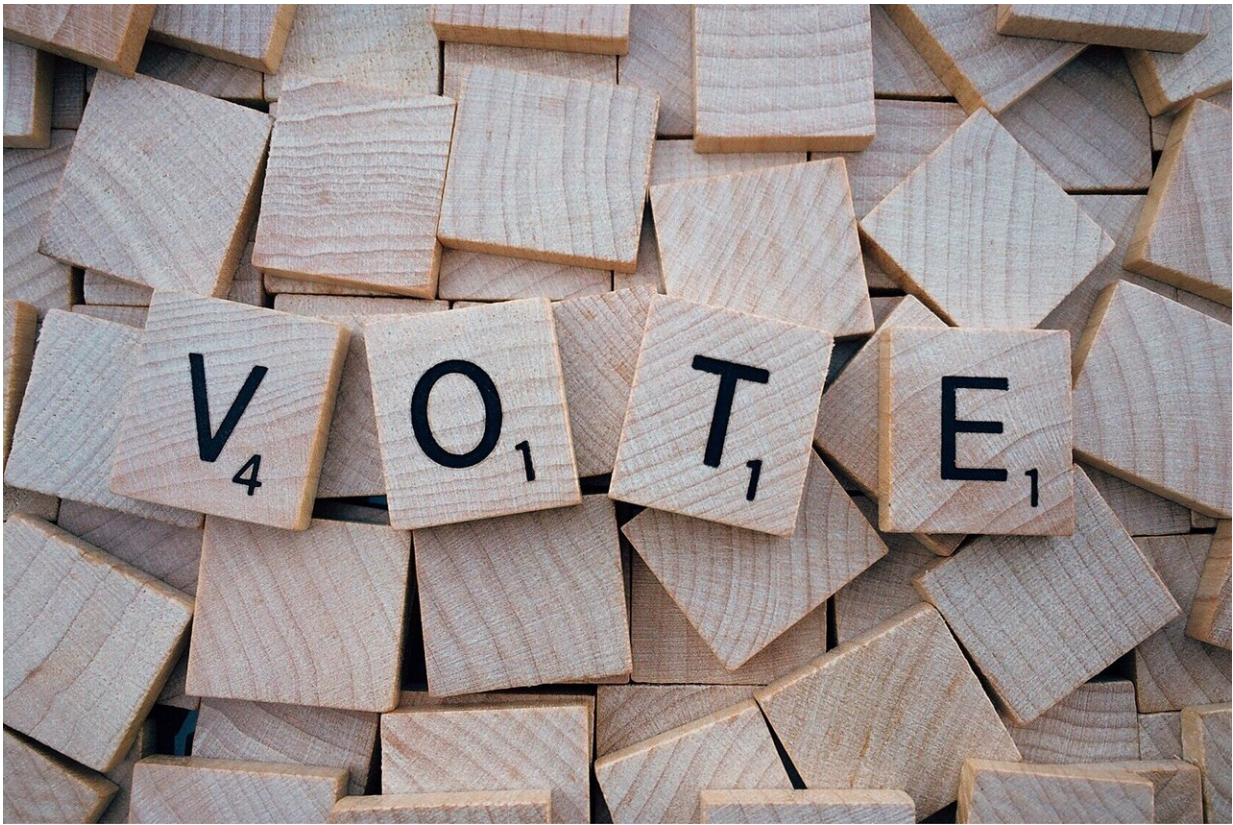


# Populism jeopardizes democracies around the world

March 11 2020, by Melissa De Witte

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The rise of populism—a political argument that pits ordinary people against a corrupt, government elite—is putting democracy at risk, said Stanford scholars [in a new white paper](#) released today.

When populist leaders discredit formal institutions and functions, democracy is being undermined and hollowed out, warns Stanford [political scientist](#) and paper co-author Anna Grzymala-Busse.

Here, Grzymala-Busse discusses what is at stake for democracies worldwide if populist rhetoric continues to take hold. As Grzymala-Busse points out, populists' grievances about government failures are not entirely baseless. That's why Grzymala-Busse and the paper's co-authors—who include director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI) Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, and political scientists Francis Fukuyama and Didi Kuo—argue that populism is a political problem that requires political solutions.

Their paper, *Global Populisms and Their Challenges*, released Mar. 11 through the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI), outlines what mainstream political parties must do to protect democracies from populists, including strategies such as reclaiming the rule of law and upholding democratic norms and values.

## **Why do some politicians find populist arguments so appealing?**

Populism argues that elites are corrupt and the people need better representation, but makes very few policy commitments beyond this criticism. There's been increasing distrust regarding political parties and politicians, especially given various funding and election scandals. And so people readily believe that these actors are corrupt and not to be trusted.

It is a message that is credible these days. It is also a message that doesn't tie politicians down to any other ideological or policy commitment.

## **Why is populism on the rise?**

The immediate causes are the failures of mainstream political parties—parties of the center-left and center-right—to meet voter concerns and respond with distinct policies. In both Europe and in the United States, many voters who support populists want a change from politics as usual, which they view as unresponsive and unaccountable, and who fear losing cultural and economic status. They perceive that politicians have failed to respond to immigration, free trade, international cooperation, and technological advances and the threats they pose to many voters.

## **According to your research, what makes populist rhetoric detrimental to democratic governance?**

Populist politicians and governments view the formal institutions of liberal democracy as corrupt creations spawned by crooked establishment elites—and so they systematically hollow out and undermine these institutions, such as the courts, regulatory agencies, intelligence services, the press, and so on. They justify these attacks as replacing discredited and corrupt institutions with ones that serves "the people"—or, in other words, populist parties and politicians. Moreover, precisely because populists claim to represent "the people," they have to define the people first and that often means excluding vulnerable and marginalized populations, such as religious or ethnic minorities and immigrants.

For example, in Hungary, the governing populist party brought the courts under political control, abolished regulatory agencies, and funneled funding to allied newspapers and media. In Poland, the chair of the governing populist party refers to his opponents as a "worse sort of Poles."

## **In the short term, what can be done to counter the effects of populism?**

Vote! Vote for politicians and parties who make credible promises, who do not simply want to shut down criticism or who view their opponents as their enemies, and who are committed to the democratic rules of the game. At the same time, we need to understand, not just condemn, why so many voters find populist politicians appealing.

## **And in the long term?**

Mainstream political parties need to credibly differentiate themselves, become far more responsive to their voters and consistently articulate and uphold the democratic rules of the game. Our research finds that where mainstream [political parties](#) are strong, populists stand far less of a chance of making inroads. Such parties would also be far more responsive to voter concerns about economic and cultural status, which also motivate populist support.

**More information:** Some of the paper's findings are from Global Populisms, a project sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation at FSI's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CCDRL). [fsi.stanford.edu/global-populisms/global-populisms](https://fsi.stanford.edu/global-populisms/global-populisms)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Populism jeopardizes democracies around the world (2020, March 11) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-populism-jeopardizes-democracies-world.html>

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