

National Populism Challenges Right as Well as Left

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Peter Berkowitz

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Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 president election outraged Democrats and delighted Republicans. Progressives have been tempted to console themselves with congenial fantasies or to sink into despair and blame the voters for their ignorance and vulgarity. Conservatives have been inclined to believe that the scales have fallen from the people's eyes, that the right's electoral dominance is secure, and that voters have given them a mandate to disrupt, shatter, and overturn – dramatically illustrated by President Trump's declaration of a national emergency to justify a raft of hard-hitting tariffs.

Thoughtful figures in both camps recognize that ordinary citizens' discontents with elite performance contributed decisively to the improbable return of the nation's 45th president to the White House as America's 47th president. It is far from sinking in on either side, however, that the future of freedom in America hinges on reconciling the nation's tradition of individual liberty, equality under law, and limited constitutional government with the powerful populist and nationalist turn in American politics.

Among Democrats, Minnesota governor and former Kamala Harris running mate Tim Walz exemplifies the self-deception crowd. At a late-March townhall meeting in Texas, Walz lamented those occasions “when we see people back off and we see corporations back off to the threats, instead of leaning into” diversity, equity, and inclusion. For Walz, embracing DEI is a political must “because it's not only morally the right thing to do, it's economically the right thing to do.” Contrary to Walz, however, government classification of citizens based on race and ethnicity violates America's founding principles, and the 2024 elections results indicate that clinging to DEI would further erode Democrats' electoral prospects.

In contrast, a day or two later, the New York Times editorial board published a sober reflection about where Democrats went wrong and how to right the ship. In “The Democrats Are in Denial About 2024,” the Times editorialists recognize that while Trump's victory did not confer the mandate he claims, Democrats suffered last November a “comprehensive defeat.” They “lost control of the Senate and failed to recapture the House of Representatives,” writes the editorial board. “Of the 11 governor's races held last year, Democrats won three. In state legislature races, they won fewer than 45 percent of the seats.”

The Times editorialists reject the soothing tales that Democrats have been telling themselves. The party was not unlucky in 2024, and the problem was not an ineffective messenger delivering a winning message. Yes, post-pandemic inflation hurt Democrats as the incumbent party but, as the Times does not say, the Biden administration's enormous spending as the pandemic receded aggravated matters. Furthermore, the Times

acknowledges, incumbent parties “in Denmark, France, India, Japan, Mexico and Spain” won reelection. And, the Times stresses, low voter turnout did not harm the party last November because those who stayed home favored Trump.

What then, according to the Times, was the problem? Party leaders’ lying about Biden’s declining mental acuity eroded voter trust. The transparent fibbing reinforced voters’ suspicions that Democrats “refuse to admit uncomfortable truths” on matters of prime importance such as “crime, illegal immigration, inflation and Covid lockdowns.” In addition, “the party moved too far left on social issues after Barack Obama left office in 2017,” and it “remains too focused on personal identity and on Americans’ differences – by race, gender, sexuality and religion – rather than our shared values.” While understating matters in asserting that “progressives sometimes adopt a scolding, censorious posture,” the Times editorialists recognize that identity politics “has alienated growing numbers of Asian, Black and Latino voters.”

To broaden the party’s appeal, the editorial board urges Democrats to generate “new ideas” for “improving life for all Americans” and to search for political leaders who “deftly mix boldness and moderation.” This, though, does not capture the depth and breadth of the divide that has opened in American politics.

Progressives would do well to consult Henry Olsen’s recent analysis, as would conservatives. An Ethics and Public Policy Center senior fellow and host of the weekly podcast “Beyond the Polls,” Olsen is an uncommonly astute observer of American politics. In “Germany and the Future of National Populism” he turns his attention to large social and political forces that are transforming rights-protecting democracies on both sides of the Atlantic.

“In Germany and elsewhere in the world, populist parties and figures continue to increase in size at the expense of the old parties, left and right,” writes Olsen. The reason is simple: “Populists of all stripes are gaining because the old elites are failing.” Following the Allies’ victory in World War II, elites in American and Europe “rose to power by delivering peace, social solidarity, and prosperity.” In recent decades, however, they have frittered away their credibility by failing to secure these crucial political goods.

In Germany, France, and Italy – with Hungary and Poland ahead of the curve – the trend lines suggest “that in a decade, perhaps two, most of the West will be governed by a conservative-populist coalition not unlike what Donald Trump has created in America.” One could add to the list Israel: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has hollowed out the old Likud, with its staunch commitment to individual rights and equality under law, in favor of a coalition of the ultra-Orthodox, religious ultranationalists, and traditionalists united by a resentment of Israel’s own post-World War II elites.

While the European left is losing more ground, the continent's traditional center-right parties are seeing substantial numbers of their voters switch allegiance to the national populists. The center-right has sought to keep at bay the rising nationalist-populist challenge by cobbling together centrist coalitions. These coalitions, however, are proving too heterogeneous and fragile to handle the discontents that have driven voters to far-left parties as well as to the national populists. Olsen suspects that as immigration further strains European politics, the center-right will increasingly – and with an increasingly clean conscience – join the national populists.

“Those coalitions will likely take Europe in a much different direction than it has been traveling for decades,” argues Olson. Instead of pursuing multicultural and social democracy priorities, the new national-populist-led governments will crack down on illegal immigration and raise the bar for legal immigration. They will vigorously oppose the woke-progressive sensibility and stand up for the West. They will combine free-market elements and a social-welfare state favoring lower taxes for the working class but not for the wealthy and for corporations. They will adopt a host of family-friendly measures. And they will exhibit ambivalence toward NATO and express skepticism concerning a common European defense policy but will demonstrate a greater readiness to rearm to defend their traditional ways of life.

European national-populist-led governments, in other words, will look a lot like the merging of national populism and the center-right presided over by President Trump in the United States, and pursued by Nigel Farage in Britain and Pierre Poilievre in Canada. This consolidation of traditional-right and national-populist factions across the West's rights-protecting democracies, maintains Olsen, marks not “a populist moment” but the dawn of “a populist age.”

In the new populist age, progressives face a harsh political landscape. If they move left, they likely turn their back on the voter anxieties and dissatisfactions that have fueled national populism's rise. If progressives move to the center, which has shifted rightward, they risk abandoning their distinctive political commitments.

While the traditional center-right faces a clearer path to exercising political power in the new populist age, it too faces difficult choices. National populism marshals popular discontent with highly credentialed, overweening, and incompetent elites while supposing that the people are a reliable repository of good sense and moral decency. It also attacks the nation-state's subordination to universal principles and international institutions while insisting that law and public policy should uphold religious faith. But not all wishes of the people, even those backed by a supermajority, are wise and lawful. And many aspects of the people's faith should not be translated into political imperatives and enforced by government. When clashes arise between popular will and basic rights, or between religious faith and

fundamental freedoms, traditional center-right parties – which seek to preserve individual liberty, equality under law, and limited government – may be compelled to choose between their principles and their access to power.

At the same time, American conservatives, national-populist as well as center-right, enjoy an advantage in reconciling nationalism, populism, and universal principles. That's because the principles of individual freedom, equality under law, and limited government form constitutive features of the American political tradition. So too does the conviction that a nation-state grounded in the consent of the governed is the best vehicle for securing basic rights and fundamental freedoms.

As the country confronts the momentous changes and challenges that mark our populist age, America's national populists – along with center-right conservatives and indeed all Americans – should regard fidelity to the nation's founding principles and constitutional form of government as a political imperative, not least because such fidelity honors the nation's precious inheritance.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on X [@BerkowitzPeter](https://twitter.com/BerkowitzPeter).