The populists' trap: mainstream responses to populist new parties are a threat to democracy

New populist and nativist parties have emerged in many western democracies as a response to large-scale economic transformations, argues **Stephane Wolton***. The reaction by established parties in trying to imitate their anti-immigrant policies have dangerous consequences for our democratic norms.*

Gilet Jaunes protestors, Paris, 2018. Photo by [Norbu Gyachung](#) *on* [Unsplash](#)

Imagine a world with no war between major powers for decades. A world increasingly interconnected via the circulation of capital, goods and people. A world which is approaching a 'true cosmopolitanism', where 'towns are full of people, houses are full of tenants, hotels full of guests', and 'the people are flooding the beaches, the citizens can no longer bathe.' These quotes do not apply to [Barcelona](#) or [Amsterdam](#), and nor do they describe our current globalisation. Rather, they depict the world at the beginning of the 20th century in Jan-Werner Müller's excellent book [Contesting Democracy](#).

We know how this history goes: Sarajevo, World War I, the Bolshevik 'Revolution', Fascism, Nazism. The breakdown of the liberal golden age was brutal, so brutal that it pushed Stefan Zweig, the great proponent of cosmopolitanism, to suicide. How did we go from one extreme to the other?

Müller suggests an answer. The end of the 19th century saw with the extension of the franchise the irruption of the masses into politics – and into life. The old political system, built on the idea of politics as a gentleman's (read elitist) club, was at odds with the new world. This generated a crisis of representation at two levels. One question was who is represented, or can the old elites properly represent the new members of the polity? The second was about what type of claims can be made within the political system, or how can the interests of the masses be accommodated. Two competing (broad) answers were proposed: the politics of moderation (or compromise), and the militarised politics of the will. The latter was tried first, and only its failure left political space for the former.

Besides the familiar echoes, how is this history informative? Our democratic systems again are experiencing a shock. This is not a political shock (all Western countries are mass democracies), but an economic one, though a shock nonetheless. This shock is the third economic revolution. The scale of creative destruction is probably unprecedented, and easy to notice. Take a stroll and count the number of bank branches that have closed in recent years. These economic changes have also had cultural and sociological effects. It changes our transportation habits (congestion charges, ultra-low emission zones), modifies our leisure (streaming rather than live TV) and affects our consumption patterns (ordering online rather than visiting shops). Even our money is disappearing. The third economic revolution is a great transformation, which does not occur without pushbacks. In France, the *gilets jaunes* originally protested against transportation costs; in the UK, book shops are organising the resistance against their main rival, Amazon. This shock is comparable with the beginning of capitalism analysed Polanyi's seminal book. Then, like now, politicians sought to mollify the social consequences of the enormous changes experienced by the population. But unlike the 19th century, political decisions following the economic revolution are not made by a monarch or a government that is isolated from the people. They are, at least indirectly, made by the people themselves.

And here enter the populists. Academic papers have found that populist parties attract recent economic losers, who have lost out from globalisation, the Great Recession, automation, or greater economic insecurity. As Yotam Margalit rightly points out in his excellent review of the literature on the causes of populism, each study separately explains only a small fraction of the populist vote; all together, however, they paint a consistent picture linking the current economic transformation with the rise of populism.

Pointing out that populists benefit most from the economic revolution is one thing; explaining why them and not others is another. One possible factor is voters' distrust of more traditional parties, especially social democrats. From the end of World War II to the mid-1980s, Western democracies effectively became social democracies. Right- and left-wing parties practised the politics of compromise and incremental change, whereby trade unions and corporations, government and opposition negotiated until a solution acceptable to all parties could be found. But compromise and its constant tinkering are for small changes, not revolutionary transformations. However, instead of constant discussion and adaption, economic losers demand actions – a counter-revolution no less. What they seek is the political will to reverse the course of history and this is exactly what populists offer. In Italy, Lega and their leader Salvini do not celebrate the 1950s as the golden age of the country (though it was, but thanks to social democracy and compromise), but instead they see the Fascist era as the pinnacle of Italian glory.

A second factor facilitating populist success is 'descriptive representation', to borrow from Hannah Pitkins. Descriptive representation has long been seen as essential for women (female legislators best represent their interest) and minorities (BAME politicians best defend the rights of ethnic minorities) because of shared experience. Populists play the same tune. They signal that economic losers can trust their party because they field candidates who are like them. For example, those who have lost out from economic changes are over-represented in the candidates put forward by the Sweden Democrats, whereas they are under-represented in all other parties.

Populists do more than represent (at least descriptively) economic losers. They also advance a particular vision of politics. They adhere to Carl Schmidt's vision that politics is determined by the distinction between friends and enemies. Populists systematically promote an agenda of hatred and of division. Nigel Farage campaigns on the theme of the great betrayal, just like the German far-right after World War I. Donald Trump talks about 'Making America Great Again' just like the National Front wanted to 'Make Britain Great Again' during the 1975 EU referendum campaign. The populist rhetoric is a rhetoric of us versus them, with Muslims (in Europe) or Hispanics (in the US) as the main targets. The populist agenda consists of separating the native majority from an imaginary enemy within.

Populists' talk or populist-promoted policies targeting the minority (such as burqa ban, and anti-veil laws) are not just symbolic words or actions. They can have severe consequences. The election of Donald Trump caused a significant increase in citizens' willingness to express their racial bias. Abdelgadir and Fouka show that all Muslim female pupils suffered academically from the introduction of the 2004 headscarf ban in French schools, whether they wore the niqab (a tiny minority) or they did not (the vast majority). In a recent working paper, Torun Dewan and I argue that symbolic policies are meant to make salient identity traits commonly associated with the non-native population (for example, the burqa ban makes salient that some individuals are Muslims and not Christian, whether or not these individuals wore the burqa in the first place). Once salient, identity can serve as a focal point in hiring decisions, yielding a labour market loaded in favour of native workers. As a result, the minority sees their employment prospects diminished. As the labour market becomes segregated, the economy shrinks, and redistributive transfers are reduced, imposing another cost on the minority.

And it is here that the populists' trap lies. Populists entangle legitimate concerns with their agenda of hatred. To counter populists' success, democratic parties have responded by importing (in only a slightly toned-down version) the whole populist agenda, without distinction. In the UK, most Tory leadership contenders want to appear purer than the hardest Brexiters. As a pure incarnation of the politics of the will, Boris Johnson asserts that 'we can do it if we really want it'. Labour, in turn, embodies the us-versus-them approach: 'for the many, not the few'. In France, the former leader of the traditional right-wing party *Les Republicains*, Laurent Wauquiez, tried to imitate Marine Le Pen's far-right *Rassemblement National*. In Denmark, the centre-left Social Democrats now stand against non-European immigration. This strategy can only benefit populists. Their agenda becomes mainstream, if not their party per se (see, for example, the poor result of *Les Republicains* in the recent European Election). This normalisation also encourages even greater extremism at the fringe such as Stram Kurs, a Danish party that publicly campaigns for the deportation of all Muslims from Denmark. The current response to populism is, thus, politically dangerous, and it is also morally wrong. The populists' claim to respond to legitimate concerns does not make their policies less objectionable. It is a trap we cannot afford to fall into.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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