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Today, the deeper meaning of every election in Europe (perhaps even around the globe) appears to be judged by the answer to one question: Is it a win or a loss for populism? Until the Dutch election in March 2017, the image of an unstoppable populist wave—or, as Nigel Farage put it, a populist “tsunami”—dominated the public conversation. Then, following Emmanuel Macron’s big wins in both the presidential and the legislative elections in France, pundits and politicians have frequently been telling us that we are already living in a “post-populist moment.” Both diagnoses are wrong and merit the very label which is usually attached to populism itself: simplistic.

The notion of an unstoppable wave takes for granted that both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump were triumphs for populism.¹ To be sure, both Farage and Trump are populists, though not because, as the clichéd phrase goes, they “criticize elites.” Not everyone who criticizes elites is automatically a populist. After all, any civics textbook would instruct us to be vigilant with the powerful; keeping a close eye on elites can in fact plausibly be seen as a sign of good democratic engagement. Of course, when in opposition, populists criticize governments. But, crucially, they also claim they alone represent, what populists often call, “the real people” or “the silent majority.” As a consequence, they denounce all other contenders for power as fundamentally illegitimate. What is at stake is never just a disagreement about policy or even values, which is of course completely normal (and, ideally, productive) in a democracy; rather, populists immediately personalize and moralize political conflict: the others, they insist, are simply “corrupt” and “crooked;” they allegedly do not work for “the people” but only for themselves (i.e., the establishment), or multinational corporations, or the EU (or what have you).

¹ I shall concentrate in this piece on right-wing populism, but in no way wish to suggest that there cannot be any left-wing populism. Left-wing populists also claim a moral monopoly of representing the people; however, the content with which they try to substantiate this claim is drawn for leftist sources. The most obvious examples of our time are Chávez and Maduro.

Less obvious is that populists insinuate that all citizens who do not share their conception of “the people,” and hence do not support the populists politically, should have their status as properly belonging to the people put into doubt. Think of Farage [claiming](#) that Brexit had been a “victory for real people”; he implied that the 48 percent who voted to stay in the EU might not be quite real—not real British people at all. Or, think of Trump [announcing](#) at a campaign rally last year: “The only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything.” In other words, the populist decides who the real people are, and whoever does not want to be unified on the populist’s terms is excluded—even if they have a British or an American passport.

Therefore, the important thing to grasp about populism is not some vague “anti-establishment sentiment.” Criticisms of elites may or may not be justified, but it is not automatically some dangerous form of populism. Rather, what matters is populists’ antipluralism. They always exclude (or, put differently, adopt a monist stance) at two levels: at the level of party politics, where they are the only legitimate representatives of the people and hence all others are at least morally excluded; and, less obviously, at the level of the people themselves where those who do not conform to the populists’ symbolic construction of the “real people” are also shut out.

An unstoppable wave?

This understanding of populism as a particular form of antipluralism should help avoid lazily repeating the notion of “the people” supposedly rising up everywhere against “the establishment.” This is not a neutral description of the political developments of our era; it is actually populist language. It accepts that populists really are the authentic representatives of “the people.” But, in fact figures like Farage or the Dutch far-right populist Geert Wilders are not even close to being successful among a quarter of the electorate.

Yet, strangely, politicians and journalists often switch from one extreme of degrading populists—assuming they are all demagogues whose utterances can automatically be discounted— to conceding that populists ultimately articulate people’s “real concerns.”

Giving populists a monopoly on telling us what really worries citizens betrays a deep misunderstanding of how democratic representation works. The latter is not about a mechanical reproduction of objectively given interests and identities; rather, the latter are dynamically formed in the process of politicians (as well as civil society, friends, family, etc.) making political offers of representation and citizens responding in one way or another. It's not that everything that populists say is necessarily fictitious—but it certainly is a mistake to think that only they know what is truly happening at the heart of society. Trump, for instance, undoubtedly succeeded in making some Americans see themselves as part of something like a white identity movement. But citizens' self-perceptions could also change again.

It would also be a mistake to assume that all voters for populist parties are themselves necessarily populists, i.e., share the antipluralist views of populist leaders.² And it would be a mistake to think that populists reveal to us the ultimate objective truth about society. Yet many non-populist actors make precisely these mistakes. Think about the now-infamous phrase “deplorables” uttered by Hillary Clinton during the campaign. Or, think about how some socialists and Social Democrats in Europe these days seem essentially to be saying to themselves: “The working class simply doesn't like foreigners nowadays, as the success of right-wing populists demonstrates. Nothing we can do about it.”

Still, is there not something to the notion of a populist wave—even if it might be receding for the moment? In fact, such an image has always been deeply misleading. After all, Nigel Farage did not bring about Brexit all by himself. He needed the help of established conservatives, such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove (who both now serve in Theresa May's cabinet). Trump did not become president as the candidate of a grassroots protest movement of an angry white working class. He represented a very established party and needed the blessing of former Republican heavyweights such as Rudy Giuliani and New Gingrich. What happened on November 8 was not a free-

² This is not to say there is no “demand” for populism among citizens at all. As Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have pointed out in their seminal writings on populism, social scientists have paid too little attention to the question of “supply” and “demand” of populism. My point is simply that such a demand is not somehow objectively given. See Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

standing triumph for populism, but a confirmation of how partisan US politics has become: [90 percent](#) of self-identified Republicans voted for Trump; they clearly could not fathom voting for a Democrat, even if many Republicans in surveys registered deep doubts about candidate Trump. To this day, no right-wing populist has come to power in Western Europe or North America without the collaboration of established conservative elites.

Conservatism and right-wing populism: Collaboration, condoning, copying

After the Dutch and the French elections, many observers were quick to declare a “post-populist moment.” Such a perspective fails to see the distinction between populism as a claim to a moral monopoly on representing the real people and particular policy ideas that have an affinity with right-wing populism—think of restrictions on immigration—but which are not populist as such. In the Netherlands, Wilders, a populist, did worse than expected. However, his mainstream opponent, center-right Prime Minister Mark Rutte, adopted Wilders-style rhetoric—for example, [telling immigrants](#) they should leave the country if they do not want to behave “normally.”

Rutte has not become a populist—he is not claiming to be the only representative of the authentic Dutch people. But, political culture is shifting to the right, without any kind of proper democratic authorization by citizens. Rather than seeing a post-populist moment, we might be witnessing populist policies winning, even though populist candidates are nominally losing. Conservatives, rather than officially collaborating with them, are now simply copying their ideas. This dynamic was also evident in the campaign of Theresa May who bet that she could destroy Farage’s UK Independence Party by imitating it.

Finally, apart from collaboration or copying, there is another option for conservatives to effectively condone right-wing populism. The European People’s Party (EPP), the very mainstream supranational party family of Christian Democrats and moderate conservatives, has effectively protected Viktor Orbán, the right-wing populist prime minister of Hungary, from outside criticism. Orbán has been the pioneer of populism in power in Europe, but he could never have built his (by now in many ways) authoritarian

regime without the de facto shelter provided by the EPP. Again, it is not that EPP members have become populists themselves—far from it. But strategic choices—mostly to do with wanting to keep the EPP the largest party in the European Parliament—have made conservatives the enablers of right-wing populism.

In this context it is also worth remembering a recent election where conservatives decided against collaborating with populists. Arguably, the whole image of an unstoppable wave had already been called into question empirically with one counter-example. In Austria, where the victory of far-right populist Norbert Hofer had been widely predicted last December, a Green politician, Alexander Van der Bellen, carried the day instead. Many conservative politicians explicitly came out against Hofer; this was especially true for local mayors and other provincial heavyweights who had credibility among rural Austrians, which Green “bobo” leaders dropping in from Vienna clearly could not have mustered. Contrary to an emerging conventional wisdom, a complete split between the countryside voting populist and cities committing to cosmopolitan liberalism is not inevitable.

Anxieties about what exactly?

As Daniel Ziblatt has argued, the consolidation of democracies in Europe depended crucially on the behavior of conservative elites.³ During the interwar period, they opted for working with authoritarian and even fascist parties—in many places democracy died as a consequence. After the war, they chose to stick to the rules of the democratic game even if core conservative interests were not faring well. We do not live in anything comparable to the interwar period and today’s populists are not fascists—but the lesson still holds that the destiny of democracy is as much a matter of the choices of established elites as insurgent outsiders. As Larry Bartels [has pointed out](#), it is also empirically highly dubious even to assume an increase (let alone a “tsunami”) of right-wing populist sentiment; what can be shown, though, is that both political entrepreneurs and more established actors have decided either to defuse or mobilize and exploit such sentiments over time. We must hold accountable elites who

³ Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

collaborate with populists, copy their ideas or effectively condone their conduct and shield them from criticism.

Rejecting the image of the irresistible populist wave does not mean that we should conclude that anxieties about democracy are necessarily exaggerated. We should be cautious, however, not to allow certain anxieties—especially when they become linked to “ordinary people” and their allegedly unquenchable desire for populism—to frame our political challenges the wrong way. One important research question is why and how some conservatives have changed their stance. Presumably conservatives today are no more opportunistic, or less morally inhibited than conservatives were twenty or, for that matter, fifty years ago. Or, are they?

This essay is partly based on my book [What is Populism?](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) as well as “[How Populist Win When They Lose](#),” published on June 15, 2017, in *Project Syndicate*, and “[Populists Cannot Win on Their Own](#),” published in *Financial Times* on February 8, 2017.