


Cambridge Analytica

Photo: Getty Images

We Should Worry About Authoritarian Practices, Not Just Populist Leaders

Series | Populism and Democracy
September 18, 2018 | Volume 11 | Issue 47
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No reader of political commentary in recent years could fail to notice a concern, perhaps even a panic, about a global tide of 'authoritarian populists' that may now be affecting even established democracies. Leaders such as Filipino President Duterte, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, Indian Prime Minister Modi and above all US President Donald Trump are regularly branded 'populist', and the established democracies they head are feared to be in the process of 'democratic backsliding'. These commentators are on to something. Their concerns are widely shared and legitimate. But what is authoritarian populism? I will argue that while there is a burgeoning research agenda on the meaning and origins of populism, political scientists lack the tools to analyze what *authoritarian* populism means, especially in democratic institutional contexts.

As Archibugi and Cellini acknowledge, the meaning of populism continues to be essentially contested. If populism is defined as a strategy for winning and exerting state power that "revolves around personalistic leadership that feeds on quasi-direct links to a loosely organized mass of heterogenous followers," then of course it "inherently stands in tension with democracy."[1] If, on the other hand, populism is a thin ideology that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite',[2] then phenomena such as the Arab revolts, the anti-austerity movements of Southern Europe, and the Occupy movements may also be deemed 'populist', and the notion that populism can also reinvigorate democracy becomes much more plausible.

But the lively academic debate about the meaning of populism and the origins of its most recent manifestations obscures a silence, an absence of academic answers, on the other end of Archibugi and Cellini's question. What does it mean to suggest that populist leaders may be 'authoritarian', and hence dangerous for democracy? Professional political scientists can give little guidance as to whether there can be such a thing as authoritarianism or autocratic leadership in a democratic society, and if so what it would look like.

In the academic literature, 'authoritarian' means two quite different things. In comparative politics, it refers to a regime that does not organize periodic free and fair elections. Authoritarian personality theory tells us about likely correlations between holding what it calls authoritarian values and voting behavior. This is where it connects to the research on the electoral appeal of populism. But neither regime classification nor authoritarian personality theory helps us to comment intelligently on the concern that Duterte, Modi, Orbán or Trump may be 'authoritarian' leaders. Political science has much to say on why leaders like Duterte, Modi, Orbán or Trump get elected, but very little on how to evaluate what they *do* once in office. Nor can political science theories adequately respond to public accusations that the digital spying practices of Cambridge Analytica, or earlier, the US National Security Agency (NSA), were 'authoritarian'.

Yet without such analysis, without really understanding what authoritarianism might look like in a democratic context, we are in the dark as to what the exact problem is, and how this 'authoritarianism' might relate to tendencies such as populism, xenophobia, and nativism. Why have political scientists developed such blinkers, and how can we set about taking them off?

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The failure of political science to offer clear answers to such questions is due to three main problems. First, authoritarianism is in fact a negative category: a shortfall of democracy without a definition of its own. The second problem is an excessive focus on elections, while the apparently natural relationship between voting in elections and actual influence on policy-making is widely doubted by citizens and political scientists alike. Third is an assumption, ignoring the impact of processes of

globalization, that authoritarianism is located only at the level of the (autonomous) nation-state. Instead, we need a definition that is substantive and dynamic rather than negative and systemic; that focuses on the sabotage of accountability rather than the quality of elections alone; and that lends itself to assessing political institutions within, below, or beyond the state. Consequently, a practice-oriented definition, rather than a system-oriented definition, is better suited to understanding authoritarianism today, and to answering urgent questions from society about it.

Practices are, simply put, “patterned actions that are embedded in particular organized contexts.”[3] They are much more than the action or behavior of an individual, but much less than a state structure. A focus on practices allows a shift away from designating only ‘regimes’ as authoritarian, recognizing that in contemporary politics, governance arrangements can be more fluid. In this way, we can begin to imagine (and hence identify defining features of) authoritarian practices occurring in India, the United States, or the EU. At the same time, practices do not narrow the focus to the individual: when considering the possibility of ‘authoritarianness’ in Hungary or the United States, we must not get obsessed with the personalities of Orbán or Trump alone, but equally consider the indispensable ‘doings and sayings’ of clusters of politicians, civil servants, and public figures, at different levels, who are associated with them.



Vice president-elect Mike Pence at Trump Tower in New York, Nov. 28, 2016. (Photo: AP/Evan Vucci)

What, then, are authoritarian practices? There is a risk of unhelpfully stretching the term to encompass everything that has a negative impact on people's lives, including discrimination, violence, corruption, or inequality. At its core, authoritarianism is about the *sabotage of accountability*. I define an authoritarian practice as follows: 'a pattern of actions, embedded in an organized context, that sabotages accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by disabling their access to information and/or disabling their voice'. Such practices are of course rife in authoritarian regimes, but they also occur in real-world democratic systems, and they have no *necessary* connection to populism. I will give two illustrations of authoritarian practices in the context of liberal democratic states, one closely connected to far right populism, but the other one rooted in secretive bureaucracies.

The first example relates to deliberate spreading of disinformation by a power-holder. Politicians spin, twist and deflect from the truth all the time; but a pattern of

disinformation is more than an occasional gloss on the facts. A one-off political lie does not constitute an authoritarian practice, but a pattern of inaccurate information by a number of people in authority on the same issue at different times would qualify. For instance, President Trump's assertion that there was a record attendance at his inauguration should not be considered sustained or consequential enough to count as a pattern. But the allegations that millions of illegal migrants had fraudulently voted in the US presidential elections display a more sustained pattern. These allegations were first aired during the Trump election campaign, and then repeatedly voiced by the President himself, by his spokesman, and by a White House senior adviser. They were then made the subject of an investigation headed by Vice President Mike Pence, which may have had the ultimate intention to discourage and obstruct voters from migrant backgrounds, but that got stranded because of lack of cooperation from most states.

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The second example is that of the US National Security Agency's global digital surveillance program as revealed by the Snowden revelations. For a number of years, the NSA gathered massive amounts of data primarily on non-U.S. citizens, but also from Americans, through various methods including siphoning data from land and undersea cables, ordering companies to share metadata, using malware, and pressuring vendors to install backdoors into their products. The practice was not associated specifically with one administration and was quite transnational in its mode of operation, with the British Government Communications Headquarters and the Australia Signals Directorate being particularly close collaborators. While the invasion of privacy involved was perhaps illiberal more than authoritarian, the practices were surrounded by secrecy and disinformation. Under the Bush Administration, the NSA allegedly bypassed the need for court warrants on a massive scale in the name of fighting Al Qaeda. In early 2013, before the Snowden revelations, National Intelligence Director James Clapper was asked in a congressional hearing for a yes or no answer to the question whether the NSA collected any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans, he said "No, sir, not wittingly."[4] As late as June 2013, President Obama still claimed 'unequivocally' that "if you are a U.S. person, the NSA cannot listen to your

telephone calls, and the NSA cannot target your emails." By August, the president had amended his line to "we don't have a domestic spying program"[5] and promised more transparency in the future. In other words, what we saw from various US officials was a pattern of secrecy and disinformation regarding the NSA's programs, sabotaging accountability to Congress and the public without any discernable connection to populism.

If we want to understand whether populism is dangerous for democracies, we need to spend less time arguing about the populist element and worry more about understanding what is dangerous for democracy. Redefining authoritarianism from a practice perspective allows us to bring back home the knowledge we have developed about how authoritarianism works. Turning our gaze on our own societies, we can come to understand how authoritarian practices—populist or otherwise—unfold and evolve within democracies; we can begin to see in what circumstances they thrive, and how they are best countered.

This article is loosely based on a longer text recently published in *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 3, 515-533.

See also the short video, "Understanding what authoritarianism is." Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, September 12, 2018.

Notes

1. Kurt Weyland, "Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left." *Journal of Democracy* 24(3), 2013, p. 20.

2. Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, p. 23.

3. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, "International practices." *International Theory* 3(1), 2011, p. 5.

4. Spence Ackerman, "Clapper: Obama stands by intelligence chief as criticism mounts." *The Guardian*, 12 June 2013, Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/12/james-clapper-intelligence-chief-criticism

5. Adam Gabbatt, “’Nobody is listening to your calls': Obama's evolution on NSA surveillance.” *The Guardian*, 9 August 2013, Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/09/obama-evolution-nsa-reforms

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governance



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