The resurgence of populism

Populist parties have become a force to be reckoned with in many countries around the world. What explains this sudden, widespread re-emergence of political protest? Three LMU specialists explore the driving forces behind this development.

The term ‘populism’ has become ubiquitous in public debate in Western democracies, often in combination with the name Donald Trump. Why has the 45th President of the United States become the prototype of the populist politician? Schulze Wessel: Populists claim to speak for ‘the people’, for the ‘real’ people. That is probably their most prominent defining feature. Populism always involves the exclusion of minorities. Populists are stridently opposed to elites, and are highly suspicious of intermediary authorities. Attacks on elites and experts, contempt for the judiciary, mockery of the press – these are some of the traits that make Trump a populist.

Reinemann: Then there is Trump’s campaign slogan: “Make America Great Again”, which invokes a fictional, imagined America which allegedly existed in the recent past. He also uses the word ‘heartland’ in much more than its geographical sense. It too is meant to evoke the idea of a homogeneous community united by shared interests and values. Fischer: Populism is not a coherent political program. It is a means of acquiring and exercising power, as demonstrated by the nature of its defining features. But these elements also embody populism’s contradictions. Its criticism of elites is enunciated by members of elites. It cites ‘alternative facts’, i.e. lies, to attack the so-called lying press. Its objection to the TINA gambit is accompanied by the assertion that ‘there is no alternative’ to populist policies. It constantly refers to ‘the people’, but what is meant is not the demos, but an ethnos, a community that is defined in strictly ethnic terms. And then there is a further interesting paradox – populists are now intent on setting up an International of Nationalisms.

How do populists draw the line between those who belong and all the others?

Reinemann: Populists deliberately create an atmosphere of crisis and threat. They conjure up an economic or cultural disaster scenario, identify some group as the – ostensibly – guilty party, and then try to turn public opinion against that group. This tactic is now being used made ever more openly: mainly against immigrants – in the European context, often Muslims. In Germany, the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) first appeared on the scene as opponents of the Euro and the bail-out for Greece. Then the party changed course to focus on immigration and Islam, and for AfD supporters this issue still tops the list. The success of this approach may be partly attributable to mainstream politicians who for decades have ostentatiously refused to acknowledge that the country is an attractive destination for immigrants. Populists cleverly conflate the issue of immigration with questions of identity, community and belonging. As for the typical populist targeting of elites, it is important to note that these attacks do not fall within the ambit of normal political debate, which is based on rational argument. Populists fundamentally reject the legitimacy of elites.

Fischer: In most European societies, the populists’ focus on homogeneity is very remote from everyday social reality. But they use it to construct a kind of hare-and-hedgehog argument that accounts in large part for their success, because it is difficult to refute. [In the game, the hare gives up, deceived by the sight of a (second) hedgehog on the finish line.]. Trump bemoans the plight of white, blue-collar workers in the US, but sets it in the context of identity and offers no realistic economic response. We have seen the same in France: The economic ideas proposed by the Front National are so devoid of substance that they could hardly be more unpatriotic. No other party’s policy would more rapidly and comprehensively drive France to wrack and ruin than that of the FN. For a country that is so dependent on agriculture to leave the European Union – the very institution whose subsidies...
keep French farming alive – would be an absurd act of self-harm. But the FN is interested solely in the matter of identity. Populist arguments boil down to the assertion that the basic problem lies in the fact that ‘the people’ no longer constitute a homogeneous community. The very fuzziness of this fantastical notion is what makes it difficult to refute. 

Schulze Wessel: Populists in the US, Russia, India and parts of Southeast Asia undoubtedly deploy very similar sorts of rhetoric. It would, however, be misleading to imply that populism forms a coherent program. These movements differ too much in terms of their political programs and the scope available to them for political action. For some, the term ‘populism’ goes too far, in others it doesn’t go far enough.

Fischer: With regard to political programs, one must indeed employ a more precise and discriminating vocabulary. There are also populist movements on the Left, such as Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece, but the Right is now in the ascendant. In this context, I believe it may be justifiable to speak of a re-emergence, or renewed relevance of Fascism. For the movements we are concerned with here exhibit all the hallmarks cited in the classical definition of Fascism: They are openly hostile to specific categories of people, draw a sharp distinction between friend and foe, are obsessed with scenarios of decline and loss, cast themselves as victims, see their communities and identities as being under threat, and their ultimate goal is to radically change the political system. It is not simply a matter of their sharing certain elements of ideology. What is now happening in Russia, Poland, Hungary and Turkey are efforts to reconfigure the political system from the ground up. Recall that Marine Le Pen stated that, if elected, one of her priorities would be to change the electoral system. This is history repeating itself, in a fashion that is fascinating for the historian, but very disquieting politically.

The spectrum of politicians that has been labelled populist covers a wide range of views. To what extent does the term exaggerate or underplay the degree to which particular positions lie outside the mainstream? The German weekly Die Zeit, for example, recently referred to the new French President Emmanuel Macron as a cheerful populist.

Reinemann: If one were to describe every politician who exploits or – to put it more positively – responds to the popular mood as a ‘populist’, the term would become worthless. I have great difficulty accepting the notion that Macron is a populist. He utilizes modes of communication that make him attractive and he has charisma, but he lacks many of the essential criteria that make a real populist. His political model is certainly not based on exclusion, for instance.

Fischer: Martin Schulz, the SPD’s candidate for Chancellor, has also tried to drum up support by emphasizing his modest origins, his anti-elitist credentials, so to speak. But that by no means makes him a populist.

Schulze Wessel: When used as a catch-all, the word ‘populism’ no longer serves any analytical function.

Let’s take a look at the other end of the spectrum: For which of Europe’s present crop of ‘populists’ is the term far too tame?

Fischer: For Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), for Marine Le Pen, for the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for...

Fake news? According to his spokesman Sean Spicer, US President Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony drew an unprecedentedly large crowd. Spicer presented no evidence for this claim, perhaps because pictures like this suggest otherwise.

Source: Pool/Getty Images
Viktor Orbán in Hungary and for Jaroslav Kaczynski in Poland. In the case of these politicians, the term doesn’t go far enough, because their common goal is to replace the liberal democratic system itself – unlike Boris Johnson, for instance. To begin with, Johnson was not a supporter of Brexit, but he realized that he could jump on the bandwagon, and became one of the leading Brexiteers. It is perfectly conceivable that, in a few years, he will have adopted a very different position – within the system. Truly fascist populists, on the other hand, would never adopt a liberal, humanist position.

Why has populist rhetoric become so effective over the past few years?

Schulze Wessel: It is a symptom of the uncertainty brought about by globalization, which has indeed helped to anchor issues of identity and belonging on the political agenda. The second factor has to do with the new forms of communication. Thanks to digital media, political models are now rapidly transferable across international borders. Populist movements are closely interconnected, and have no problem imitating tactics and techniques that have been successfully employed elsewhere. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has simply copied strategies used by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin. The law designed by Orbán for the specific purpose of shutting down the international Central European University (CEU) in Budapest is modeled on Putin’s administrative attack on the European University in St. Petersburg. Both institutions were set up in the 1990s with the aim of fostering pluralism and academic freedom. That makes them anathema to populists. Moreover, not only information but, in certain cases, money too flows between the different groups. It is clear, for instance, that the Front National has received funding from Putin’s Russia, and Austria’s populists have extremely close ties with their Russian counterparts.

Fischer: The impact of the new media actually extends much further than that. Consider the cognitive and psychological effects produced by the echo-chamber phenomenon. Communication on the Internet increasingly involves interactions with people who agree with one, and whose opinions one confirms. That in turn leads to a characteristic and antidemocratic aspect of populism – the inability or indeed refusal to take competing views into account. Reinemann: The Internet and social media provide ideal conditions for populists to set up their own channels of communication by bypassing the established media. This allows them to spread their message and build up communities of the like-minded. The FN and the FPÖ have put much effort into the design and development of their websites, but traditional media can also play a major role. In addition to state-controlled media, several media firms in Eastern Europe are in the hands of populist businessmen, which introduces a further element into the mixture. The dominant tabloid in Austria, the Kronenzeitung, enjoys a special relationship with the political protagonists of populism. Interestingly enough, Germany’s Bild is not all that enthusiastic about populism.
**Schulze Wessel:** Quite apart from the Internet, in our analog lives – if I may use such an expression – there are other structures that work in the same way as digital echo chambers: In towns and villages in the countryside it is quite possible for the vast majority of the local population to be made up of kindred spirits. The gulf between the urban and the rural, which is a feature not only of the US, but also of Poland and Hungary, can promote such an effect. In Turkey, Austria and France, there are striking differences in the distribution of the regions whose populations tend to favor populists and those that don’t. That has a lot to do with the fact that whole areas of the provinces feel left behind, and this has accentuated the tendency of rural communities to define themselves in conscious opposition to the inhabitants of the metropolitan areas.

**Where does the support for populist positions come from in the countryside?**

**Reinemann:** In addition to all the real problems that exist in such underdeveloped regions, their inhabitants may come to regard their very way of life as discredited. The image of metropolitan life projected by the media is in many respects alien to those who live on the land, with its more traditional and long-practiced modes of life. An American colleague of mine has published a fascinating study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana entitled Strangers in Their Own Land. She describes, for instance, how people in the American South feel when they watch comedy shows on TV that disparage their antiquated Evangelical views. That is indeed a form of emotional exclusion that is not easily forgotten. And I for one am not sure what negative effects the dominance of West German media has had on communities in the East over the past 25 years.

**Schulze Wessel:** I think the comparison is misleading. Unlike the US and countries like Poland, there is no strict divide between town and country in Germany. Germany’s many middle-sized cities are well integrated with their rural hinterlands. Unlike the situation in some parts of Poland, it would be absurd to suggest that an immigrant, or, let’s say, a homosexual might be better advised not to settle down in the German countryside.

**Reinemann:** I fully agree that one shouldn’t neglect the specific differences between states in this context. Recently, the Allensbach Institute [one of the largest opinion and market research institutes in Germany, Ed.] released comparative polling data relating to how the French and the Germans rate their respective political systems. The French were far less satisfied with their relatively inflexible system – which has been dominated by two parties that have each held power for long periods and have produced their fair share of scandals – than the Germans were with theirs. And there are other European countries, such as Spain, where populism based on hostility to foreigners has failed to take root. Germany is an atypical case. The rest of the world was surprised to note that, as the surge of right-wing populism became apparent in neighboring countries like France and the Netherlands, there was no sign of a comparable development in Germany for quite some time. That can be explained by the widespread consensus among the elites and the media here that – to put it in a nutshell – political parties to the right of the CSU [Christlich Soziale Union, conservative party only operating in Bavaria, Ed.] are to be shunned.

**Fischer:** At that time, Oskar Lafontaine, a left-wing populist then in the SPD, now a member of Die Linke, remarked that anyone who owned a German Shepherd could pass for an ethnic German. This polemical phrase made little impression then. Meanwhile, however, right-wing populist rhetoric has been “adopted” into our political discourse. And this change has entailed not just a learning process, but also a process of forgetfulness or perhaps even an active effort to forget. At all events, it is now possible for the AfD to assert that border guards should have the right to open fire on refugees if necessary, and refer to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin as a national shame. That is quite a remarkable development. And similar phenomena can be observed elsewhere, such as Marine Le Pen’s dismissal of the significance of the European Union as a guarantor of peace as “outdated rubbish”. Populists have learned that tactical and rhetorical breaches of the norms of democratic discourse can appeal to a section of the
electorate that is prone to historical amnesia. We have become accustomed to the progressive differentiation of democracy in response to historical change. Democracy today is inseparable from personal freedom, constitutionalism, representation, freedom of the press, human rights, open discussion, rationality and tolerance of error. For populists, on the contrary, the sole defining criterion of democracy is popular sovereignty. The Swiss People’s Party (SVP) therefore argues that “the people are always right”.

Schulze Wessel: This points to the paramount importance of historical awareness, of learning from history. That a liberal democracy is more than a simple majoritarian system is something that must be learnt.

Given that in the Netherlands and France, the established political parties have electorally imploded, how can the political mainstream effectively confront the rise of populism? Schulze Wessel: Populist movements have recently experienced a sequence of setbacks, beginning with Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, then Marine Le Pen in France. I believe that democratic politics can weather the storm, as long as it believes in itself. Many young people have become actively engaged in politics, and mainstream parties have gained new members.

Reinemann: While the destabilization of Turkey is alarming, Erdogan’s winning margin in the referendum on the new constitution was very narrow. Given the one-sidedness of the campaign, and the enormous pressure on the opposition, one can almost rate the 50:50 result as encouraging. The polls are predicting that the AfD can expect between 8 and 9% of the vote in the Federal elections in September – and don’t forget that the widely expected boost for the AfD following the terrorist attack in Berlin last December failed to materialize.

Fischer: In Germany the traditional party system remains stable despite the advent of the AfD. In Italy and France, the established parties bear much of the responsibility for their own eclipse, and the two-party system in the US is under acute strain. Like a virus, Donald Trump has hijacked the Republican Party and is now trying to rewrite its genetic code.