

“Another problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced. When a talented demagogue addressed the Athenians with moving rhetoric but bad arguments, they were all too ready to be swayed, without ever examining the argument.”

One of the most frequently used words in recent political journalism and political discussions has certainly been ‘populism’. From Syriza coming into power in Greece, over Donald Trump winning the election in the US, to Marine Le Pen running for French president, it becomes clear to political analysts and regular citizens alike that a shift is taking place in the political landscape: complicated and professional-sounding analyses give way to simple soundbites. The narratives of a crooked elite working against the masses gain traction. Whether this is something to be feared and avoided at all costs or welcomed as a rejuvenation of democracy depends on whom you ask.

This is the primary question this essay will seek to analyze and answer. This is to be done firstly by examining what the nature of political speech and persuasion is, how and why it recently shifted in a populist direction, what factors influence the decisions of people as voters and citizens and finally by offering arguments both against and in favor of populism.

Political speech has multiple functions. The first is informative – it serves to communicate the stance of a politician to citizens. It is through speech that most citizens gather information as to what exactly the current government is doing in terms of, say, healthcare or foreign policy, what progress they are making if they are in power (e.g. a statistic on the number of created jobs), or what a party that seeks to gain power would do once in power (raise the taxes on the rich, for example). Closely linked to this is the second, persuasive function. This is particularly important in democracies, but plays a role in authoritarian states as well. Political discourse becomes a battlefield of ideas, with the ultimate goal of every candidate, party or media house to persuade citizens into voting for a particular option. This is done through careful use of rhetoric – pointing out the positive traits of a candidate (one of the most prominent adjectives, and words in general, in the campaign of Hillary Clinton was that she was qualified), offering to fulfill a specific parochial interest (Jeremy Corbyn promising to support the steel industry in parts of England) or portraying the opposition in a negative light. With some limits, this applies to authoritarian states too. Although there is limited or no opportunity to vote, the wish of a ruler to appear legitimate, brave or caring is still relevant – this is obvious in Mao or Stalin carefully building personality cults, that very precisely responded to what the population of their countries needed and wanted to see in its leaders. Closely connected to this role is the third function, that of signaling identity – it appears that a significant predictor of citizens’ voting decisions is whether they feel that a politician is or is not ‘one of them’. Barack Obama won a large share of vote of black people in the US by pointing out his identity and connecting to the struggle against racism black people feel on a daily basis. On the other hand, white politicians used this to stoke racial resentment among conservative white people – claiming that Obama is a Muslim or that his policies increased racial tensions was a message that a lot of them bought into without much thinking. Communicating identity is therefore a powerful political tool, as citizens feel safe when they see that someone similar to them is holding power.

This last aspect of political speech is one of the crucial elements in the change in the political sphere we can witness as of recently. Labeled as populism, it evades a clear definition, but here are some characteristics that are often used to describe it: it builds a narrative that consists of an elite (corrupt politicians, bourgeoisie, the Jews, depending on how left or how right you go) pitted against *the masses* (the working class, white people). Secondly, it simplifies political debate. Complex economic terms are avoided in favor of explanations that can be understood by virtually everyone and short suggestive phrases are used heavily to grab attention – think of *Drain the swamp* used by Donald Trump. Thirdly, it often makes use of nationalism – its goal is to strengthen national cohesion and to

demonize *others* picturing them as a threat or enemy. This is clear in Viktor Orban's repressive policies against refugees and migrants, that come in pair with messages of pride about Hungarian history. Lastly, in addition to populist rhetoric, populist policies also exist, joined with publicized appearances of political figures when opening a school, providing free textbooks or helping the elderly. To continue, it is necessary to clarify that different *populisms* exist, and they can be roughly divided into left-wing populism and right-wing populism, and not all of the characteristics mentioned above may be covered by one or the other.

But what made this shift occur? The answer boils down to *people respond more positively to it*. There may be multiple explanations as to why this is true. Firstly, the fact that people are *too easily influenced* happens due to the failure of political and educational institutions to equip students and adult people with tools for critical thinking (to examine the content of the political argument) and the failure of democratic societies to turn inhabitants of a certain territory fully into citizens of a state. This is evident in the fact that in fledgling democracies, which recently shifted from an authoritarian regimes and where democratic involvement is low, populism is more of a rule than the exception. Secondly, particularly in older democracies such as the US or the UK, political passivity and indifference has taken ground – democracy is not something that has been passionately fought for in recent history (as is the case in Eastern Europe or the Middle East) and political experience teaches citizens that a particular vote has no substantial impact on the state of affairs in a nation. This was exacerbated by the fact that pre-election campaigns used to deal mostly with questions of growth, trade and budget deficits, using complex terms and analyses that did not respond to the crucial aspects of the lived experience of the majority of people – this includes the long-term stagnation of wages of the working and middle class, growing inequality and rising household indebtedness. Having no proper political competence to speak of and seeing that the politics does not respond to their concerns, a mass of citizens turned into a fertile ground for populist politicians to sow seeds and reap benefits.

There are multiple arguments to support the claim that populism is principally wrong and practically harmful.

Firstly, it can be said that it reduces the quality of discourse to an oversimplified level. To say categorically that Mexicans are bad people or that the Chinese are to blame for the plight of American industrial workers lacks further analysis and does not enable further constructive discussion. These kinds of statements are not backed up by data or a result of a rigorous objective investigation, they're a product of a biased belief of a politician. To take the view that a proper democracy is one where informed citizens build consensus on the basis of factually true and verifiable data formed into logically coherent and developed arguments, of which the strongest one is to be accepted, the kind of political culture that consists of these kinds of statements is unacceptable. Furthermore, these statements are often deliberately not true or misleading, existing only with the aim of political gain. With the fundamental aspect of democratic society being that citizens give up some of their freedoms for social stability and progress, along with the obligation to be completely informed on every political issue, when politicians lie to citizens or mislead them, they fail to fulfill their duty as representatives to serve and protect citizens. This puts democratic representation in jeopardy. The idea that the duty of political officials is to achieve general societal good, present all the way back from Plato over Mill to Rawls, is broken when politicians use their platform to acquire personal benefits. In addition, the aforementioned statements (and we can also add to them leftist characterizations of banks as inherently evil) are not formed in a way to enable discussion. As they tend not to include data and are rarely specific enough, it is hard to impossible for the opposing viewpoints to engage with them. When Republicans in America deny climate

change, they are rarely ready to admit that they might be wrong and attempts to provide scientific meteorological research prove futile. This shows not only that these statements are not open for democratic discussion, what is more, this shows that there often exists a clear resistance to any kind of debate on these statements. This leaves people split according to ideological lines each in their own bubble, which ultimately results in the impossibility of consensus and the failure of each political side to develop their positions fully by responding to outside criticism, sometimes by modifying, sometimes by getting rid of particular elements of their ideology. This is the argument Mill uses when defending free speech.

Secondly, populism can be harmful because it stokes the fear of the other. This applies mostly to the right-wing variants of it. People are, due to psychological reasons, prone to look for a particular person or a group of people to blame when faced with problematic situations in life. The fact that people feel that the gains of progress were not distributed equally or justly or that their children are not living in a better world than they had, leads them to believe that there is someone guilty. And while centrist politicians, when they bother, offer complex analyses pointing out that the problem is systemic, that there is no one to blame, it's hard to balance everything out, populist politicians take the spotlight: it is Mexicans stealing jobs or Muslims committing crime that threaten social stability and progress. Coupled with the fact that majority citizens do not fully understand their culture or the factors that lead them to migrate, a combination is created where confusion is channeled into hate. This is problematic because populist rhetoric then normalizes violence and discrimination against minorities. It also distracts people from the fact that they live in an exploitative and an unfair economic system, thus leading them to express their frustration against people who suffer the same fate as they do instead of joining forces. Also, instead of promoting integration and intercultural dialogue (which would for example enable Western people to understand why some Muslim women wear a hijab and then accept it), we are left to live in a society of violence and hate. All of these messages are hard to examine when the highest echelons of political culture do not professionally question and analyze them, and citizens tend to copy the political behavior of the politically powerful. This creates a culture where citizens are not incentivized to examine the content of the argument.

Thirdly, populist rhetoric escalates tensions between different ideological groups. The aforementioned quality of populism is that it is resistant to external engagement. This has another result: both conservatives and liberals form their own echo chambers, permitting only voices that closely follow the ideological dogma to be heard, refusing dissent. This means that each side gets more and more radicalized, as already extreme views become normalized and boring, and more radical views gain attention and acceptance. What this leads to is a state where different ideological groups occupy their own spheres of society, each with its own media houses, celebrities, jokes and forms of behavior and discussion. These spheres connect rarely, if ever, which results in a creation of a society where people living in similar conditions do not understand each other or hate each other. When such polarization occurs, consensus is impossible and risks of social tensions escalating are very high.

However, some may claim that there exist redeeming qualities of populism, which would render it a justified and a beneficial element of politics.

A first argument in favor would claim that populism challenges the established status quo in politics and that this status quo ought to be challenged. We can characterize the current political landscape as Rancière does: as one where matters of politics, especially economy and finance are portrayed as inexplicably complex, requiring highly and specifically trained officials to deal with them. The idea that political representatives serve merely as vehicles of popular will has been replaced with the idea

that politics has become a profession akin to medicine or engineering. Note that what politicians are required to be especially knowledgeable in is economics. A state should be run as a company, because the exact and positivist science of economics offers the best way to govern a nation. This is what technocrats actually believe. However, it can be easily disputed that economics or science can offer us moral judgments. Although it can calculate whether a tax policy will increase or decrease inequality or GDP, it can't calculate whether a fair society is one where everyone has the same amount of resources or one where resources are distributed according to merit, the same as it cannot calculate whether seeking economic growth justifies the environmental damage the *factories of growth* do on the way there. What populism does then is challenge this established mode of thinking, of politicians as the only competent people to decide on the matters of statehood. It opens up discussion on the dogmatic belief that science and economics will save us all, the same way that free thinkers of the Enlightenment challenged the religion and the divine power of God that legitimized absolute monarchies. This refusal to blindly and religiously follow economics as *the way forward* revitalizes debate on fundamental societal questions, such as how to distribute resources and what the role of political representatives is. Pointing out the existence of elites and the subtle ways they keep their power is what is necessary for people to start examining themselves and political arguments they hear or read.

Furthermore, populism brings people into discussion. Those who would see this in a positive light prioritize the quantity of discourse (in the terms of inclusion of a high number of people) over the quality of it. Although the political debate becomes simplified, that is not necessarily something to be feared. The use of sophisticated and fancy words only goes to signal that a politician went to an elite university or reads a lot, rather than being proof of their moral quality. Regardless of the amount of trivia or history or economics one knows, each human being is equipped with an innate ability for moral reasoning, regardless of economic status or education. Therefore, intelligence or knowledgeable-ness does not establish desert over the power to decide what is right and what is not. A society where everyone is engaged is a society where more diverse ideas get heard, where minorities can stand up for themselves and a society where people are likely to become aware of politicians' lies and examine the content of political arguments after a while. This possibility does not even exist in a society of political indifference.

Lastly, the fact that populism heightens the sense of community can also be said to be good. However, it is important to distinguish between outright racism or aggressive patriotism on one side and inclusive sense of community featuring mutual aid, respect and tolerance regardless of differences in identity on the other side. The latter is achieved through populism as follows: modern western capitalistic societies are those where individualism prevails and where human beings are reduced to individual units of consumption. This is a society where interpersonal relationships are reduced to market relations and where the primary aim of an individual is to satisfy his/her own desires and comfort. These desires are not authentic and are implanted by ideology. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this is how capitalist hegemony simultaneously produces oppression and consent to oppression. How populism can counteract this is by shifting the lens from viewing people only as individuals to viewing people as individuals that are a part of a community, and that individual liberation can be achieved only through common mass action. This is where the aspect of narratives about elite vs the masses comes into play. This heightens an individual's sense of belonging, their class consciousness, building a society where rather than being hostile to each other due to differences in identity, people cooperate, realizing that one's own well-being depends on others flourishing at the same time. The ultimate result of this process is that participation in politics stops being merely a means of acquiring individual gain and becomes something that stems from the sense of responsibility for other members of society and for society in general. This is a much more

powerful motivation for people to think more thoroughly and critically about politics, to resist influence of the more powerful and to refute and develop political arguments.

To conclude, what has at various stages of history been called demagoguery and populism needs a clearer and firmer definition. Among elements currently thrown under the same umbrella, some as a result have harmful impacts on society, while some change the way people think about politics. These aspects, of making politics more understandable, including more people in politics and building inclusive communities need to be accepted, while we'd best do away with spreading misinformation, racism and resisting plurality. This is because the latter results in deterioration of both politics and the well-being of citizens, and this is because the former can result in people who examine both the morality within them and political arguments they hear from others, be it friends or politicians. Only then are we approaching what thinkers of democracy envisioned at various times of history of philosophy – inclusive informed democracy.