

BOOK REVIEW

The people vs. democracy. Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it, by Yascha Mounk, Cambridge, MA, and London, UK, Harvard University Press, 2018, 392 pp., index, £21.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-67497-682-5

The recent “rise” of populism is a much-focused upon development. Concurrent to what many see as the declining attractions of “liberal democracy”, populism has widely reared its head. This has led to political parties and in some cases governments whose “pro-people” outlook doesn’t necessarily extend to ensure the liberal and democratic rights of all citizens living within a polity. The issue of whether populism is “antidemocracy” *per se*, however, is by no means clear cut; neither is an agreed definition of what “populism” is.

In March 2016, *Democratization* devoted a special issue to: “Dealing with populists in government”, which featured case studies of: Ecuador, Venezuela, Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Austria. The *Democratization* special issue focused on ways to roll back the influence of populists in order to reinstate card-carrying democrats who would play by the rules of the liberal democratic game and continue their countries’ pro-liberal democracy trajectories.¹ But what if populism is the way of the future and populists are here to stay? What can “liberal democracy” do about it to “fight back” and reinstate “properly” liberal democratic governments of the kind which emerged in many parts of the world following the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union three decades ago?

Mounk’s book is a wide-ranging survey encompassing Europe and the USA during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, who he identifies unequivocally as a right-wing populist. If there is one thing guaranteed to make liberal democrats sit up and take notice it is the idea that the United States, for many a venerable bastion of liberal democracy, is now part of a new and highly unexpected populist landscape.

Mounk’s book is clearly and well-written. It is engaging and thought-provoking. It is the product of a great deal of research and draws on hundreds of sources (the references alone fill 88 pages, one-quarter of the book’s length). It is also highly polemical and usefully prescriptive. Mounk wants to identify “the problem”, explain why it has come about, and suggest ways to remedy things. He is a great fan of liberal democracy and believes that populist governments want to destroy it. In particular, he believes, the “liberal” dimension is under great threat.

There is always a great problem when writing about populism from a democracy point of view. That is, unless populists seize power by non-democratic means then the problem for democrats is that they have got there through the “popular will”: that is, enough people have pro-actively voted for them to put them into power. In other words, how should we regard populists who achieve power by – comparatively – democratic means, that is without packing ballot boxes or using guns to install the populist in the president’s palace?

Of course, the often-unacknowledged truth is that many voters may care little about *liberal* democracy, if that means unequivocally respecting the rights of those who they do not believe deserve them, including some immigrants. Certainly, as Mounk emphasizes, populists who achieve power do so by overtly identifying who the “people” are, that is, the indigenous, salt-of-the earth, locals who have been “badly treated” often for decades by the devious knaves who achieve power in the name of liberal democracy only to rule in self-interestedly. Mounk argues that it is widely believed that liberal democracies, such as those in France and the United Kingdom, are strong and stable because they have achieved three things: free and fair elections, high levels of wealth and education, and a vibrant civil society with neutral institutions such as courts. Now, however, Mounk argues, liberal democracy is

declining in efficacy due to individual rights and the popular will being increasingly at odds with each other.

Mounk identifies three common aspects of shifts to populism in Europe, the USA and Latin America: (1) a lack of economic growth and concomitant improvements in most people's lives (2) significant influxes of immigrants or *the belief by many voters that there is a significant influx of immigrants whose presence will change irrevocably the extant culture and well-being of the indigenous*, and (3) capacity to spread opinion and sometimes information by the myriad of social media and other "news" sources on the internet. In addition, Mounk also identifies the rise of supranational decision-makers, for example in the European Union, who are utterly untouchable by voters and, as a result, he argues have added to the widespread disenchantment felt by many voters at the present state of political, social and economic affairs in their countries.

Mounk sets out a well-meaning and hopefully effective set of prescriptions to "deal with" the populists. His strategy doesn't focus on destroying them politically but works from the premise that at least some of the grievances which populists identify and exploit – such as "high" levels of immigration – cannot be swept under the carpet and must be addressed by whoever is in power, whether populists or card-carrying liberal democrats. Mounk contends that in order to reverse the trend against liberal democracy, politicians must act speedily to create and implement radical reforms to improve living standards, undermine fears of multi-ethnic democracy, and deal with the divisive rise of social media. Yet, while these are eminently sensible approaches it remains to be seen whether politicians supportive of such measures have the will or capacity to do what Mounk advocates. The problem is that if they were capable of bolstering liberal democracy and undermining populism then it would take more cohesive and concerted actions than they have hitherto shown themselves capable of.

In sum, this is a major contribution to what might be called the "where are we and what the hell do we do about it" school of political science writing. I read the lengthy – nearly 400 pages – book in just over 24 hours. It is a page turner and even better, a page turner that makes you think. Highly recommended.

Note:

1. Kaltwasser and Taggart, "Dealing with Populists in Government," 201.

Bibliography:

Kaltwasser, Cristobal Rovira, and Paul Taggart. "Dealing with Populists in Government: A Framework for Analysis." *Democratization* 23, no. 2 (2016): 201–220.

Jeffrey Haynes
London Metropolitan University
Jeff.haynes@londonmet.ac.uk

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