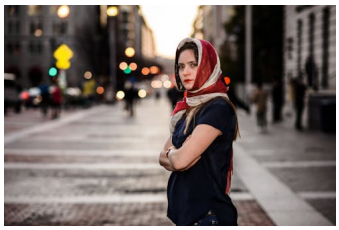

Populism celebrates laypeople without offering them any real autonomy or integrity. Geoff Livingston/flickr

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This article is part of the Democracy Futures series, a joint global initiative between The Conversation and the Sydney Democracy Network. The project aims to stimulate fresh thinking about the many challenges facing democracies in the 21st century.

This is the third in a series, After Populism , about the challenges populism poses for democracy. It comes from a talk at the Populism: What’s Next for Democracy? "symposium hosted by the Institute for Governance & Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra in collaboration with Sydney Democracy Network .

Populism is not about bureaucracy, technocracy or even democracy. Donald Trump's presidential campaign slogans – "America First" and "Make America Great Again" – clearly express the essence of populism. It is a moral and nativist political response to the increasing globalisation, professionalisation and individualisation of national policy.

We no longer live in a collectively disciplined mass society with clearly defined groups and classes along the left-right axis. The connections between bureaucracy, capitalism and democracy have long been undercut.

These have been reshaped to fit globalist neoliberalism and its celebration of the accumulation

of human capital as the foundation of economic, political and social development.

Neoliberalism is not about hierarchy (the state), anarchy (the market) or solidarity (civil society). It's principally about self-management. Enhancing global competition and growth is about increasing the stock value of the human capital that identifies one as a "whole person". It is about governing individuals positively and constructively to constantly value or appreciate themselves.

Such chronic monitoring is required to improve their own self-appreciation and thereby their chances of success in the competitive and professionalised neoliberal world. "Co-production", "citizen-centric government" and "evidence-based policy" are all about steering individuals, from cradle to grave, to seek success above everything else.

Populism, on the other hand, springs from the idea of the exceptional moral and political leader who rises to prominence and power in order to restore and protect the nation as the home of " we the people ". Neoliberalism creates a democratic dilemma by identifying self-governance only with those individuals who exercise their human faculties professionally and successfully.

But when Trump exclaims "I am your voice", he indicates that laypeople have no political voice of their own at all.

'They are forgotten, but they are not to be forgotten long … they no longer have a voice. I am your voice.'

Since populism is primarily about political authority and leadership (citizenship and the political community are secondary), it doesn't actually make the life of political "amateurs" easier. By subjecting them to an exceptional leader's struggle for hegemony, populism doesn't seek to make the laypeople better at governing and taking care of themselves.

Instead, leaders like Trump are trying to persuade them to blindly follow and support him in his battle against the establishment or the globally interconnected and collaborating " professionals " who purportedly trample on their feelings and values.

It's Trump as political leader, not "the people", who is re-articulating the boundaries between us and them. His is a nativist /globalist opposition that precedes all other societal cleavages, including the overarching contest between the right and the left.

It is him, not them, who is the moral and political medium for placing Americans first and making the nation great again. Trump wants to reawaken the lonely, silenced and atomised crowd to help *himself*.

In short, populism considers politics:

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a property of communication which takes form in retrospective demands ("Make America Great Again");

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a metaphysics about the "pure people" and the extraordinary leader as its physical embodiment;

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a conflict-driven discourse, constructing the political order in terms of a binary friend/foe opposition;

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a crisis-focused framing of the political situation in terms of a resistance identity aimed at crushing a so-called rigged and corrupt system;

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a moralist and emotionalist political discourse that condemns everyone who neglects, devalues, or exploits the nation as the home of the pure people;

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an anti-technocratic mode of governance that celebrates the exceptional leader's power and will to decide and act immediately, intuitively, toughly and smartly in the face of an emerging or escalating crisis; and

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a counter-elitist strategy for replacing the " wicked " political establishment of globally networked elites with " authentic " political leaders who are drawn from, or more effectively represent, the interests and values of the pure people.

Rounding up the forgotten amateurs

Somewhat shamefully, mainstream political theory and research did not see populism coming, just as they didn't foresee the 1968 Youth Rebellion or the fall of the Berlin Wall.

One reason is that the mainstream has, in this period, paid less and less attention to the "amateurs" that populism calls upon and attempts to mobilise in its quest for hegemony.

This is odd, given the widespread reports of escalating distrust in established politicians, political parties and democratic governments. New but fading social movements like the Indignados
and Occupy Wall Street also recognise that a crucial dilemma for democracy lies in its neglect of laypeople's political capacities to interrupt how "professionals" authoritatively articulate, deliver and evaluate policies.

Still, had the theorists and researchers read Jurgen Habermas , they might have been forewarned. Habermas concludes
The Inclusion of the Other
with:

The private autonomy of equally entitled citizens can be secured only insofar as citizens actively exercise their civic autonomy.

Amateurs are at the core of democracy in Habermas' conception of the lifeworld. This consists of laypeople who express themselves by connecting with each other in various networks and project communities. There can be no representative, participatory, discursive or deliberative democracy without laypeople who can and will govern and take care of themselves.

In a democracy, political amateurs should be able to organise and govern themselves.Ted Eytan/flickr

Populism's main challenge to democracy, then, is its claim that laypeople lack the faculties required for governing themselves. It celebrates laypeople without offering them any real autonomy or integrity as political subjects of history.

Instead, the laypeople must depend for their sovereignty on an exceptional leader who can marshal them around a collective resistance identity and lead them in the struggle against the establishment.

And yet populism destroys the possibility of self-governance precisely by imposing a homogenising collective identity upon laypeople. Without difference, there can be no self-governance and no civic autonomy.

The idea of the exceptional leader as the very embodiment of the "pure people" is as metaphysical as it is anti-democratic. It doesn't only deny laypeople a voice of their own. It also relegates those who don't identify with the great leader to "non-people" who must be kicked out from the home of "the people".

Clearly, Trump places national sovereignty before "people power". For him, "the people" is just a collective construct that will help him gaslight the establishment, seize power and sustain his own order.

Habermas would strongly oppose this populist self-image of the leader as “unbound”, a symbol of the (pure) people’s hopes and desires. As he conceives of democracy, despotism will take over whenever and wherever people power becomes synonymous with a national quest for collective self-assertion and self-realisation:

The assumption of a compulsory, collective identity necessitates repressive policies, whether it be the forced assimilation of alien elements or the purification of the people through apartheid and ethnic cleansing.

Trump, “ The People’s President ”, constantly reaffirms that he will never let his voters down. But by taking responsibility for the people’s collective choices, he moves to dominate their political existence. “The people” effectively become the exceptional leader’s own construct.

Certainly, Trump recognised from the outset how big an asset “ the deplorables ” would be to his campaign, if only he could
convince
them he was their man.

I’ve joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up the people who cannot defend themselves … Nobody knows the system better than me. Which is why I alone can fix it.

The thorn in populism’s side

Without laypeople’s acceptance of what’s got to be done, a political system could not survive, far less develop, at least in the long run. The authority relationship between professionals and amateurs is at the heart of the political.

There must be political authorities if authoritative decisions are to be made and implemented for the population. However, it does not follow that political control must always lie in the hands of the few.

The difference between authorities and non-authorities is functional, not causal. In principle, at least, their relationship could be shaped to involve balanced reciprocities of power, knowledge and trust.

In fact, political authority could always have been shaped otherwise. As such, Habermas speaks about the lifeworld as composed of laypeople who can act spontaneously, emotionally, personally and communicatively as interconnected “fire alarms”, “experimenters” and “innovators”.

This is anarchism with a twist: the laypeople’s sociopolitical integrity and self-governance are not considered the only things that matter in a democracy. Democratic action must also often be spontaneous, fast and emotionally driven.

This does not diminish the value of strong, collective civil action and rigorous and “slow” deliberation. It simply maintains there is often no time for any of this.

This is why laypeople’s chronic disruptions of how things are done are so important. Anarchists consider the laypeople a permanent thorn in the side of existing superpowers that police people power.

I call active laypeople who engage with one another in political networks and action communities to pursue various goals and projects everyday makers . They:

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want to do things themselves;

-

do it for fun or because they find it necessary;

[dy-your-voice](https://theconversation.com/everyday-makers-defy-populists-false-promise-to-embody-your-voice)