TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

Repel and Rebuild: Expanding the Playbook Against Populism

BRETT MEYER

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Executive Summary

While mainstream parties have continued to struggle against populists in Europe and Israel, we find that the number of populists in power today is at a 20-year low largely because of the success of progressive centrism over populism across the Americas. In South America, progressive centre-left leaders have replaced the old, populist left. The number of centre-left leaders in power is near an all-time high while the populist left's popularity is close to an all-time low. Furthermore, independents turned away from Trumpist candidates in the US midterms but were willing to support moderate Republicans. While populists degrade a country's political norms and culture, these can be rebuilt, and populism can be overcome in the long run if parties on the left and right commit to moderation.

In our report last year, we observed a pattern across different countries in how mainstream challenger parties were running against populist leaders. Despite often having very different ideologies, they were downplaying their differences and uniting to focus on the ills of the populist. We conceptualised these common tactics as a "playbook against populism". We argued further that, once in power, these anti-populist coalitions should limit the potential for division among themselves by focusing on reforms to institutions to prevent future entrenchment of populist leaders.

This year, we find that while they tried to implement the playbook against populism, mainstream challengers to populist leaders up for re-election in 2022 and the new post-populist coalition governments that defeated populist leaders in 2021 struggled to do so. Opposition parties were unified against populist leaders in Hungary and Slovenia but were successful only in the latter. And the fragile post-populist governments of Bulgaria and Israel proved unable to keep their focus on a limited agenda of institutional reforms and collapsed, resulting in new elections.

But the playbook against populism focused only on how to defeat populist leaders. This past year, mainstream governing parties also struggled against populist challengers in elections in Sweden, Italy and Israel. Based on these observations, we need to expand the playbook against populism to address how campaigns against populist challengers should differ from campaigns against populist leaders. We argue that mainstream parties should have a clear, substantive agenda of their own. They should not focus on negative campaigning against populist challengers: populist challengers argue that their core issues are underaddressed in mainstream politics and a focus on negative campaigning risks validating these concerns.

While populism remains strong across Europe, it has weakened in the Americas. Much of this is due to the success of a new generation of moderate-left leaders in South America. Conscious of the region's history of left-wing populism, they have disavowed populist rhetoric and focused on progressive economic and social rights rather than the populist left's historic focus on industrial nationalisation. They

have included members of other parties in their cabinets. While the populist left is historically weak in South America, contributing to the low number of populist leaders in power around the world, the moderate left is historically strong.

The Trumpist faction of the Republican Party also recorded a conspicuously poor performance in the US midterm elections, alienating independents and consistently underperforming moderate Republicans. After having defeated several moderate Republicans in swing-state primary elections, they lost most of these races in November, costing the Republicans control of the Senate and several governorships. Most notably, they lost every state-level election for offices involving election administration in swing states. While Congress blocked Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election, US voters blocked his followers' efforts to administer future ones in 2022.

Finally, one of the main concerns about populism is that populist leaders erode checks and balances. While we're primarily concerned about how this affects democratic competition, it can also enable erratic and poor policymaking. We witnessed this during the Covid-19 pandemic and have seen it the past year with fiscal and macroeconomic policy in Turkey and Sri Lanka, which had some of the highest inflation rates in the world in 2022. It also caused a food shortage in Sri Lanka, which in turn caused a mob to storm the presidential palace and topple President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government. And despite high inflation, the Turkish central bank continues to cut interest rates, ensuring that inflation will remain high and be a central battleground in the country's upcoming presidential election.

Introduction

While the number of populists in power was near an all-time high of 19 at the beginning of 2020, by the beginning of 2022 there were only 13, the lowest number since 2004. Donald Trump was out of office and while he has continued to proclaim that he won the 2020 presidential election, we found that in 2021, several populist leaders left office peacefully and without contesting the election results. The wave of left-wing populists in Latin America from the early 2000s peaked and then almost completely subsided, with the remaining examples of populism around the world – ten out of 13 – almost entirely comprising right-wing cultural populists.

While the late 2010s represented a high point for global populism, was 2022 the beginning of a new, less populist era? With the first right-wing populist-led government in Italy, right-wing populists achieving a historic result in Sweden, and populist leaders bouncing back from election losses in Bulgaria and Israel in 2022, perhaps 2021 was just a temporary low and the number of populists is returning to the higher level that we saw throughout the mid-2010s.

But while there were some notable cases of populist successes in 2022, we find that the number of populist leaders is now down to 11, the lowest since 2003. How can we explain the recent successes of populists as well as the long-term decline in their overall number? In our report last year, we described an emerging "playbook against populism", explaining commonalities in how challenger parties were winning against populists in power and elaborating on how they could govern successfully in their wake. While challengers to populist leaders and post-populist governments attempted to follow these guidelines in 2022, many struggled to do so. Moreover, mainstream parties in Europe struggled against populist challengers.

The number of populists in power is down largely because the number of populist leaders in Latin America, historically a hotbed of left-wing populism, is near a 30-year low. This is because of the success of progressive, centre-left leaders. US voters have also been rejecting populism, delivering resounding defeats to Trumpist candidates, especially in swing states and for state-level offices involved in election administration. To explain both recent populist successes and the decline of populism in the Americas, we expand on the playbook against populism to address the following questions:

1. Has the framework of the playbook continued to apply against populist leaders?
2. How can the playbook be adapted to run against populist challengers?
3. How can progressive centrists create a post-populist framework for sustainable governance?

Defining Populism

Populism is a term used in several contexts and is not always easy to define, so it is important to clarify what we mean by it. Our definition follows the Ideational Approach to the study of populism. Populists are united by two claims: first, that a country's "true people" are locked into a moral conflict with "outsiders", and second, that nothing should constrain the will of the "true people". Rather than seeing politics as a contest between different policy positions, populists argue that the political arena is a moral battleground between right and wrong – between a country's true people and the elites or other groups that populists deem to be outsiders, like ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants or criminals. Because of the absolute nature of political conflict, there can be little room for compromise on most issues. Anti-elitism always features prominently in populist rhetoric, and the moral conflict between the "good people" and the "corrupt elite" is one of the most important threads running through populist narratives.

Following our previous reports *Populists in Power Around the World*, *High Tide? Populism in Power 1990–2020*, *Populists in Power: Perils and Prospects in 2021* and *A Playbook Against Populism? Populist Leadership in Decline in 2021* we place populist leaders into three sub-categories:

1. **Cultural populism**, also commonly referred to as right-wing populism or radical-right populism, claims that the true people are the native members of the nation-state, and outsiders can include immigrants, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities and cosmopolitan elites. Populists argue that these groups pose a threat to "the people" by not sharing their values. Cultural populists tend to emphasise religious traditionalism, law and order, anti-immigration positions and national sovereignty.
2. **Socioeconomic populism**, also commonly referred to as left-wing populism, claims that the true people are the honest, hard-working members of the working class, and outsiders are the big businesses, capital owners and international financial institutions benefitting unjustly from the working class's difficult economic circumstances. This form of populism is almost always accompanied by a left-wing economic ideology, though the specific policy agenda varies across contexts.
3. **Anti-establishment populism** is a less ideological form of populism that claims that the true people are hard-working victims of a state run by special interests. Often, these special interests are the elites empowered by a former regime (such as former communists in Central and Eastern Europe). Although all forms of populism are anti-establishment, this form distinguishes itself by focusing on establishment elites as the primary enemy of the people and does not sow as many intra-society divisions. Anti-establishment populists tend to compete on issue areas outside the typical left-right political divide, such as corruption, democratic reform and transparency.

We classify leaders as populist if they were initially elected in free and fair elections and employed substantial populist rhetoric during their campaigns. Our definition is not based on leaders' actions while in office but on how they won office in the first place. We continue to define such leaders as populists as long as they remain in office, even if subsequent elections are not free and fair. Because of this, there are several autocrats, such as Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus and Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, on our list of populist leaders. Please see our previous reports for further discussion of our coding methodology.

Why Are We Concerned About Populism?

The core populist idea, that of a homogeneous "true people" whose will provides the only basis for legitimacy, conflicts with the core liberal democratic value of pluralism. Pluralism is the recognition that society comprises diverse groups (religious, ethnic, economic and so on) and that each of these groups can govern in accordance with their interests and preferences provided that they can convince a sufficient number of others to join them to constitute a majority. This process of persuasion involves give-and-take between differing groups as typically none is large enough to govern on its own and each needs to make some concessions to others to persuade them to join.

Many of the institutions of liberal democracy, like checks and balances in the legislative process and a free press, exist in large part to restrain those in power so that other groups are treated equitably and have a fair chance to compete for power in the future. Whether implicitly or explicitly, populists tend to weaken some of these norms and institutions. In a previous report, we found that democratic backsliding was more likely under populist leaders than other democratically elected leaders, with populists being more likely to erode checks on executive power, press freedom and other civil liberties. What is most concerning about populists who achieve power is that by undermining these norms and institutions, they may do long-term damage to liberal democracy.

Populists may also damage electoral democracy by degrading a country's political norms and increasing political polarisation. This can lead to a cycle of populism, where populists enflame those on the other side of the political spectrum, who then start to support populist candidates of their own. This happened in several Latin American countries between the 1960s and 2010s. Further, as we have seen in the United States, populists cultivate intense loyalty among their followers, which causes more moderate politicians on their side of the political spectrum to pander to the populist to win their followers. Even if populists didn't damage a country's political institutions, they can coarsen the country's political culture and inflict damage on its political norms that may take several election cycles to repair.

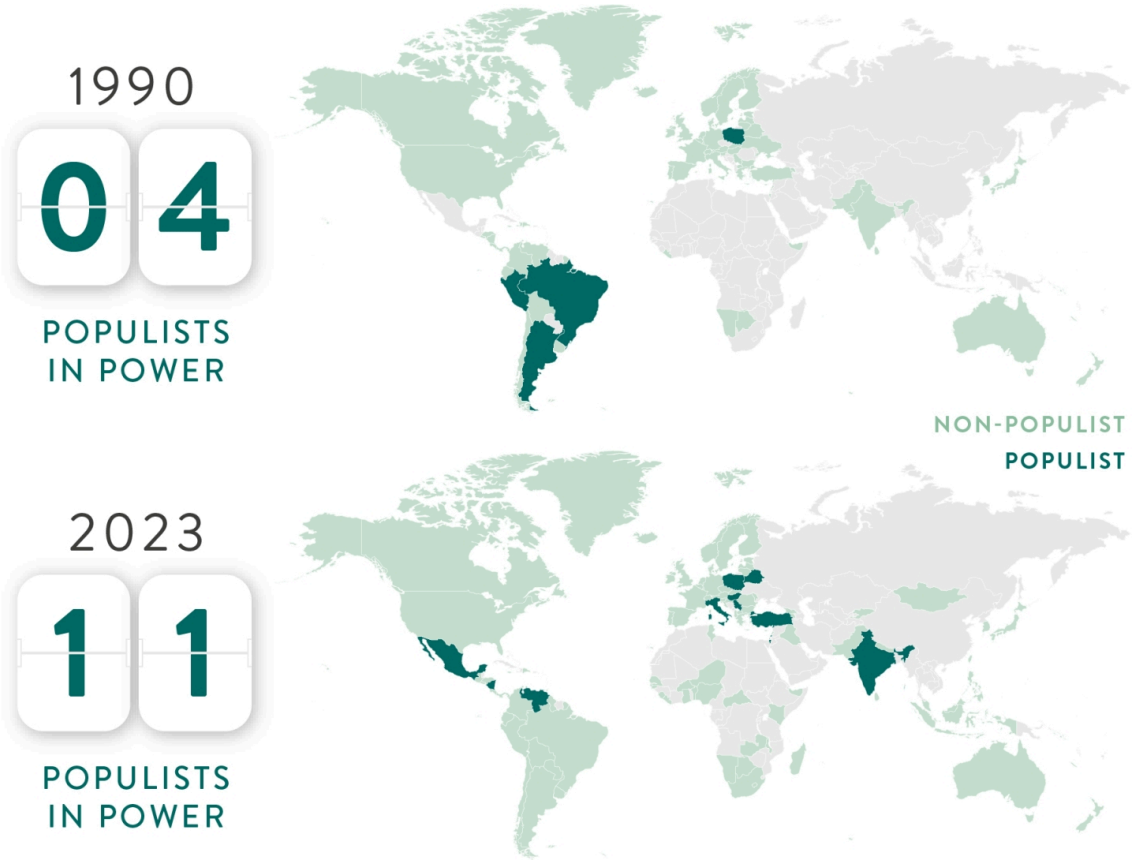
A further concern about populist leaders is that if they erode checks and balances, this erosion will remove the restraints that might have prevented them from pursuing bad policies. We found, for example, that several populist leaders downplayed the significance of Covid-19 during its initial wave and that countries with populist leaders had higher case and death rates than countries with non-populist leaders. Populist leaders also have a history of economic mismanagement, pursuing flawed macroeconomic policies that have resulted in inflation and debt crises. While left-wing populists in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s were responsible for much of this economic mismanagement, we will see later in this report that macroeconomic mismanagement occurs under cultural populists as well.

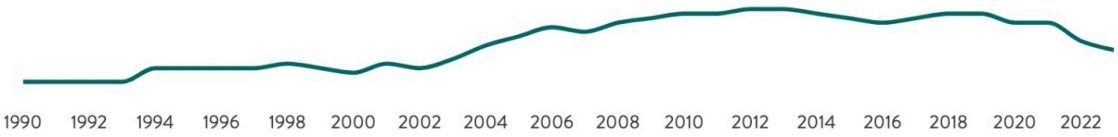
Updating the Data Set

We noted in our report last year that the number of populists in power was down to its lowest level since 2004. Yet with the success of cultural populists in France, Hungary, Sweden and Italy, there has been some discussion that we are seeing a resurgence of populism.

Globally, this is not what we find. We calculate that the number of populists in power has continued its decline from a peak of 19 in 2019 to today's 20-year low of 11. Not since 2003 have there been fewer populist leaders in power than there are at the beginning of 2023. And arguably, the true number of populist democrats in power is even fewer. Under our coding rules, we continue to classify a leader as a populist if they were initially elected as a populist in a free and fair election and have remained in power since, even if subsequent elections were not free and fair. This means that we continue to classify Lukashenko of Belarus, Maduro of Venezuela and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua as populists because they were initially elected in free and fair elections, even though subsequent elections have been fraudulent.

Figure 1 – Tracking the number of populists in power (1990–2023)

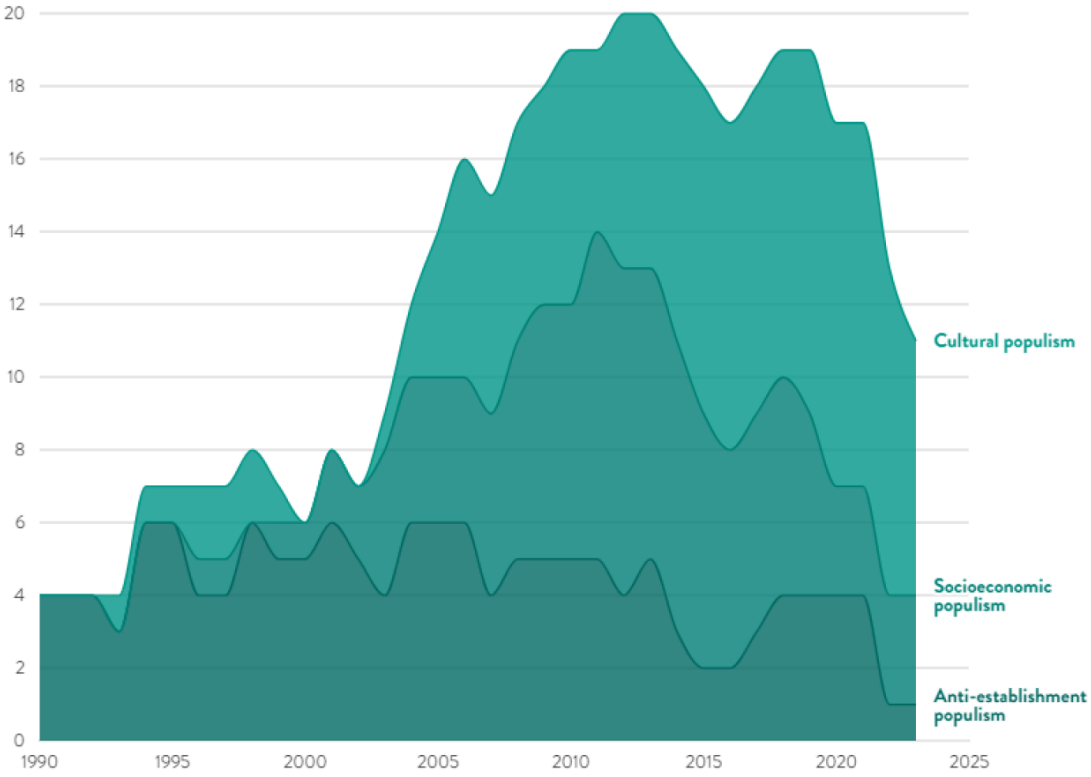




Source: TBI Populists in Power database

As the trend in the number of populist leaders in power around the world has continued downwards, so has the skew in the distribution of populists toward cultural populism. We noted last year that nine of 13 populists in power at the beginning of 2022 were cultural populists. It is seven out of 11 at the beginning of 2023, second only to 2022 in terms of the percentage of cultural populists out of the total number of populists of all types. The recent churn in populist leaders is largely among cultural populists: all six transitions of populist leaders to and from office in 2022 involved cultural populists. Arguably, there are no democratically legitimate anti-establishment populists and only one democratically legitimate socioeconomic populist (President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico) at the beginning of 2023.

Figure 2 – Tracking the number of populists in power by type (1990–2023)



Source: TBI Populists in Power database

Cultural-populist leaders fell from power in 2022 in four countries: Brazil, the Philippines, Slovenia and Sri Lanka. President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Prime Minister Janez Janša of Slovenia lost relatively close elections while President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines was limited to one term in office and

could not run for re-election. Prime Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka was driven out of office in response to a severe economic downturn.

While four cultural populists lost power in 2022, two gained it. The first was Giorgia Meloni, the new prime minister of Italy. While Italy has had populist-led governments in the past, this is its first under a cultural-populist leader; previous populist governments were led by anti-establishment populists. The new Israeli government will be headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, who has previously served five terms as prime minister and is the longest-serving prime minister in Israel's history. His new coalition will, however, have a much stronger cultural-populist presence in its coalition partners than past Netanyahu-led governments.

The Playbook Against Populism

Last year we revealed that opposition parties were defeating populist leaders by downplaying their frequently substantial ideological differences and focusing their campaigns on highlighting the ills of the populists' leadership. We found that sometimes such coordination was explicit, in that the parties formed a unified front, or implicit, in that they ran separately but agreed to limit criticisms of each other and focus on the populist leader. Such a playbook was successful in removing populist leaders in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Israel in 2021.

The second part of the playbook against populism addressed how, if they defeated the populist leader, the opposition parties could create a durable coalition government. This would be challenging because the opposition to populists tends to be ideologically diverse, as they often alienate people across the political spectrum. We argued that post-populist coalitions could achieve stability by keeping their governing agendas limited and disciplined, focusing on shoring up checks and balances to prevent the entrenchment of future populist leaders and limiting the rest of the agenda to issues on which they could either agree or find compromise.

Succeeding and Failing by the Book: Elections and Post-Populist Governance in Eastern Europe and Israel

How did the playbook fare in 2022? While opposition parties and governing coalitions attempted to follow it, they did so with mixed success. Opposition parties in both Hungary and Slovenia coordinated their efforts against their populist leaders but were successful only in Slovenia. And once in government, the post-populist coalitions in Bulgaria and Israel struggled to focus their agendas and collapsed under internal disagreement.

The Hungarian opposition was one of the first in recent years to adopt the playbook, forming a united front that has been successful in local elections in recent years. But national elections have been a challenge for them because cultural-populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is popular almost everywhere

outside Budapest. Orbán was ahead of the opposition in the polls for most of the year leading up to the elections and won by an even larger margin than was expected.

But in Slovenia, the opposition parties defeated cultural-populist Prime Minister Janša. They succeeded through both explicit and implicit coordination. Four opposition parties agreed to run as a united front against him. Then, popular former finance minister Robert Golob formed his own party – the Freedom Movement – and entered the race late. Although Golob took support from the united opposition, polling suggested that his party was the most likely to defeat Janša's and they did not attack him. All focused their campaigns on defeating Janša.

The post-populist governments of Bulgaria and Israel both fell when they proved unable to follow through on the limited agendas that they set for themselves when taking power. Led by Harvard-educated Kiril Petkov, the new Bulgarian government focused on fighting the country's endemic corruption. While Petkov stuck to his promise to fight corruption, his zeal for battle went too far for some of his coalition partners.

Ultimately, the government collapsed over disagreements about the budget and North Macedonia's accession to the European Union. But it was undermined by some of its key members failing to follow through on what was supposed to be its core focus: corruption. There was a new election in October 2022 but this produced an inconclusive result. The parliament is now led by its most senior member, who reluctantly agreed to do the job of Speaker after three days of inconclusive leadership elections.

After a fourth election in three years, in 2021 anti-Netanyahu parties in Israel formed the most ideologically diverse coalition in the country's history, including Arab parties for the first time. But the coalition was weak, containing only a bare majority of 61 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. This meant that if just one MK left the coalition, it would no longer command a majority.

While the government achieved some early successes, it stumbled over a variety of issues, including failing to pass a recurring bill, normally a formality, to extend basic Israeli law to the West Bank settlements and being unable to resolve disagreements over the applications of religious law. Notably, the government also failed to follow through on a bill to introduce term limits for prime ministers, which would have helped prevent the entrenchment of populist leaders. Last year, we highlighted this bill as a promising example of how post-populist governments could focus their efforts to shore up institutions against populist leaders. When a right-wing member of the governing coalition quit over the government's decision to enforce a controversial Supreme Court decision, the government lost its majority and scheduled a new election for November.

These cases highlight the difficulties in maintaining a government after replacing a populist leader who has been in power for many years. But they also reinforce the point we made last year: with such fragile coalitions, it is important to focus on the areas where the parties agree. Because they agree on the importance of preventing populist power grabs in the future, institutional reforms to restrain leaders

should be at the top of the agenda. And when there are areas of substantive agreement – such as the importance of fighting corruption in Bulgaria – it is crucial that the parties focus on acting in areas where they can reach agreement. If they can achieve success early, they can expand on this success later. But if not, they may threaten the stability of the government.

The Playbook Against Populist Challengers

Several populist successes in 2022 were by challenger cultural-populist parties against mainstream governments. Cultural-populist parties either won elections outright or were part of election-winning blocs in Sweden, Italy and Israel, while cultural populist Marine Le Pen of France had her strongest ever showing against President Emmanuel Macron in the country's presidential election.

This raises an important question: should mainstream parties' tactics differ when facing a populist challenger rather than a populist leader? We argue that the answer is yes. While it is critical, as when running against populist leaders, for mainstream parties to maintain unity among themselves, they should limit negative campaigning against the populist challenger. It is more important to keep the focus on their substantive agenda than when they are facing an incumbent populist leader.

While we recommended a focus on the ills of the populist leader when running against one, such negative campaigning presents a problem when running against a strong populist challenger. The reason why a populist challenger is strong is that they promote ideas that have been insufficiently addressed by the current government. Populists claim that their ideas are popular with the public, that they represent a silent majority, and that there's a conspiracy of silence to suppress their ideas, which are unpopular with elites. A focus on negative campaigning can come across as downplaying these concerns and plays right into a populist challenger's hands. It is also risky to focus on more abstract concerns like the threat that populist challengers may pose to democratic norms because they haven't had a chance to govern – voters may be willing to believe that they'd be more moderate in government than on the campaign trail.

Instead, mainstream parties should develop a substantive agenda that provides strong counterarguments to the populists' positions. They cannot shy away from the populists' issues and if they're the incumbents, mainstream parties must be clear about how they have worked to address these concerns and how they can expand on this. More generally, voters need to know what the mainstream parties stand for. They know what the populists stand for – and if the mainstream parties fail to present a clear agenda for the future of the country, voters may be willing to take a risk on the populists' vision.

Struggling Against Populists: Sweden, Italy and Israel

Cultural-populist parties in Europe focus mainly on issues surrounding immigration and EU incursions into national sovereignty. While these issues were not especially significant across much of Europe in

2022, immigration was high on the agenda in Sweden. In the past few years, Sweden has seen a spike in gun deaths, largely in communities with a high immigrant presence. This played into the hands of the culturally populist Sweden Democrats, who emerged from the 2022 elections as Sweden's second-largest party with their strongest ever result.

Breaking past electoral norms that had placed a taboo on cooperation with the Sweden Democrats, the centre-right Moderate Party formed a pre-electoral coalition with them and both parties focused their campaigns on the rise in crime. The Social Democrats, who have been in power since 2014, focused on negative campaigning against the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats, charging the former as agreeing to a "blue-brown" coalition – the brown referring to fascism. But this rang hollow because the Social Democrats had been in power both when the asylum waves started in 2015–2016 and over the past few years as the crime problem increased. While the Social Democrats increased their share of the vote from 2018, other parties in the left bloc lost vote share and ultimately the right bloc won a narrow parliamentary majority.

Immigration has not been particularly relevant in Italy over the past year but, nevertheless, Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI), a party with roots in Italy's post-war neo-fascist movement, got the highest share of the vote with just over 26 per cent. While this was by far the party's highest ever vote share, Meloni didn't succeed by winning voters to the right bloc – she mostly shifted voters from other right-wing parties to her party. She also benefitted from being the primary opposition to the previous technocratic government under Mario Draghi. Italian voters have a rich history of anti-establishment voting, supporting populists of various (or no) ideologies including Silvio Berlusconi, the Five-Star Movement and Matteo Salvini. Meloni is the latest beneficiary of this anti-establishment streak.

But a large part of the reason for the success of the right was the failure of the left. The left lacked both unity and coherence of message. While the right bloc of Meloni's FdI, Salvini's Lega and Berlusconi's Forza Italia had consistently received the support of over 40 per cent of voters in the year before the election, the left bloc led by the Democratic Party consistently polled in the 20s. But the left bloc didn't include two parties that together polled over 20 per cent of the vote: the left populist Five Star Movement and the centrist Action – Italia Viva. Had these parties been able to coalesce into a bloc, they likely would have defeated the right bloc. The Democratic Party also struggled because voters felt that it didn't stand for anything distinctive and focused on negative campaigning against the right. The one party on the left that did better than expected was the Five Star Movement, which ran on a clear platform of more benefits for the poor that resonated in the impoverished south.

Unity also proved to be a major weakness for the left-bloc parties in Israel, especially relative to Netanyahu's right bloc. As in other countries with proportional representation, party mergers before elections are important because Israel has an electoral threshold of 3.25 per cent and any vote percentage below this results in no seats. There was concern that without mergers, several Arab parties and the left-wing parties Labor and Meretz would fall below the threshold. Yet bloc leader and Prime

Minister Yair Lapid was unable to forge these mergers, with Balad running separately from the Arab parties and Labor running separately from Meretz. To be fair to Lapid, his own party performed very well, and these were very difficult coalitions to forge: the Arab parties range in ideology from Islamist to nearly communist and Labor leader Merav Michaeli rejected overtures to join with Meretz. But Netanyahu was able to forge a merger between two far-right parties, Itamar Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power and Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionism, creating a right-wing bloc with several other religious parties that was guaranteed to receive at least very close to a majority.

These (non-)coalition formations proved decisive. Netanyahu's coalition received a better-than-expected 64 seats, largely on the strong performance of the Jewish Power-Religious Zionism alliance, which received 14 seats. The reason for their strong performance is that both Balad and Meretz fell just below the electoral threshold (in Meretz's case, by just 4,000 out of 4.8 million votes cast), costing the left bloc six seats that they would have won if they had crossed the threshold. Had that happened, the results would have been similar to the previous election, with neither bloc receiving a majority of seats. Indeed, the vote shares for left- and right-bloc parties were similar to those in previous elections. Instead, because centrist Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz ruled out forming a centrist unity coalition with Netanyahu, the coalition of Netanyahu's Likud Party, religious parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, and the far-right Jewish Power-Religious Zionism coalition will be the most right-wing coalition in Israel's history.

A Post-Populist Playbook?

In previous work, we've noted that populist leaders tend to stay in power longer than non-populists and that they erode democratic checks and balances. But another problem with populist leaders is that, because they're especially divisive and can be inclined to polarise the political system, they tend to provoke a populist backlash, which can result in switching between left- and right-wing populists that can spiral into autocracy. The experience of Latin America from the 1960s through to the 2000s demonstrates this, with Peronist left-wing populists being deposed by right-wing populists and autocrats, who were themselves replaced by the Pink Tide left-wing populists like Hugo Chavez and the Kirchners.

How can countries break the hold of populism and stabilise their political systems in the long run? First, it is important for moderates running on the same side of the political spectrum as past populists to demonstrate differences in style and focus. They must tone down divisive rhetoric and eliminate conspiratorial thinking. Populists avoid substance and run negative campaigns focusing on their enemies, the damage that they've done, and discussing only vague generalities about what they would do themselves. Post-populists must invert this, developing and focusing on a forward-looking policy agenda. They must be sensitive to the direction in which the country is moving and promote policies that are consistent with and help promote evolving values.

To the extent that populists do give concrete policy ideas, they're often extreme (nationalising industries, banning immigration). This fuels polarisation, creating the potential for a populist cycle. Post-populists must also show that they are the opposite of the populists on this, that they are willing to moderate and compromise with political opponents if implementing their policy ideas becomes too controversial. To this end, it will be important to include moderates and perhaps even members of the opposing party in government. The top priority for post-populist leaders is to try to re-establish the norm that politics are a debate between equals who have different but legitimate visions for the country.

The Rise of the Post-Populist Left in Latin America

It's been a rough few years in Latin America, with poor Covid outcomes and post-Covid economic struggles. Incumbents have fared poorly, losing the last 13 democratically contested elections. But contrary to what we might expect in such circumstances, voters aren't selecting extremist candidates. They're often selecting more moderate candidates, most of whom are left-of centre. [1] Those in this new generation of centre-left presidential candidates have focused their election campaigns on socially progressive ideas and have explicitly eschewed rhetoric of the previous generation's populists. As a result, Latin America currently has the fewest populist leaders that it has had since 1990. Yet the number of left-of-centre leaders – in a region renowned for its history of leftist leaders – is near an all-time high. At the beginning of 2023, all but three countries in South America have left-of-centre presidents.

While often not running against populist challengers, this new crop of centre-left candidates has had to run implicitly against the previous generation of "Pink Tide" left-wing populists, like Chavez, Evo Morales and the Kirchners. Their opponents have tried to link them both in substance and personally to the populists.

But this hasn't worked with voters because the new candidates have distanced themselves from past populists and current far-left governments (like those in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela) differ in both tone and substance from their populist predecessors. They've excluded left-wing populists Maduro of Venezuela and Ortega of Nicaragua from progressive gatherings. They've dropped the divisive speaking style and the focus on US imperialism and international organisations characteristic of their populist predecessors.

Rather than emphasising grievances with international organisations and multinational corporations, the new centre-left presidents in Latin America have concentrated on developing a progressive policy vision that responds to recent national trends. Like the populists, the new leaders focus on inequality and the social problems that this has caused. But rather than use this to rail against multinational corporations and push the nationalisation of industries, they have instead called for an expansion of social rights to housing and health care. They've also paid more attention to gender and LGBT issues than their populist predecessors, who remained parochial and largely uninterested in such social issues. While much of Latin

America remains conservative on social issues, several of these new leaders have courted the youth with progressive positions on women's issues, LGBT rights and climate change.

Although these new leftist leaders are much more moderate than their older incarnations, they have been restrained after entering office by only modest approval, and electoral and policy defeats. Latin American countries directly elect their presidents and the president needs the cooperation of the legislature to enact their policy agenda. In several cases, the president's party has not won the legislature or has lost it soon after gaining power. [2] Presidents have also been losing important local elections and referendums.

President Gabriel Boric of Chile ran on a promise to amend the Pinochet-era constitution, but the new draft, which he supported, was rejected in a national referendum (38 per cent for, 62 per cent against) because it was seen as guaranteeing too many sweeping social rights. But support for amending the constitution remained high and Boric, responding to the demand for moderation, replaced five leftist members of his cabinet with centrists. After losing the 2018 presidential election, Gustavo Petro of Colombia won in 2022 by moving to the centre and appointed an ideologically diverse cabinet, including a US-educated, market-friendly finance minister and a conservative minister of foreign affairs.

The most closely watched election in a Latin American country in 2022 – that in Brazil – followed a similar pattern, with the leftist candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) winning by less than two percentage points over cultural-populist President Bolsonaro. Lula had been Brazil's president previously from 2003 until 2010, coming to power during the Pink Tide. But Lula was always more pragmatic than the left-wing populists. He eschewed their harsher rhetoric and focused on creating new social programmes for the poor (including the incredibly popular *Bolsa Familia*) and increasing Brazil's attractiveness for foreign investment. Bolsonaro's strong showing in the first round put additional pressure on Lula to move to the centre. Like several of Latin America's other new centre-left leaders, he faces a congress controlled by opposition parties, limiting his ability to push an ideological agenda.

However, there is some concern that moderation in Latin American politics may be temporary. Many of these countries had high death rates during Covid-19 and have struggled economically in its wake. This has only been exacerbated by fuel and food shortages in 2022. Support for most of the new centre-left leaders remains modest and they will be vulnerable if their countries' economies continue to struggle. By the end of 2022, underlying tensions had already led to the fall of one of these leaders. Having never attained strong public support, Peru's President Pedro Castillo was ousted from power after months of conflict with the legislature that culminated in his failed attempt to dissolve it and rule by emergency decree.

Also concerning in the long run is how social media enables populists and fuels polarisation. Having previously been little known, Bolsonaro rose to fame through social media, which enabled him to bypass the traditional media and gain a following through unmediated communication. Brazilian politics has

become much more polarised, with each side using social media to promote radical claims about its opponents. This Brazilian election cycle was the most violent in recent memory, with politically motivated conflict killing dozens of civilians and politicians. And Bolsonaro is unlikely to go away; his narrow loss and the strong devotion of his millions of followers ensure that he will continue to be the main player in right-wing Brazilian politics for the near future.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to this. As the populist cycles of previous decades have shown, polarisation produces a ratchet effect, with each side escalating its response to anything that it perceives as a provocation from the other. This is even more problematic in the social-media age because the number of people with access to a wide audience has increased and political partisans have an incentive – for self-promotion reasons – to seek out the most inflammatory stories and present their messages in the most extreme way possible. Communication is less mediated than in the past and political leaders may have a difficult time containing their own supporters. But they can lead by example, using moderate rhetoric, demanding that their followers do the same, and calling out those who fan the flames of partisan conflict.

Continued Resilience Against Populism in the United States

While he wasn't running in any election, Trump involved himself heavily in the US midterm elections. He continued touring the country and holding rallies, backing many candidates in Republican primaries – who had to all but swear fealty to him – over more moderate challengers, including those in many swing states and districts.

But the US public decisively rejected him and his hand-picked candidates. While the results for the Republican Party generally were disappointing, losing the Senate and winning only a bare majority in the House, they were especially bad for Trumpist candidates. They lost almost every race that they contested in a swing state or district and massively underperformed moderate Republicans running for other offices in those same states and districts. The US midterms were a decisive rejection of Trumpism and a resounding victory for the impartial administration of elections.

The sitting president's party almost always loses seats in midterm elections and these elections are often disastrous for the White House incumbent. Based on economic fundamentals, with the highest inflation in 40 years, the Democrats' losses should have been especially pronounced in this election cycle. Yet there were a few issues which potentially worked in their favour. One was the Supreme Court ending constitutional protection for abortion rights, which allowed Democrats to run on popular pro-choice positions. The other was that, in many swing states and districts, the Republicans had nominated Trumpist candidates, who continued to focus on Trump's 2020 election loss and take extreme positions on abortion.

The poor performance of the Trumpists, especially relative to more moderate Republicans, is striking. Moderate Republicans did well in some key states, most notably New York and Florida. But the Trumpists were defeated resoundingly in swing states and districts. Early in the election cycle, election experts noted seven swing House districts in which Trumpists defeated moderate Republicans in the primaries. The Trumpists lost all of them. They lost winnable governorships with extreme candidates in Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania, and failed in winnable Senate races in Arizona and New Hampshire. Even when Trumpists won races in solid Republican states they massively underperformed moderate Republicans: Trumpist Senate candidate JD Vance of Ohio won his race by just seven points, while the moderate Republican Governor Mike DeWine won by 26 points. Republicans were victorious in six out of nine House districts in Arizona, with the moderate House candidates winning an average of 50,000 more votes than the loyal Trump supporter and television personality gubernatorial candidate, Kari Lake, in each district.

While we have discussed the danger of focusing on abstract concerns about democracy when running against populists, the issue was substantially more salient and concrete in the US than in Sweden or Italy. Unlike in those countries, many of the candidates running for office in the midterms continued to focus on Trump's 2020 election loss and promised that if they were in charge, they would concentrate on preventing such "losses". And it appears that voters were able to distinguish between candidates who still wanted to overturn the 2020 election and those who did not, especially for state-level offices involved in election administration. US election terms are determined by state legislatures and these elections are overseen by state administrators, many of whom are directly elected. Trumpists had been aggressively targeting these offices. But they lost every race in a swing state to be the top election official and won only 14 of 94 election officiating offices nationwide.

What does this mean for the future of cultural populism in the US? Trump has announced that he is running for president again in 2024 but is already facing a backlash from many within the Republican Party, who believe that he has become an electoral liability. He will also likely face a strong primary challenge from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who won re-election by almost 20 percentage points.

Yet even if Trump loses, cultural populism is likely to remain strong within the Republican Party. As Florida governor, DeSantis signed a divisive bill regarding LGBT issues and education. Several partisans see DeSantis as an American Orbán, with similar positions to Trump and a similar willingness to stoke divisiveness, but with a much higher degree of political savvy. But it's too early to determine whether Trump and DeSantis will be the only major contenders in the 2024 Republican primaries.

The Pitfalls of Economic Populism: Sri Lanka and Turkey

While this report has chiefly focused on how to run elections against populists and how to overcome the long shadow of populism, another important theme this past year has been economic mismanagement by populist leaders. We saw an example of policy mismanagement under populists during the Covid pandemic, with higher case and death rates under populist than non-populist leaders. But this past year, economic mismanagement created a cost-of-living crisis which brought down the cultural-populist president of Sri Lanka, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and threatens Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 2023 re-election prospects.

Historically, macroeconomic troubles occurred primarily under left-wing populists in Latin America, who kept interest rates low and increased spending to stimulate employment. This eventually caused inflation and debt crises, fuelling the rise of right-wing populists and authoritarians, and eventually plunging many countries into the populist cycle from which they have only recently emerged.

But in the last few years, cultural populists have also found themselves in trouble for their economic policies. Unlike Latin America's right-wing neoliberal populists in the 1990s, who came to power on promises to root out corruption and fix macroeconomic problems caused by their left-wing populist predecessors, many cultural populists are driven less by free-market ideology and have a nationalist concept of the economy. They have been willing to take action at odds with the neoliberal consensus, such as intervening in markets to wrest control of strategic sectors from foreign companies and attacking the independence of central banks.

Both Sri Lanka and Turkey had economic crises in 2022 that had their roots in overstimulation of the construction sector. In Sri Lanka, this started back in the early 2010s, when Gotabaya Rajapaksa's older brother, the cultural populist Mahinda Rajapaksa, was president. He ran a large trade deficit and pursued several vanity construction projects, including ports and cricket stadiums that were unlikely to be used. This heavy spending and lack of revenue produced an unsustainable debt load.

The debt situation became substantially worse after Gotabaya Rajapaksa took office in 2019 and the country's foreign reserves dwindled. First, Covid-19 killed the tourism industry, removing the country's major source of foreign income. Second, he initiated a series of unfunded tax cuts. Third, in part to try to conserve foreign reserves, in May 2021 he abruptly halted the import of synthetic fertiliser. While he had pledged in his 2019 campaign to phase out synthetic fertilisers over a 10-year period for health reasons, he moved this up the agenda because of the spiralling debt problem and lack of foreign reserves for it.

Agricultural specialists warned that the country's crop yields would fall dramatically. And they did. The rice yield dropped by 30 per cent, causing Sri Lanka to have to import rice for the first time. And the policy worsened the foreign-exchange problem because it caused the tea yield – one of the country's major exports – to drop to its lowest level in more than 20 years. By the time Sri Lanka defaulted on its debt in May 2022, this was hardly the largest problem that the country faced; inflation rose to 80 per cent, the price of milk tripled, and millions had to receive temporary food aid. This caused protests that eventually arrived at the presidential compound. Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned and fled the country in July 2022.

While Turkish President Erdoğan is a cultural populist who came to power in 2003 on a promise to bring more Islam into Turkey's secular state, he has based a substantial part of his legitimacy on delivering economic growth. And this is what he did over his first decade, presiding over numerous infrastructure and development projects that made Turkey one of the leaders in economic growth among developing countries.

But a turning point came in 2013, as development plans started displacing people (causing the Gezi Park protests) and it was becoming clear that many of the projects under development were not economically sensible. Furthermore, most private developers had been borrowing in foreign currency because of foreign investors' concerns about Turkish lira inflation. When inflation started to spike in 2018, many developers were unable to repay their debts and went bankrupt.

At that time, the Turkish central bank increased interest rates to lower inflation. But this drew the ire of Erdoğan, who wanted low interest rates to stimulate construction spending, tourism and exports. Over the next three years, the Turkish central bank went through four leaders as Erdoğan put heavy pressure on the bank to lower rates and drove those who wouldn't do so from office. During this time, the bank has become completely subordinate to Erdoğan's monetary preferences. The current head of the central bank, Sahap Kavcioglu, has been in office since March 2021. Since then, he has cut interest rates first from 19 per cent to 14 per cent, then to 12 per cent in September 2022 – even as inflation climbed to over 80 per cent. By the end of 2022, Turkey had the deepest negative interest rates in the world when adjusted for inflation and the lira was the worst performer in emerging markets relative to the dollar. Currently, Turkey has by far the highest inflation in the G20, which puts Erdoğan in grave jeopardy for the June 2023 election.

Elections in 2023

The biggest election involving a populist leader in 2023 is in Turkey. Despite the economic turmoil, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) still has a polling lead in the parliamentary elections. And no clear opponent has emerged in the presidential elections. The opposition is a coalition of diverse parties. They've been following the playbook against populism, forming a six-party coalition (the National Alliance) and promising to re-establish checks and balances if they win. But this hasn't unified all anti-Erdoğan parties. The six-party coalition leaves out the Kurdish HDP and its leftist allies. While there is a willingness to back a single candidate to face off against Erdoğan, there is also tension between the more nationalist elements of the National Alliance and the Kurds. They may need to find a way to overcome these differences to avoid the fate of the Italian and Israeli left.

This will be one of the most testing elections for the playbook against populism because among populist leaders currently in power, Erdoğan has shown himself to be one of the most willing to manipulate elections in his favour. In addition to holding interest rates low, he's been trying to stimulate home ownership by pressing the state development agency TOKI to heavily subsidise mortgages on newly built homes. He's shown himself willing to reignite the country's long-running feud with Greece and there's a good chance of further conflict over energy exploration. Most infamously, he arguably started a civil war with the Kurds in 2015 after performing poorly in the election.

The other populist-led government scheduled to face an election in 2023 is in Poland. Like Hungary, Poland is a conservative country and the Law and Justice party (PiS) has been consistently polling ahead of the opposition. While the Polish government has made controversial changes to the judiciary, it has backed down on some of these in response to pressure from the EU. Unlike Hungary and other populist-led countries, there have only been minor and often temporary changes to the electoral system. There is no reason to believe at this point that Poland will not have free and fair elections in 2023.

Among other European countries with strong populist parties, there will be elections in 2023 in Finland, Greece and Spain. In both Finland and Spain, cultural-populist parties were polling the third-highest of all parties at the end of 2022 with the centre-right party in both countries having taken a polling lead over the governing centre-left coalition. In both countries, there is a chance that these populist parties could become part of a right-wing governing coalition.

Conclusion

The number of populist leaders in power is down to its lowest level in more than 20 years. This is largely because of a moderating trend in Latin America, where centre-left leaders have risen to power on the promise of progressive reforms and a repudiation of the polarising rhetoric and policies of the region's left-wing populists.

Yet cultural populists have scored some key election victories and remain poised for success across much of Europe if their core issues become salient. To address this, we have expanded our playbook-against-populism framework to aid mainstream parties in running against populist challengers. Centre-left leaders in Latin America have succeeded because they have a progressive vision for the future. Mainstream parties in Europe must seek to convince voters of the same.

Another major challenge going forward will be keeping populism at bay in countries with a history of it. This is especially difficult with the widespread use of social media, which makes it easier for extreme voices to gain attention. Centrist politicians and policy advocates must resist the temptation to play this game, which may be great for their social-media following but tightens the ratchet of polarisation and can prompt an even stronger populist backlash. Unilateral rhetorical disarmament may seem risky but as we've seen in South America and the US, voters get tired of rhetorical excess and revert to politicians who sound more modest and offer a progressive, centrist vision. If mainstream politicians can resist this temptation and show that they're focused on solving the problems that the country faces, they can diminish the public's willingness to take a chance on populists.

Footnotes

1. ^ The new centre-left leaders include Alberto Fernández of Argentina, Luis Arce of Bolivia, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Gabriel Boric of Chile, Gustavo Petro of Colombia and Pedro Castillo of Peru.
2. ^ President Pedro Castillo of Peru was especially weak, and his administration was plagued from the beginning by ineptitude, corruption scandals and cabinet turnover. During his first 16 months in power, the opposition-led legislature tried to impeach him twice. They tried a third time in December 2022 but Castillo responded by trying to dissolve the legislature and install an emergency government. When the courts, armed forces and even many in his government refused to support him, the legislature voted to impeach and remove him from office. His Vice President Dina Boluarte was immediately sworn in and called for a truce between the political parties.

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