



Roman Chytilek

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart: Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2019. 540 pp.
ISBN 978-1108444422

The eminent American social scientist Ronald Inglehart and the important American political scientist Pippa Norris, who specialises in conjunctural issues and broadly conceived comparative studies, have joined forces in *Cultural Backlash* to explain the current rise of “authoritarian populists” in many parts of the world. What do Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Rodrigo Duterte and Jair Bolsonaro have in common? (The last, who only scored his major victory this year, when the book manuscript was already in press, is given less attention.) At the core of their political message is populism, defined by the authors in conformity with the emerging theoretical consensus as a style of politics built on criticism of a rotten establishment and, contrasted with it, emphasis on the primacy, purity and sovereignty of the people, seeing both (the people and the elite) as homogeneous. Combined with authoritarianism – a political discourse that emphasises the necessity of defending oneself against various external threats, and hence stressing security, group cohesion and conformity, as well as the role of a strong leader as the representative of the interests of the masses – populism is particularly dangerous to the survival of democracy. While populism questions the fundamental institutions of democracy (for example, the principle of representation), authoritarianism fights democratic values, such as respect for the rights of minorities, working to achieve consensus, or at least a compromise, the separation of the private from the political, and respect for the rules of the political game.

Generically, the book falls somewhere between a large-scale comparative study (the data on voters’ values from the *European Social Survey* cover 32 countries) and an effort to provide a deep understanding of some unique milestones in authoritarian populism’s “backlash,” such as the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 American elections and Brexit. But the book’s main added value is not so much its definition of an actor that uses a new ideological mixture or the cautious considerations of whether democracy as we know it will survive; it is, rather, a theory, supported by data, about where the authoritarian populists have come from. According to Inglehart and Norris, they are a response to the “silent revolution,” which since the 1970s has implied that the emphasis in the political arena is weakening on material values and shifting towards post-materialist issues such

as environmentalism and minority rights. This has been accompanied by the rise of green parties, or greater acknowledgment by the traditional parties of social liberalism. This shift in the median position of political representatives on this type of political issue provoked a conservative response, represented today so strongly by authoritarian populism. This argument is not new – it was first proposed in 1992 by the Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi, who, analysing the first wave of right-wing populism, represented by the French National Front and Austrian Freedom Party, introduced his “silent counter-revolution” thesis. Inglehart and Norris, however, develop the theory further. They show, for instance, that the conservative response does not necessarily imply a decline of liberal values, and its strength and conspicuousness is substantially linked with the fact that the electoral discipline of the left-wing post-materialists is appreciably weaker than that of the authoritarians. The strength of authoritarian populism over the past decade has also been fuelled by conjunctural factors, such as the economic and migration crises. At its core, however, the rise of this discourse is a natural and perhaps inevitable consequence of the shift of the political actors’ thematic focus, away from the socio-economic axis and towards socio-cultural issues. Without the success of socially progressivist political actors, authoritarian populism would never have become as strong as it is. The book also documents how voters’ values spill over into their electoral behaviour, and consequently also into the representation won by authoritarian-populist parties. It likewise examines how the political discourse has changed in countries where the authoritarians have already risen to power, and assesses further developments largely through the lens of what the prognosis is for the dissemination of authoritarian values, and to what extent democratic political institutions are able to defend themselves.

An interesting finding for Central European readers is that the sources of authoritarian populism in their region are somewhat different from the rest of the countries examined. This can be demonstrated by the generational effect, for instance. The book shows that in most countries examined, social liberalism is generationally influenced, and is much stronger among millennials than with the older generation. There are only a few Eastern European countries where this does not apply, including the Czech Republic. That country also exhibits a less frequent pattern, in which populist values are supported more by the younger generation (in Western Europe they more frequently appeal to older voters).

Unfortunately, Inglehart and Norris’s work exhibits some of the appreciable risks of massive comparative studies, whose authors are usually not specialists in the politics of every country under study, and they seek to reduce error by relying on data obtained by a standardised – but contextually not very sensitive – operationalisation of some basic concepts. The measurement of political parties’ populist positions can furnish us with an example. This is done here on the basis of data from the 2014 *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* (CHES). The survey regularly measures political parties’ positions on various issues, and investigates the salience of some of them; but it is fairly weak in terms of items operationalising populism. The authors have chosen two indicators: the importance of anti-establishment rhetoric and the importance of the issue of political corruption. Whereas the first choice can be easily accepted, the second is very questionable: the populists link corruption exclusively with the rotten, old political elite, whereas the CHES question is much broader. This results in a devastation of face validity in certain countries. For instance, for

Slovakia during the period following the “Gorilla affair,” when corruption became a pivotal issue in party political competition – not as a rhetorical strategy of the populists, but as an everyday, lived experience – the American authors find that nearly all Slovak parties were “populist,” with the exception of Smer-SD, which was closely linked with the corruption, and hence did not talk much about it. Of the Slovak parties, the Christian Democratic Movement has the misfortune to score highly as a party of traditional values and order, and this includes the authoritarian dimension, which is operationalised not so much in terms of “authoritarianism” as by using variables that are commonly employed to measure social conservatism. Ultimately, this party, which of the traditional post-1989 Slovak parties has been historically the most supportive of social pluralism, is dragged through the mud and classified as authoritarian-populist. This issue, created by the unfortunate inclusion of the criterion of whether the topic of corruption was important for the party, is much broader and leads to more than half of the CHES parties being described as populist. Of these some provide the backbone to the party systems and government coalitions in the countries examined, and in no case can it be argued that their rhetoric is based on a dichotomy between the rotten elites and the sovereign people. While the book is fairly convincing in defining what authoritarian populism is – how it emerges, and why it presents a particularly dangerous combination for democracy – it fails drastically in its attempt to reliably identify the empirical representatives of authoritarian populism.

The book is also problematic when it descends to the level of individual countries, to provide examples to illustrate the authors’ argument. Most of the examples are concerned with the specific actions and expressions of authoritarian leaders. Given their peculiarly conceived role of a tribune (they speak on behalf of a homogeneous people, but expect the people to accept their role without reservation and to not interfere with it in any way), this makes sense, content-wise. What I am after is not so much starting a discussion about whether this is a desirable strategy in a largely quantitative, massive comparative study, as the facticity of some of the details. For example, one reads in the book that the 2015 Polish election was won by “Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński’s” Law and Justice party (the first brother had perished in 2010), and that Miloš Zeman’s slogan in the 2018 presidential election was “You’re no longer alone” and not “This is our country.” This raises concerns.

The final impression from this voluminous book is therefore somewhat unconvincing. On the one hand, it offers an evidence-based story about the rise of a political actor whose nature is very dangerous (here the book stands on firm ground). On the other, it suffers because the available data are not always able to fulfil the authors’ considerable ambition. The compromises they have to make to pursue their project, as far as valid operationalisation and factual precision are concerned, are not at all small.