



## How to fail at populism

### Description

Twitter replaced some of Trump's recent tweets about the US election with the message: "Some or all of the content shared in this Tweet is disputed and might be misleading about an election or other civic process" followed by a link to [Twitter's Civic Integrity Policy](#). As votes for Joe Biden (D) secured the electoral college and the popular vote tally, Trump accused Democrats of rigging the system.

### Uncommon sense

I just discovered that Trump's confidant and lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, has a regular YouTube channel entitled *Rudy Giuliani's Common Sense*. Trump's tweets and statements are in step with Giuliani and others in their orbit. Episode 84 of the video casts provides a calm 17 minute polemic that concludes with the summary:

"Donald Trump won this election. Democrats tried everything they could beforehand to stop it, including censorship. They couldn't. Now they've got one last chance, and this is what they're very good at, which is cheating on the vote count. But this time the Republican party, and our President, fights for you. Because they [Democrats] want to take your vote away. They want the elites to determine our president."

"We want the people of the United States to determine our president. We'll fight to make sure your vote is counted, and that your vote is not cancelled out by an illegal vote, and we'll do whatever we have to do within the law to do that. That's because we have a President who cares about you, and they [Democrats] have a candidate who says you don't have the right to know, and who announced, probably in a Freudian slip, two days before: We'll get the people. I'm going to win it without you; [but] with the network heads, big tech-heads, and the money he's [Biden] gotten from all kinds of places including communist China. We're not going to let that happen. Thank you, and we'll be back in a few days with another *Rudy's Common Sense*."

These words have been repeated in various contexts, including in place of Trump's concession speech today. While the world celebrated the Biden victory, Giuliani outlined a series of cases they were bringing to the courts. Meanwhile, Trump was in Virginia playing golf.



## Populism 101

I've been reading political scientist Jan-Werner Müller's helpful book *What is Populism?* Giuliani's message exemplifies some of the key elements of populism. Here's a summary, inflected by my own observations.

1. Populism requires a charismatic leader. That's someone who in the words of the social theorist Max Weber in the 1940s, "is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples" (350). That sounds archaic in the current age, yet the mass rallies and news interviews with rally attendees have foreground that kind of devotion. Consider Trump's previous TV celebrity and picture his "super-human" recovery from COVID-19.

2. It's crucial for the populist to connect with enough of the population who will offer up their votes. That's the "silent majority," often people who are disoriented by social and cultural change, endure economic deprivation, job loss, poor living conditions and have other grievances or at least are persuaded to identify with those grievances. For Müller, populism is often associated strongly with "particular moods and emotions: popularists are 'angry'; their voters are 'frustrated' or suffer from 'resentment'" (3).

3. That group has to be available for persuasion: that they share their grievances, persuasion to vote, and to vote for the leader. As well as shared grievance, the populist singles out a cabal of culprits to

blame. Hence Giuliani's reference in the quotation above to the "elites": "the network heads, big tech-heads, and the money." I'm reminded of Michael Gove's comment in the lead up to the Brexit vote that "Britain has had enough of experts."

4. The populist leader equates himself/herself with the people. In the Giuliani quote above, the Democrats and other critics are against Trump, which means they are against *you* the people. Who or what constitutes the people is particular. Rarely is it everyone. For Mä¼ller, populist identification denies "pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens." Populism replaces diversity with the fantasy of a "single, homogeneous, authentic people" (3).

5. The populist leader has to present him or herself as separate from the elite ruling classes. The populist presents as an outsider and thereby identifies with the aggrieved population. This separation continues when the populist becomes the leader with power, maintained by constant reference to people and institutions that seek to undermine the leader's efforts (e.g. via the so-called "deep state"). Trump encouraged people to protest against COVID restrictions that his own government advised, or that local leaders tried to mandate. Such populist tactics show an attempt to identify with protest, even against the things for which the populist is directly or indirectly responsible.

6. The populist seeks to disparage or control the mass media. The populist seeks unmediated communication, i.e. speaking directly to the people. For Mä¼ller, that's "preferring a direct, unmediated relationship between the personal leader and the people" (61). Twitter is ideal for this "direct access," or "the illusion of direct contact" (35). Digital social media are well suited to the populist tactic of creating, appropriating, disseminating and repeating simple phrases and slogans: "It was a perfect call," "there was no collusion," "the Russia hoax."

7. What compels the populist to lead? It is likely to be a mixture of ideology, a sense of a superior right, to maintain a dynasty, or to create and sustain a privileged lifestyle and wealth for the leader, their family, race, religion or that of others in their orbit. Many Trump critics assert that his intention all along has been to improve his own financial stakes and that of others with wealth, while deceiving the population into believing that it was all for their benefit. Such self-serving often equates to scandal. For Mä¼ller, "the perception among supporters of populists is that corruption and cronyism are not genuine problems as long as they look like measures pursued for the sake of a moral, hardworking "us" and not for the immoral and even foreign "them" (48).

I think that for a populist regime to succeed long term, three further conditions must apply:

- Goodwill: that the populist is able to maintain a sense, if not the actuality, that he or she is acting for the benefit of others, and for all, rather than the populist leader's own self interest.
- To endure, populism needs to ensure that its base of support includes all the people, either by further persuasion or effectively casting out those who do not submit.
- Competence: that the populist is capable of maintaining these tactics and delivering something that continues to satisfy sufficiently the needs of the people via competent management.

Thankfully, something went wrong, and it's over for the time being.

## References

- Giuliani, Rudy W. 2020. ELECTION THEFT Of The Century | Rudy Giuliani | Ep. 84. *Rudy Giuliani's Common Sense (YouTube)*, 6 November. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVSJriRbxQQ&feature=youtu.be> (accessed 6 November 2020).
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- Miller, Jan-Werner. 2017. *What is Populism?* New York: Penguin
- Weber, Max. 1997. *The theory of social and economic organization*. Trans. A.M. Henderson, and Talcott Parsons. New York: Free Press. First published in 1947.

## Notes

- On the subject of incompetence, see where the photograph above was taken. The story is that the event was meant to be held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Philadelphia designed by Norman Foster, but ended up at the car park of a landscape supply firm with a similar name, and next to an adult bookshop. Davidson, Justin. 2020. An Architecture Critic Looks at Four Seasons Total Landscaping. *Curbed*, 8 November. Available online: <https://www.curbed.com/2020/11/four-seasons-total-landscaping-trump-giuliani-philadelphia-perfect.html> (accessed 8 November 2020).
- Trump's non-acceptance tweets.



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