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Populists Aren't the Only Enemies of Liberal Democracy

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The populist uprisings in the U.S. and Europe have aroused fears for the future of liberal democracy. The concerns aren't misplaced, but I'm not sure the threat is well understood.

The Rise of Populism

One mistake is to assume that all forms of populism are alike, and dangerous in the same way.

Populism sustains President Donald Trump in the U.S. and Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary; it drove Britain's vote to quit the European Union, and put the Five Star Movement and Matteo Salvini's far-right League in charge of Italy. These movements are populist by definition. They stand, or claim to stand, for ordinary people against a failed establishment — not just a failed government, but a discredited ruling class. All populists are fed up with politics-as-usual, expert orthodoxy, received opinion and elite purveyors of all of the above.

These attitudes are conducive to bad government. Populism is always strong on resentment and weak on judicious proposals. It's angry, impatient and not much interested in details. As a result, it's apt to get things badly wrong. Trump, Brexit, Orban and Salvini are enormous mistakes.

Even so, notice that those defining characteristics of populism aren't in themselves illiberal — if, by illiberal, you mean opposed to constitutional checks and balances, bigoted, intolerant of disagreement, monolithic or anti-pluralist. Opposing the establishment insists on none of these. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal was a populist project. Hubert Humphrey was a populist of a sort. Think of Eastern Europe in the 1980s or the early days of the Arab Spring. There's such a thing as liberal populism.

Here I find myself at odds with William Galston, a liberal political theorist whose work I've long admired. He and I agree on the kind of politics we want — centrist, pragmatic, problem-solving, compromise-seeking, pluralist. In his latest book, "Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy," Galston contends that "populism is always anti-pluralist" and as a result unavoidably illiberal. I disagree.

Certainly pluralism and liberal democracy have to go together. Pluralism is the view that values are often in conflict. The demands of justice, fairness, freedom and equality, to name just some, often point in different directions. There's no universally accepted ordering of such values, so good people will disagree about what's right. The purpose of liberal democracy is to accommodate these disagreements and let people live together peaceably despite them. Part of the formula is to put constitutional limits on the ability of majorities to impose their will. An anti-pluralist denies that such limits are necessary: There's one right answer, the people know it, and that's that.

The fascist variants of populism that ruined Europe in the 20th century were anti-pluralist in the extreme — fundamentalist and totalitarian. The versions simmering today in Poland and Hungary are strongly anti-pluralist, with nativism at the fore and open contempt for anti-majoritarian niceties such as an independent judiciary. But the populisms that put Trump in power and the U.K. on the path to Brexit aren't milder forms of the same thing. They're different.

Pro-Trump populism isn't a monolithic movement but an unruly coalition of diverse ideologies and backgrounds — evangelical Christians and the irreligious; anti-Nafta union members and anti-tax business owners; social conservatives and people who voted for President Barack Obama.

“Trump voters hold very different views on a wide variety of issues including immigration, race, American identity, moral traditionalism, trade and economics,” wrote the political scientist Emily Ekins in a paper for the Voter Study Group. On all these issues, they agree to disagree. That's pluralism.

Crucially, disdain for constitutional formalities isn't much in evidence either. American populists tend to think of themselves as a beleaguered minority, and see the Constitution as a bulwark of their liberties rather than a tool of the establishment or a legalistic nuisance. Impatience with what the Constitution actually says (about the right to free speech, the right to bear arms, powers “reserved to the states . . . or to the people,” and the anti-majoritarian institutions of American federalism, including the Electoral College) is a lot more common among anti-Trumpers.

Something similar is true in the U.K. Brexit supporters are at least as diverse — politically, geographically and culturally — as Remainers. And many of them are acutely concerned with what Americans would recognize as constitutional questions, about who holds power and how governments are held accountable. Remainers tend to view these issues as interesting in theory but unimportant in practice. They're more concerned with weighing the income losses from Brexit than worrying about checks and balances in the running of the EU.

Populism in the U.S. and U.K. plainly harbors nativists and racists. But most U.S. populists are more exercised about illegal immigration than about immigration in general — a distinction that their opponents tirelessly ignore. (Another nit-picking legalism.) Brexit supporters merely claim that a sovereign country should be able to control its borders — not long ago, a statement of the obvious.

Turning to the opponents of populism, the pluralism that Galston rightly sees as essential to liberal democracy doesn't much interest the truculent edge of the Resistance. To be sure, most Democrats are pluralist, but a prominent faction of the anti-Trump coalition is not. For them,

fondness for diversity doesn't always extend to diversity of opinion. Speech can be violence. Tolerance is weakness. This speaker should be no-platformed. That view is illegitimate. We stand against bigotry — but you are white, so your views on race are tainted; male, so your views on gender aren't wanted; uneducated, so your views on everything are worthless. Sanctimony, condescension and conformity are the opposite of what liberal used to mean.

Trump is a leader of stunning incompetence, defective ethics and autocratic appetites. Whatever his supporters were thinking, however legitimate their grievances, they're to blame for putting him in position to do damage. They could turn overtly illiberal if Trump has to contend with more forceful resistance from Congress and the courts, or with the results of his own incompetent policies. Under pressure, U.S. populism could become what its opponents say it is already.