



Commentary

Why Populism Is a Pathway to Autocracy

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Populism is gaining ground. Around the world, economic hardship and growing unease with globalization, immigration, and the established elite have propelled such movements into power, leading to a groundswell of public support for parties and leaders viewed as capable of holding the forces of cultural and social change at bay. [In Europe](#), populist parties dominate parliaments in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Switzerland and are part of governing coalitions in Finland, Norway, and Lithuania. In Southeast Asia, the Philippine strongman Rodrigo Duterte is pursuing a populist agenda. And in the United States, Donald Trump has been elected president.

The objectives of contemporary populists are not new. Like most of their [historical predecessors](#) in Latin America and Europe, today's populist parties extol the virtues of strong and decisive leadership, [share a disdain for established institutions, and express deep distrust of perceived experts and elites](#). But the tactics that today's populists employ to implement their vision of iron rule have evolved. Rather than orchestrating sudden and decisive breaks with democracy, which can elicit domestic and international condemnation, they have instead learned from populist-fueled strongmen such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Post-Cold War populists such as Chávez, Putin, and Erdogan took a slow and steady approach to dismantling democracy. These leaders first come to power through democratic elections and subsequently harness widespread discontent to gradually undermine institutional constraints on their rule, marginalize the opposition, and erode civil society. The playbook is consistent and straightforward: deliberately install loyalists in key positions of power (particularly in the judiciary and security services) and neutralize the media by buying it, legislating against it, and enforcing censorship. This strategy makes it hard to discern when the break with democracy actually occurs, and its insidiousness poses one of the most significant threats to democracy in the twenty-first century.

The steady dismantling of democratic norms and practices by democratically elected leaders, what we call "authoritarianization," marks a significant change in the way that democracies have historically fallen apart. [Data on authoritarian regimes](#) show that until recently, coups have been the primary threats to democracy. From 1946 to 1999, 64 percent of democracies failed because of such insurgencies. In the last decade, however, populist-fueled authoritarianization has been on the rise, accounting for 40 percent of all democratic failures between 2000 and 2010 and matching coups in

frequency. If current trends persist, populist-fueled authoritarianization will soon become the most common pathway to autocracy.

Even more disheartening, the slow and gradual nature of populist-fueled democratic backsliding is [difficult to counter](#). Because it is subtle and incremental, there is no single moment that triggers widespread resistance or creates a focal point around which an opposition can coalesce. And in cases in which vocal critics do emerge, populist leaders can easily frame them as “fifth columnists,” “agents of the establishment,” or other provocateurs seeking to destabilize the system. Piecemeal democratic erosion, therefore, typically provokes only fragmented resistance.

Moreover, because populist leaders enjoy substantial popular support, they tend to have broad approval for many of their proposed changes. In Argentina, for example, Juan Perón was elected president in 1946 and leveraged his popularity to consolidate control over the political system. More recently, Turkey’s Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party claimed a resounding victory in the 2002 national elections and continued to attract increased vote shares in 2007 and 2011. Such broad public support provides leaders such as Erdogan with a perceived “mandate” to rule. And because they are elected on a platform of change, early efforts to expand control are dismissed as necessary to implement ambitious reforms.

Not only is populist-fueled authoritarianization difficult to defeat, it is increasingly giving rise to “personalist dictatorship”—a particular brand of autocracy in which power is highly concentrated in the hands of an individual. Data show that just under half (44 percent) of all instances of authoritarianization from 1946 to 1999 led to the establishment of personalist dictatorships. From 2000 to 2010, however, that proportion increased to 75 percent. In most cases, the populist strongmen rose to power with the support of a political party but then proved effective in sidelining competing voices from within. This was the story not only in Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela but also with Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa. Even in countries where populist-fueled threats to democracy have not fully evolved into autocracy, such as in Hungary and Poland, dominant leaders like Viktor Orban and Jaroslaw Kaczynski enjoy a disproportionate share of power.

As [we have previously argued](#), the rise of personalist dictatorships is a great cause for concern. A robust body of political science research shows that such systems tend to produce the worst outcomes of any type of political regime: they typically pursue the most volatile and aggressive foreign policies, espouse the most xenophobic sentiments, are the most likely to mismanage foreign aid, and are the least likely to transition to democracy when they collapse. Today’s populist movements, therefore, could very well be fueling the proliferation of the world’s most problematic regimes.

Finally, populist-fueled authoritarianization is likely to put countries that we typically think of as stable democracies at risk. [Recent political science research](#) reinforces the idea that new democracies do indeed consolidate

sometime between 17 and 20 years after they are established. However, the research shows that a declining risk of coups is the primary factor driving down a country's risk of democratic failure beyond this time frame. The threat of authoritarianization, it turns out, does not diminish over time. Venezuela is a case in point. When Chávez was elected in 2002, Venezuela was the third-oldest democracy outside of the industrialized West. Likewise, Hungary and Poland were long assumed to be fixtures within the democratic club but nonetheless have experienced significant declines in respect for democratic principles.

The forces fueling populism aren't going away anytime soon. If anything, economic underperformance, disillusion with corruption, and dissatisfaction with government performance will continue to fan the flames of populism across the globe. That is why the threat of populism to democratic development should not be underestimated. The damage to democracy caused by the populist surge in Europe has so far been limited to Hungary and Poland, because Europe's long-standing norms, strength of institutions, and experience with democracy have so far buffered populism's antidemocratic pull. The damage to democracy is likely to be more pronounced in less developed democracies. Already, Duterte has sold his strongman tactics and fiery rhetoric as the solution to his public's disillusion with crime, poverty, and corruption. Since coming to office in June, Duterte has moved quickly to suppress challengers and expand his personal control—all while promising to [reorient his country's foreign policy](#) away from the United States and more closely toward China and Russia.

Mitigating populism's threat to democratic norms and practices will require vigilance and coordination among broad segments of at-risk societies. Recognition of the tactics and approach that today's leaders are using to expand their control is a necessary first step in developing strategies to counter this trend. Fragile democracies are particularly at risk, but the world's established democracies are certainly not exempt. Citizens in Europe and the United States [should hesitate](#) before assuming that they are invulnerable to a populist-driven backslide. The tactics of today's populists might be subtle, but if left untamed, they will lead to grave consequences for global democracy.