

Populism

By Luis Rubio, President, Centre of Research for Development (CIDAC), Mexico City
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It sounds simple: elect me and I'll fix it all: in the words of Trump, "I alone can fix it." The so-called Populist seduces for the simple reason that he purposefully distorts the key intuitive element of democracy: that "the people" can govern themselves. The Populist peddles the notion, clearly illusory, that he or she represents the people and, in fact, personifies them. Thus it is that Jan-Werner Müller, author of *What Is Populism?*, states that "Populism is a permanent shadow on representative democracy."

Populism has become an easily accessible label but one difficult to spell out. During recent months, diverse European parties and at least two U.S. candidates have been classified under that definition. Some are of the Right, others the Left, but all share a series of common elements. John B. Judis, in *The Populist Explosion*, affirms that the Populism of the Right (utilizing Trump as an example) proposes that the middle classes are being squeezed out by "others," who can similarly be "the rich", foreigners, bureaucrats: that is, "the bad guys". On its part, the Populism of the Left, where Judis employs Bernie Sanders as a prototype, promotes defending the masses from the plutocratic elites. Both derive from the same thing: the good guys against the bad guys, where a sole individual can solve the problem because he is identified with the population and comprises an integral part of it, the only authentic representative of the people.

The Populist focuses on real problems in order to convert them into a call to action: what matters is not whether he has better ideas or tools to solve the difficulties, but rather creating a sensation of impotence because it is the absence of hope or of a perception of improvement that constitutes Populism's main breeding grounds. It is also the reason why it is of such great import when Mexico's president plies terms such as "poor social mood" because, coming from a person in a position of authority, that type of characterization tends to validate itself and become a mantra. Among U.S. elections scholars, there is virtual consensus that Jimmy Carter forfeited the possibility of being re-elected when he attested that Americans were suffering from a "crisis of confidence." That address, known as the "malaise speech", changed the expectations of the population and devised a space for the defeat of the then-president.

Populism is not about public policy –of taxes, jobs or business-, nor is it an ideology, but instead it deals with a political logic that appropriates possibilities when grievances rise, when the tone of political discussion is raised and when the discontent of the status quo is heightened. The genius of the Populists lies in their capacity to convert the population's apprehensions, which contain some element of truth (such as immigration in Brexit), into sustainable electoral platforms. Fundamentally, however, the factor that energizes the Populists is not the economy but the impotence that manifests itself in a thirst for justice. Why is a poor soul sent to jail and

not a corrupt governor? Why is a known criminal maintained as a senator or representative while the economy continues without benefits for the majority? Why was no banker imprisoned for the Fobaproa banking scandal?

Populism, says Müller, stands on three feet: negation of the complexity, anti-pluralism and distortion of the system of representation. For the Populist, solutions are straightforward and obvious and his is always the only response possible, that is, there can be no legitimate discussion on the best way to solve the existing problems because only that leader has the solution, which, additionally, he does not have to explain to anyone. In that the Populist represents the popular will, legislative processes are counterproductive. Public life is not a matter of debate but strictly one of morals. We are right and the rest are immoral, with ulterior agendas. Needless to say, the best antidote to Populism rests in transparency: explaining the dilemmas and the complexity to the population as the adults that they are, recognizing the diversity in views of society and that not all conform to the technocratic ideal, and strengthening legislative instances to become the supreme mechanisms of representation more readily than, like now, the instrument of political control by the presidency.

Only a little less than two years are left in the current presidential term and 17 months until the next elections. The primordial issue should be the conclusion of this government under better conditions than the current ones in the best way possible. Although the society will decide with its vote who will govern us during the next six years, it is the present government that has the responsibility of engendering conditions for the option to be real. What it has done to date is exactly the opposite: it has polarized, ignored the population and been lacking in its essential mission, which is to bring about conditions for the prosperity and hope of the population. With its mistakes, the government has promoted uneasiness and impotence. There's still time to turn things around.

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