. Yet only if conjunctural opportunities appear as well can these leaders garner overwhelming support, push aside the remaining institutional obstacles, attack the opposition, cement their hegemony, and thus destroy democracy.

This book's assessment of the actual danger emanating from contemporary populism builds on, updates, and expands my earlier study of the current challenges facing liberal pluralism in Latin America and Europe (Weyland 2020). The broader and far more in-depth analysis presented in the following chapters confirms the prior empirical findings and theoretical arguments. At the same time, it includes a number of new high-profile cases, such as the left-winger Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico (AMLO, 2018–present), the ideologically shifty Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (2019–present), and the right-winger Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018–22).

The extended time frame also covers the trajectories of populist governance and the corresponding fate of liberal pluralism at greater length. In some instances, there has been a further descent into competitive authoritarianism, as in Hungary and Turkey. But there have also been encouraging developments: Several personalistic plebiscitarian leaders have suffered electoral defeats, such as Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria (2021), Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic (2021), “Janez” Janša in Slovenia (2022), and most prominently Donald Trump in the USA (2020) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2022). Moreover, Igor Matovič felt compelled to resign in Slovakia (2021), and Pedro Castillo's rule collapsed after an unrealistic self-coup attempt in Peru (2022). For the time being, these ousters ended populist threats to democracy (although some leaders, especially Trump, may seek a comeback).