

Populism vs. Liberalism: Ideology and Political Practice

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This conflict between populism and liberalism has become one of the new characteristics of modern politics. Whereas liberalism focuses on individual rights, pluralism, and institutional limits to power, populism views politics as being a battle between a righteous people and a wicked elite. These ideologies of conflict do not only fuel political speech but have also determined the way governance is done with major effects on the concept of democracy.

Liberalism is based upon constitutionalism, the rule of law, and the rights of the minority. It presupposes that political authority must be checked and regulated by the independent institutions, i.e. the courts and free media, to avoid the tyranny of the majority. Liberal democracy focuses on compromise, representation, and procedural legitimacy and values stability and inclusiveness above speed in decision-making (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

The concept of populism, on the other hand, is sometimes referred to as a thin-centered ideology which could be applied to left- and right-wing movements. It is centered on the argument that politics must simply be an expression of the general will of the people and that is not mediated by technocratic elites or instituted institutions. Collective populist leaders often declare liberal organizations as a danger to democratic responsiveness and state that courts, bureaucracies and international bodies are the ones threatening popular sovereignty (Muller, 2016).

Such a clash between ideologies is especially notable in politics, when the populist movements come to power. Although populists usually ascend to power democratically, their ruling style may defy the liberal standards. Any attempt to undermine the independence of the judiciary, limit the freedom of the media or discredit opposition parties are usually in the name of restoring popular control. These practices lead to the issue of backsliding of

democracy where the majoritarianism rule is more likely to override the constitution (Muller, 2016).

Nevertheless, the adherers of the populism philosophy state that liberalism has tuned out the interests of citizens. The idea of being marginalized and inequality has been propagated due to economic globalization, technocratic conservatory, and the decision-making by non-elected authorities. In this sense, populism is seen as a remedial factor of reinforcing political participation and accountability back into what is seen to be an elitist system. This implies that the opposition between populism and liberalism is not only ideological but also indicates the presence of structural stresses in the contemporary democracies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

It is the difficulty, consequently, to strike the proper balance between democratic responsiveness and liberal protections. Democracies should be free to listen to the demands of the people and at the same time maintain the interests of the institutions that safeguard rights and ensure that power abuses do not occur. The extreme form of populism, which completely declines the liberal limits, may destroy democracy internally; the more liberalism ignores the popular complaint, the more polarization is stirred.

To sum up, populism and liberalism are two opposite conceptions of democracy that put emphasis on various democratic values. The key to the evaluation of the current order of the democratic rule and sign-posts to the homogeneity between popular sovereignty and constitutionalism, lies in comprehending their relations.

References

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Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.