When Does Populism Become a Threat to Democracy?
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The New Era of Democratic Distemper

This conference is taking place at a time of a deepening global recession for freedom and democracy in the world. I believe this recession began around 2006-2007, when roughly a quarter century of steady expansion in electoral democracy, liberal democracy, and political rights and civil liberties drew to a halt. For most of the last dozen years, it has been a mild (and even debatable) phenomenon, most evident in the cessation of democratic expansion. In addition, average levels of freedom in the world (as measured by Freedom House) have been declining, with the number of countries declining in freedom outstripping the number gaining in every one of the last eleven years (pretty much reversing the pattern of the first fifteen years after the Cold War). Less noticed has been the rising rate of democratic failure: About one in six democracies failed in the first decade of the Third Wave (1975-84); then the failure rate declined to a little less than ten percent in the subsequent two decades; and now in the past decade or so it is again approaching the rate (above 15 percent) of those early years of the Third Wave.[1]

Three inter-related trends have recently persuaded a growing number of observers and analysts that the global conditions for freedom and democracy are clearly trending downward. First are the growing signs of a democratic distemper or recession spreading to the core of the world's liberal democracies, particularly Europe and the United States. For a number of years now, scholarship has focused on the growing dysfunction and polarization of American democracy, and the long-term secular declines in confidence in government to do the right thing (which has fallen in half from the Reagan years, to about one in five Americans) and trust in political institutions (with now less than ten percent of Americans expressing confidence in the Congress). But until 2016, virtually no one anticipated that an illiberal populist demagogue could—and indeed would—get elected to the presidency. More generally—and to the point of our conference—nativist and illiberal populisms are gaining electoral ground across many advanced liberal democracies, and we now have an instance—I argue (along with many Hungarians)—in which there has actually been a failure of democracy in an EU nation, at the hands of a populist party and leader. The ruling illiberal populist Law and Justice Party is eroding democracy in Poland as well, and there are reasons to be concerned about other post-communist EU democracies, along with the growth in support for various kinds of populist and illiberal parties and movements even in Western Europe. *Since the dawn of democracy's Third Wave, this is the first time that serious doubts have arisen about the future of democracy in the advanced liberal democracies.*

Second, the erosion or malfunctioning of democracy in liberal democracy's core is part of a broader downward shift in the entire spectrum of regimes. Some liberal democracies are showing increasing signs of illiberalism, de-institutionalization, and, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk even provocatively suggest, "de-consolidation." But in recent years we have also seen declines in the quality or stability of democracy in less well entrenched liberal democracies (e.g., South Africa, Botswana, Mongolia, and Brazil); the breakdown of prominent (illiberal) electoral democracies—such as Thailand, Turkey, and Bangladesh; decay or growing vulnerability in other electoral democracies (the Philippines, Indonesia, perhaps Mexico); the quashing of pluralism and competitiveness in "competitive authoritarian" regimes, from Venezuela to Uganda and Cambodia; the failure of all the Arab Spring political uprisings save for Tunisia; the stalling of the transition in Burma into an increasingly illiberal and military-dominated competitive authoritarian regime; and the intensification of authoritarianism in already very authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, Egypt, and Iran.

This leads to the third recent trend: The relative rising power of Russia and especially China, and the growing tendency of autocrats worldwide to identify with these powerful autocracies and cite them as models. Even if publics in these other countries are largely not buying it, or are more resentful of Chinese neo-imperialism than is generally being reported, China and Russia—through their increasingly resourceful and multidimensional projection of soft power—and authoritarian ruling elites in various African, Asian, and post-communist countries are spreading the word that democracy is passé, that it leads to chaos and stagnation, and that concentrated power is the path to progress. This ideological counter-narrative is struggling mightily to give birth to a new authoritarian global zeitgeist. It is very important to appreciate this changing global context, because one answer to the question I am asking here—when does populism become a threat to democracy?—is "when there is a permissive international climate for it to do so."

The reasons for the ebbing of global democratic progress have been several.

- Nothing expands forever, and it was virtually inevitable that after freedom and democracy had spread to unprecedented lengths around the world, it would recede in some of the countries and regions with the weakest structural and historical conditions for sustaining it (low-income countries, deeply ethnically divided countries, countries with no prior experience of democracy, and countries living in bad neighborhoods, like the periphery of Russia).
- During the Third Wave of democratization, the commitment of powerful Western democracies, particularly the United States, to promoting democracy and supporting democratic parties and civil society actors played a vitally important role in encouraging democratic change and discouraging rollbacks of democratic progress. The debacle of American intervention in

Iraq gave democracy promotion a bad name and eroded domestic American commitment to it, leading the liberal democracies (and most consequentially, the United States) to downgrade democracy promotion in foreign policy and foreign aid.

- The financial crisis of 2008 had longer-lingering effects in some countries than we perhaps realized at the time, and the downward pressure on real incomes of the working and middle classes interacted with longer-term trends of economic stagnation and insecurity to make significant segments of the electorate in the U.S. and many European countries more susceptible to the appeals of nativist, populist, and illiberal alternatives to the established political parties.
- Increasing globalization—movements across border of capital, goods, services, but most of all people—added to the anxiety of many voters who felt that the sovereignty and integrity of their nation was under assault, thus driving a nativist and illiberal backlash against immigration, trade, and the EU. This became a more palpable crisis with the flood of immigrants into Europe fleeing the Syrian civil war, as well as generally rising immigration pressures from Africa and the Middle East. Europe was less well equipped to handle these pressures than the U.S. because the U.S. has been historically a nation of immigrants. But as William Galston and others have pointed out, the current percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign born is pretty near a historic high since the civil war (currently about 13.5 percent, as compared to just under 15 percent in 1890 and again in 1910). And periods of high immigration have tended to give rise to intense nativist, populist reactions as well.
- Finally, social media have proved a fertile milieu and set of tools for polarizing (wittingly and unwittingly) democratic publics, sowing doubts about democracy and mobilizing disaffected citizens into new, populist, anti-establishment movements and appeals.

The result of all of this is that we have now entered a new period in world history of much broader and more palpable erosion of freedom and democracy. There is even a gathering sense among observers that liberal democracy may be facing its most serious challenge since the radical upheavals of the mid-1970s. This is all by way of setting the historical context for the period we are in.

"Bad" vs. "Good" Populism?

One of the challenges we face in this conference and project is to figure out what we are talking about. To my mind, the essence of populism is that it is:

1. Anti-elitist, condemning the corrupt dominance of established elites whose interests do not align with the majority of the people.

2. Anti-institutionalist, arguing that at least some established institutions (including potentially the party system) are perpetuating the unfairness that is being inflicted on the people, and must be abandoned or reformed.
3. Plebiscitary, favoring mass mobilization of the popular majority, and a direct relationship between the populist leader or movement and the people, rather than the indirect filters of public opinion through representative democracy that the American constitutional founders favored as a check on the potential for "tyranny of the majority."
4. Therefore, majoritarian, in its desire to empower strong, energetic elected government that can overcome the establishment bias to perpetuate the status quo.

If that is *all* that populism is at a minimum, then it is possible to argue that it is not all bad, and that there are times in the history of democracy when a certain dose or impulse of populism can have a tonic effect in promoting needed economic and institutional reforms that break up monopolies, redistribute power and income, attenuate injustices, and invite new grassroots forms and sources of political participation that are not inconsistent with liberal democracy and may actually invigorate it.

Looking at the paper titles for this conference, I suspect that at least one paper may make this kind of argument. And I will be interested to hear to what extent the historians among us think that some elements or degrees of populism were useful if not essential to accomplishing the reforms of the Progressive Era.

I am tempted here to ask (at least for the purposes of being provocative) if we might not need to distinguish between "good populism" and "bad populism." The fact is that we do a two-party duopoly in the United States that does not speak to a growing desire among many Americans both for more political choices and less political polarization. We have a long-term trend since 1979 toward widening income inequality in the United States, in which the income gains of the top one percent of households have dwarfed those of lower and middle-income earners (as a result of which, their share of total U.S. household income has more than doubled, from ten percent to over twenty percent).[2] And the fact is that in the wake of massive criminal fraud leading to the worst financial crisis in the United States since the Great Depression, virtually no senior official in the industry has gone to jail. You don't have to rehearse all of the soft corruption embedded in our systems of campaign finance and lobbying, or all of the egregious new conflicts of interest that have been unleashed in the era of President Trump (and not least, in the person of Donald Trump) to appreciate the accumulation of massive and compelling reasons for ordinary Americans to believe that they are being ripped off by the political and economic "establishment". Many good people have good reason to doubt that the system, as it now functions, is capable of reforming itself. Much as I am wary of them, I think the instruments of direct democracy (especially the initiative) provide a vital means for the people to reform certain institutional practices—such as partisan gerrymandering, closed primaries, first-past-the-post electoral systems,

and opaque campaign finance and lobbying rules—that in combination are making our politics dysfunctional. Does that make me a populist? It might be the case that if "good populists"—who promote grassroots mobilization for democratic and progressive institutional reform and renewal—don't succeed, "bad populism" (in the sense of illiberal and potentially undemocratic) will become increasingly difficult to hold at bay.

To be sure, populist politics is always dancing with the devil. This is not because populism is intrinsically disparaging of the weak and marginalized. Historically, in the United States and many other countries (up to the recent examples of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia), there have been plenty of populisms mobilizing constituencies of the economically and socially marginalized. Rather, all forms of populism—even "good" (progressive, democratically inspired) ones—harbor an intrinsic tendency to become a runaway train. If you weaken the brakes on political action, you may overcome barriers to needed reform, but you also risk a descent into tyranny, or at least erosion of essential democratic checks and balances. A classic example is Franklin Roosevelt's effort to "pack" the Supreme Court.[3] Roosevelt was motivated by a democratic impulse—to overcome undemocratic (and weakly constitutionally reasoned) obstruction of his economic and social reform agenda. But as Levistky and Ziblatt wisely and fairly argue, had he succeeded in packing the Court, he would have done serious long-term damage to democratic institutions.

What then distinguishes "good" from "bad" populism?

I would like to suggest that a certain form or degree of populism can be functional or "good" for democracy when 1) conditions of rising and extreme inequality are actually, objectively, pitting a narrow, privileged elite against the bulk of the population; 2) the established political institutions are no longer working to address this and other pressing policy challenges; and 3) grassroots mobilization for social, economic, and political reform proceeds in a democratic spirit, which values pluralism, opposition and the underlying norms (what Levitksy and Ziblatt call the "soft guardrails") of democratic life; and 4) the leaders of popular reform organizations or movements model democratic behavior and understand the ultimate need ultimately to work through and not over or around democratic institutions to achieve change. In other words, "good" populism is not purely populist, even in the above four respects, but may combine a passionate, populist tone and style with other elements of democratic pluralism and pragmatism, including absolute commitment to democratic proceduralism and minority rights.

So now we come to the additional elements of populism that make it not just bad but really bad, and certainly at least a threat to *liberal* democracy:

5. Anti-pluralist (hegemonic): Populism becomes a danger to democracy when it rejects democratic pluralism and posits that its leader and party are the only true, legitimate expression of the popular will.

6. Illiberal: Populism becomes a danger to democracy when it seeks to restrict the rights of political, racial, ethnic and other minorities, or simply seeks in general to erode freedom of thought, information, and expression, or the ability of people in society and the media to criticize the elected populist leader.
7. Nativist: Populism is at risk of mutating into an illiberal threat to democracy because it targets a certain social group: immigrants. While the members of this targeted group are typically not (yet) citizens, some of them are, and if one studies the rhetoric of European nativist parties, like the Front National (FN), it is not difficult to discern a broader narrative that at least borders on racism and applies as well to people of the targeted group of national origin who have in fact become citizens or are even native born.

In an important effort to distinguish among the "challengers to liberal democracy," Takis Pappas argues that the merely nativist parties, such as the FN (as it has been "restyled" under Marine Le Pen), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPO), are neither populist nor illiberal because they are not "against political liberalism *for the natives*," they are not unwilling to join in coalition governments, and they are "fully committed to parliamentary democracy and constitutional legality."[4] This is a line of argument that, at a minimum, has not been fully tested (and hopefully never will be), but even now it must be acknowledged that some of these parties have rather creepy (as in deeply illiberal) origins and harbor at least some much more blatantly extremist (illiberal) elements, including a wing of the now booming Alternative for Germany with neo-Nazi sympathies. The real distinction that must be made is between parties that take a reasoned stand in favor of stricter rules for immigration (which can be entirely liberal and democratic) and parties that in practice, if not as a matter of party policy, mix up opposition to liberal immigration policies with illiberal demonizing of Muslims, Africans, and other racial and religious minorities. The history of nativist parties and movements in the United States certainly inspires no grounds for confidence in their commitment to liberal values.[5] All cultural exclusionary political projects tend to slide down the slippery slope of anti-pluralist illiberalism. And it is no coincidence that right-wing social conservatism has been repeatedly found to have an affinity for authoritarianism.[6]

When Does Populism Become a Threat to Democracy?

To summarize my argument so far, populism becomes a threat to liberal democracy (at least) when it is culturally exclusionary (not to mention racist); when it yields to its hegemonic pretensions, exhibiting contempt for pluralist notions that intrinsically respect differences and opposition; and obviously when it seeks to restrict basic freedoms of the press, association, and so on. But because populism is intrinsically majoritarian and plebiscitary, it poses some intrinsic dangers for democracy, even when it is not peddling prejudice against cultural minorities. These can be exacerbated by populism's suspicion of established institutions and its tendency to want to work around them or blow them up. Populism presents some

dilemmas for democracy, and this is one: Sometimes democracies grow stale and occluded and need reform, but if populist reform sentiment runs amok, it can so damage the existing institutions that it destabilizes democracy itself.

We can summarize all of this by simply saying that the more comprehensive (across the above seven characteristics), extreme, unfettered, and uncompromising the version of populism, the more it is likely to represent a threat to democracy.

But the test is what populists do once they actually hold power, and in particular once, as in Hungary and Turkey, a populist party not only holds a share of power but unilateral control over the government. Then, it is very important to scrutinize carefully not just what populists say but how they utilize power.

The majority of democratic failures during this recent democratic recession have not come suddenly via the old fashioned means of military coup or even via the classic "autogolpe," when an elected president like Alberto Fujimori declares a state of emergency, suspending the constitution and shuttering the congress. Rather, they have come piecemeal through a process of creeping authoritarianism, wherein the elected ruler gradually eviscerates political pluralism and institutional checks and balances until the irreducible minimum condition for democracy—the ability of the people to replace their leaders in free and fair elections—is gone. Under this scenario, a country gradually descends from democracy into a competitive authoritarian regime.

The process of creeping authoritarianism moves incrementally in stages, and there is no fixed sequence that all such instances must traverse. Moreover, the stages or domains overlap with one another in time. But there is a kind of playbook, what may be termed the autocrats' twelve-step program:

1. Begin to demonize the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic, part of the discredited establishment (or other disloyal elements), out of touch with the "true people."
2. Undermine the independence of the courts by forcing existing judges to retire or restructuring the judiciary to enable new appointments, particularly at the highest levels that will interpret the constitution.
3. Undermine the independence of the media, by denouncing them as partisan, mobilizing the intense populist following against independent, professional news media, then bringing to bear tax and regulatory pressure, discouraging advertising, and then finally, after independent media are severely weakened, taking over ownership of them through politically loyal businesses and party-linked political cronies.
4. If there is public broadcasting, gain control of it and politicize it.
5. Impose stricter control of the Internet, in the name of morality, security, counter-terrorism, but casting a chilling effect on free speech.
6. Subdue (depoliticize) other elements of civil society—particularly NGOs and universities—by casting independent and especially anti-corruption and

human rights NGOs as politically partisan and anti-government, and for that matter, just representative of the corrupt, effete elite who have betrayed the "true people," the majority of the country. Make university professors afraid to criticize the government in their writings and classrooms, and student protest groups liable to prosecution for peaceful protest. Create a new, fake civil society that is loyal to the authoritarian populist leader and party.

7. Intimidate the business community into ceasing support for opposition parties, by threatening to unleash tax and regulatory punishment on businesses that continue to fund opposition parties and candidates—and then actually victimizing (e.g. bankrupting) business corporations and owners that do so.
8. Use state control over contracts, credit flows, and other resources to enrich a new class of political crony capitalists who are tightly linked to and reliably supportive of the ruling party.
9. Extend political control over the state bureaucracy and security apparatus to purge the "deep state" of "corrupt elites disloyal to the nation," which is to say professional civil servants and military officers who are loyal to the nation and not to any political party. Use the state intelligence apparatus as a weapon against the opposition.
10. Gerrymander constituencies and otherwise rig electoral rules to make it much more difficult for opposition parties to win the next election, and to ensure that the ruling party can return to power even if it wins less than majority support at the polls.
11. Gain control over electoral administration to further tilt the electoral playing field and institutionalize competitive authoritarianism.
12. Repeat steps 1 to 11, ever more vigorously, deepening fear of opposing or criticizing the new political hegemony and thus demobilizing all significant forms of resistance.

The above twelve-step program roughly represents, though not in identical sequence or degree (and no doubt not exhaustively), how populist leaders like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Recip Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Viktor Orban in Hungary have dismantled democratic regimes and disfigured them into competitive authoritarian ones. Vladimir Putin, though not really a full-blown populist, used many of these same techniques, but he moved more quickly and ruthlessly. Many observers are concerned about early warning signs of a similar playbook unfolding under the Law and Justice government in Poland, though the civic resistance to it is stronger (and the party's majority in parliament does not give it the same ability to amend the constitution that greatly facilitated Orban's project in Hungary). The process can stop at the point of producing a regime that is still sufficiently competitive that many well-intentioned observers (including Freedom House) fail to grasp the demise of real democracy. That is still the case in Hungary; it was the case in Venezuela for several years after Chavez, in the early 2000's, had dragged the system below minimum democratic standards; and it was the case in Turkey until last year, when the failed military coup attempt prompted a crackdown on

opposition and purge of the state bureaucracy so sweeping and ruthless that no serious observer could any longer fail to recognize that democracy had died.

The Historical and Geopolitical Context

There is one other point to be underscored in conclusion. Populist (and other) projects to undermine democracy do not take place in isolation from one another, or from other external influences. I cannot at this point "prove" that populist aspiring autocrats are coordinating with one another or consciously borrowing one another's techniques. There is a logic to the twelve-step program that any smart and willful aspiring autocrat can probably figure out on his or her own. But even many decades and centuries ago, rulers and movements were adopting models and techniques and inspiration from one another, across borders. There is at least a lot of circumstantial evidence that populists are borrowing rhetoric and tactics from one another. And diffusion and demonstration effects work at the more popular level as well. When one illiberal populist party gains power, imposes policy changes, shows decisiveness, and claims to have struck a blow for the "real people," that trajectory inspires and emboldens other movements in other countries, stimulating support for them as well. We aren't—in scope or consequence—in anything like the era of the 1920s and 30s, when fascist and communist movements were spreading with great fervor across Europe and beyond. But the trends are disturbing enough.

The most important permissive factor right now is the general international context, in two senses. First, rulers who aspire to become autocrats, or to deepen their autocracy, perceive no serious consequences from "the international community" (which means, in effect, the advanced industrial democracies, particularly the U.S., and the EU and its key members states) if they move in an authoritarian direction. Thus, the international inhibitions are now greatly diminished even within Europe and largely gone outside of it. Second, even if powerful democracies were to impose consequences, autocrats like Orban and Erdogan—and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Rodrigo Duterte (who hasn't quite pulled it off yet) in the Philippines, and a host of African presidents moving in this direction—increasingly perceive that they have other options in drawing closer to Russia and China. And as geopolitical competition between the West (especially the U.S.) and these two geopolitical rivals intensifies, we increasingly are moving back to the Cold War days where alliances are what matter, irrespective of democracy and human rights.

So the last part of the answer to the question, "When does populism become a threat to democracy?" is: When other powerful democracies stand by and let it happen.

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[1] This is from my own coding of countries as democracies and non-democracies for every year since 1974, based on a minimalist definition of electoral democracy. In

their 2015 Journal of Democracy, article, Steven Levitksy and Lucan Way come to the conclusion that there is no democratic recession because they count only "free" countries (as classified by Freedom House) as democracies, but I think this excludes a number of instances of regimes do not perform particularly well in protecting civil liberties and the rule of law but which nevertheless enable citizens to choose their leaders and replace their leaders in free, fair, and meaningful elections.

[2] https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/a-guide-to-statistics-on-historical-trends-in-income-inequality.

[3] For a concise but insightful discussion of this historical episode with precisely this dilemma in mind, see Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018, forthcoming).

[4] Takis S. Pappas, "Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (October 2016): 27.

[5] Seymour Martin LIpset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977*, 2nd. Ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[6] This is another finding of the Lipset and Raab work, but it also recurs as a major finding of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and in an analysis, soon to be released, of a 2017 survey of democratic attitudes and values of the American population by the Voter Study Group.