

The State of Populism in the Post-Industrial Democracies of the Global North: Fading Out, Growing Ever Stronger, or Preparing to Unveil a New Face?

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ABSTRACT

As it is new to the political realm, there are still a lot of questions to be asked and research to do with regards to right wing populism: how it functions, why it exists, what it is, and where we go from here. This essay will answer these questions, as well as investigate recent wins and losses for major far-right parties and movements across the globe. In seeking to answer these questions, I find that right-populism is not, in fact, the political fad many expect it to be and if it is to ever lose popularity, will likely only be pushed into obscurity by a major large-scale global event, or eclipsed by a more powerful political movement. In the short term, the COVID-19 pandemic and left-wing populism are right-wing populism's biggest challengers, but neither have seemed to make a big enough dent in the power of right-populism for it to be considered a loss for the far-right just yet.

Keywords: populism, COVID-19, left-wing political movements, the far-right, electoral success

Introduction

In recent years, political scientists across the globe have been baffled by the rise of populism, a “thin” ideology or rhetorical strategy often used by demagogues that pits the “pure people” against the “corrupt elite.”¹ The term “populism” has existed for centuries now, starting in the late 1800s with the Populist Party in the United States. The Populist Party, a left-wing group, led by William Jennings Bryan, was primarily made up of farmers. The Populists believed that the “big-wigs” in DC had forgotten about the hard-working farmers of Middle America as they continued to pass policies that disenfranchised the farmers while watching from their ivory towers. As a result, the farmers formed the Populist Party, advocating for the “pure people” (the farmers) over the “corrupt elite.” They endorsed policies like a graduated income tax and direct election of Senators, both policies that exist in today’s United States. Although no member of the Populist Party ever held as high an office as President, they were very effective in Congress at lobbying for their policies and speaking for the “little man.”²

These pro-worker, anti-corporatist populist ideals quickly spread their way across the world, notably in the Global South and Latin America. For the next century, the western world seldom used the term “populism” aside from describing these labor movements in the Global South. These movements include Thomas Sankara’s Populist Revolution in Burkina Faso, based on the teachings of Karl Marx, and the campaigns of Argentina’s Juan Perón and Brazil’s Getúlio Vargas.³ However, populism re-emerged in the West during the late 20th century, showing a much harsher face. Since 1990, the number of populists in power around the world has increased

¹ Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

² de Wit, Maywa Montenegro et. al. *Agrarian origins of authoritarian populism in the United States*. Journal of Rural Studies, 2019.

³ Abankwa, Daniel. *Populism: Utility of its Approaches and the Prospects of the Phenomenon’s Resurgence in America*. Journal of Social and Developmental Sciences, 2021.

fivefold⁴, but instead of labor movements representing economic populism, most populists today are “cultural” populists that lie on the far-right of a hypothetical political spectrum. While countries in the Global South such as Bolivia and Venezuela still have strong left-populist movements, the traditional left-wing definition of the term has gone nearly extinct in the West, save for a few “flickers of hope” in areas such as Greece, France, and Spain (which have all but fizzled out in due time).

While left-wing populism has largely faded into obscurity, right-wing populism has dominated 21st-century politics. Nearly every post-industrial democracy has observed a strong and electorally viable far-right populist movement. Yet, despite this recent success, there is still much debate within the political science community about how populism will look throughout the rest of the century. On the one hand, many argue that the right-variety of populism is here to stay, as proven in its recent electoral success. But, on the other hand, it is certainly possible that massive public disapproval of how right-populist leaders have handled current crises such as recessions and the COVID crisis could lead to an implosion of the movement. If that is true, then what is to replace it? Will another political action begin to dominate world politics in the upcoming years? What political movement will garner enough working class support to succeed globally and how? This essay seeks to explore these questions as well as how right-wing populism in the 21st century has gotten so vogueish, how left-wing populism has observed lost interest, and where the state of global populism may head amidst an uncertain outlook.

The New Populism

Starting in the 1990s, right-wing populism began to find its way into the rhetorical strategies and ideologies of many significant political figures globally, such as The Netherlands’ Pim Fortuyn, France’s Jean Marie Le Pen, and Austria’s Jörg Haider.⁵ Right-wing populism adds another layer to the “us vs. them” mentality for what populism is known. The “pure people” are culturally homogenous, typically identifying themselves as a “silent majority” and aligning themselves with a notion of “common sense.” At the same time, the group of “corrupt elites” also encompasses immigrants and minorities (who are supposedly favored by the government elites). This form of populism is has become common in today’s global political sphere, gaining massive swaths of power in countries like Brazil, Italy, Hungary, the UK, Turkey, and Australia⁶.

Why is Right-Wing Populism so Powerful?

Right-wing populism has become very popular, but the answer to why this is has caused much debate amongst political scientists. One hypothesis comes from Margaret Canovan of Keele University in England. Canovan states that democracy presents “two faces”: a pragmatic side and a redemptive side to politics. These two sides often clash, as they are opposed yet interdependent. In between “lies a gap in which populism is liable to appear.” Canovan explains the pragmatic side of politics as the side made up of institutions and “systems of processing conflicts without killing one another.” However, the redemptive side is the notion that a government should be “of the

⁴ Kyle, Jordan, et. al. *Populists in Power Across the World*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2020.

⁵ Eatwell, Roger. *Introduction: The New Extreme Right Challenge*. Routledge Press, 2003.

⁶ Wike, Richard et. al. *Globally, Broad Support for representative and direct democracy*. Pew Research Center, 2017.

people, by the people, and for the people,” and people are often prone to emotional responses.⁷ A thriving democracy can find the balance between the two faces to keep everyone pleased; a safe, strong, and prosperous state held up by institutions, where the people feel as though they are in control. However, Canovan highlights that the conflicts between the faces of democracy have gotten worse in the 21st century due to political elites in countries worldwide ignoring the redemptive “face,” therefore ignoring “the will of the people.”⁸ In Europe, institutions like the EU continue to grow in power and influence, mandating refugee quotas for countries like Spain and Italy, much to the demise of ordinary folk who “don’t like to see the demographics of their country changing.”⁹ When candidates promise to care about the people’s voice at the expense of the institutions and “elites,” it frequently comes across as a pleasant change of pace.

Another theory comes from Peter A. Hall of Harvard University, in what he calls the “third-rung phenomenon.” Suppose you ask a group of people to imagine a ladder with ten rungs (with the first rung representing the lowest social status and the tenth rung of the highest social status). In that case, a disproportionate amount of people nowadays will put themselves somewhere around the third rung due to an extreme lack of social mobility in some of the world’s largest superpowers, such as the US. Putting themselves on the third rung means that they know they have something to lose, but are still near the bottom, have been that way, and wish to be higher. Because of this, “third-rungers” are the group most prone to right-wing populist arguments and tend to support right-wing populist politicians. They know the “elites” are above them and thus believe that “elites” constantly attempt to push the ordinary person down the ladder in favor of those currently below them.¹⁰ The “first and second-rungers” that serve as scapegoats for the far-right politicians vary by country. In Spain, for example, they tend to be refugees and feminists. As a result, Santiago Abascal’s far-right Vox movement has observed immense popularity in Spain scapegoating these groups. In the United States, they are immigrants (typically working-class and from Mexico or Central America) and black people. Hall concludes that due to the lack of social mobility of the working class in a capitalist world and dissociation between the political elites and working class in many countries, populism has a large gap to fill.¹¹

Lastly, the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, known as the “father of modern populism,” has a different notion of why populism is so popular today. He believes that the reactions of various political movements in trying to curb populism have strengthened the populist movement rather than weakening it. That allows for populist movements to grow in size and strength that they maintain over time. He states that when political campaigns try to shame populism and limit their membership, populism only grows stronger because they value output over input and leadership over participation.¹² Populism thrives on having the loudest and most compelling voices in the room instead of having the most members with pragmatic trains of thought. As a result, populist leaders look to have the most devout followers at their core with room to grow. Mudde also states that the global narrative of the “war on terror,” set by the US and Britain, made it easy for

⁷ Canovan, Margaret. *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy*. Political Science Journal, 1999.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Bruneau, Emile. *The unique effects of blatant dehumanization on attitudes and behavior towards Muslim refugees during the European ‘refugee crisis’ across four countries*. European Journal of Social Psychology, 2018.

¹⁰ Gidron, Noam and Peter A. Hall. *Populism as a problem of social integration*. Comparative Political Studies, 2020.

¹¹ Hall, Peter A. *The Shifting Relationship Between Postwar Capitalism and Democracy*. Harvard University, 2021.

¹² Mudde, Cas. *The Populist Zeitgeist: Government and Opposition*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

immigration, Islam, and security to become the “hot-topic” issues of the 21st century, the main talking points of the far-right.¹³

Each of these theories seems to have a significant degree of validity. Not only are they essential to discuss why far-right populism has taken over mainstream politics, but we can also use these theories to discuss a hypothetical downfall of right-wing populism. If these far-right leaders no longer uphold a convincing redemptive side to their politics, can no longer effectively scapegoat historically oppressed populations, or can be drowned out by another political campaign that *embraces* populism, they essentially have nothing to stand on. I will revisit this notion later after further discussion and theory-building concerning similar world-scale political movements.

Similar “Trends” in Global Politics

It is certainly possible that this far-right brand of populism is, in essence, a fad and is not here to stay. Many political scientists have dedicated their careers to arguing that the mere existence of time will render right-populism useless in the upcoming years. This reasoning comes from the observation that there have been many vogueish “fad”-like trends observed in the way people prefer their politics. Still, these have often faded out after time invalidates them or a large-scale event makes them irrelevant. For example, the voting population of the United States used to value military experience as one of the essential traits in a President. Now, such accreditation rarely crosses one’s mind when filling out their ballot, as three out of the last four American Presidents had no experience in the military. Many people now actually prefer someone seen as an “outsider” instead of someone with experience. Perhaps Americans have begun to distrust the military. Perhaps Americans underwent a paradigm shift after observing the weighty foreign policy stances taken by Presidents Obama and Clinton despite no military experience. Any conclusions drawn from this data would be circumstantial at best. All we know is that military service is no longer a significant factor in deciding who would be a better President in the eyes of the American public. This preference was a trend. For years, political scientists have been discussing the phenomenon of populism in the Western world as a trend. The current discussion has shifted: should right-wing populism still be considered a trend with an end to its appeal on the horizon, or is it here to stay?

Why Right-Populism is Here to Stay

There are various arguments as to why right-wing populism won’t be going anywhere for quite a while. Mainly, left-leaning (or even center to center-right) movements globally have consistently failed to defeat far-right parties in elections, despite their best efforts. In fact, on balance, far-right parties have continued to grow in support the longer they’ve been in office throughout this century.¹⁴ All across the globe, far-right leaders are enjoying immense popularity and continue to win elections. Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, The Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte, India’s Narendra Modi, and the PiS Party in Poland are enjoying record-high levels of support domestically (no matter how unpopular they remain abroad). These levels of support could partially be attributed to the weakening of the free press and constitutional courts

¹³ Mudde, Cas. *Europe’s Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making*. Foreign Affairs, 2016.

¹⁴ Borg, Karl. *The radicalization of politics in Europe: the rise of the far-right in the age of austerity*. University of Malta, 2014.

that these governments have all pushed for, effectively destroying their once-existent democracies, but regardless, the ideals that they uphold persist. Even when right-populists lose elections or are ousted from office (i.e., France’s Marine Le Pen, The United States’ Donald Trump), they continue to have a strong base of ardent supporters who have shifted the Overton window (the everchanging spectrum or range of politically acceptable ideas within a population)¹⁵ of their respective countries into uncharted territories. Furthermore, handing right-populists a loss in an election is incredibly difficult. In a meta-analysis done by Yascha Mounk, Professor at Johns Hopkins University in 2020, results showed that six years after they are first elected, populist leaders are twice as likely as non-populist leaders to still be in power; twelve years after they are first elected, they are more than five times as likely.¹⁶

These ideas spread rapidly; countries who haven’t yet seen an executive dominated by right-populist ideals may very well see one soon. Countries like Denmark and Finland have far-right populist parties in the metaphoric “passenger’s seat” of their legislatures, making up the main opposition (and starting to “backseat drive” the policy direction of the majority on issues like immigration). More and more Danes and Finns are identifying as “nationalists” each year. The aforementioned Vox in Spain has seen a meteoric rise, and many political scientists keep an eye on them ahead of the upcoming elections in Spain, especially with the popularity of the Sánchez premiership remaining uncertain during the COVID crisis.¹⁷ The far-right Italian party, Brothers of Italy, the only major Italian political party to not join the newly formed broad government coalition led by Mario Draghi, has become the next most popular Italian party in mere months.¹⁸

This newfound success of right populists is much to the dismay of social democratic and traditional conservative parties, many of whom now see historically low support. Moreover, most efforts of these parties have been futile in countering the influence of the far-right. Mudde finds that traditional parties will most often cave into right-populist parties and adopt some of their policy proposals to “win back the working class.” He highlights European leaders like Macron, who have pivoted towards a more “authoritarian” stance on issues like immigration in recent campaigning. Unfortunately, this proves rather detrimental for multiple reasons.

I. Mudde explains that if these parties like *En Marche!* or the SPD in Germany continue to pivot right, nothing fundamentally changes.¹⁹ These pivots do nothing to stop right-wing populism and only delay the inevitable. Suppose “moderate” parties begin to agree with far-right parties on issues such as immigration. In that case, the people will come to the realization (or illusion) that the far-right was almost prophetic in predicting the problems for which every politician suddenly cares. Additionally, when these “moderate” parties change their policy positions to reflect what they believe the working class embodies based on their support for far-right populism, the populists have effectively won to frame the current political climate. This notion of the left creates a slippery

¹⁵ Karpenko, Oleksandr Valentinovich. *The Overton Window as a Manipulative Mechanism of Public Values Transformation*. National Academy of Culture and Arts Management Ukraine, 2019.

¹⁶ Mounk, Yascha and Jordan Kyle, *What Populists Do to Democracies*. The Atlantic, 2018.

¹⁷ Vampa, Davide. *Competing forms of populism and territorial politics*. Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 2020.

¹⁸ de Luca, Marino. *The new Draghi government and the face of populism in Italy*. London School of Economics, 2021.

¹⁹ Mudde, Cas. *Why Copying The Populist Right Isn’t Going To Save The Left*. The Guardian, 2019

slope. When the traditionally or economically liberal parties that previously dominated European elections continue to lose recent polls to the far-right, what other “compromises” will they make? Is climate policy next? Will we see another exodus of countries leaving the EU like Britain or flat out ignoring EU demands like Hungary?

II. The opposition has failed to make any sufficient gains in suppressing the ideas of right-populism in the long term. Even if this “pivoting” works short-term, liberal parties tend to overvalue small victories. Look no further than Poland: in the 2007 elections, the center-right “establishment” Civic Platform Party recovered well after considerable losses to the far-right PiS in previous elections. At this point, Civic Platform became the Polish government and ousted PiS from power. While in power for eight years, the Polish people were disappointed at the lack of substantive policy change brought about by Civic Platform, which led to PiS regaining power and growing more prominent and popular than ever before.²⁰ Ever since, PiS has continued to gain clout and support by eroding press freedoms, stacking constitutional courts, and restricting free speech and immigration. Civic Platform has yet to recover from these losses, while PiS’ popularity is sky high.

Mudde predicts a similar observation in the United States in the coming years.²¹ After the recent electoral defeat of Donald Trump, many Democrats already believe that they’ve “won back the Rust Belt” and that the Blue Wave has reached its crest, never to crash again. Assuming this would be nonsense. Donald Trump was leading polls by double digits before an inadequate response to the COVID crisis.²² The American people didn’t suddenly become repulsed by the ideals of right-populism overnight; they didn’t have a choice. What happens if the Republicans nominate another politically popular right-populist like Tom Cotton or Ron DeSantis to be their Presidential nominee in 2024? The Democrats have far from won back working-class support, and they won’t do it without making substantial efforts to better the lives of the working-class people of America. The same goes for social democratic parties in European democracies, such as Germany’s SPD, Britain’s Labour Party, Spain’s PSOE, and more.

Failures of Modern Social Democrats

The question then remains; why has it become so hard for social democratic parties to make substantial reform for the working class? The answer is twofold: First, as previously discussed, liberal parties have become infatuated in making compromises with far-right parties to stay “electable” in their own eyes. Playing electoral politics and becoming obsessed with optics distracts politicians from making reforms genuinely “for the people.” Democrats in the United States are shaking in their boots, terrified of coming out to support policies like the Green New Deal and Medicare for All. They are most worried about being branded radicals by their opposition (despite polls showing 70%+ approval amongst Americans for these “radical” policies). Second, reform for the working class can only go so far within a capitalist economy. If capitalists still own the means of production in any system, workers will always feel disenfranchised and in a state of

²⁰ Szczerbiak, Aleks. *An anti-establishment backlash that shook up the party system*. Journal of European Politics and Society, 2017.

²¹ Mudde, Cas. *Why Copying The Populist Right Isn’t Going To Save The Left*. The Guardian, 2019

²² Erikson, Robert S. and Christopher Wlezien. *Forecasting the 2020 Presidential Election*. Political Science and Politics, 2021.

wage slavery. Likely, it's not so much the *policy* of far-right groups that bring them such great appeal in the eyes of ordinary people, but the fact that they stand for change and the ideals of the government looking out for the “everyday” working-class citizen. If social democrats decide they will adopt right-wing immigration policies, they won't gain any support from right-populists. National Rally supporters in France aren't flocking to support Macron; this would be illogical.

This malleability is the problem with traditional social-democratic political parties. They should not treat the working class like pawns, solely focusing on their benefits within an electoral system. To garner working-class support, social democracy (or socialism) needs to be revitalized, and the idea of working-class-centered politics needs to stay in the mainstream. Otherwise, it is incredibly easy for the working class to become infatuated with the scapegoated politics of the far-right.²³ It's challenging to defeat right-populists in national elections without local support and community organization. I argue for organizers to start at the local level by enlightening the working-class and pushing for class consciousness while strengthening the vehicles of working-class mobilization within the democratic system, such as trade unions. Without this mass organization, I would argue that right-populism will grow to be the preferred politics of much of the working class.

Could We Be Turning a Corner Already?

However, there are also arguments about why this new form of populism could be on its last leg. The reason for this mainly lies with COVID-19. Historically, political ideals tend to shift amongst the masses during and after large-scale crises. The most significant gains acquired by far-right parties in Europe, in particular, happened following the financial collapse and global recession in 2010²⁴. No crisis in recent history has been more significant in scope and scale than COVID-19. Nearly 200 million people have suffered from the disease worldwide, and well over four million people have died²⁵. During crises of this scale, people can't help but blame the political administrations in charge.

Additionally, many of the countries hit the hardest by the pandemic have had right-populist leaders in charge of handling the COVID procedure. As previously mentioned, the main reason Donald Trump lost re-election in the United States is due to how the pandemic has hit America hard. It did not help that President Trump refused to acknowledge the benefits of mask-wearing, social distancing, and other recommended COVID-deterrents until hundreds of thousands of Americans, many of those his ardent supporters, had already suffered. The United States never went into a single nationwide lockdown. While President Trump still has a group of staunch supporters that agree with his every move during the pandemic, many Americans were all but forced to look at the ordinary lives of others across the globe. New Zealand summers were filled with music festivals and beach vacations after essentially conquering the pandemic following their strong (and early) response.

This disappointment in far-right leaders during the pandemic is not an isolated American issue. Far-right parties all across Europe saw substantial losses throughout 2020. For example,

²³ Kitschelt, Herbert. *The Radical Right in Western Europe*. The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

²⁴ Funke, Manuel, et. al. *The Financial Crisis is Still Empowering Far-Right Populists*, Foreign Affairs, 2018.

²⁵ *COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*, Worldometer, July 2021.

Greece’s ascendant far-right household name Golden Dawn saw a massive hit to their popularity and is now officially branded by Greeks (and many abroad) as neo-Nazis.²⁶ Simon Schütz of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University illustrates the bind that right-populist parties have faced during the pandemic, highlighting Germany’s AfD.

Schütz finds that COVID has caused countries like Germany to resort to extreme measures, such as shutting down borders, giving massive swaths of funding to small businesses, and focusing primarily on national interests instead of supranational interests (such as the EU or WHO). Many of these policies have been advocated by far-right parties for years. In the last year, these policies have been forcibly thrust into the mainstream by politicians of all parties. Unfortunately, people are still worse off than they were before the pandemic. Economies have slowed down, crime is still high, and the working class has been laid off from their jobs in droves. The far-right promise has shown to be a failure. These policies have proved not to be the “cure-all” that parties like the AfD have promised they would be, which has led to splitting support for these parties.²⁷

The Far-Right Double-Bind

Now, far-right parties have two options. On the one hand, they can continue to stick to their wheelhouse and envision this dwindling support as a short-term issue. Perhaps they can phrase this as a win for the far-right at the end of the day. Many traditionally far-right policies found their way into the mainstream. The problem with this idea, Schütz continues, is that these parties no longer have their immense populist appeal. If everyone from social democrats to conservatives to greens advocates for their policies, they are no longer outsiders but effectively the “establishment” they continuously denounced. The popularity of parties that choose this path will undoubtedly take a hit.²⁸

On the other hand, with dwindling support, far-right parties could try to do something to reinvigorate their base and continue to be contrarian, pivoting even further to the fringes of the political spectrum. Many AfD members have resorted to joining the Querdenker movement, a loose grouping of libertarians, vaccination opponents, and conspiracy theorists that has steadily gained support for its protest rallies against government health restrictions and lockdowns. A recent poll showed that 24% of AfD members don’t believe in the pandemic and are under the impression that liberal governments across the world conspired to create the notion of this pandemic to create chaos discontent. These fringe beliefs are also sure to alienate voters. As a result, AfD’s support has slashed in half since 2018.²⁹ At the very least, right-populist parties will fracture into two different camps: traditional right-populists and fringe conspiracy groups. It is much tougher for these splintered groups to survive on their own in an electoral system. While AfD is still polling in fourth place ahead of the 2021 German federal elections later this year, their support is still on a downwards trend and they did not fare well in many of the local elections that took place earlier this year.

²⁶ Schütz, Simon. *How The Pandemic Dented The Popularity of Germany’s Far-Right AfD Party*. NPR, 2020.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

With dwindling support over their COVID response worldwide, political scientists will have to wait and see what the outcome will be for right-populists. However, many right-populist parties still saw increases in their voter base during 2020, primarily when led by figures with a cult of personality (i.e., Viktor Orbán³⁰ and Narendra Modi³¹). Even if right-populism takes a massive hit in the coming years, it is unlikely it will completely disappear like other political trends before it.

A Return to the Left?

If right-populism continues to lose support in post-industrial democracies globally, what will be the next political belief to replace its popularity? Many political scientists believe that global politics may see a return to the “traditional” populism of the left. This shift could be a critical development, as left-populism provides the type of focus on the working class that Mudde finds so integral to global democracies today. I would contend that the far-right’s “anti-establishment” calls for supporting the “little man” are not what makes them so dangerous. Instead, I believe that their poisonous cocktail of xenophobia, racism, and authoritarianism that is spoon-fed to the masses across the globe is what makes them threatening. Left-populism gives an alternative to its right counterpart without spewing hate and ignorance. That is not to say that left-populism is a cure-all; it certainly has its flaws. However, left-populism may be the most straightforward transition to make from right-populism. Often, left-populist parties can poach supporters from the far-right with more inclusive calls for corporate accountability and working-class support. These parties and politicians classified as “left-populists” incorporate a wide area of the political spectrum. I will also refer to them throughout this article as left-wing, leftist, and socialist, despite the “scary” and radical connotation that some of these terms have garnered in many post-industrial democracies in recent years.

Is the Left Doomed to Fail?

However, it is tough to remain optimistic over the prospects of a sustainable global left-populist movement, given its massive failures in recent years. Six years ago, international relations experts predicted that a new left-populist campaign was among us. After the global economic recession, left-wing parties started to pop up across Europe, rapidly gaining clout. Former Communist and current leader of Syriza, Alexis Tsipras became the Prime Minister of Greece, campaigning on rejecting EU calls for austerity measures against the Greeks. Jeremy Corbyn found himself as the leader of the British Labour Party, a party that rather conservative Blairites had primarily dominated throughout the 21st century thus far. Pablo Iglesias Turrión’s Unidas Podemos coalition was influencing Spanish politics in an unprecedented manner. Bernie Sanders was mere votes away from becoming the Democratic nominee to take on Donald Trump for the Presidency. Six years later, all these movements have failed. In the most recent elections, Syriza was dominated by New Democracy, a liberal-conservative party, removing Tsipras from his seat as Prime Minister.³² Corbyn was ousted from his leadership in the Labour Party, replaced by the unremarkable Keir Starmer.³³ Iglesias became the Vice President in an increasingly unpopular and

³⁰ Cervenka, Eve. *Public Opinion in the United States and Hungary*. International ResearchScope Journal, 2020.

³¹ Batra, Jagdish. *The two years of Modi rule*. Jindal Global University, 2021.

³² Rori, Lamprini. *The 2019 Greek Parliamentary Election*. West European Politics, 2020.

³³ Martell, Luke. *Beyond factionalism to unity: Labour under Starmer*. Renewal Journal, 2020.

rather conservative Spanish government led by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, with limited influence on policy after an underwhelming performance in both 2019 elections. He retired from politics completely after the 2021 Madrilenian regional election, facing pressure from a massive outpour of death threats addressed to him and his family for his political beliefs and the fact Podemos failed to gain even 8% of the total vote.³⁴ Sanders once again lost the Democratic nomination in 2020 and (arguably prematurely) endorsed a Biden presidency without securing a single seat for the left in Biden’s cabinet.³⁵ How could this be? Is left-populism doomed to fail?

These movements had one thing in common: they caved into moderate-led demands within their respective electoral systems. The reality may be that these leftist movements cannot survive within any electoral systems without compromising that will eventually prove damning to their cause. Many of these recent movements, especially Tsipras’ Syriza (as well as most truly leftist movements; arguments can be made for many of these movements to be liberal social-democratic merely), take inspiration in their political philosophies and the way that they organize from leftist thinkers such as Marx, Lenin, and Luxemburg. All of them advocated for armed revolution as means of change, as opposed to bourgeois electoralism. Many have brushed these aspects of their theories to the side: calling for revolution will undoubtedly alienate most of the base that has supported these movements thus far.

Additionally, today’s Greece, USA, and Spain’s material conditions are far different from late 20th century Germany and Russia. However, leftist movements trying to accumulate power within any existing political system is always a risky move. Predictions made by revolutionaries such as Mikhail Bakunin about leftist politics dating back to the 1870s have continued to ring true through to the present.

Why the Left Has Been Unable to Change Their Fate

One of these predictions stated that leftists are wrong to think that they can enter the existing capitalist state, transform it from within, and use it as a tool to build towards a leftist society.³⁶ Instead, the capitalist state, an inherently hierarchical institution that perpetuates the power of the economic and political ruling classes, will transform *them*. They will be gradually corrupted by power and will become concerned with expanding and maintaining it through any means (abolishing any electoral system, for example) rather than achieving their original goals. Bakunin predicted that socialist politicians would come to do awful things to preserve and expand their power while thinking they were doing it to advance their original causes. That’s because they’ve come to view themselves and their power as indispensable to their achievements of moving towards a “socialist” society. Look no further than figures like Lenin, Stalin, and Mao to see that this prediction has been fulfilled.

The second prediction sounds even more familiar to today’s left-populists. If left-populists don’t become corrupted by power, they will enter an electoral system to garner as many votes as possible.³⁷ Catering to electoralism inherently means a political shift towards a more “big-tent”

³⁴ Custodi, Jacopo. *The case of Podemos*. Nations and Nationalism, 2021.

³⁵ Watson, Anthony. *A study of the modern progressive movement*. Missouri S&T Press, 2021.

³⁶ Bakunin, Mikhail Aleksandrovich. *Statism and Anarchy (English Translation)*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

platform. It is necessary to gain votes from traditionally left-center or center-right voters to advance any policy. Thus, socialist parties will need to reduce their goal to making minor reforms to existing capitalist society and make alliances with existing bourgeois parties to form coalitions or successfully pass reforms. These compromises will continue to pile up until the original message of left-populism has diluted so much that there becomes no discernable difference between them and the bourgeois parties that they vowed to overthrow.

As touched on previously, Syriza, British Labour, Unidas Podemos, and more could not escape this latter prediction and change their fates. To maintain the amount of popular support needed to keep his premiership, Tsipras caved in to the austerity measures proposed on the Greeks by the European troika that he vowed with never to work. He flirted with militarism in the Aegean Sea and sold Greek port access to China. Even this pivoting wasn't enough to keep him in power, as Syriza lost its Parliamentary majority in 2019. British Labour MPs rallied around removing Corbyn from his leadership position once he was seen as “too radical” and unwilling to compromise with the opposition. This is despite Corbyn refusing to take a strong stance against Brexit. How much does the left need to bow down to their opponents to become “electable”? How much compromise is acceptable before it becomes immoral? Unidas Podemos is essentially a nonstarter in Spanish politics today; their approval ratings continue to fall as they become replaced by the insurgent Vox.

How the Left Could Succeed

Despite all of this, political theorists like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau believe that there is a future for left-populists, specifically if they start by campaigning on issues in an incredibly vague way (intentionally so). Their theories have been studied intensely over the last few years, with other electoral experts tweaking, critiquing, and providing their takes on the matter. Overall, the theory states that if left-populists start their campaigning around an anti-establishment, pro-working-class platform designed to accommodate causes and grievances supported by the masses, they can quickly get an outright majority of votes in most systems. The catch is that they have to not focus on policy-based rhetoric or identify with traditional leftists movements and phrases with poor connotations, such as “socialism.”³⁸ This is because most of the world's voters don't own any capital or private property and are thus members of a class with inherent grievances in the current system that would identify with the rhetorical strategies of this party. However, words like socialism, communism, redistribution, and shifting ownership of the means of production still leave a bad taste in the mouth of many, especially in older generations who lived through or witnessed communism during the mid-20th century.

Additionally, society continues to progress. We are now at a point where most post-industrial democracies tend to have more egalitarian views on society (supporting gay rights, women's rights, etc.). Once a party like this achieves a majority, there isn't a need to make alliances with bourgeois parties. Instead, the left-populist party can start slowly dismantling oppressive mechanisms of capitalism from within. Think of these parties or political figures as “secret socialists.” Mouffe primarily has worked closely with France's Jean Luc Melenchon and other European politicians to tweak this theory and possibly put it into effect.

³⁸ Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and socialist strategy*. Verso Trade Publishing, 2014.

Criticisms of Mouffe and Laclau

While, on paper, I am intrigued by Mouffe and Laclau’s theory, I remain highly skeptical for a variety of reasons:

1. Voters are never 100% rational, and people frequently vote against their interests. Despite living as wage slaves, many working-class members with the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mentality love the current system in which they live and work.
2. People might care more about voting for non-progressive social issues than progressive economic issues.
3. Recent elections across the globe have shown the effect that the late-20th and early-21st century campaign against socialist ideals has had on voters’ opinions.

Even politically uninspiring, moderate politicians within bourgeois political parties such as Joe Biden and Pedro Sánchez have been branded as “unelectable, radical socialists by their opponents and the media. Moreover, if even being called socialist acts as a deterrent to political success, genuine socialists will have a tough time getting elected.

Regardless, even if left-populist politicians gain the amount of support needed to lead individual countries here and there, it is unlikely that left-populism will have the immense effect on global politics that right-populism has. However, if there is a time for left-populists to capitalize and grow their clout, it is now, in an age where right-populism may very well be teetering on the brink of a collapse.

Looking Forward

The next decade will be a crucial one for political scientists and those who study populism to watch. What will the world look like in 2031? Will right-populism continue to grow and dominate, or will it fall into obscurity? Will left-populism take its place, or is it truly doomed to fail? Will neoliberal institutions regain the power they had before populism cast doubt on their efficacy? How will COVID affect how people view our politicians? For now, it is too early to tell. One can only make predictions based on the information we have right now.

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