Populism’s Moment


Populist upsurges can be hard to predict. At the beginning of 2016, not many people expected Donald Trump to win the Republican nomination, let alone the presidency, nor Bernie Sanders to give Hillary Clinton such strong competition in the Democratic primaries. Europe has seen comparable surprises in recent years: the sudden rise of Left-populist parties Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, a near victory of the right-wing populist Freedom Party candidate in Austria’s 2016 presidential election, and the upset win for Brexit in Britain’s June 2016 referendum, in which the Right-populist UK Independence Party played a key role.

The Populist Explosion by John B. Judis is a tightly framed analysis of populism’s recent advances on both sides of the Atlantic. Judis relates this international upsurge to the Great Recession that began in 2008 but also to the neoliberal economic policies that have prevailed in both western Europe and the United States since the 1970s or ‘80s: cutting social spending, weakening labor unions, deregulating business, reducing corporate taxes as well as barriers to the movement of capital and workers across international boundaries. At the same time, Judis traces populist politics back historically: in Europe to right-wing anti-tax parties of the ‘70s, and in the United States to the left-leaning People’s Party of the 1890s. His U.S. historical narrative takes in Huey Long’s Share Our Wealth Society in the 1930s; the presidential campaigns of George Wallace in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and of Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan in the ‘90s; and the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements of the recent Great Recession era.

Between these various expressions of populism, Judis draws an elegant conceptual distinction: Leftwing populists champion the people against an elite or an establishment...Rightwing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance, of immigrants, Islamists, or African American militants. Leftwing populism is dyadic. Rightwing populism is triadic. It looks upward, but also down upon an out group.

That dynamic played out in the 2016 presidential campaign, as both Sanders and Trump criticized the political and economic establishment for pursuing policies that replaced well-paid manufacturing jobs with low-wage jobs overseas. But “unlike Trump and his supporters,” Judis writes, “[Sanders] didn’t blame unauthorized immigrants for the plight of American workers or seek to end terrorism by banning Muslims from coming into the country. He was entirely focused...on combating the ‘billionaire class.’”

Populist movements of either flavor may gain momentum because people don’t feel represented by the conventional options. But the two sides have different electoral bases.

Judis recalls sociologist Donald I. Warren’s “middle American radicals” (“MARs”)—often blue-collar men who supported New Deal programs but were conservative on issues related to poverty and race, and who regarded the middle class as under attack from above and below—as the key voting bloc that has supported U.S. right-wing populists from Wallace to Buchanan to Trump. Conversely, Judis notes that Sanders’s strongest support was among young people, “the descendants of the McGovern generation,” just as Greece’s Syriza and Spain’s Podemos have enjoyed disproportionate youth support.

In a compact book of 182 pages, Judis engagingly sketches out the historical roots of today’s seemingly sudden and unpredictable populist initiatives. Judis makes clear that Trump’s recent positions both can be traced back to populist antecedents in Buchanan and Wallace and also reflect ideas he’s voiced consistently for decades (belying the criticism that he doesn’t believe in anything but his own importance).

Populist politics evolve, too. In Europe, Judis notes, several right-wing populist parties (including UKIP and France’s National Front) started as laissez-faire advocates for small business-people and farmers, but later adopted more social democratic economic policies. This shift, coupled with anti-immigrant scapegoating, enabled the parties to attract many working-class voters who had previously supported the Left. The National Front, which Judis calls “Europe’s most important rightwing populist party,” has taken this further. Party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen was an antisemite and Vichy government sympathizer, but his daughter Marine Le Pen, who replaced him as party leader in 2011, has repudiated these positions, banned skinheads from National Front rallies, welcomed LGBTQ people as top advisors, and toned down the party’s anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Judis also effectively describes some of the dynamics by which U.S. populist movements have influenced conventional political actors. For example, fear of Huey Long’s Share Our Wealth movement helped inspire President Franklin Roosevelt’s move to address economic inequality in the New Deal. George Wallace’s skillful use of coded racism—framed as opposition to federal inter-
ference—inspired Republicans to copy elements of his approach and thereby attract many of his “middle American radical” supporters.

That today’s populist upsurge is largely a reaction to neoliberalism is hardly a new idea, but Judis presents it succinctly and clearly. I especially appreciate his repeated reminders that neoliberal policies have been laid down and implemented not just by Republicans but also Democrats, not just European conservatives but also social democratic parties. Business tax cuts and deregulation started under Carter, not Reagan. Obama’s refusal to challenge Wall Street in the face of the worst financial crisis since the 1930s “left a political vacuum that was filled by the angry right.” Seeing Socialist François Hollande abandon promises and impose “austerity” measures helped persuade many French workers to back the National Front instead.

But Judis’s succinct approach leaves out many examples of populism that don’t fit neatly into his chosen framework. Since the 1970s the Christian Right has mobilized popular support and built an extensive organizational network largely around fears of an elitist “secular humanist conspiracy.” The movement’s majority quickly positioned itself as a more or less stable faction within the Republican Party, confounding Judis’s assertion that populist movements tend to dissipate or slide into conventional politics once they achieve power. Meanwhile, contra his claim that U.S. and western European populists have embraced “democracy” and electoral politics, a hardline but influential minority of Christian Rightists wants to replace the U.S. political system with a full-blown theocracy. Similarly, the Patriot movement has warned since the 1990s that globalist elites are plotting to impose a dictatorship on the U.S. It has never embraced the electoral process but instead has arrogated to itself governmental powers such as judicial authority and the right to form military units. The Patriot movement shared a number of themes with Pat Buchanan’s 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, but Judis doesn’t mention it, which makes it harder for readers to understand the insurgent undertones of Buchanan’s candidacies. Speaking more broadly, the dynamic tension between those populist currents that accept the existing political system and those that reject it has often had a significant impact, but has no place in Judis’s discussion. (The Alt Right’s symbiotic relationship with Trump’s presidential campaign offers a recent example.)

With regard to Western Europe, Judis makes passing mention of Beppe Grillo’s eclectically anti-establishment Five Star Movement in Italy but ignores several other important Italian parties with at least important populist tendencies, notably Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, the regionalist Lega Nord, and the “post-fascist” Alleanza Nazionale, whose 1994 coalition put a party directly descended from Mussolini’s Black Shirts in power for the first time since 1945. Discussion of Forza Italia could be especially fruitful since, as Judis himself notes, Berlusconi is in many ways Donald Trump’s closest European counterpart. It’s perfectly reasonable for Judis to limit the scope of his discussion, but a clearer explanation of how and why he did so would have been helpful.

Judis’s contextual framework for explaining populism’s rise is also too narrow. Neoliberal economic policies are important, but they exist in relation to a number of other developments of the past half-century, particularly the limited but important gains won by popular movements against racial oppression, patriarchy, and heterosexism. Neoliberalism isn’t just a set of policies but also a strategy for social control, and in many expressions has embraced a tepid multiculturalism—largely to coopt and defuse anti-oppression struggles. This feeds right-wing populist claims that grassroots challenges to social hierarchy are abetted or orchestrated by elites. Judis notes Trump’s bigotry toward Mexicans, Muslims, and women but doesn’t explore its larger significance: that, like Wallace, Buchanan or the Tea Party, Trump speaks to millions who see their relative social privilege under attack from below, in ways that go far beyond economic policy.

The one place where I take strong exception to Judis’s book is when he asserts that right-wing populist complaints, even racist or nativist ones, “point to genuine problems.” Judis tells us that desegregation busing really was “self-defeating” because it caused White flight to the suburbs, that unskilled immigrants have indeed “tended to pull down wages and burden the public sector,” and that France’s immigrant underclass really is “a seedbed for political extremism and terrorism.” Judis offers these concessions without evidence, as if they’re simple statements of fact, when at best they’re questionable claims scholars are actively debating. Judis also fails to mention the many Muslim refugees to Europe who are themselves fleeing terrorism and war, or the many immigrants who have injected new militancy into the U.S. labor movement. It’s odd that Judis plays into victim-blaming in this way, since his argument would work just as well if he framed these “problems” as widely perceived rather than declaring them genuine.

Judis can hardly be faulted for failing to predict Trump’s victory in November, and for suggesting that the candidate’s “casual bigotry” and “impromptu assaults” on Clinton would likely bring about his own defeat. But since Trump did win, Judis’s model of populism implies a prediction: whether President Trump achieves any of his campaign objectives or not, he will probably not be able to maintain his role as a populist politician, as someone who puts forth demands the establishment is unlikely to concede. His administration will instead morph into a conventional one based on bargaining among political interest groups. This is in fact where things seem to be heading given the number of generals and billionaires Trump has picked for his team and his recent moves toward a conventional foreign policy, but if he can keep his populist base mobilized Trump may still find ways to keep the establishment off balance and on the defensive. Either outcome is cold comfort to the “out groups” who will bear the brunt of his policies.

Matthew N. Lyons is an independent scholar who studies right-wing politics, social movements, and systems of oppression. He blogs at Three Way Fight and is co-author with Chip Berlet of Right-Wing Populism in America (Guilford, 2000).