

What Explains the Political Right's Ascendancy to Global Power?

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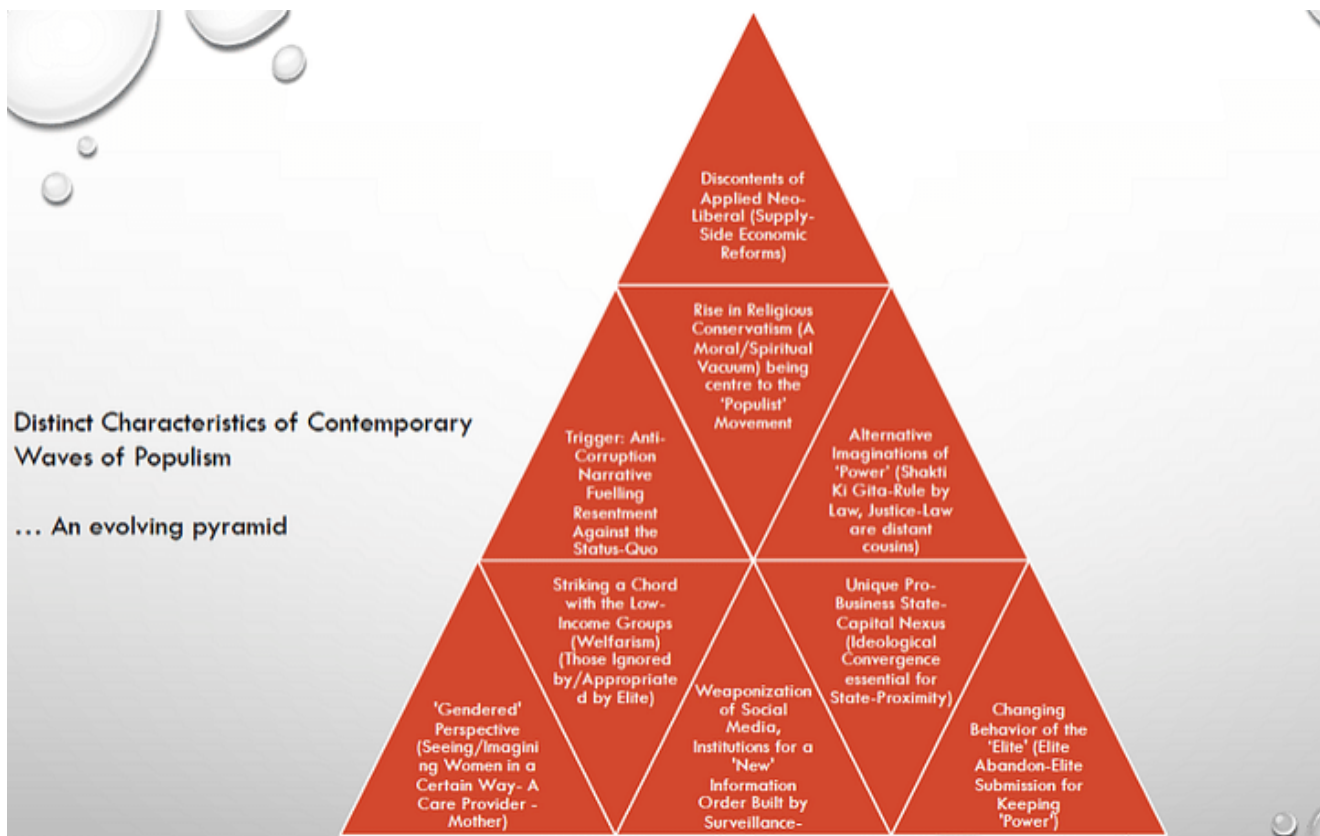
This is the second part of a two-part review analysis based on the key findings in Oleksandr Svitych's recent book, The Rise of the Capital-State and Neo-Nationalism, which attempts to provide a political economy approach to the rise of 'neo-nationalism' – a populist form of nationalism observed in the contemporary globalised period. Read the first part [here](#).

In our own book *Strongmen Saviours*

, our comparative political economy analysis in explaining the recent wave of right-wing populist movements across the world was explained through a distinct pattern exhibiting features that have been unique to the nature of right-wing movements (as against left-wing movements of the past).

The purpose then was to provide a comparative socio-political, economic explanation of the rise of populist beliefs and anti-political elite sentiment that has not captured much of the Western and non-Western sphere.

The pyramid constructed below, drawn from our book's research, may offer some insights:



Source: Author's graphic

The conceptual pyramid attempts to unpack features of right-wing populism, operating under the guise of 'ideological populism' (ideologically aligned populist movements), which has a distinct meaning (see a more detailed explainer [here](#)).

In simple terms, ideological populism refers to the unchecked and unabated rise of an ideology, the marginalisation of its moderate factions, involving the development of a cult-personality that infuses shades of populism into it. Normatively, this can be ideologically aligned towards the 'political left' or the 'political right'.

The distinct characteristics of *rightwing* populism at least the way we have observed in countries such as India, Turkey, Russia and Brazil did see certain common features, across different times and spaces. I explained a few of these factors/features from the pyramid [here](#).

The three contributing drivers for the Right's authoritative rise to majoritarian power

1. Failure of neoliberalism (supply-side economics of the '90s)

The origins of each of these movements are sourced in the economic discontents of 'neoliberalism' or the nature of supply-side economics (externally influenced by the West/Washington Consensus style reform packages) pursued in the 1990s. Studies from scholars like [Sides et al. \(2018\)](#), [Norris & Inglehart \(2019\)](#), and [Margalit \(2019\)](#) also explain this.

There is a wave of rise in religious conservatism or religious orthodoxy (from Hindutva to Orthodox Islam to Evangelical Catholicism) that aided the rise of each of the leaders who either belonged to political parties or to orthodox-religious based organisations which ensured an undercurrent of religious conservatism. I explain more about this phenomenon (as seen in India, Turkey, Russia, and Brazil) in a lecture [given here](#).

The trigger factor which led to the mass-protest vote in favour of each strongman figure (from Modi to Bolsonaro), was often related to either a series of big public corruption episodes or reported scandal(s) in the home country's domestic political environment, which gave the opportunity for the mass-support in favour of an alternative imagination of 'power' and a leader, someone outside the status quo ruling political elite-to come to power, and enjoy mass popularity.

From India to Brazil, each of the countries we [discuss in the book](#) saw episodes of public corruption (via scandals) or were operating in a widely 'perceived environment of corruption' that made more of the popular vote pivot towards the choice of voting for an 'alternative' (as also seen with the protest vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election).

The weaponisation of social media in a new tech-enabled information order made it possible for right-wing populists to continue feeding an alternative, post-truth rhetorical narrative (us vs them the axis of immigration) which not only helped them and their parties to constantly gain the support of a polarised 'majority' (their own voter base), but also help them sustain/consolidate and then later centralise power at the cost of others (those in minorities). Surveillance capitalism made this possible too under a new nexus of private capital-state relationship which supported 'strongmen' figures in power through social media and digitised surveillance tools.

2. Focus on privatisation

The nature of fiscal policy and the fiscal choice made by each of the [strongmen figures \(right-wing populists\) in recent years](#) has been drastically varied when compared to the earlier regimes of populist movements (as seen say in Latin America) where strongmen leadership was influenced by a theory of economic and political change belonging to pro-welfare, left-leaning policies (which in some instances like Venezuela made governments fiscally indebted).

The latest variant of right-wing populism has seen a promotion of privatisation (a reorientation of previous state-private capital elite relationship) – pursued with gradual disinvestment of public assets, government ownership of resources (including a de-funding of social programmes targeted for areas of job creation, human capital development-healthcare and education). This is widely seen in the fiscal choices made by most strongmen figures (case in point: see Modi's term of governance in India).

Despite this, they (strongmen) continue to strike a chord with extremely low-income voters in some of the lesser developed states/provinces by the deployed political use of specific targeted-beneficiary-based 'welfare schemes' (say, free nutrition) to keep the more poor content and as part of a loyal voter base.

It must however be observed that none of this so-called 'welfare' spending is aimed at the upward mobility of the low-income beneficiary (say through complementary support offered in human capital development – education, healthcare or job support plans).

3. On contestations within: Hyper-globalism and ideological populism

Dani Rodrik's recent work ([2021](#); [2023](#)) offers useful insights on at least addressing one of these 'contested' conceptual questions: Why did globalisation of the post-1990s variant fuel a certain wave of populism (one that spread far across the west and the east)?

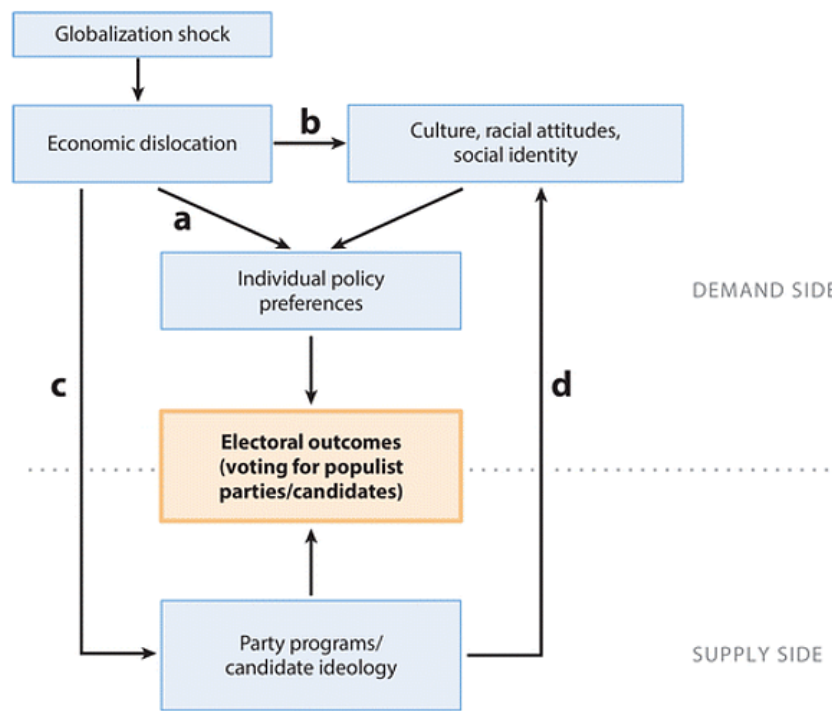
Let's look at this one first.

According to Rodrik, "It is important to understand what are the mechanisms through which globalization fuels populism. Answering this question requires a fully fleshed-out model of political economy.

Second, globalization is not just one thing: We can distinguish between international trade, international finance, and international labor flows, specifically. How does each one of these facets of globalization work its way through the political system?

Third, globalization is clearly not the only economic shock that creates redistributive effects or economic anxiety—and it may not even be the most important one. Why does globalization appear to have an outsized effect on politics compared to, say, technological change or regular business cycles?"

These aspects are studied more empirically by Rodrik in the framework created below:



 Rodrik D. 2021
Annu. Rev. Econ. 13:133–70

First, according to Rodrik’s analytical framework above, and most directly, “*economic dislocation* can determine voters’ preferences for policies and leaders (arrow *a*). Voters in a region where employment prospects have been adversely affected by a rise in imports may choose to cast their vote for a politician who advocates protectionism and a tougher line against foreign exporters.

Second, economic dislocation may shape voters’ preferences indirectly through the effect it has on identity or the salience of certain cultural values (arrow *b*). Concretely, economic shocks can heighten feelings of insecurity, inducing voters to make sharper distinctions between insiders (“us”) and ethnic, religious, or racial outsiders (“them”).

They can lead voters to yearn for an earlier era of prosperity and stability, increasing the political salience of traditional cultural values and hierarchies. And to the extent that they generate wider economic and social gaps within a nation, economic shocks may reinforce more local, less encompassing identities. To the extent that such effects operate, political preferences that appear to be driven by cultural values do in fact have deeper economic roots.”

We explored some of these links between the discontents of neoliberal economics and populism in the context of India, Turkey, Brazil and Russia; however, there were other factors complementing this – and to Rodrik’s framework shared above.

Two additional causal factors: instances of large-scale public corruption (or an environment of perceived corrupt political elite), and a rise in religious conservatism contributed to the rise of right-wing populist movements that subsequently brought leaders like Modi, Bolsonaro and Putin to power.

There is a critical need to put these explanations in both perspective and context while building upon what Gudavarthy's and Oleksandr's frame of reasoning brings in light by adopting a more neo-subaltern approach that is grounded in interpreting a random person's influence/preference for the political right and/or in explaining how the Right operates in influencing one's everyday ethics – more distinctively and assertively – while thriving on the anxieties, fears and insecurities of the emotive majority, including those fuelled by negative emotions finding an agency of their own by Modi-Shah's BJP.

A lot more needs to be done in also understanding how the moral-ethical core of an average Indian (a Hindu voter subscribing to the populist belief) remains influenced by the applied role of Dharam, Dharma, Kama and Karma in everyday life. A neo-subaltern ethnographic methodology may help explicate some of these new dimensions warranting a mixed-methods approach.

Similarly, the conceptualisation of the new capital-state's oligarchic rise, at least in India, is linked to the nature of change seen in the global technological application of information technology, rise of new media (via social media) that weaponised a counter-narrative for extreme forms of radicalism amongst the masses, interplaying with their discontented feelings about neoliberal economic policies (leaving many of them worse off), the breakdown of the old welfare state (creating an erosion of access to basic amenities), rising corruption, and a moralistic-vacuum created in a 'material-acquisitioning' capitalistic landscape (triggering a rise of conservatism, orthodoxy, and desiring a new moral-ethical code for everyday politics/action of *being* under an authoritarian-neonationalist regime). We need a more case-dependent/sensitive analysis of bringing an interpretative thread to these complex factors, explaining not just the rise but sustenance of neonationalism across the globe.

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