



# Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective

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**To understand the link between social media and the recent rise of populism we need a global, comparative approach that carefully scrutinises claims about the direct effects of new media technologies on political change.**

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Since Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016, a tidal wave of academic and journalistic commentary linking social media with the rise of populism has swept through the Western world. Most commentators to date have narrowly focused on recent events in the United States, Britain and continental Europe, with the odd nod at Latin America.

Yet if we really wish to develop a general explanation of that link, we need greater geographical breadth and historical depth. Otherwise, we would be reproducing the double parochialism of time and place displayed by much of the international media on this question.

Six issues demand urgent attention as we collectively search for a global theory of the link between social media and populism, namely: the origins of populism; ideology and populism; the rise of theocratic populism; non-populist politicians use of social media; the embedding of social media in larger communication systems; and the vexed question of how to ascertain (social) media effects. Let us briefly examine each issue in turn.

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## The tangled roots of populism

A number of commentators, including the digital culture scholar Paolo Gerbaudo, have blamed the global rise of populism on "the failure of the neoliberal system". Some authors add to this a second potential cause: a destabilised cultural identity. Thus, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have recently gauged the relative weight of cultural values versus economic insecurity as predictors of electoral support for populist parties. They find strong evidence for the "cultural backlash thesis" trumping economic concerns. In other words, voting for a populist party is "a retro reaction by once-predominant sectors of the population to progressive value change". In Europe and the United States, these are generally older, less educated, white voters.

While this may well be the case in the West, if we look further afield, other potential factors offer themselves. For instance, in societies with high crime rates such as the Philippines, Brazil, or Mexico, a 'populism of fear' can sometimes prevail over strictly economic or cultural concerns. During ethnographic research in the Philippines, for example, the sociologist Nicole Curato found that Rodrigo Duterte's electoral success was largely due to his 'penal populism'. This is a political strategy built on societal fears and calls for punishment of the perceived culprits.

The same applies to the fear of terrorism, which is unevenly distributed around the world (e.g. high in the West and in the Middle East; low in Latin America and the Caribbean). Right-wing populist leaders in countries repeatedly struck by terrorists will often bank on this concern for their political fortunes.

In most countries, then, the roots of neo-populism are likely to be thick tangles of economic, cultural, existential, and other factors yet to be thoroughly

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investigated. These factors are not always directly traceable to "the neoliberal system" except at a high level of abstraction.

### **Left, right and centre**

Gerbaudo has suggested that leftist and rightist variants of populism share an anti-establishment stance, a claim to defend ordinary people and an opposition to some of the maxims of neoliberalism. There are two problems with this claim.

First, there is a missing middle here: centrist populism. This intermediate space matters a great deal because its occupiers are typically favoured precisely by the very capitalist interests that Gerbaudo is concerned about, for example, by the influential, pro-market *The Economist* – see, for instance, [their support](#) for Emmanuel Macron's 2017 campaign in France. It is no coincidence that centrist populists are often accused of being opportunistic technocrats who borrow some of the populist rhetoric and blend it with a pro-market language of job flexibility, entrepreneurship and economic growth.

The 2017 French presidential elections are a case in point. All three positions on the populist scale were taken as the campaigns gathered momentum, namely, leftist (Mélenchon), rightist (Le Pen) and centrist (Macron). The eventual winner, Macron, presented himself as a political outsider but was, in fact, closer to the French establishment than he cared to admit. As Fabio Bordignon has rightly [noted](#), Macron developed a highly effective "anti-populist populism" – or "soft populism" – that capitalised on the current anti-establishment climate in France. A second example of centrist populism is Albert Rivera, the young leader of Ciudadanos, currently Spain's fourth political

party. It is telling that Rivera's rhetoric, programme and even physique bear an uncanny resemblance to those of Macron.

Or take the case of Indonesia's 2014 presidential campaign which pitted the centrist, technocratic populist Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi, a middle-class entrepreneur by trade, against a member of the country's ruling elite: the retired army general Prabowo Subianto. While Prabowo's campaign was bankrolled by his billionaire brother, Jokowi relied on a robust track record as a mayor for his strong grassroots support. Both candidates made extensive – and creative – use of social media to reach the country's younger urban voters. In Jokowi's case, this included countering a "black campaign" in which he was falsely accused of being a Christian of Chinese descent (in fact, he is a Javanese Muslim).

### **Theocratic populism on the rise**

The Indonesian example brings us nicely to another important expression of populism excluded from most Western discussions, theocratic populism. Gerbaudo argues that populism cuts across ideological distinctions because of its 'transversal political logic' centred on the principle of "popular sovereignty".

However, this notion does not apply to the numerous forms of theocratic populism found around the world today. For theocrats, sovereignty resides with God, not with the people. This strain of populism has been on the rise globally since the 1970s, especially in the Muslim world and in Christian-majority countries across Africa and the Americas (where neo-Pentecostalism has flourished), as well as among Hindus in India and Buddhists in Burma, for instance. A clear exponent of theocratic populism from the Global Southwest is the new mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Marcelo Crivella of the Brazilian Republican

Party. Crivella is a bishop of the Universal Church, the largest neo-Pentecostal organisation in Brazil. His support base came from the poorer neighbourhoods of Rio where evangelical churches have made major inroads in recent decades. His voters' convictions, says Juliano Fiori, were 'coloured by paranoia and post-factual Internet propaganda'. More recently, the evangelical churches have played a crucial role in the election of the right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia the key struggle today is not between leftist and rightist forms of populism, but rather between technocratic (centrist) and theocratic (rightist) populism. Thus, on 4 September 2016, a mass demonstration was held in central Jakarta against the incumbent governor, known as "Ahok", who is an ethnic Chinese Christian. Ahok is a technocrat and a close ally of President Jokowi. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and other hardline Muslim organisations exhorted Muslims not to allow a non-believer, a *kafir*, to govern them. Ahok made the mistake of mentioning the Qur'an during an official speech, pointing out that Muslims had been lied to about not being allowed to vote for a non-Muslim. A doctored version of his comments was widely shared on social media, rendering his comments 'offensive' to many Muslims. In May 2017, he was found guilty of blasphemy and given a two-year prison sentence.

### **Social media is not solely a populist tool**

Gerbaudo and other observers argue that social media outlets have provided a platform against the (neo)liberal elites not only to right-wing populists like Donald Trump or Marine Le Pen but also to leftist populists like Bernie Sanders or Pablo Iglesias.

Yet populists are hardly the only political actors who are social media savvy. Indeed, the most celebrated early adopter of social media for a political cause was none other than the cerebral, Ivy League educated, non-populist Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign. More recently, the same campaign team credited with returning Obama to the White House in 2012 also helped Spain's Conservative (PP) leader, Mariano Rajoy, secure an unlikely victory during the 2016 general elections. Led by the American political advisor Jim "The Fixer" Messina, Rajoy's team used social media analytics to target carefully selected Facebook users who had previously voted for the centrist populist party Ciudadanos. By contrast, the left-wing populist party Podemos concentrated its efforts on Twitter where it had a clear advantage over the Conservatives.

A similar social media split was evident during the Indonesian presidential elections of 2014, where the establishment candidate, Prabowo, amassed the highest number of fans on Facebook, while his non-elite, populist rival, Jokowi, had far more Twitter followers. Both candidates made sophisticated use of a wide repertoire of social media tools.

### **Populist communication: twice hybrid**

It would be an error to regard social media as a realm apart from the rest of the media environment. Instead, social media are an integral *part of* the total media system. Andrew Chadwick has theorised the emergence of "[hybrid media systems](#)" that encompass legacy and social media. In such systems, social and mass media feed off one another in recursive loops of what I call 'viral reality' whereby populist leaders and their followers co-create content, often through hashtags that straddle the social versus mass media divide and blur the lines between news and opinion.

For instance, the telegenic leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, skyrocketed from obscurity to fame because he pursued a highly effective hybrid media (or transmedia) strategy with a strong television footprint, and not a purely social media one. Precisely the same transmedia logic operates across Indonesia's rambunctious hybrid media system, as we saw earlier in the case of the governor of Jakarta, the technocratic populist Ahok, whose theocratic enemies succeeded in viralising a doctored video of him allegedly insulting Islam.

Moreover, just as social media are nested within larger hybrid media systems, these systems are themselves part of even larger *communication systems* that include transport and telecommunications networks as well as public spaces like mosques, churches, squares, slums, and so on. In these differentiated sites, communication comes in many forms, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, mass, and public communication, both online and offline. We must also consider marked cultural differences in communicative practices. For instance, the significant part played by Friday mosque gatherings in the political communication of Muslim countries.

Of particular importance to most populists is the ability to demonstrate to their supporters their regular physical presence 'on the ground', among ordinary people. In Malaysia, this direct presence is known as *turun padang*, while in Indonesia the technocratic populist president, Jokowi, perfected the art of *blusukan* – a supposedly impromptu visit to a locality aimed at communicating directly with the populace. Applying this same logic, in September 2016 the Philippines' 'penal populist' president, Duterte, cancelled an international trip to speedily reach Davao City after a bomb blast.

## **Presumed media effects**



Finally, we come to the most intractable of all problems in media and communication studies: the perennial question of media effects. Just because a populist – or indeed a non-populist – social media campaign preceded an electoral victory, we cannot assume that this triumph was a result of that campaign. We often hear claims about the decisive role of social media in populist campaigns such as Trump’s presidential election or the Brexit referendum, most recently in connection to the [Cambridge Analytica](#) scandal. But similar claims are often made about the success of establishment candidates like Obama in 2012 or Rajoy in 2016. The trajectory of the political strategist Jim ‘The Fixer’ Messina offers a cautionary tale. As we have just seen, Messina is widely credited with securing the Obama and Rajoy victories thanks to his social media analytics ‘wizardry’. But we should not forget that Messina and his team also advised the Prime Minister of Italy, Matteo Renzi, on an unsuccessful referendum campaign ending in his resignation, as well as the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, whose 2017 elections results were – to say the least – lacklustre.

## Conclusion

In sum, to understand the link between social media and the recent rise of populism we need a global, comparative approach that carefully scrutinises claims about the effects of new media technologies on political change. Future thinking and action on social media and populism must consider a larger set of factors and cultural contexts than those normally considered, while carefully checking reports about the direct impact of social media analytics, filter bubbles or fake news on populist successes.

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## About the author

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