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Against left-wing populism

Why a 'smart', left-wing populist campaign is not the right way to beat Trump in 2020

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The New York Times columnist David Leonhardt sees 'economic populism' as the Democratic Party's most promising strategy to defeat incumbent US President Donald Trump in 2020. His explanation sounds agreeable: in the US, 'real populism' is about 'fighting for the little guy and gal.' These tend toward populism anyways.

Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and Donald Trump all did well as 'fighters for the workers' – at least during their electoral campaigns and at the ballot box. Yet while Trump had to violate Republican dogma regarding economic and social policy to present this image, the Democrats would be able to count on the majority of American voters to follow them, even if their conservative values and xenophobic positions would tilt them in another direction.

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Does this sound too good to be true? It is. It's also dangerous. But this is not really about the conceit that most voters support the Democrat' economic and social policies: time and again, election results show that approval gets overshadowed by other issues – abortion, gay marriage, criminality, drugs and gun possession. Campaign strategists pay big bucks for studies on voting patterns, but interests, orders of preference and the resulting political actions arise in complex, unpredictable ways. And that's just fine: politicians and parties are forced to make an effort to convince the electorate of themselves and their positions.

The larger problem of 'economic populism' is its embrace of populism as a political strategy. Leonhardt may use the term light-heartedly because of American history. The 19th-century 'Populist Party', which inspired

the modern use of 'populism', was a short-lived progressive force that sought to mobilise small farmers and industrial workers against the power of big business and monopolies. Since it merged soon enough with the Democratic Party, Leonhardt's argument makes sense. Americans have never experienced the horror of fascism and Nazism at home. Their system of 'checks and balances' has always made it possible to contain even the most hateful troublemakers.

The case against populism

However, similar to Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe's 'left-wing populism', economic populism wants to use majority willpower to sweep away the procedural hurdles that democracies face in furthering progressive reforms. All the various social injustices, scandalous gap in incomes and wealth, persistent gender disparities, tax evaders and many other glaring problems in modern societies make such impatience with 'checks and balances' quite understandable. Wouldn't the majority– the 99 per cent, the wage and salary earners and their families – support this anways? As mentioned before: their interests are only coherent in the imagination of political strategists.

Even when populism is not filled with hate and does not seek to exclude minorities – as the right-wing version does – it relies on opposing an imagined 'we' with an imagined 'them'. But members of the remaining '1 per cent' are also citizens whose interests must be taken into account in a pluralistic society and democracy. To protect minorities from the 'tyranny of the majority' the fathers of the US constitution designed a political system that makes it difficult to achieve radical changes just by passing laws.

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Doubtlessly, they also protected the interests of the economic elite (that most of them were part of) and, out of self-interest or naivety, they wildly over-estimated the elites' altruism. But the value of institutional protection of minorities – political minorities in this case – always becomes obvious when it's lacking or overwhelmed by emotions and fears. Brexit and its still incalculable consequences are just the latest example.

Fundamentally, I'm not arguing against the populist strategists' favourite instrument – direct democracy. However, I am warning about entrusting direct democracy to solve the big, complex issues that are existential for minorities. To prevent well-balanced political powers and strategically

placed veto players benefitting from the 'tyranny of the majority', political parties and citizens must persevere in the painstaking political process and build majorities on various positions, negotiate, accept compromise and put up with defeat.

Again: faced with all the world's injustices, there's plenty of reason to be impatient. Nevertheless, the arduous democratic process of constitutional systems that are not damaged – like those in Poland, Hungary and Turkey – is precious and must be protected from left-wing economic populism. Progressive politicians must patiently convince people of their programmes and live with their contradictory interests and preferences – especially in the US. There's no such thing as a 'smart populist campaign'.



Thomas Greven
Berlin

Dr. Thomas Greven is Adjunct Professor of political science ('Privatdozent') at Freie Universität Berlin and an independent author and political consultant. An expert in US politics and foreign policy, he teaches at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies.