**Can political liberalism respond to contemporary populism?**

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Populist movements are often seen as antithetical to political liberalism. Common features of populist politics are anti-pluralist assertions about the will of the ‘true’ people, and a denial of the empirical complexity (and occasionally facts) around certain issues. In the language of political liberalism these are paradigmatic cases of unreasonable beliefs. Political liberals typically argue that the unreasonable ought to be excluded from the justificatory constituency, and that in some cases the state should intervene to limit unreasonable behaviour. The increase in popularity of populist right-wing movements in many liberal democracies in the past two decades, and the last three years especially, appears to present a unique – or even existential – threat to liberal democratic politics, and one that therefore warrants an interventionist response by the liberal state.

There is something to this analysis. However, this picture is too simplistic, and constructing an appropriate liberal response to populism requires both a more nuanced understanding of the threat presented and a more honest appraisal of existing democratic states. In particular, framing populism as a uniquely problematic style of politics distinct from ‘normal’ politics is myopic, because it ignores the way that mainstream political actors routinely violate important norms of liberal democracy. Political liberalism as a normative theory is best understood in this context as providing an ideal for legitimate decision-making that is only ever partially realised. The appropriate response of liberal states to populist movements should therefore be determined in part by the relative legitimacy of that state. This adds a further dimension to the already difficult question of whether democratic institutions ought to be protected if the methods necessary to do so are anti-democratic.

We should also be careful to distinguish populism as a style of politics from the content of the political objectives that populist movements have. Whilst populism as a style of politics is generally threatening to liberal democracies, under certain nonideal conditions it is excusable and might even be helpful. It may be excusable for those who participate in it when the state has failed to include them in democratic decision-making for a prolonged period, so lacks legitimate authority over them. It may even be useful in some contexts as a disruptive act within a system that lacks legitimacy – whilst the popular talking point that populism is a justified rebuke to an aloof elite is flawed as an overarching analysis, it does contain a kernel of truth. The danger of the current growth in right-wing populism in Europe and North America therefore lies as much in the right-wing content of the politics being espoused as it does in populism as a style of politics. It is also an elite-driven project that has spilled over into mainstream politics, and an appropriate response will reflect this.

**Keywords:**

Liberalism, Populism, Democracy, Ideal and Nonideal Theory.

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Andrew Reid is a Teaching Fellow at the University of Birmingham. His main research interests are in democratic theory and debates around public justification. He recently completed his PhD at the University of Leicester, and his thesis considered how political liberalism could be applied to political decisions involving populist and radical right-wing movements.