



*Photo credit: Alessandra Capodacqua*

Populism is one of the most widespread buzzwords in today's political discourse. Commentators have used it to refer to the Brexit campaign as well as to the vociferous anti-establishment parties and movements recently risen in continental Europe, such as the *National Front* in France, the *Freedom Party* in Holland and *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany. Italy has two parties that are often qualified as populist, the *Five Star Movement* and the *Northern League*.

The rise of populism in Western democracies has resulted in a renewed interest in this topic at a scholarly level as well. After many years in which research on populism was confined to disciplinary niches with no integrated theoretical and methodological approaches, a cross-disciplinary literature review explicitly aimed at taking stock of the existing knowledge and opening new pathways for the study of populist politics recently appeared in the Working Papers series of a Harvard University research center (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). At the time of writing this essay, a working paper on "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism" (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) was downloaded over 11,000

times in less than 15 months from the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) website. In 2017, the *Journal of Language and Politics* published a monographic issue on right-wing populism in Europe and the USA (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017).

Surprisingly, the results of the 2017 general elections in Great Britain, Holland and France seem to have reduced the rise of populism in Europe. Many observers have interpreted the defeat of the Conservative Party at the British elections as a rebound of the populist tide which, according to some, was a significant force behind the victory of the “no” in last year’s “Brexit” referendum. Outside the European continent, U.S. President Donald Trump’s faltering popularity suggests that what appeared as the dominating political trend of 2016 may already be on the wane. The performance of *Alternative für Deutschland* at the recent German general elections, however, should prompt us to question this impression and ask ourselves: is populism really overcome? From a political demand point of view, maybe. From a political supply point of view, I think it is not.

To understand why populism may remain among us for a long time yet, we need to look at what brings together the various populist discourses scattered throughout the continent. Cas Mudde, one of the most influential analysts of the subject, defines populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people” (Mudde, 2015). This means that populism does not imply any specific policy orientation, which is why, Mudde explains, politicians can combine it with other ideologies, such as nativism on the right and socialism on the left.

While it is true that populism may have various political declinations, the way it is restructuring democratic debate seems less diverse and may represent its most significant influence on today’s politics. Consistently with their distrust of the elites, populist movements use the most recent communication technologies to bypass the institutional layers that make up a modern democracy. Their ostensive aim is to foster what is sometimes called a bottom-up-or direct-democracy.

The problem with such a conception of democracy, however, is that it overrides the representative and administrative powers that intermediate political decision-making. By doing so, populism overturns the subtle equilibrium between representativeness and competence that democratic societies are built upon and borders on the tyranny of the majority. It is crucial instead that democracy consist of a system of checks and balances and in what follows I would like to explain why through a comparison with science.

Public officials can be chosen according to two principles: representativeness or competence. The primary mission of parliament members is to represent the interests of their constituencies in the lawmaking process. For this reason, they are appointed by *election*. Public officials such as functionaries, judges, or prosecutors, instead, are called to address highly technical issues, which should be handled at least in principle in a non-partisan way. They are therefore generally appointed after an *appraisal*. In a modern democracy, both figures are necessary because the former ensures the general representation of political interests, and the latter makes sure that such interests never transcend the perimeters of the law.

Modern democratic systems are involved, and their functioning may appear sometimes slow, muddled, inadequate to the fast-paced, ever-changing present world. The complexity of the democratic system, however, only reflects the complexity of the modern world, which is the environment in which it has evolved. For this reason, democracy cannot tolerate simplistic approaches to political problems, such as those communicated in “tweets,” or one-line press releases. Democracy, instead, seems designed to address complexity in the same way science does, by being inclusive at first and selective at last.

Modern democracy and science are akin because the intellectual roots of both lie at the juncture between the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of the “public sphere.” Among the features they have in common is the institution that presides over their *modus operandi*, which in democracy goes by the name of “separation of powers” and in science is known as “peer review.”

Peer review is the institution scientists have devised to control the claims made about a topic. It is inclusive because it allows anyone to submit a contribution to the joint endeavor. But it is also selective because it requires every claim to pass an expert examination before the community recognizes it as valuable. Every voice is listened to, but no deliberation is made before a socially controlled and accepted understanding of the issue has been achieved. Representation and competence coexist and cooperate for the common good. Inclusive representation and sound deliberation are the ingredients of both a well-functioning democracy and the advancement of knowledge.

Populism fails to recognize that inclusive representation does not automatically entail sound decision-making. It fails to acknowledge that deliberating a political course of action requires thinking through and expert opinion, which are precisely what democratic institutions are called up to supply.

In a time of unrelenting opinion polls and swinging electoral consensus such as the present one, however, politicians have a strong incentive to pursue short-term goals and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new media to establish a seemingly direct contact with the electoral base. Under such conditions, populism can only persist. Will democracies survive the challenge?

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**A shorter version of this essay in French was submitted as a comment article to the magazine *France Forum*.**

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