

ARTICLE

Declinism and populism

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The causes of the contemporary wave of populist successes? These can be largely explained by declinism, the feeling, shared by many, that their society is in decline, that many of the valued things are being lost or even wilfully destroyed. Many people hold the “political establishment” responsible for the supposed decline, and therefore become susceptible for populism. Using the example of the inaugural speeches of American presidents, this article also illustrates how declinism is concretely used to argue in favour of the main populist propositions.

The United States now have a populist president, populist parties play an important role in the governments of, among others, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, and are prominent in the oppositions of almost all European countries. In the extremely fragmented political landscape of the Netherlands, the populist PVV of Geert Wilders became the second party as a result of the Dutch parliamentary elections of March 15. In the French presidential elections Marine Le Pen was voted into the second round and gathered twice the percentage of votes of the Front National candidate in 2002. Citizen movements and calls for direct democracy are now heard almost everywhere. All that obviously raises the question why populism is so overwhelmingly successful nowadays.

In what follows I first specify what I understand by populism, then elaborate on the relationship between declinism and populism, and finally use a case study to illustrate how populists rhetorically use declinism, transform or translate the belief in decline into populist success.^[1]

Populism

Many authors consider populism as a “thin ideology”, meaning that it can be combined with different ideologies, both of the (extreme) left and the (extreme) right.^[2] When approached in that way, there is, in the scientific literature, a quite strong consensus about the core characteristics or, more precisely, propositions of populism:

- the political establishment does not take into account the problems and wishes of the (ordinary) people;
- there is a stark difference between the straight-thinking ordinary people (their plain common sense) and the elite which is out of touch with reality, even corrupt;
- that is why the elite, the politicians, the experts should listen more carefully to the people; why there should be, in fact, government for and by the people;
- democracy as it exists today is not a real democracy; it is useless to go and vote because the established parties do not heed the preferences of the people, not even of their own voters.

Some authors add a further characteristic: a leader who incarnates the people, says what the people feel and think and whose advent therefore effectively places the people in charge. This however cannot be regarded as a general characteristic of populism, but is rather a distinctive authoritarian sub-type. Even though the authoritarian species of populism seems to be by far

the most frequent one, the above core elements can and are also used as arguments for direct democracy and/or deliberative democracy. We did therefore not use the figure of a leader who incarnates the people to construct a scale gauging the receptiveness to populism in the population.

The scale (see table 1) does not explicitly refer to the corruption of the elite, because we feared this would bias it towards right-wing populism.

Table 1. Populism, inhabitants of Belgium, 25-35 years old, 2013, N=1865

	(Completely) Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	(Completely) Agree (%)	Factor loading
Ministers should not spend so much time in their office, but talk more to ordinary folks	8.2	19.2	72.6	0.82
Politicians should listen more to the problems of the ordinary people	2.8	15.9	81.3	0.78
The opinion of ordinary people is worth much more than that of experts and politicians	20.5	40.3	39.3	0.73
To go and vote is senseless, parties just do what they want	28.0	24.3	47.7	0.73
People who spent a long time studying, have many diploma's but do not know what is really happening in the world	29.7	32.4	38.0	0.71
Eigenvalue				2.86
Cronbach's alpha				0.80

A short version of this scale (with four items) was measured in a purely random probability sample of 4,487 inhabitants of Belgium, 18 to 80 years old, in 2006.^[3] The slightly expanded version above (five items) was measured in a similar pure probability sample of 1,951 inhabitants of Belgium, 25 to 35 years old, in 2013. When comparing the same age groups in 2006 and in 2013, the support for populist attitudes appears to have remained the same over that period. Support for the core populist propositions was already in 2006 as high as it was in 2013. Therefore, only the more recent data are presented and commented on here.

The data show a very high level of support for the populist propositions as measured here. In 2013 70 to 80% of the respondents agree that politicians should listen more to “ordinary people” and their problems. The feeling that too many people are forgotten, not listened to, is extremely widespread. About one in two (48%) experiences a strong lack of sovereignty, does not feel represented, agrees that the parties do not respect the vote, and hence that voting has no sense. Only 28% explicitly disagrees with this position. Close to 40% think that ordinary people have a clearer view of what is happening than experts, politicians and highly educated people. Given how widespread these attitudes are, there is an obvious temptation for all

politicians, and not only those of parties commonly regarded as populist, to incorporate elements of a populist rhetoric in their political communication, and to represent themselves as not part of “the system” or “the establishment”.^[4]

Declinism

Research concerning the expectations for the future reveals that one should make a clear distinction between personal and societal expectations. A finding which the Dutch Bureau for Social and Cultural Planning (SCP) expressed by summarizing the feelings of the Dutch as “I am all right, but we are not”. In the sample of young adult inhabitants of Belgium from 2013, three quarters to 80% expressed a high degree of satisfaction with personal life. Eighty per cent or more are optimistic regarding their personal future life, expecting for most aspects of the quality of life (such as housing, health, standard of living, leisure, travel, quality of the neighbourhood) to equal or better the quality of life achieved by their parents. For these aspects, the proportion expecting to do better or much better than their parents is always at least twice as high as the amount of those expecting not to equal their parents’ quality of life.

“I am all right, but we are not”

Yet, within this population, with so many satisfied and optimistic people as far as their personal lives are concerned, we find an overwhelming majority that is extremely pessimistic as to the future of their society. Seventy to sometimes more than 90% expect:

- a further decline of pension allowances and unemployment benefits, and an increase in poverty;
- increasing inequality; the emergence of a society of rich and poor, with the middle class squeezed away;
- increasing numbers of enterprises moving to low-wage countries; with high unemployment as a consequence;
- that people fortunate enough to still have a job will have to work under less attractive conditions, with lower levels of job security, and will also have to work more hours a week to maintain the same standard of living;
- an increase of working poor, people holding two jobs to make ends meet;
- an increase of intolerance; large groups of Muslims that will not adapt to European culture and ways of life;
- that the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe will turn violent.

The series of 41 possible future developments that were presented to the respondents contain both items likely to be seen as positive (14 items) as well negative or neutral by most respondents (27 items). With a few exceptions predictions likely to be seen as positive are considered plausible by 20 to less than 50% of the respondents. The predictions likely to be considered negative are deemed plausible by 70 to more than 90% of the respondents. About eight out of ten young Belgian adults can be considered declinist.

Declinism and populism

One of the most influential answers to the question who is susceptible to populism, is given by the so-called theory of “the losers of modernization or globalization”.^[5] That theory holds that modernization (i.e. the rise of the knowledge economy) and globalization (with, among other consequences, displacement of manufacturing to low-wage countries and competition from cheap foreign labour) threaten the position of certain categories of people, particularly people with elementary levels of education and skills. Consequently, these people see their material

position and socio-economic future threatened; they become socio-economically vulnerable. As a consequence of that vulnerability they are likely to see societal decline and become pessimistic about the future of society. That attitude then, so the theory continues, translates itself, through resentment and other psychological mechanisms, into xenophobia, sympathy for populism and other attitudes.



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A weak socio-economic position to a large extent explains both declinism and populism.

The crucial proposition of that theory is that, at the level of the individual, a weak socio-economic position to a large extent explains both declinism and populism. Some authors propose it is not so much the current socio-economic position that is responsible for those effects but rather the expectations with regard to one's future socio-economic position – or socio-economic vulnerability.

Socio-economic vulnerability is measured as the expectation that one will have to work harder to maintain the same standard of living (54% expects this will be the case), the expectation that one will have to cut down on household expenses (42%), that one will have to forego a number of 'luxuries' (32%), will no longer be able to afford holidays (30%), will be financially worse off (23%), will lose one's job (20%), will not be able to pay one's debts (14%), will end up in poverty (12%).^{6]}

The data allowed for a non-recursive model to be estimated, measuring the bi-causal effect of socio-economic vulnerability on declinism^{7]} and of declinism on socio-economic vulnerability. The effect of socio-economic vulnerability on declinism turned out to equal zero, while the effect of declinism on socio-economic vulnerability is very strong ($\beta=.46$). The effects of socio-economic conditions on declinism – income ($\beta=.00$), extend of past unemployment ($\beta=.10$), and socio-economic status of the parents ($\beta=-.11$) – are also quite weak.

These observations largely invalidate the thesis of the losers of modernization. The sense of decline is only very weakly influenced by the socio-economic condition and not at all by vulnerability. On the contrary, declinism very strongly influences the sense of personal socio-economic vulnerability. Once people believe in societal decline they tend to feel personally threatened, regardless of their own socio-economic situation.

That model, estimating the reciprocal effect of vulnerability and declinism, is then used to estimate the effects of both those variables on populism (see table 2).

Table 2. Standardized total effect on populism. Inhabitants of Belgium, aged 25 to 35 (N=1951)

Total effects, standardized	
Declinism	0.41
<i>Socio-economic conditions</i>	
Social-economic vulnerability	0.09
Income	0.02
Past and present unemployment	0.05
Socio-economic position of the parents	-0.10
<i>Cultural environment and consumption</i>	
Level of education	-0.24
Preference for high brow mass media	-0.24
Preference for popular mass media	0.13
Language group (French)	0.09
Muslim versus other religions	-0.03
Health	-0.05
Gender	0.00

Even when controlling for different variables measuring the socio-economic conditions, the cultural environment and consumption, and health, the effect of declinism on populism is extremely strong ($\beta = .41$) (see table 2). Compared to the effect of declinism, the effects of socio-economic conditions on populism are very weak. The effects of income and unemployment experience are almost negligible; the effect of socio-economic vulnerability is very modest. The effects of socio-economic vulnerability, income and unemployment experience combined do not explain half as much as declinism. The model shows that besides declinism cultural variables (particularly education and media preference) explain much more of the variation in populism than do socio-economic conditions. The higher the level of education and the preference for high brow media as compared to more popular media, the lower the support for the populist propositions.

Populism is very strongly influenced by the feeling that society is in decline. People clearly blame the decline they see on the political elite and hence become susceptible to the siren call of the populists. The use of less popular (populist) media – the one's president Trump tends to describe as the producers of Fake News – helps to reduce the attractiveness of populism, as

does a higher level of education. The level of education does not play through its socio-economic covariates (for which the model controls) but most likely through its more specifically cultural or cognitive role, in influencing the selection of information and the way in which that information is interpreted.

The analysis of attitudes clearly revealed the extremely strong link between declinism and populism. In order to further explore how this link comes about – is used in political discourse and entrepreneurship – American presidential campaigns and particularly the inaugural addresses of the elected presidents were analysed.



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‘For about the last thirty years a central theme of American presidential campaigns has been decline.’

The populist uses of decline and declinism

For about the last thirty years a central theme of American presidential campaigns has indeed been decline. One can easily track its course in the inaugural addresses of the newly elected American presidents.

Kennedy and Clinton

Let us first go back in time, to an unambiguously pre-declinist age, the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy in 1961. Nicholas Lemann compared it to Bill Clinton’s first inaugural in 1993. The language of Kennedy, Lemann observes, is active, optimistic, forward looking. Full of words like “begin” and “new”. Thirty-two years later, Clinton refers to his famous Democratic predecessor, but his language is quite different, backwards looking, full of “renew”, “reborn”, “reinvent”, “revitalize”, “rebuild”, “rededicate”^[8]

Since the middle of the 1980s a sense of American decline has set in. While Kennedy could unabashedly say: “Together, let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the oceans depths...”, Clinton felt compelled to observe: “We have drifted, and that drifting has eroded our resources, fractured our economy and shaken our confidence.”

Obama and Trump

Sixteen years later, in 2009, in the first inaugural address of president Barack Obama, the theme of decline occupies central stage. As a matter of fact, Obama explicitly acknowledges declinism or belief in decline: “... a sapping of confidence across our land – a nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable...”. He calls upon his countrymen to choose “hope over fear” and to “(begin) the work of remaking America”.

Seven years later, during the presidential campaign of Donald Trump that call to arms is changed into “Make America great again”. And when Trump is sworn in as the 45th president, decline is yet again the central theme of his inaugural address. His use of the theme almost perfectly illustrates how populists exploit declinism to advance their cause.

Obama in 2009 described the crisis almost analytically: “Our nation is at war... our economy is badly weakened... Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many...”. Trump largely describes the same phenomena, but dramatizes them by approaching them from the perspective of the people suffering the consequences, and who are ready to blame someone for their pain: “... mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.”



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Barack Obama explicitly acknowledged declinism and when Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president, decline is yet again the central theme of his inaugural address.

While Obama looks for the causes of the crisis in greed, irresponsibility and a lack of courage to take the measures necessary to avoid it, Trump simply blames the political establishment. “For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the costs... Politicians prospered, but the jobs left and the factories closed... And while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across the land.”

Obama tries to outline the insights and resources with which to combat the crisis. “The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works ...”. “Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill... but this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control...”. “Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends – honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism – these things are old.”

Trump simply poses himself as the solution. “We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back your dreams.” And the context makes quite clear that the “we” is not the American people but, Trump, *pluralis majestatis*.

Declinism is translated into populism by dramatizing the decline, bringing it home and blaming the political establishment. In the authoritarian variant represented by Trump, the translation is completed by presenting the populist leader as the solution and as the person through whom government for and by the people is realized: “... today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another ... but we are transferring power from Washington D.C. and giving it back to you, the people.” “The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.”

Dealing with populism

It is obvious that dealing with populism implies dealing with declinism. In trying to do so, one should, first of all, realize that some roads are closed, some paths impossible.

It seems, first of all, impossible not to blame the presumed decline on the “establishment”, “the political elite”, “the system”, etc. The actual drift of the political system is in fact to do exactly that. Many politicians scramble to run as anti-establishment, anti-system candidates. They are likely to act as a kind of multiplier of populism.

It also seems extremely unlikely to counter the feeling of decline by claiming that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. It is of course true that the populations susceptible for populism today are the richest, most comfortable, most secure, healthiest and best educated the planet ever witnessed. Yet, that simply does not mean that there is no climate change, no globalization, no threat to the welfare state, no growing inequality, no irregular migration, no problems of integration, no refugee crisis, no instability in the Middle East and North Africa...

The only road open to deal with declinism, is to fully recognize all those challenges, but to acknowledge them as challenges, not as indicators of an inevitable decline. The real problem is the restoration of trust in collective action and politics, the restoration of voluntarism, of the belief that collectively we can meet those challenges. This minimally supposes a hard nosed, realistic recognition of the challenges, a convincing analysis of their nature, and a mobilizing vision of how to deal with them. That vision or narrative, to be successful, must of course show how and why the proposed solutions are consistent with the values that are dear to people and will in fact increase the probability they can live the lives they want to live.

Noten

[1] This article is largely based on: M. Elchardus, *Voorbij het narratief van neergang*, Lannoo, 2015.

[2] P. Wiles, 'A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism', in: Y. Mény & Y. Surré (eds), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave, 1969; C. Mudde, C. (2004) *The Populist Zeitgeist. Government and Opposition*, vol. 39 (2004), nr. 4, pp. 541-563; B. Stanley, 'The Thin Ideology of Populism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 13 (2008), nr. 1, pp. 95-110; P. Lucardie, 'Tussen establishment en extremisme: populistische partijen in Nederland en Vlaanderen' ('Between establishment and extremism: populist parties in the Netherlands and Flanders'), *Res Publica*, vol. 52 (2010), nr. 2, pp. 149-172.

[3] M. Elchardus & B. Spruyt, 'Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 51 (2016), nr. 1, pp. 111-133.

[4] As I write this, Emmanuel Macron, a product of the elite producing Sciences Po and the Ecole National d'Administration, a former functionary in the very select Inspection des Finances, a former banker with Rothschild, former assistant secretary general of the Elysée and former minister of Economy, Finance and Industry, runs as an anti-system candidate in the French presidential elections.

[5] E.g. H.-P. Kriesi, 'The Transformation of Cleavage Politics', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 33 (1998), pp. 165-185; H.-P. Kriesi, 'The Populist Challenge', *West European Politics*, vol. 37 (2014), pp. 361-378; H.G. Betz, 'Politics of Resentment: Right-Wing Radicalism in West Germany', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 23 (1990), nr. 1, pp. 45-60; W. Heitmeyer, *Was treibt die Gesellschaft Auseinander?*, Suhrkamp, 1997; M. Schroer, *Das Individuum in der Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp, 2000.

[6] These various indicators of socio-economic vulnerability form a scale with a Cronbach's alpha = .90.

[7] Analysing the 41 predictions concerning the future of society, it turned out that one should distinguish declinism concerning the environment on the one hand, and declinism concerning the economic, social and cultural aspects of society, on the other. A scale concerning the latter, which was used in the analysis presented here, comprises 27 items and has a Cronbach's alpha = .91.

[8] N. Lemann, 'Mysteries of the Middle Class', *New York Review of Books*, February 3, 1994.

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