Cycles of Discontent: The Multifaceted Rise of Modern Populism

Introduction

At a political rally in 2015, Trump declared "I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words." A ridiculous and preposterous suggestion, Trump's border wall quickly became a rallying call for his supporters. They did not particularly care whether it was rational or effective. It was just a tangible symbol they could rally around without delving into the nuanced realities of immigration. It was simple. It had emotional appeal. And it meant Trump truly cared about ordinary people and was going to protect them from the 'dangerous, drug-addicted, and job-stealing immigrants.' Trump's manipulation of public insecurities is nothing new; right-wing populism has been rising throughout the globe. Boris Johnson and his Brexit campaign, Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalism, Recep Erdogan and his anti-Kurdish policies - all represent recent bouts of populism and use similar nationalistic and dichotomic policies. Over the past 6 years, the Global State of Democracy Data has shown declines in major democratic categories, such as Rule of Law (independence of judicial system) and Representation (fair elections).[1] While populists are not inherently detrimental to a democracy, they do often use us-vs-them mentality to justify centralizing power and weakening independent institutions. Prime Minister Modi cited Hindu nationalism and security issues while using trumped up tax charges to ban a BBC documentary criticizing Modi and his involvement in anti-Muslim violence in 2002.[2] Vladmir Putin rallied patriotic fervor in his invasion of Ukraine by falsely accusing the country of harboring Nazis and holding Russian-speaking populations hostage, and then used the war as an excuse to further control information and suppress dissent. But why? Why has populism increased? Why has democracy declined after decades of growth? The answer is complicated.

---

[1] "Global Patterns – The Global State of Democracy 2023." *International IDEA*, https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/global/. Accessed 13 June 2024.
[2] Yadav, Shalu. "Press freedom in India has declined under the Modi government." *NPR*, 3 April 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/04/03/1167041720/india-press-freedom-journalists-modi-bbc-documentary. Accessed 13 June 2024.

Populism has always been, well, popular. During the Roman Era, Julias Caesar distributed land, provided free grain, staged gladiatorial contests, and embarked on military campaigns to accumulate massive public support and popularity and avoid tackling fundamental issues of political tensions and economic inequality. Once he won over the people, he used his influence to consolidate power, becoming dictator perpetuo in 44 BCE. He was a populist - he appealed to the commoners and opposed the elites while slowly eroding democratic freedoms. And yet he remained popular. But why? Why is populism so appealing? If it's shown up throughout history, does that mean it is psychologically appealing? Social identity theories, relative deprivation theories, or even terror management theories seem to suggest so. After all, humans tend to make emotional based decisions first and use logic reactively. Or is populism a product of the environment? It can not be a coincidence that weak governments, economic turmoil, and social inequalities more often than not produce populists. Maybe populism is just part of the cyclical nature of policies; humanity tends to oscillate between opposite viewpoints. Take immigration; in the 19th century, America was pro-immigration, in the late 19th to early 20th they were anti-immigration only to become pro-immigration post-WWII and back again to anti-immigration under Trump.[3] This can be seen with trade, tariffs, taxes, social policies, foreign policy - almost everything. So is our modern populism just the natural and expected flip of opinions in reaction to the post Cold War democratic wave? Or, as some analysts suggest, populism may just be a product of our political system. The game theory of primaries, gerrymandering, campaign financing, and social media favors extremism, not moderation. How could we ever expect rational candidates when the way to win directly correlates with populist ideals? Speaking of social media, could that maybe be the reason? Are echo chambers, filtering algorithms, lack of internet accountability, and engagement-driven content responsible for the current wave of populism? The goal of the paper is to answer these questions. What caused the

---

[3] Baxter, Andrew M., and Alex Nowrasteh. "A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present Day." *Cato Institute*, 3 August 2021, https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/brief-history-us-immigration-policy-colonial-period-present-day#voluntary-forced-migration. Accessed 13 June 2024.

wave of modern populism? By investigating psychological, environmental, historical, social media, and game-theory factors, we can understand the fundamentals behind the recent global surge of populism, and gain a new appreciation for the complicated nature of politics.

Section I - Psychological or Environmental

Initially, psychological and environmental factors appear to contradict each other. It represents the quintessential nature versus nurture argument. Upon further analysis however, it's clear that they actually compliment each other - populism would not exist without both factors. To understand the environmental impacts, we can look at history. In the late 20th century, Venezuela was suffering. Economic inequality, poverty, and corruption were rampant, and the country's dependency on fluctuating oil prices created instability and turmoil. The Caracazo Riots in 1989, where hundreds of protestors were murdered by the government, highlighted the dissatisfaction and discontent. Enter Hugo Chavez. Despite failing to overthrow the government in 1992, Chavez gained national attention for his social welfare, nationalistic and anti-US policies, and most importantly, his radical attacks on the establishment. He created an us-vs-them ideology with remarks such as, "The people of Venezuela have been stripped of their rights, but together we will reclaim them and build a society based on equality and justice" or, "we are going to sweep away the corrupt and the oligarchs who have oppressed our people." None of his comments answered the hardest question of all; how? Populists gain support by accusing the current government of failing the people and declaring themselves the sole savior, but most of the time, they fail to explain how they actually plan to achieve their campaign promises. They just instead make generalized statements that in reality are impractical and difficult to implement. Take corruption. Being anti-corruption is easy; actually solving it requires extensive reforms, careful planning, and time. Chavez never mentioned his explicit plans and

despite him claiming otherwise, he failed to tackle corruption throughout his tenure.[4] Ionically enough, he actually needs corruption. Without social and economic turmoil, his message does not resonate with society. If a country is doing well, a politician attempting to overthrow the government and claiming the establishment is exploiting its people lacks credibility. But when there is discontent, people start listening. They feel the same. But if populists do not provide workable or rational decisions, why would people support them? Are times of trouble not the most important time to elect candidates who focus on realistic ideas? Why does democracy not flourish when problems arise? To answer this, we turn to cognitive closure and social identity theories.

Cognitive closure refers to the human preference for simple, direct solutions instead of ambiguous ones, even if a simple solution does not truly exist.[5] Social identity theory suggests people form their self-perceptions and beliefs from social groups rather than creating an individual identity and then joining groups that share similar philosophies. They define themselves by their group membership.[6] To exploit these characteristics, populists create distinct groups that revolve around simple rhetoric. A supporter is initially attracted to a populist's policies not because they make rational sense, but because they are simple. They want cognitive closure. Then, according to social identity theory, they define their personal ideology based on the group and the politician's already defined views. A moderate proposing realistic, complicated solutions lacks the simplicity necessary, especially during times of trouble. This is something we can easily observe - just try explaining something complicated to someone who is frustrated. It does not go well. But do people really form their beliefs based on a group identity? It certainly seems that our decisions come from a place of logic, but is this true? Motivated reasoning says no. According to motivated reasoning, people make decisions based

[4] Nelson, Brian A. "Hugo Chavez | Biography, Facts, & Death." *Britannica*, 16 May 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hugo-Chavez. Accessed 13 June 2024.

[5] Kruglanski, Arie W., and Donna M. Webster. "Motivated Closing of the Mind: "Seizing" and "Freezing."" *Description*, https://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/Psyc590Readings/Kruglanski1996.pdf. Accessed 13 June 2024.

[6] Ellemers, Naomi. "Social identity theory | Definition, History, Examples, & Facts." *Britannica*, 8 May 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-identity-theory. Accessed 13 June 2024.

on emotional reasons and then retroactively use logic to justify their initial decision.[7] They become susceptible to confirmation bias, as they seek information to confirm their emotionally based ideology. So, essentially, people are initially attracted to a populists emotionally charged rhetoric, and then search for rationale explaining why the policies are valid. When a populist attacks the system, if people are already discontent with various socioeconomic and political conditions, they emotionally identify with the leader. It does not matter what solutions the populist proposes. The primary source of attraction is the anger and frustration the populist uses. Without poor environmental circumstances, citizens would not resonate with populist language; without a predisposition to emotion based decisions and group identification, citizens would still not resonate with anti-establishment language. Both factors are necessary for populism.

In our current society, there are several socioeconomic factors creating ideal environments for populists. Just look at inequality. Since the 1990s, income inequality has been steadily rising within countries and considering populists anti-elite appeal to the masses, it's no wonder they have been gaining traction.[8] Add record levels of immigration to large Western countries and the misconception that they steal jobs, and populists have an easy route to emotional appeal. We also live in a time of immense change. Technology, automation, artificial intelligence - all have been rising exceptionally fast and while their incredible benefits to society and the economy can not be contested, they can alienate older generations not used to the advancements. People unable to keep up with new technologies, whether it be from lack of knowledge, skill, or access feel alienated.[9] With the increase of globalization, the job market has also changed - traditional industries for low skill work have been moved from developed to

[7] "Motivated Reasoning." *Psychology Today*, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/motivated-reasoning. Accessed 14 June 2024.

[8] "Inequality – Bridging the Divide | United Nations." *the United Nations*, https://www.un.org/en/un75/inequality-bridging-divide. Accessed 18 June 2024.

[9] Wilson, Carolyn, and Julie Tinson. "Technology is alienating people – and it's not just those who are older." *The Conversation*, 6 June 2022, https://theconversation.com/technology-is-alienating-people-and-its-not-just-those-who-are-older-184095. Accessed 18 June 2024.

developing nations, forcing sectors of the population into the unknown. Populists have been capitalizing on these often subconscious discomforts, focusing their rhetoric on returning things to the way it is, a purposely vague statement. Factor in rising inflation, supply-demand change disruptions stemming from Covid-19, global wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and gender/LGBTQ+ movements, it should be no surprise we have rising populism.

Although important, psychological and environmental factors fail to fully explain populism. Discrepancies exist. During the global financial crisis in 2008, Canada elected moderate leaders Stephen Harper and Justin Tredeau rather than turning to populism. At the same time, despite having low employment rates and steady growth, the United Kingdom supported populist Boris Johnson and his Brexit promises in 2019. These modern examples do not fit into the environment and psychological narrative, suggesting that other factors may exist.

Section II - Cycles of Populism

One possible explanation for the recent surge in populism could be the cyclical nature of policies. Civilizations often experience recurring shifts in policies, oscillating between completely opposite viewpoints. Take the United States and immigration. For most of the 19th century, the United States was pro immigration; in 1892, the famous Ellis Island opened up for immigration processing. But by the late 1920s, Congress had already passed the Emergency Quota Act (1921) and the Johnson-Reed Act (1924), which created numerical limits and quotas on the total number of immigrants entering the country. 40 years later, the US abolished these quotas with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and began a period of increased immigration. Only for that to change in 2016, when Trump passed anti-immigration acts such as the Migrant Protection Protocols and Zero Tolerance policy, and began initial construction of the border wall.[10] Or what about the United Kingdom and trade policy. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the

[10] Baxter, Andrew M., and Alex Nowrasteh. "A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present Day." *Cato Institute*, 3 August 2021, https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/brief-history-us-immigration-policy-colonial-period-present-day. Accessed 14 June 2024.

country practiced mercantilism and used extensive regulations to maximize exports and minimize imports. By the late 19th century, trade treaties such as the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty, Anglo-Belgian Treaty, or Anglo-Swiss treaty skyrocketed and Britain embarked on a free trade movement. That was until post-WWI, when Britain passed the Import Duties Act (1932) and left free trade behind. This did not last very long - by 1973, the UK joined the European Economic Community, and began to embrace globalism and reduce trade barriers. But, again, it was temporary. By 2016, Britain had voted to end its membership in the EU in an attempt to promote protectionism and control their own trade policies.[11] And there are so many more examples. Taxes, fiscal policy, social policy, government regulation, foreign policy - the list is endless. Societies oscillate between different ideologies. A famous historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., even wrote a book about this, called *The Cycles of American History*. But can this be applied to populism? After all, populism is just an ideology, and if social policies, healthcare, or defense spending can follow these trends, why can't populism? As countries flip between expanding welfare and eliminating them, they can flip between demagogic populism and technocratic pragmatism. With this assumption, our current wave of populism makes complete sense, in fact, we should have predicted it. During the 19th century, democracy was on the rise. Established monarchies were being stripped of their power as French, Belgian, Greek and other revolutions swept throughout Europe. Democracies continued to grow and spread until eventually the Great Depression hit. At a time of deep economic crisis, many countries turned towards populism and totalitarianism. It should be mentioned that, although authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are not synonymous with populism, they often adopt populist strategies and can thus be used in the analysis. But the regimes would not last long. Following the end of WWII, democracy surged, and not just through Europe. Former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East adopted democratic systems that had varying degrees of success. And throughout the 1980s and

---

[11] Heath, Edward. "Economic history of the United Kingdom." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_history_of_the_United_Kingdom. Accessed 14 June 2024.

following the Soviet Union collapse in 1991, numerous countries, including Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and Brazil, moved towards democracy.[12] With the world having experienced decades of democratic expansion, it should come as no surprise that we find ourselves in a populist, anti-democratic wave. Often, these pushes are caused by generational shifts. Younger, new generations push for democratic reforms; older generations become dissatisfied and become attracted to authoritarianism. It is not a coincidence young people voted overwhelmingly for Biden in 2020.[13] The cycling of generations through a population contributes to the periodic trends of a government; societal reactions to global events and societal progress further them. Just as authoritarian regimes in the mid 20th century were a reaction to the Great Depression, industrialization, and social changes in women and labor rights, current populism is a reaction to globalization, technological changes, and social changes in LGBTQ rights. When the world experiences rapid progress and change, it often alienates large sections of the population. People are generally opposed to change, and populists can manipulate the resulting dissatisfaction into political support. Eventually, there will be a reaction against the populists, they will lose support, and the cycle will continue. Just because policies go back and forth, however, does not mean there is no forward movement. Imagine waves; they may ebb and flow in specific moments, but overall, they advance towards the shore. Similarly, democracy today, even in the face of populism, is much stronger than it was during the last round of authoritarian regimes. The overall trend has been towards democracy, and as a wave inevitably reaches the shore, the world will inevitably progress democratically. Unless, new technology interrupts the cycle.

Section III - What about Social Media

---

[12] Huntington, Samuel P. "Democracy's Third Wave." *National Endowment for Democracy*, https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf. Accessed 14 June 2024.
[13] "Age, generation and party identification of registered voters." *Pew Research Center*, 9 April 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/age-generational-cohorts-and-party-identification/. Accessed 14 June 2024.

Assuming trends will continue just because they have in the past can be unreliable and fallacious. Societies, economies, technologies - they all change over time and can interrupt our presumptive future trends. While this is certainly possible, these cycles have existed for centuries of political governance and should continue. Despite significant social and economic changes, including the Industrial Revolution, nationalist movements, the Great Depression, and two World Wars, the trends have persisted. Even so, we have never had anything remotely similar to the internet and social media, and it is illogical to assume they will not have a notable impact. As discussed in the introduction, populists rely on passionate, inflammatory, and emotionally charged language, a characteristic favored by social media algorithms. These algorithms prioritize content receiving strong levels of likes, shares, and comments, and nothing creates stronger engagement than controversial and provocative speech. Emotions resonate deeper with human beings than logic, predisposing them to populist tactics. By spreading contentious content, social media companies inadvertently favor populism. And the algorithms get even worse. Often, algorithms expose users primarily to content aligning with their preexisting beliefs, leading to entrenchment and an amplification of views. These so-called echo chambers result in polarization; the lack of genuine disagreement leads to a distorted reality, where members shift towards more extreme positions.[14] And because of their us-vs-them ideology, populists thrive in these heavily politicized environments. The social media model does not help either. The emphasis on short-form entertainment and bit-sized information, keeps users addicted and aligns perfectly with populist tendencies to provide simplistic flawed solutions.[15] Furthermore, social media's lack of insufficient regulation on misinformation allows populists to easily spread blatantly false propaganda. Ironically, populists often attack the 'fake news media' and accuse them of spreading deceptive information and favoring their opponents,

---

[14] Mcleod, Saul. "Moscovici and Minority Influence in Psychology." *Simply Psychology*, 16 June 2023, https://www.simplypsychology.org/minority-influence.html. Accessed 15 June 2024.

[15] Zhao, Amy, and Camille Pierce. "Stuck scrolling? Short-form media is the perpetrator." *Nordic News*, 19 December 2023, https://nordicnews.net/13746/oped/stuck-scrolling-short-form-media-is-the-perpetrator/. Accessed 15 June 2024.

when in reality, it is the populists themselves engaging in these tactics and spreading misleading information. This effective tactic of falsely accusing the enemy of the same actions being carried out by oneself is another strategy boosted through social media. Take Trump. When faced with criminal charges from the Justice Department, he attacked, declaring them to be politically motivated and sent by "Crooked Joe Biden." Yet, during his presidential campaign, he tried to do exactly that; use the Justice Department as a weapon against his political opponents.[16] To spread his false narrative, he simply drafts a message and posts it, letting echo chambers, engagement algorithms, and the controversial nature of the message maximize its reach. It has never been easier to quickly and effectively spread false information. Before the internet, politicians would rely on newspapers and broadcasters, which are institutions that could immediately fact-check political statements. They essentially served as intermediates, preventing politicians from reaching large amounts of the populations unchecked. Now, since anyone can post anything, it is impossible for social media companies to fully combat and label misinformation. But is social media a direct cause of modern populism? Most of the impacts of social media have existed throughout time through other means. Before social media, newspapers, radios, and broadcast networks would also focus on emotionally engaging stories in order to capture audiences and sell their products. Running a story about an outlandish political comment attracted more attention than a tame, but pragmatic statement.[17] As discussed in Section I, humans have an innate psychological attraction to events provoking strong emotions, and that is not a recent development. Neither are echo chambers. Social media companies do not automatically provide users with agreeable content, those are just the content users choose to interact with. Before social media, humans would just do it in person. There were social societies, religious congregations, labor unions, academic circles to name a few. Social media just moved these communities online. Even the short form format of social media

[16] "Come Retribution." *This American Life*, 7 June 2024, https://www.thisamericanlife.org/833/come-retribution. Accessed 15 June 2024.
[17] Olson, Eric R., et al. "The Science of Journalism? Why Sensational Sells." *Scienceline*, 15 September 2008, https://scienceline.org/2008/09/the-science-of-journalism-why-sensational-sells/. Accessed 15 June 2024.

is nothing new - just look at magazines. We just scroll now instead of flipping a page. And misinformation? It may have been even worse before the internet and social media. Now, at least we have the option to expose ourselves to thousands of different viewpoints, since before the internet, people were limited to centralized information that made manipulation and propaganda much easier. Just look at Yellow Journalism and the misleading stories of the late 19th century that inflamed the public and pushed the United States into the Spanish-American war.[18] Or Hitler's anti-semitic propaganda that caused the Holocaust. How do modern authoritarian regimes control a country? They restrict social media. So does social media explain populism? Or is it just a representation of fundamental human behaviors? It's hard to know - most of the impacts have historical precedent. Regardless of whether social media promotes populism more than traditional media, it undeniably plays a significant impact in fostering the modern populist wave. But what if we have been focusing on the wrong factor? Throughout the essay, the primary focus has been on the voters and what leads them to choose populism over pragmatism. This approach makes sense; after all, the voters are controlling who rises to power. But is this necessarily true? What about from the politicians side?

Section IV - Game Theory

It's easy to focus on the voters when explaining fluxes in government, but it's just as important to analyze it from a politicians point of view. Politicians craft their career around being elected - how do they strategize? What techniques and ideologies are favored by the rules and laws of our country? What is the game theory of politics? Game theory, a branch of mathematics and economics, aims to predict potential outcomes by analyzing individuals' optimal strategies. Consider the Prisoner Dilemma, a classic example from the 1950s. In this scenario, there are two rational criminals, A and B, who are presented with the same deal: if they both confess they

---

[18] "Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian." *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian*, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism. Accessed 15 June 2024.

each receive 5 years in prison: if either one confesses and the other stays silent, the one who confesses goes free and the one who stayed silent serves 10 years: if they both stay silent, they each receive a year. Collectively, the ideal solution is to stay silent, and yet, most prisoners defect. The reason why is simple: if prisoner A believes prisoner B will cooperate, the ideal solution is to defect and go free, and if prisoner A believes prisoner B will defect, the ideal solution is to also defect and receive 5 years instead of 10. No matter what strategy prisoner B decides to go with, defecting results in an optimal outcome. By this logic, the most reasonable prediction is that both prisoners will defect, even though that is not the ideal outcome.[19] This type of strategic reasoning is a critical part of game theory and can be applied to our political system. Take the presidency. Under the American system, candidates have to go through their parties' primaries before they can even appear on the ballot. This does not seem initially concerning, until we investigate the type of people voting in a primary. America has a problem with voter turnout for the regular presidential election, so it should come as no surprise that less than half of regular election voters show up for the primaries. And the people who do vote? They are more polarized and partisan than the average voter.[20] So in order to just appear on the ballot, presidents have to appeal to a non centric base and move their policies further away from the center. Essentially, polarized voters have an outsized impact on the election. But why? Why are people voting in primaries more partisan? This is because people who are moderate typically lack strong motivation to see their ideology through, as moderate views appeal to logic while partisan views appeal to emotion. It follows the same logic as earlier sections; emotions are a better motivator than reason, so partisan voters who feel particularly strongly about a given issue are typically more likely to make the effort to vote and ensure their preferred policy makes it through than moderates. And it gets worse. To run a competitive campaign, candidates need substantial amounts of funding, which primarily comes from wealthy donors and various

[19] Velasquez, Vikki. "What Is the Prisoner's Dilemma and How Does It Work?" *Investopedia*,
https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/prisoners-dilemma.asp. Accessed 15 June 2024.
[20] "Turnout in Primaries vs General Elections since 2000." *States United Democracy Center*, 28 July 2022,
https://statesuniteddemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/historic_turnout.html. Accessed 15 June 2024.

interest groups. They have to cater to the donors' special interests, pushing politicians even further from the center. It is safe to assume that donors' interests are not representative of the political center, because if their views did align with the majority, additional motivation would be unnecessary; a majority opinion is motivating enough to politicians needing a majority vote. Hence, before the election even starts, certain groups have already played a disproportionate role in determining the outcome of an election. Once politicians finally manage to make it to the actual ballot, it does not even end there. Ever since the Supreme Court ruled limitations on corporate and PAC political fundraising unconstitutional, campaign spending has skyrocketed. Politicians have to prioritize appealing to wealthy supporters more than ever. But that's not all - as discussed in Section III, media coverage itself favors inflammatory content. From a politician's side, if they fail to market successfully on social media, they risk losing millions of views and hours of exposure. Even if they want to remain centrist, they can not afford to. No news is bad news; they need massive amounts of public attention to even stand a chance at being elected into office. Our two party system does not help either. While other parties do exist, they have not successfully elected a candidate to the presidency since Zachary Taylor in 1848; a Democrat or Republican has won the presidency for the last 168 years in a row. For a political candidate to be successful, they must consolidate diverse views on various issues - from immigration to the economy to social changes - into one of two platforms. Given the challenge of unifying diverse viewpoints, politicians often simplify their solutions to prevent disagreements and attack the opposition to avoid answering the nuances of their own policies. Sound familiar? These are the strategies of a populist. Moreover, the electoral college system means candidates do not have to represent a majority opinion. Despite losing the popular vote by almost 3 million votes, Trump still managed to secure the presidency. The winner-take-all approach means candidates only need to focus their attention on a few key swing states, allowing them to push their policies away from the center and towards the specific issues relevant to those areas. Just look at the recent war between Israel and Palestine. In Michigan, a swing state, over 100,000

voters protested Biden's support of Israel by casting their ballot for uncommitted. Biden won the

state by only 154,000 votes in 2020, so he can not afford to lose any votes in the highly

contested upcoming 2024 election and must adjust his policy accordingly. If this same issue had

happened in California, a state Biden won by 5.1 million, he would not need to care. Biden is

now forced to adopt policies further from the center and more towards the left, decreasing

moderation and increasing partisanship and polarization. The lack of competition in certain

states parallels the lack of competition in certain state districts, an occurrence caused by

gerrymandering. When state legislators create district maps, they often draw boundary lines to

benefit their own political party, either by cracking - spreading voters of a particular party over

many districts to dilute their voting power - or packing - concentrating voters of a particular party

in a singular district to diminish their influence in other districts. Both result in reduced

competition. Politicians trying to win the non competitive districts are again forced to move away

from moderation, instead having to differentiate themselves within their own party. They have to

become more extreme. By analyzing politicians' strategies and which ones are favored by the

political system, it is not at all surprising we live in a heavily polarized environment that fosters

populism. Voters may decide who wins an election, but they have no say in the uneven

influence of their votes and how those impact political strategies. When a candidate appears on

a ballot, no one really considers how they ended up there in the first place and what strategies

they had to change in order to be successful. As a society, we blame politicians or the

opposition for producing extremism and populism, but never consider they are products of the

system. There are many politicians fighting to be elected, but only the best strategy wins. And

the optimal strategy is not moderation. Consider the most 'controversial' issues facing our

society. 61% of Americans supported the rulings of Roe v Wade.[21] 58% of Americans support

stricter gun laws.[22] 67% say the US should prioritize renewable energy over fossil fuels and 56%

[21] Santhanam, Laura. "Majority of Americans don't want Roe overturned." *PBS*, 19 May 2022,
https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/majority-of-americans-dont-want-roe-overturned. Accessed 16 June 2024.
[22] Schaeffer, Katherine. "Key facts about Americans and guns." *Pew Research Center*, 13 September 2023,
https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/13/key-facts-about-americans-and-guns/. Accessed 16 June 2024.

say the federal government should be doing more to tackle climate change.[23] Yet we have not passed legislation on abortion in decades, Biden's efforts on stricter gun laws stalled in Congress, and Trump won in 2016 campaigning on deregulating environment protections and increasing the production of fossil fuels. We can not seem to solve controversial issues, that in reality, are not that controversial. Even just a 56% majority translates into 19.9 million more people than a simple majority. If we assume politicians' primary objective is seeking election and yet we have been unable to pass legislation supported by a majority of Americans, adopting majority opinions must not be a winning strategy. Otherwize, politicians with moderate positions would be in office passing legislation. Modern populism may just be the result of politicians capitalizing on strategies favored by our political system. But how would this explain a European rise in populism? Not all of the biases discussed apply; two-party voting, electoral college, campaign fundraising, and primaries determined by the public are fairly unique to America. So why would Germany experience populism? As it turns out, Germany's political landscape actually strengthens the game theory perspective. On a spectrum from far right to far left, current polling has the AfD at 17%, CDU at 30%, BSW at 5%, FDP at 4%, SPD at 15%, Greens at 15%, and Die Linke at 4%.[24] If we compare the policies of CDU, the most popular right leaning party, and American Republicans, it becomes instantly apparent that the CDU is far more moderate. They agree with Republicans on reducing business regulations, strong defense, and strict law and order, but align with Democrats on abortion, healthcare, social welfare programs, climate change, and the importance of international alliances. Germanys' populist wave actually refers to the far-right AfD, which only stands at 17%. Populism, while it exists in Germany, holds far less power than the Republican party (**KAJSHD**). This trend can be found throughout European countries - the far-right party in France, National Rally, only gained 30% of national support after softening their rhetoric and appealing to moderate voters. The

[23] Tyson, Alec, et al. "Americans' views of climate change in 8 charts." *Pew Research Center*, 9 August 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/. Accessed 16 June 2024.
[24]

political system favored less extremist strategies. All of this makes complete sense; America's political system, more conducive to far-right populism when compared to France or Germany, suffers from greater polarization and far-right candidates. Clearly, the strategic nature of political systems directly impacts candidate policies, increasing susceptibility to populism.

Conclusion - How do we fix it?

So what is causing our current wave of populism? Is it psychological and environmental factors, cyclical trends, social media, or our political system? It's all of them. None of the factors can fully explain populism alone. It would not matter if people are psychologically predisposed to support populists if the political system favored moderates and prevented extremists from even reaching the ballot. Or what if the media did not exist? Would we even go through cyclical trends? When the Roman Empire transitioned from a republic into an autocracy, it lasted for 503 years without going through any cycles. It also did not have widespread media. It's clear the success of populists can not be explained through individual factors; rather, they all play a critical part in the current hard-right populist wave. At this point, it is worth mentioning that throughout the analysis, hard-right policies and populism have been interchanged. This was not meant to imply populism and hard-right policies are inherently linked - there have been plenty of examples of left-wing populists as well - the modern wave has just mostly been right-wing. But why should we even care? Is populism that bad? It's surprisingly subjective - populists have had mixed track records; Adolf Hitler (Germany, 1933), Mao Zedong (China, 1949), Pol Pot (Cambodia, 1975) were responsible for the deaths of millions of people, while Eva Peron (Argentina, 1946), Hugo Chavez (Venezuela, 1999), and Luiz Inacio Lula (Brazil, 2003) drastically improved conditions for the poor, created social programs, and oversaw rapid economic growth. But then again, Venezuela experienced hyperinflation, Lula was implicated in a massive scandal, and Peron became increasingly authoritarian. And this is the main issue. All too often, populists veer into authoritarianism and begin eroding democratic foundations. While

they can be effective, especially in lower income countries, their achievements are typically short term. An undermined democratic system is inherently unstable, and even if a country manages to get a benevolent leader once, there is no guarantee they will get another. Democracies tend to be more consistent and deliver better results over the long term. So how can everyday citizens prevent populism and ensure government stability?

While we can not directly change socio economic problems, the cyclical nature of public policies, we can improve our political system and mitigate the impact of social media. Theoretically, we could also restrict our natural tendencies for populism. If people become aware of the psychological reasons behind populist support, they could self-reflect and prevent themselves from being manipulated, however, it is irrational to assume that millions of voters would ever actually achieve this. But we can definitely try to mitigate social media. By passing legislation, governments can require social media companies to perform direct fact checking on users' posts and to tweak their algorithms to expose users to various viewpoints. While some social media companies already fact check, it should be a requirement for all companies, and even for the ones that do, they often label misinformation well after thousands of viewers have already seen the information. But would these be effective? It's not clear. A study conducted by Duke University found that when exposed to alternative viewpoints on social media, Democrat views remained unchanged and Republican ones became more conservative.[25] Furthermore, when people are exposed to evidence contradicting their beliefs, they often reject the evidence and become even more convinced of their position, known as the backfire effect.[26] Regardless, there have not been enough studies on these policies to draw definite conclusions, and scientists should run further experiments.

One of the best ways to limit the spread of populism in a democracy is by changing the political system. First, remove two-party systems. According to Duverger's Law, single-member

[25] Boxell, Levi. "Are Social Media Driving Political Polarization?" *Greater Good Science Center*, 16 January 2019, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_social_media_driving_political_polarization. Accessed 17 June 2024.
[26] Shatz, Itamar. "The Backfire Effect: Why Facts Don't Always Change Minds – Effectiviology." *Effectiviology*, https://effectiviology.com/backfire-effect-facts-dont-change-minds/. Accessed 17 June 2024.

district plurality systems, or where candidates with the most votes wins the election in each district, inherently favors a two party system. Since only one candidate can win, smaller parties rarely ever win seats, and voters, knowing this, often decide to vote for a larger party and not 'waste' their vote.[27] In proportional representation systems, such as the one in Germany, seats are decided based on proportion of votes. This is a much better system; just as economic duopoly stifles competition and leads to worse products for consumers, a political duopoly leads to ineffective and worse politicians. Just look at the upcoming 2024 election in the United States - most people feel they are voting for the best worst candidate. Second, get rid of plurality.

In plurality, a voter just selects the candidate they want. This does not make much sense. By looking at a voters' ballot, the government has almost no information about the individuals' political preferences - all they know is that one candidate was preferred over the others. Say a certain voter choice candidate A. The government does not know how close the choice was? Or if the voter greatly prefers candidate A over B or if it was a difficult choice? What If there were multiple candidates? Did the voter absolutely hate candidate D and wanted B or C over D if A lost? There are so many unknowns in a plurality system. But what if democracies employed ranked choice voting (RCV)? In this system, voters would rank candidates based on preference. Initial findings found RCV increased voting turnout, increased voter engagement, ensured a majority candidate won the election, led to positive campaigning (promoting personal policies instead of attacking opposition), and increased diversity in political candidates. The only drawbacks are increased complexity and cost, and determining how to decide on a winner.[28]

To decide the winner, there are several different options. In instant runoff voting, if any candidate receives more than 50% of first place votes, they automatically win. If no candidates meet this criteria, then the candidate with the least amount of first-choice votes is eliminated. Any voters who had the candidate just eliminated would have their votes transferred to their

[27] "Duverger's law." *Oxford Reference*, https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095737871. Accessed 17 June 2024.
[28] Tolbert, Caroline J., and Daria Kuznetsova. "Editor's Introduction: The Promise and Peril of Ranked Choice Voting." *SSOAR*, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/78998#. Accessed 17 June 2024.

second choice. The process continues until a candidate receives more than 50% of the vote.[29]

There are several issues with this process - in extremely rare cases, it could lead to the 'nuclear candidate,' where a candidate no one wants becomes elected or situations where increasing the number of votes for a specific candidate can cost them the election. But it is still vastly superior to plurality and would significantly reduce extremism. Other preliminary methods for determining the winner still being studied, such as ranked pairs, have shown tremendous promise; ranked pairs favors centrist candidates, solves both of the rare issues facing instant runoff voting, is clone invariant, and last place loser independent. Clone invariant is when a political party can have multiple candidates in the same election and it would not harm the odds of the party winning, while last place loser independent means the candidate in last place dropping out will have no impact on the eventual winner. In the end, there are many different strategies and solutions to experiment with and almost all of them drastically improve our current system.

For now, as citizens, we can raise awareness about the factors associated with populism and encourage our respective governments to implement different democratic structures and pass corrective legislation. With a deep understanding of the causes of populism, we can actively try to circumvent potential dangers and improve the effectiveness of our government. Overall, by fixing their political system and understanding the nuances of political ideology, democracies can avoid polarization, extremism, and populism.

---

[29] "How Instant Runoff Voting Works." *FairVote.org*,
https://archive3.fairvote.org/reforms/instant-runoff-voting/how-instant-runoff-voting-works/. Accessed 17 June 2024.

Works Cited

"Age, generation and party identification of registered voters." *Pew Research
Center*, 9 April 2024,

https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/age-generational-cohorts-
and-party-identification/. Accessed 14 June 2024.

Baxter, Andrew M., and Alex Nowrasteh. "A Brief History of U.S. Immigration
Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present Day." *Cato Institute*, 3
August 2021,

https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/brief-history-us-immigration-policy-colo
nial-period-present-day#voluntary-forced-migration. Accessed 13 June
2024.

Baxter, Andrew M., and Alex Nowrasteh. "A Brief History of U.S. Immigration
Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present Day." *Cato Institute*, 3
August 2021,

https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/brief-history-us-immigration-policy-colo
nial-period-present-day. Accessed 14 June 2024.

Boxell, Levi. "Are Social Media Driving Political Polarization?" *Greater Good
Science Center*, 16 January 2019,

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_social_media_driving_politi
cal_polarization. Accessed 17 June 2024.

"Come Retribution." *This American Life*, 7 June 2024,

https://www.thisamericanlife.org/833/come-retribution. Accessed 15 June

2024.

"Duverger's law." *Oxford Reference*,

https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.2011080309

5737871. Accessed 17 June 2024.

Ellemers, Naomi. "Social identity theory | Definition, History, Examples, & Facts."

Britannica, 8 May 2024,

https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-identity-theory. Accessed 13 June

2024.

"Global Patterns – The Global State of Democracy 2023." *International IDEA*,

https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/global/. Accessed 13 June 2024.

Heath, Edward. "Economic history of the United Kingdom." *Wikipedia*,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_history_of_the_United_Kingdom.

Accessed 14 June 2024.

"How Instant Runoff Voting Works." *FairVote.org*,

https://archive3.fairvote.org/reforms/instant-runoff-voting/how-instant-runoff

-voting-works/. Accessed 17 June 2024.

Huntington, Samuel P. "Democracy's Third Wave." *National Endowment for

Democracy*,

https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.p

df. Accessed 14 June 2024.

"Inequality – Bridging the Divide | United Nations." *the United Nations*,

https://www.un.org/en/un75/inequality-bridging-divide. Accessed 18 June

2024.

Kruglanski, Arie W., and Donna M. Webster. "Motivated Closing of the Mind:

"Seizing" and "Freezing.'" *Description*,

https://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/Psyc590Readings/Kruglanski1996.pd

f. Accessed 13 June 2024.

Mcleod, Saul. "Moscovici and Minority Influence in Psychology." *Simply

Psychology*, 16 June 2023,

https://www.simplypsychology.org/minority-influence.html. Accessed 15

June 2024.

"Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian."

Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian,

https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism. Accessed

15 June 2024.

"Motivated Reasoning." *Psychology Today*,

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/motivated-reasoning.

Accessed 14 June 2024.

Nelson, Brian A. "Hugo Chavez | Biography, Facts, & Death." *Britannica*, 16 May

2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hugo-Chavez. Accessed 13

June 2024.

Olson, Eric R., et al. "The Science of Journalism? Why Sensational Sells."

    Scienceline, 15 September 2008,

    https://scienceline.org/2008/09/the-science-of-journalism-why-sensational-

    sells/. Accessed 15 June 2024.

Santhanam, Laura. "Majority of Americans don't want Roe overturned." *PBS*, 19

    May 2022,

    https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/majority-of-americans-dont-want-roe

    -overturned. Accessed 16 June 2024.

Schaeffer, Katherine. "Key facts about Americans and guns." *Pew Research*

    Center, 13 September 2023,

    https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/13/key-facts-about-amer

    icans-and-guns/. Accessed 16 June 2024.

Shatz, Itamar. "The Backfire Effect: Why Facts Don't Always Change Minds –

    Effectiviology." *Effectiviology*,

    https://effectiviology.com/backfire-effect-facts-dont-change-minds/.

    Accessed 17 June 2024.

Stanfield, James L. "Julius Caesar." *National Geographic Education*, 19 October

    2023, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/julius-caesar/.

    Accessed 13 June 2024.

Tolbert, Caroline J., and Daria Kuznetsova. "Editor's Introduction: The Promise

    and Peril of Ranked Choice Voting." *SSOAR*,

https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/78998#. Accessed 17 June

2024.

"Turnout in Primaries vs General Elections since 2000." *States United*

Democracy Center, 28 July 2022,

https://statesuniteddemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/historic_tur

nout.html. Accessed 15 June 2024.

Tyson, Alec, et al. "Americans' views of climate change in 8 charts." *Pew*

Research Center, 9 August 2023,

https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-a

bout-americans-views-of-climate-change/. Accessed 16 June 2024.

Velasquez, Vikki. "What Is the Prisoner's Dilemma and How Does It Work?"

Investopedia,

https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/prisoners-dilemma.asp. Accessed

15 June 2024.

Wilson, Carolyn, and Julie Tinson. "Technology is alienating people – and it's not

just those who are older." *The Conversation*, 6 June 2022,

https://theconversation.com/technology-is-alienating-people-and-its-not-jus

t-those-who-are-older-184095. Accessed 18 June 2024.

Yadav, Shalu. "Press freedom in India has declined under the Modi government."

NPR, 3 April 2023,

https://www.npr.org/2023/04/03/1167041720/india-press-freedom-journalist

s-modi-bbc-documentary. Accessed 13 June 2024.

Zhao, Amy, and Camille Pierce. "Stuck scrolling? Short-form media is the

    perpetrator." *Nordic News*, 19 December 2023,

    https://nordicnews.net/13746/oped/stuck-scrolling-short-form-media-is-the-

    perpetrator/. Accessed 15 June 2024.