

# *The political implications of COVID-19: what now for populism?*

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# The Political Implications of COVID-19

## What Now for Populism?

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**Abstract** This chapter briefly examines the political implications of COVID-19, focusing on the potential constraints and opportunities it poses for populism. Some initial comparative observations suggest the following patterns. First, populists in opposition are likely to be weakened electorally in the short-run, as voters support non-populists on the basis of valence voting. Second, this may not apply to populists in power, who may use emergency measures for democratic backsliding. Third, in the long-run, a potential economic crisis as a result of the pandemic may benefit populist parties, especially those in opposition as discontent voters may punish those in government for the poor managing of the health/economy trade-off. In sum, what will determine the direction of future political developments is the extent to which governments can balance the trade-offs involved in the COVID-19 crisis, including effective health management versus economic growth and individual freedoms versus collective security.

**Keywords** COVID-19. Populism. Far right parties.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 COVID-19 Trade-offs. – 3 What Now for Populism? – 4 Conclusion.

### 1 Introduction

The exponential spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 placed governments around the world under severe strain. Despite the global reach of the virus, nation-states responded primarily as individual actors, seeking to contain the virus and ensure the resilience of their national health systems. Part of this response was the closure of borders and the grounding of airlines confirm-



ing that, although a global phenomenon, COVID-19 required first and foremost a national response. Besides the health dimension, this is also interesting from a political perspective as COVID-19 emerged at a time when the retreat of the nation-state and the restoration of sovereignty were relevant political trends: for example Brexit and the rise of right-wing populist parties that pledge to restrict immigration and challenge EU expansion. How may we assess the political implications of this global crisis, especially given that it comes at a time when populists, who thrive on the tensions between international initiatives and the 'national preference', are either in charge, or the main opposition party, in many countries?

This chapter briefly examines the political implications of COVID-19, focusing on the potential constraints and opportunities it poses for populism. This is a new and fluid situation that is fast evolving. While data is novel and relatively untested, we may still draw some (cautious) preliminary conclusions by comparing cases in an attempt to identify broad patterns and exceptions. What follows is a brief sketch of patterns from which we may identify certain policy implications and lessons learned. The chapter first outlines a series of trade-offs with regard to the COVID-19 situation. It then proceeds to examine the political implications of these trade-offs, before briefly discussing the challenges and opportunities they represent for populist actors. Distinguishing between populists in opposition and populists in power, it concludes with lessons learned and avenues for future research.

## **2 COVID-19 Trade-offs**

According to the 2019 Global Health Security (GHS) Index, fewer than 5% of countries included in the index scored highly, suggesting that the majority of countries were poorly prepared to respond to, and mitigate the effect of, a pandemic. The emergence of COVID-19 confirmed this overall lack of preparedness, but also revealed a paradox: on the one hand, some of the world's most stable democracies that scored highly in the GHS, such as the UK and the US, performed particularly poorly. On the other hand, developing authoritarian countries, such as Vietnam, and smaller democracies fatigued by economic and political upheaval in recent years, such as Greece, outperformed advanced Western democracies in the handling of the pandemic.

In order to explain this variation, preliminary research on this topic has examined short-term indicators such as the speed with which distancing measures were introduced, quarantine effectiveness and willingness to comply (see e.g. Brouard, Vasilopoulos, Becher 2020; Hale et al. 2020; Fenner 2020). This research suggests

that along with long-term infrastructural capacity, short-term political decisions have played a very important role in the containment and mitigation of COVID-19. Responding early is key to responding effectively, so for example tracking, testing and containing infection clusters is of paramount importance. Countries that introduced lockdown measures early tended to have better results, again Greece being a prime example, though some preliminary work has noted inconsistencies with this broad pattern (see Born et al 2020 on Sweden).

This reality highlighted that addressing the pandemic is all about trade-offs and presented both governments and citizens with some important dilemmas: does effective health management occur at the expense of economic growth? Should we introduce - and adhere - to strict lockdown measures at the expense of our personal liberties? Should we trade-off these individual liberties for our collective security? These trade-offs, in turn, have important political implications given the delicate political climate - rise of populism, euroscepticism, Brexit - at the time of the emergence of COVID-19.

### **3 What Now for Populism?**

Far right populist parties, which utilise a rhetoric that combines nationalism and the 'Popular Will', have significantly increased their electoral performance since the 2010s. Examples abound: the French Front National (FN) (now Rassemblement National), the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the Austrian Party for Freedom (FPÖ), the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) and the German Alternative for Germany (AfD) have all mobilised voters on their populist-nationalist platforms. Their electoral success has been the focus of a substantial body of literature in the fields of party politics and voting behaviour (see Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Stockemer, Lentz, Mayer 2018). Different explanations place varying emphasis on factors including immigration and cultural insecurity (Inglehart, Norris 2016), economic deprivation, both actual and relative (Colantone 2018; Fetzer 2019; Adler, Ansell 2019; Engler, Weisstanner 2020; Halikiopoulou, Vlandas 2020), societal decline and status anxiety (Gest 2016; Gidron, Hall 2019) as well as institutional mistrust and poor evaluations of governance quality (Hooghe, Marien, Pauwels 2011; Agerberg 2017). While scholars disagree about the source of the grievance that prompts voters to opt for far right populism, at the core of the debate is the impact of globalisation (Kriesi et al 2006) that divides societies between winners and losers, thus incentivizing the discontent to vote for parties that place blame on the establishment.

Populism posits that only decisions made from below are legitimate - and indeed morally superior (Riker 1982), because only these decisions reflect the will of the people (Mudde 2004). As such, pop-

ulists tend to be sceptical of intermediary institutions, elites and experts, who they try to discredit. They thrive on an emotive but often empty rhetoric, aimed at voters motivated by the need to protest their social, economic and/or cultural discontent. Far right populism merges this narrative with nationalism. These parties pledge to speak on behalf of the 'pure people', restore national sovereignty, 'take back control' from supranational institutions and promote the 'national preference' through strict immigration and citizenship policies (Halikiopoulou, Vlandas 2019). This suggests competing expectations regarding the electoral fortunes of far right populist parties in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the limits placed on globalisation by the pandemic could reduce the attractions of populists. In addition, the need to manage the pandemic requires effective government, expertise and efficient democratic institutions providing the organisational and infrastructural support that determines state effectiveness. In this respect, COVID-19 could pose a significant challenge to populists by exposing their lack of competence, and placing them under scrutiny. In accordance to the valence model of voting (Evans, Chzhen 2016), which suggests that party performance evaluations affect voter choices, voters may increasingly prioritise competence over emotive narratives. Populist parties in opposition may become weakened electorally as non-populists in power have tended to consolidate their support during the pandemic (Bayerlin, Gyongyosi 2020).

On the other hand, potential 'austerity' strategies resulting from the health crisis could exacerbate those voters' insecurities that prompt them to support far right populist parties. In addition, populists in power could benefit from the crisis by blaming immigrants and refugees for the spread of the pandemic, using them as an opportunity for power abuse and an excuse to attack freedom of movement. Indeed far right populism is compatible with some of the COVID-19 blame-patterns: closure of borders, exclusion of immigrants and an emphasis on restricting health services for natives. In a number of cases this has helped populists - or rather right-wing nationalist authoritarians - in power to use the COVID-19 crisis to extend their powers in the political system. Autocratic-minded leaders, for example Orban in Hungary, Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil, have rallied around the flag to increase support at a time of heightened insecurity. One important lesson from the past is that, in similar crisis situations, authoritarian and/or nationalist leaders have taken advantage of emergencies to consolidate power (Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018). This suggests that there is a substantial danger of further democratic backsliding by suspending democratic institutions through emergency laws, for example suspending parliament and ruling by decree.

This raises questions about the utility of the term populism to describe the challenges to democratic politics both prior to, and after

the emergence of COVID-19. One of the most concerning political developments regarding actors described as 'populist' is not actually their populism - referred to above as an ideology that draws on a distinction between the good people and the bad elites (Mudde 2004) - but rather their nationalist, authoritarian and/or a far right agenda. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the extent to which the term 'populism' itself is inflated, overused and too broad to be analytically useful. Conflating the terms nationalism, right-wing extremism or authoritarianism, i.e. grouping any party that has these attributes in the populist category *because* of these attributes, means that populism is superfluous and what really matters is the other attribute: nationalist, far right, or authoritarian for example (Halikiopoulou, Vlandas 2019). Orban was able to impose undemocratic measures in Hungary not because he is a populist but because he is authoritarian. Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini blame immigrants for the pandemic not because they are populists, but because they are nationalists.

The long-term political consequences of this are significant. In cases where democratic institutions are weak there is a serious risk of further democratic backsliding. The long-term economic costs of the pandemic can only serve to exacerbate this. As a large body of literature suggests, wealth inequalities, decline of social status, and limited access to compensation can serve to drive voters closer to extremism (Adler, Ansell 2019; Gidron, Hall 2019; Halikiopoulou, Vlandas 2016).

#### **4 Conclusion**

In sum, what will determine the direction of future political developments is the extent to which governments can balance the trade-offs involved and exit this crisis having simultaneously protected society's most vulnerable and retained its democratic institutions and values.

Future research can delve into these dynamics in greater detail. Comparative research across cases and across time can identify further patterns with regard to which populist actors are more likely to be weakened and why. In the short term, health policies and stringency measures will affect a government's popularity. But longer term factors, such as state capacity and the strength and impartiality of a country's democratic institutions, will determine the extent to which democracy can withstand the COVID-19 shock. While the current pandemic may be unique in its specificities, it is not unprecedented in terms of what it represents: an emergency situation that exposes systemic weaknesses and threatens the stability of democratic societies. Lessons learned from parallel historical precedents may offer us the benefit of hindsight.

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