

Sovereignty and the National Interest

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Much of the world today is torn between national populists and liberal democrats. The national populists put the nation first; the liberal democrats argue for something closer to multicultural multilateralism. In doing so, they offer distinct visions of how sovereignty and the national interest interact. For national populists, sovereignty is an expression of the national interest; whoever wields sovereign authority should ensure that the national interest is served. For liberal democrats, sovereignty is the responsibility to determine what is in the nation's best interests, and then to reconcile competing claims and distribute scarce resources accordingly. The two groups also offer contrasting views of world order. The national populists focus on self-help and mutual respect. The liberal democrats emphasize integration, cooperation, and solidarity.

Viewed side-by-side, the two worldviews present irreconcilable differences in the constitution of political authority and the structure of international relations. Hence it is tempting to argue that the interaction between national populists and liberal democrats should be limited, particularly when national populism threatens to descend into authoritarianism. But there is a narrow path along which interaction between national populists and liberal democrats can be beneficial, when national populists promise to reconnect members of society who have lost representation within liberal democratic politics. Reconnecting those who fall away from politics is essential to the stability of liberal democracy over the longer term. Indeed, the same point applies for populists from all parts of the political spectrum, and not just the nationalist right that is so prominent in Europe, Turkey, Brazil, India, and the United States today.

The question is whether and how populists can effectively represent their constituents while at the same time adapting to liberal democratic norms for reconciling competing interests. That question has not received much attention in the scholarly literature.¹ We know a lot more about the origins and nature of populism, and about how populism can lead to authoritarianism by undermining democratic norms and institutions, than we know about how populists become something closer to mainstream liberal democrats. Research on populists in power is still in its infancy.²

The key to striking a beneficial relationship between national populists and liberal democrats lies in reinforcing the formal and informal institutions that underpin the liberal democratic connection between sovereignty and the national interest. The 'rule of law' debate in Europe and the United States is about protecting those institutions that frame the exercise of sovereignty and ensure that the national interest is defined within the context of liberal democratic politics. So long as those institutions are resilient, national populists will have little choice but to learn how to exercise sovereignty to identify the interests of the nation, rather than bending sovereignty to the service of a national interest they take as given.

A Study in Contrast

This relationship between sovereignty and the national interest seems abstract when presented at the start of an essay, but it comes across concretely when laid out in political speeches. Consider the contrast between Donald Trump and Barack Obama. When Donald Trump gave his first address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2017, his message was simple. True patriots everywhere, should invest their sovereignty – a word he used twenty-one times during the speech – in the pursuit of the national interest. As Trump explained, ‘if we do not invest ourselves, our hearts, and our minds in our nations, if we will not build strong families, safe communities, and healthy societies for ourselves, no one can do it for us.’ His only qualification to this notion of self-help is that: ‘in fulfilling our obligations to our own nations, we also realize that it’s in everyone’s interest to seek a future where all nations can be sovereign, prosperous, and secure.’³ Trump left open the question how those sovereign nations should reconcile competing claims with one-another.

Trump’s UN speech was different from any given by a United States President to the General Assembly. When Barack Obama spoke at the United Nations the year before, he never mentioned the term sovereignty. There is no question for Obama that the governments represented in the General Assembly are sovereign; the only question is how they will use the authority they have. Self-help is not a viable option, and neither is isolationism. Obama insisted: ‘a nation ringed by walls would only imprison itself.’ For Obama, the principal themes were integration, solidarity, and cooperation. He made it clear to the General Assembly that: ‘we can only realize the promise of this institution’s founding – to replace the ravages of war with cooperation – if powerful nations like my own accept constraints.’⁴ And where the United States accepts the necessity for self-restraint in the pursuit of common interests, other governments should as well.

The contrast between these speeches reflects the different ways the two presidents view the exercise of political authority. Trump believes in the ‘unitary executive’, which derives from the first sentence of Article II of the Constitution: ‘The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.’ According to this theory, there are few if any institutional checks on presidential power.⁵ The President is beholden only to his supporters within the electorate, and he acts as their sovereign. Obama believes in checks and balances and, as he said repeatedly during his two terms in office, he was president of all Americans, not just those who supported him. This belief did not stop Obama from extending the executive power through presidential decisions when he could not pass legislation in Congress, but he remained committed to an inclusive understanding of the national interest.⁶

Trump and Obama also believed in different visions of America’s role in the world. Trump saw American leadership as ‘proudly putting America first’.⁷ By implication, Trump reserves his ability as president to determine what America needs as well. For Obama, the notion of American leadership is very different. As he explained to the American people at the start of the Libyan intervention in 2011, ‘American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well....’ This is necessary, as Obama makes clear, because ‘the course of history poses challenges that threaten our common humanity and our common security’.⁸ The national interest, for Obama, is a collective endeavour. And while Obama later expressed regret over U.S. involvement in Libya, he did not change his views on the essential character of American leadership.

The Essence of Populism

This contrast in world views between national populism and liberal democracy derives from the essence of populism, meaning those characteristics that populists share across the political spectrum. The most important of these is the effort to fight for ‘the true people’ against the ‘corrupt elite’.⁹ Populists like Donald Trump claim to represent those people who cannot find a voice in liberal democracy, and they promise to re-imagine the national interest in a way that puts those unrepresented voices at the forefront.

This claim to represent the true people against the corrupt elite has four implications. Populist politicians must identify who belongs in the ‘true people’ and who does not. They must communicate with those true people in ways that are distinct from the way elites communicate and do not go through traditional gateways – media, parties, trade unions, etc. – that elites are likely to manage. They must provide an explanation for who are the elites, why they are corrupt, and what can be done to fix that corruption. And they must offer a vision of the ‘good society’ where the true people can be in control.

These implications explain why populists take the national interest as given. They need some structural feature – like race, class, faith, or gender – to distinguish the true people. That structural feature needs to be tied to the explanation for why those people have fallen out of liberal democracy and what were the consequences. This is a story with little nuance, steeped in identity politics. It is also a story that they must package in simple terms, because without the benefit of traditional media, parties, unions, and all the rest, they need to communicate that story directly to the widest possible audience.

Such direct communication works most effectively in one direction, from the populist to the public. Meanwhile, the broad accusation of elite corruption restricts any effort by the people to feed back into the process through intermediaries – because anyone who has access to institutional power is likely also to attract suspicion. As a result, the vision of a good society lacks clear trade-offs or winners and losers among the ‘true people’ the populist claims to represent. Elites will lose power, but the true people only stand to win. As Trump liked to say, his people would win so much they would become tired of winning. This does not mean populists lack policy platforms, or an articulated view of what needs to be done once they get into government. What it means is that the platforms they promote tend to lack clear priorities. The national interest is a complete package with little space for compromise among competing claims within the nation itself.

Liberal democrats face few of these constraints. Their political parties have constituencies, which tend to organize around structural cleavages, but party leaders are free to court votes from the margins by making targeted promises. Liberal democratic politicians can also rely on strong intermediaries to communicate relatively complex, subtle messages. And they can use those same intermediaries to provide feedback on how well the messages are working and where points of tension are likely to emerge. This process of intermediation works through constant compromise; it also tends to establish relatively clear priorities when trade-offs become necessary. All that is required is someone to make authoritative decisions.

This liberal democratic arrangement is far from perfect. The word ‘relatively’ does a lot of work in that previous paragraph. Not all constituencies find equal representation or attract equal attention. Not all interests can be accommodated. Some intermediaries are more effective than others both in communicating and in feeding back into the system. Not all compromises are just, not all trade-offs are equitable, and not all priorities are addressed. Not every political leader is equally effective or impartial in making authoritative decisions. Populists take advantage of such failings by identifying those communities most persistently left out.

Threats to Liberal Democracy

Populists are not the only threat to liberal democracy. Liberal democrats create their own problems by losing contact with the electorate, embracing wealthy and powerful special interests, abusing power when in office, and undermining the legitimacy of their own constitutional arrangements. If this were not the case, then it would be hard to understand how populists – who are always available and looking for opportunities to challenge the authority of political elites – could ever make any headway. When liberal democratic politics is inclusive, it is also resilient. The exercise of sovereign authority to shape the national interest works in liberal democracy so long as elected representatives remain connected to those competing interests in society that need to be reconciled. When those elected representatives lose touch with the electorate – when they find themselves ‘ruling the void’, as Peter Mair described it – liberal democracy becomes more fragile and prone to instability.¹⁰ This point is worth underscoring because the greatest threat to liberal democracy comes from the failings of the liberal democrats themselves.

The threat to liberal democracy from liberal democrats has been around as long as liberal democracy, which is why early political theorists like Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto placed such a strong emphasis on the need for a circulation of elites.¹¹ Their concern was that any group of elites that remains too long in power would inevitably fail to represent increasing elements of society. They had good reason to worry. Mosca and Pareto were writing at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Centuries, when populism emerged in various guises on all parts of the political spectrum to challenge the hegemony of traditional liberal elites and the very limited notion of democracy they represented. In that sense, populism is part of the ‘pathology of representative politics.’¹²

That transformation of liberal democracy was neither an easy nor even an obvious process. Many liberal democracies collapsed into more authoritarian forms of government along the way – and not just in Europe. The explanation lies in the top-down and inflexible nature of populist political mobilization. The challenge for populists when they get into power is that it is almost impossible to avoid making compromises. Therefore, they face a choice between losing support or escaping from accountability. The temptation to escape accountability is extreme, which is why political scientists like William H. Riker have been quick to equate populists with autocrats.¹³ In this telling of democratic weakness, the threat populists pose is that they will use the strength they garner by rallying underrepresented parts of the liberal democratic electorate – and discontent with existing elites – to seize power and then change constitutional arrangements in ways that will ensure they retain their authority.

This descent to authoritarianism is not inevitable, however. Somehow in the crucible of successive world wars, many populist movements of protest in Western Europe and the United States evolved into (or took control over) mass political parties and so reconstituted the political mainstream. The narrow pathway involves a reconciliation of populist movements with liberal democratic norms. This pathway is narrow because it requires that the leaders of those movements hold onto their supporters while also learning to use sovereign authority to intermediate competing interests and claims on resources. In turn they need to learn new, more subtle, modes of communication with a broader, more inclusive electorate. They also need to establish feedback mechanisms that make it easier to adjust their messages and to adapt to new or emerging interests and claims.

The process of adapting from populist political movement to mainstream political party is likely to be more challenging on the nationalist right, than on other parts of the political spectrum. Radical right-wing parties tend to have a nativist, exclusive understanding of the 'true people' they represent.¹⁴ As a result, they tend to be more deeply invested in a monolithic narrative about both the nation and the national interest. Such narratives tend to be inflexible because they rest on the assumption that the nation can be self sufficient. Indeed, any concession to the outside world is an affront to the national interest and so constitutes a sign of weakness. By implication, a strong sovereign is one that refuses to make concessions — and a refusal to make concessions is an essential sign of strength.

Implications for World Order

The populist movements on the nationalist right may find it more difficult to evolve into something that looks and acts like a political party of the mainstream, but they must be encouraged to do so once in office. That is why the debate over the rule of law in Europe is so important. So long as right-wing nationalist parties remain accountable to the electorate, they will have to develop the institutions and attitudes required to intermediate competing interests and to identify political priorities. In turn, that process will break open any monolithic conception of the national interest to reveal something more fragmented and nuanced. Sovereign authority will have to engage in compromise in order to shape the national interest rather than taking it as given. Populist political leaders will start to look more like liberal democratic elites in that sense.

The success of this development hangs delicately on the resilience of those checks and balances required to ensure political accountability. It also hangs on the relative strength of those intermediaries like a free press, trade unions, churches, no-profit organisations, and other elements in civil society that are able to feed back into the political process both to reinforce checks and balances and to lend weight to voices that remain underrepresented. Without these supports, the temptation for populists to try and escape accountability by re-engineering political institutions in a more authoritarian direction is too great — particularly on the nationalist right.

The challenge for liberal democrats is to explain why they have such a strong interest in helping to preserve checks and balances or strong civil society institutions in other countries. Populists of all kinds will insist that any such efforts represent an illegitimate interference in domestic politics and a violation of national sovereignty. Even liberal democrats in those countries that are the focus for international attention would have to agree. When French European Affairs Minister Laurence Boone said in an interview that her government would be monitoring Italy's new right-wing coalition closely, she drew a sharp rebuke from Sergio Mattarella as President of the Italian Republic. Italians know how to bathe themselves, Mattarella insisted. Italy's presumptive new right-wing prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, went further to insist that the French government repudiate Boone's statement and apologise.

The interest of liberal democrats is not to make Italy a better Italy, and neither is it to violate Italian sovereignty. It is to ensure that any Italian government is able to make compromises in determining what lies in the national interest. Strong liberal democratic institutions make such compromising behaviour more likely insofar as they reshape national sovereignty away from the protection of a fixed national interest and toward something that looks and works more like interest intermediation. Moreover, what is true for Italy is also true for other European countries. European integration only works as a process so long as the member states are able to compromise.

Europe is not alone in that requirement. The international system created at the end of the Second World War is similarly dependent upon a theory of governance within which sovereign authority shapes the national interest through intermediation and compromise. That system has grown increasingly unwieldy over time. That is why successive U.S. presidents have delivered the same message of self-restraint to the United Nations General Assembly. It is also why Trump's message — which he repeated annually — was so discordant. Much of the world may be divided between national populists and liberal democrats, but it is united in the need to face common challenges too large for any one government or group to address. If those governments are to cooperate, they cannot start from an inflexible notion of the national interest. They must use their sovereign authority to define that interest in finding collective solutions.

Notes

¹ Erik Jones, 'Populism in Europe: What Scholarship Tells Us.' *Survival* 61:4 (2019) pp. 7-30.

² See, for example, the special issue of *Government & Opposition* on the 'Three Faces of Populism in Power', <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/issue/293C984CB10231F7788AD5AA1DC035BF>.

³ The full text of Donald Trump's speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 19 September 2017 can be found here: <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/trump-un-speech-2017-full-text-transcript-242879>.

⁴ The full text of Barack Obama's speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 September 2016 can be found here: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/address-president-obama-71st-session-united-nations-general-assembly>.

⁵ See, Stephen Skowronek, John A. Dearborn, and Desmond King, *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic: The Deep State and the Unitary Executive* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020).

⁷ This citation is taken from Trump's last speech to the UN General Assembly, on 22 September 2020: <https://it.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-trump-to-the-75th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-september-22-2020/>.

⁸ Obama's remarks to the American people on Libya were delivered on 28 March 2011 and can be found here: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

⁹ The scholarly literature has many definitions of populism; this characteristic is a common element in most of them, although the points of emphasis are often different. See Jones, 'Populism in Europe'.

¹⁰ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).

¹¹ See, for example, Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class (Elementi di Scienza Politica)*. Translated by Hannah D. Kahn. Edited by Arthur Livingston. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).

¹² Paul Taggart, 'Populism and the Pathologies of Representative Politics,' in Yves Mény and Yves Sured, eds. *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2022) pp. 62-80.

¹³ See William H. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1982).

¹⁴ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).