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Why Democracies Give Rise to Populist Leaders?

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Abstract

Twenty-first century has seen a rise of populism resulting into downgrading the quality of democracies in several states including the United States, Britain, Italy, Brazil, South Africa, India, Turkey, the Philippines, and Pakistan. States' transformation from authoritarianism to liberal democracies passing through the phase of electoral democracy is usually achieved through processes involving preventing democratic breakdown, preventing democratic erosion, and completing democracy. In recent years, liberal democracies are facing a challenge of populism from within which has boosted the process of de-democratisation or democratic backsliding. Why are democracies giving rise to populist leadership at the first place? While applying qualitative research methods, this study explores populism in the historical context, particularly in the USA. It hypothesizes that the interplay between demand and supply of populist leaders and inherent weaknesses in democracy as an institution are giving rise to populism as a phenomenon. This introduction of binaries in politics – us versus them, common man versus elite, nationalist versus anti-nationalist, citizens versus outsiders, patriots versus traitors, white Christians versus coloured populations – led to the rise of populist leaders in the United States.

Key Words: De-democratisation, Populism, Democratic Backsliding, Democratic erosion

Introduction

Populism, as a political and potent force, has become part of the contemporary politics and is on the perpetual rise in almost every region of the world. It is a political force that divides society into two groups: a good group and bad group (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). It is a ‘thin layered ideology’ that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps – the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Leaders of populist movement accentuate these divisions on several bases, depending upon the context and circumstances. Populism has different ideological foundations and is not independent of the surrounding circumstances. Depending upon political structures, it manifests itself differently and can be defined in many ways. Mudde and Kaltwasser state that scholars do not agree on one definition, but all definitions of populism have general agreement on some aspects: appeal to ‘people’ and denunciation or criticism of ‘the elite’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populists argue that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Mudde considered populism as “a political narrative that antagonizes the people and the corrupt elite, and that aims for policies that reflect the will and are understood by the people” (Mudde, 2004). It is a belief that the will of the ordinary people should have credence over that of the established elite (‘A Brief History of Populism’, 2015).

Populist forces rarely work independently and are attached with at least one of the host ideologies – those can be right wing, left wing, nationalist, or even anti-nationalist, evangelical or anti-evangelical. It may affect democracy positively by leading to democratic consolidation – especially when populist movement intends to overthrow an authoritarian rule – or negatively when it leads to de-democratisation or democratic backsliding. Bermeo notes six forms of trends and challenges attached with democratic backsliding: ‘coup d’état,’ when government is ousted by military or other state elite; ‘executive coup,’ which is associated with dictatorships; ‘election day fraud’ when people are kept from voting a certain person in one way or other; ‘promissory coups,’ which happen against existing government with the promise of new election; ‘executive aggrandizement’ which is a slow process and occurs by weakening checks on the power of executive; and finally ‘manipulating elections strategically’ (Bermeo, 2016).

Populism is challenging almost every political system, specifically democracy. The last century saw forces of democracy and liberalism compete with those of communism, twenty-first century is seeing the forces of democracy clash with those of populism. Moreover, this challenge of populism is emerging from within the democratic system leading to the question that why democracy gives rise to populist leadership? This study further raises questions about inherent flaws of the democratic system and its ability to deal with populist challenges. It hypothesizes that absence of institutional barriers, in the way of radical or populist leaders, lead to their rise. The study is conducted using Ruth Wodak’s conceptual framework of demand and supply that she elaborated in her book *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Wodak, 2015). In Mathematics or Economics commodities are being demanded and supplied

and Wodak in her political explanation used populism as a product or commodity. Demand side model explains that in post-industrialized economy working class feels marginalized and considers itself ‘modernization losers’ (Wodak, 2015). This feeling leads to the rejection of older political parties and creates space for the populist parties. On the other hand, supply side explanatory model emphasises the strategic means used by populist leaders and parties in order to appeal to the electorates. Populism has three important components: “(1) the claim to be on the side of the people against the elite – which we label ‘supply rhetoric;’ (2) the ‘fears or enthusiasms’ of people – the demand conditions to which the populists pander; and (3) the disregard for longer-term consequences” (Guiso, Herrera, & Morelli, 2017, p. 3).

History of Populism in the Western World:

The process of democratic consolidation in the United States – that spanned over its first two and half decades – was interrupted during the presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson against John Quincy Adams. Andrew Jackson became seventh president of the United States in 1829. He was named the ‘king mob’ because of his populist tendencies – support for the ‘common man’ and oppose corrupt ‘aristocratic elite’ (Ellington, 2017). He was anti-establishment, introduced white supremacist nationalism in the US, and talked about people’s rights. In his campaign, he clearly divided the society into two groups: the establishment, and people. This introduction of binaries in politics – us versus them, common man versus elite, nationalist versus anti-nationalist, citizens versus outsiders, patriots versus traitors, white Christians versus coloured immigrants and indigenous populations – gave a new touch to the US politics. Since then, several populist political parties and movements such as the American Party, the Greenback Party, the Populist Party, Conservative Populism, and leaders such as Huey Long, who was a Governor of Louisiana and a US Senator was one of the most ostentatious figures in the American politics. He raised the slogan of ‘every man a king’ and called himself a friend of the working men. (Long, 1996). White notes that ‘From the moment he took office as governor in 1928 to the day an assassin’s bullet cut him down in 1935, Huey Long wielded all but dictatorial control over the state of Louisiana. A man of shameless ambition and ruthless vindictiveness, Long orchestrated elections, hired and fired thousands at will, and deployed the state militia as his personal police force. And yet, paradoxically, as governor and later as senator, Long did more good for the state’s poor and uneducated than any politician before or since’ (White Jr, 2006). Father Coughlin, and George Wallace are other examples of populists who have influenced American political scenery (Editor, 2019). In the twenty-first century movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party, and leaders such as Bernie Sanders used popular rhetoric to inflame cleavages in the society (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021). Finally, President Trump using the same populist sentiments won the 2016 presidential elections.

Furthermore, with the founding of Front National - FN (renamed in 2018 as Rassemblement national (RN) – National Rally) in 1972, populist tendencies in Europe started to come on surface. FN was established against ‘the Gang of Four,’ the four established political parties of France

(Fysh & Wolfreys, 2003, pp. 42–59). RN is an anti-immigrant right-wing nationalist political party (RN, 2020). Similarly, Forza Italia (FI) and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) were founded as a result of the economic grievances in those states. Some other political parties also became part of European populist movement such as The Civic Forum (OF) in Czechoslovakia, Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, Vox in Spain, and Alternative for Democracy (AfD) in Germany ('Europe and Right-Wing Nationalism', 2019; Wike et al., 2019). Populism remained one of the most important trends of the European politics in the twenty-first century. A research by The Guardian found that number of Europeans voting for populist parties in national elections has increased from 7% to 25 % in the last two decades (Henley, 2018). 2014 European Parliament elections saw a 'big bang' with almost a quarter of the seats going to the populist political parties (Martín-Cubas et al., 2019). So, the twenty-first century is seeing populists changing the political landscape of most of the Europe and their effect is felt in almost every liberal democracy. This study mostly deals with the United States and tries to find answer to the question that how President Trump being a populist leader rose to pre-eminence?

Demand for Populism (Demand side Analysis)

Political structure or political system act like a market. Demand leads to production of different commodities to be sold in this market. For instance, the world before COVID-19 was having a lesser demand for masks and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). With the spread of Covid-19 to the global level, states and World Health Organisations (WHO) issued special directives for general public to wear a mask, that resulted in its enhanced demand and so the production. So, there was an impetus or trigger, that forced actors who are involved to devise strategies or launch campaigns about the safety, that ultimately enhanced demand of a particular commodity in the market. This is the principle of demand on which market works. Scholars consider that demands of people shape the rhetoric and practice of political parties, interest groups, and even governments. Political parties while addressing the demands of the population try to increase their popularity and gain audience (Guiso, Herrera, & Morelli, 2017). For instance, enhanced demand for liberal freedoms may lead to competition between political leaders and parties about liberal rhetoric. Every political party will try to outdo the other in its liberal credentials. Similarly, if a nation values heightened nationalist sentiment then there will be more and more nationalist parties in order to address the demand. Thus, in politics demand side works as a major factor that influences the narrative of political parties. Trigger or driver for the demand of populist political parties may range from legal or illegal migrants, heightened crime rate, xenophobia, economic disparities, increased unemployment, ethno-lingual or ethno-political cleavages within society, and the like. Actors which may involve populist leaders or populist political parties may amplify those subjective or objective cleavages and offer a remedy in the form of vilification of the established elite, political parties, or a single or set of groups, thus amplifying the sense of 'us versus them' (Fortunato, 2019). For a populist leader, it is necessary for to have an audience, that supports and demands his/her narrative. If there is no audience for a

populist narrative, then there are very less chances of a strong populist party or a group to thrive in a state. Demand side claims that the voters or audience abstain from voting in the absence of a populist political party and come out to vote for the populist political party that addresses their demands (Guiso, Herrera, Morelli, et al., 2017b) Guiso et al note, “First, we study the demand for populism: we analyze the drivers of the populist vote using individual level data from multiple waves of surveys in Europe. Individual voting preferences are influenced directly by different measures of economic insecurity and by the decline in trust in traditional parties. However, economic shocks that undermine voters' security and trust in parties also discourage voter turnout, thus mitigating the estimated demand of populism when ignoring this turnout selection. Economic insecurity affects intentions to vote for populist parties and turnout incentives also indirectly because it causes trust in parties to fall. Second, we study the supply side: we find that populist parties are more likely to appear when the drivers of demand for populism accumulate, and more so in countries with weak checks and balances and with higher political fragmentation. The non-populist parties' policy response is to reduce the distance of their platform from that of new populist entrants, thereby magnifying the aggregate supply of populist policies” (Guiso, Herrera, Morelli, et al., 2017a).

Absent the audience, demand for populism vanishes. Populism did not exist in the United throughout the history. There have been intermittent interludes when demand for the populist leaders vanishes. Supporters of the demand side claim that populist parties are dependent on the trigger situations. For example, economic insecurities create mistrust with the existing political structure and are considered as one of the biggest drivers for the populist demand (Guiso et al., 2020). Guiso et al note that “Populism does not have a cultural cause, but rather an economic insecurity cause, with an important and traceable cultural channel (all italics original)” (Guiso, Herrera, & Morelli, 2017, p. 41).

Demand side shapes the rise or fall of populist parties. But when we study, there is significant population of the world that keeps and follows populist narrative irrespective of date and time. they consider themselves being abandoned, exploited, and manipulated by the corrupt leaders (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The corrupt leaders or established elite are not part of them, rather they see themselves separate from the established elite. These sentiments exist in majority of the world population. But they materialise it in the form of establishing political parties or a movement under certain circumstances which include transition in socioeconomic and socio-political patterns and corruption charges against the established elite, etc (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Once any of the above-mentioned event starts to happen, the sentiments of people are heated and the demand for populism starts to manifest itself in such circumstances. When fertile ground is established, the populist movements, populist parties, or populist leadership start rising. They fill the vacuum which is created by the recent transition in the established patterns. So, in this way

demand side creates an environment for populist tendencies to grow. Eventually, populist tendencies in the form of political parties, or movements grow in the society.

In the USA, such pattern is observed when demand side led to the rise of a populist leader. President Donald Trump did not become the American president out of the blue. It was neither magic nor some miracle of any sort. Political landscape of the USA then led to the rise of a populist leader who ultimately became the US president (Mirza, Babar, et al., 2021). In the 21st century, two major populist movements are witnessed in the USA. These movements include the “Occupy Wall Street”, and “Tea Party movement” (Levitin, 2021; Peters, 2019). Both these movements rose in the post Great Recession era, which clearly suggests the cause behind the rise of these movements. Due to the Great Recession, American economy suffered a lot. Job market started shrinking and thousands of people lost their jobs. In short, people at the grassroots level were affected by this recession, thus it gave rise to sentiments of insecurity and agitation against the established elite. These circumstances made a fertile ground for populist rise, eventually leading to the rise of these movements and election of Donald Trump (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021). Due to the weak organization, these movements started fading away, but their rhetoric is still relevant, thus making Bernie Sanders a senator in 2016 with his slogan of 1% against 99% (Stewart, 2019), and made Donald Trump president with his slogan of “Make America Great Again” (Mirza, Babar, et al., 2021).

Here one thing must be understood that there are different factors which make a ground fertile for populist rise in a state and it is not always only economy. For example, in Finland the average voter was not hard hit by the Great Recession, there was slight increase in unemployment and sovereign debt. So, it would be exaggeration to say that people suffered in Finland the way they suffered in the USA but despite that, in the 2011 elections of the state populist party obtained 19% of the votes (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist movements have different host ideologies in different states. Populist parties can also have different host ideology in the same state, under different circumstances. That is why it is called a “thin-centered” ideology by Cas Mudde (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Supply for Populism (Supply Side Analysis)

Once people (demand side) has shown interest for populist narratives, populist actors start playing their role in political arena. These populist groups adapt the host ideology that aligns with the narrative of populism among people. Thus, there are left- and right-wing populist parties, each complying with the demands of people in specific space and time. Once popular narrative is recognized by populist tendencies, they try to exaggerate the reality of those narratives for masses. They use the grievances of people in their own favour by asserting that they are addressing the issue of people, unlike the establishment or the mainstream political parties. Mudde and Kaltwasser note, “Under certain circumstances, the sovereign people can feel that they are not being (well) represented by the elites in power, and, accordingly, they will criticize—or even rebel against—the political establishment. This could set the stage for a populist struggle “to give

government back to the people” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist groups consciously make division within the society and try to give the impression that its “us, the good people” vs. “them, the bad people or the corrupt elite” (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Such narratives when find acceptance among masses, lead to the increase in vote bank of populist political actors.

Voters or masses (majority of them, if not all) always have these sentiments of being used, corrupted, and excluded. Mudde and Kaltwasser note, “Another key factor in the activation of populist attitudes is the general feeling that the political system is unresponsive. When citizens feel that the political parties and governments do not listen to them and ignore their demands, the possibility grows that populism becomes active, at least within the constituencies that feel abandoned by the establishment” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). These sentiments intensify when a situation of crisis or national emergency comes in. These first two steps are very important for the populist parties. As, they work by manipulating and exploiting the grievances of people against the established elite. So, first two are major ingredients for populist rise. If these two factors are not there then populist parties have to create them, which is a long process and still needs some igniting point at least. Otherwise, rise of populist leadership becomes very challenging (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021).

In the former case, when first two steps are fulfilled, that is, there are grievances among masses, and due to some pressing reason, these grievances are intensified, then third and the last step that facilitates the rise of populist leadership begins. It is the role of supplier side once the demand side has shown its stance. Now in such a state, populist forces start mobilizing. If grievances of people are relevant to economy, then there is possibility of the rise of the left-wing populist parties, but at times right-wing populism also rises, while blaming immigrants and other groups in a state – xenophobic populist narratives is one example of it. The case of Donald Trump is a textbook example of right-wing populist rise (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021). Demand and supply sides work hand in hand with each other, to facilitate the rise of populist leadership. But it is not always the supply side that is the product of demand side. There are grievances among masses for the issues which remain unaddressed by the establishment. Populists take advantage of it and start talking about those issues while showing to masses that establishment is not prioritizing their problems, instead they are busy in corruption (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Another trick is to create the sense of crisis in the minds of people, by intensifying the insecurities of people. Consciously or unconsciously, media helps these populist leaders in spreading their message to the masses. Thus, by using different tools, populist leaders increase their vote bank.

Historically, in the US history of populism, it was Andrew Jackson who applied this tactic to win the elections. He influenced the populist narratives at that time. During his political campaign for 1828 elections, he used worsening economic conditions for creating sense of crisis in the minds of people. Moreover, he introduced nationalism of exclusive nature, which is also called Jacksonian nationalism. His populist narrative gained recognition among masses, while leading

to the victory in 1828 elections against president John Quincy Adams who was presented as a corrupt and establishment candidate – part of the corrupt ‘them’ (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021). So, at times supply side influences the demand side.

Demand and Supply side theory highlights one fact, that be it demand side influencing the supply side or otherwise, populists acknowledge the importance of voters. They opt for democratic means, to come into power, which include campaign, propaganda, participation in elections, and the like. Though populists use democratic approach to be in power, but once they are in power, they work in anti- democratic ways while working on policies of exclusive nature, disrespecting constitution, and division of power. In bringing them to this position, demand and supply side have major role to play. They collectively help in the rise of populist leadership.

Institutional weaknesses:

Demand and Supply side collectively lead to the rise of populist leadership. 21st century populism has witnessed rise of populism everywhere, but it is more conspicuous in the democratic states, as compared with the authoritarian states. Hence one can ask why do we see the rise of populist leadership in democracies?

Democracy may not be the best political system, but it is one of the best available options. Churchill said that “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....’ (The Worst Form of Government - International Churchill Society, n.d.). Therefore, democracy has been presented with different challenges from time to time. In contemporary times, rise of populism is the challenge faced by liberal democracies. This rise of populism is basically the consequence of weakness which are embedded in liberal democracy. For instance, absence of institutional barrier to stop radical populist forces is one major weakness. As hypothesised that it is the institutional weakness in democracy which fails to stop populism from growing once the preliminary requirements are fulfilled.

This further lead to the question that what are these institutional weaknesses which cause the rise of populism in a democracy. Democratic institutions are pluralistic in nature. In simple words, democratic institutions allow multiparty system, which leads to the creation of different parties with their different agenda. In such political system, populist forces start growing under favourable circumstances. They do their campaign in a democratic way, contest in elections, gain vote, and become part of system. At times, it is not a party, it can be an individual who may run election campaign on populist narrative, like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the USA. But democracy being pluralistic in nature, does not have any mechanism to stop them. Thus, in such situations pluralism becomes liability for democracy, thus suggesting it as a weakness of democracy in such situations, instead of a strength.

Further, in a democracy there are no institutional barriers which can curb the rise of populism. For instance, in the USA, during his campaign, former president Donald Trump signalled towards his exclusive nationalism, building border wall, and controversial views about immigrant issues. Despite this, democratic institutions of flagbearer state of liberal democracy could not stop a populist leader from rising and becoming President of the state. So, absence of institution to curtail the rise of populist leader is a weakness of democracy. This weakness favours the populist leader.

In democracies like the USA, first populist leaders or populist movements find or create suitable circumstances for themselves, either through bottom to top (demand leading to supply), or top to bottom (supply leading to demand) approach. Once they are mobilized, then they start spreading their roots. For instance, economic recession of 2008 provided a reason to people for mobilizing against established elite. Brian et al; notes that “The resulting financial carnage was exemplified by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, even though the crisis had been brewing for a long time before then. What started as a financial crisis quickly made its way into the “real economy”, triggering an unprecedented collapse in world trade, widespread job losses and the first contraction in the global economy since the Second World War. No wonder some people called it “Great Recession” (Brian & Patrick, 2010). Populist used this recession as an opportunity and responded to it in the form of “Tea Part Movement” and “Occupy Wall Street”. Cas Mudde says that these movements could not survive due to weak leadership and internal conflicts. But the rhetoric they generated was furthered by Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). So, once populist actors managed to gain popularity among masses, democracy was not a challenge to them. Instead, democracy facilitated them in campaigning and presenting their views to people. Consequently, populist actors attracted voters and held important seats in the state.

The only challenge populist tendencies face in a democratic state, and specifically in the USA is opposition from other parties. Thus, when democratic institution allows populists to be part of system, then the real test of democracy begins, and here too institutions tremble in protecting democracy. That is the reason behind the democratic backsliding in the 21st century, as democratic institutions could not protect themselves from populist leaders.

Democracy survive through constitution, mutual toleration, and forbearance, which means that politicians should restrain the use of their institutional prerogative (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Later two (mutual toleration and forbearance) are called democratic norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). American democracy survived and thrived due to constitution, but also due to these two democratic norms. Since norms are not like rules or laws, so implementation of them completely depends on the mutual understanding of institutions and the main actors. So, if a populist actor chooses not to abide by these norms, democratic institutions fail to curtail the abuse of power. Complete reliability, thus, on the democratic norms instead of any strong institutional mechanism facilitate the rise of populist leadership.

Under the populist leader in democracies, these two democratic norms are not implemented or followed. For instance, Andrew Jackson did not practice forbearance and used veto against the Congress decisions more than once, while empowering the executive at the expense of legislature (III et al., 2020). Similarly, President Donald Trump also followed the same pattern. He went against the decision of Congress over the budgeting of wall and spending on the construction of wall from military budget (Bauer & Becker, 2020). Despite criticism of this approach, President Trump continued to pursue his agenda. He not only ignored democratic norms but also constitution, and democratic institutions (congress and judiciary) after using their possible options, witnessed the abuse of power and rise of a populist leader.

Once ground is fertile for a populist actor to spread its roots in a democracy, and the populist movement is mobilized under strong leadership or a well-organized party, it offers a tough competition to democracy. Once populist movement succeeds in gathering vote bank, democratic institutions offer no barrier to it, except for opposition from other political parties, which any political party faces from its opposition. Eventually, when a populist leader becomes part of system or holds the presidential or prime ministerial seat, here again democratic institutions fail as they rely on mercy of the one in power and democratic norms. This leads to the validation of hypothesis that “the weaknesses which are embedded in the liberal democracy allow the weak institutions to exist, which in return facilitate the rise of populist leadership”.

Conclusion:

Populism is an old ideology. Being thin centered it has manifested itself in different forms. At times it exists as right-wing ideology and others a left-wing ideology. In the United States, its history dates back to the 19th century (Mirza, Ali, et al., 2021). Unlike other different ideologies, history of populism has never been linear. There have been times in history when populism completely ceased to exist or there was no active populist movement. And then there have been times when populist leaders dominated the scenery of the not only the domestic but also the international politics. This trajectory of populism suggests that populism rises under certain circumstances which are explained by both demand side and supply side models. Once factors facilitating populist rise emerge, populist movement catalyses. Though several authoritarian rulers can adopt populist rhetoric in order to strengthen their rule, yet these are mostly the democracies from where populist leaders may emerge. In democracies, such movements are not crushed or stopped since there is no institutional structure for such situations. Thus, the absence of institutional barriers causes the rise of populism in democracies. In order to curtail the populist challenge, democracies and particularly liberal democracies need to revisit their institutional structures and instead of mere reliability on democratic norms, there has to be formal institutional setup. Through such measures this challenge of populist rise in democracies can be handled and also be avoided in future.

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