

The next wave of populism

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2020, the year that populism was defeated.

Or was it? Donald Trump lost his reign, Johnson's approval rating started to slip and populist tendencies all over Europe, from Hungary to Netherlands are seemingly starting to take a downturn. Academic and cultural elites started to mark the end of the "golden age of populism" and things look like they're starting to get back to "normal". But is the "fight of the people against the elites", as populists like to frame it, actually over?

In spite of the recent decline in popularity of populism in the western world, upon closer inspection, visible inconsistencies in this line of thinking are slowly creeping in. Not only did Trump secure the largest number of individual votes out of all US presidents, second only to the current president Biden, but Orbán's and Duda's support might in fact also just be a temporary attempt to challenge the status quo as the governments fail to contain the virus. Moreover, the Czech SPD party nearly doubled its voter base in only a few months after a sharp initial loss at the start of the pandemic crisis and the data from France seems to be pointing to a similar trend, with Le-Pen having a strong sustained lead over Macron in the polls.

Why is populism not retreating then? Has the last year failed to show "the people" that trusting professionals and politicians who will in fact deliver on their promises, might not be such a bad idea? If we keep asking these questions, we keep on missing the point. I believe that populist leaders (just like any other political leaders for that matter) are not the cause, but rather the symptom. To put it simply, politicians, and especially populist politicians, merely capitalize on the tendencies and ideas already held by the general public. That is why this line of thinking makes us unable to understand populism and identify the actual root of this problem.

And as it turns out, it is much deeper than we'd like to believe.

The real problem is that a significant portion of the population simply feels left out. From America's rust belt to the small villages of central Europe and small cities of eastern Germany, people are driven by the anger of not being listened to. As painful as it might be for some people, the fact is that not all progressive liberal policies championed in the big cities have the same level of support in the areas mentioned above, and any attempts at silencing this part of the society (just like any other part of society) will eventually backfire in the form of a new populist leader.

In conclusion, I must say that a "second wave of populism" seems pretty inevitable to me. The real question is, how strong is it going to be this time and just how much is it going to permanently erode the western political scene as we know it.