

WORDS AND MEANINGS

What Is Populism?

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

The term “populism” has been used very loosely in recent times. We need to define it better.

Recent years have seen the rise of new forms of populist nationalism, which today constitute the chief threat to the liberal international order that has been the foundation for global peace and prosperity since 1945. Liberal democracy had been continuously threatened by authoritarian regimes over the past century, with the exception of the period from 1991-2008 when American power was largely hegemonic. Today, a different kind of threat has emerged, with established democracies themselves succumbing to illiberal political forces driven by popular passions. The term “populism” has been used very loosely, however, to describe a wide range of phenomena that don’t necessarily go together. We need, therefore, to put some boundaries around the term.

There is no firm consensus among political scientists as to the definition of populism, but there are at least three characteristics that in my view have been typically associated with it. The first is a regime that pursues policies that are popular in the short run but unsustainable in the long run, usually in the realm of social policies. Examples would be price subsidies, generous pension benefits, or free medical clinics.

A second has to do with the definition of the “people” that are the basis for legitimacy: many populist regimes do not include the whole population, but rather a certain ethnic or racial group that are said to be the “true” people. Thus Viktor Orbán in Hungary has defined Hungarian national identity as based on Hungarian ethnicity, something that would exclude non-Hungarians living in Hungary, and include the many Hungarians living in surrounding countries like Slovakia or Romania. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India has similarly been trying to shift the definition of Indian national identity from the inclusive liberal one established by Gandhi and Nehru to one based on Hinduism. The Polish Law and Justice Party has emphasized traditional Polish values and Catholicism, and has stimulated the rise of more overtly racist groups, like the one calling for a “white Europe” in November 2017.

A third definition of populism has to do with the style of leadership. Populist leaders tend to develop a cult of personality around themselves, claiming the mantle of charismatic authority that exists independently of institutions like political parties. They try to develop a direct and unmediated relationship with the “people” they claim

to represent, channeling the latter's hopes and fears into immediate action. It is typically coupled with a denunciation of the entire existing elite, the latter of which is of course invested in existing institutions.

This personalistic approach to leadership is what makes populists such a threat to democratic institutions. Modern liberal democracies are built around power-sharing institutions like courts, federalism, legislatures, and a free media that serve as checks on executive power. All of these institutions are potential roadblocks to the populist leader's ability to achieve his or her goals, and therefore become direct targets of attack. The personalistic nature of populism thus makes it a threat to liberal institutions.

These three definitions then allow us to distinguish between the different movements that have been given the label "populist" in the past. Latin American populists like Hugo Chavez or Nestor and Cristina Kirchner emphasized popular but unsustainable social programs, and tried to create personality cults around themselves. The Argentine pair portrayed themselves as re-embodiments of the classic populist power couple, Juan and Eva Peron. They did not, on the other hand, entertain a restrictive definition of national identity. The same could be said of Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck, the former Prime Minister, in Thailand: they promoted redistribution programs for poorer rural Thais but did not have the same restrictive view of Thai identity as their yellow shirt opponents.

Leaders of the Brexit movement, by contrast, did not stress an expansive economic program, nor did they have a single charismatic leader. But they did appeal to anti-immigrant cultural fears and traditional British identity, as well as to unhappiness about economic dislocation. Viktor Orban fits all three definitions: he has tried to protect Hungarian savers from "predatory" European banks; he has a restrictive definition of "the people"; and he would certainly like to be considered a charismatic leader. It is not clear whether Vladimir Putin fits any but the last of the three definitions: he has been cautious on expansive social programs; while he has stressed Russian identity and traditions, that tradition is not necessarily restrictive in ethnic terms. Putin has certainly built a cult of personality around himself, though it is hard to argue that he is an outsider seeking to overthrow the entire elite, having come up through the ranks of the KGB and then the Russian FSB. The same can be said about India's Narendra Modi and even China's Xi Jinping: they have both become popular by attacking the existing elite, though they themselves are very much part of that elite.

It should be noted that Donald Trump fits all three definitions. During his campaign, he stressed economic populism, withdrawing from the Trans Pacific Partnership and threatening to tear up the North American Free Trade Agreement once in office. He promised to protect entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security—though since becoming President, he has governed more like a traditional conservative Republican, seeking for example to cut social benefits by repealing Obama's Affordable Care Act. And while Trump has never explicitly endorsed white nationalism, he has been happy to accept support from those who do, and went out of his way to not single out neo-Nazis and overt racists during their rally in Charlottesville. He has had a very

problematic relationship with African-Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities; black sports stars and performers have been frequent targets of his Twitter posts. And he has acted like a classic charismatic at rallies with his core supporters: when accepting the Republican nomination in 2016, he said the “I alone understand your problems,” and that “I alone know how to fix them.”

Thus, within the realm of movements labeled populist, we can distinguish between at least two broad categories. In Latin America and in Southern Europe, populists have tended to be on the Left, having a constituency among the poor and advocating redistributionist social programs that seek to remedy economic inequality. They do not however emphasize ethnic identity or take a strong stance against immigration. This group would include Chavez’s Bolivarian movement and Kircherismo in Argentina, as well as Spain’s Podemos and Greece’s Syriza.

In northern Europe, however, populists are based less on the poor than on a declining middle or working class, and takes a more right-wing ethnic and anti-immigrant turn. They want to protect existing welfare states but do not emphasize rapid expansion of social services or subsidies. Groups in this category would include Brexiteers, France’s National Front, Holland’s Party of Freedom, the Danish Peoples’ Party, and in the United States, many of Donald Trump’s hardcore working class supporters.

Then there are groups or movements that don’t really fit either category. Italy’s Five Star movement like other populist movements is resolutely anti-establishment and denounces the Italian elite as a whole. But it differs from both is Northern and Southern European counterparts by being both urban and middle- or even upper middle-class, rather than being based in a declining working class.

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THE POPULIST SURGE

Why Populist Nationalism Now?

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

The economic, political, and cultural sources of the rise of populist nationalism around the globe.

There are three reasons why we are seeing the rise of populist nationalism in the second half of the 2010s: economic, political, and cultural.

The economic sources of populism have been widely noted and discussed. The same trade theory that tells you that all countries participating in a free trade regime will be better off in the aggregate also tells you that not every individual in every country will be better off: Low-skill workers in rich countries are likely to lose out to similarly-skilled but lower-paid workers in poor ones. That is in fact what has been happening in many industrialized countries with the rise of China, Mexico, and the like. According to a recent IMF study, some 50 percent of Americans are no better off in terms of real income than they were in 2000; many more of those in the middle of the income distribution have lost ground than have moved up the economic ladder. In the United States, this relative economic decline of the middle or working class has been associated with a number of social ills, like increasing rates of family breakdown and an opioid epidemic that in 2015 claimed about 60,000 lives. At the same time, globalization's gains have been heavily concentrated among the well-educated cognitive elite, who tend to set broader cultural trends.

The second source of populism is political. The traditional complaint against many liberal democracies, with their numerous checks and balances, is that they tend to produce weak government. When such political systems combine with polarized or otherwise severely divided electorates, the result is often political paralysis which makes ordinary governing very difficult. India under the previous Congress Party government was a striking example of this, where infrastructure projects and needed economic reforms seemed beyond the government's ability to deliver. Something similar occurred in Japan and Italy, which often faced gridlock in the face of long-term economic stagnation. One of the most prominent cases is the United States, whose extensive set of constitutionally mandated checks and balances produce something that I elsewhere have labeled "vetocracy": that is, the ability of small groups to veto action on the part of majorities. This is what has produced a yearly crisis in Congress over passing a budget, something that has not been accomplished under so-called "regular order" for at least a generation, and has blocked sensible reforms of health care, immigration, and financial regulation.

This perceived weakness in the ability of democratic governments to make decisions and get things done is one of the factors that set the stage for the rise of would-be strong men who can break through the miasma of normal politics and achieve results. This was one of the reasons that India elected Narendra Modi, and why Shinzo Abe has become one of Japan's longest-serving Prime Ministers. Putin's rise as a strong man came against the background of the chaotic Yeltsin years. And finally, one of Donald Trump's selling points was that, as a successful businessman, he would be able to make the U.S. government functional again.

Moreover, there have been major policy failures by elites in both America and Europe. The United States embarked on two unsuccessful wars in the Middle East in the 2000s, and then experienced the biggest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Both of these were rooted in elite decisions that had terrible consequences for ordinary citizens. The European Union created a monetary union around the euro without a corresponding way to unify fiscal policy, leading to the Greek debt crisis. And it created the Schengen Zone and a host of other rules liberalizing the movement of people within Europe without establishing a credible mechanism for controlling the European Union's outer borders. While laudable from an economic and moral standpoint, internal freedom of movement became problematic in the absence of such controls. This turned into a legitimacy crisis in the wake of the mass migration triggered by the Syrian civil war in 2014.

The final driver of populist nationalism is cultural and has to do with identity. Many years ago, Samuel Huntington pointed out that the most dangerous socio-economic class was not the poor and marginalized, who often lacked the time and resources to mobilize, but rather middle classes who felt they had lost ground economically and were not being adequately recognized by the political system. Such people can make economic demands, but they tend to interpret their loss of status culturally as well: they used to constitute the group that defined national identity, but were now being displaced by newcomers who were being given unfair advantages over them. They are driven by a politics of resentment against elites who benefit from the system, and they tend to scapegoat immigrants and foreigners as agents of this loss of status. In this respect, economic motivation overlaps substantially with cultural concerns, and in many ways cannot be distinguished from them. It also distinguishes northern European or American populism from that of southern Europe or Latin America. The social basis of Brexit, Trump, and Le Pen voters lies in declining middle or working classes, whereas Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Chavez in Venezuela, or the Kirchners in Argentina are more traditional left-wing parties representing the poor.

This has what has made immigration such a powerful issue in driving populist nationalism in northern and eastern Europe and the United States. Rates of immigration and refugees have in fact become very high in Europe and the United States, and concerns over rapid cultural change have motivated many voters to support populist parties and leaders even if they have felt under direct economic threat. This is reflected in the oft-stated goal of populist parties to "take back our country." In many ways, questions of identity—language, ethnicity, religion, and historical tradition—have come to displace economic class as the defining characteristic of contemporary

politics. This may explain the decline of traditional center-left and center-right parties in Europe, which have lost ground steadily to new parties and movements built around identity issues.

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THE POPULIST SURGE

The Future of Populism at Home and Abroad

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

Trumpist populism could easily linger longer than most people readily assume.

This is part three of a three-part essay; part one can be found [here](#), and part two [here](#); a podcast version is available [here](#).

New populist nationalist parties have appeared across the developed world, and threaten to undermine the liberal international order. What is the likelihood that they will succeed?

For better or worse, a lot depends on what will happen in the United States. American power was critical in establishing both the economic and political pillars of the liberal order, and if the United States retreats from that leadership role, the pendulum will swing quickly in favor of the nationalists. So we need to understand how populism is likely to unfold in the world's leading liberal democracy.

The American Constitution's system of checks and balances was designed to deal with the problem of "Caesarism," that is, a populist demagogue who would accumulate power and misuse it. It is for this reason that vetocracy exists, and so far into the Trump Administration, it appears to be working. Trump's attacks on various independent institutions—the intelligence community, the mainstream media, the courts, and his own Republican party—have only had modest success. In particular, he has not been able to get a significant part of his legislative agenda, like Obamacare repeal or the border wall, passed. So at the moment he looks like a weak and ineffective president.

However, things could change. The factor most in his favor is the economy: wages have been growing after stagnating for many years, and growth has reached 3 percent for two quarters now. It may move even higher if the Republicans succeed in passing a stimulative tax cut as they seem poised to do. All of this is bad policy in the long run: the United States is not overtaxed; the stimulus is coming at the exactly wrong point in the business cycle (after eight years of expansion); it is likely to tremendously widen fiscal deficits; and it will lay the ground for an eventual painful crash. Nonetheless, these consequences are not likely to play themselves out for several years, long enough

to get the Republicans through the 2018 midterm elections and even the 2020 presidential contest. What matters to voters the most is the state of the economy, and that looks to be good despite the President's undignified tweeting.

Foreign policy is another area where Trump's critics could be surprised. It is entirely possible that he will take action on some of his threats—indeed, it is hard to see how he can avoid action with regard to North Korea's nuclear ballistic missile program. Any U.S. move would be highly risky to its South Korean and Japanese allies, but it is also possible that the U.S. will call North Korea's bluff and force a significant climbdown. If this happens, Trump will have lanced a boil in a manner that has eluded the last three presidents.

Finally, it is not possible to beat something with nothing. The Democrats, under a constant barrage of outrageous behavior from the Administration, have been moving steadily to the left. Opposition to Trump allows them to focus on the enemy and not to define long-term policies that will appeal to voters. As in Britain, the party itself is increasingly dominated by activists who are to the left of the general voter base. Finally, the Democrats have lost so much ground in statehouses and state legislatures that they do not have a strong cadre of appealing, experienced candidates available to replace the Clinton generation. Since American elections are not won in the popular vote but in the Electoral College (as [Bruce Cain](#) has recently pointed out in these pages), it does not matter how many outraged people vote in states like California, New York, or Illinois; unless the party can attract centrist voters in midwestern industrial states it will not win the Presidency.

All of this suggests that Trump could not just serve out the remainder of his term, but be re-elected in 2020 and last until 2024. Were the Republicans to experience a setback in the midterm elections in 2018 and then lose the presidency in 2020, Trump might go down in history as a fluke and aberration, and the party could return to the control of its elites. If this doesn't happen, however, the country's polarization will deepen even beyond the point it has reached at present. More importantly, the institutional checks may well experience much more significant damage, since their independence is, after all, simply a matter of politics in the end.

Beyond this, there is the structural factor of technological change. Job losses among low skill workers is fundamentally not driven by trade or immigration, but by technology. While the country can try to raise skill levels through better education, the U.S. has shown little ability or proclivity to do this. The Trump agenda is to seek to employ 20th century workers in their old jobs with no recognition of how the technological environment has changed. But it is not as if the Democrats or the progressive Left has much of an agenda in this regard either, beyond extending existing job training and social programs. How the U.S. will cope with this is not clear. But then, technological change is the ultimate political challenge that all advanced societies, and not just the democratic ones, will have to face.

Outside the United States, the populist surge has yet to play itself out. Eastern Europe never experienced the kind of cultural liberalization experienced by Germany and other Western European countries after World War II, and are now eagerly embracing populist politicians. Hungary and Poland have recently been joined by Serbia and the Czech Republic, which have elected leaders with many Trump-like characteristics. Germany's consensus politics, which made the country a rock of EU stability over the past decade, appears to be fraying after its recent election, and the continuing threat in France should not be underestimated—Le Pen and the far-left candidate Melenchon between them received half the French vote in the last election. Outside Europe, Brazil's continuing crisis of elite legitimacy has given a boost to Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who talks tough and promises to clean up the country's politics. All of this suggests that the world will be in for interesting times for some time to come.

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WHY POPULISM?

The Populist Surge

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

Trumpist populism could easily linger longer than most people readily assume.

Recent years have seen the rise of new forms of populist nationalism, which today constitute the chief threat to the liberal international order that has been the foundation for global peace and prosperity since 1945. Liberal democracy had been continuously threatened by authoritarian regimes over the past century, with the exception of the period from 1991–2008 when American power was largely hegemonic. Today, a different kind of threat has emerged, with established democracies themselves succumbing to illiberal political forces driven by popular passions. The term “populism” has been used very loosely, however, to describe a wide range of phenomena that don’t necessarily go together. We need, therefore, to put some boundaries around the term.

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to represent, channeling the latter's hopes and fears into immediate action. It is typically coupled with a denunciation of the entire existing elite, which is of course invested in existing institutions.

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Leaders of the Brexit movement, by contrast, did not stress an expansive economic program, nor did they have a single charismatic leader. But they did appeal to anti-immigrant cultural fears and traditional British identity, as well as to unhappiness about economic dislocation. Viktor Orbán fits all three definitions: he has tried to protect Hungarian savers from "predatory" European banks; he has a restrictive definition of "the people"; and he would certainly like to be considered a charismatic leader. It is not clear whether Vladimir Putin fits any but the last of the three definitions: he has been cautious on expansive social programs; while he has stressed Russian identity and traditions, that tradition is not necessarily restrictive in ethnic terms. Putin has certainly built a cult of personality around himself, though it is hard to argue that he is an outsider seeking to overthrow the entire elite, having come up through the ranks of the KGB and then the Russian FSB. The same can be said about India's Narendra Modi and even China's Xi Jinping: they have both become popular by attacking the existing elite, though they themselves are very much part of that elite.

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problematic relationship with African-Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities; black sports stars and performers have been frequent targets of his Twitter posts. And he has acted like a classic charismatic at rallies with his core supporters: When accepting the Republican nomination in 2016, he said that “I alone understand your problems,” and that “I alone know how to fix them.”

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Then there are groups or movements that don’t really fit either category. Italy’s Five Star movement like other populist movements is resolutely anti-establishment and denounces the Italian elite as a whole. But it differs from both its Northern and Southern European counterparts by being both urban and middle- or even upper middle-class, rather than being based in a declining working class.

Why Populist Nationalism Now?

There are three reasons why we are seeing the rise of populist nationalism now, in the second half of the 2010s. Those reasons are economic, political, and cultural.

The economic sources of populism have been widely noted and discussed. The same trade theory that tells you that all countries participating in a free trade regime will be better off in the aggregate also tells you that not every individual in every country will be better off: Low-skill workers in rich countries are likely to lose out to similarly-skilled but lower-paid workers in poor ones. That is in fact what has been happening in many industrialized countries with the rise of China, Mexico, and the like. According to a recent IMF study, some 50 percent of Americans are no better off in terms of real income than they were in 2000; many more of those in the middle of the income distribution have lost ground than have moved up the economic ladder. In the United States, this relative economic decline of the middle or working class has been associated with a number of social ills, like increasing rates of family breakdown and an opioid epidemic that in 2015 claimed about 60,000 lives. At the same time, globalization’s gains have been heavily concentrated among the well-educated cognitive elite, who tend to set broader cultural trends.

The second source of populism is political. The traditional complaint against many liberal democracies, with their numerous checks and balances, is that they tend to produce weak government. When such political systems combine with polarized or otherwise severely divided electorates, the result is often political paralysis that makes ordinary governing difficult. India under the previous Congress Party government was a striking example of this, where infrastructure projects and needed economic reforms seemed beyond the government's ability to deliver. Something similar occurred in Japan and Italy, which often faced gridlock in the face of long-term economic stagnation. One of the most prominent cases is the United States, whose extensive set of constitutionally mandated checks and balances produce something that I elsewhere have labeled "vetocracy": that is, the ability of small groups to veto action on the part of majorities. This is what has produced a yearly crisis in Congress over passing a budget, something that has not been accomplished under so-called regular order for at least a generation, and has blocked sensible reforms of health care, immigration, and financial regulation.

This perceived weakness in the ability of democratic governments to make decisions and get things done is one of the factors that set the stage for the rise of would-be strong men who can break through the miasma of normal politics and achieve results. This was one of the reasons that India elected Narendra Modi, and why Shinzo Abe has become one of Japan's longest-serving Prime Ministers. Putin's rise as a strong man came against the background of the chaotic Yeltsin years. And finally, one of Donald Trump's selling points was that, as a successful businessman, he would be able to make the U.S. government functional again.

Moreover, there have been major policy failures by elites in both America and Europe. The United States embarked on two unsuccessful wars in the Middle East in the 2000s, and then experienced the biggest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Both of these were rooted in elite decisions that had terrible consequences for ordinary citizens. The European Union created a monetary union around the euro without a corresponding way to unify fiscal policy, leading to the Greek debt crisis. And it created the Schengen Zone and a host of other rules liberalizing the movement of people within Europe without establishing a credible mechanism for controlling the European Union's outer borders. While laudable from an economic and moral standpoint, internal freedom of movement became problematic in the absence of such controls. This turned into a legitimacy crisis in the wake of the mass migration triggered by the Syrian civil war in 2014.

The final driver of populist nationalism is cultural and has to do with identity. Many years ago, Samuel Huntington pointed out that the most dangerous socio-economic class was not the poor and marginalized, who often lacked the time and resources to mobilize, but rather middle classes whose families felt they had lost ground economically and were not being adequately recognized by the political system. Such people can make economic demands, but they tend to interpret their loss of status culturally, as well. They used to constitute the group that defined national identity, but were now being displaced by newcomers who were being given unfair advantages over them. They are driven by a politics of resentment against elites who benefit from the system,

and they tend to scapegoat immigrants and foreigners as agents of this loss of status. In this respect, economic motivation overlaps substantially with cultural concerns, and in many ways cannot be distinguished from them. It also distinguishes North European or American populism from that of Southern Europe or Latin America. The social basis of Brexit, Trump, and Le Pen voters lies in declining middle or working classes, whereas Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Chavez in Venezuela, or the Kirchners in Argentina are more traditional left-wing parties representing the poor.

This has what has made immigration such a powerful issue in driving populist nationalism in Northern and Eastern Europe and the United States. Rates of immigration and refugees have become very high in Europe and the United States, and concerns over rapid cultural change have motivated many voters to support populist parties and leaders even if they have not felt under direct economic threat. This is reflected in the oft-stated goal of populist parties to “take back our country.” In many ways, questions of identity—language, ethnicity, religion, and historical tradition—have come to displace economic class as the defining characteristic of contemporary politics. This may explain the decline of traditional center-left and center-right parties in Europe, which have lost ground steadily to new parties and movements built around identity issues.

The Future of Populism at Home and Abroad

What is the likelihood that the populist nationalist parties threatening to undermine the liberal order will succeed?

For better or worse, a lot depends on what will happen in the United States. American power was critical in establishing both the economic and political pillars of the liberal order, and if the United States retreats from that leadership role, the pendulum will swing quickly in favor of the nationalists. So we need to understand how populism is likely to unfold in the world's leading liberal democracy.

The American Constitution's system of checks and balances was designed to deal with the problem of “Caesarism,” that is, a populist demagogue who would accumulate power and misuse it. It is for this reason that vetocracy exists, and so far into the Trump Administration, it appears to be working. Trump's attacks on various independent institutions—the intelligence community, the mainstream media, the courts, and his own Republican Party—have only had modest success. In particular, he has not been able to get a significant part of his legislative agenda, like Obamacare repeal or the border wall, passed. So at the moment he looks like a weak and ineffective President.

However, things could change. The factor most in his favor is the economy: Wages have been growing after stagnating for many years, and growth has reached 3 percent for two quarters now. It may move even higher if the Republicans' tax cut turns to be stimulative. All of this is bad policy in the long run: The United States is not overtaxed; the stimulus is coming at the exactly wrong point in the business cycle (after eight years of expansion); it is likely to greatly widen fiscal deficits; and it will lay the ground for an eventual painful crash. Nonetheless, these consequences are not likely

to play themselves out for several years, long enough to get the Republicans through the 2018 midterm elections and even the 2020 presidential contest. What matters to voters most is the state of the economy, and that looks to be good despite the President's undignified tweeting.

Foreign policy is another area where Trump's critics could be surprised. It is entirely possible that he will take action on some of his threats—indeed, it is hard to see how he can avoid action with regard to North Korea's nuclear ballistic missile program. Any U.S. move would be highly risky to its South Korean and Japanese allies, but it is also possible that the U.S. administration will call North Korea's bluff and force a significant climb-down. If this happens, Trump will have lanced a boil in a manner that has eluded the past three Presidents.

Finally, it is not possible to beat something with nothing. The Democrats, under a constant barrage of outrageous behavior from the Administration, have been moving steadily leftward. Opposition to Trump allows them to focus on the enemy and not to define long-term policies that will appeal to voters. As with Britain's Labour Party, they are increasingly dominated by activists who are to the left of the general voter base. Finally, the Democrats have lost so much ground in statehouses and state legislatures that they lack a strong cadre of appealing, experienced candidates available to replace the Clinton generation. Since American elections are not won in the popular vote but in the Electoral College, it does not matter how many outraged people vote in states like California, New York, or Illinois; unless the party can attract centrist voters in midwestern industrial states it will not win the presidency.

All of this suggests that Trump could not just serve out the remainder of his term, but be re-elected in 2020 and last until 2024. Were the Republicans to experience a setback in the midterm elections in 2018 and then lose the presidency in 2020, Trump might go down in history as a fluke and aberration, and the party could return to the control of its elites. If this doesn't happen, however, the country's polarization will deepen even beyond the point it has reached at present. More importantly, the institutional checks may well experience much more significant damage, since their independence is, after all, simply a matter of politics in the end.

Beyond this, there is the structural factor of technological change. Job losses among low-skill workers is fundamentally no longer driven by trade or immigration, but by technology. While the nation can try to raise skill levels through better education, the U.S. government at all relevant levels has shown little ability or proclivity to do this. The Trump agenda is to seek to employ 20th-century workers in their old jobs with no recognition of how the technological environment has changed. But it is not as if the Democrats or the progressive Left has much of an agenda in this regard either, beyond extending existing job training and social programs. How American society as a whole will cope with this is not clear. But then, technological change is the ultimate political challenge that all advanced societies, not just the democratic ones, must face.

Outside the United States, the populist surge has yet to play itself out. Eastern Europe never experienced the kind of cultural liberalization experienced by Germany and other West European countries after World War II, and are now eagerly embracing populist politicians. Hungary and Poland have recently been joined by Serbia and the Czech Republic, which have elected leaders with many Trump-like characteristics. Germany's consensus politics, which made it a rock of EU stability over the past decade, appears to be fraying after its recent election, and the continuing threat in France should not be underestimated—Le Pen and the far-left candidate Melenchon between them received nearly half the French vote in the past election. Outside Europe, Brazil's continuing crisis of elite legitimacy has given a boost to Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who talks tough and promises to clean up the nation's politics. All of this suggests that the world will be in for interesting times for some time to come.

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***Francis Fukuyama** is chairman of the editorial board of *The American Interest* and senior fellow at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University.*