

Democratic Backslide & Populism:
The Psychology Behind the Rise of Populism

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Key Findings:

- Populism threatens democracy by using democratic platforms for executive takeovers.
- Populist Leaders create social binarism, fragmenting society into contradicting clusters of people.
- Studies prove how populism and democratic backsliding are strongly correlated.
- Populists are more likely to last longer in office.
- The Appeal for populism is deeply rooted in society's collective conscience, culture and people's identity.

Title: The Psychology Behind the Rise of Populism

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Blurb: “Who is responsible for the rise of populism? What underlying structures allow for the increase of this political fiction, shaping how society and government interact?”

Illustration:



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The Human Psychology of Populism: Identity and Culture

Who is responsible for the rise of populism? What underlying structures allow for the increase of this political fiction, shaping how society and government interact? We could blame leaders for the establishment of populist agendas. Nevertheless, the appeal for it is deeply rooted in culture, in the appeal to this new form of government and in the social weaknesses that populists grab on to sympathize with society.

Cas Mudde argues that populism is a “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two main homogeneous groups: the [“pure people and — the corrupt elites”](#). For Mudde populism contrasts ideologies with “thick” centred approaches restricted to a single morphology such as liberalism, communism or fascism. Instead of being limited to a single line of thinking, populism appears in different forms, structures and colours. Populism can dress as blue or red, proving that it

travels along the political spectrum without restriction to an ideological origin, yet, it holds together ideologies and escalates as a [byword to challenge the status quo](#).

The rise of populism is not a phenomenon limited to the appeal of charismatic leaders, economic crises, and people's dissatisfaction with established authorities; populism is embedded in society's cultural fabric. More than an ideology, populism is a political fiction that binds multiple ideologies through a moral binary strategy, dividing society into good and evil. It grabs onto the emotional grievances of individuals, leading to fault lines translated into binary relationships of tribalism in society itself. It profits from already existing cultural and social divides and uses democratic platforms to reach power.

Depending on the motivations of society and the ideologies that dominate cultural structures, populism identifies the social weaknesses and fragmentations to establish their agendas. For instance, in the United States, populism grabs onto nationalism and conservatism as its ideological cores. Contrastingly in Latin America, it places anti-imperialist sentiments and an emphasis on social reforms at its centre. Independent of their leanings, it leverages emotional appeals and polarization to challenge the already established norms and democratic checks and balances, leading to potential democratic backsliding and explaining how individuals are willing to trade off democratic values for a leader who promises to be the true representative of "the people". The danger of populism is creating an illusion of social empowerment by appealing to emotions and the weaknesses of social cohesion.

Fragmented "Conscience-Collective"

The concept of cultural politics is a broad term with an [interdisciplinary appeal](#) that not only takes into account the identity of individuals and the causal relation with political choices but goes as far as history, cultural studies, anthropology and social behaviour. Culture is not a single object, but a multilayered system that forms what [Emile Durkheim](#) defined as a "[conscience collective](#)", an anthropological concept based on the idea that society as a whole interacts through a set of collective identities, beliefs, emotions, moral attitudes and societal norms that make social cohesion possible. Populism uses polarization as a platform to challenge the status quo, tearing apart the collective consciousness of the people using faultlines and deepening already existing social divides.

Populism and Democratic Backsliding

Populism directly relates to why democracies have been crumbling apart through executive takeovers. In all its forms and colours, populism is an alternative political fiction that turns the established elites and institutions against the “people”, undermining their integrity, arguing that they are corrupt and act as a barrier to efficient ruling and policymaking for the will of the “people.”

[Anna Grzymala-Busse](#), a researcher at Stanford University, argues that populism, in its chameleon-like nature, [puts democracy at risk](#) by viewing formal institutions as corrupt “creations.” The collaborative paper by [Francis Fukuyama](#), [Anna Grzymala-Busse](#), [Didi Kuo](#) and [Michael A. McFaul](#) proposes a tridimensional approach to understand why democracies are so vulnerable to populism and the correlation of the populist tide with the rates of democratic backsliding.

The first dimension explains that populists undermine formal liberal democratic institutions such as courts, legislatures and regulatory agencies. When gaining power through democratic elections, they take over the executive power by slowly hollowing out formal institutions. The recent [judicial reforms in Mexico](#) serve as an example of how the populist party, elected through democratic platforms, has undermined the independence of democratic institutions, viewing them as corrupt and dominated by the elites. [The judicial reform eroded democracy](#) by subverting the judiciary to the president's party, consolidating its power in the executive branch by eliminating the ability of the judiciary to act as a counterweight.

The second dimension relates to the fragmentation of society's collective consciousness; it suggests that populism “redefines the people.” Where the social structure is fragmented into clusters under the narrative of “Us vs Them.” Moreover, excluding vulnerable minorities results in 'a majority rule without minority rights. Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary, opposes migration by emphasising the Christian identity of Hungarians and the spread of nationalist ideas and policies against it.

The Third and last dimension revolves around the idea that populism harms the establishment of democracy by eroding its informal social norms, for instance, by constantly questioning loyalty to opposition groups, deeming criticisms as “fake”, and undermining the legitimacy of a free press. In Turkey, a [legislative package](#) proposed by the Erdoğan administration has restricted online freedom of speech, criminalising the spread of “misinformation.” The legislative reforms resulted in increased control of the press, forbidding coverage of specific topics and repressing criticism by journalists and media outlets, eroding one of the core principles of democracy forward.

The Paradox of Democracy: Too Much Democracy Might Kill Democracy.

Overly expansive democracy paradoxically challenges its foundations by extending democratic principles to extremes, resulting in overwhelming institutional complexity. Populism instead uses direct appeals, avoiding institutional checks and disregarding democratic norms; it may appeal to an electorate that seeks a government that is “truly representative of the people”, paving the road towards a less democratic populist form of government.

[Steven Levitsky](#) and [Lucan A. Way](#), two scholars at Harvard, both developed the theory of [competitive authoritarianism](#), which suggests that autocratic-leaning leaders use democratic institutions to gain power. Once in power, they use “areas of contestation” (referring to democratic institutions) but skew them in their favour, resulting in a government that appears democratic by making use of institutions and processes such as elections and, at the same time, taking advantage of an uneven, non-impartial field that only favours the party in power.

Liberal democratic systems emphasise freedom of expression, tolerance, citizen participation, and equality at the core of their foundations. But how permissive should democracy be? How tolerant should the system be of the intolerant? Excessive emphasis on those values may open the door for populism to grab that tolerance and use the democratic platform to degrade the system from within by direct appeals, holding on to the inefficiencies of the current administration and disregarding institutions, fueling society to believe that these institutions are out of touch, corrupt and unrepresentative of the population, increasing the appeal for a more centralised form of government. Let's return to the good old days and make America great again!

Partisan Interests over Democratic Norms:

Populists cannot be the only ones blamed for a democratic backslide; after all, people have the democratic power to remove an incumbent and vote for someone else who values democracy and its stability; nevertheless, why do people across the world continue to vote for incumbents who continue to erode the foundations of democracy from within? The reality is that since a democratic backslide is a slow-paced system, voters might not see the immediate effect of having a leader that undermines democracy. In less polarised societies with a substantial share of people voting for the center, the rise of populism can be more complex. [Svolik suggests](#) that this social cluster can act as a check to evaluate the policies of both left and right-wing parties, creating a balance between extreme groups in policy making. Nevertheless, in polarised societies which are divided into main partisan groups,

research has shown that individuals may trade off democratic norms for their partisan interests and beliefs.

The existing research conducted by Svobik shows that, indeed, democratic backsliding usually happens in two ways: through executive takeovers or military coups; if we looked at how often democracies backslid [between 1973 and 2018, out of the 197 cases of the backside, most happened through an executive takeover](#), yet does this necessarily involve populism? Indeed, most executive takeovers are led by authoritarian populists, thanks to their support and popularity in society. Another factor crucial to analyse to understand the psychology of the rise of populism is why people elect incumbents, knowing they have tendencies to degrade the democratic norm. Svobik explains that the main reason is not the lack of political knowledge but mainly because democracy is not a priority for voters; individuals are selfish and self-centred; they are willing to trade off democratic values to prioritize their partisan interests even though it may create a negative effect in the long run.

The process of a democratic backside is multifaceted and couples together multiple social, cultural and political factors in allowing this shift, populism steps into the story of backsliding as a main actor, with a direct effect on the backsliding process of liberal democracies. Nevertheless individuals are the ones opening the door for populism to step in. After all in democratic systems voters are the ones accepting populism as a political fiction even when they know they might choose long term democratic damage to defend their short term interests, showing the selfish nature of humankind. The establishment of populism continues to be a threat to the stability of liberal democracies of the twenty-first century and as challenging as it may sound, crafting a democratic system that prevents authoritarianism without compromising democratic values and principles is possible. The key strategies are establishing strong and independent institutions, educating society with democratic values to prevent uprisings, and ensuring constitutional safeguards exist. The problem is that democracy is not of the same quality across all regimes, thus explaining why democratic systems will continue down the path of erosion in countries where the level of social discontent is high and the level of democracy is low. There, populist actors can sympathise with the people and endanger democratic foundations.