



POPULISM: TESTING THE RESILIENCE OF TWO GREAT DEMOCRACIES

Sara Dobner

The Rhetoric of Populism

"We will make America great again... We will take our country back ...The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer... I alone can fix it." These are some of former U.S. President Donald Trump slogans that illustrate his populist appeal to Americans feeling alienated.

Across the globe, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, employs similar populist rhetoric, emphasizing national security and accusing critics of elitist conspiracies: *" We are guarding Israel, and we will continue to guard Israel against all threats - terrorist, diplomatic, and otherwise... The left and the media are a single entity. They recruit all their friends, all their people. They brainwash."*

Despite differences in their political contexts, these two prominent leaders have leveraged effective divisive narratives to consolidate power, test institutional boundaries, and redefine democratic governance. They both owe much of their political survival and power to their successful populist tactics to polarize societies and solidify their bases.

Populism has emerged as a significant force in democracies worldwide, challenging traditional norms and institutions. Its appeal lies in offering seemingly simple solutions and easy fixes to complex societal problems, often framing these as battles between the virtuous "ordinary people" and corrupt "elites." Populism simplifies societal frustrations into an emotionally charged "us vs. them" narrative. It thrives during periods of economic inequality, political discontent, or cultural anxiety.

Populism can take various forms. It can be referred to as "left-wing populism" (e.g., Bernie Sanders) that emphasizes economic inequality and critiques capitalism. It can also be referred to as "right-wing populism" (e.g., Donald Trump) that focuses on nationalism and identity. And it can be authoritarian populism (e.g., Viktor Orbán in Hungary; although Netanyahu and Trump also show those tendencies) which undermines democratic norms for strongman rule and shifts to a governance model that has been coined "illiberal democracy".

Populism often resonates with those disillusioned by globalization, perceived security threats, or cultural shifts. It often gains traction during crises by promising to return the power to the people. However, these simplistic solutions can erode institutions and exacerbate divisions.

Populism's historical roots range from the U.S. 19th century Populist Party to 21st century leaders like Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. Its modern resurgence underscores systemic failures (e.g., Venezuela), making it vital for democracies to address inequality and rebuild trust to minimize the potential appeal of populist leaders.

Both Trump and Netanyahu share notable populist characteristics. Each delegitimizes their opponents and portrays their political battles as struggles between us - “the people” and them – the corrupt elite. This divisive narrative polarizes their respective societies. In Israel, Netanyahu’s critics are dismissed as left-wing, traitors, Israel-haters and the corrupt elite, while he portrays legal investigations and corruption charges against him as a biased “witch hunt” by elites. He has blamed the army, intelligence, secret service, and media for Israel’s recent crises, intensifying divisions. These tactics have created unprecedented polarization, making constructive dialogue and national unity increasingly difficult. In the United States, Trump has called Mexican migrants criminals and rapists during his first presidential run, called the “Media” the “Enemy of the People”, and refused to concede the 2020 election claiming widespread voter fraud following his loss which led to a dangerous divisive narrative.

Both leaders present themselves as indispensable, strong leaders, using economic and cultural discontent (by Trump) and existential security threats (by Netanyahu) to justify their policies. Like many populist leaders, both Trump and Netanyahu are charismatic characters who position themselves as champions of “the people”.

They both use anti-institutional rhetoric to delegitimize courts, media, and democratic watchdogs, claiming these entities are biased or hostile to their leadership. Both have capitalized on alternative media channels to bypass critical coverage while discrediting mainstream outlets. And they both built opportunistic coalitions. While Trump aligned with evangelical conservatives, Netanyahu partnered with extreme-right factions and non-Zionist religious parties to secure power. To complete the parallels, both leaders, Netanyahu and Trump, have been facing significant legal challenges that are, to some extent, the result of their perception that they are the country and thus they can do no wrong. They have skillfully used these legal challenges to their political advantage, with each claiming the accusations against them are politically motivated attacks on the people and their mandates.

Populism Fueled by Discontent

Modern populism has gained momentum through a combination of economic, political, cultural, and technological factors. Economic inequality and globalization have caused stagnant wages and widened wealth gaps, leading to frustration among large segments of the population. While global trade and outsourcing have benefited urban centers and skilled workers, they have also resulted in loss of good paying jobs for the less educated population, creating divisions that populists exploit by blaming elites or foreign competition. Political discontent has further fueled this rise, as alienation from traditional politics, often seen as disconnected or corrupt, has driven support for “outsider” figures like Donald Trump, who appeal to those feeling ignored by the establishment. Similarly, in Israel Netanyahu generally appeals to the lower socio-economic groups of the population. However, security threats in Israel, such as terrorism and international biases, also resonate strongly with Israeli voters and invoke nationalistic sentiment, especially among those who tend to support Netanyahu. In this context, Netanyahu has positioned himself successfully as the protector of Israel.

Global and regional trends, such as illegal immigration crises, energize nationalist populism, with leaders leveraging public anxieties for support. Cultural trends, including the perception that "woke culture" imposes elite-driven changes on values and traditions, have bolstered populist movements positioning themselves as defenders of traditional norms. Technological advancements, particularly social media, amplify divisive rhetoric and emotional narratives. Populist leaders capitalize on these platforms to frame mainstream media as biased while presenting themselves as authentic representatives of the people. These interconnected dynamics have created an environment where populism thrives, gaining traction worldwide.

Dangers of Populism

Populism poses significant threats to democracy by undermining essential norms and institutions. It erodes checks and balances, as seen with Trump testing constitutional boundaries in the United States and Netanyahu's judicial reforms in Israel. By portraying the judicial "reforms" as a straightforward solution to "restore balance" between branches of government, and by portraying the judiciary as an overreaching, elitist institution, he seeks to limit the judiciary's independence. Further, he would like to allow parliamentary overrides of judicial decisions, thereby threatening the separation of powers fundamental to democracy.

Corruption and cronyism are also exacerbated under populist leadership, with both Trump and Netanyahu prioritizing loyalty over merit in their appointments and fostering nepotism. Populism often undermines minority protections, redefining democracy as granting absolute power to the majority, often at the expense of protecting minority rights. This undermines one of the justice system's key roles in a liberal democracy: safeguarding the rights and freedoms of all citizens, including minority groups.

Additionally, economic instability can arise from short-term populist policies; for instance, Netanyahu's subsidies for ultra-Orthodox communities, without requiring workforce integration or performing military service, strain Israel's resources and hinder productivity. These dynamics collectively destabilize the foundations of liberal democracy, making it more susceptible to authoritarianism and division.

Countering Populism

The resilience of democracy in both the United States and Israel against populism depends on their institutional frameworks, political cultures, and how well democratic norms are upheld. Each country faces its own unique challenges and strengths when dealing with populist threats.

In the U.S., a robust system of checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches has helped curb populist leaders like Donald Trump when they sought to expand executive authority beyond legal limits. Additionally, the country's federal structure and long-standing constitutional protections offer further safeguards. By contrast, Israel's democratic system relies entirely on the court system and the Attorney General (acting also as the

Government's Legal Adviser) to serve as a counterweight to the majority coalition. Netanyahu aims to dilute the power of these two safeguards which, if successful, will leave Israel with no checks and balances. Moreover, Israel's parliamentary coalition system is inherently more susceptible to manipulation by populist factions within its governing alliances, where small minority groups can exert significant, disproportionate power, sometimes pushing policies that challenge democratic norms. This vulnerability is amplified under Netanyahu's leadership, where coalition partners have advanced agendas that critics argue undermine Israel's democratic framework.

Given Israel's limited system of institutional checks and balances, the liberal segment of its population has played a critical role in compensating for this gap, especially before October 7. During that time, these citizens actively engaged in shaping the discourse about Israel's democratic future. Their efforts demonstrated remarkable passion, resilience, and creativity, allowing them to mount an effective resistance to Netanyahu's populist judicial reforms. This grassroots activism became a vital counterbalance, reinforcing democratic norms in the absence of strong institutional safeguards. However, since October 7, the traumatized Israeli public has been struggling to keep the same level of commitment to the protest movement.

Both Israel and the United States have strong media and civil society traditions, which play a crucial role in pushing back against populism. However, Netanyahu's coalition has been seeking to limit access to independent journalism, favoring supportive outlets like Channel 14, and significantly curtailing press conferences and interviews.

Populism thrives in environments where dissatisfaction with traditional politics, economic inequality, and cultural shifts create a divide between the "elite" and "the people." Its rise is fueled by real grievances - economic hardship, security concerns, cultural anxiety, and frustration with out-of-touch elites. People are drawn to populism because they believe that it directly addresses issues that traditional politics often ignore or fail to resolve.

Conclusions and challenges for the future

The future of populism depends on how well traditional political systems can address these underlying problems. Countering populism requires strategies like strengthening institutions to ensure the independence of courts, legislatures, and media; addressing root causes such as economic inequality, political corruption, and cultural marginalization to reduce its appeal; promoting civic engagement to educate citizens about democratic values and encourage critical thinking; and fostering unity through inclusive narratives and cross-cultural dialogue to bridge societal divisions.

Populism tests the resilience of democracies by exploiting grievances and undermining institutions. While its rise signals failures in traditional governance, it can serve as a wake-up call for elites to address the genuine public grievances; its dangers lie in its potential to erode democratic norms, deepen societal divides, and prioritize power over accountability and effective governance. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to address the root causes of populist movements

- such as inequality, corruption, and radical changes in cultural norms - while ensuring that democratic values and institutions remain strong and protected. The futures of the U.S. and Israel depend on their ability to adapt, protect democratic values, and resist populist overreach, ensuring that the principles of democracy endure.

The writer is an Israeli-Canadian lay leader in the Toronto Jewish Community.

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