

# POPULISM IN THE UNITED STATES: HOW DEMOCRACY OVERCOMES THE CHALLENGE

## ПОПУЛІЗМ У США: ЯК ДЕМОКРАТІЯ ДОЛАЄ ВИКЛИК

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**Abstract.** *The article considers populism as a threat to democracy in the USA. It explains the causes and consequences of populism spread. The article describes the economic and cultural factors of the growth of populism, as well as analyzes approaches to the study of modern populism based on examples of political rhetoric in the United States. Left-wing and right-wing populism, as well as its main characteristics, are defined. The article describes how the populist political identity was formed in the United States by the efforts of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The populist political rhetoric of US Presidents F. Roosevelt, R. Reagan, D. Trump and other members of the American establishment is analyzed. The reason for the attractiveness of populism is explained, and its anti-pluralist and anti-liberal approaches are described in detail. In addition, the article notes that populism is part of the strategy of political forces to manipulate the electorate, and explains how democracy in the United States overcomes the populist challenge.*

**Keywords:** *populism, democracy, USA, liberal democracy, anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, liberalism, right-wing populism, left-wing populism.*

**Анотація.** *Стаття розглядає популізм як загрозу демократії в США, а також пояснює причини та наслідки поширення популізму. Проаналізовано підходи до вивчення сучасного популізму на основі прикладів політичної риторики в США, описано економічні та культурні чинники зростання популізму. Визначено різновиди популізму: лівого та правого спрямування; проаналізовано основні характеристики. У статті розповідається про те, як зусиллями політиків із Демократичної та Республіканської партій формувалася популістська політична ідентичність у США. Проаналізовано популістську політичну риторичу президентів Ф. Рузвельта, Р. Рейгана, Д. Трампа та інших представників американського істеблішменту. У статті пояснюється причина привабливості популізму, детально описано його антиплюралістичний та антиліберальний підходи. Крім того, у статті зазначається, що популізм є складовою стратегії політичних сил щодо маніпулювання електоратом і пояснюється, яким чином демократія у США долає популістський виклик.*

**Ключові слова:** *популізм, демократія, США, ліберальна демократія, антиплюралізм, антиелітизм, лібералізм, правий популізм, лівий популізм.*

**Problem statement.** The political process provides different approaches and forms of its implementation, accompanied by the ambiguous rhetoric of modern politicians. Competition for power is often based on slogans and messages that society likes, but there are no fundamental tools for their implementation. The populist worldview is spreading in the political arena, thus increasing extremist sentiment and pressure on the elites trying hard to resist change. The phenomenon of populist rhetoric does not bypass the political struggle in the United States, which is also confirmed by Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election. Modern populists get the highest government positions by promising to solve the urgent needs of society, as well as mass corruption in the highest echelons of power. That particular rhetoric helps them to achieve electoral success.

The **purpose of the article** is to analyze the dynamics of the growth of populism in the United States of America; describe the varieties of American populism; formulate the principal risks and threats to the development of democracy in the United States.

**Literature review.** The issue of populism has been the subject of research by many American and European theorists. The scientific work of R. Eatwell and M. Goodwin [Eatwell, Goodwin, 2018], as well as the work of C. Mudde [Mudde, 2007] raised essential questions about the components of populism and its features that distinguish it from radicalism and extremism. F. Hartleb also analyzed the political behaviour of populist parties during election campaigns and their methods of influencing the electorate [Hartleb, 2011]. These same problems are discussed in detail in the works of F. Decker [Decker, 2000]. Modern theorist W. Galston analyzes the causes of populism and its connection with the liberal and democratic ideas in the current understanding of American political actors and society [Galston, 2017; 2018]. Prospects for the development of global populism are revealed in the works of T. Pappas [Pappas, 2019]. From the second half of the twentieth century, populism is gradually becoming an independent object of scientific research. Among Ukrainian scholars, the factors of populism growth became interesting for O. Novakova, V. Burdyak, I. Kiyanka, Y. Makar, and others.

**Main results of the research.** The US political system is characterized by a diversity of political views and the ideological orientation of the parties. On this basis, populism in the United States has historical roots and has grown significantly. In particular, this confirms the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential election in 2016, which was unexpected for many.

Although populism has different directions in the United States, it can be divided between left and right, depending on how each determines the people's enemy. For left-wing populists, the enemies are economic elites; for right-wing populists, it is a racial or ethnic difference, and since the middle of the twentieth century, it has been the state itself. The left is more related to the events of the 19th century and the People's Party, populist politics in the southern United States in the early twentieth century, and reflected in elements of Roosevelt's New Deal, which represented the Democratic Party.

Populist political identity was also shaped by the efforts of Republican representatives. During the presidential campaign in 1980, Reagan presented himself as an ordinary man who lived like everyone else and was guided by principles accessible to all. He has created an image of a fighter against corruption and excessive government influence [1].

However, populism did not exist comfortably in the Republican Party. On the one hand, D. Bush Sr., Reagan's successor, portrayed a more privileged elite, committed to the central role of the United States in building a cosmopolitan "new world order" and thus helped foster renewed populism outside the party. On the other hand, Bush Jr. was a strong supporter of right-wing populism during his tenure. The September 11, 2001 attacks and Bush's response, as well as his faith in the executive branch, strengthened his image as a strong leader. However, exhaustion from two wars and economic turmoil reduced its populist appeal.

Over the past decade, right-wing populist parties have made significant strides in the US election. Research shows that cultural and economic problems are the main driving force behind the growth of right-wing populism. These parties are mobilized due to fear of immigration and a sense of economic insecurity arising from globalization and rapid changes in post-industrial

societies [2; 3]. According to researchers, the immediate cause of populist voting is a cultural reaction, and its current high level reflects declining economic security and growing economic inequality [4]. Populism manipulates a significant decline in status, which can be described in economic terms (inequality), political terms (dismissal) or social terms (moving to the periphery of society) [5].

Economic and cultural factors are too often seen as competing explanations for the success of right-wing populism when they need to be analyzed together [6]. Some studies have primarily emphasized welfare nativism and chauvinism as the leading economic response of right-wing populist parties. Much research has focused on the cultural dimension of right-wing populist policies, focusing on immigration, national identity and Islam. Meanwhile, in the literature, there is a significant spread of left and right economic views among these parties [8]. Only recently, researchers of right-wing populism have considered the relationship between cultural and economic values more systematically, comparing these parties' economic positions with their agenda and connecting it with populism and authoritarianism [9].

D. Trump's discourses during the 2016 presidential campaign cultivated strong anti-elitist and anti-establishment sentiments, arguing that "Washington is not working." Elites are accused of usurping national wealth produced by virtuous American workers. As D. Trump explained, politicians and representatives of special interests bled America, deprived it of the middle class, and deprived American companies of jobs [8; 10].

The populists' success is associated with voters' distrust of traditional (ie, inscribed in the system of dominant political relations) parties and movements, whose primary function is to connect voters with government institutions. Traditional parties are losing their influence in society for objective reasons (fiscal crises, which take dramatic forms of socio-political conflicts, corruption, migration issues, etc.). However, such shifts or regroupings of socio-political forces that change the political landscape are increasingly associated with a profound crisis of representative government. Scientists define it as the accumulation of social demands within society, which can not adequately respond to the established system of institutions and relations [11].

Populism in the United States is viewed in terms of its instrumental function. Left-wing radical authors view this trend as the antithesis of liberalism established in America through the "new course" of FD Roosevelt. The "new course," according to left-wing critics, has resulted in a "new class" of well-educated, professionally trained, and bureaucratic elites. However, they used the technocratic tools of the interventionist state to their advantage, which most undermined the position of the middle class. In this historical context, populism is seen as a force capable of reviving politics at the very foundations of the social pyramid and ensuring the responsible participation of citizens in the political process. In this approach, populism is seen as a political project that can restore Americans' faith in their capabilities [12].

Left-wing populism in the United States is a particular trend in the Democratic Party, whose socialist direction is actively seeking to remove "moderate" figures (N. Pelosi, J. Biden, H. Clinton, etc.) from the institutions of power. Because they allegedly prevent the "young" from mastering the real tools and mechanisms of control in the party. By the way, B. Sanders, who joined this movement, is also considered one of the representatives of the "youth". Left-wing populists use two tactics to fight the "veterans". On the one hand, there is speculation that the attempt to impeach then-President Trump was intended to provoke an internal crisis in the Democratic Party and to dismiss those who were beginning to burden Democratic voters. However, the ideological platform of the party's internal transformation is a populist program of "comprehensive" social progress for the general population, which is not based on a realistic analysis of the country's economic system.

Assessing the left-wing populist program of the Socialist direction of the Democratic Party, experts suggest that the program's authors will not be able to implement attractive ideas with acceptable methods and forms of their implementation. Left populism, thus being an active and growing force within the Democratic Party, is not yet in mass demand in the US "political market." On the one hand, left-wing ideas are becoming increasingly popular in America among some youth

and intellectuals in the context of the political fiasco of the neoliberal-globalist project. On the other hand, these populations are not yet institutionally integrated across American society. It can be assumed that politicians can use their social protest to actualize rhetoric such as the "new course" of F. D. Roosevelt (infrastructure construction, raising wages of workers and employees, etc.) [13].

Populists have broken long-established models of party competition in many modern Western societies. The most notable case is the election of Trump as President of the United States. Many observers find it difficult to understand his victory. After all, Trump was criticized by conservatives (J. Will), Republicans (M. Romney), social liberals (E. Warren), and socialists (B. Sanders). Moreover, Trump has been described as a politician who threatens democracy, a xenophobic and racist demagogue who knows how to bring down the crowd, and a salesman-opportunist who lacks basic principles [14]. Each of these approaches has some basis. Trump can be seen as a leader who uses populist rhetoric to legitimize his governing style. At the same time, he promotes authoritarian values that threaten the institutions and norms of American democracy. However, D. Trump is not unique in this context. Prior to him, similar populist rhetoric was promoted in the United States by H. Long's "Share Wealth" movement, D. McCarthy's Communists, and others. [15]. Trump's speeches, calls against the establishment, and racial language is reminiscent of the rhetoric of many other leaders.

Both wings of the American populists gained political influence from time to time. They arise in response to real grievances: an economic system that favors the rich, the fear of losing a job because of new immigrants, and politicians who care more about their own development than the well-being of the majority. At best, populism offers rhetoric that can strengthen democracy, not threaten it. The People's Party has helped launch many progressive reforms, such as income tax and corporate regulation, that have made the United States a more humane society in the twentieth century.

Democrats who use populist appeals well, from W. D. Brian to F. D. Roosevelt, have done much to create a liberal capitalist order that, despite its shortcomings, most modern Americans want to maintain. Even some populist speakers who opposed immigrants supported laws on the eight-hour day, which helped all workers in the country, regardless of their place of birth or race. Racists and potential authoritarians have taken advantage of the appeal of populism. However, Americans have not found a more powerful way to demand that their political elites adhere to the ideals of equal opportunity and democratic governance that they have expressed during the election campaign. Populism can be dangerous, but it can also be necessary [16].

Populism cultivates an authoritarian tendency and a "negativist" approach. It is "anti-pluralistic" because it is guided by the principle of "silent majority" and "anti-liberal" because it calls into question the rights of individuals and especially the rights of minorities. These negativist positions are linked to the "opposition of the people" against the "corrupt cosmopolitan elite" that persecutes the indigenous population. Authoritarian populists challenge liberal orders. Liberal orders contain commitments on individual rights, the rule of law, democracy and relatively open borders (on discussing the liberal international order). Authoritarian populists are a global phenomenon, and in most electoral democracies, there is at least one authoritarian solid populist party in parliament. Therefore, the rise of the new schism and the authoritarian populists cannot be reduced to one of two well-known competing explanations. The prospect of economic danger explains this by focusing on the distributive effects of economic globalization and post-industrial transformations.

In a cultural aspect, authoritarian populism results from an action against the change of values, indicated by postmaterialism, feminism and multiculturalism. Accordingly, the historical trade-off between labour and capital has triggered a dynamic that has blocked the growth of so-called non-majority institutions (central banks, constitutional courts, and international liberal policy organizations) in most democracies. As a result, the gap between parliamentarians and voters was widening. Thus, the silent majority is forgotten by the political class that controls parliament and the liberal cosmopolitan experts who control non-majority institutions. Therefore,

authoritarian populists oppose the notion of the silent majority against political classes and non-majority institutions.

The dominant approach to the study of modern populism is the ideological approach. From this point of view, populism is defined as a set of ideas that portray society as divided among ordinary people against the "corrupt elite" and argue that politics is absolute respect for the people's sovereignty [19]. Accordingly, the emphasis on anti-elitism and popular sovereignty is a specific set of ideas that differs from, for example, liberalism in that it has a limited program area.

Anti-liberalism, anti-internationalism, and anti-elitism of authoritarian populism are joining the relevant issues of the new split, preferring closed borders and the will of the majority, as well as rejecting power outside the nation. Authoritarian populism, from this point of view, is not simply an ideology of comparing the establishment with the people but contains the notion of government, which replaces representative democracy with direct representation between the people and the leader. Thus, authoritarian populism contains a particular form of anti-elitism, which is better described as counter-elitism. What seems democratic in the opposition may be authoritarian in power. In authoritarian populism, the *volonté générale* acts as a pre-political and de-proceduralized will, embodied in the leaders of the populist party [17]. Authoritarian populism can be defined as a majority and nationalist political ideology [20]. It is the majority, as it opposes liberal rights, tolerance and pluralism to the homogeneous will of the majority. It is nationalistic, contrasting the importance of borders and national will to an open world society with influential international institutions. These beliefs are united in building a solid antagonism between corrupt and remote cosmopolitan elites and local people.

**Conclusions.** The populist challenge may threaten liberal democracy. In practice, populism plunges democratic societies into an endless series of conflicts. In turn, this threatens the rights of minorities and allows populist leaders to move confidently towards authoritarianism. Populist rhetoric is quite common in the United States and changes according to historical events and preferences of political leaders who professed this ideology. Despite some features of populism, its tendency to be left or right, ultimately, political leaders used social, racial, and gender issues to gain power. It should be noted that the ability of populists to receive significant support from the electorate indicates the weakness of state institutions and the inability to meet the needs of society sufficiently. However, due to the inability of populists to keep their promises, their ratings are also falling rapidly. At the same time, the needs and expectations of societies continue to grow.

Liberal democracy, particularly in the United States, is not strong enough and constantly needs cementing elements in response to new challenges and threats. However, liberal democracy, more than any other political form, contains the potential for development, synergistic resources and the power of self-correction. Liberal democratic institutions not only protect citizens from the tyrannical concentration of power, they also provide mechanisms for addressing complaints and unmet public needs for effective reform. Of course, the power of self-correction is not always enough to prevent the destruction of liberal democracies.

Finally, today's autocratic regimes do not have as much ideological appeal as fascism and communism once did. Nevertheless, at the same time, the current woes of liberal democracy are deep and pervasive. Overcoming them will require intellectual clarity and political leaders who are willing to take risks, serving the long-term interests of their countries.

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