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Why Populist Leaders Succeed

[In *Contexts*, 2022]

Francesco Duina (Bates College)

“I like the fact that he [Trump] is not afraid to say what we are all thinking!”

Donald Trump supporter at a 2016 rally

Abstract

We have recently witnessed the rise of populist leaders across the world. What makes those leaders so successful? We still do not quite know. This article offers a new perspective. In contemporary societies, the public and private spheres are typically kept distinct and apart. Populist leaders, however, behave in the public sphere *as if* they were in the private sphere: they say and do things that are normally only said and done in private. This unorthodox approach – especially pronounced among the more authoritarian populists – resonates strongly with those who feel like the public sphere has left them behind.

Introduction

Populism has been on the rise. Politicians like Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Marine Le Pen in France have won elections and secured the support of millions of citizens. Sociologists and political scientists have accordingly sought to explain both what populism is and why so many populist leaders have gained the loyalty of so many followers.

On the first question – what populism is – academics have by and large produced a robust and convincing answer. Populism, they argue, is a discursive frame rather than a set of specific policies driven by a political ideology. Specifically, populist leaders depict economic, political, and media elites as corrupt actors undermining the wellbeing of a supposedly morally virtuous people. Populist leaders present themselves as ‘outsiders’ seeking to change the system. As they do so, they interact with their followers by bypassing representative democratic institutions and favoring direct means of communication (think Twitter!).

Thus, populist leaders – whether from the left or right – set themselves apart from traditional politicians by claiming to be saviors of the nation and in direct contact with its true citizens. This perspective certainly applies well to many populist leaders – including the four mentioned above but also Narendra Modi in India,

Matteo Salvini in Italy, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and others.

As to why millions of people have embraced those leaders with such fervor, explanations exist but fall short of being fully satisfactory. The most common ones stress that populist leaders speak to a segment of the population that feels frustrated by mainstream politics and policies. That sense of frustration has both economic and cultural dimensions. On the economic side, the argument is that scores of people have suffered from the rise of globalization, the concentration of wealth in the hands of ever fewer individuals and organizations, and unscrupulous politicians tied to moneyed interests. Populist leaders promise to fix these problems. On the cultural side, the argument has been that populist leaders wish to return the nation to supposedly forgotten but cherished values – revered traditions, a sense of community, caring for vulnerable citizens, and the like. These explanations certainly have merit.

Yet, is that the full story? Do such basic tactics alone generate the electrifying and palpable energy of Trump rallies? Is this why millions of Venezuelans listened spellbound to Chávez's often interminable speeches? Is Le Pen's grip on so many French people solely a reflection of widespread economic and cultural dissatisfaction? It seems that something else – something more emotionally resonant and provocative – is also at work.

Here I offer an additional perspective – one that recognizes existing accounts of economic and cultural frustrations as correct but builds on them to highlight something hitherto not understood, but fundamental, about populism. The focus is on the propensity of populist leaders – especially the authoritarian sorts, but also the more moderate ones as well – to behave in public *as if* they were in private. Populist leaders breach the divide between the public and private spheres. They subjugate the logic of the former to that of the latter. They delegitimize the former by attacking it with the latter. Their followers love it: feeling betrayed by the public sphere, they finally have someone who, unfiltered, gives them a voice and amplifies their frustrations and aspirations. Populism entails the vindication and liberation of the private self – done in, and against, the public sphere:

Making Himself at Home



To explain this idea, this essay is divided into three sections. The first reflects on the separation in contemporary societies between the public and private spheres. The second details, with the help of examples, how populist leaders undermine the public sphere with the logic of the private one. The third articulates why this has proven so effective across the world.

The Public and Private Divide in Contemporary Society

We can start by recognizing that modern society has depended on a clear divide between the private and public spheres. The public sphere may be defined as the place where our political, social, and economic lives unfold supposedly in line with principles such as objectivity, rationality, the respect for human rights, predictability, professionalism, and transparency. It is a theoretically neutral place with clear abstract rules with which our selves selectively interface. Here, a good

portion of what we might think, feel, believe and rather do is not allowed. Those things are irrelevant and in fact potentially harmful.

By contrast, the private sphere may be defined as the space where we are free to feel and express a wide array of feelings, indulge in personal pleasures, entertain ambiguities and even 'illegitimate' thoughts, use colorful or profane language, and the like. Our liberties are certainly not unbounded there, but we are nonetheless allowed to think and behave in ways that are quite different from what is expected of us in the public sphere, as sociologists Ervin Goffman and Norbert Elias compellingly argued. In the private sphere, we need to worry less about whether others see us and what they think of us. There is less external judgment and admonition. We have more latitude.

Keeping the two spheres separated is not without its challenges. Often, we make mistakes and breach boundaries. By and large, however, modern society functions with this divide solidly in place. And this is largely because the divide has, as intended, brought about considerable benefits: peace, stability, and wealth. None of these things could have flowed to the same extent from the arbitrariness and ambiguities common in the private sphere. In the public sphere, science has flourished, life has unfolded mostly in an orderly and predictable fashion, investments of all kinds (in education, transportation, technology, finance, biotechnology, high-tech, housing, etc.) have been possible, governments have generally delivered on many public goods (a reliable public administration, for instance, as well as schooling, roads, and defense against enemies), and all types of economic activities have flourished.

To be sure, the divide has not been without its critics. Early on, social scientists felt it generated considerable problems. For Max Weber, for instance, it implied a dulling 'disenchantment' with the world and spiritual impoverishment, while Karl Marx saw the purported neutrality of democracy and legal systems in the public sphere as helping capitalists' private interests. W. E. B. Du Bois made similar arguments in relation to race, while Sigmund Freud viewed the public sphere's repression of personal drives and instincts as the root cause of widespread psychological misery. Feminist thinkers like Jane Addams, in turn, saw it as empowering men and not women. Subsequent criticisms have echoed and even amplified some of these concerns – all the way to today with, for instance, the Black Lives Matter or Me Too movements.

Yet, even for some of the fiercest critics, the point has actually not been to do away with the split between the two spheres. No one has called for a merger of the two. Rather, critics want an *improvement* of the public sphere so that it serves and benefits everyone fairly and better – so that, in other words, it moves even further away from the drives, inclinations, and possibilities allowed in the private sphere.

As a whole, then, contemporary societies rely fundamentally on the separation between our private and public spheres. All of our major institutions – from the

local elementary school to the World Bank – promote or prepare us for that separation. Big incentives and rewards are available to those who follow the model. Various kinds of penalties and punishments are imposed on those who challenge it.

The Private Attacks the Public

Populist leaders do something that other types of politicians do not do. They attack the public sphere by breaching it with the logic of the private sphere: in particular, they openly say with conviction things that are only thought or spoken in the private sphere, and they do so in ways that are typically seen only in the private sphere. This is so especially among the more authoritarian sorts of leaders, but elements of this approach are present even among the tamer sorts – including, for instance, the likes of Bernie Sanders. Populism thus entails an affront to the core principles of the public sphere by negating them while asserting those found in the private sphere. We will discuss why this has proven so appealing in the next section. In this section, we focus on the nature of the approach itself.

Political sociologists and other scholars have already noted that populist leaders adopt discursive strategies that do not normally ‘belong’ to the public sphere. Populists, they point out, use ‘rudimentary’ moral arguments about good versus evil, appeal excessively to emotions, say things that are customarily ‘unsayable’ for politicians, and often employ exceedingly vague and romantic language in their outlooks and promises. They shed tears in public, breach diplomatic protocols, and take unexpected actions without consulting even close advisors and allies. The observation that these behaviors are unusual for the public sphere is valid. But closer scrutiny reveals something more. These behaviors are all typical of how we can, and often do, operate in the private sphere. Thus, when performed by political leaders in the open for everyone to see, they are direct affronts to the foundations of the public sphere.

Examples will be presented shortly, but for now note that this observation holds in terms of both content and style. Regarding *content*, populist leaders often favor intuition and instinct over science, espouse conspiracy or fantastical theories to cast doubt on governmental policies and processes, disparage opponents by resorting to unflattering caricatures, like to warn about doomsday scenarios, and tend to dispense favors as if they were personal resources. All of this is normally acceptable, and at times even encouraged, in the private sphere but, of course, not in the public one.

In the same vein, the more aggressive types dismiss legal and judicial requirements as secondary to expediency. They often enlist racist and xenophobic perspectives: one identifies with one’s community, after all, and not with some imaginary sets of human rights or abstract global society. Importantly, though, moving expressions of love, generosity, and other positive sentiments may also be in the cards for all sorts of populists. Happiness, light, and joy are certainly present – indeed, even more

cultivated – in the private sphere. Populist leaders are not afraid to celebrate life, cheer their own people, and express optimism and creativity – in contrast to the dullness and rationality of the public sphere. They also claim to be willing to sacrifice themselves for higher things.

The *style* of populist leaders complements what they say. It subscribes, after all, to the same logic. The public behavior of normal politicians is measured, planned, detached from personal inclinations or idiosyncrasies. Whether they are talking to a common citizen or the prime minister of another country, their words are carefully chosen and reflective of standard protocols. The mainstream leader reaches the public through established and monitored channels of communication.

Populist leaders say things very differently. They talk as if they are amongst friends and family. They launch into stream of consciousness monologues, raise their voices, speak directly to supporters, and use social media informally. They disregard etiquette in political debates by interrupting – as if they were quarreling with a detested relative – or, sometimes, by joking inappropriately. The more extreme can be vulgar and sexist. Populist leaders make ample use of hyperbole, folksy language, and false equivalence. They are often unpredictable, sometimes charming, humorous and kind, and other times insulting. They may dress informally and look a bit unkempt. Some call them ‘liberated’ and ‘genuine’. Unshackled from conventional restraints, they appear to be more honest.

Hence, on the whole, populist leaders challenge the legitimacy of the public sphere by ‘freeing’ themselves and their followers from its constraints, and by acting in effect as if they were in the private sphere. In a sense, they remind us of Weber’s definition of charismatic actors, Goffman’s view of the social order as performance and of daring social actors as undermining it by revealing its backstage secrets, and perhaps even of Marx’s famous line that ‘all that was once solid now melts into the air’. What we have taken for granted about the world is no longer assured. The *raison d’être* of the public sphere is suddenly cast into doubt. Is it still useful? Does it really serve its citizens? Does it serve *us*? Has the time come for radical change?

We can see illustrations of this in all recent cases of populism in North America, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Trump of course gave us daily examples – from his hostile and compulsive use of Twitter (around 12,000 tweets in his last year as President) against the core institutions of American democracy and their officials, to his talking about the ‘beautiful’ letters he exchanged with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and of their ‘falling in love’. Still in the United States, Bernie Sanders also comes to mind, with his acerbic characterizations of the ‘millionaire class’ and Wall Street executives, delivered with disheveled hair, excessive arm gestures, and a rising tone of voice. But examples abound no matter whom we consider.

Take, for instance, Chávez in Venezuela and his *Aló Presidente* television show. Broadcast every Sunday at 11 a.m. for many years, it was unscripted, lasted many hours, and involved direct exchanges with audience members and impromptu

decisions to help farmers, workers, or whoever else might appear. Informally dressed, Chávez hugged children, broke into song, cried with those who suffered, fired and hired ministers, and staged several episodes not in official buildings but in local villages, farmers' fields, and the like. Many shows felt like fireside chats. He acted impulsively: after losing patience with a tense diplomatic situation with Colombia, he once ordered, on the spot, a top general to send 10 battalions to the border and almost started a war.

Putin also comes to mind when we glimpse him riding bare-chested astride a horse or following the tradition of submerging himself in icy water to mark the Russian Orthodox Epiphany. Consider Duterte and his pledge to rid the Philippines of the drug trade by executing drug dealers without due process. Why bother to try them in court? Erdogan's shedding of tears when hearing old Turkish poems, and Bolsonaro's offensive denigrations of Brazilian gays and lesbians, offer other illustrative examples. The same may be said of Le Pen's attacks on Muslim immigrants and her vocal disdain of French legislators, or Wilders' depiction of Moroccans as 'scum' and his condemnation of all Islam as destructive. In all these cases, things traditionally said and done in the private sphere are given expression in the public sphere, with the effect of challenging it head on.

Why It Works So Well

Any explanation of the success of populist leaders must be able to shed light not only on why so millions of their followers support them but, almost invariably, on why they do so viscerally and with such great intensity. Populist leaders elicit deep, instinctive, and often uncompromising allegiance. The connection is emotional, as political scientist Emilie Hafner-Burton and colleagues wrote in a June 2017 *Washington Post* column. What can account for this? Should supporters not be concerned about their leaders' unorthodox behaviors?

The simple answer is that large segments of societies, comprising significant percentages of populations and electorates, have felt let down by the public sphere. The public sphere is their problem. They do not believe it has delivered for them. It represents an antagonistic and untrustworthy space in which they cannot win. They see its supposed fairness and objectivity as illusory and even downright harmful. Its bureaucratic and scientific qualities and processes have translated only into obstacles. Willing to work hard, their efforts have yielded little and their earnings have dwindled. Accepting to play by the rules, they have seen others bend them and get ahead. Devoted to their country, they have witnessed politicians and business leaders sell it for personal gain. Their children attend underfunded schools, the elderly and vulnerable in their communities are neglected, and yet migrants are let in and supported. As they suffer, the mainstream media fails to talk about their problems, and in fact belittles them. No one seems to be listening.

We in fact already know this from the numerous academic studies documenting the kinds of grievances populist voters feel: they are angry at the political, economic, and cultural realities around them. What needs pointing out is that these are anxieties about the public sphere. We can think, for instance, of the work of prominent scholars such as Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, Cus Muddie, Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Mabel Berezin, and Andrew Cherlin (including his recent piece in *Contexts* itself) on resentment toward immigration policies, job opportunities, welfare safety nets, and government corruption.

Welcome, then, to those courageous leaders who are willing to make a mockery of all that goes on in that sphere, and of the people who benefit from it. The more daring their attacks, the deeper they will resonate. The more unfiltered and offensive the comments, the more gratitude and appreciation those leaders will earn. The more those leaders ‘sound like them’ – the disaffected, with their fears, hopes, and lexicon – the more inspiring they will be. At last the people have a voice – their *inner voice* – in the public arena: a genuine, irreverent, uncompromising representative willing to say and do what hitherto has been ignored and considered taboo. What for so long they have said behind closed doors – about their workplaces, the direction of the country, immigrants, gays and lesbians, China, multinational corporations, politicians, or whatever – can finally be projected outward into the open, ideally with the biggest megaphone available. And if an establishment politician, like Hillary Clinton, calls them ‘deplorable’, they, for once, will have the final word. The public sphere will be shaken up to reflect who they are and what they need.

Various surveys and analyses show that this is precisely what followers of populist leaders especially appreciate – though of course more research is needed to explore this further. A recent Pew Research survey indicates, for instance, that Trump supporters place a premium on his ability to ‘tell it like it is.’ ‘No more bullshit’, as so many 2020 Trump campaign signs read. The biggest cheers on his 2016 and 2020 campaign trails came in response to his inflammatory attacks against all things related to the establishment. Calling Hillary Clinton ‘the devil,’ the media ‘the enemy,’ and Western allies ‘brutal’ and ‘two-faced’ were highlights of his rallies. Importantly, Trump’s voters also see him as one of their own – with a 2020 *Politico* poll finding that 1 in 5 says that he reminds them of their ‘best friend.’

Similar evidence comes from Europe. Salvini’s supporters, for instance, routinely explain their loyalty by noting that he says ‘what every Italian is thinking’ when it comes to problems like illegal immigrants, soulless EU elites and bureaucrats, corrupt politicians, and the imposition of authoritarian Covid-19 lockdowns. In 2019, *Wired* thus posted the full list of insults that Salvini hurled at public figures, organizations, and government entities during his year as Interior Minister in 2018-2019. This is his currency. It helps that nearly 50% of Italians, according to a 2018 survey conducted by leading research institute Censis, are in favor of someone in power who does not need to worry about being held accountable by mainstream public institutions. In parallel, of course, Salvini’s supporters have also shown much

appreciation for his more personal expressions. His tweets about his love of Nutella (renounced recently, however, because, he claims, it contains Turkish nuts), the joys of being Italian, and the importance of family are much admired.

Evidence from other continents is also available. In Asia and Latin America, for instance, the rise of Duterte and Bolsonaro have consistently been linked by journalists (in a series of articles in *The Atlantic*, for instance, and the *Washington Post*) and scholars alike to their brazenness.

It is easy to see how such behavior might feel irresistible. It is the foundation of an existential bond. The denigration of the public sphere comes with the recognition of the people's injured and neglected dignity – their unfiltered and whole selves. It follows, crucially, that to those leaders goes loyalty, commitment, and, crucially, a willingness to act as instructed, even if that comes with serious risks. This is not a typical sort of political connection, after all.

The events of January 6, 2021 in Washington, D. C., illustrated all of this with tragic clarity. Encouraged directly by then-President Trump, a furious mob stormed nothing less than the United States Capitol. Most people who watched the events unfold felt disbelief and repulsion. But in reality, if properly understood, the actions taken by the mob that day were perfectly coherent and even predictable. The irreverent insurrection – complete with the assaulting of police officers, looting, the placing of feet on elected officials' desks – summed up best Trump's appeal: it represented the culmination of his (and now their, too) assault of the public sphere through the logic of private sentiments and actions. By definition, they could not have achieved their goals in an orderly manner. Instinct, insult, and desecration were the insurrection's essential ingredients. Aimless roaming, searching, and barging into offices served as the perfect contrasts to the highly regulated and bureaucratic unfolding of life that define that building. Each person felt free to do as they wished: smash windows, take selfies on phones, seize busts, lecterns, and other trappings and symbols of government, or leave threatening notes. Under the weight of the private sphere, the public sphere thus collapsed for several hours.

Populism, then, is a unique sort of formula that calls into question and challenges the very foundations of our contemporary world. What this may mean for the future is unclear and beyond the scope of this essay. But those intent on understanding its appeal, and exploring ways to challenge it, will do well to appreciate what lies at its core.

Recommended Sources

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→ Excellent overview of current academic thinking on nature of populism

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric>

→ Excellent report on the rise of populism in the world

Aslan, Senem. 2020. "Public Tears: Populism and the Politics of Emotion in AKP's Turkey." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1-17.

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→ Example of emotions and tears from Erdogan in Turkey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFOy8-03qdg>

→ Example of Trump behaving as if in the private sphere (mocking of reporter)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOsABwCrn3E>

→ Example of Chávez behaving as if in the private sphere (claiming at the UN that President George W. Bush is the devil)

Author Bio

Francesco Duina is Professor of Sociology and European Studies at Bates College (USA). He is especially interested in understanding how nation states persist and operate in the age of globalization. Francesco's most recent book is *Broke and Patriotic: Why Poor Americans Love Their Country* (Stanford University Press 2018). He is a regular contributor to media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.