



A cure for the populist infection? A bigger dose of democracy!

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For long time, political scientists have cultivated the idea that a country which succeeds in achieving a democratic transition, creates stable institutions, provides a robust civil society, and has achieved a certain level of wealth, has a rather low risk of an authoritarian backlash. In other words, a consolidated democratic society would create a sort of political “antibodies” able to impede the slide towards a totalitarian regime. This assumption was corroborated by the very impressive wave of democratization that took place since 1990 and, in fact, both the number and the quality of democratic regimes increased steadily. Such has been the progress of the new democracies that it suggested a sort of democratic triumphal march.

Is this still true? How should we interpret the state of democracy in light of the electoral victories of Recep Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán and, above all, Donald Trump? For the first time over the last quarter of a century, it seems that democratic regimes are no longer consolidating and, above all, that this apparent reversal transpires through procedures of the secular democratic liturgy, namely free elections.



Marine Le Pen. Credit: AFP/Getty

Economic stagnation and increasing income inequality, the rise of unemployment and of poverty have generated discontent and xenophobia. And, as already happened in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, the word “democracy” has for many citizens become an empty box. Where they succeeded in gaining power, populist leaders did so through the mechanism of elections and were keen on presenting themselves as the authentic representatives of the people. Even when populists have not managed to acquire electoral majorities, as Beppe Grillo in Italy, Nigel Farage in the UK, Marine Le Pen in France and Norbert Hofer in Austria, they pretend to be the genuine interpreters of the people’s wishes.

Is there a risk that new elected leaders will substantially attack liberal institutions, as already happened in Europe in the inter-war period? So far, this has occurred 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? Or, to phrase it differently, is there a danger that the power of the majority will be able to attack the rule of law and reduce civil, political and social liberties?

Liberal systems are stable when there is a large majority of citizens that directly support democratic institutions as the only legitimate form of government.[1] But, apparently, this is less true than it used to be. The prolonged economic stagnation faced by most Western democracies since 2007 had the adverse consequence that many material advantages provided by democracy have not been delivered. Income inequality, unemployment and poverty have increased while intergenerational mobility has decreased. It is therefore not surprising that so many citizens disappointed by what has not been delivered by traditional political parties are now supporting new forces. But can this often fully justified discontent undermine civil rights and democratic institutions? We are here wondering if the rule and the power of the people could work against the rule of law up to the point that liberal states would be transformed. It is always easy to unleash the worst attitude of the people against ethnic minorities, migrants, LGBTQ.

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Are the “new entrant” political factions just anti-establishment or more generally anti-democratic? New political leaders manage to acquire electoral support because they use aggressive language, denounce the wrongdoings of the incumbent politicians, and often call for scapegoats in weak and marginal social and ethnic groups. In optimistic scenarios, the new political forces become domesticated and after a while get accustomed to using parliamentary language and strategies; after having succeeded in harnessing the attention of the dissatisfied, they just become fresh contenders in the usual electoral race. But the pessimistic scenario is that they

use their popular support to reduce liberties and modify the institutions that should guarantee democratic checks and balances.

In Turkey, a country that for several years has struggled to consolidate its rather recent democratic structure, the government is re-writing the Constitution and there is a risk that this could be approved by popular referendum. In Russia, Putin is more than ever backed by its citizens. Brexit will also reduce the checks and balances provided by European institutions within British politics. And how the Trump administration will re-design civil and social rights, from abortion to immigrants' entitlements, is still a mystery, even if the first signs are certainly not encouraging.

Two ambitious scholars, Foa and Mounk,[2] have provided some interesting and disconcerting data about citizens' sentiments and perceptions toward democracy. Using data from the World Value Survey (1995-2014), the study shows that citizens in both North America and Western Europe became more critical toward democracy, and that an increased share of them no longer considered democracy as the only legitimate form of government. And to complicate the picture, it seems they began to look favourably upon non-democratic alternatives.



While older generations keep thinking that democracy is essential, younger generations became more indifferent. In Europe, about 52% of citizens among the generation born in the 1930s believed that to live in a democratic country is fundamental, but only about 45% among the ones born in the 1980s shared this view. In the United States, the intergenerational gap is even more accentuated: 72% of citizens born in the 1930s believed democracy is essential, while only around 30% of those born in the 1980s had the same belief. A similar pattern is visible regarding support for alternative, non-democratic forms of government. In both the US and Europe, the percentage of citizens believing that being ruled by the army is a “good” or a “very good” alternative increases, especially among young and rich 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 for democratic institutions, including political parties, parliamentarians and trade unions. The citizens that regard positively a strong leader 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.

These data match rather well several electoral results that came out of the polls, to the extent that they could be used to predict the rise of populist parties and leaders.[3] But do they also indicate that democracy is now at risk even in Western countries? The danger is that the growing inability of Western democracies to respond to citizens’ concerns and guarantee them high levels of wellbeing has had the consequence not only of removing from office traditional political parties, but also in provoking a de-legitimization of the democratic institutions and the democratic system as a whole.

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Populism’s broadening consensus is therefore not only a searching for alternative political factions. It is also the symptom of an anti-democratic infection affecting liberal systems which, if not cured, could end up permanently damaging the democratic system itself. In order to avoid other populist backlashes, and possibly to avoid any non-democratic one, 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 youngest classes. To do so, democratic forces should become more sensitive toward citizens' concerns and aspirations, deepening their inclusion in domestic political and policy processes. Further, democratic forces should deepen their international collaboration, pushing for citizens' inclusion also at the level of international decision-making.

The current crisis in political legitimacy is likely to see the rise of quite divergent new entrants in the political arena: on the one hand, populist leaders who assure voters that they will be able to respond to the needs of the population yet who, once elected, are not particularly keen to validate their policies, and on the other hand, leaders willing to listen to grass-roots movements and to find new forms of participation. 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.



And if the real answer to the sceptics of democracy is to increase democracy? In the United States, the Democratic Party has already learned the lesson that the best candidate against populism is not necessarily the one closer to the establishment. A few leaders, including Benoît Hamon in France, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom and, before them, Alexis Tsipras in Greece, have taken on the challenge of re-thinking both democratic procedures and outcomes. Today, faith in democracy may well be in their hands.

Notes

[1] Juan, J. Linz and Alfred, Stepan. (1996). *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[2] Roberto Stefan, Foa and Yascha, Mounk. (2016). "The democratic disconnect." *Journal of Democracy*,27(3), pp. 5-17.

[3] Roberto Stefan, Foa and Yascha, Mounk. (2017). "The Signs of Deconsolidation." *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), pp. 5-15.

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