

Bartels, Larry M. *Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 280 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Does a populist specter haunt Europe? Conventional wisdom has it that economic dislocation, uncontrolled immigration, and loss of sovereignty to a distant EU has created a combustible mix and provoked unprecedented anger among voters that threatens to send democracies backsliding toward illiberalism or outright authoritarianism. A wave of electoral gains—and some victories—by right-wing nationalists around the continent in recent years appears to confirm the consensus.

In this timely volume, the political scientist Larry Bartels takes a critical view of the “democracy-in-crisis” thesis that has gained urgency as populist authoritarians appear to take advantage of the Euro-crisis to threaten consolidated democracies. Through a deft combination of case studies and survey data, Bartels has provided an accessibly written and novel perspective on this important discussion that will interest those who follow political trends in Europe, as well as anyone concerned with the health of global democracy. His departure from the usual interpretation, though, is not all good news.

Bartels exhaustively surveys public opinion before and after the Euro-crisis on economic anxiety, immigration, ideological polarization, and institutional trust, and finds scant evidence for an eruption of anger toward an arrogant and indifferent elite. Indeed, the book reveals a remarkable consistency in attitudes with only modest movement, and sometimes movement away from right-wing nationalism.

What then, does explain the uptick in populism? Instead of an outpouring of populist sentiment among voters, these parties have had greater success where their leaders have maneuvered into the spaces occupied by traditional conservative parties and managed to appeal

to conventional conservative voters. Rather than staking out extreme political positions, they have campaigned on familiar issues and later taken advantage of the political weaknesses of their rivals to reshape the system to maintain their own power.

Effective resistance to populism comes from political elites, as well. Mainstream parties stave off authoritarian challenges when they unite in their efforts to exclude extremists within their own ranks rather than try to harness their energy. So rather than a tidal wave of populism sweeping the continent, Bartels draws a complex picture in which populist victories come down to elites' interrelations and ability to navigate local institutional structures. The most dramatic cases of populist authoritarian transformations—Hungary and Poland—achieved that dubious distinction only by exploiting the peculiar political conditions of their countries, which are unlikely to reproduce themselves elsewhere.

Is this supply-side reality good news or bad for those committed to the integrity of liberal democratic institutions?

On one hand, it will come as a relief that voting publics are not, by and large, rushing to hand over the keys of democracy to autocrats. Instead, European citizens are fairly satisfied with the outcomes of liberal democracy and with European integration. An optimistic view would therefore have it that populism does not represent an existential threat to democratic regimes and may be a passing phase with little potential to take root and spread further. Previous waves of populism exhausted themselves without leaving much of an imprint, after all.

If citizens are not the driving force behind populism, however, nor are they blameless. Bartels points out that, just as voters remain fairly content with their liberal democratic governments, they remain largely content with illiberal democrats, as well. The governments of Hungary and Poland have remained popular even as they make brazenly illiberal power-grabs.

Bartels' most important contribution to the discussion of populism, then, is that political elites have adopted authoritarian postures *in the absence* of significant authoritarian sentiment. As we watch politicians adapt themselves with alarming alacrity to previously taboo behaviors and rationalize the destruction of democratic norms, Bartels' conclusion is perhaps an even more sobering one than the conventional story.

Currently, populism is primarily a right-wing phenomenon, but it may be paired with all manner of ideologies. This malleability makes possible a similar slide toward authoritarian populism among left-wing parties. Voters across the political spectrum may be more inclined to tolerate an authoritarian populist party that shares their ideological preferences than to prioritize the defense of democratic institutions. In such a case the crisis of democracy will emanate not from citizens' embrace of illiberal populism, but from their collective shrug.

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