
Timing note: This paper was written before the upcoming Indian election in April/May. And seven months out from the November 2024 U.S. vote.

Seven Lessons for Winning Elections Against Populists

David Cowan and Sir Chris Powell

winningagainstpopulists.com

In an era when populists threaten the very fabric of democracy, the need for effective voter engagement strategies to win against them is more pressing than ever. Yet, comprehensive analyses on defeating populists at the ballot box are surprisingly scarce. This work, leveraging the over 40 years of advertising and marketing expertise of David Cowan and Sir Chris Powell, begins to bridge this gap by examining populist defeats across various countries through the lens of their discipline.

The work has entailed an extensive review of press reports and articles about the various campaigns, alongside AI-generated translations of Facebook and YouTube campaign ads. Speeches by leaders were also analysed to further grasp the messaging. Of particular value was hard voter panel and exit poll data. And the valuable input of country experts.

By identifying common patterns and unique tactics in these populist defeats, the booklet provides actionable insights for political strategists, campaigners, and anyone invested in the health of the democratic processes. It is a call to action as well as a guide to understanding and overcoming the populist challenge.

Executive Summary

Populists endanger democracy and must be defeated in elections, but there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for winning against them – country variations are too great for that. However, gathering evidence from around the world can show what has (and has not) worked in specific cases, and these can work again, when the circumstances are similar.

Seven lessons are identified to help political parties in their struggle.

Lesson 1. Anti-populists must cooperate much more effectively

In two-party systems, like the U.S. and U.K., this means that the different wings of the party need to cooperate and present a united front.

However, most political systems are not like this. Quite often the populist party is dominant and competing against fragmented competition. To stand any chance of winning, these smaller parties need to find better ways to cooperate in coalition. This is particularly difficult in first-past-the-post systems or presidential elections where parties with different ideologies have to agree a motivating offer to voters ahead of the election. But, without this, the coalition will lose.

Opponents of populism need to pay urgent attention to effective coalition building. This requires compromise and sacrifice and persuading anti-populist party supporters that getting some of what they want is better than getting none of what they want and permanent opposition.

Example. The successful 2021 coalition led by Sergio Garrido in Barinas Province, Venezuela. (*See page 6.*)

Lesson 2. Leader electability must be given a much higher priority

An attractive and charismatic leader is particularly important to compete with the, usually, bombastic populist. An appealing leader is particularly important in leading a coalition against populists, as they need to retain voters from parties with different ideologies to support the new group. Whether leading a coalition or not, whatever the internal political difficulties, electability needs to have a much higher priority in choosing the leader. They should have a minimum of political baggage and be seen by voters as a leader on the way up – a leader of the future.

Example. Gergely Karácsony, Mayor of Budapest, successfully led a coalition in 2019. *(See page 8.)*

Lesson 3. In the age of populism, the model for winning elections has changed

Traditionally, in most countries, elections were decided by voters changing sides. Today, populists have polarised electorates and voters are more and more members of calcified voter blocks and difficult to persuade. Consequently, there are now fewer and fewer swing voters, and the mobilisation of voters who lean anti-populist is the major objective. Fortunately, the evidence suggests that, in many countries, populist supporters are a minority, a noisy minority, but a minority nevertheless. Consequently, an overarching strategic aim of campaigns against populists should be to draw in the anti-populist majority that might otherwise not have voted. And, to do this, by ensuring the election is seen as critically important, close and even existential.

Example. Poland 2023: where previous abstainers voted out the populist government. *(See page 12.)*

Lesson 4. Caution in attacking the populist leader

Show caution in attacking the populist leader and avoid tit-for-tat because this can harden support for the populist and distract from the anti-populist message, pulling the campaign onto their agenda. Although difficult, it is important to resist the temptation to react to populists' provocations.

Example. Hillary Clinton failed to do this in 2016 and got sucked into a disadvantageous tit-for-tat with Donald Trump. *(See page 14.)*

However, for specific reasons this general caution is less important to Biden v. Trump.

Lesson 5. Exploit the populist vulnerabilities that voters care about

Once populists gain power, they set about undermining the institutions of democracy. Unfortunately, for most voters, worthy things like democracy or human rights are rarely key issues. Anti-populists need to identify the things populists do, or have done, that large groups of voters care about, and exploit these in their campaigns. Corruption and abortion are obvious candidates but the extreme nature and arrogance of populist leaders and their treatment of the economy and other social

issues can provide opportunities to be weaponized. This may seem obvious but there are examples of oppositions attacking the wrong things. The important consideration is traction with large numbers of voters.

Example. Bulgaria in 2021: a successful anti-corruption campaign. *(See page 17.)*

Lesson 6. Focus attention on real life concerns of voters

Populists whip up and weaponize societal anxiety and have little interest in the bread-and-butter concerns of daily life. The government's duty is to make life better for its citizens which populists fail to do. This vision should play a significant role in the opposition's campaign against the populist. There should be a clear agenda on 'felt' bread-and-butter needs.

Example. U.S. midterms in 2018, where a focus on healthcare proved more powerful than Trump's anti-immigrant fear-mongering. *(See page 19.)*

Lesson 7. Show populist voters respect

The emotional driver behind the populist supporters' anger is injured pride. They are enraged by the condescension and disdain of the educated elite. Show up, be respectful, empathetic and listen to them. Identify their needs and formulate policies to address them.

Ultimately, the populist threat will only diminish if the anger is reduced. A combination of respect and practical policies can help to do this.

Example. Istanbul mayoral elections in 2019 and 2024 where Ekrem İmamoğlu reached out to AKP voters. *(See page 22.)*

Introduction

As many commentators have observed, 2024 is a record-breaking year for elections with 70 countries involved in national elections, presidential elections and other important regional contests. Around half the adult population of the whole world will be involved.

Many countries have populists in contention. Of particular interest are India, Mexico, the 27 states of the European Union and of course the United States.

Before discussing how these populists and others can be defeated, some observations about populism are in order.

What is populism?

Populism, unlike ideologies such as capitalism or socialism, doesn't offer distinct answers to major political questions regarding economic organisation and distribution. It thrives both in capitalist and socialist settings, adapting to different economic models, which is why it's often referred to as a 'thin ideology.'⁽¹⁾

At its core, populism is a strategy for winning and retaining power, primarily through electoral success.⁽²⁾ It operates by dividing the nation into 'us' versus 'them', aiming to rally the majority under its banner. Populist leaders, such as Trump, Modi, and Erdoğan, employ tactics that stoke fear, grievances, and hatred. They demonise minorities, exploit fears of immigration undermining jobs and national culture, amplify grievances about the 'true' citizens being exploited by elites, and direct hostility towards political foes, accusing them of malice and incompetence. Their campaigns are marked by personal attacks, lies, and conspiracy theories that often dominate national discourse, painting a picture of elite failure and a nation on the brink of crisis, desperately in need of a strong leader.⁽³⁾

Has it peaked?

During the Covid pandemic, there was a noticeable decline in support for populist parties, sparking hope that their failure to effectively govern had signalled a turning point in populist movements.⁽⁴⁾ At the start of 2023, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change reported a significant drop in the global population living under populist rule, from 2.5 billion in 2020 to 1.7 billion.⁽⁵⁾ This decline was brought about by notable

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events such as Donald Trump's defeat and Rodrigo Duterte's exit from office due to term limits, alongside a shift towards more moderate leaders in South America and the narrow defeat of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. These developments were seen as positive signs.

However, since the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change's report in January 2023, there have been mixed outcomes: Poland's Law and Justice party (PiS) has been defeated, Erdoğan has won another five years in Türkiye, Fico has made a comeback in Slovakia, and Wilders secured the largest vote share in the Netherlands. Moreover, the looming presence of Donald Trump highlights the ongoing challenge. The resurgence of these figures suggests that democracy has not yet gained the upper hand over populism.

The U.S. has always been the shining city on the hill, the most powerful country in the world inspiring others to live up to its ideals. And of course, it supports other democracies. When nations act undemocratically, or are likely to, the U.S. makes its disapproval known. For example, behind-the-scenes it helped head off a Bolsonaro coup after the Brazilian 2022 election.⁽⁶⁾ All that would go should there be a Trump victory, weakening democracy around the world.

So, the stakes are high – very high.

The trouble with populism

Its gravest flaw is vividly captured by Erdoğan's infamous phrase:

“Democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off.”⁽⁷⁾

The urgency of winning elections

Once in power, the populist mission is to retain it at all costs. They seek to control the media, courts, election authorities and to corrupt the business community to support them.^{(8), (9)} And, as time goes on, it becomes harder and harder to win elections to remove them.

In a recent FT article,⁽¹⁰⁾ it was said that experts consider: “10 years to be the longest period of democratic backsliding that a state can endure, after which the country enters into a black hole from where it is almost impossible to get out.” So, there is huge urgency, many countries are already at this threshold, and some are long past it.

Although populists are anti-democratic in their actions, they do crave the legitimacy that elections provide. So, they hold them, although sometimes other methods force them out. Occasionally, demonstrations against their rule are so strong that they are compelled to resign. In Sri Lanka, protests drove Gotabaya Rajapaksa from office, the same happened in Slovakia in 2018. And there are examples of this in South America. But, the main means of defeating them must be elections. So how can they be won?

Searching for what works

The method adopted was to study how populists have been defeated to find common patterns, but also to pay attention to unique details. These unique details might seem like one-off instances, but they could reveal a general strategy that can be used in other situations. From this, seven lessons are identified that have different degrees of relevance depending on circumstance.

Lesson 1. Anti-populists must cooperate much more effectively

When populists are in power, they are often the largest party by far, opposed by a fragmented opposition, and this situation has continued over several electoral cycles.

In Türkiye, when Erdoğan came to power in 2002, he won with 34% of the vote, the second party trailed with 19%. The third, fourth and fifth got 9%, 8% and 7% respectively. This happened again in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. In India, Modi's BJP was by far the largest party in 2014 and 2019 and faced even more scattered opposition. This situation pertains in Hungary, Venezuela and other countries.

Divide and rule is a well-known strategy for retaining power but for many years populists have faced the already-divided. No need to lift a finger, their political opponents were successfully squabbling amongst themselves leaving the populists to rule.

At last, oppositions are waking up.

Political parties are appreciating the old adage: "We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." They are realising that if they cooperate there is a chance that the sum of the votes of the separate parties will secure victory. But why has it taken so long? The likelihood is that their differences in political belief create an intense aversion to compromise and cooperation but as the years tick by the frustration builds and builds until eventually that aversion is overwhelmed. This can take 10, 15 or even 20 years out of power before parties are willing to get together.

However, even when they do get together, their different ideologies remain and these have profound implications for how they are able to cooperate and campaign. The greatest problem occurs in multi-party systems where the parties have to agree a manifesto before the election. This happens in first-past-the-post (FPTP) parliamentary, presidential and mayoral elections where fragmented opposition parties face the dominant populist. The coalition problem is much less acute in proportional systems because parties win their own seats, and then haggle over policies afterwards, as in the 2023 Polish election.

Of course, countries like the U.S. and U.K. don't have this difficulty, although they have to negotiate within their own big tents to agree their electoral offer.

In the cases reviewed in this paper, there are notable successes where parties were able to agree a common platform before the election. The 2019 mayoral elections in Istanbul⁽¹¹⁾ and later that year, the local elections in Hungary⁽¹²⁾ are examples of diverse political parties coming together and defeating the populist government candidate. Also, in Barinas Province in Venezuela, the internationally recognised opposition coalition joined forces with emerging centrist groups to create a grand coalition. This coalition achieved a victory so substantial that the Maduro government was unable to change the outcome.

So far so good, but can these sub-national election victories be replicated at a national level? The Hungarian election of 2022 illustrates the difficulties.

The Hungarian election of 2022

Buoyed by their success in the mayoral elections in Budapest and other parts of the country, the opposition formed the United for Hungary coalition, consisting of six parties, the five that had cooperated successfully in the mayoral elections plus one. The problem was the coalition was a diverse range of parties with widely different ideologies. Unsurprisingly, they couldn't agree a comprehensive policy agenda.⁽¹³⁾

The two things that united the coalition were their hatred of Viktor Orbán and their desire to undo the constitutional and legislative changes that he had introduced. But these issues are not ones that preoccupy most voters – how was this potential government going to improve the lives of Hungarian citizens? There was no answer to this question.

In the end, the United for Hungary coalition suffered a crushing defeat. The 2018 combined vote share of the six parties had been 48%, this fell to 36% for the coalition. Fidesz, Orbán's party, increased its number of seats and won an even greater super-majority, enough to make more changes to the constitution should Orbán desire.

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Local elections are different

So, what happened to all that optimism and hope that cooperation and coalition was the way forward? It had worked in Budapest and Istanbul, so why not nationally? The answer is that national and local elections are different. At local level, it is easier for diverse political parties because collaboration and coalition are possible based on shared goals for the local community. They can focus on education, transport, keeping the streets safe, or simply picking up the trash. The contentious national issues that parties on the left and right disagree about can be avoided. Also, the populist play, of the downtrodden people fighting the corrupt elite, has less resonance in local matters.

This was something that the architects of the successful Istanbul strategy were very clear about. In their speeches and their instructions to party workers ‘high-politics’ were to be avoided at all cost and the focus was to be exclusively on the local needs of the Istanbul citizens.⁽¹¹⁾

Of course, all elections can be an opportunity for voters to express dissatisfaction with the current government.

What’s to be done in national elections?

The coalition must strike a balance in its breadth; too wide, and reaching policy consensus becomes a challenge, as seen in Hungary. However, it must be broad enough to secure the votes needed to overcome the populist threat. Finding common ground is crucial; without it, victory is unlikely.

Sacrifice needed

An outstanding example of personal sacrifice occurred in Israel in 2021. After three inconclusive elections, seven diverse parties agreed to form a coalition because they were determined to prevent Netanyahu returning to power. An opposition politician Yair Lapid, whose political group won more than three times the seats of Naftali Bennett’s, agreed to let Bennett serve as Prime Minister for the first two years of the term. This compromise was crucial for securing enough support among the parties to form the coalition.^{(14), (15)} This was quite a selfless act, as there was a good chance the parliament would not last long enough for him to become prime minister and it didn’t.

For coalitions to defeat populists, politicians sometimes need to make sacrifices in order for the parties to agree.

Lesson 2. Leader electability must be given a much higher priority

Populist parties are usually led by charismatic leaders: Trump, Erdoğan and Modi are clear examples. It shouldn't need saying, but oppositions opposing populists must field politically attractive leaders too and for obvious reasons. The leader embodies the party's values, policies, and vision for the future and successful leaders are able to connect with voters. This is universally true, but it is particularly important for anti-populists to have attractive, high-profile leaders to successfully compete for share-of-voice with brash populists.

There were several of these in the studied sample of elections where populists were defeated. Macron in France is a stand-out example, but also in Bulgaria, where Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, who were nicknamed the 'Two Harvards' (because of their postgraduate studies there).

Macron's youth, personal appeal, communication skills, and portrayal of a new political vision were decisive in launching his new party and winning the presidency twice. The 'Two Harvards' were young, dynamic, and importantly, seen as trustworthy in a political environment viewed by many as corrupt. Robert Golob in Slovenia is another example. These leaders were young and charismatic and they founded their own parties.

The young and charismatic theme is further exemplified by Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul, and Gergely Karácsony the Mayor of Budapest. They both won primaries to become coalition leaders and ran innovative and successful campaigns against their populist opponents.

Clean skins are particularly important for coalitions

The examples above illustrate another important point. To the voters, these candidates were clean skins; they were new and had little political baggage that could make them unappealing, and their lack of political history made them more difficult to attack.

It is not difficult to see why clean skin politicians have advantages particularly when leading an anti-populist coalition. The logic of a coalition is that the sum of their votes exceed those of the populist. But the coalition can comprise of left/right/green and soft/hard/centre parties. The danger is that the head of the largest party, or some other powerful politician, demands leadership of the

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coalition even if he or she can't maximise the votes. There could be a situation, where for example, a left-wing voter is being asked to vote for a coalition leader who is right-wing and who they thoroughly dislike. This is a difficult ask. Whereas an attractive clean skin (unknown/no history) candidate, even if he or she is from an opposing party, helps to get around this.

Choosing the right coalition leader

A standout example, to discuss in more detail, is that of Ekrem İmamoğlu, who stood for and won the Istanbul mayoral elections in 2019. This contest contains many lessons to draw on. But, as far as the leader is concerned, it is a case where the coalition parties took the issue of leader electability particularly seriously.

As mentioned, Erdoğan won power in Türkiye in 2002 and went on to win the next four elections. Erdoğan himself had been the mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s and his AKP party had held the mayoralty ever since.

In each election the opposition had been divided. But by 2019 the opposition parties had had enough – it was time to act. They came together and formed a coalition to oppose Erdoğan's AKP candidate. The opposition, the CHP and its coalition partners, recognised the importance of who their leader would be and they carried out research amongst voters to establish the characteristics the leader should have.

The research showed that the leader with most appeal needed to have the following characteristics:⁽¹⁶⁾

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 İmamoğlu was a candidate who embodied these three qualities and consequently was chosen. He ran a forward-looking positive campaign outlining how as mayor he would improve the lives of Istanbul citizens and went on to win the election. And he has repeated his success in 2024.

Earlier, several high-profile and charismatic leaders from different countries were cited who have successfully countered populists at the ballot box. Their success was attributed to their personal appeal and dynamism. However, the voter research conducted in Istanbul deepens the understanding as to why they

were successful, because each of these leaders has the necessary characteristics determined by this research. This suggests that the ideal leader profile, as articulated by Istanbul voters, is not parochial, but universal. This is the ideal profile for a coalition leader confronting populists that transcends cultural and national boundaries.

Choosing the wrong leader – consequences

After their success in the mayoral elections, the opposition to Erdoğan's AKP party formed a coalition (entitled The Table of Six, composed of the CHP, Good Party and others) and had high hopes of winning the presidential election scheduled for May 2023.

Erdoğan was not popular, research showed his acceptability for president was running at 40%, down from 57% two years before.⁽¹⁷⁾

Possible candidates for The Table of Six leader were the Mayor of Ankara (Mansur Yavaş) and the mayor of Istanbul (Ekrem İmamoğlu). They were much more popular than Erdoğan – scoring highly at 62% and 52% respectively. Also, in contention, the leader of the CHP party, by far the largest coalition party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, but he was even less acceptable than Erdoğan at 34% acceptability. On these numbers, there was a good chance that either one of the two popular mayors could have won the presidency on the first round.

As it turned out The Table of Six didn't choose their leader till two months before the election when it was announced that the unpopular Kılıçdaroğlu would lead the coalition! Up until that point the opposition enjoyed a lead of 10 percentage points, after the announcement the AKP and Table of Six were running neck and neck. And the opposition never recovered its lead, going on to lose both the parliament and the presidency.

According to someone close to The Table of Six,⁽¹⁸⁾ Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of what was the largest party the CHP, used his position to get his candidacy accepted. He led a negative campaign within the party against the popular mayors of Istanbul and Ankara and distributed his party's parliamentary seats to the alliance parties in exchange for their support of his candidacy. According to this source, not only was Kılıçdaroğlu an uncharismatic 73-years-old former bureaucrat and weak speaker – he had a fatal flaw – he belonged to a sect of Islam (Alevi) that many Turkish people dislike. Our source likened this to a Catholic politician becoming the head of state in an Orthodox nation and added, "It is just

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impossible for an Alevi and Kurdish politician to be president in Türkiye, where Sunni Turks are the majority.”

This was a dramatic demonstration of how a leader can affect an election outcome.

One of the biggest barriers that democracies face when confronting populists is the personal ambition of politicians, who despite their low electability, do everything they can to hold on to power or promote themselves to positions of leadership.

Lesson 3. In the age of populism, the model for winning elections has changed

Which strategies lead to winning elections? Is it more about retaining current supporters? Or is it converting voters from the opposition? Perhaps it's about boosting voter turnout and securing a larger portion of these participants? Or does the key lie in engaging first-time voters?

It is important to know which source is most important because each implies a different election campaign strategy.

These questions can only be answered by research but it is very important to have accurate voter behaviour data.^{(19), (20)} Accurate data necessitates voter panels that track the same people over time, however, these studies are expensive and not many have been conducted. Consequently, close attention should be paid to data that comes from these gold-standard sources.

In a landmark study,⁽²¹⁾ published in 2021, Jonathan Mellon analysed all the election panels that have been conducted over the last 65 years. This was a very comprehensive analysis of 104 elections, from every decade and across 18 countries.

His conclusion was:

On average, party switching contributes three times as much to the change in voter share as increased turnout does. In fact, party switching was the most important factor in 97% of the cases.⁽²²⁾

This is the way that elections used to work, but in the age of populism and polarisation do they work in this way now?

It is instructive to look at what happened in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Trump lost and Biden won, so according to the above, voters that switched from Trump to Biden should have been the major reason for Biden's win. But this wasn't the case.

An important feature of the 2020 election was the high turnout at 66.7%, and this was the highest for 100 years; it played an important role in the Biden victory.

To gain insights into voter dynamics, one can examine the gold-standard American National Election Survey (ANES), which interviews eligible voters about their participation in the 2016

election. These individuals were then reinterviewed to assess their voting behaviour, or lack thereof, in the 2020 election.

The analysis below uncovers the dynamics beneath the headline results, offering insights into the shifting voter patterns between the 2016 and 2020 elections:

- A similar percentage of Democrat (12%) and Republican (13%) voters from 2016 chose not to vote in 2020, resulting in no significant advantage for either party.
- Notably, 42% of those who didn't vote in 2016 participated in 2020, with a majority (56%) supporting Biden over Trump (40%). This group represents Biden's largest gain.
- Loyalty among party voters remained strong, with 83% of 2016 Democrats and 79% of 2016 Trump supporters voting for their respective parties again in 2020. Democrats showed slightly higher voter retention, indicating greater loyalty.
- Voter migration between parties saw 3% of 2016 Democrats switch to the Republicans, while a larger 7% of Republicans switched to the Democrats, netting a gain for the Democrats.

These patterns contributed to Biden securing more votes from each of these sources. When these results are combined with the overall number of abstentions and votes cast for each party, we can quantify where the increased vote share for Democrats came from.

- 50% came from garnering a higher share of votes from those who abstained in 2016.
- 26% resulted from greater loyalty among 2016 Democrat voters.
- 14% was due to net switching from Republicans to Democrats.
- The remaining 10% came from net switching from other parties.

This analysis reveals a significant shift from historical patterns, as highlighted in the 104 elections study. The primary driver of the Democrats' vote advantage in 2020 was not party switching but rather capturing a larger proportion of the increased voter turnout.

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The 2023 Polish election

Similar to the U.S., Poland saw a record-breaking voter turnout, increasing from 62% in 2019 to an unprecedented 74% in 2023 – the highest since the fall of communism. This surge played a crucial role in the election's outcome.

Despite PiS gaining 5% of their vote share from other parties,⁽²³⁾ they were ultimately defeated. The decisive factor was the four million previously abstaining voters who participated this time, with a staggering 86% of them voting against PiS. Had the turnout remained similar to 2019, PiS would have retained power, highlighting the significant impact of increased voter participation.⁽²⁴⁾

Other examples

This phenomenon isn't isolated to Poland. The Slovenian election of 2022 saw a turnout jump from 53% to 70%, resulting in the defeat of the populist leader Janša. Similarly, in 2021, the Czech Republic witnessed its highest turnout in two decades, leading to Babiš's ousting. Slovakia's election, where Zuzana Čaputová emerged victorious, also recorded a turnout peak not seen in twenty years. These instances underscore a pattern where higher voter turnout seems to disadvantage populist incumbents, favouring anti-populist forces.

However, it's important to note exceptions to this pattern. For example, in Bulgaria during the November 2021 election, despite a historically low turnout the anti-populist 'Two Harvards' party emerged as the largest faction. This suggests that while there's a noticeable correlation between higher turnout and anti-populist success, it's not a universal rule, as exemplified by this Bulgarian exception. However, this may well have been due to voter fatigue as this was the fourth election in 18 months.

Tentative conclusion – anti-populists are likely to benefit from high turnout.

There are several other pieces of evidence to suggest that higher turnout benefits the anti-populist.

In the U.S., studies of non-voters indicate they have a small but significant preference for the Democrats.⁽²⁵⁾ A study of 11 European countries concludes that populists are in the minority in all but two countries (Italy and Hungary).⁽²⁶⁾ And this is the opinion of Cas Mudde, a leading populist scholar.⁽²⁷⁾

This implies that where turnout is higher, there is a higher likelihood that more voters will vote for the anti-populist. Consequently, generating high turnout should be a central strategic campaign objective. It is up to the opponents of populism to generate high-profile campaigns and to stimulate the media in every way possible to create the impression that the election is of great importance and that it is likely to be close as these factors drive turnout.

The 2023 Polish campaign was very high profile. It is described as being intensely bitter. Each side attacking the other, a back-and-forth with sound and fury. Both sides claimed that the election was of fundamental importance to the future of Poland. For Donald Tusk, if PiS were to win, then the last chance to save Polish democracy would be gone. PiS asserted that, if Civil Platform won, there would be an invasion of refugees and a Poland submissive to Germany and the EU. This heightened importance is likely to have driven the high turnout.

The diminishing pool of floating voters

Another factor underscoring the importance of turnout is the shrinking number of floating voters. Historical data from the U.S.,⁽²⁸⁾ reveals a decline in party-switching voters, from the 9% – 14% range (1950 – 1980) to a mere 5% in 2020,⁽²⁹⁾ with projections dropping to as low as 3% for 2024. This trend is attributed to heightened political polarisation⁽³⁰⁾ and clearer party positions on key issues, making voters less likely to switch allegiances.

In the past, voters often cast their ballots for parties without fully understanding where the parties stood on all the issues, potentially supporting parties that had some policies they didn't agree with. Now, with parties highlighting divisive issues more openly, voters are better informed about party policies, solidifying loyalty and reducing switching.

The trend of increased political polarisation and parties clearly stating their positions on divisive issues isn't limited to the United States; it's a global phenomenon. Populist parties around the world are focusing their campaigns on these contentious issues, making it easier for voters everywhere to understand where each party stands. This global clarity on party policies suggests that the decrease in undecided or swing voters is a trend not just confined to one region, but likely to occur worldwide.

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Lesson 4. Be cautious about attacking the populist leader

Populist leaders promote divisive and harmful ideologies and engage in practices that undermine democratic principles. They spread misinformation and conspiracy theories, attack the rule of law, manipulate electoral processes, marginalise minorities, and oversimplify complex issues. In extreme cases, they use legal systems to target political rivals and exert control over media to propagate their agendas, sometimes resorting to intimidation and violence.

Given these issues, the impulse to directly attack populist leaders is understandable. However, this approach can backfire.

When the populist leader is attacked, and particularly when the anti-populist leader attacks the populist leader, this can reinforce their voter's belief that the elite is against them. It reinforces the us v. them polarisation – the populist's primary weapon for winning elections.

The 2018 Turkish presidential elections serve as a case in point. The CHP candidate, Muharrem Ince, attacked and mocked Erdoğan but his critique inadvertently played into Erdoğan's narrative of a haughty elite pitted against a victimised people. The Ince campaign converted virtually no populist supporters, it solidified waverers behind the AKP party and Erdoğan himself and Ince went down to a crushing 30/50 defeat.⁽¹¹⁾

A demonstration, in a different context, of how attacks on the populist leader can strengthen them occurred in March 2023 when Donald Trump was first indicted for false accounting for the money he paid the porn star Stormy Daniels. Of course, this was not part of an election campaign, it was the law taking its course but, nevertheless, it was seen as an establishment attack on the leader and it caused outrage amongst Republicans. More than half of Republican voters said that the charges against Mr Trump were “an attack on people like them” and his poll standing in the primaries rose by 9%. Fundraising contributions spiked from \$129,000 per day to \$778,000 in the weeks following the indictment.⁽³¹⁾

This was the start of Donald Trump's comeback which at the time seemed very unlikely.

Resist provocation

In campaigning against populists, the added difficulty is that populists provoke with outrageous accusations against their opponents and it is very tempting to give in to emotion and attack back. In the Turkish mayoral elections of 2019, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Istanbul mayoral candidate, and his coalition were subjected to merciless attacks from Erdoğan. Day after day he accused them of being terrorists, criminals, atheists and traitors.⁽¹¹⁾

İmamoğlu refused to take the bait, he turned the other cheek and ignored Erdoğan. He refused to be distracted from his vision for Istanbul and concentrated on explaining how he was going to improve the lives of Istanbul citizens. He eventually went on to win with 55% of the vote.

The dangers of punching back

The 2016 U.S. election offers a cautionary example of the risks involved in engaging directly with populist provocations. Trump called Hillary Clinton a ‘bigot’, she devoted a whole speech to his links to racists and white supremacists. Trump doubled down on ‘bigot.’ Clinton retaliated with a blistering ad showing Ku Klux Klan members praising Trump and a quote from a KKK imperial wizard: “the reason a lot of clan members like Donald Trump is because a lot of what he believes, we believe in.” And on it went for three or four more rounds.⁽³²⁾

It is easy for attacks on populist leaders to slip into a perceived attack on populist voters. Trump claimed at the time that Clinton was maligning, not just him, but the Americans who supported him.

Also, the campaign time taken in tit-for-tat was a distraction from the messages Clinton wanted to get across.

It is difficult for politicians, because no doubt when attacked, their supporters urge counter-measures and cheer when it happens. But, if it has to be done, attacking back needs to be carried out with great care.

Debate the populist but ignore their lies

Zuzana Čaputová's 2019 Slovak presidential campaign exemplifies how to address populist attacks.^{(33), (34)}

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At the outset of her bid she was an unknown human rights lawyer with no political experience and she had to tread a narrow path because she was a divorced single mother in a Catholic country.

She was aghast at the ferocity of the assault against her.

One of her attackers, who had previously vilified Muslim migrants for “killing and raping European women”, accused her of being a lover of immigration and wanting to destroy Slovak culture. She was said to be Jewish (which she isn’t) and the candidate of George Soros, a hate figure for the far right, and was on the receiving end of many other insults. She refused to retaliate in kind. In an interview she stated, “I have absolute faith in the ability and maturity of Slovak voters to distinguish between what is true and what is not.” In reply to specific untruths, her staff were instructed to post the facts on her Facebook page and leave it at that.

Appealing to Christian values

As a champion of minorities and LGBT rights, her position made her vulnerable. She defended her stance by invoking a compassionate interpretation of Christianity, stating, “I am a religious believer and a spiritual person, but I don’t believe Christian values are contradictory to liberal stances.” She further stated, “I rely on traditional Christian values, such as compassion and love for our neighbours and for people who belong to a minority. I would consider it a positive if this country united.” In a Christian-majority country, it is difficult to dispute the virtues of Christian compassion, justice, and fairness. This approach made it difficult for her opponents to effectively critique her liberal positions.

By refraining from counterattacks and disregarding insults, she was able to thoughtfully present her case for strengthening the judiciary and addressing corruption – longstanding issues in Slovakia. During debates, amidst a backdrop of critics attacking her and each other, her decision to not engage in the fray painted her as the sole mature presence.

Slovak voters were impressed by Ms. Čaputová’s calm demeanour, which ultimately led to her convincing victory in the presidential race.

Observing the bickering during the 2024 Republican presidential primary debates, one might wonder how Ms. Čaputová’s approach

would resonate with American audiences. It's plausible she would have been successful in winning over hearts and minds.

Should Biden not attack Donald Trump?

In U.S. politics, attacking presidential candidates has a history of effectiveness, such as the swift boat campaign against John Kerry in 2004 and the attacks on Michael Dukakis in 1988 on crime and race, both of which significantly weakened their campaigns. In both cases, the Democratic candidates failed to respond speedily. However, these attacks were not directed at grievance-based candidates with a grievance-fuelled base.

The caution in attacking a populist stems from the risk of solidifying their support. In Trump's case, legal proceedings have already contributed to this effect. Furthermore, Biden's focus on the threats to democracy, whether rightly or wrongly, necessitates confronting Trump. Thus, Biden has compelling reasons to challenge Trump, with much to gain and nothing to lose.

Lesson 5. Exploit the populist vulnerabilities that voters care about

Populist movements present several vulnerabilities that can be strategically exploited, particularly through the lens of corruption and extremism.

Corruption

At the heart of populist rhetoric is the claim of representing 'the true people' against a, so-called, 'corrupt elite.' Despite this, the reality often shifts dramatically once populists ascend to power, the corruption indices consistently deteriorate. This contradiction is stark, as it is under populist and authoritarian regimes that corruption, rather than being eradicated, tends to deepen. Populist leaders frequently erode trust in institutions, concentrate power among their allies, and stifle media freedom, which in turn diminishes accountability and paves the way for more rampant corruption.

There were a number of cases where opposition parties were able to expose corruption and use this as a potent election-winning strategy.

In Bulgaria, between 2018 and 2020, Prime Minister Borisov and his ministers were implicated in a series of corruption scandals involving EU funds.⁽³⁵⁾ The Czech Republic Prime Minister Babis was mired in corruption allegations.⁽³⁶⁾ In Slovenia there were questionable deals involving state-owned companies.⁽³⁷⁾ as well as accusations of increasing authoritarianism. Slovakia presented a particularly egregious case with the murder of a journalist investigating ties between the government and organised crime, high-lighting the perilous extent of corruption.⁽³³⁾

Through determined street protest, these corrupt practices were made salient. In some cases, they erupted after an action to silence corruption investigators. In Bulgaria, in 2020, after a government raid on the president's offices, there began a series of street protests that continued for many months both in Bulgaria and other European capitals.⁽³⁸⁾ The President of Bulgaria (an opponent of the government) explained the reasons for the protest thus: "turning the government into a Mafia-type structure has pushed freedom-loving Bulgarians of all ages regardless of their political affiliations, to raise demands for the respect for law."

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In the Czech Republic, 250,000 protesters demanded ethical accountability and that their democracy should be defended. In Slovakia, there were the biggest demonstrations since the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The protesters mobilised using the slogan: ‘Movement for a decent Slovakia.’

The egregious abuses of power and consequent demonstrations provided the springboards for successful election campaigns in each of these countries. Two campaigns are particularly noteworthy.

Stand up to evil

In Slovakia, Zuzana Čaputová mobilised the public outrage over the murders. She campaigned under the slogan ‘Stand up to Evil.’ In the final round she was up against a political heavyweight, Maroš Šefčovič Vice-President of the European Commission and the ruling party’s pick. She won the run-off by a handsome 20% margin. In a few short months, she had gone from total unknown to the presidency; a demonstration of the power that comes from addressing an acute public concern.

We will stop them stealing

In Bulgaria in 2021, the ‘Two Harvards’ brought to light several scandals, both national and local, and managed to disseminate these stories widely despite 80% of the media being pro-government. They campaigned with a laser-like focus on the need to stop corruption and to make the judiciary work. They produced newspaper-like pamphlets, that detailed the wrongdoings, which they distributed door-to-door⁽³⁹⁾ and they toured the country in their battle bus repeating the same message over and over:

“We will redistribute the money which the bad guys have been stealing from you up till now.”

Their new party swept to victory seven weeks later, winning 28% of the vote to Borisov’s 23% and were able to form a coalition. Fortunately, enough voters agreed that these issues were important and needed to be addressed.

Populists erode democracy’s foundational elements, such as anti-corruption frameworks and judicial independence. They do this knowing that such complex issues typically fail to capture the attention of large segments of the electorate. Consequently, populists can dismantle democracy in plain sight and not suffer electoral consequences. Corruption is one of the tangible outcomes when rule of law is undermined and voters really

dislike it – they really dislike politicians and their cronies enriching themselves at their expense. Therefore, highlighting and campaigning against this corruption is a powerful strategy.

Exploiting populist extremism

The autocratic tendencies of populist governments can lead them to overstep, making themselves vulnerable electorally and providing campaign opportunities for the opposition.

Abortion

In early 2021, Poland introduced the strictest abortion laws in Europe, abortion only permitted if a woman's life was in danger. More than 400,000 people protested in towns and cities across Poland. Jaroslav Kaczyński, who controls the PiS party, is a vehement anti-abortion politician and the government was unmoved. Opinion polls in May 2022 found that 66% of Poles were in favour of abortion, with this rising to 82% for 18 to 39-year-olds.

As discussed earlier, there was a huge turnout in the 2023 Polish election. This was particularly true of the young 18 to 29 age group, well known for their low participation. Their turnout rose dramatically from 46% in 2019 to 69%, a participation even higher than the 65+ age group.⁽⁴⁰⁾ And it is highly likely that abortion was one of the major reasons for this. The abortion law is widely regarded as being an important reason for the PiS defeat. Their Prime Minister acknowledged as much, saying the law was a “mistake”.

Roe v. Wade

For much of the last 50 years, Republicans have rallied voters around their hopes of the Supreme Court rescinding Row v. Wade, but now the fulfilment of their desires has brought unintended and negative electoral consequences.

Rather like in Poland, a large proportion of U.S. voters think ‘abortion should be legal in most cases’. 80% of Democrats, 74% of 18 to 29-year-olds and even 38% of Republicans think this. The Democrats have not been slow to weaponize the issue and it has been effective. In the 2022 midterms, they spent heavily in key states like Michigan, Arizona and Pennsylvania. And the much-anticipated red Republican wave didn't materialise.

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An exit poll in Michigan showed that 45% of voters ranked abortion as their top issue well ahead of inflation and there was a similar result in other states. There were voters who said it was the abortion issue that got them out to vote.

For the majority though, abortion is not the top issue, but if handled effectively it can have a wider relevance. After the Supreme Court judgement, 21 states (with more states pending) have introduced restrictions that are tighter than they were under Roe v. Wade and most have an almost complete ban – no exception for rape or incest. The logic of Roe v. Wade's overturning is to ban IVF and pharmaceuticals connected to abortion and even birth control. This demonstrates Republican extremism, and what would happen if the GOP captured all three arms of government.

As one Democratic strategist explained: “the democratic narrative about democracy, and the electoral process being under threat wasn't really making much dent in the numbers. Then Dobbs (the case that overturned Roe v. Wade) happens and I think it made this argument of Republican extremism more real to voters. It connected the dots.”⁽⁴¹⁾

This is very important because amongst most voters the issues of democracy and the autocratic danger that Trump presents is not cutting through. The assault on reproductive rights serves as a tangible example, showcasing the consequences that can arise from slipping into extremism and autocracy.

A bit like corruption, abortion is the sellable aspect of an abstract danger.

Populist make major mistakes that must be exploited

Populist leaders, known for their stubbornness and propensity for eccentric decisions, offer additional opportunities for opposition strategies. Prime examples include Narendra Modi's sudden demonetisation of 500 and 1,000 rupee notes in 2017 and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's counterintuitive stance that higher interest rates lead to higher inflation. Both actions resulted in significant economic turmoil within their respective countries and are widely regarded as policy failures. The opposition must always capitalise on these sorts of errors, but in these cases they didn't, and both leaders were re-elected.

Lesson 6. Focus attention on real-life concerns

Voters have many common concerns outside politics. They have daily frustrations and needs, but can addressing these be powerful enough against the culture wars and fear-mongering of populists?

Bread-and-butter versus fear

In the 2018 U.S. midterms, there was a clear example of bread-and-butter concerns going head-to-head with fear-mongering tactics, and the former prevailing over the latter. As the election neared, Donald Trump, in his characteristic populist style, amplified apprehensions surrounding a migrant caravan heading for the U.S. from Central America. He escalated the situation by deploying 5,200 troops to the U.S.-Mexico border, fortifying it with barbed wire to thwart the group's arrival.⁽⁴²⁾

Trump lauded this move as 'beautiful' during one of his rallies.

Conversely, the Democrats centred their campaign on healthcare and they poured their advertising dollars into this. In a polarised situation there is normally little switching, but in this case Trump voters had to decide whether to be loyal to their party or vote in their self-interest. In the end, enough chose self-interest.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Bread-and-butter versus nationalism

In the 2021 state elections in West Bengal, Modi's BJP was convincingly defeated by Mamata Banerjee's TMC party. An important reason for the victory was a wide range of welfare schemes aimed at women: regular cash transfers to girls if they do not get married and remain at school, unemployment dole for young citizens, scholarships for Dalits and minorities, pensions for the old and widows as well as bicycles for girl students.⁽⁴⁵⁾ And a wide range of other schemes that illustrate how these bread-and-butter issues can loom much larger than the divisive politics of Hindu nationalism.

These cases highlight the effectiveness of focusing on fundamental issues, although they didn't involve presidential or national elections. While such strategies might not alone be enough to secure victory in more significant elections, they should undoubtedly play a role in the campaign. More details on this will follow later.

Populists and social policies

Populists vary from country to country, but in the area of social policy it is possible to identify different types of populist and different types of populist policies which in turn helps identify common weaknesses. For example, one prevalent type of populist is the neo-liberal.

Neo-liberal

Many right-wing populists adopt a neo-liberal stance, championing the mantra 'markets good, governments bad', which leads them to take an anti-statist approach. As a result, they often scale back welfare programmes and show little interest in social investment, preferring to minimise government involvement. This stance can create vulnerabilities, as the attitudes and policies that follow may negatively impact large segments of the population. Opposition forces must be strategic, identifying the affected groups and leveraging these vulnerabilities to their advantage.

For example, in the U.S. the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. Republicans often oppose this policy due to its redistributive nature. Under this system, wealthier Americans subsidise those purchasing coverage from government-run marketplaces. This is anathema to a party that promotes limited government intervention. And Trump has vowed to repeal it.

Political scientists have identified two other characteristics that right wing populists can have in different degrees – 'welfare chauvinism' and 'nostalgic chauvinism'.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Welfare chauvinism

Welfare chauvinism is the idea that social benefits should only go to native-born citizens, excluding migrants and other groups. Populists focus on this divisive issue rather than on improving the lives of all citizens.

This is highlighted in a study of European populist radical right parties within coalition governments,⁽⁴⁹⁾ which showed their tendency to sideline healthcare importance unless it involved restricting migrants' access.

Populist concern for citizens' welfare is questionable

The focus on welfare chauvinism raises doubts about how much populist parties genuinely care for their citizens' welfare.

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This scepticism is fuelled by the politicisation of Covid by populist parties, resulting in significant death tolls in countries with populist governments, such as the United States, Brazil, and Hungary⁽⁵⁰⁾ – the latter suffering one of the worst per capita death tolls after opting for ineffective Russian and Chinese vaccines for political reasons.”

Martin Wolf of the Financial Times⁽⁵¹⁾ has observed that many populist governments display a lack of interest in genuine governance, often treating politics as performance and even aiming to dismantle state structures. This neglect opens avenues for campaign exploitation, particularly among significant minorities with pressing concerns like drug costs, unaffordable housing, and student debt, which populists often ignore.

Nostalgic chauvinism

In addition to welfare chauvinism, some populist governments exhibit nostalgic chauvinism – a longing for the past’s social policies. This attitude favours welfare support for those perceived as left behind and endorses policies upholding traditional family values, such as tax breaks for stay-at-home parents. It typically opposes measures like paid parental leave or support for single-parent households, as these conflict with traditional gender roles.

Populists focus on divisive issues, both during elections and in governance, coupled with their disregard for citizens’ welfare, presents vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

Opponents of populism must therefore emphasise their commitment to genuinely improving citizens’ lives, contrasting with the populists’ performative governance and neglect of substantive welfare policies.

Joe Biden’s recent State of the Union address that emphasised bread-and-butter issues was a good example of doing just that.

In their book, Trump’s Democrats, Shields and Muravchik identified why small town and rural voters, many of whom switched to Trump in 2016, voted Democrat in the first place. It was not because of left-wing ideology but simply because the Democrats were seen to be the party that looked after the working class – a party image dating back to the Roosevelt New Deal. This ‘looking after’ was perpetuated and reinforced by local Democrat party bosses who helped their people in numerous (and sometimes dubious) ways. Providing a focus on the concerns of everyday life is a way of rekindling this submerged relationship, reconnecting an abandoned people with the party.

Lesson 7. Show populist voters respect

In her book Strangers in Their Own Land, Arlie Russell Hochschild spent five years embedded with Tea Party supporters in Louisiana interviewing them and making friends.

The Trump voters she spoke to were economically vulnerable and they see the Democrats as much more interested in caring for immigrants, blacks and the social security poor. Helping those groups get ahead in life, ignoring the economically vulnerable and not interested in their tough lives.

She watched as they became involved with the Trump campaign. Trump voters feel looked down on, patronised and humiliated by Democrats. The analyst D.W. Winnicott warned that people who feel ‘dropped’ strike back. “That’s the populist moment when humiliated people lash out in support of demagogues promising them dignity.”

As The Guardian puts it:

“They want respect for their long hours of work that risks their bodies, for the hands caught in vices, backs wrenched by weights, and knees torn. They want respect because they are doing dangerous work, but their pay has been flat for decades.”⁽⁵²⁾

The insult and humiliation are inflamed when Democrats talk about them as ignorant, backward, poorly educated, voting against their own interests and not grateful for the funds that the federal government puts into their states. Calling them the “deplorables” (Hillary Clinton), saying that they’re only interested in “guns and religion” (Obama) or calling them “chumps”, as Biden did during the 2020 election. To be fair, this was a momentary lapse by Joe Biden who had largely learnt from the mistakes of Hillary Clinton in 2016.

This is why there is wide-eyed adoration and worship of Trump at his rallies as they roar their approval. It is because populist voters have injured pride, they feel disregarded, disrespected, dishonoured, and persecuted by the elite culture.

Similar dynamics can be observed in Europe and other countries where populism has gained traction, fuelled by widespread dissatisfaction with the political establishment, economic inequality, and cultural divisions but also that they feel disdained and scorned and this drives the anger.

“That’s the populist moment when humiliated people lash out in support of demagogues promising them dignity.”

How are opposition politicians to approach voters who feel this way? Again, the 2019 campaign in Istanbul, which became known as the Radical Love campaign, has something to teach us.

In Türkiye, disrespect for populist voters takes the form of looking down on religious people and viewing AKP voters as unenlightened and religiously backward. Not that dissimilar to how the U.S. white working class is often ridiculed and joked about as ‘white trash,’ ‘trailer trash,’ ‘rednecks’ and ‘round people from square states’.

The CHP strategy document for the mayoral campaign, dubbed the Book of Radical Love,⁽⁴³⁾ underscores the importance of respecting all identities and religious beliefs, and it warns against arrogance. It highlights that populist voters will be receptive to policy ideas only if they feel valued, rather than patronised or overlooked.

During his mayoral campaign, Ekrem İmamoğlu’s efforts were characterised by outreach, respect and humility. He respected religious values by attending Friday prayers, participating in local meals during Ramadan and connecting directly with traditionally AKP-voting residents in Istanbul neighbourhoods. His speeches consistently emphasised the importance of serving all citizens of Istanbul, irrespective of their political affiliations, lifestyles, or economic status.⁽¹¹⁾

In her bid for the Slovakian presidency Zuzana Čaputová used a similar approach when, in the debates, she engaged with populist voters over the heads of their leaders by showing sympathy and understanding for them. “Often people vote for this party through personal frustration and dissatisfaction, and they want fast and radical solutions”. “It will be my task to convince them that the solution to these problems should be calm and pragmatic.” ⁽³³⁾

The Atlantic magazine asked Hochschild about the relevance of Radical Love to the U.S. situation. She said that many divisions in American society can be overcome by crossing what she terms ‘empathy walls’.⁽⁴⁶⁾ “I see many parallels between my work and what the Turkish opposition is trying to do with Radical Love.”. What is needed is ‘emotion work’ by which she means to suspend any judgement about others and to be deeply curious about them. She contended that the emotional element often gets overlooked in discussions about right-wing populism. To defeat politicians such as Donald Trump and Erdoğan, opposition parties have to engage with those leaders’ supporters and address their feelings of injured pride.

Michael Wuthrich, an American political scientist and the co-author of the most definitive article about Radical Love, was also asked about its relevance to the U.S. “Using the election in Türkiye as a playbook could benefit any candidate running against Donald Trump in the upcoming presidential election.”

“This whole ‘Radical Love’ approach they used in Türkiye was a way to force the opposition to go down to the level of the supporters of the populist and say, ‘What are your needs?’ To actually listen to them and not disparage them or say they’re completely illogical and uneducated,” he said. “Rather than vilifying them, they said, ‘Love the supporters. Ignore the leader.’”⁽⁴⁷⁾

For some, the countries of Türkiye and Slovakia might appear distant and difficult to relate to, but it’s inspiring to note that Josh Shapiro, who became the governor of Pennsylvania, secured his position in the November 2022 U.S. gubernatorial elections, in part, by employing a strategy with strong Radical Love elements.^{(55), (56)} Shapiro holds a firm belief in treating everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of their voting choices. He emphasises the importance of engaging with voters in traditionally non-Democratic areas and offers tangible solutions to their problems. By campaigning in predominantly Republican counties, that normally would be avoided, he managed to secure a victory with a 15% lead in a state that Biden won by just 1% in 2020. This approach has offered Democrats a new blueprint for success: expanding their reach across the entire state rather than solely trying to drive up margins in urban centres and friendly suburbs that are already inclined to vote for them. In office Shapiro has continued his rural engagement and enacted a series of policies addressing rural voters’ needs.

Communicating with respect is crucial because it helps to diminish the emotional reservoir that fuels ‘us versus them’ polarisation. The persistence of political figures like Donald Trump, and Fico in Slovakia, underscore the challenge of overcoming deep-seated division. Such scenarios demonstrate that even when populists are defeated, the risk of their resurgence remains if the electorate’s polarisation is not addressed. A strategy of Radical Love engages with the emotional drivers of populism and helps heal the divide.

Opposition
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feelings of
injured pride.

And, of course, avoid elephant traps

Patriotism

Patriotism must not be overlooked. It is important that the image of the anti-populist is linked with the love of country. And for this to run through all communications. This is particularly important because populists portray themselves as representing the true people and opponents are branded as illegitimate and even traitors. Anti-populists must not allow themselves to be outflanked in this way.

One of the simplest ways of doing this is displaying the national flag prominently at events, and in campaign materials as it acts as a powerful visual affirmation of commitment to the nation's values and heritage.

There was a clear demonstration of patriotism in Israel in early 2023 when there were massive demonstrations against the right-wing government's plan to overhaul the judiciary. It seemed that every protester was carrying and waving the Israeli flag. This sea of flags had huge symbolic value – the protesters defending their country. It also made it impossible for the government to portray these protesters as enemies of the state.

Election security

Ensuring the integrity of the electoral process is very important. Populists cannot be trusted with the vote. Mobilising an army of volunteers dedicated to monitoring polling stations and safeguarding ballot boxes is crucial.

Post script: the 2024 mayoral and local Turkish elections

Just as this paper was nearing publication, the opposition's triumph in Türkiye's mayoral and local elections was declared, marking a significant win from an anti-populist perspective.

The outcome offers valuable insights, especially when analysed through the prism of the seven lessons discussed earlier.

While international media has largely credited the economic downturn for the opposition's victory, attributing it solely to the poor state of the Turkish economy overlooks the fact that inflation was also alarmingly high during the national elections in May 2023, which saw the opposition defeated.

However, it is the contrast in leadership between the two elections that is stark. The 2023 national elections featured the Table of Six under an unpopular leader, whereas the recent local elections saw Istanbul and other cities rallying behind charismatic and visionary figures.

During the national campaign, the opposition's message centred around peace, inclusivity, tolerance, and the promotion of democracy and human rights in Türkiye. However, Erdoğan was very vulnerable on other things that had much wider voter resonance. If ever there was a referendum on a populist leader's record, this was it. Not only inflation, caused in large measure by Erdoğan's bizarre economic views, but the tragic earthquake that claimed 53,000 Turkish lives, largely due to the government's negligence in not enforcing building codes. These failings highlighted a broader issue with Erdoğan's governance – wilful, negligent and corrupt.⁽⁵⁵⁾

This election is an example where the wrong populist vulnerabilities were chosen to focus on.

In contrast, the mayoral elections focused on the most relevant local issues and tangible improvements to citizens' lives that their candidates would realise, echoing the successful strategy of 2019.

An old saying from McKinsey holds that success requires getting everything right, a principle that applies with particular force in defeating populists.

If ever
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Conclusion

At the outset of this project two years ago, we anticipated that the primary issue in most anti-populist elections would be the threat populists posed to democracy. But this study reveals that this is rarely the dominant concern of voters (only in Slovenia of all the elections we have surveyed). Winning, in the main, generally depends on other factors. The seven lessons have been distilled from these victories, with a synopsis in the executive summary.

Over the past two years, the degree to which populists are becoming organised internationally has become clearer. They meet together at the CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference). Steve Bannon continues his tours and lectures in Europe, sharing ideas in the developing populist playbook, Orbán visits Trump, and they plot their assaults on liberal democracy.

Supporters of democracy must get organised and share their experiences too.

This paper is intended as a start. The seven lessons should help campaigners be more aware of attacks against populists that have led to victory. Also, the mistakes that have led to democrats losing elections that otherwise would probably have been won.

To fully arm democrats with the evidence needed for their efforts, this paper alone isn't enough. We envision a comprehensive support system including:

- Periodic conferences for democrats to exchange experiences.
- Ongoing updates and analyses of elections featuring populists, with a focus on:
 - Innovations in campaigning, especially where media access is restricted.
 - Strategies to prevent populists from skewing election outcomes.
 - Insights on sustaining coalitions effectively.
 - Enhanced and detailed voting data to facilitate thorough analysis of voting patterns over time.

And, of course, it will be necessary to develop these strategies further in light of the lessons learned from forthcoming elections, particularly the presidential election in the U.S..

This is a first paper addressing electoral battles with populists. The intention is to update it with evidence from elections yet to take place. Also, to receive additional information from those with knowledge of the elections already covered in this paper or any other observations.

Please get in touch at

winningagainstpopulists.com

Appendix

Our sample of elections where populists have been defeated (and some informative ones where they haven't).

The cases we identified are:

Türkiye: Ekrem İmamoğlu's 2019 victory over Erdoğan's AKP party for the mayoralty of Istanbul. Noteworthy because it is Erdoğan's home city.

Türkiye: The presidential and parliamentary elections of May 2023 where the Table of Six failed to defeat Erdoğan.

Slovakia: Zuzana Čaputová's stunning 2019 win of the presidency, where in a matter of weeks, she went from a total unknown to the presidency.

Slovakia: The general election in 2023 when Fico made a comeback.

West Bengal: Mamata Banerjee's success in holding the state governorship in 2020. Modi's BJP party had won the state in the general election the year before.

Israel: The 2021 election where Netanyahu was removed after 12 years in office.

Venezuela: In 2022 a unity candidate defeated the governing party in Barinas Province particularly noteworthy because this province is the home state of Hugo Chavez's family.

Bulgaria: The general election in November 2021 that led to the defeat of Prime Minister Borisov.

Slovakia: The 2019 general elections.

Colombia: 2022 presidential election where Gustavo Petro defeated the populist Hernandez.

Czech Republic: The 2021 general election when Babiš was removed from power.

Ecuador: The presidential election 2021.

France: Emmanuel Macron's defeats of Marine Le Pen 2017/2022.

Slovenia: The general election of 2022, where the populist, Prime Minister Janša, was defeated.

U.S.: Donald Trump's defeat in 2020.

U.S.: The midterms in 2018 and 2022.

Chile: The 1988 plebiscite that removed dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Poland: The elections of 2014, 2019 and particularly the defeat of PiS in October 2023.

Hungary: The mayoral elections in Budapest and other towns and cities in 2019.

Hungary: Elections of 2010, 2014 and 2018.

Hungary: Orbán's victory over the United for Hungary coalition in 2022.

Türkiye: Ekrem İmamoğlu's 2024 victory over Erdoğan's AKP party for the mayoralty of Istanbul.

U.S.: The Pennsylvania November 2022 gubernatorial elections.

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About the authors.

Sir Chris Powell was knighted in 2011 for services to advertising. He was a founder of an advertising agency that grew to be the second largest in the UK and regarded as the most influential.

From 1985 until 1997 he advised the Labour Party on election strategy.

David Cowan worked alongside Chris as Director of Strategy, pioneering a way of integrating quantitative and qualitative consumer data into the advertising strategy and development process; later generalised to develop strategies for organic business growth.

Both Chris Powell and David Cowan were core members of the team that built the agency (Boase Massimi Pollitt) up and launched it on the London Stock Exchange.

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