

Andrés Velasco: The Populists' Pandemic

Because populist leaders of both the right and left have topped the ranks of incompetence during the pandemic, it has become common to claim that they will soon become its political victims. Alas, this may be wishful thinking, **writes Andrés Velasco for Project Syndicate**



The crisis restored a modicum of respect towards "experts"

US President Donald Trump suggested that injecting them with household disinfectant might cure people of the coronavirus. Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte ordered police and military to shoot dead anyone "who creates trouble" during the stay-at-home period. And in Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador denied for weeks that the virus was a threat and continued to hug and shake hands with supporters, only to flip suddenly and impose a severe lockdown without warning.

Because populist leaders of both the right and left have topped the ranks of incompetence during the pandemic, it has become common to claim that they could soon become its political victims. Alas, this may be wishful thinking. The virus is lethal and ruthless, but alone it will not flatten the populist contagion curve.

The crisis has had one healthy byproduct: restoring a modicum of respect toward expertise. After making disparagement of experts a trademark of their political careers, both Trump and UK Prime

Minister Boris Johnson have been forced to hold press conferences with their scientific advisers, who have openly contradicted their bosses when needed. Even worse, Trump has had to endure the indignity of a poll showing that Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, enjoys an approval rating nearly twice as high as his own.

But other factors still operate in populists' favour

This is one strike against the anti-elitism that has propelled populists to power. But other factors still operate in their favour. Wild-eyed populists are certainly not the only ones making a hash of things. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – not populists themselves, though they have populist junior partners in their coalition governments – have the unenviable record of leading countries that are world leaders in per capita coronavirus deaths.

And whoever said that facts drive political preferences, anyway? The weight of fake news and identity-driven politics may be rising, not falling, in the era of COVID-19. Trump blamed China for the virus and closed off the US to migrants, and his base cheered. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro followed the same script, claiming that the coronavirus crisis is a media trick. As an epidemiologist from the University of São Paulo put it: "It's as if everybody's on the same train heading towards a cliff-edge and someone says: 'Look out! There's a cliff!' And the passengers shout: 'Oh no there isn't!' And the train driver says: 'Yeah, there's nothing there!'"

Wild-eyed populists are certainly not the only ones making a hash of things

Because establishing causal relationships is hard (Are lockdowns effective in slowing the rate of contagion? Are fiscal expansions effective in pulling the economy out of recession?), most people do not expect to arrive at answers on their own. Instead, they look to others who claim to know, and then they follow a simple rule of thumb: Believe people with whom I can identify, who talk and act like I do, and who are likely to share my values and make the decisions I would have made if I had enough information.

That is why voters trust populist politicians and distrust the political establishment, leaders of traditional institutions and, until recently, experts and technocrats. Whether populists gain or lose politically from the pandemic thus depends on whether the crisis strengthens or further weakens trust in democratic institutions.

I can imagine two very different replies to this second question. The first is the 2010 answer: As many voters saw it, after the global financial crisis Wall Street got a bailout, while Main Street got only unemployment and home foreclosures. (Forget that in the US the bailout averted another Great Depression and also made the government money.)

In some countries, the economic recovery was slow; in others, like Greece, the crisis dragged on for nearly a decade. Add a spoonful of corruption, a pinch of ineptitude, and a dash of juicy scandal, ranging from FIFA to the Catholic Church, and voilà: a perfect casserole of distrust. We are not in this together, many concluded. Elites look out only for themselves. Let's drain the swamp.

The alternative answer dates back to 1945. From the rubble and devastation of war, durable social trust emerged. In the UK and the US, the rich kid from Oxford or Yale had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the coal miner's son from North Yorkshire or Hazard, Kentucky. Private businesses, large and small, had mobilized for a public purpose: the war effort. And politicians had delivered on the ultimate common good: victory.

The suffering and loss of life during World War II had been horrific. But in many countries, citizens could plausibly conclude that we are in this together, and together we will build a better tomorrow.

Virus contagion may be flattening, but unemployment and bankruptcy is on the rise

So, which one will it be, 2010 or 1945?

While it is too soon to tell, the ritualistic applause for front-line health workers, whether in New York, Madrid, Paris, or Istanbul, is reminiscent of the spirit of 1945. In my corner of London, neighbours emerge every Thursday punctually at 8:00 p.m. not only to celebrate the National Health Service but also to trade stories and offer one another help with shopping or with a child who needs looking after.

Trust in a public institution and in your neighbours is bad for populism, and populist politicians know it. That is why Santiago Abascal, the leader of Spain's far-right Vox movement, is demanding an end to the applause and to the enthusiastic singing that accompanies it. Instead, he wants Spaniards to bang pots and pans in protest against the government.

But before liberal democrats get their hopes up, they should remember that the crisis will also sow plenty of divisions: between professionals who can work from home and factory workers who cannot; between the elderly who cannot go outside and the young who are being kept inside by government decree; and between formal workers who receive wage subsidies and the self-employed who have lost all income.

The virus contagion curve may be flattening, but the unemployment and business bankruptcy curves remain on the rise. If the public-health shock is followed by a protracted economic crisis that leaves many people behind, trust in government and institutions will suffer and national identities will fracture even more. It will be 2010 all over again – or worse. United we stand, divided we fall. If we fall, it won't be liberal democrats who pick up the pieces.

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Author

Olivia Grace

Editor

olivia.grace@ing.com

Julian Geib

Junior Economist, Global Trade

julian.geib@ing.de

Zoltán Homolya

Economic research trainee

zoltan.homolya@ing.com

Amrita Naik Nimbalkar

Junior Economist, Global Macro

amrita.naik.nimbalkar@ing.com

Mateusz Sutowicz

Senior Economist, Poland

mateusz.sutowicz@ing.pl

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist

alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist

+32495364780

ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi

Economic research trainee

kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song

Chief Economist, Greater China

lynn.song@ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior UK & Eurozone Rates Strategist

michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek

Senior Economist, Poland

michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea

Economist, Romania

tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Senior Economist, Healthcare & Technology

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure

Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc

Sector Strategist, Financials

Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan

Junior Economist

samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl

Senior Economist, Germany

Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne

Deputy Global Head of Editorial and Supervisory Analyst

rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani

Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)

mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill

Credit Strategist

timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek

Senior Economist, Poland

leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Antoine Bouvet

Head of European Rates Strategy

antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek

Global Head of Sector Research

jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma

Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare

edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole

FX Strategist

francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics

Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen

Sector Economist

jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin

Chief Economist, CIS

dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa

Senior Economist, Philippines

nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov

Senior Credit Analyst

egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke

Consumer Economist

sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga

Senior Sector Economist, Energy

gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier

Head of Corporate Sector Strategy

nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier

Senior Economist, France and Switzerland

charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter

Behavioural Scientist

+31(0)611172684

laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru

Chief Economist, Romania

valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK

james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands

marcel.klok@ing.com

Paolo Pizzoli

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering

Senior Macro Economist

raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson

Head of Commodities Strategy

Warren.Patterson@ing.com

Rafal Benecki

Chief Economist, Poland

rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz

Senior Economist, Hungary

peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner

Senior Economist, Global Trade

inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania

+40 31 406 8990

ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan

Chief Economist, Turkey

muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman

Writer, Group Research
+44 20 7767 6209

Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA

Regional Head of Research, Americas

padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley

Chief International Economist, US

james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon

Asia Chief Economist

+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet

Senior Interest Rate Strategist

+31 20 563 8801

martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski

Senior Economist, Poland

Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel

Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405

viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content

+44 (0) 207 767 5331

owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands

bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone

peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist

benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE

chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM

+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com