

Winning elections against populists

Populism is a world-wide phenomenon, with thousands of articles, books, and podcasts discussing it. But very few focus on how to win elections against them. Surely, this is a most important practical question to answer. Populist attitudes to democracy are encapsulated by Erdogan's well-known phrase about democracy being, "...like a tram you get off once you've arrived at the stop you want." Once in power, the mission is to retain it at all costs. The media fall into the hands of cronies, judges are emasculated, electoral authorities are corrupted, and even opponents are imprisoned. The longer they remain in power, the greater the difficulty of removing them. The opposition must win before it becomes impossible to do so. Therein lies the urgency.

We thought we could make a contribution by studying elections where populists were defeated, in the hope that this would aid others facing populists in elections. To see how this might be done, we identified 15 elections where populists had been defeated. We started this work in February 2022 and reported at the end of September last year. Cases included national elections, presidential elections, governorships of provinces, and mayoral contests. The countries included Slovakia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Venezuela, Chile, and India. For each of these, we read as many press reports and articles as we could find. Although the basic story is usually the same, often little details would be in each article that was missing from the others. This is why we read widely.

Since our report, there have been recent elections in Turkey. So, we went to Istanbul for a week and talked to those campaigning against Erdogan's AKP. We have also spoken to one of the leaders of the Bulgarian opposition and the victorious governor of the Barinas province in Venezuela, plus campaign advisers in Slovakia and Hungary. But our investigation was mainly written material. It is clear to us that populists are a special type of competitor. To defeat them demands different strategies and tactics. Of course, each election has its own unique context, but they do have things in common.

The populist will typically win 35 to 45% of the vote at the start, while the nearest party gets 20% and others get 8%, 7%, and 6% respectively (the US is obviously an exception). So, the first thing that is evident is that parties must cooperate or lose. It's as simple as that; going it alone guarantees failure. Boycotts are pointless. But parties are very reluctant to cooperate; it's very difficult as they have differing political aims. It seems to take 3 or 4 defeats, 10/15/20 years, to be desperate enough to do it.

Cooperation can and has worked in Turkey's mayoral elections, Barinas province in Venezuela, the Czech Republic, Israel, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Chile. One might think that cooperation is so obvious and a lesson learnt, but not so. Last year's Uttar Pradesh election saw Modi's BJP win against a divided opposition. He would have lost had they united. But Modi has only been in power since 2014, so maybe a couple more defeats are required! The problem with that is it might be too late to leave any realistic chance of winning.

An outstanding example of cooperation was the coalition of 16 parties that overthrew Pinochet in Chile (1988). But these were left-wing parties, so it was not so hard to cooperate. Bringing together more diverse parties is going to be harder. The danger is that coalitions can't agree on policies except the populist's overthrow. This is not an attractive proposition for voters. A good example is Hungary (2022): the only thing they could agree on was their dislike of Orban; they couldn't agree on any policies. Consequently, they failed spectacularly. The unity candidate polled 32%, but the sum of individual parties was 48% four years before!

Coalitions may not last long, but even in a short time, they can start to undo harm. To succeed, coalitions must have the right coalition leader for electoral appeal. Leaders are always important but particularly important when fronting diverse coalitions. A 'clean skin' coalition leader has huge advantages. It's not hard to see why: the logic of a coalition is that the sum of the votes exceeds those of the populist. But the parties can be of the left, right, green, soft, hard, center, etc. The danger is that the head of the largest party demands leadership of the coalition even if he can't maximize the vote.

A left-wing supporter might be asked to vote for someone in the coalition who is a hard right-wing person who has been around forever and is thoroughly disliked. Whereas an attractive, clean-slate candidate gets around this issue.

Another characteristic of populists is the lying and the virulent attacks they make. We've been very impressed with the way Slovakia's Zuzana Caputova dealt with them. Zuzana Caputova was an environmental campaigning lawyer new to politics. In a few short months, she went from being a complete unknown to president of Slovakia.

She was accused of being a supporter of immigration, with claims that immigrants rape and murder European women. She refused to retaliate, saying in an interview, "I have absolute faith in the ability and maturity of Slovak voters to distinguish between what is true and what is not."

She was attacked for her support of LGBT rights. Her defense appealed to Christian values in a strongly Christian country. She stated, "I am a religious believer and a spiritual person, and I don't think Christian values are contradictory to liberal stances. I rely on traditional Christian values, such as compassion and love for our neighbors, and the people who belong to a minority. I would consider it a positive if this country united."

She answered the many attacks made against her with statements like these. In a Christian country, it is hard to counter this sentiment. She calmly put her case for strengthening the judiciary and tackling corruption. She was accused of being Jewish (which she isn't) and being supported by George Soros. Specific untruths were instantly rebutted: for the record, not tit for tat.

Her calm demeanor impressed voters, and she won with a convincing majority. All this is in sharp contrast to Hillary Clinton in 2016. She got into a spat with Trump that went on for weeks, distracting from her campaign message.

There are other reasons for opposition leaders not to attack a populist leader. Attacking confirms the populist narrative of the elite attacking the champion of the people. The leader they voted for, so attacking him is indirectly attacking them. It's counterproductive.

Populists use powerful negative motivators, so the opposition needs powerful ones as well. They campaign on "us versus them." Their whole point is to destroy trust in the governing system (which they call elites). They stoke fear of immigrants and minorities. They claim their opponents are the elite, who are self-serving, corrupt, and incompetent. They maintain that a strong leader like them is needed, and they campaign on what they call cultural war issues. These are all powerful motivators.

So, what's to be done? Well, populists have weaknesses. They are usually corrupt and egregiously violate the rule of law. Corruption and fraud particularly enrage voters.

Four Eastern European countries were able to mobilize this repugnance. In Bulgaria, Prime Minister Borisov and his ministers were implicated in corruption scandals. In the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Babis was mired in allegations of corruption. These abuses led to widespread street protests, making the issues salient.

In Bulgaria, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev (known as the 2 Harvards) toured the country, saying, "We will re-distribute the money which the bad guys have been stealing from you up till now." In Slovakia, a journalist investigating corruption was murdered. Zuzana Caputova capitalized on the outrage. She won the presidency using the slogan, "Stand up to evil."

But these motivators are only available when the press is free enough for these abuses to become known. For Hungary, Venezuela, and obviously Russia, this is not the case.

So, what motivators are available to the opposition? In most cases, the only other thing available is the concerns of everyday life: good jobs, healthcare, good schools, and affordable housing.

In Istanbul mayoral elections and Venezuela's Barinas province, these issues were all powerful motivators for voters yearning for a better life. In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee's TMC party defeated Modi's BJP. A wide range of welfare schemes aimed at different targets contributed to this win. Schemes were aimed specifically at women, unemployed young citizens, minorities, and widows.

One might think that these are weak tools against fear and hatred, but they can be enough. The US 2018 midterms provided an illustration of how powerful day-to-day concerns can be.

As the election approached, Trump went into overdrive stoking fears about a caravan of migrants moving towards the US from Central America. He sent 5,200 troops to the US-Mexico border. They laid barbed wire to repel the group's entry. Whereas the Democrats focused on health.

Many older voters, predominantly Trump supporters, have pre-existing conditions that preclude them from medical insurance. They worry about these issues. The Democrats were more convincing in the protection they were offering. Consequently, sufficient numbers of Republicans switched sides.

The most interesting of the cases studied were the 2019 mayoral elections in Turkey, particularly Istanbul. The context is that Erdogan won power in 2002. He won again in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2018. Each time the opposition had been divided.

By 2019, the opposition had had enough; it was time to box clever. They came together in Istanbul and Ankara in a coalition to oppose Erdogan's AKP in the mayoral elections. We will discuss Istanbul, but there were similar approaches in the other Turkish cities.

The opposition CHP and its coalition partners recognized the importance of the leader. Their voter research showed that the leader with the most appeal needed to have the following characteristics:

1. The right experience (in this case, local experience)
2. Be a clean skin with no political baggage
3. Should be someone on his way up, a man of the future!

Ekrem Imamoglu was chosen; he fitted the criteria. Choosing a leader this way is very much a voter-centered approach. It is simply the marketing principle applied to the political realm.

The opposition CHP had learned a thing or two about competing with Erdogan. They had learned not to attack him. They had belittled him in national elections the year before. This had been portrayed by Erdogan's AKP as the elite attacking a man of the people.

In the 2019 election, Erdogan called them terrorists, criminals, atheists, and traitors. But like Suzanna Caputova, Imamoglu turned the other cheek and did not answer back. His approach was Love Thy Neighbor. He went into AKP strongholds and engaged with the AKP voters in conversation, demonstrating that he was striving to address the common problems citizens face: housing, cost of education, transport, rubbish collection, and other difficulties of urban life.

He demonstrated active listening, open-mindedness, and sympathetic understanding for their situation. All of this was filmed and distributed on social media. In his speeches, he showed empathy, humor, and a problem-solving attitude. He also demonstrated his Muslim faith. He himself is religious, he goes to Friday prayers, and he fasts. A video that went viral showed him reciting verses from the Quran. He made public appearances with his headscarf-wearing mother. All very important as the CHP had a reputation for being militantly secular.

The strategy can be summed up as addressing populist voters over the heads of their leader, showing deep and sincere respect for AKP voters, and empathy for their situation. Engage in dialogue, be problem-solving, and be humble. This was, in any case, Imamoglu's natural style of campaigning.

In contrast, the AKP was all negative and full of hatred, whereas the opposition campaign was optimistic, problem-solving, and inclusive. Three of their slogans: "The end of the march is spring," "If there is Imamoglu, there is a solution," and "We are all on the same local bus."

In 2014, the CHP won 40% of the vote. In 2019, this had risen to 48.5%, marginally ahead of the AKP. Erdogan disallowed the election, but in the subsequent rerun, the opposition won by 55%.

To see why this case is so important, we need to take a step back and ask: Why are populist voters so angry? Why the adoration of Trump at his rallies? The analyst, DW Winnicott, warned that people who feel "dropped" strike back. I quote: "That's the populist moment when humiliated people lash out in support of demagogues, promising them dignity."

In her book **Strangers in Their Own Land**, Arlie Russell Hochschild spent five years embedded with Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, making friends and interviewing them. She observed them as they became involved with the Trump campaign. The very clear take-out was that Trump voters felt ignored, looked down on, patronized, and humiliated by Democrats, which fueled enormous resentment.

And this is the same in Turkey and really all over the world! For years, CHP had been on a 'civilizing mission' directed at what they claimed were backward religious people. With the target audience feeling like this, it is easy to see why populist voters need to be charmed, listened to, and approached with humility, not arrogance. Above all, they must be shown genuine respect and empathy. This is the way for the opposition to gain a hearing and not be rejected out of hand. This is also the way to rebuild trust.

That's why the mayoral elections in Turkey were so successful and why they are a template for opposing populists around the world. Our conclusion from the study is that it is possible to beat populists in elections, but parties need to adopt a wartime attitude and present a united front with an electable leader. They need bread-and-butter policies that are highly motivating to specific target

groups. They need to recognize the state of mind of populist voters and to campaign in a way that reaches out, showing respect, empathy, and understanding. This is the way to build trust. It should also be positive, problem-solving, and optimistic.

However, all of this is a HUGE ASK. It requires sacrifices that political parties and leaders inevitably find difficult and are very reluctant to make. Sometimes, an opposition is sufficiently desperate enough to make these compromises. In 2021, the Israeli opposition was desperate enough. In order to form a coalition, Yair Lapid allowed Naftali Bennett to become prime minister for the first two years. Lapid's grouping had won three times as many seats as Bennett's. A very selfless act, as there was a good chance the parliament would not last long enough for him to ever become prime minister. And, indeed, it didn't!

To defeat populists, these sorts of selfless acts are necessary. It was missing in Turkey this year. The leader needed to be someone who met the criteria used in the 2019 Istanbul election, someone like Imamoglu or like the mayor of Ankara. But the leader of the largest party became the Presidential candidate. Before the leader was announced, the opposition was at 60%. After, they were neck and neck! It could have been a different result with a more electable candidate.

As we noted earlier, it seems to take three or four election defeats before parties are willing to make the compromises necessary to win. We wonder whether the victories in Istanbul and other cities in 2019 reset the desperation clock. Hubris returned; they felt they were going to win anyway!

Let's recognize IT'S HARD. It goes against the grain of tribal politics for very different shades of political opinion to come together with a common program (and take their supporters with them). It requires superhuman qualities to bring parties together in a coalition and then stand aside for a more junior yet more electorally attractive person. It sticks in the craw not to respond to the taunts of the populist loudmouths.

BUT all this must be done before time has allowed the populist leader to become so entrenched, enabling him to so corrupt the system as to make it impossible to remove him. Henry Kissinger observed, I quote, that "power is the ultimate aphrodisiac" and "once acquired, it is never voluntarily relinquished." So it will always be difficult to be rid of these self-regarding populists. It will require an iron discipline to do so.