

# What causes the populist infection? How can it be cured?

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Political scientists have long believed that when a country succeeds in achieving a democratic transition, creating stable institutions and accomplishing a certain level of wealth, it has a rather low risk of an authoritarian backlash.

There was the implicit assumption of a natural and irreversible path containing the following steps: 1) dictatorship, 2) dictablanda, 3) democradura, 4) democracy transition, 5) consolidated democracy. This assumption was valid for several decades and corroborated by the impressive wave of democratization that took place after 1990. In the last quarter of a century, in fact, both the number and the quality of democratic regimes has increased steadily, leading to what appeared to be a democratic triumphal march.

But for the first time over the last quarter of a century, democratic regimes are no longer consolidating and, above all, this apparent reversal manifests itself in procedures that belong to the secular democratic liturgy, namely free elections. The outbreak of this populist infection within most western democracies challenges the idea that once consolidated democracies are immune to the possibility of experiencing a non-democratic reversal.

The electoral successes of populist parties and leaders are a challenge for democratic practice and theory. Will the hypotheses regarding democratic consolidation still hold? And, most of all, what lies behind such a populist infection, and how it can be cured?

Concerning the first two questions, the analysis of the data from the World Value Survey (1995-2014) carried out by two young scholars, (Foa & Mounk, 2016) provide some interesting and disconcerting data about citizens' sentiments and perceptions toward democracy. The study shows that citizens within both North America and western Europe, have become more critical toward democracy, and that an increased proportion of them no longer consider democracy the only legitimate form of government. To generate further concerns, they began to look favourably upon non-democratic alternatives.

According to this study, while older generations keep thinking that democracy is essential, younger generations are much more indifferent. In Europe, about 52% of citizens among the generation born in the 1930s believe that to live in a democratic country is fundamental, but only about 45% among those born in the 1980s share this opinion. In the United States, the intergenerational gap is even more heightened. 72% of citizens born in the 1930s believed democracy is essential, while only around 30% of those born in the 1980s had the same view.

A similar pattern is visible regarding support for alternative, non-democratic forms of government, and in

both the US and Europe, the percentage of citizens believing being ruled by the army is a “good” or a “very good” alternative steadily increases, especially among young, affluent citizens. A closer look at the original data confirms that in all countries there are still large majorities in favour of democracy. But while there are overwhelming democratic majorities, there is a strong disaffection with regard to democratic institutions, including political parties, parliamentarians and trade unions. The citizens that view a strong leader positively are still a minority, but they number more than in the past in the United States and in Spain, in Sweden and even in Germany. In both the US and Europe, the percentage of citizens believing being ruled by the army is a “good” or a “very good” alternative steadily increases, especially among young, affluent citizens.

The same scholars, in a subsequent paper (Foa & Mounk, 2017) arrive at the claim that all these data could be a sign of the fallacy of the democratic assumption, and that they may also be a signal of a democratic deconsolidation within western democracies. Liberal systems are stable if a large majority of citizens directly support democratic institutions as the only legitimate form of government. But this is less true than it used to be.

Is this disaffection undermining civil rights and democratic institutions? Is there a risk that newly elected leaders will substantially attack liberal institutions, as already happened in Europe in the inter-war period? So far, this has occurred only in weak and relatively recent democracies such as Russia and Turkey, where governments have managed to attack and even imprison actual or potential opponents, limit the freedom of the press, and subdue the judicial power without losing much of their popular support. Can something similar also occur in consolidated democracies? Is there the possibility that new leaders with strong popular support will use their power to attack liberal infrastructures, breaking the golden rule of respecting the election winner, and leading consolidated western democracies into non-democratic backlashes?

Until now, these new political entrants have shown an anti-establishment rather than an anti-democratic sentiment. New political leaders have managed to acquire electoral support using aggressive language, denouncing mainly the wrongdoings of the incumbent politicians, and often calling for scapegoats in weak and marginal social and ethnic groups. But they have done it through democratic political institutions. Where they succeeded in gaining power, populist leaders did so through free and competitive elections, presenting themselves as the authentic representatives of the people. So, whether the signs highlighted by Foa and Mounk may or may not be a predictor of a possible non-democratic backlash, is far from being ascertained.

We are facing two possible alternative scenarios, both plausible: in the optimistic one, the new political forces become domesticated and after a while get accustomed to using parliamentary language and strategies. Their language and policies aim to harness the attention of the dissatisfied, and they “mature” to become fresh contenders in the usual electoral race. But in the pessimistic one, they may use their popular support to reduce liberties and modify the institutions that should guarantee democratic checks and balances.

Populist sentiments, more or less dormant, have always been present within western democracies as well as everywhere else in the world, and we may think they are deep feelings belonging to human nature. Can democratic politics manage to tame them? Until a few years ago, they affected only a minority of citizens. The fact that new political movements are managing, often rapidly, to increase their votes is generating a threatening race to the bottom. In all countries, established political parties have the dangerous propensity to counter this electoral wave of populism by adopting the issues and language used by them. It is a sort of infection and only a few politicians manage, at one and the same time, to resist the temptation and to be re-elected. For this reason, if it is not properly cured, the infection could end up permanently damaging the democratic system itself.

The basic question we have to answer is therefore: why, over recent years, has the populist consensus so swiftly arisen? What is the basis of its success? Populist parties grew in most western democracies only after the end of the Cold War, most of them in the 1990s.

To answer this question, it is useful to adopt a historical perspective. Populist parties grew in most western democracies only after the end of the Cold War, most of them in the 1990s. Despite some notable exceptions, their share of popular votes remained below ten percent for several decades. Looking at the electoral data (Figure 1), the picture then dramatically changes, and from 2007 populist parties began to gain traction consistently. Since 2007, populist party support has been growing in terms of both electoral votes and parliamentary seats.

In the United States, the November 2016 electoral campaign demonstrated how two ‘outsiders’, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, tried to storm the two well-established political parties. One of them succeeded. In other countries with more pluralized and fractious political systems, such as Spain, Italy, Austria, France and Greece, the populist upsurge has coincided with the rise of new socially progressive movements. However, even in these cases populist parties have succeeded in gaining considerable electoral support. In Italy, the Movimento 5 Stelle gained 25.6 per cent of votes in 2013, being the party most voted for in what was its first parliamentary electoral race. In Greece, Syriza’s consensus moved from 4.6 per cent in 2009 elections to 35.5 per cent in 2015. In Sweden, the Sverigedemokraterna (SD), a right-wing populist party, moved from 2.9 per cent of votes in 2006 to 12.9 per cent in 2014.

The temporal evolution of the populists (Figure 1) indicates that the economic variable played an important role both in the affirmation and in the growth of populist parties’ consensus. In the first place, the consolidation of most populist parties in the 1990s coincided with a quite strong, even if not prolonged, economic stagnation starting in 1992/1993. In the second, their growth coincided with the prolonged economic crisis that began in 2008. In both cases, western countries experienced a steady drop in their growth rates and a significant economic stagnation (figure 2).

The difference between the two crises in securing support for populist parties could be explained by their consequences in terms of impact. While the former lasted only a couple of years, after which western countries’ economies started to recover, the latter produced an altogether heavier and more prolonged effect. In recent years, a marked decline in the principal macroeconomic indicators has occurred, to different degrees, within most western democracies: national growth rates, that collapsed in 2009, are struggling to recover to pre-crisis levels, and income inequality has increased substantially, while unemployment (in particular youth unemployment) and poverty have risen to alarming levels. Within most western democracies, national growth rates that collapsed in 2009, are struggling to recover to pre-crisis levels.

This situation has generated discontent among citizens, because western democracies have not been able to combat, in a timely and effective way, the negative effects of the crisis. From a political perspective, the last financial crisis had the adverse consequence of delegitimizing the democratic system. Since liberal systems are stable if a large majority of citizens directly support democratic institutions as the only legitimate form of government, the fact that the many material advantages usually provided by democracy have not been delivered has had the consequence that many citizens, disappointed by what has not been delivered by traditional political parties, are now supporting new forces, in most cases populist ones. And as has already happened in Europe once before in the 1920s and 1930s, the word ‘democracy’ is becoming an empty vessel for far too many of its citizens.

The root causes of the rise of populism should therefore be sought in the growing inability of western democracies to respond to citizens’ concerns and guarantee them high standards of living, and that this

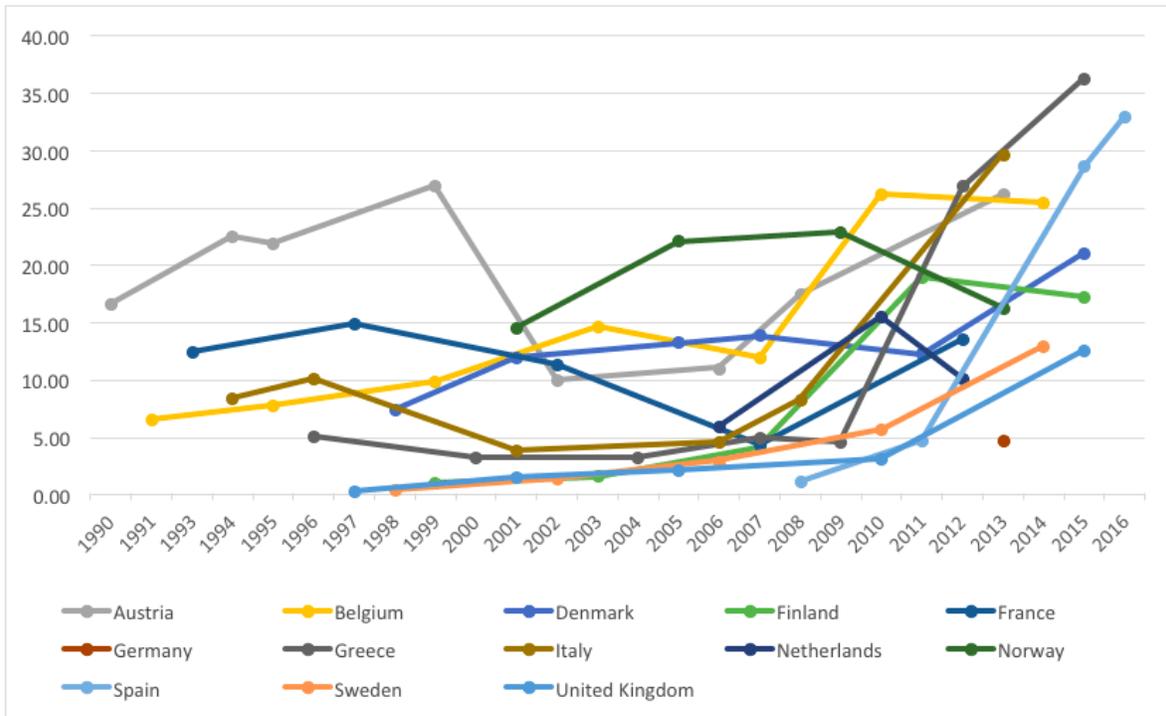


Figure 1: Source: Authors' elaboration on Wolfram Nordsieck data<sup>1</sup>. Available at: <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu>.

inability is having the consequence not only of removing from office traditional political parties, but also of provoking a de-legitimization of democratic institutions and the democratic system as a whole.

What can be done in order to avoid other populist backlashes, and possibly their non-democratic consequences? In other words, what can be done to cure the populist infection before it becomes an incurable illness? Since the spread of the populist infection is mainly due, on the one hand, to western inability to respond to economic crises and, on the other, to the consequent decrease in legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens, a twofold strategy is necessary. Protecting democracy today means, above all, to dare more in the economic sphere in terms of creating job opportunities for the young and social protection for the weak.

On the one hand, liberal democracies should start to rethink their economic systems and the instruments they can employ in case of severe crises, both at national and international level. We need to re-think the history of the 1930s when liberal democracies managed to survive only when governments introduced major plans of job creation and income support policies (as happened in the New Deal of the United States). When democratic countries did not manage to do that, the outcome was the rise of totalitarian political parties. Protecting democracy today means, above all, to dare more in the economic sphere in terms of creating job opportunities for the young and social protection for the weak. These policies will be effective in re-balancing the polarization in income distribution that has occurred over the last decades.

On the other hand, established parties as well as new democratic form of political participation should work to reignite citizens' interest in politics, and in public affairs in general, especially among the younger age cohorts, to overcome the current crisis in legitimacy of democratic systems. To do so, democratic

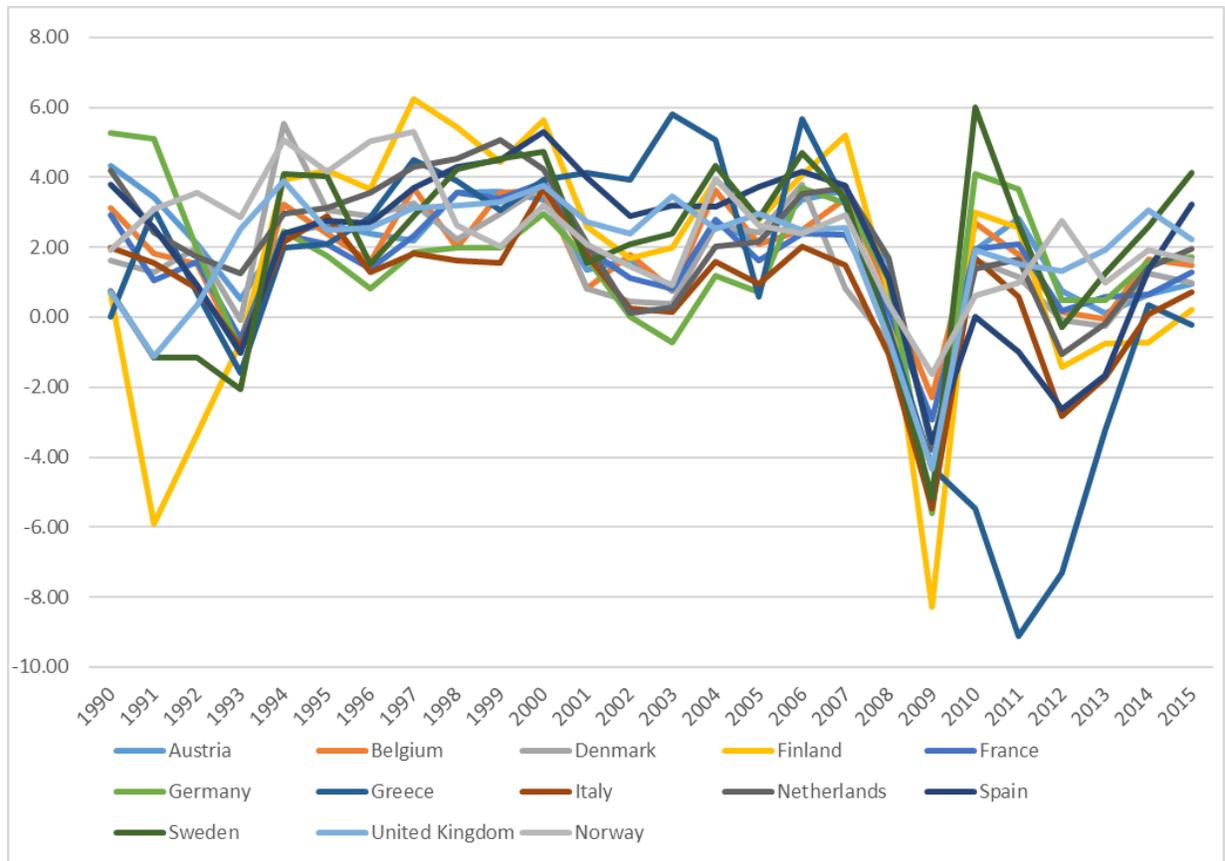


Figure 2: Source: Authors' elaboration on World Bank national account data, and OECD National Account data files. Available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>.

forces should become more sensitive toward citizens' concerns and aspirations, deepening their inclusion in domestic political and policy processes. Furthermore, democratic forces should deepen their international collaboration, pushing for citizens' inclusion also at the level of international decision-making. Phrasing it differently, all democratic political forces, new as well as consolidated, should work hard to include citizens in all those decisions that directly affect their lives, regarding both national and international affairs.

Can the real answer to the populist infection be a bigger dose of democracy? In the United States, the Democratic Party has already learned the hard lesson that the best candidate against populism is not necessarily the one closer to the establishment, and that to propose old solutions for new kinds of problems can be counterproductive.

Now the challenge for democratic partisans is that of being capable of coming up with new and credible, alternative answers to contrast those offered by the populist view. A few leaders, including Benoît Hamon in France, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom and, before them, Alexis Tsipras in Greece, seem to have taken on the challenge of re-thinking both democratic procedures and outcomes. Today, faith in democracy may well be in their hands, and in their ability to accomplish this task.

## Authors' Note:

*This article originates from a dialogue at the 21st Global Dynamics at the University of California at Santa Barbara. It has been first published on OpenDemocracy.net (April 10, 2018).*

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *The classification of populist parties mainly relies on the party classification provided by Wolfram Nordsieck according to which populist parties are part of the right-wing political spectrum: “right-wing populist parties are protest parties that appeal to the fears and frustrations of the public. They appeared first in the early 1970s. These parties combine national stances with an anti-elitist rhetoric and a radical critique of political institutions. They usually prefer strict law-and-order and anti-immigration policies”. However, the limitation of the populist parties’ definition encompassing right-wing parties only is problematic, since we can often see centre or centre-left oriented parties employing the same, anti-establishment, and anti-elitist rhetoric, as in the case of Podemos in Spain. Moreover, we can also find instances where the left-right cleavage is less marked, as in the case of the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, which proposes both leftist and rightist policies, framed by an anti-establishment rhetoric. We decided to leave aside the left-right classification and to simplify the definition of populist parties by considering more relevant the presence of strong antisystem and anti-elitist instances.*

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