

## Populism

# Democracy's enemy within

Cynicism is gnawing at Western democracies

DEMOCRACIES ARE generally thought to die at the barrel of a gun, in coups and revolutions. These days, however, they are more likely to be strangled slowly in the name of the people.

Take Hungary, where Fidesz, the ruling party, has used its parliamentary majority to capture regulators, dominate business, control the courts, buy the media and manipulate the rules for elections. As our briefing explains, the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, does not have to break the law, because he can get parliament to change it instead. He does not need secret police to take his enemies away in the night. They can be cut down to size without violence, by the tame press or the taxman. In form, Hungary is a thriving democracy; in spirit, it is a one-party state.

The forces at work in Hungary are eating away at other 21st-century polities, too. This is happening not just in young democracies like Poland, where the Law and Justice party has set out to mimic Fidesz, but even the longest-standing ones like Britain and the United States. These old-established polities are not about to become one-party states, but they are already showing signs of decay. Once the rot sets in, it is formidably hard to stop.

At the heart of the degradation of Hungarian democracy is cynicism. After the head of a socialist government popularly seen as corrupt admitted that he had lied to the electorate in 2006, voters learned to assume the worst of their politicians. Mr Orbán has enthusiastically exploited this tendency. Rather than appeal to his compatriots' better nature, he sows division, stokes resentment and exploits their prejudices, especially over immigration. This political theatre is designed to be a distraction from his real purpose, the artful manipulation of obscure rules and institutions to guarantee his hold on power.

Over the past decade, albeit to a lesser degree, the same story has unfolded elsewhere. The financial crisis persuaded voters that they were governed by aloof, incompetent, self-serving elites. Wall Street and the City of London were bailed out while ordinary people lost their jobs, their houses and their sons and daughters on the battlefield in Iraq and Afghanistan. Britain erupted in a scandal over MPs' expenses. America has choked on the lobbying that funnels corporate cash into politics.

In a survey last year, over half of voters from ten European countries and North America told the Pew Research Centre that they were dissatisfied with how democracy is working. Almost 70% of Americans and French people say that their politicians are corrupt.

Populists have tapped into this pool of resentment. They sneer at elites, even if they themselves are rich and powerful; they thrive on, and nurture, anger and division. In America President Donald Trump told four progressive congresswomen to "go back...to the broken and crime-infested places from which they came". In Israel Binyamin Netanyahu, a consummate insider, portrays official inquiries into his alleged corruption as part of an establishment conspiracy against his premiership. In Britain Boris Johnson, lacking support among MPs for a no-deal Brexit, has outraged his opponents by manipulating procedure to suspend Parliament for five crucial weeks.

What, you might ask, is the harm of a little cynicism? Politics has always been an ugly business. The citizens of vibrant democracies have long had a healthy disrespect for their rulers.

Yet too much cynicism undermines legitimacy. Mr Trump endorses his voters' contempt for Washington by treating opponents as fools or, if they dare stand on honour or principle, as lying hypocrites—an attitude increasingly mirrored on the left. Britain's Brexiteers and Remainers denigrate each other as immoral, driving politics to the extremes because compromising with the enemy is treachery. Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's Northern League, responds to complaints about immigration by cutting space in shelters, in the knowledge that migrants living on the streets will aggravate discontent. Mr Orbán has less than half the vote but all the power—and behaves that way. By ensuring that his opponents have no stake in democracy, he encourages them to express their anger by non-democratic means.

Cynical politicians denigrate institutions, then vandalise them. In America the system lets a minority of voters hold power. In the Senate that is by design, but in the House it is promoted by routine gerrymandering and voter-suppression. The more politicised the courts become, the more the appointment of judges is contested. In Britain Mr Johnson's parliamentary chicanery is doing the constitution permanent damage. He is preparing to frame the next election as a struggle between Parliament and the people.

Politics used to behave like a pendulum. When the right made mistakes the left won its turn, before power swung back rightward again. Now it looks more like a helter-skelter. Cynicism drags democracy down. Parties fracture and head for the extremes. Populists persuade voters that the system is serving them ill, and

undermine it further. Bad turns to worse.

Fortunately, there is a lot of ruin in a democracy. Neither London nor Washington is about to become Budapest. Power is more diffuse and institutions have a longer history—which will make them harder to capture than new ones in a country of 10m people. Moreover, democracies can renew themselves. American politics was coming apart in the era of the Weathermen and Watergate, but returned to health in the 1980s.

## Scraping Diogenes' barrel

The riposte to cynicism starts with politicians who forsake outrage for hope. Turkey's strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, suffered a landmark defeat in the race for the mayoralty in Istanbul to a tirelessly upbeat campaign by Ekrem İmamoğlu. Anti-populists from all sides should unite behind rule-enforcers like Zuzana Čaputová, the new president of Slovakia. In Romania, Moldova and the Czech Republic voters have risen up against leaders who had set off down Mr Orbán's path.

The bravery of young people who have been protesting on the streets of Hong Kong and Moscow is a powerful demonstration of what many in the West seem to have forgotten. Democracy is precious, and those who are lucky enough to have inherited one must strive to protect it. ■



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