

HOW TODAY'S POPULISM DISMANTLES DEMOCRACY WORLDWIDE

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Populism is spreading across the globe. In Europe, populist parties have won victories in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Switzerland; and they have joined governing coalitions in Finland, Norway, and Lithuania. More broadly, strongmen with populist agendas have become president -- including Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Donald Trump in the United States.

Various causes lie behind populist upsurges, ranging from increased economic hardship and inequality to growing frustrations with globalization and immigration. But the consequences are worrisome, because research suggests the very real possibility of democratic backsliding worldwide. Populist takeovers are associated with personalist dictatorships and the dismantling of democratic institutions.

Populism Today

Contemporary populists share the objectives of their historical predecessors in Latin America and Europe. They promote a disdain for traditional political institutions, praise the advantages of strong and decisive leadership, and vocalize deep distrust of experts and the “establishment.” Today’s populists use new tactics, however. They no longer signal a quick break from democracy, but rather set in motion a subtle chipping away at democratic institutions.

Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Russia’s Vladimir Putin, and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan illustrate this dynamic. Rather than gaining control through coup or revolution, which can incite domestic and international pushback, these leaders came to power via elections. Once in office, they stoked widespread discontent to undermine institutional constraints on their power, sideline the opposition, and weaken civil society. The tactics used are straightforward – and subtle enough each step of the way to make it hard for supporters of democracy to stop.

- Populist regimes place loyalists and allies in key positions regardless of competence, especially in the judiciary and security services
- Traditional media is muzzled, and government turns to alternative outlets to push its message
- Those in power use lawsuits and new legislation to undermine civil society and the opposition

A New Pathway to Autocracy

Today’s populist tactics represent a shift in how democracies fall apart. “Authoritarianization” is the term for this kind of regime change, where elected leaders lead the way in undermining democratic institutions. Historically, military coups were the dominant pathway. Data on authoritarian regimes show that from 1946 to 1999, 64 percent of democracies collapsed due to coups. From 2000 to 2010, however, authoritarianization has been on the rise, representing 40

percent of all democratic failures, equal to the percentage of failures through coups. All signs point to populist-fueled authoritarianization becoming the most common pathway from democracy to autocracy.

Personalist Dictatorships and Their Results

Not only are we seeing a change in how democracies wane; a new type of dictatorship is emerging. Populist politics gives rise to “personalist dictatorships,” where power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual. From 2000 to 2010, this happened in 75% of authoritarian transitions, compared to less than half the time in such transitions from 1946 to 1999. We have seen this personalist route from election to authoritarianism in Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela, as well as in Peru under Alberto Fujimori. Even where populist strongmen have not fully dismantled democracy, we often see them enjoying a disproportionate share of power, as in Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega, Ecuador under Rafael Correa, Hungary under Viktor Orban, and Poland under Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

A growing literature in political science finds that personalist dictatorship is associated with a wide range of ruinous outcomes. Even compared to other kinds of dictatorships, personalist regimes pursue the most risky and aggressive foreign policies. They are the most likely to invest in nuclear weapons, initiate interstate conflicts, and launch wars against democracies. Weakened accountability mechanisms enable personalist leaders to take risks without facing consequences for poor choices. This is more the case for personalist regimes than even for other types of authoritarian regimes. Cases in point include the adventurism of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, of Idi Amin in Uganda, and of the Kim family in North Korea. The annexation of Crimea by Russia’s Vladimir Putin is another prominent example.

Existing research also shows that personalist dictatorships stoke xenophobic sentiments and mismanage foreign aid allocations. And when such regimes collapse, they are unlikely to revert to democracy. In short, populist-fueled creeping authoritarianism is potentially triggering a global spread of highly adventurist and dangerous regimes.

To Buck New Antidemocratic Trends We Must Recognize the Signs

Conditions giving rise to populist candidates and parties are probably not going to disappear in the near future. Problematic trends include slow growth and rising economic inequalities and joblessness; rising frustrations with immigration and refugee crises; and citizen perceptions that traditional political establishments are crooked and corrupt. In combination, such trends may very well continue fuel support for populist leaders worldwide, putting elected strongmen in position to shift democracies in authoritarian directions.

Pushing back against this threat to democracy will be difficult to accomplish precisely because of the subtle means through which today’s populists implement strongman rule. Because they incrementally dismantle democratic institutions and norms, no single dramatic change triggers widespread mobilization of opposition. All too often, populist leaders can frame vocal critics as destabilizing provocateurs, fragmenting resistance and rendering it ineffective.

In short, the global surge in populism poses a serious challenge to democracy. A first step toward mitigating this threat is for citizens and leaders in many countries to recognize what is occurring and how.