

# FALSE FRAMES

## HOW WE UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY WITH CARELESS LANGUAGE\*

~~DEMOCRACY CRISIS~~ ATTACK ON DEMOCRACY  
~~POPULISM~~ ANTI-DEMOCRATIC FORCES  
~~ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY~~ AUTOCRACY

### SUMMARY

The media and many academic researchers have settled on three labels to debate democracy's current malaise. They invariably talk about "populism" and "illiberal democracy" as contributing to a "crisis of democracy".

But these labels create frames of understanding that weaken democracy. There is a simple warning against using these false frames: those who attack democracy cherish all three of them. They want to be illiberal, they claim that democracy is in crisis (and that only they can save it) and do not mind being called populist, but rather wear it as a badge of honour.

### 1. "DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS" – A DANGEROUS HALF-TRUTH

The talk of a crisis of democracy is ubiquitous. Commentators from all political orientations use and thereby reinforce the notion of a crisis of democracy. The chorus of gloom is happily reinforced by authoritarian states that actively broadcast anti-democratic propaganda, reinforce divisions to fuel extreme polarisation and try to create an image of democracies as being dysfunctional – in contrast to supposedly stable authoritarian regimes. Freedom House's democracy index shows that the number of democracies has remained fairly stable since 2000, at around 46 to 47% of countries around the world, with a slight drop from 47% in 2006 to 45% in 2016. Other democracy indexes show similar trends.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is worth keeping in mind

that in the UN's Human Development Index the top 30 countries are democracies with only two exceptions.<sup>2</sup>

That being said, democracies currently do face problems. But the "democracy in crisis" frame suggests to many people that democracy is the problem. Democracies face an increasing number of problems that should be precisely named and described, rather than resorting to an unprecise and unhelpful frame like "crisis of democracy".

Some of the problems include:<sup>3</sup>

- A widespread and well-funded attack against democracy. The attack is organised, ideologically underpinned and financed by diverse actors, including the Russian government, extreme right-wing movements and political parties on both sides of the Atlantic. It takes many forms, including social media campaigns and indoctrination. In countries where these parties control the government, it also includes assaults on checks and balances (dismantling judiciaries, controlling media, etc.), on the space for civil activism and the media, and on democratic culture (as with President Trump's constantly lying). An attack becomes a crisis if it is not defeated. The precise framing of an attack against democracy strengthens the resolve to defend democracy. Talking about a "crisis" of democracy weakens that resolve.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., The Economist, The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index." <<https://infographics.economist.com/2017/DemocracyIndex/>>

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>

<sup>3</sup> See, for a consolidated overview of democracy's challenges, IDEA's new report "The Global State of Democracy." <<https://www.idea.int/gsdod/files/IDEA-GSOD-OVERVIEW-EN.pdf>>

- The quick transformation of the public space through social media and the internet more generally. In contrast to the Silicon Valley narrative of fostering equality and human progress, new technologies are morally neutral. They can be used for good and bad purposes. Social media has liberated public debate from diverse controls and made it easier for the marginalised to connect and be heard. However, social media can also be used to silence debates through hate speech and intimidation, and to manipulate and falsify debates through paid agents (“trolls”), fake news and fake engagement (“social bots”). Furthermore, as widely discussed, social media can contribute to extreme polarisation (filter bubbles, etc.). Social media, and Facebook in particular, are also problematic by allowing virtually anybody to run highly targeted political campaigns (“dark ads”, “micro-targeting”) with almost no transparency. This raises significant concerns about the role of money in politics, foreign interference and the emerging information monopoly held by Facebook.
- Money in politics. Democracies have proven unable to contain the influence of wealthy interests on public decision-making. This influence often goes directly against the will expressed by the voters of the party/parties in government, thereby undermining the very essence of what democratic elections are about. Recurring scandals, such as the Dieselgate in Germany and the role of UK accounting firms in “advising” the government on reforming the tax code are but a few examples. Surveys<sup>4</sup> show that people lose trust in politicians’ will to represent the people, which opens the door for populist messages of “draining the swamp” and kicking out the “corrupt elite”.

These are identifiable challenges that should be monitored, discussed and addressed. Some academic research would result in clearer insights if it broke down these elements rather than using changing parameters to indicate a fuzzy “crisis of democracy”. For decades, a crisis of democracy was identified based on decreasing electoral turn-out. With turn-out on the rise, the argument has now shifted to voters supporting the wrong parties, i.e. “populists”.

The frame ‘crisis’ is psychologically problematic as it implies a hard-to-explain, sudden affliction and a somewhat helpless victim. An attack becomes a crisis if it is not defeated. Calling it an attack will strengthen the resolve to defend democracy. Call it a crisis and people wonder what to do and lose confidence.

## 2. FORGET POPULISM

Populism has become the catch-all description of a large variety of new parties that challenge the status quo. Journalists typically use it to describe parties that do some of the following things: challenge the status quo; attack incumbent parties as unaccountable elites; pretend to represent the people against “the system”; simplify complex problems; use false facts; attack checks and balances, like the courts; have a right-wing

conservative agenda; have an extreme right-wing, xenophobic agenda; explicitly or tacitly condone political violence.

The pervasive notion of populism, as used by media (not as used by political scientists; see below), is problematic because it is fuzzy. A criterion like simplifying complex problems could apply to the political communication of any party or candidate. “Immigration is bad for our country” is as simplified as “the EU guarantees our peace”. Both express a message that needs further explanation. Other criteria would fit parties to which the term is not applied: President Macron’s *en Marche* party campaigned against the status quo and existing elites, but nobody called it populist.

The deeper problem of the media’s extensive notion of populism is that it obscures whether the problem is the party’s political platform or its attitude to the democratic rules of the game. Democrats must distinguish between political opponents whose programmes they do not like and opponents who seek to destroy democracy. With the way journalists use populism, it is impossible to distinguish between the two. Is a political party being attacked as “populist” because it is against immigration – a legitimate political position in a democracy within the limits of human rights – or because it rejects political pluralism and checks and balance – an anti-democratic position? A right-wing programme does not threaten democracy, but an extremist platform does.

By obscuring the borders between what constitutes a legitimate political party and an anti-democratic party, the media plays into the hand of “populist” parties who can claim that the “establishment” seeks to thwart their political programme. It is no wonder then that “populist” parties cherish the label.

Leading academic authors (such as Jan-Werner Müller and Cas Mudde) use the populism label in a more cautious manner. According to them, populism’s core is a rejection of pluralism. Populists will always claim that they and they alone represent the real people and their true interests.

In this definition, populism is a problem for democracy, because of its anti-pluralistic nature. The idea of democracy is based on processes and institutions that give space to the will of the majority without marginalising electoral minorities. Indeed, pluralism provides these electoral minorities with special rights (such as opposition rights in parliament) and hedges electoral majorities in a system of checks and balances. Populists (in the narrow sense) pretend that these institutions dilute the real will of the people, which by some magic only these parties represent. That attitude is anti-democratic.

The notion of populism in the public debate – because it is used in the catch-all manner described above – has become counterproductive. Instead of populism, journalists should distinguish clearly between platforms that they do not like, but which are legitimate in a democracy and platforms that are anti-democratic. Where the two are mixed up, they should be specific about which part is anti-democratic.

<sup>4</sup> Transparency International, “People and Corruption: Europe and Central Asia 2015/16,” November, 2016. <https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/7493>

To understand the threat to democracy, a lot of academic research would benefit from greater clarity in its definition. According to Cas Mudde populism is a “thin-centered” concept that can be combined with “a so-called host ideology, normally some form of nationalism on the right and some form of socialism on the left”.<sup>5</sup> However, a lot of academic research combines the thin and the thick. To draw on one stark example, Norris and Inglehart define populism as the use of “nativism” as opposed to “cosmopolitanism”.<sup>6</sup> With that kind of definition it is not possible to ascertain whether a party is a threat to democracy or not, because “cosmopolitanism” is not the essence of democracy. A party can be against immigration or against international treaties without being undemocratic.

- In this vein, it would be helpful if the public discourse and academic research became more specific by tracking the development of “populist” platforms in the narrow academic sense of a thin ideology that is anti-pluralistic/anti-democratic;
- Do not categorise extremist, undemocratic right-wing parties that have a “thick” racial or extreme nationalist ideologies as “populists” because that definition banalises the threat;
- Do not compound right-wing platforms with populism; Germany’s CSU, France’s UPM under Sarkozy or Spain’s PP have expressed many far-right positions, but they do not question political pluralism;
- Do not compound platforms that are against the EU or international co-operation with “populism”. While they may often coincide, they are not linked. Being against EU membership is a legitimate position for a party. It says nothing about whether it is being democratic or not.

### 3. FORGET “ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY”

Next to populism, “illiberal democracy” is often used to describe the aspirations of some parties or the reality in countries like Hungary, Poland or even Russia.

The political commentator Fareed Zakaria publicised the term “illiberal democracy” in 1997, arguing that in more and more countries, democratically elected leaders were curtailing the fundamental freedoms of their citizens. The problem with his argument is that in the countries he cited as examples, such as Russia or Kazakhstan, leaders were not democratically elected. A country is not an electoral democracy simply because people have the chance to cast a vote. Communists and Nazis held elections.

The idea of an ‘illiberal democracy’ has no basis in political science or international law.

Even the most minimal scientific definition of democracy, proposed by Joseph Schumpeter, namely “a competitive struggle for votes”, presupposes ‘competition’, i.e. a level-playing field. Throwing opponents into jail or abusing media to only broadcast one message undermines competition. Schumpeter did not think that the Third Reich or the Soviet Union were democracies simply because they held elections.

Other, wider definitions by political scientists include political rights. The same goes for obligations of states under international law, which makes clear that democratic participation is not limited to voting. The right to vote is only one expression of the wider right to political participation. Relevant international obligations, such as Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), include both the right to vote and the right to wider political participation beyond casting a ballot. The UN Human Rights Committee, the body tasked with monitoring states’ compliance with the ICCPR, in its authoritative interpretation of Article 25, makes clear that the right to political participation requires additional political rights to be respected.<sup>7</sup> In relation to the right to vote it states that: “Freedom of expression, assembly and association are essential conditions for the effective exercise of the right to vote and must be fully protected.”<sup>8</sup>

In short, the right to vote is not a stand-alone right but it stands and falls with other political rights. A democratic election requires political freedoms: political parties and candidates must be able to compete under equal conditions, the media must be free and pluralistic, and citizens must be free to express themselves. These conditions were not present in the countries Zakaria cited, and they are rapidly weakened in the newly emerging “illiberal” states.

Democracy also requires institutions (such as independent courts) to protect these freedoms. For example, once the Polish PiS party paralysed the country’s constitutional court, the opposition was unable to defend its rights in parliament through any legal means. When a large part of the population cannot be effectively represented in parliament, it is a problem with democracy, not with liberalism. Together, these rights and institutions make up a democracy. If they are not present, a state does not become illiberal, it becomes less democratic or outright authoritarian.<sup>9</sup>

A conception of democracy as a majority will without limitations is a tyranny of the majority. Furthermore, the characterisation of authoritarian parties as only believing in the majority will – as

<sup>5</sup> Cas Mudde, “Populism isn’t dead”, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2017. For a more in-depth analysis by Mudde see “The Populist Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition* Vol. 39, No. 4 (2004): 541-563.

<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris propose that the traditional economic right-left cleavage is increasingly overlaid by a new cultural cleavage that separates populists and cosmopolitan liberals. We do not argue with this proposition but with the idea that in this new cleavage some attitudes that the authors associate with “populism” (such as traditional values as opposed to “progressive” values or closed border) can be equated with anti-democratic attitudes. See Robert F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash”, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, August 2016. <<https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/citation.aspx?PubId=11325>>

<sup>7</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 25 (1996), paragraph 8. The General Comment can be downloaded here: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fc22.html>

<sup>8</sup> *Supra*, paragraph 12

<sup>9</sup> The point is eloquently made by Jan-Werner Müller in *What is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). For the reasons explained above, we would only prefer if the essential problem is called “anti-democratic”, rather than populist.

opposed to checks and balances – is not backed by evidence. They only do so as long as the majorities are in their favour. Neither Poland’s PiS, nor Hungary’s FIDESZ party, nor Donald Trump propose to abolish the courts. Instead, they want to bring them under their control. Indeed, Prime Minister Orban of Hungary, who pretends to be close to the people, has barricaded his political beliefs behind far-reaching constitutional – and other – protections. The talk of “illiberal democracy” thus provides a sense of philosophical sophistication to something that is better described as a power grab.

Indeed, using the idea of “illiberal democracy” feeds a new frame that is being constructed around the supposed juxtaposition of traditional-conservative versus progressive-liberal views. Authoritarian leaders say: “Don’t ask me how I govern, ask me how I defend our culture and way of life”. This helps autocratic leaders shift the dominant frame of thinking about politics because it implies a battle about political ideologies – pro- or anti-liberalism – what is in fact an attack on democracy. In short, it’s not about liberalism, it’s about democracy. The methodology used by Inglehart and Norris supports such a re-framing as it also does not distinguish democratic and anti-democratic elements of political platforms, but builds an opposition of “populist” versus “cosmopolitan liberal”.

It is time to rethink the blossoming academic industry around “illiberal democracy” and focus it on the real thing: the attack on pluralism and democracy. Media has to meet the same responsibility.

## ABOUT DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

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