

HAS POPULISM WON?

THE GLOBAL WAR ON LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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HAS POPULISM WON?: THE WAR ON LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

BY DANIEL DRACHE AND
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A FIVE-MINUTE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL POPULISM

DANIEL DRACHE AND MARC D. FROESE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

WHAT IS POPULISM?

Populism is a way of framing a political message that places grievance and anger front and centre. It also tells the listener who to blame. Every populist movement imagines that it speaks for the true people, and it opposes evil elites who they accuse of stealing their money. Who these evil elites are depends on the moment — they could be cultural elites like film makers, Wall Street money managers or the political class in Ottawa, Washington, Delhi, or Brasilia.

IS POPULISM A TOOL OF THE LEFT OR RIGHT?

As a method of political communication, populism is used by both the left and the right. But the authoritarian hard right defines modern populism today, with a few exceptions. Far right populism today is an ideological mixed bag. It has inherited ideas of both neoliberalism, about shrinking the state and increasing private sector competition, and the anti-globalization left of twenty years ago, about the corrosive effects of open markets. This is an explosive combination because it both maintains the insecurity of working people while increasing their rage at the unfairness of the global order.

WHY ARE VOTERS CHOOSING POPULIST LEADERS?

Some experts blame hyper-globalization with its strategies of off-shoring and globalized production chains. Others blame rising inequality and the unwillingness of governments to create policy that helps globalization's losers. Still others blame racism and resentment of immigrants and minorities. Populist leaders have legitimized a paranoid style of politics in which conspiracy theories are used to win elections and hold on to power.

WHO VOTES FOR POPULISTS?

The profile of the populist voter is someone who lives outside the biggest urban areas, and who feels left behind and ignored by the political class. In France it is the Gilets Jaunes (yellow vests), in Britain it is older blue-collar voters in the north and west, in the US, it is Republicans in flyover states and Christian nationalists, and in India it is Hindu traditionalists. Twenty-eight US states have elected Republican governors who are in thrall to the MAGA movement. In Canada, the truckers' convoy won support from Ontario's small towns as well as anti-Trudeau western Canada. This is a big movement that has captured the Conservative Party of Canada, attracting older and younger voters. Often they are more male than female, white with only a high school education. Many are gainfully employed, and the movement is more broad-based than its critics realize.

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HOW MANY POPULIST GOVERNMENTS ARE IN POWER AROUND THE WORLD?

There are at least 35 governments in which populists have captured the highest leadership offices, or they are in opposition, framing the political narrative. Some of the most important are in the United States, the UK, Hungary, Poland, India, Israel, and Brazil. We estimate that more than half a billion people have voted for populist parties since 2015.

WHO ARE THE POPULIST LEADERS OF THESE MANY MOVEMENTS?

In our book we show that the populists are usually men, mostly born after World War II, who gained their wealth through connections in the media and corporate power brokers in their home countries. Without exception they are religious and tap into anti-liberal and traditionalist Christian, Hindu, and Jewish movements. The exact list of big-dog leaders keeps changing. Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Benjamin Netanyahu are out for now, but they might be back. In places where constitutional term limits stop them, populists sometimes back their own children, like Sara Duterte in the Philippines.

IS POPULISM PART OF A GLOBAL ANTI-DEMOCRATIC TREND?

Yes. Authoritarian populism is the single biggest movement undermining democracy today. It has been embraced by anti-liberal traditionalists in democratic societies as well as illiberal despots in some of the world's most corrupt regimes. Each national populist movement emphasizes its own concerns, but together they have several features in common, such as the use of "big lies" to gain power, authoritarian tactics to maintain it, and an ultra-nationalist vision for national renewal that requires scapegoating outsiders.

WHY IS POPULISM DANGEROUS TO DEMOCRACY?

It is not simply about economic grievance. Populism plays to the mass psychology of fascism in which extremism provides meaning to alienated voters. Populism emphasizes messages of grievance for the purpose of "rage farming." The movement grows on anger. It is anti-democratic because it blames democracy and "liberals" for problems that are deeper than any one party or governmental administration. Populist movements attack the most vulnerable people in society such as refugees, First Nations peoples, and trans-identifying individuals.

IS POPULISM WINNING?

Populist movements are winning because they have captured powerful political parties such as the British Conservative Party. Even when a single leader is brought down by corruption or incompetence, there are others waiting in the wings to take their place, like Liz Truss in the UK, or Ron DeSantis in the US. Viktor Orban in Hungary and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua are exceptional for holding power as long as they have. Jair Bolsonaro is trying to become another populist lifer, with no plans to cede power if he loses in October. He has recently said "a new class of thieves has emerged who want to steal our freedom. If necessary, we will go to war." The populists are going to be a threat for at least the next decade, or longer.