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The Limitations of the “Populism” Explanation

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“Populism” serves as the default description for the upsurge of contemporary anger among electorates of reasonably stable Western democracies. It is typically defined as a reaction against a perceived elite exploiting “the people” and tends to animate demands for solutions seen as too extreme for the traditional political parties to accommodate. Populism can come from the right or the left; populism on the right often finds an additional target in a minority group of one sort or another (usually ethno-racial) believed to gain from the “rigged” system. Today, the successes of Brexit and President Trump serve as typical cases.

What are the sources of populist explosions? Explanations commonly focus on an economically vulnerable social group, particularly one whose vulnerability has recently worsened. There are concerns, however, that the term is too broad, too vague—at least for the present-day range of phenomena it is meant to describe and explain. Indeed, even when it is not a tool in the hands of tone-deaf elites, the concept can lead us away from understanding what is happening and why—which is a problem for those who would aim to formulate policies that have a chance of pulling popular sentiment away from demagogues, especially on the right. Particularly misleading can be the search for economic causes of populist rage and for cross-national commonalities.

Some have attributed the rise of populism in the West to the pain of the Great Recession—a single cause intended to explain the cross-national outbreak. Others have suggested the real causes originated much earlier, with the rise of income inequality beginning in the early 1970s. Father Coughlin, Joseph McCarthy, and George Wallace are all examples of American populists on the right. Were all three appealing to people who felt vulnerable and fearful about changing economic security? Quite possibly. But whether that factor was the necessary and sufficient source of these men’s popularity would be a harder sell. In any case, the changes in economic security that were operating were not the same in these cases—and certainly none were related to changes in economic security since the 1970s. Quite simply, economic changes are common and they often leave some social groups feeling more insecure than before. Finding the linkage between such groups and support for populism will be useful, but the economic source need not be a great transformation like the Great Recession or the long-term rise in income inequality. And given the prevalence and diversity of the probable economic causes, there is no need to privilege those that operate across national boundaries. Indeed, given the range of common economic vulnerabilities, one might wonder why populist reactions are not even more common.

We also need to look more closely at the noneconomic targets of populist anger: the intermingling of political, ethnic, and cultural themes in a particular outburst of populism. The appeal of George Wallace lay centrally in his fury at three cultural and political themes. Above all was race and racial transformation, especially in the South and the “ghetto riots” in the North, along with resentment of school busing and affirmative action. The second was in the antiwar movement’s “lack of patriotism,” and the third was the sexual mores of supporters of these causes.

Another example: immigration may spur populism in both EU countries and the United States, but the nature of the perceived immigrant threat is not the same on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, anger is overwhelmingly centered on two specific characteristics of the current immigration: undocumented border crossings (mostly by Latinos) and the fear of Islamic terror. The resentment over legal immigration (mostly from the developing world) is far less central, and certainly least discussed. By contrast, illegality is not the primary factor generating rage over immigration in Europe; even if the inability to control borders is a key issue there, it has much less to do with people sneaking across the border unregistered. And the resentment of immigrants among pro-Brexit voters had much to do with legal residents from EU countries, something simply without meaningful parallel in the United States. Seeking the origin of immigrant resentment on both sides of the Atlantic in the worldwide movements of peoples can hardly be the end of a quest for understanding anti-immigrant populism in each place—especially if our goal is to find ways to reduce resentments in particular countries.

Thus, two critical observations about the sources of populism are crucial to keep in mind before proceeding to larger conclusions, at least in the democratic West. First, cultural and political themes are far from marginal in driving cases of surging populism. Second, the shock of rising economic insecurity experienced by various social groups may well be a common source of populism, but such insecurity is too prevalent and too diverse to be tied primarily to giant international economic shifts. Even where international shifts like the Great Recession provide a trigger, the events unfold in national contexts, with their own cultural and political influences. These takeaways are true even in the European Union, whose countries share a modicum of common governance—all the more so across the Atlantic. Policy responses will need to focus on the national level.

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