

# Polarization and the disintegration of the polity. Reflections on populism and the future of liberal democracies

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I was asked to elaborate some thoughts on the topic of “The future of liberal democracies: The rise of populism”. The title of the topic suggests that populism is and will continue to be on rise. It also implies that the future of liberal democracy is intertwined with the populist phenomenon. Although I am uncertain about the growing prospects of populism, my prediction is that it will indeed stay with us for some more time, and I agree that it will impact liberal democracy, for better or worse. Therefore, I focus on the second implication of the topic title. I share those wide-spread concerns which consider populism a potential threat to liberal democracy and I will point to a specific consequence of populist politics which is the polarization of the polity and the erosion of democratic norms. However, I also argue that populism is more than simply a threat to liberal democracy: it is also a warning sign of some deep, structural problems of today’s socio-political systems and, as such, will presumably not go away until those problems, like growing inequalities in income and influence, persist. From this perspective the paradox of populism lies in that it is a reaction to the disintegration of the polity while it is also contributing to its further fragmentation, which, I believe, is one of the greatest challenges of today’s politics.

## **Populism and liberal democracy**

Populism is a contested concept even within political science and has several, partly competing, partly overlapping, definitions, though it was already discussed in one of the classical works of modern political science. In the *Political Man*, Lipset (1960), inspired by examples of post-war Latin American politics, treated populism as an emerging extremist mass movement that relied on the lower classes. The original ‘populism as a movement’ perspective was later developed into three different approaches: first, populism as a political logic or political strategy ‘through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers’ (Weyland, 2001:14). Second, populism as a political communication style or discourse (Laclau, 2005; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014) characterized by a Manichean logic (‘elite’ vs. ‘people’), adversarial narratives targeting the ‘enemies of the people’ as well as the depiction of crises that justify immediate political action. Third, maybe the most widely used approach conceptualizes populism as a thin-centred ideology without an elaborate ideological and programmatic core that expresses a heavily moralising Manichean worldview

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and considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', arguing that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people (Mudde, 2004).

What is the relationship between populism and liberal democracy?

Populism expresses the inherent tension between the democratic and non-democratic components of the modern political systems. Some argue that populism is an essentially democratic phenomenon, because it takes the common people as its political base and expresses a dissatisfaction with the ruling elites, institutions and politics, a dissatisfaction that may become a frustration or even resentment. Majoritarianism is a basic feature of democracy as well as populism (Pappas, 2014). In her seminal article Canovan (1999) argues that populism is a necessary 'redemptive' face of democracy and the 'legitimacy of democracy as a pragmatic system (...) always leaves room for populism that accompanies democracy like a shadow' (Canovan, 1999:16).

However, today's liberal democracy is much more than a majoritarian decision making mechanism: it is a complex institutional arrangement with check and balances, the division of powers, multiple veto players, constitutional safeguards as well as the protection of human rights and minority interests. It is generally argued that populism has an antagonistic relationship with the institutional and normative complexity of liberal democracy. First, populism is antithetical to pluralism: while the latter allows or even expects different interests and ideologies to be present in society and politics, the former posits a homogenous people (Mudde, 2004). Therefore, populist politics has a tendency to become exclusionary and intolerant, rejecting any compromise. Second, populist politics is generally based on the direct relationship of the leader and their followers as well as the direct translation of popular will into decisions. This is against the logic of liberal democracy with its complex institutional machinery (Bartha et al., 2020). Third, the protection of human rights and minority interests clashes with the idea of supreme popular sovereignty advanced by populism (Alston, 2017).

Populism is a diverse and malleable phenomenon therefore it is difficult to make generalization about it. Some populist movements may strengthen democracy through filling a representation gap, as some Latin American examples illustrate the point, or promote more participative decision making models, as the Italian 5Stars movement does. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) argue that populism might be exclusionary (building on a nativist, nationalist conceptualization of 'the people') or socially inclusionary and while European populism is predominantly exclusive, Latin American populism is chiefly inclusive. Both Canovan (1999) and Mudde and Rowira Kaltwasser (2013) assign some positive democratic effects to populism, chiefly in terms of filling the representation gap, reinvigorating popular rule and politically mobilizing people.

Still, despite the great variety of populism we can safely posit that populism has a difficult relationship with liberal democracy, especially with its 'liberal' aspects: constitutionalism, rule of law, division of powers and protection of human rights. Both theoretical arguments and empirical studies demonstrate that populism is leaning towards illiberal politics (Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Pappas, 2014). That is, if populism will stay with us, let alone rise further, we have reasons to worry for the future of liberal democracy.

Populism may affect the liberal institutions mostly when in power; however, it can influence democratic norms as well as the practice of democracy even from the opposition. The next section points a particular feature of populist politics which has a definitely negative effect on democracy: increasing polarization.

### **Polarization and the erosion of democratic norms**

Polarization refers to the division of the polity along ideological lines. It is not evident that this should pose any problems – after all, democracy is based on the competition of different ideologies, values and policy proposals. There are actually arguments in favor of at least some extent of political divergence. Politics, as Karl Schmitt convincingly put it, is about conflict. In fact, if the policy and ideological position of parties converge, elections have no real stakes and mobilizing potential. Conversely, polarization has a mobilizing effect on citizens (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008) which is, *ceteris paribus*, good for democracy: without mobilization and participation democracy may hollow out and decisions will increasingly be taken by either non-elected institutions or political bodies with low legitimacy. The 2020 US presidential election offers an illustration to the mobilization potential of polarization: after four years of polarizing politics by Donald Trump the turnover at the elections was record high.

However, even the pluralist democratic polity needs some ties that bind citizens together, the “sentiments of sociability” as Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it. They need to share a common identity, and feel to be part of the same community: identity is a strong predictor of cooperative behavior, and norm abidance (Tyler, 2011). People need to trust each other in order to be able to engage in collective action – self-interest is not a sufficient motivation (Ostrom, 1998). Citizens need to have some basic values in common and accept the “minimal consensus” on the principles of democracy (Downs, 1962). It is also needed that their political and policy preferences converge to some extent: otherwise “(...) half the electorate always feels that the other half is imposing policies upon it that are strongly repugnant for it. In this situation, if one party keeps get reelected, the disgruntled supporters of the other party will probably revolt (...)” (Downs, 1957: 143).

Anthony Downs is maybe the first who warned about the dangers of extreme political polarization. Some level of polarization is bearable, or might even be beneficial to democracy – but we don’t have exact measures of the ‘healthy’ level of polarization, and today it appears that increasing and excessive polarization is more menacing than the lack of it in a number of countries, including the US as well as Eastern and Southern European countries (Patkós, 2019; Somer et al., 2021). Somer et al. (2021) coined the term ‘pernicious polarization’ to describe the extreme division of the society into mutually distrustful ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’. They argue that there is a negative relationship between the level of polarization and the democracy ratings of countries. Patkós (2019) has a similar finding: political polarization erodes democratic quality, increases the risk of corruption, and diminishes the overall level of satisfaction with democracy as well as trust in political institutions.

What is the mechanism through which political polarization leads to negative democratic consequences? Körösenyi (2013) argues that polarization undermines public accountability of politics, therefore good governance and democratic quality through the following effects: *information selectivity* (polarization fosters parallelism in the media system as well as media use – common understanding of what ‘is’ is vanishing); *moral bias* (common understanding of what ‘ought’ to be is undermined); *patronage effect* (frequent dismissals in the public administration erodes its attractiveness and ultimately its quality); *delegitimizing politics* (contributes to spreading political cynicism); *poor policy-making* (policy reforms are stopped if politics changes).

Extreme polarization leads to a disintegration of the polity in which the members cease to share a common understanding of the political reality; cease to accept a minimal consensus on democratic norms; and cease to respect the other camp. Again, the four years of Donald Trump in office as well as the 2020 US presidential election and the bitter fight over the result offer a shocking illustration to these arguments.

Polarization has several causes – and populist politics is among them (Pappas, 2014; Schulze et al., 2020). Although the populist discourse posits and constructs the concept of the homogenous people, they are contrasted to the enemies. The enemies are first and foremost elite groups, like old political elites (the ‘Washington swamp’), George Soros, the banks and financial institutions, or the European Union. But their supposed internal allies might also be easily targeted by populist politics, thus conducing to an effective division and polarization of the polity. Venezuela is a strong example where the populism of Chavez caused the extreme political division of the country, and led it to the verge of a civil war – and a total economic breakdown.

Populism has a subversive nature. It has a penchant for questioning established institutions and norms, overstepping boundaries, and among them the limits of civility and political correctness. While this may seem liberating to some, it hurts those minorities (immigrants, LMBTQ people etc.) which are also often targeted by populist since they do not fit into the idealized and normalized concept of ‘the people’.

Polarization, the erosion of democratic norms and the growing incivility of political camps towards each other is a deep wound on democracy. Populist politicians may lose their appeal, they may be defeated on elections – but polarization is hard to heal because it exploits deep psychological mechanisms and creates social identities that are difficult to change. For me this is one of the most alarming consequence of populism.

### **On the Roots of Populism: Inequality**

However, while populism contributes to social and political polarization, it is also a product of social division. The roots of populism are manifold. Hawkins and Rowira Kaltwasser (2019) argue that populist attitudes are widely present in the society, but specific context and factors are needed to activate them. The latter refer to the ‘supply-side’ of populism in terms of politicians and political entrepreneurs who exploit the existing problems and frame them along the populist discourse. The former, according to Hawkins and Rowira Kaltwasser

(2019: 8), is usually an intentional failure of democratic representation, a “situation in which politicians’ act knowingly against one set of constituents in order to benefit others. The result is a feeling of indignation and resentment.” That is, in terms of social context the authors blame populism on the division of the polity by the ruling elites.

However, division can happen not only along political, but socio-economic lines as well. There is overwhelming evidence on the role of socio-economic problems, like marginalization, joblessness and inequality in fuelling populist sentiments. Burgoon et al. (2018) argue that positional deprivation and inequality increases the support for radical right populist parties. In the DEMOS project<sup>2</sup> we found that the lack of activation policies and the exclusion of a significant proportion of young people from the labour market clearly feeds populist attitudes.

A dramatic illustration of this point is that during the 2016 US presidential election Donald Trump over performed the most in counties with poor health conditions, and the highest drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates – strongly linked to economic distress.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of growing inequalities in most of the countries is well known. Its causes are, again, complex, the explanations ranging from the capital accumulation mechanism of capitalism (Piketty, 2013), the increasing return of knowledge and education (Rodriguez-Pose and Tselios, 2009), the inherent logic of globalisation (Reich, 1991). Its dire consequences are also well documented. In their convincingly written study Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) show that income inequality is a factors behind a number of social ills, including substance abuse, health problems, shorter life expectancy, homicide rates, teenage birth rate, poor school performance. In their recent book, *The Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* Case and Deaton (2020) argue that in the US life expectancy has fallen for three years in a row which is mainly due to the fast-increasing death rates of working-class Americans struck by economic hardship and joblessness.

Compared to the US the European welfare-states provide more social protection to vulnerable groups, but the growth of inequality did not spare them either. These problems fuel populist sentiments and political entrepreneurs are ready to capitalize on them. An illustration is provided by the long struggle of the ‘gilets jaunes’, the French grassroot movement originally mobilized against the introduction of a new environmental fee by President Macron, turning into a general populist revolt. The ‘gilets jaunes’ expressed deep resentment about their socio-economic problems and criticized the establishment with typical populist arguments.

Unless mainstream politics is able to meaningfully address the problems of growing inequalities and social precarity populism will continue to have a solid basis to build on. This is, of course, not to say that inequality is the only factor that shapes populism or the single most important problem to deal with in this context. Other phenomena, like the role of social media in spreading populist messages, fake news and conteos as well as creating ‘echo

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<sup>2</sup>See <https://demos-h2020.eu/en/>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.economist.com/united-states/2016/11/19/illness-as-indicator> and [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm\\_term=.8639211d5cf4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm_term=.8639211d5cf4)

chambers' that also contribute to political polarization, is also an extraordinary challenge to deal with. But I wanted to emphasize that if blame populism, and rightly so, for polarizing the polity we should keep in mind that our societies are already highly divided. This is a serious problem on its own right – and it contributes to strengthening populism as well.

## Conclusion

Liberal democracy is more than a specific institutional arrangement of political rule and collective decision making. It comprises a set of norms, values and acceptable behaviours – a kind of political culture. Liberal democracy cannot properly function without some level of unity, integration and cooperation inside the polity. Populism undermines the unity of the polity through its highly polarizing logic and therefore it undermines democratic quality as well. However, our societies must face the challenge of already existing and deepening socio-economic divisions which effectively fuel populist sentiments. In this perspective populism should be considered not only as a threat, but also as a warning sign.

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