

Populism, Affective Polarization, and Worldwide Democratic Backsliding. Interview with Cas Mudde

Cas Mudde 

In recent decades, the rise of populism, the normalization of authoritarian discourses, and the growing affective polarization have tested the resilience of liberal democracies worldwide. In this interview, Dr. Cas Mudde, Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF Professor of International Affairs at the University of Georgia and one of the most influential scholars in the study of populism and authoritarianism, whom I thank for his time and willingness to participate, analyzes the main factors that have weakened democratic institutions and the rule of law in Latin America and Europe. He also examines the rise of radical ideologies and nationalist projects, the distinction between ideological and affective polarization, and models of “*militant democracy*” as well as the links between antidemocratic actors. Finally, Professor Mudde reflects on the lessons that Latin America, marked by hyperpresidentialism and populism, offers to the global debate on processes of autocratization and the future prospects for democratic transition in the region.

Sergio Angel [S.A.] Over the past decade, various analyses have warned of a progressive deterioration of liberal democracy and human rights across different regions of the world. From your perspective, what are the main factors that have led to the weakening of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the 21st century?

Cas Mudde [C.M.] Let me premise this question with a caution, in criticizing the present, we should not idealize (and whitewash) the past. While it is certainly true that we are in a phase of democratic backlash, most of these backlashes are in countries that only nominally or relatively recently turned democratic. And while some established liberal democracies are also facing democratic backlash, many of these were far from perfect systems before (think only of the U.S.). Finally, democratic backsliding is uneven, affecting certain institutions and rights as well as groups... and some groups are still better off today than, say, 20 years ago, in many countries this applies to both women and the LGBTQI+ community, for example.

Having that out of the way, the weakening of democratic institutions and the rule of law is a complex process, with many different actors and factors. For instance, neoliberalism has

weakened the political accountability of much of the economic system, through various forms of privatization (e.g. energy sector, public transport) or depoliticization (e.g. independent central bank). At the same time, immigration and terrorism has led to authoritarian responses, undermining the rule of law not just for targeted minorities (e.g. Muslims) but also the broader public (e.g. privacy laws). All these measures were primarily taken by mainstream parties, i.e. those that claim to be liberal democratic.

We now focus mainly on the more open attacks on liberal democracy by populist actors, particularly those on the radical right (e.g. Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump). Populists target the independence of the judiciary and media, weaken checks and balances between political institutions, and create an all-powerful executive. This is true for both the populist left (e.g. Chávismo in Venezuela) and the populist right (e.g. BJP in India or Republicans in the U.S.). But there are non-populist authoritarians who do the same, most notably Vladimir Putin in Russia, in many ways the inspiration for populist authoritarians like Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel.

It is hard to say why this all happens now. In part, I see populism as an illiberal democratic backlash against undemocratic liberalism. As mainstream politicians have embraced neoliberalism, and defended with “There Is No Alternative” (TINA) politics, populists and other authoritarians in general offer a sense of empowerment, saying “we can change the world if we really want to”. At the same time, the media infrastructure has changed fundamentally. In most countries, political elites controlled most of the major media until the late-20th century, be it public (e.g. state) or private (e.g. through Churches or trade unions). While they did not censor in the same way as authoritarian regimes do, they did suppress unwanted issues and sentiments (e.g. on corruption and immigration) and marginalize certain political competitors (e.g. communists and the far right). With an increasingly privatized media, and a burgeoning social media, liberal democratic elites have mostly lost their gatekeeping function. Moreover, the media, social and traditional, now mainly follows a profit-seeking logic, which incentivizes radical political outsiders (notably populists) and their favorite topics (e.g. crime, corruption)

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S.A. In your work on political radicalism and populism, you have noted that certain autocratic and authoritarian ideas have managed to become normalized within public debate. What political and social dynamics explain the normalization of radical discourses both on the left and the right?

C.M. Again, it is important to note that certain authoritarian ideas have always been mainstream and normal, particularly during times of “crisis”, which have always led to an authoritarian reflex, irrespective whether there is an authoritarian or democratic party in power or pressuring for such a response. But over the last decades, we see, in particular, a mainstreaming and normalization of nativism, i.e. the belief that a country should only be inhabited by the “native” population and is threatened by non-natives (e.g. immigrants, ethnic minorities). While this focuses primarily on ethnic minorities and immigrants, particularly Muslims in Europe, some far-right parties and people also believe that other minorities either have too much power or are undermining the nation (e.g. LGBTQI+ community or even women). And, finally, in many parts of Western Europe, you see a growing authoritarian response to environmentalist and pro-Palestine protesters, think of the UK and Germany, respectively.

The mainstreaming of nativism is a direct consequence of the electoral threat of the far right as well as their growing political relevance. But one should also not forget that nativism has always been part of most political cultures and systems, even if it was not openly advocated or even acknowledged. Similarly, many mainstream right-wing parties have always been skeptical towards full equality of LGBTQI+ people and women. Interestingly, the population has not become more xenophobic, let alone more homophobic or sexist, but in many countries the salience of these sentiments has increased, because of alarmist and sensationalist campaigns by media and parties. Finally, there are powerful lobbies pressing governments to crack down on environmentalist or pro-Palestine protests. These crackdowns are purely elite-driven, as populations are overall not particularly concerned or opposed to environmentalists or pro-Palestine protests.

S.A. The rise of political polarization appears to contribute to the deterioration of democratic systems while simultaneously preventing the formation of basic social consensus. In your view, to what extent does current polarization represent a threat to the stability and sustainability of liberal democracies?

C.M. First of all, it is important to note that polarization is a process rather than a state. Second, in the academic literature there is a distinction between ideological and affective polarization, which are often conflated in the public debate. We speak of *ideological* polarization if the main parties of a party system move to the extremes of the main ideological

dimension, whether that is a socio-economic or socio-cultural dimension is irrelevant. In terms of ideological polarization, what we see today is mostly *radicalization* of the right, with no significant equivalent on the left. To put it very simple, while the Tea Party took over the Republican Party, Occupy Wall Street has remained marginal within the Democratic Party. Many mainstream right-wing parties have moved to the right (e.g. Conservative Party in the UK or Popular Party in Spain), particularly on socio-cultural issues like immigration, and some even transformed into far-right parties (like Fidesz in Hungary or the Republican Party in the U.S.). Most mainstream left-wing parties have not moved to the left on socio-economic issues and, in fact, many moved right on some socio-cultural issues, particularly immigration too (think about Labour in the UK or the Social Democrats in Denmark).

There is more evidence of affective polarization, which means that you see “the other side” as a threat, i.e. as an (illegitimate) enemy rather than a (legitimate) opponent. This plays out stronger in two-party systems, however. In most multiparty systems, this mostly separates the center to center-left from the far right, with right-wing parties and their voters increasingly moving to the far-right pole. Again, the process started on the right. As right-wing parties moved further to the right, and sometimes either transformed into far-right parties or were replaced as largest right-wing party by the far right, their supporters increasingly saw “the other side”, which they refer to as “the left” (even if it often also includes centrists), as a threat. As the right became more radicalized, the left started to see them more as a threat too.

Both ideological and affective polarization are a problem for liberal democracy, which is based on the core value of pluralism, i.e. the idea that society consists of multiple groups of different but interests and values, which are legitimate political actors, and on a politics of compromise. Affective polarization undermines the idea of pluralism, ideological polarization the politics of compromise. To be clear, compromise does not mean consensus, let alone the absence of conflict. As Chantal Mouffe has forcefully argued, liberal democracy requires conflict and “the sacralization of consensus”, promoted by centrists and particularly the Third Way of Anthony Giddens and Tony Blair, is also harmful for democracy. However, as Mouffe has also argued, pluralism should be *antagonistic*, i.e. between legitimate opponents, rather than *agonistic*, i.e. between enemies.

S.A. One of the most important debates revolves around how democracies should respond to outsiders who weaken and reject democratic rules from within the system itself. How can liberal democracies balance the defense of the separation of powers with the protection of pluralism and political participation?

C.M. The literature distinguishes between the German model and the U.S. model. The German model is called militant democracy and is based on the active repression of anti-democratic forces, inspired by the traumatic implosion of the Weimar Republic in the early 20th century. In a militant democracy, anti-democratic actors and ideas are illegal, and the state will strictly enforce this by banning anti-democratic political organizations and barring people who are members of extremist organizations from public jobs (such as bureaucrats, soldiers and teachers). The U.S. model is based on complete tolerance, i.e. the freedom to be anti-democratic in word and deed, so long as you don't use violence. Hence, while neo-Nazi organizations can march freely in the U.S., they are banned in Germany. These are ideal types, however, which do not exist in their pure form in the real world, not all extremist organizations are banned in Germany, while freedom of speech is not absolute in the U.S. It is therefore better to see them as poles of a dimension of state repression. Most European countries fall between the German and U.S. model, albeit closer to the former than the latter.

As we see today, both models have a hard time limiting the influence of extremist actors. The U.S. is currently ruled by an authoritarian leader, who is actively weakening liberal democracy, including pluralism and the separation of powers, while the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is getting closer and closer to power in Eastern parts of Germany. This is because rules are only as strong as the people who should enforce them. In the U.S., the Supreme Court has given President Trump almost carte blanche, while in Germany the state has not (yet) started a banning procedure against the AfD, even though the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) has classified the party as extremist.

The reality is that extremist actors can become successful in every type of political system, presidential versus parliamentary, majoritarian versus consensual, as institutions themselves cannot protect democracy. In the end, it is up to the democratic establishment to protect democratic institutions and values, and we see that they often either do not really stand up to strong extremist actors or actively collaborate with them. This is because of a variety of different reasons: some believe that democracy is too weak to fend off the extremists, some believe that there are only two extremists options (one left and one weak), and some think they can use the extremists to get or stay in power, this was the case with the right-wing elites in Weimar Germany, who thought they could control Hitler, but also with right-wing elites in 21st century Brazil, who thought they could control Bolsonaro.

The only way to protect liberal democracy is to convince the majority of people that it is the best system we have, because it limits the power of the majority and protects the rights of

minorities, and we are all minorities in certain contexts! Of course, liberal democracy should also deliver, both in terms of input and output, which is often lacking. And, finally, politicians must be more honest and realistic about their (lack of) power, many promise far too much, giving people the impression that politicians can do much more than they actually can, and (try to) do what they promised. Moreover, we live in an era of fragmentation and mediatization, which will lead to more critique and disappointment than one hundred years ago. This will be even the case when countries perform well, for example, even in countries with very low levels of corruption, like Estonia and Finland, you have minorities who believe the country (and elite) is corrupt.

S.A. Although much of your work has focused on Europe and the United States, Latin America offers multiple examples of political polarization, hyperpresidentialism, and authoritarian regimes. From a historical and regional perspective, what lessons can the Latin American experience give to the global debate on democratic backsliding and the systematic violation of human rights?

C.M. Latin American political systems tend to be characterized by strong presidents and relatively weak political parties, which makes them somewhat similar to the U.S. but much less so to most European countries. This is important, particularly because most often democratic backsliding, polarization, and systematic violation of human rights are primarily linked to a strong executive (which is often the president). Moreover, the military tends to play a more central role in Latin American politics than in European, or even U.S. politics. So, one must be careful in generalizing too widely.

I see several similarities between Trump 2.0 and 20th century right-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America, as well as the recent Bolsonaro presidency in Brazil. In fact, I think that these Latin American right-wing authoritarian regimes can probably tell us at least as much, and probably more, than historical fascism in Europe. One of the key differences is the level of organization and institutionalization, which was extremely high in historical fascism but much lower in right-wing authoritarianism. Similarly, the role of ideology was much bigger and more central in European fascism than in Latin American right-wing authoritarianism. The second Trump administration remains quite weak in terms of organization and institutionalization, and its ideological penetration of U.S. society is limited and contested. Its rules rather chaotic, with little coherence or consistency, again, more like Latin American right-wing authoritarianism than European fascism. In terms of party politics, the U.S. sits in between Latin America and Europe. The Republican Party is stronger than most Latin American parties, both in terms of legislative power and ideological coherence, but weaker than in European fascism.

Finally, the use of relatively unorganized and unregulated militias is similar, ICE in the U.S. and paramilitaries in Latin America.

S.A. In particular, the recent detention of Nicolás Maduro, leader of the Venezuelan regime and subject to charges of drug trafficking and other offenses in the United States, has sparked intense international debate about justice and democratic transition. In your opinion, what political and social effects does the detention of an authoritarian leader produce for Venezuela and other regimes in the region?

C.M. In the short term, it is probably a positive for the Chavismo regime, which is deeply unpopular, but many Venezuelans will oppose the abduction of its leader by a foreign country even more. For other countries, notably Cuba but possibly also Colombia, i.e. countries that have been called out by Trump, it is a frightening warning that international rules mean nothing to the Trump administration and that they will come for you if they want to, and based on their own interpretations of the truth. And the latter makes it more difficult to accommodate the U.S., as Trump regularly operates based on wrong information, from a small silo of far-right media and operatives, and seems largely immune to information from outside of that bubble.

S.A. Along the same lines, within a regional and global context marked by authoritarianism, populism, political polarization, and geopolitical tensions, is democratic transition possible in Venezuela and the other authoritarian regimes of the region, for example, Cuba and Nicaragua? And if so, what institutional and social transformations are necessary to rebuild the legitimacy of democratic governments?

C.M. On the one hand, the price for continued authoritarian rule has gone up, because Trump has made it clear that he is willing to intervene, financially and militarily. On the other hand, these actions are often perceived as “U.S. imperialism”, which rarely is embraced in these countries, outside of some smaller circles of far-right opposition. But both the Venezuela abduction and the Iran bombing have made it clear that the Trump administration is not really interested in regime change and has no plans on how to achieve that. In fact, they seem perfectly fine to work with people in the authoritarian regime that are more submissive to Trump and the U.S. So, democratic transition will still mainly have to come from within. Moreover, given the Trump administration’s preference for far-right actors, both in Europe and Latin America, there is a fair chance they will push for replacement by far-right actors, who have a poor track record in terms of liberal democracy.

S.A. Looking ahead, from your perspective and based on your trajectory, do liberal democracies possess the necessary

power to adapt and overcome the current tensions between authoritarianism, radicalism, and populism?

C.M. I know it has become fashionable to see the second half of the 20th century as a kind of Interregnum, a transition period between two different forms of authoritarianism, and to see liberal democracy as an aberration rather than the rule. I don’t think this is our necessary future. First of all, democracy is the norm for the majority of people in most countries, even if people have very different conceptions of democracy. This explains why many authoritarian leaders today attack democracy *in the name of* democracy, from Maduro to Orbán to Trump. Second, while several established democracies are struggling (e.g. UK and US), most democratic backsliding is taking place in either new (e.g. Hungary) or weak (e.g. India) democracies. Third, in few countries democracy is completely abolished and, as recent elections in a variety of countries show (e.g. Brazil, Hungary, Poland), democratic backsliding can be stopped before it is too late.

In the end, the current process of democratic backsliding is less about the strength of the authoritarian forces and more about the weakness of the democratic forces. Most authoritarians come to power because significant parts of the elites and masses do not believe the democratic system functions well. In some cases, this is true (see the corruption scandals in Hungary or Italy), in others much less so (e.g. the allegations against Lula in Brazil). But my main point is, we spend too much time on fighting off the authoritarian challenges and too little on modernizing and strengthening democracy. But even if we could wish the authoritarians away, most countries would still have a problematic democratic system with relatively weak support.

S.A. I thank Professor Mudde for his valuable insights, perspectives, and reflections on the debate surrounding populism and democratic backsliding at the global level. Drawing on the analysis across Europe, the United States, and Latin America, Professor Mudde demonstrates that the weakening of liberal democracy does not stem from a single ideology, but rather from structural dynamics, including neoliberalism, mediatization, affective polarization, and the weakness of democratic elites, cutting across the entire political spectrum. In the face of these tasks, the strengthening of democratic institutions, the defense of pluralism, and social recognition of the virtues of the democratic system have become indispensable factors for halting the advance of authoritarianism.