

## Pushing against the populist leaders' playbook

As Donald Trump finds all doors except the exit door closing, he is still making moves that defy convention. One that has got little attention is the acceleration of the execution of federal prisoners. Usually (for the last 130 years) this end-of-term period is when executions are paused. So far the Trump administration has pushed for more.

Executing more death row inmates (in total his administration has executed more than any administration in the last century) is in stark contrast to the inclination of Trump to pardon loyalists imprisoned for criminal acts to help Trump win the 2016 election. But don't expect a pardon for Michael Cohen who has shown his disloyalty by calling out Trump on such acts as sanctioning payment of hush money to women claiming illicit affairs with Trump.

Whether encouraging the use of the death penalty is a deliberate strategy by Trump to reinforce his image as a tough leader or an instinctive reaction to his narrowing options, it will resonate with authoritarian-inclined voters.

Authoritarianism is not limited to the inclination to vote for populist leaders. It is a bundle of beliefs that promote a hierarchical, anti-outsider, faith- rather than an evidence-based approach to making decisions. That includes belief in the value of capital punishment.

When civilisations were coalescing in the Middle East and Asia, it was critical to guard the uniqueness of 'your' group from the encroachments of others. The death penalty was universal and served to focus citizens minds on the need to be totally 'for us'. One of the side-effects of democracy, and respect for a plurality of beliefs and opinions, was the abolition of the death penalty. The persistence of the death penalty is still a good guide to whether a country is non-democratic. Think Iran, China, North Korea; all keen exponents of state-sponsored executions.

Such autocracies cannot claim that they can make the hard decisions that are needed. There is no evidence that capital punishment deters murder. New Zealand ran an (inadvertent) experiment in the middle of the last century to test this question. The new Labour government of the 1930s stopped capital punishment. The returning National Party of the 40s reinstated it. Then the returning Labour party of the 50s finally eliminated it. From the death penalty to no death penalty, back to the death penalty, and then end of the death penalty – that provides a good chance to see if, all other things being equal, there is any change in homicide rates. And the clear result – capital punishment made no difference to the murder rate.

This is not an argument for going soft on offenders. There are bad people in our jails, whose terrible actions have had a catastrophic impact on others. They deserve punishment, and potentially the chance for redemption through profound personal change.

So why does the death penalty persist? For the same reason that populist leaders persist. There is a mutually reinforcing arrangement between authoritarian voters who want to

retain an established order against threats from outside, and populist leaders who are keen to identify such 'threats' and so boost their legitimacy (Putin and gays, Trump and Mexicans, Johnson and Brussels bureaucrats, Xi targeting Muslims).

Trump's present move to accelerate the use of the death penalty serves to reassure his authoritarian supporters that he is the man. Despite the clear evidence of his incompetence in terms of dealing with real risks such as climate change, the transition of the economy and jobs through automation and, obviously, the terrible response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Autocrats (and those aspiring to the job) follow a populist playbook – attacking usually weak and vulnerable out-groups as threats, denigrating evidence-based decision-making (and use of 'alternative facts') and enthusiasm for punitive approaches (at the extreme the death penalty). We can identify which leaders are pushing their societies further towards non-democratic autocracies from their use of these tactics.

Looking the other way – we can identify countries that are working their way toward democracy, to valuing diversity, to giving voice to previously repressed people. At the end of the year, it would be good to signal these 'most improved'. According to the annual review of political rights and civil liberties that Freedom House completes each year – the countries that showed positive development in the five years to 2020 – Uruguay, Portugal and South Yemen deserve a medal.

By celebrating such improvements, and showing the paths taken toward such development, these countries could provide some hope to those stuck in the grip of autocratic populists.

**Published in Newsroom 17 December 2020 - <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/pushing-against-the-populist-leaders-playbook>**

*Stewart Forsyth is an executive coach and organisational psychologist and author of four books in The Remarkables series, available as digital books from Amazon and other providers.*

[stewart@fxc.co.nz](mailto:stewart@fxc.co.nz)