

The Implication Of Populism On The Democratic System

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Populism has grown exponentially, with votes for populist parties tripling in European countries over the last twenty years (Roodujin, 2018). This has caused a global debate on the implication of populism on the democratic system. Although some observe populism as a threat, others claim that it is a legitimate expression of democracy. To explore the relationship between these terms, this essay will define populism and democracy, analyse the argument of the oppositions and the advocates of populism and determine why populism — once a legitimate expression of democracy — is now a threat to the democratic system. A threat to democracy will be identified as, an ideology that prevents the democratic system from fulfilling its purpose. Whereas, an ideology that is observed as an legitimate expression of democracy, will share a similar characterisation and purpose to the democratic system.

Democracy is defined as a system of government, of which the populace governs themselves, to rule directly through a referendum or by electing a representative by exercising their right to vote. This is to ensure that the rights, interest and welfare, of all citizens in the populace are protected (Chylinski, 2002). Although democracy has various forms, the term is frequently used by academics, when referring to liberal democracy. Liberal democracies are characterised by “free and fair elections, universal suffrage, the rule of law, separation of powers, wide political and civil liberties, and juridical equality” (McCabe, 2011, P.18).

Populism, an increasingly popular ideology implemented by political candidates, is observed as a method of appealing to ‘the people’. This is achieved by fostering the belief that, ‘the people’ are a morally pure force. Thus, they should have a greater influence on political decisions than those who reside in the small group of ‘elites’, who are perceived to be corrupt (Chylinski, 2002). Historically, this juxtaposition was made based on class. But it is observable that in modern populist campaigns the way the terms, ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ have been defined, also extends to the differences between the ethnicity, the religion and the values of the populace (Lewis et al., 2019).

From the definitions of democracy and populism, readers gain a better idea of the purpose and implications of these terms. However, it remains unclear if populism is a threat or a legitimate expression of democracy. To explore this further, we must observe the argument of the opposition and the supporters of populism.

“Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; or he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion” (Burke, 1899, P.95). Oppositions of the ideology of populism, implore that populism cannot represent a legitimate expression of democracy, without ensuring that the rights of all groups in a nation are protected.

As populism categorises the populace into a majority and a minority group, society's focus is centred on the differences between these groups. This promotes conflict to occur between the majority and the minority of the populace, as each group tries to ensure that their interests are protected (Roth, 2017). This frequently results in the rights of minority groups being threatened, as they do not possess the resources to defend themselves, from the influence of the majority on the ballot (Muis, J., & Immerzeel, T., 2017). These conflicts, are observed by populists' parties, as a method to increase voter support. This is because, proposals of radical movements are an opportunity for populist candidates to depict themselves as, a leader who will protect the majority's interest regardless of the cost (Muis, J., & Immerzeel, T., 2017). For instance, Donald Trump appealed to the Caucasian majority by targeting ethnic minorities, with bias movements such as 'The wall'. These movements did not aim to solve the complex issue regarding border control but were instead used to promote Trump's appeal to the Caucasian majority (Pring-mill, 2018).

Consequently, voters should not consider populism to be a legitimate expression of democracy as it exchanges the rights of minority groups, for the populist's party self-interested agendas. Instead, oppositions of the ideology of populism urge voters to observe populist ideology, as a threat to democracy. From the application of populism, we observe that society is shifting away from the democratic purpose, of presenting a collective voice. Instead, it is beginning to threaten the rights, welfare and interest of minority groups in the populace (Rohac, Kennedy, & Singh, 2018).

”We may have democracy. Or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. But we can't have both.” (Brandeis, cited by Irving, 1941, p 42.). Supporters of populist ideology, express that populism should be considered a legitimate expression of democracy. For the reason that successful populist parties are being elected through a fair democratic process and populism promotes a better representation of the collective voice, by promoting the purpose of a democracy.

Firstly, because populist parties have been elected through a just and free ballot, populism fulfils the characterisation of democracy as the populace are able to govern themselves (Castaño, 2018). Secondly, the claim that populism promotes a more representative voice, is justified by the reason that in the past, data has shown that in the United States of America, less than 50% of low-income citizens voted, whilst over 80% of high-income voters voted (Rohac, Kennedy, & Singh, 2018). This suggests that the outcome of past ballots was not a fair representation of the whole populace. As they were more likely to be influenced by the group categorised as 'elites'; especially as political candidates would propose bills that directly benefited the 'elite' group, as they comprised a larger proportion of the majority of the populace that voted. (Rohac, Kennedy, & Singh, 2018). Populism assists in correcting this failure, by addressing the concerns of the lower class, to motivate this group of the populace to participate in the ballot. Theoretically, this should result in a more representative ballot, and thus a more impartial political candidate being elected (Miller, 2018).

Therefore, populism satisfies the criteria to be categorised as a legitimate expression of democracy, as it operates under the characteristics of a democratic system and promotes the democratic purpose. Because of this, populist supporters observe that populism is an aid, rather than a threat to the democratic system, as it assists in mitigating voting bias.

Populism's relationship with democracy is difficult to define, as the theoretical interpretation and the practical implications of these terms are vastly different. In theory, populism appears to be a legitimate expression of democracy, but in practice, the flaws in the current democratic system have allowed modern politicians to corrupt the purpose of this ideology (Muis, J., & Immerzeel, T., 2017). This has resulted in the democratic system being threatened by contemporary populist campaigns, such as Donald Trump's proposal to build 'the wall' and movements such as Brexit (Lewis et al., 2018). As the rise in populism, caused a destabilising effect on society's perception of democracy, this has resulted in democracy's inability to uphold its purpose.

Whilst populism appears to motivate lower income groups to vote, in practice, it has caused distrust in the populace. This is because populist leaders who have been selected based on their radical movements, have been unable to fulfil their promise to the public (Rohac,

Kennedy, & Singh, 2018). This has resulted in populism posing a threat to the democratic system, as the loss in trust of the government's ability to respond to the concern of citizens, has lead to the resentment of the democratic system. This is observed by a Pew Research Centre study, which stated that over 45% of voters aged between 18-29 in the United state of America, would prefer a different system, over the current democratic one (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017). This is concerning, as this group will represent the majority of the populace in the future. This suggests that, if the democratic system cannot restore their relationship with this group, many nations will turn to alternative government systems.

There is no easy or obvious solution to remedy the current state of democracy, but with the growing popularity populism, political institutions must act promptly to restore their relationship with the populace. Especially, if they want to ensure the viability of the democratic institution in their nation and reinstate the position of populism as an expression of democracy. As currently, the ideology of populism is posing a threat to democracy, by tarnishing the reputation of the institution.

To conclude, populism's relationship with democracy is ever-changing, as the way it is perceived is unique to the relationship between the populace and the democratic system. In today's political climate, populism is observed as a threat to democracy. This is because modern populist campaigns are culturing a divide between the government and 'the people', which has resulted in a greater proportion of the populace retracting their support for a democratic government. For the reason that they no longer feel that their concerns are being addressed by this system. However, If the flaws in the current democratic system can be resolved, populism would again be considered a legitimate expression of democracy. Which can be observed as an aid to the democratic purpose, by encouraging a more representative ballot.

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