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The People vs. Democracy?

For liberals, only irrational and ill-informed voters could opt for Trump, Brexit or Italy's Five Star Movement. If so, then logic dictates voters need less influence, not more

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The election result in Italy, where populists and far-right parties topped the polls, following the twin disasters of Brexit in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump's election in the United States, seems certain to harden a common liberal belief: the people brought these calamities on themselves. 'Ordinary citizens' according to this view, are so irrational and ill-informed that they make terrible choices. Some go a step further and attribute to them coherent preferences for anti-democratic leaders. Indeed, a new book asserts that the problem is one of The People vs. Democracy.

Such diagnoses are deeply mistaken. By focusing on individual citizens' beliefs, they miss the structural reasons for today's threats to democracy. As a result, they are also bound to yield the wrong practical lessons. If one really believes voters are incompetent or illiberal, the obvious next step is to take even more decision-making power away from them. But, rather than retreating to technocracy, we should tackle the specific structural problems that have aided the triumph of populist politicians.

There is plenty of evidence that citizens are not as well informed as democratic theory would like them to be. Especially in the US, political scientists have repeatedly shown that a realistic view of the people diverges drastically from civics textbook wisdom. But elections are neither citizenship tests nor exams in master's programmes in public administration. Voters do not need detailed knowledge and preferences on every policy question; broad orientations and the capacity to take cues from trusted authorities – politicians, journalists, or, God forbid, experts – can be enough.

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The problem starts when citizens view every issue purely as a matter of partisan identity, so that the credibility of climate science, for

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example, depends on whether one is a Republican or a Democrat. It gets worse when partisan identity becomes so strong that no arguments from or about the legitimacy of the other side ever get through.

Trump was not elected as the candidate of a grassroots movement of globalisation's angry white losers, but as the leader of an establishment party. Long before Trump, that party – and its cheerleaders in the right-wing media – had started to demonise its opponents and effectively told its followers that they could never opt for 'European-style socialists' and other un-American abominations under any circumstances. Thus, Republicans who readily admitted that Trump was not qualified to be president voted for him anyway.

In the US, polarisation is not an objective reflection of given cultural differences; it has at least partly been a conscious elite project to divide the country for political advantage and sometimes even personal profit. After all, polarisation is also big business, as a quick look at the earnings of major figures on Fox News and talk radio can confirm.

Observers who claim that Europe is now split between a liberal-democratic West and an East where deeply illiberal electorates have brought populists to power make the same mistake of explaining all political outcomes in terms of culture. They, too, attribute authoritarian outcomes to what voters allegedly 'really wanted.'

But recall the crucial elections in Hungary in 2010 and Poland in 2015: as my colleague Kim Lane Scheppele has pointed out, voters then did exactly what democratic theory told them they should do in a two-party system. In Hungary, a dismal economic record and corruption discredited the major left party, so it was time to vote for the other side. In Poland, the center-right Civic Platform had an excellent economic record but was widely perceived as having become complacent after many years in power.

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In 2010, Viktor Orbán did not campaign on a promise to draft a new constitution, weaken checks and balances, and radically reduce media pluralism. Instead, he presented himself as a competent mainstream Christian Democrat. In Poland, the Law and Justice (PiS) party went out of its way to stress its character as a reasonable conservative party which simply wanted to provide more benefits to families

with children.

Many people remembered the dismal, polarising performance of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński as prime minister from 2006 to 2007. But Kaczyński kept out of the limelight, and let someone else lead the government. Even today, he is nominally a simple member of the Sejm (parliament) – even if he controls the administration from behind the scenes.

Once in power, populists like Orbán have engaged in all-out cultural warfare. In the name of 'unifying the nation,' they have divided their societies, betting that, after getting most media under their control, they can manipulate public opinion to remain in power.

As in the US, the imperative is not to lament people's authoritarian tendencies, but to tackle the structural problems that have enabled populists to do well. For example, not everything populists say about those 'left behind' is wrong; nor is it always a mistake to suspect that parts of the state have been captured by special interests. But these ground-level grievances always need to be articulated and represented with the help of media and political parties. It is media and party systems that are visibly failing in many countries and require systematic re-building.

To be sure, more and better civic education also would help. Such education has been declining for decades, because it does not easily fit curricula that rely heavily on standardised testing. If done properly, it is also very time-consuming and thus detracts from subjects that appear more useful in the short run, in the sense that they are supposed to contribute more directly to economic success. Civic education can be crucial in helping young people to manage disagreements and recognise other citizens as legitimate opponents in democratic conflicts. Cultural differences will not and should not disappear, but if the people themselves have learned to live with them, populists will not succeed in using them as political weapons.

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