



Democracy Can Win at the Ballot Box

Lessons for how leaders in North America and Europe committed to preserve and protect democracy can win over voters, win elections, and triumph over anti-democratic authoritarians and nationalists.

Report by John C. Austin with an
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Introduction

Today, close to 80 percent of the world population lives under regimes rated “Not Free” or “Partly Free” by the Freedom House¹, a think tank that evaluates freedom around the world in an annual report. What’s more, according to the recent data, democracy has been in decline over the last 17 years.

Reasons for the decline in freedom around the globe include the raise and strengthening of authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and China, which have become more totalitarian overtime. However, the decline in freedom is also due to the erosion of democratic institution and freedom brought upon by rise of populism the world over including in the established democracies.

Cass Maude, the foremost authority on populism argues that, while ideologically thin, populism boils down to a “fundamental opposition between the people and the elite.”² As such populist politicians can have a broad appeal, promising to stand for everything good against everything bad. Yet, being “thin-centered,” populism is often combined with other powerful ideologies, such as nationalism or communism. What the “red brown” coalition has in common is a rather limited policy. Instead, their fervent criticism is aimed at “the establishment,” which can be dangerous to the institution of the consolidated liberal democracies, threatening “rights of the minorities, pluralism, and separation of powers.”³

What makes the populist politicians appealing? A growing body of research points out that economic inequalities, general dissatisfaction with the status quo, and feeling of being “left behind” by the economic processes of globalization play important roles in the rise of populism. More importantly, the “left behind” assessment arises not merely from the perceptions of interpersonal inequality but also from regional economic decline. Such “interpersonal” and “interterritorial” inequalities have further been linked to racist and anti-immigrant attitudes that can further fuel dissatisfaction with existing political process and support for far-right populist politicians.⁴

According to the Pew Research, a solid majority of people surveyed in 2023 throughout 24 countries around the world still believe that representative democracy is best form of governance for their countries. Yet, this support has continued to decline since 2017. Moreover, a majority of the same respondents (median of 59%) are dissatisfied with the way their democracies are functioning, 74% don’t believe that politicians care about citizens, and 42% feel unrepresented by the political parties in their countries⁵. Maude suggested that future of liberal democracies in

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/countering-authoritarianism>

² <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://academic.oup.com/joeg/article/23/5/951/7126961>

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/02/28/representative-democracy-remains-a-popular-ideal-but-people-around-the-world-are-critical-of-how-its-working/>

Europe and the U.S. is going to depend on how well the “democratic mainstream will be able to adapt to the new circumstances⁶” and address the electoral demands.

This matters today, because in 2024, a total of 73 national elections have been planned. The Global Elections Super Cycle offers us an opportunity to further study the electoral processes worldwide and evaluate the strategies employed by “defenders of democracy” in various corners of the world.

[In a timely discussion](#), experts from Transforming Industrial Heartland Initiative discuss best practices, tactics, and strategies available to defenders of democracy – highlighting how positive change-makers and leaders can counter the authoritarian destructive populism, win elections, rebuild communities, and strengthen democracy. While there are important lessons to be learned about the voters in the “left behind” regions, like those in Poland⁷, the discussion shows that perhaps not all populist tactics are harmful, and can be employed by “democratic mainstream” to overt the dangers of far-right and left.

- *Lena Surzhko-Harned*

⁶ <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century>

Commonalities Across Countries

In Poland, the U.K., and the U.S., there are eerie similarities in the timing and conditions that brought anti-democratic and anti-system parties to power.

Poland led former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe out from behind the “Iron Curtain” and into the European Union. Since then, the countries’ economic growth has been impressive, with an economy growing six times over. But that growth was geographically unequal. Existing urban-rural and regional (prosperous West Poland vs. rural, poorer East)—were exacerbated. Secular cities exploded with new buildings and businesses, while deeply religious, and patriotic/nationalist residents of rural reaches and small towns were left behind.

This dynamic came to a political head in 2015 when, with a Polish population split by urban-rural economic and cultural divides, and an imbalanced, but otherwise impressive growing economic prosperity, elections swept the populist, ultimately anti-democratic Law and Justice Party to power.

In the **United Kingdom** in just the very next year, 2016, residents of North and Eastern England’s manufacturing and industrial centers – industries in long-term decline, years of austerity measures taking a toll on living standards and community conditions, residents left out of London and Southeast England-centered growth and ignored by the London-focused political class – these voters sent a message with their Brexit vote: “We aren’t going to be ignored any longer.”

As Labour Party advisor Andy Westwood put it during our transatlantic discussion: “*We should not have been surprised. It wasn’t hard for some politicians to come in and whip up the anger that was already there. People wanted leaders to see their situation. They also wanted answers.*” And just a few years later, the populist Boris Johnson swept to a landslide Conservative party victory – promising to deliver economically for residents of this “left-behind Britain,” get Brexit done, and “level-up” economic opportunities between North and South.

That same year in **United States**, the rural and factory-town working class denizens of the American Midwest – reeling from manufacturing and small-town job loss and decline – responded to Donald Trump’s unadorned language, pledge to bring manufacturing jobs back, and grievance-rich rhetoric—sweeping him to power. As Illinois’ Robin Johnson recounted: “*I remember attending a Trump rally in Burlington Iowa in 2016. There were no people in suits and ties. It was a working-class crowd. They loved his message. He talked plainly, not the political, poll-driven language. Bernie Sanders (left-wing populist) did it too that year. He and Trump spoke a language people could understand.*”

How to Turn the Anti-Democratic Tide

But in the years that followed, we also witnessed and learned how this tide can be turned.

Local, regional, and national leaders in all three countries – those who listen to, and do not reject, the frustrations and grievances of heartland voters, those who openly embrace and seek to meet their concerns – can win some of the same voters’ support. And with it, they, too, can win elections.

Leaders who show up in heartland communities – the rural and small-town regions – to campaign there (and not just in election season), while not winning over every voter, can “lose less badly” (or even win) in contrast to politicians viewed as out of touch or as condescending elites.

As Georgetown’s Universities’ Lucas Kreuzer, lead author of the report [*Polish Election Provides Lessons and Hope for Democracy*](#) told us: *Donald Tusk (Prime Minister of Poland) actively campaigned in Poland’s rural areas to chip, chip away at the Law and Justice’s party base of support.*” And Robin Johnson described the strategy of democracy-defending elected officials who win in the U.S. Midwest: *“The idea is not to win the rural areas, but to gain maybe two or three points – to make a difference at the margins which really adds up.”*

Know Your ‘Place’ – and Deliver

Leaders can succeed when they not only know their communities, but also know what makes them tick. Successful leaders understand the importance of local institutions that are community-defining points of pride, whether it is the schools, sports teams, the pub, theater, library, or a busy and clean main or high street, a community newspaper, or radio station. As the U.K.’s Andy Westwood put it: *“Being of those places, from those places, really matters. People can tell if you are from out of town.”*

Then, leaders can find electoral success when they not only know intimately their communities and which institutions and attributes really matter to residents but do more than maintain these institutions by helping them to thrive. These leaders bring competence and follow-through to their campaign promises, which can be by doing the seemingly less significant things, such as making sure there is a functional bus and transportation system, that have larger impact.

U.K.’s Westwood observed: *“You’ve got to sweat the small stuff – to come off as someone authentically of the place, who cares about the daily lives of people. Leaders who do these things build trust and get permission to do the bigger things that can create renewed prosperity and community vitality in the longer-run – like the bigger infrastructure projects, innovation and research hubs that can then deliver the good new jobs of the future.*

Importantly, leaders must deliver on their promises. Empty rhetoric on the campaign trail can lead to nowhere or to backlash.

Describing the dynamic in the U.K., Westwood noted: *“Leaders began to make more and more promises after 2016, including to deliver for left-behind regions – but they haven’t delivered on them, so the political dial is now swinging back.”*

As Poland’s Kamil Lungu recounted: *“Law and Justice had come to power due to economic dissatisfaction and the perception of decline. Tusk’s win for democracy was a mix of the public’s dissatisfaction with Law and Order’s scandals, attacks on democracy and civil liberties, and their mishandling of the economy”.*

Place Over Party

In Poland, Tusk was also able to co-opt, versus reject, some of the populist (and popular!) pocketbook issues that had been delivered by Law and Justice. Lungu noted: *“They kept the social spending Law and Justice did – the child allowance. Tusk was successful in part by embracing the good policies that spoke to voters’ real concerns. They won in part by taking in the popular populist programs.”*

This tactic has also proved helpful in the U.S., where Democratic candidates who win in districts that are otherwise going for right-wing populists by putting their partisan identification and ideology aside, getting to know their voters, and then both speaking to and delivering for them on the issues that are making rural and factory town voters anxious.

As Johnson put it: *“Democrats are usually seen as elitists and condescending, but they can, and do, win when they focus on grassroots campaigning – lots of door knockings, lots of face-to-face engagement. Got to make your neighbors the face of the Democratic party, not the people in Washington.”*

Johnson recounted the story of Wisconsin State Senator Jeff Smith – a Democrat who keeps winning in very rural, very red district. *“He parks his pickup truck by the side of the road with a hand-lettered sign, ‘Stop and visit with Senator Jeff Smith’. It’s hard to demonize someone you’ve had a good talk with.”*

On local leaders in the U.K. who win and deliver for their communities, Westwood observed: *“At the mayor and local level, it’s about promoting the ‘place’ first, versus the political party first. Saying: I’m from here; I understand what this place is; I will work for this place; I will represent this place before I take orders from the Party. You gotta show up. It’s the only way they (residents) believe you are fighting for the place is if you show up there. They have to see you there.”*

Respect the Voter

Relatedly, the winning Polish coalition did not ignore, patronize, or minimize the concerns of disaffected voters, particularly rural Poles anxious about prices and markets for their farm goods.

Instead, Tusk and his allies spoke directly about how their policies would economically lift and benefit all Poles. He spelled out the pocketbook benefits of the E.U., such as receiving the tens of billions of Euros in funds frozen under Law and Justice. Tusk also campaigned for more robust family support and [stronger social policies](#), such as a higher pension to counter inflation, a higher minimum wage, and no tax raises.

A similar outreach and careful listening strategy also worked for Democrats (and democratic-minded Republicans) in Trump-leaning geographies. As he previously detailed in the [Washington Monthly](#), Johnson points to careful listening, addressing voters with respect, “showing up,” and understanding what issues voters care about. As he put it, when door knocking and meeting rural voters leaders and candidates “*should listen to what they say and how they say it. Don’t talk in poll-tested language but in how people actually speak.*” This approach helped U.S. Democratic Congressional candidates make gains or even win in rural and small-town geographies otherwise carried by anti-Democrats like Donald Trump.

Westwood also described the successful path taken by leaders in the U.K., like Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, a Labour leader now elected three successive times in Northwest England in a region that otherwise centered Brexit anti-system movements. “*Naming and sharing in your constituents’ concerns, whether it’s riding a faulty transport system or visiting growing homeless encampments – then enlisting the community’s help and participation in fixing the problems – these tactics have gone a long way for Burnham and other successful Mayors towards building trust.*”

Draw on Special Pride and Past

Poles are proud of how their leaders successfully transitioned to democracy and capitalism, beginning with the Solidarity trade union movement during the Cold War that led to communism’s downfall across Europe and the Soviet Union and reaching its pinnacle with its accession to the E.U. in 2004. Kreuzer and Lungu of Georgetown suggested no politician was better equipped to tap this Polish pride than Tusk, whose career echoed Poland’s democratization and Europeanization. An anti-communist organizer with Solidarity in the 1980s, he helped found Poland’s nascent democracy in the 1990s, established Civic Platform as a center-right liberal, free-market, pro-European party in the early 2000s, was Poland’s Prime Minister between 2007 and 2014, and served as president of the European Council from 2014 to 2019.

Whatever pride leaders call on, national renewal strategies that build firmly on the identity of the people and their contributions are essential. Andy Westwood of the UK pointed to the progress made in Sheffield, England – where the university and employers, like Boeing and McLaren, supported by the Mayor of South Yorkshire and other civic leaders have turned the community’s heritage in steel [into a new pride of building high-tech manufacturing and the machines](#) of tomorrow.

Offer a New Message of Hope

The recent victory by the Labour Party in England – clearly a rejection of the multiple years of failed Conservative government, and economic distress – was also a vote for change, a vote for hopes of a better future. All the tactics and strategies detailed by our discussants as key to democracy defenders prevailing in elections must be rooted in offering a new story of positive change –of positive hope for a better life.

In Poland, Tusk’s Polish Civic Union and the other opposition parties campaigned to defeat Law and Justice painted its tenure as a dark and damaging chapter to be moved past in favor of pro-democratic change and a bright and sunny future. Tusk went so far as to frame the election as “a battle between good and evil.” They also emphasized political and cultural moderation and an improved relationship with the E.U.

Tusk and coalition partners also tapped the values of tolerance and forward-looking orientation, particularly of young Polish voters. All this resulted in a voting turnout in which young voters (18-29) overwhelmingly favored the Civic platform, and voters between the ages of 30 and 49 expressed a slight preference for the Civic platform. In contrast, voters over 50 strongly preferred the populist Law and Justice.

Tusk and allies could overwhelm the educational, age, and geographic divisions that brought Law and Justice in the past two elections by mobilizing the electorate’s young, pro-democracy, pro-Europe, and pro-future elements. Other pro-democratic leaders and parties across the West would be wise to study his example.

A New Beginning

This [year of elections](#) across the globe is an important time to put to work the tactics and strategies whereby we not only keep our democracies, but we deliver better lives for our fellow citizens in struggling heartland regions.

Knowing and respecting your community and its residents. Showing up. Listening hard. Delivering results and building trust. Tapping the pride in the place and its work. Offering a new message of hope and positive change.

Winning elections and delivering better lives for people doesn’t sound that hard. But it is hard work worth doing.

– *John C. Austin*

About the Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative

The [Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative](#) is a transatlantic collaborative partnership dedicated towards closing geographic economic divides and reconnecting residents of rural and former industrial heartland communities to economic opportunity. The initiative works to return community pride and optimism about the future, and diminish the appeal of polarizing, resentment-driven, isolationist and ethnonationalist political movements that threaten our democracies.

The initiative, its learning exchanges, convenings, events, study tours, presentations, publications, and other learning products, are conducted with partners including the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College, the Brookings Institution; the Georgetown University BMW Center for German and European Studies; the Jefferson Educational Society; the Ruhrkonferenz of North-Rhine Westphalia; Policy Manchester at the University of Manchester, U.K.; the University Allianz Ruhr; the German Consulate General in Chicago; the University of Michigan; the European Commission Directorate of Regional and Urban Policy; and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, among others.

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