

Populism, Neoliberalism, and Distributive Justice

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The differing electoral support across social classes, races and ethnic groups for populist candidates and policies raises a number of questions. Why do some rather than others respond favorably to the populist appeal? Is there some rational calculus of benefits and costs for their adherence to populism?

In some local, immediate, context (like the workplace) are there situations that generate emotional support for populism? The last question is the primary focus of this essay. Many authors have noted the particularly strong emotions expressed by populists during political campaigns: fear, anger, frustration, and resentment (Judis, p. 59). Answers to the question of emotional support for populism progress through three topics: 1. populism's relationship to democracy, 2. the emergence of today's "populist explosion" and populism's opposition to pluralism, 3. the relationship of pluralism to a sense of injustice in the workplace.

1. Is populism democratic?

Professors Mudde and **Rovira Kaltwasser**, both political scientists, have resolved a current controversy about whether or not populism is democratic. Much of their argument hinges on the distinction between "electoral" and "Liberal democracy". Populism supports electoral democracy, understood as *majority rule* and *popular sovereignty* (no higher authority than "the will of the people"). Populism opposes Liberal democracy that includes three additional principles: protection of fundamental minority rights, constraints on the "tyranny of the majority" by independent institutions such as constitutional courts, and checks and balances (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, pp. 80-82).

Müller, also a political scientist, is in agreement with these authors, however he employs a somewhat different set of terms. Electoral democracy for Müller is "illiberal democracy" (pp. 50, 51, 54, 55). Many debates end here without considering the context of the political system. The authors point out that populism supports the transition to electoral democracy from authoritarian rule.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser define *populism as an ideology and a "populist logic"* that views society as divided into two homogeneous subcultures, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" and that politics should reflect *only* the general will of "the people". Understood in this way, it becomes clear that populism opposes Liberal democracy and pluralism. Müller states that populists are always anti-pluralist (Müller, pp. 3, 20). Populists sometimes combine populism with a host-ideology. Left-wing populists often adopt socialism as a host-ideology while right-wing populists may espouse nationalism, authoritarianism or nativism.

2. Why are "the people" opposed to neoliberalism?

The history of populism as protest traverses several successive periods of the changing “underlying consensus about the government’s role in the economy and abroad” (Judis, p. 19). This begins with the period of laissez-faire capitalism (until 1929), followed by New Deal liberalism begun under Roosevelt (1932-1968), then neoliberalism since the early 1970s. The latest is the period of anti-neoliberalism beginning in the crisis of 1991 and exacerbated by the global financial crisis in 2008 (Judis, pp.46, 59).

The most recent years of the populist explosion up to the 2016 US election can be understood as taking place within an ever-growing reaction to the failures of globalization and its neoliberal policies. Who has lost most in terms of its failed promises? Are these “the people” whose complaints have least been heard by the “establishment”? What are their complaints? What have these complaints to do with their social identity as “the people”? My answers to these questions will help explain how they experience distributive injustice and why they oppose pluralism.

According to Judis, the period beginning in the late 1980s saw growing disappointments in the promises of globalization: growing inequality of wealth, unemployment, trade deficits, de-industrialization, and illegal immigration (Judis, p. 45). The neoliberal ideology underpinning globalization endorses free trade, free flow of capital, free flow of migration-workers, de-regulation of markets, and more.

Populists have increasingly spoken out against neoliberal policies and in favor of those who have had the most to lose. This trend only deepened with the Great Recession of 2008 enabling many to comprehend the flaws in neoliberal policies and programs. One of the long-term complaints of “middle American radicals” MAR (Judis, 35, 38), a term often used to characterize “the people”, is that immigration has been used consciously by “the elites” to push down wages and weaken unions by the influx of cheap labor (Judis, 42). The MAR considers that recent immigrants have taken away jobs from native-born Americans (Judis, 57). They oppose having to subsidize lower classes or recent legal immigrants for health care through their tax increases (Judis, pp. 43, 57). They resent Obama’s policies to address the Great Recession that appeared to favor lower income groups while neglecting middle-income groups (Judis, p. 55).

Fareed Zakaria emphasizes the predominance of culture over economics in the explanation of support for current American populism. He cites survey research that shows economic concerns to be less important than cultural issues such as massive immigration in generating “an assault on their civilization” (Zakaria, *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 2016, p. 13). The cultural fears of populists produce racism, xenophobia and ethnic nationalism (Zakaria, pp. 14-15).

The most recent attempts by populists to mobilize “white Americans left behind by globalization and post-industrialism” are found in the 2016 Trump campaign (Judis, p. 75). His support base can be described as Republican, White working and middle-class voters (MAR) (Judis, p. 75). Based on several polls carried out in 2016, it is possible to identify “the people” supporting **Donald Trump**. They were less educated, less wealthy, and predominantly blue collar or service workers. Of the Trump voters 70.1% were not college graduates, 50% earning under \$50,000 per year. Predominantly they were descendants of White-working class voters whose alienation from Washington began in 1972 (Judis, p. 75). Their alienation deepened since the Great Recession as their economic prospects declined and as policies favored the upper- and middle-class and the rich (Judis, p. 75). They opposed

Obamacare because it favored minorities and the poor and would place a further tax burden on the middle class (Judis, p. 77).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Trump supporters, the most recent populist movement in the US, oppose the “Washington consensus” that endorses neoliberalism (the latest stage in the relation of the economy to government). “The people” lose job opportunities, have stagnating wages, anticipate higher taxes to support minorities and immigrants, and feel anxious about their economic future, all because of the “corrupt elites” who pursue neoliberal policies and neglect “the people’s” complaints.

3. How does the workplace generate support for populism?

Müller and other observers of the populist phenomenon consistently refer to the emotionality of populist supporters. Most often they refer to populists being driven by resentment, anger, and frustration (Müller, pp. 1,9, 12,15,16). Some of these emotions may be traced to the above discussion of the uprising against neoliberal policies (of globalization) that clearly have had negative impacts on certain parts of the population (inequality, stagnating wages, higher tax burdens, unemployment). And further, the “corrupt elites” in industry and government pursue their neoliberal policies to the neglect of the marginalized “people”.

Another trait of the “populist logic” explains further the emotionality of its supporters. That logic, once again, is that a “morally pure people” challenges a “corrupt elite” (Müller, pp. 3, 19-20, 63). In stronger words, “the hardworking people” oppose “the very bottom of society (those who do not really work and live like parasites off the work of others)” (Müller, p. 23). Müller speaks of the populists in power who claim to be “the exclusive moral representation of the people” (Müller, p. 48) and claim further a “moral justification” for populist policies (Müller, p. 44). This leads Müller to refer to populism’s “political morality” (Müller, pp.23, 24). When morality enters political discourse one can expect emotions to be activated.

Now, in the light of these conditions (the adverse reaction of “the people” to neoliberal policies and the moralistic “logic of populism”), how can one’s emotional experience of distributive injustice in the workplace make one a populist? Aristotle’s view on distributive justice helps to produce an answer. But before addressing Aristotle’s ideas, a few preliminary words are necessary on the basic notion of distributive justice.

Overview of distributive justice. We can understand distributive justice as the rationale for the distribution (equal or unequal) of rewards in society. According to the principle of equity, “rewards” such as wealth, opportunity and privilege, are distributed unequally yet proportionately according to a consensual criterion or criteria.

Then the distribution is said to be just. Whether the valuables are material, such as wealth, or immaterial such as opportunities (job, security, promotion), an individual may receive his or her “fair” share by these criteria, or otherwise perceive relative deprivation in invidious comparisons with others. From the perspective of social psychology, the criteria for the unequal distribution are labelled, “investment statuses” and the outcomes, “reward statuses” (wealth, etc.). Furthermore, the investment statuses may be *achieved*, that is acquired (e.g. education, skills) or *ascribed*, that is inborn (e.g. race, religion, nationality, ethnicity). In a meritocracy, rewards are distributed unequally according to achieved investment statuses. In an aristocracy the unequal distribution corresponds to ascribed statuses (Alschuler, pp. 135-139).

Aristotle on distributive justice. When a social comparison results in perceived injustice in the distribution of “awards,” this generates “quarrels and complaints,” according to Aristotle. He describes several situations in which this may happen.

If they are not equal, they will not have what is equal – hence the quarrels and complaints when either equals have and are awarded unequal shares or unequals equal shares (Barnes and Kenney, p. 96). Further, this is plain from the fact that awards should be according to worth; ... though they do not all specify the same sort of worth – democrats identify it with the status of freeman, supporters of oligarchy with riches (or with high birth)... The just, then, is something proportionate... It is the “equality of ratios” (of the worth of persons to the things awarded).(Barnes and Kenney, p. 97)

Aristotle’s abstract formulation can be translated into two situations that describe a typical worker in today’s America. Let us imagine two carpenters with equal job qualifications, co-workers on the job, one of whom is a White, Christian, native born American while the other is a member of an ethnic minority (non-White, non-Christian, immigrant). They engage in social comparisons in two situations.

Situation A: in a Liberal democracy

“If they are not equal, they will not have what is equal” (Barnes and Kenney, p. 96)

The White supremacist carpenter considers “worth” to be based on ascribed statuses: White race, Christian religion, and nativism. In comparison to the minority ethnic carpenter, the White supremacist considers his worth to be greater. For him it is “fair” to receive a greater wage. Yet, the two earn equal wages. The proportion of worth to award, (higher ascribed status to same wage) for the supremacist is not equal to the ethnic carpenter’s proportion of worth to award (lower ascribed status to same wage). As Aristotle says, “hence the quarrels and complaints”, due to a perception of injustice or unfairness. It ought to be evident already that pluralism (rights for minorities) is operative in a Liberal democracy, allowing the ethnic worker to receive the same earnings as the supremacist worker for the same occupation and same qualifications. After all, pluralism means the protection of rights of minorities (equal rights protected by law). It goes without saying that the ethnic carpenter finds Situation A to be fair (equal pay for equal work).

Situation B: in an Electoral democracy

“equals have or are awarded with unequal shares” (Barnes and Kenney, p. 96)

The ethnic carpenter bases his “worth” on achieved statuses: education, skills, experience. He views his worth as equal to that of the supremacist carpenter. So the ethnic carpenter expects a fair wage to be equal to that of the supremacist carpenter. Yet, the supremacist worker earns more. The ethnic worker perceives this as unjust. “Hence the quarrels and complaints”. Under electoral democracy minority rights are not being respected. Indeed, this is job discrimination. From the supremacist worker’s perspective, he has greater worth in terms of his ascribed investment statuses and consequently finds his greater wage to be justified. Situation B confirms that the ethnic job discrimination is “fair”.

The political context (electoral democracy versus Liberal democracy) goes a long way toward understanding the emotional responses of these two carpenters to their perceived injustices (relative deprivation). The supremacist carpenter experiences moral indignation

("a complaint") in situation A (under Liberal democracy) and contentment in situation B (under electoral democracy). The ethnic carpenter experiences contentment in situation A and resentment ("a complaint") in situation B. It is evident that the differing political contexts influence their contrasting "definitions of the situation" in A and B, and as a consequence, their distinct *emotional* reactions.

Conclusion

Returning to the focus of this essay, what situation generates emotional support for populism? In a Liberal democracy a chain of causality begins in the workplace with the *racism* of the White supremacist worker. Given a sense of racial superiority, the higher ascribed investment status of a supremacist worker who receives pay or other rewards equal to that of a minority ethnic worker leads to the perception of DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE. The emotional experience of moral indignation makes him receptive to the appeal of POPULISM. 1. The "populist logic" opposes pluralism, the protection of minority rights, since government should reflect *only* the general will of "the people". 2. Populism opposes NEOLIBERALISM that unduly benefits minorities at the expense of "the people".

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