Populists in Power: Perils and Prospects in 2021

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Donald Trump’s attempts to subvert the democratic process and peaceful transfer of power illustrate the risks associated with populist leaders, who undermine the norms and institutions on which liberal democracy depends. But Trump is just the most salient example of populists in power around the world. Our annual study takes stock of the prevalence of populist leaders globally at the start of 2021.

We find that the number of populist leaders in power around the world is down from its mid-2010s high, but it is close to the same level as at the start of the last decade. The composition of populist leaders in power has shifted. Cultural populists now constitute the majority of all populist leaders.

Trump’s loss may constrain other populist leaders around the world as they will likely have less international support and voters may become tired of their antics. But his absence is unlikely to damage their electoral prospects since most came to power before Trump was elected and base their support on domestic issues. Most are savvy and will adjust their behaviour accordingly.

US institutions are strong and held up against Trump’s attempts to subvert them. Countries with weaker institutions may be less likely to withstand a similar onslaught by a populist leader.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had some counterintuitive political effects, with populist leaders who took Covid-19 seriously in many cases receiving a polling boost. Opposition populist parties in western Europe took a polling hit in the first three months of the pandemic but had returned almost to their pre-Covid-19 polling levels by the end of October.

The economic fallout from Covid-19 will create opportunities for cultural populists in advanced democracies.
Introduction

Donald Trump’s refusal to concede his loss in the 2020 presidential election culminated in a mob of his supporters storming the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021 – resulting in numerous acts of vandalism and five deaths. This unprecedented development graphically illustrated the way in which populists tend to weaken the institutions and norms that underpin liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, loser’s consent and the peaceful transfer of power. As we have shown in a previous report, it is not unheard of for populist leaders to do permanent damage to liberal democracies, enabling them to hold onto power. And populism appears to beget populism: Only four of 32 countries that had a populist leader were limited to one term under that leader.

While Donald Trump broke many norms during his tenure as president, American institutions have so far been resilient enough to prevent him from being able to hold onto power after losing the election. Despite his bluster about his deal-making prowess, Trump was very poor at building the relationships that would enable him to make institutional changes and hold onto power. And while the events of the last four years have badly tarnished America’s image around the world, the experience has also demonstrated the strength of the institutions and norms that underpin the system.

But Trump’s constitutional carnage may well weaken the appeal of liberal democracy around the world. Xi Jinping is unlikely to be the only world leader who has become more convinced of the superiority of illiberal forms of government in recent days. As a result, in similar circumstances, savvier populist leaders and less well-established liberal democracies might have seen a different outcome to the transition of power.

As important as Trump’s loss was for global populism, it was arguably not even the most important event for global populism in 2020. Covid-19 put societies in a situation unparalleled in modern history, with governments shutting down the movement of people and much of their economies to try to prevent the spread of a virus that, for at least a few months, no one understood. Polling suggests that it was important for people to have leaders who took such an unprecedented situation seriously. Leaders who can give a press conference with a straight face and tone. Leaders who are seen to draw on the opinions of relevant experts.

We might not expect this to be a favourable climate for populists, who tend to believe that politics should be guided by the common sense of the “true people,” not by the prescriptions of elites and so-called experts. Populists tend to place little emphasis on health policy, and we might expect people to reject politicians who have spent much of their careers denigrating the types of specialised expertise on which societies are now so reliant.
But we also found in our recent report *Pandemic Populism* that most populist leaders around the world took the Covid-19 pandemic seriously and pursued policies similar to those of non-populist leaders. Most populist leaders are politically savvy and knew that populist displays and downplaying the virus would cost them public support.

With all of this in mind, we expect that 2021 will be a quiet year for global populism. The fallout from the US transition of power and Joe Biden’s leadership combined with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic may cause populist leaders to restrain their worst impulses. Of the four current populist leaders up for re-election in 2021, three face strong prospects of being re-elected. There are few other upcoming elections in 2021 where populist parties or politicians look to play a major role.

In this piece, we take stock of the state of global populism, updating our *Populists in Power* database through early 2021. We examine populism trends in recent years, important elections involving populist leaders in 2020, and the meaning of Trump’s loss and Covid-19 for both the near and longer-term future of populism.
Our Definition of Populism

Populism is a term used in a variety of contexts, 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. Anti-elitism always features highly in populist rhetoric, and the moral conflict between the “good people” and the “corrupt elite” is one of the most important threads through populist narratives.

Following our previous reports *Populists in Power Around the World* and *High Tide? Populism in Power 1990–2020*, we classify populist leaders into three sub-categories:

1. **Cultural 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. **Socio-economic 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** 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.
Populists in Power at the Beginning of 2021

Below, we update the TBI Global Populism in Power database through to the inauguration of Joe Biden as president of the United States on 20 January 2021. We find that there are 17 populists in power at the beginning of 2021, just as there were at the beginning of 2020. The distribution of populists across the subcategories is also the same: There are ten cultural populists, three socio-economic populists and four anti-establishment populists. The world has lost one cultural populist in Trump, but it has gained one with Slovenia’s Janez Jansa.

Figure 1 – Number of populists in power around the world, 1990—2021

Looking at the longer-term trends, we can see that the number of populists in power around the world was relatively stable through the 1990s, accelerated sharply in the 2000s and has been broadly stable over the past decade. While the number of populist leaders reached a three-decades high three years after the financial crisis, the current number of populist leaders is now the same as on the eve of the financial crisis in 2008.

But the composition of populist leaders as per our sub-categories has changed, with cultural populism coming to be the dominant variant. In 2008, there were six cultural populist and six socio-economic populist leaders. Today there are ten cultural populists and just three socio-economic populists.
What might be behind these trends? The most familiar story about populism in the past decade has been the rise of cultural populism in Western democracies, including the establishment of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, Brexit and Trump’s election. But, Trump aside, this has not been a story about cultural populists becoming leaders of governments. There were three cultural populist leaders in 2008 and all were in eastern Europe. Now there are only four – still all in Eastern Europe. There have been no cultural populist-led governments in western Europe. ¹

As we can see in Figure 3 below, the global increase in the number of cultural populist leaders has been largely due to growth outside of Europe and other advanced democracies. There was only one cultural populist leader in South or South-East Asia in 2009 (Sri Lanka) but now there are three – including in the largest country in the region, India. Meanwhile, Jair Bolsonaro is the first cultural populist leader in Latin America.
Equally important has been the decline of socio-economic populists, which is largely a story about South America, where populism has a long history thanks to an even longer history of economic disparities. By 2005, a new generation of socio-economic populists, the so-called Pink Tide (including the Kirchners in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela), had ascended to power thanks to a backlash against austerity and popular demands to use resource wealth for social programmes. The Pink Tide has recently subsided, with Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner running up against a two-term limit and Morales leaving office after a contested election. Their parties have regained control of the presidency recently but in both cases, the new president is a less populist member of the party. For now, much of the region appears to have found a middle ground between austerity and far-left populism.
Notable Cases in 2020

In this section, we discuss four notable cases of transitions and non-transitions involving populists: the US, Slovenia, Bolivia and Belarus.

The most notable loss/gain of a populist leader in 2020 was US president Donald Trump’s election loss. Trump was always a vulnerable leader because he won the 2016 election by a small margin (he defeated Hillary Clinton by fewer than 100,000 votes across Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin) and did little to expand his appeal beyond his base. Joe Biden focused on these traditionally Democratic-voting states and won all three back – plus Arizona and Georgia, states which Democrats haven’t won since the 1990s. He flipped these states by targeting and improving his performance among highly educated white voters in the suburbs. One of the great ironies of the US election results is that while Trump lost vote share among his core white supporters (even those without college degrees), he increased his vote share among voters of colour – who are among the main targets of his cultural populism.

But the aftermath of the election has been more noteworthy than the election results themselves. Immediately, Trump contended that election results in states that he narrowly lost (Pennsylvania, Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin) were fraudulent. A variety of individuals and groups – including several states’ attorneys general – brought lawsuits challenging various aspects of how states conducted their elections. Almost all of these were thrown out in court, most notably a challenge to Pennsylvania’s election certification process in the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, in response to which Trump appointee Judge Stephanos Bibas delivered a stinging rebuke, writing in his opinion for the court that: “Charges require specific allegations and then proof. We have neither here.”

Beyond personally refusing to accept his loss, Trump encouraged his supporters to reject it too and to come to Washington, DC on 6 January 2021 – the day on which Congress was to certify the election results – and protest the election certification. During a speech near the White House, President Trump told his supporters that “we’re going to walk down to the Capitol … you’ll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong … Make no mistake, this election was stolen from you, from me, and from this country … this is a criminal enterprise.” Several thousand of his followers subsequently went to Congress and broke through police barricades, necessitating the evacuation of members of Congress and their staffs. The Trump supporters stormed offices and the chambers of the Senate and House of Representatives, committing numerous acts of vandalism and theft. These events resulted in five deaths – including an officer with the US Capitol Police – and dozens of subsequent arrests. But the leadership of the House and Senate were not deterred and finished the certification process at 3.40am on 7 January.
Trump and his supporters’ efforts to prevent a democratic transition to power were always likely to fail because the US has a strong system of checks and balances that Trump was not able to breach and military and security services that would not support his attempts to subvert a constitutional transition of power. But while America’s institutions and norms have proved strong enough to withstand such an onslaught, populists and would-be autocrats elsewhere are likely to be emboldened by these events. Other populist leaders have been and will be more able to rig electoral institutions in their favour, to undermine the rule of law, and to get the military and security services to help them hold onto power after a contested election.

A perfect example of this is one of the other most noteworthy elections involving a populist leader in 2020: Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. Although he’s long been regarded as “Europe’s last dictator”, Belarusian President Lukashenko is classified in our methodology as a populist because he ran for office as a populist in his first election. Lukashenko ran for office as an anti-establishment populist in 1994 and has been in office since then. While he’s been accused of election tampering in the past, he has never faced an electoral challenge as great as that in 2020, which was held in the wake of rising discontent around a faltering economy and Lukashenko’s mishandling of Covid-19. Protests began almost immediately after Lukashenko declared victory and they have persisted through the end of 2020. But the military and security services have supported Lukashenko and he remains in power.

Aside from Trump’s loss, the only other transition to or from populism in 2020 was cultural populist Jansa becoming prime minister for a third time in Slovenia on 12 March, having previously served as prime minister from 2004 to 2008 and 2012 to 2013. He’s an avid Twitter user and even sent a tweet on 4 November congratulating Donald Trump on being re-elected. Jansa’s career path is similar to that of neighbouring populist leader Viktor Orban of Hungary. He was a liberal reformer during the late years of the Soviet Union but has become very nationalist. The major charge against him is that he’s trying to “Orbanise” Slovenia by cracking down on media and press freedom. There have been protests against him since he took office. But like other Eastern European populists, Jansa took Covid-19 seriously, initiating a lockdown and urging people to practice social distancing and wear masks if they had to go out.

Although they didn’t involve a populist candidate, the 2020 Bolivian elections were also noteworthy for global populism. Socio-economic populist president Morales stepped down from power in 2019 in the wake of a disputed election and fled the country. He was replaced by an interim right-wing government, which had promised new elections but delayed them twice, citing the Covid-19 pandemic. Bolivia finally held its general elections on 18 October, and they resulted in a first-round victory for Luis Arce, a member of Morales’s Movement for Socialism (MAS) party. Arce, however, is seen as “one of the few technocrats in the MAS” who “doesn’t engage in inflammatory rhetoric”. Therefore, while he comes from a party with a history of populism, we do not classify President Arce as a populist.
Trump’s Loss and the Future of Populism

While most commentators had been quite cautious about the impact of Trump’s departure on other populist leaders and parties, Trump’s handling of his loss complicates the picture. It is important to separate the fact that Trump will no longer be the president of the United States from the violent aftermath of his election loss, because they may affect populist leaders in different ways.

The Implications of Trump’s Departure

Trump’s loss and his replacement by centre-left moderate Joe Biden means that populist leaders will not have tacit backing from the world’s strongest country for any attempts to subvert liberal democratic institutions or individual rights. The Biden administration will be much more likely to press populist and autocratic leaders on human-rights abuses or attacks on democratic institutions and media freedom.

Trump’s presence on the international stage and high-profile denial of evident truths emboldened populists around the world. Trump expressed admiration for populist leaders Rodrigo Duterte, congratulating him for his drug war that has killed more than 20,000 people, and Narendra Modi, whom he avoided criticising in the wake of violence and discriminatory legal changes to citizenship. While he didn’t invent the term, Trump was the first major politician to promote the use of the words “fake news” to attack reporting that he didn’t like. The term is now in widespread usage by populist leaders around the world.

That Trump is no longer in power may also embolden anti-populist world leaders to step up their criticisms of populists. Many major international leaders, including former European Council President Donald Tusk and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have been clear about their distaste for the populist style of leadership. While Trump tacitly and even explicitly supported some of populist leaders’ most controversial actions, Biden will be likely to support these other leaders if they decide to take a more aggressive line with populists.

The Implications of Trump’s Efforts to Overturn the Election

The impact of the fallout from Trump’s election loss is a bit less clear. Much of this depends on whether the backlash to the consequences of Trump’s incitements spreads to other populists and if it does, how strong it is and how long it endures. While the backlash against Trump’s 6 January speech and the subsequent violence has been much broader than that against his previous controversial actions – including statements from the usually conservative National Association of Manufacturers calling for his removal from office and widespread corporate suspension of donations to members of Congress who
voted against election certification – there’s no guarantee that it will spread to other populist leaders, especially if they keep their distance from Trump’s actions.

Having seen the consequences of Trump’s actions, the populist style may be tarnished among some voters worldwide, at least in the near-term. While it is unlikely to cause populist leaders to lose many of their core supporters, these leaders may lose those who have supported them as the lesser evils. And as we saw with the US presidential election, this can be enough for populists to lose elections. Trump lost the election because he lost too many educated suburban voters – voters who used to form the backbone of the Republican Party’s support.

It is possible that the fervour of Trump’s supporters will encourage populist leaders to attempt the same type of incitement strategy if they want to contest an election in the future. He has motivated tens of thousands of supporters to travel to the national capital and their state capitals to protest election results for which there was no real evidence of malfeasance. But Trump’s attempt to hold onto power was unlikely to succeed in light of the lack of strong evidence for electoral manipulation because US checks and balances are strong. Without at least some formal support from courts and Congress, Trump would not have been able to get the military and security services take his side.

Things may be different in other countries where the military’s allegiance to the country’s institutions is not as strong as in the US. There have been numerous episodes of autogolpe, or “self-coup”, around the world, in which a leader who came to power through legal means dissolves the national legislature and unlawfully assumes extraordinary powers. These have been attempted or successfully carried out under several populist leaders, including Peru’s Alberto Fujimori in 1992 and Sri Lanka’s Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015. Brazil, which has a history of military coups, is especially worth keeping an eye on here – President Bolsonaro has long-standing ties to the military.

**Trump’s Loss and Populist Leaders’ Future Electoral Prospects**

Of the populist leaders in our database, four are up for re-election in 2021: Prime Minister Boyko Borisov of Bulgaria, Prime Minister Andrej Babis of the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Except for Netanyahu, they have among the least connection of all populist leaders with Trump. Those with closer connections to Trump have time to build distance between him and themselves.

Furthermore, most populist leaders were elected and most of these parties built their current support base before Trump came to power. While prominent cultural populist Bolsonaro came to power after 2016, Erdogan, Orban and Modi pre-date Trump. Similarly, the growth spurt of European populist parties – including the establishment of the AFD in Germany – and Brexit came in the wake of the European sovereign debt and refugee crises. Even if the fallout from Trump’s loss causes them to lose some support, many populist leaders have made or proposed institutional changes that favour their re-
election. Like Lukashenko, they may be much more effective at employing the machinery of government to prevent them from losing the election on paper in the first place.

And just because they were elected and have governed thus far as populists does not mean that populist leaders will continue to use populist style. If they think that, as it did with Trump, this style could cause them to lose the support of crucial voters, they will restrain themselves. For example, as we explore below, most populist leaders have taken Covid-19 seriously and kept case and death rates in their countries relatively low. And apart from the four aforementioned exceptions, no populist leader faces re-election until at least 2022, giving them time to change their public perception. Populist leaders who do not face re-election in 2021 will likely downplay culture-war issues and emphasise their less controversial accomplishments if they feel that this will shield them from the Trump backlash.
The Fallout From Covid-19 and Populism

One of the issues that many populist leaders might highlight is their performance on Covid-19. Before Trump lost the US presidential election, several commentators had argued that Covid-19 would expose the limits of populism because the pandemic reminded everyone of the importance of expertise and the hollowness of rhetoric in politics. But in our *Pandemic Populism* report, we found that the majority of populist leaders (12 of the 17 in power at the beginning of 2020) took Covid-19 seriously, taking strong action to halt the spread of the virus. While some of their lockdown policies and enforcement actions were illiberal, experts praised elements of these.

A second reason for scepticism is that while populist parties in western Europe and some populist leaders elsewhere experienced a polling decline during the first few months of Covid-19, they had recovered these losses by the end of October 2020. We found that while lead governing parties in western Europe benefitted from a “rally around the flag” effect at the expense of cultural populists through June, both types of parties were close to their pre-Covid-19 levels of polling by the end of October. Some cultural populist parties, like the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Brothers of Italy (Fdi), were polling better by autumn than they were before Covid-19. While Bolsonaro lost support for the first few months of Covid-19, he had also regained it by the autumn. Populist leaders like Modi and Duterte who took Covid-19 seriously have remained popular throughout the pandemic – even as the number of cases and deaths in their countries have grown.
Looking Forward to 2021

The electoral landscape for populists in 2021 looks fairly quiet. Two of the European populist leaders up for re-election – Babis of the Czech Republic and Borisov of Bulgaria – have fared well in recent polling. The outlook in western Europe appears quiet as well. There are scheduled elections in Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. Both the cultural populist AfD in Germany and the Progress Party in Norway have been polling below their 2017 election vote share. While Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom in the Netherlands has polled well in the wake of Covid-19, other parties have avoided forming a coalition with it. Support for the other cultural populist party in the Netherlands, the Forum for Democracy, has collapsed because of internal scandals. It is also always possible that there’s a snap election in Italy – there have been 61 governments since 1945 – in which case cultural populist parties Lega and the Brothers of Italy could form a coalition.

There will also be few elections elsewhere, with populist leaders facing election only in Israel and Nicaragua. While Israeli cultural populist prime minister Netanyahu’s Likud Party has been the largest party in parliament for several years, the fractured nature of the Israeli electoral system has made it difficult to hold a coalition together, and Israel is now facing its fourth election in the last two years. While Netanyahu is receiving credit for Israel becoming a global leader in early vaccination rates, he has been criticised for bias in his lockdown policies. He has been losing close supporters and his opponents, although they come from the same ideological pool and have similar positions on key issues, have been challenging him on his populist style.

President Ortega of Nicaragua, who was one of the populist leaders who downplayed Covid-19, appears to be less likely to lose his 2021 election. The Nicaraguan congress passed a law allowing Ortega unilaterally to declare citizens “terrorists” or “coup-mongers” and banning them from running against him. While several other Latin American countries still have populist leaders, three of those with the most extensive histories of populist leaders – Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador – have recently elected more mainstream leaders from populist parties. There do not appear to be any other potential populist leaders on the horizon in Latin America.

As for most leaders, the major issue for populist leaders in 2021 will be the economic fallout from Covid-19. Western European countries have been supporting businesses and workers with extensive job-retention programmes, but it is likely that many of these businesses and jobs will no longer be viable when these programmes are wound down. And the pain will not be evenly felt. In these countries, the economic fallout from Covid-19 will continue to affect mostly small-business owners and service-sector workers – groups which are disproportionately likely to support cultural populists. This will create opportunities for cultural populists to increase their support among these groups with favourable
positions on economic issues. We will address this in a forthcoming piece on how cultural populists in western Europe responded to Covid-19.
Conclusion

Global populism reached a high point around the middle of the last decade and the number of leaders in power is down slightly from then. The composition of populist leaders by sub-category has changed, with cultural populists now comprising more than half of the total number of populist leaders. Many of the current populist leaders in power have been there for several years.

What does this mean for the threat that populism poses to liberal democracy? As we and others have discussed, much of this depends on whether domestic institutional constraints make it difficult for leaders to rig elections or hold onto power through contested ones. Donald Trump couldn’t subvert American institutions, and this prevented him from holding onto power. But other leaders have already shaped judicial and electoral institutions to favour them and they may be much more successful than Trump was.

Given the fallout from the US presidential election and the lack of elections in which populist parties are likely to play a prominent role, it is unlikely that we will see the number of populist leaders grow in 2021. What happens after that remains to be seen and depends in large part on the political fallout from Trump’s election loss and the economic fallout from Covid-19.
Footnotes

1. ^ The cultural populist Lega was part of a governing coalition in Italy and cultural populist parties have supported governments in Northern Europe.

2. ^ Through 2020, 71 of the 119 years that a socio-economic populist leader was in power were in South America.

3. ^ The 13 federal circuit courts of appeals are the highest level of federal courts below the Supreme Court.

4. ^ While the election results of six states – Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin – received an objection from at least one member of Congress, only the results in Arizona and Pennsylvania received an objection from a senator and came up for a vote in both houses. The Arizona objection was rejected by a vote of 93-6 in the Senate and by a vote of 303-121 in the House of Representatives. The Pennsylvania objection was rejected by a vote of 92-7 in the Senate and by a vote of 282-138 in the House of Representatives.