

These days, everybody is worried about populism. The great early liberal thinkers – Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, the authors of the Federalist Papers – mercilessly skewered the elites of their day, along with human pretensions generally. Its rise throughout the world, but especially among the voters of liberal democracies in both the Americas and Europe, has confounded the political, journalistic, economic and academic establishments. In keeping with this skepticism concerning power and those wielding it, liberalism has always preached the necessity of popular vigilance and of political institutions that support it. This side of the liberal argument is too little appreciated today. Hence their promotion of the supremacy of a legislative branch held accountable to the people through frequent elections, and their vindication of rights of protest and, even as a last resort, revolution where accountability to the people had failed. These early and canonical liberal thinkers saw the opposition of liberalism and populism as far less strident than we today make it out to be. My claim isn't that all tensions between liberalism and populism rest on misunderstandings. Two possibilities would then present themselves to liberals: Co-operation with populists on issues where the overlap of their respective stances on the issues warrants it, and greater success in competing with them where competition there must be. In fact, liberalism and populism have far more in common than we might think. Lord Acton's famous dictum that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely restated a core liberal insight already two centuries old by his time. In fact, their designers hoped both to tap populism and to contain it. They saw no contradiction here: they sought for politics a kind of Newtonian equilibrium. So will they over limited government insofar as it protects unpopular minorities and restricts the reach of popular will. Donald Trump's election isn't the only victory that has sent liberals into conniptions. What if liberalism could succeed in exploiting many of the same concerns that animate its rival? Which isn't to deny that liberal institutions were also designed to contain populism. Populists will fret over the inevitable distance between the people and their elected representatives. Still, because there is more common ground between the two outlooks than generally acknowledged, there is more of a basis for arbitrating their differences. While both may be (as each claims) compatible with democracy, aren't they incompatible with each other? I even sympathize with its critique of liberalism – as should every liberal, in my opinion. Populism begins from popular suspicion of political, economic and other elites. At its best, however, and from its origins, liberalism too has cultivated such suspicion. Liberals should not despair of appealing to populists. Speaking for myself, while I have always seen myself as a liberal, I have always sympathized with populism. But what if populism actually presents an opportunity for liberalism? Today, each perceives the other as its major rival. And that makes me far more willing both to meet populism halfway and to compete with it on its terms where necessary. This isn't as odd as it may sound. After all, Liberals, too, are supposed to be concerned with fair treatment for the little guy. This might seem a strange claim. Perhaps not quite as much as supposed.