

The Populist Challenge to U.S. Democracy: Renewing American Political Development's Comparative Perspective

Kurt Weyland 

Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

Research Article

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Corresponding author:

Kurt Weyland,
email: kweyland@austin.utexas.edu

Abstract

Regarding the implications of the political developments of the last five years for the study of American political development (APD), this article argues that the unprecedented Trump phenomenon and its problematic repercussions for U.S. democracy have greatly enhanced the value of a comparative perspective, which can draw instructive lessons from the fate of attacks on liberal democracy by populist leaders in other countries. Comparativists examining the contemporary United States initially highlighted the risks of populist leadership (i.e., political agency), stressed the possibilities of democratic backsliding, and examined how popularly elected chief executives can undermine democracy from the inside—all of which fueled grave concerns. Yet for a more realistic assessment of populism's actual danger for U.S. democracy, one must analyze the probability of such a deleterious outcome. Therefore, researchers need to embed agency in contextual conditions and investigate what institutional, structural, cultural, and conjunctural factors empowered populist leaders to destroy democracy in some countries, whereas other constellations of these factors have impeded democratic backsliding in many other nations. With this move beyond a primary focus on agency, comparative analyses align with APD's longstanding attention to complex context factors. Interestingly, such a comparative perspective corroborates the distinctive institutional strengths and relative resilience of U.S. democracy.

1. The Importance of a Comparative Perspective

By posing unexpected challenges to U.S. democracy, Donald Trump's populism has punctured American exceptionalism and made a comparative perspective crucial for American political development (APD). Because populism inherently threatens liberal pluralism,¹ Trump's election made American democracy, whose consolidation had long been taken for granted, suddenly look vulnerable. The United States now faced the political regime issue that is central to comparative politics (CP). Consequently, the burgeoning comparative research on democratic backsliding and the danger of populism became relevant for Americanists. Trump's rise thus revitalized the scholarly exchanges between APD and CP that used to be intense and fruitful, yet had faded over time.² Because the big questions on the contested nature of democracy became salient again,³ comparative experiences assumed renewed importance for APD.

Indeed, with Trump's election, the United States was swept up in the global wave of populism that gathered steam in the twenty-first century. Could the strangulation of democracy by a populist chief executive, which had occurred in Peru, Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey, happen in the United States as well? Because numerous other countries had experienced populist governments, whereas the United States had been spared this predicament since the long-gone days of Andrew Jackson, comparativists were well-placed to help elucidate this crucial question. After all, Latin Americanists had for decades, and Europeanists for years, investigated how populist chief executives exercised power and how much damage they did to democracy. Therefore, a comparative perspective became highly instructive for the study of American politics, especially APD with its keen interest in the fundamental issues unexpectedly raised by Trump's emergence.

¹Kurt Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the US," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 2 (June 2020): 389–92.

²Kimberly Morgan, "Comparative Politics and American Political Development," in *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 166, 169–71.

³cf. Suzanne Mettler and Richard Valelly "The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development," in *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

2. The Initial Focus on Populist Agency and Its Pernicious Possibilities

Trump's unexpected victory called attention to the power of leadership, that is, political agency. After all, this outsider had won against all odds, despite the United States' institutional and political safeguards against demagogues. By shattering longstanding certainties, Trump's triumphant populism demonstrated what a savvy leader *can* do. As observers were struck by this populist's abilities and surprising success, they were impressed with political possibilities. Suddenly the future seemed wide open, with potentially pernicious prospects. Observers now wondered what else "can ... happen here"—maybe even "authoritarianism in America"?⁴

The first comparative analyses therefore highlighted what populist leaders can do, namely undermine democracy, and how they can do it. For this examination of possibilities, scholars focused on cases in which populist chief executives had succeeded in concentrating power and asphyxiating democracy from the inside.⁵ These authors emphasized the inherent vulnerability of liberal pluralism: Political freedom allows demagogues to garner support; electoral victory can hand them government power; and command over state institutions enables them to cement their own hegemony, harass and constrain the opposition, and gradually abolish democracy. Distressingly, thus liberal pluralism lacked reliable, iron-clad defenses; on several occasions, it fell to the autocratic machinations of skillful populists. Because of this inherent fragility, observers were struck by the frightening possibility that such a strangulation of democracy by a popularly elected leader could indeed happen in the United States.

Arguably, however, this focusing on possibility did not yield a realistic assessment of the risks that populism actually posed to democracy in the United States and beyond. In analyzing what populist leaders *can* do, and how democracy can die as a result,⁶ scholars discussed only cases where this deleterious outcome had occurred. But this "selection on the dependent variable" precluded estimating the *probability* of democracy's downfall and thus assessing the actual danger of populism. For that purpose, scholars must investigate the full range of populist governments, including the many cases in which these power-hungry leaders did *not* manage to destroy democracy. After all, populism constitutes a risky political strategy; many populist leaders suffer political failure before they can seriously damage democracy.

3. Investigating the Probabilities and Contextual Conditions of Populist Damage to Democracy

When comparativists study the wide range of experiences with contemporary populism, they immediately find great variation. Popularly elected demagogues smothered democracy in some cases, but not in many others. Thus, populist agency is far from all-powerful; its destructive potential often encounters obstacles. To ascertain effective risks, scholars must determine the actual probability of populism's suffocation of democracy by exploring under what conditions such leaders have managed to impose their illiberal hegemony.

Interestingly, wide-ranging analyses reach less scary conclusions than the initial discussions of possibilities suggested.

⁴Cas Sunstein, ed., *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America* (New York: Dey St., 2018).

⁵Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Robert Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, "Democratic Decline in the United States," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (June 2019): 417–32.

⁶cf. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

Populist chief executives undermine or smother democracy only in a minority of cases; statistical investigations find rates of 25–33 percent, depending on the depth of deterioration measured.⁷ Indeed, moves to competitive authoritarianism have succeeded only under fairly restrictive conditions: The combination of distinctive institutional weaknesses and unusual conjunctural opportunities was a necessary prerequisite for the populist strangulation of democracy in Europe and Latin America, the two regions relatively similar to the United States that have seen large numbers of populist governments. These results suggest that America's continuing institutional strength and its high level of socioeconomic development, which cushions against the severe, acute crises that populist leaders can use for winning overwhelming mass support, provide considerable protection for U.S. democracy.⁸ Analyses of probabilities and contextual conditions thus show that the dangerous possibilities that have worried recent observers are unlikely to unfold fully in the United States.

Focused comparisons with countries particularly similar to the United States seem to corroborate these more reassuring findings. Populist leaders have rarely captured governments in the advanced industrialized world; and where they did, the damage to democracy has remained quite limited. The chief executive most akin to Trump was Italian tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, who governed for nine years between 1994 and 2011. While Italy's parliamentarism and multiparty system differ from the United States, Berlusconi—like Trump—faced several serious obstacles to his power-concentrating ambitions, namely, an active, independent judiciary; a strong, popularly rooted partisan opposition; and a resourceful, mobilized civil society.⁹ Consequently, Berlusconi could not cement political hegemony and undermine democracy; per Freedom House, even democratic quality remained unscathed.¹⁰

Comparative studies of varying scope thus suggest that the potentially destructive agency of populist leaders is hedged in by a variety of contextual conditions. These charismatic politicians certainly try hard to boost their autonomy and power, efforts that *can* in principle threaten democracy. But they manage to realize their self-aggrandizing ambitions only under certain conditions. Their agency encounters limitations that are not easy to overcome. These obstacles have institutional, structural, and cultural roots and cannot simply be engineered away. As a result, populist leaders cannot do anything they want.

To draw valid lessons from instructive foreign experiences and thus help inform realistic assessments of the dangers facing U.S. democracy, scholars must therefore move from a discussion of possibilities to an examination of probabilities: How likely will the risks potentially posed by populism actually run their full course? For this purpose, political agency needs to be embedded in its contextual conditions.

This crucial structuralist turn aligns well with APD's analytical approach. After all, with its methodological holism,¹¹ APD has always highlighted complexity. Accordingly, this field has paid

⁷Jordan Kyle and Yascha Mounk, *The Populist Harm to Democracy* (Washington, DC: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2018), 17; Saskia Ruth-Lovell, Anna Lührmann, and Sandra Grahm, *Democracy and Populism* (working paper, Varieties of Democracy Institute, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2019), 9–10.

⁸Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy," 399–402.

⁹James Newell, *Silvio Berlusconi: A Study in Failure* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019).

¹⁰Paul Taggart and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Dealing with Populists in Government," *Democratization* 23, no. 2 (March 2016): 351.

¹¹Mettler and Valeyly, "The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development," 3.

thorough, systematic attention to a range of institutional, structural, and cultural factors and their robust historical roots. The prominent category of path dependency, for instance,¹² suggests that the longstanding institutional framework of U.S. democracy—with its power-dispersing checks and balances, anchored in a firm, age-old constitution—seriously hinders any move toward authoritarianism. Whereas, Latin American populists such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez initiated the strangulation of democracy by convoking constituent assemblies and then pushing through new power-concentrating charters;¹³ such a full-scale assault on liberal pluralism is unimaginable in the United States.

Thus, a comparative perspective that shares APD's systematic attention to context factors helps elucidate the unusual challenges of the Trump era. As the first populist outsider in the White House in almost 180 years, this idiosyncratic leader, his unexpected political success, and his ongoing repercussions for U.S. democracy are difficult to ascertain. Comparisons with other populist experiences across the world, especially in countries similar to the United States, can be highly instructive. Interestingly, comprehensive, thorough analyses suggest that the initial fears, inspired by a sudden awareness of shocking possibilities, seem to have been too acute. Instead, the examination of contextual conditions, a long-standing strength of APD,¹⁴ suggests that the probabilities and actual risks of serious damage to democracy, not to mention its effective suffocation, are rather low in the United States.¹⁵ Thus, a revived combination of APD and CP can yield more realistic assessments of the undeniable danger posed by populism, which can also help to inform well-targeted, effective remedies and reforms.

4. Conclusion

Prominent APD scholars have looked far into the past and examined longstanding tensions as well as earlier crises and conflicts to

elucidate the current problems afflicting U.S. democracy.¹⁶ These studies make crucial contributions: They insightfully place the recent populist challenge in historical context and demonstrate how it emerged from, yet also exacerbated, prior problems.

What stands out from the comparative perspective advocated in this essay, however, are not only the various threats facing U.S. democracy,¹⁷ but the country's political capacity to cope with these threats, however imperfectly; the spirit of renewal driving America's citizenry; and the United States' comparatively impressive track record in preserving and slowly improving democracy—not an easy achievement. Similarly, while President Trump's autocratic tendencies aggravated the longstanding tensions between control-seeking presidents and other governmental and state institutions,¹⁸ what is noteworthy is the resilience of the U.S. polity in impeding the wholesale replacement of competent officials by personal loyalists and thus hemming in the populist quest for arbitrary, undemocratic supremacy.

Thus, to foster well-calibrated assessments of America's recent descent into populism, this essay recommends thorough comparative investigations that draw systematic inferences from the ample set of foreign experiences with this inherently problematic type of political leadership. In this way, scholars can shed light on the unusual Trump phenomenon, which emerged as a surprise in the United States—but was part of a global wave of populism. APD can therefore learn from the many instructive cases abroad.

For this purpose, scholars need to move beyond the initial focus on populist agency and its possibilities. They need to ascertain probabilities by examining contextual conditions and constraints as well. With this analytical turn, comparative perspectives reinforce APD's long-standing attention to a rich set of institutional, structural, and cultural factors and suggest the relative resilience of U.S. democracy with its solid foundations.

¹²Ibid., 12–13.

¹³Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy," 394.

¹⁴Adam Sheingate, "Institutional Dynamics and American Political Development," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 462, 474–75.

¹⁵Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy," 399–402.

¹⁶Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020); Stephen Skowronek, John Dearborn, and Desmond King, *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁷Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*.

¹⁸Skowronek et al., *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic*.