

The Populist-Nationalist Rebellion: Challenge to Transatlantic Democracy

John Shattuck

Executive Summary

- > The United States and the European Union are confronted today by a surge of populist nationalism driven by rebellion against governing elites. This presents multiple challenges to transatlantic democracy.
- > The rise of economic globalization and a collision of social values since the end of the Cold War has produced widespread anxiety, economic disruption and a corrosive politics of fear. This has led to economic rebellion by people left behind by globalization, from which elites have disproportionately benefited, and social and cultural rebellion by national and ethnic majorities feeling threatened by minorities, immigration and European integration promoted by governing elites.
- > A prime example of these trends is Hungary, which has become a European laboratory for populist nationalism. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's soft authoritarianism is based on populist-nationalist manipulation, and his success has made him the strongman of the far right on both sides of the Atlantic. Similar populist-nationalist movements emerged around Brexit in the UK and the Tea Party in the US, exacerbating centrifugal forces in the EU and leading to the election of Donald Trump in the US.
- > Democratic institutions in the US and the EU – the electoral process, the media, the courts, law enforcement, civil service and above all, civil society – are potential sources of democratic resilience. The dangers democracy faces today can in fact stimulate its revival if populist-nationalist forces and the broader civil society are able to work together in a movement for economic fairness and democratic renewal.

The US and the European Union (EU) are confronted today by a surge of populist nationalism that presents multiple challenges to transatlantic democracy. Populism is a form of grassroots rebellion against governing elites with a long history and complex relationship to democracy, as illustrated by two historical examples, the rebellions in colonial America and post-1989 Czechoslovakia, both of which led to democratic governments, and two contrary contemporary examples, in the US and Hungary, which have gone in the opposite direction.

This policy brief looks into the causes of the current wave of populist-nationalist rebellion, the challenges it presents for transatlantic democracy and the potential for democratic resilience on both sides of the Atlantic.

Causes

Clashing forces were set in motion by the Fall of the Berlin Wall. First were the forces of integration – the falling of all kinds of borders, from the collapse of the Iron Curtain, to the spread of economic and cultural globalization, the rise of a communications revolution, the integration of Eastern and Western Europe, the growth of democracy and the market economy, and the expansion of the European Union and NATO -- all leading to what Francis Fukuyama (1989) optimistically called at the time, “the end of history”.

But equally powerful were the forces of disintegration – the dark side of globalization, including the movement of industries overseas and the loss of jobs and income, the financial crises, bank bailouts and growing economic inequality, 9/11 and the major terrorist attacks in Europe and the US, the rise of ethnic conflict and genocide and the collapse of countries like Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as well as mass migration from failed states in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America – all leading to populist-nationalist political movements in Hungary, Poland, Italy, the United Kingdom, the US and other countries.

What happened when the forces of integration and disintegration collided? An ongoing cataclysm produced mass uncertainty, social anxiety and economic disruption, leading to a corrosive anti-democratic politics of fear.

This anti-democracy disease has attacked core elements of democratic governance: free and fair elections, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, minority rights, civil liberties, checks and balances against concentrations of power, and public goods like health, education and welfare. These are safeguards against tyranny, and were among the products of the rebellions in America in 1775 and Czechoslovakia in 1989.

Today, many people on both sides of the Atlantic do not believe that democracy is working for them. Discontent has been building for years. In 2014 a European Commission poll found that 68% of Europeans distrusted their democratic leaders and governments – up from only 25% in 2002. A Gallup poll in the same year showed almost identical results: 65% of Americans were dissatisfied, up from 21% in 2002.

These polls reflected anger at political and economic elites who were promoting the forces of integration in both Europe and the US. In Europe an elite consensus formed after 1989 around three ideas: EU integration, neo-liberal market economics and multi-ethnic diversity. This created the image of Europe as technocratic, corporate and cosmopolitan. Two decades later many average Europeans could not relate to this image. They felt buffeted by the forces of disintegration, especially after the financial and economic crises after 2008, which created economic hard times, and the migration crisis of 2015, which produced cultural and demographic anxiety.

Forms of populist rebellion

The forces of disintegration led to two forms of populist rebellion in Europe and similar outrage in the US. First, there was economic rebellion by people left behind by the loss of jobs, stagnating middle-class incomes, austerity programmes and cuts in social welfare, all of which resulted from the forces of integration and globalization from which the elites were disproportionately benefiting. Second, there was a social and cultural rebellion by ethnic majorities feeling threatened by minorities and outsiders and the forces of European integration which the governing elites were promoting.

These rebellions were rooted in reactions to the major social and economic revolutions of our time. First was the market revolution, which had promised to stimulate eco-

nomical growth through deregulation, but drastically reduced the social safety net by defunding government programmes and producing growing inequality. Second was the civil rights revolution, which had strengthened democracy by broadening the participation of previously excluded groups, especially women and minorities, but stimulated a counterrevolution by previously dominant majorities. Third was the digital revolution, which had created a vast increase in communication, but also led to the rise of social media echo chambers and facilitated the spread of disinformation.

The reactions to these three revolutions fundamentally altered the playing field of democracy. Market deregulation led to the loss of shared benefits of economic growth and growing inequality between the top 10% and everyone else. Backlash against the civil rights movement led to a loss of social solidarity and the rise of a new climate of racism. And the explosive growth of social media led to the loss of common narratives based on fact and truth.

Out of all this came a deep fear of demographic change by people feeling left behind, which fueled the far-right reactionary politics in the US and the EU. Some whites, especially white men, felt threatened by the racial and cultural diversity they believed was being imposed on them by a distant and oppressive elite. Former political majorities feared their displacement by newly empowered minorities. In the EU, the migration crisis was depicted by right-wing nationalists like Viktor Orbán as a threat to national and European identity. In the US, the rising political strength of minority voters sparked campaigns to suppress the minority vote. The huge impact and high stakes of these demographic fears have been succinctly summarized by Danielle Allen of Harvard: “The world has never built a multi-ethnic democracy in which no one ethnic group is in the majority”.

Examples on both sides of the Atlantic: Hungary and the US

A prime example of these trends is Hungary, a contemporary European laboratory for populist nationalism. The financial crisis hit Hungarians harder than many other Europeans. After the crisis many felt they were no better off than they had been under communism, especially in the countryside where 70% of Hungarians live. Hungary has been the targets of invasion and outside domination for centuries – by Mongols, Turks, Russians, Austrians, Germans and Soviets. Hungarians had no real experience with democracy before 1989, and civil society was weak and stunted by the long history of authoritarian rule. This set the stage for a populist-nationalist opportunist, and in walked Viktor Orbán.

Orbán fanned the flames of discontent by playing to Hungary's victim mentality. He attacked Brussels as "the new Moscow". He warned Hungarians that Middle East migrants were "a threat to Christian civilization". In 2010, he campaigned on the now familiar slogan, "make Hungary great again," and promised Hungarians that he would rescue them from Brussels, bankers and socialist holdovers from the old regime.

Most of all, Orbán created a new model of government that he called "illiberal democracy", using democratic elections to undermine democratic institutions. After the elections, his party set out to use its parliamentary supermajority to rewrite the Hungarian constitution and eliminate democratic checks and balances. He subverted an independent judiciary by packing the courts, limiting their jurisdiction and forcing judges to retire. He took over an independent media by using political and financial pressure, regulation and disinformation. He attacked civil society by accusing NGOs of being foreign agents, hitting them with heavy fines, taxes and restrictions. He controlled universities by cutting their funding and overseeing their curricula, and in the case of an international privately funded university like the Central European University (CEU), by using the tools of regulatory repression to make it impossible for CEU to issue US-accredited degrees in Hungary.

The durability of Orbán's "illiberal democracy" – he has now held office for nine years in his second time as Prime Minister – has made him the strong-man of the far right on both sides of the Atlantic. The former Trump presidential advisor Steve Bannon has called him "Trump before there was Trump". Orbán is particularly dangerous as a soft authoritarian whose political power is based on manipulation and does not depend on violence, torture or the jailing of opponents. In this way, the Orbán model is different from fascism, but in other ways it is similar because it stirs up populist fears by using racist and anti-Semitic propaganda, like the billboard campaign against George Soros that depicts him as a wealthy "foreign manipulator" with slogans reminiscent of anti-Semitic dog whistles.

How does this compare with what's going on elsewhere in Europe and in the US? The same fears and anxieties and anger at distant elites have sparked populist-nationalist movements like Brexit and the Tea Party in the US. Brexit has led to extended political chaos in the UK, and the Tea Party Movement has led to the election of Donald Trump. Trump and Orbán have much in common.

There are three models of the Trump presidency, each similar to Orbán's anti-democratic brand. First is the authoritarian model: the President assaults pluralist institutions like the media, which he calls "the enemy of the people", through the blatant use of lying and disinformation

against fact-based reporting that he attacks as "fake news". Second is the anti-government model: the Trump presidency is tearing down the administrative state by deregulation, especially on economic and environmental issues, and dismantling the professional civil service. Third is the polarization model, which involves appealing to populist fear by stimulating racism, smearing opponents and destroying the norms of democratic governance.

Potential sources of resilience

History shows that democracy can be resilient. In the US, bipartisan opposition has stopped power grabs by both Democratic and Republican presidents, as three modern examples demonstrate. Franklin Roosevelt's infamous scheme to expand the Supreme Court was stopped by Congress and the public. Richard Nixon's notorious Watergate crimes and cover-up were stopped by the press, the courts, the Congress and the public. And George W. Bush's illegal use of torture in the "war on terror" was stopped by the courts and the Congress.

In a 2018 study, "Trump's First Year: How Resilient is Democracy in the US?" I reviewed nine institutions that make up the checks and balances of American democracy (Shattuck, Watson & McDole 2018). These included the media, the federal judiciary, law enforcement, the civil service, the electoral process, the Congress, presidential norms, state and local government and civil society. The study found that while all of these institutions had come under attack by the Trump presidency, some of them showed resilience in resisting presidential abuses of power during Trump's first year. The greatest resistance came from state and local government and civil society. Lagging behind were the media, federal law enforcement, the federal judiciary, the electoral process and the civil service, all of which were struggling but still resistant. The greatest damage to democracy was done by Trump's attacks on presidential norms and the Republican congressional majority's facilitation of Trump's abuses.

Last fall's midterm elections demonstrated that some aspects of American democracy continue to be resilient in Trump's second year. The elections produced the highest voter turnout in a non-presidential year by minorities and younger voters, despite an ongoing campaign of voter suppression and gerrymandering by Republicans fearing demographic change and the rise of new groups of voters, especially minorities, as documented in a March 2019 report, "The War on Voting Rights" (Shattuck, Huang & Thoreson-Green 2019). The new Congress is no longer controlled by one party, and can, at least theoretically, act as a check on presidential power.

However, a new test for democracy is ahead: now that the investigation of the Trump presidency conducted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller is over, it will be up to the Congress and the public to determine what to do about Trump's documented abuses of power. Political polarization will increase, and the President is stepping up his attacks on the media, on the checks and balances of democracy, and on democracy itself.

Strengthening checks and balances in a pluralist democracy

A wide variety of strategies can be employed to strengthen checks and balances in a pluralist democracy. The following recommendations focus on the US but are equally applicable to the EU, where populism and nationalism are challenging European integration and democratic values. The question is whether the dangers democracy faces today can stimulate its revival. Five things will have to happen for that to come about.

First, the current wave of populist-nationalist rebellions must be recognized as an authentic reaction to the excesses of globalization and the elites that are promoting it, destroying communities and leaving people behind in dying cities and towns across America and Europe. We may not agree with some of the political views of populists, but we need to listen and understand their demand for recognition and political response.

Second, coalitions will need to be built across political divides, putting aside differences on social issues to connect with voters demanding economic fairness and opportunity on issues like health care, education, taxes and public spending. This kind of inclusive populism – as opposed to the exclusionary racist brand – can break down the polarization on which Trump thrives. We can take inspiration from earlier forms of inclusive populism like the American Farmer-Labor Movement of the late 19th century that brought together urban workers, rural farmers and black sharecroppers, and ultimately led to the Progressive Movement of the early 20th century. Following this example, there is a potential today for a left-right populist coalition on economic fairness and inequality.

Third, defenders of democracy need to vote, and encourage others to vote in the US and in the EU and its member states. Participating in a voter registration campaign in a contested swing state in the US where the presidential election will be decided is among the most important things that can be done to strengthen democracy. Politicians who attack democracy must be punished at the polls. This is what began to happen in the US midterm elections when 40 incumbents who facilitated President Trump's anti-democratic agenda were defeated.

Fourth, the idea that liberal democracy is about negotiation more than confrontation must be revitalized. Without negotiation there is only polarization, gridlock and conflict, which is why people are angry at Washington or Brussels, or their national capitals. Ending polarization must be at the top of the political agenda. It is what the polls say most Americans and Europeans want, and it is what democracy most needs.

Fifth, saving and strengthening democracy must be a patriotic struggle for national survival, not just a liberal political cause. For too long liberals have given up the symbols of patriotism to the right. They need to reclaim the flag to push back the appeal of right-wing identity politics. Patriotism and the defense of constitutional democracy are the same thing. This was the rallying cry of the patriots in Boston who started the American Revolution and the dissidents in Czechoslovakia who led the Velvet Revolution in 1989. It should be the rallying cry for saving democracy today.

Conclusion

It took a long time and much struggle to consolidate constitutional democracy after the early populist rebellions. At the time the US Constitution was written, one of its principal authors, James Madison, described the state of political dysfunction in words that could apply to the state of transatlantic democracy today: "Complaints are everywhere heard that our governments are unstable and oppressive, that the public good is disregarded in the conflict of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided by the superior force of interested and overbearing political powers".

To get out of this crisis, factions had to be harnessed by a system of checks and balances. Democratic norms had to be developed for conflict management and compromise. And when these restraints were destroyed in the US by the Civil War, the Jim Crow Era and the Gilded Age, they had to be rebuilt, spurred on by the Great Depression, two World Wars and the Civil Rights Movement. And when they were overridden by presidents who abused their authority and power, they had to be restored by public outcry and pressure – for example, by calling for the impeachment of Richard Nixon.

What can citizens do today to strengthen their democracy? Democratic discontent on both sides of the Atlantic can be addressed through citizen engagement in the electoral process. The late Speaker of the US House of Representatives Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill famously said that "all politics are local". Democracy begins at home. Local political engagement and voting participation are the building blocks of democratic governance. A European observer of

American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, declared that “the greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than other nations, but in her ability to repair her faults”. It is the task of citizens on both sides of the Atlantic

to repair the faults of their democracies by rekindling the fervor of the political movements out of which they emerged in the first place.

Further Reading

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About the Author

John Shattuck is Professor of Practice in Diplomacy at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University; Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School Carr Center for Human Rights Policy; and Fulbright Specialist at the College of Europe. From 2009 to 2016 he was President of Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Earlier he served as US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; US Ambassador to the Czech Republic; Vice-President for Government Affairs at Harvard University and taught at the Harvard Law School; and CEO of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and chairs the international advisory board of the Center on Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University. His many publications include *Freedom on Fire*, a study of the US response to genocide and crimes against humanity in the 1990s, *Rights of Privacy*, and articles on human rights, democratic governance, foreign affairs, international security and higher education.

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