

REDISCOVERING 'POPULISM'



Jan-Werner Müller wrote in *What is Populism?* (2000), “The danger to democracies today is populism—a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals.” For Müller and other prominent advocates of this populism brings into focus the common danger posed to democracy by such disparate leaders as Trump and Chavez, Orbán and Morales, Erdoğan and López Obrador, and such **disparate political movements** and parties as Podemos and the Tea Party, Syriza and Alternative for Germany, the Five Star Movement and the National Front. But what do we make of a concept that can unite such **ideologically polarized** leaders, movements, and parties?

The charge of populism tells us at least as much about those making the charge as it does about their opponents, and in contemporary political contexts the inherent ambiguity of populism assumes clear polemical meaning when articulated from the embattled position of a once-hegemonic liberalism. The blanket accusation of populism polices the parameters of legitimate and reasonable political speech. Advocates of the (anti)populist thesis emphasize its authoritarian dangers while quietly pushing off stage the more enduring and structural sources of democratic decline such as the **dramatic and growing inequalities of wealth and power** that have defined the era of global neoliberalism, **the marketization of once public goods** and steady erosion of procedures of democratic accountability, and **the unfettered role of money** in political life that further guarantees the ongoing intensification of these processes. These more enduring sources of democratic decline—and the resulting dynamic devolution Antonio Gramsci elegantly termed, “*catastrophic equilibrium*”—have arguably led to the emergence of these authoritarian movements in the first place. The term populism conveniently facilitates this evasion.

When considering the familiar portrait of (anti)populism and the dangers it poses to democracy, it is worth remembering that populism entered the English language to describe a nineteenth-century political movement born of struggle against the oligarchic economic and political order of the United States’s first Gilded Age. Twenty years before the People’s Party and William Jennings Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold”

speech at the 1896 Democratic National Convention, the Farmers’ Alliance served as the egalitarian heart of U.S. populism. Throughout the 1880s, hundreds of thousands of men and women participated in this interlacing and explicitly non-hierarchical network of cooperative organizations, which were active in forty-three states and territories. Far from a Caesarist politics of authoritarian personalism, U.S. populism was, as Lawrence Goodwyn writes:

first and most centrally, a cooperative movement that imparted a sense of self-worth to individual people and that provided them with the instruments of self-education about the world they lived in. The movement gave them hope—a shared hope—that they were not impersonal victims of a gigantic industrial engine ruled by others but that they were, instead, people who could perform specific acts of self-determination.

This populist experimentation with new democratic forms—and the sustained effort to understand and collectively address the impoverished conditions of their lives—defines U.S. populism’s **radical democratic realism**. The struggle to generate democratic power outside the established institutions of governance and to build a “**cooperative commonwealth**” gave birth to the concept of populism—an origins story that is erased in our contemporary preoccupations with “populism and democratic decline.”

Ironically it is the Republicans, the “one party in U.S. history that explicitly called itself ‘populist,’ was in fact not populist.

The point, however, is not to resolve the semantic ambiguity of populism by appealing to the authority of original meanings. Instead, while taking orientation from that history, we should examine how the charge of populism operates in contemporary political debates, especially the dangers to democracy it brings to light and those it conceals.

Populism has become the name given willy-nilly to all movements challenging these developments of a decline in democracy on behalf of a recovered sense of collective authority and political control, whether articulated from a racist and xenophobic right or a radically egalitarian left. Authoritarian attempts to centralize and expand the state’s executive power and wield it against “enemies of the people”—defined precisely by Trump, Erdoğan, Orbán, and others—should never be equated with the radically democratic institutional experimentalism of Spain’s **Podemos** or the 19th century **Farmers’ Alliance**. More attention should be paid to how “**the people**” is envisioned by these different movements, and how they propose popular power to be democratically enacted.

Designating populism as the term that best encapsulates the political dangers authoritarianism poses to democratic politics in so many parts of the world today has the additional and unfortunate consequence of suggesting that widespread resistance to these movements should not itself be populist,

should not claim the mantle of “we the people” and engage in an antagonistic politics of who we are and what kind of collective power we should wield. This political movement need not recover and rally around the term populism—**democratic socialism** is also enjoying a new day in the sun—but it should openly recognize that a return to “politics as usual” may be insufficient to confront the full extent of the dangers democracies currently face. Defenders of democracy cannot surrender the authority of the people without undermining the very goal they claim to be fighting for.

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NEWSOM VETOES POPULAR INSTANT RUN-OFF LAW

It has been an outstanding year for ranked choice voting. Except in California where Gov. Newsom vetoed such a law in the face of Senate votes of 29-9 and a 56-18 vote in the Assembly. The California bill, titled SB 212, allows all jurisdictions—including cities, counties, school boards—to have the option to adopt rank choice voting, or instant runoff voting, thereby ensuring that a decisive election is held when voter turnout is highest, in November, and not during an expensive run-off 8 months later.

In rank choice voting, or instant run-off voting, voters rank the candidates for a given office by preference on their ballots. If a candidate wins an outright majority of first-preference votes (i.e., 50 percent plus one), he or she will be declared the winner. If, on the other hand, no candidates win an outright majority of first-preference votes, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated and their first choice votes are distributed where others have indicated them as a second choice. A new tally is conducted to determine whether any candidate has won an outright majority of the adjusted voters. The process is repeated until a candidate wins a majority of votes cast.

Maine will expand rank choice voting to presidential elections in 2020, New York City adopted rank choice voting in November, and five cities across Utah, Michigan, New Mexico, and Minnesota used rank choice voting for the first time. Even the Democratic National Committee has approved plans to use rank choice voting in their party-run primaries for president in 2020 in Hawaii and Kansas.

It is argued in favor of an instant run-off system that winner-take-all election by contrast are characterized by distortions in partisan representation, entrenchment of incumbents in safe seats, regional polarization, and low representation of women and racial and ethnic minorities. 25 percent of California’s cities are already charter cities that can act with rank choice voting without the governor’s permission. They have good reasons to join San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and San Leandro in using an instant run-off system. For instance San Francisco and Berkeley, saw significant cost savings from adopting the method and avoiding citywide runoffs—savings that totaled over \$3.7 million for San Francisco and \$759,000 for Berkeley. In its use of rank choice voting, San Francisco has seen as well an empirical increase in elected officials who are women and people of color and a decrease in the negativity of campaigns.

Ironically or not, Gov. Newsom once before vetoed rank choice voting in San Francisco as Mayor, then won the first election under the new system!?! Unfortunately there is a tradition of not over-riding Governor’s vetoes but our representatives Maquire and Wood should be instructed to break that tradition.

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