COUNTERING POPULIST AUTHORITARIANS

WHERE THEIR SUPPORT COMES FROM AND HOW TO REVERSE THEIR SUCCESS

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Executive summary

It is impossible to propose an effective solution to a problem, unless we understand that problem. Mainstream research on populist authoritarianism in Europe is dominated by political scientists. But political scientists have yet to come up with a convincing and consistent explanation of why populist authoritarians are gaining political ground across the European Union. People with authoritarian political attitudes tend to vote for populist authoritarian parties or causes. The most powerful predictor of how a person will vote in elections is a person's political attitudes. And the origins of people's political attitudes can best be explained by research from the field of social psychology. This book uses research from the field of social psychology to complement the analysis of political scientists. If mainstream scholars were to incorporate social psychology better into their research, it would greatly improve their ability to offer a coherent analysis of why populist authoritarians are becoming increasingly successful in Europe.

European law, including the protection of pluralist democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

People who hold authoritarian political attitudes are attracted to parties that reflect those attitudes in the policies they offer. People with authoritarian attitudes make up the biggest slice of the voter base for populist authoritarian parties or positions (such as Brexit). Although authoritarians have historically also voted for other political parties, recent elections across Europe and in the USA show that populist authoritarian parties and candidates are becoming more sophisticated at uniting authoritarian voters behind them to win elections and referendums. Furthermore, mainstream parties have a tendency to shift their policies to the right to retain or attract voters with authoritarian political attitudes, which is ultimately also damaging for continued respect for pluralist democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Who are populist authoritarians and what do they want?

Populist authoritarianism refers to a political ideology characterised by anti-elitism, ethno-nationalism or nativism, strongman politics, opposition to pluralist democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and support for ultra-conservative cultural norms. Populist authoritarian parties and candidates advance a coherent set of policies that aim to reverse or water down standards guaranteed under international and

Why is there a gap in our understanding about populist authoritarianism?

Political science scholars and others leading the mainstream debate on populism have identified many factors – particularly socio-demographic factors – that are relevant to understanding populist authoritarianism. Such factors include the role of education, age, gender, one's position on the employment market, one's degree of religiosity and one's degree of exposure to minority communities. They have used these socio-demographic factors to explain why particular

Countering Populist Authoritarians
Where their support comes from
and how to reverse their success

parts of the population are overrepresented among groups that vote for populist authoritarian parties or causes. In short, according to their analysis, it is these groups that are most vulnerable to the economic, migratory, cultural and security 'crises' that have struck Europe over the last decade.

However, this approach has two shortcomings. First, political scientists have difficulty explaining how these socio-demographic factors relate to each other, and why they seem to have an impact on support for populist authoritarians in some countries but not in others. Second, using socio-demographic factors is not the most accurate way of working out whether someone is likely to vote for an authoritarian populist party or cause. Ample research shows that the most accurate way of discovering whether someone will vote for a populist authoritarian party or cause is to look at their political attitudes. And our political attitudes are determined largely by our psychological worldview.

How does research from the field of social psychology help to fill the gap?

Social psychology research explains where authoritarian political attitudes come from. This allows us to understand what factors make people more likely to adopt authoritarian political attitudes in the first place. It also allows us to understand how people who are inclined to support authoritarian political attitudes can be triggered to act on those attitudes and then vote for authoritarian populists. Put otherwise, social psychology gives us the tools to understand why people support populist authoritar-

ians. And consequently, it allows us to develop solutions that can prevent and counter growing support for populist authoritarians.

It is well established in social psychology research that authoritarian political attitudes are endorsed by individuals that subscribe to one of two psychological worldviews: right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. Some political science scholars have tried to use social psychology research to improve their understanding of where political attitudes come from. But this has only achieved partial success, because they have only partially used, or they have misunderstood, research from the field of social psychology.

Evidence suggests that the majority of people who support populist authoritarian parties or causes embrace one of these psychological worldviews. People who adhere strongly to right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation endorse a range of policies designed to suppress outgroups such as women, ethnic minorities, LGBTI persons and others who are seen to disrupt traditional socio-economic hierarchies, compete for resources, or pose a threat to traditional cultural values, security or economic stability. They also endorse the restriction of rules (like human rights standards), institutions (like courts), and limiting forms of participation (like public protest or lobbying) that protect outgroups or promote progressive norms.

Countering Populist Authoritarians
Where their support comes from
and how to reverse their success

What is a psychological worldview?

A psychological worldview is an interrelated set of beliefs that operate at a subconscious level and determine our opinions on how the world is, how it should be and how the ideal should be achieved. It is likely that right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation have their roots in human evolution as a means of ensuring internal group cohesion and cooperation to survive against outside threats.

Those who adhere strongly to right-wing authoritarianism see the world as a dangerous place. They favour adherence to 'traditional' cultural norms, the use of harsh punishment to deter those who threaten these norms and desire strongman political leadership to enforce these norms. They are triggered to endorse authoritarian political attitudes by perceived threats to economic stability, security and cultural norms. This group endorses authoritarian political attitudes that would secure the status quo or return society to a prior situation of perceived stability.

Those who strongly adhere to social dominance orientation see the world as a competitive jungle. They favour the maintenance of traditional socio-economic hierarchies. They are triggered to endorse authoritarian political attitudes when they perceive competition to these hierarchies. This group endorses authoritarian political attitudes that would preserve traditional inequalities.

How are psychological worldviews formed and triggered?

We should distinguish between two stages when it comes to psychological worldviews: factors that make people more likely to embrace these worldviews, and factors that trigger people to act on them and endorse authoritarian political attitudes.

Whether individuals strongly adhere to right-wing authoritarianism or social dominance orientation will depend mostly on their development and their experiences. This can otherwise be referred to as 'socialisation'. Our upbringing, schooling, the media, government policies, peers and partners all have an impact on the beliefs, values and worldviews that we come to embrace. We are not born into a psychological worldview. Rather the environment transmits and reinforces ideas and ways of thinking, which are continually moulded during our lives. However, our worldviews and beliefs can become so entrenched that they are difficult or impossible to change. This is likely to be the case for those that strongly adhere to right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. But it is possible to change the values and attitudes of those people who endorse these worldviews less strongly.

When an individual strongly endorses one of these worldviews, they will not necessarily express or consciously hold authoritarian political attitudes constantly. Rather, they have to be triggered by a perception of threat to physical security, economic stability or cultural norms, or a perception of competition to traditional socio-economic hierarchies. Once triggered,

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Countering Populist Authoritarians
Where their support comes from
and how to reverse their success

those strongly endorsing right-wing authoritarianism or social dominance orientation will then endorse authoritarian political attitudes.

Although right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation are the strongest predictors of support for populist authoritarian parties and policies, this does not mean that the socio-demographic factors relied on by mainstream scholarship on populism are irrelevant. Socio-demographic factors like education, age, gender, religiosity, or geographic proximity to migrant communities are weaker predictors of support for populist authoritarian parties, but they do have an impact on whether individuals endorse one of the psychological worldviews discussed and whether these worldviews are triggered. For example, those with a university education are less likely to support populist authoritarians in Western Europe. One of the reasons for this it that the Western European university system socialises individuals into more progressive values. Equally, social psychology research does not dispute the central relevance of structural factors such as the economic crisis, increased migration flows, security threats posed by terrorism and rapid cultural changes. These background factors have either, by themselves, or through the manipulation of populist authoritarians, triggered a perception of threat and competition among those strongly endorsing right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation.

Progressives have limited time to respond

Populist authoritarian politicians are taking advantage of human psychology, which is hardwired to respond to crises by becoming more authoritarian to ensure group cohesion and stability. Populist authoritarian politicians are becoming extremely adept at creating the perception of threat and competition and associating these anxieties with outgroups such as ethnic minorities, feminists, LGBTI persons and activists. This accounts for their increasing success and for the shift of mainstream parties towards authoritarian positions.

Progressives have limited time to counter this phenomenon by reforming state institutions, public services, social security and the way that they communicate with the public. If mainstream parties instead continue to move to the right to absorb increasingly authoritarian voters, this is likely to entrench authoritarian attitudes among the public in the long-term.

Similarly, merely trying to tackle the crises that have provided the environment in which populist authoritarianism can thrive by reducing immigration, increasing security and improving economic stability is unlikely to be sufficient. First, because it is the perception of threat and competition that triggers authoritarians rather than objective reality. Perception of threat and competition can be manufactured, for example over migration, even in countries where there is very little immigration, such as in Hungary, Poland and Czechia. Second, because the measures commonly taken to increase security such as mass surveillance and ethnic profiling are ineffective and counter-productive and will increase public anxiety further in the long-term. Third, because even if these economic, migration and security questions are eventually 'resolved', in the meantime populist authoritarians

CIVIL
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UNION FOR
EUROPE

Countering Populist Authoritarians
Where their support comes from
and how to reverse their success

are coming to power and cementing their control over state institutions, media outlets and, consequently, public opinion. This makes authoritarianism difficult to reverse once populist authoritarians do come to power. First, because once in power, populist authoritarians control the principal means through which individuals are socialised into support for authoritarian political attitudes such as the media, education system and government policies and narratives. Second, because populist authoritarians are entrenching their retrogressive measures in laws and constitutions that are difficult to change unless large majorities of the population can be persuaded to support progressive values. However, creating sufficient public support for progressive values will prove difficult precisely because populist authoritarians control the principal means of socialisation, such as the education system and the media.

How can human rights counter rising populist authoritarianism?

It is possible to counter the endorsement of authoritarian political attitudes among the public in two ways. First, by addressing the factors that make people more likely to adopt the two aforementioned mentioned psychological worldviews in the first place. And second, by addressing the factors that lead to these worldviews being triggered. Human rights law offers a ready-made template for countering and diffusing authoritarian political attitudes. This is because human rights standards were designed not only to prohibit abuses by authoritarian regimes, they were also calibrated to prevent the creation of an environment in which authoritarians could

even come to power. The human rights based recommendations summarised below can only be implemented fully in those countries that are not yet under populist authoritarian control. In this sense they should be viewed as a preventive measure. Nevertheless, governments and civil society organisations can also draw on these recommendations to support or implement activities in countries with populist authoritarian governments. The measures recommended in this book include the following, which concentrate on steps to prevent populist authoritarians from capturing public opinion and, consequently, electoral support.

Measures to reduce the likelihood that people will endorse right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation

• Implementing the right to education. The right to education includes an obligation to transmit progressive values through the education system and develop critical thinking, as well as educating individuals about the content of human rights law. These steps are proven to reduce the endorsement of authoritarian political attitudes.

• Promoting progressive values through political discourse, laws and policies. Human rights standards require governments to promote tolerance and equality for marginalised groups through the tools they have at their disposal. The laws, policies and narratives spread by politicians are proven to influence political attitudes among the public.

CIVIL
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Countering Populist Authoritarians
Where their support comes from
and how to reverse their success

Measures to prevent populist authoritarians from creating or exaggerating the perception of threat and competition

- Human rights standards require governments to maintain and support an independent and plural media, and high quality journalism. Populist authoritarians and their allies in the media have helped to spread fear among the population through inflammatory and misleading reporting. Furthermore, the current economic difficulties in the media market incentivise sensationalist and superficial news coverage. Governments could create an environment conducive to balanced and well-informed public debate by implementing their human rights obligations as well as creating a financially sustainable media market.

- Human rights law requires governments to promote inclusion of marginalised ethnic and social groups in society. This includes through methods such as desegregation of housing, education and the workplace. Facilitating contact and mixing between the majority population and outgroups is proven to reduce the levels of prejudice towards these groups, as well as to reduce support for populist authoritarian parties or causes.

Measures to deal with genuine sources of threat and competition

- Human rights-based counter-terrorism measures are shown to be more effective in addressing security threats than commonly used rights-violating measures like mass surveillance and ethnic profiling. By implementing human rights-compliant counter-terrorism measures that actually work, governments could reduce security threats more effectively.

- Social and economic rights require governments to provide effective social safety nets, adequately funded public services, and to ensure that workers receive a standard of remuneration that affords them a decent standard of living. Implementing these rights would help shield the public from the consequences of economic shocks and reduce inequality, which are both factors that have helped to fuel the rise of populist authoritarianism.

Countering Populist Authoritarians
Where their support comes from
and how to reverse their success

About Liberties

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a non-governmental organisation promoting and protecting the civil liberties of everyone in the European Union. We are headquartered in Berlin and have a presence in Brussels. Liberties is built on a network of national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU. Unless otherwise indicated, the opinions expressed by Liberties do not necessarily constitute the views of our member organisations.

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