



**Populism and  
Civic Engagement**



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## **Understanding Populism**

# **Populism**



## Introduction

This educational resource is to guide educators to lead a workshop or lesson with young people on the topic of populism and to enable young people to be able to think about and debate future policy challenges related to the rise of populism in Europe. By the end of the workshop or lesson the participants will be able to i) identify and discuss populism and ii) identify and discuss future policy challenges regarding populism. This will be guided by three key indicators set out in the foresight scenario matrix.

The matrix, indicators and policy challenges considered here are drawn from the research developed in the EC Horizon 2020 funded PaCE (Populism and Civic Engagement) project. Specifically, it draws on the development of foresight scenarios (PaCE D5.7 'finalisation of scenarios').

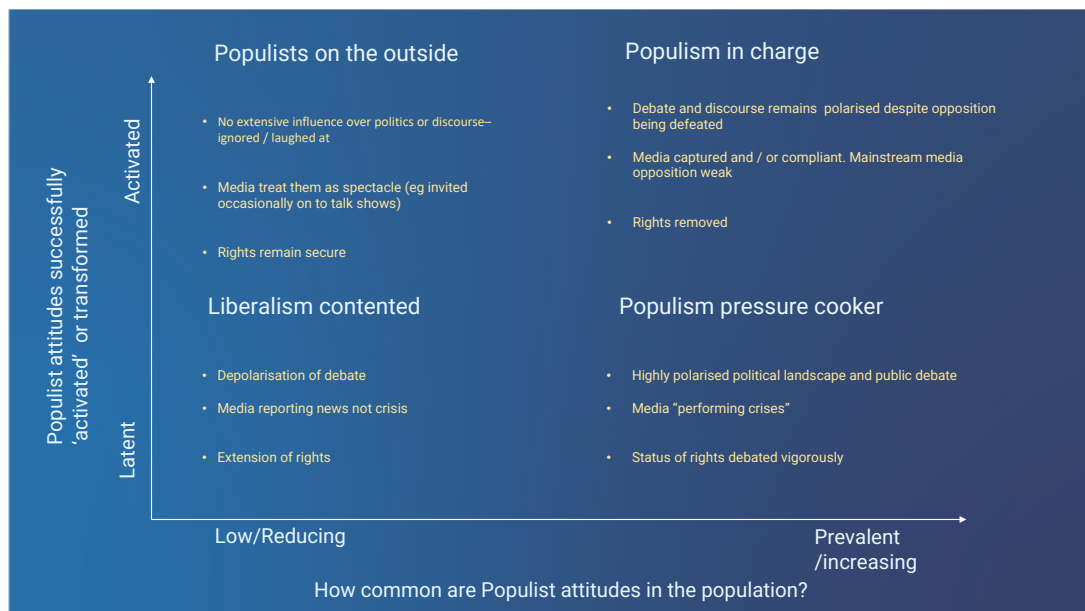
The indicators used to discuss populism in the scenarios and in this workshop are:

- Quality of public debate
- Behaviour of media
- Status of rights

In this document is included:

- The foresight scenario matrix containing four possible futures for populism in Europe
- A short summary of each scenario
- Questions and activities to guide learning about populism
- A handout of concepts and definitions
- A handout of a populism comic

### The populism foresight matrix (handout)





## **Structure**

The rest of the document is structured as follows (read Part 2 yourself before you hold the workshop):

### **Part 1 – The workshop**

1. Welcome and introduction
2. Warm up
3. Short summary of each scenario
4. Definitions and concepts
5. Activities
6. Debrief and evaluation
7. Next steps

### **Part 2 – Guidelines for the workshop**

1. Introduction
2. Establishing a safe learning environment
3. Ground rules for discussion
4. Starting points
5. Distancing techniques
6. Handling tricky questions

By the end of this lesson or workshop participants will know what populism is, will understand what 'rights', 'public debate' and 'media' mean in the context of populism and how this relates to future policy challenges. They will be able to describe what the future could be like, make basic policy recommendations and suggestions that could direct the future in a different direction, assess what scenario best fits their own country, talk about their own experiences of populism, talk about what causes populism and talk about what potential negative effects are caused by populism. As a follow-up exercise, you may ask students to write their own scenarios or a comic.

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## Part 1

### 1. Welcome and introduction

Conduct introductions with the workshop participants and review your objectives, learning outcomes and agenda. Relevant objectives and outcomes are listed below, feel free to use them all, choose some or use your own.

#### **Objectives and outcomes:**

##### **Knowledge**

By the end of the workshop participants will be able to:

- Recognise the differences between the foresight scenarios
- Define what populism is
- Describe their own country's experience of populism
- Relate to the scenario narratives
- Distinguish between negative effects of populism
- Understand the future policy challenges related to public debate, media and rights

##### **Skills**

By the end of the workshop participants will be able to:

- Debate future policy challenges
- Develop their own narrative to reflect their experience of populism
- Articulate basic policy recommendation

### 2. Warm up exercise

As a collective exercise get workshop participants to discuss and reflect on the following questions in a group discussion:

1. "What does politics mean to you?"
2. "What does populism mean to you"?
3. Finish the sentence "If I were president I would...."

### 3. Definitions, concepts, and the scenario matrix

Show participants the scenario matrix, explain it using the guide below, and run through the definitions and concepts in the handout, or, allow participants to refer to the handout when they need to.

#### Explaining the matrix

The matrix allows us to assess what scenario we find ourselves in based on the behaviour of the three key indicators – the media, public debate, and status of our rights.

- The extent of populist attitudes in society (how many people have populist attitudes and how strongly they hold them) are along horizontal axis and whether those attitudes are activated (are the attitudes turned into political change) along vertical axis
- Activation means voting for or openly supporting populism
- Activation can be achieved by populist leaders or media
- This gives us a spectrum from low levels of populist attitudes and low activation versus high populist attitudes and high activation

So, for example, going off the matrix, if we look around at our own country and observe that public debate is de-polarised and calm, the media are reporting news not crises and rights are being extended not reduced, then the scenario we find ourselves in according to this matrix is *Liberalism Contented*. Observing a different status or behaviour of these indicators would imply we are in a different scenario.

#### Definitions and concepts (handout)

In this **handout** there are some definitions and concepts included in the matrix that it will be worth outlining for participants. Hand these out now for participants to refer to when they need to.

## Definitions and concepts

**Populism** is a type of politics that blames the elite and minorities for a nation's problems and proposes strong leadership and the erosion of rights to make the nation better in some way. Populists claim to speak for the people, but this is often only a claim.

**Populist parties** are those political parties who prioritise the majority while either blaming elites or minorities for the problems of the country and violating rights.

**Attitudes** are how people feel about a certain topic, in this case the relevant attitudes are those promoted by populist parties, such as blaming minorities or elites for the country's problems.

**Latent** means dormant or not yet acted upon.

**Activated** means a person's attitudes are acted upon. For example, in voting for a populist party.

### Indicators:

**Rights** are legal protections given to people to protect them and activities they wish to pursue.

Examples include:

- The Right to equal treatment.
- The Right to privacy.
- The Right to asylum.
- The Right to marry.
- The Right to freedom of thought, opinion, and expression.
- The Right to work.

**Minorities** refers to those who are either not in the majority based on some protected characteristic or underrepresented in some way in public debate and politics.

Examples of minority status:

- Sexuality
- Ethnicity
- Immigration status
- Asylum seeker
- Gender (while women are not necessarily in the minority, they have certain rights that are important to them and their status, such as reproductive rights, equal rights to pay and representation etc)

Being a minority has historically required protections under law (eg rights) because you are not protected by the fact that you are in the majority. You can be a minority in one thing but majority in another, and some may be intersecting.

**Media** here means newspapers, broadcasters (TV) and social media. The issue at stake with the media is the role they play in getting people angry about things that perhaps are not as bad as they claim.

**Discourse or debate** refers to how people conduct conversations about politics with one another. Do they listen? Are they prepared to change their minds and be persuaded, or do people just try and convince others? Do people think that others are lying?

**Polarisation / De-polarisation** means how divided or argumentative discussions about politics in the country are. Can people agree? Is calm debate possible?


#### 4. Short summary of each scenario

**Liberalism contented:** In this scenario there is little public disagreement about policy and the future direction of the country. Debate is peaceful. The media report news in a calm way in this scenario and rights for minorities and equal rights are extended.

**Populists on the outside:** In this scenario populist parties exist but have very little influence over public debate, which remains calm albeit with small outbreaks of disagreement and scandal. The media treats the new populist party as entertainment, and report on things their leader says or does, but report less on their policies. Rights remain secure in this scenario.

**Populism pressure cooker:** In this scenario public debate contains lots of argument and conflict and is difficult to hold calm discussions about politics. Attitudes that are supportive of populism have increased in this scenario and can be heard in public discussions of politics. The media is “performing crises”, meaning every disagreement is framed in a sensationalised form. Whether certain groups should have rights taken away from them is debated angrily.

**Populism in charge:** Public debate is still full of conflict in this scenario; however, the media is now supportive of the new populist government and in many cases the government now owns the media or has influence over what it says. Equal rights and minority rights are removed in this scenario, leaving people less protected.



**Open discussion:** Get participants to think about what questions are posed by these scenarios?

One question to get participants to reflect on the challenges presented by the scenarios is:  
**how do we change public attitudes?**

## 5. Activities

The following four structured activities can be done one by one in order, or, you can pick and choose which activity is right for your workshop depending on the participants or time constraints.

**i) List the pros and cons of each scenario (10 minutes)**

**ii) Group discussion (15 mins)**

**Prompting questions for group discussion**

### **Public debate**

- Is disagreement good or bad? And why?
- What type of disagreement is bad, if any?
- What if we all agreed?

### **Media**

- Should news be entertainment?
- What role do the media play in disagreement?
- What role do the media play in causing unnecessary arguments?
- If you think the media cause arguments, why do you think they do this?

### **Rights**

- Why is it important to have rights?
- In what ways are these rights threatened in your country?
- In what ways might your rights be threatened in the future?





### iii) Think, pair, share (15 mins)

Get participants to reflect on the themes below alone for 5 minutes, then share ideas with a partner for 5 minutes, then, as pairs, share their thoughts with the rest of the group.

#### **Reflect on these themes (the themes are related to the scenario indicators):**

- Why is public debate / discussion important? In what ways can it be damaged?
- How important is the media in increasing / decreasing support for populist ideas? In what ways is this good or bad?
- Why are minority rights and equal rights important? In what ways are they under threat?

### iv) Personalised activity (15 mins)

Each student to finish the sentence, referred to earlier, based on what they have since learned in the workshop so far. "If I were president I would..."

Write down the answer and feed back to class and collectively reflect on each contribution.

#### **Follow up tasks for participants**

Ask participants to write their own scenario based on their country. Draw your own matrix with different scenarios or draw your own comic, based on the [comic shown here](#), if doing this online, or in the comic handout if doing this in person.

## **6. Conclusion / evaluation**

### **Reflections**

- Is there anything you now feel differently about?
- What do you know now that you didn't before?
- Will you behave differently in any way?
- How could attitudes be changed in your country?

Sum up learning outcome that help people reflect on future policy challenges.

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## Part 2

### Guidelines for the workshop discussion

Populism is a difficult and controversial topic to discuss in a classroom environment. Being a controversial political issue, it may be uncomfortable for some students. However, being uncomfortable in a safe and productive way is often the basis for learning and should not necessarily be avoided. Challenging views can be the basis for good education. This section is guidance and ground rules for discussing populism and using these foresight materials in a productive way.

### Introduction

Explain why it is important to discuss populism as a topic when you introduce the session. Setting expectations is also important, the topics discussed in the workshop may make people uncomfortable; working through that discomfort productively in the right way is part of the process. Participants should be clear that this is what the workshop or lesson will entail. There should be some red lines, however. Statements and arguments should be based on evidence. Facts matter. Encourage participants to remember that people of goodwill can disagree, but conversation must be about the issues at hand, not other people or their experiences. Insults and threats should not be tolerated. Ask students to question their own assumptions throughout.

### Establishing a safe learning environment

To share feelings and experiences about populism, to explore different values, challenge attitudes, express opinions and consider those of others without feeling threatened in any way, requires a supportive learning environment. For example, part of the workshop discusses the rights of minorities and the threat that some forms of populism pose for those rights. There will be people in the workshop from a minority or marginalised group, or someone who has protected characteristics of some kind. These participants could find the conversation difficult if not discussed appropriately.

As well as encouraging more open discussion, creating supportive learning environments also helps to ensure that educators are not nervous about unexpected disclosures or comments and that pupils are not put on the spot, upset or traumatised. For the educator in charge of the workshop. It is good practice to:

- Work with pupils to establish ground rules about how they will behave towards each other in discussion (a list of suggested ground rules is set out below)
- Provide opportunities for pupils to discuss issues in small groups as well as sharing views with the whole class
- Provide access to balanced information and differing views to help pupils clarify their own opinions (whilst making clear that behaviours such as racism, homophobia, misogyny, discrimination and bullying are never acceptable in any form)
- Be mindful of your influential position before expressing your own views. However, don't be afraid to confront views being expressed in a harmful way
- Be sensitive to the needs and experiences of individuals, as some pupils may have direct experience of some of the issues
- Always work within the school's policies on safeguarding and confidentiality
- Make pupils aware of reliable sources of support both inside and outside the school

## **Ground rules for discussion**

Ground rules set out at the beginning can minimise the chances of inappropriate or unintended comments that may have negative impacts on other pupils; whether intentional or not. Ground rules are also important to effectively manage discussions that might elicit strong opinions from participants.

It may be appropriate or worthwhile to develop ground rules together with participants and then test them in discussion and group activities, amending them as necessary. Follow the below examples of ground rules for discussing populism but feel free to also make your own.

Examples of ground rules for discussing populism include:

- **Openness:** We commit to being open and honest but will not discuss directly our own or others' personal/private lives. We will discuss examples but will not use names or descriptions which could identify anyone
- **Keep the conversation in the room:** We know that what we say in this workshop will remain in this workshop (if in line with the institution's safeguarding policies)
- **Non judgmental approach:** We can disagree with another person's point of view but we will not judge anyone, criticise them personally or make fun of them or their ideas. We will 'challenge the idea, not the person'
- **Right to pass:** Taking part is important, but we all have the right to pass on answering a question or participating in an activity and we will not put anyone 'on the spot'
- **Make no assumptions:** We will not make assumptions about people's values, attitudes, behaviours, identity, life experiences or feelings when they are discussing populism. We will listen to the other person's point of view respectfully and expect to be listened to ourselves
- **Asking questions:** Questions are a valuable part of learning. However, we will not ask personal questions, or anything intended to deliberately try to embarrass someone
- **Seeking help and advice:** If we need further help or advice, we know how and where to seek it—both in school and in the community. We will encourage friends to seek help if we think they need it

## Starting points

Finding out participants starting points with populism is crucial to ensuring that learning about the issue is pitched appropriately, particularly to tackle any misconceptions held among the group. These can be baseline assessment activities that can establish these starting points, such as:

- Individual, small group or whole class mind-mapping
- 'Graffiti' sheets
- Use photographs or pictures as a stimulus for a brain-storm (or the comic we have included with these materials)
- Quick round table, where each pupil in turn contributes something they know about a topic.

## **Distancing techniques**

Depersonalising the discussion can be a good way to discuss populism. Using distancing techniques such as stories, the scenario narratives, the comic included with these materials or case studies can provide fictional characters and storylines to stimulate discussion whilst allowing students to leave personal issues aside. This allows pupils to engage more objectively with the lesson content. The following or similar questions can be used to support distanced discussion:

- What is happening to them?
- Why might this be happening?
- How are they feeling? What are they thinking?
- What do other people think of them?
- Who could help them?
- What would you tell them to do if they asked for help?
- What could you say or do to persuade them to act differently?

## **Handling tricky questions**

Inherent to the topic of populism (and politics more broadly) is asking and discussing difficult issues. It is important to encourage pupils to ask such questions, however this requires the educator to feel confident when responding to the questions raised. The following guidelines may help you navigate this:

- Have an 'Ask it basket'. This is an anonymous question box available before, during and after all lessons, so pupils can ask questions anonymously at any time. (If you are concerned about a question, ask anyone whose question has not been answered to come and see you privately)
- Be conscious of the message you give the rest of the group when responding to a question. You may be certain that a question has been put to you to attempt to embarrass you or put you on the spot but a dismissive answer could dissuade others from asking genuine questions

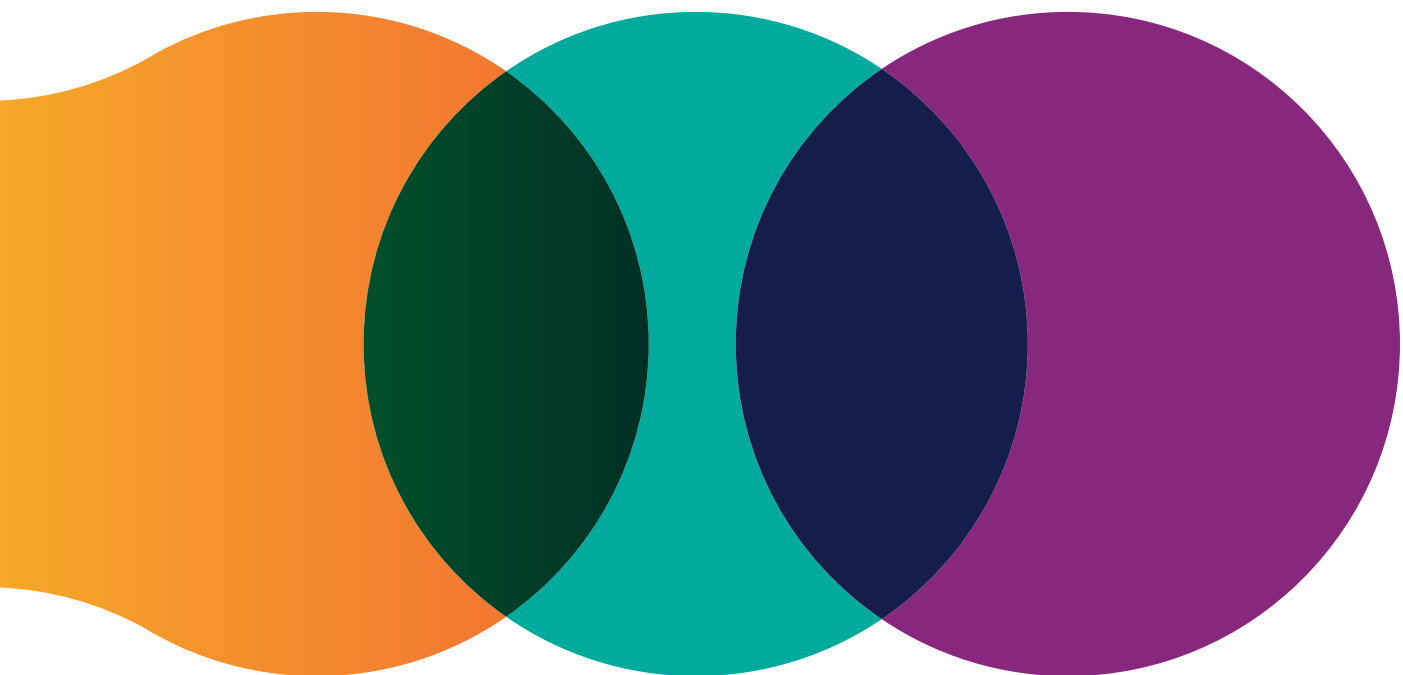
**When faced with a tricky question...**

- Thank them for the question and check you have understood what they are asking and what they think

**The answer is...**

- Give a factual, age-appropriate answer when you can
- Buy time if necessary: explain you do not know the answer/are not sure how best to answer and that you will find out more and respond later
- If taken aback by a question, be prepared with a response such as 'That's a really interesting question and it deserves a good answer – let me have a think about it and get back to you later'
- Consider whether you need to consult senior colleagues. What is the institution's policy? Is there a potential safeguarding issue?

Following these simple guidelines will contribute to a safe and productive discussion of challenging issues.





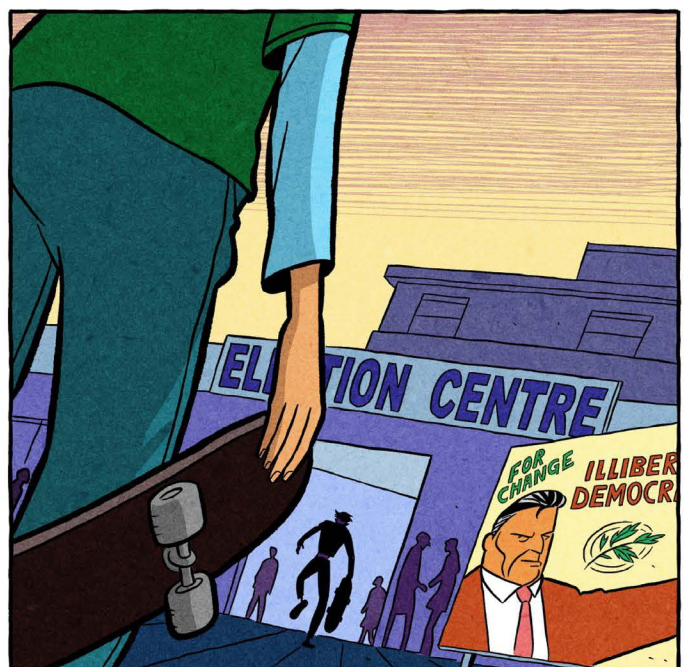
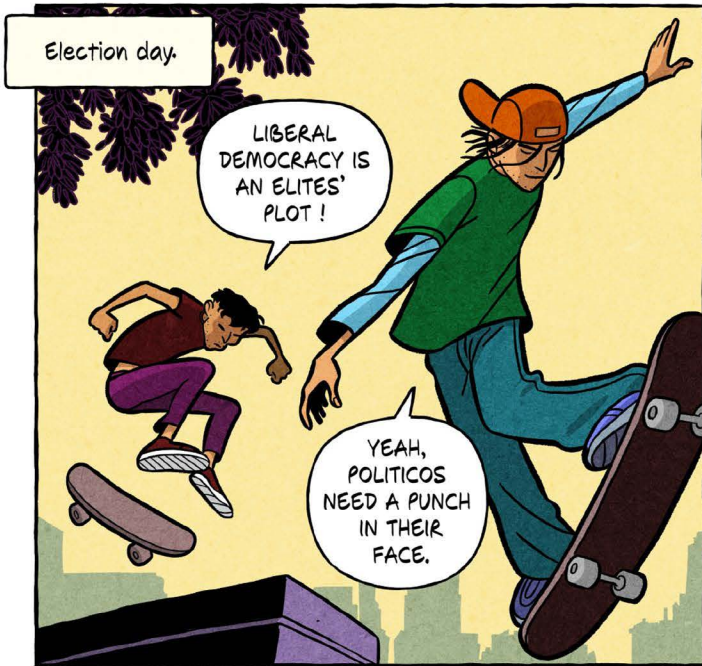
# I, THE PEOPLE



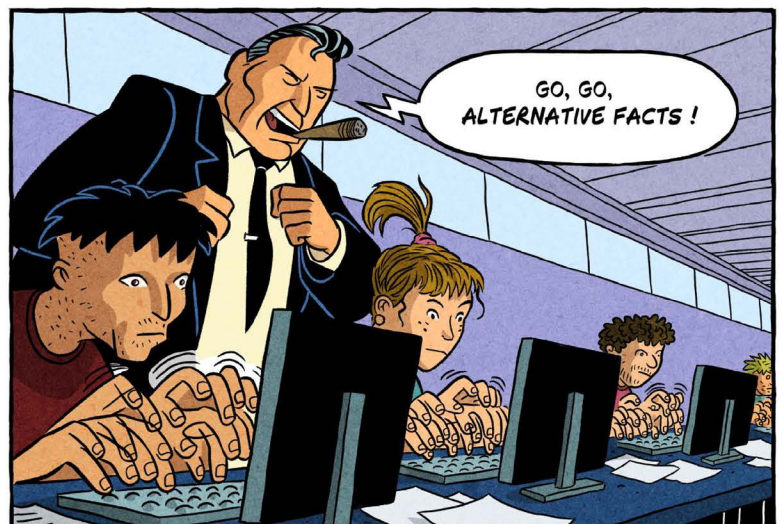
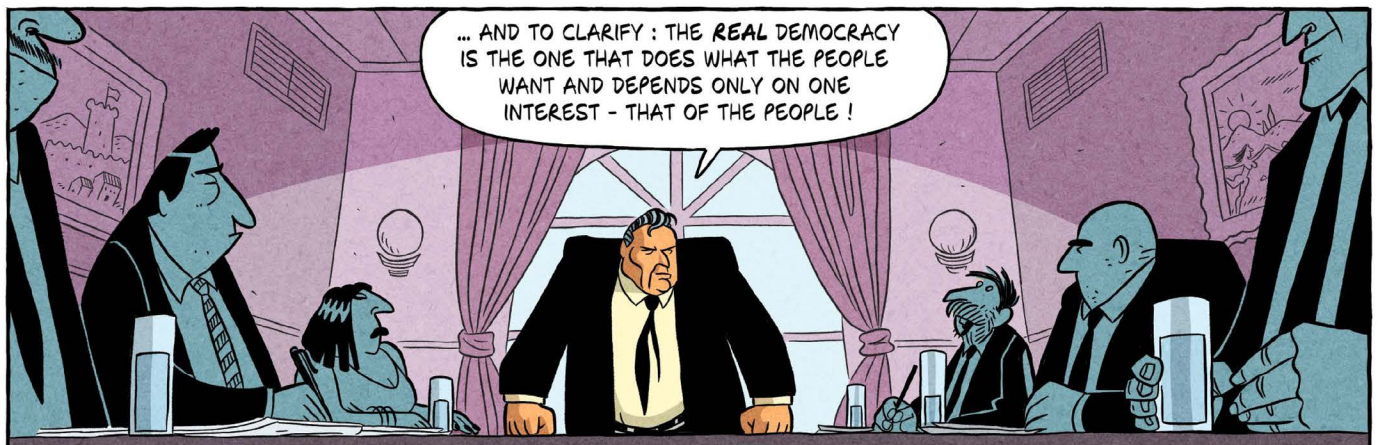
## THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIC ILLIBERALISM

TAKIS S. PAPPAS  
ALECOS PAPADATOS

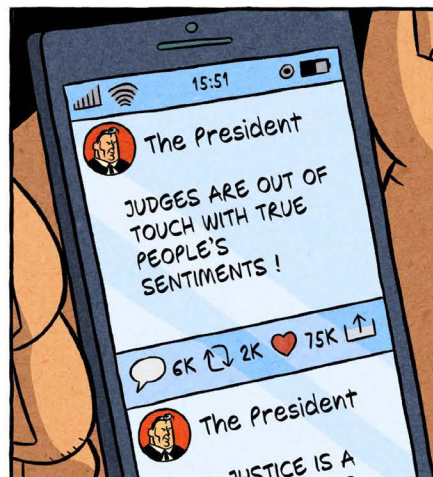














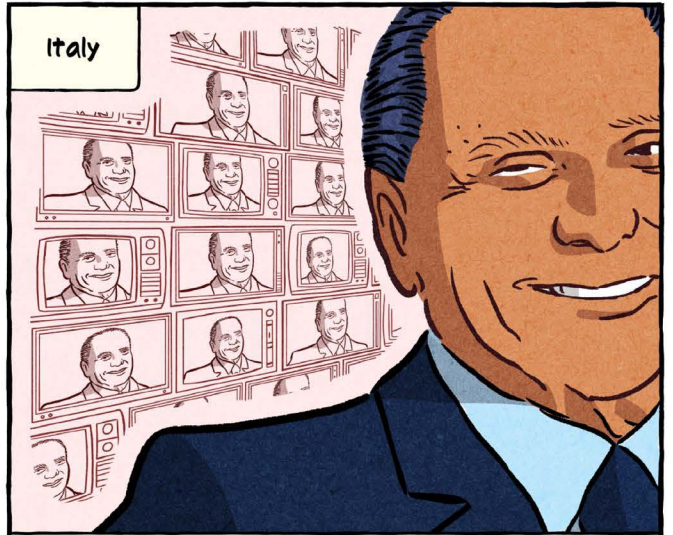
## Populism's aftermaths.

### Argentina



Juan Perón's populism led up to the 1976 military coup. Peronism however survived to this date despite Argentina's \$95 billion default in 2001.

### Italy



Silvio Berlusconi is best remembered today for his sex scandals, financial shenanigans, control of the media, and disrespect for the rule of law.

### Venezuela



Under Hugo Chávez and his successor, about six million Venezuelans have fled abroad in what is the largest refugee crisis recorded in the Americas.

### Hungary



Having transformed a country that belongs to the EU into an illiberal democracy, Victor Orbán became a trailblazer and model for other populists.

### Greece



The government led by Alexis Tsipras closed the banks and organized a referendum that could have led to an exit from the Eurozone (and return to the drachma).

### United States



After electoral defeat, Donald Trump's loyalists stormed the Capitol causing a blow to America's prestige and manifesting democracy's fragility.



## REFERENCES

### Page 1

**"Dishonest"** and **"crooked"** are some of the nicknames populist Donald Trump used for his rivals (e.g., "crooked Hillary" [Clinton]).

**"It's either Them or Us"** was the main motto of left populist SYRIZA party in Greece's 2012 national elections.

**"To hell with institutions"** was how Mexico's populist leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador (a.k.a. AMLO) denounced the electoral tribunals after his 2006 defeat at the polls.

**"There are no institutions; only the people exists"** is what Greece's Andreas Papandreu proclaimed in 1989 during a rally of his populist party, PASOK.

**"The media should... keep its mouth shut and listen for a while"** was said by Steve Bannon, then chief White House strategist, in a 2017 interview with the New York Times.

**"Enemies of the people"** was a frontpage headline of British newspaper Daily Mail on 4 November 2016 under the picture of three judges. The subtitle read: "Fury over 'out of touch' judges who defied 17.4m Brexit voters and could trigger constitutional crisis."

The title of the fictional party **"Illiberal Democrats"** hints at the minimal definition of populism as "illiberal democracy," originally introduced in Takis S. Pappas, "Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary," *Government and Opposition* 49:1, 2014 (January). In July 2014, the term was famously used by populist leader Viktor Orbán to describe Hungary's type of democracy under his rule.

### Page 2

**"True democracy is when the government does only what the people want and defends only one interest—that of the people"** is the first of the "Twenty Truths of Peronism" pronounced by Argentina's Juan Perón himself in October 1950.

In weaponizing the term, Donald Trump called journalists and established news outlets **"fake news"** nearly 2,000 times during his presidency.

**"Alternative Facts"** was a phrase coined by Trump's counselor Kellyanne Conway in January 2017. American comedian Stephen Colbert criticized Conway on his TV show saying "Kellyanne Conway has only one move: 'Go, go, alternative facts!'"

### Page 3

**"For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law"** is attributed to Peru's interwar populist leader Óscar Raymundo Benavides (1878-1945).

In 2008, Italy's P.M. Silvio Berlusconi called the Italian judiciary a **"cancerous growth,"** saying that biased prosecutors had pursued him since he entered politics.

In February 2017, Trump lashed out at a federal judge sending tweets throughout many days. One of them read: **"The opinion of this 'so-called' judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned!"**

**"I am not an individual, I am the people"** (Ya yo no soy yo, yo soy un pueblo) is how Venezuela's Hugo Chávez addressed his followers in a 2010 rally in Caracas, demanding "absolute loyalty" since he embodied the heart and soul of the Venezuelan people.

In July 2014, Hungary's Viktor Orbán publicly declared:  
**"A democracy is not necessarily liberal... and the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state."**

After losing the 2002 elections, Orbán refused to concede defeat saying that **"the nation cannot be in opposition, only the government can be in opposition against its own people."**

Takis S. Pappas is a writer and academic known for his work on populism. Among his books is [Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis](#) (Oxford UP, 2019), which the present comic is based on. He keeps the blog [www.pappaspopulism.com](http://www.pappaspopulism.com)

Alecos Papadatos is a cartoonist who, among others, has designed the graphic novels [Logicomix](#) (Bloomsbury, 2009) and [Democracy](#) (Bloomsbury, 2015), both translated in many languages. His new work is a graphic novel on the life of Aristotle, forthcoming in 2022 by Dargaud.

