

A People's Federation? Populism, Deliberation and Federal Reform

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1 Introduction

Brexit, Trump, Duterte. It has become commonplace to observe that we live in a time of populism and public political disaffection. In Australia, the populist moment has manifested in the recent rapid turnover of governments and leaders and, as I argue in this chapter, in the current long freeze in meaningful reform of governance. The chapter connects the populist tide to the subjects at the centre of this book: federalism and federal reform. It interrogates federalism's roles in helping to drive contemporary populism, and in turn populism's roles in helping to thwart contemporary federal reform.

To some, populism (in certain guises) presents precisely the kind of problem that the American constitutional founders foresaw. In their classical federalist vision, states would serve as counterweights in the event of a national government's authoritarian overreach. Yet, federalism today – in the US and in Australia – is also a contributing factor to the populist moment. Many citizens express hostility toward contemporary democracy's complex and ossified decision-making norms, which federal governance aggravates. Populist attitudes are dismissive of the tortuous paths of traditional policy making that only governmental insiders seem able to navigate. Populism is 'anti-elitist, exalts "the people", and stresses the pathos of the "little man"'.¹

In these ways populism provides a starkly poor fit to federal decision making – including decision making about the federation itself. Populist policy making can be hasty, unschooled, simplistic, poorly conceived, divisive and premised on the 'bad manners' of political candidates and their electors.² As I describe below, contemporary populism is at once impatient for, and prone to derailing, federal reform. However, after diagnosing problems, I turn to consider institutional routes around them. The best solutions – those perhaps most able to restart stalled progress toward reform – may be those aiming to

1 Margaret Canovan, 'Two Strategies for the Study of Populism' (1982) 30(4) *Political Studies* 544, 552.

2 Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, 'Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style' (2014) 62(2) *Political Studies* 381, 392.

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