

How Can Liberal Democracy Contain Populism? A Pragmatist Critique of Liberal Responses to Contemporary Populism

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Abstract

Populism understood as an idea that political sovereignty belongs to and should be exercised only by “the people,” is widely considered to be a threat to liberal democracy. A popular approach liberal theorists take to address this threat is containment through accommodation - an idea that it is possible to dissolve or ameliorate the tension between liberal democracy and populism if the latter conforms to liberal democratic norms. This paper revisits liberal approaches to contain populism, particularly the one proposed by Wolkenstein. Then, drawing on Talisse it characterizes the tension between liberal democracy and populism as an example of *the problem of deep politics*, which can be settled only through solving *the paradox of democratic justification*. The paper concludes that the pragmatist argument for democratic justification may serve as a powerful tool, potentially enabling liberals to justify democratic inclusion to anti-pluralists, without reference to contestatory fundamental moral commitments.

Populism has gained significant popularity in political science and political philosophy (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Despite the growing literature on the topic, there is no consensus on how it should be characterized, and it is often regarded as an "essentially contested concept" (Mackert 2018; Weyland 2001; Peters and Pierre 2020). Recently, the most popular approaches defined populism as an ideology (Mudde 2004); a discourse (Laclau 2005); a redemptive style of politics (Canovan 1999), a moralistic imagination of politics

(Müller 2016), or a political strategy (Weyland 2001). However, populism could be as well understood as the idea that political sovereignty belongs to and should be exercised only by the elusive collective of “the people” (Pappas 2019, 86).

Due to the shared components, such as invoking the notion of peoplehood as the source of legitimate political authority (Canovan 2004), the precise nature of the relationship between populism and liberal democracy has been the subject of an academic debate. Even though this view was much more contested in the past, after the recent rise of right-wing populism in Western politics (especially Donald Trump in the US or *Front National* in France), it became commonplace to brand populism as a direct threat to liberal democracy. Mostly due to the exclusionary, anti-pluralist nature of their understanding of "the people" (Galston 2018; Müller 2016; Rummens 2017). Accepting that populism is a threat to liberal democracy, liberals have been trying to find a way of addressing this threat. A popular approach to this problem is containment through accommodation - an idea that using discursive resources the tension between the two can be dissolved or ameliorated if the latter conforms to liberal norms (Mounk 2018; Wolkenstein 2019).¹

This paper starts by analyzing Wolkenstein (2019), as he offers one of the first attempts to provide a coherent normatively based critique of populism. His conception of "liberal ethics of populism" articulates who "the people" are, in a way that is compatible with liberal democratic principles of political justification and claims that it is possible to imagine liberal democracy accommodating populism. However, it shall be suggested that Wolkenstein's norms alone are not sufficient for a successful containment of populism, because the tension on the ethics of peoplehood he identifies, roots from a more fundamental tension between liberal democrats and populists. Drawing on Talisse (2009), I

¹ Despite being a proposed approach to addressing the threat of populism, there is no consensus on this matter. For a critique of this approach see Reid (2022).

characterize the tension between liberal democracy and populism as a division over fundamental moral commitments, which can be settled only through solving the so-called *paradox of democratic justification*. To achieve that and successfully contain populism, liberals would need to provide populists with a justification for why they ought to respect liberal democratic principles in the first place. That, however, as Misak (2000) tells us, may be impossible under the Rawlsian framework adopted by Wolkenstein and other like-minded liberal scholars. Consequently, I shall propose that liberals should pay more attention to the inquiry-based, pragmatist justification of democracy.

Wolkenstein's liberal ethics of populism

This section aims to analyze Wolkenstein's (2019) approach to formulate a normatively based critique of populism from the liberal democratic perspective. First, it will explain why according to Wolkenstein populism is in tension with liberal democracy, supporting his argument with empirical examples as well as with other theoretical suggestions. Then the section will proceed to criticize the practical implications of his concept. I shall suggest that contrary to what Wolkenstein claims, his concept does not provide us with a sufficient reason to believe that liberal democracy can contain populism. That is because his ethics of peoplehood does not provide sufficient justification for why populists ought to respect liberal democratic norms in general.

As stated in the introduction, even though the problematic relationship between populism and liberal democracy was discussed by various scholars, and a huge share of them maintain that populism poses a threat to liberal democracy, Wolkenstein (2019) is one of the firsts to provide a comprehensive normatively grounded critique of populism from the liberal democratic perspective. Contrary to some scholars of the ideational approach to populism, who characterize democracy as a set of institutions (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), he characterizes it as a normative theory of legitimacy. The justification-based model of liberalism upon which he bases his argument has

been proposed by Rawls who understood liberal democracy as a constitutional regime where laws must be consistent with certain fundamental rights and liberties (Rawls 2001, para. 44). Or in simpler terms, where political power must be justified to its subjects to be considered legitimate (Wolkenstein 2019, 332).

By adopting this model, he attempts to identify the purported tension between liberal democracy and populism. If the two are in tension, that means that populism must violate one of the fundamental principles of democracy. By drawing on Forst (2012, 173-174), Wolkenstein (2019, 332-333) suggests that the principles of justification violated by certain populist practices are principles of *reciprocity* and *generality*. *Reciprocity* means that “in making a claim or presenting an argument, no one may claim a right or resource he denies to others whereby the formulation of the claim must itself be open to questioning and not determined by one party only”. Whereas *generality* means that “all those subject to the norms in question must have equal chances to advance their claims and arguments”. The most salient implication of these two principles is that from the liberal perspective, ethics of peoplehood should be consistent with them, to be justifiable.

Using empirical examples, Wolkenstein points out which populist practices violate the principles of *generality* and *reciprocity*. He argues that some forms of populism, are less harmful to liberal democracy than others (2019, 332). Among those, he includes the left-wing populists such as the Spanish party Podemos who tend to characterize “the people” in a contestatory way (2019, 337). A similar theoretical view on the notion of peoplehood was also employed by Laclau (2005, 224), who found “the people” of the left-wing populists to be “simply the result of an aggregation of social demands”. The more harmful populists are the right-wing populists who tend to base their conceptions of peoplehood on static and pre-political grounds. Right-wing populists often take “the people” to be synonymous with national or ethnic groups, which makes their understanding of peoplehood particularly exclusionary and

incontestable (Wolkenstein 2019, 334). A good example of that would be the populism of the Polish party Law and Justice (PiS), whose narrative understands peoplehood as a specific ethno-religious idiom, equating "the people" with "the Poles" (Kotwas and Kubik 2019).

However, even if left-wing populism may be less harmful, due to its partial consistency with the principle of reciprocity (as by being contestatory it is open for questioning), Wolkenstein finds both left-wing and right-wing populists to violate the liberal democratic principles. The source of this violation lies in the belief that "the people" do not disagree about policies, and are also unified in terms of their values, interests, and preferences (2019, 338). Interpreting the presented position through Lefort (1986) and Müller (2014), populists "extract some people from within the people and claim that they are the only legitimate source of authority". This directly violates the principle of *generality* by putting the interests of the narrow category of "the true people" above everyone else's.

Therefore, having clarified why populism is harmful to liberal democracy, Wolkenstein approaches the question of how the articulations of the people must look to be compatible with liberal democratic principles. The approach results in a formulation of three norms constituting the foundations of what he calls "liberal ethics of populism". According to them, any legitimate claim concerning who the people are, must: ***not turn upon pre-political grounds of popular unity, exhibit sensitivity to the externality problem and, remain responsive to demands for justification from outside the people*** (Wolkenstein 2019, 341).

With those norms in hand, Wolkenstein (2019, 343) argues that it is possible to imagine how populist politicians could shape their favored conception of the people to render it justifiable in conformity with liberal democratic principles. Moreover, he finds the articulation of the people by the Scottish National Party to be an empirical example of "liberal populism". While the party invokes the concept of "the people" by claiming to represent the Scottish people,

it does so consistently with liberal democratic norms. Therefore, it is possible to articulate "the people" in a way that does not violate liberal democratic principles.

Wolkenstein finds his concept valuable in a twofold way (2019, 345). First, it has the critical power of distinguishing between those conceptions of peoplehood that are appropriate in a liberal democracy and those which are not. He considers such a foundation to be crucial "if liberals don't want to content themselves with blunt assertions of their moral superiority and want to confront populists with an actual critique of their practice". Secondly, "the ability to articulate what is wrong with populism may inform alternative political projects with a liberally minded and pluralist conception of the people. The addressee of this information are liberal projects confronting populists, but naturally, they are also populist actors themselves" (2019, 345).

The criticism of Wolkenstein's concept I want to draw is that even though it is informative for liberals, it is not informative for populist actors. If we take "an actual normatively based critique" to be a justified articulation of what the criticized agent ought to do, instead of what they actually do, then Wolkenstein's norms do not entail that, unless we take for granted that following liberal democratic principles of justification is what one ought to do. I am suggesting that his argument is far more limited than his conclusion holds. It indeed shows that there is an articulation of "the people", which is consistent with liberal democratic principles, and it informs liberals that referring to the concept of peoplehood is not anti-liberal *per se*. However, it lacks the normative power to inform populist politicians why liberal ethics of peoplehood is what they ought to follow. If we assume that under the Rawlsian framework, populist politicians represent self-aware unreasonableness, i.e., they self-confessedly believe that liberal order should be overthrown (Badano and Nuti 2017, 151), then Wolkenstein's norms will be circular, and question begging for them.

Wolkenstein is indeed skeptical of the receptiveness of

populist actors to his norms. That is for the fact that a large part of them does not care about the ethics of political contestation (2019, 345). He is well-justified in this skepticism. Empirical research in political psychology indicates that populists tend to propagate collective narcissism - a belief that one's own group is exceptional but not sufficiently recognized by others (Golec de Zavala et al, 2021) or that they show aversion to uncertainty, which contributes to attribution of essence and moralizing (Krueger and Grüning 2021). Characteristics like these may pose a serious challenge in persuading populists to endorse liberal democratic norms. Nevertheless, persuasion does not equal justification. Populists could reject liberal democratic norms even though they ought not to reject them, taking the moral framework they follow. My suggestion is that liberals lack sufficient, non-question-begging justification as to why populist politicians should follow liberal democratic principles. They fail to provide an answer to why populists ought not to believe what they believe, and merely say that populist practice is undemocratic. That approach to contain populism fails miserably if populists do not take democracy to have an intrinsic value.

Wolkenstein finds the tension between populism and liberal democracy to lie in contradictory views on the notion of peoplehood. However, he does not touch on the source of this tension in sufficient detail. Following the definitions of populism derived by Mudde (2004) and Müller (2016), to which Wolkenstein (2019, 331) refers, Populism can be understood as a "way of perceiving the political world which opposes a morally pure and fully unified, but ultimately fictional people, to small minorities who are put outside the authentic people". From this, I want to argue that populists and liberals differ on the level of fundamental moral beliefs. Therefore, the conflict over the ethics of peoplehood is just a reflection of the tension between these two ideologies, not the core of it. In sum, if liberals would like to keep pursuing the strategy of containing populism, they would need to justify why populist politicians would need to follow liberal norms in general, not just a

few ones in particular.

Populism, pluralism, and *the problem of deep politics*

So far, I have analyzed Wolkenstein's liberal ethics of populism, paying special attention to its suggested practical implication that with these norms in hand, it is possible to think of liberal democracy containing populism. It was concluded that even though his concept is informative for liberal democrats, it is doubtful how informative it is for populist actors due to its question-begging nature. This section shall propose a new way to look at the tension between liberal democracy and populism. It will suggest that this tension reflects a conflict between fundamental moral commitments which Talisse (2009) calls *the problem of deep politics*, and which can be hypothetically dissolved through overcoming *the paradox of democratic justification*. As far as I am concerned, this would be the first attempt to utilize Talisse's pragmatist account in dissolving the tension between populism and liberal democracy.

Talisse's diagnosis of the state of contemporary democracy starts by acknowledging that we live under moral pluralism, which means that there are many minimally plausible moral doctrines (2009, 14). Moreover, people will take certain precepts of their moral commitments to be basic. That is, each citizen will take the core of their moral doctrine to specify values, aims, and ends that are fundamental. Citizens will also ultimately disagree about these fundamental concepts and will accordingly disagree about the shape that politics should take (2009, 12). Lacking a shared set of moral commitments, democratic citizens cannot resolve conflicts or justify collectively binding decisions by way of an appeal to concepts such as freedom, justice, or even fairness, because in many cases they disagree about the nature of these concepts themselves (2009, 3).

The fact that even the most reasonable people can ultimately disagree about basic moral matters is what Talisse calls *the problem of deep politics* (2009, 11). The problem has a salient implication for democratic theory in general and our inquiry about dissolving the

tension between democracy and populism in particular. *The problem* generates what Talisse calls *the paradox of democratic justification*, which can be summarized as the following reasoning: The core idea of constitutional democracy, such as those of Rawls and Wolkenstein, is that its legitimacy rests upon the consent of those governed. It requires its proponents to articulate principles that justify this mode of government and which the governed will find acceptable. Nevertheless, the fact that citizens are deeply divided over basic moral commitments, renders any such principles essentially contestable, making them unable to reach a widespread agreement. In sum, the core justificatory tenets of democracy make its own legitimacy unsatisfiable (2009, 15). I want to argue here that the situation is not any different in terms of the tension between liberal democracy and populism. Liberal democrats and populists find themselves in a conflict over fundamental moral commitments. That renders *the paradox of democratic justification*, which makes the containment of populism theoretically impossible, as liberal democrats are unable to provide populists with justification for democracy they will accept.

Wolkenstein already told us how populist practice violates the justificatory principles of liberal democracy. However, let us not only think in what ways populists violate these principles, but for what moral reason they violate them. Populism is always a form of anti-pluralism (Müller 2016, 8). Populists claim that they and only they represent "the people". This claim is not an empirical one, but distinctly moral (Mudde 2017; Müller 2016). Their fundamental moral commitment is that power should be possessed and exercised only by "the people" who are unified in their morals and interests. It should not be understood as the claim of populists that they represent the majority, but all of "the people", often conflating it with their own electorate and the electorate with the nation (Ferrara 2018). The only legitimate form of politics is this which reflects the will of these "people" (Mudde 2017, 29). Therefore, why should the norms of Wolkenstein be anyhow justifiable to populists? What reason would a

populist have to accept that their claims should be open to questioning for those from outside “the people” and that those outsiders have equal chances to advance political claims if following the populist logic outsiders are intrinsically amoral?

For political liberals, according to Rawls (1999) as cited in (Müller 2016, 47), accepting pluralism is not only a descriptive fact but also a commitment to finding fair terms of sharing the same political space with people of different identities and interests. Contrary, following the populist moral reasoning, sharing the same political space with outsiders would not be tolerable (Müller 2014, 487). That makes populists morally skeptical about liberal democracy understood as a set of constitutional norms and renders the *paradox of democratic justification*. Liberals cannot provide populists with moral justification of democratic norms as their principles of justification rely on the fundamental moral values populists don't share with them already.

Returning to the central question of whether liberal democracy can contain populism by solving the tension between the two. One may argue that if the tension between liberal democracy and populism is rooted in the conflict over fundamental moral commitments, there is no conceivable way to dissolve this tension. If populism is essentially anti-pluralist and accepting liberal democracy entails accepting pluralism as one of the fundamental moral commitments, it is impossible to imagine liberal democratic rhetoric providing populists with a justification the latter ought to find acceptable. It would require liberals to justify why anti-pluralist populists should be pluralists, and that seems to be question-begging *per se*. Moreover, liberalism may lack the tools to provide such justification. As Müller (2016, 47) and Talisse (2010) note, while pluralism and liberalism have often been associated, it does not mean that the presence of moral pluralism entails a principled endorsement of liberal virtues. Therefore, liberals need to be much more precise about what is wrong with anti-pluralism.

Justifying liberal democracy to anti-pluralists

The previous section concluded that to solve the tension between populism and liberal democracy, liberals need to be more precise about what's wrong with populist anti-pluralism, and why the latter ought to endorse liberal democratic principles instead of their own beliefs about politics and morality. This section shall elaborate on the final suggestion, drawing further on Talisse (2009) as well as on Misak (2000) and Festenstein (2021). It shall be argued that the pragmatist argument for democratic justification provides a valuable tool in justifying democratic values to non-democrats. Therefore, it can then serve as a potential justification for populists, making containment of populism possible to imagine. Before that, however, I intend to address the criticism of my approach which can potentially arise.

The first line of potential criticism which I want to address concerns the justification itself. If my argument relies on the need to justify the endorsement of pluralism and democracy in general, what is so special about populism? One could also argue that some forms of religion are always anti-pluralist, taking only their god's law to be morally acceptable (Clayton and Stevens 2014), yet I do not address them here. My focus on populism is more pragmatic (in the everyday meaning of the term). The recent rise of populism in Western politics showed us that this form of anti-pluralism can gain significant popularity in broad liberal societies, making it particularly harmful to democracies (Badano and Nuti 2017, 147). Even if populism is not a proto-totalitarian movement, just like Lefort (1986) argued, there are strong indications that populism weakens democracy. For example, of all fifteen presidents elected in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, five were populists and all of them weakened democratic institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019, 23). Therefore, it is in the best interest of liberal democrats to find a potential way of dissolving the tension between populism and liberal democracy, if it is possible.

That links to another critical question. Why does the burden of proof lie on liberals? Why shouldn't it be populists to justify to liberal democrats that the latter need to abandon pluralism? This is because it is the liberals who advocate for principle-driven politics, and who base their model of democracy on the idea that the exercise of political power must be justifiable to be considered legitimate. Lack of justification which avoids *the problem of deep politics*, makes the liberal model and the normative critique of populism incomplete. Whereas, following the populist logic, "the people" are essentially and self-evidently moral and owe no justification to the outsiders as no opposition is legitimate (Müller 2014, 487).

Coming back to the core question. So far, I have argued that liberals need to be more precise about why one ought to accept and follow the liberal moral framework. It is to avoid the conflict between fundamental moral commitments, included in *the problem of deep politics* and *the paradox of democratic justification*. Only then, a normative critique of populism or any other form of anti-pluralism may be complete, as it will provide a justification that one ought to accept liberal democratic virtues. To achieve that, the justification of liberal democracy must not refer to any fundamental moral commitments. Again, it is crucial to highlight that this is not about offering a justification which one will find persuasive, but which one ought to find persuasive, assuming that moral and political deliberation is subject to truth (Talisso 2009, 133; Misak 2000, 25). The argument remains philosophical and normative and is not psychological.

Rawlsian liberalism which Wolkenstein's (2017) as well as other normative analyses of populism are based on (Badano and Nuti 2017; Ferrara 2018) indeed approaches this problem of justification. Rawlsian principles, put forward in *The Theory of Justice* (1971) and modified later, are intended to be "political, not metaphysical". Instead of providing an alternative comprehensive view of the good, they aim to ensure that politics in a pluralistic society can proceed in a stable fashion (Rawls 1993, 5-6). Rather than search for groundings of our beliefs, they hold that we should start

from where we are and ¹work out the relationship between incompatible doctrines which according to Rawls can coexist in an overlapping consensus (Misak 2000, 21) The key assumption is that one ought to stay reasonable, i.e one's claims and reasons have to be freed from problematic ethical connotations and translated into a neutral language of politically acceptable reasons (Forst 2001, 349).

Nevertheless, following Misak's claim (2000, 26), from the perspective of a non-liberal, like Schmittian, the "politically neutral principles" of Rawls look just like a list of the goods valued by liberalism. They again pose several important questions: Why must we value reasonableness, pluralism, and cooperation? Why should we care about a stable, pluralistic society? In his argument that the principles of justice serve political stability, Rawls has implicitly taken these values for granted, treating them as fundamental moral commitments. According to Misak, it means that even if Rawls's social ontology was right or shared by everyone, nothing about it warrants the thought that liberalism is what we ought to aim at, which is a crucial assumption (2000, 26). Moreover, the challenge that Schmitt's theory poses to liberal democracy according to Misak, is analogous to the challenge posed by populism I identified earlier. One of the reasons for that is that both views provide a specific interpretation of the sovereign rule of the substantially homogenous people, where the outsiders are treated as enemies *per se* (Schmitt 1988, 14-15).²

Rawlsian liberalism as well as other traditional justifications of democracy which are framed in terms of the promotion of certain values, struggle to justify inclusion in a non-question-begging way (Festenstein 2021, 43). They are unable to overcome problems such as *the paradox of democratic justification* or the Schmittian challenge,

¹ Misak claims that this results from Rawls (1993) giving up on the idea that the principles of justice are derived from the 'original position' and serve no comprehensive good (1971).

² For a detailed explanation of the similarity between populist logic and Schmittian theory, see Abts and Rummens (2007).

which I identified as a crucial element of a complete normative critique of populism or any other form of anti-pluralism. Therefore, I would like to pay more attention to the solutions provided by Misak and Talisse. Furthermore, as my final claim, I want to suggest that their pragmatist argument for democratic justification can be utilized in the debate about the normatively based critique of contemporary populism.

The pragmatist argument for democratic justification can be summarized as an idea that liberal democratic ethos and institutions, rather than a set of constitutional values, are a form of inquiry. For pragmatists, liberal democracy is justifiable not because it is the most moral, taking a particular conceptualization of good, but because it is most likely to generate true beliefs (Festenstein 2021, 39). If a true belief is responsive to all reasons, evidence, and experience, then an authentic believer is committed to testing their claims against as wide a range of different experiences as possible (Festenstein 2021, 40). As Peircean pragmatists are moral cognitivists, for them that view applies not only strictly to epistemic claims but also to moral and political ones (Misak 2004). As we need access to evidence, arguments, and exchange of information about the social reality in order to test their truth, it follows that authentic believers need to live in a social and political order making that possible. Liberal democracy is an example of such an order, as it renders political decisions publicly challengeable and open to revision (Festenstein 2021, 40).

How does it relate to the containment of populism? Festenstein (2021) rightly points out that the pragmatist argument of Misak and Talisse has strong implications for the boundary problem - i.e., debate on how the boundaries of democratic polity (demos) should be set. If we recall Wolkenstein (2019) or Canovan (2004), the tension between liberal democracy and populism reveals itself in contradictory answers to the questions revolving around that problem. They both invoke the concept of peoplehood as the source of political authority, but they hold different views about the internal boundaries of the concept of the people, as well as its practical

implications. As I have pointed out before, the tension is a result of conflict over fundamental moral commitments, and if liberals would like populists to conform to liberal discursive norms, they would need to provide the latter with a non-question-begging justification for why they ought to respect liberal inclusive view instead of their exclusionary one.

Justifying democracy on the commitment to arriving at true beliefs entails, as Talisse (2009, 121) argues, "the political manifestation of the folk epistemic commitments each of us already endorses". Holding that "each person has compelling epistemological reason to embrace democracy, simply in virtue of the fact that he or she holds beliefs" (Misak and Talisse 2014, 373), the argument enables to justify democratic inclusion, without referring to fundamental moral commitments, which will eventually face the opposition of fundamental moral commitments held by other groups. Consequently, the pragmatist view allows us to resist a priori set-up authorities that treat some groups as subservient to another (Festenstein 2021, 40). That includes populists, for whom that kind of an a priori set up authority is "the people".

A normative critique of populism based on the pragmatist argument is potentially a powerful discursive tool. It suggests that through undermining democratic institutions and adopting an imaginary and essentially anti-pluralist definition of "the people", populism is not only immoral from the perspective of liberal democratic principles, but it poses an obstacle to the basic epistemic commitment of arriving at true beliefs. Paraphrasing Misak: "We needn't reject the part of the phenomenology of moral inquiry which has us aiming at doing things right, where 'right' does not mean 'right by the lights of my own people'" (2000, 52). That does not apply only to populists and their "moralistic imagination of politics", but to any political framework striving to justify their views in a non-question-begging way.

Conclusions

Through utilizing pragmatist ideas, particularly those of Talisse and Misak, this paper has proposed an alternative way of describing the tension between liberal democracy and populism. Drawing on the already existing liberal responses to the contemporary threat of populism, the paper argued that pointing out what is wrong with populism in the light of liberal democratic principles and values is not sufficient. To provide a complete normative critique, liberals should justify why anyone ought to respect liberal democratic principles at all. Such justification cannot refer to fundamental moral commitments, as then it will render *the paradox of democratic justification*. It was suggested that epistemic-based justifications, such as the pragmatist argument, may offer a much more powerful tool for containing populism. The purpose of this paper was not to settle the debate once and for all and offer a comprehensive answer to the populist challenge to liberal democracy, but to suggest that pragmatist political philosophy offers a valuable perspective on it. It opens up a space for further discussion about the practical implications of the pragmatist justification of democracy, as well as normative studies of populism.

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