How Populism Threatens Liberal Democracy Around The World And What Canada Should Do About It

By Michael Petrou

Synopsis

Michael Petrou takes stock of the current state of the global international order, the status of global populist movements, and the impact populism exerts at the start of a new decade. He goes on to examine why Canada should care about the weakening of global democracy, and what it can do to combat rising populist tides.
About the Author

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In 2017-18, Petrou was the Martin Wise Goodman Canadian Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. He is a longtime foreign correspondent who has reported from across the Middle East, Europe, and Central Asia. He won the 2017 R. James Travers Foreign Corresponding Fellowship, which he used to report on Syrian refugees in the Middle East. Petrou has won three National Magazine Awards and been shortlisted for six more.

Petrou’s book, Is This Your First War? Travels Through the Post-9/11 Islamic World, won the Ottawa Book Award. He is also the author of Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War. He has a doctorate in modern history from the University of Oxford, which he attended as a Chevening Scholar.
Populism and democracy

At first glance, there seems to be little reason to fear that populism is a threat to liberal democracy. Its roots, in late 19th century America and Russia, are anti-authoritarian and related to democracy’s spread as an idea and in practice.¹ What is populism if it is not the empowerment of the masses—the people—against the few who would suppress and control them? How can such a movement threaten democracy?

There is no universally agreed upon definition of populism, which makes answering that question difficult. This paper holds closely to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser’s explanation of populism as an ideology that purports to champion the general will of the pure people against a corrupt elite. That poses a problem specifically for liberal democracy — meaning a system of government that both reflects popular will and has institutions that protect fundamental rights and the rights of minorities — because populists seek to delegitimize those they deem to be part of the corrupt elite. On this basis, they deny their opponents the right to full participation in the political process. They do this by weakening or sidelining those independent institutions and measures that might protect those who oppose the will of the pure people, or who can never be considered among them. Such protective checks include courts, a constitution, legislatures, local governments, and the media.

Populists try to “drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism,” writes William A. Galston of the Brookings Institution. “Liberal norms and policies, they claim, weaken democracy and harm the people. Thus, liberal institutions that prevent the people from acting democratically in their own interest should be set aside.”²

As described by Takis Pappas: “Populism is always democratic but never liberal.... To be classified as populist, a party must display two antithetical characteristics. It must harbor an allegiance to democracy, and it also must endorse illiberal tactics. Parties that do not do both those things, whatever else they are, cannot be populist.”³

Those whom populists consider the pure elite and those they might target as members of the corrupt elite are flexible, which is why populism exists on the left and right of the political spectrum. In any case, populism rarely stands on its own. It is usually paired with what Mudde and Kaltwasser describe as “host ideologies” — typically socialism on the left and nationalism on the right.⁴ But a populist’s conceptual framework might be more focused. The corrupt elite might be the European Union in a British context, say, or supposed fascists and fifth columnists working for foreign powers in the case of Venezuela under President Hugo Chávez or his successor Nicolás Maduro.

The crime of the corrupt elite might also be to champion a third group of people who are the real threat to the pure ones. Some right-wing Americans, for example, accuse liberals in the media or in the Democratic Party, of selling out their country to immigrants. European populists on the right make similar accusations against established political parties, the EU, or other so-called elites whom they say put the needs of foreigners ahead of more deserving — meaning native-born, not-Muslim and white — countrymen.

Populism’s threat to liberal democracy is also rooted in its implicit erosion of the cultural norms that buttress democracy. Harvard professors of government Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt call these the “soft guardrails of democracy.” Foremost among them are toleration and forbearance.⁵ But populists at their most rigid do not tolerate, or accept the legitimacy of, their opponents; and because they think their opponents must not be tolerated, they exercise little forbearance when confronting them.
But populism can also be a democratizing movement. Mudde and Kaltwasser examine the effect populism can have on four types of political regimes: full authoritarianism; competitive authoritarianism; electoral democracy; and liberal democracy. They find that populism has a positive effect on regimes that are transitioning from full authoritarianism to competitive authoritarianism because “it helps articulate demands of popular sovereignty and majority rule, which call into question existing forms of state repression” and therefore “contributes to the formation of a ‘master frame’ through which opposition leaders can mobilize (all) those opposed to the regime.”

They conclude that because of the primacy populism puts on electing leaders, it plays a more ambiguous but still “rather constructive” role in states transitioning from competitive or fully authoritarianism regimes to an electoral democracy, meaning a political system in which leaders are elected (and the opposition has a legitimate shot at winning) but which lacks checks on the government in power and the built-in protection for fundamental rights and the rights of minorities present in a liberal democracy.

Where the authors believe populism most hurts democracy is in political regimes that are electoral or liberal democracies. Populism frustrates a “democratic deepening” process because it rejects constraints on popular will such as the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Populism is therefore an impediment to a country’s transition from an electoral to a liberal democracy. For similar reasons, populism can act as a lubricant for democratic erosion and breakdown — the shift from a liberal to an electoral democracy, and from an electoral democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime. The primacy it places on popular will, however, means it will also hinder a transition from a competitive authoritarian regime to a fully authoritarian one. 6

These are important points when considering the bigger picture of populism’s impact on democratization. Fully authoritarian regimes rarely leapfrog directly to liberal democracy. There is typically an evolutionary progression in which, in the early stages, populism may benefit the democratization process. And although populism can be used by undemocratic governments as a protective tactic, as is the case in Venezuela, populism can also act as a check on a regime that might otherwise become ever more authoritarian.

Rejecting populism out of hand therefore seems like a self-defeating position for a liberal democrat to take. Populism is a threat to democracy, but the danger it presents is most pronounced in states that are at least quasi-democratic already.

**Populism’s impact on global democracy today**

Freedom House, a think tank that studies the strength of democracy in the world, says that 2018 marked the 13th year in a row that global freedom declined. It says that democracy is in retreat all over the world, with notable erosion happening in consolidated democracies that were rated “free” between 1985 and 2005, and in countries that benefited from a post-Cold War wave of democratization and achieved a status upgrade from “not free” to “partly free” or from “partly free” to “free” between 1988 and 2005.

There are many reasons for this recession. The rise of China and Russia as seemingly successful alternatives to democracy is among them. So, too, is the recent weakening of democracy in America. Freedom House says American democracy is still strong by global standards but notes that President Donald Trump’s “ongoing attacks on the rule of law, fact-based journalism, and other principles and norms of democracy threaten further decline.”7

This matters beyond America’s shores. Political scientist Larry Diamond says it is difficult to overstate how important was the “vitality and confidence” of American democracy during democracy’s “third wave” that crested with the end of the Cold War. Writing in 2015, before Trump was elected president, Diamond pointed to the enabling environment for democratization created by past European and American solidarity and said: “If this solidarity is now greatly diminished, so will be the near-term global prospects for reviving and sustaining democratic progress.”8
America’s example is now unquestionably a less compelling model to emulate. Equally important, Washington is less interested in persuading other nations to democratize at all. Whereas America once held firmly to its position as leader of the liberal international order, its president now views alliances as transactional and exhibits a fondness for strongmen and dictators.

Populism is a factor in this democratic recession. Galston describes its rise as “the most fundamental challenge to the post-World War II order since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.” He points to the recent, rapid rise of right-wing, anti-immigrant populist parties and politicians in Europe. These include: the Alternative for Germany, now a force in the German Bundestag; the Sweden Democrats, now firmly established as the country’s third-largest party; the far-right League party in Italy, which has joined a coalition government with the populist Five Star Movement; and the January 2018 re-election of anti-immigrant Czech president Miloš Zeman.

Galston cautions against assuming all populist movements threaten liberal democracy. “The Brexit vote did not weaken democracy in the United Kingdom,” he writes. “[Hungarian President] Viktor Orbán’s consolidation of control over Hungary’s press, judiciary, civil society, and electoral law certainly does.” This is fair, but it is important to note that the overall populist trend in Europe is of a right-leaning, exclusionary and authoritarian bent.

It is also primarily anti-Muslim. Shadi Hamid makes the point that what is often described as “anti-immigration” in the context of European populist movements is usually more specifically anti-Muslim immigration. And this can than easily engulf a hostility to Muslims who are not immigrants. It’s a cultural cleavage, in other words, not an economic one. Dutch nationalist politician Geert Wilders’ anti-Polish posturing never gained much traction, for example. His anti-Muslim rhetoric has.

In Latin America, populist movements have a long history, in part because of extreme social inequality in the region combined with relatively free and fair elections that give downtrodden majorities an opportunity to put their hopes for restitution in populist movements. Populism’s current wave in Latin America began with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998. It then continued with Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Latin America’s populist leaders are explicitly leftist. They allege the corrupt elites traditionally controlling their countries have stacked the political decks in their own favour. Populist leaders therefore justify constitutional changes they say are designed to return sovereignty to the people but in practice serve to hinder political opposition.

Whether America’s current president Donald Trump is a populist is a matter of some debate. Barack Obama, when he was president, rejected the label for Trump. Saying controversial things to win votes isn’t populism, Obama said in 2016. “That’s nativism. Or xenophobia. Or worse. Or it’s just cynicism.” Obama’s claim misses the point that populism can include all those things. Recall the importance of host ideologies.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder describes Trump as a “sado-populist,” because his policies are designed to hurt the most vulnerable among his electorate. But whatever Trump’s policies are designed to do, he bases his appeal on the idea that there are real, pure Americans, and there is an elite that wants to keep them down. He furthermore derides and abuses institutions and people that might check his power — notably journalists and political opponents, whom he accuses of lying and treason. This is the behaviour of an authoritarian populist. Combined with a similar surge in Europe, it leaves Canada somewhat isolated among its traditional allies.

Canada does not have the revolutionary history of the United States. Its modern origins involved a lot of compromise, a foundation that might not lend itself to rebellious, anti-authoritarian movements. Canada’s geography has also sheltered it from one of the main accelerants of nativist populism in Europe: the arrival in large numbers of uninvited migrants, as was the case in Germany in 2015; or a contrived fear of the same, as was in the case in Hungary. It is naïve to assume that, were Canada to face an influx of refugees on a similar scale as did Germany in 2015, there would not be a more robust backlash that combines nativism and populism than we have so far seen.
And yet Canada is not completely barren ground for populism. Successful politicians often make a show of connecting to supposedly ordinary Canadians, usually through superficial gestures. And anti-elite discourse is present especially in provincial and federal Conservative parties. This is often loosely defined. Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who says he speaks for the “grassroots,” says elitists, who exist in his party as well as in the Liberal and New Democratic ones, are the kind of people who look down on “the average, common folk” and “have their little glass of champagne with their pinkies up in the air.”

But Ford has not tried to hobble the judiciary or re-write electoral rules. And his Ontario Progressive Conservative Party draws support from the wealthy and working class and is popular among immigrants and ethnic minorities. When Canadian politicians blend populism with anti-immigrant nativism, as did Maxime Bernier and his People’s Party of Canada, they flop. This is not to say Canada is immune to the illiberal aspects of populism, but it has shown itself to be resilient to them.

**Why this should matter to Canada**

Canada has a stake in populism’s spread because of what it means for liberalism and the liberal, rules-based international order.

This was a theme highlighted by Chrystia Freeland during her tenure as Canada’s foreign minister. In a June 2017 address in the House of Commons, she argued that Canada’s interests depend on the strength of that order and what Canada can do to mitigate challenges posed to it by climate change, rogue states, and mass migration triggered by civil war.

“Our ability to act against such threats alone is limited. It requires cooperation with like-minded countries,” she said, noting that the space in which Canada might cooperate with the United States has shrunk for the simple reason that Trump is not the only American less interested in doing so.

“Indeed, many of the voters in last year’s presidential election cast their ballots, animated in part by a desire to shrug off the burden of world leadership. To say this is not controversial: it is simply a fact.”

Freeland returned to some of these themes last summer, in a speech at the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London. She cited the historian and analyst Robert Kagan, who describes the liberal order as a garden that is forever threatened by the forces of nature: “Today, there are signs all around us that the jungle is growing back.”

Populism is not the only factor contributing to the global erosion of liberal democracy. There are many vines in the jungle. But threats to democracy do not operate in isolation of each other. And here again it is worth noting the adaptability of populism and the importance of host ideologies. Consider, for example, Russia’s support for far-right, anti-immigrant movements in Europe that serves to boost both populism and a nativist, racial supremacism.

It is also necessary to recognize that much of what fuels populism abroad is rooted in domestic concerns over which Canada can have little impact. Some of these are legitimate. As Galston has written, it is important to differentiate policy disputes within liberal democracy from those about it. Differing opinions about desirable levels of immigration are an example of the former, he says, adding that liberal democrats must make their peace with national sovereignty, including control of borders. The stark wealth inequality in much of Latin America is also a legitimate grievance. Populist attempts to address these concerns are not necessarily anti-democratic or illiberal.

But, as this paper has tried to show, populism as it so often manifests itself today — in combination with nativism and authoritarianism, and harnessed to illiberal, exclusionary tactics — is a threat to the liberal, democratic international order.

Canada’s defence must involve cooperating with its allies. Former U.S. ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay have argued that a “G-9” consisting of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Canada should band together to “save the liberal world order,” at least until Washington reclaims its leadership role. The authors recommend increased economic but also military cooperation, as well as conditioning aid on
the promotion of democracy, freedom, and human rights.\textsuperscript{14}

Such an alliance — formal or ad hoc — has much to recommend. Free and fair trade has the potential to create wealth in a manner that undermines class-based resentment. Russia and other hostile states will seek to spread their influence and weaken their adversaries by subterfuge and overtly violent means, and a coalition of democracies needs the means to deter such actors and support its friends. This requires cooperation among allies but also investment by individual countries. Here it must be said that Canada’s defence and foreign aid spending is inadequate.

Canada can best use its foreign aid spending to counter illiberal populism abroad by supporting the institutions that populists most often target as checks on their power: the judiciary; the press; political parties; civil society; and political dissidents. Canada already tailors much of its democratic development funding abroad in this manner.\textsuperscript{15}

Such initiatives should avoid explicit partisanship. Canada should not be funding opposition movements, for example. It should fund the legal defence of political dissidents or human rights defenders. Organizations that research and expose corruption or human rights violations likewise deserve support.

A free press is also a check on illiberal populism. It can hold government to account. And it can nurture the civil associations independent of government that contribute to growing a democratic culture. What Canada might do to support free media abroad is complicated. Governments funding media outlets in their own countries — as Canada does — involves a conflict of interest. By choosing who gets money, even if that choice is made by a supposedly impartial panel, the government distorts the market, and the market of ideas. And by dangling money, the government risks enfeebling its watchdogs and damaging public trust in them. Canada’s current media bailout is bad public policy.

Some of these same concerns exist when a democratic government funds media in other countries. To these must be added the fact that media receiving foreign funding are open to accusations that they are stooges for outside interests. And yet in many dictatorships and conflict states, media outlets, if they exist at all, do so only with the support of governments or other actors that don’t have the same democratic values as does Canada. This reality may justify the direct funding of foreign media in some circumstances, but it’s something Canada should do with caution.

The scaffolding that supports free media abroad, however, should be aggressively upheld and may be financially supported. This includes legal defence and campaigns to expose abuses against journalists and bring the perpetrators of such abuses to justice. Canada’s modest contribution, with Britain, to a United Nations global media defence fund is welcome — although it costs Canada little. A more forceful response to outrages against journalism committed by countries with which Canada has a trading relationship would reflect a more meaningful commitment to press freedom.

Training is also part of the scaffolding that strengthens a free press, and Canada does fund NGO-led training of journalists abroad, including in fragile and conflict-ridden states. Canada might also work with journalism schools at Canadian universities to attract and fund more students from authoritarian states and weak democracies and provide them with a journalism education that is globally relevant and tailored for work in the challenging environments to which they will return.

None of this promises immediate or revolutionary results. Democratization, when it is most successful, is an evolutionary ground game that includes a strong foundation of civil society and democratic cultural norms. Protecting democracy must be similarly methodical. Populism threatens liberal democracy when it undermines those norms, civil associations, and independent institutions on which liberal democracies are built. The most effective thing Canada and likeminded nations can do to challenge populism is to defend and strengthen them.
Endnotes

4 Mudde and Kaltwasser, 21.
6 Mudde and Kaltwasser, 86–93.
11 Mudde and Kaltwasser, 28–32.
12 Timothy Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 274.
14 Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, “The Committee to Save the World Order: America’s Allies Must Step Up as America Steps Down,” Foreign Affairs, November/ December 2018.
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