

# The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy\*

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**T**here is currently a wave of interest in populism and populist politics. This is the result in particular of the spread of a new type of political party which first emerged in the 1980s and was soon characterized by the term »right-wing populism«. Apart from a few exceptions, there are right-wing populist parties today in all Western democracies. Many have now established themselves in the party system of their country and are winning double-digit percentages of the vote in elections. In some countries, the right-wing populists have even managed to establish themselves in national government.

After some delay, political scientists began to study right-wing populist phenomena intensively in the 1990s. There are now numerous comparative international studies which analyze the emergence of the new parties and attempt to explain the diverging results in the various countries (for example, Betz 1994; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Decker 2000). There is general agreement that this is a »multi-factorial« phenomenon, which cannot be traced to any single cause.

Observers at first expected that right-wing populism would be only a short-lived phenomenon, and that sooner or later the parties would disappear. This optimism has long faded, and it is now acknowledged that the right-wing populist parties have established a solid base and must be expected to continue to exist in the future. However, there is still no consensus about what consequences this will have, or about how populism should be assessed from the point of view of democratic »health«. Whereas some see it as embodying a basic democratic impulse with its criticism of the distortions of the political system, others point to the dangers that populist phenomena can pose directly or indirectly for the development of democracy. The problem is that at this general level both

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sides are right. From a democratic point of view, the ambivalence is already apparent in the term »populism«. Its root is the Latin word »populus« (»the people«), which exhibits a clear link with the democratic idea. Where there is democracy, in other words, there is always populism (Canovan 1999). On the other hand, the suffix »ism« signals an ideological potentiation, in contrast to the moderate character of today's democracies. By exaggerating the democratic element and mobilizing it against the constraints introduced into democratic systems by constitutional principles, populism moves at least potentially into the proximity of opponents of the system.

### **Promoting or Threatening Democracy?**

Which of the two interpretations applies to right-wing populism? In order to be able to answer this question it is necessary to distinguish between words and deeds in populist politics. Though something may in itself seem undemocratic – the ideological contents of right-wing populism, or its agitational forms – it can help to promote or stabilize democracy as a consequence of the confrontation with other agents and ideas. The emergence of populist parties and movements is not necessarily a sign of democratic instability. Even in the case of groupings with clearly hostile intentions it could promote the system's integrational capability, if the reasons for their protests are taken up and in this way a new political balance is established. Obviously there are populist moments in today's society, »when the system is threatening to rigidify, when the establishment lacks imagination, when there is a need for renewal, times in which such movements and energies have their positive historical function« (Puhle 1986, 32). The new right-wing populism is no exception. By giving a voice to protest, it ensures that a matter is resolved within the system, and discontent does not feed into darker channels of violence and sectarianism.<sup>1</sup> Second, it forces the established political

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1. Comparative investigations in Europe indicate that the two forms of protest are to some extent interchangeable: the number of violent crimes with links to right-wing extremism are particularly high in countries in which the new right-wing parties have remained weak (such as Germany), whereas in other cases the willingness to use violence has obviously been restrained by the success of such parties (for example, in France and Denmark). Cf. Koopmans 1995.

forces to address problems that had obviously been neglected, and which drove the voters to the »newcomers« in the first place. Self-confident democracies therefore have no need to fear populism (Probst 2001).

However, two objections can be raised against this optimistic view. In the first place, there seems to be an underlying assumption that, once they have fulfilled their function, the populist movements will simply disappear, sooner or later. In the case of the new right-wing parties this has obviously not been the case. On the contrary: the populists have proved to be stable and are even attracting more voters in some cases. For the moderate right wing this means that in future it will have to take these bothersome competitors into account when it comes to forming coalitions, if it does not wish permanently to lose its ability to achieve majorities over left-wing parties (Decker 2002). Right-wing populists have become »acceptable« and have even participated in government in a number of countries (Austria, Portugal, Netherlands) or have even come to power (Italy).<sup>2</sup>

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Political action becomes more responsive and at the same time more irresponsible.

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Where the parties lost support it was often the result of internal quarrels which ruined the public image of the right-wing populists (examples are the National Front of Le Pen in France, which had to cope in 1999 with the defection of the Mégret wing, or the Danish Progress Party, which in the 1980s had to fight off the power demands of its founder Mogens Glistrup). Alternatively, the parties fell victim to the government responsibility they had taken upon themselves. An anti-establishment attitude is a key element of populism, and a massive loss of credibility threatens if the party itself becomes part of the establishment. This fate has been shared recently by the Freedom Party of Austria, the List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands and – on a smaller scale – the Schill Party in the Land of Hamburg in Germany. In Italy it seems that the three-way coalition of Forza Italia, the Northern League and the National Alliance

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2. The right-wing populist parties in Norway and Denmark, which picked up fifteen and twelve per cent respectively in the last elections, are currently lending their support to a centre-right minority government, and are therefore indirectly exercising power.

has managed the tricky transition from anti-institutionalism to responsible government. Admittedly, this exception can be understood only by taking into consideration the complete turmoil of the Italian political system in the 1990s. However, apart from the cases mentioned, the right-wing populists remain the classic »pretenders«, and, given the concrete problems facing governments today, they should have adequate opportunity to maintain this stance in future. For other political parties this may be a depressing thought, because the populists mostly propose »solutions« barely worthy of the name (Sturm 2000). However, if the challengers manage to overcome their organizational problems and to repress ideological contradictions, it would be extremely surprising if they could be made to disappear simply through the actions of their political opponents.

The second objection relates to the longer-term institutional implications of right-wing populism, which are – to put it mildly – problematic because they could contribute to the hollowing out of the democratic substance of the constitutional state. The newly established parties are trendsetters in a development which could be termed the »plebiscitary transformation« of the political process. Classic intermediary institutions such as parliaments and political parties lose importance and are replaced or overshadowed by direct links between the government and the electorate. The new populist parties are a symptom of this development, however, not the cause. To be sure, they have pushed this change more energetically than the established parties. It is characteristic, for example, that some of their representatives exhibit clear parallels with the American parties in their approaches to electioneering, which embody the plebiscitary model in its purest form (for example, Forza Italia, the Freedom Party). In addition, right-wing populists almost all favor the increased use of methods of direct participation in the democratic process in order to limit the power of representative institutions. These efforts should not, however, obscure the underlying causes of the transformation, which lie in the system and are related to the functioning of democracy itself.

## **Constitutional Versus Populist Democracy**

As a real political system existing in large parts of the world, democracy represents a synthesis of two normative principles: the sovereignty of the people (which could also be viewed as the democratic principle in the nar-

row sense), and the constitutional basis of the state. The two exist in an uneasy but complementary relationship. While the democratic principle postulates a form of government in which power is always exercised in the name of the people, or at least a majority of the people, the constitutional state is a response to the paradox that such a democracy could use democratic means to abolish itself (if the people so decided). The structures of the constitutional state therefore aim at strengthening democracy by limiting the scope of its sovereignty. They ensure that the rulers chosen by the people are controlled in the way they exercise power and they define an area of protected rights which cannot be impinged upon by any democratic majority – however large it may be. This is institutionally guaranteed by various checks and balances in respect of the exercise of power, and the principle of the constitutional state finds its most visible expression in the processes of judicial review.

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The constitution imposes external limitations on the scope of democratic power, but the principle of the sovereignty of the people is also subject to immanent barriers. Even if only for reasons of size, democratic systems can tackle the problem of government only by means of representation. Rule by the people therefore does not mean that the people carry out government business themselves, but that they delegate specific people or groups of people to exercise the powers of government in their name and in their interests. The consequence of this is that the rule of the many is replaced by the rule of the few. Viewed realistically, it is not possible to imagine a democracy without chosen leadership personnel who carry out the leadership functions and enjoy the appropriate privileges of power. The question is, whether that is how things should be. »Are elites and ruling minorities a necessary (or even unnecessary) evil, or are they an essential and useful factor?« (Sartori 1992, 173). In the normative democracy debate there is still no consensus on this point.

The fundamental controversy between the constitutional and »populist« views of democracy is thus also reflected in the interpretation of the principle of the sovereignty of the people (Mény and Surel 2002;

Taggart 2002). Some would prefer to see government power in the hands of a suitably qualified leadership group which exercised its responsibility for the people without responding to every changing mood of the general public; others argue that the people should be given the greatest possible influence on politics, because only then would it be possible to achieve the greatest possible degree of conformity between rulers and ruled. The representative view of democracy coincides with the constitutional one in the emphasis it places on the deliberative character of the political decision-making process; it therefore tends to be inclusive, aiming to take account of the widest possible range of interests. The populist-plebiscitary view of democracy favors the decision rather than patient negotiations. Preference is given to expression of the view of the majority rather than the existing variety of interests, so it is based on exclusion and has a polarizing effect. This explains the need for homogeneous identity constructions, and the efforts to present the people as a supposed unity, not only internally, against the ruling elites, but also externally, to distinguish it from other peoples and nations. It shows that populism is essentially an anti-pluralist (or anti-liberal) ideology (Rosenberger 2001, 106 f.).

The plebiscitary transformation of the political process, which has already been mentioned, must be seen against the background of a development which in the past has increasingly shifted the weight from the populist to the constitutional-representative view of democracy. The main reason for this is the growing complexity of the business of government. On the one hand, the problems which have to be solved are more complicated and more urgent, although the capacity of the state to handle them has not grown correspondingly. On the other hand, in the course of social differentiation there are growing numbers of interested parties wishing to have a voice in decision-making processes. In order to be able to cope organizationally with this growing complexity, more and more government business is being transferred to specialized »policy networks«, in which the experts and representatives of special interests largely have the field to themselves. At the same time, social relationships are increasingly becoming the subject of legislation, which strengthens the influence of bureaucracy and the legal system and thus also contributes to a tendency to devalue the democratically based organs of government (Papadopoulos 2002).

The implications of these developments for democracy are worrying, because to the extent that the decision-making processes on complicated

matters are more inclusive, consensual and output-oriented, they become increasingly difficult for the general public to understand. Margaret Canovan (2002, 25 ff.) refers here to a »democratic paradox«, to which populism represents a reaction. With its radical simplifications it transmits a feeling of accessibility and transparency which has obviously been lost in democratic reality. The counter-movement is by no means limited to the right-wing populist challengers. Supported by the transformation of the media, it is increasingly impacting on the entire spectrum of electoral politics, and the logic of presentation is thus becoming more and more distant from real decision-making processes (Korte and Hirscher 2000). Politics is becoming more introverted and at the same time more extroverted.

The division of the two spheres raises difficult questions for the legitimization of the democratic system. One could accept that, as a result of »media democracy«, the public presentation of politics is increasingly subjected to its own laws and has less and less to do with the contents of decisions. But the problems begin when the logic of presentation gains the upper hand, and begins to affect the substance of the decisions being made. When, as we see in election campaigns, with increasing frequency, politicians not only allow themselves to be influenced by public moods, but also actively generate and influence these moods themselves, then the plebiscitary speech threatens to be degraded to populist genuflection or the politics of symbols. Political action becomes more responsive and at the same time more irresponsible.<sup>3</sup> Populism therefore places the legitimization of democracy under pressure from the output-side, too.

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3. An amazing example is provided by Federal Chancellor Schröder's exploitation of the Iraq crisis in the last Bundestag election campaign, when the head of government, showing a reliable populist instinct (and with hindsight amazing audacity) succeeded in linking concerns about a war in the Middle East with anti-American resentment and bringing home that argument to middle-class voters. It is open to debate whether the fact that he ignored *raison d'état* and destroyed much of the trust that his government had previously built up between Germany and its European and Atlantic partners is an appropriate price to pay for staying in power. What is certain, however, is that using the war in its election campaign has seriously and morally tainted the SPD/Green Party coalition's second term in office, which is bound to have repercussions in terms both of foreign and domestic policy. This will definitely influence history's judgement of Gerhard Schröder.

## The Changing Face of Party Competition

Nowhere is the change in democratic politics clearer than in the structure and function of party competition. As intermediary institutions par excellence, political parties form the link between the constitutional and plebiscitary components of democracy. On the one hand, these are de facto organs of state, which recruit almost all the political personnel and occupy all key positions of the system of government. On the other hand, as social groups and organs for the formulation of opinion, parties are the natural addressees of electoral policy. According to Peter Mair (2002), it was the combination of social segmentation and ideological polarization which in the past ensured the democratic functionality of party competition and thus also formed a safeguard against populism. The European mass integration parties were representative in that they formed a clearly outlined political identity. They stood for the interests and value systems of certain sections of the population and were firmly rooted in their social milieu. For party competition, this had contradictory consequences. On the one hand, even though competing, the parties were safe in the knowledge that they could each rely on their own loyal supporters and thus on a reliable share of the vote. On the other hand, the ideological-programmatic divide between the parties made sure that party competition still played a key steering role. The allocation of political responsibility, without which a democratic election would not be possible, was ensured because it did indeed make a difference which party was in government.

As the major ideological differences have faded and identification with a party has gradually lost its social foundations, the nature of party competition has changed fundamentally. Today the competition is fiercer because the parties are competing for the favors of an electorate which is increasingly prepared to switch sides, and which often no longer feels bound by sociological or ideological loyalties. However, in parallel – and this is only an apparent contradiction – the real basis for party competition is disappearing. As the scope for national policy-making becomes smaller in an age of globalization, the desire to gain the maximum number of votes forces politicians to pursue virtually the same goals and to offer the same solutions. But in order to succeed in elections, it is still essential to establish distinguishing features of some kind. The parties face the choice between highlighting differences in the details of the solutions they propose, with the risk that the electorate will not understand them or will simply be bored, or deliberately depoliticizing the electorate

by switching to a strategy of personalization and symbolic action, making the people the central point of reference in their rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> It almost goes without saying that the latter option is more attractive in today's media society. This is also a result of the nature of presentation, particularly on television, which has a natural affinity for populist forms of address (Decker 2000, 324 ff.). For politicians it can therefore be rewarding to »give populism a try«, when they want to broaden their electoral appeal. In this way, they also have the opportunity to emancipate themselves from »their« party. The plebiscitary transformation is therefore also reflected in the internal workings of the political parties, which become increasingly top-heavy in their structures and in which all other goals become secondary to the electoral function (Panebianco 1988, 264 f.).

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The transformation of party democracy would seem to have other populist consequences. It ensures that political parties are the prime target of public criticism. The anti-party attitude can look back on a long intellectual tradition in Western democracies, but only in exceptional situations has this led to anti-party parties being set up. With the new right-wing populism, however, the exception has become the rule and the criticism of parties has become an increasingly important mobilization issue. The fact that this seed falls on fertile ground in parts of the electorate is a consequence of the contradictory role which political parties play in democracy today. On the one hand, they have weakened their ties to specific social groups, so that if the voters are dissatisfied they are more liable to change sides, abstain or otherwise express their objections, and the willingness to participate sinks (declining memberships, lower turnouts at elections). On the other hand, the weakening of social ties has not led to

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4. An example of such a strategy according to Mair (2002, 96) is the electoral address of Tony Blair's New Labour in Great Britain. »These are non-partisan leaders with a non-partisan programme running a non-partisan government in the interests of the people as a whole. This is, in short, *partyless* democracy.«

a corresponding loss of political power for the parties at the level of government. On the contrary, because their social basis has crumbled, the parties have done all they can to fortify their positions in the state wherever possible. This lands them in a hopeless dilemma as far as legitimization is concerned: »As the different faces of the party become more autonomous of one another, and as the party leaderships increasingly turn towards the state for their resources, the relevance of linkages which are based on trust, accountability and, above all, representation, tends to become eroded, both inside and outside the parties. Thus while the parties may become more privileged, they also become more remote. It is this particular combination of developments that may well have provided the basis for the increasingly widespread anti-party sentiment which now characterizes mass politics in Western democracies« (Mair 1994, 18 f.).

## **Counter-Strategies in Constitutional States**

Populism as a feature of political systems is characterized by two faces. On the one hand, it describes a plebiscitary extension of electoral politics, which can be traced back to the change in importance of party politics and affects the entire political spectrum. On the other hand, it is a protest phenomenon, giving rise to »anti-party parties« which campaign against the consequences of the party-ruled state. In both cases, of course, it is interesting to consider possible counter-strategies. If the diagnosis presented here is correct, the main problem lies in the fact that the plebiscitary and the consensual legitimization strategies of the democratic constitutional state are drifting apart. Party competition as a criterion for electoral decisions is increasingly becoming a fiction, whereas the populist aberrations it gives rise to are also affecting the substance of material politics. One answer to this problem could be to take some plebiscitary elements out of the electoral sphere and to relocate them in the consensual area of the system of government. For Germany, for example, this could involve the careful introduction at the Federal level of instruments of direct legislation which are already used locally and regionally (Decker 2001). Along the same lines, recent research recommends participation in the form of an associative or network democracy, with gradations depending on the subject matter or the geographical area affected. The intention is to strengthen the deliberative elements in the decision-making process (Abromeit 2002, 100 ff.).

The introduction of new forms of democracy does not, of course, mean that party competition would be completely stripped of its electoral function, not least because it must remain possible to get rid of an incompetent or corrupt government. For the formulation of the contents of policy, on the other hand, it would be better to peg back the elements of majority-led democracy and to direct the focus of democratization onto the consensual decision-making mechanisms, which would have to be opened up to new forms of participation and made more responsive. The changing conditions of government today mean that democratic politics require more consensus, not less. Therefore there is a growing need to gain legitimization for decision-making processes by linking decision-making as closely as possible to those directly affected.

The implication of this is that populism poses the greatest threat when it undermines the existing consensual elements of the political system. In other words, the more plebiscitary tendencies become established, the more important it becomes to have provisions to protect the liberties of the constitutional state (Dahrendorf 2002). As long as right-wing populist movements remain in opposition and only appear as protest parties, they will probably not pose a threat to the constitutional order. The situation becomes worrying when they acquire the power to govern and actively implement their ideas on plebiscitary democracy. The experience with right-wing populist parties sharing power in Austria or forming a government in Italy show that these worries are by no means groundless (Rusconi 2002; Rosenberger 2001). Nor can they be calmed by hopes that once the right-wing populists are in government they will inevitably fail, even though this was indeed the case in Austria and the Netherlands. A look at Latin America or Eastern Europe clearly shows that it is often only a short step from a populist democracy to quasi-democratic authoritarianism. This may not for the moment be the fate of the mature democratic states. But they should nevertheless take seriously the threats posed by populism, and take precautionary steps now against a plebiscitary transformation of their system of government.

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