

Why is populism on the rise?

July 26 2022



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A recent *Washington Post* article commenting on Marine Le Pen's candidacy in the recent French Presidential elections stated that: "Populism has a French accent this month," belying the accepted wisdom that populism has become a global phenomenon.

Perhaps we should start with a definition of populism.

"While there's no consensus definition of populism, it seems to be an ideology that divides society into a fight between 'the people' and 'the elites,'" says Kubik. "Claiming to express the will of the people, populist politicians downplay checks and balances. Right-wing populists also denigrate 'others' based on nationality, religion, race, sexual orientations or gender identity."

Kubik argues that monitoring the number of populist parties, leaders and discourse, alongside [voting patterns](#), shows we are living through a particularly intense wave of populism.

As he explains: "The prevailing wisdom had been that when populists come to power, they screw up and are quickly replaced. But now we see populist governments in Brazil, Hungary, India, the Philippines and Poland, not to mention recent Trumpism in the United States."

So what has changed to explain this surge? Kubik points out that regions tend to have their own distinctive drivers.

In Latin America, broadly speaking, it is corruption; in western Europe, it tends to be centered around immigration, while in post-Soviet eastern Europe, Kubik has dubbed it "delayed transformation fatigue."

Taking eastern Europe, Kubik sees partly a reaction to the sometimes chaotic processes of post-communism reorganization, with neo-traditionalism appealing as a bulwark to liberalism.

Studying Czechia, Hungary and Poland for the POPREBEL project, Kubik cited the resentment of people hit by dramatic cultural, social and political changes, alongside a shift away from traditional notions of family and sexual roles, all exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis.

"We can also talk about white male resentment, stoked by rising

inequality and dwindling employment opportunities," says Kubik.

Kubik argues this mix can amount to a feeling of disorientation, extending beyond the political and economic, to the cultural and social, while stirring deeper issues of identity and belonging. Additionally, [social media](#) offers an effective echo chamber within which to exacerbate anger.

But if populism is an expression of the will of the people, what's the problem?

"There is no democracy that is not a liberal democracy. A fundamental component is the protection of the rights of minorities. We typically don't see this with populist governments," says Kubik.

Indeed, Kubik's work has tracked how the rise in populism has led to increased persecution of women, migrants and LGBT citizens.

Another populist hallmark is an attempt to remove checks and balances. This could be in the form of instigating favorable voting procedures or attempts to dismantle, co-opt or attack cultural institutions. "Beyond politics, these attempts aim to control cultural institutions and historical memory," adds Kubik.

So what hope for the future?

Kubik cites practical steps such as: protecting the decentralization of elections, to maintain local politics where populists typically falter; ensuring the separation of church and state, and avoiding cultural institutions being solely reliant on state support.

But ultimately, he puts his faith in civil society, in grassroots mobilization, especially of young women. "We saw a willingness in the

United States during Trump's tenure to stand up for values and rights. That legacy lives on, but needs support. I'm a short-term pessimist but a long-term optimist," Kubik concludes.

Provided by CORDIS

Citation: Why is populism on the rise? (2022, July 26) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-populism.html>

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