

Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States

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POPULISM HAS BECOME A SALIENT topic in U.S. public discourse, as commentators have sought to make sense of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and of related developments in Europe, from Marine Le Pen's electoral gains to the Brexit referendum. Most observers have interpreted these events as driven by outsider politics that vilify elites while promising to restore political power to ordinary people. Some have gone further, arguing that populism is not only an ideology of insurgent politicians, but also a worldview of the voters who support them.¹

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The proliferating analyses of populism have attracted criticism for applying the term too loosely. During a visit to Canada in June 2016, for instance, President Obama dedicated part of a press conference to challenging media portrayals of Trump as a populist. The president's argument rested on a distinction between opportunism and sincere populism: "[candidates] don't suddenly become populist because they say something controversial in order to win votes. That's not the measure of populism; that's nativism or xenophobia, or worse...just cynicism."² The primary goal of these comments was presumably to delegitimize Donald Trump, not to contribute to the scholarly debate about the meaning of populism. But the critique raised an important point: analyses of populism are often conceptually vague and have the tendency to conflate populism with related but distinct political phenomena, such as nationalism, social and economic conservatism, and anti-immigrant discourse. This confusion

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has an analytical cost. If we are unclear about the meaning of populism, we will have difficulty understanding its implications for political change.

A sizeable academic literature in political science, history, and sociology has been grappling with populism for over 40 years, generating important insights about the phenomenon and its role in electoral and legislative politics. These insights have become more consistent in recent years as scholars have come to recognize that populism is a common feature of democratic politics that spans ideological positions and world regions. Drawing on this literature, this article will suggest that in order to understand populism we need to reconsider three assumptions commonly found in journalistic and academic accounts: that (1) populism is an ideology deeply held by political actors, much like liberalism or conservatism; (2) populism is inherently tied to right-wing politics; and (3) populism is a new feature of political culture. Contrary to these narratives, I will argue that populism is a discursive strategy selectively employed by political outsiders on both the left and right extremes of the political spectrum to challenge the political status quo. By conceptualizing the phenomenon as dynamic and ideologically variable, we can better understand the causes and implications of the populist turn in contemporary politics.

DEFINING POPULISM

To ground the discussion, it is useful to begin with a simple definition of populism that captures its most fundamental features. Most scholars would agree with political scientist Cas Mudde that, at its core, populism is a form of politics predicated on the juxtaposition of a corrupt elite with a morally virtuous people.³ Studies of populism are not concerned with adjudicating whether such moral judgments are accurate, but rather with understanding when this form of politics becomes prevalent, why it is able to garner public support, how it affects existing configurations of political power, and what impact it has on political institutions and policy.

While a binary moral classification is common to all populist rhetoric, the identities of the vilified elites vary. They frequently include political actors—either elected representatives or civil servants—but also journalists, academics, and business leaders. The boundaries placed around “the people” are often less specific so as to maximize the scope of populist claims. Despite this common vagueness, some varieties of populism exploit antipathies toward particular out-groups, such as ethnic, racial, or religious minorities, by accusing them of having co-opted the elites for their own nefarious ends. The result of such exclusionary

discourse is the implicit narrowing of “the people” to a subset of the public that qualifies as the legitimate source of political power. In recent cases of right-wing populism, such as the Trump campaign and European anti-immigrant movements, appeals to “the people” have primarily targeted white, native-born voters, by tapping into their grievances with demographic and cultural change, as well as their dissatisfaction with mainstream politics.⁴ Nonetheless, such targeting strategies are often subtle and subsumed under ostensibly universal appeals to the public will.

Besides its vilification of elites and glorification of the people, populism also entails a particular understanding of political institutions. Like most political strategies, populist appeals not only diagnose a political problem—in this case, the elites’ abandonment of the common good in favor of their own self-interest—but also offer a solution, namely the acquisition of political power by the populist politician or party on behalf of the people. What complicates this simple political calculus, however, is populists’ persistent delegitimization of democratic institutions. The moral suspicion cast on ostensibly corrupt elites, often extends to the institutions from which those elites profit, as evidenced by frequent references in populist discourse to rigged elections and the power of special interests. As a result, populism often calls for the replacement of existing intermediate political institutions with more direct forms of participation (e.g., referenda instead of legislative action by elected representatives).⁵ This presents a legitimacy challenge for those populist actors who successfully gain entry into the same institutions they disparage.

These basic features—an anti-elite and pro-people moral logic and institutional suspicion—can be observed in all empirical cases of populist politics, from the People’s Party in late nineteenth-century United States to the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. These features are not, however, exhaustive. In some populist movements, larger-than-life charismatic leaders who claim unmediated access to the public, such as Bolivia’s Evo Morales and France’s Marine Le Pen, have played an important role in mobilizing support for their causes. Additionally, many Latin American populist parties, such as the Movement for Socialism in Bolivia and the United Socialist Party in Venezuela, have been concerned with incorporating previously marginalized constituencies (e.g., the working class and indigenous people) into the political process with promises of expanded social rights and economic redistribution.⁶ Finally, in many cases, populist appeals are matched by policy proposals that symbolically cater to the public will regardless of actual efficacy, such as the popular price caps on fuel and electricity that exacerbated inflationary trends in Brazil under Luiz

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Inácio Lula da Silva. These ancillary features help illuminate individual cases, but their particularity makes them ill-suited to a general definition of populism.

This brief conceptual overview offers some useful criteria for identifying populism, but it leaves important questions unanswered. First, the definition of populism offered above rests on the rather vague claim that populism is a “form of politics” based on the juxtaposition of “the elite” and “the people.” But is populism a coherent ideology or is it merely a veneer obscuring other more principled political ideas? Second, many of the examples cited thus far—Trump, Le Pen, Brexit—were drawn from the radical right, which is preoccupied with immigration control and nationalist politics. But is populism limited to the far right of the political spectrum or is it equally suited to far-left politics, as evidence from Latin America would suggest? Third, increased public attention to populism lends itself to the interpretation that the phenomenon is somehow unusual, that it represents a new development in democratic politics. Is that claim empirically accurate?

POPULISM IS NOT (PRIMARILY) AN IDEOLOGY

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One way to think about populism is to view it as a set of ideas that cohere into an overarching worldview that shapes people’s actions; that is, to think of populism as an ideology. Doing so makes populism relatively easy to analyze, placing it on similar analytical footing with liberalism or conservatism. One could simply identify populist actors and then try to understand where their ideas come from, what implications their positions have for policy, and how their form of politics gains popular support.

The trouble with this approach, however, is that unlike most political ideologies, populism is based on a rudimentary moral logic that has few direct policy implications and does not provide a general understanding of society or politics. In other words, populism does not offer a worldview; at best, it offers a simplistic critique of existing configurations of power. This is quite different from liberalism or conservatism, which are based on well-articulated principles about the desirability of state intervention in social and economic affairs and about the appropriate balance between individual freedom and the amelioration of social inequalities. In light of these conceptual complications, some scholars have categorized populism as a “thin-centered ideology:” a set of relatively coherent but narrow propositions that are used to express more robust ideological perspectives, such as nativism or economic protectionism.⁷

The understanding of populism as a thin-centered ideology provides a rea-

sonable description of how populism functions. Indeed, vilification of elites and glorification of the people typically serve other political interests. These include opposition to European integration, support for restrictive immigration laws, or the desire for more limited government. By attacking the powerful few on moral grounds and accusing them of serving special interests, populist actors are able to capitalize on public dissatisfaction, fear, and resentment in order to serve their own wide-ranging political agendas. The thin-centered ideology approach makes it possible to look for contextual predictors of the success of populist actors and movements, such as economic inequality and stagnation, rising levels of immigration, or increasing free trade. It also lends itself to the identification of public opinion trends that may fuel populist mobilization, which may include distrust of government, authoritarian beliefs, or racism.

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While useful, the thin-centered ideology approach is based on one problematic assumption: that populism is a relatively stable property of political actors, and that we can therefore classify some politicians or parties as populist and others as non-populist. This is typically done through the close reading of official policy statements, such as party manifestos or campaign platforms, which can reveal whether a party or candidate understands politics through the anti-elite/pro-people binary distinction.

The assumption of ideological stability is problematic for the simple reason that it cannot account for the dynamic nature of populism. Empirical analyses show that many politicians often rely on populist language selectively, presenting the same political claims in either populist or non-populist terms depending on the audience and broader social context. In this vein, my work with Noam Gidron on U.S. presidential discourse demonstrates large differences in the same candidate's use of populism across multiple campaigns: for instance, Eisenhower relied heavily on populism in 1952, but not in 1956, and Clinton did so in 1992, but not in 1996 (a finding to which I will return).⁸ This variation suggests that populism is not a deeply held ideology, but rather a rhetorical strategy, or what political sociologists call a "frame."

POPULISM AS A DISCURSIVE FRAME

Framing is the practice of presenting an issue from a particular perspective in order to maximize its resonance with a given audience.⁹ For instance, climate change can be framed as an economic problem (e.g., natural disasters caused by climate change can result in costly damage) or as a moral issue (e.g., we owe it to future generations to ensure that the planet is habitable). Which frame is most effective depends on how well the claims resonate with the preexisting beliefs of the audience. Those attempting to persuade diverse publics of the importance of climate change may rely on the first strategy in one setting (perhaps at an international economic summit) and the second in another (perhaps during a general election). This implies that frames are not features of individual people, movements, or parties, but rather of specific political statements—of speeches, press releases, or debates.

By treating populism as a speech-level phenomenon rather than an actor-level one, it becomes possible to ask which political actors are more likely to rely on populist rhetoric in particular circumstances and why. Populism, thus, becomes a strategic tool selected based on context, with the latter consisting of the characteristics of the audience, the speaker's own political background and career aspirations, and the political position of the speaker and his or her party. Based on these insights, my research has shown that the longer a politician is in power, the less likely he or she is to rely on populist claims to outsider status because these are likely to be viewed as increasingly inauthentic (for instance, this was the case for Nixon, whose 1968 campaign was far more populist than his third presidential run in 1972).¹⁰ At the same time, the decision to rely on populism is also likely to be shaped by social, political, and economic conditions, such as recessions, national security crises, or political scandals. The terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015 and July 2016) and Nice (July 2016), for example, increased the incentives for politicians to rely on nationalist populism by drawing sharp moral boundaries against Islam and placing the blame for permissive immigration policies on political elites. This was Hungarian President Victor Orbán's strategy following the Bataclan massacre when he claimed that "those who said yes to immigration, who transported immigrants from war zones, those people [politicians] did not do everything [they could] for the defense of European people."¹¹

Dispelling the notion that populism is an essential attribute of certain political actors does not preclude the possibility that some politicians will rely on populist rhetoric more frequently than others. Indeed, the point of analyz-

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ing populism at the speech level is to enable the treatment of a politician's or party's populist tendencies as matters of degree, not kind. While some actors may rely on populism sporadically, others may do so much more systematically. This variation then becomes an object of analysis.

If populism is not an ideology, but rather a discursive frame, does this mean that all politicians who use populism are cynically exploiting this strategy to curry favor with voters? From the standpoint of the voting public, this is a reasonable question given the importance of sincerity and conviction in evaluating legitimate political leadership. From the perspective of scholarly research, however, this question is largely immaterial. Some politicians who rely on populist claims may truly believe that elites are fundamentally morally corrupt, while others may make such claims for purely instrumental reasons; most are probably somewhere in between. What is more important for the purpose of understanding populism is that, regardless of convictions, politicians choose to engage in populist discourse only in some circumstances, and these decisions exhibit aggregate patterns that lend themselves to systematic explanation.

What might we learn from treating populism as a form of political speech rather than an ideology? First, populism is a strategy of political outsiders. That may seem unsurprising given the anti-establishment orientation of populist claims, but the insight becomes more interesting once we take into account the fact that political actors' outsider status is not a static trait: it varies over the course of a politician's career and a party's electoral performance. As careers progress and as political conditions change, so too should politicians' reliance on populism.

This is precisely what Gidron and I have found in our research.¹² U.S. presidential candidates with less experience in federal politics are more likely to rely on populist language than

those who have held positions of power in Washington D.C. (e.g., George McGovern ran a more populist campaign than Richard Nixon during the 1972 election), and

candidates tend to become less populist over the course of successive electoral campaigns, as in the cases of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956, and Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996. In general, incumbent candidates rely on populism less frequently than challengers. Similar patterns emerge in the European Parliament: veteran politicians and those whose parties are represented in na-

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tional governments tend to rely on populism less frequently than newly elected parliamentarians and those whose parties are excluded from legislative power.¹³

These findings help explain the prevalence of populist discourse among the radical right in Europe, which, for all its media prominence, has not made major inroads into national parliaments outside of a few exceptional cases, such as Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Switzerland. The National Front in France, for instance, which is one of the most emblematic right-wing populist parties in Europe, holds only two seats in the National Assembly, despite its successes in local and regional elections and the popularity of its leader, Marine Le Pen, as a candidate for French presidency. The notion that populism is the strategy of political outsiders also applies to the political messaging of Donald Trump whose presidential campaign often cited his political inexperience as evidence of his populist bona fides.

Second, the degree to which politicians rely on populism depends on their audience. The interests and preferences of political publics vary across both place and time. What works in one region of a country may not work elsewhere, and what works at one point in a political campaign may not work later on. Both of these expectations are confirmed by data on U.S. presidential campaign speeches.¹⁴ Presidential candidates tend to rely on populism in those parts of the country where their parties have historically done well and their populist claims find a friendly audience, but do so less frequently in regions where their base is weaker and radical rhetoric is less likely to be effective. Moreover, challengers tend to tone down their populist rhetoric over the course of their campaigns as their audience expands from ardent supporters to the general electorate, which is more ideologically moderate than the party base and therefore less receptive to

incendiary rhetoric. Interestingly, the opposite is true of incumbents who tend to become more populist over the course of any given campaign, presumably in response to their opponents. These conclusions are based on data limited to the last two months of each general

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election, but the differences are likely to be even greater as candidates move from the primary to the general election. Indeed, Donald Trump's decision not to temper his populist rhetoric as he emerged from the primary may have been partly responsible for his severe slump in the polls after the Republican National Convention.¹⁵ At the same time, the unusual strategy of continuing

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to use populist appeals in the final weeks of the general election appears to have paid off for the Trump campaign in the long run.

POPULISM IS NOT LIMITED TO THE RIGHT

President Obama's statement about populism referenced at the beginning of this article, while insightful, placed too much emphasis on sincerity as a feature of "true" populism. There is no incompatibility between political expediency and populism if we understand the latter as a strategic moral frame through which a wide range of political claims can be expressed. Nonetheless in arguing that Donald Trump's populism has often been conflated with nativist and xenophobic discourse, President Obama made an apt critique of common analytical slippage in popular accounts of populism. Indeed, Trump's appeal is as much about his incendiary rhetoric targeting immigrants, Latinos, Muslims, and African Americans, as it is about his sustained attacks on democratic institutions and the elites that lead them. A similar convergence between populism and exclusionary nationalism can be found among European radical-right parties, which combine attacks on EU elites with Islamophobia and nativism.¹⁶ The coexistence of these ideas makes it all too easy to assume that populism is synonymous with right-wing nationalism. Indeed, until recently, this was the implicit view of much Europeanist scholarship on populism: to study populism was to study the radical right.

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This approach is limited on both theoretical and empirical grounds. From a theoretical standpoint, if populism is a frame and not an ideology, it can be used to express any ideological position, not just ethno-nationalism. For instance, it would not be difficult to imagine the earlier example of environmental activism articulated in populist terms:

Climate change denial is perpetuated by self-serving and corrupt politicians who don't care about the future of our families because they have sold their souls to big oil companies. We need radical change that will take money out of politics and return rightful power to the people, saving the planet for future generations.

This quote is fictional, but it echoes general themes employed by some leftist politicians in Europe and the United States and illustrates that populism is a malleable discursive strategy.¹⁷

Indeed, the malleability of populism was a key theoretical insight of Ernesto Laclau, one of the most prominent political theorists studying this phenom-

enon. Laclau argued that the categories that constitute populist claims—that is, “the elites” and “the people”—serve as conceptual containers that can be filled with a wide range of ideological content.¹⁸ In fact, Laclau, himself a radical leftist thinker, went so far as to claim that socialism is the purest manifestation of populism because it seeks to abolish the power of self-interested elites and emancipate the people from capitalist domination.¹⁹ We need not accept this conclusion, however, to appreciate Laclau’s more general insight that populism is not inherently limited to conservatism—or any other ideology.

The need to study populism on both the left and the right is not simply a matter of theoretical principle, but also one of analytical clarity. One limitation of research on the European radical right is that it has interchangeably used terms like “populism,” “nationalism,” “Euroskepticism,” and “the far right” when labeling a set of specific parties. That is reasonable if the point is to describe how those specific parties function and who supports them. But if the objective is to understand populism itself, then it is imperative that the phenomenon be analytically separable from these ancillary ideologies. Anti-immigrant ideology is no more a constitutive feature of populism than is socialism. By considering how populism functions regardless of what ideology it is combined with, we can gain more clarity about populism’s general characteristics, causes, and consequences.

18 Finally, there is a straightforward empirical reason to study populism outside of the usual suspects on the far right: there is growing evidence that left-wing populism is becoming a prominent feature of U.S. and European politics. In the United States, the popularity of the Bernie Sanders campaign is as worthy of attention as the electoral success of Donald Trump; the same is true of their predecessor movements, Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party. In Europe, popular support for Greece’s Syriza, Spain’s Podemos, and other left-wing populist movements is no less notable than the electoral fortunes of the French National Front, Denmark’s Vlaams Blok, or Austria’s Freedom Party. That populism has been resonating with voters on both the left and the right is not coincidental, and studying these developments across political ideologies can lead to useful insights about the current sociopolitical context.

POPULISM IS NOT NEW

Recent scholarship on populism has started to acknowledge the bimodal distribution of populism across the political spectrum. Having observed the rise of leftist populist movements in Greece, Spain, and most recently the United States, researchers are increasingly including these cases in their comparisons. There is a

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tendency, however, to assume that the recent leftist entrants onto the European political scene represent a new frontier in populist politics, which had previously been the domain of the far right. The perceived timeline of U.S. populism on both the left and the right is even shorter: nineteenth-century agrarian politics notwithstanding, it is tempting to view both Trump and Sanders as breaking new ground. Occasional parallels are drawn to Barry Goldwater and George Wallace on the right or to George McGovern on the left, but these historical figures are considered highly unusual in U.S. politics.

Even though there may be some truth to the claim that we are entering a new era of populist politics, this assessment misses the fact that populism has long been a feature of modern democracy.²⁰ As my research shows, left-wing populism has been commonplace in the European Parliament since at least the late 1990s and its prevalence has often outpaced that of right-wing populism.²¹ Furthermore, despite common perceptions to the contrary, neither variety of populist discourse appears to have increased in the European Parliament in the immediate aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. Finally, in the United States, where my data reach back to 1952, populism has been a mainstay of both Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns from Eisenhower onward. It is safe to say that as far as anti-elite and pro-people claims are concerned, neither Trump nor Sanders have invented a new form of politics.

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Taken together, the above findings suggest that political scientists' preoccupation with the populism of the European right, while understandable, has come at the price of understanding populism's ideological range and historical prominence. While scholars of Latin American politics have recognized that populism is perennial and ideologically flexible, it is only in recent years that these insights have been applied in other world regions.²² This emerging scholarship demonstrates that if we are to understand populism, we must examine the phenomenon in the full range of its empirical manifestations, not only in electoral politics, but also in legislative debates and public discourse.

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EXPLAINING THE RADICAL RIGHT: SUPPLY, DEMAND, AND RESONANCE

Where does this account leave Trump, Brexit, and other populist movements that have come to occupy the media spotlight? Treating populism as a rhetorical

strategy used by political outsiders to gain access to power makes it possible to better understand the structure of incentives that cause political actors to rely on populist frames, such as the need to offer voters a persuasive narrative that reframes a candidate's peripheral political status as a virtue rather than a liability. At the same time, populism's steady presence in U.S. and European electoral and legislative politics suggests that a growing supply of politicians with populist proclivities is not the primary driver of the recent successes of the radical right. Populism has long been an available option for disaffected voters, and yet it is only recently that this has translated into major victories for radical parties and candidates in Western countries.

If the popularity of populism is not primarily driven by a growing supply of populist politicians, then perhaps it stems from greater public demand. In other words, public opinion may be changing in a way that favors populist politics. There are two factors related to voter preferences that may influence radical-right support: ethno-nationalism and distrust in the political system. Indeed, a combination of ethnic exclusion and lack of political and economic institutions constitutes a commonly observed disposition toward the nation—what in past work I have called “restrictive nationalism”—which is found across many Western democracies.²³ In the United States, however, the prevalence of this belief system in the population has not increased in recent years despite their heightened visibility during the 2016 election, while the trends in European

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countries are mixed. Nationalism aside, trust in government did decline between 2001 and 2008 in the United States, but its current low levels are not unprecedented; they mirror the trends from the early 1990s. If anything, the peak in institutional trust during the

early 2000s was itself unusual, reflecting a reaction to a period of economic prosperity in the late 1990s and the collective shock of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.²⁴

This suggests that public opinion provides at best a partial explanation for the recent salience of populist discourse. Instead, an adequate account of Trump's and Brexit's successes requires a departure from a simple supply-demand model of political communication, which assumes that populism's successes are driven either by a growing prevalence of populist politicians or an increase in exclusionary and anti-elite attitudes. Instead, we must consider the importance

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of frame resonance. What seems to be driving the popular support for radical politics is, on the one hand, a potent mix of populist and ethno-nationalist discourse, and, on the other, a confluence of contextual factors that makes such anti-elite, anti-foreigner, and anti-minority arguments resonant. These include rising immigration, growing ethnic diversity of national populations, changes in cultural mores, persistent social inequality, economic crises, terrorist threats, and ineffective political governance. While the anxieties generated by these conditions are commonplace, it is among white, native-born, less educated voters that they lend themselves particularly well to narratives of collective status loss at the hands of globalizing elites. Such narratives can be easily exploited by nationalist, anti-establishment politicians.

Of course, ethno-nationalism is only one ideology that can be expressed in populist terms. Leftist economic populism is also becoming more visible, driven by increasing dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies. My research suggests that these two forms of populist politics are not evenly distributed across countries: radical-left populism is most prevalent in the poorer countries of Southern Europe, while radical-right populism is more common in Europe's richer core.²⁵ This is understandable, since for poorer countries, economic downturns are a more urgent problem than immigration, while the opposite is true for rich countries that tend to have high net migration.

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It appears to be the case, then, that populism—coupled with nationalism (on the right) or socialism (on the left)—though not new, has increasingly come to resonate with voters who are experiencing frustrations associated with rapid social change. The channeling of such anxieties into deep resentments against immigrants and ethnic, racial, or religious minorities has proven to be a profitable political strategy. Persistent attacks on the legitimacy of political institutions—whether those in Brussels or in Washington, D.C.—by mainstream politicians and media personalities, not just populist upstarts, are likely to have further increased the appeal of anti-elite nationalist talk. This in turn may have made politically salient preexistent resentments among supporters of the radical right, even if it has not resulted in a greater prevalence of those resentments in the general population.

CONCLUSION

The dangers of the recent ethno-nationalist turn in politics are obvious. But if populism is to stand on its own as an analytical concept, it must have consequences independent of the ideologies to which it is attached. Here I will only

touch upon three. First, populism undermines political institutions. Populists on both sides of the political spectrum are often quick to call into question the legitimacy of elections, the motives of political leaders, and the integrity of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government, all in the name of returning political power to the people.²⁶ When normalized, this type of public

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discourse can upend basic principles of democracy and threaten the peaceful transfer of power between parties. We have seen evidence of this in Hungary and Poland, where populist politicians have compromised the in-

dependence of the judiciary and with it the separation of powers fundamental to democracy. We are also witnessing this in the United States, where Donald Trump's false claims about widespread electoral fraud risk undermining public confidence in democratic institutions.

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Second, populism is reductive: it rejects nuanced political arguments in favor of moral outrage. This can serve to reduce the quality of political knowledge in the electorate and limit the possibility of informed public debate. Disagreements over policy give way to conspiracy-laden attacks by the morally indignant against those they perceive as fundamentally corrupt. Because moral attacks are typically based on a fundamental rejection of the political legitimacy of one's opponent, the likelihood of productive dialogue and compromise is reduced. This tendency may exacerbate the effects of political polarization by further driving apart competing political camps. This is a pattern observed in the U.S. Congress in recent years, for instance, where activist lawmakers have drifted so far apart on the ideological spectrum that effective governance has given way to routine obstructionism.²⁷


Third, by foregrounding moral distinctions between groups, populism is likely to encourage politics based on fear and resentment rather than informed policy debate. When political actors mobilize exclusionary collective identities, as in right-wing populism's appeals to ethno-nationalism, inter-group hostility and even violence may follow, as evidenced by media reports of ethnic tensions in the wake of Brexit, violent incidents at Donald Trump's campaign rallies, and a rise in racially motivated harassment and assault following the U.S. presidential election.²⁸ In principle, left-wing populism carries similar risks (by, for instance, devolving into welfare chauvinism), but in practice, it often embraces more inclusive identities. Even then, however, it often bases its message on appeals

to collective resentment rather than policy nuance.

By potentially undermining institutional trust and contributing to polarization and legislative deadlock, populism stands in tension with democratic practice, which depends as much on shared faith in the political system as it does on legal rules. Moreover, the heightening of inter-group tensions by exclusionary populism can further exacerbate social inequalities that run counter to the egalitarian principles

of democratic societies. At the same time, populism possesses one virtue: it gives voice to the grievances of those who are often silent in the political process. As

a result, it can serve as a barometer for deep-seated social problems and a catalyst for social change. To realize these potentially positive outcomes, however, populism has to be carefully managed. Its underlying causes must be recognized and addressed, while its attempts to normalize the logic of moral resentment must be resisted.

Populism is a persistent undercurrent in democratic politics, the salience of which appears to increase in periods of acute social discontent. The recent successes of radical politics in Europe and the United States heighten the need for a systematic understanding of populism that comes to terms with the phenomenon's varied manifestations, its causes, and its potential consequences. That in turn requires a degree of consensus about what populism is in the first place. By recognizing that populism is not a coherent worldview but a dynamic framing strategy; that it is analytically separable from the political ideologies it expresses; and that its recent manifestations build on a long history of populist politics in Europe, the United States, and beyond, it is possible to overcome common misperceptions about this phenomenon and gain the analytical precision necessary to explain its popular appeal. 

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