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# Is Populism Really a Problem for Democracy?

Patrick Liddiard

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## History and Public Policy Program Christian F. Ostermann, Director

The Wilson Center  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20004  
Telephone: (202) 691-4110  
Fax: (202) 691-4001

[HAPP@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:HAPP@wilsoncenter.org)  
[www.wilsoncenter.org/happ](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/happ)

# Is Populism Really a Problem for Democracy?

Patrick Liddiard

**Abstract:** Populism offers the promise of democratic renewal, bringing new actors and policies into the political system. But while populist parties in power can make politics more representative, they can undermine accountability when their lack of ability or interest in legislating shifts policymaking to other actors outside the ruling party. Populists in government can also erode the institutional checks on executive power necessary for durable democracy, even in previously resilient advanced democracies, and populist mobilization has precipitated democratic breakdown in the wealthiest democracies to ever revert to autocracy: Turkey, Venezuela, and Thailand. Populists are more likely to have future electoral success in the subregions that have weaker connections between voters and parties than other subregions: Central and Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, the Andes, Central America, and Southern Africa. The weak formal and informal executive constraints in most of these countries would put them at risk of democratic breakdown under populist governments.

When Hugo Chávez was first inaugurated as President of Venezuela in February 1999, he modified the oath of office to announce: “I swear in front of my people that over this moribund constitution I will push forward the democratic transformations that are necessary so that the new republic will have an adequate Magna Carta for the times.”<sup>i</sup> He would add: “The Constitution, and with it the ill-fated political system to which it gave birth 40 years ago, has to die.” Within hours of taking office, he would issue a decree calling for a new constituent assembly.<sup>ii</sup> Revising the constitution was a key part of Chávez’s election campaign against the “corrupt” traditional parties, and would make good on his pledge to re-found the republic.<sup>iii</sup>

Populists like Chávez offer the promise of renewing democracy, bringing new actors and policies into the political system. But they also claim that their constituency represents all of “the people” rather than a portion of a diverse electorate, and—seeking to institutionally lock in their temporary political advantage—they frequently abuse the power of government to suppress their opponents. How has this tension within populist governance—between deepening democratic deliberation and accountability through more representative government while maintaining the freedoms, inclusion, and electoral fair play necessary for democracy—played out in practice?

*This is the fourth in a series of occasional papers by the Wilson Center’s History and Public Policy Program looking at the declining influence of political parties worldwide. For more information, please see: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication-series/happ-occasional-papers>.*

## Populist Mobilization Can Increase Democracies' Representativeness but Undermine Governance

The work of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser has stressed that populism does not threaten democracy per se—that populism is a natural reaction by voters against some of the undemocratic qualities of liberal institutions. In this view, decisions on too many issues have been shifted from legislatures to judiciaries or bureaucracies, removing them from democratic deliberation by elected officials, and creating a sense that “there is no alternative” for certain policies. Scholars like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue further that populists can perform an important role in re-politicizing politics, making clear that policies do indeed create winners and losers, and these decisions on who wins and who loses should be made by elected rather than unelected bodies.<sup>iv</sup> The economist Dani Rodrik would argue that, in particular, international economic agreements and the bureaucratization they entail too often undermine democratic deliberation by limiting the policy options of future governments.<sup>v</sup>

Richard Katz and Peter Mair would add that mainstream parties for too long worked to prevent real political competition, raising barriers to entry for new parties through campaign finance and media laws that benefitted incumbents. This “cartelization” of political competition has produced parties that are often indistinguishable on policy, and lent credence to populist claims that mainstream parties are unresponsive to public preferences.<sup>vi</sup> These arguments suggest that by mobilizing new constituencies, populists can make democracy more representative, improving democratic deliberation and accountability.

Few of these scholars would describe populism as an unmitigated boon to democracy, however. Jan-Werner Müller argues that populism’s illiberal elements are in fact threats to democracy. Populists frequently disregard the rights of individuals who are not considered “the people”—usually ethnic or sectarian minorities—as well as the checks on government power they believe stifle the “will of the people.”<sup>vii</sup> In this line of argument, such tendencies are anti-democratic by their nature because they lead populists to undermine key qualities necessary for democracy: civil liberties for all citizens to freely organize and express their political preferences, and independent state institutions that can guarantee fair competition between the government and opposition.

In a similar vein, Larry Diamond has argued that populism can, at a minimum, threaten liberal democracies—those that uphold the highest democratic standards for protecting civil liberties—when populists reject the notion of pluralism and embrace cultural exclusion. Diamond suggests that, for the first time since the worldwide “Third Wave” of democratization began in the mid-1970s, there is a risk

that advanced liberal democracies could break down, and illiberal populists could be the actors behind these reversions to autocracy.<sup>viii</sup>

In practice, populist parties in the 21st Century have had no more success than mainstream parties in improving democratic deliberation. Populist parties in power have increased democracy's representativeness, but undermined accountability when their lack of interest or aptitude for governance has shifted policymaking to actors outside the party, and populists' policy failures in office can create continuing crises of accountability. Populists in power have frequently strengthened the power of the executive over the legislature while polarizing the electorate into exclusionary groups and coopting or suppressing civil society. And populists' weakening of key checks on executive authority has been a common precursor to autocratic reversion—including in the wealthiest democracies to ever break down.

## Populism, Representation, and Accountability

Populism, with its focus on representing “the people” rather than “the elite,” offers the potential for more representative democracy. However, populist parties frequently focus on personalistic leaders at the expense of party institutionalization. This can mean that, once in power, populist legislators' lack of ability or interest in policymaking shifts policy formulation to other parties, the bureaucracy, or even hostile foreign powers, any of which can undermine democratic accountability by obscuring the actors responsible for given policies. If populists in government appear unresponsive to public opinion—having come to power themselves precisely because of mainstream parties' lack of responsiveness—then countries can be subject to endemic or “serial populism.” This is particularly true in the event of party system collapse in which, say, a mainstream center-right party has dissolved, leaving ideological space for right-wing populists to emerge and to fill.

Populist parties in power have frequently increased the representativeness of politics. For example, the most economically vulnerable members of Sweden's society are overrepresented among local elected officials for the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats—60 percent of councilors, compared to 35 to 40 percent of the population. In contrast, the wealthiest are overrepresented among councilors from the mainstream parties, typically 40 percent of the councilors versus 20 only percent of the population; this is even true of the center-left Social Democrats and the leftist Left Party, both of which represent the interests of the working class and economically vulnerable.<sup>ix</sup> Similarly, since the collapse of Peru's party system in the 1990s and rise of populism, officeholders have increasingly come

from more diverse cultural, racial, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds than the previous elite political class of largely European descent.<sup>x</sup>

However, these populist officials often lack traits associated with aptitude for politics and good governance. The average Sweden Democrat councilor is less likely than mainstream councilors to have political or public sector experience or tertiary education. Although a lack of experience is probably to be expected of outsider politicians, Sweden Democrat councilors are also considerably less likely to have traits associated with good governance or democratic durability: motivation for public service, honesty or humility, or trust in others, according to an analysis of their responses to survey questions from Ernesto Dal Bó, Frederico Finan, Olle Folke, Torsten Persson, and Johanna Rickne.<sup>xi</sup> Reviewing evidence across Latin America, Scott Mainwaring suggests amateur politicians like populists lack the skills or interest to build up their party or legislature as institutions, and this frequent short-term focus leads them to pursue personal gain.<sup>xii</sup>

This lack of aptitude for governing can shift responsibility for policymaking to other parties. In his study of the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria's (FPÖ) 2000-2002 governing coalition with the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), Reinhard Heinisch found that the ÖVP was able to take advantage of the FPÖ's political inexperience and lack of expertise to quickly and strategically appoint its preferred candidates to most of the expert-level positions in the civil service and parastatal companies. ÖVP-installed policy experts were able to push their favored policies through the ministries, including those controlled by the FPÖ, even as the costs fell largely on the FPÖ's core supporters. Opinion polls showed the FPÖ losing nearly a third of its working class support during its first period in government as the FPÖ-led Ministry of Social Affairs' put forward pension reforms proposed by ÖVP-aligned experts that hit working class voters' pocketbooks, including a law that made accident-related disability pensions taxable.<sup>xiii</sup>

In a similar fashion, the rise of populism can empower career bureaucrats because of the conceptual overlap between advocates of pure populism and pure technocracy, both of whom reject the idea of political parties as intermediaries for constituencies in a pluralistic society. Populists believe that they alone represent the "will of the people" and that any political opponent represents not a party of the loyal opposition with a competing view of the collective good but membership in the "corrupt elite." Advocates of pure technocracy would assert that the "will of the people" arises not from a dynamic process of democratic deliberation between opposing political parties but from independent bureaucracies that can impartially determine where there is unanimity in society.<sup>xiv</sup> Kurt Weyland argues that, in practice, the neopopulist politicians that arose in Latin America in the late 1980s and early 1990s

embraced policies that closely mirrored those of “neoliberal” economists, who espoused a less politicized and more technocratic approach to economic policymaking. In particular, neopopulists’ implementation of neoliberal structural adjustment policies weakened mass organizations like political parties and labor unions, which neoliberal economists viewed as potentially rent-seeking organizations that undermined market efficiency.<sup>xv</sup>

Populist politicians may be particularly susceptible to foreign influence and adopting foreign actors’ preferred policies. The average populist party’s top-down structure, focusing on charismatic and personalistic leaders rather than a robust and resilient organization, may make them particularly appealing as targets for foreign influence. Moscow in particular has coordinated messaging with Europe’s far-right populists in exchange for Russian material support, based on a shared nationalist ideology that seeks to weaken liberal international institutions, including those that constrain Russian power.

In 2014, France’s right-wing populist Marine Le Pen directed senior National Front (FN) officials to seek foreign loans to finance the party. After an FN Member of the European Parliament secured a 9.4 million-euro loan, FN and Moscow coordinated on messaging to the point that Russia provided Le Pen with statements on the Ukraine conflict, according to the Alliance for Securing Democracy.<sup>xvi</sup> In Germany in 2017, Markus Frohnmaier—the head of the youth wing of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany and spokesman for the party’s co-leader—sought material support from Russia’s Presidential Administration, and in return offered to promote good relations with Russia in his election campaign to the Bundestag, according to documents obtained by Der Spiegel.<sup>xvii</sup> The leader of Austria’s right-wing populist FPÖ ahead of the 2017 election weighed an offer of illegal donations and other campaign support from a purported representative of a Russian oligarch, for which the oligarch would receive artificially inflated contracts if the FPÖ became part of the subsequent government, according to video footage obtained by Süddeutsche Zeitung.<sup>xviii</sup> And recent recordings released by BuzzFeed News capture a long-time adviser of the head of Italy’s right-wing populist Lega party negotiating in October 2018 with representatives of Russian officials on a covert scheme to potentially use profits from Russian oil sales to finance Lega; such a scheme would contravene Italy’s restrictions on foreign campaign finance. The adviser during the meeting claimed the two sides were “changing...the situation in Europe” and that a “new Europe had to be close to Russia because we want to have our sovereignty.”<sup>xix</sup>

If populist parties in power are continually unable to renew public faith in government because of their own policy failures, they can create recurring crises of democratic accountability through serial

populism. After the collapse of Peru's party system in the 1990s, the country has seen a succession of populist presidents, each of whom assembled short-lived, personalistic political organizations as vehicles for his or her candidacies. It has also experienced the most extreme electoral volatility in Latin America, nearing 50 percent turnover of the electorate's party vote between legislative elections. In this environment, few politicians have gained the experience or ability necessary to drive policy formulation. Instead, policymaking has been driven by a relatively cohesive class of bureaucrats, in place since the 1990s, with an ideological commitment to market-friendly policies. Inexperienced politicians' failure to pass reforms and their propensity for corruption have helped make Peru's the least trusted legislature in Latin America; 60 percent of legislators, three of Peru's last four presidents, and the runner-up in the 2016 presidential election have faced various levels of corruption charges.<sup>xx</sup>

### Italy: Increasingly Prone to Self-reinforcing Serial Populism

Italy, like Peru, may be becoming subject to serial populism, prone to large swings in party vote shares and declining voter turnout as voters express their dissatisfaction with existing political parties. Since the end of the Cold War, party system volatility in Italy has more than doubled, with 22 percent of the electorate changing its party vote between elections, up from nine percent. This increase has been driven by the emergence of new parties, with vote switching to new parties increasing by an order of magnitude, from less than one percent to seven percent of the electorate between elections. Volatility has been highest in the 1994 and 2013 elections, with more than one-third of the electorate switching its vote to support new populist parties like Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing Forza Italia (FI) and Beppe Grillo's left-wing Five Star Movement.

The recent surge of electoral volatility in Italy's elections suggests it has not recovered from party system collapse of the "Clean Hands" investigation and corruption scandal of the early 1990s, and that Berlusconi's personalistic populist mobilization has become a recurring feature of the party system. An advertising firm associated with Berlusconi's business conglomerate established the original 14,000 local FI clubs in two months ahead of the 1994 election, and this top-down method of party building saw no role for members to play in the party outside of election years. When FI first entered Italy's legislature in 1994, more than 90 percent of its Members of Parliament (MPs) were brand new legislators—a share half again as high as the average MP in that election.<sup>xxi</sup> These inexperienced MPs were much more reliant on and deferential to their party leader, and unsuccessfully sought to shield him from corruption charges.<sup>xxii</sup>



Other political parties in Italy have adopted a similar personalizing approach to campaigning, making parties more vehicles for individual leaders' elections than institutions pursuing clear ideological goals. This includes the center-left Democratic Party (PD), one of the few mainstream parties to survive Italy's party system collapse. In his rise to the leadership of PD, Matteo Renzi sought to cultivate an image of celebrity and to use his personal charisma rather than policy as a focal point for the party; he first signaled his intention to oust PD leadership in an appearance on the popular TV talent show *Amici* and, in doing so, copped a resemblance to the character Fonzie from TV's *Happy Days*.<sup>1</sup> Chris Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti suggest that Renzi's policy proposals in his bid for leadership reflected an apolitical and almost technocratic bent, in that each proposal had already been advocated by Berlusconi and would concentrate power in the hands of the executive and its agencies.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Pepe Grillo's left-wing populist Five Star Movement, as a new entrant to the party system, may be a purer example of a leader's Berlusconi-esque approach to personalizing his party and detaching it from ideology. Despite utilizing direct member participation via the internet, Grillo has unilaterally decided which party decisions to put to a vote, and participation in online party primaries has been orders of magnitude smaller than in primary elections for mainstream parties. Although the party's founding 2009 platform put it on the far left of the ideological spectrum, Filippo Tronconi found that the 2013 campaign introduced several new topics aimed at conservative voters, including abolishing the tax agency; perhaps as a consequence, the party's 2013 voters were evenly distributed across the ideological spectrum. And in its first nine months in the legislature, Five Star MPs' bills were remarkably similar in content to those of the average party, with no particular emphasis on the "five stars" of the movement: safeguarding public water, protecting the environment, promoting public transport, fostering technological connectivity, or promoting sustainable development.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The potentially serial populism of Italy, in which the center-right Christian Democracy (DC) party dissolved when the party system collapsed in the 1990s, stands in contrast to Austria, where right-wing populists have failed to gain the premiership because a longstanding center-right party occupies a portion of their ideological space. In Italy's 1994 election, former DC voters generally switched to right-wing populists by region: FI in Sicily, Lega Nord in the north, and the National Alliance (NA) around Rome and in the southeastern Puglia region;<sup>xxv</sup> the three parties have since sought out separate ideological niches along the right, with FI moving toward the center once occupied by DC, Lega embracing anti-immigrant and anti-EU sentiment, and NA pursuing historical revisionism of Italy's Fascist past.<sup>xxvi</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> The resemblance is...tenuous, at best. <https://www.corriere.it/politica/foto/05-2013/renzi/fonzie/renzi-posa-come-fonzie-chi-edb2d1a8-c21b-11e2-a4cd-35489c3421dc.shtml#3>

contrast to Berlusconi's nine years as prime minister—the longest-serving prime minister in postwar Italy—Austria's right-wing populist FPÖ has never held the premiership and has only ruled in coalition with the center-right ÖVP. FPÖ's political missteps contributed to the collapse of the government and early elections in 2002—when the scandal-free ÖVP gained votes at the FPÖ's expense<sup>xxvii</sup>—and again in 2019.

## Populism Empowers Executives Over Legislatures, Threatening Democratic Durability

Beyond creating issues of democratic representation and accountability, populist politicians' lower aptitude for governing can undermine legislative power and therefore key features of democracy. A 2006 study found that US state legislators who were term limited—and therefore less experienced—were much more influenced by the governor than state legislators who were not.<sup>xxviii</sup> Similarly, a 2002 study of Argentina's Chamber of Deputies, where the reelection rate from 1983-1997 averaged 20 percent, found that Argentina's legislators' low expertise shifted policymaking to the presidency.<sup>xxix</sup>

Legislative institutional power is an important part of democratic durability because stronger legislatures are better able to check abuses of executive power that can undermine democracy. One cross-national study of legislative powers—to include legislator experience—and checks on executive authority found that empowered legislatures were associated with longer-lived democracy.<sup>xxx</sup> Institutional checks that constrain executives are generally a boon to democracy; a separate academic study found that chief executives were less likely to engage in human rights abuses in countries with more independent judiciaries,<sup>xxxi</sup> and a third study found that executive constraints in general were associated with more durable democracy.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Weakened legislative oversight can enable executives to curb other constraints on their power, whether other government institutions—such as judiciaries and electoral commissions—or informal constraints, such as the press and civil society groups. With fewer formal and informal constraints on their power, executives can undertake more serious abuse of government institutions to target their opponents for repression, a process that undermines the principles of freedom, inclusion, and electoral fair play necessary for democracy. And it has been empowered populist executives' undermining of democratic institutions that had led to democratic breakdown in the wealthiest countries to ever revert to autocracy.

## Populism Has Driven Recent Democratic Breakdowns in Previously Immune Wealthy Countries

Democratic breakdown—reversion to autocracy through military coup, executive takeover, or popular uprising—is exceptionally rare in the world’s richest democracies. Wealthier democracies are probably more durable because greater prosperity for all members of society reduces the value of control of the state and its sources of patronage, lowering the stakes of national political competition and discouraging subversion of democratic rules.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The richest democracies also have more vibrant press and civil societies that can help prevent reversions to autocracy by calling out abuses of government power before they can significantly undermine democratic institutions.

A 2000 study of transitions to and from democracy since 1800 by Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi found that Argentina in 1976 was the wealthiest country to experience democratic breakdown. Its per capita income in the year before its breakdown was roughly \$13,600, and no modern democracy that had surpassed that income level had ever reverted to autocracy.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, this finding has not held up in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. According to data from Freedom House and Penn World Tables,<sup>xxxv</sup> four democracies with higher per capita incomes have broken down since 2000: Russia in 2004, Venezuela in 2008, Thailand in 2014, and Turkey in 2016. As Jason Brownlee has pointed out, 2016 Turkey now has the distinction of being the wealthiest democracy to ever break down;<sup>xxxvi</sup> its income the year before the breakdown was \$26,600, or nearly twice the per capita income of 1975 Argentina.<sup>2</sup>

Some statistics can give us a sense of how unusual a breakdown in a democracy as wealthy as 2016 Turkey is in a historical sense. Many Western European democracies were established and endured for decades at much lower income levels; for example, Sweden democratized in 1918 but its GDP per capita surpassed \$26,600 only in 1979.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In their 2000 study, Przeworski and his coauthors’ modeling suggested that countries with national incomes of at least \$26,600 had essentially zero chance of breaking down in any given year.<sup>xxxviii</sup> A recent study by Milan Svolik would put the chances at less than half of a percent.<sup>xxxix</sup>

What’s driving the trend of breakdowns in increasingly wealthy democracies? In all but one of the four cases—Russia in 2004—populist mobilization was the immediate precursor to the breakdowns. In both Venezuela and Turkey, democracy broke down through elected populist leaders’ self-coups—their undermining of key aspects of democratic accountability that rendered their countries autocratic.

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<sup>2</sup> All figures are given in 2018 constant purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars. For more information on the methodology, please see the Appendix.

In Thailand, democracy broke down when the military ousted the populist elected government over political deadlock between Bangkok elites threatened by the political rise of the populist government's supporters in the hinterlands.

## Populist Mobilization Polarizes the Electorate into Exclusionary Groups

Populist mobilization has contributed to democratic breakdown in a class of previously immune wealthy democracies because populists' ideology in practice undermines key sources of democratic durability: low stakes of state control and strong civil societies. Populists' sharp distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" polarizes electorates into two exclusionary groups. In such polarized electorates, the stakes of political competition are higher because it increases the possibility that the electoral victor, doubting the good faith and forbearance of its opponent, would seek to permanently advantage itself through institutional changes. By making each election a potentially all-or-nothing affair, populist mobilization can lead any of the actors whose continued cooperation is necessary to sustain democracy—the government, the opposition, or the military—to abandon a system they can no longer trust to protect their interests in the future.

Populists' ideology polarizes the electorate, denies the possibility of a pluralistic society, and transforms political competition into a moral rather than material affair. Populists' identification of "the pure people" and "corrupt elite" sharply divides an electorate into two incompatible groups that can have no overlap. By identifying only a portion of the electorate exclusively as the "the people," populists deny that their opponents could be a legitimate part of the electorate; if populists are in power, this same distinction denies the possibility of a loyal opposition, for who could oppose "the people"? This denial of a pluralistic society in which reasonable people can disagree elevates politics to a moral contest, in which populists' formulation of the "will of the people" is correct and infallible, making political disagreements much more difficult to bridge.<sup>xl</sup> Moralized attitudes can prevent individuals from assessing the costs and benefits of political policies because of these attitudes' visceral and intense nature, and moralized attitudes lead people to oppose compromise, punish politicians who would accommodate political rivals, and forgo material rewards rather than compromise.<sup>xli</sup>

Higher polarization means fewer moderating blocs in society, which increases the risk of political instability<sup>xlii</sup> and democratic breakdown.<sup>xliii</sup> This is especially true if strong partisanship overrides voters' considerations of democracy. Milan Svobik's study of polarization among Venezuelan voters found the overwhelming majority of the most left-wing voters were willing to support a potentially undemocratic candidate—one who pledged to stack the supreme court and electoral commission—if the candidate

also campaigned on their preferred left-wing economic policies. Apartisan voters who were indifferent between two candidates' policies but opposed to a potentially undemocratic candidate, and would vote for the more democratic candidate even if he or she espoused economic policies the apartisans found less than ideal, amounted to only five percent of the electorate.

Once in power, populists often crack down on civil society—a key source of resilience in wealthy democracies. Populists view themselves as the sole representative of the people, and therefore seek to sideline potential rivals who would make similar claims to representation. Restricting civil society or making it dependent on the government reduces the number of actors who can call out abuses of executive power, abuses that typically precede democratic breakdown through self-coups. And research has shown that poor respect for civil liberties in general<sup>xliv</sup> and for freedoms of association and assembly in particular<sup>xlv</sup> are associated with subsequent democratic breakdown.

Populists competing for power can also prompt the most common pathway to democratic breakdown historically: a military coup. Elites alarmed by the election of populist governments may foment unrest to undermine public belief in populist governments' competence, prompting the military to step in to restore stability. These same elites can directly urge the military to seize power in an attempt to prevent populists from implementing their policies; sometimes, they pursue both strategies at the same time.

## Populist Mobilization and Democratic Breakdown in Turkey, Venezuela, and Thailand

Outsider candidates in Turkey, Venezuela, and Thailand were able to mobilize previously marginalized groups left behind by economic change—chiefly the informal sector. In Turkey, leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) represented a rising and culturally conservative middle class largely from the interior, and its policies offered means-tested social assistance programs to the poor and unorganized segments of Turkey's society.<sup>xlvi</sup> In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez as a former paratrooper and failed coup leader, unaffiliated with any traditional party, appealed to the growing informal and unemployed sector that had never benefitted from the mainstream parties' patronage.<sup>xlvii</sup> And in Thailand, the businessman-cum-politician Thaksin Shinawatra found an untapped constituency of informal and agricultural workers, closely linked through migration and remittance patterns, that constituted perhaps a majority of the workforce.<sup>xlviii</sup>

In all three countries, the unexpected electoral successes of outsider candidates, each having potentially tenuous attachment to democratic principles, prompted elite backlashes for principled

reasons as well as considerations of maintaining their privileged status. In the run up to the AKP's election to a second premiership, the party's nomination of an openly Islamist presidential candidate drew increasingly vocal opposition from the more secular established parties, the military, and the judiciary;<sup>xlix</sup> the following year, the Constitutional Court came within one vote of shutting down the AKP as a party.<sup>l</sup> In Venezuela, opposition elites—alarmed by Chávez's redistributive policies and his unilateral approach to constitutional revision in his first term—in 2002 backed an unsuccessful military coup and organized a two month-long general strike that crippled the economy.<sup>li</sup> In Thailand, the businessman-cum-politician Thaksin Shinawatra faced increased judicial and media scrutiny for potential corruption and conflicts of interest in the run up to the elections to his first and second premierships, including official corruption charges during a previous stint in government.<sup>lii</sup>

In response to these higher stakes, with the potential to lose office outside of the ballot box and to potentially face imprisonment, these leaders became increasingly populist to mobilize supporters against their elite opponents. During the AKP's second premiership, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rhetoric more and more identified his party's Islamist supporters as the "virtuous people" against Turkey's non-religious and its ethnosectarian minorities.<sup>liii</sup> In Venezuela, the efforts by Chávez's government to revive the economy led it to adopt more directly populist measures, such as participatory social programs through community-level missions.<sup>liv</sup> In Thailand, Thaksin in his first reelection bid covered every region of the country in a tour of the countryside to hear villagers' petitions for budget assistance and pledged support to billions of dollars' worth of programs on the spot in an essential quid pro quo for votes.<sup>lv</sup>

These populist leaders also restricted civil society groups that might oppose them, often arguing that the leaders alone represented "the people." In Turkey, independent trade unions and women's groups critical of the AKP have lost members or policy influence as new and weakly-institutionalized counterparts more closely associated with the ruling party and its patronage networks have grown. These AKP-affiliated groups have echoed the party's populist message that they are above division and faction because they represent "the people."<sup>lvi</sup> In Venezuela, Chávez's government instituted laws that protected public authorities and institutions from insulting criticism and allowed the government to control the content of radio and television programs; Caracas failed to renew the operating license of a popular opposition television station, stating the station had been attempting to destabilize the government.<sup>lvii</sup> In Thailand, Thaksin bought the Nation, the country's most influential newspaper; his company Shin Corp sued three editors at the Thai Post and a media reformer for alleging the company benefitted from his administration; and a close ally of his attempted to buy up the Matichon Press Group.<sup>lviii</sup>

In Turkey and Venezuela, with civil society less able to act as a watchdog on abuses of government power, populist presidents lifted institutional checks on their authority; democracy broke down when these empowered presidents used their control of government institutions to suppress the opposition. In Turkey, the AKP enhanced the power of the executive by undermining judicial independence, including stacking the highest criminal and administrative courts with its supporters.<sup>lix</sup> In 2016, Erdoğan would go on to declare a state of emergency in the wake of a failed coup attempt, and Ankara subsequently engaged in politically-motivated prosecution of Kurdish Members of Parliament from the opposition People’s Democratic Party.<sup>lx</sup> In Venezuela, Chávez would stack the Supreme Court and electoral committee with his supporters; the electoral committee in 2008 would disqualify hundreds of opposition candidates for regional office for politically-motivated reasons, and Chávez’s party would abuse state resources for campaigning ahead of regional elections.<sup>lxi</sup>

Thailand experienced continuing political polarization even as Thaksin was forced into de facto exile by a 2006 military coup. Although both Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party were banned, TRT’s successor parties like Peua Thai (PT) still won majorities in 2007 and 2011 elections. Recurrent cycles of protests by the “Yellow Shirt” Bangkok elite against Thaksin and other party leader’s self-dealing and alleged corruption were countered by demonstrations from his largely rural supporters, the “Red Shirts.” Tit-for-tat violence between Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts escalated in the run up to early elections in 2014, to the point that Constitutional Court annulled the election results. Amid continuing Yellow Shirt demonstrations against the caretaker PT government, street violence, government agencies under siege, and a falling stock market, the military declared martial law.<sup>lxii</sup> Thailand in 2014 thus became the wealthiest democracy to ever experience a successful military coup, with a GDP per capita almost 20 percent higher than Argentina before its 1976 military coup.

## What Are the Risks of Populists’ Emergence and of Democratic Breakdown?

The emergence of populist parties, of course, does not lead deterministically to democratic breakdowns. Party system change and the electoral success of new political actors have historically reflected political entrepreneurs mobilizing new constituencies that had previously lacked representation, and most populist parties that do gain control of government will govern without democracy collapsing. Populist parties can also moderate their anti-establishment stances while in office, particularly if party leadership has previous political experience. For example, Greece’s left-wing populist SYRIZA party, once in power, toned down its polarizing rhetoric and moderated its policies as it was confronted with domestic and international political and economic constraints.<sup>lxiii</sup> SYRIZA’s Alexis

Tsipras came to the premiership with considerable experience in the workings of large political organizations, having held various leadership positions in leftist political parties for 20 years beforehand.

But populist mobilization by its nature represents deficiencies in representation that the mainstream parties have failed to address, to the point that a sizeable portion of the electorate has rejected the political system itself. The emergence of new political parties in the past, like the Labour Party's replacing the Liberal Party in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, occurred in a period of increasing enfranchisement and voter engagement, in contrast to new populist parties emerging in a time of declining voter turnout and hostility towards political parties. Populist parties' weak institutionalization and frequent reliance on personalist leaders makes them prone to collapse whether they attempt to moderate or not. With the charismatic Silvio Berlusconi banned from holding public legislative office for six years because a tax fraud conviction,<sup>lxiv</sup> Italy's Forza Italia lost vote share despite its move towards the center, and it earned only nine percent of the vote share in the May European parliament election despite Berlusconi's return at the top of the ticket. And the prominent role populist mobilization has played in undermining democratic checks and balances, and the subsequent breakdown of previously immune wealthy democracies, suggest populist mobilization significantly increase a country's risk of democratic collapse.

By analogy: smoking increases the risk of lung cancer even if most smokers don't go on to develop the disease. But getting lung cancer has such a high impact on well-being and mortality that the risk, in terms of probability multiplied by cost, is still high—even if the chances are less than 50 percent. So the sign of any risk factor for a low probability event demands attention if the potential outcome is costly enough. In this case, a democratic breakdown would be costly in its own right, but would also produce knock-on effects; autocracies tend to have less economic policy continuity after government turnover than democracies because of autocracies' weaker constraints on individual leaders,<sup>lxv</sup> and autocracies tend to be less predictable and cooperative allies than democracies because autocracies tend to pursue private national rather than public international goods.<sup>lxvi</sup>

## Where Might Populists Succeed—and Democracy Fail—in the Future?

Where might we see populists rise in the future, and where would they most put democracy at risk? A brief survey of the global regions with the most democratic countries, particularly those with a long history of mass rather than elite parties, can highlight the countries where populism is most likely to have electoral success, and where populist government would most increase the risk of democratic breakdown. Doing so will require an examination of past precursors of populist mobilization: economic



policy convergence suggested by fewer social protections; public dissatisfaction with mainstream parties, as suggested by high party system volatility; the existence of underrepresented constituencies as suggested by the emergence of newly salient postmaterialist issues or lower voter registration; and feelings of unfairness suggested by perceptions of widespread corruption or status anxiety prompted by prolonged economic crises. It will also require examining formal executive constraints, such as legislative power, and informal constraints on executives, such as measures indicating strong civil societies.

### *Europe*

Within Europe, populists are more likely to have electoral success in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe than other subregions. The subregion has the highest electoral volatility in the world, with countries that, on average, have more nearly 45 percent of their electorates switch party vote between elections.<sup>lxvii</sup> Central and Eastern Europe is also the subregion that has seen the greatest policy convergence toward market-friendly policies, with regulation that tends to promote greater autonomy for holders of capital, as exhibited by the subregion's higher income inequality and historically lower collective labor protections.<sup>lxviii</sup> Ninety-six percent of Europe's voting age population is registered to vote—including essentially all of Central and Eastern Europe's voting age population<sup>lxix</sup>—suggesting few politically marginalized communities for left-wing populists to mobilize. Economic crisis and demographic trends in Central and Eastern Europe have created considerable status anxiety among voters, however, creating a pool of voters for right-wing populists to mobilize.

Central and Eastern Europeans' status anxiety stems from the deep and lasting effects the Great Recession had on the subregion, especially coming after an era in which policy convergence on market-friendly "neoliberal" policies created tremendous wealth for some. In the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the median Central and Eastern European country experienced a recession that was five times deeper on a per capita basis than the Great Depression was in the United States, and a recovery that was far slower than the average lower and middle income country.<sup>lxx</sup> In the preceding 20 years, competition for foreign direct investment had led countries in the subregion to converge on neoliberal economic policies—even experimental policies such as a flat tax that were neither recommended by international financial institutions nor required for EU membership.<sup>lxxi</sup> Although these policies had produced tremendous wealth for perhaps 40 percent of the population, the magnitude of the effects of the Great Recession led voters to question neoliberal policy convergence and to prompt their dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties of the center-right and center-left that had implemented them.<sup>lxxii</sup>

Demographic changes have also heightened the average Central and Eastern European's status anxiety. Mass migration to Western Europe had led to population declines in many of these countries—the populations of the Baltic countries alone declined between 16 and 28 percent between 1990 and 2018<sup>lxxiii</sup>—many of them young people and prominent agitators for reform under Communism.<sup>lxxiv</sup> These demographic changes in more ethnically homogeneous and culturally conservative countries heightened voters' fears that their ethnic group could soon cease to exist, potentially replaced by a new population of migrants.<sup>lxxv</sup>

It has been Central and Eastern Europe where we've seen populists take the premiership more than any other part of Europe—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Central and Eastern European countries, like the rest of Europe, have some of the strongest formal executive constraints in the world, with the average country's measure of legislative powers being in the top 20 percent globally.<sup>lxxvii</sup> However, the average country in Central and Eastern Europe is far poorer than any other region in Europe—most having lower GDP per capita than Turkey at the time of its 2016 breakdown.<sup>lxxviii</sup> In addition, the average Central and Eastern European country has a significantly weaker civil society than a decade ago,<sup>lxxix</sup> in part because of a crackdown on foreign funding of NGOs across the region,<sup>lxxx</sup> suggesting fewer informal check on executive power in the subregion.

Within the subregion, Hungary and Poland are the countries at greatest risk of democratic breakdown under populist governance. Both are only slightly wealthier than Turkey before its 2016 democratic breakdown, and populist governments in power in both countries have further reduced informal and formal executive constraints by increasing government scrutiny of civil society groups and reducing judicial independence.<sup>lxxxi</sup> As in the cases of Turkey and Venezuela, democratic breakdown could occur if the governments abused state institutions to repress their political opponents through politically-motivated prosecutions of opposition politicians.

Although the chances of populists' electoral success and the related risk of democratic breakdowns is probably higher in Central and Eastern Europe, the impact of a populist government in the older democracies of Western Europe would have the potential to impact foreign policy in some of the core states in multilateral organizations such as the EU and NATO. In France, the collapse of the center-left Socialists and the emergence of the Yellow Vest protest movement suggests there is an underrepresented and marginalized constituency that could be receptive to left-wing populist mobilization. Such mobilization would be more likely to be inspired by a new political entrepreneur with no previous connection to a political party—perhaps a media personality similar to Italy's Berlusconi or

Grillo—given that most Yellow Vest protesters rejected any role for political parties in their movement.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

In Italy, populist mobilization has led to the election of a coalition government between the right-wing populist Lega and left-wing populist Five Star Movement. Italy's press and judiciary remain robust and potential checks on executive power; Lega in fact voted with the opposition to block Five Star legislators' efforts to defund a semi-public media outlet.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> But Lega's forbearance to formal and informal scrutiny could wane if judicial and prosecutorial inquiries—into corruption under Lega's previous leader, the treatment of migrants by its current leader and Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini, and potentially illegal foreign campaign contribution to the party<sup>lxxxiv</sup>—pose serious risks to its continuation in office.

### *East Asia and Pacific*

Like Europe, the East Asia and Pacific region is home to some of the wealthiest democracies in the world, most of which have well-institutionalized party systems. Populists are most likely to have success in countries with the most volatile party systems, chiefly in Southeast Asia—where party vote switching between elections can reach up to 40 percent of the electorate—but also in South Korea, where more than a third of the electorate switches its party vote between elections.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Southeast Asian countries and South Korea also have historically poor respect for collective labor rights in practice, suggesting policy convergence on market-friendly policies.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> In many countries in Southeast Asia, 10 to 15 percent of the voting-age population is not registered to vote, suggesting a sizeable population of politically marginalized groups for populists to mobilize.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

Southeast Asia is where populists have already seen their biggest electoral successes, with the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Thaksin in Thailand. Although Duterte attracted support from diverse sectors of society, his strongest and earliest support came from among the upper and middle class, including petit bourgeois small shop owners and taxi drivers, who feared losing the modest gains of the Philippines' economic boon and slipping any further in socioeconomic status.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> The southern mayor's campaign, alleging that the corrupt elites of Manila had coddled drug dealers and addicts, struck a chord with middle class urban voters as well as southerners, where the negative effects of drug use in their communities had not previously been part of the political conversation.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

Other countries in the region are potential growth areas for populists. Indonesia's right-wing populist Prabowo Subianto has been the runner up in the past two presidential elections, and his party in its 11 years has grown to be the second largest in the legislature, with nearly fourteen percent of the seats. In Malaysia, populists may benefit from the political opening created by the 2018 electoral defeat

of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which had held the premiership for 51 years. Greater political competition could create space for new populist parties to emerge or for UMNO to take up a more populist mantle if its ethnic Malay constituency feared loss of status in a new political environment.

Compared to Europe, the democracies of Southeast Asia have fewer formal and informal checks on executive power, increasing the risk that they would revert to autocracy under populist government. The legislative power of the average democracy in Southeast Asia is barely above the global median. National incomes are comparable to or—much more frequently—lower than Turkey’s ahead of its 2016 democratic breakdown,<sup>xc</sup> and many Southeast Asian governments are hostile to civil society organizations, which governments often view as potential political threats.<sup>xc</sup>

In Southeast Asia, populist mobilization has already led to democratic breakdown in Thailand, and the election of Duterte as President increases the risk of democratic breakdown in the Philippines. Duterte has already weakened the legislature’s oversight powers; when a senator launched an investigation of the increase in extrajudicial slayings under Duterte, his allies in the Senate removed her as head of the investigative committee and members of the House of Representatives began to investigate her instead. Other formal judicial and informal civil society checks on executive power had already weakened under his predecessor Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III; Aquino had removed the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for political reasons, and the civil society activists that had staffed much of the social welfare positions in his government were discredited by his failure to produce broad-based economic growth.<sup>xcii</sup>

Outside of Southeast Asia, South Korea’s poorly institutionalized party system increases the chances that a populist outsider could emerge to mobilize a constituency in a country where political parties are among the least trusted institutions, and where street demonstrations are the preferred vehicle for political expression. In 2012, a political outsider in the form of Ahn Cheol Soo, CEO of the high-profile software company AhnLab, entered the presidential race and was considered a serious contender because of his high popularity ratings before ultimately withdrawing.<sup>xciii</sup> South Korea has higher formal and informal checks on the executive than the countries of Southeast Asia, however, with an empowered legislature and active civil society, suggesting its democracy would be much more resilient in the event a populist government was elected.

#### *Latin America*

Electoral volatility in Latin American countries is similar to that of East Asian and Pacific countries, with about 25 percent of the electorate switching its party vote between elections.<sup>xciv</sup> The

region has seen considerable economic policy convergence, with some of the highest income inequality and worst collective labor protections in the world.<sup>xcv</sup> Within Latin America, populists are more likely to have electoral success in the countries of the Andes and Central America than in other subregions. These countries have experienced the highest cumulative party system volatility in the region, with between 59 and 100 percent of the electorate switching party votes in legislative elections between 1990 and 2015.<sup>xcvi</sup> Outside of Central America, essentially all of the voters in Latin American countries have been registered, suggesting there are fewer marginalized groups for left-wing populists to mobilize. Recent electoral trends suggest that a fourth wave of largely right-wing populist mobilization, prompted by corruption but also postmaterialist issues, may be underway.

Left-wing populists came to power in many of the Andean countries in Latin America's third wave of populism in the 1990s and 2000s, as outsider politicians mobilized previously marginalized groups—largely among informal workers and indigenous peoples—in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. In Central America since 2016, sharp drops in perceptions of control of corruption contributed to voters' sense of unfairness that precipitated right-wing populist success. After Guatemala dropped one decile in the World Bank's control of corruption index during President Otto Pérez Molina's 2011-2015 term,<sup>xcvii</sup> voters elected to the presidency an outsider candidate in the form of the former comedian and right-wing populist Jimmy Morales. After a similar drop in perceptions of control of corruption in otherwise low-corruption Costa Rica, right-wing populist Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz won the most 2018 presidential votes in the first round before losing in the runoff.

Alvarado Muñoz's competitive campaign highlights the increased salience of post-materialist values to right-wing populist mobilization in the region. He had campaigned against gay marriage after the Inter-American Court of Human Rights determined its member states—to include Costa Rica—must recognize same-sex equality in marriage and property rights.<sup>xcviii</sup> This cultural rather than material appeal echoed those of Brazil's right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, who claimed during his campaign that politicians of the center-left sought to teach young people to be homosexual.<sup>xcix</sup>

The countries of Latin America tend to have strong presidencies with fewer formal and informal executive constraints than in Europe, making them more susceptible to democratic breakdown under populist government. The overwhelming majority of countries in the region have above average legislative powers but are below the top 20 percent globally.<sup>c</sup> Almost every country has lower GDP per capita than Turkey ahead of its 2016 democratic breakdown—and frequently lower than Argentina ahead of its 1976 breakdown—and associational and organizational rights have significantly declined since 2005.<sup>ci</sup> Democratic breakdown under populist government did occur in Venezuela in 2008,<sup>cii</sup> and

the recent election of President Bolsonaro in Brazil and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico increase those democracies' risks of breakdown.

Brazil historically has had an independent and assertive judiciary, one that to date has shown its ability to check executive power by overturning some of President Bolsonaro's decrees.<sup>ciii</sup> But the judiciary's attempts to limit corruption investigations, along with evidence that judges overseeing anti-corruption investigations coordinated with politicians or public prosecutors,<sup>civ</sup> could weaken the judiciary by undermining public confidence in judges' independence and freedom from politicization. This declining informal power could give Bolsonaro the opportunity to formally reduce judicial independence, heightening Brazil's risk of democratic breakdown.

The administration of López Obrador has weakened informal executive constraints by cutting public funding of NGOs. It has also weakened formal constraints by reducing the electoral commission's budget, and undermined judicial independence by taking control of judicial evaluation and proposing legislation to pack the Supreme Court with his supporters.<sup>cv</sup> A weakened judiciary and watchdog civil society would be less able to oppose abuses by López Obrador that could bring about democratic breakdown, such as any attempts to suppress political opponents in the run-up to 2021 mid-term elections to the Chamber of Deputies.

#### *Sub-Saharan Africa*

The countries of Sub-Saharan Africa have slightly higher electoral volatility than Latin America, with about 28 percent of the electorate or legislative seats switching between parties from election to election.<sup>cvi</sup> And similar to Latin America, many Sub-Saharan Africa governments are able to pursue a limited menu of economic policies because of the influence of international financial institutions as well as their dependence on foreign aid.<sup>cvii</sup> Southern Africa is the subregion with party systems most similar to those of the Western European or Latin American countries in which populism first emerged, having experienced a measure of industrialization that prompted working class mobilization through labor unions and the creation of mass parties.<sup>cviii</sup> The average Sub-Saharan African country has a weaker legislature and much lower national income than the average Latin American country, and Sub-Saharan Africa has seen a significant decline in associational and organizational rights since 2005;<sup>cix</sup> all of these suggest the region has far fewer formal and informal executive constraints that could prevent democratic breakdown under populist government.

As expected, Southern Africa has seen the emergence and success of populist politicians and parties. In South Africa, the left-wing populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), in the party's six years of existence, has become the third-largest party in the legislature, with 11 percent of the seats. EFF's

electoral success has come as it campaigned against the economic policy convergence of both the ruling African National Congress and the opposition Democratic Alliance,<sup>cx</sup> and as the party focused on working class black Africans as the “pure people” against both white capitalists and the elite ANC leadership.<sup>cxii</sup>

Zambia is the Southern African country with the highest party system volatility in the past 25 years—with more than a third of the electorate switching party votes between legislative elections<sup>cxiii</sup>—and in 2011 elected the populist Michael Sata as President. Sata mobilized an underrepresented constituency of urban poor<sup>cxiiii</sup> against the inequality and low growth associated with mainstream parties’ convergence on a technocratic approach to economic policymaking—an approach ruling and opposition parties had adopted under the influence of international financial institutions.<sup>cxiv</sup> Sata died in office in 2014 and, during the 2016 reelection campaign of his successor Edgar Lungu, the government harassed opposition media and shut down opposition rallies amid considerable electoral violence between rival parties, amounting to a democratic breakdown, according to Freedom House.<sup>cxv</sup>

## What Is To Be Done?

The emergence of populism reflects severe problems with representation and accountability in democracies worldwide. However, despite potentially increasing the representativeness of a country’s politics, populists in government increase the risk of democratic breakdown even in a class of previously immune wealthy democracies. What can be done to improve representation and accountability to keep voters engaged within the party system, and what can be done once a sizeable share of the electorate is so alienated from political parties that it elects a populist government? The next and final paper in this series will look at potential options, including increased internal party deliberation to increase the supply of responsive political parties and compulsory voting to increase their demand.

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## **Appendix: Methodology for Determining Breakdowns of Wealthy Democracies**

I attempted to use the same methods as those used by Przeworski and Limongi in their original 1997 study, "Modernization: Theory and Facts." I first determined the year of a country's democratic breakdown from the year it dropped off of Freedom House's list of electoral democracies. Like Przeworski and Limongi, I used the Penn World Tables (in this case, version 9.1) to determine historic per capita income levels in terms of constant purchasing power parity dollars, and excluded countries that derived at least half of their income from oil revenues.

For the latter reason, I omitted the case of Libya's democratic breakdown in 2014; although the World Bank data on the share of Libya's GDP derived from oil rents only runs through 2011, the share during the last five years of data averaged 50 percent. I also excluded breakdowns in wealthy democracies with populations less than 500,000, such as Maldives in 2015, which can have very different political dynamics than the average country.

Lastly, these results hold across different data sources for democratic breakdowns since 1989: Freedom House's list of electoral democracies, V-Dem's list of electoral democracies, and Larry Diamond's list of democratic breakdowns in his 2015 *Journal of Democracy* article "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession." According to each source, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela are the wealthiest democracies to ever break down, at levels higher than Argentina before its 1976 breakdown; this even true when the sources disagree on the year of the breakdown.



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