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Populism and the Challenge of Democracy in 2016

Abstract

"Populism really flexes its political muscle when a large enough group of people are just fed up with the current trajectory of the government."

Posting about this turbulent political year from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/populism-and-the-challenge-of-democracy-in-2016/>

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Populism and the Challenge of Democracy in 2016

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Donald Roth

December 13,
2016

Winston Churchill famously said, “Democracy is the worst form of government ... except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,” and perhaps this year in politics has many of us sharing the frustration of the first half of that quote. In the past decade or so, the march toward globalism and our settled faith in democracy have gone largely unchallenged; however, a variety of political chickens have come home to roost in this past year, exposing the messy reality of systemic corruption and manifesting in a surge of populism around the world. This has generated an environment of fear and uncertainty, as the experts that most of us rely on for our political analysis have been repeatedly confounded by these global shifts. As a result, there is a pervasive climate of fear in many circles, leading some to predict [impending doom](#). So, what have we seen around the world this year? Is it headed to hell in a handbasket, or somewhere else?

The Seeds of Global Dissatisfaction

“[W]here reason is allowed to modulate the diverse elements of the state, there is obtained a perfect concord from the upper, lower, and middle classes as from various sounds; and what musicians call harmony in singing, is concord in matters of state, which is the strictest bond and best security of any republic, and which by no ingenuity can be retained where justice has become extinct.” – Scipio Africanus (quoted in Augustine’s [City of God, Book 2, Chapter 21](#))¹

What Scipio is so elegantly saying is that social harmony is what keeps the gears of state moving (particularly in a democracy/republic), and pervasive injustice will undermine that harmony in a way that eventually disrupts the government itself. If you buy this notion, then this can be a useful framing lens for understanding much of the disruption that has marked 2016.

Globally, there have been some massive revelations of systemic corruption during this past year. The biggest was the April release of the [Panama Papers](#), a trove of leaked documents which implicated powerful corporations and individuals around the world in over \$135 billion of tax evasion and money laundering. Although investigations are on-going, this data leak [lead directly to the resignation](#) of Iceland’s Prime Minister along with other government officials in Armenia, Spain, Austria, and the Netherlands. Similar revelations of [financial self-dealing and government corruption](#) also toppled the Brazilian government in the wake of the 2016 Olympics, culminating in the [impeachment](#) of the Brazilian President in August. Finally, revelations that South Korean President Park Geun-hye had [consulted a cult leader on classified issues of national security](#) resulted in her recent [impeachment](#).²

The West has had other stresses building in the past years as well. In Europe, the on-going Syrian civil war saw an influx of over one million refugees in 2015, creating a humanitarian crisis and [straining relations](#) between countries already under pressure from various debt crises. In the United States, tension has only been mounting over the use of force [by police](#), resulting in outbreaks in violence [against](#) them as well.³ This hasn’t been a purely partisan tension either, with groups on both the [right](#) and the [left](#) squaring off against what they view as government encroachment. Finally, of course, 2016 saw a U.S. election cycle so rife with scandals that much of the [electorate became numb to the concept](#).

Reaping the Whirlwind

“I’m a believer in the polls by the way. Rarely do you see a poll that’s very far off.” – Donald Trump (Dec. 9, 2015 [interview](#) for Washington Post)

One of the biggest political trends of this past year has been the global surge of [populism](#).⁴ It has historically had left and right-leaning permutations, but populism really flexes its political muscle when a large enough group of people are just fed up with the current trajectory of the government. Sometimes, the establishment listens to that outcry and reintegrates the disenfranchised masses. Other times, the populists just keep radicalizing and burn the whole system down. Looking at the world around us, it's easy to see the pitchforks out, but, at least in America, I think there is reason to believe that this is people needing time to process change and clean some of the gunk out of the societal machine, rather than something more radical. That is, this is more like Progressivism in the late-19th/early-20th century (think Roosevelt) than it is the rise of, say, [Hitler](#) (or [Mussolini](#)).

How can I be confident in this? Part of the fear right now is that the experts have been wrong so often in the last year. Nobody predicted Brexit; nobody predicted Trump, yet both happened. Well, really, it's not that no one predicted these things so much as that most of us used the wrong paradigm to analyze those events.⁵ American University Professor Allan Lichtman has predicted the last nine presidential elections correctly, and he says this is because he doesn't look at elections as [a horse race so much as a referendum on the party in the White House](#). Lichtman's insight is interesting, and, looking at [his method](#), it's hard not to agree with him that, regardless of who ran on the Republican ticket, the outcome we saw was more likely than polls suggested.⁶ It also supports the conclusion that Trump's victory had less to do with Trump's actual policies, and his subsequent [backpedaling](#) on much of his rhetoric suggests that Trump understands that too.⁷

If you're someone who was optimistic about the progressive globalism of the past few decades, things might slow down, but they're unlikely to be totally undone. When the populist movements of the past in the United States cropped up, they have not completely dialed back the clock. Roosevelt's populism didn't ultimately kill corporations; Nixon's populism didn't completely undo the Civil Rights movement. Society keeps evolving at a rapid pace, and a reaction that slows that pace isn't likely to stop that.

If you're someone who is happy with the political revolution, then push your leaders to make the most of it. Republicans have ended 2016 with an unprecedented level of control in American politics, and they can't wield that power just to roll back a bunch of policies they don't like. They need to articulate a positive vision of social flourishing rooted in empowered communities and limited government.

Finally, if you're afraid. Take heart. Beyond confidence that our hope doesn't lie in the political powers of this world, social struggle does not need to equate with social collapse. Conflict can be healthy, and the destruction of America will be apathy, not passion. In the end, 2016 is a year in which I think we can all do well to remember Alexander de Tocqueville's charge from [Democracy in America](#), "Let us then look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, not with that faint and idle terror which depresses and enervates the heart."⁸

Footnotes

1. Yeah, I'm using a lot of quotes in this article. Maybe it's because they add a sense of perspective a gravity to the issues we're considering, or maybe I'm not clever enough to come up with clever sayings by myself. Either way, bear with me. [↩](#)
2. This upheaval in the relatively closed South Korean society has been a huge opportunity for social change, especially spurred by the younger generation. For instance, a protest in November drew [2 million demonstrators](#), a full 4% of the total population. [↩](#)
3. I have pointed out [before](#), however, that this may actually help to point us forward to a resolution on this

issue. ↩

4. We can see this all over the place. In America, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump ran on essentially populist platforms. Populism was the driving force behind [Brexit](#) and the surge of [populist parties across Europe](#) who seek to end the European Union. It was also a driving force behind the election of the brutal and unstable [Rodrigo Duterte](#) in the Philippines and the remarkable strengthening of Shinzo Abe and his [Liberal Democratic Party's dominance](#) in Japan. ↩
5. Notably, Michael Moore, whose analysis I tend to dislike in most things, nailed what I think is the biggest reason for Trump's victory by calling it "[Rust Belt Brexit](#)." ↩
6. Obama's approval ratings have [not been stellar](#), and one party has [not typically held on to the White House](#) for more than 8 years since Truman. ↩
7. Trump's subsequent behavior regarding intelligence briefings and political appointments sort of suggests he'll be more "delegator-in-chief" than "commander-in-chief," so perhaps those who feared what Trump would do don't have to worry, since it doesn't sound like he'll be *doing* much. ↩
8. I think most of the paragraph from the end of Chapter VII, Book Four is prescient: "The men who live in the democratic ages upon which we are entering have naturally a taste for independence: they are naturally impatient of regulation, and they are wearied by the permanence even of the condition they themselves prefer. They are fond of power; but they are prone to despise and hate those who wield it, and they easily elude its grasp by their own mobility and insignificance. These propensities will always manifest themselves, because they originate in the groundwork of society, which will undergo no change: for a long time they will prevent the establishment of any despotism, and they will furnish fresh weapons to each succeeding generation which shall struggle in favor of the liberty of mankind. Let us then look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, not with that faint and idle terror which depresses and enervates the heart." ↩