

Populism and the Decline of Democracy. How does it happen? Could it happen here?

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In 2006 the Economist's research unit began collecting data on 165 independent states using 60 indicators organized into 5 sets of criteria to rank and categorize how democratic each was. Based on this data they also placed countries into 4 categories. Since that time the average score for almost all countries has declined and the number of full democracies has shrunk.

Table 1.
Democracy Index 2021, by regime type

	No. of countries	% of countries	% of world population
Full democracies	21	12.6	6.4
Flawed democracies	53	31.7	39.3
Hybrid regimes	34	20.4	17.2
Authoritarian regimes	59	35.3	37.1

Note. "World" population refers to the total population of the 167 countries covered by the Index. Since this excludes only micro states, this is nearly equal to the entire estimated world population.

Source: EIU.

Table 2.
Democracy Index 2021

	Overall score	Rank	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties
Full democracy							
Norway	9.75	1	10.00	9.64	10.00	10.00	9.12
New Zealand	9.37	2	10.00	8.93	9.44	8.75	9.71
Finland	9.27	3	10.00	9.29	8.89	8.75	9.41
Sweden	9.26	4	9.58	9.29	8.33	10.00	9.12
Iceland	9.18	5	10.00	8.21	8.89	9.38	9.41
Denmark	9.09	6	10.00	8.93	8.33	9.38	8.82
Ireland	9.00	7	10.00	7.86	8.33	9.38	9.41
Taiwan	8.99	8	10.00	9.64	7.78	8.13	9.41
Australia	8.90	9=	10.00	8.57	7.78	8.75	9.41
Switzerland	8.90	9=	9.58	8.93	7.78	9.38	8.82
Netherlands	8.88	11	9.58	8.93	8.33	8.75	8.82
Canada	8.87	12	10.00	8.21	8.89	8.13	9.12
Uruguay	8.85	13	10.00	8.57	7.22	8.75	9.71
Luxembourg	8.68	14	10.00	8.57	6.67	8.75	9.41
Germany	8.67	15	9.58	8.21	8.33	8.13	9.12
South Korea	8.16	16	9.58	8.57	7.22	7.50	7.94
Japan	8.15	17	9.17	8.57	6.67	8.13	8.24
United Kingdom	8.10	18	9.58	7.50	8.33	6.25	8.82
Mauritius	8.08	19	9.17	7.86	6.11	8.75	8.53
Austria	8.07	20=	9.58	6.79	8.89	6.88	8.24
Costa Rica	8.07	20=	9.58	6.43	7.78	6.88	9.71
Flawed democracy							
France	7.99	22	9.58	7.50	7.78	6.88	8.24
Israel	7.97	23	9.58	7.50	10.00	6.88	5.88
Spain	7.94	24	9.58	7.14	7.22	7.50	8.24
Chile	7.92	25	9.58	7.86	5.56	7.50	9.12
United States of America	7.85	26	9.17	6.43	8.89	6.25	8.53
Estonia	7.84	27	9.58	7.86	6.67	6.88	8.24
Portugal	7.82	28	9.58	7.14	6.67	6.88	8.82

For the first time in 2021, as the *Economist* noted, Canada's score declined.



Comparative Political Scientists have asked

- What accounts for the development of democracies historically? The role of wealth and capitalism.
- What sustains a democracy? Why do some democratic regimes fail and authoritarian ones emerge in their place ?
- In the past 20 years the question of the decline of liberal democracies has been linked to the rise of populism.

When we hear that word what comes to mind?

Elites vs Masses

Referendums

Left/Right

Anti-immigrant

The main studies of populism and its impact on democracies came from European political scientists who observed the rise of what were called “populist” right wing parties. In Latin America there has been more of a focus on left wing parties.

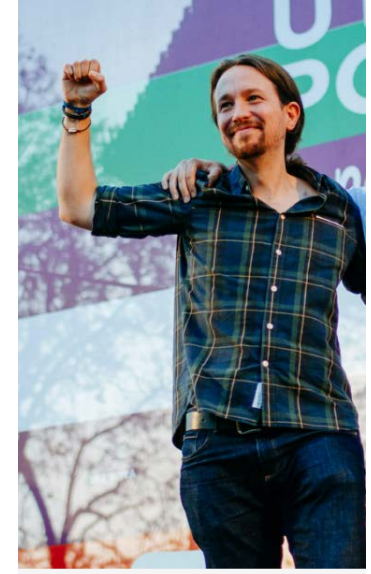
The most widely cited definition is that of Cas Mudde, a Dutch political scientist

He defines it as: An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde [2004](#),). This ideology, that is, a ‘view of how the world is and should be’ is ‘thin-centred’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser [2017](#), 6), which implies that it can be attached to other ideologies such as communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism (Mudde [2004](#), 544).

Populism continued:

- Focuses on the corrupt elite vs the people
- Anti-institutional—claims established institutions are part of the problem and perpetuate unfairness, injustice
- Plebiscitary (Diamond) encourages mass mobilization
- Establishes a direct relationship between the leader and the people (circumventing for example representative democracy)
- Seeks to create a strong, elected government that can overcome the establishment and overturn the status quo.

Debates: right wing—exclusionary / left wing-- inclusionary
good /bad
impact on democracy--- a corrective to or
undermining of ?



What gave rise to it?

- Globalization
- The financial crisis of 2008 and its longer-lingering effects including the downward pressure on real incomes of the working and middle classes. Imposition of harsh austerity measures on those not responsible for the crisis.
- Social media and its corporate business model which has provided a fertile milieu and set of tools for polarizing democratic publics, raising doubts about democracy and mobilizing disaffected citizens into new, populist, anti-establishment movements and appeals.
- Rising income inequality and the concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands
- Diffusion of populism from one regime to another. (See above Orban at CPAC) A recent study on Covid 19 and misinformation found that the US was a major source of conspiracy theories about the “elites” that were widely disseminated globally.

The populist recipe for undermining democracy (loosely based on Diamond, 2017)

1. Begin to demonize the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic
2. Undermine institutions, particularly the independence of the courts. Marginalize or limit the role of elected legislative bodies.
3. Control elements of civil society—particularly NGOs and universities—by casting them as politically partisan and anti-government. Make professors afraid to criticize the government, and student protest groups liable to prosecution. Create a fake civil society that is loyal to the authoritarian populist leader and party.
4. Undermine the independence of the media, denouncing them as partisan, unpatriotic, mobilizing an intense populist following against independent, professional news media.
5. Intimidate and/or co-opt business

6. Use stricter control of the Internet or other means to have a chilling effect on free speech. This can include weaponizing social media to spread disinformation (see Maria Rassa's book on the role of Facebook and the Duterte government)

7. Gain control over electoral administration to further tilt the electoral playing field and/or undermine confidence in the electoral process.



Fair Elections Act? 2014

Social Media: A gift to populist leaders

- They can tell their story directly. They can circumvent traditional news organizations and journalistic gatekeepers.
- They are not bound by the ethics and standards of traditional media. They can say what they want, unfiltered and they do.
- Social media is relatively inexpensive to use. The message can move quickly and be vastly amplified. What goes out on social media often finds its way into traditional media outlets, an echo effect.
- Leaders can marshal an online army of anonymous followers who can intimidate, harass and threaten those who oppose them with relative impunity.

Could it happen here? Yes

In a *Globe and Mail* editorial on Dec 3 entitled **Some of Canada's Premiers appear to be losing their minds**, a direct link is made to populism.

“What the premiers of Alberta, Ontario and Quebec share is their predilection for populism. All three focus on a base of voters that they portray as the victim of an uncaring enemy. In Quebec, it's the federal government and immigrants that are the peril. In Ontario, it's “elites” in big cities. In Alberta, it's Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Their populism is exacerbated by Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system, which allows parties to target voters in particular ridings, often divided along rural-urban lines, to win enough seats to control a legislature with as little as a third of the popular vote. Carving up voters this way is something all parties at all levels do.

But the blame for the worst consequences of the rise in polarization in Canada falls on premiers who, in the name of their allegedly aggrieved voters, are quick to undermine democratic voting principles, pass incoherent laws, break key promises and gorge on the notwithstanding clause.”

Now some good news– backlash and resistance

- Supreme or Constitutional Courts can sometimes put a stop to the erosion.
- Counter-mobilizations of resistance can be effective e.g. Brazil /Poland

In the case of Alberta widespread condemnation of aspects of Bill 1 across the political spectrum are having an impact.

On Dec 3 Alberta's premier announced changes to bill 1 indicating it was "never supposed to give cabinet such sweeping authority,"

Then how did it happen?

Making a mistake or testing the waters?



Protests against Bolsonaro on September 7, 2021; photo courtesy of Tetizeraz



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