

# THE DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION



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The Political Causes of  
Authoritarian Populism

ARMIN SCHÄFER AND  
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Translated by Stephen Curtis

polity

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This English edition © Polity Press, 2024

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
111 River Street  
Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5876-6 – hardback  
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5877-3 – paperback

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023936628

Typeset in 11 on 14pt Warnock Pro  
by Cheshire Typesetting Ltd, Cuddington, Cheshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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# Acknowledgements

At a conference in Potsdam on 10–12 November 2016, political scientists from various countries got together to discuss the condition of our democracies. Shortly before heading for the conference, on 8 November – the day of the US presidential election – some of our American colleagues gave interviews in which they forecast victory for Hillary Clinton, only to find out, upon arrival in Germany, that things turned out differently. There was much to discuss at this conference. It was also the first opportunity that we, the authors, had to present our reflections, still separate at that stage, on why contemporary explanations of the rise of populism were unsatisfactory and why we had to look at how democracy functioned. Coming from two different perspectives, we offered explanations that pointed to the selectivity of political decisions.

The conference in Potsdam marked the beginning of a series of workshops held under the aegis of the German Research Foundation's (DFG) project 'Concerns about Democracy in North America and Europe', which concluded at the Villa Vigoni, the German–Italian Centre for European Dialogue on Lake Como, shortly before the coronavirus outbreak in Lombardy. Working within the context of this project offered



us numerous opportunities to discuss facets of the material in the present book with various colleagues from different countries. We are grateful in particular to Claudia Landwehr and Thomas Saalfeld, who not only helped to create this context but also were always available for discussions. The two of us then held another workshop at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center in order to promote still further the idea of a joint text on what we call the *political* causes of authoritarian populism. We profited greatly from the comments and pointers we received at this meeting, especially from Swen Hutter, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Céline Teney. This book is also an outcome of those joint discussions.

We have each had important opportunities to discuss and improve the work that has gone into this book. As scholar in residence at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne during the winter semester 2019/20, Armin Schäfer had the chance to present the core ideas of the manuscript in a lecture series and to discuss them with those present. He is grateful to Jens Beckert and Lucio Baccaro for the invitation. Some of the ideas developed here came out during a joint research project with Lea Elsässer and Svenja Hense, in the course of which the three of them often talked about the meaning of representation and the nature of the shortcomings related to unequal responsiveness. Armin is grateful for the very stimulating exchange of views that resulted. He is also indebted to Miriam Hartlapp-Zugehör, Martin Höpner, Andreas Nölke, Simone Leiber, and Hubert Zimmermann, with whom he has repeatedly discussed many aspects of the manuscript. Although the participants did not always agree, the exchanges were always valuable in helping him to refine his own perspective.

Michael Zürn conducted his own research within the framework of the Cluster of Excellence ‘Contestations of the Liberal Script’, which is financed by the German Research Foundation (EXC 2055, Project ID: 3-0715469). Throughout

many discussions with Tanja Börzel, Jürgen Gerhards, Johannes Gerschewski, Heiko Giebler, Christoph Möllers, and Stefan Gosepath he received important suggestions for which he is especially grateful. Subsequently these ideas found their way into the present book. As always, his work also benefited from the Global Governance unit of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. He is immensely thankful to Alexandros Tokhi and Johannes Scherzinger for their data-collecting work. His discussions with Jelena Cupać, İrem Tuncer-Ebetürk, Rainer Forst, Edgar Grande, Peter Katzenstein, John Keane, Cédric Koch, Wolfgang Merkel, and Christian Rauh proved to be particularly significant. Michael would like to thank especially Karen Alter, with whom he undertook a thematically related project on backlash politics. He had much to learn from it.

Last but not least, we both would like to thank Katinka von Kovatsits, Lisa Scheuch, and Barçın Uluşık for supporting us in preparing and editing the English version of the manuscript; Stephen Curtis and Barçın Uluşık for their meticulous work on the translation; Manuela Tecusan for superb editing; and Elise Heslinga for her excellent efforts in coordinating the publication of the English version of the book.

Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn, April 2023

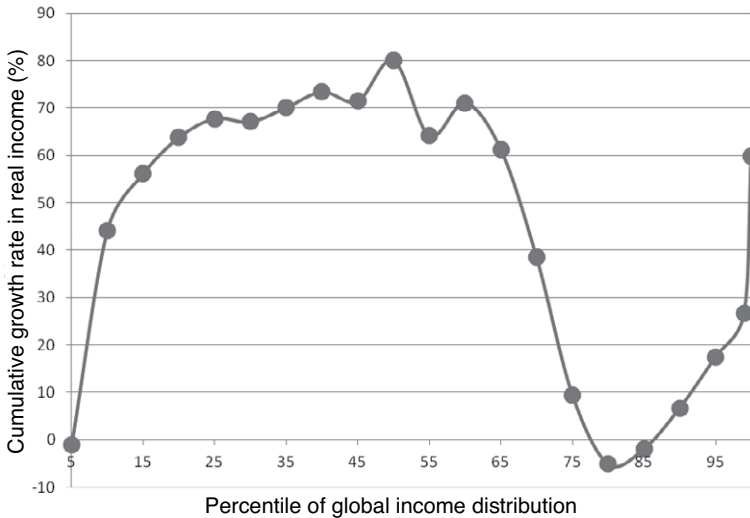


# 1

## Introduction

A line that runs in a peculiar hump-shaped curve between the X- and Y-axes has made a name for itself. What is called the elephant curve<sup>1</sup> first appeared in a World Bank report of 2012. It shows how incomes developed across the globe between 1998 and 2008. Income groups are marked off in 5 per cent increments along the horizontal axis, and they range from the very poorest on the far left to the super-rich on the far right. The income growth of each group is captured on the vertical axis. With a little imagination, the curve can be seen to resemble the outline of an elephant (see Figure 1).

The world's absolute poorest registered almost no growth in income over the period under consideration. Things went as miserably wrong for them in 2008 as they had in 1998; this is the elephant's tail dangling in the dirt. However, the curve then climbs steeply along the elephant's back, the groups at its head chalking up increases in real income of up to 80 per cent. It is not until about three quarters of the way along the X-axis that the curve drops – and sharply. The trunk reaches right down to the ground. Only the tip of the trunk, the part that represents the richest 1 per cent of humanity, points steeply upwards again. To put it plainly, the new middle layer in the



**Figure 1** The elephant curve of global income growth.

Source: Milanović 2016, p. 31.

newly industrialized countries, above all in East Asia, together with the richest of the world's rich, profited massively from globalization. By contrast, the poorest of the poor in Africa and the old middle classes in more prosperous countries were left moaning about small growth and relative loss of prosperity. The upshot has been the 'new geography' of income inequality, in which differences between countries diminished, whereas within (western) countries they increased.<sup>2</sup>

That the income of the poorest of the poor remained stuck at under one dollar a day while that of the super-rich increased dramatically is a moral scandal. This is where global capitalism showed its ugly side of injustice. On the other hand, global capitalism's enormous ability to get things done was on display in Asia, especially in China, where hundreds of millions of people escaped from absolute poverty.

What interests us in this book, however, is not the implications of the elephant curve for distributive justice as much as its meaning for democracy. By 'democracy' we mean the principle

of collective self-determination and its institutional realization as a form of government that is bound up with promises of political equality, legitimate reasons [*guten Gründen*], and power control. The elephant represents a problem for democracy because autocratic countries showed greater increases in prosperity than consolidated democracies – where, besides, the rich profited most. This is in marked contrast with the situation in democratic countries during the postwar decades, when prosperity soared even as income inequality declined.

The distribution of global economic growth points to two central challenges to the democratic form of government. On the one hand, it tells the story of the enormous success of an autocratic political system such as China's. From the time of the financial crisis, if not earlier, western liberal democracy has been faced with a political competitor that, in contrast with really existing socialism, is both different and successful. It is different because it does not explicitly link the emergence of economic market dynamics to the institutions of liberal democracy, and thereby calls into question the seemingly indissoluble connection between democracy and the market. It is successful because the authoritarian ruling elites in countries such as China and Singapore cannot simply be written off as self-seeking despots. Pursuit of the common good is a recognizable component of their policy, and they can claim considerable progress in combating poverty in particular. These states demonstrate that social progress is possible without those in power being subject to democratic oversight and without individual rights being guaranteed; in this way they undermine the notion, entertained especially after 1989, that there is no alternative to liberal democracy. If China is seen today in parts of the global South as an acceptable political alternative, then the question concerning the correct political order is back on the agenda.

What is more, the upward-pointing trunk on the elephant curve relentlessly draws attention to a further weakness of

democracy: the growing inequality in the rich countries of the West. The material basis for supporting democracy is becoming weaker. The attractiveness of the political systems in Europe, North America, and Japan since the end of the Second World War was not sustained exclusively by the normative logic of freedom and self-determination – that was a delusion of columnists and thinkers who argued in purely normative terms; it also relied on the empirical observation that individual prosperity and the availability of important collective goods in the long run could best be achieved within the framework of a liberal democracy. For a long time, the lesson of history seemed to be clear: a materially rich life, innovative and comfortable products, an efficient political system – all these things were only to be had in western democracies. But this promise has lost credibility as a result of the income growth depicted in the elephant curve.

## 1.1 Double Alienation

Are these shifts in world society leading to a regression in democracy – that is, to a sustained movement away from the ideal of collective self-determination based on political equality and on a strong support base in the population? From our point of view, one can start talking about a *democratic regression* when two different changes become apparent at the same time. One is about the increasing distance between the democratic ideal of collective self-determination and an actual practice in which decision-making has been transferred to bodies that are not legitimized by elections and that are barely under citizens' control. The other involves an aversion to democracy from (parts of) the citizenry, as they no longer feel that they are adequately represented. Hence we propose to speak of democratic regression when we perceive a *double alienation*: the abstract alienation of practice from

the democratic ideal and the concrete alienation of citizens from democratic institutions. In this connection, Rainer Forst (2020) speaks of a 'neglect of democracy'. The outcome of this dual disengagement is that democracy forfeits a portion of its charisma.

The reference point for our concern with democratic regression is to be found in Chapter 2: the great self-confidence that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Democracy seemed at last to have permanently rid itself of all its rivals and become the only game in town. Sooner or later, or so many diagnoses assumed at the time, its light would brighten even the darkest corners of the world. This optimism has not really survived the past decades – not unscathed at least. For one thing, there are authoritarian regimes that have steadily resisted becoming even a tiny bit more democratic; for another, the number of democracies has, again, declined during the past few years. If the rate of democratization simply slowed down, or if it came to a halt periodically, one might still assume that this was merely a blip in an unstoppable historical trend. But when democratic states turn into electoral autocracies,<sup>3</sup> in other words into autocracies with more or less free elections, and when the quality of democracy declines in its core countries, then hope of linear progress with a few little wiggles on the way can be kept alive only with a great deal of effort.

There is currently much talk of democratic backsliding,<sup>4</sup> above all because the quality of democratic government has gone down even in supposedly consolidated democracies. For a long time the decay of democracy was, from a Western European perspective, something that happened only in far-away countries; now the damage is being done closer to home. In the past ten years things have got worse for democracy, not just in Venezuela or Brazil but in the United States and Poland, too. It is true that in many of these countries there are hopes that a change of government would bring about a reversal of the trend; yet in countries where democracy has already been



replaced by an electoral autocracy the prospect of the government's being voted out becomes more and more unlikely.

The current withdrawal of democracy appears to be more than a temporary blip. The optimistic story of democracy's spreading in waves separated merely by short-lived periods of partial regression hardly seems to square with actual developments. Instead, especially the period from 1945 to the end of the twentieth century has turned out to be, in retrospect, a phase of worldwide democratization. That half-century was characterized by positive basic conditions that no longer hold today in the same way. The advance of democracy was less the result of an inescapable logic of progress and much more the outcome of a specific historical constellation. The change in this constellation, a process that we trace in Chapter 2, now makes democratic regression possible. Societies are not gliding smoothly down a predetermined path towards the goal of liberal democracy; they develop through political conflicts and struggles over the extension of social and democratic rights. These conflicts may not only slow down the journey but also lead to a change in its destination.

## 1.2 The New Populism

The new populism stands at the centre of current debates about democracy. This is our main topic in the present book. In almost every country, populist parties have been founded and claim that they want to save democracy by giving 'the people' a voice again. Unlike the old parties of the extreme right, populists have nothing in their election manifestos and party programmes to say that democracy should be replaced by a different form of rule. On the contrary, they advocate an expansion of direct democracy and profess to represent people who are overlooked by the established political parties. Their claim to be the true voice of the people is presumptuous, but

it strikes a chord with a not inconsiderable number of citizens. Our aim in this book is to explain why this is the case. To begin with, we need to grasp the ideas contained in authoritarian populism and delimit them with definitional precision. This we do in Chapter 3.

The predominant understanding of populism in political science today has been shaped by the works of Cas Mudde, who sees it as an ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and mutually antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'.<sup>5</sup> According to this view, populism is a 'thin' ideology that can be combined with some other, more substantial ideology. We shall argue in Chapter 3 that neither of the elements of this established definition goes far enough. First, it produces too many 'false positives', the peaceful revolution in the last days of the German Democratic Republic being one example. That, too, was a case in which a movement opposed to an elite cartel rallied around the homogenizing formula 'We are the people'. Movements that want to prevail against authoritarian rulers must necessarily take a stand against the establishment and present themselves as relatively homogeneous. But that alone does not make them populist.

Second, populism is not an empty form that can be filled with any type of content, at will. Its ideological substance is not as thin as a mere confrontation between the establishment and the people represented as a homogeneous body might insinuate. We argue that contemporary populism is pre-eminently authoritarian and functions as an ideology in its own right. It is a political ideology built on an unmediatized form of representation of the majority that takes a nationalistic stance against 'liberal cosmopolitan elites'.

Contemporary populism is nationalist because it is exclusionary in two respects. On the one hand, it denies the legitimate interests of other countries by adhering rigidly to the topos 'our nation first'. On the other, from the very start it lays down who is allowed to belong to 'our nation', 'our people'.

The 'us against them' logic is not only directed at those who strive for other goals, it also always makes clear who does not belong. The anti-pluralism of authoritarian populism grows out of its vision of a homogeneous people with unanimous political aims. Anyone who claims to know and represent the will of the people cannot tolerate the idea that there may be other legitimate opinions. This is why the political opponents of authoritarian populists are always labelled 'traitors to the people' or 'corrupt power cliques'. The only possible reasons for wanting something different from what the populists themselves want are morally corrupt ones.

This specific understanding of politics also leads to the rejection of established procedures for shaping the will of the people. Unlike in a deliberative and participatory understanding of democracy, what is right is not something that has to be negotiated through democratic argument because, come what may, it is already established. The notion that political positions can be further developed and changed through participation in public discourse is foreign to authoritarian populism. This is why parliaments are derided as mere talking shops, which talk without deciding. And this is why claims that can be exempt from their reference to truth serve exclusively as weapons in a political dispute. Populists' own utterances are aimed more at casting contempt on politics in general than at shedding light on substantive positions on concrete and factual questions. Populists typically have no love for detail, they much prefer gross simplification. In the end, their deproceduralized understanding of democracy goes together with a very specific idea of what representation means. Here, too, the focal point is not the constant exchange between representatives and the represented, but the implementation of a (pre-established) will of the majority. In short, authoritarian populism builds on a specific understanding of politics that is not equally compatible with every type of content and that represents far more than just a 'thin ideology'.

### 1.3 The Causes of Populism

In Chapter 3 we develop the kernel of a *political* explanation of authoritarian populism, taking as our starting point the idea that neither socioeconomic nor sociocultural explanations suffice to account for its rise in and of themselves. Socioeconomic accounts start from the economic situation, in particular from a (feared) loss of social status. The losers of globalization, so the short version goes, are especially susceptible to the siren songs of populism. Yet it remains a mystery why this group turns to authoritarian populist parties and not, say, to parties of the left, as the very essence of their brand is the struggle against inequality and for social safeguards. Why should voters who feel economically disadvantaged and expect more state support vote for tax cutters par excellence, people like Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump, and Boris Johnson, who, besides, belong in the top 1 per cent of the income distribution? It is also noticeable that the Netherlands, Austria, and France – precisely the countries in which authoritarian populist parties enjoyed their first success – have been relatively less plagued with growing inequality. All in all, it remains unclear from a socioeconomic perspective why authoritarian populist forces have prevailed in countries that have profited exceptionally from globalization, at least at times – think of Turkey, or even India, for instance.

The sociocultural explanation for authoritarian populism that interprets it as a reaction to processes of cultural liberalization is equally inadequate when taken on its own. For one thing, it does not seem very helpful to restrict authoritarian populism to the cultural sphere. In disputes over the acceptance of refugees – to take one example – cultural aspects are not the only thing that matter; economic aspects such as the consequences for the labour market<sup>6</sup> matter just as much. Besides, the culturalist reading runs the risk of confusing cause and effect. In fact sociocultural conflicts often intensify only

after an authoritarian populist party has chalked up some successes at the polls.<sup>7</sup> When all is said and done, it is unclear why authoritarian populism is particularly strong in countries with comparatively low levels of sociocultural liberalization, such as Russia and Turkey.

Both of these established explanations need to be completed, because they ignore the political sphere. They observe macro-social changes – globalization and modernization – and see in populism an understandable but futile revolt against them.<sup>8</sup> The political reaction to these changes, however, is not a foregone conclusion. Our thesis is that only the *politically selective handling* of these social changes provokes a populist defence reaction. A genuinely political explanation of populism sets out from liberal democracy's real deficits in the sphere of representation. Not all social groups are equally well represented, and the interests of the resource-rich receive more than their fair share of attention. Those who want to explain populism cannot close their eyes to the weaknesses of democracy.

Two factors in particular ensure that political decision-making is tilted in favour of the better-off. First, as political science pointed out back in the early days, the choir of democratic representatives sings 'with a strong upper-class accent'.<sup>9</sup> The responsiveness of parliaments in liberal democratic political systems has shown virtually no sign of improvement since then. Rather there is evidence that the accent has become even stronger in the course of globalization, and this is precisely what authoritarian populist parties have complained about at the top of their voices. At the heart of their criticism is the claim that representative democracy, the 'system parties', and the media pay no attention to ordinary folk – your average person in the street. This makes the perfect backdrop for a rhetoric that pits the ordinary people against a corrupt elite.

Second, over the past three decades decision-making powers have been transferred, on a large scale, from majoritarian institutions (MIs) such as parties and parliaments to

non-majoritarian institutions (NMIs) such as central banks, constitutional courts, and international bodies. Decisions are increasingly made by institutions that are subject neither to the majority principle nor to the duty of accountability that binds representative bodies. The purpose of many NMIs is to impose the threefold liberalism of individual rights, international rules, and free markets. The more powerful these institutions become, the harder it is to implement an illiberal or protectionist policy, even if the majority of the population is in favour of it. So, to find the causes that underlie democratic regression, one should look particularly at changes in the political systems concerned (see Chapter 4).

As a result of these two developments, the impression of many people that politics no longer takes any account of them has grown – and there is a real basis for it. Not all groups enjoy the same opportunity of having their concerns heard and dealt with politically. This is the background that enabled the idea to spread that there is a homogeneous political class set apart from the rest of the population, a class that does its own thing and thereby serves the interests of a spoilt and tendentially corrupt cosmopolitan layer of society. Consequently, the target of the vast majority of authoritarian populist campaigns is not this or that particular economic or cultural policy, but the system that brings them into being.

This political explanation of the rise of authoritarian populist parties focuses on two developments in modern democracies: the professionalization or cartelization of party politics;<sup>10</sup> and the fact that NMIs are a main target of contemporary populism.<sup>11</sup> The cartelization of party politics has rendered the selective responsiveness of legislators more pronounced, and this, in turn, has revealed that the lower orders have little influence on the laws passed by parliament. As a result, trust in the social democratic and conservative people's parties, the 'cartel parties', has declined. A subsidiary transfer of trust to NMIs functioned only temporarily. Increasing criticism of NMIs

testifies to their loss of the magic touch. This has brought the political system as a whole into focus, and the outcome has been the rise of authoritarian populist parties whose principal targets are the political system, the system parties, and the political class.

According to this reading, democratic regression is the consequence of the double alienation mentioned earlier: the abstract alienation of political processes from the democratic ideal and the concrete alienation of sections of the population from democratic institutions. This has prompted us to take up the rhetoric that authoritarian populist parties direct against the political system and to ask whether this rhetoric speaks to what motivates people to vote for those parties and whether the political systems in question show systematic changes that explain those parties' relative strength. We will show that dissatisfaction with the lack of openness of the political institutions results in high approval ratings for authoritarian populists – not because the voters who back them want to venture more democracy, but because they feel neglected by the existing system. This is how the lack of representativeness in the critical decision-making organs of democracy has contributed to alienation from democracy.

But why is it only in the past few years that these changes led to a rise in authoritarian populism and to a weakened democracy? Why have these structural changes been considered a problem and made an object of scandal? Why have they been prevented until now from mobilizing support for authoritarian populist parties? In our explanation, the role of trigger mechanism gets assigned to the major crises that have plagued democratically constituted societies throughout the past fifteen years, as we shall show in Chapter 5. These crises took structural changes in the functioning of democracies – changes that had already been under way for a long time – and turned them into a springboard for the rise of authoritarian populism. We are particularly interested in crises that largely played out

*within the consolidated democracies* rather than affecting them only from the outside. These are the financial and euro crisis, the crisis surrounding the admission of refugees, and the Covid crisis. Each of these worked on democracy like a magnifying or burning glass:<sup>12</sup> they made changes to political processes more clearly visible, and they also threatened to start fires. In times of crisis, essential decisions are taken not by elected parliaments but by other political institutions. Thus the crises prove to be not only 'the hour of the executive' but also the hour of the experts – and that above all. That is when NMIs contribute substantially to policy orientation. But NMIs are not neutral. Their preferences tend to be cosmopolitan. In controversial cases, NMIs stand for individual rights, open markets, and international rules. Internationally agreed austerity policies thus take precedence over national referendums (e.g. Greece during the financial crisis), and the impositions of the open society cannot be countered simply by closing national borders (e.g. Germany in 2016 on refugees from Syria). Insofar as people come to realize not only that unpopular decisions get made but that they get made in committees that are largely insulated from people with other ideas, the political system itself comes under scrutiny. If, according to the logic of TINA ('there is no alternative'), the system allows for no alternatives, there ought to be a different system.

By concentrating rays of light, a burning glass threatens to set fire to anything that the light falls onto. A series of crises in quick succession accelerated the double alienation from democracy. They laid bare the decreasing representativeness of consolidated democracies and at the same time led to the strengthening of anti-democratic forces.