

# Populism erupts when people feel disconnected and disrespected

January 5 2021, by Noam Gidron and Peter A. Hall

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Credit: Karen Arnold/public domain

American society is riven down the middle. In the 2020 presidential election, [81 million people turned out to vote for Joe Biden, while another 74 million voted](#) for Donald Trump. Many people came to the polls to [vote against](#) the other candidate rather than enthusiastically to support the one who secured their vote.

While this intense [polarization](#) is distinctly American, [born of a strong two-party system](#), the antagonistic emotions behind it are [not](#).

Much of Trump's appeal rested on a classically populist message—a [form of politics](#) evident around the world that rails against mainstream elites on behalf of the ordinary people.

The resonance of those appeals means that America's social fabric is fraying at its edges. Sociologists refer to this as a problem of social integration. [Scholars argue that societies are well integrated](#) only when most of their members are closely connected to other people, believe that they are respected by others and share a common set of social norms and ideals.

Although people voted for Donald Trump for many reasons, there is growing evidence that much of his appeal is rooted in problems of social integration. Trump seems to have secured strong support from Americans who feel they have been pushed to the margins of mainstream society and who may have lost faith in mainstream politicians.

This perspective has implications for understanding why support for populist politicians has recently been rising around the world. This development is the subject of [widespread debate](#) between those who say populism stems from [economic hardship](#) and others who emphasize [cultural conflict](#) as the source of populism.

Understanding populism's roots is essential for addressing its rise and threat to democracy. We believe seeing populism as the product not of economic or cultural problems, but as a result of people feeling disconnected, disrespected and denied membership in the mainstream of society, will lead to more useful answers about how to stem populism's rise and strengthen democracy.

## Not only in America

One [Democratic pollster](#) found that support for Trump in 2016 was high among people with low trust in others. [In 2020, polling](#) found that "socially disconnected voters were far more likely to view Trump positively and support his reelection than those with more robust personal networks."

[Our analysis of survey data from 25 European countries](#) suggests that this is not a purely American phenomenon.

These feelings of social marginalization and a corresponding disillusionment with democracy provide populist politicians of all hues and from different countries with an opportunity to claim that the mainstream elites have betrayed the interests of their hard-working citizens.

Across all of these countries, it turns out that people who engage in fewer social activities with others, mistrust those around them and feel that their contributions to society go largely unrecognized are more likely to have less trust in politicians and lower satisfaction with democracy.

## Marginalization affects voting

Feelings of social marginalization—reflected in low levels of social trust, limited social engagement and the sense that one lacks social respect—are also linked to whether and how people vote.

People who are socially disconnected are less likely to turn out to vote. But, if they do decide to vote, they are significantly more likely to support populist candidates or radical parties—on either side of the

political spectrum—than people who are well integrated into society.

This relationship remains strong even after other factors that might also explain voting for populist politicians, such as gender or education, are taken into account.

There is a striking correspondence between these results and the stories told by people who find populist politicians attractive. From [Trump voters in the American South](#) to [radical right supporters in France](#), a series of ethnographers have heard stories about failures of social integration.

Populist messages, like "take back control" or "make America great again," find a receptive audience among people who feel pushed to the sidelines of their national community and deprived of the respect accorded full members of it.

## **Intersection of economics and culture**

Once populism is seen as a problem of social integration, it becomes apparent that it has both economic and cultural roots that are deeply [intertwined](#).

[Economic dislocation](#) that deprives people of decent jobs pushes them to the margins of society. But so does [cultural alienation](#), born when people, especially outside large cities, feel that mainstream elites no longer share their values and, even worse, no longer respect the values by which they have lived their lives.

These economic and cultural developments have for long shaped Western politics. Therefore, electoral losses of populist standard bearers such as Trump do not necessarily herald the demise of populism.

The fortunes of any one populist politician may ebb and flow, but draining the reservoir of social marginalization on which populists depend requires a concerted effort for reform aimed at fostering social integration.

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