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Populism isn't dead. Here are five things you need to know about it

Cas Mudde

Recent victories for European centrists offer a chance to reflect on the phenomenon of populism - and draw some crucial lessons for the future. Cas Mudde is a US-based Dutch academic and writer

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Fishing for Leave: the pro-Brexit 'flotilla' campaigns outside parliament.
Photograph: NurPhoto/NurPhoto via Getty Images

The electoral victories of Emmanuel Macron in France and Mark Rutte in the Netherlands have significantly changed the discourse on European politics. The international media has gone from "populism is unbeatable" to "populism is dead". Obviously, neither is or was true. In fact, populist parties are still doing better in elections, on average, than ever before during the postwar era. Various European

countries have populists in their government - including Finland, Greece, Hungary, Norway, and Slovakia - while the most powerful country in the world is at the mercy of a billionaire president who has wholeheartedly embraced the populism of some of his main advisers, notably Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller.

But at the very least, the rise of Macron has given us some breathing space to reflect in a less alarmist and more rational way on the phenomenon of populism, and draw some lessons for the future. Because, whether we like it or not, in many western democracies populism has become ingrained in national politics and there is no reason to assume this is going to change in the short- or medium-term future. Here are five theses on populism and the lessons that liberal democrats should draw from them.

Thesis 1: Populism is neither right nor left, but populists can be either left or right (or even centrist)

Populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

The core features of the populist ideology are monism and moralism: both “the” people and “the” elite are seen as essentially sharing the same interests and values, while the main distinction between them is based on morals (“pure” versus “corrupt”).

Populism is an ideology - that is, a world view, but it is thin-centered, which means it addresses only part of political agenda - for instance, it has no opinion on what the best economic or political system is. Consequently, almost all relevant political actors will combine populism with a so-called host ideology, normally some form of nationalism on the right and some form of socialism on the left. In other words, not all populists are xenophobic and xenophobia is not populism.

Lesson 1: Populism cannot be defeated by adopting a (soft) xenophobic discourse or by tightening immigration. It is about the struggle within “the own people” (however defined).

Thesis 2: Populism is anti-system, but not anti-democracy

The basic features of democracy are popular sovereignty and majority rule. But western democracies are not just democracies. First of all, they are representative democracies, in which political elites compete for the support of the majority of the population to govern. Second, majority rule is not without limits. The majority is kept in check by a complex system of features - such as minority right, rule of law and separation of powers - that is more properly called liberal democracy. While populism supports democracy, as it wants politics to be based on the “general will” of the people, it opposes many of the features of our liberal democratic system, as it believes ultimate power resides in “the” people.

Lesson 2: Populism can only be defeated by a clear and comprehensive defence of liberal democracy, which explains that our political system goes beyond mere popular sovereignty and majority rule, and explains that the liberal aspects of the system benefit all citizens - as everyone can be a minority one day.

Thesis 3: Populism is an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism

In some ways populism signals the end of liberal hegemony, in which national governments oversaw an unprecedented relinquishment of power. Neoliberalism led to the privatisation of many national industries, while Europeanisation moved many policy fields upwards, to the supranational level, where they were also often stored in technocratic institutions (like the European central bank).

On top of that, a more progressive liberalisation has affected many socio-economic policies (from abortion to gay marriage). Many of these decisions were taken by democratically elected governments, although not always with much public debate and input. Moreover, once these policies had been implemented, they became depoliticised, as national politicians no longer decided upon them.

Any critique is countered by There Is No Alternative (Tina) arguments. “We can’t have the death penalty because we are a member of the European Union.” Populists challenge not just the specific policies but also the depoliticisation of the issues. Often correctly, they argue that what once was political can be political again, if the majority of the population wants it to be.

Lesson 3: Liberal democrats must move beyond Tina arguments, and purely anti-populist campaigns, and return to ideological politics. Even depoliticised issues have to be politically explained, ie by arguing why it is better that they were depoliticised.

Thesis 4: Populists often ask the right questions but give the wrong answers

Populist parties are not the cause of most political dissatisfaction within western democracies, they are the consequence of it. And much of this dissatisfaction is caused by the fact that a part of the population feels that the established parties do not (adequately) address important political issues. And they are not always wrong. In many countries mainstream parties largely ignored issues like immigration and European integration in the last two decades of the 20th century – they have since more than made up for it. Populist radical right parties forced those issues on the political agenda, thereby giving a voice to an ignored part of the population. Similarly, leftwing populist parties in southern Europe have questioned the dominance of austerity policies in the past decade, rejected the Tina “arguments” of the established parties. In most cases, the answers of the populists were flawed, based on the illusion that there is a policy that is (equally) good for all “the” people.

Lesson 4: Neither ignoring populists nor adopting their issues and frames will defeat populism – let alone strengthen liberal democracy. Liberal democrats have to set their own agendas and address all issues, also those raised by populists, on the basis of their own ideology.

Thesis 5: The power of populism is largely determined by the actions of liberal democrats

In recent years populist parties have contested national and European elections in most EU countries. On average, the populists attract some 20% of the vote, often split over at least two populist parties, and the biggest populist party is the third biggest in the national party system. This is unprecedented in the postwar era, but it doesn’t represent a majority.

And yet, much of the media has presented the (particularly radical right) populists as the true “voice of the people”, and mainstream politicians have bought into this framing – which was made hegemonic in the wake of the Brexit and Trump victories. Because liberal democrats

redefined “the people” in terms of the populist (radical right) electorate, they felt forced to implement softer versions of their agendas.

Lesson 5: Liberal democrats should start to treat populists as any other political actors, that is, as the political voice of a (sometimes substantial) minority of the population. Their influence should be not be disproportional to their popular support, particularly not when they are in opposition.

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