

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024 • VOLUME 103 • NUMBER 6

---

## The Populist Phantom

—  
Threats to Democracy Start at the Top

LARRY M. BARTELS

# The Populist Phantom

---

## Threats to Democracy Start at the Top

LARRY M. BARTELS

**M**any countries have been roiled in recent years by what is often called a “populist wave.” In the Anglophone world, this new era began in 2016 with the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Media and political elites shocked by these events tied themselves in knots trying to figure out what had happened and why. According to the most popular strand of this thinking, the Brexit vote and Trump’s victory were the reverberations of a profound economic and social transformation. Globalization and technological change had shattered the livelihoods of working-class people and eviscerated their communities, provoking a groundswell of anger and resentment, a populist rejection of the status quo and the political establishment. Since then, observers have been quick to find further evidence of the

---

LARRY M. BARTELS is University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Law at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Democracy Erodes From the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*.



*Illustration by Lincoln Agnew*

surging force of populism in an ever-lengthening list of countries, including Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, and Sweden. An electoral surge for a supposedly populist party anywhere in the world renews the drumbeat of alarm that populism is submerging established party systems and, ominously, democracy itself.

And yet for all the alarm that populism has generated, its nature and political significance are widely misunderstood. The metaphor of a “populist wave” reflects this error. It exaggerates the electoral suc-

---

The triumphs of populists do not augur democracy’s demise.

cess of populism around the world, which has been rather more modest than it sometimes appears. It also exaggerates the coherence of populism as a political tendency, overlooking the extent to which ostensibly populist entrepreneurs in different times and places have appealed to distinct grievances. Even more important, the metaphor overstates the

implications of populist parties’ electoral successes for policymaking and for democratic stability.

Those panicking about the rise of populism tend to imagine that shifts in public opinion fuel the success of populist parties and figures; the public’s broadening antipathy to globalization, immigration, integration (in the European context), and the political class threatens to empower extremists and undermine democracy. But that is demonstrably not the case. Public opinion in the West on most typically “populist” issues has remained relatively stable for decades, belying the notion that a new surge of popular discontent is remaking the political landscape. Both in the United States and in many parts of Europe, the gains of populist and far-right forces have less to do with a genuine shift in political beliefs among the public than they do with changing elite politics. In other words, top-down developments, not bottom-up ones, drive populism: an expanded menu of political alternatives for voters, more effective mobilization of long-standing discontents, and the tendency of mainstream political leaders to concede in the face of challenges that are sometimes more illusory than real.

Liberal democracies do face genuine threats, including the potential erosion of important democratic norms and institutions. And citizens of democracies have long prized their own well-being and values over the defense of democratic procedures. But their passivity is to be expected, not understood as a sign of rebellion against the status

quo. The political successes of populist groups and leaders do not in themselves augur democracy's demise. Misconstruing the nature and appeal of populism muddles a clearer understanding of the contemporary political landscape and distracts attention from the chronic vulnerabilities of democracy—notably, the perennial temptation for political leaders to entrench themselves in power.

#### THE MYTHICAL SURGE

The emergence of populist parties as significant electoral players in many parts of the world has been a shock to the unusually stable party systems of the post-World War II era, but in the longer arc of democratic politics, it should hardly be surprising. Across Europe, for example, the average vote share for right-wing populist parties has increased by less than half a percentage point per year since the turn of the century. The rise of social democratic parties in many of these same countries in the early twentieth century was far more dramatic by comparison.

The impression of a relentless surge in support for populist parties is partly a product of media hype. The international press is fascinated and alarmed by their successes but mostly tends to ignore their struggles and downturns. The *New York Times*' coverage of the 2023 election in Spain provides a striking illustration of this habit. Two weeks before the election, the *Times* rolled out a long front-page story portraying the rise of Vox, a far-right party, as “part of an increasing trend of hard-right parties surging in popularity.” The morning of the election, the *Times* ran another long front-page story whose headline touted a “Far Right Poised to Rise.” But the next day, after Vox fared poorly in the vote, the election result itself was reported only in a brief article on page 8.

The media's fascination with populism doesn't just warp conventional wisdom; it can have real consequences at the polls. British political scientists studying media coverage of the United Kingdom's pro-Brexit UK Independence Party found that its electoral successes received “disproportionate attention” in the press, which in turn helped generate additional popular support. Insurgent parties thrive on the perception that they are viable alternatives to the status quo, and journalists unwittingly stoke that perception.

The press also routinely misinterprets shifts in electoral support for populist parties as evidence of momentous changes in public opinion.

In fact, there is remarkably little relationship between support for these parties at the polls and underlying populist sentiment—the specific attitudes, such as antipathy toward immigrants, distrust of politicians, and nationalism (and in Europe, opposition to further European integration) that generally predict individual support for contemporary populist parties. That incongruity is paradoxical. How can the factors that account for populist support at the individual level not do so in the aggregate?

That is because support for populist parties depends on factors beyond the predispositions of voters. In particular times and places, populist parties succeed or fail mostly as a result of the quality of their leadership, the alternatives voters have to choose from, and the strategic incentives provided by electoral systems. These parties have long flourished in a variety of places where populist sentiment is relatively scarce. The Swiss People's Party, for instance, has garnered 25 to 30 percent of the vote in each of the past six elections—more than any other populist party in western Europe—despite Switzerland's unusually high levels of trust in politicians and satisfaction with the economy, the government, and democracy. Populist parties in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are among the most successful in western Europe despite those countries having the continent's most favorable attitudes toward immigrants. Conversely, populist parties were slow to emerge in Belgium, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain—all places where public opinion exhibited more widespread populist sentiment.

In majoritarian democracies, winning parties are generally broad coalitions of diverse interests, and it is hard to gauge how much of a party's support can be ascribed to "populist" rhetoric or policy positions. In the United States, for example, the Republican nominee for president won 46 percent of the popular vote in 2016 and 47 percent in 2020, but that is a testament to the strength of partisan loyalties in the current, highly polarized political environment, not to the specific appeal of populism or of Trump. Trump won the 2016 Republican nomination with intense factional support in a crowded field, then mostly relied on the backing of traditional Republicans to defeat an unpopular Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, in the general election. Although the Republican Party has indeed reflected an increasingly populist cast in recent years, that is probably more a product than a cause of Trump's success; loyal partisans are notoriously susceptible to cues from party leaders.

Republicans' shifting views regarding Russian President Vladimir Putin during Trump's presidency provide a remarkable example. A 2014 survey by YouGov and *The Economist* found just ten percent of Republicans expressed favorable views of Putin. But in December 2016, after over a year of Trump's pro-Putin campaign rhetoric, that number was up to 37 percent. It seems far-fetched to imagine that the party of Ronald Reagan was transformed by an autonomous groundswell of enthusiasm for the Russian dictator; rather, Trump supporters were swayed by the president's peculiar fondness for Putin. Effects of this sort are not limited to the domain of foreign policy. In the early days of Trump's presidency, the political scientists Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope tested the reactions of rank-and-file Republicans to information about his positions on a variety of major issues, including immigration, health care, guns, and abortion. They found substantial shifts in preferences, especially among the most committed and least informed partisans, in the direction of positions ascribed to Trump, regardless of whether those positions were conservative or liberal. "Many people's expressed issue positions," they concluded, "are malleable to the point of issue innocence."

#### THE MYTH OF ECONOMIC DISAFFECTION

The common invocation in Western media of a "populist wave" encourages observers to imagine that there is some single driving force propelling the various manifestations of populism seen around the globe in recent years. In fact, populism is a political language and style adaptable to a wide array of circumstances. In most democracies most of the time, there is a substantial reservoir of potential support for challenges to the status quo, and populists draw on that reservoir opportunistically to build their brands and jostle for power.

The most frequent explanation for the so-called populist wave is widespread economic disaffection stemming from deindustrialization, globalization, and technological change. This explanation appeals to observers for a number of reasons: it gratifies nostalgia for an orderly postwar era in which economic issues shaped the party systems of affluent democracies; it invites leftists to chastise so-called neoliberals for the policy errors of the late twentieth century; and it submerges the ugly significance of racial and ethnic animosities in contemporary democratic politics. But it doesn't really fit the facts.

In conventional accounts, the global economic crisis triggered by the financial meltdown of 2008 was the key factor in what the author John Judis called “the populist explosion.” As the journalist Matt O’Brien wrote in *The Washington Post* a few months after Trump’s inauguration, “It shouldn’t be too surprising that the worst economic crisis since the 1930s has led to the worst political crisis within liberal democracies since the 1930s.” But it hasn’t. Although populist parties in some places made electoral gains in the wake of the economic calamity, they were mostly small and scattered. Moreover, careful survey research showed that the supporters of populist parties were mostly distinguished by traditional conservative ideology, as measured by where respondents placed themselves on a left-to-right spectrum of political belief, and by opposition to immigration and European integration; economic disaffection played little discernible role.

---

Economic disaffection did not drive populist successes.

In Spain, for example, GDP fell by almost five percent during the euro crisis that lasted from 2009 into the early 2010s and unemployment soared to 26 percent, yet no viable right-wing populist party emerged. Vox made substantial inroads only several years later, in 2019, after economic disaffection had ebbed and the relatively favorable attitudes toward immigration and globalization that had been cited as explanations for Spain’s quiescence had become even more favorable. Statistical analyses of survey data showed that the most important factor driving support for Vox was the same conservative self-identification that had long predicted support for the mainstream People’s Party; nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment played lesser roles, while economic disaffection, opposition to European integration, and dissatisfaction with democracy had little or no effect.

In *Foreign Affairs* after the election, an essay by the journalist Sam Edwards was subtitled “Far-Right Populism Has Finally Conquered Spain, but the Real Shift Lies Elsewhere.” The use of “conquered” is a typical example of exaggerating populist strength—Vox’s vote share peaked at 15 percent. But Edwards’s real point was that even that success had less to do with the intrinsic appeal of right-wing populism than with the “implosion” of the People’s Party, triggered by the failure of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to head off a chaotic referendum on Catalan independence and the convictions of several

prominent party officials for their role in what the High Court called an “authentic and efficient system of institutional corruption.” In most of the places where populist parties have made significant electoral gains, the explanations have been similarly prosaic; the scandals and failures of mainstream parties were often paramount.

Economic disaffection is similarly overblown as an explanation for the rise of Trump in the United States. Pundits surmised that Trump’s rise was a testament to the crash of the American middle class and the high debts and consequent frustration of millions of Americans. But in their book-length analysis of the 2016 election, the political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck found that the biggest shifts in voting patterns were related to education, not income, and that those shifts primarily reflected “attitudes about race and ethnicity,” not “economic anxiety.” They concluded that “the dividing line between Clinton and Trump voters was not the widespread belief that average Americans are being left behind” economically. The real key was “how people explained economic outcomes in the first place—and especially whether they believed that hard-working white Americans were losing ground to less deserving minorities.” A separate analysis by the political scientist Diana Mutz likewise showed that perceived loss of status, not tangible economic deprivation, explained the 2016 presidential vote. Even so-called deaths of despair—such as suicides and deaths caused by addiction and overdose—in economically devastated white working-class communities seem not to have had the populist resonance that many pundits imagined. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck found that whites who voted for Clinton were more likely than those who voted for Trump to report knowing someone who had abused alcohol or been addicted to painkillers.

#### BUILD THE WALL

Support for populist parties and candidates in contemporary Western democracies is driven primarily not by economic grievances but by cultural concerns. In broad terms, these parties and candidates appeal to people distressed by the pace of social and cultural change in Western societies. Like William F. Buckley’s conservatives in the 1950s, today’s right-wing populists stand athwart history yelling, “Stop!” In the United States, changes stemming from the decades-long struggle for racial justice and the decline of organized religion are major sources of distress for this group. Fears about the erosion of local and

national identities loom large in many places. But the most concrete and common source of tension is immigration—especially that of people ethnically and culturally distinct from existing populations.

Many affluent societies have experienced significant inflows of immigrants in recent decades. The European refugee crisis that began in 2015 provided new opportunities for right-wing populist entrepreneurs to stoke and exploit long-simmering concerns about immigrants and immigration, inflaming public fears about “the great replacement” of a white majority by nonwhites. As with the supposed impact of the economic crisis, however, the causes and political implications of these developments are often misunderstood.

For one thing, there is remarkably little relationship between the scale of immigration in specific countries and the extent of anti-immigrant sentiment. In long-running cross-national surveys, Germany and Sweden, which have experienced substantial immigration, remain among the most welcoming countries in Europe; the refugee crisis barely dented favorable opinions there toward immigrants and immigration. Hungary and Poland, which have not received many immigrants (although Poland has taken in many refugees from Ukraine), are among the most hostile—largely because their governments have energetically scapegoated immigrants, another instance of leaders manufacturing rather than responding to public opinion.

The ubiquitous notion that the immigration crisis was tearing Europe apart represented an overreaction to the agitation of a xenophobic minority. Just as the press tends to exaggerate electoral gains by anti-immigrant parties, it tends to mistake outbursts by extremists for broad shifts in public opinion. Across Europe, attitudes toward immigrants and immigration have become substantially more favorable since the turn of the century, even in places where there have been significant inflows of immigrants. This shift is largely due to generational replacement, as younger, better-educated people are less concerned about immigration than their parents and grandparents have been. In surveys conducted in the past few years, the difference in attitudes toward immigrants and immigration between young Europeans (born in the late 1990s) and some of the oldest ones (born in the early 1930s) is comparable to the difference between the countries that have the most favorable perceptions of immigration, such as Norway and Sweden, and those that have the least favorable,

such as Poland or Slovenia. Although immigration is not about to disappear as a political issue, it is swimming upstream against a strong generational current.

A similar generational divide appears in the United States. Indeed, in recent years, the long-standing gap in immigration attitudes between older and younger Americans has widened. A 2023 Gallup poll found that 55 percent of people 55 and older wanted the level of immigration reduced, but only 16 percent of 18-to-34-year-olds agreed.

For some older Americans, especially, concerns about immigration have been supercharged by the deeper fear of becoming strangers in their own country. A decade ago, the psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson showed that reminding white Americans of a projected demographic future in which whites are outnumbered by nonwhites significantly altered their political attitudes. Now, such reminders are constant, as politicians and pundits on the right incessantly hawk the conspiratorial notion that radical elites are using nonwhite migration to hasten that future and cement their own hold on power. For people who view demographic diversity as a significant threat to the traditional American way of life, the political stakes could hardly be higher.

The frictions stemming from immigration are real. But they reflect the increasing intensity of feeling among a minority, not the massive, irresistible tide of popular conviction that many observers imagine. Moreover, their political implications are often overblown; much of the opposition to immigration is more symbolic than concrete. For example, a June 2024 Gallup poll found 47 percent of Americans saying they favored “deporting all immigrants who are living in the United States illegally back to their home country.” But anyone tempted to take that dire finding at face value would do well to note that 70 percent of the same survey respondents said they favored “allowing immigrants living in the United States illegally the chance to become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements over a period of time.” As with many issues, there may be less to the public’s immigration policy preferences than meets the eye. Exaggerating the breadth and solidity of anti-immigrant sentiment merely encourages mainstream political leaders to cave to pressure from extremists, abdicating their responsibility to craft policies and rhetoric that address the issue soberly and sensibly.

BARKING DOGS

The electoral successes of populist parties invariably raise alarms about their potential impact on public policy. But that impact, too, is often exaggerated and, even more often, difficult to assess. Regardless of the specific institutional structure in which they operate, populists generally need political allies to shape policy. In majoritarian systems, that requires bargaining within parties and governments. In multiparty systems, it usually requires populist parties to partner with mainstream parties in governing coalitions. The more extreme a populist party is, the less attractive it tends to be as a coalition partner and the more likely it is to have to moderate its policy ambitions to participate in government. Thus, as the political scientist Cas Mudde once put it, even when western Europe's right-wing populists reach parliament, they are "dogs that bark loud, but hardly ever bite."

The accession of the right-wing populist Giorgia Meloni to the post of prime minister of Italy in 2022 is a case in point. Meloni's rise was portrayed as the vanguard of yet another "new wave of populism," but in truth, she benefited from the crash of Matteo Salvini, an earlier far-right leader who lost support after he overplayed his hand in a coalition government. As prime minister, Meloni has been less zealous and ideological than many analysts anticipated, constrained by Italy's reliance on the European Union for economic support and by her coalition partners.

In some countries, mainstream political leaders have long shunned populist parties as political allies. In Sweden, for example, the electoral rise of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats was counterbalanced for many years by mainstream parties across the political spectrum refusing to partner with it in governing coalitions, even at the cost of ceding power to their rivals. In 2018, the Sweden Democrats' 62 seats in parliament represented a clear balance of power between the Red-Green coalition's 144 seats and the center-right Alliance's 143 seats. Nonetheless, the mainstream parties negotiated for more than four months, eventually settling on a precarious but functional center-left coalition. In 2022, the Sweden Democrats won 73 seats, making it the largest party in a prospective center-right coalition. But the reluctance of the other parties in the coalition to partner with it resulted in a minority government with carefully negotiated external support from the Sweden Democrats. Although the norm of "cordoning" the Sweden

Democrats from power has clearly eroded in recent years, it hasn't disappeared. Whatever one may think about the legitimacy of nullifying the influence on government of a substantial minority of voters, political leaders in multiparty systems retain considerable leeway to do just that.

---

Leaders panicked by the overblown threat of a populist wave concede more than they should.

The efforts of mainstream political elites to contain the policy influence of right-wing populists is similarly evident in the Netherlands, where the issue of immigration fueled a major political crisis, leading to the collapse of the longtime prime minister Mark Rutte's center-right coalition in 2023. The big winner in the resulting snap election, more than doubling its previous vote share and parliamentary representation, was the Party for Freedom, helmed by the anti-immigrant firebrand Geert Wilders. Although some media declared the outcome "a tectonic change in the Dutch political landscape," Wilders's potential coalition partners blocked him from becoming prime minister, eventually settling on a new leader with no party ties or political experience. As in Sweden, the policy impact of Wilders's election victory remains to be seen.

For mainstream politicians, attempting to suppress populist parties and the grievances they exploit may often be good politics. Yet it sometimes risks further alienating their supporters. A survey conducted in the six months following Sweden's 2018 election showed satisfaction with Swedish democracy declining substantially among people who had reported voting for the Sweden Democrats, as the drawn-out post-election maneuvering made it increasingly clear that the party would once again be shut out of government. Managing the currents of populism sometimes requires concessions and compromise. More often, however, political leaders panicked by the overblown threat of a populist wave probably concede more than they must or should. Perhaps the most consequential instance of such overreaction was British Prime Minister David Cameron's promise in 2013 to stage a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union, a reckless gamble intended to blunt the exaggerated threat of the UK Independence Party and a move that even many who supported it soon came to regret.

THROW THE RASCALS OUT

While observers have overstated the electoral successes and political clout of populist parties, they have also exaggerated what is at stake in those successes by conflating populism with democratic backsliding. According to the political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, “Far-right populist parties . . . have risen from obscurity to transform the party system of virtually every Western European country. Meanwhile, parts of Central and Eastern Europe bear witness to the institutional and ideological transformations that might be afoot: In Poland and Hungary, populist strongmen have begun to put pressure on critical media, to violate minority rights, and to undermine key institutions such as independent courts.” The word “meanwhile” is doing a lot of work here. In fact, the parties that eroded democratic institutions in Hungary and Poland bore little resemblance to the populist parties of western Europe, and the forces fueling their rise were largely unrelated to the conventional understanding of right-wing populism.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party came to power in 2010 as the only viable alternative to an incumbent party fatally discredited by years of scandal and mismanagement. Contrary to many observers’ assumptions, Fidesz’s support at that point was unrelated to anti-immigrant sentiment, resistance to European integration, political distrust, and other common bases of support for right-wing populist parties. Only after winning did Orbán turn to scapegoating refugees and the European Union, adapting and extending the populist playbook and pulling the views of his supporters closer to those of right-wing populists elsewhere. But the vote that brought Orbán to power in 2010 was a surprisingly routine instance of “throwing the rascals out,” not a welling up of xenophobic or antidemocratic passions.

Having won 53 percent of the popular vote—hardly a ringing mandate under the circumstances—Orbán exploited what one Hungarian writer aptly called an “accidental” two-thirds majority in the National Assembly to retrospectively declare a transparently bogus “voting booth revolution,” engineering changes to the electoral system and constraints on civil servants and the media intended to entrench Fidesz in power. This assault on Hungarian democracy was not a reflection of Hungarians’ yearning for populism, much less for authoritarianism. Orbán took advantage—as incumbent politicians in many times and places have—of an opportunity to rewrite the rules of the game in his own favor.

Orban's changes to the Hungarian electoral system and attacks on independent media gave Fidesz "an undue advantage" in subsequent elections, as an international monitor reported in 2014. An even more important basis for the party's continued hold on power, however, was a marked improvement in ordinary Hungarians' subjective quality of life. Surveys registered massive improvements after 2009 in public satisfaction with the economy, the national government, and—ironically—the working of Hungarian democracy. These improvements in subjective well-being continued for several years after Fidesz's rise to power.

Democratic backsliding in Poland followed a similar course after the center-right Law and Justice party's victory in 2015. "Law and Justice won big," a BBC News analyst explained at the time, "because they offered simple, concrete policies," including "higher child-care benefits and tax breaks for the less well-off." Scholars concurred that Law and Justice "softened its image," running on the anodyne slogan "Good Change." Only after taking power did the party turn to packing the judiciary with party loyalists, castigating the European Union, and tightening its control over state radio and television. "You have given an example," the party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski told Orban in 2016, "and we are learning from your example."

If the authoritarian turn in Poland was attributable to political elites rather than ordinary citizens, the same might be said of its end. The ouster of the Law and Justice party in an election in October 2023—just a month after its expected reelection had been touted in *The Economist* as part of "a fresh wave of hard-right populism"—led some observers to wonder whether Europe's populist wave had finally crested. But the election outcome was hardly a sea change in Polish public opinion. The Law and Justice party's 35 percent of the vote was only slightly lower than the 38 percent vote share that brought it to power in 2015. The key difference was not in voters' behavior but in the determination of the various opposition parties' leaders to subsume their differences in a coalition government led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

#### ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

The tolerance of many citizens in Hungary and Poland for what scholars have characterized as "mildly authoritarian" regimes may strike democratic idealists as blameworthy, but it should not be surprising. Ordinary people in most times and places have cared more for their

security, their personal finances, and the validation of their social identities than they have for the upholding of democratic norms and procedures. Summarizing her detailed study of full-blown breakdowns of democracy in twentieth-century Europe and Latin America, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, the political scientist Nancy Bermeo wrote that “ordinary people generally were guilty of remaining passive when dictators actually attempted to seize power.” Although they “generally did not polarize and mobilize in support of dictatorship, they did not immediately mobilize in defense of democracy either.”

A study published in 2020 tested how survey respondents’ willingness to support a hypothetical political candidate was affected by informing them that the candidate had violated some democratic norm (for example, advocating the prosecution of unfriendly journalists or ignoring unfavorable court rulings). The authors concluded that “only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices,” making public opinion a “strikingly limited” check on undemocratic behavior by elected officials. Turks and Venezuelans were similarly “reluctant to punish politicians for disregarding democratic principles when doing so requires abandoning one’s favored party or policies.”

Americans’ commitment to democratic principles was put to a more concrete test in 2022, when scores of Republican members of Congress who had supported or condoned Trump’s “stop the steal” effort following the 2020 election stood for reelection. In contested general elections, they did not fare significantly worse or better than their counterparts who had bucked Trump—the electoral cost of “disregarding democratic principles” was essentially zero. Moreover, in other respects they were advantaged; for example, they were much less likely to lose Republican primary elections or to retire from politics and more likely to seek higher office.

It might be tempting to interpret public indifference to violations of democratic norms as itself a product of the “populist wave.” In fact, it is a long-standing feature of democratic politics and not only in the cases of breakdown studied by Bermeo. Six decades ago, the political scientist Herbert McClosky’s classic study of “consensus and ideology in American politics” documented the shallow allegiance of many ordinary Americans to the “rules of the game.” McClosky concluded that members of “the active political minority” were “the major repositories of the public conscience” and “the carriers of the [democratic] Creed.”

In McClosky's postwar era, elite support for democratic norms was bipartisan. That consensus was facilitated by the fact that policy differences between the two parties were modest by historical standards. (In 1950, the American Political Science Association issued a public report titled *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System* that advocated for stronger, more distinct party platforms and greater power to implement them.) In recent years, however, the rise of hot-button issues such as civil rights, abortion, immigration, and national identity have polarized the

---

The threat Trump poses to American democracy has little to do with populism.

parties, raising the stakes of political contestation. In response, political elites—especially Republicans—have demonstrated a troubling willingness to violate democratic norms in pursuit of partisan advantage. The increasingly unrestrained struggle for power among elites, not populism, represents the greatest threat to democracy in the United States and elsewhere.

Case studies of democratic breakdowns around the world suggest that the most important bulwark against autocratic backsliding from the top is uncompromising opposition from prominent political allies. Orban's constitutional coup in Hungary required absolute party discipline, facilitated by his ironclad control over the Fidesz party apparatus and candidate selection. Although Trump's control of the Republican Party has been less complete, it has increased considerably since 2016. When he floated the possibility of postponing the 2020 election, Republican leaders in Congress promptly and publicly rejected the idea, and it was quickly dropped. But after the election, when Trump's allies hatched a plan to derail the certification of electoral votes, Republican congressional leaders were divided in their response. Two-thirds of House Republicans ended up voting to decertify electoral votes, while only seven of 51 Senate Republicans did so.

Since 2021, Trump has bolstered his standing among the Republican rank and file, as demonstrated by his cakewalk through the 2024 primaries. He has also significantly tightened his grip on the party organization—for example, by installing allies and in-laws in the leadership of the Republican National Committee. Many of the Republican leaders who resisted his extremist tendencies have voluntarily or involuntarily retired from politics and been replaced by newcomers who seem willing to give Trump a freer hand. Even if he wins

reelection, the institutional fragmentation of power in the U.S. system will leave him well short of the ironclad control that Orbán enjoys in Hungary. Nonetheless, with an increasingly united Republican Party and an increasingly compliant Supreme Court supporting him, there is good reason to fear a further erosion of democratic norms.

Trump's movement to "Make America Great Again" appeals to a deep fear of diversity and social change. That sort of fear is commonplace in all societies, and it has often roiled democratic politics. Yet the threat Trump poses to American democracy has little to do with "populism." It doesn't come from ordinary citizens immersed in "culture wars"—even from those who stormed the Capitol on January 6. They were and are a sideshow. The real threat is from the Republican officeholders who, hours later, supported Trump's effort to decertify the election outcome. It was not some rush of antidemocratic feeling that threatened American democracy in those months; it was the machinations of political elites determined to entrench themselves in power.

At its heart, widespread misunderstanding of the contemporary populist threat rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of democracy itself. An idealized "folk theory of democracy," as the political scientist Christopher Achen and I have called it, encourages journalists, scholars, and ordinary citizens to imagine that the moving force behind major shifts in party systems and governing coalitions must be correspondingly major shifts in public opinion. If populist parties are gaining strength in parliaments, it must be because people are turning against immigration, European integration, and established political institutions. (They are not.) If democratic norms and institutions are eroding, it must be because public support for democracy as a system of government has weakened. (It hasn't.)

As the eminent political scientist E. E. Schattschneider observed several decades ago, this sort of understanding of democratic politics is "essentially simplistic, based on a tremendously exaggerated notion of the immediacy and urgency of the connection of public opinion and events." The fate of democracy lies in the hands of politicians. It is they who choose to manage, mollify, ignore, or inflame populist sentiment. It is a dangerous blunder to gullibly accept their show of bowing to the ostensible will of the people. And when popular grievances are used as a pretext for bad policy—or, even worse, as a pretext for democratic backsliding—it is politicians, not the citizenry, who are culpable. 🌐