Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

# POPULISM

## A Very Short Introduction

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# Chapter 5
# Populism and democracy

The relationship between populism and democracy has always been a topic of intense debate. Although we are far from reaching a consensus, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the conventional position is that populism constitutes an intrinsic danger to democracy. Probably the most famous recent proponent of this position is the French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon, who argues that populism should be conceived of as "a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of representative democracy." But throughout time dissenting voices have appeared, some even proclaiming populism to be the only true form of democracy. Among the more recent defenders is Laclau, who believed that populism fosters a "democratization of democracy" by permitting the aggregation of demands of excluded sectors.

Both interpretations are to a certain extent correct. Depending on its electoral power and the context in which it arises, populism can work as *either* a threat to *or* a corrective for democracy. This means that populism per se is neither good nor bad for the democratic system. Just as other ideologies, such as liberalism, nationalism, or socialism, can have a positive and negative impact on democracy, so can populism. To better understand this complex relationship, we start by presenting a clear definition of democracy, which helps to clarify how the latter is positively and negatively affected by populist forces. We then present an original

theoretical framework of the impact of populism on different political regimes, which allows us to distinguish the main effects of populism on the different stages of the *process* of both democratization and de-democratization.

## Populism and (liberal) democracy

Just like populism, democracy is a highly contested concept in the academic realm and public space. The debates not only concern the correct definition of democracy, but also the various types of democracy. Although this is not the place to delve too deeply into this debate, we need to clarify our own understanding of democracy, before we can discuss its complex relationship with populism.

Democracy (*sans* adjectives) is best defined as the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule; nothing more, nothing less. Hence, democracy can be direct or indirect, liberal or illiberal. In fact, the very etymology of the term *democracy* alludes to the idea of self-government of the people, i.e., a political system in which people rule. Not by chance, most "minimal" definitions consider democracy first and foremost as a *method* by which rulers are selected in competitive elections. Free and fair elections thus correspond to the defining property of democracy. Instead of changing rulers by violent conflict, the people agree that those who govern them should be elected by majority rule.

However, in most day-to-day usages the term *democracy* actually refers to *liberal* democracy rather than to democracy per se. The main difference between democracy (without adjectives) and liberal democracy is that the latter refers to a political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities. When it comes to protecting fundamental rights, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and, in consequence, liberal democratic regimes have adopted very

different institutional designs. For instance, some of them have a strong written constitution and Supreme Court (e.g., United States), while others have neither (e.g., United Kingdom). Despite these differences, *all* liberal democracies are characterized by institutions that aim to protect fundamental rights with the intention of avoiding the emergence of a "tyranny of the majority."

This interpretation is very close to the one proposed by the late U.S. political scientist Robert Dahl, who maintained that liberal democratic regimes are structured around two separate and independent dimensions: public contestation and political participation. While the former refers to the possibility to freely formulate preferences and oppose the government, the latter alludes to the right to participate in the political system. Moreover, to ensure the optimization of both dimensions, he believed a demanding set of so-called institutional guarantees is required, including freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, alternative sources of information, among others.



Now that we have clear definitions of democracy and liberal democracy, it is time to reflect on how they are affected by populism. In short, populism is essentially democratic, but at odds with *liberal* democracy, the dominant model in the contemporary world. Populism holds that nothing should constrain "the will of the (pure) people" and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the "institutional guarantees" that should protect them.

In practice, populists often invoke the principle of popular sovereignty to criticize those independent institutions seeking to protect fundamental rights that are inherent to the liberal democratic model. Among the most targeted institutions are the judiciary and the media. For example, Berlusconi, who has been in and out of court for decades, would attack the judges for defending the interests of the Communists (hence, the term "Red Robes"). In pure populist fashion he once stated: "The

government will continue to work, and parliament will make the necessary reforms to guarantee that a magistrate will not be able to try to illegitimately destroy someone who has been elected by the citizens." As expected, populists in power have often transformed the media landscape by turning state media into mouthpieces of the government and closing and harassing the few remaining independent media outlets. This has been the case, most recently, in Ecuador, Hungary, and Venezuela.

Populism exploits the tensions that are inherent to liberal democracy, which tries to find a harmonious equilibrium between majority rule and minority rights. This equilibrium is almost impossible to achieve in the real world, as the two overlap on important issues (think of antidiscrimination laws). Populists will criticize violations of the principle of majority rule as a breach of the very notion of democracy, arguing that ultimate political authority is vested in "the people" and not in unelected bodies. In essence, populism raises the question of who controls the controllers. As it tends to distrust any unelected institution that limits the power of the *demos*, populism can develop into a form of democratic extremism or, better said, of illiberal democracy.



In theory, populism is more negative for democracy in terms of public contestation and more positive in terms of political participation. On the one hand, populism tends to limit the scope of competition because it often maintains that those actors who are depicted as evil should be allowed to neither play the electoral game nor have access to the media. While it goes too far to call populism "the paranoid style of politics," populist forces are prone to highly charged rhetoric and conspiracy theories. For instance, Syriza politicians in Greece would refer to domestic opponents as "the fifth column" of Germany and one of its (now former) ministers even called the EU "terrorists." In the United States, a country in which some citizens are fascinated with conspiracy theories, many right-wing populists are convinced that elites among both Democrats and Republicans are working to establish

a "new world government," which would put the United States under UN control.

On the other hand, populism tends to favor political participation, since it contributes to the mobilization of social groups who feel that their concerns are not being considered by the political establishment. As its core belief is that the people is sovereign, *all* the people and *only* the people should determine politics. It is worth noting that specific forms of populism, such as the populist radical right in Europe, might try to limit political participation by excluding certain minority groups. But these groups are excluded from the *native* people and not the *pure* people; in other words, it is the nativism and not the populism that is at the basis of the exclusion.

**Table 1. Positive and negative effects of populism on liberal democracy**

| Positive effects | Negative effects |
|---|---|
| Populism can give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the political elite. | Populism can use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent minority rights. |
| Populism can mobilize excluded sectors of society, improving their integration into the political system. | Populism can use the notion and praxis of popular sovereignty to erode the institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights. |
| Populism can improve the responsiveness of the political system, by fostering the implementation of policies preferred by excluded sectors of society. | Populism can promote the establishment of a new political cleavage, which impedes the formation of stable political coalitions. |
| Populism can increase democratic accountability, by making issues and policies part of the political realm. | Populism can lead to a moralization of politics whereby reaching agreements becomes extremely difficult if not impossible. |

In summary, populism can play both a positive and a negative role for liberal democracy. For instance, by giving voice to constituencies that do not feel represented by the elite, populism works as a democratic corrective. Populists often do this by politicizing issues that are not discussed by the elites but are considered relevant by the "silent majority." Indeed, without the presence of populist radical right parties in Europe, immigration would probably not have become a significant topic for mainstream political parties in the 1990s. The same can be said about the economic and political integration of excluded sectors in contemporary Latin America. This topic has become one of the most pressing matters in the last decade, to a large extent due to the rise of left-wing populist presidents, such as Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia, who successfully politicized the dramatic levels of inequality in their countries.

But populism can also have a negative impact on liberal democracy. For instance, by claiming that no institution has the right to constrain majority rule, populist forces can end up attacking minorities and eroding those institutions that specialize in the protection of fundamental rights. As a matter of fact, here lays the main threat posed by populist radical right parties to liberal democracy in Europe. Aiming to construct an ethnocracy, a model of democracy in which the state belongs to a single ethnic community, they undermine the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, such as Muslims in western Europe and Roma (gypsies) in eastern Europe.

Something similar occurs in contemporary Latin America, where left populist forces have drafted new constitutions that seriously diminish the capacity of the opposition to compete against the government for political power. A case in point is contemporary Ecuador, where President Correa has used constitutional reform not only to put loyal supporters in key state institutions, such as the electoral tribunal and the judiciary, but also to create new electoral districts and rules to favor his own


**8. The Bolivarian government of Venezuela printed this stamp after the death of Hugo Chávez, a populist leader who was president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013. Chávez wears the presidential sash, and crowds of his supporters assemble behind him.**

political party. An almost identical process has recently taken place in Hungary.

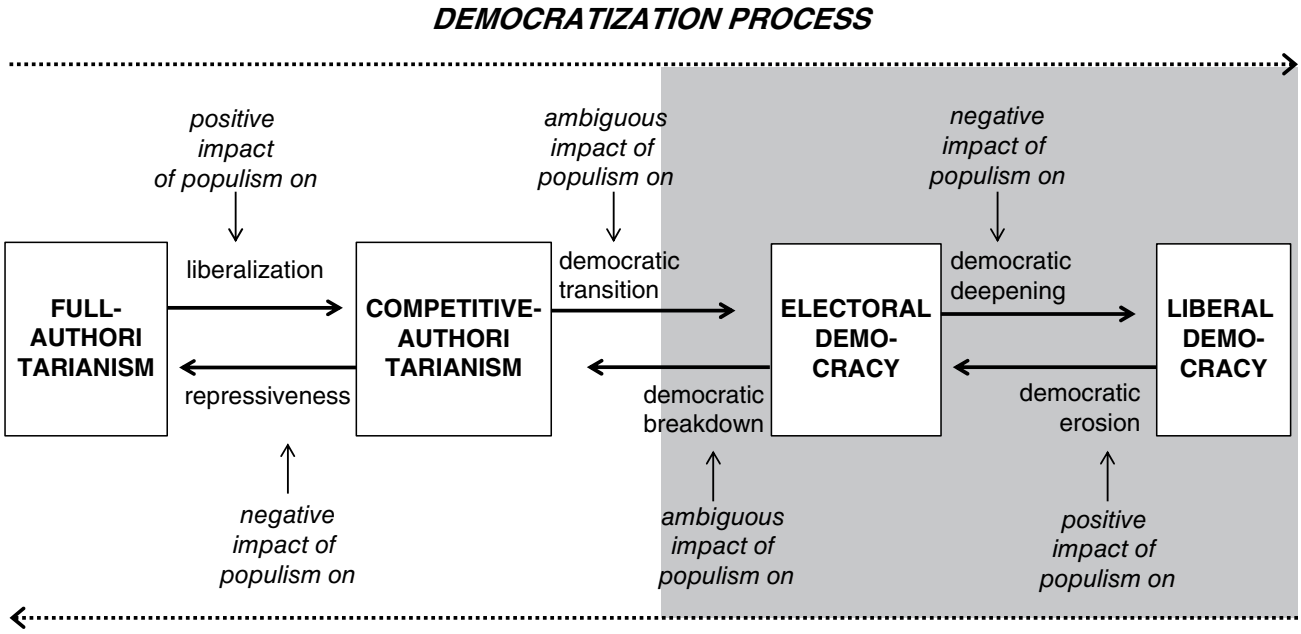
## Populism and the process of (de-)democratization

While a lively debate is ongoing on the role of populism in established liberal democracies, almost no attention is paid to the impact of populist forces on other political regimes and on the potential transition processes to either more or less democracy. What are the effects of populism on a (competitive) authoritarian regime or on fostering transformations toward more democracy? This is a blind spot that needs illumination.

Democracy is always incomplete and can at any time experience either deterioration or improvement. Therefore, it is important to think not only about *regimes* of (liberal) democracy, but also about *processes* of democratization (and de-democratization). Although there is no such thing as a "paradigmatic" democratization path, it is possible to recognize the existence of different episodes in which a movement toward either democratization or de-democratization occurs. Each of these stages alludes to the transition from one political regime to another, and we suggest that populism has a different effect in each. Let's begin by explaining the four most common political regimes in the contemporary world.



We can distinguish two different regimes within the authoritarian and the democratic camps, respectively: full authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism, on the one hand, and electoral democracy and liberal democracy, on the other. In full authoritarianism there is no space for political opposition and there is systematic repression, while competitive authoritarianism does allow for limited contestation but within an uneven political playing field between incumbents and opposition. Competitive authoritarian regimes tolerate the presence of an opposition and conduct elections, but the latter are systematically violated in favor of officeholders.




**9. Populism can have positive and negative effects on different political regimes. In fact, populist forces can trigger episodes of institutional change that might well lead to both democratization and de-democratization.**

Electoral democracy is characterized by the periodic realization of elections in which the opposition can potentially win. Nevertheless, electoral democracy has a number of institutional deficits that hinder respect for the rule of law and exhibit weaknesses in terms of independent institutions seeking the protection of fundamental rights. While liberal democracies are not perfect regimes, immune to accountability deficits, compared to electoral democracies the governed have more opportunities to hold the authorities accountable, ranging from a robust public sphere to independent judicial oversight.

It is worth noting that each of these four political regimes have their own political dynamic, but once they are in place they tend to remain relatively stable. Consequently, they are not *necessarily* in transition toward (more) authoritarianism or (more) democracy. Nevertheless, the rise of populist forces can trigger changes within each of these regimes. We theorize about the particular kind of impact that populism has on each of the transition episodes and illustrate this on the basis of one case each.



The impact of populism on the democratization process can be divided into three episodes: liberalization, democratic transition, and democratic deepening. During the first stage of *liberalization*, when an authoritarian regime loosens restrictions and expands some individual and group rights, populism tends to be *grosso modo*, a positive force for democracy. Because it helps articulate demands of popular sovereignty and majority rule, which call into question existing forms of state repression, populism contributes to the formation of a "master frame" through which opposition leaders can mobilize (all) those opposed to the regime. A good example of this can be found in the role that populism played in some of the broad opposition movements in communist eastern Europe, most notably the Solidarity trade union in Poland.

Solidarity was an anticommunist umbrella organization, harboring a broad and loose coalition of actors who agreed on the

problem of the communist present almost as much as they disagreed on the preferred post-communist future. While Solidarity as such was not a populist movement, some leaders and constituencies of the movement adhered to populism, which was particularly expressed at mass demonstrations by its iconic leader Lech Walesa. Fundamentally, Solidarity represented "the people" against "the elite" of the Polish United Workers Party (PZSR) in both ethnic (nationalist) and moral (populist) terms. It is not a coincidence that (leading) members of the Solidarity movement would found various populist parties in the post-communist period, of which the most notable is the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party of twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyńsky.

In the stage of *democratic transition*, i.e., the transition from a competitive (or fully) authoritarian regime to an electoral democracy, populism plays an ambiguous, but still rather constructive role, fostering the idea that the people should elect their rulers. Given that populist forces are characterized by claiming that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost, they will attack the elites in power and push for a change in the form through which access to political power is warranted. This means that they will support the realization of free and fair elections. An interesting case in this regard is Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in Mexico and the formation of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) at the end of the 1980s.

The PRD split from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which—under a succession of names—had been in power since 1929 and, despite its democratic façade, ruled a competitive authoritarian regime. Once Cárdenas and others realized that it was not possible to change the neoliberal economic policies of the PRI from within, they opted to build a new political vehicle that would not only oppose neoliberalism, but also demand the full implementation of free and fair elections. Since its beginning, the PRD adopted a populist language in order to present its party

leader—initially Cárdenas and later Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)—as a "humble man of the people," interested in building a real democracy for all Mexicans. Although the PRD was not able to win the presidency itself, it did help pave the way for the historic deals that enabled the "founding elections" of 2000, in which the conservative National Action Party (PAN) won the presidency.

Finally, during the stage of *democratic deepening*, pending reforms that are crucial for improving institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights and the development of a fully-fledged liberal democratic regime are completed. Theoretically, populists are at odds with the process of democratic deepening, as they support an interpretation of democracy based on unconstrained popular will and the rejection of unelected bodies. The latter are normally portrayed by populism as illegitimate institutions, which seek to defend the "special interests" of powerful minorities rather than the "real" interests of the people.



Three-time Slovak prime minister Vladimír Mečiar provides an excellent example of populist opposition to democratic deepening, particularly during his third and last coalition government (1994–1998), which consisted of three populist parties. When Mečiar came to power in 1994, Slovakia was in the group of democratic frontrunners for accession to the European Union (EU) in post-communist central and eastern Europe. As a consequence of the government's illiberal politics, which included both disregard for laws as well as (attempted) efforts to change laws—such as the redrawing of electoral districts to undermine the opposition parties—the country slowly but steadily retreated into the category of democratic laggards. The EU even threatened to exclude Slovakia from the first round of accession.

The last decades have served as a reminder that democracy can be not only deepened, but also diluted, and even abolished. Populism

can play a significant role in this process of de-democratization too, which can also be divided in three episodes: democratic erosion, democratic breakdown, and repressiveness. The stage of *democratic erosion* includes incremental changes to undermine the autonomy of those institutions that specialize in the protection of fundamental rights, such as diminishing judiciary independency, jettisoning the rule of law, and weakening minority rights. Populist leaders and followers are inclined to trigger episodes of democratic erosion because they support, in essence, an extreme majoritarian model of democracy that opposes any groups or institutions that stand in the way of implementing "the general will of the people." Probably no better illustration of the ways in which populism can lead to a process of democratic erosion can be cited than the current situation in Hungary.

After losing the 2002 elections, a loss he only grudgingly acknowledged, Viktor Orbán and his right-wing populist Fidesz party adopted a radical opposition outlook that even included violent street protests. Upon his return to power in 2010, he used his party's electoral majority to force through a new constitution that ensures, in the words of some academic observers, that "(t)he current government now has very few checks on its own power, but the new constitutional order permits the governing party to lodge its loyalists in crucial long-term positions with veto power over what future governments might do." Although foreign governments and international organizations have been reluctant to criticize the Orbán government too harshly, both the EU and the United States have expressed growing concerns with the "crackdown" on democracy in Hungary.

The second stage in the process of de-democratization is *democratic breakdown*, denoting a regime shift from electoral democracy to competitive authoritarianism (or full authoritarianism in an extreme case). Populist actors are expected to play an ambiguous, but still rather supportive role during democratic breakdown, because they are inclined to tilt the rules

of the game in favor of populist forces and/or attack "the corrupt elite" for not permitting the expression of the general will of the people. Fujimori's regime in Peru is a case in point.

Fujimori came to power as a populist outsider in 1990, campaigning against the political establishment and in favor of a gradual approach to solve the economic crisis that the country was facing. Given that Fujimori neither had a strong party behind him nor was interested in establishing alliances with the existing parties, the country experienced a real deadlock between the executive and legislative powers. To break the deadlock, Fujimori suspended the constitution and closed the parliament in 1992, arguing that he was simply following "the will of the people." After this *autogolpe* (self-coup), Peru continued to be governed by Fujimori for eight more years, during which the regime was certainly closer to competitive authoritarianism than to electoral democracy. In fact, Fujimori established an alliance with military sectors—in particular with the intelligence service and its director Vladimiro Montesinos—with the aim of not only destroying the Shining Path guerrilla movement, but also skewing the playing field to the disadvantage of the opposition.



Finally, the last stage of de-democratization is *repressiveness*, the movement from a competitive authoritarian to a full authoritarian regime, a process that usually unfolds gradually and is related to the occurrence of crises. Given that populism inherently supports popular sovereignty and majority rule, we believe that populists will generally oppose this process of repressiveness. There are almost no recent cases of repressiveness, in which a populist actor has been relevant.

One of the few exceptions is probably Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenka, who—despite opportunity and rising opposition—has not transformed his competitive authoritarian regime into a fully authoritarian one. The main reason that Lukashenka has supported a competitive authoritarian regime,

based on (increasingly rigged) electoral support, rather than the fully authoritarian "clan politics" of other post-Soviet countries, is his populist ideology. He justifies his (competitive authoritarian) regime on the basis of a populist argumentation, in which the opposition is painted as a "corrupt elite," aligned to foreign (i.e., Western) powers. However, for Lukashenka to be able to claim to be the true representative of "the pure Belarusian people" with some legitimacy, he needs a popular contest with his opponents, even if it is through elections that are not truly competitive.

## Intervening variables

This theoretical framework distinguishes, first and foremost, between the effects of populism in the six distinct stages of the processes of democratization and de-democratization. However, within each stage the nature and strength of the effect can vary too, depending on at least three intervening variables: the political power of populist forces, the type of political system in which populist actors operate, and the international context.



The most important factor is the political power of the populist actor. Whether populist forces are in opposition or in government can affect not only the strength, but also the nature of their impact on the process of democratization. In general, populists-in-opposition tend to call for more transparency and the implementation of more democracy (e.g., founding elections, referendums, recall votes) to break the alleged stranglehold of the elite, either in a (competitive) authoritarian or in an (electoral) democratic context.

Populists-in-power have a more complicated relationship with the use of direct democracy and respect of the rules of public contestation. Although it is true that populists defend majority rule, only some of them have more or less consistently used plebiscitary instruments. Most notably, Chávez organized several referendums, including a successful one to overturn term limits for the presidency, which allowed him to win reelection for the

second time, and an unsuccessful one to change the constitution. Populist politicians have also used their political power to tilt the electoral playing field in their own favor, as both Correa and Orbán have done through constitutional reforms.

A second important factor is the *type* of political system. Like all political actors, once populists come to power in a democratic system they are more or less constrained by the specific features of the political regime in which they operate. While presidential systems make it easier for populist "outsiders" to gain power, they often lack support at other levels to push through their agenda—particularly when they lack a strong party organization. In contrast, parliamentary systems tend to limit the power of populists-in-power because they often lead to coalition governments, in which populist parties have to work together with mostly stronger nonpopulist parties—as was the case with the FPÖ in Austria, for example. However, if a populist actor, or coalition of actors, acquires a parliamentary majority, they have fewer counterbalancing forces to contend with—as is most strikingly illustrated by Hungary, where Orbán for a long time could count on a qualified parliamentary majority, allowing him to change the constitution without any impedimentary action by the opposition.



Finally, the international context plays an important role. If a country is integrated into a strong network of liberal democracies, such as the EU, it is more difficult, but not impossible (again, see Hungary under Orbán), for a populist actor to undermine key features of liberal democracy without a major international backlash. Not by chance, the recent coming to power of left populist governments in various Latin American countries has been accompanied by efforts to construct new regional institutions, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which are trying to defend their own model of democracy. In fact, UNASUR has developed its own system of electoral observation to compete with the system of the

Organization of American States (OAS), the main intercontinental organization in the Americas, in which Canada and the United States are also member states.

## Populism and democracy revisited

The complexity of the relationship between populism and democracy is reflected in theory and practice. In essence, populism is not against democracy; rather it is at odds with *liberal* democracy. It is a set of ideas that defends extreme majoritarianism and supports a form of illiberal democracy. Populism strongly champions popular sovereignty and majority rule but opposes minority rights and pluralism. But even its relationship with liberal democracy is not one-sided. Around the world populist forces seek to give voice and power to marginalized groups, but they also tend to combat the very existence of oppositional forces and transgress the rules of political competition.



In practice, populists usually cite and exploit a tension inherent in many liberal democracies of the contemporary world: they criticize the poor *results* of the democratic regime, and, to solve this problem, they campaign for a modification of the democratic *procedures*. When the liberal democratic regime does not deliver what certain constituencies want, political entrepreneurs can adopt the populist set of ideas to criticize the establishment and argue that the time has come to strengthen popular sovereignty. Put another way, populists tend to claim that the rule of law and the institutions in charge of the protection of fundamental rights (e.g., electoral tribunals, constitutional courts, supreme courts, etc.) not only limit the capacity of the people to exercise their rightful power, but also give rise to growing discontent with the political system.

Populism does not have the same effect in each stage of the democratization process. In fact, we suggest that populism tends

to play a positive role in the promotion of an electoral or minimal democracy, but a negative role when it comes to fostering the development of a full-fledged liberal democratic regime. Consequently, while populism tends to favor the democratization of authoritarian regimes, it is prone to diminish the quality of liberal democracies. Populism supports popular sovereignty, but it is inclined to oppose any limitations on majority rule, such as judicial independence and minority rights. Populism-in-power has led to processes of de-democratization (e.g., Orbán in Hungary or Chávez in Venezuela) and, in some extreme cases, even to the breakdown of the democratic regime (e.g., Fujimori in Peru).

If the democratic system becomes stable, populists will continue to challenge any limitations on majority rule, and when they become strong enough, they can cause a process of democratic erosion. However, it is unlikely that they will threaten the existence of the democratic system to the point of producing its breakdown, as they will experience strong resistance from multiple actors and institutions that defend the existence of independent bodies specialized in the protection of fundamental rights. To a certain extent, this is the scenario that some European countries are experiencing today, in which populist forces have become electorally dominant (e.g., Greece or Hungary) but do not have absolute leeway to revamp the whole institutional design of their countries.

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