

## On Populism. A Comment on Philippe Schmitter's Essay

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### Abstract

A comment on Philippe Schmitter's essay "The Vices and Virtues of 'Populisms'" (*Sociologica*, 13(1), 2019).

**Keywords:** Democratic Virtues; Populism; Party Organizations; Real-Existing Democracy; Social Movements.

Professor Schmitter does not believe that sophisticated political theory can increase the chances that "good populism," which is simultaneously anti-oligarchic and pro-democratic, will be politically successful. But he does think that dumbed-down political theory can be deluded by the current wave of white nationalist, anti-immigrant, nativist authoritarianisms into assuming that "good populism" is essentially an oxymoron. He obviously aims to refute this historically conditioned analytical error. But he also knows that *Occupy Wall Street*-style left-wing populisms have had a tendency to fizzle out inconsequentially, that immigration panic has made it dismayingly easy for nativist parties to poach formerly leftist voters, and that social democratic principles are more warmly embraced by college educated voters than by workers struggling with status loss in the new knowledge economy. Hence it is unclear, at least to this reader, if Schmitter really hopes to counter the current tendency to see *Brexit*, Orbán, Salvini and of course Trump as so many symptoms of the coming "death" of liberal democracy at the hands of populist demagogues. Does the mere analytical possibility of "good populism," once Schmitter has convinced us that it exists, make the political triumph of "bad populism" any less likely? Presumably not. So what conclusions should we draw from this dazzling little tour de force?

I will limit myself to four telegraphic remarks.

First, Schmitter's entire argument makes clear that historians of political rhetoric, focused on how and why the word "populism" is used in various political settings, are very unlikely to think that the term has much value as a social scientific category for analyzing political reality.

Second, the statement that "populism," as generically defined, is good or bad "depending" on its good or bad effects is hard to evaluate without a more clarity about Schmitter's no doubt well-reasoned and debatable ideas about political vice and virtue that appear elsewhere in his writings.

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Third, the idea that generic populism “is the product of a failure of the existing system of political parties to provide credible representation for ‘neglected’ groups of citizens in what are otherwise ‘real-existing’ democracies” (Schmitter, 2019, p.76) needs elaboration since every historically known democracy has neglected some citizens but, perhaps because beaten-down fatalism is common among politically voiceless strata, not all have produced populist challenges to the ruling factions.

And fourth, according to President Donald Trump:

Globalization has made the financial elite who donate to politicians very wealthy. But it has left millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache. (Full Transcript: Donald Trump’s Jobs Plan Speech. *Politico*, 28 June 2016).

That authoritarian nativists speak this way provides a perhaps useful reminder that pro-oligarchic demagogues have no trouble mastering the rhetoric of anti-oligarchic populism.

## References

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