

Combating Populism

A Toolkit for Liberal Democratic Actors

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The Transatlantic Security Program (TSP) offers comprehensive analysis and concrete recommendations to help U.S. and European policymakers navigate changing relationships and shifting contexts to improve outcomes. Key among the challenges that the United States and Europe face are growing threats to democracy, stemming both from increasingly assertive authoritarian powers and from forces within liberal democratic societies themselves. TSP analyzes threats to European democracy and institutions, including populism and technological change. This work aims to identify policies and approaches that U.S. and European officials, the media, and civil society actors can use to renew and safeguard the democratic foundations that underpin U.S. and European cohesion, influence, and security.

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Executive Summary

The rise of populism in Europe and the United States is well documented. Although studies may disagree about the relative importance of populism's drivers, there is broad consensus that rising inequality, declining bonds to established traditional parties, increasing salience of identity politics, and economic grievance have played a role in fueling populism's rise. Although populism is a symptom of democracy's larger problems, the strategies and tactics populist parties and leaders use also provide their own, direct threat to liberal democracy. Many of the tactics that populist leaders use weaken democratic institutions and constraints on executive power. Populism is also detrimental to democracy because it exacerbates political polarization, which makes it hard for democracy to effectively function. As societies grow more polarized, people become willing to tolerate abuses of power and sacrifice democratic principles if doing so advances their side's interests and keeps the other side out of power.¹ The polarization that populism fuels, in other words, increases the risk of democratic decline.

This report offers recommendations for combating populism. It translates key findings from cutting-edge academic research in the political science, political psychology, sociology, and communications disciplines into practical, evidence-based recommendations. The first set of recommendations is intended to equip political parties, politicians, and candidates to create a political context more conducive to the success of liberal democratic actors. Research shows that context matters—although many people may hold populist attitudes, these attitudes must be activated by the political context to translate into votes for populist leaders.

To push back against populism, liberal democratic actors should avoid language and framing that link identity and partisanship, including by focusing on and owning their issue positions, and fostering interaction between groups at the local level. Liberal democratic actors must also pursue strategies to reduce political polarization, including by shaping people's perception of norms and avoiding an overdependence on efforts that overly rely on "educating" the other side. Research shows, for example, that efforts to simply expose people to "the facts" or to break down echo chambers by exposing them to views that contradict their pre-existing beliefs are ineffective and can accentuate polarization.²

The second set of recommendations pertains to political parties and identifies approaches that party operatives can implement to more effectively compete and engage with populist parties. Here parties should seek to re-energize grassroots mobilization to disrupt populist efforts to exploit the disconnect between citizens and parties. Party leaders should also seek to integrate platform policies into a larger story about society. Through explanation, political parties can make people less vulnerable to populist promises to preserve the status quo and more willing to support policy change. Perhaps most controversially, the report highlights research suggesting that allowing far-right populist parties to compete in the political system while excluding their illiberal ideas can succeed in mitigating the risks that right-wing populist parties pose to liberal democracy.

Finally, the report identifies a number of communications strategies to help liberal democratic actors better articulate their ideas, appeal to voters, and disrupt populist attitudes. The way that liberal democratic actors talk about contemporary challenges—the words they use and the frames they employ—will play an important role in countering illiberal populism and renewing liberal democracy. Liberal democratic actors should seek to create unifying and aspirational narratives, use blame attributions sparingly, be intentional about myth-busting, highlight solutions and emphasize their efficacy, and avoid adopting the language of right-wing populists.

It is important to recognize that the long-term impact of this report's recommendations will be limited if the deeper sources of discontent with democracy—issues as inequality, immigration, voter suppression, and

the role of money in politics—go unaddressed. The report’s recommendations, however, can disrupt illiberal actors’ ability to activate these grievances and translate them into votes. In this way, the report’s recommendations seek to help neutralize the factors that are benefiting populist forces and give liberal democratic parties the opportunity to recapture the political momentum.

Introduction

Liberal democracies face a number of challenges from within their own political systems. Key among these challenges are high levels of inequality and growing unease with globalization, immigration, and the elite, which have allowed populism to gain traction. Although populism is a symptom of democracy's larger problems, the strategies and tactics populist parties and leaders use also provide their own, direct threat to liberal democracy.

Populism is not inherently anti-democratic. It can give voice to popular grievances and advocate for issues that large portions of the population care about, but that governments, mainstream parties, and media have ignored.³ But populism is illiberal. Populists look to place the needs of the majority ahead of individual liberties and needs.⁴ This is especially true of right-wing populism, which tends to advocate policies that protect the "in group" at the expense of groups such as immigrants and ethnic minorities. Moreover, once in power, populists use many tactics to implement their agendas that undermine democracy. Because they purport to represent the will of the people, populists claim a mandate to dismantle the institutions that might hinder their ability to deliver on the "popular will."⁵ Populist-fueled democratic decline in countries such as Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary illustrate the threat that populism poses to liberal democracy.

Populism also is detrimental to democracy because it fuels political polarization, which makes it hard for democracy to effectively function. Populists force extreme and exclusionary ideas onto the political agenda. These actors push public discourse out to the ends of the political spectrum and undermine the consensus-building political culture that democracy requires. Populists also view the world through a divisive lens, pitting the "pure people" versus the allegedly "corrupt elite," and frame politics as a zero-sum competition between these groups. Research underscores the polarizing effect of populist parties: when far-right populist parties enter government, public attitudes grow more polarized.⁶ As societies grow more polarized, people become willing to tolerate abuses of power and sacrifice democratic principles if doing so advances their side's interests and keeps the other side out of power.⁷ The polarization that populism fuels, in other words, increases the risk of democratic decline.

Given the challenge that populism poses for liberal democracy, what can be done? Although the sources of populism are well diagnosed, little work has been done to develop responses that liberal democratic actors can use to push back and make a compelling case for democracy, multilateralism, and international institutions in this political landscape. How can democratic parties and leaders communicate in a way that rebuilds trust in the democracy? What political strategies and tactics can help them compete in a way that strengthens democratic values, while sidelining nativist voices? How should they engage with right-wing populist leaders without amplifying those leaders' message?

The Report

This report offers recommendations for combating populism. For the purpose of this report, populism is defined as an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.”⁸ Populism also makes moral distinction between these groups; it valorizes and legitimizes the people, while denigrating the elite.⁹ There is little agreement across populist parties, however, about who constitutes the people or the elite. For this reason, populism is chameleonic—it appears differently in different times and places.¹⁰

The focus of this report is on responding to right-wing populism, given its current prevalence in Western liberal democratic societies and the challenges it poses to the health of liberal democracy. Right-wing populism is exclusionary—it has a limited view of who constitutes “the people,” or the dominant group, and excludes benefits and rights to individuals in the out-groups. The criteria for exclusion are almost always cultural, religious, or ethnic. The National Front in France and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) are two prominent examples of right-wing populist parties. Right-wing populism differs from left-wing populism, which is more inclusive and calls for the extension of benefits and rights to historically disadvantaged groups. The populism found in Latin America from the 1930s until recently, the Syriza party in Greece, and Podemos in Spain are examples of left-wing populist parties.

As this report argues, populism poses challenges to liberal democracy. “Liberal democracy” refers to a system of government characterized not just by free and fair elections but also by accountability, representation, participation, and the protection of the rule of law, civil liberties, and individual rights. Liberalism and democracy are not one and the same, and they need not occur together. Liberalism, for its part, is about individual rights: it holds that people are endowed with natural rights that provide individuals with the space to live according to their own propulsions and according to their own values. Such freedom, in turn, provides people with the opportunity to live life to its full potential and spurs self-improvement. Populism, with its emphasis on majority rule, illuminates the tensions that exist between democracy and liberalism.

While all the recommendations outlined in this report may not be generalizable to every political context or country, the goal is to help liberal democratic parties, elected officials, and political candidates develop strategies to push back against illiberal populism and renew support for democracy. Although these recommendations are targeted at political parties and politicians, several of them—especially the communications strategies—will also help other liberal democratic actors, such as journalists and democracy advocates, to effectively articulate their ideas and connect with citizens, and avoid actions that activate support for populist actors.

This report translates key findings from cutting-edge academic research in the political science, political psychology, sociology, and communications disciplines into practical, evidence-based recommendations. These recommendations are designed to address populism’s key drivers, which are discussed in greater depth below. Scholars group the factors driving populism into two general categories: those that emanate from growing public grievance and dissatisfaction with democracy’s performance—demand-side explanations—and those drivers stemming from populists’ ability to translate those grievances into votes—supply-side explanations.

The recommendations in this report predominately focus on counteracting populism’s supply-side drivers. The recommendations are intended to neutralize the dynamics that are benefitting populist parties and create conditions that will allow liberal democratic parties and actors to compete more effectively in the current political environment. There are two main reasons for this supply-side focus. First, policies addressing the demand side—for example, policies intended to reduce levels of inequality or develop

sustainable immigration policies—are context specific. Although safeguarding democracy will require governments to address these long-term challenges, it is difficult to make general recommendations for parties and politicians in diverse political settings.

Second, the demand-side grievances that have fueled populism's rise—such as inequality and identity politics—have long been present in democratic societies.¹¹ This is not to discount the significance of contemporary grievances of this sort. What is different today, however, is the ability of political actors to activate these grievances and translate them into votes. The recommendations in this report focus on those tactics and approaches that can help liberal actors reframe political discourse and compete from a position of strength.

This report briefly discusses the key drivers of populism, providing readers with the necessary context to more effectively apply the recommendations. By understanding what is—and is not—driving populism, liberal democratic actors can better calibrate their response.

The report then turns to that response, which is divided into three sections. The first set of recommendations is intended to equip political parties, politicians, and candidates to create a political context more conducive to the success of liberal democratic actors. Research shows that context matters—although many people may hold populist attitudes, these attitudes must be activated by the political context to translate into votes for populist leaders. The second set of recommendations pertains to political parties, identifying approaches that party operatives can implement to more effectively compete and engage with populist parties. Finally, the third section identifies a number of communications strategies to help liberal democratic actors better articulate their ideas, appeal to voters, and disrupt populist attitudes.

It is important to recognize that the long-term impact of the recommendations below will be limited if the deeper sources of discontent with democracy go unaddressed. Pushing the populists back out to the fringes of politics, where they remained for decades until recently, will require that liberal democratic actors address such longstanding issues as inequality, immigration, voter suppression, and the role of money in politics. The report's recommendations, however, can play a role in neutralizing the factors that are benefiting populist forces and give liberal democratic parties the opportunity to recapture the political momentum.

Why Have Populists Performed So Well?

The rise of populism in Europe and the United States is well documented. There is broad consensus about the forces driving populist parties' support. Although studies may disagree about the relative importance of each of the drivers, there is widespread agreement that the following factors have played a role in fueling populism's rise.

Rising inequality. In most democracies, living standards have declined or stagnated over the past 25 years while the real incomes of the wealthy have risen. Research shows that inequality increases the salience of status relations between groups,¹² erodes social cohesion and trust,¹³ increases intolerance for out-groups and support for anti-immigrant messages,¹⁴ and drives up perceptions of threat and status anxiety among all income groups.¹⁵ Rising threat perceptions, in turn, drive people to support leaders they view as capable of holding social change at bay and maintaining the social order they want to protect.¹⁶ Research suggests, in other words, that support for far-right populist parties has grown not because people necessarily prefer extreme policies and leaders, but rather out of a response to increasing perceptions of social and economic threat.

Declining bonds to established traditional parties. Societal changes beginning in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution weakened ties between individuals and their communities. Because these ties historically played an important role in determining voters' attachment to political parties, their erosion promoted a decline in partisanship.¹⁷ As established parties lost support from their traditional support bases, many parties sought to maintain their vote share by broadening their electoral appeal. Political parties, therefore, began to drift toward the ideological center, particularly on economic policies, reducing the substantive differences between them. Angry and alienated by a perceived lack of political choice, voters increasingly voted for smaller, alternative parties, with many voters turning to populist parties on the extreme ends of the political spectrum.¹⁸ Moreover, rising education levels and the spread of digital technologies further reduced voters' perceptions of the importance of political parties, making voters more receptive to populist leaders' direct appeals to voters.¹⁹

Increasing salience of identity politics. Because voters now perceive little difference between parties on the basis of economic policies—largely resulting from a convergence over the past three decades in the economic platforms of the center left and center right in Europe and those of the Democrats and Republicans in the United States—identity has become a more politically salient factor. Concurrently ethnic and religious diversity in Europe and the United States has grown (in part driven by immigration), further increasing the salience of national identity for many voters. Far-right populist leaders have tapped into the growing salience of national identity and present themselves as the only parties concerned with protecting national interests. They seek to paint a simplified vision of a return to the past, before social changes upended the dominant groups' status in society.²⁰ Research shows that those with less favorable views of immigration support right-wing parties at higher rates.²¹ More broadly, studies show that ideological agreement with far-right parties on culture and identity issues is the strongest predictor of voting for those parties.²² Additionally, in Europe, some people's concerns about the European Union and a perceived loss of national sovereignty have made them cling more strongly to identity issues.

Economic grievance. Research suggests that economic hardship played only a modest role in both the U.S. election of President Donald Trump and the success of right-wing populist parties in Europe. In 2014–15, for example, economic dissatisfaction was not related to support for right-wing populist parties in most European countries, especially in comparison with anti-immigrant sentiment.²³ However, when economic grievance is viewed through the lens of racial identity, this factor plays a more significant role in driving support for populism.²⁴ It is less problematic when individuals hold the sentiment “I might lose my job” than when they believe “People in my group are losing jobs to another group.”²⁵ In other words,

economic deprivation can increase support for populist parties when it triggers status anxiety, or the perception that one's position in society is declining relative to that of other cultural groups.²⁶ When groups feel threatened, including economically, individuals become more likely to vote for populist parties and leaders.²⁷

A media environment that is conducive to populist rhetoric and views. Some research suggests that the media give disproportionate attention to the sensational ideas of populists. Their use of emotional and direct language, including short, simple slogans that are directed at people's "gut feelings," is especially effective in the current media environment.²⁸ Although not all studies agree that media provide populists with disproportionate coverage, at a minimum, media force traditional parties to respond to populist statements, giving the populists the ability to shape the narrative. Social media in particular can help populists set the agenda and attract coverage in the mainstream media. For instance, Trump's image as a candidate was largely formed by his Twitter posts, which were widely quoted and debated in the mainstream media.²⁹ In addition, social media provide populists with the freedom to articulate their ideology and spread their messages largely uncontested, without filters or framing from mainstream media.

Declining trust in institutions. Political trust in institutions has steadily declined since the early 2000s. Today, only 17 percent of Americans say they trust the government in Washington always or most of the time. In Europe, the picture is the same; 33 percent of French citizens, 36 percent of UK citizens, and 55 percent of German citizens said they trusted their parliaments in 2018.³⁰ High levels of political corruption in some countries and the perception that government is no longer responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens have contributed to the trust deficits.³¹ Studies show that there is a clear correlation between lack of trust in political institutions and populist voting.³² The media's focus on instances of suboptimal government performance and mainstream politicians' antigovernment rhetoric also reinforce populist narratives that government is unresponsive to and unrepresentative of average citizens,³³ which increase the appeal of the anti-establishment narratives that populists promote.³⁴

How to Respond

There will be no silver bullet or single approach that can renew public faith in democracy or mitigate the negative effects of illiberal populist actors. The recommendations below, therefore, are multifaceted and summarize a diverse body of academic literature to inform a multidimensional and evidence-based response to one of the most significant threats to democracy today.

SHAPING THE CONTEXT OF COMPETITION

Research suggests that people holding “populist attitudes”—or attitudes that adhere to key elements of populism, such as a belief that a “popular will” exists and the elite are corrupt—are more likely to vote for populist parties. Yet while populist attitudes are prevalent, many people holding these attitudes do not actually vote for populist actors. This is because, as newer research suggests, populist attitudes are not always politically relevant. They must be activated by context.³⁵

In the United States, for example, the factors that led people to vote for President Trump, including concerns about the country’s growing diversity or racial views, were not new in 2016.³⁶ The difference in 2016 was the context created throughout the political campaign, particularly the ways Trump talked about these issues. Trump’s provocative statements and rhetoric increased the salience, or the intensity of importance, of identity for voters in ways that favored himself.³⁷ Similarly, in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán brought identity to the forefront of the political context through his almost exclusive focus on immigration. Since the 2015 European refugee crisis, Orbán’s decisions to close Hungary’s borders, present migrants as the “enemy,” and refashion Hungary into an illiberal “Christian democracy” have been so successful that Orbán did not create an election platform in the 2018 campaign. His focus on migration changed the context of political competition.³⁸

In short, research shows that context matters and that it is malleable. Liberal democratic actors must be careful to avoid language and framing that encourages the alignment of partisanship and attitudes about race and immigration. Research suggests that the following approaches can create a political context more favorable for liberal democracy.

Avoid language and framing that link identity and partisanship

Political actors play an important role in shaping the context of political competition. They help articulate what it means to be part of a group and can identify and sometimes exaggerate threats to a group. Through their narratives, therefore, political actors are able to increase the salience of group identities and attitudes and make these identities a more central criterion for decision-making. When identity is the dominant lens through which political competition is refracted, populists benefit. They use the heightened salience of identity to instill fear within dominant groups that their status is being threatened, and fear becomes a powerful motive for voting. In order to avoid activating populist voting tendencies, political actors should:

Focus on and own their issue positions. Right-wing populists have emerged as the issue owners for the protection of national identity against both decline and the perceived threat associated with immigrants, refugees, and minorities. Research suggests that liberal democratic actors should focus less on these issues. U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, talked less about race than other Democratic presidents and frequently used rhetoric that sought to unify Americans of different racial backgrounds³⁹ (an issue addressed below). Research suggests that liberal actors should shift the discourse to focus on their own policy agendas.⁴⁰ This will mean, in part, that politicians will have to set out a proactive agenda, rather than getting stuck solely responding to the agenda of right-wing populists.

Talking less about such issues as race and immigration does not mean ignoring them.⁴¹ Indeed, addressing identity politics is crucial to progress toward equality and representation. One study shows that voter perceptions of parties' failure to address public concerns over immigration can erode public trust in institutions.⁴² The key is to avoid linking racial, ethnic, and religious identities with partisan affiliation. Doing so will require striking a balance: recognizing the specific policy needs of marginalized groups, and that some members of society have advantages not enjoyed by others, on the one hand, but not following the right-wing populists' lead by refracting politics solely through the lens of identity.

The recent success of the green parties in the 2019 European Parliament elections and in German politics illuminates the importance of clear issue position ownership. The greens have put forward a policy platform that links social justice and human rights with climate change, drawing in voters disillusioned with mainstream center-left parties. The green parties' manifestoes include clearly articulated policy positions on a variety of issues, including climate change, migration, and a guaranteed minimum income, appealing to voters who want to stand for something, rather than simply disrupt.⁴³

Foster interaction between groups. Political actors should foster regular and meaningful interactions between diverse groups of constituents at the community level, which research shows can reduce prejudice, counter perceptions of threat, and improve levels of tolerance.⁴⁴ Interaction has been shown to be particularly effective when it takes place under certain conditions: groups should have equal status, work toward a common goal, experience substantive interaction, and have the support of authorities.⁴⁵ For example, political actors can pull together diverse community groups to fix up and maintain local parks or playgrounds. Research shows that such events can decrease the salience of identity in the electoral arena.⁴⁶

Reduce Political Polarization

Even in consolidated democracies with citizens who are strongly supportive of liberal democracy, polarization creates an environment conducive to incumbent efforts to dismantle democracy from within. Research shows that voters in polarized societies are willing to trade democratic principles for partisan interests and that their willingness increases with the intensity of their partisanship.⁴⁷ In a sharply polarized electorate, a significant fraction of voters will be willing to sacrifice fair, democratic competition in favor of (re)electing an incumbent who champions their interests. Efforts to reduce polarization, therefore, will be key to containing the detrimental effects that populists can have on democracy. More research is needed to inform strategies for decreasing political polarization. However, the report highlights two considerations.

Avoid efforts to “educate” the “other side.” Research shows that efforts to simply expose people to “the facts” or to break down echo chambers by exposing them to views that contradict their pre-existing beliefs are ineffective and can accentuate polarization.⁴⁸ These efforts are especially ineffectual when they are delivered by untrusted or unfamiliar messengers and when policy-relevant facts are suffused with culturally divisive meanings (e.g., facts related to issues such as climate change or gun control in the United States).⁴⁹ The pressure to form similar beliefs with one's own group often dominates whatever incentives individuals have to “get the right answer” from the presented facts. The dynamic is even more pronounced among highly educated individuals who will use their reasoning skills to find evidentiary support for beliefs consistent with their position. At a collective level, an approach that depends largely on presenting the “other side” with the facts can actually aggravate polarization; it leads people to adhere even more closely to their own group-congruent beliefs.

Focus on shaping people's perceptions of norms. Rather than simply seeking to educate the other side, political actors should focus on shaping norms. Surveys consistently show that many Europeans hold anti-immigrant attitudes, yet relatively few people vote for far-right parties. Research suggests that these voting trends are due to a widely spread norm against prejudice and discrimination.⁵⁰ People's

behavior is shaped by both individual attitudes and normative context. This means that rather than seeking to change attitudes—which tend to have developed over a long period of time and are inflexible—liberal actors can more effectively mitigate polarization and create a context more conducive to liberal democracy by shaping norms. Consider the following example about increasing rates of recycling: Political psychology suggests that instead of convincing individuals that recycling is important and hoping that they will then recycle, interventions are likely to be more effective if they target perceptions about rates of recycling. Methods may include exposing people to a popular peer who recycles, providing people with information that most of their peers recycle, or advertising new recycling guidelines from an important and trusted community institution.

PARTY STRATEGIES

Political parties—and their efforts from the local to the national level—will play a crucial role in restoring faith in democracy. Political parties must focus not only on shaping which issues become most politically salient but also on who votes. In other words, the ability of political parties to mobilize voters will be key to restoring support for democracy. In the past few years, however, citizens have come to view democratic institutions, including mainstream political parties, as being out of touch with citizen concerns and demands. The Pew Research Center found, for example, that as of 2019 “[o]nly 17% of Americans today trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ (3%) or ‘most of the time’ (14%).”⁵¹ Further, only 35 percent of respondents believe the European Union “understands the needs of its citizens.”⁵² Some studies suggest that far-right populist parties have strengthened their activism and grassroots mobilization efforts, leading many voters to feel as if these parties are the most reliable option for getting their voices heard. Moreover, increasing education levels and evolving expectations have also made citizens more discerning, increasing volatility within the electorate. Liberal democratic parties will need to adapt in response to the changing political environment. Below are recommendations for ways parties can respond to populist parties—from campaigning to coalition building.

Re-energize grassroots mobilization

Political campaigns have become more professionalized and less focused on activism and grassroots mobilization.⁵³ Rural voters in particular believe that mainstream parties are no longer concerned with rural issues. In the 2016 U.S. election, for example, researchers argue that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton underinvested in field organization and lacked a robust presence on the ground. Not only was Clinton’s overall field organization smaller than President Obama’s in 2012, but her field offices were located more in areas with high concentrations of Democrats, whereas Obama’s offices were better spread throughout the states.⁵⁴ In Europe, the picture is similar. One study conducted in Britain found that in some small towns voters experienced more face-to-face contact with activists from far-right populist parties than from the mainstream parties.⁵⁵

Right-wing populist parties are seeking to exploit this disconnect between citizens and parties. As a result, other political parties have to show up and listen. They should bring politics to the local level, through grassroots mobilization and community events. Methods of reaching out to voters include running candidates at the local level,⁵⁶ increasing face-to-face and substantive interactions with constituents, and most importantly, establishing a consistent presence in communities.⁵⁷ In France, for example, President Emmanuel Macron held a series of town-hall meetings throughout the country in an attempt to address public grievances that fueled the Yellow Vest protests that began in 2018. These national consultations were largely popular with the public, with nearly every seat filled in the meetings, and most accounts assess that the consultations allowed the average French citizen to feel heard, diffused the protest movement, and helped Macron regain some of his popularity among his electorate.⁵⁸

Integrate platform policies into a larger story about society⁵⁹

The scope and magnitude of societal change and challenges have created significant anxiety among citizens in democracies. Populist actors exploit this anxiety for their electoral advantage. Liberal parties should address voter anxiety by presenting policy solutions that fit into a broader vision for the future. Placing policies into a larger story about the future increases the likelihood that such ideas will stick. Moreover, political actors should not merely assert a relationship between the cause of a problem and its effect but should offer an explanation about how one leads to the other. The way that people understand cause shapes their perceptions of the appropriate response; providing explanation can help make citizens smarter about social issues and help them see solutions that were not previously apparent to them. Through explanation, political parties can make people less vulnerable to populist promises to turn back the clock and more willing to support policy change.

Allow far-right populist parties to compete in the political system but exclude their illiberal ideas

Some research has suggested that mechanisms to exclude populists from government, such as a cordon sanitaire or Ausgrenzung, in parliamentary systems could be viewed as undemocratic and might have the unintended effects of legitimizing populist viewpoints about the elite and eroding trust in democracy.⁶⁰ Further, some studies suggest that allowing right-wing populist parties into the political system in parliamentary systems can lead these parties to moderate their views and help socialize these actors into the liberal democratic system.⁶¹ For obvious reasons, this recommendation is the most controversial in this report.

Research suggests that liberal parties should include populist parties in coalitions in Europe's parliamentary systems, but only under the condition that these parties abide by liberal democratic norms. Liberal parties could:

- Allow right-wing populist parties in government if it is electorally necessary and only as junior coalition partners.⁶²
- Establish conditions that populist parties must meet to be part of government coalitions. Conditions should include a promise that populist parties will respect the tenets of liberal democracy and will abandon exclusionary viewpoints with respect to migration and nationalism.⁶³ In Italy, for example, the center-left Democratic Party made its coalition deal with the populist Five Star Movement conditional on five demands, including allegiance to the European Union, changing immigration policy to get Europe involved, and full acceptance of parliamentary democracy.
- Hold populist parties accountable to the promises they make in coalition negotiations.⁶⁴

EFFECTIVE FRAMING FOR LIBERAL ACTORS

How political actors connect with the people is critical for democracy and in elections.⁶⁵ Currently, many mainstream political parties and actors are falling short in articulating a compelling vision for the future. Instead, in many cases, far-right populist parties are defining societal challenges and framing the political debate while liberal actors find themselves merely responding. The way that liberal democratic actors talk about contemporary challenges—the words they use and the frames they employ—will play an important role in countering illiberal populism and renewing liberal democracy. Research suggests that the following tactics can equip liberal actors to reframe the political debate in ways that will help liberal parties and avoid activating support for populist parties.

Create unifying narratives

Populists seek to create a narrative pitting the “pure people” against the supposedly “corrupt elite.”⁶⁶ This “us versus them” narrative—a common tactic used by authoritarian leaders—is corrosive for democracy. Rather than using such divisive and polarizing narratives, liberal democratic actors should create an inclusive discourse. Research suggests that narratives that highlight common, unifying beliefs, practices,

rituals, institutions, and processes can inspire “greater tolerance from the intolerant.”⁶⁷ Civic nationalism can be an effective tool, but liberal democratic actors must claim it for themselves and fill it with their own brand of inclusive civic pride.⁶⁸ More specifically, it is important to define national identity in terms of values—such as believing in a country’s ideals, working hard to achieve success, and contributing to the community—rather than by race, nationality, religion, or partisanship.⁶⁹

Advance aspirational narratives

Western voters increasingly doubt that the system works for them or that it is fair. In polling in 2018, just 36 percent of Germans, 24 percent of Canadians, and 9 percent of the French thought that the next generation would be better off than their parents.⁷⁰ Far-right populist parties are attractive to societally pessimistic citizens because populist parties provide a deceptively simple vision of how society should change—namely, they advocate for returning to idealized earlier times.⁷¹ Concurrently, populist parties stoke anxiety about the future, emphasizing the risks and challenges ahead, instead of chances and opportunities.

Liberal democratic parties can no longer live by their past glories but must promise a better future. In Europe, the liberal and green parties have benefitted from a platform that emphasizes opportunities. Likewise, many credit the power of positivity and the tirelessly upbeat campaign that Ekrem İmamoğlu waged in Istanbul’s mayoral elections as the reason he was able to defeat Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party.⁷² İmamoğlu framed the Republican People’s Party (CHP) campaign around the idea of “Radical Love,” a strategy designed to counter populism’s efforts to “divide and rule.”⁷³

Develop coherent and concise narratives

Far-right populist parties are more likely to simplify their campaign messages to demarcate themselves from mainstream competitors. Mainstream parties, in contrast, use “barely comprehensible language to communicate their policy positions.”⁷⁴ Evidence suggests that individuals are better able to place parties on the ideological spectrum if parties use less complex campaign messages.⁷⁵ Therefore, political parties should seek to use simple and concise language to communicate their policy positions.

Avoid adopting the language of right-wing populists

The more mainstream politicians adopt the framing and rhetoric of populism, the more they allow their opponents’ ideas to shape political debates.⁷⁶ This is almost always a losing strategy. Not only does this legitimize and amplify far-right messages—and compromise underlying traditions of tolerance and pluralism—but evidence shows that mainstream parties that adopt the language of right-wing populists rarely benefit from doing so. This strategy can damage credibility, alienate core voters, and lead to a weaker performance at the ballot box.⁷⁷ For example, in 2018, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) moved to the right on migration by asserting that Germany “cannot accept all” migrants.⁷⁸ However, this move did not have the intended effect of winning over voters from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and was likely one of several factors that have contributed to the SPD’s steady decline in the polls.

Use blame attributions sparingly

Blame is central to populist rhetoric. Populists frame adversity facing “the people” as resulting from the corrupt and incompetent elite. Research shows that messages blaming the elite or immigrants can bolster citizens’ populist attitudes.⁷⁹ In other words, exposure to messages that shift blame from the innocent people to culprit out-groups reinforces people’s “us versus them” attitudes, which in turn reinforce polarization. Moreover, when liberal democratic actors use blame attributions—for example, blaming corrupt politicians in Washington who fail to represent the people’s will—it can reinforce the populist notion of the “corrupt elite,” giving momentum to far-right populist narratives. This is not to say that liberal

democratic actors should not seek to hold government actors accountable. Instead, liberal democratic actors should use blame attribution sparingly, and when using it, they should avoid painting problems in over-broad strokes. For example, liberal actors should be specific about the causes of the problem.⁸⁰ Research shows that liberal actors can best hold government accountable by pinpointing specific government actors. This has a less negative effect on political trust than placing blanket blame on “the government” writ large.⁸¹

Connect with a common value

Far-right populist parties appeal to the values of their voters; for instance, Viktor Orbán frequently appeals to “European Christian values” and frames the migration crisis in terms of the criminality of migrants and justice for Hungarian citizens. Liberal actors can appeal to values, or “enduring beliefs that orient individuals’ attitudes and behavior,” that resonate with their target audiences.⁸² By speaking to values, they can “tap into...higher-level reasoning” of participants, which makes points more salient and persuasive.⁸³ For example, framing migration policy in terms of inclusivity and the future will be more effective than framing it as a purely economic issue or talking about it in technical terms, such as debating how many migrants to accept.

Be intentional about myth-busting, or debunking

Far-right populist parties thrive on conspiracy theories and inaccuracies; liberal actors must be careful not to get trapped in a constant state of response to them. In those cases that require a response, however, there are several factors that research suggests will enhance the efficacy of that response. Most importantly, liberal actors should avoid repeating the fact or idea they are trying to refute. Studies show that the best predictor of what people believe is the number of times they have heard it. Don’t repeat it to rebut it.⁸⁴ Also, refutations will be more effective if they are made in close temporal proximity to the initial case of misinformation and when corrections provide an alternative story to help fill the resulting gap in understanding when false “facts” are removed.⁸⁵

Highlight solutions and emphasize their efficacy

Far-right populist parties frame most problems as an urgent crisis but rarely provide solutions to address those problems. It is not enough to diagnose the problem. Liberal actors should provide robust solutions and adopt a tone of efficacy. People are most moved by solutions “they can see themselves taking part in.”⁸⁶ Solutions should include an achievable call to action for the target audience.

Conclusion

The factors fueling populism are likely to persist; populism will be a fixture of politics for the foreseeable future. Given this outlook, liberal democratic actors must learn to compete responsibly and to contain the negative effects that populism can have on liberal democracy. Combating illiberal populism and restoring public faith in liberal democracy will require policies and approaches that address both the demand- and supply-side drivers of populism's appeal. Doing the hard work of developing policies that are capable of addressing such contemporary challenges as inequality and migration will be critical to sustaining support for democracy. Liberal actors also will have to develop a vision for addressing future challenges, such as artificial intelligence and the future of work. These challenges will create new winners and losers—and could give renewed impetus to populism.

Addressing these fundamental challenges will be key to the long-term resilience of democracy; in the short term, liberal actors must also consider the recommendations identified in this report. These strategies and approaches will better equip liberal parties, elected officials, and candidates to activate broader support for their ideas and policies and translate that support into votes. Today's populist players have managed to turn the tides and create conditions that are conducive to their illiberal ideas and agendas. Liberal democrats must now reclaim the initiative.

End Notes

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