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DEMOCRACY'S FINAL ACT?

FREELY CHOOSING RIGHT WING POPULISM

Shawn W. Rosenberg

SINCE World War II democratic governance flourished and expanded its reach. Now this process has stalled and is even reversing in many countries of the West, not to mention further afield. Momentum appears to be with populist—particularly right wing populist—alternatives to democratic governance. This raises serious concerns about the current wellbeing and future prospects of democracy.

Right wing populism challenges the basic tenets of liberal democracy, including its emphasis on collaborative decisionmaking, the rule of law, and individual and minority rights. I argue that the rise of right wing populism is not the result of fluctuating circumstances, such as economic recession, income inequality, or migration, nor can it be regarded as a momentary retreat in the progress toward ever greater democratization.

Instead I suggest populism reflects a structural weakness inherent in demo-

cratic governance itself. The critical factor is the inability of most individuals to meet the demands of citizenship in contemporary, multicultural democracies. I argue that individuals typically do not have the cognitive or emotional capacities required. As their opportunities for democratic participation broaden and deepen, they are therefore increasingly required to address a complex political reality in terms that they cannot adequately understand. The result is confusion, discomfort, and alienation.

Populism offers an alternative, less demanding view of politics and society—one that is more readily understood and more emotionally satisfying. Ironically, as the established democracies become more truly democratic, democracy's structural weakness—its citizenry—becomes more consequential: the people's support for democratic governance wanes and democracy becomes more susceptible to the siren

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A desperate battle against human psychology?

call of populism. The freer people are to choose, the more likely it is that they will reject democracy in favor of a populist alternative.

Hence the concern that democracy is likely to devour itself.

WHAT IS RIGHT WING POPULISM

The intellectual roots and underlying logic of right wing populism (RWP) are a contemporary expression of the fascist ideologies of the early twentieth century. The key difference is that RWP emerges in political environments in Europe and North America where a democratic ethos is

well entrenched. Thus it adopts the democratic emphasis of the primacy of the people as expressed in elections and referenda.

Its fascist dimension is retained in the demand for strong leadership coupled with its rejection of or discomfort with the rule of law, free speech, the legal conception of the nation as a polity and its members as citizens, and the rights of individuals and minorities. That said, RWP, like all ideologies, is not assimilated by mass publics (and even the majority of their leaders) as a coherent political vision, but rather as family of political attitudes.

As suggested by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, RWP can be described by examining the political attitudes espoused by right wing populist leaders and parties. In his influential account, Mudde divides these attitudes into three clusters: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism. In its populism, RWP identifies its constituency as “we the people.” The “people” here are ill-defined but generally comprise the entirety of ordinary citizens. The definition is given some clarity by to whom the people are opposed. This is typically the “elite” in political, economic, and intellectual terms.

Right wing populism challenges the basic tenets of liberal democracy, including its emphasis on collaborative decisionmaking, the rule of law, and individual and minority rights.

RWP advocates for the people in their struggle against this elite, characterized as an alien entity that harbors uncommon beliefs and values, exercises unwarranted power over the people and unfairly benefits from the fruits of their labor. The will of the elite stands in opposition to the will of the people. Their power is exercised through their control of democratic processes like elections, dominant political discourses, and core governmental institutions. Thus liberal democracy is regarded as providing the institutional subterfuge for what is in fact oligarchic control.

RWP also incorporates what Mudde calls “nativism” or what is alternatively referred to as “ethno-nationalism.” Here the people, as a nation, are given clear, substantive definition. They are distinguished in a variety of concrete ways. These include the specific core beliefs they all hold, the particular behaviors and rituals in which they all engage, the aspects of their physical appearance they share (e.g. race or style of dress) or the origins they have in common (e.g. a history or ancestry). This definition of “who we are” typically also entails a depiction of who we are not. This other fails to share our distinguishing characteristics, is often regarded negatively and is opposed to us as a matter of practice as well as definition.

Constituted in these terms, the ethno-nationalism of RWP readily leads to a competitive view of international relations and an accompanying xenophobia. This typically extends to a rejection of the “aliens within:” immigrants and their descendants who do not share the same ritual practices, religion, race and origins as the national people. As such, RWP rejects the liberal democratic conception of citizenship in which national membership

is defined not by origins, appearance, or behavior, but by legal status.

The third defining component of RWP is its authoritarianism. This has two core aspects. One pertains to its conception of the leadership. Guided by its roots in ideological fascism—the inter-war writings of Giovanni Gentile are representative—and its affinity to the fascist governments of 1930s Germany and Italy, RWP tends to delegate unusual power to its leadership: more specifically, its key leader. This leader embodies of the will of the people, renders it clear for everyone else and executes accordingly. Thus distinctions between the leadership, the people as a whole, and individuals are blurred as their will is joined in a single purpose. The authoritarianism of RWP is also evident in its hierarchical conception of power.

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In this view, society is naturally and necessarily organized in a way that involves a centralization of power at the top and then a top-down delegation of different degrees of power at lower levels. This enables right and effective governance of the nation in pursuit of the collective will. That will is expressed in elections, but once done the initiative and responsibility shifts entirely to the government. From this perspective, democratic institutional arrangements

designed to constrain governmental power are unwarrantedly complex and only serve to obstruct the key leader’s ability to act on behalf of the people.

The foregoing empirical and self-described theoretically ‘thin’ account of populism certainly captures some of RWP’s important features. However it does not illuminate the underlying coherence or logic of right wing populism. Consequently a descriptive account like Mudde’s cannot clarify which aspects of RWP are central and which are peripheral, or which beliefs and practices may be consistent with RWP and which definitely are not. Similarly, it cannot provide a basis for determining whether we should accept that RWP shares some apparent overlap with liberal democracy and is a mere corrective to it, or whether we must recognize that RWP is basically inconsistent with a liberal democratic ethos and constitutes a fundamental rejection of it.

To address this limitation, in the following section I analyze the underlying logic and structure of RWP’s form of governance. Here three levels of political life are examined: the macro level of the cultural and institutional integration, the middle level of communicative practices in the public sphere, and the micro level of defining human nature

and citizenship. Following these, I consider the psychology of how citizens make sense of politics and how the logic of their thinking parallels that of RWP.

RWP POLITICAL CULTURE

First, in right wing populism, the polity is conceptualized categorically, causally, and hierarchically and is understood in concrete, specific terms. As a nation, the polity is understood as a social category: an ethno-national entity that is both defined by and defines the people. The focus is on the specific characteristics deemed to be shared by the individuals who comprise the people. They include the specific actions that the people typically do and should perform, the specific beliefs they typically do and should hold, the specific things they do and should want, and the specific ways in which people typically do and should appear. The nation thus both reflects who the people are and dictates who they should be.

Importantly, the categorical concept of the nation is not only defined internally by what they people are, but also externally by how they differ from other peoples. These others belong to different ethno-national categories and as such share different characteristics than one's own nationals. Internal and external considerations operate in unison to

highlight the essential characteristics of the nation and its people.

A nation is also defined by its trajectory into its future. The focus is on the energy that moves it and the end to which it is directed. In the first regard, the nation's trajectory is understood as an expression of the "popular will:" the needs and aspirations shared by all the people are the nation's first cause. National politics is thus about energy and action oriented to collective realization and satisfaction. National policy and goals are defined accordingly. Partly this involves maintaining the integrity of the people by insuring its members retain the specific characteristics that constitute their nature. It also means insulating the people from the influence (or influx) of foreign influences. Because the nation exists among other nations who are all pursuing their own trajectories, the nation is naturally in a competitive relationship with others. To be secure is to be stronger than others to insure freedom from interference. To do well is to do better than others and at their expense.

Throughout the pursuit of national goals is understood in concrete and particular terms. This includes domestic policies that support the performance of particular practices and beliefs all are

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will:" the needs and aspirations shared by all the people are the nation's first cause. National politics is thus about energy and action oriented to collective realization

deemed to share. This might include appropriate educational practices or policies that limit incursion of aliens and their culture.

Foreign policies are oriented to the specific acts that concretely manifest national strength and/or undermine or weaken the position of other nations. This might extend from the economic or military diminution of other nations and the rejection of international institutions to winning at the Olympics. Throughout the pursuit of national aims not only is a matter of practical considerations, it also is importantly a moral imperative. What contributes or obstructs the national mission is judged accordingly.

Thus, in the populist conception of politics, individual persons have a subordinate status. Rather than being defined in their own individual terms, persons are defined by their categorical status, as members of the nation. They are thus both assumed and encouraged to share certain defining concrete characteristics, practices, and beliefs. Individuality per se is not regarded as significant. Differences between individual members are thus ignored, devalued, and diminished. Similarly, the relationships individuals construct between themselves are disregarded or

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discouraged except insofar as they contribute to the national mission.

The key relationship the individual has is to the nation, which is understood to be symbiotic. The nation is realized in the people and the people are realized in the nation. In the latter regard, individuals are realized insofar as they manifest national characteristics and participate in the national mission. They are thereby defined and valued, recognized, and glorified.

In all of this, the nation—and not the individual—is an end unto itself. This defines the political morality of RWP. The nation, and by implication the "people" that it embodies, is the source of value in political life. Thus what is critical is maintaining the integrity of the nation—its categorical purity—and pursuing the national trajectory.

All political actions, actors, institutions and laws are judged accordingly. And all public claims—whether social, scientific, or journalistic in content—are subject to the same standard. If any act, person, truth claim, law, or institution serves the national will, it is embraced and venerated. If it obstructs that will, it is rejected and vilified.

RWP POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Second, the political state is the categorical manifestation of the people. As such it does not embody a set of individuals, but rather their collective nature. It is tasked with maintaining the integrity of the nation, its national character, and with accomplishing the national mission.

To this end, the state gives expression to the will of the people, but in a way that always entails guidance and control over individuals. In the latter regard, the state is centrally involved in the design of educational institutions and collective political rituals. Where this guidance fails, it also actively polices citizen activity to insure appropriate levels of conformity.

Political organization is hierarchical. This entails a simple, military-like structuring of power. Each level of the hierarchy commands the next level down. The top of the hierarchy is keystone of the state and political life. It gives specific expression of the national will and direction to national action.

Political authority at this highest level is supreme. All other and lower state institutions have a derivative and subordinate status. They accrue their legitimacy and power by virtue of their relation to this highest authority.

At the bottom of the political hierarchy are individual citizens. Their role is defined by their bond to the nation and its leadership. It centers on civic responsibilities that revolve around loyalty to the nation and obedience to the state and its key leader(s). In this context, the political and legal status of individuals is defined more by a set of obligations than one of rights. Deviation is punished, often severely. To reject the authority of the state is to reject the national will and consequently remove oneself from the people.

Populism reflects a structural weakness inherent in democratic governance itself.

The individual thereby loses social and moral status and is treated accordingly. Complementing this political

regulation of individuals from above is a subtle yet powerful alienation of individuals from each other. As members of the nation, individuals are defined by and obligated to the nation and its authority, not to one another. In this context, interpersonal connections and loyalties are discouraged, except insofar as they further the national purpose.

In this politics of collective will and concrete action, power does not have the ambiguous and somewhat negative status accorded to it in democratic governance. Here it is an unsullied good, the very lifeblood of the people, and by implication, its individual members. It is through the exercise

of power as effective action that the national will is expressed and achieved. As such, power is to be embraced, both in its authoritative exercise and in filial submission to it.

Moreover the authoritative and thus legitimate use of power has no limits. In the realization of the individual in the people and the people in the nation, there is no meaningful divide between the social and the political, or the public and the private. The social and the political are united and there is the only the public and what is hidden, always inappropriately, from it. Thus power in the service of the national will may be used ubiquitously and freely.

Of course because RWP emerges in the context of a predominantly democratic system, all of the above emerges as tendencies rather than imperatives. Cultural emphasis is placed on advancing the nation and each individual's obligation to serve that purpose. This is tempered by recognition of the traditional liberal democratic value of individualism. However the associated freedoms are

typically defined in ways that are politically irrelevant and thus do not interfere with the pursuit of national destiny. Thus there is little concern for minor-

The structure of right wing populism also shapes the substance and dynamics of communicative practices in the public sphere. Oriented to maintaining the integrity of the national character and the realization of the national will, these practices provide a means for the state to broadcast authoritative dicta to an accepting followership and for individual citizens to realize their national identity through participation in the mass expression of shared beliefs.

ity rights, a rejection of multiculturalism, and ambivalent attitudes to individual rights.

Similarly the authoritarian and hierarchical understanding of collective organization is tempered by according symbolic value to political institutions of democracy. However there is also recognition of the unworkability of those institutions and the willingness to compromise them when authoritative action for the national good requires it. In this vein institutions such as an independent judiciary, a free press, and the rule of law may be regarded as obstructionist and readily undermined.

COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Third, the structure of right wing populism also shapes the substance and dynamics of communicative practices in the public sphere. Oriented to maintaining the integrity of the

national character and the realization of the national will, these practices provide a means for the state to broadcast authoritative dicta to an accepting followership and for individual citizens to realize their national identity through participation in the mass expression of shared beliefs.

In both aspects, communication is less about reasoned argument or reflection and is more about emotional connection and facilitating action: a means of bonding individuals to the people, the nation and their leadership.

The information that is communicated in this RWP public sphere has a distinctive form. It is about concrete actions, particular statements, and specific actors and groups of actors. These are entities are observable and are regarded as objective. Similarly these entities are linked together and thus understood in observable, objective ways.

On the one hand, they may be linked categorically by the evident characteristics they share. Thus all people who perform the same action (such as enacting

a common ritual), appear the same way (they have the same skin color or wear the same uniform), or share the same origins are linked to one another and understood to be categorically the same.

On the other hand, actions or actors may be linked in a linear causal way. Here the observed contiguity of one actor or action and the action that follows it allows them to be understood as cause and effect. A series of temporally linked specific actions and actors may be combined to form a linear causal chain of cause and effect.

In a social or political context, this chain of causality provides a framework of understanding of the hierarchical structure of power as emanating from a source and filtering

down. The categorical, causal, and hierarchical information/communication structures thus constructed are specific to the particular actors or actions observed. Consequently, understanding is piecemeal or fragmentary.

Information of this kind is constructed in two ways, either through direct experience of the objective facts or

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an accepted account of that experience. "Knowledge" is thus passively received rather than actively constructed. It is learned and internalized. In RWP communicative practice, the authoritative account takes precedence over all other accounts and personal experience. The state is the authoritative source of information about all aspects of collective and personal experience. In this manner, the transmission of information becomes another venue for the exercise of power. Power defines information and information operates to sustain power. The possession of information is also very much a collective activity. For the individuals involved, it therefore has a strongly emotional component. To "know" something is to be joined to all those who also "know" it in the same way.

Structured in this way, the "knowledge" of right wing populism operates in a manner that eliminates, blurs, or reconstitutes certain key distinctions characteristic of the more democratic forms of possessing information ("knowing"). For example, in the RWP conception, subjectivity is folded into the field of what is authoritatively ascertained to be objective. Thus a notion of differing cultural or personal perspectives gives way to the simple distinction

of correct and incorrect beliefs. Democratic concerns for authenticity are reduced to determinations of whether a person is telling the truth or lying.

Similarly, in a right wing populist context, the line between claims of truth (what is the case) and claims of right (what should be the case) are also blurred. Here both are subsumed under

In a right wing populist context, the line between claims of truth (what is the case) and claims of right (what should be the case) are also blurred. Here both are subsumed under the authority of what serves the national will.

the authority of what serves the national will. Like the duality of the meaning of the term "normal" which suggests both what is the case and what should be the case, the authoritative dictates of a nation's leadership describes the world as it is and should be.

The public sphere of right wing populist communication is organized accordingly. It is centralized and hierarchical. Statements of truth and right originate in the authoritative expression of the national will by the leadership. Communicative structures and technologies are organized to communicate those messages through the institutional hierarchy and directly to the citizenry.

Political control is exercised over all of media of mass communication and favors the development of technologies that have a one-to-many

form. In this context, alternative communicative structures are proscribed. Particularly lateral communication between individuals is discouraged except if it entails the rehearsal of authoritatively sanctioned claims and discourses.

The RWP public sphere is also structured so as to create opportunities for individuals to engage in collective expression of the national will. Venues are provided for individuals, through the performance of common rituals and the joint rehearsal of collective truths, to come together as one in a visceral realization of the “people.”

The quintessential example is the mass rally. It provides a multifaceted opportunity in which the people are physically present, their focus is on the authoritative leadership and the individuals there share in the experience of the spectacle that renders the many one. Alternatively, it may be produced in social media through the liking of appropriate images or videos or the retweeting of authoritative or commonly held claims.

Throughout, the communicative practice in the public sphere is suffused with an emotional, often ecstatic, quality—one that reflects and promotes the symbiotic union of individuals and the nation or the people.

THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS

Fourth, the individual is constituted as dependent. To begin, this is evident in the view of how people think. From the perspective of RWP, to understand something is to know how it is linked to other actions or actors. Understanding therefore depends either on direct personal observation or others' report of the linkages in question.

Typically the latter is most influential in determining what individuals know and understanding. This is the case for two reasons. First, in political matters, everyday social life typically everyday social life affords an individual limited opportunity to directly observe what is happening. Consequently the individual is forced to rely on others' reports.

When an individual does directly observe matter and constructs linkages that coincide with the reports of others, understanding are constructed comfortably and with certainty. The problem arises, as is often the case, when one's own and others' observations conflict. The individual is presumed to lack the requisite cognitive capacity to place these various conflicting judgments relative to one another and then to draw on some overarching or higher order consideration to adjudicate among them. Instead the individual must rely on others to determine the truth or value of the matter at hand.

At this point, authorities—those individuals or entities that embody and help define the will of the people—are particularly influential.

The individual of RWP is also an emotional being. Indeed, as it offers as degraded view of people's cognitive abilities, RWP celebrates their emotionality. With its focus on realizing the national will and the action it requires, the individuals' feelings and their vigorous expression of those feelings are valued over and against their thoughts and useless contemplation. The former is strong, alive, and vigorous; the latter weak, decadent, and diminishing. A person is not so much a thinker, but a physically healthy, emotional, and motivated actor.

The best of these emotions are those that bind the individual to the group, like loyalty, and lead the individual to act for the group, like valor. Another emotion, closely linked to the capacity to act, is aggression. Marshalled in the service of the national will, it too is highly valued. In interpersonal relations, it is to be expected and is generally tolerated.

Like their cognition, the individual's emotionality also renders them dependent. In both cases, the satisfying expression of one's individual nature depends on the reaction of others. As individuals' only know what is true and

right when they are validated by others, so they can only feel secure and good about themselves when they approved by others. Alone the individual lacks the meaning, value, direction, and strength needed to confront a dangerous world fraught with confusion and uncertainty.

As such their well-being depends on their incorporation in the group, particularly the nation. The nation gives them their knowledge of what is true and right. It thus supplies certainty and direction. It endows them with a social position and thus imbues them with meaning and worth. The nation protects them and provides security.

In all of this, the connection forged is a deeply emotional one. When dormant, it is a feeling of love and attachment. When realized in collective expression or action it is self-transcendent, even ecstatic. As these positive feelings reflect what the individual has by virtue of this union with the nation, other feelings reflect the individual's dependence and vulnerability.

Consequently love, attachment, and ecstasy are laced with a fear and anxiety attendant on the ever-present possibility of rejection by authority and excommunication from the group. Indeed this contributes to the intensity of the emotional bond of the individual to the group. It also insures that the individual remains submissive.

So defined, the individuals of RWP are well suited to competently execute their roles in social and political life. As individual citizens, they are unable to divine the general nature of the national will. They understand little of politics, society, or themselves as individuals. However, they are ready and able to learn the particular things the authoritative expression of the will requires that they know and value. They also recognize the need to rehearse what they have learned and take pride and pleasure in doing so publicly and together. In so doing, they recognize themselves as part of the people and feel good about it and themselves.

As citizens, they are also profoundly emotional beings. They draw on that emotion to connect themselves to the people and to the authority that expresses and realizes their collective will. They are ready to realize themselves by participating in realizing the nation. They are thus ready to act at the command of others. As such they are loyal, valiant actors who are ready to perform as deemed necessary, thereby achieving honor and glory.

DIAGNOSIS

We can now turn to a consideration of the recent ascent of right wing populism in liberal democracies. While recognizing that the rise and fall of RWP movements reflect fluctuating social and economic circumstances, I want to suggest that

recent developments are manifestations of something more fundamental. They reflect a basic structural weakness of liberal democracy, one that renders it ever more vulnerable to the threat of right wing populist alternatives.

A key weakness of democratic governance is that it lacks the citizenry it requires. When fully realized, liberal democracy empowers a citizenry that lacks the requisite cognitive and emotional capacities to understand its definitions, norms, and institutional organization to participate in its public sphere or to conceive of themselves as self-directing agents.

Although the view of citizens in modern democracies articulated here is not new, however, a consideration of its structural dynamics and implications is.

Even as democratic governance was first being institutionalized some two centuries ago, democratic theorists began expressing concerns regarding the capacities of democratic citizens. Some, like John Stuart Mill and his numerous followers, nonetheless retained a basic faith in the ready manner in which limitations regarding citizen capacity can be overcome and democracy can function in stable and normatively appropriate ways.

Others were less sanguine in the judgment of people's capabilities. For

instance, this was clearly reflected in James Madison's efforts to counter Thomas Jefferson's optimism about what the people and to design American government in a more republican and less directly democratic way.

In the shadow of the collapse of democracy between the two world wars in Europe, other theorists, like Arthur Schopenhauer and Hannah Arendt, offered a very skeptical view of the present or potential capacities of democratic citizens. They suggested that the vast majority of citizens do not have the cognitive capacity or emotional wherewithal to act as reflective, critical subjects or self-directing actors. Instead they are prone to thoughtlessness, insecurity, and fear in a way that makes them dependent on external direction.

Therefore the people are always susceptible to the influence of populist demagogues and approving of the authoritarian regimes they seek to create.

Questions regarding capacities and consequent competence of democratic citizens have also emerged in the empirical research of political science and psychology. This is reflected in research on political ideology. Since the late 1950s, study after study has shown incontrovertibly that people do not draw on some general understanding or perspective when formulating their attitudes. Rather these attitudes seem

independent of one another, the product of thinking which is in Yale University's political scientist Robert Lane's terms "morselizing" rather than integrative.

To the degree to which they are organized or integrated and thus subjectively integrated, this is the result of emotional needs and personality rather than rational reflection.

Two recent book length works in political psychology encapsulate decades of research in this field: *The Rationalizing Voter* (2013) by Charles Taber and Milton Lodge and *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Difference* (2013) by John Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John Alford. In both cases, the authors emphasize that citizens do not think in the rational, reflective, and integrative way suggested by democratic theory and associated conceptions of governance. Rather people's thought is fragmentary, a matter of prejudices and prior bits of knowledge that are cued by present circumstances and then applied to them.

In sum, the research suggests that people's social and political responses are not a product of considered decision. On the contrary, they are unselfconscious reactions that are conditioned by immediate contexts and enduring biological predispositions. That is not to suggest that reasoned justifications cannot be offered to others or even oneself. However,

these will be nothing more than post facto and largely conventional rationalizations of what is in fact a non-rational, unreasoned process.

In my own work, I have explored the underlying logic of people's political thinking. In so doing, I offer a view of the structure of cognition that attempts to integrate the insights of the various strands of political and social psychological research outline above. I also draw on developmental psychology to introduce a consideration of individual differences as central to the analysis of cognitive structure.

Differentiating between three developmentally different forms or structures of cognition, I indicate that the vast majority of Americans (and I would argue, Westerners broadly understood) think in what I term a 'linear' manner. As such, when considering the world they live in, they focus on concrete actors and actions. They make sense of these concrete objects by observing how they are similar to or follow on one another or by drawing on other people's accounts of how the objects are thus connected. Thinking in this way, people understand the world by constructing simple concrete categories and linear causal relationships.

When focused on political life, this thinking generates an understanding of action as governed by 'natural' and

normatively right rules of behavior, of social groups or nations as 'natural' categories of individuals who share the same characteristics, and of institutions as hierarchies of status and power. Thinking in these terms, people are largely unable to step back from an issue or situation to be considered and reflect either on the broader socio-political context in which that situation is located or on the broader subjective context in which one's initial response to that situation can be considered.

As a result, their orientation to issues and events tends to be shaped by circumstantial factors. Elements of the situation at hand operate as cues evoking a specific relevant categorical, causal, or normative knowledge or an emotional or affective predisposition. In either case, the person's response is less self-consciously considered and defined, but rather is more conditioned by factors beyond his or her full awareness or subjective control.

When all is said and done, the existing research suggests that, for the most part, people lack the requisite cognitive capacities for integration and abstraction needed for the kind of systemic understanding, considered judgment, and critical reflection that liberal democracy requires of its citizenry. However they can learn the truth and value of specific claims. In this fashion, they will internalize the

dominant truths and values of the democratic context in which they live.

That being said, the knowledge produced is assimilated in their terms and thus is distorted in largely fragmentary, emotionally mediated, contextually conditioned, conventional, and prejudicial ways. For example, people may learn that democratic politics requires a basic respect for others and thus according them the right of free speech. If asked in general terms, they will rehearse the narrative they have learned. On the other hand, if asked about people with whom they emphatically disagree, citizens are unlikely to accord those people full rights of free speech.

FRIGHTFUL IMPLICATIONS

This last six decades of social science research has been largely ignored by theorists and researchers, the vast majority of whom have an ideological commitment to liberal democracy. Thus with no or very little grounding in evidence, theorists like UCLA's Carole Pateman have suggested that even though citizens may appear to be incompetent, this is a matter of circumstance rather than capacity. Give them more decisionmaking opportunity and they will demonstrate the ability to do what is necessary.

Similarly empirical researchers have often concluded studies that document citizen limitations with speculative

claims that, despite the evidence, people have the requisite capacity to be competent and this would be realized if they were better informed, more motivated, less consumed by the rest of their lives, or more communicatively engaged with others. In this vein, there is little consideration of the possibility that these factors are the effect of limited competence rather than its cause.

In sum, there is an acknowledgment of the problem, but one that diminishes its significance and does not pursue its broader implications.

If taken seriously, what are the implications of this social scientific evidence for democratic governance? Overall, it suggests that most people think in concrete categorical, simple linear causal, and hierarchical terms such that they will be unable to comprehend the vision of government, the public sphere, and themselves as individuals that is being imposed upon them in a liberal democracy.

The logic of their thinking naturally leads them to conceive of the nation as homogeneous ethno-cultural group, the government as hierarchically structured, political communication as a venue for expressing loyalty and solidarity, and beliefs as objectively true or false and good or evil in a manner that is conventionally or authoritatively determined. In these terms, it becomes

impossible to understand liberal democratic politics, to embrace its values, or to act as it requires.

Democratic institutional arrangements are complexly structured and thus difficult to understand. For example in the American case, government is complexly organized system with a division of powers among somewhat equal branches of government (legislative, executive, and judiciary) in which power and influence are exercised laterally as well as vertically.

This institutional structure is very difficult to comprehend for citizens who think of organizations as hierarchical entities in which power flows simply from the top down. They do not understand the function of governance as regulator and referee-oriented to maintaining just relations between citizens and the integrity of each of them. In their understanding, the purpose of the government is to maintain social order and to act as situations require. In this context, the law and the judiciary are and should be subordinate to the demands of effective executive action.

For most people, governance is a matter of authoritative decisionmaking

and control, and citizenship is a matter of the loyal fulfillment of political obligations. All of this is in the service of the common good. When either government or citizens do not act accordingly, they will be regarded to be as wrong and evil.

Most people think in concrete categorical, simple linear causal, and hierarchical terms such that they will be unable to comprehend the vision of government, the public sphere, and themselves as individuals that is being imposed upon them in a liberal democracy.

As democratic governance confronts people with political context that is hard to comprehend or value, so it also asks them to participate in a public sphere in ways they cannot understand and in which they cannot appropriately act. To enter the public sphere, they are asked to abandon their guiding assumptions about truth and right: that there are objectively true and moral claims, actions and ends and these are known by all. Instead they are required to understand that people enter the public sphere with subjectively and culturally different understandings that lead them to reasonably make very different claims about what is good and true.

Moreover they are also asked to value these alien claims out of respect for the integrity of the individuals who voice them. Finally they are told to collaborate with others to bridge

differences with the aim of constructing a shared understanding of what is the truth and right of the situation they are considering and the goals to which they should be aspiring.

But this is not how most people naturally think. In their terms, they are being asked to respect claims they know to be mistaken or immoral and to respect individuals, who by making those claims, reveal themselves to be incompetent or evil. On top of this, they are asked to engage these incompetent or evil people and their mistaken and immoral claims to construct a shared view of things.

For the vast majority of Americans, for instance, not only are these demands incomprehensible and confusing, they also seem clearly wrong-minded. Consequently, when confronted with the demands of participating in the public sphere, they will either withdraw or they will engage on their own terms. In the latter regard, they will voice what they know to be true and right, engaging with like-minded others to establish solidarity with those who share their view and to defeat those who do not.

Finally there is the issue of how individuals are supposed to understand and feel about themselves in a liberal democracy. They are to reject the direction of conventional authority and

tradition and instead 'discover' who they are in some essential underlying or overarching sense. Then equipped with the requisite understanding and the emotional wherewithal, they are supposed to act accordingly.

For most Americans this again makes no sense and creates an impossible demand. What they know and value is constituted by that authority and convention they are supposed to reject. Similarly they rely on others approval to know that they right and good. They have no other resources to draw upon to make their judgments, ground their sense of self-worth or direct their action. Insofar as they attempt to be critical and self-directing, they will simply reject dominant conventions and authorities in favor of alternative ones, much like adolescents adhering to the imperatives of teenage fashion when rebelling against their parents. And like adolescents who are unleashed from the certainties of parental control, people's sense of identity and worth are likely to become less secure and the confidence they require for independent action is likely to be reduced.

At the same time, they are also asked to feel connected to those around them. However they are required not to do so in terms they can understand—that is, on the basis of concrete commonalities of specific action and belief. Instead, the desired connection must

be predicated on their difference and relationships of mutual interdependence. It is not a predetermined connection between defined persons, but a negotiated relationship between partners who are actively engaged in exploring who they are and who they can be for the other.

For the vast majority of Americans, this is an incomprehensible and impossible task. To the degree to which they feel compelled to try, they will search for authoritative guidance that provides concrete recipes for how to act to 'realize' oneself and 'connect' satisfactorily with others. In general, confronted with the demand for a kind of social connection they cannot forge, people are left alone in a world with others who are as alienated and estranged as themselves. In this context, the only relationship that emerges is one between isolated actors competing to realize selfish ends. The result is loneliness, weak self-identity, and insecurity.

In sum, the majority of Americans (and, I would postulate, Westerners in general) are generally unable to understand or value democratic culture, institutions, practices, and citizenship in the manner required.

To the degree to which they are required to do so, they will interpret what is demanded of them in distorting

and inadequate ways, leading to confusion and uncertainty. This may simply lead them to withdraw from the public sphere of democratic life, retreating into private life or unconsidered economic pursuits.

Alternatively, they may seek alternative political perspectives, ones that offer more comprehensible and satisfying definitions and direction.

ILLIBERAL ATTRACTION

As citizens of a liberal democracy, people are required to adopt a view of politics, society, and themselves as individuals that they cannot comprehend and to internalize a set of orienting values that they cannot accept.

Viewed in this light, it is easier to appreciate the enduring attraction of right wing populism—why, as Princeton University's Jan Werner Muller suggests, right wing populism is liberal democracy's ever-present shadow.

Right wing populism provides the lost, lonely, alienated, and frightened souls of democracy with an alternative vision and practice that is readily comprehensible, morally sensible, and personally satisfying. In the place of the conceptual complexities of democratic cultural definitions and values,

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RWP offers a clear, simple definition of what is true and right. The facts are objective, certain, and authoritatively defined and they are construed in a way that serves the national interest and therefore one's own. Individuals are not abandoned to the impossible task of understanding things and making judgments on their own, but are offered the authoritative guidance and direction they need. Codes of good behavior provide concrete direction of what one is to do when.

Individuals are also not left alone. Group conferred identities, with the accompanying attribution of readily understood shared characteristics and beliefs, bind individuals to the people.

RWP also provides a simpler, more readily comprehensible understanding of politics. The largely perplexing complexities of democratic power sharing, fair regulation, and proper representation are replaced with readily understood hierarchical structures of administrative control. Power emanates from the top—a top which embodies and promotes the national interest: an interest that individual citizens, left to their own devices, cannot be expected to understand or know how to pursue.

Right wing populism also offers a public sphere in which most people can readily participate in appropriate and satisfying ways. It expressly invalidates the difficult, incomprehensible task mandated in the democratic public sphere of perspective taking in order to collaborate with contrary others in the construction of political meaning and value.

In its place, RWP only requires that individuals attend to and internalize the authoritative dictates, the ones voiced by the leadership and reflecting the will of the people. They are then asked to rehearse these learned beliefs and actions when engaging with others and during occasional mass events. Alternative views and those who voice them are to be rejected. The views are wrong or bad and their advocates are enemies of the people. This view of the public sphere is readily understood and demands for participation are readily met.

Moreover, acting accordingly confers the approval and validation that secures individuals' sense of the world, directs their action and binds them to one another in emotionally satisfying ways. They are no longer lost, confused, inadequate, and alone.

At the same time, RWP also validates whatever existential dread, anxiety, and insecurity people living in a democratic and globalizing world are feeling. It also provides a solution. RWP recognizes a world that is fragmented into nations or groups who differ in their understanding of the world and in the values they uphold.

But this is not the largely incomprehensible democratic world of differing interpretations, collaborative engagement and mutual benefit. Rather it is the easily understood world of "us and them," where the "we" are "right" and the "they" are "wrong." It is a zero sum game world wherein interests necessarily collide and some win as others necessarily lose.

In this conflictual world, individuals are right to feel anxious and insecure. However the solution is clear. In ways people can readily comprehend, they can achieve a clear concrete identity and secure relationship to others through the twin processes of embracing the nation and accepting the authority of its leadership.

At the same time, the nation and its leadership will protect "us" readily identified members of the nation from an also easily identified "them" who are the source of the anxiety and insecurity "we" feel.

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forces and the particular role traditionally played by democratic elites. This is a complicated issue, one that I will offer only in summary form in this essay. The bottom line is that economic, global, and technological forces all operate to structure social relations in ways that reinforce the understandings, values, and practices that democracy demands of its citizenry.

DEMOCRATIC PERSISTENCE, ELITE CONTROL

I began with addressing the question of why right wing populism is on the rise in democratic countries, particularly the United States. The answer to this question raises a prior one. Given its structural weakness, how have democratic governments been able to function for so long, even if in sub-optimal ways?

The answer lies with both the impact of broader structural

Together they function so as to undermine traditional authorities and conventional practices, thereby emancipating individuals to make their own choices in an ever-changing world replete with an infinity of alternatives. However, in the end, this is not enough to insure that the citizenry will be democratic. Thus, these favorable structural conditions may not be enough unto themselves to insure the requisite understanding of, commitment to, and compliance with democratic institutions and practices.

Something additional is needed to address this citizen deficit. Ironically, in democracies like the United States, that something additional is a dominant elite that has the motivation to support democratic culture and institutions and the power to do so effectively. They are motivated partly because a substantial number of the elites have the requisite capacity to have some understanding of the relative protection and functionality that democratic governance provides.

This is not to understate the impact of self-interest. These elites, as evident in their status as elites, are clear beneficiaries of the system they are protecting. Elites support of democratic governance by using their power to insure that the mass of citizens speak and act in ways that are at least appear consistent with the demands of democratic

practice. To this end, the elite provide authoritative interpretations of democratic institutions and culture that translate these more complex entities and abstract orientations into simpler, more concrete terms.

The need for individual citizens to meet democracy's demands for reflection, understanding different views, and collaborative deliberation is avoided while, at the same time, those citizens are given the requisite direction so that they appear (to themselves and to others) to understand their political context and to perform their democratic role.

Elites exercise this oligarchic 'democratic' authority in several ways. In part, this is accomplished through control of the institutions which orchestrate how individuals interact with one another. In the United States, these include political institutions like the U.S. Congress, the courts, and the legal and statutory framework; state and city administrations as well as law enforcement; and economic institutions like banks and corporations. Via such institutions and the rewards and punishments that are administered by them, elites can manage citizen action so that it approximates, even if inadequately, democratic practices.

Elites also exercise 'democratic control' by managing the discourses that

dominate the public sphere. They can thus affect the pool of socially approved knowledges and preferences that are available for individuals to draw upon as they seek to understand, evaluate, and react to the circumstances of daily political life. This cultural domination is secured through the control of the means by which these discourses are dispersed. This includes the mass media and the institutions of socialization, such as schools and universities.

Through these vehicles, the elite can disseminate the orienting beliefs and values of democratic culture. Even if these are transformed into mere slogans rehearsed by citizenry that does not fully understand what they are saying, they are nonetheless reified and accepted as true and right. At the same time, this cultural control also allows elites to exclude and delegitimize contrary or system threatening discourses (as stupid or evil) and derogate those who advocate them (as fanatics, ignorant, unbalanced, and, to borrow a word made famous by Hillary Clinton, “deplorable”).

Again, the citizenry may not understand why these alternative discourses are misguided or wrong, but they will nonetheless reject them. In these ways, democratic elites can manipulate the mass of citizens so that they mimic, even if inadequately, democratic understandings and practices. Thus even though

democracy is burdened by an inadequate citizenry, the elite’s exercise of power can sustain the democratic system and hold potentially attractive alternatives, such as right wing populism, at bay.

UNDERMINED BY ITS OWN SUCCESS

Understanding both the structural weakness of democratic systems and the conditions of their persistence, we can now finally address our central question: Why are democracies faltering now in the face of the challenge of a right wing populism alternative?

In the advanced industrialized societies of the West and particularly in the United States, the structural forces of modernity described earlier—like those of the economy, science, technology, and globalization along with that of democratic governance itself—have been increasingly successful in supplanting more traditional forms of organizing everyday social life. This has entailed an ever greater dismantling of hierarchical structures and a delegitimation of conventional or traditional authority.

One crucial aspect of this ongoing process is the increasingly loss of elite control over the public sphere.

Partly the diminution of elite cultural power is a practical matter of dismantling of the centralized technologies

of mass communication that facilitated the elite control of the messages that circulated in the public sphere. Structured by capitalist and democratic forces, the internet, the computer, and the smartphone have been developed in ways that give individuals both an increasing range of choices and a greater ability to express preferences in a very public way.

Now an alienated, uneducated, working class ranch hand living in east Texas has access not only to the information

Why are democracies faltering now in the face of the challenge of a right wing populism alternative?

disseminated by the major television channels or the national newspapers controlled by elites, but also to a myriad of smaller, more varied and less culturally sanctioned sources. Consequently, he or she is now able to choose which messages he or she wants to receive. Similarly that “ordinary” American, who once had very little political voice, now has the potential to broadcast his or her beliefs as widely as any U.S. Senator, economic journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*, or Yale University professor of environmental science.

With this democratization of the public sphere, elites have become less able to control the messages that are disseminated and therefore they are less able to assert the dominance of democratic views and to exclude anti-democratic alternatives.

This loss elite control is also a cultural matter, one which reflects how structures of modern life have diminished the legitimacy of those who have been conventionally allocated authority in the various spheres of everyday life. From the venues of formal governance to the market, the workplace, schools, universities, and the home, power hierarchies have been increasingly flattened and communicative practices of command have increasingly given way to negotiation and collaboration among equals. The institutionally conferred authority of political leaders, experts, employers, and even parents has been undermined.

In the process, expression has become increasingly free and all voices have been increasingly equalized. Thus not only is our east Texan able to broadcast his beliefs as widely as those of senior journalists and professors, his views have an equal claim to validity as his more “institutionally advantaged” counterparts.

Thus there is a confluence of similar and mutual reinforcing forces that are moving political life in the same direction. The ever greater structural penetration of everyday life by the forces of capitalist markets, democratic politics, and globalization have made the complexities of social life

and the necessity of individuals to rely on themselves when negotiating those complexities increasingly apparent.

Given their inadequate cognitive and emotional abilities to participate in the ways required, the people living in this freer, more equal, and more culturally diverse world are left more confused, directionless, alienated, and insecure. They feel a commensurately increasing need for an authoritative definition of the world and how to act, as individuals and a people, in that world.

At the same time, that this need for authoritative direction is heightened, the ability of democratic elites to provide that direction is being diminished. The messages they offer regarding democratic understandings and practices are not, in themselves, compelling. Partly this is because this vision is fundamentally incompatible with the way in which most citizens think and feel—even when reformulated in the simpler more concrete terms that people can better understand. The message offered does not resonate with the natural abilities and inclinations of those intended to accept it.

Moreover, the ability of the elite to compel such an acceptance is being diminished. The changing technologi-

cal structure of communicative technologies has made it practically more difficult for the elites to insure the predominance of their message and the exclusion of alternatives. Moreover in this more open playing field there has been a flattening of conventional authority rendering the democratic elite progressively less able—simply by virtue of their position or expertise—to confer legitimacy on the truths, values, and practices they advocate.

In sum, the ever more democratic conditions of everyday life and the ever more democratic structuring of the public sphere has undermined the essentially undemocratic power and authority of 'democratic' elites to manage that critical structural weakness of democratic governance, namely a citizenry that lacks the cognitive and emotional capacities to think, feel, and act in ways required.

Instead, in the increasingly open, free, and equal sphere of public life characteristic of the contemporary western democracies like the United States, democratic elites are forced to compete with opponents—most significantly right wing populists—who offer a message that is intrinsically more comprehensible and satisfying to a recipient public hungry for meaning, security, and direction.

Democracy seems now poised, as it has been always potentially, to devour itself.

Even, or perhaps particularly, in well-established democracies like the United States, democratic governance will continue its inexorable decline and will eventually fail.

The probable result is clear. In this ever more democratic context, the authoritarian, nationalist vision of the right wing populist is likely to triumph. In this sense, democracy seems now poised, as it has been always potentially, to devour itself.

POST MORTEM

Considering the current conditions and trajectory of democratic politics, the conclusion is evident. Even, or perhaps particularly, in well-established democracies like the United States, democratic governance will continue its inexorable decline and will eventually fail. The alternative that will supersede liberal democracy, right wing populism, is also clear. It offers the understandings the people can readily comprehend, the values they can readily appreciate, and the direction of speech and action they can readily follow.

This triumph of right wing populism over democracy was averted in early twentieth century because of a felicitous combination of a circumstantial distribution of power between nations and, ironically, the insufficiently democratized way of life of any one of them. However such a happy result is unlikely now.

To conclude, we can ask if this trajectory and the promised results are inevitable. I think the answer is probably yes. However there is another possibility, if an unlikely one. Before it is too late, the democracies might directly address their own critical vulnerability: the inadequacy of their citizens.

For reasons outlined above, the Madisonian strategy of managing inadequate citizens with less democratic, more republican institutions is no longer a viable option. The alternative is to create the citizenry that has the cognitive and emotional capacities democracy requires. This would entail a massive educational initiative, one that would have to be premised on the recognizing the dramatic failure of prior efforts. Partly this would entail a restructuring of educational practices that target particularly school children and university students. It would also entail a complementary redesign of modes of adult political participation along the lines of more deliberative democratic governance that prioritizes citizen pedagogy as well as collective decisionmaking. Perhaps in this way, democratic forms of governance may yet prevail. ●