



Credit: Robert Gardziński

Why illiberal politicians are winning

Populist politicians—a diverse bunch that include business tycoons, academics and even comedians—are winning elections in Europe and beyond. Jan Zielonka discusses the reasons underlying the rise of populism and how liberals must appeal to the younger generation and regain voters' trust.

The latest populist hero, Thierry Baudet, is a former Dutch academic from the prestigious University of Leiden. His new party, the Forum for Democracy, won the regional elections in Holland in March. Baudet speaks a sophisticated language with frequent references to philosophy and literature, he dresses smartly, and he even plays piano. Yet he knocks the elites, migrants, environmentalists and Eurocrats, speaking in apocalyptic tones, promising easy solutions for Europe's complex problems. He resembles Emmanuel Macron in style, but Matteo Salvini (the Italian Deputy Prime Minister) in substance.

'Populist' politicians have always been part of democratic life, but only recently have they started to win elections and form their own governments. They include some tycoons who obviously know how to make money—Donald Trump the most prominent among them—as well as a Czech billionaire, Andrej Babiš. Some of them, like Beppe Grillo or Volodymyr Zelenskiy, are charismatic and funny; they are professional comedians after all. (Grillo's Five Star movement came first in the last Italian parliamentary elections and Zelenskiy won the presidential elections in Ukraine). Some are former academics, while others are professional politicians. Viktor Orbán has been Hungary's Prime Minister for 13 years already. He clearly knows how to win elections. They all mirror distinct cultures, reflect local concerns and propose different programs. It is hard to put Viktor Orbán, Thierry Baudet and Beppe Grillo in the same category. However, they are united in their criticism of liberal elites and their long record in office. They either mock liberal ideals or have a different vision how to handle free trade, cultural tolerance, religious neutrality, human rights, diplomatic multilateralism and European integration. At the centre of their critique is the liberal notion of democracy with all the measures protecting minorities and institutional checks-and-balances.

Populists may well form a special group of politicians, but they are not superhuman. They are winning because liberals are

weak at present. They are winning because the liberal order is in tatters. If we want to understand the illiberal turn, we need to study the record of the centre-right and centre-left parties that have governed Europe and the United States over the past few decades. All these parties formally subscribed to the basic catalogue of liberal values, but the practical realization of these values was full of flaws.

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The list of these flaws is long and depressing. Inequalities have increased dramatically over the past few decades, tax evasion has become widespread and cuts to social spending have been painful. Democracy has increasingly become oligarchic. More and more decisions have been shifted from parliaments to unelected bodies such as central banks, constitutional courts and the European Commission. Elections failed to generate genuine policy changes: power alternated between the same parties with similar programs and led by the same troupe of politicians. Liberal foreign policies were also full of flaws. Countries have been invaded with no UN mandate and prisoners have been tortured. Autocrats such as Colonel Gaddafi of Libya or Ben Ali of Tunisia have been embraced, while human rights campaigners have progressively been abandoned. Even the flagship of the liberal project, the European Union, has become a symbol of austerity, stagnation and conflict.

None of this is fake news. These are widely known facts pointing to the liberal record in office across the entire Western world. Populists may well utilise these facts for their own partisan aims, they may demonise some aspects of the liberal legacy and they may lack credible alternatives to the liberal project. That said, one should not be surprised that voters have begun to

desert liberals and search for alternatives, however untested and controversial they may be. This was painfully clear in last week's European elections, especially in such important countries as Italy, the United Kingdom and France.

Is the liberal project doomed? Much depends on liberals' ability to regain voters' trust. So far, their efforts to accomplish this aim have been disappointing. Some liberal politicians adopted a soft populist stance to thwart the illiberal tide. The leader of the centre-right Austrian People's Party, Sebastian Kurz, gradually embraced a populist rhetoric and formed a government with the FPÖ, the extreme-right party led by Heinz-Christian Strache. The coalition government did not last long because Mr Strache was embarrassed by a secret recording in which he was seen offering public contracts to a woman alleged to be the niece of a Russian oligarch. Not only did Mr Strache lose his job, but Mr Kurz was ousted by MPs following the fallout from this video. Flirtations with illiberal politicians are politically toxic, and soft populism is not a remedy for combating populism proper.

To bounce back, liberals need to comprehend and admit their past mistakes; they need to get rid of the politicians responsible for these mistakes, and they need to offer a liberal vision which is attractive to young people. The younger generation tends to look forward rather than back and therefore liberalism cannot be a device for maintaining the status-quo and preserving the interests of those in power. Liberalism should be a force for social progress and technological innovation. This is chiefly an intellectual rather than political challenge and it calls for the involvement of scientists. □

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