



**OAS** | School of  
GOVERNANCE

**Looking for a “Democracy That  
Delivers”:  
structural transformations,  
(neo)populism, and the crisis of  
liberal democracy**

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## [1] Introduction

Seeing from the above, democracy is under threat around the world. Accordingly, to Freedom House Index (2019), in every year since 2007, many more countries have seen their freedoms decrease than have seen it increase – reversing the post-World War II pro-democracy trend. Different manifestations of democracy demotion phenomena (i.e., threats to civil liberties, the emergence of populism, the rise of xenophobic parties, media outlets’ oversight by autocrats) can be observed in a diverse set of countries such as Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Thailand, Pakistan, Myanmar Mexico, Brazil, and United States - among others. (Diamond 2019). However, when seen from below, democracy is flourishing. Deliberative democracy is wide- spreading in every corner of the free world, boosted by internet access, mobile phones, and socialmedia platforms (Heller and Rao 2015). The technology revolution empowers ordinary citizens to have their voice heard online and facilitates street mobilization of networks of outrage and hope (Hessel 2010, Castells 2012) – sometimes overthrowing authoritarian regimes (Diamond 2010). Digital revolution is also a contributor to facilitating a more consequential type of politicalactivism: “supply-side” open government initiatives (Lathrop and Ruma 2010, OECD 2016) and “demand-side” citizen participation in the policy decision-making process (Fung 2006, Baiocchit al. l 2011) such as transparency portals, participatory budgeting, and innovation labs to co- produce public services with citizens.

This apparent ambiguity characterizes a time of incomplete change, an interregnum, a time of a “pregnant widow” – a point at which the old order has given way, but the new one has not yet been born (Hazen 1850, Amis 2006). To properly understand this transitional crisis, we must stepback for a while in time and look for the wheels of change beyond the current state of affairs.

I will argue that since the mid-80s – or maybe a bit earlier – societal and cultural structural transformations have been gradually obliterating critical elements of the political apparatus that liberal democracy and liberal democrats get used to. By that, I mean not only vital institutions and organizations we used to organize collective decisions and action (i.e., elections, political parties, political representation), but also “ideas, concepts, and categories we used to understand democracy have expired” (Innerarity 2022, 11). For instance, these transformations affect political parties’ effectiveness in aggregating individual preferences and the very idea of political parties as

a helpful category to understand political representation in contemporary times. The same occurs with ideas of legitimacy, sovereignty, or justice. These transformations affect “the politics” and the “the political” (Schmitt, 1932) as well: the nature of conflicts (i.e., the interstate wars), the historical political forms (i.e., the Nation-State), and practices (i.e., minority right to voice dissent) there were somehow permanent in time despite the flip-flopping of the everyday politics. This transformation goes beyond “the political” as well. They affect state capacity in the developed and developing world to deliver public goods effectively. They make liberal democracies across the globe in a constant struggle to deliver on their promises of peace, order, and prosperity for all.

The ICT revolution boosted these transformations. By drastically improving economies of scale and reducing transaction and coordination costs in all human activities, digital technology accelerated transactions, obliterated borders, made intermediation useless, revealed deep inequalities, and created the “global village” (McLuhan 1992). Although the digital era is not a cause of these transformations and not even a necessary pre-condition to the rise of (neo)populism, it boosted the effects of this transformation in disrupting liberal democracy as we know it.

The rise of (neo?) populism is a byproduct of a general sense of anxiety, disorientation, and revolt affecting those affected by the rhythm and deepness of change. It competes with other forms of ideology but has clear competitive advantages: differently from different types of political idealism, populism simplifies the political reality. It's a form of a political religion that abdicates the myth, offering redemption, not in the future but right now, not for a tiny group but to "the people," requiring no sacrifice (Girard 1972, 1) than popular mobilization. Anti-liberal and anti-pluralist, populism negatively defines itself: against the elites of any sort (i.e., the villain), against the rules and norms that do not fully correspond to the will of "the people" (i.e., the victim) – that can only be interpreted by "the leader" (i.e., the vindicator).

Firstly, I will briefly introduce these transformations, indicate what are their more recent manifestations, discuss the collective action challenges it imposes on citizens, governments, and corporations under the liberal democracy context – especially over the political system's capacity to compromise and the government capacities to deliver policies in line with a political decision. Second, I will point out how technology exacerbates these challenges, making them "wicked" problems. Third, I will argue populism seizes this opportunity in the market of political ideas by

offering a "simpler way" to interpret, frame, and promise to solve these problems. Finally, I will briefly discuss what liberals can do about it in moving towards a more pluralistic form of liberalism (Berlin 1994) without surrendering to more benign forms of populism (Laclau 2005), competitive authoritarianism (Way and Levitsky 2010), or illiberal democracy (Zacharria 2007).

## **[2] The five societal transformations and the rise of (neo)populism**

The first structural transformation to be considered is the compressed society, a condition of the post-modern world (Harvey 1992) that implies a compression (or shortage) in the way we experience time and space: crammed daily schedules, jammed traffic, crowded restaurants, tiny apartments, salaries that do not reach the end of the month, employees (i.e., sales) and organizational performance (i.e., profits) measured in quarters. Urbanization and nanotechnology speed and miniaturized the human experience. Digital technology increases productivity across sectors (i.e., the government is an exception) but does not deliver additional leisure time - as expected by labor sociology scholars during the early 00s (De Masi, 2000).

Time and space compression overdemand the political system to make too many choices at a time and demand the government to make infinite balancing acts among concurrent legit policy priorities. It impairs political compromise that usually takes time and energy and policy innovation that often requires redundancy of resources. Democracy responsiveness diminishes as a result (Powell 2004). Economic volatility (Rogoff and Reinhart 2009) and burnout (Han 2015) are manifestations of compression fueling the sense of insecurity and disorientation in a VUCA world (Bennis and Nanus, 1987).

Populism offers just the opposite: the reign of certainties, voluntarism, and infinite possibilities of the present. Although some right-wing populism presents itself as fiscally conservative, all varieties became expansionary when external shocks hit (Dornbusch and Edwards, 1990). Populist discourse does not ask for sacrifice, moderation, or restrains. Particularly in the US, right-wing populism affirms a very particular type of (positive) idea of liberty (Boyd 2018, Hansen 2015, Witoslawski 2016): an insurgent liberation from the State, the Rule of Law, and the "side constraints" imposed by the others (Nozick 1974). As an anti-elite ideology, populist leaders point fingers toward a technocratic elite as a scapegoating for "the people" frustration. Technocrats

allegedly do not serve the people's interest because they are out of touch, incompetent, and protected from the economic decline affecting the traditional middle-class - as members of a "managerial overclass" (Lind, 2020). More important, technocrats lack the legitimacy to regulate public affairs once they are unelected by popular vote (Rosanvalon 2008).

The second societal transformation is the open society (Popper 1945), and its more recent manifestation is globalization (Mounk 2018). A wide variety of global fluxes across national borders every day: data, money, products, services, drugs, weapons, intelligence, films, songs, sex, and (to a minor degree) people. In a globalized world, the capture and control of transnational flows (think about international hubs, such as London, NYC, Singapore, and Hong Kong) are becoming more strategic for prosperity and security than natural resources endowments (think about Russia, Nigeria, or Brazil). Moreover, due to obligations toward international liberal order (i.e., WTO rules, IMF conditionalities, UN treaties, NATO reciprocity, EU standards, OECD procedures, OAS sanctions), globalization and regional integration reduce the degrees of freedom of national government in pursuing their own political agenda at domestic level, especially when domestic preferences privilege some degree of political autonomy and economic autarky (Rodrik 2010 and 2018).

The Internet boosts the power of foreign actors (i.e., multinational corporations, global NGOs, and transnational crime), allowing them to operate without the inconvenience posed by jurisdiction. That introduces governance challenges of scale, enforcement, and regulation (ZebraFilho 2012). Open societies can see sudden pressure over the scale of public services supply when dealing with a massive increase of potential beneficiaries (i.e., migration flows). In addition, open societies are often affected by adverse actions taken by unterritorialized actors complicating law enforcement (i.e., cyber-attacks). Under globalization, wicked global problems express themselves domestically more often and deeper (i.e., droughts and flooding derived from climate change, domestic inflation due to rise in oil prices) while mitigation depends on decision coordination at supranational organizations. At the community level, globalization affects traditional ways of living, morals, habits, and practices shared by hinterlands communities so far protected by foreign influence and cultural postmodernism. It produces an overall sense of disorientation, obsolescence, and fear toward a future full of unintelligible cultural, social, and technological innovations. And, more important, produce nostalgia toward old zeitgeists.

Once again, populism has the competitive advantage of a simple solution: (some degree of) autarchy and nativism. Not always a nativist ideology, its right-wing East European variety is often reactionary (Applebaum 2018). Populist leaders point fingers toward the globalized and the globalist elite, scapegoating "the people" sense of being left behind. Populism is not a movement toward the future but forward toward the past. Not always a reactionary ideology (and less often a communitarian one), populist discourse promises to re-establish the past in the coming future: the good old days of nation-State, family, communitarian solidarity, fraternity, and all sorts of partisans relations.

The third transformation is the *fragmented society* (Mafessoli 1988, Godin 2008, Chua 2018), and its most recent manifestation is (the politics of) **identity** (Mounk 2018). In the contemporary world, every one of us plays different social roles simultaneously. The dichotomies of the past (i.e., father or son; employer or employee; a teacher or a student) no longer grasp the complexity of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989). The prevalence of identity groups over social class or interest groups brings multiple governance, policy, and political challenges. First, it's hard to identify and understand beneficiaries and users based exclusively on their socio-demographic attributes – the ones we have in our hands to build political consensus around policy choices and target beneficiaries. Second, the vehicles of political representation we have at hand (aka, mass parties) used to be organized along class cleavages (i.e., Labor Party; Popular Party) or political ideologies (i.e., Socialist, Communist, Liberal, Conservative Party). These cleavages are no longer helpful to represent political preferences' archetypes. Maybe that explains the displacement of political parties by NGOs (the 80s), social movements (the 90s), and "collectives" (00s) as preferred channels for civic engagement in the political arena (Everson 1982, Kitschelt 1993, Castells 2011). Third, despite reducing political gridlock and easing majority formation, fragmented politics implies higher transaction and coordination costs due to the empowerment of noisy minorities at the expense of "silent majorities" (Baudrillard, 1978). Collective action became costly, and the common denominator of action tends to be minimized when fragmentation trumps. In a deeply fragmented society, pluralism can quickly degenerate into rivalry when an identity group demands recognition of social, ethnic, cultural, or religious rights by the State and other groups perceive this recognition as unfair privileges (i.e., differential treatments, compensations, reparations) under the Law. Digital technology boost fragmentation in two ways: (a) multiplies identities frees the

sense of belonging and group affiliation from "neighborhoodness" (i.e., think about Greenpeace activist all over the globe), and (c) feed dissent and (sometimes) rivalry between "us" and "them" (Pierskalla and Hollenbach, 2013) – primarily when "selfhood is defined by sameness and otherness". (Ricoeur 1992, 140) and the "mimetic desire" is in place (Girard 1972, 146).

Once more, populist discourse saves the day by replacing pluralism and fragmentation with dialectic and polarization, putting identity to rest under a more straightforward, schematic, easy-to-understand confrontational speech: "the elites" as villains, "the people" as victims, and "the leader" as the vindicator. As an anti-pluralist ideology, populist leaders point fingers toward the affluent, educated, frivolous cultural elite as scapegoats for the people's frustrations regarding their own social status and lack of upward social mobility.

The fourth transformation is the *connected society* (Castells 2011), and its more recent manifestation is the Internet and social media (Mounk 2018). Necessarily, an overconnected society is an overarched and overcommunicated social environment. That poses substantial implications over political and public dialogue dynamics.

On the one hand, overarching societal groups facilitate negative-oriented collective action against a current state of affairs as grassroots political mobilization toward political liberalization (Diamond 2010 and Hessel 2010). On the other hand, however, when proposing a positively framed agenda for negotiating reforms with political authorities, outrage does not easily translate in moderation to "get involved" (Hessel 2011).

On the other hand, overcommunication (i.e., multiple sources) produce cognitive overload even with the State of selective attention that characterizes contemporary urban life. While the 280-character cacophony adversely affects meaningful public dialogue, digital technology displaces mass media as the middleman in charge of filtering, framing, and agenda-setting what would be trustworthy to the audience. The abundance of sources replaces "the audience" with "the public" (Gurri 2018); even the most private matter became noteworthy as a political issue (i.e., see the politicization of the proper use of neutral pronouns). Capturing citizens' attention due to the noise and cognitive overload produced by many sources became paramount. Spectacularization (even the most complex issues) became the only effective way to connect, communicate and convince (Llosa

2012). Media spectacularization is the antechamber of political polarization. Facts became open to interpretation, and primetime news and late-night interviews make a name for themselves as "shows."

And here goes (neo)populism again, offering to free "the people" hearts and minds from "fake news" promoted by the media elites. Tapping on the growing citizens' distrust of mass media (Brenan 2019), populist narratives offer a more straightforward and easy-to-understand interpretation or distortion of facts sold as "the real news" to a public averse to complexity, curious about conspiracy theories and urban legends, subject to anchoring, proximity, selection, and confirmation biases and – more important – eager to make viral every piece of information that confirms the evil of the elites.

Finally, the fifth societal transformation is the liquid society (Bauman 1999), and its most recent manifestation is transience – the permanent change in all aspects of the human condition (i.e., consumption, education, work, love), but with particular consequences in the domain of political life. Transience is everywhere. We no longer get jobs; we get "gigs." We do not spend years with the same partner as our parents did. We reinvent ourselves several times in our lifetime (i.e., changes in preferences, objects of desire, occupations, hobbies). We trash out all sorts of electronic gadgets well before their programmed obsolescence.

That's true in the domains of politics as well. All stable categories, assumptions, and practices that have been instrumental to the proper functioning of liberal democracy are vanishing (Landemore 2020). Political transience means the permanent deconsolidation of political forms, concepts, ideas, practices, arrangements, settlements, and even regimes in degenerated versions of the canonic original – sometimes for the best, others for the worst. Presidential powers are in check by social media humor and might not endure even the old news cycle. The legitimacy that used to come out from free, fair, and frequent elections now depends on social oversight and constant accountability. Statehood and nationhood are decoupling in growing autonomic demands and separatism (Fazal 2018). Wars are no longer fought between States (i.e., jihadism and war on terror), and those who are "are not fought for the reason of security or material interest, but instead reflect a national spirit" (Leblow 2010, 42).



Once digital technology allows broader voicing, elite-based representative democracy loses ground for bottom-up deliberative democracy. However, hope in community deliberation is degenerating into group polarization. Identity was once primarily related to the homeland, and interest related to the class. Nowadays, identity transcends sex to include gender, nationality, or citizenship to include occupations and hobbies. Interest transcends class to include status. "Everything solid melts in the air," as Marx's Communist Manifest states during another transient era.

This political philosophy has necessary implications for liberal democracy as we know it. "Punctuated equilibrium" is becoming the rule of the game when it comes to institutional reforms (O'Donnell 1997). A permanent state-of-change produces a sentiment of reform fatigue that undermines the political support for gradualism and political moderation (IDB 2004) and the stable and updated body of knowledge (i.e., concepts, theories, glossaries) we need to fix liberal democracy and save it from perishing.

Populism is the easiest response to liquidity because it resolidifies the world of politics in what is permanent (Schmitt 1932) or, at least, recognizable permanent dualities we are used to good vs. evil, friend vs. foul, "the people" vs. "the elites," facts vs. truth, authenticity vs. fake, family vs. stranger, simplicity vs. complexity. It reinstates elements we know from experience: state, nation, family, power, elite, people, vote.

In a nutshell, despite its varieties, populism seems to be an easy sell to save us from a compressed, open, fragmented, connected, and liquid society. So, what can we do to explicit populism's threats and failures? What can be done to convince "the people" to dismiss the sirensong? What can we do to stop it?

### **[3] The road ahead: complex democracy or post-democracy**

Many scholars have been crafting future scenarios for the liberal democratic experiment. Some advocate in favor of a post-democratic society where "all institutions of democracy persist but become a formal shell while energy and innovative drive pass away into small circles of the politico-economic elite" (Crouch 2000). Others advocate in favor of making political capture of the public decision-making process by vested interest just more transparent to the public,

naturalizing polyarchy (Dahl 1971) and the prevalence of technocratic reasoning (Jones 2020) as the rule-of-the-game. A few welcome complexities as a vital element of a new form of multi-layered democracy with liberal and illiberal elements but primarily focus on new civic ethics that help us to understand better democracy and purposeful engagement in public life (Innerarity 2022). Some frame the crisis of liberal democracy as a policy problem: a democracy that does not deliver can be only saved by broader political participation (Heller 2015) to have ordinary people deeply involved in solving their problems by "taking advantage of data, technology, and collective wisdom" (Noveck 2021). Finally, some propose a virtuous agenda of interdependent remedies: domesticating nationalism, fixing the economy (aka, reducing inequalities and promoting some version of a welfare state), and reviving civic faith – as Putnam maybe might put it, "get back to bowling together" (Putnam 2000).

Nevertheless, all these approaches will be useless if we do not try to reinterpret populism in the light of the long-term transformations early mentioned. Populism is not the cause of them. Populism is opportunistically freeriding political vacuums appearing between the cracks of liberal democracy. Before fixing them, we need to build a whole new apparatus to start wondering and experimenting with contingent solutions in the liberal democracy sandbox and, simultaneously, prevent populism from eroding the foundations of liberal democracy from political power positions. That means not tolerating and denouncing populism's false promises and (very often) authoritarian means.

The future of liberal democracy will not come out of any theoretical design or social engineering. That is because not only institutions are hard to change – they are path-dependent and very often stick (North 1990) - but because the "political futures cannot be easily predicted" (Foa, Mounk, and Klassen 2022), especially when a political regime no longer fits the culture – what seems to be the case regarding modern-born liberal democracy in contemporary times.

A tentative agenda might be one less ambitious and focused on damage control. That agenda welcomes a democracy that will remain imperfect – and maybe still in crisis – until another paradigm emerges. However, it is an agenda that focuses on mitigating the advancement of populism as an "easy fix" to the broken promises and "(re)aristocratization" of liberal democracy (as perceived by "the people") by mimicking some of populism's popular elements. It goes as

follows, summarized in 4 main challenges:

(a) Understand: try to understand better the role of networks and identity to formulate a complex theory of democracy along the lines of a more pluralistic political representation or polyarchy-type of governance. For example, political representation in Congress must become more plural, welcoming social movements, identity groups, and even corporations as ordinary actors, breaking the political parties' monopoly over access to power.

(b) Decide: promote a gradual but decisive devolution of power, responsibilities around service provision, and fiscal to local communities. Digital technologies can be used to do the trick in aggregate preferences and transmit decisions upward. That means a more radical form of federalism that will perhaps bring tensions regarding additional autonomic demands or, on the limits, separatist movements.

(c) Act: we need a democracy that debates and compromises and that delivery. Fixing the economy does not necessarily mean extending welfare to all citizens once that maybe goes beyond the fiscal space of some developed and developing economies. Prosperous liberal societies might not be equal; they must be fair. Fair inequality means the absence of privileges. Equalizing social conditions during early childhood and implementing universal basic income schemes to protect human dignity are good starting points to tackle unfair inequality.

(d) Protect: we must protect liberal institutions and values, especially pluralism. Conciliating liberalism, pluralism, and democracy is not an easy task (Berlin 1994 and Galton 2009). Nevertheless, liberalism must not surrender the very principle of equal treatment under the Law to accommodate privileges cross-dressed as differentiated treatment or historical reparations in the name of pluralism. On the same token, we must promote an ethic of tolerance, moderation, and civic engagement in the public arena: attending a local council meeting must be as usual as attending church services once a week in deep America.

Liberal democracy will not be saved from the living room's couch by sticky hashtags, funny political memes, or active WhatsApp groups. Liberal democracy requires living under pluralism without fear, anxiety, or anger toward others. It requires coexistence in diversity and divergence.

That demands us to leave the screen, open the doors and get back into clubs, churches, and public squares across the street to learn to be tolerant and curious about the world we live in and "the peoples" inhabiting it.

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