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Europe's new class war

Why the populist wave spreading across the continent might be just the kick democracy needs

These are difficult times for democrats. The apparently relentless rise of populism as marked by the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote in the UK, the march of anti-establishment forces that seem to threaten a tolerant democratic culture. Why has all of this come about and what can democrats do to save us from what seems an almost inevitable decline into authoritarian and illiberal politics?

The first point to note is that, notwithstanding the extraordinary events of 2016, this is a crisis that has been brewing for some decades. The relevant data says that whilst our support for democracy and democratic institutions is strong, our level of engagement with electoral politics is in serious decline. We vote less; we are turning our backs on political parties; we trust politicians less and our interest in mainstream parliamentary politics is in apparently inexorable decline. Stories of scandals, corruption and nepotism delivered by a 24/7 news media, and reinforced by Twitter, Facebook et al have made us resentful about our own powerlessness in the face of a rapidly changing world.

So there is much to be worried about. We are in the grip of collective gloom and inertia, as populist forces make the running. Yet before despondency sets in, we should remember that populism doesn't mean we've collectively given up on democracy or democratic institutions. Indeed, intense scrutiny of recent events on social media should reassure us that, whilst we may not like the outcomes, we are not indifferent to them. After some decades of politics being seen by many as "boring" or inconsequential, people are now seeing the importance of engaging politically to make their feelings known.

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It would be a mistake to see this populist moment in purely negative terms. Rather, the crisis in our faith in the capacity of our politicians to represent us can be a moment for reflecting on what "real" democracy could look like. Perhaps we've become too complacent, too

ready to sit back and watch our representatives represent, as opposed to asserting our democratic right to participate in politics.

It was this desire to bring politics to the people that stirred the Spanish into one of the most extraordinary democratic events of recent decades, what became known as #15M, standing for May 15 2011. Under the banner of *Real Democracy Ya,* millions of Spanish citizens occupied towns and squares across the country. The collective sense of indignation brought about an "us vs them" gesture of frustration and rage with elites.

This shared feeling has given rise to a period of intense political experimentation. New parties and initiatives have sprung up, in turn unsettling the two party system that has dominated Spanish politics for the past half century. At a local level, "street" figures Ada Colau and Manuela Carmena - the repsective mayors of Barcelona and Madrid - have sought to disrupt the elites' grip on power by setting up political assemblies and Internet forums where ordinary citizens hold sway.

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It's too early to gauge how effectively such measures can overcome the profound alienation and sense of betrayal felt by voters; but the point is that populism doesn't necessarily equate to a politics of despair and division. It can also be a platform for exploring ways to address the growing chasm between those who exercise power and those subject to it.

The lesson from Spain is less the ubiquity of voters' indignation, but the ease with which such sentiments can be translated into concrete action. The social media revolution means it has never been so easy to share our feelings, organise events, mobilise groups and become political actors in our own right. Political campaigning can be done on the cheap, leading to the creation of new, popular parties such as Podemos in Spain, the Alternative in Denmark, the Pirates in Iceland, and popular local leaders who can bridge the gap between the government and those opposed to its policies.

Perhaps then we can harness this populist movement to rethink how democracy works and for whom. We need this crisis to remind ourselves of what is at stake. Citizens have to engage in the task of renewing democracy. We can no longer expect the elites to do it for us.



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