

# Comparative Politics Newsletter

The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association

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## Letter from the Editors

by [Matt Golder](#) & [Sona N. Golder](#)

The Pennsylvania State University

Welcome to the Spring 2016 issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter. Our current issue includes a symposium on [Populism in Comparative Perspective](#), a special issue on [Populism in the United States](#), and a special issue on [Populism and Brexit](#).

### *I. Symposium: Populism in Comparative Perspective*

Our symposium has sixteen contributions dealing with various aspects of populism in comparative perspective. Four contributions focus on how populism is conceptualized. [Bart Bonikowski](#) and [Noam Gidron](#) provide a foundational introduction to the conceptualization of populism. As they explain, there are three main traditions in populism research: populism as a political strategy, populism as a political ideology, and populism as a discursive style. Each of these traditions imply different levels of analysis. Among other things, Bart and Noam advocate adopting a minimal definition of populism that treats populism as an attribute of political claims rather than actors. [Benjamin Moffitt](#) also addresses the conceptualization of populism. He focuses, though, on populism as a discursive style and, in particular, on the 'performance of populism.' For him, populism is a political style based on an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite,' bad manners, and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat. A third contribution examining the conceptualization of populism comes from [Jan-Werner Müller](#), who argues that the central feature of populism is its anti-pluralism. Among other things, he observes that anti-elitism is not sufficient to identify populists. According to Jan-Werner, a key characteristic of populists is that they also claim to be the only ones capable of representing 'the people.' In his contribution, [Kenneth Roberts](#) focuses on populism as an ideology. He emphasizes that populism tends to attach itself to an 'anchoring' ideology such as nationalism or socialism, and that it is these anchoring ideologies that define the specific content of the elite-popular divide in populist appeals.

Many of our contributors focus on populism in various regions of the world. [Elisabeth Ivarsflaten](#), [Stijn van Kessel](#), [Lenka Bustikova](#), and [Hans-Georg Betz](#) address different aspects of populism in Western and Eastern Europe. [Elisabeth](#) reminds us that there is no perfect

correlation between populism and far right extremism. [Stijn](#) highlights how the refugee crisis, the economic crisis, and terrorist attacks in Europe have created a helpful environment for populist parties on the radical right. [Lenka](#) focuses on Eastern Europe and argues that the success of populist parties on the right, in particular radicalized mainstream right parties, is a response to the growing political power of minorities and the elites that are perceived to favor them. [Hans-Georg](#) addresses left-wing populism in Europe through the lens of Podemos in Spain.

[Carlos de la Torre](#) and [Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser](#) examine populism in Latin America. In his contribution, [Carlos](#) looks at how left-wing populism in Latin America and its promise of a more participatory, communal, and direct form of democracy has instead produced competitive authoritarian regimes in countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. [Cristóbal](#), in contrast, looks at the different ways that scholars have conceptualized populism in Latin America and how this can inform the study of populism in other regions of the world. He argues that populist sentiment arises as a result of political unresponsiveness and a failure of democratic representation, and claims that many countries are seeing the emergence of a populism versus anti-populism cleavage that rivals the traditional left-right cleavage.

Populism has been widely studied in Europe and Latin America. In contrast, there is relatively little research on populism elsewhere in the world. The remaining contributors to the Newsletter are all seeking to remedy this imbalance in our comparative knowledge of populism. In their pieces, [Nic Cheeseman](#) and [Danielle Resnick](#) examine populism in Africa. While Nic focuses on the apparent contradiction between ethnic and populist politics, Danielle discusses the differences between Africa's two waves of populism. She argues that Africa's first wave of populism in the 1980s was particularly concerned with peasants in rural areas, but that its second post-2000s wave of populism has focused on the young urban poor. In his contribution, [Vedi Hadiz](#) looks at populism in the Middle East by contrasting the fortunes of populists in Egypt and Turkey. Among other things, he argues that populists in the Middle East have employed a religiously derived form of identity politics, in which the *ummah* (community of believers) stand in for 'the people' and are in conflict with secular nationalist elites.

Our remaining contributions to the symposium examine populism in Asia. [Narendra Subramanian](#) provides a brief history of populism in late colonial and post-colonial India. Many of our contributors distinguish between the inclusive forms of populism that predominate in Latin America and the more exclusive forms of populism that predominate in Europe. In his piece on populism in Southeast Asia, [William Case](#) reminds us that even inclusive populism can be perceived as exclusive depending on where you sit. Using a comparison of populism in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, William examines the conditions under which the middle class and other elites feel threatened by 'inclusive' populists and instigate an authoritarian backlash. [Yaoyao Dai](#) and [Zijie Shao](#) discuss how Communist Party leaders in China have used populism as a political strategy to maintain support. To our knowledge, they provide the first attempt to measure populism in China using automated content analysis of state-controlled news reports from China Central Television's (CCTV) Xinwen Lianbo (Daily News Program) and the annual work reports of China's central government.

## *II. Special Topic: Populism in the United States*

We have four contributions that examine populism in the United States. In her contribution, [Katherine Cramer](#) examines rural populist support for right-leaning candidates. She argues that populists like Donald Trump and Scott Walker have been able to mobilize long-standing resentments among rural populations against urban elites. [Joseph Lowndes](#) discusses the role of racial populism in the 2016 presidential election campaign, while [David Smith](#) examines the implications of populism for U.S. foreign policy. In his contribution, [Kirk Hawkins](#) encourages Americanist scholars who have recently become interested in populism not to ignore the insights gleaned over many years from the study of populism in other regions of the world. He also provides information about the level of populism adopted by the various candidates during the 2016 presidential election campaign, and places it in comparative perspective. He finds, for example, that Bernie Sanders was by far the most populist candidate in the U.S. presidential race, and that while Sanders' level of populism was similar to that seen in populist parties in Europe, it was considerably lower than that demonstrated by populist presidential candidates in Latin America.

## *III. Special Topic: Populism and Brexit*

We also have four contributions that examine populism in the context of the June 2016 Brexit referendum vote in the United Kingdom. Using EU opinions polling data, [Catherine de Vries](#) presents evidence that the overwhelming majority of voters in the 27 EU member states would have supported 'Remain' in a hypothetical referendum on EU membership. She also shows that those people who would vote to 'Leave', including those who did vote to 'Leave' in the UK, have significantly more positive evaluations of national institutions and policies than European institutions and policies. [Matthew Goodwin](#) and [Oliver Heath](#) link the geographic distribution of Leave voters with support for the populist UK Independence Party. Among other things, they argue that the Brexit referendum vote allowed long-standing populist undercurrents in British politics to come to the fore. In his contribution, [Anand Menon](#) suggests that the populist forces that shaped the Brexit vote are unlikely to dissipate any time soon. According to Anand, this will make renegotiating the UK's relationship with the EU extremely difficult, with economic and populist/political interests pulling in different directions. Finally, [Stephanie Rickard](#) highlights the role that grievances with economic globalization played in the Brexit vote. She points out that the British government, unlike other governments, have never taken significant steps to compensate the losers from economic openness and globalization.

As you can see, we have a fantastic group of scholars from across the world working on different aspects of populism. We have enjoyed reading all of the contributions and we hope, and suspect, that you will too. Before closing, we'd like to thank our editorial assistants, Christopher Boylan, Charles Crabtree, and Yaoyao Dai, for their help at various stages in the production of this issue of the Newsletter. If you would like to cite this, or any other, issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter, we recommend using a variant of the following citation:

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Finally, if you have ideas for possible symposia or special topics, or would like to publicize a dataset of broad appeal, please contact us. As always, you can contact us through the Contact page of our webpage at <http://comparativenewsletter.com/contact> or simply use our Penn State email addresses: ([sgolder@psu.edu](mailto:sgolder@psu.edu), [mgolder@psu.edu](mailto:mgolder@psu.edu)).

Matt and Sona

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## Daenerys Targaryen at IKEA: Left-wing Populism in Spain

by Hans-Georg Betz  
University of Zurich

The parliamentary election of June 2016 was expected to be a decisive turning point in post-Franco Spanish politics. Pre-election polls saw the newly formed alliance between Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU) surpassing Spain's traditional Socialist party (PSOE) to become the second largest political force behind the center-right Partido Popular (PP). Given this constellation, Pablo Iglesias, Podemos's charismatic leader, appeared to be in a favorable position to become Spain's new prime minister. The election resulted in a fiasco for Unidos Podemos. Mobilizing one million fewer voters than in the December 2015 legislative elections, Unidos Podemos ended up a disappointing third behind the two major parties — and this despite PSOE's historically poor score.<sup>1</sup>

The disastrous result renewed tensions over the future course of Podemos, which had already flared up in the run-up to the election, provoked by the alliance with IU, a party of the traditional anti-capitalist left, dominated by the Communist Party. Substantial currents within Podemos, following Íñigo Errejón, the party's leading theorist, opposed the alliance, particularly after IU's leader, Alberto Garzón, had charged that Podemos's "populist strategy" championed by Errejón had "exhausted itself" ([García de Blas and Manetto, 2016](#)). In Garzón's view, Errejón's populist vision had engendered a process of "ideological moderation" designed to appeal to as broad a constituency as possible. On this reading, Unidos Podemos's disappointing showing in the election was a direct result of the programmatic vagueness and dilution engendered by Errejón's populist strategy. Errejón and his partisans, in turn, blamed

the election result on the alliance with IU, which they deemed in open contradiction with the original Podemos project. Whereas the latter sought to transcend the traditional left-right cleavage and construct a broad social base for fundamental sociopolitical change, the alliance with IU effectively relegated Podemos to "the left-wing margins of the political spectrum", thus jeopardizing the very essence of the project ([Calvajal, 2016](#)).

In order to understand what is at stake, it is necessary to revisit the origins of Podemos, review the major ideas that informed its project, and examine its social base of support.

Podemos originated as a political experiment launched in 2014 by a small circle of intellectuals and social scientists, mostly from Complutense University in Madrid, inspired by the recent experience of Latin American populism. Adopting key ideas from Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto Laclau, they advanced a populist project designed to take advantage of the window of opportunity that had opened up three years earlier with the Movimiento 15-M, a spontaneous grassroots movement of predominantly young people protesting against the Zapatero (PSOE) government's austerity policies ([Beas, 2011](#)). The strategy was to appeal to the broad segments of the Spanish population that were suffering from the economic crisis and exhausted by the EU-imposed politics of austerity, and mobilize them by articulating disparate popular grievances and claims directed against a common enemy labelled *la casta*.

Errejón and Iglesias insisted right from the start that the central political goal behind Podemos was one thing — to take over power from Spain's self-serving and corrupt elites in order to bring about a "post-neoliberal transformation through the state" and make the institutions work for the benefit of ordinary people ([Iglesias, 2015, 15](#)). The provocative cover of a collection of essays on the popular TV series "Game of Thrones" that analyzed the narrative of the series from a social science perspective drove the point graphically home: It featured a drawing of a relaxed Pablo Iglesias comfortably seated on the Iron Throne ([Iglesias, 2014b](#)). In the preface to the volume, Iglesias explained some of the lessons to be learned from the series for real-life politics in current-day Spain. Arguably the most interesting observations were on the relationship between power and legitimacy. According to Iglesias, Game of

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-election polls had Unidos Podemos at about 25 percent of the vote; they won a bit more than 21 percent.



Thrones taught that in politics there was no space for legitimacy “in the abstract, for a legitimacy that was not prepared to convert itself into alternative political power, to compete for power.” Competing for power, in turn, necessitated having a “political project” that is “credible, plausible, and real” (Iglesias, 2014b, 7). What made Podemos competitive, Iglesias insisted, was that it had an “idea,” or what Errejón would call a “hypothesis.”

This hypothesis was that politics is fundamentally about “the construction of meaning” through discourse; that language and discourse represent the “fundamental battle ground” for contesting the dominant narrative and constructing new collective political identities and new majorities; and that this contestation has to be informed, not by theoretical dogmas, but by the concrete claims and demands of ordinary people (Errejón, 2016). As a frequent guest on television and host of his own talk show (*La Tuerka*) broadcast on regional television and over the internet, Iglesias understood the central importance of communication for political mobilization. His communicative skills and media presence made him the natural choice for party leader. Articulate and endowed with an undeniable charisma, he became the face of Podemos.

Errejón and Iglesias believed that the prolonged socioeconomic difficulties in Spain following the 2008 financial collapse had provoked a profound crisis in the post-Franco (1978-) political regime that was reflected in “the failure of the ruling institutions — including the mainstream political parties — to preserve and renew their legitimacy” (Iglesias, 2015, 10). As a result of this legitimacy crisis, they assumed, traditional political identities had started to break up and disintegrate, opening up opportunities for a left-wing populist discourse no longer grounded in the established left-right dichotomy but resting on a new dichotomy — above/*la casta* vs. below/*la gente* — that they believed had the potential of becoming majoritarian (Errejón, 2014). They derived their optimistic reading of the Spanish situation from their experience with, and analysis of, left-wing populism in Latin America (particularly Venezuela), which, as Iglesias emphasized, “should serve as our fundamental point of reference” (Iglesias, 2014a, 37).

Given its founders’ connections with the Chávez regime, Podemos was repeatedly charged with harboring antidemocratic, perhaps even totalitarian, tendencies (Ruiz Soroa, 2015; Delibes, 2016). Against that, its

leaders maintained that Podemos was all about reclaiming democracy from the privileged minority, which had appropriated it in the post-Franco era, and restoring it to the people. In short, Podemos was fighting for fundamental political change in order to bring about true democracy in Spain.

Initially, Podemos proved highly successful. In the 2014 European elections, the party received almost eight percent of the vote, which translated into five seats in the European Parliament. This was followed by the municipal elections later that year, where Podemos’s support of independent local citizen platforms was crucial for the election of progressive mayors in Madrid and Barcelona. Finally, in the national election of December 2015, Podemos became Spain’s third-largest party, polling more than twenty percent of the vote. With none of the major parties in a position to form the new government, Podemos assumed a pivotal role in the new political constellation. After the failure of a series of negotiations between the major parties aimed at forming a coalition government, a new election was called for June 2016, resulting in the bitter disappointment for Unidos Podemos.

There are a number of possible explanations for the fiasco. One has to do with Podemos’s social base. The “Podemos hypothesis” depended for its success on the mobilization of a broad spectrum of the electorate. In reality, as a number of studies have shown, Podemos’s appeal was largely limited to a younger, better educated, predominantly urban constituency who, in ideological terms, overwhelmingly placed themselves on the (far) left (Criada Olmos and Pinta Sierra, 2015; Fernández-Albertos, 2009). Podemos supporters distinguished themselves by their high level of disenchantment with the political system and, in particular, the political class — a disenchantment informed particularly by their high sensitivity to (political) corruption (León, 2014). In addition, Podemos attracted a significantly larger proportion of men than women in every age group. A number of explanations for this gender gap have been offered, among them women’s greater risk aversion; the lower labor participation rate of women; and a leadership largely dominated by men (Orriols, 2015; Claveria, 2016; Criada Olmos and Pinta Sierra, 2015, 239-240).

Secondly, the success of the “Podemos hypothesis” depended to a significant extent on the disintegration of the established partisan alignments in the wake of the fi-

nancial crisis and prolonged austerity. The resulting collapse of the post-1978 two-party system was supposed to make enough voters available for populist mobilization to secure Podemos a majority. This did not happen. If anything, the outcome of the June election shored up the established system to the detriment of the new actors (Unidos Podemos and especially Ciudadanos). This was hardly surprising given the progressive deterioration of Podemos's image among the electorate: Between late 2014 and late 2015, the number of survey respondents who said they would never vote for the party increased from 42 to 52 percent (Lavezzolo et al., 2015).

Given its founders' connections with the Chávez regime, Podemos was repeatedly charged with harboring antidemocratic, perhaps even totalitarian, tendencies. Against that, its leaders maintained that Podemos was all about reclaiming democracy from the privileged minority...and restoring it to the people. In short, Podemos was fighting for fundamental political change in order to bring about true democracy in Spain.

A third reason was the alliance with IU. Not only did the alliance strain Iglesias's credibility as a political leader, it also further reinforced the perception that Podemos was a party of the radical left. Less than a year before the June election, in a major interview, Pablo Iglesias had rejected the very idea of an alliance with the extreme left. These were old leftists who, he charged, were "sad, boring and bitter," who took ordinary people for idiots addicted to trash television, who were ashamed of their own country and their own people, and who, in the final analysis, were partly responsible if nothing ever changed in the country (Picazo, Delàs and Iglesias, 2015).

Given these invectives, the alliance with IU was nothing short of a strategic U-turn, which a significant number of both parties' supporters found hard, if not impossible, to swallow. Not surprisingly, some of them stayed home (Jurado and Orriols, 2016). At the same time, the alliance threatened to relegate Podemos to the

leftwing margins of the political spectrum, thus jeopardizing its populist project. In response, the party leadership reinforced its efforts to make Podemos appealing to broader constituencies. Among other things, they issued the party's election program in the style of the Ikea catalogue, which presented the party's candidates engaged in domestic activities (Iglesias, for instance, watering a plant). In order to appeal to female voters, they designed a campaign poster that featured portrayals of Unidos Podemos's leading politicians equally divided by gender (four women, four men). Finally, to appeal to mainstream, particularly older, voters, who in the past had been least disposed to vote for Podemos, the party's leaders further moderated their discourse. Pablo Iglesias, towards the end of the election campaign, promoted himself as a social democratic politician and patriot. None of these tactical maneuvers proved particularly successful.

The fiasco of the June 2016 election appears to have marked the end of Podemos's populist strategy, at least for the immediate future. This, at least, would only be logical. The title of the collected volume on the Game of Thrones mentioned earlier was, after all, "Ganar o Morir" — "Win or Die". In the short introduction to the collection, Iglesias compares Podemos to the Khaleesi Daenerys Targaryen. After the June election, the Khaleesi will have to wait another day to assume the Iron Throne.

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## Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis

by Bart Bonikowski & Noam Gidron

Harvard University

The Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election have attracted newfound public attention to populist politics. Despite its recent salience, however, the phenomenon has a long history on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, populist parties on both the right and the left have been gaining strength since the 1990s (March, 2007; Mudde, 2007), and populist appeals have been a staple of Democratic and Republican candidates in the United States for much of the 20th century (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Kazin, 1998). Latin American politics, of course, is well known for its populist leaders (Hawkins, 2009; Roberts, 1995, 2006). Indeed, scholars have been studying populism for decades, typically relying on case studies of individual countries or regions. This rich tradition has generated a wealth of research findings, but less consensus on how populism should be conceptualized and empirically analyzed.

The diversity of approaches to the study of populism is in part a result of the growing importance of comparative research on the topic. Theoretical orientations that prove insightful in one region are often found wanting when applied to structurally disparate cases, leading to the proliferation of definitional approaches and empirical strategies. The lack of a single shared research framework is also a consequence of the amorphous nature of populism itself. The ideal of “the sovereignty of the people” (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, 323) takes on myriad forms and shares much in common with commonplace democratic principles, which complicates a precise bounding of the concept.

Nonetheless, amidst this multiplicity of theoretical perspectives, there is some consensus concerning a minimal definition of populism, one that lends itself to comparison even if it does not capture all aspects of the phenomenon. We can think of populism as a form of politics predicated on a moral distinction between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter viewed as the sole legitimate source of political power (Laclau, 1997; Mudde, 2007). Just who the elites are varies across context, as do the boundaries of “the people”, but the binary structure of populist claims is largely invariant. In addition to its moral logic, populism’s anti-elite orientation often lends itself to a wholesale rejection of intermediary institutions.

This core definition is relatively uncontroversial, but scholars differ in how they interpret, operationalize, and elaborate on it. This conceptual variation can be reduced to three dominant approaches, which view populism as (i) a strategy of political mobilization, (ii) an ideology, and (iii) a form of political discourse. Although these distinctions are primarily theoretical, they have implications for how populism is measured in empirical research. In addition, there is a separate debate concerning the relationship between populism and democracy, with some scholars seeing the two as standing in tension to one another, and others arguing that they are deeply interrelated. We are ambivalent about the normative implications of populism, but we do take a position on its conceptualization: we make a case for the analytical advantages of the most minimal, discursive definition of populism that treats the phenomenon as an attribute of political claims rather than actors. We end with a series of unresolved research questions that a discursive approach to populism can help address. It is our hope that this brief — and necessarily partial —

review will serve as useful starting point for further discussion, in this volume and elsewhere.

### *I. Three Traditions in Populism Research*

The literature broadly reflects three main (non-mutually exclusive, as discussed below) approaches to the study of populism: as a political strategy, as an ideology, and as a discursive style. These research traditions not only rely on distinct theoretical underpinnings, but they also suggest different levels of analysis for the study of populism.

**Populism as a Political Strategy.** Research on populism as a political strategy has been especially prominent among social scientists working on Latin America. From this perspective, what is unique in populist mobilization is the unmediated relationship between leaders and their supporters. As defined by Weyland (2001, 4), “populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.” Levitsky and Roberts (2011, 6-7) similarly define populism as a “top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established political or economic elites on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo.”

Studies in this tradition focus primarily on the determinants of populist mobilization. For instance, Roberts (2006) argues that different combinations of strong or weak civil society and high or low institutionalization of partisan institutions give rise to distinct forms of populist mobilization (for instance, by parties or unions). Other scholars point to the role of leaders in shaping populist mobilization: according to Pappas (2012, 2), for instance, populism becomes a potent political force “when a certain political entrepreneur is able to polarize politics by creating a cleavage based on the interaction between ‘the people’ versus some establishment, thus forging a mass political movement.” In contrast, Barr (2009) notes several examples of non-charismatic populist leaders and concludes that populist leadership depends less on charisma than on actors’ self-proclaimed “outsider” position (see also Pappas, 2012).

**Populism as a Political Ideology.** A second approach to populism is less interested in the attributes of political leaders, and instead emphasizes the content of their

ideology. This tradition has dominated the literature on European populism in the last decade. Mudde’s agenda-setting work has paved the way for many others, with its definition of populism as,

“a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, 543).

Ideology here means an interconnected set of ideas that derive meaning from their relationship to one another (Freeden, 1996, 2003). In the case of populism, these ideas revolve around the Manichean contrast between the corrupt elite and the morally pure people (Stanley, 2008). By characterizing this ideology as “thin-centered,” scholars stress that populism is not a complete worldview that offers consistent answers to a wide range of important political questions; instead, populism attaches itself to other full-fledged ideologies such as socialism or nationalism. There is some evidence that this conceptual approach “has recently won ground in the definitional debate” (Pauwels, 2011, 99).

The literature broadly reflects three main ...approaches to the study of populism: as a political strategy, as an ideology, and as a discursive style. ...these traditions lend themselves to distinct analytical strategies that privilege different levels of analysis.

Research on populism as an ideology often begins with close readings of textual materials — such as partisan manifestos — in order to ascertain which political actors engage in populist appeals. Once parties or leaders have been classified as populist, scholars look at their base of support, leadership style, political organization, and performance once in power (see, for instance, Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014; Arter, 2010; Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Pankowski, 2010). Since the close reading of partisan materials is labor intensive, research in this tradition has, at least



until recently, focused on within-case analysis or small-N comparisons.

**Populism as a Discursive Style.** Another body of literature conceptualizes populism as a discursive style that is predicated on the fundamental conflict between the corrupt elite and the people (Hawkins (2009, 2010)).<sup>1</sup> Rather than a set of core ideas embedded within constitutive texts, populism as discourse is better thought of as a rhetorical style used by political actors of diverse ideological persuasions.

Although the ideological approach (or at least, its common applications) typically considers populism as a largely fixed attribute of political actors, the discursive tradition views populism as an attribute of the message and not the speaker (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn and Akkerman, Forthcoming). This makes it possible for political actors to use different degrees of populism under different circumstances. Of course, some political actors may be more populist than others, but this can only be established by examining the within-actor variation in discursive styles. This perspective, then, opens the possibility for studying the contextual determinants of populist discourse and their variation across historical periods and geographical regions.

It is more useful to think of populism not as a constitutive ideology, but rather as a frame through which other kinds of political claims, from those on the far left to those on the far right, can be expressed.

In our own work, for instance, we have employed the discursive approach to examine the conditions under which U.S. presidential candidates were more likely to rely on populist discourse during the second half of the 20th century (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). In line with historical research (Kazin, 1998), we found that the prevalence of populism fluctuated over time on both sides of the ideological divide. Yet we also demonstrated that this variation was highly patterned: the degree to which candidates relied on populism depended on their target audience, the stage of the campaign, and the degree to which candidates were able to claim an

outsider position. These factors explained not only differences between candidates, but also between multiple campaigns run by the same candidate.

Importantly, the three approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive. For instance, Jansen (2011) weaves together the mobilization and discursive approaches to define populism as “any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people” (p. 82; see also Filc (2009)). Other works suggest a synthesis between the ideological and discursive perspectives (Pauwels, 2011; Hawkins, 2009).

At the same time, however, the three approaches lend themselves to distinct analytical strategies that privilege different levels of analysis. If populism is an ideology, then the appropriate place to observe it is in ideological texts. If populism entails not only talk but also a particular mode of mobilization, then analyses of populism must place the relationship between political actors and their constituents within broader patterns of power relations. Finally, if populism is a mode of discourse, then the starting point for analysis should be distinct speech acts.

Given that methods and theory are often closely linked, these analytical approaches also suggest different sets of research questions. Ideological approaches tend to focus on party systems, examining the changing configuration of electoral coalitions, whereas mobilization scholars often focus on the ability of populism to appeal to otherwise excluded political constituencies. Studies of political discourse are well suited for the investigation of micro-level mechanisms that account for within-actor heterogeneity in populist rhetoric.

Nonetheless, because the definition of populism employed by the discursive approach is the simplest and least encumbered by multiple necessary conditions (such as ideological stability or a particular mobilization style), we view it as the most suitable for comparative research. Our position, which we elaborate below, does not imply that discourse is more important than ideology or political practice; rather, we argue that a minimal discursive definition offers the most precise and parsimonious conceptualization of populism that can serve

<sup>1</sup> For a review, see Poblete (2015).

as a foundation for any study of populism, regardless of geographic focus or the ideological orientation of the populist claims in question.

## *II. The Case for an Analytically Thin Approach to Populism*

In developing his definition of populism as a “thin-centered ideology,” [Mudde \(2004\)](#) argues for a minimal conceptual approach that involves as few necessary conditions as possible. This is indeed the intention behind the “thin-centered” qualifier borrowed from [Freeden \(1996, 2003\)](#). In principle, viewing populism in this light should lend itself to a wide range of research questions. In practice, however, scholars who employ the ideological definition often treat the phenomenon as having more coherence and stability than is warranted, by assuming that political actors either do or do not subscribe to populist ideology. This problem is partly a matter of data availability, but also of the theoretical implications of the term “ideology.”

Thin-centered or not, ideologies are objects of belief, whether whole-hearted or tentative, and relatively stable drivers of behavior. We claim, instead, that populism is something political actors use strategically when the conditions are appropriate. Therefore, it is more useful to think of populism not as a constitutive ideology, but rather as a frame through which other kinds of political claims, from those on the far left to those on the far right, can be expressed. It is possible that some political actors use populism relatively frequently, but others may use it sparingly. Whether populism is stable or variable within actors should be an empirical question rather than an *a priori* assumption of populism research.

By treating populism as an attribute of specific political speech acts rather than political actors, it is possible to systematically analyze the conditions that generate incentives for populist talk. To do so, it is important to understand why populism is not used in specific circumstances, particularly by actors who are otherwise likely to view it as an attractive strategy. This approach also elides the need for examining the sincerity of populist beliefs — what matters is that actors employ populism in some circumstances but not others.

What analytical leverage might we gain from a focus on populism as a feature of political speech? Our work suggests that doing so can help illuminate the

mechanisms that shape the dynamics of populist contention. In our work on U.S. presidential elections, for instance, we have shown that populism is primarily the language of political challengers: both those who have had shorter political careers and those who served in positions removed from the center of political power ([Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016](#)). Moreover, populism fluctuates based on the target audience: challengers become less populist when they shift from their base to the general electorate, whereas incumbents become more populist over time in reaction to the challengers.

Our research on legislative discourse in the European Parliament (EP) further suggests that political actors’ long-term aspirations shape their likelihood of using populist frames: European parliamentarians with ambitions in national politics are more likely to use populist language than those who intend to remain in the EP in the future ([Bonikowski and Gidron, 2015](#)). We also observe a socialization effect (which may interact with a cohort effect), whereby longer-serving parliamentarians are less populist than more recent entrants into the EP. Finally, access to power plays a role here much as it does in our U.S. research: members of national parties that serve in national governments are less likely to rely on populist rhetoric than those whose parties are in opposition or are relegated to the periphery of the national political arena. These findings point to the benefits of measuring populism at the lowest level of analysis (i.e., individual speeches) and aggregating up as necessary to a variety of higher-order units, such as electoral campaigns, politicians, parties, and geographical regions.

Importantly, we want to emphasize that by treating populism as a feature of political rhetoric, we are not suggesting that a discursive approach should displace the focus on party-level use of populism or on populist mobilization. The mobilization and ideology approaches have their unique advantages: the former is holistic and theoretically rich and the latter is flexible and lends itself to straightforward party classification. Instead, we want to argue that defining populism as a measurable aspect of political speech can serve as a foundation for these — and other — theoretical perspectives, while avoiding unnecessary definitional disagreements. An ideological approach can still treat individuals or parties as fundamentally populist if it first demonstrates that actors rely on populist discourse across contexts (if it cannot do so, its conclusions would need to be more modest). Similarly, a mobilization

approach can begin with populist talk, but then supplement this with other variables of interest, like the leadership style of a given party or the composition of its support base. In other words, treating populism as discourse and measuring it at the level of speech acts should not be viewed as the sole end of populism research, but rather as an important and necessary starting point for empirical analysis — and a definitional common ground that can help bring into conversation disparate research traditions.

### *III. Is Populism Necessarily Exclusionary?*

Besides definitional difficulties, there is some ambivalence in the scholarly literature on the normative status of populism in democratic politics. For some, populism is democracy's inescapable shadow (Canovan, 2002; Ardit, 2007), which can serve as a barometer of popular grievances and restrain excessive power at the hands of political elites, but which can also threaten democracy's central institutions. For others, populism is a perversion of democracy that promises the empowerment of the people but instead delivers authoritarianism and social exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Although we remain agnostic on these normative questions, it is worthwhile considering how populist claims may demarcate symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), given the phenomenon's fundamentally moral nature.

At its core, populism draws sharp distinctions between social groups, portraying some as virtuous and others as corrupt. Charges of moral failing against powerful actors, such as political power-holders or business leaders, can have their own negative consequences, like the erosion of public trust in intermediary representative institutions, but they do not necessarily generate or perpetuate social inequalities. It is when this initial moral classification is extended beyond a powerful elite to other social groups that populism becomes more deeply exclusionary. Attacks on immigrants and racial and religious minorities have become the hallmarks of right-wing populism. These marginalized groups are frequently portrayed as responsible for the cultural and economic grievances experienced by segments of the voting public (in Europe and the United States, typically white, native-born, predominantly male voters), and elites are faulted for appeasing these groups' interests instead of those of the 'true' members of the national community.

This type of populism is quite distinct from more inclusive varieties of the phenomenon, such as efforts by Latin American political leaders to expand full political membership to indigenous populations. Madrid (2008), for instance, notes that the most successful Latin American populist movements are "inclusive, ethnically based parties that adopt classical populist electoral strategies," such as an emphasis on redistributive policies. In this case, inclusive populism is associated with progressive ideology, but it would be a mistake to definitively associate populist inclusion/exclusion with the political left/right: organized labor, for instance, has a long history of ethnic stigmatization in defense of 'working people' (Olzak, 1989) and charges of political corruption from the right need not vilify immigrants. These differential outcomes are likely to be shaped by the structure of party competition and coalition building in specific cases. Thus, the degree to which populist claims attack elites alone or extend their moral critique to marginalized social groups should be subject to careful empirical analysis that does not conflate populist politics with partisan ideology.

By focusing on the common features of [populism] across contexts — without ignoring the specificities of its particular instantiations — social scientists are in a position to make important gains in identifying mechanisms that have shaped the recent successes of radical politics on both sides of the political spectrum.

In thinking about the loci of exclusion, Filc's (2009) work offers a useful starting point. In his research on Israel, Filc identifies three forms of populist boundaries: material, symbolic, and political. Material exclusion is related to the implications of specific social policies; symbolic exclusion is located in discourse itself; and political exclusion has to do with the organization of party structures and access to political representation. This typology highlights the fact that exclusionary or inclusive populist appeals need not be accompanied by exclusionary or inclusive policies and mobilization strategies; whether they do is a matter for empirical in-

<sup>2</sup>For an overview, see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012).

quiry.

#### *IV. Directions for Future Research*

The literature on populist politics is rich in empirical findings. Thanks to a growing theoretical consensus, it is also increasingly coherent in its ability to generalize beyond specific cases. We know a lot, for instance, about the bases of support for, and political behavior of, populist parties in Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2008) and in Latin America (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). There is growing evidence for the centrality of anti-immigrant sentiment in fueling both the supply and demand sides of populist politics in Western Europe and the United States (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Rydgren, 2008). Efforts to expand political inclusion in Latin America (Madrid, 2008) can teach us important lessons about the logic of populist appeals in other regions, given that those appeals depend on perceptions (however accurate) of political and economic marginalization. For all these advances, however, there are still many unanswered questions that this literature can address.

**Effects on mainstream parties.** One important question for future research is whether and to what degree populism is contagious. Has the rise of fringe parties that rely on populist discourse led to the diffusion of populism to the mainstream? Some research on this question has focused on the diffusion of policy positions, especially welfare chauvinism (i.e., support for welfare benefits restricted to the native-born), between radical and mainstream parties (Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016). Yet populism may also diffuse separately from specific policy positions. Research on party platforms has observed little evidence of this process thus far (Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug, 2014), but party platforms are not the only form of communication between elected representatives and their constituencies. Future research could examine social media content, political speeches, and other forms of communication that are particularly suitable to subtle changes in discursive strategies.

**When populists gain power.** Actors who rely on populist messages position themselves in opposition to power holders, but their ability to do so becomes more difficult once they themselves gain access to power. Whether and how electoral victories and membership in governing coalitions alter actors' reliance on populism is highly consequential, because it points to the long-

term effects of populism on the political system. Some scholars have suggested that radical-right parties that gain power "will invariably be pressured to tone down the radicalness of their agenda and political presentation" (Heinisch, 2003, 101). Others have come to the opposite conclusion and argued that the persistence of populist politics is likely to have negative implications for the quality of liberal democracy (Pappas, 2012). It is possible that the answer depends on the structure of electoral institutions in specific countries, but this has not yet been systematically established. A challenge for studies that may demonstrate the dampening effect of mainstream success on populist discourse is endogeneity: it may be the case that access to power dampens populism, but it is also possible that signaling a willingness to tone down populist language may help actors assume power in the first place. This suggests the need not only for further theoretical development, but also for novel research designs that can help address these empirical difficulties.

**Effects of populism outside of politics.** Most research on populism is interested in explaining the increased support for and electoral gains of parties that rely on populist claims. Yet, populism is likely to have lasting consequences even when its proponents lose elections or are excluded from governing coalitions. Populism's representation of social groups in binary moral terms is often reductive and essentialist, which has the potential to reproduce widely held stereotypes and incite inter-group conflict. In particular, when exclusionary populism that vilifies marginalized populations gains traction in dominant discourse, it risks normalizing racism, nativism, and xenophobia. Forms of talk and behavior that were previously relegated to private spaces can become legitimized in the public sphere, which can in turn influence the character of routine interactions between members of dominant and marginalized groups. Reports of growing discrimination and violence against Eastern Europeans and Muslims after Brexit and of rising Islamophobia as a result of Donald Trump's nomination provide some suggestive evidence for populism's social consequences (Bayoumy, 2016; Khalleeli, 2016). Systematic research is needed, however, to determine whether such incidents are part of a broader trend, and if so, whether they are a result of populism itself or of the exclusionary ideologies associated with its right-wing varieties. Finally, populist discourse may have other consequences regardless of its ideological content; by reducing complex policy issues to moral dichotomies,



it risks impairing the quality of informed political debate and reducing the potential for meaningful policy change.

**Populist attitudes and support for populist politics.** A number of recent studies have sought to identify public attitudes that favorably predispose voters toward populist politics. For instance, building on the work of [Hawkins, Riding and Mudde \(2012\)](#), [Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove \(2014\)](#) propose a scale for the measurement of populism in attitudinal surveys that includes dispositions toward political elites, views about the rightful role of the people in shaping political decisions, and tendencies toward binary moral thinking. Oliver and Rahn's (2016) research on Trump supporters similarly cites the importance of "people's feelings towards the political process, experts and common wisdom, and attachment to an American identity." Other studies, however, argue that political support for radical parties stems not from abstract populist orientations, but from an assortment of psychological dispositions (e.g., authoritarianism, strong in-group identity) and social attitudes (e.g., anti-immigrant sentiments, low levels of generalized trust) ([Ivaresflaten, 2008](#); [MacWilliams, 2016](#); [Mols and Jetten, 2016](#)). This raises the theoretical question of whether we can meaningfully talk about "populist attitudes" or whether populist politics activate (and perhaps exacerbate) other preferences linked to the ideological positions that are expressed in populist terms. This in turn further underlines the importance of analytically separating populism as a mode of political claims-making from political ideology. In light of the growing interest in the basis of support for radical candidates across Western democracies, the status of populist attitudes is of central importance to populism research.

Populism scholarship, including the stellar work of the contributors to this issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter, has matured over the past few years into an increasingly cumulative body of knowledge that is less occupied with conceptual disagreements than with the generation of theoretically motivated empirical findings. We view this as a highly positive development. It is our hope that by sketching out a broad overview of the field and proposing an integrative, minimal definition of populism, we can further encourage discussions across disciplinary and subfield boundaries and regional specializations. It is becoming increasingly clear that populism is an important feature of modern democracies, from Europe and the United States to Latin Amer-

ica and beyond. By focusing on the common features of the phenomenon across contexts — without ignoring the specificities of its particular instantiations — social scientists are in a position to make important gains in understanding the recent successes of radical politics on both sides of the political spectrum.

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# Populism in Eastern Europe

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The politics of exclusion and contestation is closely linked to populism, which is often defined as the rule of the ‘pure many’ mobilized against the ‘corrupt few.’ It is an ideology that pitches the people against the elite and calls for greater congruence between the general will of the people and politics. Some have studied it as a ‘thin’ yet coherent ideology, a rhetoric, an ethos, an ‘empty signifier’, whereas others see it as a social movement and an expression of contentious politics.<sup>1</sup> Following the will of the many is sometimes antithetical to democracy. Along these lines, some view populism as a disfigurement of democracy because it reifies the popular will by suppressing democratic procedures and restricting the plurality of opinion. Populism, on this count, “is a politics of exclusion” (Urbiniati, 2014).

The standard bearers of populist appeals are radical right parties that represent those who are most outraged by ‘the betrayal of the people.’ As a result, radical right mobilization that revolves around the exclusion of minority groups, and not the economic destitute, represents a populist revolt against a political system that allows minorities to legitimately gain political power and advance their causes. Politics differ in how far they are willing to go to resolve the tension between ‘the people’ and ‘the other’ by curbing the pluralist dimension of representative democracy. In most cases, niche radical right parties endanger the ascent of minorities, but not the system of representative democracy. That honor belongs to large, mainstream parties, capable of thwarting electoral laws, institutions of oversight, independent courts, and free media.

Radical right parties mobilize to keep minorities from advancing (Bustikova, 2014). The ire of radical right voters is thus not directed at any minority, but specifically at minorities (and their allies) that aspire to change the status quo through the political process. Radical right mobilization does not originate in the demons of xenophobia (group hostility), but in policy shifts that reflect political competition (Dancygier, 2010). Since resources are finite and prestige originates in hierarchy, any change in the status quo of minority-majority relations implies a status loss, which results in a grievance that can be politicized in the right hands.

Radical right parties are not interested in the annihilation of minorities, but rather in suppressing their desires to wield greater political power, influence policy, obtain governmental resources, and acquire positions of prominence. In sum, radical right support is not fuelled by prejudice and xenophobia, but by dissatisfaction with ascending minority groups.

## *I. Sister from Another Mister: Populism in Western and Eastern Europe*

Populism in Eastern Europe is largely a revolt of the titular group against the political parties and politicians that ‘betrayed’ them by shifting the status quo in favor of minorities. Using Rovira Kaltwasser and Mudde’s (2013) typology, it most closely resembles “exclusionary populism...[which] focuses on the exclusion of non-native groups.” There are some subtle differences between the ideal type of exclusionary populism, as outlined by Rovira Kaltwasser and Mudde, and the populism on the ground in Eastern Europe. Populism is exclusionary, but the anger of ‘the people’ is not targeted at minorities per se, but at their advances — that is, at the shift in the balance of power between the majority and the minority. Second, populism in Eastern Europe is economically left-leaning, blurring the boundaries between exclusionary and inclusionary (economic) populism. Third, populist mobilization affects democratic consolidation (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2015; Vachudova, 2008).

The contemporary radical right is also a relatively new phenomenon in Eastern Europe, but has been steadily gaining in prominence. Although many radical right movements today embrace the legacy of the fascist movements from the inter-war period, their novelty lies in their adherence to the rules of electoral competition and — at least on the surface — their rejection of outright violence as a solution to internal political conflicts. Given the diversity in terms of ethnic heterogeneity, economic performance, and cultural legacies across East European countries, it is not surprising that radical right parties reflect this heterogeneity. In some countries, such as Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Latvia, ethnicity and language create cleavages that clearly structure radical right politics. In more ethnically homogeneous countries, such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland, the ethnic cleavage is less pronounced and radical right politics

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Gidron and Bonikowski (2013).

are focused either on mobilizing against the Roma or on social and religious issues that map onto particular party systems. Despite the new-fangled radical right in Eastern Europe, the authoritarian legacy of the inter-war period is becoming an acceptable reference point due to the elevated sense that liberal democracy is not compatible with a vision of societies ruled exclusively by titular majorities (Carter, Bernhard and Nordstrom, 2016).

The radical right in Eastern Europe is similar to its Western European cousins in its emphasis on mobilization against minorities. Until 2015, however, that mobilization was exclusively against minorities with electoral rights who have been settled in Eastern Europe for centuries. The million plus influx of refugees into Europe from Syria expanded the portfolio of minorities to rally against and, paradoxically, somewhat “Westernized” the Eastern European radical right in its opposition to Islam and migrants with non-European backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

Radical right support is not fuelled by prejudice and xenophobia, but by dissatisfaction with ascending minority groups.

Older democracies are more resilient, having lived through cycles of political contestation and successfully absorbed (some) ascending minorities into the mainstream. The danger of contestation in post-communist democracies is that the parallel processes of building democratic institutions and the ascension of minorities to power might entice voters to take authoritarian shortcuts. Emboldened illiberal leaders can then use the process of ‘shutting out’ minorities from access to power channels as smoke and mirrors to eliminate political opponents from within the titular group.

In the post-communist context, democratization has often interfered with the process of minority accommodation. It empowered the titular group to search for its expression of national identity but, at the same

time, it emboldened the titular group to exploit the banner of the ‘people’s will’ to curb the plurality of voices that minorities can use to advance their causes. Given the relationship between policy shifts and radical right mobilization, it is not surprising that a backlash often ensues after referenda or following the adoption of laws and policies that pertain to ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities.<sup>3</sup>

## II. *The Anatomy of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe*

The radical right in Eastern Europe has three unique characteristics that distinguish it from its older, Western European cousins: (1) left-leaning party positions on the economy; (2) linkages between identity and democratization, which leads to the association of minority policies with democratization; and (3) the coexistence of radical right parties with radicalized mainstream parties.

First, notwithstanding their label, East European radical right parties are left leaning on the economy when compared to other parties in their respective political system (Bustikova and Kitschelt, 2009). Their policy platforms stand for protections against market volatility, more social spending, and greater state control over the economy, along with less foreign involvement and ownership. Despite their overwhelming left-leaning economic stance, it does not follow that the parties have a clear socioeconomic profile at the micro-level that links poverty to radical right voting (Tucker, 2002). There are two reasons why individual economic and sociodemographic profiles with the (mild) exception of gender, do not map on to the economic policy platforms of radical right parties in Eastern Europe. The first reason is the diffuse nature of economic risk that obscures the links between voting, income levels, and occupational profiles. The second reason is because economic grievances are tied to identity issues, such as concerns about the loss of national sovereignty and the perceived unfairness of the economic system, which undermines the legitimacy of wealth acquired by the winners of the economic transformation. The perceptions of unfairness generate grievances that trump objective indicators of wealth.

<sup>2</sup> Eastern Europe was home to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina who were of Muslim faith. Yet rallying against refugees from the former Yugoslavia was never comparable to the mass demonstrations in the summer of 2015 against Islam that swept Eastern Europe and mobilized both mainstream and fringe parties against settlement policies for migrants. As one mainstream Slovak politician noted: “They would not have been happy here since we have no mosques for them.”

<sup>3</sup> Economic crises can be a double-edged sword for populist mobilization. In Eastern Europe, the crisis of 2008 has increased citizen participation but also the growth of a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ civil society. See, for example, Guasti (2016).



Democratization in Eastern Europe has empowered minorities and politicized the protection of minority rights (Kelley, 2010). In some instances, the backlash against diversity and inclusiveness was immediate, and reflected the growing pains of post-authoritarian politics. In other cases, nationalism emerged in the subsequent era of normal politics. After being preoccupied with the establishment of basic electoral institutions, resentment towards opportunities that the new liberal democratic order opened up for minorities resulted in the counter-mobilization of the radical right (Pop-Eleches, 2010). The distinctiveness of Eastern Europe's development therefore stems, in part at least, from its concurrent transitions: the economic transformation, the democratic transition, and the redefinition of both the state and ethnic boundaries.

The primary targets of radical right parties and groups are empowered minorities but, in some more important ways, also political parties as well as domestic and international organizations that are associated with the promotion of minority rights and minority accommodation. The process of democratization and political transformation, as is well known, frees ethnic and social minorities to pursue their demands, but also unleashes the mobilization capacity of actors who wish to pursue hostile acts against minorities.

Dissatisfaction with policies undertaken during the process of democratization, especially the expansion of ethnic and social minority rights (by politicians that are viewed as unaccountable), is increasingly linked to anti-democratic attitudes in the East (Minkenberg, 2015). Although corrupt political practices are certainly present in Western Europe at the highest levels, they are not associated with calls that question the core rules of democratic governance (Warner, 2007). In the East, responsiveness to the demands of minorities and democracy are bundled together, such that the backlash against establishment politicians and parties feeds off the intensity and depth of a deeper identity-based cleavage. Given the relatively higher levels of aggregate xenophobia in the East, attempts to modify ethnic relations, which are wrapped in populist calls for a more direct relationships between voters and leaders, can be interpreted as covert calls to revisit inclusive democracy as a form of political representation. The ability of new liberal democracies to survive hinges on their ability to contain this backlash against the expansion of minority rights.

Nationalism and sour attitudes towards liberal democracy have three interconnected sources in Eastern Europe. The first is the European Union, which is associated with rights for ethnic, social, and sexual minorities, along with restrictions on national sovereignty (O'Dwyer, 2012; Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010). Opposition to these principles of liberal democracy in Europe conveniently provides a pathway to increasing sovereignty in domestic affairs. Second, opposition to liberal democracy is often disguised as opposition to diversity, and goes hand in hand with advocating for further restrictions on civic life. Third, since the democratic and economic transitions occurred simultaneously, voters associate the introduction of free markets with democratization. The corrupt nexus of politics and economics, which was born and raised in this dual transition, has cast a dark shadow over democratic institutions that have often failed to establish adequate regulatory and oversight institutions to curb political corruption (Grzymala-Busse, 2007).

Paradoxically, the historical legacies of authoritarian, fascist interwar regimes are more relevant after twenty-five years of democratic consolidation than they were in 1989.

The third aspect of radical right mobilization that distinguishes the East from the West is the presence of radicalized mainstream parties. These parties are typically left leaning on the economy and advocate greater state involvement in the economy, but might have even originated in anti-communist movements prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The most prominent examples are Fidesz in Hungary, the Law and Justice Party in Poland (PiS), and in Slovakia both major past and present social democratic prime ministers Meciár (HZDS) and Fico (SMER) (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009). Although many Western European mainstream parties embrace tough policies on immigration and home-grown terrorist networks, Eastern European mainstream parties are, comparatively speaking, much more comfortable with their radical right cousins. Therefore, radical right parties operate in a much more permissive environment where they are often incorporated into governing coalitions.

### III. The Economic Leftism of the Radical 'Right'

In the East, the boundaries between the *radicalized* right and the *radical* right are remarkably blurry. It is becoming increasingly difficult to determine whether prominent mainstream parties, such as Fidesz led by Viktor Orban in Hungary, PiS unofficially led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland, and Smer led by Robert Fico in Slovakia can still be classified as not radical. On the surface, radical right parties in the East are a rare phenomenon and, on average, they are less electorally successful than their Western counterparts. Their weakness can perhaps be attributed to the presence of radicalized mainstream parties that siphon away their electoral potential. Therefore, whether mainstream parties cooperate with radical right parties or distance themselves from the ideological extremes (or even support the prosecution of the extremes) has had a mixed effect on the electoral fortunes of radical right parties (Pytlas, 2016; Pirro, 2015; Meguid, 2008).

Higher aggregate levels of self-reported xenophobia in the East contribute to the permissiveness of radical right rhetoric and to the authoritarian tendencies of many postcommunist democracies. Given their presence in governing coalitions, radical right parties in the East indicate a deficiency in liberal democratic consolidation. Paradoxically, the historical legacies of authoritarian, fascist interwar regimes are more relevant after twenty-five years of democratic consolidation than they were in 1989, since some politicians are now looking for new ways to organize political systems. Glorification of the interwar regimes ultimately benefits both the radical right and the radicalized mainstream right, for they claim to be the political successors of these undemocratic, nationalist movements that are associated with state independence, territorial re-unification, and self-rule (Hechter, 2013).

Voters and politicians have begun to contemplate possible substitutes because Eastern Europe is experiencing democratic fatigue, low levels of trust in deliberative institutions, and dissatisfaction with democratic governance. Unlike in 1989, when democracy was the only game in town, at least in Central-Eastern Europe, there is no agreement on what an alternative form of governance might look this time around. Liberal democracy, with its appeal to inclusiveness, has its opponents. Since the communist parties that preceded the democratic experiment have largely been discred-

ited as well, some voters and parties are looking to the distant past of the interwar period and reviving nationalistic heroes with dubious democratic credentials.

This helps to explain the resurgence of t-shirts offered for sale of the Polish interwar authoritarian statesman, Pilsudski, who unified Poland (and protected minorities), or the controversial interwar leader of the Ukrainian Nationalists, Stepan Bandera, and the similarly controversial leader of the Romanian Iron Guard, Corneliu Codreanu. A newly elected member of the Slovak parliament, Marian Kotleba, occasionally wears symbols of the Hlinka guard, associated with the clerofascist (and short-lived) Slovak state during WWII. The third largest political party in Hungary, Jobbik, uses symbols similar to those of the authoritarian and anti-semitic WWII Arrow Cross Party.

### IV. Conclusions

The narrative that rejects communism (which diminished national sovereignty) and criticizes liberal democracy (which has increased the power of ethnic and social minorities at the expense of the titular nationality) is compelling because fascism is both an alternative to democracy and antagonistic towards communism. Countries with a nationalist legacy of communist rule are in a unique position to relate to populist legacies either via mainstream or extreme political mobilization that evokes interwar authoritarianism. If there is a reversal in liberal democratic governance in Eastern Europe, it will most likely not be initiated by a small radical right party, but by a large radicalized mainstream party. Whether the presence of a radical right party will facilitate such a turn by introducing new issues and ideas into the mainstream, or will alleviate pressure on the democratic system by offering an alternative electoral channel for discontent, needs to be explored further. Most of the research on Eastern Europe has treated post-1989 radical right parties as a Western equivalent of pathological normalcy, but if radical right parties contribute to the dismantlement of democratic governance by undermining constitutional checks and balances, such an approach would prove imprudent.

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## Profiles in Populism: Southeast Asia

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Populism has made a comeback, both as a real-world strategy of political mobilization and a mode of political analysis. And it thrives today in the regions where it was most practiced and studied before, Europe and South America. In vexed socioeconomic conditions, leaders have emerged in these regions who arouse 'virtuous' masses against 'corrupt' elites. Further, they select from 'varieties' of populism through which to identify followers and map strategies.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) characterize these varieties of populism as exclusive or inclusive: leaders either challenge elites by promoting 'native' constituencies over 'alien' minorities or they try more collectively to activate and uplift social forces. By way of explanation, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser invoke levels of development. In rich Europe, populist leaders issue exclusivist appeals, defending hard-earned welfare gains against 'interlopers'. In poorer South America, leaders are inclusionary, proposing new programs that embrace all comers.

Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) also conceptualize populism in dyadic terms of 'moral boundaries' between 'us and them'. And they broadly agree with the distinctions made by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) that populism can be practiced and analyzed along exclusive and inclusive lines. But in breaking

fresh analytical ground, they push beyond explanation for populism's varieties to examine its implications for democracy. And on this count too, they detect different modes. Most crucially, when exclusivist in form, populism may undermine the constitutional protections that are built-in for social minorities. But it can also open avenues for political participation by once ignored, sullen, and inert majorities.

These insights into the breadth of constituencies and the consequences for democracy enrich our discussion of populism. But perhaps we can make still more advances. First, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have kept their notion of populism spare, purposely streamlining it so that it might travel farther, in particular, from Europe to South America. Hence, in their framework, the tensions inherent to populism are reduced to the arousal of masses against elites. One aim of this essay is to revisit a classic and more demanding concept of populism, and show that despite its heavier freight it remains far-reaching. Indeed, it finds application in 'faraway' Southeast Asia, beyond the ken of most mainstream analysts.

Second, in adopting a more classic interpretation, this essay sheds light on Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's debate over exclusion, as well as Gidron and Bonikowski's concerns with participation. In Southeast Asia, the populism to which ambitious leaders resort, while animating the poor, eschews any overt exclusion of other societal segments. Even so, in gaining traction, it comes to be perceived as exclusivist by the middle class, fearful of threats to its hard-won new status and resentful over redistributive taxes. And as the populist leader so amasses followers that they swell into electoral majorities, their heightened participation exacerbates the middle class's anxieties. At this juncture, then, we take another analytical step, examining the impact of perceived exclusion and heightened participation on democracy's stability. Simply put, to the extent that populism alienates establishment elites and alarms the middle class, the risk increases that these forces will counter with authoritarian backlash.

### *I. Classic Populism*

Populist strategies are deployed by leaders who, in contesting elections, pursue a 'narrow' ascendancy in high office. Pulsing with ambitions, they break with the establishment elites with whom they had cooperated,

declaring themselves as 'outsiders'. Then, in a context of yawning inequalities and hardship, perpetuated by skewed development and corruption, they appeal to the poor through redistributive schemes. Accordingly, populism, classically conceived, is hallmarked by configurations of elite-level divisions and trans-class coalitions.

Next, as the leader amasses followers, he or she often inspires them with ringing charisma. In addition, the leader may bundle mobilizing appeals in what Linz once described as a 'mentality'. Where this occurs, the loyalties of followers grow emotively charged. And yet, the leader's mentalities remain capped, stopping short of any transformative challenges to the political economies and sociocultural hierarchies upon which robust elite statuses and minimalist democracy are founded. The leader's appeals are anti-establishment in tone, but never anti-system. They do not reach climax in shrill personas or stringent and intricate ideologies. After all, existing hierarchical binaries and electoral arenas serve well, preserving the leader's standing and lifting him or her to office.

To be sure, the populist leader, in seeking insurance for fresh and narrow ascendancy, is wont to commit executive abuses, truncating civil liberties, and manipulating electoral procedures. But this leader is not the one to finish democracy off. Rather, this is instigated by establishment elites from whom the leader has defected. In the leader's drive for narrow ascendancy, the standings and interests of these elites are so shaken that they strike back, whether by nimbly wielding judicial institutions or bluntly mounting military coups. And in sheeting criticisms about the corruption of the populist leader in office, they reach down into society to enlist the support of a timorous middle class, now abandoning any earlier democratizing commitments. In this way, the extent to which populism is seen to grow exclusionary is revealed. So too in these conditions is democracy's frailty.

Thus, in Southeast Asia at least, it is where populism is avoided that democracy survives. We should complement our analysis of populism, then, by canvassing the historical and societal terrain in which it fails to take root. In contemporary European and South American milieus, wherein both full-throttle liberalism and egalitarian leftism are missing, an assumption has taken hold that is only in the interstices that populism can thrive. Let us turn to Southeast Asia, then, whose more com-



plex record offers a useful foil.

## II. Southeast Asia's Analytical Green Fields

Southeast Asia, though off the beaten track, offers a trove of different regime types and hence, broad scope for comparative analysis. But in this essay, focusing on the formation, impact, and negation of populism, analysis is limited to the country cases that have the most democratic experience — Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Further, with these countries ranked by the World Bank as middle- or lower-middle-income, we can control for the development levels that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser contend are pivotal for the exclusive or inclusive patterns that populism attains.

In setting development levels aside, Southeast Asia's varied and storied patterns of ethnic identification come to the fore. Briefly, where ethnic fractionalization is moderate, as in Thailand or the Philippines, leaders can broadly mobilize the poor, boosting themselves into high office. But in doing this, they alienate establishment elites and the middle class, risking an authoritarian backlash. However, where ethnic fractionalization is extensive, as in Indonesia, appeals to the poor dissipate amid a mosaic of more compelling social identities. In these conditions, ambitious leaders who adopt populist strategies are thwarted, leaving establishment elites undisturbed and the new democracy on beam.

## III. 'Classic' Populism and Democratic Breakdown: Thailand and the Philippines

Thailand is deeply integrated into global production chains and export-oriented agribusiness. Thus, within Southeast Asia, it has acquired the region's most extensive bases of manufacturing and commercial farming. In these conditions, industrial and agricultural workers have made material advances, yet suffer grave inequalities. And in the country's comparative absence of ethnic identification, registering in a modest fractionalization score of 0.431 (Fearon, 2003), workers gain an affiliation as 'the poor', rendering them highly attuned to populist appeals over redistributive schemes.

Thaksin Shinawatra, a third-generation scion of a prominent Sino-Chinese business family and a major beneficiary of concessions over government procurement, had sought to leverage his assets for political advancement, attaining ministerial positions during the

1990s. But in seeking to catalyze his ascent, he drew upon his corporate resources and mastery of consumer survey techniques to more fully discover mass-level sentiments. Duly informed, he unveiled a new political party, Thai Rak Thai (Thai Loves Thai), then famously pledged cheap public health care, village development schemes, and debt forgiveness for farmers. Over time, he also learned to embellish his appeals with charisma, delighting audiences through a resonant use of local dialects and humor. Thaksin was thus brought handily to power in an election in 2001. And he was reelected in 2005 and 2006. During campaign events, one regularly heard from workers and farmers a refrain that "this is the first government ever to do something for us" (personal attendance, campaign rallies 2005, 2006).

Where ethnic fractionalization is moderate, as in Thailand or the Philippines, leaders can broadly mobilize the poor, boosting themselves into high office. But in doing this, they alienate establishment elites and the middle class, risking an authoritarian backlash. However, where ethnic fractionalization is extensive, as in Indonesia, appeals to the poor dissipate amid a mosaic of more compelling social identities.

However, as Thaksin adopted populist strategies, he drew further away from establishment elites in the military, the royalist Privy Council, the Interior Ministry, old money conglomerates, and rival political parties. Further, in his valorization of the poor, in tandem with his sustained self-enrichment while in office, he alarmed the middle class, who increasingly perceived his policies as exclusivist. Indeed, in realizing that Thai Rak Thai could not be beaten in competitive elections, they abandoned their earlier democratic commitments for what was branded 'new politics', a plan by which to replace majority rule with military appointments to the legislature and regulatory agencies. In these circumstances, the generals obliged by mounting an authoritarian backlash, ousting Thaksin via a coup in 2006, then his successor, his sister, Yingluck, through another coup in 2014.

Within the Southeast Asian setting, Thailand most fully embodies a demanding notion of populism, denoted by a specific set of originating economic conditions, an ambitious, breakaway, and charismatic national leader, redistributive programs through which to anchor a trans-class coalition, and heightened competition that fractures elite-level relations. In addition, Thailand's record helps to resolve questions over the exclusivist quality of populism, at least where the level of development is sufficient to produce a new, but unconfident middle class. And it exhibits the pressures on new democracies, their elections elevating a populist leader but then triggering an authoritarian backlash.

These patterns of populism are echoed in the Philippines. Though the country possesses far less industry than Thailand does, it is classified still as lower-middle income. And its unique historical legacies, civil society traditions, and cross-national migration ensure that popular awareness of, and resentments over, social inequalities remain keen. Moreover, these sentiments are comparatively unhindered by ethnic identification, indicated in the Philippines by a low fractionalization score of 0.161. In these conditions, the poor, particularly in urban Manila, have grown available for populist mobilization. In polling conducted during the late 1990s, the qualities that voters most sought were that candidates for office be 'pro-poor' and 'approachable' (*Social Weather Stations*, 1997). And during the late 1990s, just as Thaksin was plotting his rise, so too did Joseph Estrada, contesting the presidency in 1998.

Estrada is a onetime film star, warmly recalled for his persona of rough, but big-hearted, street corner justice. He is a breakaway from the country's establishment elites, a 'black sheep', and a drop out from the country's credentialing college system. In campaigning for the presidential election, he cast himself as an 'enemy of the rich'. He invoked his nickname, 'Erap', an anagram of 'pare', Tagalog for friend, in fashioning a slogan of 'Erap for the poor'. Indeed, Estrada's "standard movie role mimicked his own life — someone from the edges of the elite who prefers the company of the poor" (*Rocamora*, 2009, 46). Estrada easily won the plurality needed to lay claim to the presidency in 1998.

Accordingly, Estrada forged a trans-class coalition. And he began to strain elite-level relations. But once in office, he lacked the personal discipline and policy vision that Thaksin had shown. His political vehicle,

Struggle for Filipino Masses (LAMPP), lacked organizational capacity. His redistributive schemes remained vacuous and short-lived. For example, he set up the Presidential Action Center, issuing packages of rice and sardines from the backdoor of Malacanang Palace, his official residence. But as supplicants were trampled in the rush to claim staples, this ad hoc program was promptly closed. Another weak plank involved extra services for the country's "one hundred" poorest towns. But amid a vast archipelago in which 76 million people resided at the time, this program also was too haphazardly undertaken to in any way redress poverty.

Thus, from the perspective of establishment elites, housed in major business conglomerates, vast landholdings, the Catholic Church, top bureaucratic posts, and the security forces, Estrada posed no resolute challenge to their prerogatives. Nor did he threaten the life chances of the middle class. Yet he aroused the poor enough, while neglecting any technocratic policy making, that the elites from whom he had broken scorned him. And as his personal corruption worsened, while the poor gathered along Manila's thoroughfares and in its malls, the middle class grew resentful. Thus, through a dubious Supreme Court ruling, instigated by establishment elites, sanctioned by the military, and applauded by the middle class, Estrada was forced from office and jailed for plunder. He was promptly succeeded by the vice president, Gloria Arroyo, more in the mould of establishment elites.

This episode of populism in the Philippines is less complete than in Thailand. Originating conditions were weaker, leaving the poor less primed for mobilization, especially in rural areas where old patterns of repressive agriculture and bossism persist. And Estrada, in his personal indiscipline, failed to craft any meaningful redistributive schemes. Accordingly, Estrada's behaviors were seen as less threatening than embarrassing by establishment elites. Similarly, his policies were perceived as less exclusionary than bumbling by the middle class. Thus, after Estrada was ousted from the presidency and jailed, establishment elites were content to leave a rough democratic framework in place, avoiding any more withering authoritarian backlash. Even so, nascent patterns of trans-class coalescence, elite-level fractiousness, and democratic strains encourage our analysis of Estrada's tenure through a demanding notion of populism. And we may soon have reason to do so again. A newly elected president, Rodrigo Duterte,

hailing from a rising provincial clan, mobilized impoverished voters by railing against corrupt elites and drug lords. But though he pursues rough street-level justice, we await his articulation of redistributive schemes and mentalities.

#### *IV. 'Thwarted' Populism and Democratic Persistence: Indonesia*

Recently, populist syndromes have been detected in Indonesia too. With its social inequalities approaching the levels of Thailand and the Philippines, a former general, Prabowo Subianto, contesting the presidency in 2014, adopted a classic populist mien and repertoire of strategies. Yet amid Indonesia's very high level of ethnic fractionalization, to the point of mosaicized fragmentation, registering a score of 0.766, Prabowo's populist appeals lost force.

Acutely ambitious, Prabowo began to plot his narrow ascendancy a decade before Indonesia's presidential election in 2014. His personal and family profile marked him as "the epitome of an elite politician" (Mietzner, 2015, 2). He hailed from an aristocratic lineage, traceable, he claimed, to the Javanese warrior-prince, Diponegoro. He had married into the Suharto family clan and had operated as a top general during the New Order. And he had enlarged his family wealth afterward by dealing in the country's metal resources. However, Prabowo also felt a 'strong sense of rejection' by establishment elites, blaming them in particular for his dismissal from the military at the time of Suharto's fall in 1998. Thus, in Mietzner's (2015, 20) words, "a deep wound in his pride [fed] his ambition for a comeback and revenge against those who had wronged him."

In assuming the strident posture of an 'outsider', Prabowo fueled elite-level suspicions. His aim was to forge a trans-class coalition, appealing expressly to "the rural poor and low-income workers" (Mietzner, 2015, 2-3). In doing this, Prabowo drew lessons from Thaksin Shinawatra, whom he "admired", and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, an ex-general with whom he was "fascinated" (Mietzner, 2015, 18). He plowed vast funding into a political party, the Greater Indonesia Movement (Gerindra). He worked up a mentality, arousing nationalist resentments against foreign investors.

And yet, despite the vast campaign resources that

Prabowo was able to muster and the redistribution that he proposed, he stumbled in his bid for the presidency. At the mass level, his virulently populist appeals often fell on deaf ears, with exit polling showing that by a margin of ten percent, Prabowo drew less support from the rural poor than did his rival, Joko Widodo. But accordingly, sections of the middle class, which were given less cause to be wary, were drawn to Prabowo's charisma, organizational talents, and archly heroic mentality. We see, then, in Prabowo's loss, the distractions in Indonesia from populism's logic. Notwithstanding grave inequalities, a terrain of intensely localized ethnic identities rebuts a narrative of supremely overarching leadership and base material redistribution.

But in proclaiming the continuing salience in Indonesia of populism, some analysts argue that Widodo, winner of the presidential election, is a populist too, but of a new kind, a humbly-born and widely embracing 'man of the people.' Yet this is to so strip the concept of analytical assets that it loses much of the punch that only in its classic form can it convey. To be sure, Widodo canvassed health care cards for the poor. But he also scaled back popular fuel subsidies, then laid great stress on port development and fisheries, suggesting less prioritization of any redistribution than technocratic decision-making. He insisted too that in his "polite" approach to campaigning and policy formulation, "of course, I have no anti-rich sentiments" (Mietzner, 2015, 26), evoking an aversion to elite-level divisions and middle-class exclusion.

Widodo's victory over Prabowo, then, signifies his pragmatism, centrism, and calming demeanor more than any incisive and authentic populist mobilization. In these circumstances, Widodo's holding high office is viewed as unthreatening by establishment elites, leaving an authoritarian backlash unfueled by any searing elite-level alienation or middle-class alarm. Hence, two years on, Widodo's presidency is more secure than when he was first elected. And Indonesia's democracy, since its inauguration nearly two decades ago, has been less often degraded than those in Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

#### *V. Conclusions*

The main aims of this essay have been to revisit a demanding notion of populism, then demonstrate in the understudied region of Southeast Asia that it can illumi-

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<sup>1</sup> See Freedom House (2016).

nate exclusion, participation, and democratic stability — the concerns of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) and Gidron and Bonikowski (2013). It canvassed the countries in Southeast Asia with the most democratic experience, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In each case, ambitious, breakaway elites appeared, defecting from other establishment elites in the hopes of winning through elections a narrow ascendancy. Further, these cases are roiled by grave social inequalities, tempting leaders to arouse the poor through redistributive appeals.

But thereafter, trajectories diverged, evoking Southeast Asia's diversity in political outcomes and its opportunities for controlled comparison. In Thailand, we found heightened participation by the poor and perceptions of exclusion among the middle class, prompting alienated establishment elites to break democracy down. In the Philippines, we found heightened participation by the poor, but weaker perceptions of middle-class exclusion, dissuading elites from mounting any full authoritarian backlash. What best accounts for these differences? A pivotal, but unquantifiable factor comes to the fore: the determined or insouciant styles of populist leadership that respectively horrify or simply irritate establishment elites. Thaksin and Estrada show similarities in their leadership. They can thus be examined together through high-powered populist lenses. But in doing this, we detect the differences in their seriousness of purpose and on-the-job performance, leading to the death of democracy in Thailand, but merely to its disabling in the Philippines.

Thailand and the Philippines thus differ in degree. But their trajectories differ in kind from Indonesia. As we have seen, Indonesia also featured an ambitious, breakaway leader in Prabowo. But though he modeled his populist strategies upon those of Thaksin, forming a party and even a nationalist mentality, he and his vehicle fell short of the presidency and any parliamentary majority. Establishment elites, evidently unthreatened, and the middle class, mostly ambivalent, acquiesced, then, in Widodo assuming and retaining high office, therein leaving the country's democracy no worse off.

What best accounts for this difference in democracy's persistence, with Thailand and the Philippines on one side and Indonesia on the other? In the Indonesia case, forceful populist leadership mattered less, for Prabowo was as highly-motivated and as resourced as

Thaksin was. And he was far more driven and richly-endowed than Estrada. Thus, in explaining Prabowo's defeat, another factor looms large — social structure. Indonesia, with its bristling ethnic fractionalization, is less receptive to electrifying populist appeals than reassuring nice-guy idioms. In Southeast Asia, then, we observe populism's varieties, denoted by the extent to which they exclude, heighten participation, and destabilize democracy. But to better elucidate these dynamics, a classic and demanding notion of populism seems to help.

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# Populism in Africa: Ethnicity, Solidarity, and the Potential for Inclusive Politics

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You cannot escape Donald Trump, even in Africa. At a public talk in Nairobi one of the speakers, Godwin Murunga, was asked whether African universities should run more courses on American and European politics.<sup>1</sup> He responded by arguing that this would be a good thing for both African students and the discipline of political science more generally. After pointing out that the distinctive research focus and experience of Africanists means that they have a comparative advantage in a number of areas, Dr. Murunga drew warm applause and more than a few knowing laughs by suggesting that academics from the continent should be dispatched to the United States to help their colleagues understand the political strategy and appeal of the Republican presidential candidate.

This is just one example of a growing tendency for media commentators, academics, and even comedians to draw analogies between Trump and African leaders over the past twelve months, a political meme that reached its apogee in October 2015 when a comedy sketch by Trevor Noah, the South African presenter of the *Daily Show*, depicted Trump as the “perfect African president”.<sup>2</sup> In the clips that followed, which have been widely circulated on the Internet, Noah juxtaposed some of Trump’s quips on the campaign trail with footage of African dictators, including Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe and Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi.

The comments of Dr. Murunga and Trevor Noah were light hearted, but speak to a set of widely held assumptions about African politics, namely that it features more than its fair share of populist rabble-rousers. In recent years, this sentiment has also found expression in the form of a number of well-received academic analyses. Carbone (2008, 77) has carefully documented the way in which the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, uses “antipolitics as a legitimizing strategy”, while Ismail (2015) has documented the rise of “populism in Southern Africa’s dominant party states.” Similarly,

Resnick (2010) has written insightfully about the rise of populist leaders capable of mobilizing a mass support base in urban areas in Kenya and Zambia. In all of these cases, leaders have sought to rally support by deploying classic populist tropes: the reification of the common man, the demonization of elites and expertise, and the claim to be one with the people.

However, in line with the findings of Gidron and Bonikowski (2013), the populist label has been inconsistently applied and researchers have not always been careful to explain precisely what is populist about a given leader. As in other parts of the world, the term has often been applied to left-leaning leaders who advocate more radical solutions to the challenges facing their countries, but has also been used by other authors to describe a very different dynamic of rural conservatism. At the same time, in the media, blogs, and more general treatments of the continent, there has also been a noticeable tendency to deploy populism as a catch-all concept in which it effectively becomes a rather empty way of describing leaders and policies with any kind of popular appeal.

Over the last decade a number of African leaders have proved able to sustain a diverse support base that includes both ethnic and populist constituencies.

Partly as a result, populism in Africa has received insufficient theoretical and empirical interrogation. Most notably, there is a serious question about whether genuine populist strategies are compatible with a political context in which a great deal of electoral mobilization occurs along ethnic lines.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, recent research on this topic has identified a number of “ethnopolitist” parties that draw on the “ethnic” appeal of party leaders within their own communities, especially in rural areas, in addition to a broader populist message that is usually most effective in cosmopolitan urban constituencies (Cheeseman and Larmer, 2015, 23). The

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Godwin Murunga is a Senior Research Fellow at Nairobi University; the talk was a launch event for my book, *Democracy in Africa*, at the British Institute in Eastern Africa on 24 August 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Episode 2,681 of the *Daily Show* aired on 1 October 2015 in the wake of the Oregon College shooting. It can be viewed at: [goo.gl/HBnkBY](http://goo.gl/HBnkBY) (accessed 29 August 2016).

<sup>3</sup>“Ethnic” is used here as a shorthand for a range of ethnic, linguistic, and regional identities that are politically salient in Africa, the precise form of which varies across the continent.

fate of these parties is telling, because the tension between these two very different types of appeal tends to undermine the viability of their campaign, preventing leaders from achieving electoral success on the basis of the kind of cross-ethnic “inclusionary populism” found in Latin America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

## *II. Populism in the Africanist Literature*

It would not be surprising if populism was rampant in Africa, given the context within which political leaders operate. Although there is significant variation in terms of the structure and dynamics of the continent’s political systems, parties tend to be weak, election campaigns often have limited programmatic content, and the capacity to communicate messages via television is limited to urban areas. As a result, political aspirants continue to rely heavily on delivering highly targeted messages through face-to-face meetings to get the vote out. It is for this reason that recent research has found that campaign rallies are more important in Africa than anywhere else in the world (Paget, 2016). Under such conditions, populist forms of political communication and organization, which do not rely on the existence of strong state or party structures, are likely to thrive. However, efforts to describe the kind of populism that has emerged in Africa have not always been fully successful.

In part, this is because the literature has variously understood populism through all three of the approaches identified by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013, 14) – as an ideology, as a discursive style, and as a form of political mobilization – without always recognizing that which framework one embraces significantly shapes both the classification of political leaders and the understanding of their strategies. As a result, there has been a tendency for different scholars to talk past one another.

Some of this conceptual confusion is revealed by the academic response to the work of Idahosa (2004). Given the lack of research on this topic, Idahosa’s attempt to conceptualise populism as a political ideology in order to demonstrate that a populist outlook unites the thought of writers and leaders such as Franz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Julius Nyerere, represented a significant contribution to the field. However, in order to make this case, Idahosa relied on a definition of populism that has proved to be highly controversial. Draw-

ing inspiration from African and Russian literature and examples, he conceptualized populism as “an emancipatory ideology based upon a specific conception of production relations”, giving it a distinctly socialist outlook (Idahosa, 2004, 15). Idahosa also relied heavily on a distinction between nationalism and populism, in which nationalists paper over class differences whereas populists support “the peasant masses.” Other scholars proved to be less persuaded by this framing. For instance, Blaser (2007, 1) argues that Idahosa’s analysis neglects the fact that “populism is not only the domain of the left”, and that his “distinction between nationalism and populism falters on the eclecticism of daily political discourse and policy making.”

Despite Idahosa’s best efforts, the tendency of the literature to treat African politics as if it were an ideology free zone, combined with the focus of recent work on the personalization of politics, meant that few researchers followed his example and analysed African populism as a system of political thought. Instead, recent scholarship has primarily focused on populism as a discursive style and as a political strategy. Indeed, Africanists have tended to overlook the distinction between these two approaches, and for good reason. In a continent in which leaders mainly communicate with voters through rallies and personal networks, discursive style is a political strategy. Thus, although Carbone (2008, 3) concludes that “neither Museveni nor his regime are fully-fledged examples of ‘anti-political neo-populism’”, he notes a populist dimension in the president’s “ever more plebiscitarian and ‘pro-people’ discourse.” Similarly, Resnick (2010, 24) identifies a number of populist practices in recent presidential campaigns in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, finding that “[Michael] Sata, [Raila] Odinga, and [Jacob] Zuma all utilized populist strategies that involved the fusion of charisma with policy promises oriented towards the priorities of the growing urban poor” (see also Resnick (2014)).

Resnick’s focus on the urban poor is significant, because a number of recent publications on populism have concentrated on the more densely populated states of Southern Africa, where growing inequality and a history of urbanization have given rise to a more radicalised population that can be more easily reached and organized. In this vein, Larmer and Fraser (2007) document the rise to political prominence of Zambia’s Michael Sata, who used a populist strategy to go from being a

political also-ran to the country's fifth president in the space of little more than a decade. To achieve this remarkable transformation, Sata carefully targeted his appeals to communities in towns and cities that, by virtue of the country's history of mining, trade union activism, and urban poverty, were particularly responsive to his argument that the state could and should play a role in transforming the condition of the masses.

Larmer and Fraser's analysis is particularly important because it explicitly makes the case that populism is often both a political strategy and a discursive style, and provides a strong argument as to why the two are inherently linked. More specifically, they argue that Sata's populist political policies were able to rally disaffected and disenfranchised Zambians to his side because they were given credibility by his intense and rabble rousing speaking style (Larmer and Fraser, 2007, 613). By launching into vociferous attacks on his opponents and ending his routines by tearing up a cabbage – chosen to symbolize the then-president Levy Mwanawasa, who Sata nicknamed “the cabbage” after he suffered a stroke – the opposition leader demonstrated that he was a man of action capable of overthrowing the status quo (Larmer and Fraser, 2007, 629-630). In this way, his discursive style was critical to the success of his populist message and strategy.

In order to bridge the likely gap between ethnic and populist constituencies, leaders must be able to “articulate shared narratives of exclusion in order to integrate diverse constituencies into a united campaign.”

While the recent focus on urban populism has generated many valuable insights, it has also led to the relative neglect of rural populism. This is unfortunate, because the wider literature tells us that some of the earliest forms of populism emerged in rural settings, and variants of rural populism are alive and well in Africa. In Ghana, for example, President J. J. Rawlings – nicknamed Junior Jesus as a result of his charisma and popularity among his supporters – utilised a populist discursive style to great effect in some of the most rural parts of the country. Similarly, Maloka (1996)

has argued that the concept of populism can be profitably used to illuminate struggles over political power in rural South Africa. The neglect of rural populism in much comparative work overlooks this reality, and has led Africanists away from engaging with two critical questions: How does populism relate to ethnic politics, and is Afro-populism really just ethno-nationalism in disguise?

## *II. Inclusive and Exclusive Populism in Africa*

With a small number of important exceptions, African elections witness high levels of ethnic political mobilization. Although recent research has found that a number of other factors shape voting behaviour, such as evaluations of the economic performance of the incumbent, most studies conclude that ethnicity remains the most powerful determinant of electoral behaviour (Eifert, Miguel and Posner, 2010; Cheeseman, 2016). This is significant, because at first glance ethnic and populist forms of mobilization appear to be incompatible. Promising to defend the interests of the common man implies a form of solidarity rooted in class or economic status that does not fit well with ethnic politics and its emphasis on sectional divisions. While populism has the potential to be relatively inclusive, with leaders pledging to improve the position of the disenfranchised whatever their ethnic or racial identity (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), the logic of ethnic politics is inherently exclusionary. Indeed, the notion that individuals should vote for a candidate of their ethnicity, who in turn is expected to deliver benefits back to their own community, effectively casts members of other ethnic groups as outsiders and rivals.

Yet despite this apparent inconsistency, over the last decade a number of African leaders have proved able to sustain a diverse support base that includes both ethnic and populist constituencies. This raises the question of how candidates can reconcile these two different types of appeal. One way to answer this question is to conceptualize African populism as a discursive style with no ideological content. Understood in this way, there is no real clash between populist and ethnic strategies because populism is little more than a rhetorical device that leaders use to rally their supporters around a range of different messages, which can be ethnic, religious, programmatic, nationalist, and so on. In other words, one could argue that there is no tension between ethnic politics and populism because populism is simply

a way of delivering a message; it is not the message itself. However, this answer is ultimately unsatisfactory because in at least some cases populism has clearly been more than just a discursive style.

To return to the example of Michael Sata, while it was his firebrand performances on the stump that caught the eye of many analysts, “King Cobra” also developed a powerful explanation of the country’s economic woes that rested on the claim that an out of touch government had colluded with Chinese and other foreign “infesters” to betray the interests of the common man (Larmer and Fraser, 2007, 627-629). Like many populists, Sata suggested that economic salvation was just a short step away, and could be achieved by transferring control of the state back into the hands of ordinary Zambians, represented by their most loyal of servants – Sata himself. Thus, although Sata’s political platform was at times inconsistent and incoherent, his thinking demonstrates clear evidence of the kind of thin populist ideology described by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013, 5-6).

Moreover, there is good evidence that these policies resonated with a significant portion of Sata’s support base. Research by Cheeseman, Ford and Simutanyi (2014) found that Zambians who held political beliefs and attitudes commonly associated with a leftist populist position – rejection of elites, support for high levels of state intervention – were significantly more likely to support Michael Sata than those that did not. By cultivating the appeal of his Patriotic Front (PF) party among these voters, Sata was able to consistently expand his support base across ethnic lines in urban areas. At the same time, he was able to grow his popularity in some rural areas through “ethnic” appeals to the Bemba community with which he identified (Cheeseman and Hinfelaar, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these two trends enabled Sata to increase his share of the vote from just 3% in 2001 to 42% in 2011, which proved to be sufficient to secure the presidency, unseating a formerly dominant ruling party in the process. In the case of countries such as Zambia, then, we cannot simply dismiss or sidestep the apparent tensions between ethnic and populist political strategies.

In order to explain the conditions under which it is feasible for political leaders to deploy ethnopolitist

strategies, Cheeseman and Larmer (2015) conducted a pairwise comparison of Zambia and Kenya. The latter case was selected on the basis that scholars such as Resnick have identified Kenya’s main opposition leader, Raila Odinga, as one of the new generation of effective populist mobilizers. In both countries, we identified a clear tension between the messages leveraged by political leaders in urban and rural areas. To take the most obvious example, in Zambia, Michael Sata pledged to reduce the cost of food for urban workers, which implicitly threatened to undermine the revenue received by agricultural producers among his rural Bemba support base. At the same time, his pledge to promote the interests of the Bemba community implied that members of other ethnic groups might lose out if he secured power. So how was Sata able to rally support across these very different constituencies without his campaign being undermined by the inherent contradictions at the heart of this “ethnopolitist” approach?

One possible answer to this question is that poor information networks in Africa mean that leaders can say different – and often incompatible – things to different groups without being punished. In other words, ethnic appeals about favouritism and local issues can be targeted at rural voters, while populist appeals can be targeted at urban voters, with neither group being aware of what is being said to the other. This may be true in some instances, but it doesn’t appear to apply in the Zambian case. Instead, there is strong evidence that Sata was able to appeal to various constituencies at the same time because, despite their different economic interests, they shared many of the same political beliefs (Cheeseman, Ford and Simutanyi, 2014). In other words, Sata did not simply mobilize in a “populist” way in urban areas and an “ethnic” way in rural locales (though there was certainly an element of this); rather, he articulated a set of grievances that resonated with both constituencies.

Although well documented, the Zambian experience is relatively rare in Africa. On the whole, populist appeals have not been so ethnically inclusive, or so effective. The case of Kenya demonstrates this tendency well. In the run up to 2007, Raila Odinga struggled to find a common message to rally his ethnically diverse support base. Forming a “pentagon” of leaders from each part of the country to back his candidacy proved to be an effective way of broadening the reach of his campaign, but, in

<sup>4</sup>Sata was a member of the Bisa community, and so not a Bemba, but he spoke Bemba and sought to identify himself with, and mobilize through, this more numerous ethno-linguistic group.



effect, Odinga's candidacy depended on the ability of regional "Big Men" to deliver their communities. In other words, despite his populist rhetoric, Odinga attracted a cross-ethnic support base by harnessing diverse ethnic identities, rather than overcoming them. This raises an important question: how can the variation in outcomes between Kenya and Zambia be explained?

The literature on populism in other parts of the world has already suggested some potential answers to this puzzle. Most notably, Madrid (2008, 479) has sought to explain the "rise of ethnopopulism in Latin America" by arguing that ethnically based appeals can be successfully married to populist ones when ethnic identification is not "unidimensional" and ethnic polarization is relatively low. For example, Madrid suggests that the electoral strategy of Evo Morales succeeded because the mobilization of self-identified indigenous peoples did not clash with more class-based appeals to the poor in Bolivia's multidimensional political space. However, although Madrid's work is illuminating, such explanations are of little help in Africa where the salience of communal identities is profound and ethnicity is often the overriding political cleavage.

Instead, Cheeseman and Larmer (2015, 22) suggest that the two main factors that shape the feasibility of successfully adopting an inclusive form of ethnopopulism are "variation in the reach of the urban political economy and the extent to which ethnic identities have historically been politicized." More specifically, Cheeseman and Larmer argue that in order to bridge the likely gap between ethnic and populist constituencies, leaders must be able to "articulate shared narratives of exclusion in order to integrate diverse constituencies into a united campaign." This is most likely to be possible "where urban areas have comparatively high economic and political significance, such that patterns of rural-urban-rural migration and urban-rural remittances bridge the divide between urban and rural voters and increase the willingness of rural communities to support populist parties" (Cheeseman and Larmer, 2015, 23).

The contrasting fortunes of ethnopopulist leaders in Kenya and Zambia demonstrate this point well. In Zambia, high levels of urbanization and industrialization have underpinned a history of urban radicalism,

while President Kenneth Kaunda's one-party state attempted – though not always successfully – to manage ethnicity out of politics. The cumulative effect of the repeated circulation of people and ideas between urban and rural locations, the centrality of the urban economy to wider developments, and the lower political salience of ethnic cleavages, ensured that populist appeals resonated beyond the cities. On this interpretation, it was the shared interests of rural Bemba and urban voters, who both stood to gain from improvements in the pay and conditions for urban workers as a result of the significance of urban remittances to rural livelihoods, that underpinned their common support for populist positions. As a result, Sata was able to run a more inclusive campaign in which voters from a range of ethnic groups were attracted to his political platform,<sup>5</sup> overcoming – if only for a short time – the country's ethno-linguistic divisions.

By contrast, in the Kenyan case the high salience of ethnicity and comparatively low level of urbanization limited the reach and efficacy of ethnically neutral populist appeals. Faced with such a context, Odinga had little option but to mobilize support by co-opting regional leaders, which had the side effect of emphasizing the importance of ethnically constituted patron-client relations, exacerbating inter-communal tensions. In turn, this contributed to the outbreak of ethnic violence following a particularly heated election campaign that culminated in the electoral commission announcing a disputed result. In this way, the "fate of the PF and the ODM reveals not only the constraints under which opposition leaders operate, but also the danger posed by forms of ethnopopulism that rely more heavily on ethnic, rather than populist, foundations" (Cheeseman and Larmer, 2015, 23).

This finding represents an important challenge to the notion that populism is rife, and effective, in Africa. Such a claim may be true if we confine ourselves to speaking about populism solely as a discursive style, but it is misleading if it is taken to imply the existence of a populist ideology, or the effective deployment of populist strategies of electoral mobilization. Of course, not all African states feature 'ethnic politics', and there are a number of countries that are more ethnically homogeneous and in which ethnicity has played a less impor-

<sup>5</sup>In 2009, citizens from a number of different ethnic communities were found to have no bias against Sata, even when they did not share his background and had the option of backing co-ethnic leaders. The one exception was the Tonga community (Cheeseman, Ford and Simutanyi, 2014, 358).

tant role in structuring political competition, such as Botswana and Zimbabwe. However, when it comes to the salience of ethnicity, most African states are closer to Kenya than they are to Zambia, and there are few countries in which leaders can hope to win elections on the basis of urban votes alone. As a result, an inclusive populist appeal in urban areas is rarely enough for a leader to secure national power. In turn, this constrains the potential for pure populist strategies to be successful and pushes aspiring candidates towards ethnopolitism.

### III. The Future for Populism in Africa

If we are right that populism thrives in the context of larger urban populations, and closer ties between rural and urban areas, then the next twenty years are likely to see the rise of an increasing number of leaders in the mold of Michael Sata. According to UN Habitat (2014), Africa is one of the fastest urbanizing regions in the world. By 2035, around 50% of the people on the continent will live in urban areas, while the number of urban dwellers on the continent is likely to increase from 400 million to 1.26 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2014, 9). A recent report by the consultancy group Oxford Analytica (2016) suggests that this is likely to change the political geography of the continent, giving rise to extended metropolitan areas, growing urban corridors, and in some cases urban ‘mega-regions.’ Already, the average distance between urban centers with populations of more than 10,000 people in West Africa has decreased from 111 km in 1950 to just 33 km in 2000. Thus, in the future, more Africans will be living in urban areas, and the gap between those urban areas, and between them and the rural hinterland, is going to decrease (2016, 1).

These demographic trends will place increasing strain on urban infrastructure. Much of the analysis of urbanization has focused on capital cities such as Lagos and Nairobi, but around 75% of the urban population increase will be absorbed by small and intermediate sized cities (Oxford Analytica, 2016, 1). This means that a considerable portion of the challenge of accommodating new urban residents will be born by areas that typically lack the finance and human capital to respond. Without urgent action, it is almost certain that the growth of towns and cities will result in the emergence of new slums (United Nations, 2014, 17-18). Taken together, these developments are likely to improve the prospects for the gestation and transmission

of populist ideas.

However, as in the past, other trends will complicate this story. It is unclear whether the overall political salience of ethnicity on the continent is rising or falling, but recent research has demonstrated the propensity for election campaigns to focus attention away from overarching sentiments such as class and nationalism and towards narrow sectional interests such as ethnicity (Eifert, Miguel and Posner, 2010). Along with continuing tensions between “indigenes” and “settlers” over the local distribution of political rights and economic resources (Geschiere, 2009), this suggests that ethnic cleavages are likely to play a major role in the struggle for power for the foreseeable future. Given this, the chances are that future political leaders will continue to face the challenge of how to reconcile populist and ethnic constituencies. We therefore need to develop a better understanding of the dynamics and possibilities of ethnopolitism in the African context.

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## Populism and Authoritarian Survival in China: Concept and Measurement

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"Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people." In 1863, Abraham Lincoln gave this famous quote in his Gettysburg Address. Eighty years later, Mao Tse-Tung developed the leadership method for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) known as the 'Mass Line' (群众路线). The leadership should be "for the masses, relying on the masses, from

the masses, and to the masses," and the party should serve "the people whole-heartedly and never for a moment divorce ourselves from the masses."<sup>1</sup> The 'Mass Line' has remained central to the Chinese Communist Party, and Chinese politics more generally, ever since.

Although the 'Mass Line' is very similar to Lincoln's famous quote about democracy, and some scholars view it as outlining a democratic decision-making process in which decisions result from deliberation between the leaders and the citizens (see Blecher, 1979), this style of leadership departs in significant ways from what we would consider pluralistic liberal democracy. Instead, the 'Mass Line' is much closer to what scholars have labeled populism: "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, 543).

Like populism, the 'Mass Line' separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the people/masses and the people's enemy. The 'Mass Line' asks all levels of CCP members to serve the people and represent the people. Over the years, the enemy has changed from the corrupted Kuomintang (KMT) government to capitalist roaders,<sup>2</sup> to the corrupted factions within the party itself. In many cases, the enemy is an element within the established elite. The enemy, though, can also be any group that threatens the rule of the CCP government and the stability of society. Although the precise identities of the enemy and the people have changed over time, the idea of an antagonistic relationship between corrupted elements of the elite and the people has always remained a central feature of Chinese politics.

Although populism has been examined in some competitive authoritarian regimes, especially in Latin America, it has been relatively understudied in other forms of authoritarian regimes and regions. Many scholars, particularly in Latin America, have conceptualized populism as a political strategy used by personalistic leaders to mobilize excluded elements of the population to help them gain power (see Weyland, 2001; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). They have also discussed

<sup>1</sup>The leadership method of the 'Mass Line' is addressed in many of Mao Tse-Tung's essays. His earliest systematic discussion of the 'Mass Line' is in his 1943 article, "Some Question concerning Methods of Leadership" (Mao, [1943] 1967c). He later discussed the 'Mass Line' in more detail in his 1945 article, "On Coalition Government" (Mao, [1945] 1967b).

<sup>2</sup>The concept of 'capitalist roaders' comes from the Chinese word, '走资派', and captures a corrupt Chinese official who has taken the capitalist 'road.'

the consequences of populism for various aspects of democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, 2012). In addition, scholars have distinguished between different sub-types of populism, particularly when comparing the more inclusive populism in Latin America with the more exclusive populism seen in Europe (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). After pointing out the relative lack of attention to populism in Asia, Case (2016) and Subramanian (2016) in this issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter go on to examine how populism has been employed as a political strategy in Southeast Asia and India. There is almost no work in political science on populism in China. This is surprising because populism has long been used as a strategy to secure power in China. Mao, for example, attributes the success of the CCP against the KMT in the 1940s to the 'Mass Line'. The later leadership of the CCP also treats the 'Mass Line' as an important 'lifeline' of the Communist party (Xinhua, 2013a).

Mao Tse-Tung developed the leadership method for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) known as the 'Mass Line' ('群众路线') ... "for the masses, relying on the masses, from the masses, and to the masses" ... Like populism, the 'Mass Line' separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the people/masses and the people's enemy.

How does the populist 'Mass Line' influence the survival of the CCP? Under what conditions does the CCP adopt populism as a political strategy? In this article, we briefly demonstrate that the CCP has used populism as a tool to solve the two fundamental conflicts that exist in all authoritarian regimes, namely, intra-elite conflict and elite-mass conflict (Svolik, 2012). Historically, few Chinese scholars have examined the role of populism in China. Recently, though, Tang (2016) has provided an innovative theoretical discussion of populism's role in regime sustainability in China. One issue, though, with studying populism, both as an ideology and as a political strategy, in an authoritarian regime has to do with how populism is measured. One of the goals of our contribution is to examine the feasibility of measuring populism in China using automated content analysis of

public speeches from party leaders and state-controlled news reports. Our preliminary analysis suggests that this is, indeed, feasible, and we are able to produce a measure of populism that varies across time and leaders in ways that are consistent with historical events and commonsense understandings of Chinese politics.

### *I. Populism as a Strategy of Survival in China*

Authoritarian leaders face two fundamental challenges to their rule: challenges from within the elite and challenges from the masses (Magaloni, 2006; Svolik, 2012). No dictators govern alone. Although authoritarian leaders do not need to win elections to stay in power, they do need some cooperation from the masses to generate rents and to avoid costly repression. The very agents, such as the military and high ranking civil leaders, that help keep the dictator in power, though, also pose a threat to the dictator. Below, we briefly describe how Chinese leaders have historically used populism to resolve both of these challenges.

#### *Populism and Intra-elite Conflict*

Historically, populism has been used to mobilize previously excluded groups, the masses, to attack sections of the established elite, either within the Chinese Communist party or outside of it. Before taking control of China, for example, the CCP used populism as a tactic to mobilize excluded groups, especially peasants, in its fight against the Kuomintang Party (KMT). Although the CCP won military battles against the KMT, many scholars argue that the CCP's ultimate victory was primarily political rather than military; that is, that its success was based largely on mass mobilization through propaganda and land reform (Johnson, 1962; Hinton, 1966; Pepper, 1999). According to the CCP's rhetoric, Kuomintang Party rule was "anti-popular," the "disrupter of China's national unity," and the "breeder of civil war" (Mao, [1945] 1967b). The Chinese people naturally "demand the immediate abolition" of the KMT one-party dictatorship (Mao, [1945] 1967b). Whereas the KMT government was portrayed as anti-popular, Mao attributed the power of the People's Liberation Army to its roots in the masses. According to Mao, the sole purpose of the People's Liberation Army was to stand firmly with the Chinese people and to serve them whole-heartedly. Facing a broken economy and a population already tired of war, the CCP used land reform to mobilize vast numbers of peasants in its battle against



the KMT. They “launch[ed] large-scale rent reduction campaigns and carr[ied] out rent reduction universally in all the Liberated Areas, and particularly in the vast newly liberated areas, so as to arouse the revolutionary fervour of the great majority of the peasant masses” (Mao, [1945] 1967b).

After taking control of China, Mao continued to use populist appeals to the masses to consolidate his personal hold on power, to weaken institutional constraints on that power, and to eliminate his rivals. Party elites who were threats to Mao’s personalist rule were portrayed as capitalists roaders and enemies of both the Communist revolution and the Chinese people. Top leaders of the government were criticized for “adopting the reactionary stand of the bourgeoisie” (Mao, 1967a). Class struggle was emphasized and revolutionary action was praised. Mao encouraged Red Guards to rebel against “all landlords, bourgeois, imperialists, revisionists, and their running dogs who exploit and oppress the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals and revolutionary parties and groupings” (Mao, 1966a). Mao used the mobilization of the masses to both justify his opposition to government policy and as evidence in support of his own policies. For example, he stated that “the broad masses of students and revolutionary teachers support us and resist the policies of the past” (Mao, 1966b). Liu Shaoqi, the head of the government before the Cultural Revolution, was soon replaced and arrested for being the “biggest capitalist roader in the party” and was beaten regularly at public denunciation meetings. By mobilizing the masses, Mao was able to destroy virtually all of the state and party institutions, and concentrate power in his own hands.

In many ways, Mao’s use of populism to mobilize the masses in an attempt to consolidate his personal power mirrors the strategy adopted by many populist leaders in Latin America. Like Mao, these populist leaders in Latin America called for “government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland, 2001). Morales in Bolivia and Chávez in Venezuela both encouraged the previously voiceless masses to participate in politics. Relying on ‘the people’, Morales and Chávez sought to build a form of ‘direct democracy’ that ultimately undermined representative democratic institutions and concentrated power in their own hands. As Morales pointed out, mobilizing the people to protest and blockade is important, because it

is this mass mobilization that allows one to change and enforce laws (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

The use of populism as a strategic tactic can create a security dilemma, though. The mobilized masses that are used to gain power are themselves a threat to the government/leader. In fact, after the Cultural Revolution, we observe much less mass mobilization by the government. Nonetheless, populist rhetoric continued to be used whenever political rivals within the party were eliminated. Rivals of the party leaders are often portrayed as betraying the masses and as a threat to the interest of the people. They are often charged with corruption and removed during special anti-corruption campaigns (Tang, 2016; Jiang and Xu, 2015; Dai, 2016).

### *Populism and Elite-mass Conflict*

In addition to intra-elite threats, authoritarian leaders also face threats from the masses. CCP leaders have been well aware of this threat. Indeed, this is why the ‘Mass Line’ strategy contains the element, ‘to the mass’. After forming some ideas or policies, party members and leaders are supposed to “go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action” (Mao, [1943] 1967c). Whereas the previous section focused on constructing the people’s enemy, the process of ‘to the mass’ has to do with constructing the homogeneous interests of ‘the people’. In practice, the people may or may not share coherent interests. Similar to what Disch (2011) has in mind when she talks about ‘mobilization representation’, ‘Mass Line’ leaders do not aim to make some preexisting interest visible. Instead, ‘Mass Line’ leadership is about persuasion and about constructing the people’s interests and their understanding of these interests. The party is also constructed as the only true and loyal protector and representative of the people’s interests.

We argue that the CCP seeks to achieve two goals through this process that help to prevent mass rebellion. First, populist rhetoric and policy are used to show the government’s responsiveness to the masses and to coopt potential opponents. During and after the civil war, for example, the CCP attempted to secure support among the peasants for the Party and the new communist regime through rent reduction and land redistribution. Indeed, the fact that the Chinese central government is perceived to be highly responsive to

popular needs suggests that, in many ways, this populist strategy has been successful (Tang, 2016).

Second, a populist strategy has been used to marginalize political opponents from the masses. Societal groups that show dissatisfaction with the authoritarian rule of the government are almost always portrayed as enemies of the 'national interest' and 'the people' in an attempt to undermine any sympathy or support they might receive from the public. In general, stability is portrayed as the most important national interest, because without stability there can be no development. Protesters against the government are often portrayed as threatening societal stability for their own selfish interests; they are portrayed as enemies of the people. This is precisely what happened, for example, when Tibetans attacked the Wabaling Tibetan Muslims in the late 1950s after the CCP took control of Tibet. The Wabaling Tibetan Muslims, who often served as translators for the CCP, were attacked because they were perceived to be collaborating with the CCP. Although the Tibetans did not attack any other Muslim group, the Chinese state-controlled media portrayed the incidents as radical religious attacks that targeted all Muslims and something that therefore threatened the stability and unity of society (Atwill, 2016).

A much more recent example concerns the pro-democracy Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014. After the decision by the National People's Congress to revise Hong Kong's electoral system, thousands of students took to the streets in protest. Rather than report the full range of opinions held by Hong Kong residents towards the protests, China's mainland media concentrated on only the negative opinions. It focused, for instance, on complaints from residents about how the protests blocked roads, created stress and inconveniences, hurt the local economy, and in general threatened the interests of the majority of society (Xinhua, 2013c,b). It is little surprise then that the Hong Kong student protests received almost no sympathy and support from Chinese citizens on the mainland (New York Times, 2014).

## II. Measuring Populism in China

When do authoritarian leaders adopt a populist political strategy? Under what conditions is a populist strategy effective at promoting authoritarian survival? To answer research questions such as these, we need to

be able to measure populism. Scholars have measured populism in Europe, Latin America, and the U.S. using both human-coded and automated content analysis. For example, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) use human-coded content analysis of political party broadcasts to examine the use of populist discourse by six Belgian parties. Hawkins (2009) also uses human-coded content analysis to measure the degree of populist language in the speeches of political chief executives from thirty-four Latin American and other countries. Dictionary-based automated text analysis has recently been used to measure populism in Western Europe (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011) and the United States (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). Although automated text analysis usually has lower content validity than human-coded content analysis, it is often more reliable, less time and resource intensive, and can produce high levels of validity when applied carefully (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Grimmer and Stewart, 2013; Laver and Garry, 2000). In what follows, we provide the first measure of populism in China over time using a dictionary-based automated text analysis.

We apply our dictionary-based automated text analysis to two different types of texts in China: news reports from the state-controlled media and the governments' annual work reports. The first type of text comprises the daily news reports from China Central Television's (CCTV) Xinwen Lianbo (Daily News Program) from 2003 to 2015. CCTV is the predominant state television broadcaster, and the main propaganda machine of the Chinese government. The Xinwen Lianbo program broadcasts news every day from 7 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. All of the local TV stations are required to broadcast Xinwen Lianbo on at least one of their local channels during that time period. In fact, for many years, Xinwen Lianbo was the only TV program Chinese audiences could watch at this time in the evening. To a large extent, our decision to examine populist discourse in China's state-controlled media follows the same basic approach adopted by Rooduijn (2014), who examines opinion articles in West European newspapers to measure the diffusion of populism in public debates. In the context of authoritarian regimes, state-controlled media acts as a propaganda machine and the mouthpiece of the government. As a result, news reports from state-controlled media such as CCTV should provide a fairly accurate reflection of the type of discourse used by the government.

Table 1: Dictionary of the Content Analysis

Anti-Elitism	People-Centrism
class (阶级)	proletariat (无产阶级)
corrupt (腐败, 腐化, 堕落, 贪污, 私利)	people (人民, 老百姓)
betray (背叛, 背弃, 背离)	mass (群众)
anti-revolution/(反革命)	revolution (革命)
shame (耻辱, 羞耻)	worker (工人)
struggle (斗争)	camp (阵营)
	peasant (农民)

The second type of text comprises the annual work reports published by the Chinese central government. Around the beginning of each year, the Prime Minister delivers an annual report to the National People's Congress. The work report usually contains three main parts: an overview of the government's performance (achievement) during the past year, the government's policy and plan for the current/coming year, and the government's plan to build a better government. In many ways, annual work reports are similar to election manifestos.

Each of the two different types of text has its strengths and weaknesses. Compared to annual work reports, the subject matter of CCTV news reports is more heterogeneous and may include topics that are not always relevant for evaluating the use of populism as a political strategy. That said, CCTV news reports provide a much richer body of information. Significantly, CCTV news reports can be aggregated into different units, such as days, weeks, or months. This is useful if one wishes to examine whether and how the use of populism responds to economic and political shocks. Another advantage with respect to external validity is that news reports are potentially comparable across countries. On the other hand, government work reports provide a more direct and 'unmediated' look at the political strategy of the CCP. They also allow us to investigate the use of populism over a much longer period of time. For example, we can look at government work reports from 1954 to 1964 and from 1975 to 2015,<sup>3</sup> whereas we have data on CCTV news reports only from 2003 to 2015. In some ways, using two different types of text acts as a validity check; the two measures should be highly correlated in the period in which they overlap.

For the annual government work reports, each re-

port is treated as one document. For the preliminary analyses reported in this paper, each year's news from Xinwen Lianbo are grouped as one document. The automated content analysis assumes that each document is a 'bag of words', in which the order of words does not matter. Although we only look at the frequency of words and ignore the real-world generating process of the texts, a document that is produced to convey populist ideas should generally contain more populist words than other documents. This method has been shown to generate similar results to those generated by human-coded methods (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Grimmer and Stewart, 2013).

To build our dictionary, we draw on existing theoretical and empirical work related to the measurement of populism. People-centrism and anti-elitism are recognized as the two key components of populism, irrespective of whether populism is measured by human coders or a computer. Existing research has identified words that reflect people-centrism and anti-elitism (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). As this research focuses primarily on Europe and Latin America, though, we cannot simply construct our dictionary by translating this set of words into Chinese.

We first translate existing dictionaries of populism into Chinese (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). For each word, we try to identify all possible Chinese translations that express a similar meaning. We then examine whether both CCTV news and the government's annual work reports use these translated Chinese words. Only words used in both types of text are included in our dictionary. We also randomly select and read texts that contain these populist words to see if the use of these

<sup>3</sup>With the exception of 1975, the People's Congress did not meet during the Cultural Revolution.

words truly reflects populism in the China context. For example, the word ‘elite’ (精英) does not reflect anti-elitism in either type of text, and is thus not included in our dictionary. We also identify and add China context specific words that reflect anti-elitism and people-centrism by reading random subsets of the texts. For example, the word ‘class’ (阶级) in the China context is often used to separate society into the corrupted bourgeoisie and the pure proletariat. The word ‘class’ (阶级) reflects both people-centrism and anti-elitism, and is therefore included in our dictionary. The list of words in our dictionary is shown in Table 1.

The degree of populism is measured by the percentage of populist words used in each document. Unlike English, Chinese is written without spaces between words, and one word usually consists of multiple characters. We use the Stanford Word Segmenter developed by the Stanford NLP group to split the texts into a sequence of words, i.e., to insert space between each Chinese word. In Chinese, characters such as “的”, “地”, and “得” are usually attached to a noun to change the word from a noun to an adjective, verb, or adverb. During the segmentation process, the root/noun is generally separated from the characters “的”, “地”, and “得”, a process we can treat as word stemming as well. Therefore, although the dictionary only includes the nouns shown in Table 1, our word frequencies actually include all forms of the words. After segmentation, we use the R package Quanteda developed by Benoit and Nulty (2016) to automatically identify populist words and calculate the percentage of populist words in a document.

In Figure 1, we show how the degree of populism in the government’s annual work reports changes over time. Each color represents a different prime minister (speaker). Although the prime minister is supposed to give the reports, the deputy prime minister actually gives the reports in some years. We use lighter colors to highlight these particular years, but still label them as belonging to the PM’s government. It turns out that the reports given by the deputy PM are much less populist than the reports given by the PM in the same government. This might be because the deputy PM does not feel the same ability to ‘represent’ the people and the government as the prime minister. The annual reports given just before the Cultural Revolution (1964) and at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1975) are, by far, the most populist. The degree of populism is generally lower after Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1979, but there

is still variation across time.

The different color groups in Figure 1 are based on who gave the annual work report speech. One issue that arises here concerns ‘succession years’ in which the leadership of the CCP changes hands. In succession years, such as 2003 and 2013, the incumbent head of government gives the report to the People’s Congress. However, the succession process happens during the meeting of the People’s Congress, and so it is hard to say whether the reports reflect the policy of the incumbent government or the new government. Things are made more complicated by the fact that the annual work reports are drafted by groups of people in the government and usually collectively approved before the meeting. When it comes to analyzing the CCTV news reports, I treat data for 2003 and 2013 as reflecting the degree of populism in the new government’s policy. This is because the succession process happened early (March) in these years, and so the majority of the news coverage in these years should be influenced by the new government leadership.

In Figure 2, we show the degree of populism measured in CCTV news reports. The light blue dots represent the first tenure of the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao leadership. The green dots represent the second tenure of the Hu and Wen leadership. And the brown dots represent the Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang leadership. As we can see, populism peaked in 2008, after which it declined, before a small rise in the first two years (2013 and 2014) of Xi Jinping’s tenure. In Figure 3, we plot our two measures of populism based on the different types of text side by side. The percentage of populist words is not directly comparable across the two types of text, because the document lengths and styles are quite different and because the CCTV news reports contain significantly more non-populist content. What matters in Figure 3 is the extent to which the trends in the use of populism are similar. Although our analyses are very preliminary at this stage, the trends over time in our two measures of populism are fairly similar, suggesting a certain degree of concurrent validity.

Our project is in its very early stages. So far, we have begun to evaluate the potential of using state-controlled news reports and public speeches to measure populism in a closed authoritarian regime (China) with automated text analysis. This is our first attempt to measure populism in China. As a result, there is much more work



Figure 1: Degree of Populism in the Annual Work Reports of the Chinese Government

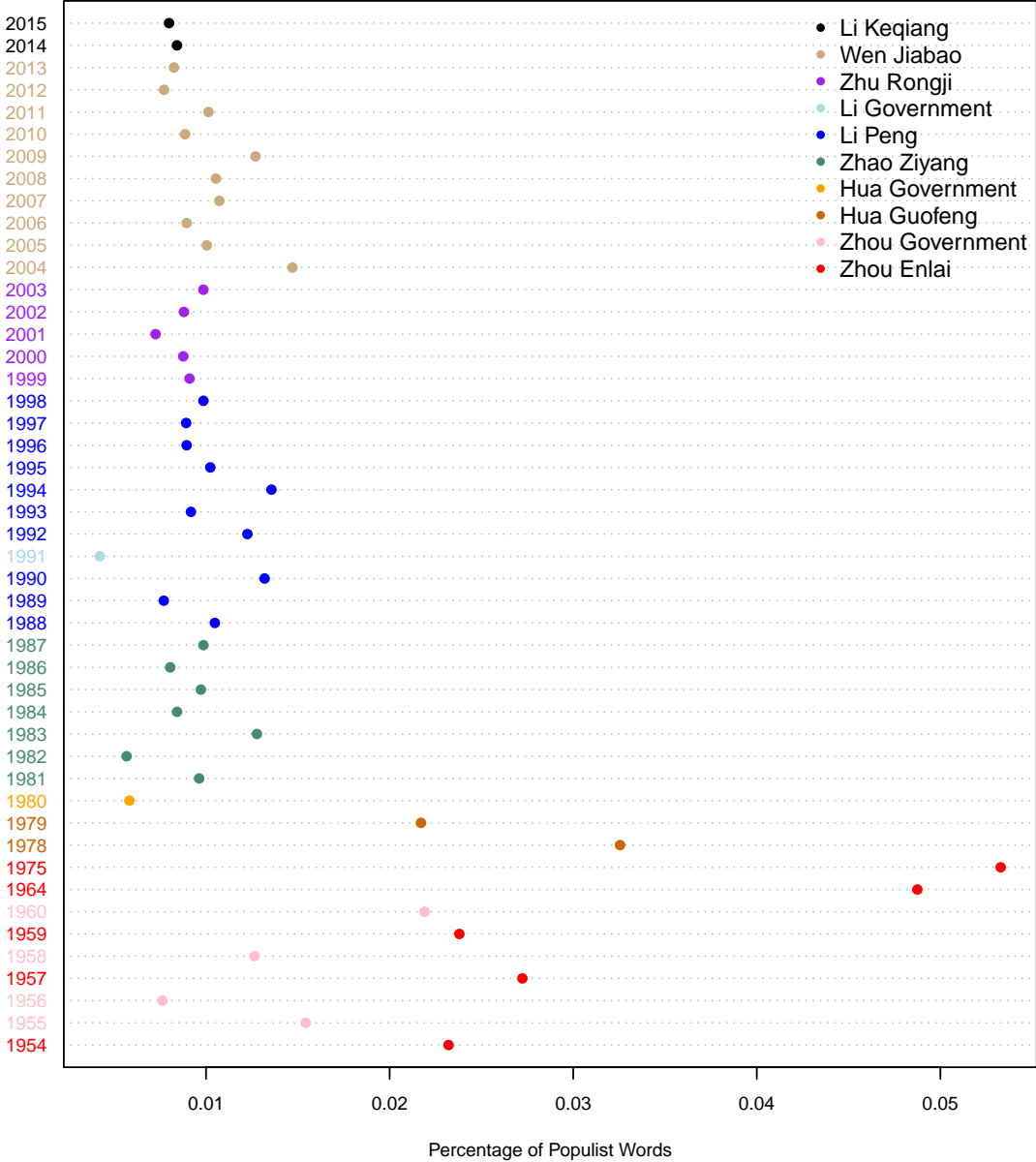


Figure 2: Degree of Populism in CCTV News Reports

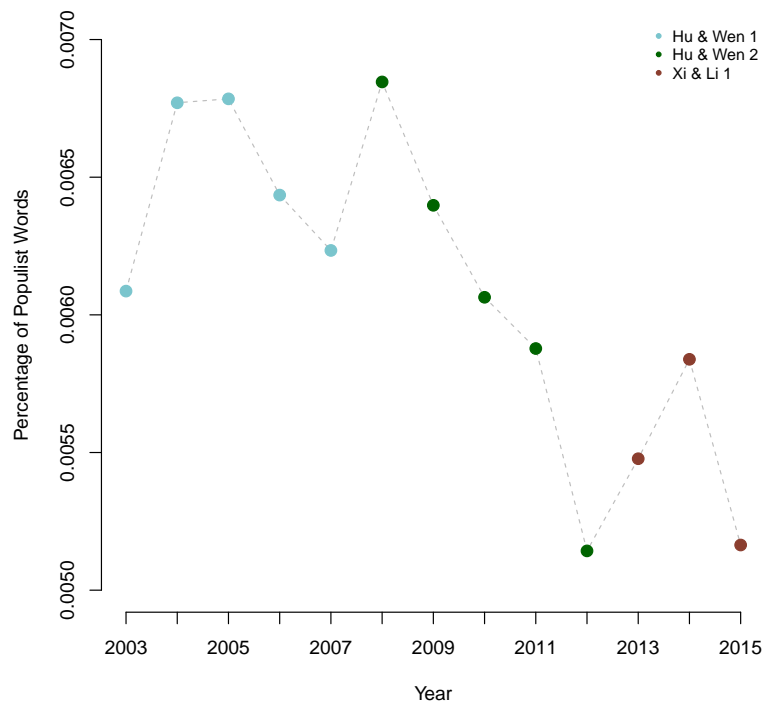
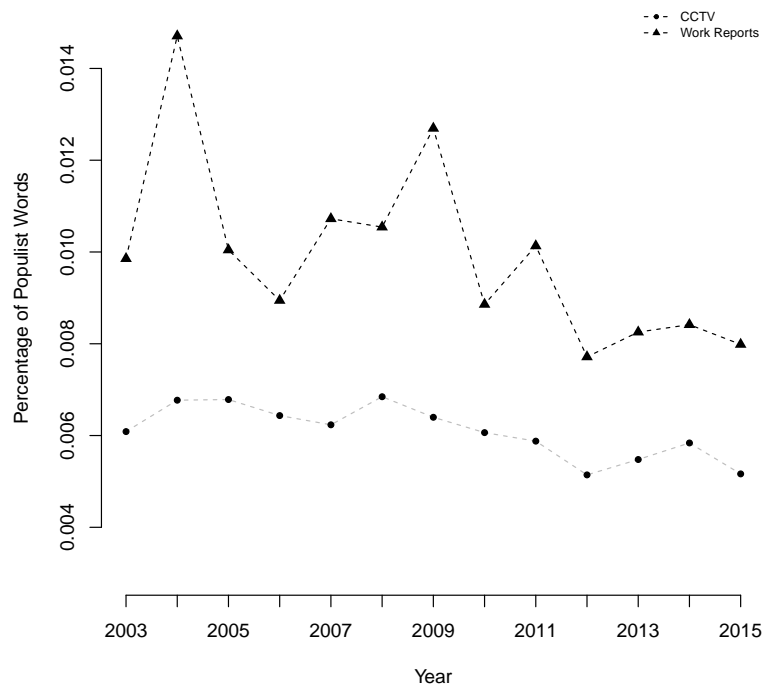


Figure 3: Degree of Populism in the Annual Work Reports of the Chinese Government and CCTV News Reports



that needs to be done to improve and evaluate the validity of our measure. One possible extension is to use an expert survey to help evaluate and build our populism dictionary. Our analyses so far suggest that the degree of populism in China varies both across time and leaders. In the future, we plan to examine whether our measure of populism varies in theoretically intuitive ways. Does the strategic use of populism, for example, demobilize opponents and contribute to the stability of authoritarian regimes?

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## What Went Wrong? Leftwing Populist Democratic Promises and Autocratic Practices

by [Carlos de la Torre](#)

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Hugo Chávez inaugurated a wave of leftwing populism in Latin America that also brought Evo Morales and Rafael Correa to the presidencies of Bolivia and Ecuador. These leaders promised to reform all national institutions, rejected neoliberalism, promoted Latin American integration and unity, and aimed to establish participatory, communal, and direct forms of democracy. They came to power as a result of profound crises of political representation and popular insurrections against neoliberal policies. They convened participatory constituent assemblies that drafted constitutions with expanded rights. Leftist scholars expected that their regimes would inaugurate a new dawn towards more democratic societies. Yet after their long terms in power, the sobering reality is that their governance eroded democracy. Chávez (and his successor Nicolás Maduro), Morales, and Correa concentrated power in the executive and subordinated all other branches of government, they used the state to colonize the public sphere by regulating the content of what the media could publish, they clashed with social movements and criminalized protest, they regulated NGOs, and they created parallel social movements. While their governments reduced poverty when the prices of oil and minerals reached record levels, they also increased dependency on natural resource extraction.

In order to explain what went wrong, scholars and activists developed structuralist arguments that focused on the dependence on natural resource extraction, institutional explanations of why populism in contexts of

weak institutions led to competitive authoritarianism, and arguments that focused on how the political logic of populism led to the erosion of democracy.

### *I. Dependency on Natural Resource Extraction*

Chávez, Morales, and Correa were elected on platforms to reverse neoliberal policies, and to reduce inequality by increasing social spending. They promised to move away from natural resource extraction. Morales and Correa even claimed that they were implementing sustainable models of development based on the Andean notions of *suma qamaña* and *sumak kawsay* to achieve "the good life."

Writing at the peak of Chávez's ascent, [Weyland \(2009, 146\)](#) wrote that "rather than tracing a new development model ('twenty-first century socialism'), the populist left led by Chávez is largely reviving the traditional rentier model." Oil and mineral rents allowed these governments to reject neoliberal orthodoxy, increase state spending, and create regional organizations free from U.S. hegemony, like the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). Despite their rhetoric of changing the economic matrix of natural resource exploitation and oil and mineral rents, these governments increased state spending without reducing their economic dependence on minerals. "Between 1998 and the present, the percentage of Venezuela's export earnings derived from oil increased from 68.7% to 96%" ([Hettland, 2016, 9](#)). In Bolivia, the exports of extractives rose from 41.8% in 2001 to 74% in 2009 ([Schilling-Vacaflor and Vollrath, 2012, 128](#)). In Ecuador, oil exports increased from 41% in 2002 to 58 percent in 2011, and by 2007 Correa had granted "2,8 million hectares to mining companies, half of which were for the extraction of metals" ([Martínez Novo, 2014, 118](#)).

Oil and mineral rents were used to strengthen the role of the state in the economy and society, and funded social programs and anti-poverty initiatives. World Bank figures indicated that in Venezuela the poverty rate fell from 55.4% of the population in 2002 to 28.5% in 2009. Poverty in Ecuador was reduced from 37.4% in 2006 to 29.4% in 2011. In Bolivia, it dropped from 60.4% in 2006 to 50.6% in 2009, with an even greater decrease in levels of extreme poverty ([de la Torre and Arnson, 2013, 28](#)). Yet prosperity lasted as long as the bonanza, and as Weyland anticipated, the rentier model proved to be unsustainable in the long run. Accord-



ing to the Economic Commission for Latin America, poverty in Venezuela jumped from 24% in 2012 to 32% in 2013. Another study concluded that 75% of Venezuelans were poor according to their income in 2015 (Arenas, 2016, 9).

Despite agreeing to consult indigenous communities regarding the extraction of natural resources from the territories of these groups in their national constitutions, these administrations autocratically expanded extractivist activities in indigenous territories. The result is that, similarly to neoliberal multiculturalism, which separated “permitted Indians” from “recalcitrant” ones, given limited symbolic distribution and targeted redistribution to the first and punishing the later, compliance with natural resource extraction determined the limits on the recognition of indigenous rights in these nations (Martínez Novo, 2014, 121). In Ecuador, indigenous protesters were criminalized as terrorists, and as anthropologist Martínez Novo argued, the permitted Indian of Correa’s citizens’ revolution is conceived of as a passive recipient of redistributive state policies. The extraction of natural resources also sets limits on indigenous rights in Bolivia. As Nancy Postero (2016, 412) puts it, “it is clear that the state sees indigenous control over natural resource extraction as a threat to its own power.”

## II. Weak Institutions and Competitive Authoritarianism

In well functioning democracies with strong parties and democratic institutions, elected populists are constrained by national political institutions and supranational organizations. (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016). Contrastingly, in these presidential systems, elected populists systematically attacked pluralism, privately owned media, and independent organizations during political crises, leading to what O’Donnell (2011) referred to as the slow death of democracy.

Levitsky and Loxton (2013) argued that populism pushed weak democracies into competitive authoritarianism for three reasons. Firstly, populists were outsiders with no experience of the process of parliamentary politics. Secondly, populists were elected with a mandate to reform existing political institutions, specifically the institutional framework of liberal democracy. Lastly, populist leaders confronted congresses, the judiciary, and other institutions that were controlled by political parties. In order to win elections, they set about skewing the electoral playing field in their fa-

vor. As incumbents, they had extraordinary advantages. They could use the state media, selectively silence the privately owned media, harass the opposition, control electoral tribunal boards and all instances of appeal, and use public funds to influence the electoral process. Although these presidents won elections while adhering to formal electoral procedures, the electoral process blatantly favored incumbents.

Once in power, Chávez, Maduro, Morales, and Correa turned to discriminatory legalism, understood as the use of formal legal authority in discretionary ways (Weyland, 2013, 23). In order to use laws discretionarily, populist presidents packed the courts and institutions of accountability with loyal followers. Control and regulation of the media by the state was at the center of the populist struggle for hegemony. Chávez led the path in enacting laws to control the privately owned media. In 2000, the Organic Law of Telecommunication allowed the government to suspend or revoke broadcasting concessions to private outlets when it was “convenient for the interest of the nation”. The Law of Social Responsibility of 2004 banned “the broadcasting of material that could promote hatred and violence” (Corrales, 2015, 39). These laws were ambiguous at best, and the government could interpret their content according to its interests. Correa’s government emulated Chávez. In 2013, the National Assembly, as congress is named in Ecuador, controlled by Correa’s party, approved a communication law that created a board tasked with monitoring and regulating the content of what the media could publish.

If the political is conceived as a struggle between friend and enemy, it is difficult to imagine adversaries who have legitimate institutional spaces.

To challenge the power of the private media, Chávez’s government shut down radio and television stations utilized by critics. The state became the main communicator, controlling 64% of television channels (Corrales, 2015, 41). In Bolivia, media concessions were equally divided between the state, the private sector, and popular and indigenous organizations. Here, too, Correa followed Chávez, using discriminatory legalism to close down critics’ radio and television stations. He

created a state media conglomerate that included the two most popular TV stations, as well as several radio stations and newspapers (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016, 231). In the hands of governments that did not differentiate their interests from those of the state, these outlets were put to the service of populist administrations.

Bolivarian presidents also enacted legislation that used ambiguous language to control and regulate the work of NGOs. In 2010, the Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination in Venezuela barred Non-Governmental Organizations that defended political rights or monitored the performances of public bodies from receiving international assistance (Corrales, 2015, 39). Three years later, in 2013, Correa enacted Executive Decree 16. This decree gave the government authority to sanction NGOs for deviating from their specified objectives, for engaging in politics, and for interfering in public policies in a way that contravenes internal and external security or disturbs public peace (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016, 229-230). Morales followed suit by passing legislation in 2013 to revoke an organization's permit to operate if it performs activities different from those listed in its statute, or if the organization's representative is criminally sanctioned for carrying out activities that "undermine security or public order" (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

In Venezuela and Ecuador, social movements were created from the top down to counteract the power of worker's unions, unionized teachers, students, and indigenous groups. Protest was criminalized in Venezuela and Ecuador. Union leaders and striking workers, even those that were supporting Chávez, were charged with terrorism (Iranzo, 2011, 28-31). Hundreds of peasant and indigenous activists were accused of terrorism and sabotage in Ecuador (Martínez Novo, 2014). Laws were used discretionally to arrest and harass leading figures of the opposition in the Bolivarian nations. The most notorious cases occurred under Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, when opposition leader Leopoldo López was imprisoned on charges of inciting violence.

### *III. The Logic of Populism: Constructing the People and its Enemies*

Laclau (2005) wrote that the logic of populism aims to create popular subjects who have antagonistic rela-

tionships with their rivals. He argued that the division of society into two antagonistic camps was required to rupture exclusionary institutional systems and create an alternative order. While Laclau saw populism as the only construction of the political and as the only path to rupture exclusionary administrative systems, I argue that his reliance on Carl Schmitt's theory of the political could justify authoritarianism. If the political is conceived as a struggle between friend and enemy, it is difficult to imagine adversaries who have legitimate institutional spaces. Enemies as in Schmitt's view might need to be manufactured and destroyed. By giving normative priority to populist rupture, Laclau embraced myths of the revolution as the overhaul of all existing institutions, and as the dream of total discontinuity with a given order. Positive reformist improvements are ruled out by normative eschatological constructions of revolutionary politics.

Populists used polarizing Manichaean discourses that pitted the people against the oligarchy. Hugo Chávez did not face political rivals, but the oligarchy defined as the enemies of the people, "those self-serving elites who work against the homeland" (Zúquete, 2008, 105). He called traditional politicians imbeciles, squalid ones, and little Yankees. He referred to the owners of the media as the "four horsemen of the Apocalypse" (López Maya and Panzarelli, 2013, 248). Similarly, Correa created a long list of enemies to his government, his people, and his nation. The list included traditional politicians, the owners of the privately owned media, journalists, the leadership of autonomous social movements, the "infantile left", and almost anybody who questioned his policies. Morales defined external and internal enemies. "At the external level, the foreign, especially the United States, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the transnationals, are the enemies of the nation and the sovereign. At the domestic level, the oligarchy, whites, and Western culture are the enemy, as opposed to the people, the indigenous, and specially the Andean." (Postero, 2010, 29).

Populists constructed political rivals as enemies but did not physically eliminate them and did not use mass terror and disappearances to create a homogeneous and uncorrupted national community. The foundation of populism lies in winning open and free elections that are considered to be the only expression of the popular will (Peruzzotti, 2013). Classical populists like Juan Perón fought against electoral fraud, increased the fran-

chise, and gave women the right to vote. Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa used ballots to displace political elites. Venezuelans voted in sixteen elections between 1999 and 2012, Bolivians in seven between 2006 and 2014, and Ecuadorians in six. Constantly traveling the election trail, these presidents ruled as if they were in permanent political campaigns. They used populist discourse and strategies to manufacture rivals into enemies of the people and the homeland, while transforming elections into plebiscites on their personas – the embodiment of the revolutionary future, pitted against the defenders of the old regime.

Even though the legitimacy of populist leaders is grounded in winning elections, they might have a hard time accepting that they could lose popular elections. If the people are imagined to always be right, and thus having one unified voice and will, it is “morally impossible” that they could vote for those constructed as the enemies of the people (Ochoa Espejo, 2015, 83). Under conditions of populist polarization, elections are represented as titanic battles between the enemies of the people that want to restore the past of oppression, and the leader of the people – the only guarantor able to fulfill the populist project of redemption.

“The people” as Laclau (2005) wrote, is a discursive construct, and a claim made in struggles between politicians, activists, and intellectuals. The people could be constructed as a diverse population, or as the people-as-one, as a single subject with one will. The people could face democratic rivals within institutional and normative settings, or antagonistic enemies that need to be eliminated. Constructing the people as plural, liberal and social democrats face democratic rivals that have legitimate institutional and normative spaces. Unlike liberals and social democrats, populists construct the people as a sacred entity with a single consciousness and a will that can be embodied in a Redeemer. Chávez claimed to be the embodiment of the Venezuelan people: “This is not about Hugo Chávez, this is about a people” (Zúquete, 2008, 100). Because his mission was to redeem his people from oppression, he could say, “I demand absolute loyalty to me. I am not an individual, I am the people” (Gómez Calcaño and Arenas, 2013, 20). Similarly, after winning his second presidential election in 2009, Correa asserted, “Ecuador voted for itself”.

The populist category of the people does not necessarily need to be imagined as one. Evo Morales did

not use exclusionary ethnic appeals; on the contrary he constructed the notion of the people as multiethnic and plural (Madrid, 2008). The Constitution of 2009 declared Bolivia as a plurinational and communitarian state. Yet at times Morales attempted to be the only voice of the people. When indigenous people from the lowlands challenged his policies of mineral extraction in 2011, they were depicted as manipulated by foreign NGOs and as not truly indigenous. Morales’s regime attempted to impose a hegemonic vision of indigeneity as loyalty to his government. But because of the power of social movements, Morales was not able to impose his vision of the people-as-one.

Chávez, Correa, and Morales did not see themselves as ordinary leaders elected for limited terms in office. On the contrary, they perceived themselves as leading the refoundation of their republics. Only cancer prevented Chávez from becoming Venezuela’s permanently elected president for life. Correa modified the constitution to allow for his permanent re-election with an amendment that prohibited him to run in the 2017 election. If Correa wishes, he could be a candidate in 2021 after his successor attempts to deal with a severe economic crisis. In February 2016, Morales narrowly lost a referendum to change the constitution that would have enabled him to run for another term in the election of 2019.

Constantly traveling the election trail, these presidents [Chávez, Morales, and Correa] ruled as if they were in permanent political campaigns. They used populist discourse and strategies to manufacture rivals into enemies of the people and the homeland, while transforming elections into plebiscites on their personas – the embodiment of the revolutionary future, pitted against the defenders of the old regime.

Keane (2009, 285) writes that “enforcing the distinction between holding and leaving office is a key indicator of whether or not a form of government can be considered democratic.” In a democracy the presidency is a depersonalized or disembodied role. To

hold an office is not to own that office. For populists, the presidency is a possession that should remain in their hands until the liberation of their people has been achieved. Yet populists claim legitimacy through winning elections that they could conceivably lose and thus are bound by electoral results (Cheresky, 2015). Populism, thus, grounds its legitimacy in the democratic precept of winning elections, and under the autocratic view of power as a possession of the liberator of the people.

#### IV. Conclusions

Left wing populists challenged neoliberal orthodoxy, committed to redistribute wealth, aimed to integrate Latin American nations, and mobilized the poor and the excluded. What went wrong with these democratizing promises, and why did populism lead to authoritarianism in Venezuela and Ecuador and, to a lesser extent, in Bolivia? Part of the answer is structural and has to do with the politics of natural resource extraction. Rentier states used fiscal resources discretionarily to secure a clientelist base of support, undermining autonomous citizenship. The need to increase natural resource extraction led to clashes with indigenous organizations and environmentalists, setting limits on their politics of inclusion and recognition. The populist promise to destroy existing institutions for the creation of a new order led to conflicts with all of the institutions of constituted power. Moreover, populists relied on discriminatory legalism to punish critics, concentrate power, and colonize the state and civil society. The Schmittian logic of populism manufactured enemies as a threat that had to be eradicated. Their language of love to the people and hatred to the oligarchy helped to create powerful adversarial and emotional, yet undemocratic, identities. Populists aimed to stay in power until fulfilling their missions to liberate their people, yet they used elections that, in principle, they could lose.

The undemocratic outcomes of populist promises should not lead us to conclude that the only route for avoiding authoritarianism lies in following the institutional designs of liberal democratic politics. In contrast to Laclau's argument, populism was not the only alternative to administration, and it was certainly not the only way to construct the political. Whereas Laclau was right in arguing that liberalism has been a mechanism for safeguarding property rights, liberalism is also "an indispensable bulwark against political despotism"

(Wolin, 2006, 251). Constitutionalism, the separation of powers, freedom of speech, assembly, and the press are necessary to the politics of participatory democracy. These features strengthen the public sphere and allow independent social movements to push for their democratizing demands. The historical evidence shows that revolutions made in the name of a unitary people end in authoritarianism. Rather than populist ruptures imagined as the overhaul of all institutions made in the name of a mythical people, as Kalyvas (2008, 229) suggested, we should shift "to a plurality of social movements, and voluntary political associations as the inescapable ground upon which popular sovereignty is reconstructed."

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## Islam and Populism In The Middle East

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This article addresses a specific variant of populism in the Middle East, which places the ‘exploited masses’ against the ‘rapacious elites’, by employing a religiously derived form of identity politics. Specifically, I discuss an Islamic populism that facilitates broad social alliances through the notion that individuals with potentially different preferences commonly belong to an *ummah* (community of believers) that has been historically marginalised by secular nationalist elites (and their foreign backers). The *ummah*, in this sense, substitutes for the idea of a homogenous ‘people’ that is more conventionally thought to be a major characteristic of populist politics. But like the ‘people’, the *ummah* is held together by a self-narrative that depicts it as a repository of moral virtue, thereby distinguishing members from elites that are portrayed as immoral as well as culturally distant (see Hadiz, 2016, 2014). And like ‘the people’, the symbols, imagery and terminologies associated with the *ummah* enable what might be called the “suspension of difference” – which is necessary for the mobilisation of support bases to transcend the reality that they are actually quite diverse – given the growing complexities of modern society.

### I. Egypt and Turkey

Here I focus on the cases of Egypt and Turkey, two important Muslim majority societies in the Middle East that have produced Islamic movements identified as models in different parts of the Muslim world. Even if the political genealogies of these movements have intersected, their recent political fortunes could scarcely be more different. While Turkish Islamists have drawn inspiration from luminaries of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (such as Hassan Al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb), more recently Egyptian Islamists have looked to the more successful model offered by the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey. For Turkish Islamic political activists, the Muslim Brotherhood once provided an example of how to build up bases of support within civil society in the face of state repression, gaining the loyalty of the rapidly growing urban poor. For newer Egyptian Islamic political activists, the AKP's successes provided an example, which they hoped to emulate, of how to obtain power through electoral means and adherence to the principles of a market

economy. In both cases this meant relegating the aim of establishing an Islamic state to the background.

Islamic populism...facilitates broad social alliances through the notion that individuals with potentially different preferences commonly belong to an *ummah* (community of believers) that has been historically marginalised by secular nationalist elites (and their foreign backers). The *ummah*, in this sense, substitutes for the idea of a homogenous 'people' that is more conventionally thought to be a major characteristic of populist politics.

Turkey's experience is characterised by the emergence and quick triumph of the AKP out of a longstanding Islamic political tradition that had been subject to secular nationalist state repression for large parts of the last century. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP has ruled Turkey for one and a half decades and has successfully undermined the Kemalist establishment's grip on the state and on the economy. Although it gained power democratically in 2002, recent developments have shown a growing authoritarian tendency as the AKP has faced challenges while strengthening its stranglehold on the institutions of the state.

The Egyptian experience, in contrast, shows an Islamic movement, also subject to decades of state repression and mainly under the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had long dominated the political opposition and civil society (Berman, 2003) but was unable to seize control of state power until the events of the Arab Spring. Triumphant in the country's first free electoral contests after the fall of Mubarak in 2011, its brief period of political ascendancy was to result in disastrous consequences. The organisation over-reached in attempting to wrest fuller control of still hostile institutions of the state, leading to the *felool* (remnants of the old regime) pushing back decisively in 2013. The proud Muslim Brotherhood is now in deep crisis, with almost all its top leadership incarcerated for the first time in history, leaving followers to regroup in underground activity, and, perhaps, increasingly to resort to violent

political strategies. This shows that Islamic populism's embrace of electoral politics and the market is contingent on the prospect of advancement through them; if this possibility is closed, then the political agenda could shift again to extra-electoral politics and to a variety of associated strategies.

There are, however, some commonalities between Egypt and Turkey in spite of these different outcomes. In both countries, the Islamic variant of populism evolved in conjunction with Cold War-era social conflicts, contested modernization projects, and processes of integration into the global economy as well as long histories of struggles with state authoritarian tendencies. Islamic populism also developed bases of support from a similar cross-section of societal elements: large segments of the urban poor, the educated middle class, and parts of the business community that have been historically marginalised by more powerful forces.

The varied social bases of Islamic populism are enabled by structural problems ingrained in the political economies of these countries, which have led to the proliferation of large numbers of new urban poor inhabiting vast urban slums as well as significant cohorts of educated middle class youths. Both categories of people had bought into the promises of modernity but have good reasons for discontent. For many educated youths, for example, the promise of social advancement may not be realized, as there is little prospect of meaningful employment in spite of the attainment of knowledge and skills as part of modernizing state projects (Hefner, 2005). Some individuals with higher education degrees boast conditions of life that are only marginally better than that of the poor around them (see Bayat, 2013, 210-212). With political liberalism only having a weak presence in both countries due to the legacies of Cold War-era conflicts, Islamic populism holds significant appeal to both the urban poor and sections of this educated urban middle class. Such is the case especially given that Islamic terminology regarding a virtuous society and economy has been grafted onto the rhetoric of modern social justice concerns (Tripp, 2006, 69).

In addition, in Turkey especially, and to a lesser extent in Egypt, culturally Muslim sections of the business class have been relatively peripheralized by state-business alliances centered on cronyistic relationships between the holders of power within the secular nationalist state and top businesspeople. Indeed, a ma-

major source of support for the AKP in Turkey is the so-called “Anatolian bourgeoisie” (Yavuz, 2006) that socially, economically and politically had been sidelined by large Istanbul-based business conglomerates that are an integral part of the Kemalist establishment. But in Egypt too, the tenuous accommodation of the Muslim Brotherhood by the Mubarak regime had allowed for significant large business elements within its support base. This was best represented by the prominence of such people as the now-jailed former number two of the organisation, Khairat El-Shater, as both a business and political figure in the early days of the Arab Spring.

Today, ‘pious’ elements of the business class in Turkey are well integrated into the social alliance that underpins the AKP’s Islamic populism, including through organisations like MUSIAD (Independent Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association). They can reflect on the fact that their economic fortunes have risen together with the political ascent of the AKP.<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that Erdogan’s break with the community led by former ally and Islamic cleric-in-exile in the USA, Fethullah Gulen, has caused fissures within this business support base due to the wealth of the Gulen community and its vast business networks organised through an association called TUSKON (Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists). In Egypt, tentative attempts to enhance the infrastructure of business support for the Muslim Brotherhood were dashed with the dramatic fall of the Morsi government,<sup>2</sup> along with any ambitions held by those nurtured within the organization’s vast networks of quickly displacing entrenched politically-connected businesses.

## II. Conceptualising Islamic Populism and its Evolution

Gidron and Bonikowski (2013), among others, have attempted to categorise existing approaches to populism in the theoretical literature. In their view, these approaches differ according to whether they primarily understand populism as ideology (e.g. Mudde, 2004); discursive style (e.g. Laclau, 2005); or political strategy (Madrid, 2008). Though with slightly different elucidations of their main features, I posit a way of categorising these approaches that is quite similar (Hadiz, 2016, 22-27). However, I suggest a fourth approach, used in only a small number of analyses, which looks at pop-

ulism from the point of view of its social bases and owes something to the broader traditions of class analysis. In basic terms, Ionescu and Gelner’s (1969) pioneering, though flawed, volume had ambitions of developing a comparative analysis of populist politics premised on its divergent social bases and evolution in different historical contexts. Moreover, Oxhorn’s (1998) more recent analysis of populism in Latin America is more clearly influenced by the concerns associated with class analysis. Here, he argues that populism embodies asymmetrical “multi-class coalitions” that gather the frustrations of lower classes built up under conditions of profound social inequalities, while noting that they are led by those who are only relatively marginalised within the social hierarchy, such as elements of the middle class.

The suggestion of a fourth category of approaches to the study of populism is made at this juncture to underscore the theoretical position taken in this article. As outlined above, it is largely premised on the idea of the ‘cross-class’ nature of Islamic populist social alliances in Egypt and in Turkey. The approach suggests that the deployment of Islamic identity, based on symbolism, imagery, and terminology associated with the Islamic religion, holds together the multiple class elements that underpin Islamic populism in these countries.

[In Turkey,] the demand for an Islamic state probably came to be seen as somewhat redundant, as Islamists gained power over the existing state through democratic means due to broad and coherently organized social bases of support.

The advantage of this approach is that it allows for analysis of the evolution and shaping of populist politics in relation to broader processes of social, political, and economic change. For example, it can help to account for shifts in the sorts of demands articulated by Islamic populism. For most of the 20th century, the purveyors of Islamic populism almost uniformly called for the establishment of an Islamic state. In their minds, not only would such a state be imbued with ‘morality’, given that those with demonstrated piety would lead, but it would

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Eyup Vural Aydin (MUSIAD general secretary) and Dr Hatice Karahan Piskin (MUSIAD deputy secretary general), Istanbul, 20 September 2011.

<sup>2</sup> These had included a plan to form a new business association.

actively nurture and protect an *ummah* that had been marginalized since the heyday of the age of Western colonial empires. Such a yearning was understandable given that the social base of Islamic populism was much narrower than it is now, being focused on communities of small traders and manufacturers – or what would have been once considered the world of the bazaar (Keddie and Richard, 2006, 26).<sup>3</sup> But this was prior to the social transformations experienced in large parts of the Muslim world, including Egypt and Turkey, as integration with the global economy continued apace, especially with the growing pressures exerted with the advent of neoliberalism since the latter part of the 20th century. Internally, the result of such integration was new transformations (and dislocations) within existing social structures, which, as described above, provided fertile ground for the expansion and diversification of the social bases of Islamic populism.

In Turkey, however, the old economic protectionist policies that were championed by the precursors of the AKP – particularly the late ‘grand old man’ of Turkish Islamic politics, Necmettin Erbakan – are no longer a major part of the demands articulated by the social agents of Islamic populism. In fact, the Erdogan government has been notable for its market oriented policies and enthusiasm for participation in the global economy. In many ways, shifting social bases of support could explain the changing outlook of Islamic populism in Turkey. The more outward-looking orientation is fundamentally a reflection of the modern sensibilities of its educated urban middle class supporters, who view the AKP as a vehicle to realize ambitions of upward social mobility that seemed frustrated by a close-knit and culturally exclusive Kemalist elite. It is also a reflection of the direct material interests of a largely export-oriented Anatolian bourgeoisie that views its success as dependent on aggressiveness on the world stage, making more inroads into markets not only in Europe, but also in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. For them, the economic structures established by Kemalism, which at one time relied on heavy state protection of the economy, had mainly benefitted the businesses of elites in Istanbul as well as those connected with a military that had often suppressed Islamic political tendencies.

Furthermore, the demand for an Islamic state prob-

ably came to be seen as somewhat redundant, as Islamists gained power over the existing state through democratic means due to broad and coherently organized social bases of support. In Turkey, the AKP does not even refer to itself as an Islamic party – much less one that strives for an Islamic state – calling itself instead a ‘conservative party that embodies the moral values associated with Islamic teachings.

Interestingly, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, whose highly influential ideologue in the 1950s and 1960s, Sayyid Qutb, had been uncompromising on the issue of an Islamic state, appeared to develop a fascination with the AKP experience. Thus, its electoral vehicle, the Freedom and Justice Party – defunct after the military ouster of the Morsi government – also proclaimed itself to be pro-democracy and pro-market and showed little overt interest in an Islamic state (El-Wardani, 2011). Such a change in outlook is also related to the shifting social bases of support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which encompass components of the educated middle class and a business class, though less developed than in Turkey, that had become quite significant. For these interests, it was worth relegating the old commitment to an Islamic state, if adherence to democracy and the market could undermine the cronyistic relationships that lay behind the power of the *felool*. It is to be expected, however, that the persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood in recent years, which has been more wide-ranging than that experienced under Mubarak, would resuscitate old misgivings about democratic politics and the idea that only an Islamic state could really side with the *ummah*.

### III. Outcomes and Prospects

When prospects emerge to productively benefit from the mechanisms of electoral politics and the market, the purveyors of Islamic populism are likely to envision a kind of state led by the righteous and who would protect the interests of the *ummah*, but without necessarily requiring the establishment of an overtly theocratic Islamic state. Representatives of Islamic populism in Turkey, and until recently Egypt, have therefore aspired toward a state and society that would see power and resources redistributed more ‘justly’, without the ideological component of being ‘anti-capitalism’ and ‘anti-democracy.’ Such a component has featured regularly, if

<sup>3</sup>Though the term comes out of the Persian experience, it has come to be utilized more broadly in the Middle East and the broader Islamic world.



sometimes ambiguously, in the thinking of generations of Islamic activists that responded to the experience of the capitalism introduced by a Western-dominated colonial world order. Democracy, which is often criticized for asserting the sovereignty of the laws of man over the laws of God, would be acceptable too because it potentially undermines the authority of the coercive apparatus of secular nationalist states that hounded Islamic political activists in the past. Furthermore, in this conception, charities and the delivery of social services to cater to the needs of the poor – rather than a radical redistribution of power and wealth – would be a key feature of a ‘just society.’ The concern for such a just society is seen in the thought of Rached Ghannouchi, for example, the Tunisian thinker and politician whose political genealogy also derives from the Muslim Brotherhood tradition. While voicing support for any market based economy, he also speaks favourably of the Scandinavian model of capitalism, though ironically, while his En Nahda party was battling Tunisian trade unionists for political dominance in the immediate years after the fall of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime.<sup>4</sup>

But the call for an Islamic state is far from a thing of the past. It lives in the Middle East where social, economic, and political circumstances make the advancement of an imagined homogenous *ummah* through electoral politics and the market highly improbable. It could be resuscitated too in places where the discourse on the Islamic state has become less a feature of politics in recent years. From that point of view, countries like Tunisia and perhaps Morocco are places to watch. In this way, Egypt provides an interesting counterpoint to Turkey, where democratic contestation has suited the AKP. This is so even if it has resorted to increasingly harsh methods in battling the so-called Kemalist ‘deep state’ and its rival in claiming to represent the interests of the *ummah*, the wealthy Gulen community.

When Mubarak fell from power and the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the most organized force in Egyptian civil society, the aim seemed to be to attain and maintain power through electoral politics and embracing the market. That this path has now led to utter failure could have longer-term consequences. In disarray and with their assets frozen, the organization’s business elements will not be able to steer the direction of the mainstream of Egyptian Islamic populism. Middle class activists who had honed their skills in electoral

politics, since the days when the Muslim Brotherhood was forced to put forward its candidates under the banners of other parties or as independents, are no doubt frustrated and have likely lost influence too. Interestingly, in its persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood, the El Sisi government has branded it a terrorist organisation, decades after it had actually abandoned violence as a strategy of struggle. Now locked out of state power and banned from activities in the sphere of civil society, the option of taking up violent struggle may become increasingly appealing to some of the organization’s rank and file. After all, there are many potential foot soldiers to be recruited into such a strategy, especially from cohorts of unemployed youths left disillusioned by the broken promises of modernity.

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<sup>4</sup>Interview, Tunis, 18 April 2013.

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## Siren Songs: Reflections on Contemporary Populism in Europe’s Old Democracies

by Elisabeth Ivarsflaten

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In summer 2016, we experienced an epic populist moment in one of the world’s oldest democracies: Brexit. As will be well known to readers of this newsletter, this British referendum on whether or not to leave the EU resulted in a small, but clear, majority in favor of leaving.

The referendum is one of the preferred democratic mechanisms of the right-wing populists I have studied during the past 15 years.<sup>1</sup> While seldom explicitly argued, the underlying reason why many populists like referenda is that they regard the will of the majority as normatively good. To populists, this view is a matter of doctrine or instinct. It is not an empirical question or a question to be debated. From the premise that the popular will is good, it follows that the purpose of institutions and leaders should be to find out what this will is and to put it into practice.

In this populist reasoning that underpins their support for referenda, all institutions should be regarded with suspicion. Representatives, too, even when elected, are from a populist point of view always in danger of corruption in so far as they become distanced from ‘the people.’ Distance from ‘the people’ can be geographical (think about how centers of power become negatively charged —Brussels, London, or Washington); social (way of life, ways of speaking, and dressing); or

economic (abuses of the public purse; personal wealth). If they become removed from ‘the people’, political representatives and others in power, have according to populist reasoning, parted with ‘the good’ side. They have become obstacles to, or even threats to, the realization of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Quite naturally, since populist reasoning is so suspicious of people in power, populist ideas have a tendency to be more appealing to those who do not have it. Furthermore, since populist movements are so critical of government and governing institutions, they tend to experience upswings in support in times of governing crises or political scandals. Most political scientists who study populism as an empirical phenomenon note its Janus-faced nature (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). On one side, populism can be a positive corrective that helps bring together the powerless against the powerful, thereby contributing to throwing the rascals out, or at least scaring them sufficiently to start needed reform. On the other hand, populism can be a set of deeply anti-systemic impulses that undermine the institutions that generate the compromises necessary for democracy to work, the necessary authority of representatives, and the value of pluralism. Most worryingly, populism clearly has an authoritarian streak in its ignorance of the very existence of a myriad of ways of living and thinking and the potential this generates for real conflict among ‘the people.’

Brexit has, at least in Europe, raised a discussion about whether or not an increase in referenda now is our predicament on a global, or at least regional, scale. In my view, we should not be surprised if in the future we see more initiatives mobilizing to ‘democratize’ the least democratic field of policy-making – foreign policy. The institutions most vulnerable to such possible calls for the ‘democratization of international politics’ will be not only the EU, but also international courts and international trade agreements. Whether we like it or not, there can be little doubt that there is a clear potential for populists to have a profound effect on future global developments through their insistence that institutions and representatives be more democratically accountable. It is not unlikely that populists will propose more referenda as their preferred solution.

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<sup>1</sup> For an updated analysis of the preferences for referenda among right-wing populist voters in Europe’s old democracies, see Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For a brand new effort to gather the knowledge, including from native language sources, about populist initiatives and their communication styles from across all of Europe, see Aalberg et al. (2016).

As much as it would be quaintly aristocratic, or even authoritarian, to fail to acknowledge that a populist corrective can be good for democracy, it is dangerous to ignore that it also can be a real threat to it. The versions of populism that rely on an inflexible notion of ‘the people’ and that legitimize turning against minority groups while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of the institutions protecting these minorities and the political representatives speaking up for them are rightly seen as threats to democracy.

I am often asked by journalists and policy-makers if I believe that the populist right movements in Europe, who mobilize opposition to immigration, are dangerous (Ivarsflaten, 2008). My answer is that it depends. It depends on the exclusion criteria they use to identify those who do not belong to ‘the people’, what they believe about these outsiders, and how they treat them. It depends on how vicious their antipathy to political representatives is. And it depends on how apocalyptic their ideas are of how elites and outsiders conspire to corrupt societies.

After years of empirical research on the demarcation line between legitimate and illegitimate actors on the far right,<sup>3</sup> I have come to the conclusion that this particular boundary of democracy is crucial for understanding political dynamics in Europe’s old democracies. Still, this boundary is a much more complicated and contentious matter than we all would have preferred. In particular, the relationship between populism and far right extremism is not at all clear: Some extremists are also populists, some populists are also extremists; but not all populists are extremist, and not all extremists are populists. So knowing that a movement is populist tells us something about what energizes it. But many crucial aspects of the political initiative are not conveyed by the “populism” label, including whether or not the populist initiative is truly democratic.

The right-wing populists that have put their mark on European politics during the past 30 or so years are all problematic in democratic terms, primarily because of how they exclude entire minority groups living within the state territory from the notion of ‘the people’ and how they actively contribute to scapegoating these groups for societal and economic problems that are not their fault. In the Brexit campaign, the Eastern

European labor immigrants were scapegoated not only for the government’s austerity policies and the limited UK welfare regime, but also for National Health Service lines and rises in housing prices. We have seen time and again in Europe that in the absence of convincing policy solutions to real economic and social problems, finding someone to blame (immigrants, the EU) carries the day.

Whether we like it or not, there can be little doubt that there is a clear potential for populists to have a profound effect on future global developments through their insistence that institutions and representatives be more democratically accountable. It is not unlikely that populists will propose more referenda as their preferred solution.

Their lack of convincing solutions to the very real problems that feed the current surge in support for populist initiatives in Europe, is the most fundamental weakness of the populist movements that we have seen so far in Europe. Most problems in Britain will not be solved by reducing immigration and not even by leaving the EU. The discrepancy between the scale of the problems raised and the solutions offered by the populists is a fundamental reason why populists in Europe have either changed or, most often, not lasted very long in government (Deschouwer, 2008). This does not mean that populist initiatives can be safely ignored. Brexit would not have happened in this way and at this time in the absence of the right-wing populist party, UKIP.

Comparative political scientists have a lot of important work ahead of us on the topic of populism. We need to vigilantly and continuously examine the ideas, the rhetoric or styles, the organizational structures, and the leaders and supporters of the populists movements in Europe and elsewhere (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). I hope that an over-arching contribution of this work will be to inform, analytically and empirically, the likely never-ending effort of distinguishing between the true proposals for improving democracy and the siren songs.

<sup>3</sup>This work examines how and why far right parties with reputation shields against accusations of racism have been more successful at large-scale mobilization than parties without them. See Blinder, Ford and Ivarsflaten (2013); Harteveldt and Ivarsflaten (Forthcoming).

Both may appear, at first glance, as populist.

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## The Performative Turn in the Comparative Study of Populism<sup>1</sup>

by Benjamin Moffitt  
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It's a good time for those of us who study populism. A small snapshot of the past few years: Trump. Duterte. Le Pen. SYRIZA. Brexit. The ascension of European right-wing populists into the mainstream. The wax and wane of the Latin American populist left. The emergence of new populist actors in Africa and the Asia-Pacific. On top of this, near-constant media hysteria

over populism in all of its variants. The confluence of these phenomena has meant that interest in populism is perhaps at an all-time high – not only in the press, but in the academic literature as well.

Indeed, there has been a glut of academic work on populism in recent years, which has grown increasingly sophisticated in at least two ways. The first is that the scope has expanded: comparativists working on populism are gradually throwing off the regionally-bound shackles of the literature and instead undertaking impressive cross-regional analyses that go beyond the usual European and Latin American cases. The second is that this expanded scope has contributed to a growing sophistication in the way that populism is conceptualized. Given that concept formation in comparative politics is (at its best) an iterative process, it is encouraging that these processes are informing one another in such a productive way.

In this short article, I argue that this shift has seen the emergence of a sustained challenge to hegemonic understandings of populism. Instead of seeing populism as an ideology or strategy (two of the most dominant approaches to populism in the comparative politics literature), a growing number of authors have shifted their focus towards how populism is done – that is, how it is performed or enacted. As such, I identify these approaches as part of a 'performative turn' in the comparative study of populism – a shift towards focusing on the political practice of populism.

The article sets out as follows. First, I discuss the features of the 'performative turn' in the literature on populism, explaining what I mean by this term, outlining the key authors within this approach, and exploring what unites them. Second, I present my own conception of populism as a 'political style' as an illustration of this shift in conceptualizing populism. Third, I explain the benefits of such a conceptual approach in the comparative political analysis of populism.

### *I. The Performative Turn in the Comparative Literature on Populism*

In my book, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Moffitt, 2016), I identify four central approaches to populism in the contemporary literature – seeing it as ideology, strategy,

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Pierre Ostiguy for his helpful comments on this piece.



discourse, or political logic. It is the first two that are arguably the most commonly utilized in the comparative literature on populism, particularly in the European and Latin American literatures respectively. Yet these approaches have increasingly come under fire from critics. The ideological approach has been criticized for its binarism, its methodological inconsistencies, and the complications of insisting that populism is a ‘thin’ ideology (Aslanidis, *Forthcoming*) – something that has been most damningly rebuked by the very author responsible for the concept of ‘thin ideologies’ (Freeden, 2016). The strategic approach, meanwhile, has been criticized for casting far too wide a net in terms of cases (Hawkins, 2010, 168), for not engaging with the key referent of ‘the people’, and for having limited ‘travelability’ outside the Latin American context (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014).

In response to some of these problems, an alternative approach has been developing and gaining ground in the comparative politics literature in recent years. As opposed to focusing on the ideational or strategic/organizational aspects of populism, this approach foregrounds populism’s performative dimension. Here, the stylistic, politico-cultural, and relational aspects of populism take precedence. The authors I identify as part of this approach may use different terms to describe populism – political style, communication style, or discourse amongst others – yet all are united by the view that populism is something that is done, embodied, and enacted.

As such, I argue that it makes sense to talk about a ‘performative turn’ in the comparative literature on populism. Why use this phrase? It echoes the wider talk of a performative turn in the social sciences in the 1990s, which forced a shift away from structure-based explanations of social phenomena towards making sense of symbolically mediated action in contemporary social and political analysis (Bachmann-Medick, 2016). The performative turn highlighted the importance of speech acts, the creation of meaning through performance, the role of audiences, actors, scripts, and so forth in the study of social science (Alexander, Giesen and Mast, 2006). In practical terms for the study of populism, this has meant a shift away from focusing strictly on ideational material (such as manifestoes or party material) or what Hawkins (2010, 39) has called “largely material aspects of politics, that is, coalitions, historical preconditions and policies” under the strategic ap-

proach, towards the actual performance of populism.

This performative focus is reflected in the different definitions of populism that are utilized by authors working under this broad approach in the comparative study of populism. A number of authors see populism as a discourse, whether utilizing an Essex School informed approach to the term (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Poblete, 2015) or a more traditional definition of discourse (Hawkins, 2010). Others have offered variations on the discursive approach, with Aslanidis (*Forthcoming*, 9) recently arguing that populism is actually a discursive frame that constructs “an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People”, while Bonikowski and Gidron (2016, 1593) see populism as a “discursive strategy that juxtaposes the virtuous populace with a corrupt elite and views the former as the sole legitimate source of political power.” Methodologically, Bonikowski and Gidron (2016, 1593) argue that it is best to focus on populist claim-making, contending that “populism is best operationalized as an attribute of political claims rather than a stable ideological property of political actors.”

Other authors have gone beyond the strictly discursive level, and have extended their definition to take in further performative aspects. Ostiguy’s (2009a; 2009b) definition of populism as the “flaunting of the low” in politics makes this clear: “High and low have to do with ways of relating to people; as such, they go beyond ‘discourses’ as mere words, and they include issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, ways of dressing, etc. As a way of relating to people, they also encompass the way of making decisions” (Ostiguy, 2009b, 5). As such, his definition combines politico-cultural aspects (such as personalistic, strong leadership and ‘immediacy’ in decision-making) with more performative social-cultural aspects (such as the use of local vernacular, demonstrative behaviour, ‘colorfulness’, and so forth). Beyond this, others have sought to include performative aspects of populism under the concept of populism as a ‘political style’ (de la Torre, 2010; Mondon, 2013; Knight, 1998) – a term which I elaborate upon below.

A central theoretical influence of many of these authors is the work of Laclau (2005). While comparative politics scholars have sometimes shunned Laclau’s work on populism for being “extremely abstract” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, 7), the authors operating un-

der the performative turn disagree. Instead, they have used Laclau's important insights into the roles of leadership, representation, affect, and the constituting processes of 'the people', and applied them to a wide array of cases. In doing so, they have critiqued a number of the problematic elements of Laclau's work (such as his insistence that populism is the logic of 'the political'), yet also worked with, built upon, and extended his theoretical framework in a way that has made it more accessible and easily applicable to the comparative study of populism.

Another important aspect to note about those associated with this turn is that their work is not focused on one particular region; rather, it is truly comparative. While ideological approaches to populism have mostly been applied to the European context (with some Latin American applications) and strategic approaches almost entirely to Latin America, these performative approaches have been applied to contexts as distinct as Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014), South Africa (Mbetse, 2015), the United States (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016), Argentina (Ostiguy, 2009a) and Australia (Moffitt, Forthcoming) amongst others. This speaks to the 'travelability' of the definitions used by these analysts. Unlike ideological and strategic approaches, which have the tendency to universalize regional subtypes of populism as representative of populism *in toto*, this approach takes account of a truly global set of cases.

## II. The Political Style Approach<sup>2</sup>

My own contribution to this performative turn has been to put forward an understanding of populism as a distinct 'political style' that appears across a number of political and cultural contexts. As laid out in Moffitt (2016), my aim in doing so was to build on the work of previous scholars who had used the term 'political style' to describe populism (Canovan, 1984, 1999; Kazin, 1998; Knight, 1998; Taguieff, 1995), but whose efforts had remained somewhat underdeveloped. Despite these authors' important conceptual contributions, Weyland's (2001, 12) critique that "political style is a broad not clearly delimited concept" still rang true, and as such, I sought to define the term more clearly for usage in comparative political analysis, with a particular focus on the performative and embodied dimensions of populism.

To do this, I first took a step back and examined the usage of the term 'political style' in the wider social scientific literature. Synthesizing the work of Ankersmit (1996, 2002), Hariman (1995), and Pels (2003) in the fields of political philosophy, rhetoric, and political sociology respectively, I defined political style as the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life. The aim here was to offer a social scientific category that took account of the discursive, rhetorical, and aesthetic aspects of political phenomena, framing them under the rubric of performance to take account of the intensely mediated (and mediatized) conditions of contemporary political life.

It makes sense to talk about a 'performative turn' in the comparative literature on populism....The three necessary and sufficient conditions of the populist style [are] ...[an] appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; 'bad manners'; and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat.

I then used the concept of political style to inductively identify the features of *populism as a political style*. This was done by examining twenty-eight cases of leaders from across the globe that are generally accepted as populists within the academic literature, and identifying what links them in terms of political style. The assumption here was that while there is wide disparity in the literature as to how to conceptualize populism, there is at least some (mild) consensus regarding the actual cases of actors that are usually called 'populist'. These leaders – all from the 1990s onwards, given the book's focus on contemporary populism – were drawn not only from the 'usual' regions of Europe and the Americas, but also from Africa and the Asia-Pacific, two regions that are usually marginalized in the comparative politics literature on populism given its "Atlantic bias" (Moffitt, 2015a). Populist leaders, rather than populist movements or parties, were focused on as they are most clearly the central performers and 'embodiments' of

<sup>2</sup>This section reproduces some elements from Chapter 3 of my book, *The Global Rise of Populism* (Moffitt, 2016).

populism as a distinct political style.

It is important to note that this was not an attempt to capture the very 'essence' of populism, nor is it an ideal-type. Rather, this approach allowed me to chart, as a baseline, what links a number of disparate cases of contemporary populism across the world and to construct a minimal concept (in line with a number of alternative approaches to populism) that outlines the three necessary and sufficient conditions of the populist style. These three features were found to be: an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; 'bad manners'; and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat. I outline each of these features below.

### *Appeal to "the People" versus "the Elite"*

'The people' is both the central audience of populists, as well as the subject that populists attempt to 'render-present' (Arditi, 2007) through their performance. 'The people' are also presented as the true holders of sovereignty. This appeal to 'the people' can take many forms, from invocations of 'the people', 'the mainstream', 'the heartland', or other related signifiers, to performative gestures meant to demonstrate populists' affinity with 'the people'.

Connected to the appeal to 'the people' is the dichotomous division of society between 'the people' and 'the elite' (or other related signifiers, such as 'the Establishment' or 'the system') – a divide that is acknowledged throughout the majority of contemporary definitions of populism. Populists may also target particular Others – such as asylum seekers, immigrant workers, or particular minority groups – as enemies of 'the people', but these Others will be linked to 'the elite'. For example, it might be argued that 'liberal elites' have allowed increased immigration, which has led to an influx of migrants, which has threatened 'the people's' livelihood. In such cases, it is 'the elite' or 'the Establishment' that is the source of crisis, breakdown, corruption, or dysfunctionality, as opposed to 'the people', who in turn have been 'let down', 'ripped off', 'fleeced', rendered powerless, or badly governed.

The appeal to 'the people' can also include claims against the 'political correctness' of the 'the elite', which are used to demonstrate that the populist 'really knows' what people are thinking as well as prove their outsider status. This often takes the form of the denial of expert

knowledge, and the championing of 'common sense' against the bureaucrats, technocrats, representatives, or 'guardians of our interests' (Saurette and Gunster, 2011). This was particularly evident in the language of Preston Manning's Reform Party of Canada, whose charter declared "we believe in the common sense of the common people" (Reform Party of Canada 1993, 2), as well as figures like Evo Morales or Pauline Hanson's valorisation of the wisdom of ordinary citizens.

### *'Bad Manners'*

A function of the appeal to 'the people' as the arbiters of 'common sense' and of the urgency of the matters that populist actors present is a coarsening of political rhetoric, and a disregard for 'appropriate' modes of acting in the political realm. Canovan (1999, 5) has identified this as the "tabloid style" of populism, while as mentioned earlier, Ostiguy (2009b) has identified this as the 'low' of a high-low axis that runs orthogonal to the traditional left-right axis. Such elements of this 'low' include the use of slang, swearing, political incorrectness, and being overly demonstrative and 'colourful', as opposed to the 'high' behaviors of rigidity, rationality, composure, and the use of technocratic language. An American example of this high-low distinction would be to compare the more refined manners of Hilary Clinton to the populist manners of Donald Trump. Clinton's manners are very much those of the establishment: gravitas, intelligence, and the display of sensitivity to the positions of others. Trump's manners are those of the 'outsider': directness, playfulness, bullying, coarse language, a disregard for hierarchy and tradition, ready resort to anecdotes as 'evidence', and a studied ignorance of that which does not interest him. What constitutes the 'bad manners' of populism may differ from one cultural context to another. As Ostiguy (2009b, 5) makes clear in his conceptualisation of populism, notions of what is considered 'high' or 'low' "link deeply with a society's history, existing group differences, identities, and resentments", meaning that the concrete specifics of such divisions are often culturally particular (and because of this specificity, have great political and cultural resonance), yet can nonetheless be compared across contexts as general traits.

### *The Performance of Crisis, Breakdown, or Threat*

Populism gets its impetus from the perception of crisis, breakdown, or threat (Taggart, 2000), and at the

same time aims to induce crisis through dramatisation and performance (Moffitt, 2015b). This in turn leads to the demand to act decisively and immediately. Crises are often related to the breakdown between citizens and their representatives, but can also be related to immigration, economic difficulties, perceived injustice, military threat, social change, or other issues (whether real or perceived). The effect of the evocation of emergency in this fashion is to radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate. For example, Hugo Chávez ramped up his populist style in the light of a perceived crisis regarding an imperialist conspiracy perpetrated by the United States, while Geert Wilders has posited the increasing Islamisation of the Netherlands as an imminent threat to social and economic well-being.

This performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat relates to a more general distrust of the complex machinery of modern governance and the complicated nature of policy solutions, which in contemporary settings often require consultations, reviews, reports, lengthy iterative design, and implementation. In contrast, populists favor short-term and swift action rather than the 'slow politics' (Saward, 2011) of negotiation and deliberation. Politics thus becomes highly instrumentalised and utilitarian. That which gets in the way of addressing 'the issue' or the 'crisis' has to be ignored, supplanted, or removed.

As such, taken together, populism can be defined as a political style that features an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners', and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat.

### III. Repercussions of Thinking about Populism as a Political Style

Thinking of populism in this way has four major repercussions for the comparative study of populism. The first is that it gives us a way to understand populism across not only regional contexts, but across ideological and organisational contexts as well. No matter whether populism is left or right, nationalist or transnational, grassroots or 'top-down', this approach allows us to compare populism as a general phenomenon.

The second is that the political style approach moves away from the dominant view of seeing populism as a binary category towards conceptualising it as a gradational concept. Binary approaches (such as the ideo-

logical and strategic approaches outlined above) place political actors on a simple populism vs. non-populism binary, whereas the political style approach acknowledges that political actors can be more or less populist at certain times. Put another way, while binary approaches see populism in a 'black-and-white' fashion, the political style approach accounts for the 'grey area' between the two extremes. Focusing on this grey area acknowledges that "the degree of populism that a given political actor employs may vary across contexts and over time" (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013, 9).

The third repercussion is that the approach allows us to make sense of populism's alleged lack of 'substance' or its 'emptiness', not by seeing it as somehow deficient or 'thin', but instead by taking its *stylistic characteristics* seriously. What is 'on the surface' when it comes to populism matters, and this approach gives style the analytical weight it deserves, without condemning populism to being something 'superficial' – it acknowledges that style and content are interrelated, and style can generate, affect, and interact with content in quite complex ways.

The fourth repercussion of this approach is that it offers up a new conceptual vocabulary for studying populism, focusing on performers, audiences, stages, and the *mise-en-scène* of the phenomenon. This vocabulary captures the inherent theatricality of contemporary populism, while also bringing the mechanisms of populist representation into focus. By conceptualising populism as a political style, the question is not only who 'the people' are, but also how the activity of interpellating or 'rendering-present' 'the people' actually occurs. The emphasis on performance shifts the focus from forms of representation to the actual mechanisms of representation – mediated enactments, televised performances, rallies, speeches, use of certain dress, vernacular, and so forth – and in doing so, stresses the very important (and sometimes forgotten) role of presentation in *re-presentation*.

While the 'performative turn' in the comparative study of populism has only just begun, its adherents offer a different perspective on the phenomenon of populism than other approaches – one that is arguably more sensitive to the mediated political landscape we find ourselves within today. The example provided in this short article – the notion of populism as a political style – is able to account for populism across contexts, opens



up possibilities for the gradational measurement of populist performance, takes the appeal of populist performance seriously, and offers up an intuitive and easily applicable conceptual language with which to analyse populism. In a context where populism is arguably becoming more 'mainstream', where populist/non-populist binaries no longer hold, and where populism has gone truly global, the performative turn offers a possible avenue for making sense of one of the most important phenomena in the comparative study of politics today.

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## How to Think – and How Not to Think – about Populism

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No U.S. election campaign in living memory has seen as many invocations of 'populism' as the one unfolding in 2015–2016. Both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have been labelled 'populists.' The term is regularly used as a synonym for 'anti-establishment,' irrespective, it seems, of any particular political ideas; content, as opposed to attitude, simply doesn't seem to matter. The term is thus associated with particular moods and emotions: populists are 'angry,' their voters are 'frustrated,' or suffer from 'resentment.' Similar claims are made about figures in Europe and their followers, such as Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders. The latter politicians are clearly on the right, yet, as with the Sanders phenomenon, left-wing insurgents in Europe are also labeled populists: SYRIZA in Greece, a left-wing alliance that came to power in January 2015, and Podemos in Spain, which shares with SYRIZA a fundamental opposition to Angela Merkel's austerity policies in response to the Eurocrisis. Both – especially Podemos – make a point of admitting that they feel inspired by what is commonly referred to as the 'pink tide' in Latin America – the success of populist leaders such as Rafael

Correa, Evo Morales, and, above all, Hugo Chávez. Yet do all these political actors actually have anything in common? If we hold with Hannah Arendt that political judgment is the capacity to draw proper distinctions, the widespread conflation of right and left when talking about populism should give us pause. Might the popularity of diagnosing all kinds of different phenomena as 'populism' be a failure of political judgment? But then, what is a proper understanding of populism? In this essay, I shall first review a number of, in my view, mistaken (but very common) approaches to comprehending populism, before suggesting a notion of populism as primarily a form anti-pluralism.

### I. How Not to Think about Populism

The notion of populism as somehow 'progressive' or 'grassroots' is largely an American phenomenon. In Europe, one finds a different historically conditioned preconception of populism. There, populism is connected, primarily by liberal commentators, with irresponsible policies or various forms of political pandering (with 'demagoguery' and 'populism' often used interchangeably). As the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (2003) once put it, populism is simple; democracy is complex.

Populism is also frequently identified with a particular class, especially the petty bourgeoisie and, until peasants and farmers disappeared from the European and the American political imaginations (ca. 1979, I'd say), those engaged in cultivating the land. This can seem like a sociologically robust theory (classes are constructs, of course, but they can be empirically specified in fairly precise ways). This approach usually comes with an additional set of criteria drawn from social psychology: those espousing populist claims publicly and, in particular, those casting ballots for populist parties, are said to be driven by 'fears' (of modernization, globalization, and so on) or 'resentment'.

Finally, there is a tendency among historians and social scientists – both in Europe and the U.S. – to say that populism is best specified by examining what parties and movements that at some point in the past have called themselves 'populists' have in common. One can then read the relevant features of the '-ism' in question off the self-descriptions of the relevant historical actors.

<sup>1</sup>This text is based on my book, *What is Populism?* (Müller, 2016c), and two essays, "Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy" (Müller, 2016b) and "Real citizens" (Müller, 2016a).

None of these perspectives really helps us in pinning down populism. First of all, when examining the quality of policies, it's hard to deny that some policies justified with reference to 'the people' really can turn out to have been irresponsible: those deciding on such policies did not think hard enough; they failed to gather all the relevant evidence; or, most plausibly, their knowledge of the likely long-term consequences should have made them refrain from policies with only short-term electoral benefits for themselves. One does not have to be a neoliberal technocrat to judge some policies plainly irrational. Think of Hugo Chávez's hapless successor as president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, who sought to fight inflation by sending soldiers into electronics stores and having them put stickers with lower prices on products. Or think of the French Front National, which in the 1970s and 1980s put up posters saying "Two Million Unemployed is Two Million Immigrants Too Many!" The equation was so simple that everyone could solve it and seemingly figure out with *bon sens* what the correct policy solution had to be.

It is rather peculiar to conflate the content of a set of political beliefs (populism is, after all, an 'ism') with the socio-economic positions and the psychological states of its supporters. This is like saying that the best way to understand Social Democracy is to re-describe its voters as workers envious of rich people.

Still, we cannot generate a criterion for what constitutes populism this way. For in most areas of public life, there simply is no absolutely clear, uncontested line between responsibility and irresponsibility. Often enough, charges of irresponsibility are themselves highly partisan (and the irresponsible policies most frequently denounced almost always benefit the worst-off). In any case, making a political debate a matter of 'responsible' versus 'irresponsible' poses the question of 'responsible according to which values or larger commitments?' Free trade agreements – to take an obvious example – can be responsible in light of a commitment to maximizing overall GDP and yet have distributional consequences that one might find unacceptable in light

of other values. The debate then has to be about the value commitments of a society as a whole, or perhaps about the different income distribution that follows from different economic theories. Setting up a distinction between populism and responsible policies only obscures the real issues at stake. It can also be an all-too-convenient way to discredit criticism of certain policies.

Focusing on particular socio-economic groups as the main supporters of populism is empirically dubious, as a number of studies have shown. Less obviously, such an argument often results from a largely discredited set of assumptions from modernization theory. It is true that in many cases voters who support what might initially be called populist parties share a certain income and educational profile: especially in Europe, those who vote for what are commonly referred to as right-wing populist parties make less and are less educated. (They are also overwhelmingly male—a finding that holds for the U.S. as well, but not for Latin America.)<sup>2</sup> Yet this picture is by no means always true. As the German social scientist Karin Priester has shown, economically successful citizens often adopt an essentially Social Darwinist attitude and justify their support for right-wing parties by asking, in effect, "I have made it – why can't they?" (Think of the Tea Party placard demanding "Redistribute my Work Ethic!") (Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, 2011). Not least, in some countries such as France and Austria, populist parties have become so large that they effectively resemble 'catch-all parties': they attract a large number of workers, but their voters also come from many other walks of life.

Surveys have shown that one's personal socio-economic situation and support for right-wing populist parties often do not correlate at all, because the latter is based on a much more general assessment of the situation of one's country (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). It would be misleading to reduce perceptions of national decline or danger ('elites are robbing us of our own country!') to personal fears or 'status anxiety'. Many supporters of populist parties actually pride themselves on doing their own thinking (even their own research) about the political situation and deny that their stances are just about them or driven merely by emotions (Kemmers, van der Waal and Aupers, 2016).

However, even if one wants to hold on to the no-

<sup>2</sup>On this 'gender gap' see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013).

tion that particular emotions consistently characterize voters who want to 'Make America Great Again,' it is rather peculiar to conflate the content of a set of political beliefs (populism is, after all, an 'ism') with the socio-economic positions and the psychological states of its supporters. This is like saying that the best way to understand Social Democracy is to re-describe its voters as workers envious of rich people. The profile of supporters of populism obviously matters in how we think about the phenomenon. But it is not just patronizing to explain the entire phenomenon as an inarticulate political expression on the part of the supposed 'losers in the process of modernization'. It is also not really an explanation.

Then why do so many of us keep resorting to it? Because consciously or unconsciously, we continue to draw on a set of assumptions derived from modernization theory that had its heyday in the 1950s and '60s. This is true even of many political theorists and social scientists who, if asked, would say they consider modernization theory to be thoroughly discredited. It was liberal intellectuals like Daniel Bell, Edward Shils, and Seymour Martin Lipset (all heirs of Max Weber) who in the course of the 1950s began to describe what they considered to be 'populism' as a helpless articulation of anxieties and anger by those longing for a simpler, 'pre-modern' life. Lipset, for instance, claimed that populism was attractive for "the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, . . . the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian personalities" (Lipset, 1963). The immediate targets of these social theorists were McCarthyism and the John Birch Society – but their diagnosis often extended to the original American populist revolt of the late nineteenth century. Victor C. Ferkiss, for instance, saw the original followers of the Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party as nothing less than the precursors of a distinct American variety of fascism (Ferkiss, 1957). This thesis was not to remain uncontested – but the background assumptions remain present among many social and political commentators today.

Finally, there is the thought that populism must have something to do with those who first called themselves populists. Think of the Russian *narodniki* in the late nineteenth century and their ideology of *Narodnichestvo*, which is usually translated as 'populism'. The *narodniki* were intellectuals who idealized the Russian

peasants and saw the village commune as a political model for the country as a whole. They also advocated 'going to the people' for political advice and guidance. (Like many urban intellectuals, they found that 'the people' neither welcomed them in the ways they had hoped nor recognized the political prescriptions deduced from their supposedly 'pure ways of life' by intellectuals).

For many observers, there simply has to be a reason why something called 'populism' emerged simultaneously in Russia and the United States towards the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that both movements had something to do with farmers and peasants gave rise to the notion – prevalent at least until the 1970s – that populism had a close connection to agrarianism or that it was necessarily a revolt of reactionary, economically backwards groups in rapidly modernizing societies.

There is no single political will, let alone a single political opinion, in a modern, complex, pluralist – in short, enormously messy – democracy. Populists put words into the mouth of what is, after all, their own creation: the fiction of the homogeneous, always righteous people.

While that association is largely lost today, the origins of populism in the U.S. in particular still suggests to many observers that populism must at least on some level be 'popular' in the sense of favoring the least advantaged or bringing the excluded into politics – a sense that is reinforced by a glance at Latin America, where the advocates of populism have always stressed its inclusionary and emancipatory character in what remains the economically most unequal continent on the globe.

To be sure, one cannot simply by fiat ban such associations: historical languages are what they are. But political and social theory also cannot simply root itself in one particular historical experience – with, for example, every form of populism presumed to fit the template of the American People's Party (Dubiel, 1986). We have to allow for the possibility that a plausible understanding of populism will in fact end up excluding historical movements and actors who explicitly called themselves



populists. With very few exceptions, historians (or political theorists, to the extent that they care about such historical phenomena) would not argue that a proper understanding of socialism needs to make room for National Socialism just because the Nazis called themselves socialists. But then to decide which historical experience really fits a particular ‘-ism’, we must of course have a theory of that particular ‘-ism’. So what is populism?

## *II. How to Think about Populism*

We can only pin down populism by properly paying attention to what populist leaders themselves are saying. The crucial point is this: it’s not enough to be critical of elites in order to be classified as a populist. Otherwise, anyone finding fault with the status quo in, for instance, Greece, Italy, or the US would by definition be a populist – and, whatever else one thinks about, for instance, Sanders, SYRIZA, or Beppe Grillo’s insurgent Five Star Movement in Italy, it’s hard to deny that their attacks on the status quo can often be justified. Also, virtually every presidential candidate in the US would be a populist, if criticism of existing elites is all there is to the phenomenon: everyone, after all, claims to run ‘against Washington’.

When in opposition, populists for sure criticize elites. But there is also always something else they do – and that is the tell-tale sign of populism: they claim that they, and only they, represent the people. Think, for instance, of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressing his critics in the country: “We are the people. Who are you?” Of course, he knew that they were Turks, too. The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly moral. Populists’ political competitors and critics are inevitably condemned as part of the immoral, corrupt elite, or so populists say when running for office; once in government, they will not recognize anything like a legitimate opposition. The populist logic also implies that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people at all: there are American citizens, and then there are what George C. Wallace always called ‘real Americans’ (white, God-fearing, hard-working, gun-owning, and so on).

Think of Nigel Farage celebrating the Brexit vote by claiming that it had been a “victory for real people” (thus making the 48 per cent of the British electorate

who had opposed taking the UK out of the European Union somehow less than real – or, rather, questioning their status as members of the political community). Or consider a deeply revealing remark by Donald Trump that went virtually unnoticed, given the frequency with which the New York billionaire has made scandalous statements. At a campaign rally in May, Trump announced that “The only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything.”

The conventional wisdom that populists want to bring politics closer to the people or even clamor for direct democracy could not be more mistaken. They do say that they are the only ones who care for the ‘people’s will’, but they are hardly interested in an open-ended, bottom-up process where citizens debate policy issues. What populists take to be the people’s real will is derived from what they stipulate to be the real people – and not all citizens will automatically be part of that real people. What’s worse, ‘the people’s will’, which populists claim they will just faithfully execute – in that sense denying their own role as leaders and also any real political responsibility – is a fiction. There is no single political will, let alone a single political opinion, in a modern, complex, pluralist – in short, enormously messy – democracy. Populists put words into the mouth of what is, after all, their own creation: the fiction of the homogeneous, always righteous people. And then they say, like Trump, “I am your voice.” Or think again of Erdoğan claiming this July: “What do my people want? The death penalty!” Never mind that he had asked for its reintroduction first.

This split between the actual citizenry and ‘the real people’ explains why populists so frequently question election outcomes, when they aren’t the winners (which, after all, seems to falsify their claim to be the only legitimate representative of the people): populists only lose, if ‘the silent majority’ – shorthand for ‘the real people’ – has not had a chance to speak, or, even worse, has been prevented from expressing itself. Hence the frequent invocation of conspiracy theories by populists: something going on behind the scenes has to account for the fact that corrupt elites are still keeping the people down. As long as Trump had not been assured of the Republican nomination, he kept alluding to fraud, and with a defeat in the November election looming, he is already trying to discredit Clinton’s victory. Recently, the right-wing populist Freedom Party in Austria

successfully contested the outcome of the presidential election in May. Its candidate, Norbert Hofer, had kept confronting his rival, the economics professor Alexander Van der Bellen, with the claim: “You have the *haute volée* behind you; I have the people with me.” What clearly follows: if the people’s politician doesn’t win, there must be something wrong with the system.

Populist politicians are not like other politicians in a democracy. But the difference is not that they are somehow closer to the ‘masses’, or that they want direct, as opposed to representative, democracy. Populists are fine with the idea of representation, as long as they get to represent what they consider to be the real people. This is why one cannot score points against figures like Geert Wilders (who has literally spent his entire adult life in the Dutch parliament) or Trump by pointing out that they themselves are not exactly ordinary people: their claim is that they will represent the real people faithfully, not that they are like everyone else. The crucial difference is that populists deny, or wish away, the pluralism of contemporary societies. When they say equality, they mean sameness, which is to say: conforming to some ideal of Middle America, Little England, or whatever a symbolic representation of real peoplehood comes down to for them.

We need to understand that populism is not just anti-elitism – it is a form of anti-pluralism, based on an exclusionary identity politics. Populists implicitly promise that homogeneity will solve social and political problems and that the world will be set to rights if the representatives of the real people are in power. This is not a helpful ‘corrective’ to a liberal democracy that might somehow have become too remote from ordinary folks, as some sympathetic scholars of populism have argued. The fantasy of the fully homogeneous people is a danger for democracy itself. For, as Jürgen Habermas put succinctly, ‘the people’ can only appear in the plural. Equality is a democratic value; homogeneity – based on some fantasy of the pure people – is not.

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## Two Generations of African Populism: Applying a Cumulative Conceptual Approach

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Most studies on populism have focused on Europe, North America, and Latin America (e.g. Hawkins, 2009; Kazin, 1998; Lowndes, 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Roberts, 2006; Taggart, 1995). The African context, however, poses an especially hard case for conceptualizing the core essence of populism given the longstanding absence of well-institutionalized political parties and the attendant prominence of personalistic rule. Based on certain conceptualizations, an expectation of populism could be overdetermined. In fact, the populist modifier has described many disparate behaviors of African politicians, including electoral handouts, xenophobic discourse, homophobic rhetoric, promises of valence goods, and declarations of economic nationalization. Consequently, there is substantial confusion about what phenomenon is actually being catalogued

and how well it corresponds with its manifestations in other areas of the world.

As observed by [Gidron and Bonikowski \(2013\)](#), three main conceptual approaches exist with respect to identifying populism. One involves populism as a mobilization strategy involving personalistic leaders forging plebscitarian ties with a diverse and unorganized constituency for opportunistic purposes (see [Weyland, 2001](#)). Another approach stresses the use of discourse and performances ([Hawkins, 2009](#); [Ostiguy, 2009](#)). [Ostiguy \(2009\)](#) particularly emphasizes performances that emphasize a 'flaunting of the low' involving the use of popular and sometimes vulgar language and dramatic, colorful, and even politically incorrect acts that grab the public's attention. A third approach focuses on the importance of ideology (see [Mudde, 2004](#)), whereby populism is characterized by a sharp delineation between the corrupt elite, the pure people, and the general will.

This essay suggests that a cumulative conceptual approach (see [Gerring, 2001](#)), which combines these three approaches, offers the most analytical leverage in discerning African cases of populism over time than any single approach on its own. Specifically, the combined presence of personalistic leadership dependent on direct ties to the poor bolstered by socio-cultural performances and an inclusive ideology of the people versus the elite helps delimit cases of African populism, both historically and more recently. As in Latin America, and in contrast to its European and North American manifestations, populism in Africa has revolved around leaders rather than political parties, and relies more on an inclusionary ideology with regards to social policy, incorporating marginalized constituencies, and being anti-establishment rather than pro-nativist.<sup>1</sup>

### *1. First Generation African Populism*

A first generation of African populism emerged as a consequence of coups in the 1980s that were justified by military leaders as the only means of ousting corrupt incumbents who had exacerbated macroeconomic mismanagement and undermined citizens' welfare (see [Chazan et al., 1999](#)). The quintessential example was Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, who ousted Ghana's civilian government in 1981 through a popular coup. He espoused the need for a 'social revolution', entreating

Ghanaians to eliminate exploitation and claiming that his goal was to provide "a chance for the people...to be part of the decision-making process" ([Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi, 1989, 222](#)). He often toured the country in his military fatigues, delivering impromptu speeches that emphasized that he was not only a man of the people but also above the people, epitomized by his nickname of "Junior Jesus" (see [Chazan et al., 1999](#)). He established the Provincial National Defense Council (PNDC), as well as lower level institutions, to facilitate the voice of the people and provide 'popular justice', including People's and Workers' Defense Committees.

The combined presence of personalistic leadership dependent on direct ties to the poor bolstered by socio-cultural performances and an inclusive ideology of the people versus the elite helps delimit cases of African populism, both historically and more recently.

In neighboring Burkina Faso, known as Upper Volta at the time, a charismatic army officer from the countryside, Thomas Sankara, overthrew the civilian government in 1983. Sankara justified this as a revolution intended "to take power out of the hands of our national bourgeoisie and their imperialist allies and put it in the hands of the people" ([Martin, 1987, 78](#)). To implement his peoples' revolution, he established neighborhood *Comités de Défense de la Révolution* (CDR) that were tied to a national political organ, comprised of key elements of the military, known as the *Conseil National de la Révolution* (CNR). To dramatically demonstrate his distaste for profligacy, he gave away the state's fleet of Mercedes cars in a national lottery and encouraged civil servants to accept salary reductions in order to re-orient investment to the rural masses ([Martin, 1987](#)).

Yoweri Museveni in Uganda likewise accessed power by mounting a guerrilla campaign against the corrupt regime of Milton Obote in 1986, taking over as president and leader of a movement he founded called the National Resistance Movement (NRM). He promised a clean break from the past and appealed to the common man by emphasizing his own peasant background and through "a frequent use of metaphors and

<sup>1</sup> [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser \(2013\)](#) usefully disaggregate the ideological approach into exclusionary and inclusionary types.

images that are near to people's lives, or proverbs and short phrases taken from vernacular languages" (Carbone, 2005, 5-6). In addition to these performances, Museveni also set up a series of five-tiered 'resistance councils', ostensibly to encourage popular participation at the local level, but implicitly to further entrench the NRM's reach at the grassroots level (see Tripp, 2010).

The common characteristics of these first generation populists were fivefold. First, they attempted to establish direct ties with their populations through new, local level, avowedly participatory structures. Secondly, these leaders grounded their populism in an anti-establishment discourse and, by portraying their usurpation of power as peoples' revolutions, implied that they were acting in the interests of the 'general will' and against the 'enemy of the people'. The latter encompassed not only the political elite but also former colonial powers. Thirdly, they pursued similar economic strategies focused on heavy state intervention, import substitution industrialization (ISI), and rural collectivization schemes. Fourthly, they all aimed for a broader societal transformation predicated on modernization and equality, often attacking chiefly privilege in rural areas. Lastly, their populism was not easily compatible with genuine democracy. Both Rawlings and Museveni banned other political parties, while Sankara's increasingly iron grip on the CNR alienated other members of the military corps, particularly his deputy, Blaise Compaoré. His populist experiment was cut short when he was assassinated in 1987, allegedly on Compaoré's orders.

## *II. Characteristics of Contemporary Populism*

After a decade of democratic experiments in the 1990s, populism in Africa has re-emerged from the 2000s onwards. Key exemplars include the late Michael Sata of Zambia, Julius Malema of South Africa, Raila Odinga of Kenya, and Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal. Both supply- and demand-side factors contributed to these dynamics. On the supply-side, these countries have experienced critical junctures in the party system. As Roberts (2015, 145-146) suggests, populism is more likely when party systems are highly fluid and leave voters unattached, or when parties have been so entrenched that they appear to be detached from popular concerns. The former dynamics were key in Zambia and Kenya, while the latter played an important role in Senegal and South Africa.

Africa's changing economic and demographic landscape provide the 'demand-side' grievances upon which savvy politicians can capitalize. As the world's fastest urbanizing region, African cities are major sites of inequality, as gleaming shopping malls and new middle class housing estates abut informal markets and pockets of slums. These challenges are augmented by Africa's persistent high unemployment and the world's most prominent youth bulge. In many of the region's countries, the youth are more likely to be susceptible to ambitious promises by politicians to improve their lives in a very short time span (see Resnick and Casale, 2014). Consequently, a common feature of contemporary populist strategies is a concentration on mobilizing urbanites, and particularly the urban poor. Consisting of heterogeneous, unorganized masses, this constituency is often disillusioned with slum housing, unemployment, poor service delivery, and often frequent harassment by the ruling class. Therefore, unlike in the 1980s, when populist regimes were particularly concerned about the exclusion of the peasant class, more contemporary populist strategies have been centered on urban areas.

Thus, the components of contemporary populism witnessed in Africa consist of four key elements: (a) unmediated ties with the urban poor that are facilitated by charisma and socio-cultural performances; (b) anti-elitism that often delineates between 'the people' and 'the establishment'; (c) an economically eclectic message centered on promoting employment and services for the urban poor; and (d) combining populist appeals to the urban poor with ascriptive appeals to a select but sizeable group of rural voters (see Resnick, 2014). These dynamics are elaborated in more detail below.

### *Unmediated Ties*

The lack of non-mediated rapport between a leader and his/her followers, who singularly claims to represent 'the people', closely reflects Weyland's (2001) definition of populism as a political strategy. These unmediated ties are facilitated by a potent mixture of charismatic leadership with the socio-cultural practices that Ostiguy (2009) stresses. At a basic level, this is illustrated by the use of well-known nicknames that aim to endear these politicians to their constituencies. These range from the paternalist Gorgui ('old man') for Wade, the biting and acerbic 'King Cobra' for Sata, the ambiguous Agwambo ('the mysterious one') for Odinga, and the childhood moniker of Juju for Malema. More



specifically, each of these leaders has engaged in media-grabbing socio-cultural performances and antics. One example includes Sata's majestic arrival to the High Court in 2008 to register for the elections being tugged in a speedboat because a boat was the PF's campaign symbol. Likewise, instead of the suits favored by the previously ruling Parti Socialiste (PS), Wade wore the traditional Senegalese boubou in his 2000 campaign while his security guards favored blue jeans rather than the typical professional garb of civil servants. The aim was to celebrate and honor Senegal's informal sector workers who typically don denim (see [Foucher, 2007](#)). Malema has often been the most fanatical in the use of costume, making the trademark of his party, the Economic Freedom Front (EFF), a red beret, and aiming to show an affinity with the working class. When he and 24 other EFF MPs who were elected in the May 2014 elections arrived for their first day of Parliament, they dressed up as miners and domestic workers to indicate their refusal to conform to the conventional Western dress code of suit and tie.

As in other regions, the feasibility of combining populist with ascriptive appeals is due to the emphasis on marginalization. Feelings of exclusion and grievances over inequality among the urban poor have been complemented by perceptions among certain ethnic and religious groups of having been sidelined in the political sphere.

Other particular performance tactics relate to language. The ability to speak in the vernacular, rather than give speeches that were translated from either French or English, was an important distinction for both Wade's and Sata's campaigns vis-à-vis those of their competitors. Sata's quick wit made him extremely popular. For instance, when a competitor, Hakainde Hichilema, claimed that he was the "best man" to be president, Sata retorted by asking "then who is the groom?" ([Sishuwa, 2011, 65](#)). Wade was also famous for his oratory skills, which sometimes involved drawing on well-known fables to make parallels between literary villains and the incompetence of the PS ([Breuillac, 2000](#)). Malema's one liners enlivened South Africa's parliamentary proceedings with comments such as "[President Zuma] is a

man of tradition, a tradition of empty promises" (cited in [Findlay, 2015](#)).

Yet, language by some of these politicians and their supporters could also demonstrate violent undertones that truly emphasize their 'flaunting of the low'. Odinga once emerged from his campaign cavalcade to exclaim that "This [PNU] government needs a hammer ... it needs to be hammered out" (cited in [Bosire, 2007](#)). Malema gained widespread notoriety by singing Dubul iBhuni ('Shoot the Boer') at campaign rallies, referring to an old liberation song encouraging the killing of white Afrikaner farmers. He also incorporated elements of sexist discourse, such as when he called the former white leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance, Helen Zille, a "racist little girl."

### *People Power and Anti-elite Rhetoric*

An anti-elite rhetoric also has been prominent among African populists. Wade did this mostly by showing how his leadership styles and priorities were more aligned with the people's desires and how the political elite were unable to relate to the poor. Proclaimed "President of the street" because of his popularity with everyday people ([Onishi, 2002](#)), Wade's paternal image helped distinguish him from the PS regime, which had been led by the intellectual poet-president, Leopold Senghor, and the stolid technocrat, Abdou Diouf. Responding to questions about his novel campaign approach of blue marches in the run-up to the 2000 elections, he noted "I have wanted to do what no other candidate can do. I reach out to the people" (cited in [Foucher, 2007, 113](#)).

For Odinga and Sata, the elite were not just divorced from the concerns of the people but actually to blame for inequality and exploitation. Odinga's campaign manifesto presented stark dichotomies, evoking Manichean discourse and stating, "I give you a cast-iron guarantee that I will be a champion of social justice and social emancipation – a champion of the poor, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged in our nation. I will redress the imbalance between the powerful and the weak, between the rich and the poor, between the satisfied and the hungry" ([Odinga, 2007, 7](#)). To make the point clear, his campaign T-shirts in 2007 espoused that he was the "People's President." In Zambia, Sata likewise viewed himself as the people's liberator, proclaiming "Zambia needs a redeemer, Zambians want Moses to re-

deem [them] and I am the redeemer of Zambia!” (cited in Chellah, 2006, 3).

Malema similarly has proclaimed himself the “Son of the People” and has adopted the most divisive approach. The EFF manifesto states: “Our decision is to fight for the economic emancipation of the people of South Africa, Africa and the world. Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) locate the struggle for economic emancipation within the long resistance of South Africans to racist colonial and imperialist, political, economic, and social domination.”<sup>2</sup> By extension, the people Malema claims to represent are specifically poor, majority black South Africans, as evident from his 2014 campaign rally when he stated, “You must give the ANC a wake-up call. Black people your time is now. Political freedom without economic freedom is an incomplete freedom” (cited in Harding, 2014).

#### *Eclectic Economic Ideologies and the Centrality of Urban Concerns*

Like their neo-populist counterparts in Latin America (see Roberts, 1995), African populists tend to adhere to eclectic economic ideologies, reinforcing Weyland’s (2001) contention that populism cannot be defined in terms of economic strategy alone. Unlike the projects embarked on by Rawlings or Sankara in the 1980s, there is not a clear delineation of populist economic interventions. Instead, most of these leaders fused norms from both the left and right of the ideological spectrum. Wade shied away from explicit claims about state intervention and at the time of his 2000 campaign, his party was associated with having, at least in theory, an economically liberal bent. By contrast, the minerals-based economies of South Africa and Zambia have inspired more rhetoric about government intervention.

A common thread across all of these populists has been a more concerted focus on the priorities of the urban poor, especially employment but also upgrading slum housing and providing services such as sanitation, electricity, and water. For instance, Wade vowed to end the forced urban housing removals that had been commonplace under the PS regime by either relocating people into better housing or compensating them if they had to be moved elsewhere (see Resnick, 2014). Upon accepting the ODM’s nomination as president, Odinga promised to rectify Kenya’s ‘economic apartheid’ by

ensuring his supporters jobs and highlighting the unacceptably large share of urbanites living in informal settlements. Sata’s main campaign slogan, used consistently across the 2006, 2008, and 2011 elections, was “lower taxes, more jobs, and more money in your pockets.” This message directly attacked the lackluster record of the previously ruling Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) on employment, as well as high prices for food and services consumed by the poor. The EFF manifesto likewise promised to provide houses, sanitation, millions of sustainable jobs, and a minimum wage to reduce inequality.

#### *Ascriptive Identity Appeals in Rural Areas*

As in Latin America, a common tactic by these leaders has been the use of ethno-populism (see Madrid, 2008), by mobilizing the urban poor with a populist discourse and using ascriptive identity appeals to particular ethnic or religious groups in rural areas. For example, in 2006 and 2008, Sata’s rural campaigns were predominantly located in provinces where his fellow Bemba co-ethnics are geographically concentrated. In 2011, Sata expanded to Western Province and promised to restore the sovereignty of the Barotse kingdom. In Senegal, Wade drew on his strong ties with one of the country’s four Sufi brotherhoods, the Mourides, which historically have commanded strong voting allegiances among rural constituencies. Malema likewise draws on his Pedi ethnicity, often using the SePedi language to address even urban rallies, such as his concluding one in Pretoria in 2014.

As in other regions, the feasibility of combining populist with ascriptive appeals is due to the emphasis on marginalization. Feelings of exclusion and grievances over inequality among the urban poor have been complemented by perceptions among certain ethnic and religious groups of having been sidelined in the political sphere. Sata alluded to the exclusion of Bembas by MMD leaders, Odinga suggested that inter-provincial economic disparities had prevailed under Kikuyu leadership, and Wade capitalized on growing disenchantment by the Mourides of being sidelined by the PS regime.

### *III. Conclusions*

Elaborating on the features of populism over different

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<sup>2</sup>See <http://www.economicfreedomfighters.org/documents/economic-freedom-fighters-founding-manifesto>

Table 2: Comparing Populist Eras in Africa

Characteristics	1980s Populism	2000-2015 Populism
Charismatic leadership	Yes, leaders are genuine outsiders who enter politics through military.	Yes, leaders are longstanding insiders who enter politics by forming new parties.
Unmediated ties to the masses through socio-cultural performances.	Metaphors, use of vernacular, foster messianic image, publicly eschewing political traditions	Theatrical antics and clothing, speaking in vernacular, quick wit and metaphors, eschew intellectualism.
Anti-elitist discourse?	Yes	Yes
Pure people	Rural peasants, unemployed, women, youth.	Urban poor, unemployed, co-ethnics, youth.
Corrupt elite	Traditional chiefs, civil servants and professionals, 'parasitic classes,' post-independence leaders, colonial powers.	Leaders of democratic transitions, politically powerful ethnic/religious/racial groups, international donors, foreign investors.
General will	A social revolution.	Greater access to the economic 'pie' through creating more jobs, reducing taxes, reducing harassment of poor, and expanding social protection.
Economic ideologies	State intervention, import substitution industrialization, rural collectivization.	Economic diversification, state intervention, nationalization.

eras illustrates the importance of adopting a cumulative approach to defining populism in the region. Both the populism of the 1980s and of the 2000s onwards were precipitated by disappointment with democratic experiments and the emergence of a corrupt elite that appeared detached from the poor masses. As shown in Table 2, anti-elitist discourse has therefore been a prominent feature in both eras. However, the people's revolutions of the 1980s were driven by genuine outsiders, particularly military leaders, who often had the latitude to implement radical plans for restructuring society and who sidelined existing bureaucratic administrative structures in favor of new grassroots structures ostensibly aimed at facilitating popular participation. Though concerned with the poor in general, they gave special weight to the plight of peasants in rural areas. Their economic policies were firmly nationalist and interventionist. By contrast, the economic ideologies of more contemporary leaders have been highly variegated, their main constituency has been the (young) urban poor, and they have often courted traditional authorities where it helps to gain votes among particular ethnic and religious groups in rural areas.

A cumulative conceptual approach not only traces

similarities in populism over time but also identifies a narrower subset of cases that simultaneously satisfies the conditions of all three approaches to populism. Weyland's (2001) conceptualization of populism as predominantly about personalistic leadership around plebiscitarian ties with a majority of citizens certainly fits many of the leaders discussed here. Yet, while it may be sufficient for identifying populism in North America or Europe, where programmatic parties are well-institutionalized, the relative newness of democracy in Africa and the absence of mediating organizations means that many parties are essentially synonymous with their leaders. In other words, political strategy is too broad a definition in the African context to provide analytical precision on its own.

The ideological approach helps distinguish episodes of genuine populism from those where charismatic leaders simply try to mobilize voters based on promises of valence goods. However, the ideological approach can also encompass efforts by political leaders, such as Henri Bédié of Côte d'Ivoire and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, to use exclusionary discourse that identifies a smaller set of the citizenry as the 'pure people'. In these circumstances, 'purity' has been defined in ethnic,

racial, or religious terms rather than constituting 'purity' in a moral sense of being uncorrupted. As a result, it can include cases in Africa that do not necessarily rely on Weyland's (2001) notion of the principal power capability, whereby mobilizing the masses is prioritized. Instead, such cases have depended on courting just a slice of the population who solely align with a leader's own ascriptive identity.

The overlap between the political strategy and ideological approaches in the African cases is reinforced through socio-cultural performances. Among the leaders discussed here, social-cultural practices sometimes have been quite vulgar, even inciting violence and praising anti-intellectualism. In other instances, they simply have involved clever, innovative techniques that craft the image of a 'common man' who can relate to his people.

Importantly, while populism offers a means of mobilizing new constituencies, especially for opposition parties, its sustainability is often short-lived once charismatic leaders come to office. Leaders with strong direct ties to the rural or urban poor need to widen their policies to the broader populace to gain a national foothold, and they rarely achieve the ambitious economic reforms they initially promised in order to rectify inequality and injustice. This results in alienating the leader's core supporters. At the same time, as witnessed by Sata's or Wade's tenure as presidents in their respective countries, African populists have exhibited a certain intolerance for independent institutions, civil liberties, and internal dissent within their parties. In this regard, the legacy of populism for democracy and governance is no different in Africa than that found in most other regions of the world.

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## Populism as Epithet and Identity: The Use and Misuse of a Contested Concept

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Although populism is widely recognized to be one of the most elusive and contested concepts in the social science lexicon ([Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013](#)), debates over its meaning are typically contained within the insular walls of academia. The remarkable eruption of varied forms of populist leadership and discourse in contemporary global politics, however, has injected some of these debates into the 'real world' of public affairs, making the populist label itself a focal point of political contestation. Perhaps the most prominent example of this conceptual contestation can be seen in remarks made by President Barak Obama at a joint press conference in Ottawa with the Canadian and Mexican heads of state in the summer of 2016. "I'm not prepared to concede the notion that some of the rhetoric that's been popping up is populist," President Obama said, in a thinly-veiled reference to Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump. "I care about poor people who are working really hard and don't have a chance to advance. And I care

about workers being able to have a collective voice in the workplace and get their fair share of the pie." Claiming that he wants to provide decent education for disadvantaged kids, childcare for working moms, a progressive tax system, and curbs on the excesses of the financial sector, Obama concluded:

I suppose that makes me a populist. Somebody else who has never shown any regard for workers, has never fought on behalf of social justice issues or making sure that poor kids are getting a decent shot at life or have healthcare – in fact, has worked against economic opportunity for workers and ordinary people, they don't suddenly become a populist because they say something controversial in order to win votes. That's not the measure of populism. That's nativism or xenophobia or worse.<sup>1</sup>

Obama's statement was notable in two principal respects. First, in comparative perspective, the mere fact that he claimed the populist mantle for his own brand of politics was unusual, though not unprecedented. Scholars and pundits are often quick to assign the populist label to a diverse array of movements and leaders – from charismatic leaders to leftist mass movements and far-right nativist parties – but rarely is the label appropriated by such leaders and movements as a badge of honor or political identification. It is more typically hurled as a catch-all epithet designed to demean or discredit political forces viewed as demagogic, anti-democratic, or politically irresponsible in their disruptive appeals to the basest instincts in a mass body politic. Such opprobrium has long been the norm in Europe and Latin America, although the recent economic and political crisis in Southern Europe has spawned Laclauian-inspired efforts to reappropriate – and positively valorize – the populist mantle by radical left protest movements and parties (see [Laclau, 2005](#); [Errejón and Mouffe, 2016](#); [Fernández Liria, 2016](#)). Obama's statement, however, reflected a singular propensity in U.S. progressive circles to use the populist label as a euphemism for 'left', reflecting, perhaps, the country's 19th century tradition of progressive 'populist' reform, the lack of a meaningful socialist tradition, and a discursive tool-kit that was truncated and distorted by Cold War antipathy for anything charac-

<sup>1</sup> Statement delivered by President Barak Obama at the "Three Amigos" Press Summit Conference, Ottawa, June 29, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Such distortion also helps to account for the anomalous usage of the term 'liberal' in the U.S., which elsewhere in the world is associated with free markets and private property rights rather than an interventionist and redistributive state.

terized as ‘left’.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Obama’s statement reflected a highly economistic conceptualization of populism that associates the phenomenon with economic policies that appeal to popular constituencies. When positively valorized, as by Obama, such economic policies are understood to respond to the just and legitimate material needs of such constituencies. When negatively valorized, however, as by the economists [Dornbusch and Edwards \(1991\)](#) or [Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin \(2013\)](#), populism becomes synonymous with myopic and irresponsible economic policies that harm such constituencies over the long term, whatever their short-term popularity. So conceived, populism becomes a pejorative label that is used to signify fiscal profligacy and the fecklessness of politicians who promise to tax less, spend more, and stoke mass consumption, consequences be damned.

Whether used as an epithet or as a marker of political identity, such economistic conceptualizations of populism are strikingly at odds with most contemporary theorizing on the subject by political scientists and sociologists. These latter social scientists may disagree about the essential or defining political traits of populism, but they share a common premise in their understanding that populism has such traits. Populism, in other words, is conceptualized in political terms and assigned to the political field of behavior, rather than the domain of economic policies. Expansionary economic policies may (or may not) be employed by populists to help mobilize mass support, but they are ancillary and instrumental to the phenomenon itself.

Not all populisms are identifiably left or right, inclusionary or exclusionary, but those that are should be characterized as such. The populist label, in short, badly needs its own descriptors to identify its substantive content and differentiate among its multiple expressions or sub-types.

Conceived in political terms, populism is more than simply an appeal to the ‘common’ (i.e., non-elite) people. It is, more fundamentally, a way of structuring the political field along an antagonistic divide between

‘the people’ however defined, and some kind of elite or political establishment, also however defined ([Laclau, 2005](#), 67-124). Beyond this basic starting point, scholars diverge on the question of where to look to identify and define a populist brand of politics. Followers of Laclau prioritize the discursive construction of ‘the people’, while others emphasize the ideational dimensions of the antagonistic divide ([Mudde, 2007](#); [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013](#)), its leadership component ([Weyland, 2001](#)), its mobilizational properties ([Jansen, 2015](#)), or its ‘flaunting’ of the socio-cultural ‘low’ ([Ostiguy, 2009](#)). Despite their differences, these political conceptualizations of populism all disentangle the phenomenon from any predetermined set of economic policies, practices, or development stages, an analytical demarcation that became increasingly transparent as scholars sought to interpret the unexpected coupling of anti-establishment populist politics with market liberalization in Latin America in the 1990s ([Roberts, 1995](#); [Weyland, 1996](#)).

To be sure, a political conceptualization of populism is capable of ‘traveling’ to a wide range of national and historical settings, which helps to account for its analytical appeal. Indeed, it is capable of accommodating both top-down and bottom-up patterns of socio-political mobilization, ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ constructions of ‘the people’ and the elite or establishment ‘other’, and both left- and right-wing variants of populist politics (see [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013](#)). This malleability, however, can be both a blessing and a curse for scholarship on populism, as it allows the label to be loosely attached to disparate political phenomena that share little beyond an anti-establishment bent and a discursive invocation of ‘the people’. The question posed by [Jansen \(2015, 159\)](#) – “What, then, is the value-added of the ‘populist’ descriptor?” – becomes especially germane in a global context of generalized discontent with established parties and professionalized leadership castes (aptly labeled ‘castas políticas’ in Southern European protest movements). If leaders from Donald Trump to Evo Morales, or parties from the French National Front to the Spanish Podemos all fit under the populist rubric, that rubric is clearly highly elastic. The populist label runs the risk of losing its analytical bite when it lumps together without differentiating among radically divergent forms of anti-establishment politics.

The distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism identified by [Mudde and](#)

Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) provides one important corrective to this problem, as it allows for the identification of sub-types within the populist genus that are differentiated by their specific ideological content and the conception of 'the people' articulated within it. By emphasizing the limited, 'thin-centered' character of populist ideology, they make it possible to analyze how populist appeals can be grafted onto other ideologies, such as nationalism and socialism, and shaped by their articulation of 'the people' and 'the other'. Such grafting helps to account for much of the variation across populist sub-types; the inclusionary forms of populism that emerged in the recent Latin American experience and the more exclusionary patterns which have predominated in much of Europe (with the partial exception of the region's southern 'periphery', which looks increasingly 'Latin American') are the products, respectively, of populist grafting onto socialist and nationalist (or even nativist) ideological currents.

It is important to note that such grafting is neither a necessary condition nor a definitional attribute of populism. Some forms of populism, such as Argentine Peronism or the "Five Star" movement in Italy, draw loosely from a range of different (and often conflicting) ideological currents and are virtually impossible to locate on an ideological spectrum (in part due to their internal heterogeneity). They are, in a sense, more 'purely' populist than movements which graft populist appeals onto more well-defined nationalist or socialist projects. As such, no other label – or, in Jansen's terms, descriptor – captures their traits better than 'populist'. Where populist appeals are explicitly grafted onto nationalism or socialism, however, the populist traits are generally secondary to those of the host or anchoring ideology, as they convey less substantive content to identify and locate the movement within the larger field of political contestation. In Jansen's terms, the value-added of the populist descriptor is less than that of the anchoring or host ideology; to call France's National Front party, Spain's *Podemos*, Greece's SYRIZA, or Bolivia's MAS 'populist' is to say far less about their political identity, role, and impact than to call them right-wing nationalists (for the case of the National Front) and either radical left (SYRIZA) or movement left (*Podemos* and MAS) alternatives. The same goes for Donald Trump, who is surely a populist by the conventions of the social sciences – President Obama's commentary notwithstanding – but clearly of the nationalist (or better yet, nativist) right sort, which determines the highly exclu-

sionary character of his discursive construction of 'the people'.

This is not to say that the populist descriptor should be abandoned in the analysis of such cases. It only means that it should not be used in isolation from the host or anchoring ideology which defines the specific content of its elite-popular divide. Not all populisms are identifiably left or right, inclusionary or exclusionary, but those that are should be characterized as such. The populist label, in short, badly needs its own descriptors to identify its substantive content and differentiate among its multiple expressions or sub-types.

Such conceptual precision is especially important at a time when populism is seemingly ascendant on the global political stage. Though he surely would not have put it in such terms, Laclau's (2005) influential work identified two basic preconditions for the rise of populism: a crisis of representation in the political-institutional domain, and forms of social heterogeneity or fragmentation that can only be overcome through a discursive construction of a new popular bloc, conceived as a unified 'people', in confrontation with an alien or elite 'other'. Such conditions are clearly present in much of the world today, in both economically advanced and developing regions, but they are capable of eliciting wildly varying populist responses. The challenge for scholars of populism is not only to identify what these responses share in common, but also to clarify along which dimensions they diverge, and to what effects for democratic governance.

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## Populism in Latin America and Beyond: Concept, Causes, and Consequences

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When considering populism, the first cases that come to mind are from Latin America. From Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina to Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the political history of Latin America has been marked by the rise (and fall) of populist leaders who have undertaken major reforms with contentious legacies. While still prominent in Latin America, populism is today making headlines in other parts of the world, such as Eastern and Western Europe, as well as in the United States and South East Asia. Comparative politics scholars are increasingly using the concept of populism to try to make sense of the emergence of 'unusual' political leaders, movements, and parties.

In this short piece, I would like to draw some lessons from the scholarship on Latin American populism to

those who are interested in analyzing the phenomenon beyond the region and thus seek to develop concepts and theories that are useful for studying populism across the world. The rest of this contribution is structured in three sections. I begin by providing a brief review of how populism has been conceptualized by analysts of Latin American politics. Based on what has been referred to as the ideational approach, I then reflect on the causes of populism and conclude by briefly discussing the consequences of populism.

### I. Conceptualizing Populism

Scholars of Latin American politics have long debated how to define populism. This conceptual debate stays in close relationship with the discussions taking place today around developing a definition of populism for the analysis of politicians and parties as diverse as Donald Trump in the U.S., the Front National in France, Podemos in Spain, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, or Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ in Hungary. Instead of starting from zero, scholars working on different case studies and world regions can draw important lessons by reviewing the Latin American conceptual debate on populism. All in all, four conceptual approaches dominate the discussion in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

The first approach is 'structuralist' and has its origins in the work of Latin American sociologists (e.g. [Germani, 1978](#)) who understood populism as a specific type of political regime supported by heterogeneous class alliances and commanded by strong leaders, who are able to mobilize and incorporate previously excluded sectors. According to this approach, structural changes such as industrialization and rural-urban migration paved the way for the emergence of new patterns of class formation that facilitated the rise of populism. Peronism in Argentina is a typical example of this. Given that this conceptualization equates populism with a specific type of political regime, it offers little to the analysis of populist forces in opposition. Moreover, by putting too much emphasis on the multi-class nature of populism, this definition overlooks the fact that all political projects that aim to conquer power via democratic means are inclined to develop heterogeneous class alliances (consider Christian and Social Democracy in Europe).

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful for helpful comments from Sofia Donoso and Kirk A. Hawkins.

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed overview of these four conceptual approaches, see [Rovira Kaltwasser \(2014a\)](#).



The second approach is linked to economics. It was introduced at the beginning of the 1990s by [Dornbusch and Edwards \(1991\)](#), who claimed that populism should be thought of as a specific pattern of macroeconomic malfunctioning, characterized by excessive public spending financed by debt and heterodox policies that lead to a hyperinflationary crisis, thereby forcing the implementation of painful structural reforms in order to bring the economy back on track. While this type of ‘irresponsible’ economic policy-making can be seen in various cases of populist leadership in the past (e.g. Allende in Chile and Perón in Argentina), it cannot be found in many of the most contemporary examples of populism in the Latin American region (e.g. Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Evo Morales in Bolivia). Nevertheless, similar definitions of populism centered on irresponsibility and pressures for socioeconomic redistribution are quite common in the economics literature (e.g., [Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin, 2013](#)).

Populism is not only about charismatic political entrepreneurs who mobilize angry and disenchanted voters, but also about ordinary people who sometimes have good reasons for interpreting political reality through the lens of populism.

A third approach that has been influential in Latin American scholarship can be labelled ‘politico-institutional’ (e.g. [Weyland, 2001](#)). It defines populism as a strategy employed by political leaders to conquer and stay in power by developing a direct and unmediated link with large swaths of the population that are unorganized. Although this approach is useful for analyzing many instances of populism across the region, it has two important shortcomings. First, this definition puts excessive emphasis on the leader and thus overlooks the micro-foundations of populism – the reasons why, under certain circumstances, ordinary people like you and me might become fervent populists (I will come back to this point later). Second, this conceptualization fails to notice that populism neither always, nor necessarily, comes to the fore due to the rise of a charismatic leader. The word ‘populism’ comes from two movements of the late nineteenth century characterized by their leaderless nature (the People’s Party in

the U.S. and the *Narodnik* in Russia). Moreover, many of the contemporary examples of populism in Western Europe are characterized by the development of strong party organizations.

Finally, there is a fourth tradition within the scholarship on Latin American populism that has been gaining increasing traction in the European debate, namely the so-called ideational approach (e.g. [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013b](#)). Here populism is defined as a moral discourse, which by pitting ‘the pure people’ against ‘the corrupt elite’, defends the idea that popular sovereignty should be respected by all means. In other words, populism can be understood as a set of ideas whereby the establishment is seen as a dishonest entity and the people are depicted as a virtuous community. Although this approach retains a close relationship with the normative political theory advanced by the Argentine philosopher [Laclau \(2005\)](#), an increasing number of scholars are working from a ‘positivist’ or ‘empiricist’ perspective according to which it is possible not only to measure the existence of populist discourse both at the elite level (e.g. [Hawkins, 2009](#)) and the mass level (e.g. [Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014](#)), but also to study the negative and positive impact of populism on democracy (e.g. [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012](#); [Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012](#)).

Although this is not the place to go into detail about the advantages of the ideational approach over the structuralist, economic and politico-institutional understandings of populism, let me highlight two particularities of this definition. An important advantage of the ideational approach lies in allowing the analysis of diverse populist phenomena, particularly along the classic left-right spectrum. While it is true that all populist forces rely on the moral distinction between ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’, these are constructions – or ‘imagined communities’ to paraphrase Benedict Anderson’s language ([1983](#)) – whose content can be defined in very different ways. For instance, most European populists are exclusionary due to their nativist vision of ‘the people’, whereas most Latin American populists are inclusionary because of their idea of ‘the people’ as the socioeconomic underdog ([Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013a](#)). In addition, once populists win elections and stay in power for a long period of time they become part of the establishment, but they deny this by claiming that ‘the elite’ is still governing the country in alliance with powerful allies from outside. This

means that populist actors always frame themselves as outsiders, i.e., as political novices without links to the establishment. However, whether populist actors actually are outsiders or not is an open question that should be addressed empirically.

The second advantage of the ideational approach lies in facilitating the study of both the supply of, and demand for, populism. Populism is not only about charismatic political entrepreneurs who mobilize angry and disenchanted voters, but also about ordinary people who sometimes have good reasons for interpreting political reality through the lens of populism. There is a fair chance that many of us would have voted for Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998 or for SYRIZA in Greece in 2015, when those countries were experiencing critical moments that facilitated the emergence of populist sentiments across the population. In other words, those actors who rely on the populist set of ideas do not operate in a vacuum, but rather in societies that have specific political cultures, historical legacies, and political opportunity structures that can either facilitate or hinder the support for populist projects. Therefore, the ideational approach invites us to take into account the standing debate about agency and structure: the success of populist forces hinges upon both (a) political entrepreneurs who are able to advance a populist frame around perceived social grievances, and (b) specific socioeconomic and sociopolitical contexts that give more saliency and validity to the moral language of populism.

## *II. Causes of Populism*

One should think about populism neither as an abnormality nor as a democratic pathology. The populist set of ideas is quite widespread across the population, but stays dormant. As Kirk A. Hawkins has noted, most of us have a Hugo Chávez inside of us, but he is hidden and does not define our everyday political preferences. In other words, populist ideas lie latent and become activated under specific circumstances. Why does this set of ideas resonate with certain citizens? What causes voters to support populist leaders, movements, and parties? New research based on the ideational approach presented above helps us to answer this question (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Although much more empirical evidence is needed, some preliminary research supports the idea that there are at least two important triggers for the activation of populist sentiments across the population: political unresponsiveness and

major failures of democratic representation.

Authoritarian regimes are controlled by leaders and groups who don't need to pursue the interests of the people, and, consequently, they have no problem governing in an unresponsive manner. By contrast, democratic regimes need to take into consideration the opinion of the electorate. The periodic execution of free and fair elections serves as a mechanism to ensure that those who govern try to satisfy the expectations and wishes of the voting public. So why are many democracies seeing the rise of populist forces? Part of the answer is that the more political leaders and parties become unresponsive, the higher the odds that voters support populist forces. These voters are not necessarily authoritarian; they are tired of the growing convergence between mainstream parties, and the inability of these parties to deal with some of the most pressing concerns of 'the people'. At the same time, elected politicians have been losing power due to the increasing influence of international markets as well as supranational institutions, but are usually reluctant to accept this situation and often present themselves as almighty figures able to create jobs and take control of the country.

Mainstream leaders and parties are not blind to this reality. They can adapt their political programs to try to address (some of) the issues raised by populist forces and that way find a better balance between responsiveness and responsibility. This is occurring to an extent in Europe today, where populist radical right and populist radical left parties are succeeding in forcing the establishment to rethink some of the policies they have defended in the past. As a consequence, mainstream attempts to act more responsively limits the electoral growth of populist forces. Not by chance, populist forces in most (but not all) European countries obtain a sizeable, but comparatively limited, amount of votes.

Quite different is the situation in Latin America, where populist leaders and parties have not infrequently been able to obtain more than fifty percent of the vote and win consecutive elections. To understand this, we have to consider not only the unresponsiveness of the establishment, but also something more dramatic: major failures of democratic representation. By this I mean when democratic elected governments are unable to produce some basic outcomes that are crucial for the very legitimacy of the political regime. For instance, if democratic elected governments have little capac-

ity to enforce the rule of law against criminal groups and powerful elites or have serious problems generating economic stability and guaranteeing minimum levels of welfare, one shouldn't be surprised that populist forces obtain massive electoral support. Under these circumstances, populists can plausibly claim that 'the people' have been robbed of their rightful sovereignty and the time is ripe to get rid of 'the elite'.

This is indeed an important lesson we can learn from Latin America: major failures of democratic representation should be seen as fertile soil for the rise of electorally strong populist forces. The very weakness of Latin American states facilitates the activation of populist sentiments across the population and the existence of relatively free and fair elections permits the emergence of populist entrepreneurs. Ultimately, this is why populism and democracy in countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, and Peru maintain a kind of love-hate relationship: one cannot live without the other. This is likely also occurring in other places that are seeing the rise of democratic elected governments predisposed to experiencing major failures of democratic representation, because they have serious stateness problems and long histories of oligarchical rule. Take, for instance, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, a populist leader who won massive electoral support at the beginning of the 2000s by not only criticizing the establishment but also by proposing a new policy platform focused on poor voters in rural areas. As Slater (2013) has indicated, Shinawatra's rise to power cannot be understood without recognizing that the bureaucratic-military-monarchical power elite that have historically controlled Thailand is increasingly challenged by new groups, which seek to give voice to excluded constituencies in urban and rural areas alike.

### *III. Consequences of Populism*

Much has been written about the impact of populism on democracy and the common assumption is that populist forces should be seen as a threat. However, as I have argued elsewhere in more detail, populism can have both positive and negative effects on the democratic system (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, 2014b). For example, as discussed above, populist radical left and populist radical right parties in contemporary Europe are forcing mainstream political actors to become more responsive. Furthermore, while it is true that the very rise of populist forces in coun-

tries with serious problems of stateness can be harmful for democracy, the democratic credentials of those controlling the government in those countries in the past should not be overstated. For instance, Venezuela before Chávez was governed by a corrupt two-party system that despite the wealth of the country was not able to address the material needs of the population or to recognize the full rights of democratic citizens (Hawkins, 2016).

Beyond the normative and empirical debates about the impact of populism on democracy, I would like to raise a second argument about the consequences of populism, namely, that growing polarization can potentially lead to the emergence of a populism vs. anti-populism cleavage. When populist actors are able to obtain a sizeable share of the vote over time, mainstream political parties are forced to respond to the populist challengers. One potential response consists in developing a common electoral umbrella for mainstream parties against populism. The problem with this response is that it tends to give more validity and visibility to the populist discourse. Fighting fire with fire is problematic because it usually leads the establishment to present itself as 'the good and smart guys' at odds with 'the bad and stupid fellas'. By employing this moral language, political polarization increases and can foster the true formation of a populism vs. anti-populism cleavage that crosscuts other cleavages, such as the traditional left-right distinction, that normally structures the political game. To a certain extent, this has occurred in Argentina due to the electoral consolidation of Peronism to the point that Peronist leaders in power have supported both right-wing policies (Menem in the 1990s) and left-wing policies (Kirchner in the 2000s). Therefore, the Argentine political space is structured much more around a populism vs. anti-populism cleavage than the traditional left-right distinction (Ostiguy, 2009).

A similar situation is developing in Greece today, where since 2015 an awkward coalition of two populist parties has been in power: the populist radical *right* party ANEL and the populist radical *left* party SYRIZA. This means that contemporary Greece is governed by an alliance between inclusionary and exclusionary populists, who have big differences in terms of their preferred policies, but have the same understanding of who should be blamed for the problems that the country is facing: local oligarchs with strong ties to foreign governments and international institutions (Aslanidis and

Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Although it is too early to know if this will result in a durable political coalition, it shows us that Western democratic countries are not immune to the emergence of a populism vs. anti-populism cleavage. Another case in point might be contemporary Italy, where the centrality of populist figures such as Silvio Berlusconi, Umberto Bossi, and Beppe Grillo reveals that populism vs. anti-populism is probably becoming as relevant as the traditional left-right distinction.

Given that the very emergence of a populism vs. anti-populism cleavage does not facilitate the construction of stable governments or robust liberal democracies, scholars and policy-makers should try to think more thoroughly about how to respond to the rise of populist forces. Research on this topic is still in its infancy,<sup>3</sup> but there is little doubt that there is a great deal of variation in the success of opposition to populism and my impression is that much more emphasis should be given to the ways in which actors can try to mediate populist impulses in the electorate. After all, once large swaths of the population understands political reality through the lens of populism, it might be too late to avoid the rise of strong populist forces, which can lead to the consolidation of a populism vs. anti-populism cleavage.

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<sup>3</sup>For a partial exception, see the special issue on "Dealing with Populists in Government" of the journal *Democratization* that I have edited with Paul Taggart (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016).



# Populism in India

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In earlier work, I highlighted the recurrent salience of populism through different phases of Indian political history since the late 19th century, its role in mobilizing emergent groups, its coexistence with diverse ideologies and different forms of movement and party organization, the varied consequences of populist political forces for civil society and democracy, and the diverse policies enabled by populist discourses and mobilization. Placing these Indian experiences in a comparative perspective clarified that populism has assumed these varied forms at different points in many world regions. Despite the varied contexts of emergence, modes of expression, patterns of mobilization, and consequences of political forces that are considered populist, I found populism to be a useful analytical category to understand the dynamics of many movements and parties ([Subramanian, 1999, 2007](#)). I revisit these arguments in the light of developments in India and certain recent analyses of populism, especially in Latin America and Europe.

## *I. Populism – An Understanding*

I use the term populism to characterize movements, parties, and regimes that deploy distinctions between the virtuous ‘people’, said to have limited access to various spheres of privilege, and an elite, considered to be unfairly dominant in these spheres and to be culturally distinct from the ‘people’. Populists claim to represent the will of the people to overcome their subordination, and thus infuse their projects with an air of righteousness. Such discourses mobilize groups that are subordinate in certain spheres, yet may enjoy significant power in others. Populists may oppose not only elites, but also certain marginal groups. Populism is an analytically useful concept if applied only to cases in which such contrasts between the people and the elite shape movement strategy and organization, mass response, the composition of support, and the policies pursued. This view bridges conceptualizations of populism primarily as a discursive style (e.g. [Shils, 1972](#); [Laclau, 2005](#)), a type of ideology (e.g. [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012](#)), a form of movement organization (e.g. [Taggart, 2000](#)), and a kind of policy orientation (e.g. [Weyland, 2001](#)).

This understanding enables me to account for the significant roles populism has played in societies at different levels of industrialization, with varying degrees of citizen organization, and in association with different kinds of regimes, varied movement and party organizations, and various policy frameworks. Populism was important in the predominantly agrarian Eastern European and South Asian societies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in rapidly industrializing Latin American countries in the mid-20th century, and in the postindustrial United States and Europe. While citizen organization was low in precommunist Eastern Europe, it is high in contemporary Western Europe.

Populism shaped authoritarian regimes such as those of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and semi-democracies such as those that existed during the rule of the Pakistan People’s Party and Hugo Chávez’s United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Indian nationalism of the interwar period and the PASOK in Greece in the 1970s enabled transitions to democracy, and the Movement for Socialism aided the consolidation of democracy in Bolivia over the past two decades. Moreover, populist forces enhanced the quality of India’s consolidated democracy since the 1960s by increasing emergent group representation, but diminished the quality of some of Western Europe’s consolidated democracies by attacking minority rights over the past two decades.

Populist organizations such as Juan Perón’s Justicialist Party in Argentina were loose and leader-centered, while others such as Evo Morales’s Movement for Socialism were more cadre based and socially engaged. Populist policy frameworks ranged from the agro-artisanal romanticism of Mohandas Gandhi and the peasant egalitarianism of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union between the two World Wars to import-substitution industrialization in Argentina and Brazil from the 1930s to the 1950s, neo-liberalism in Peru and Brazil in the 1990s, and redistributive reactions against neo-liberalism in Venezuela and Bolivia over the past two decades.

[Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser \(2012\)](#) define populism as a thin-centered ideology based on a limited number of core concepts, which need to be combined with other concepts and ideologies, enabling one to understand how distinctions between the people and the elite vary with context and are paired with rather dif-

ferent ideologies, ranging from fascism to socialism (Mudde, 2004). Populists distinguish plebeian from patrician with reference to categories such as language and dialect use, pigmentation, occupation, levels of education, types of education (colonial/traditional), and patterns of worship. Although this increases the political significance of certain cultural differences, populist discourses sometimes enable inter-ethnic coalitions by conceiving the popular community as composed of various partly overlapping ethnic, status, and class categories.

## II. Late Colonial India

In India, populist discourses, modes of mobilization, mentalities, and policies were most often and centrally associated with appeals to nationhood, caste, and language, and less frequently and crucially with religious political forces. Two kinds of political forces deployed populist appeals extensively in the late colonial period – multiethnic Indian nationalism and middle and low caste movements. Gandhi's revaluation of an imagined pre-colonial social economy based in self-sufficient villages had marked populist characteristics. It mobilized peasants and artisans as well as groups of middling and high class and caste status into anti-colonial agitations, and influenced a strategy alternating between non-violent civil disobedience and social work to rebuild village social infrastructure. This vision of a popular national community aiming for cultural and political decolonization also built a multi-religious and multi-ethnic alliance, albeit one fraught with tensions. Certain other anti-colonial nationalists such as Ahmed Sékou Toure in Guinea, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania also similarly revalued precolonial popular mores, but Gandhi differed from them in that he led the formation of strong party institutions. The Indian National Congress (Congress Party) struck root in much of India and provided space for many with rather different social visions, including modernists such as Jawaharlal Nehru. These modernists gained control over policy after independence, and abandoned Gandhi's plans to build a radically decentralized democracy with a limited state presence and a non-industrial economy.

Low and middle caste movements were particularly strong in western and southern India. In regions that became Maharashtra state, the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeker Society) led by Jyotirao Phule appealed

to a bahun samaj (a popular/ majority community) composed mainly of the low and middle castes, to oppose various caste inequalities and exclusions, particularly the dominance of the upper Brahman caste. Moreover, certain members of formerly untouchable castes, notably Bhimrao Ambedkar, adopted the label dalit (meaning broken people) to express their determination to gain full citizenship in alliance with other underprivileged groups (O'Hanlon, 1985; Rao, 2009). In the current state of Tamil Nadu, the Self Respect Association and the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK - Dravidian Party) mobilized middle castes, and to a lesser extent low castes, to reclaim the autonomy these groups enjoyed. These organizations only had small pockets of support before Indian independence, but effectively pressed larger organizations to promote caste mobility. They inspired various later initiatives for low and middle caste empowerment that gained greater support (Subramanian, 1999).

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## III. Postcolonial Experiences

The Congress Party's populist features diminished when postcolonial state-building and state-led industrialization began in the 1950s and the 1960s. Democracy was consolidated through this period, but political participation was low especially among lower strata, whose substantive representation was limited by the close links between the state and dominant groups. From the late 1960s onward, the participation and representation of middling and lower strata increased, inspired in part by populist forces. The populist challengers to the Congress Party included forces that foregrounded caste (the socialist parties, middle caste parties such as the Janata Dal (People's Party), the Samajwadi Party (SP - Socialist Party) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD - National People's Party), and low caste parties, particularly the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP - Party of the Popular Community)), caste and language (especially the later Dravidian parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

(DMK – Party for the Progress of Dravidam) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)), or class (the communist parties, that also deployed populist discourses at times), or revived aspects of Gandhian Indian nationalism (e.g., the socialist parties, the movement that opposed the erosion of democracy in the mid-1970s under Jayaprakash Narayan's leadership, and movements that resisted logging in the Himalayas in the 1970s and that protested the construction of the Narmada dam in western India from the 1990s onward).

The socialist parties and their successors adopted certain Gandhian notions, gained considerable middle caste support in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Karnataka, and became important parts of national coalition governments from 1977 to 1980, from 1989 to 1991, and from 1996 to 1998. The later Dravidian parties connected the movement's initial focus on the middle castes to the Tamil language and to various indicators of modest status. Their populist articulation of ethnicity lent them strategic flexibility and increased their support so that they dominated Tamil Nadu politics from the late 1960s. Moreover, it made them more tolerant of groups at the margins of the movement's early visions, such as Brahmins, non-Tamil-speakers, low castes, and non-Hindus. Besides, the Dravidian parties built close political links across religious boundaries and thereby inhibited the growth of Hindu nationalism, which promoted attacks on non-Hindus, tribal groups, and sometimes also low castes in its bastions. The success of the Dravidian parties influenced the formation of similar ethno-populist parties later, notably the Telugu Desam and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which have been important forces in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Assam respectively since the 1980s.

More recently, the BSP became the most successful low-caste-led party. It incorporated certain ethnic and subaltern notions developed by early low and middle caste mobilizers (specifically, dalit and bahujan) into a vision of a multi-ethnic popular community. Aware that the influence of earlier low caste parties such as the Republican Party of India had been restricted by their failure to build multi-caste support, the BSP leaders prioritized doing so as a means to acquire state power. Their encompassing communitarian vision helped them recruit Muslim, middle caste, and upper caste candidates and build significant, though inconsistent, support among these groups. This enabled the party to

rule the largest state of Uttar Pradesh at times, either on its own or in alliance with other parties (1993-5, 1997, 2002-3, 2007-12), and gain significant support in other north Indian states, including Uttarakhand, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Bihar (Jaffrelot, 2002; Subramanian, 1999; Chandra, 2004; Guha, 2008).

In response to such challenges, the Congress Party's populist features were revived, particularly through the 1970s. Indira Gandhi, who then led the party, replaced many party leaders – who she claimed had helped maintain elite dominance – and concentrated power in her hands, pledging to use this power to end poverty. These promises strengthened the Congress Party among marginal groups, and motivated anti-poverty policies that however aided only a small proportion of the poor. The nationalization of some major banks in 1969, purportedly to enable microcredit provision, was the most noted of these measures. The partial dismantlement of Congress Party institutions focused the popular mandate on the leader, encouraging her to repress opponents and curtail the autonomy of other parties, civil society, and opposition party-ruled state governments. These changes led to the imposition of authoritarian rule from 1975 to 1977. Popular opposition to this move caused the Congress Party to lose control over the national government for the first time in 1977, after which Indira Gandhi retreated from populist rhetoric and policies.

Populism's demonstrated mobilizing success led the two parties that have ruled India since 1998, the Congress Party and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to use populist appeals at times and to introduce new anti-poverty measures even after they adopted a neo-liberal agenda in the 1990s. While the Congress Party's recent populist rhetoric associated it with the common people, the BJP also presented itself as offering a popular indigenous alternative to India's secularist and multicultural institutions, which it portrays as Western imports that enjoy support only among a narrow elite. Despite their use of such appeals, populism has not been central to the functioning of either the BJP or the Congress Party since the 1980s.

#### *IV. Democracy, Inclusion, and Equality*

All of India's populist forces increased the political participation and representation of emergent groups, and provided some members of these groups increased

benefits. However, their discourses, forms of organization, and policies varied, with different consequences for democracy, inclusion, equality, and conflict.

Gandhian populism dramatically increased political participation in opposition to the authoritarian colonial regime, organized this opposition in a durable party, pressed the colonial regime to grant some authority at times to local and provincial governments that were popularly elected albeit under a limited franchise, and enabled decolonization. These experiences in turn made the consolidation of democracy after independence much more likely, especially as representative institutions were introduced despite Gandhi's preference for direct democracy. Gandhi used his charismatic authority to contain pressures for the rapid redistribution of power and resources. This made it easier for his postcolonial successors to implement their growth agenda more than their redistributive promises, and encouraged them to limit the upward mobility in the Congress Party of those who prioritized faster redistribution. Thus, the legacies of Gandhian populism helped the consolidation of democracy, but also limited its equality.

By weakening party institutions and civil society, Indira Gandhi prepared the way to override democratic institutions and curtail resistance to authoritarianism in the mid-1970s. Yet her populist claim that her authoritarian rule enjoyed popular support might have encouraged her to call competitive elections within two years, and to respect the popular mandate when the majority of voters rejected the abandonment of democracy. The welfare policies that accompanied her populist rhetoric provided limited benefits to a small number of poorer citizens, but also helped her contain growing pressures for the more extensive representation and entitlement of emergent groups.

The late colonial middle and low caste movements increased their target groups' power and public presence in their regions of strength, and developed idioms in which these groups conceived their projects later in certain other regions too. Despite their use of inclusive rhetoric, their support remained largely restricted to the castes that led them. Their postcolonial successors were more attentive to, and successful in, gaining broad support, partly because their strategies were shaped by competition in universal franchise elections. They built parties deeply embedded among the middling and lower

strata, which nevertheless varied in how authority was distributed between leaders and cadre. While the cadre enjoyed considerable autonomy in the socialist parties, the DMK, and the AGP in their early years, leaders exercised much more control, either individually or collectively, over the SP, the RJD, the BSP, the AIADMK, the Telugu Desam, and the communist parties.

These parties increased the representation of middling and lower strata and gained them greater patronage and policy benefits. The most important redistributive and welfare policies with which they were associated were middle caste quotas in higher education and government employment, introduced in some states from the 1950s to the 1990s and then in national government employment and national educational institutions in 1990, and free lunch schemes that were adopted in various states from the 1980s. Moreover, their pressures contributed to the adoption of low caste quotas in higher education, government employment, and political representation at the national and state levels in 1950, and the extension of these quotas to local government representation in 1993. The BSP's mobilization empowered low castes in particular in parts of north India. When it ruled Uttar Pradesh, the party pressed for low caste quotas to be filled in the elite bureaucratic layers, for low caste bureaucrats to be promoted, for social infrastructure to be improved in low caste neighborhoods, and for the police to better address violations of low caste civil rights, and erected statues of major low caste leaders throughout the state. Besides, the communists introduced extensive land reforms or caused their competitors to do so in their regions of strength – Kerala, Bengal, and Tripura. The populist forces that focused on the intermediate and lower strata thus increased the symbolic, political, and, to a lesser extent, material inclusion of these groups.

However, certain populist forces limited redistribution to lower strata and increased conflicts between middle castes and low castes. This was particularly the case with the middle caste parties that aided their supporters in their conflicts with low castes over resources and access to public space, restricted the fulfillment of low caste quotas, and redirected resources earmarked for low castes to middle castes. The communist parties, whose leaders were drawn more from upper and middle castes than from low castes, distributed land more extensively to the middle castes even though more of the low castes were landless and land-poor. Furthermore,



it was the most advanced low caste of north India, the Chamars, which was predominant in the leadership and cadre of the BSP, which directed most resources to the upwardly mobile among the low castes. Thus, populist forces usually channeled only meager resources to the most marginalized, and obscured this tendency through allusions to a broad popular community including the middling strata. Worse, the populist rhetoric and welfare policies of the Congress Party and the BJP helped contain opposition to the regressive neoliberal policies of the past quarter century, and in the case of the Hindu nationalists, also increased support for their attacks on the rights and persons of the religious minorities, tribal groups, and sometimes the low castes.

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## The Surge of 'Exclusionary' Populism in Europe

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Particularly in recent times, populism is a concept used widely across the globe (Moffitt, 2016). The term is employed to describe political actors and phenomena such as Chavismo in Venezuela, the rise of xenophobic far right parties across Europe, the Labour leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, and the successes of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the presidential primaries in the United States. From these examples, it is clear that populism is used to refer to an ideologically heterogeneous set of politicians and movements around the globe. Sadly for those who seek conceptual clarity, in the vernacular the term is often used without much consistency, or pejoratively – very often as a synonym for opportunism or demagoguery – to refer to those with opposing political views (Mudde, 2004; Bale, Van Kessel and Taggart, 2011).

The academic debate on populism is more sophisticated, even though there is an on-going – perhaps never-ending – debate about whether populism can best be conceived of as a discourse, (thin-centred) ideology, style, or discursive frame (e.g. Laclau, 2005; Stanley, 2008; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; van Kessel, 2014; Aslanidis, 2015). Many scholars, however, broadly agree on the constitutive elements of the concept. Accordingly, populism entails a defense of popular sovereignty and a Manichean distinction between the corrupt 'elites' and the virtuous 'people' (e.g. Mudde, 2004). Populism can thus be seen as a set of ideas about the functioning of democracy. It chooses the side of the ordinary people, and opposes the political establishment and other 'elites'. While populism is also regularly associated with organizational or stylistic aspects (e.g. 'charismatic' leadership and plain, confrontational language), such elements are arguably not defining properties of populism, and often derive from its more ideational elements (e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; van Kessel, 2015).

While it blames the 'elites' for the ills in society, and appeals to the 'common wisdom' of the ordinary

people, populism *per se* remains silent as far as concrete policy proposals are concerned – hence why some scholars prefer to treat it as a ‘thin-centered’ ideology (see [Freeden, 1998](#)). Populism can be combined with more comprehensive ideologies. Indeed, it is not necessarily problematic to conclude that populism is used for such a wide variety of political actors across the globe; populism is ‘chameleonic’ in appearing in different ideological guises in different contexts and throughout history ([Taggart, 2000](#)). Moreover, movements, politicians, and political parties that express populism differ in the way they define ‘the people’ they appeal to and ‘the elites’ they oppose.

Taking this into consideration, and subscribing to the notion that populism can be seen as a key characteristic of certain political actors, it is possible to identify various subtypes of populism. One example of scholarly work engaging in such an exercise is the article of [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser \(2012\)](#), which compares contemporary populism in Europe and Latin America, and argues that European populism predominantly has an ‘exclusive’ character, whereas Latin America is characterized by a more ‘inclusive’ type of populism. In the remainder of this contribution, I will predominantly focus on the (dominant) exclusionary type of populism in Europe, and the characteristics, key themes, and electoral drivers of the populist radical right (PRR) party family in particular ([Mudde, 2007](#)). While current affairs and developments related to the various crises in Europe provide a conducive environment for populism, the success and failure of individual populist parties is also a matter of their own ‘agency’.

### *I. Populism in Europe*

Since political parties are still the main vehicles of political competition in European democracies, populism in Europe is typically associated with parties and their leaders. In Western European countries with (previously) dominant party families, it is mainly parties at the ideological fringes that are associated with populism – though some cases such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy are quite hard to pin down ideologically. In former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, populism is a more broad-spectrum phenomenon (e.g. [Učeň, 2007](#)). After the fall of communism, it was practically impossible to distinguish between ‘established parties’ – save, perhaps, the ‘communist successor’ parties – and populist parties chal-

lenging them. Economic crises and corruption scandals, furthermore, fed into a favorable context for populism, and a large number of new parties, some more successful than others, aimed to capitalize on a prevailing anti-political mood by promising to offer a ‘clean’ alternative to the corrupt political class. Some of these parties’ anti-establishment traits soon waned, however, once they took the opportunity to govern themselves. Furthermore, it is a moot point whether all these parties were, beyond their anti-establishment character, truly populist. Some scholars indeed prefer to stay away from the concept, resorting instead to terms such as ‘anti-establishment reform parties’ ([Hanley and Sikk, 2016](#)).

When populism is widespread, it is not always straightforward or meaningful to separate populist from non-populist parties (see e.g. [Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug, 2014](#); [Aslanidis, 2015](#)). However, for some political actors, which express populist statements frequently and consistently, populism is arguably an essential element of their ideology. Particularly in the Western European context, the concept has discriminating power, as populism is not a consistent trait of traditionally dominant party families. Irrespective of more ‘mainstream’ populist examples such as Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia ([Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015](#)), populist parties are typically found on the radical left and, in particular, the radical right.

The European debt crisis, like the subsequent refugee crisis, arguably proved the PRR’s point that the EU is a malfunctioning apparatus unable to solve pressing problems ...the UK’s decision by referendum to leave the EU has further emboldened PRR parties with an anti-EU agenda.

Left-wing populist parties frame the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’ mainly in socio-economic terms, whereby ordinary people are portrayed as the victims of neo-liberalism and its agents (e.g. multinationals, bankers), and a political elite supporting the capitalist system ([March, 2011](#)). Examples of such parties are Die Linke in Germany and the relative newcomers Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece. The latter two parties experienced remarkable electoral success recently, with

Podemos receiving a fifth of the vote in the 2015 Spanish national election – although it was not able to extend its support in the early 2016 reprise. SYRIZA polled over a third of the vote in both 2015 national elections, and has been the senior governing party since – though its behavior in government and compliance with the EU bailout packages has led to some debate as to whether the party is still populist (Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Katsambekis, 2016).

In general, left-wing populists do not attain the same levels of success as their populist radical right counterparts. Following Mudde (2007), these PRR parties share an ideological core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism; besides their populist anti-establishment appeals, they are characterized by a xenophobic version of nationalism, and express the belief in a strictly ordered society with clear norms and lines of authority. In Western Europe, the PRR's nativism has predominantly translated in anti-immigration and, particularly in more recent times, anti-Islam positions. In the post-communist context, where immigration levels have remained low, the PRR has typically taken a hostile stance towards ethnic minority groups. This applies not least to the Roma, who have a considerable presence across parts of Central and Eastern Europe.

Given the party family's nativist character, the characterization of the PRR by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) as primarily 'exclusive' makes sense. PRR parties favour the exclusion of 'non-natives' where it concerns the distribution of state resources (material dimension) and political influence (political dimension). They furthermore primarily define the 'people' they appeal to in a negative way, that is, by identifying those who do not belong to the nation (symbolic dimension). This sets them apart from contemporary populist movements in Latin America, as well as left-wing populist parties in Europe, which are primarily geared at representing (or 'including') the ordinary (working-class) people. The notion of an exclusive-inclusive dichotomy should not be pushed too far. The PRR arguably strives for the political *inclusion* of the 'silent majority' of native people, whose interests have, they argue, been ignored by the corrupt elites. At the same time, left-wing populist parties in Europe can be exclusionary in their wariness of intra-EU labour immigration, which they fear brings down working-class wages and leads to a race to the bottom in terms of welfare provision.

In terms of electoral results, the PRR party family has gradually expanded its popular support in the past decades. Early members include the French Front National and Austrian People's Party (FPÖ), which have survived leadership changes and, judging from recent French regional and Austrian presidential elections, currently experience highs in their popular support. The Danish People's Party (DF) has been another successful PRR party that has seen stable support levels in the 2000s – a period during which it repeatedly acted as support partner for minority governments – and which has increased its vote share (21.1 per cent) in the latest national election of 2015. Examples of other PRR cases enjoying considerable support during the past decade are the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the True Finns (PS), and the Sweden Democrats (SD). Hungarian politics is arguably dominated by the PRR, if one counts Fidesz (which has progressively shifted away from 'mainstream' politics) and Jobbik (perhaps too 'extreme') among its members (see e.g. Pirro, 2015; Batory, 2016). Between them, the parties obtained almost two-thirds of the vote in the 2014 national election (44.9 per cent for Fidesz and 20.2 for Jobbik).

While the PRR is on the rise in various parts of Europe, it is worth noting that not all parties have experienced stable successes. The Slovak National Party (SNS), the Flemish Interest (VB) in Belgium, the Lega Nord (LN) in Italy, and the Greater Romania Party (PRM), for instance, saw their electoral results fluctuate or deteriorate. In certain countries, moreover, the PRR has still failed to (genuinely) break through at the national level. The German Bundestag lacks representatives of the party family – even though the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which currently qualifies as a PRR member, is represented at the regional and European levels, and is likely to enter the federal parliament after the elections scheduled for the autumn of 2017. The House of Commons in the United Kingdom only has one member from the PRR UK Independence Party, although this is largely due to the mechanics of the First-Past-the-Post electoral system – a similar majoritarian system also holds back the French Front National in parliamentary elections. Finally, in crisis-stricken Greece and Spain, the populist left has shown itself to be a more attractive option in recent years.

## II. A Conducive Environment for the PRR

Despite variation in the levels of PRR success across

Europe, it is fair to argue that the party family is experiencing a high in terms of electoral strength. This is not a great surprise, considering the issues that have dominated the news in recent years, notably the European debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and the series of terrorist attacks and assassinations carried out by Muslim men. All of these issues played into the hands of PRR parties, who are in a position to argue that the recent events prove right their analysis of the current state of affairs in Europe.

Starting with the latter issue, the recent terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, Germany, as well as those beyond Europe, arguably lend credence to the PRR's warnings about Islam's violent and expansionist tendencies. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Islam has become a key issue for the party family, with Muslims being depicted as a dangerous non-native group, or a 'fifth column' in Western societies. The inflow of refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries provides a related issue on which PRR parties can capitalize. Besides concerns about overpopulation and the 'Islamisation' of Europe, reports about some of the violent acts being committed by returned Islamic State recruits, or otherwise traumatized refugees, play into the PRR's hand. Even in Central and Eastern Europe, a region with few immigrants or Muslims, these issues have become more salient. Notably, dominant 'mainstream' party figureheads Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, and Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Robert Fico in Slovakia – all branded as populists by some observers – have expressed their opposition to harboring refugees. Refugees are alleged to pose risks concerning safety, cultural homogeneity, as well as public health.

In previous years, the European financial and economic crises provided ammunition for PRR parties, which tend to share a Eurosceptic outlook. The contemporary PRR typically portrays the EU as a 'super state' threatening the sovereignty of the nations and, through the opening of borders, the cultural homogeneity of countries. In addition, the complex and elitist European decision-making process is at odds with the populist appeal of these parties (e.g. [Canovan, 1999](#)). With the crisis unfolding and amidst rising levels of Euroscepticism ([Serricchio, Tsakatika and Quaglia, 2013](#)), the PRR in debt-ridden EU countries could, similar to left-wing populists, voice dissent with the harsh austerity stipulations of the European Commission and creditor countries – not least Germany. In creditor countries,

on the other hand, the PRR could express opposition to tax-payer-funded bailouts and the transfer of more sovereignty to the European level, in the form of arrangements such as the European Stability Mechanism and the banking union. More generally, the European debt crisis, like the subsequent refugee crisis, arguably proved the PRR's point that the EU is a malfunctioning apparatus unable to solve pressing problems. Most recently, the UK's decision by referendum to leave the EU has further emboldened PRR parties with an anti-EU agenda. That said, while the EU is, or has become, a central issue for parties like UKIP, AfD and PVV, not all PRR parties have prioritized the issue, or gone as far as to oppose EU-membership outright ([Pirro and van Kessel, 2015](#)).

It further is questionable whether the socio-economic downturn itself has fueled the PRR's success. Following [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser \(2012, 167\)](#), "the European populist radical right is in essence [...] a post-material phenomenon, based first and foremost on identity rather than (material) interest" (see also [Mudde, 2007](#)). Indeed, studies have shown that PRR supporters are primarily motivated by 'cultural' concerns about immigration and multiculturalism, instead of socio-economic grievances (e.g. [Ivarsflaten, 2008](#); [Oesch, 2008](#)). There are indications, however, that (Western European) PRR parties are converging around a well-defined 'welfare chauvinist' position ([Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990](#); [Lefkofridi and Michel, 2014](#); [Ivaldi, 2015](#)). This position basically entails a support for economic redistribution and the preservation of welfare state entitlements, but only for 'deserving natives'. Immigrants, on the other hand, should be excluded from most entitlements. It is conceivable that the welfare chauvinist positions of PRR parties contribute to their success. PRR parties tap into an amalgamation of cultural and economic anxieties: resistance to immigration is not only related to concerns about culture, identity and safety, but also borne out of fears of economic competition and deprivation. The role of 'the economy' in PPR support thus deserves a fresh look, particularly in the context of the European debt crisis and its consequences.

### *III. Success is also a Matter of 'Agency'*

While the breeding ground for the PRR in Europe is fertile, the success of individual parties does not depend on the presence of political opportunities alone.



There are other factors at play which explain why the PRR is currently more successful in some countries than in others. Notably, in order to seize the opportunities provided, PRR parties, just like their contenders, need to present themselves as credible alternatives to other (established) parties (Carter, 2011; Mudde, 2007; van Kessel, 2015). PRR parties need capable and visible leadership in order to put their agenda across to the electorate, and should frame their grievances with the current state of affairs in a non-extremist way to remain palatable to a sufficient number of voters (Rydgren, 2005). After their breakthrough, furthermore, they need to remain organizationally cohesive in order to survive and impress their supporters. Once in government, they need to preserve their credibility as populist anti-establishment forces, which is a challenging, yet not impossible, balancing act (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). Yet in many countries PRR parties have now become the natural 'owners' of issues such as immigration and European integration. Many mainstream parties find it difficult to formulate a clear vision concerning these issues, which means that the fortunes of PRR parties are unlikely to wane any time soon.

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## Special Topic: Populism in the U.S.

### Listening to Rural Populist Support for Right-Leaning Candidates in the United States

by Katherine Cramer

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What drives populism? Economic insecurity and lack of representation by political elites seem to be key ingredients. But those things are not sufficient to have a populist uprising (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). It is perceptions and the construction of identity, not objective conditions, that are at the root of populism. Populist candidates are buoyed by a perception among voters that elites are out of touch with ordinary people, trampling on their interests and usurping resources for themselves and undeserving minorities (Canovan, 1999). Populists pledge to restore order to 'the people' by taking power away from elites and experts. They strive through their rhetoric to define who is the 'us' and who is the 'them' and to map good vs. evil onto the will of the people vs. that of the elite (Hawkins, 2009).

Because perceptions and identities are key to understanding when members of the mass public will be mobilized by populist appeals, it is worth our while to listen to the manner in which people are interpreting their circumstances and how they are understanding themselves in relation to others. It is by listening to those perspectives that we can better understand how support for a tough-talking, economic populist candidate like Trump can emerge from a party like the Republican Party whose establishment leaders have been pro-free

trade and include the economic elites that we might expect populist arguments would be railing against.

In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, both Democrat Bernie Sanders and Republican Donald Trump have vied for the 'populist mantle' (Azari and Hetherington, 2016, 104) and used anti-establishment rhetoric (Oliver and Rahn, 2016, 193–4). In this essay, I focus on populism as it pertains to the right-leaning candidate, Trump, to dwell on the question of how it is possible for economic populism to emerge in support of a party that has in recent years been the party of the wealthy and pro-business elite.

In addition, I focus on support for Trump in order to delve into the nature of the rural vs. urban divide in support for this candidate. The last time that the United States experienced a populist resurgence of this magnitude, during the Gilded Age of the late 1800s, we did not observe the extensive rural vs. urban split in support for the parties that we do now, particularly in areas outside the deep South (Azari and Hetherington, 2016, 99–100).

I have been listening to the perceptions of people through fieldwork in the upper Midwestern state of Wisconsin since 2007. In this essay, I will apply what I have learned from listening to conversations among regulars in local gathering places to illuminate populism in the contemporary United States, particularly as it pertains to support from rural areas for the Trump candidacy.

#### *I. Observing rural resentment in Wisconsin*

The study I draw on here consisted of observing conversations among 39 groups of 'regulars' that I found with the help of informants across 27 communities that I had sampled across the state of Wisconsin. I repeatedly invited myself into these groups between May of 2007 and November 2012, and have revisited some of these groups during the 2016 presidential campaign. These were groups of people typically meeting early in the morning in gas stations and diners. The modal person was a middle-aged white man on his way to work, but most groups contained a mix of workers and retirees, as well as men and women.<sup>1</sup>

My initial purpose was to study the role of social class identity in political understanding, so I sampled municipalities to vary in socioeconomic background

<sup>1</sup> More details on the methods are in Cramer (2016, ch. 2).

and type of industry. That sampling approach meant that I spent time in urban and suburban areas, but a great deal of time in rural places as well, as about half of the population in Wisconsin resides in a rural place. Wisconsin has two main metropolitan centers, Madison, the state capitol and home to the flagship university of the state university system, and Milwaukee, the largest city and its industrial center.

I was not expecting to observe, nor looking for, rural vs. urban divides. But the pervasive resentment toward the major cities in the non-metropolitan places I visited surprised me. This 'rural consciousness' consisted of a strong identity as a person from a small town combined with a perception that rural communities do not get their fair share of decision-making power, resources, or respect.

The resentment I heard was a complex perception of injustice and a sense that people less deserving than people 'like us' were getting more than their fair share.

For example, in a small town in northwestern Wisconsin, I occasionally spent time with a group of people that gathers in the basement of the local church every Tuesday morning: stay-at-home moms and some kids, retirees, and people taking a break from work. On my first visit to this group, they told me that people in the major cities in the state, Madison and Milwaukee, have no understanding of what rural life is like and regularly overlook the concerns of people in rural places.

KJC: What do you think the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not do well? When you think about [it] . . .

Martha:<sup>2</sup> Represents our area. I mean we are like, we're strange to Madison. They want us to do everything for Madison's laws and the way they do things, but we totally live differently than the city people live. So they need to think more rural instead of all this city area.

Donna: We can't afford to educate our children like they can in the cities. Simple as that. Don't have the advantages.

Ethel: All the things they do, based on Madison and Milwaukee, never us.

Martha: Yeah, we don't have the advantages that they give their local people there, I think a lot of times. And it is probably because they don't understand how rural people live and what we deal with and our problems.

KJC: I think that's right. I think there is a whole lot of distance between – especially this corner of the state.

Martha: Oh we're, like, we're lost up here!

Rosemary: They don't even understand how we live in [our community]! [Laughter]

Martha: Yeah that's right! It's very true. They won't even come and help us with our roads until you demand it.

I heard about the unfair distribution of resources in many different forms, but most prominently in conversations about public education funding and the structure of taxation. In a small town in central Wisconsin, I took part in the following conversation among a group of men playing dice in the back room of a diner on a weekday morning in May 2007:

Mark: One thing we were bitching about yesterday is that you – is the state's penchant for unfunded mandates – what three times, two times they got a referenda in the community that was not wanted. And so now – they keep jamming the cost down to the county so they can avoid spending it on the state's nickel, that has to stop.

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<sup>2</sup>All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the people I observed.

Ernie: Things that are mandated should be paid for.

Mark: Yeah, the tax structure in this state is weird. I think that is a fundamental problem with the state is that they have to re-organize their tax structure. Local schools, local municipalities, and of course the state – what they're doing is they're just redirecting tax burden on the local taxes which ends up being more evident to the locals, so they more complain and then what ends up happening is they say it isn't their fault.

Richard: We don't have the economic base here to pay the kind of taxes that comes out of Madison. You know I mean down there if things go up 1 percent it doesn't – but 1 percent means a hell of a lot more here than it does in Madison or what Henry calls south of the Mason Dixon Line, the line east and west going through Wausau.

Dale: Or Portage [a city about an hour's drive north of Madison].

Richard: Well –

Mark: But I mean you know, right down to the tax form or the support form for the schools – why is a kid worth fourteen thousand dollars in Mequon [a suburban Milwaukee city] and what is he up here, Henry? Seven?

Henry: Oh yeah – the consistency in schools that we're spending money – ridiculous. ... Why don't they give each school X number of dollars per kid? If they want to spend eleven thousand dollars on a kid, tax the school district for the difference.

Ernie: Have it averaged.

Henry: Yeah, have it averaged. Everybody gets eight thousand dollars and if you want to spend eleven, tax the local district for it.

Comprehensive plan.

Mark: This goes with the schools, in terms of facilities – facilities are gorgeous because they have the money to spend on it.

Henry: If you take the state of Wisconsin and take a ruler and start at Green Bay and diagonally and just go fifty miles north of Madison, right over to the corner of the state, all your money lies in the south end of the state, your votes weight there. You're never going to get nothing changed to the north.

Dave: That is absolutely correct.

Henry: That's it.

Mark: That's not just the schools.

Henry: We listen to the – being on the school board, we went several times to testify to the legislature to tell you that the formula was wrong, but they don't change it, because we haven't – if anybody on the south end would say change the formula for the schools, they never would get elected another two years and that's why all they are is looking for their own job.

This conversation reveals a perspective of people who feel ignored, overlooked, and disrespected by elites, especially those in government. For many of the conversations, the resentment was directed specifically at liberal urban elites.

These views also carry another hallmark of contemporary populism: identity anxiety. In the conversations of this and other small town or rural groups, I heard concern that the way of life they associate with communities like their own, which they consider quintessential American communities, is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. They see the population in their small towns disappearing, along with their Main Street storefronts, family farms, and even their local schools (e.g. Davidson, 1996; Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Lobao and Kraybill, 2005; Domina, 2006).



I observed these views as far back as May 2007. In 2010, Republican Scott Walker successfully tapped into them to win election as Governor of Wisconsin. One part of his strategy was to direct this rural resentment, and economic and identity anxiety more generally, toward public employees (Cramer, 2014). Even though roughly 10% of the workforce in any given Wisconsin municipality are public employees, the people I spent time with viewed those employees as people driven by urban values and decisions. I heard many people talk about public school teachers, for example, even those who had lived in the community for decades, as people whose behavior was influenced by teachers' unions, and 'those bureaucrats in Madison'. The policies that drove them and others, such as employees of the Department of Natural Resources, were regularly viewed as out of touch with local wisdom and concerns.

In addition, public employees have pensions and health care insurance, and in the smaller communities, salaries that outpaced employees in the private sector (see analyses in Cramer (2016, 133)). In that context, Walker was able to campaign on a platform that painted public employees as the target of blame. They were the haves, and private employees were the have-nots. For example, during a debate during the 2010 gubernatorial campaign, Walker said, "We can no longer have a society where the public-sector employees are the 'haves' and the people who foot the bill, the taxpayers, are the 'have-nots'".<sup>3</sup> Among people who believed they were working hard to make ends meet, and couldn't afford health insurance, and yet were being forced to pay taxes for public employees who seemed to neither work very hard nor address local concerns, Walker's arguments were welcome.

Donald Trump is a very different candidate from Scott Walker. Walker is a pro-business, small government Republican, heavily backed by the Koch brothers who conduct significant fundraising, organizing, and policy development work on behalf of the Republican Party (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). One of Trump's signature stances has been to oppose free trade. Establishment Republicans have tended to denounce Trump. During the Wisconsin presidential primary, Walker denounced Trump and announced his support for Ted Cruz.

people who supported Walker may also be supporting Trump due to more than the fact that they are both Republicans. Both Walker and Trump are saying, in effect, "You are right. You are not getting your fair share. What you consider to be the American way of life has evaporated and it is in part because people who are undeserving are getting more than they should." Walker placed blame on public employees. Trump is pointing to immigrants, Muslims, and out-of-touch elite politicians.

The nativist appeals of Trump deserve attention. The blatant ethnocentrism of Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail has surprised many. However, it is an oversimplification to explain the appeal of Trump among the people I studied as simply racism.

When the people I talked with were expressing resentment toward urban areas, it is highly likely that that was at times a reference to race (Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005), especially given the highly racially segregated nature of Wisconsin and its cities (Frey, 2010). The reference to the Mason-Dixon line in the conversation about the allocation of resources above has an obvious racial reference, for example.

However, the resentment I heard was a complex perception of injustice and a sense that people less deserving than people 'like us' were getting more than their fair share. When people talked about 'those people in Madison' or 'those people in Milwaukee', they were referring to white, professional, upper-middle class people, Democrats, and elite urban decision-makers – as well as to people of color. And the references to cities were also often references to public employees. They were perceiving of all of these groups as less hard working and therefore less deserving than themselves (Soss and Schram, 2007; Winter, 2008).

I do not mean to suggest that economic anxiety drives racism. Indeed, the opposite may be the case, given evidence that people higher in racial resentment are more likely to perceive that the economy is worse off (Tesler, 2016). What I am suggesting is that economic anxiety and racism were intertwined in the sentiments I heard, and understanding the political implications requires paying attention to how they are intertwined.

The conversations I have listened to suggest that

Politicians have much to gain by giving people tar-

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<sup>3</sup>This comment was reported here: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/04/business/04labor.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/04/business/04labor.html?_r=0).

gets to blame for the economic, political, and social injustices people believe they are experiencing. The fact that these perceptions are complex means that one candidate can successfully tap into them by claiming that public employees are lazy, inefficient bureaucrats who are getting way more than their fair share, while another seemingly very different candidate can capitalize on them by claiming that non-whites are undeserving and enjoying unjust public support. Both candidates are tapping into a similar well of economic and identity anxieties.

Those similarities underscore the fact that populist appeals operate through perceptions more than individuals' objective circumstances. Observing individuals' objective economic situations is not enough to understand whether or not they will support a populist candidate. A recent Gallup analysis of Trump supporters suggests that they are not less well-off economically than the average American. However, it does suggest that his supporters tend to be from places that are struggling economically and socially; they are from places with less intergenerational mobility and lower life expectancy (Rothwell, 2016).

Understanding populism requires understanding how people perceive their situation and how they perceive the threat of others. Trump supporters do not appear to be living in places more exposed to trade or immigration (Rothwell, 2016), but they are nevertheless drawn to a candidate who points to these things as threats to their well-being. They see their personal financial situation as worse and are dissatisfied with their own life and economic status (Sides and Tesler, 2016).

Notice that the geographic context in which people are living is related to whether or not a populist candidate like Trump has an appeal. This is a reminder that the rural vs. urban divides we see in populist appeals are about more than people with particular socioeconomic characteristics living in certain types of places. People construct perceptions of who is getting their fair share of power, resources, and respect in ways that are often related to the places that they live, and they use these perceptions to interpret politics. The conversations I observed suggest that Trump may have extra appeal in

rural places not because such places have more experience with trade or immigration, but because in such places there is a geographic map of residents' understanding of who is and is not getting their fair share. For many in more rural places, urban areas seem to be getting public resources, they are the location where the decisions affecting their lives are made, and they are at the same time out of touch and disrespectful of their own communities' way of life.<sup>4</sup>

Populism is a political phenomenon that builds on a complex mix of conditions and sentiments. That is why I find it useful to refer to resentment as opposed to anger. In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, we have heard a lot about the anger motivating support for Trump and Sanders, but there is a need to notice the undertone of resentment that has been brewing for multiple decades. It is this undertone that sets the stage for enterprising politicians to tap into and mobilize support by fomenting that resentment into anger. How is it that Trump can create 'ungentleness' in a crowd within minutes of starting a speech (Saunders, 2016)? He has not created that ungentleness from scratch. He is cultivating it out of perceptions that are already there.

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<sup>4</sup>In the Wisconsin Republican presidential primary in April 2016, Ted Cruz beat Donald Trump. The map of returns shows that Cruz was particularly successful within the Milwaukee media market, and that Trump was more successful in the more rural areas of the state (<http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/Wisconsin>). It is notable that the Republican establishment in the state is primarily within the Milwaukee media market, and Walker expressed his support for Cruz on a highly popular Milwaukee conservative talk radio show.

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## Populism and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election in Comparative Perspective

by Kirk Hawkins

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With the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, populism finally seems to have found the United States (Gerson, 2015; Stoeck, 2016). A putative populist (Donald Trump) managed to win a major party nomination; other alleged, if less successful populist candidates, dominated the ranks of the Republican Party nomination; and a populist contender (Bernie Sanders) nearly won the Democratic Party's nomination. Commentators have noticed the strong ideological and stylistic similarities between these candidates and radical populists in Latin America and Europe, and they fear the polarization and authoritarianism these populists might bring (Carroll, 2016; Seib, 2016; Wofford, 2016).

Reactions to populism in the campaign have focused especially on Trump. Early reactions were ambivalent (in a scientific sense): Trump was acknowledged as someone very anti-establishment, who had policy views associated with the European radical right (Kazin, 2016; Norris, 2016; Hamid, 2016) – hence definitely populist. But skeptical academics argued that he also lacked clear references to a popular subject that should be the bearer of sovereignty; indeed, his speeches were mostly about himself (Barr, 2016; Mudde, 2015).

While this newfound awareness of populism is welcome, one is reminded of the foreign language student who, after learning a new word in his second language, discovers that all the native speakers have learned the same word as well. Populism, of course, is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Populist third-party movements have challenged the traditional parties at regular intervals for over 150 years (Kazin, 1998). Yet, according to one review (Ochoa Espejo et al., Forthcoming), fewer than five articles on populism in the U.S. have appeared in mainstream political science journals in the past 25 years, and recent studies of ostensibly populist movements – such as Ross Perot's United We Stand, the Tea Party, or Occupy Wall Street – almost entirely fail to mention the term (Hardt and Negri, 2011; Skocpol and Williamson, 2013; Stone and Rapoport, 2008).

Comparativists are especially worried that Americanists will ignore the insights gleaned from years of

study of populism in Latin America and Europe. Coverage of the U.S. campaign has not been very comparative or scientific. With rare exceptions (see especially [Oliver and Rahn, 2016](#)), articles, blog posts, and other media coverage of the campaign have ignored the theories devised by political scientists who study populism in other countries. U.S. scholars and pundits have been extraordinarily hasty to declare different candidates populist, and almost none of them use the measurement tools created by other scholars. Thus, we really don't know if Trump, Sanders, or any other candidates are populist, and if they are, we don't know how strong their populism is comparatively.

In an effort to provide this comparative perspective, members of [Team Populism](#), an international research network studying the causes of populism, have been conducting a project measuring the populist discourse of the major candidates during the presidential campaign. (Because of this joint effort, I will speak in the editorial 'we'). Furthermore, we consciously incorporate insights from the broader study of populism to an analysis of events in the United States. Our results are tentative – the campaign is incomplete as of this writing – but we feel confident sharing a summary.

As it turns out, there have been strong populist candidates in the current campaign, and at least one candidate (Trump) became more populist. But populism in the U.S. is still not at the level one finds in Latin American countries. Instead, it is similar to what we see in most Western European countries, where radical populists rarely win seats, but mild populists occasionally win pluralities or membership in a government coalition ([Hawkins and Silva, 2015](#)). We argue that this comparative perspective helps us better understand what is causing populism in the U.S. and how severe its consequences might be for this nation's democracy if it came to power. We also suggest where the study of populism in the United States could go if Americanists were to take it more seriously.

### *I. How Populist Are They?*

For us, populist discourse is the essential indicator of whether a politician (or voter) is populist. Like many of the contributors to this issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter, we define populism in ideational terms, as a discursive frame or thin-centered ideology that sees politics as a Manichaean struggle between a reified will

of the people and a conspiring elite. We recognize that many scholars prefer to add other features to their definitions, such as a charismatic, outsider leadership; a movement-based organization; short-sighted economic policies; or the presence of certain types of coalitions. However, most definitions consider a pro-people/anti-establishment discourse a necessary condition for anything to be considered populist, and so we feel confident that our measurement speaks to diverse academic audiences.

In our study, we measure populist discourse through a textual analysis of speeches and party manifestos, using a technique called holistic grading that we have successfully deployed in other settings ([Hawkins, 2009](#); [Hawkins and Kocijan, 2013](#)). Holistic grading is a type of content analysis, in that it assigns a numerical value to the text based on the content. But unlike in traditional content analysis, which works at the level of words or sentences, the coders read each text in its entirety and assign a single score, based on a coding rubric and a set of anchor texts that illustrate each point in the measurement scale. Roughly, the scale runs from 0 (no populism) to 1 (clear populist elements, but used inconsistently or with only a mild tone) to 2 (clear populist elements used consistently and with a strong tone). Just to be clear, by 'populist elements' we mean the two core elements of populist discourse: a reified will of the common people and a conspiring elite. Thus, an antagonistic speech is not populist unless it references both elements, and a speech cannot merely contain positive references to ordinary citizens, but must situate the people in a struggle with the elite.

For each text, we have two student coders read the text in its original language (English), assign a score, and complete a record with a short, typed justification for their score and illustrative quotes. In this study, we asked coders to provide an additional decimal score, as well as subscores for the key elements of populist discourse (reified people, and conspiring elite). These subscores are a new feature that give added information for some of the candidates. All of the scoring sheets, scores, and original texts are available at the Team Populism website, [populism.byu.edu](http://populism.byu.edu). Just to be clear, holistic grading is not the only way to measure populism – other scholars have used other techniques of textual analysis productively ([Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011](#)) – but it is currently one of the few that allows large-scaled international comparison.



The average scores for all of the candidates are in Table 1. These are averages of all the speech scores and the manifesto score, with the speech total weighted twice as heavily as the manifesto (the total number of speeches varies from 3 to 8 for each candidate). For a truly comparative perspective, we include scores for the major parties in the Spanish parliamentary election of December 2015 and the candidates for the Venezuelan presidential by-election of 2013; these scores use smaller but similar samples of just three texts: the announcement speech by the party leader or presidential candidate, the closing speech, and the party manifesto. By way of background information, the Spanish election took place less than two years after the emergence of Podemos, a widely discussed left-populist party that exploited popular anger towards the post-2009 austerity measures; this was the second parliamentary election in which Podemos participated. It also marked the first appearance of Unidad Popular, a coalition of traditional leftist parties that in later elections formed a coalition with Podemos. In Venezuela, the 2013 presidential by-election was held to elect a successor following the death of Hugo Chávez; Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's vice-president, defeated the opposition candidate Henrique Capriles by a small margin after a campaign marked by irregularities.

As can be seen, the level of populism in the U.S. campaign is more like that of the Spanish election than the Venezuelan election. Consider first the U.S. campaign versus the Spanish election. Only one candidate/party in each of these countries has a score close to the threshold of 1.5, Bernie Sanders and Unidad Popular. Below these are one or more moderately populist candidates (average scores greater than .5): Trump and Ted Cruz in the United States, and Podemos and Democracia i Libertad in Spain. And in each country there are two or three essentially non-populist parties or candidates: Hilary Clinton, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich in the United States, and the traditional governing parties of PP and PSOE in Spain.

By contrast, Venezuela is a seething cauldron of populism. Admittedly, the context is different, in that we have just two parties/candidates competing in a situation of declining democracy. But both the governing and opposition candidates receive very high scores across the entire campaign. For the current U.S. campaign to end up similarly, not just Clinton but Trump would need to significantly ratchet up their rhetoric and

re-write their party manifestos. Only Sanders' discourse comes close to what we hear in Venezuela.

Because we have a large number of datapoints for the U.S. campaign, we can break these results down across time, allowing us to look more closely at individual candidates – and thus at some of the specific claims that pundits and scholars have made about Trump. The results are in Figure 1. Most of the candidates have fairly consistent rhetoric: Sanders stays high (coders all noted how similar his speeches were), and Clinton, Kasich, and Rubio remain low. The candidate who shifts the most is Trump, who has become more populist across the course of his campaign, especially after May 2016 when he begins to change his campaign team and effectively wins the nomination. Thus, our scores show that Trump was not initially very populist, but that he began to speak a more clearly populist language as the campaign progressed.

Comparativists are especially worried that Americanists will ignore the insights gleaned from years of study of populism in Latin America and Europe. Coverage of the U.S. campaign has not been very comparative or scientific.

Table 2 clarifies this shift by providing subscores for two crucial elements of Trump's speeches: a reified will of the people and a conspiring elite. These show that both sets of scholars – those who see populism in Trump, and those that note the absence of key elements early in the campaign – are somewhat right. The notion of a reified will of the people is relatively weak in his speeches, often showing up at barely a moderate level that is half as strong as the notion of a conspiring elite, confined frequently to vague references to 'we' or 'America'. But it is not entirely absent and increases as the campaign progresses, often moving in tandem with the notion of a conspiring elite. After Trump's breakthrough to the nomination in May, both elements began to show through more consistently and Trump appears more fully populist, as in his June 22 speech when he declares "This election will decide whether we are ruled by the people, or by the politicians," or in the convention speech when he says: "I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible

Table 1: Populist Discourse of Major Candidates/Party Leaders

US 2016		Spain 2015		Venezuela 2013	
Candidate	Average Score	Party	Average Score	Candidate	Average Score
Bernie Sanders	1.5	Unidad Popular	1.3	Nicolás Maduro	1.7
Donald Trump	0.8	Podemos	0.8	Henrique Capriles	1.5
Ted Cruz	0.8	Democracia i Libertad	0.8		
Marco Rubio	0.3	PP	0.1		
Hillary Clinton	0.2	PSOE	0.1		
John Kasich	0.1	Ciudadanos	0.0		

Figure 1: Individual Speech Scores by Candidate

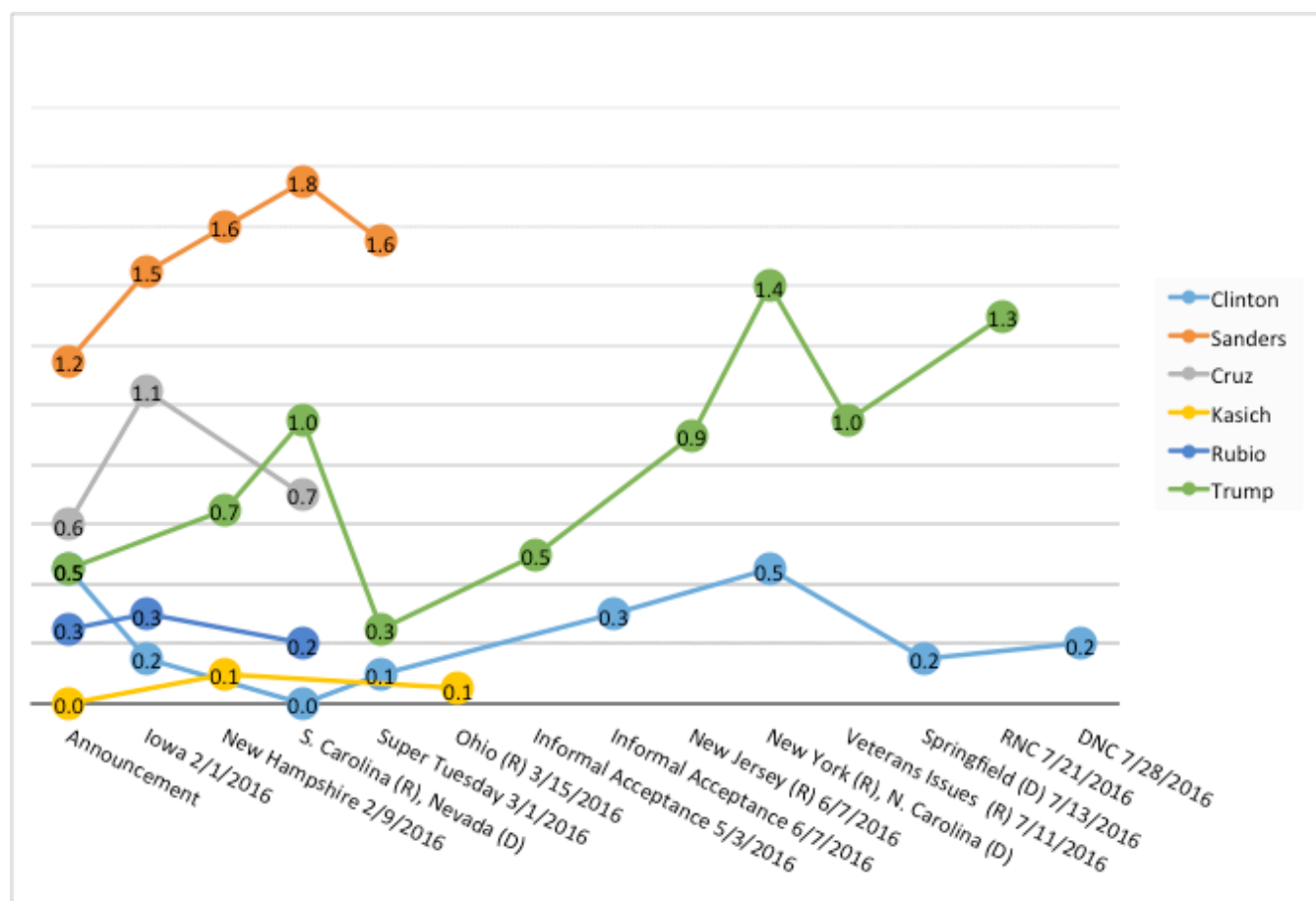


Table 2: Subscores by Text for Donald Trump

	Will of the people	Conspiring elite
Announcement	0.2	1.3
New Hampshire 2/9/2016	0.6	0.8
S. Carolina (R), Nevada (D) 2/20/2016	1.0	0.9
Super Tuesday 3/1/2016	0.2	0.9
Informal Acceptance 5/3/2016	0.5	0.9
New Jersey (R) 6/7/2016	1.0	1.4
New York (R), N. Carolina (D) 6/22/2016	1.2	1.6
Veterans Issues (R) 7/11/2016	0.6	1.5
RNC 7/21/2016	0.7	1.0
Average	0.6	1.1

and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country. People who work hard but no longer have a voice. I AM YOUR VOICE.” That said, Trump still does not feature these elements as strongly or as consistently as Sanders – he is, perhaps, only moderately populist.

## II. What is Causing This?

The discussion of Trump against a background of the other candidates and their more consistent discourses raises the question of causes. At a micro-level, we can ask why Trump changed his discourse while that of other candidates remained steady. Likewise, we can ask how the radical populism of Sanders could be reconciled with the decisively pluralist discourse of Clinton (given the near rebellion within the ranks during the convention, the answer is “not very easily”). These questions are not unimportant, since they get at the question of whether populism is a sincere feature of political rhetoric or something instrumental.

But we can also look at the macro-level, where we can ask what broader conditions facilitate the rise of populist forces across countries and across time – and what kinds of consequences they have for democracy. Scholars and pundits in the U.S. have suggested roughly two explanations for this latest wave of populism (albeit, as we have seen, a fairly moderate one). They are similar to explanations coming out of the broader comparativist literature on radical-right populism. First, a number of U.S. scholars and pundits are arguing that

populism grows out of economic resentment; specifically, the losers of globalization (especially manual low-skilled labor) are seeking some kind of economic retrenchment or revenge against a political elite that has abandoned them (e.g. [Sides and Tesler, 2016](#)). Second, another group of scholars argues that populism is instead culturally driven, a response by holders of traditional values to the inroads made by liberal progressives (e.g. [Inglehart and Norris, 2016](#)).

While each argument has a grain of truth, they both repeat the mistakes made by a first generation of studies of radical right populism in Western Europe. These studies focused primarily on the radical right dimension of these parties (i.e., their anti-immigrant views, opposition to EU governance, and welfare state chauvinism), finding that support for these positions was especially common among the blue-collar sectors that supported these parties ([Oesch, 2008](#); [Ivarsflaten, 2008](#); [van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005](#)). While helpful for understanding the radical right, these theories later struggled to explain the inroads made by left-populist or other non-radical right populist parties, such as Podemos in Spain, SYRIZA in Greece, or the Five Star Movement in Italy, which have different issue profiles. Thus, more recent work on populism has shifted away from a focus on the narrow issues that drive particular flavors of populism, and towards general explanations for populism *per se*. These theories focus on the substance of populist ideas: the claim that politics is a cosmic struggle between the virtuous people and a conspiring elite.

Taking this populist argument at face value, these newer theories suggest that populism is a response to broad failures of democratic representation (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, *Forthcoming*; Kriesi, 2014; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). According to this view, populist forces arise whenever politicians collude to deny citizens their fundamental rights, especially equality before the law.

Seen in this comparative light, explanations that focus either on economic globalization or culture shifts are not wrong, but they are missing the larger picture. A comparative approach suggests that the current wave is similar to previous populist moments in U.S. history, reflecting a temporary disconnect between traditional parties and their constituents, rather than widespread outrage at a political system that has routinely failed to satisfy basic standards of governance. Much the same has been said of the newer populist parties and movements in Western Europe, such as those in Spain (de la Torre, 2015). This is not the situation one finds in many parts of Latin America and other developing democracies, and we should not expect to see the same overwhelming victories for highly radical populists in the United States.

### III. Directions for Further Research

While the recent study of populism in the U.S. presidential campaign should be applauded, much more research remains to be done. The work of comparativists provides some helpful avenues for Americanists (or ambitious comparativists) to consider.

First, of course, is the possibility of measuring the supply of populist parties at earlier points in U.S. history. Impressive work has been done recently for the latter half of the twentieth century (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016), but a fully comparative focus would greatly help this analysis. And there are one and a half centuries to study still, an impressive time series that cannot be duplicated in very many other countries.

Second, scholars studying populism in the U.S. have available a number of comparative tools for studying the demand for populism at the individual level through public opinion surveys (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014) and experiments (Bos, van der Brug and de Vreese, 2013; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, *Forthcoming*). While some of the first survey research

on populist attitudes was actually done in the U.S. (Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012), there has been very little follow-up. And, somewhat embarrassingly, there are no published studies of populism using experiments in the United States. These tools are essential for studying the mechanisms by which populist attitudes are created and activated, and they create opportunities for political psychologists to study the intersection of framing, emotion, and other cognitive mechanisms.

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## Populism in the 2016 U.S. Election

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In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, populism has been strongly evident in both the Democratic Party, in the unsuccessful primary campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, and the Republican Party, in the successful nomination of Donald Trump. The central conflicts in both major parties turned – albeit very differently – on populist framings of outsiders versus insiders, people versus elites, virtue versus corruption, and production versus parasitism. This is not to say that either figure is a populist as such, rather that each deployed populist language and style. Ultimately, populism was more strongly distinguishable in the Trump campaign, which also resulted in a takeover of the national party in this election season.

Populist phenomena in the United States differ from those elsewhere in two respects – one institutional, the other historical. Institutionally, the constitutional frame of U.S. politics constrains and fragments political expression. Indeed, where populism demands popular sovereignty and unmediated representation of the people, the Constitution separates governance between three branches of government, breaks up representation over time and space (staggered elections, overlapping electoral units), divides sovereignty between the national government and the states, and filters popular political expression into two great parties. Thus there are, on the one hand, no durable 'populist' parties as one finds in Europe, nor the possibility of populist majoritarian control of government as one finds in Latin

America. Rather, populism in the United States is expressed in the discourse of political candidates, or in social movements.

To say that populism occupies no formal space in the U.S. political system is not to diminish its potential power within party politics however, and this leads to its second distinguishing feature. As historian Michael Kazin described it, U.S. populism has historically operated as a 'mode of persuasion'. This mode can be quite powerful because it invokes the people – which in the U.S. context has always been the greatest form of legitimation. This notion of the people is deeply rooted in Machiavellian republicanism – which has been an authorizing form of political discourse since the founding. Populism's republican roots in the U.S. are also shaped by the 'producerist ethic', as historian Alexander Saxton called it, which divides society between the great majority who produce society's wealth and the minority (both elites and the dependent poor) who are seen as parasitic. This is reflected in the Jeffersonian belief that the yeoman farmer, as neither a master nor a slave, was the proper subject of civic virtue, republican liberty, and self-rule.

Unlike past populists, Trump's followers respond less to appeals to their value as producers, which in a financialized economy seems nostalgic anyway, than to brutal rage against immigrants and Muslims, and a new generation of black insurgents, who along with establishment elites are seen as the authors of the misery Trump supporters feel themselves to be experiencing.

For this reason U.S. populism remains open politically, because authorizing definitions of the people cannot be given in advance. Populist movements emerge at moments when powerful institutions can be convincingly cast as corrupt or parasitic on the body politic. It is then that myths of the latent authority that resides in the people become more powerful. This is the tension at the heart of U.S. populism – at moments of populist upheaval, the boundaries around the people can be fluid

and unstable. Yet the intelligibility of populist claims require an idea of the people that can credibly be narrated within identifiable logics. In the United States, this logic has employed the binary of producer and parasite – one that is often rendered in raced and gendered associations, yet need not be. Its expressions can be egalitarian and inclusive, or hierarchical and exclusive, or some of both. It is most potent, I argue, when expressed through strong affect.

Both Sanders and Trump proclaimed themselves to be tribunes of the people against entrenched elites. Announcing his candidacy in May 2015, Sanders thundered, "Today, with your support and the support of millions of people throughout this country, we begin a political revolution to transform our country economically, politically, socially and environmentally. Today, we stand here and say loudly and clearly that; 'Enough is enough. This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACs and their lobbyists.'" Similarly, Trump announced his candidacy as a political outsider, an anti-establishment figure who would refuse donations from Washington insiders.

To be sure, most presidential candidates since Jimmy Carter in 1976 have in some sense run against Washington, D.C. As trust in government has declined across the last half century, most contenders have sought to be saviors of a corrupt system. Sanders in some ways is both a political outsider and institutional insider. He has been an independent for his entire political career, only changing his partisan affiliation to Democrat to run for president. Yet he has had a long political career, first as mayor of Burlington, Vermont; then as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and finally as a U.S. Senator. Trump, meanwhile, presented himself as an outsider by virtue of his personal wealth, which he argued kept him free of 'special interests'.

Sanders ran a campaign that drew explicitly on the populist language of the Occupy Wall Street movement, claiming to speak for the 99%. Identifying Clinton with the pro-financial wing of the Democratic Party, he was able to paint Clinton as a political and economic elite, laying at her feet the enormous gap between the very rich and everyone else. "I don't think I have to explain to the American people what Wall Street did to this economy," he said in a typical campaign statement about

Clinton. “Are you qualified to be president of the United States when you’re raising millions of dollars from Wall Street?” Trump also claimed special connection to the people, drawing on old Nixonian language of ‘the silent majority’ and the ‘forgotten American’. Trump argued that he alone among his Republican rivals was a truth-teller, someone who could represent what Americans really think, and perhaps more importantly, feel.

Key to the populist politics is the claim of corruption – that small groups conspire against the people. Sanders supporters across the campaign season came to see the Democratic National Committee (DNC) as a corrupt force doing all in its power to rig the party nomination process on Clinton’s behalf. This sentiment exploded into tumultuous theater during the Nevada Democratic caucuses, and gained steam among Sanders voters prior to the Democratic National Convention when Wikileaks released internal DNC documents, some of which evinced some support for Clinton among DNC staff members. Although the emails did not demonstrate a clear conspiracy against Sanders, the backlash was severe enough to get DNC chair Deborah Wasserman-Schultz relieved of her position, and thousands of Sanders supporters demonstrated both in and outside the Democratic Convention in the days that followed.

Language of corruption has been fundamental to the Trump campaign, particularly in the general election. He refers to his Democratic rival solely as “Crooked Hillary” and her vice presidential candidate as “Corrupt Kaine.” Hammering away at charges of corruption concerning Benghazi, the email scandal, the Clinton Foundation, and more – Trump has made the venality of his opponent a central feature of his rhetoric.

Producerism was also a strong element in both the Sanders and Trump campaigns. Both spoke of bringing manufacturing jobs back to the US, and sought to do so through criticism of free trade – an issue that ties criticism of unrepresentative elites to the producerist ethic. Yet while both spoke of it on the campaign trail, Trump inhabited the stronger version of it, linking national decline to the absence of production. Throughout his campaign, Trump told crowds: “We don’t win any more.” “We don’t make anything.” “We are losing so much.”

Trump is arguably a more populist candidate than

was Sanders. That is partly because right-wing populism has had far greater purchase in the United States over the last half century, but also because of Trump’s mastery of performance and ability to generate affective popular identifications. Stated in its barest form, Trumpism links anxious racial standing to economic precarity, masculine worth, and political abandonment. Each of these terms impacts and amplifies the other through circuits that are at once rhetorical, visual, and emotional.

The populist politics that originally emerged as what Richard Nixon famously called the ‘silent majority’ in 1968 was forged in opposition to the black freedom movement and related anti-racist struggles, feminism, gay rights, and the counterculture. This politically conservative identity was steeped in resentment, and indeed drew strength, focus, and direction from its determination to maintain whiteness, masculinity, the heteropatriarchal family, and global might as the governing terms of U.S. political culture.

Today, this formation is still marked by resentment, but it can no longer sustain the dream of white majoritarianism in a demographically changing electorate, the comfort of economic security after decades of growing precarity, nor the perceived masculine virtue of producerism in an increasingly financialized economy. It was in this context that the billionaire deal-maker and reality television star yoked traditions of right-wing populism to contemporary mass-media skills to produce a singularly affective political campaign of rage, violence, melancholy, and profound intra-party disruption that dramatically exploited fissures already present in the GOP.

Observers have been continually startled by the open white nationalism that marks both Trump’s own actions and those of his supporters. Trump announced his candidacy by calling Mexicans rapists and criminals, and promising to build a wall across the border with Mexico. He continued to expand the dimensions of his racist platform by calling for the tracking of Muslims within the U.S. and a ban on those who seek to enter the country.

The 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump was also marked by violence in his rhetoric, at his rallies, and among white nationalists more generally. Negative comments about Latino immigrants and Muslims drew

people to his rallies, where physical assaults on black and Latino protesters were common. His rhetoric also inspired attacks, including two men severely beating and urinating on a homeless Latino man in Boston, one of whom said afterward, “Donald Trump was right; all these illegals need to be deported.” Far from denouncing the assault, Trump said when asked about it, “I will say that people who are following me are very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again. They are passionate” (Moyer, 2015).

The relationship between transgressive rage and racism is complex. Right-wing populism in the U.S. was conceived principally in opposition to the black freedom struggle of the 1960s, but also in opposition to changing politics of gender and family. The representative figure of populism was an aggrieved white man displaced from his centrality in politics, the workplace, and the home. The moral force of what came to be called identity politics forbade this figure from expressions of racism, chauvinism, and so on. Hence the extraordinary popularity of the phrase ‘politically correct’. Within this logic, any opposition to expressions of racism, misogyny, or homophobia are acts of repression – indeed of ‘repressed truths’.

In the context of right-wing populism, rage against government officials on behalf of an aggrieved majority is a well-developed pleasure, and one that evinces not only a ‘return of the repressed’, but what psychoanalytic theorist Melanie Klein called projective identification. In other words, the violent rhetoric of populism depends on the notion that you are responding to threats of violence. Political scientist Pierre Ostiguy discusses what he calls a “combative pleasure principle,” expressed in the sociocultural dimension of populism. This transgression can be rhetoric that provides fantasies of violence.

Racial violence underscored the campaign in numerous ways. While Trump unabashedly employed the language of white supremacy and misogyny, rage, and even violence, at Trump rallies was like nothing seen in decades. Assaults on journalists and protestors of color became a near regular event, while the number of assaults on people of color and Muslims spiked into the high hundreds during Trump’s campaign. From white racists shouting “Trump 2016” while shooting into a crowd and wounding two Black Lives Matter protestors in Minneapolis to the burning down of a

mosque in North Dakota, Trumpism emerged as a social phenomenon beyond electoral politics.

This urge to violence toward protesters easily recalls George Wallace in 1968 threatening to run over any demonstrator who lay down in front of his car. Indeed, in a strategy that anticipates Trump, the Wallace campaign purposely held rallies in venues that were too small in order to encourage fistfights between protesters and supporters. It also echoes white populist Pat Buchanan’s 1992 GOP convention speech when he associated feminism, gay rights, and pornography with the Los Angeles riots that year, and compared the GOP’s political task to the federal troops called in to Los Angeles, exhorting the party to “take the country back block by block.” Yet Trump is neither a third party candidate, nor an inter-party insurgent who could be ultimately marginalized and contained, but the party nominee for president.

The other side of this rage was the language of permanent loss. While Trump’s campaign slogan was “Make America Great Again”, much more emphasis was placed on defeat. Unlike the leaders of past populist revolts, Trump seems less a champion of working people than a figure who confirms their debased status. Unlike past populists, Trump’s followers respond less to appeals to their value as producers, which in a financialized economy seems nostalgic anyway, than to brutal rage against immigrants and Muslims, and a new generation of black insurgents, who along with establishment elites are seen as the authors of the misery Trump supporters feel themselves to be experiencing. In the Super Tuesday primaries, Trump performed most strongly in the counties where middle-aged whites were dying the fastest.

The populist revolt in the Republican Party allows us to see how a party responds to extraordinary stress under structural circumstances it no longer controls. Given the high correlation between racism and nativism on the one hand and economic liberalism on the other, and the growing prevalence of voters with this profile in the GOP, it would appear likely that racial populism will become an even more pronounced trend over time in the party, even as party elites have sought to emphasize multiculturalism, not class, as the basis for party expansion among donors and voters. These elements pulling in opposite directions have created an historic crisis for the party. Trump is the first figure to exploit



this crisis to the great detriment of the party, but he is unlikely to be the last.

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## Populism, Nationalism, and U.S. Foreign Policy

by David Smith  
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"Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo."

Donald Trump, August 9 2016.

The 2016 election, and particularly the candidacy of Donald Trump, has seen a rupture in public discourse between American nationalism and globalism. The opposition between nationalism and globalism has been building since the end of the Cold War, when shared consensus between foreign policy elites and ordinary Americans about their country's role in the world began to break down. This gradual breakdown, exacerbated by the Iraq War, has led to a populist opening for Trump and other anti-globalist candidates, who frame sometimes-radical foreign policy alternatives in terms of moral opposition between elites and ordinary citizens. A key part of Trump's appeal is his claim that the domestic problems of the United States stem from the weakness of American elites on the global stage. While he is sometimes mischaracterized as an 'isolationist,' Trump's vow to 'make America great again' is a promise to restore unconstrained American dominance, not to abdicate it. This essay traces the breakdown of the nationalist-globalist link from the end of the Cold War, and then examines the extent to which Trump's domineering nationalist anti-globalism fits a matrix of populism that may allow it to flourish beyond the candidacy (or presidency) of Trump.

### *I. Nationalism and Globalism from Truman to Trump*

Throughout the decades of the Cold War, the concepts of nationalism and globalism sat comfortably side by

side. As Ambrose and Brinkley (2010, i.) note, "The United States of the Cold War period, like ancient Rome, was concerned with all the political problems in the world ... Americans had a sense of power, of bigness, of destiny." John F. Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech and Ronald Reagan's "Tear down this wall" speech, delivered more than two decades apart, were emblematic of American nationalist globalism. Public consensus in support of Cold War 'leadership of the free world' was firmly grounded in nationalist sentiment, a widespread belief that national greatness imposed the responsibility of global leadership in the fight against communism (Fousek, 2000). The United States government, as it committed its political and military weight to increasingly remote sites of engagement throughout the world, could rely on public acceptance of the idea that American national interest was synonymous with maintaining the global order. The United States was both the chief benefactor and chief beneficiary of this order, what Ikenberry (2009) describes as the "owner and operator of the liberal capitalist political system." Even the disaster of Vietnam, while it shook confidence in the military and the government, did not dispel the idea that American prosperity and security depended on global hegemony. If anything, the national humiliation of Vietnam and the 'malaise' of the second half of the seventies created the conditions for a renewal of nationalist globalism under Reagan, framed as the United States reassuming its rightful position in the world (Lieven, 2004).

The disappearance of the existential threat of communism began to expose contradictions in the nationalism-globalism nexus that would ultimately lead to a populist opening for anti-globalist politicians. At the outset of the 1990s, George H.W. Bush retained and even accelerated the rhetoric of global leadership as an obligation of American greatness. In an address before a joint sitting of Congress to announce action against Iraq over its invasion of Kuwait, Bush spoke of the need for a "new world order" of freedom and peace guaranteed by American military strength and the cooperation of its allies, including the newly liberalizing Soviet Union (Bush, 1990). Despite the apparent success and popularity of the Gulf War, foreign policy realists became increasingly disquieted by a new American interventionism that seemed decoupled from any sense of national interest or respect for global political realities. George Kennan, like fellow Cold War intellectuals Walter Lippmann, Gabriel Almond, and Henry Kissinger,

saw the crusading moralism of the American public as a serious and perennial danger to prudent foreign policy. Reflecting on The US mission in Somalia in 1993, Kennan worried that “if American Foreign Policy from here on out ... is to be controlled by popular emotional impulses, and particularly ones provoked by the commercial television industry, then there is no place – not only for myself, but for what have traditionally been regarded as the responsible deliberative organs of our government, in both executive and legislative branches” (Kennan, 1993).

Kennan, however, was wrong to attribute 1990s interventionism to popular sentiment, especially when it came to humanitarian interventions in distant or even nearby countries. Jentleson and Britton (1998) found that while the American public was generally supportive of actions aimed at containing foreign policy aggressors, it was less comfortable with humanitarian interventions and generally opposed to actions aimed at forcing internal political change in other countries. Kull and Destler (1999) showed that although foreign policy-makers at the end of the Cold War believed Americans wanted a reduced global diplomatic presence while maintaining high levels of defense spending, the opposite was actually true, according to opinion polls that both the President and Congress usually ignored. And Drezner (2008) used opinion polls of both foreign policy elites and the general public to show that realists had it backwards: ordinary citizens generally had far more ‘realist’ and less crusading views about America’s role in the world than foreign policy elites. Americans no longer saw the benefits, but were increasingly conscious of the costs, of policing a post-Cold War world. And despite buoyant bipartisan rhetoric about the potential of an ever more integrated global economy, many citizens resented the post-Westphalian intrusions of globalization, a system that operates beyond the sovereign authority of the United States, even within its own borders (Ikenberry, 2009).

George H.W. Bush’s ‘new world order’ coinage would ultimately come to symbolize not a new era of American globalism but a dark backlash against it, especially on the right. Former Nixon speechwriter Pat Buchanan campaigned for the Republican nomination in 1992 and 1996 on a program of moral traditionalism at home and isolationism abroad. His nationalist opposition to free trade deals and immigration would find echoes in Trump’s campaign twenty years later.

Buchanan was joined in his opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement by third party candidate Ross Perot, who warned of the threats it posed to American jobs and sovereignty. Perot won 18.9% of the popular vote in 1992, and 8.4% in 1996. He and Buchanan were both referred to as ‘populists’ in the media (Wilentz, 1993; Stark, 1996), and Buchanan exalted in leading ‘peasants with pitchforks’ against his own party’s elites. By the end of the Clinton era, Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush was campaigning on a ‘humble foreign policy’ that acknowledged the limits of U.S. action in the world. In a debate with Democratic candidate Al Gore, Bush stated “I just don’t think it’s the role of the United States to walk into a country and say, ‘we do it this way, so should you’” (Newshourl, 2000).

Despite widespread criticism of Trump’s foreign policy as ‘incoherent’, his foreign policy worldview is one of his few points of long-term political consistency. Put simply, Trump has believed for decades that the global order underwritten by the United States does not serve American interests, and needs to be renegotiated.

George W. Bush would go on to deal a major blow to nationalist globalism himself by way of the Iraq War. Bush framed the war, and his administration’s whole approach to the post 9/11 world, in resolutely nationalist terms. This won popular support, making him appear, in contrast to the internationalist Clinton, as a leader who would use the military decisively in American interests (Lieven, 2004). Dividing the world into countries that were ‘with us or against us’, and promising a bloody end to America’s enemies, Bush tapped into an important populist tradition in American foreign policy, which Walter Russell Mead terms ‘Jacksonianism’. Jacksonians, according to Mead, “are prepared to support wholesale violence against enemy civilians in the interest of victory; they do not like limited wars for limited goals. Although they value allies and believe that the United States must honor its word, they do not believe in institutional constraints on the United States’ freedom to act, unilaterally if necessary, in self-defense.”

(Mead, 2011, 35).

Bush flaunted his willingness to act unilaterally and in violation of numerous international conventions. However, he broke with the Jacksonians' "deep skepticism about the United States' ability to create a liberal world order" (Mead, 2011, 35). Bush went much further than his father had gone in his ambition to create such an order. He wanted not just to defeat Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, but to bring liberal democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan, which he saw as the surest way of bringing about wholesale political change in the Middle East, change that would ultimately make the United States safer and more prosperous. The rhetorical idealism, if not the rapacious conduct of this approach, was more reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson than Andrew Jackson, leading Peter Katzenstein to brand it "Wilsonianism with heavy boots" (Katzenstein, 2005, 305). The expensive failure of this project led to a purist Jacksonian backlash within American conservatism. While some libertarian and paleoconservative critics like Buchanan or Ron Paul advocate a return to 'Jeffersonian' principles – an end to all 'entangling alliances' and the complete return of the military to homeland defense – the bulk of right-wing responses to Bush's failure, from Sarah Palin and the Tea Party to Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, have been framed in the language of domination rather than withdrawal.

Effectively campaigning against the party whose nomination he sought, Trump denounced the Bushes and the Iraq War more brazenly during the 2016 primary debates than any previous Republican had done, to the point of denying (falsely) that he had ever supported it. Far from punishing him for violating a taboo, Republican voters rewarded him for his mockery and dismissal of party elites. Even Trump's slur against John McCain's war heroism ("I prefer people who don't get captured") seemed to act as a positive signal to the Republican electorate that he would be unbound by political correctness or decorum of any kind. Trump insists the United States should have 'taken' Iraq's oil during the war. He has cited apocryphal stories about war crimes committed by American troops in the Philippines under Pershing as his preferred model for counter-terrorism, further demonstrating the affinity between Jacksonianism and imperialism (Cha, 2015). But Trump's attack on foreign policy orthodoxy goes far beyond the Jacksonian backlash against the Bushes.

Despite widespread criticism of Trump's foreign policy as 'incoherent', his foreign policy worldview is one of his few points of long-term political consistency. Put simply, Trump has believed for decades that the global order underwritten by the United States does not serve American interests, and needs to be renegotiated. Trump held this view before the end of the Cold War. In 1987, he published an open letter in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Boston Globe* with the headline "There's nothing wrong with America's Foreign Defense Policy that a little backbone won't cure." Trump told readers that:

For decades, Japan and other nations have been taking advantage of the United States ... The world is laughing at American politicians as we protect ships we don't own, carrying oil we don't need, destined for allies who won't help ... Make Japan, Saudi Arabia and others pay for the protection we extend to our allies. Let's help our farmers, our sick and our homeless by taking from some of the greatest profit machines ever created – machines created and nurtured by us. "Tax" these wealthy nations, not America. End our huge deficits, reduce our taxes, and let America's economy grow unencumbered by the cost of defending those who can easily afford to pay us for the defense of their freedom. Let's not let our great country be laughed at anymore. (Trump 1987, quoted in Kruse (2016)).

This statement closely mirrors Trump's 2016 rhetoric on alliances, which has generated the most alarm from the foreign policy establishment. Because he has little time for the alliance system and views it as a waste of American resources, Trump has often been characterized as an 'isolationist', which seems in keeping with his adoption of Charles Lindbergh's 'America First' slogan (see e.g. Haass (2016)). This, however, is a serious misreading of Trump.

Trump does not, like Pat Buchanan, argue for withdrawal and modesty in foreign affairs. He wants the United States to engage with the world, but on its own and much tougher terms. Trump wants domination, not leadership. Foreign policy is central to Trump's political appeal because he attributes nearly every domestic problem to other countries getting the better of the United States. On his signature issue of immigra-

tion, for example, he claims “we are the only country in the world whose immigration system places the needs of other nations ahead of our own.” Illegal immigration is not a matter of “a few individuals seeking a better way of life,” but is a way for foreign governments to “get rid of their worst people without paying any price for their bad behaviour” (Trump, 2015, Ch.3). Trump is not opposed to foreign trade, but he believes inept American negotiators have given away the advantages the U.S. should enjoy in trade deals thanks to its superior labor force and markets, costing the country good jobs and wages (Trump, 2015, Ch.8). Trump does not, as the quotation above shows, want to withdraw from alliances – he wants them to turn a profit, which should be the natural state of affairs given that the U.S. supplies the overwhelming firepower. The message is consistent: the United States should be winning, but is not. This is both economically draining and psychologically humiliating. Trump essentially presents a wounded, imperial version of the old connection between national greatness and international responsibility: a country as mighty as the United States should be demanding tribute from other countries, not allowing them to take advantage of its generosity.

## II. The Populist Moment in United States Foreign Policy

A Pew poll in May 2016 found that 57% of respondents believe the U.S. should “deal with our own problems and let others deal with theirs the best they can,” while only 37% favored “helping other countries deal with their problems.” In the same survey, 49% of respondents (and 65% of Trump supporters) agreed that U.S. involvement in the global economy was a “bad thing” because it “lowers wages and costs jobs.” Only 44% of respondents agreed the global economy was a “good thing” because it “creates new markets and growth.” Results such as these, along with the success of candidates Trump, Sanders, and Cruz, have led numerous commentators to declare a new era of populism that threatens the traditional precepts of U.S. foreign policy (Rothwell, 2016; Heilbrunn, 2016; Fontaine and Kaplan, 2016). Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, summarizes the situation in starkly populist terms. The first great debate about post-Cold War foreign policy, between those who wanted to stabilize the world and those who wanted to liberalize it, took place between groups of elites. The second great debate, “on whether the U.S. should retain the international leading role it has held since the end of World War II,” is

taking place between elites and non-elites (Haass, 2016).

While not all of Trump’s supporters may hew to a vision of imperial domination, a mood of disenchantment with their country’s role in the international system probably makes them receptive to his claim that American elites have placed the needs of other countries ahead of their own. To what extent does this fit a ‘populist’ matrix? In one sense, because foreign policy is the area of politics traditionally most dominated by elite consensus (Saunders, 2014, 2015), any major challenge to that consensus has the potential to be seen in populist terms. Trump has framed his campaign in terms of sweeping away incompetent elites, and some of the detailed and vehement criticism he receives comes from experienced foreign policy operatives. But it is worth exploring further how much Trump’s nationalist anti-globalism conforms to populist tropes, styles, and world-views. The future of nationalist anti-globalism as a political force after Trump may depend on the extent to which it has a genuinely populist appeal.

The parties are internally polarized on foreign policy, with the ‘establishment’ wings of each party controlling foreign policies at odds with grassroots activists on both sides. Under these circumstances, we should expect figures such as Trump, Cruz, and Sanders to appeal to the idea that Washington is as rotten in the realm of foreign policy as it is in any other area, and that the elites of their own parties are barely distinguishable from the other side.

Core to most scholarly definitions of populism is a worldview based around a moral opposition between corrupt elites and the virtuous ‘people.’ (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Moffitt, 2016). This is usually cast as an internal social division. The people are the virtuous mass of society who work, produce, and sacrifice for the nation, and expect basic guarantees of security and dignity in return. The elites are those who hold economic, political, and cultural power in society, along with their allies on the unproductive and criminal margins of society, including those who have no right to be there in the



first place. Ordinary people find themselves squeezed from the top by elites who take the lion's share of what they produce, and from the bottom by a threatening underclass who enjoy elite patronage in exchange for political support (Kazin, 1998).

In this worldview, both the political problem and the political remedy is national. National elites deprive their own people of what is rightfully theirs and allow increasingly exorbitant claims by those who have no right to make them. The people must reclaim their rightful share of the nation's prosperity, hold elites accountable to basic morality and common sense, and exclude those who have benefited from the social compact while having no stake in it. Populism, then, usually demands a nationalism that is inward rather than outward facing, a nationalism of repair and rebirth. It seeks to supplant poisonous social divisions with a renewed national consciousness, and to replace privilege and patronage with the natural allocation of rewards to the deserving, as defined by the national ethos. And it requires clear boundaries to be drawn around 'the people' to prevent elites and political opportunists from overpowering them by enlisting outsiders.

In the United States, the link between populism and nationalism is relatively straightforward when it comes to trade and immigration. Cosmopolitanism and free trade undermine the privileges of being an ordinary citizen of the wealthiest and most powerful country on earth. They benefit wealthy, mobile elites, and the citizens of other countries (as immigrants or exporters) while weakening national solidarity and standards of living. The slogan "America First" concisely expresses populist disdain for elites who they believe have traded away America's advantages for the sake of personal enrichment and globalist ideology. But how does populism manifest on the other side of US foreign policy – the projection of American interests abroad?

While there have been many waves of populism of different colors in American history, it surfaces far more rarely in the context of outward-facing foreign policy. In the traditional self-image of American politics, foreign policy is a different realm altogether, a place where social and partisan divisions melt away – "politics stops at the water' edge," in the words of Arthur Vandenburg, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1947. On the one hand, this vision seems to fulfil the populist project of creating a unified national body in

which both sacrifice and reward are shared. This would have seemed particularly true when Vandenburg first said it, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and as the early Cold War was taking shape. The defeat of one existential enemy and the challenge posed by another sharpened an ingroup-outgroup boundary that was truly national, suppressing for a while painful internal divisions that could not be reconciled under any simple conception of 'the people'. On the other hand, this conforms to a very elitist idea of foreign policy as something that should be insulated from normal democratic politics, the 'high politics' among nations that is so important it has to be left to skilled experts (see e.g. Lippmann, 1943; Almond, 1950).

The current populist moment in foreign policy is made possible by the fact that politics, in 2016, obviously does not stop at the water's edge (Milner and Tingley, 2015). Four years of Republican-led Congressional inquiries into the attack on Benghazi, targeting the Democratic presidential candidate, are symptomatic of the extension of partisan polarization to foreign policy (Gries, 2014). Furthermore, the parties are internally polarized on foreign policy, with the 'establishment' wings of each party controlling foreign policies at odds with grassroots activists on both sides. Under these circumstances, we should expect figures such as Trump, Cruz, and Sanders to appeal to the idea that Washington is as rotten in the realm of foreign policy as it is in any other area, and that the elites of their own parties are barely distinguishable from the other side. In a 2016 debate between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, for example, Clinton invoked Henry Kissinger in support of her foreign policy, leading Sanders to retort that he was proud Kissinger was no friend of his. Populist potential, then, will exist in foreign policy arguments for as long as the current polarization continues, both between and within parties. The 2016 election may play a large role in determining whether Trump's racially-charged, domineering nationalism remains the dominant form of that populism.

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## Special Topic: Brexit

### Brexit and Beyond: Euroscepticism in a Comparative Perspective

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On 23 June 2016, against the recommendation of most political and economic experts, the British people voted to leave the European Union (EU). The result sent a shock wave through the political establishment and ultimately led to the resignation of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron. The Brexit vote has grave economic and political consequences for the United Kingdom (UK). Over 100 billion pounds was wiped off the London Stock Exchange in the immediate aftermath of the vote (although it has since recovered), the British pound and the 10-year government bond yield have fallen to record lows, and the UK has been stripped of its triple-A credit rating. In a grim assessment of post-Brexit Britain, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research predicts that the UK economy has a fifty per cent chance of slipping into a recession next year, which could result in the loss of 320,000 jobs (Farrell, 2016). The two major political forces in Westminster, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, find themselves in disarray over how to shape the UK's relationship with the EU. The new Prime Minister Theresa May faces the daunting task of organizing the British exit from the EU while keeping the UK together. Scotland, Northern Ireland, and London voted to remain in the EU, while Wales and the rest of England voted to leave. The UK is currently characterized by enormous political and economic uncertainty.

#### *I. Brexit: A Leap into the Unknown*

Given that the British economy benefits from EU membership and the UK has secured opt-outs and rebates, why did many British citizens favor a highly uncertain future over the arguably imperfect, but nonetheless beneficial status quo? This type of risky behavior runs not only against commonly held stereotypes about 'the British' ('keep calm and carry on' is the official national slogan), but also against what we know about voting behavior in referendums. Referendums are usually characterized by a status quo bias. A status quo bias refers to the tendency to favor decisions that maintain the current state of affairs, the status quo. Faced with

new options, people often stick to what they know. For example, voters often choose to reelect an incumbent to Congress over an unknown candidate. Translating these insights to referendums, LeDuc (2003) found a tendency for people to vote increasingly for the status quo as the campaign progresses. This occurs even when a large majority prefers to reject the status quo at the start of a campaign. Both political scientists and traders expected to observe a status quo bias in the Brexit vote, as demonstrated by the rallying of U.S. stock markets the evening before the vote. Yet, despite the large amount of political and economic uncertainty associated with an exit from the EU, a (narrow) majority of British voters voted to leave.

People are only willing to take the risk of leaving the EU when they perceive the alternative, their country without EU membership, as better, even if only slightly so.

#### *II. Brexit and Euroscepticism: The Role of National Reference Points*

Support for EU membership is commonly perceived as the result of two factors: economic interest and national identity (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Work on economic interest stresses that market integration favors citizens with higher levels of human capital (education and occupational skills) and income, and, consequently, such individuals will be more supportive of European integration (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Gabel, 2009). Studies on identity highlight that the European project, however, is not only about market integration, but also about the creation of a sense of European political identity and mutual obligation (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). As a result, people's strong attachment to their nation and their perceptions of people from other cultures also influences their support for the EU (Hooghe and Marks, 2005, 2009; McLaren, 2006). Both explanations are important, but perhaps cannot fully account for the outcome of the Brexit vote (or the rise in Euroscepticism more generally). Although Brexit support was high in many economically deprived areas, wealthy areas in the South of the UK voted to leave, while poorer areas in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. Moreover, although people's feelings of national belonging have always been strong in the UK and their

sense of European identity low, both attitudes have been remarkably stable over the years, and cannot explain the recent spike in Eurosceptic sentiment (European Commission, 2016).

In my forthcoming work, I suggest that the extent to which people are willing to change the status quo by voting for exit crucially depends on their national reference point (de Vries, 2017). It depends on how they perceive the counterfactual of their country being outside the EU. Research on risk taking behavior by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) suggests that risk attitudes are shaped by the subjective reference points that people employ. Translating this to the EU, people are only willing to take the risk of leaving the EU when they perceive the alternative, their country without EU membership, as better, even if only slightly so.

One can think about this in the following way. Every individual (or group of individuals) derives some benefits from their country through the provision of public goods and services, such as roads, public television, national defense, and so on. Yet, some public goods and services require international cooperation to be delivered efficiently due to scale advantages, think trade for example, or because they transcend borders and require international solutions, such as environmental protection. Being part of the EU institutional architecture may deliver unique goods and services for individuals that the national system alone could not provide. When deciding to stay or go, people compare the current EU status quo to the potential losses or gains based on an alternative state, namely their nation. People thus evaluate the EU by comparing to a national reference point (see also Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000).

This intuition fits nicely with the conclusion reached in other work, namely that individuals, particularly those who are politically aware, are capable of distinguishing between EU and national institutions when making their evaluations (Karp, Banducci and Bowler, 2003). People thus weigh up differences between two sets of evaluations, European and national. These evaluations, as my work shows, are influenced by people's background characteristics and their socioeconomic status, as well as the political environment in which they find themselves; that is to say, party and media opinion leaders provide them with cues (Steenbergen, Edwards and De Vries, 2007; de Vries and Edwards, 2009; de Vries, 2017). People will only be expected to

take the risk of leaving the EU when they perceive that their country could do as well or even better outside. Hence, those who supported the UK to leave should display more positive evaluations of their own system compared to the EU.

### *III. UK Survey Evidence: National Reference Points of Brexit Supporters and Opposers*

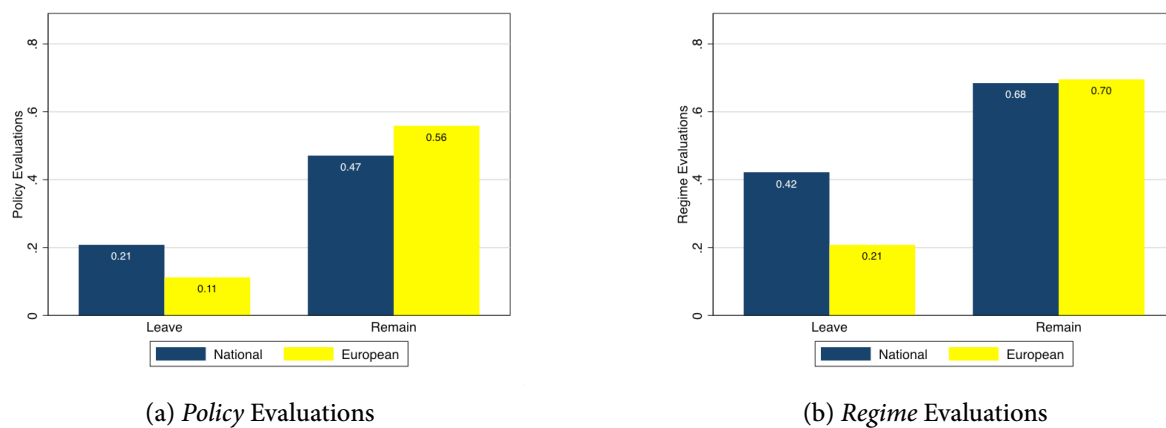
Together with the Bertelsmann Foundation, I conduct regular polls, *EUpinions*, in all European member states to explore what European citizens think about current political issues. The latest wave of the survey from the end of April 2016 was devoted to people's opinions on the Brexit referendum and their own country's membership in the EU (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2016). We asked British people how they planned to vote in the Brexit referendum. Fifty-three per cent of respondents indicated that they would vote to leave while forty-seven per cent of respondent indicated they would vote to remain. National and European evaluations are captured by two sets of questions about the UK and the EU. The first set of questions focus on regime evaluations, and survey respondents' opinions about the democratic institutions and procedures in the UK and the EU. The second set of questions relate to policy evaluations, and tap into respondents' assessments of the content of collective decisions taken by EU or national actors. Dahl (1989) has argued that these elements tap into the two important aspects of representative democracy. Given that we ask the same questions about the national and EU levels, we can judge if voters intending to vote leave employ more favourable national versus EU reference points compared to those who want to remain.

Figures 1a and 1b present the share of people who display positive national and EU evaluations about policies and the regime among leave and remain supporters respectively. Several interesting patterns stand out. First, among leave supporters, national evaluations trump EU evaluations (these differences are statistically significant). Second, among those backing remain, this is not the case; the share holding positive EU evaluations is equal or slightly higher than the share of positive national evaluations. Third, the share of leave supporters holding positive policy or regime evaluations is lower than the share with positive evaluations among those wanting to remain.

In the next step, I model voting intentions in the



Figure 1: Evaluations of Leave vs Remain Supporters in the UK



Note: 'Policy Evaluations' have to do with the content of collective decisions taken by national or EU actors. 'Regime Evaluations' have to do with opinions about the democratic institutions and procedures in the UK and the EU.

Source: EUpinions, April 2016.

Brexit referendum as a function of people's European and national regime and policy evaluations, while controlling for a host of individual level characteristics, such as age, education, subjective class perception, as well as economic perceptions. The main explanatory variables capture the difference between people's national and European policy and regime evaluations (the national differential where I subtract people's national evaluations from their EU evaluations), while the dependent variable is whether they intend to vote leave or not.

I present the results of this model in Figure 2. The dots represent the coefficients from a logistic regression analysis, while the horizontal blue lines represent the 95% confidence intervals of these estimates. Negative coefficients (those to the left of the vertical red zero line) indicate variables that reduce the probability of voting to leave, whereas positive coefficients (those to the right of the vertical red zero line) indicate variables that increase the probability of voting to leave. The effect of a variable is statistically significant when the horizontal bar representing the 95% confidence interval does not intersect the zero line. The coefficients for the national policy and regime differentials are positive and statistically significant, indicating that people who evaluate national policies better than EU policies and the national regime better than the EU regime are more likely to vote leave in the Brexit referendum. Older, male, less highly educated, working class voters with more negative economic outlooks are also more likely to vote leave. The effects of more positive national reference

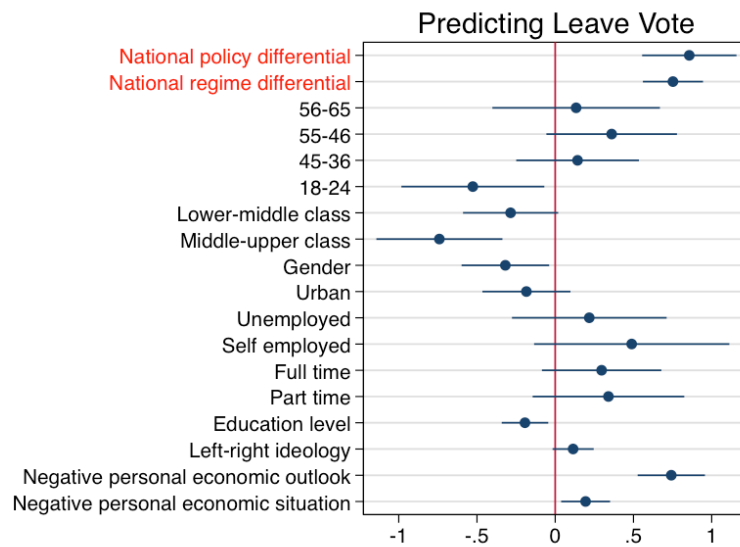
points hold when we control for a set of individual-level characteristics.

These findings are interesting as the Remain and Leave campaigns tried to influence people's perceptions about the UK in reference to the EU. The Remain campaign, also coined Project Fear, painted a dark picture of a Brexit Armageddon, characterized by economic meltdown and the collapse of the housing market. People should vote to remain in the EU as the UK alone would not be able to prosper in an increasingly interconnected world. The Leave campaign aimed to convince people that these doom scenarios were exaggerations, and that post-Brexit savings would bring prosperity and allow Britain to take complete control over its own affairs. After the vote, however, prominent Leave campaigners like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson quickly reneged on their pledge that £350m a week would go to the National Health Service (NHS) instead of the EU, as these savings would be needed to compensate for income losses by farmers and others. The Brexit campaign was very much a fight over the national reference point people should employ.

#### IV. Comparative Survey Evidence: National Reference Points of Eurosceptics and Eurosupporters

How do these British findings compare to other countries? In the EUpinions survey, we also explore the voting intentions of citizens in the other 27 member states in a hypothetical referendum on EU membership

Figure 2: Predicting Brexit Vote Intention, UK April 2016



Notes: Dots are logistic regression coefficients. The horizontal blue lines represent 95% confidence intervals. The reference category for class is lower class and the reference category for age is a 26-35 year-old. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent intends to vote 'Leave' and 0 otherwise.

Source: EUpinions, April 2016.

in their respective countries. While fifty-three percent of British people in our survey indicated that they would vote leave and forty-seven percent indicated that they would vote remain, the vast majority of EU-27 citizens, namely over two-thirds, indicated that they wanted their country to remain in the EU. Yet, when we explore the national and EU evaluations of leave and remain supporters in the EU-27, as displayed in Figures 3a and 3b, we find a very similar pattern to UK respondents. Leave supporters always display higher national evaluations compared to European ones, even though their overall share of positive regime and policy evaluations are lower.

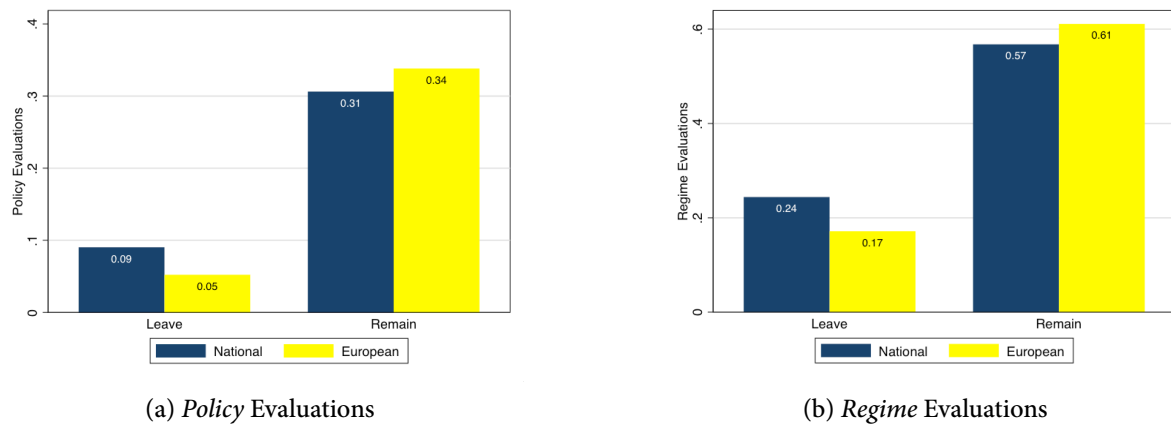
Figure 4 shows that more positive national reference points indeed increase the likelihood of voting leave if an EU exit referendum were held, even when we control for a host of individual-level characteristics. Taken together, these results show that leave supporters employ more positive national reference points, but are also less satisfied overall with policies and the regime at both the national and EU level compared to remain supporters. This might suggest that EU exit supporters perceive that they have less to lose from a change from the status quo, that is to say from leaving the EU. Even if the outcomes of an exit are highly uncertain, the current status quo of

EU membership is less attractive to begin with. Against this backdrop, taking a leap into the great unknown by voting to leave the EU may seem like a calculated risk.

#### V. Beyond Brexit: What's Next?

The EU today is facing enormous challenges, some of the biggest since its foundation. In the midst of the Euro and refugee crises sweeping across Europe, popular support for European integration seems more important than ever. Yet, enthusiasm for the EU seems to be waning as the support for Eurosceptic parties is on the rise, and the British have voted to leave the Union for good. Following the Brexit vote, many commentators speculated if other countries would hold exit referendums. While Eurosceptic politicians like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands have since tried to push exit referendums through parliament, so far none of these bills has passed. The analysis I present here would suggest that even if Eurosceptic politicians would be able to call exit referendums, they might not lead to the same outcome as in the UK. Presently, over two-thirds of EU citizens intend to vote for their country to remain in the EU if an exit referendum were held. That said, I also find parallels with the UK case. In the remaining 27 EU member states, leave supporters, like their British counterparts,

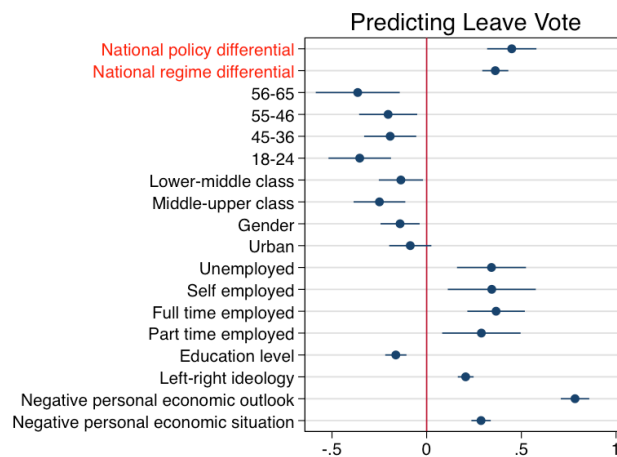
Figure 3: Evaluations of Leave vs Remain Supporters in the EU-27



Note: 'Policy Evaluations' have to do with the content of collective decisions taken by national or EU actors. 'Regime Evaluations' have to do with opinions about the democratic institutions and procedures at the national and EU levels.

Source: EUpinions, April 2016.

Figure 4: Predicting EU Referendum Vote Intention, EU-27 April 2016



Notes: Dots are logistic regression coefficients. The horizontal blue lines represent 95% confidence intervals. The reference category for class is lower class and the reference category for age is a 26-35 year-old. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent intends to vote 'Leave' and 0 otherwise.

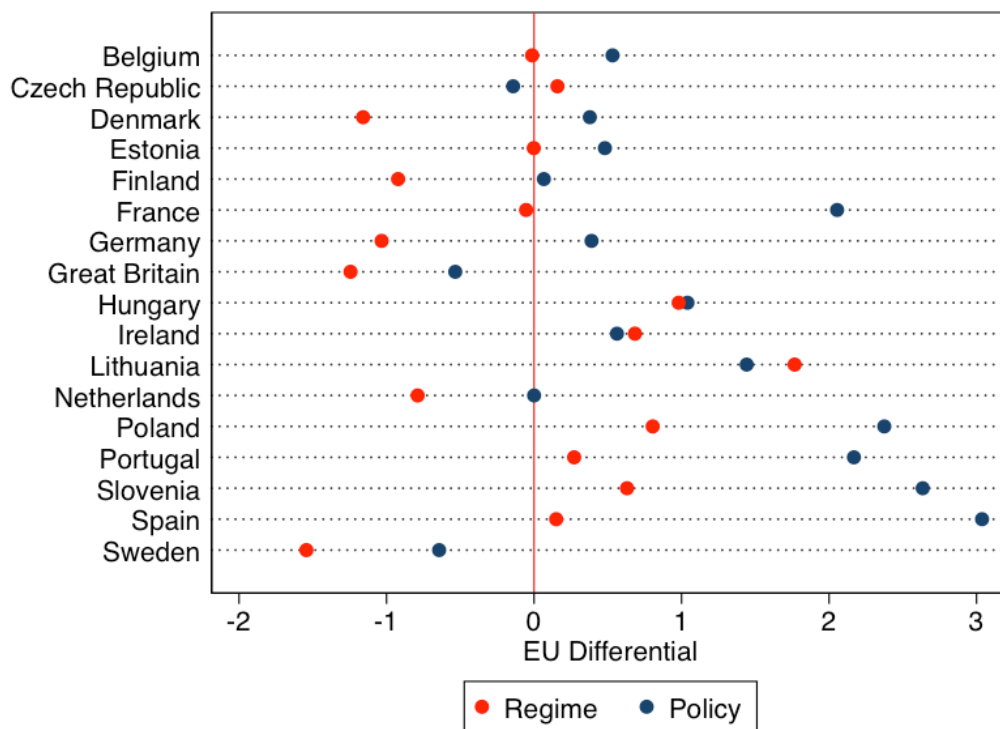
Source: EUpinions, April 2016.

hold more favourable national reference points. When I inspect differences between countries further, I find that public opinion in countries like Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands most closely mimics the UK situation.

Figure 5 presents the difference between people's EU and national policy and regime evaluations in 2015 across member states included in the European Social Survey (ESS). Positive values here indicate more positive evaluations of EU policies and regime compared to national ones. Although in the vast majority of countries, the EU is still evaluated more positively compared to the national level, in Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands,

like in the UK, national regime and policy evaluations exceed or are equal to European ones. While it currently seems unlikely that EU referendums would take place in these countries in the near future as mainstream parties hold parliamentary majorities, if they do, the outcome is highly uncertain. Given the contours of public opinion in these countries, Eurosceptic political entrepreneurs could, like the Brexit campaigners in the UK before them, construct positive national counterfactuals and discredit the doom scenarios remain campaigners put forward. If that happens, exit referendums might actually become winnable.

Figure 5: EU Regime and Policy Differential in 2015



Notes: The dots display the difference between country mean EU regime and policy evaluations. Positive values indicate that people on average evaluate EU policy and regime higher than national policy and regime, and vice versa.

Source: European Social Survey 2015



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## Brexit, Populism, and the 2016 UK Referendum to Leave the EU

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The United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union (EU) marked a watershed moment in the country's history. Despite a long tradition of Euroscepticism, with the UK long being more negative about its EU membership than other EU member states, few analysts or opinion polls had forecast the eventual result. When all votes had been counted, 52% of the electorate had opted to leave the EU, a figure that increased to nearly 54% in England. The vote to leave the EU surpassed 70% in eight local authority areas, 60% in 102, and 50% in 263. Only Northern Ireland, Scotland, and London voted to remain in the EU. In this essay, we consider the dynamics of the result, the role of populism in the campaign, and the implications for British and EU politics.

Populist politics is a central part of the story about how the UK came to vote for Brexit. In sharp contrast to other European states, the populist radical right in Britain has historically been something of a failure. Confronted with a majoritarian electoral system and, on the supply-side, a legacy of stigmatized neo-Nazi parties, such as the National Front and British National Party, populist parties historically remained an isolated and local phenomena (Goodwin, 2011). Populist appeals against the EU were often also led by the mainstream Conservative Party, which under various leaders, from Margaret Thatcher to William Hague, rallied against the Euro single currency, free movement of EU workers, and economic and political integration. Yet from 2010, during the more liberal Conservative leadership of David Cameron and against the backdrop of a financial crisis, a fairly new populist actor attracted rising support. Though founded in 1993, it was not until after 2010 that the hard Eurosceptic and populist UK Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage, became increasingly prominent. Against the backdrop of growing public concern over unprecedented levels of net migration into the country that would soon surpass

300,000 per year, and which were fuelled mainly by the arrival of Central and East European workers, UKIP transitioned from the margins to the mainstream.

The geography of the vote sparked a debate about a divided Britain in which many trace the vote for Brexit to impoverished left behind communities that in the modern economy are struggling to keep pace with high skilled areas.

Capitalizing on a long national tradition of Euroscepticism and growing concern over immigration, from 2010 onward UKIP replaced the Liberal Democrats in the opinion polls as the third most popular party, it won the 2014 European Parliament elections with almost 27% of the vote, and, at the 2015 general election, it attracted four million votes (though under a majoritarian system secured only one seat in the House of Commons). Between 2010 and 2014, therefore, UKIP cultivated dissatisfaction with the established 'liberal consensus' among sections of the electorate that felt economically 'left behind' by the country's rapid economic transformation and also culturally under threat from inward migration. Research on support for UKIP found that this was often strongest in 'left behind' areas, among voters who tended to be old, white, working-class and, in terms of their attitudinal profile, strongly disapproving of EU membership, concerned over immigration, and dissatisfied with the established elite (Goodwin and Ford, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015). It was these differences in demography that help to explain why the Eurosceptic and populist UKIP attracted 40% of the vote in an economically struggling area like Rotherham but only 14% in the more affluent and leafy Richmond upon Thames. Traditionally, a significant portion of these voters had once supported the centre-left Labour Party; though since the mid-1990s, the aggressive centrism of the 'New Labour' project that focused more on the aspirational middle-classes alienated working-class voters and helped create space for this populist mobilization (Heath, 2015, *Forthcoming*).

The 2016 referendum thus provided a framework for populist undercurrents that had long been evident in British politics to take centre stage. As Gidron and

Bonikowski note in this issue, populism is best understood as "a rhetorical style or thin centered ideology based on a Manichean, anti-elitist logic and a desire to reclaim political institutions on behalf of the people." Populists often present themselves as the 'true democrats', voicing grievances and opinions of 'the people' that are systematically ignored by the established political, media, and business elites (Canovan, 1999).

Strong echoes of this type of populism were clearly evident in the official 'Vote Leave' campaign, which was supported unofficially by UKIP's ongoing grassroots mobilization. In communicating its populist message to 'Take Back Control' from an unelected and out-of-touch EU elite, Leave campaigners also benefitted from two of the most charismatic messengers in British politics, Boris Johnson, the former Mayor of London, and Nigel Farage, the UKIP leader. Supported by senior Conservatives, a handful of Eurosceptic Labour Members of Parliament, and a myriad of grassroots movements, such figures sought to mobilize economically marginalized voters while articulating an "anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people" (Jansen, 2011, 82). Much of their claims focused on the perceived costs and threat of free movement and the alleged ability to redirect contributions to the EU into the National Health Service.

### *I. Brexit: The Results Analyzed*

In England, the 'Leave' vote ranged from nearly 76% in the disadvantaged and coastal town of Boston to 21% in the highly diverse district of Lambeth in London. Like Boston, many of the local authorities that recorded some of the strongest support for Brexit are struggling areas where average incomes, education, and skill levels are low and there are few opportunities to get ahead. Authorities that recorded some of the highest levels of support for Brexit included the mainly working-class, coastal, or decaying industrial communities of Castle Point, Great Yarmouth, Mansfield, Ashfield, Stoke-on-Trent, and Doncaster. In such communities, life experiences contrast sharply with those in areas that gave some of the strongest support to remaining in the EU, such as the London boroughs of Islington and Richmond-upon-Thames, or Edinburgh, Cambridge, and Oxford. The geography of the vote sparked a debate about a divided Britain in which many trace the vote for Brexit to impoverished left behind communities that in the modern economy are struggling to keep pace with high

skilled areas. The left behind, it is argued, were especially responsive to the populist appeal to 'take back control'.

At the aggregate-level, it is certainly true that support for Brexit was strongest in areas that tended to be older, have lower than average levels of education, have experienced relative deprivation and, over the past ten years, witnessed significant demographic change as a consequence of the inward migration of EU nationals. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, we examined data from 380 of the 382 local authorities across the UK, linking this to data from the 2011 census (Goodwin and Heath, 2016a). Support for Brexit was strongest in areas where a large percentage of citizens did not have any qualifications and hence were poorly equipped to compete amid the modern economy; 15 of the 20 'least educated' areas voted to leave, while all of the 20 'most highly educated' areas voted to remain. Support for Brexit was also stronger than average in areas with a larger number of pensioners; of the 20 youngest authorities 16 voted to remain, but of the 20 oldest authorities 19 voted to leave.

To a large extent then, the sort of places that were most likely to support Brexit were the same ones that had previously given support to UKIP, and propelled the party onto the national stage. Indeed, this point comes out very clearly if we consider the bivariate relationship between past support for UKIP in the 2014 European Parliament elections and support for Brexit in the 2016 Referendum. The R-square between the two variables is 0.73, indicating a very strong relationship.

These aggregate patterns are also evident at the individual level. Further analysis based on data from the British Election Study (Goodwin and Heath, 2016b) reveals how people living in the poorest households were much more likely to support leaving the EU than those in the wealthiest households. In households with incomes of less than £20,000 per year the average support for leave was 58%, but in households with incomes over £60,000 per year support for leaving the EU was only 35%. Those out of work were also far more likely to support Brexit than those in full employment: support for leave among the former was 59% but only 45% among the latter. Similarly, people engaged in low-skilled manual occupations were much more likely to support leaving the EU than those who work in more secure professional occupations – on average the leave

vote among the former was 71% but among the latter was only 41%. Lastly, and consistent with past studies on support for Eurosceptic parties (Goodwin and Ford, 2014), people without any educational qualifications were far more likely to support Brexit than those with postgraduate degrees. Support for leaving the EU was a striking 75% among those who lacked qualifications, but just 27% among those who had achieved the highest level of education.

The role of values also occupied a key position in the referendum campaign, from debates about threats to national sovereignty and national identity to the more specific issue of immigration. Unsurprisingly, attitudes on these issues are closely related to the leave vote. Nearly 90% of people who thought immigration was bad for the economy supported leave, compared to just under 10% for people who thought immigration was good for the economy. Similarly, whereas 88% of people who thought that the country should allow fewer immigrants supported Brexit, whereas the equivalent figure among people who wanted to keep immigration as it is was just 21%. People who feel 'very strongly' English were much more likely to say they would vote leave than anybody else (71% vs 36%) – and it was this narrow conception of national identity – rather than a broader sense of feeling 'very strongly' British that mattered most. There is also some evidence that those people who felt disillusioned with politics – and agreed with the statement that "politicians don't care what people like me think" – were more likely to support leave than people who disagreed with the statement (70% versus 30%).

These findings point to deep divides in Britain, both geographically, socially, and culturally. Moreover, to a certain extent these divides cross-cut. When we combine individual-level survey data with aggregate-level district data, we find evidence of a cross-level interaction between an individual's level of education and the educational profile of the area where they live (Goodwin and Heath, 2016b). Controlling for a whole host of variables, the level of support for Leave among graduates varied much more than among those with low levels of education across different types of areas and different parts of the country. Graduates who live in low-skilled communities were more likely to support Brexit, and were more similar to those with low education, than graduates who live in high-skilled communities (and who were, in contrast, very different to those with low education).

There are several plausible interpretations for this pattern. One is to do with the role of place and the availability of local resources and opportunities. Even if people possess educational qualifications and skills, if they are stuck in left behind areas that are experiencing decline, then they are less likely to be presented with local opportunities to use these skills and get ahead in life. Such an environment can fuel feelings of exclusion or marginalization. Therefore, the left behind in Britain face a 'double whammy'. On one level, the left behind may feel marginalized because of their lack of qualifications and skills, which puts them at a significant disadvantage in a modern and increasingly competitive economy. But on a second level, they may also feel marginalized because they lack the opportunities to get ahead within their local communities. The populist rhetoric of the Leave campaign, with its promise to 'take back control' directly engaged with these marginalized constituencies and sought to empower them. As a result, this message perhaps had far more resonance with large parts of the country than the economic message of the Remain camp, which emphasized the potential risk that Brexit posed to continued economic prosperity, which many felt they had never benefited from.

## II. Implications of the Result

As Gidron and Bonikowski observe in this issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter, there is a duality between populist politics and democracy: populism challenges the common sense of liberal democratic practice and may have ominous implications for liberal democracy; but at the same time, populism identifies otherwise overlooked problems and awards marginalized groups a legitimate voice in the political debate. The UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership provided a framework in which long-held grievances among large sections of the electorate found voice.

Primarily, though not exclusively, the vote for Brexit was driven by economically disadvantaged, older, low educated, white, English-identifying, and socially conservative sections of the electorate who were motivated by their concern over immigration and disapproval of EU membership. For the new Prime Minister Theresa May, delivering on these demands amid negotiations over the United Kingdom's future relationship with the EU will not be straightforward. Since the referendum, opinion polls have suggested that most voters desire strong restrictions on the free movement of EU work-

ers, a core pillar of the European Union that is also likely to influence debates over whether or not the UK should retain access to the European single market. Should Theresa May deliver fundamental reform of free movement, this is likely to strengthen her appeal among the economically disaffected and immigration-minded voters who provided the bulk of support to the Brexit camp. Should she fail to deliver such reform, however, then it appears likely that populist mobilization around the immigration issue will remain at the forefront of contemporary politics in the United Kingdom.

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# Taking Control: Before and After the British EU Referendum

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Of the many lessons that could be learned from the UK referendum on EU membership, one is that prediction is something of a mug's game. While the pollsters managed to relatively accurately predict what kinds of people in what kinds of areas might support each of the two camps, they were far less successful at anticipating the levels of turnout, which were generally higher in more pro-Leave areas (Goodwin and Heath, 2016). Be that as it may, what follows involves the same mug's game. For it is my contention here that, just as the effectiveness with which the Leave camp ran its campaign swung voters behind it, so, too, will that effectiveness continue to shape the post-referendum debate.

## *I. Securing Victory*

Many factors conspired to create the conditions in which the British voted for an outcome opposed by virtually all of what we have increasingly come to call the political and economic establishment. First was the fact that the Leave camp had over twenty years – since the bad tempered debates over the ratification of the Maastricht treaty – to make their case. In the subsequent years, campaigners had honed their attacks, bringing the idea of exit from the EU from the fringes to the mainstream of political acceptability (Lancaster, 2016). Anti-European arguments provided 'the background hum of political discourse at Westminster and in the country' (Lancaster, 2016).

Little wonder that the Remain camp struggled to confront 20 years of negative newspaper stories. The period from the end of the Prime Minister's renegotiation of the terms of British EU membership in February to the referendum in June was simply not long enough to permit the crafting and embedding of a credible positive message about the benefits of EU membership. In any case, the Government's strategists believed that the results of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and 2015 General Election supported the view that fears of economic risk are electorally effective. Consequently, the case made for remaining in the Union was a negative one – based on the dangers of being out rather than the

advantages of being in. The negative nature of the campaign was revealed in the polling. A YouGov survey carried out on 9-10 June found that whilst 45% thought that leaving the EU would damage the British economy (the central theme of the pro-membership campaign), 24% were of the opinion that remaining within the Union would have the same effect. A campaign rooted in the notion of the lesser of two evils was always going to struggle. Indeed, a YouGov poll carried out between 20 and 22 June revealed that 23% thought that Britain would be better off should it leave.<sup>1</sup>

The problem was all the more marked given that the Prime Minister himself had to perform something of a political pirouette. Prior to his renegotiation, he was adamant that he could imagine supporting the Brexit camp. Following his return from Brussels on 19 February, he became a passionate defender of British membership in the EU. Yet despite the alleged role of Britain's 'new settlement' in bringing about this transformation, the Remain camp did not refer to it during the campaign, casting doubt on the Prime Minister's sincerity and undermining the Remain camp's most important spokesperson.

In contrast, the Leave campaign had a clear message that they rammed home at every opportunity. In one hour-long television debate, then Justice Secretary Michael Gove used the phrase 'take back control' 23 times. The phrase resonated, and meant all things to all people – for some it meant a reassertion of parliamentary sovereignty, for others the ability to stop paying money to 'Brussels', and for others an end to uncontrolled immigration from elsewhere in the EU. This fed into perceptions about the economic case for membership: YouGov (20-22 June) found that 35% felt that leaving the EU would be good for the National Health Service (NHS) compared to 24% who thought it would be bad.<sup>2</sup>

For the majority of Leave voters, Brexit implied an ability to control flows of people into the UK. And the contrast with the resonance of the Remain message on the economy was all too clear. Whilst, as we have seen, many believed that the British economy would suffer even if it remained in the EU, 49% believed that immigration would go down in the event of Brexit, while 52% assumed it would increase should Britain remain

<sup>1</sup><http://tinyurl.com/gt8thcc>.

<sup>2</sup><http://tinyurl.com/h8ynknv>.

within the EU. For those concerned about immigration, in other words – and polling has consistently shown this to be one of the most important issues to the British public – exiting the Union implied real advantages.

## *II. Shaping the Future*

This brief history is interesting enough in its own right, but all the more so as the forces that shaped the outcome on 23 June look set to continue to shape the political agenda in the months to come. Strikingly, the effectiveness of the message propounded by the Leave campaign outlived the referendum itself.

There has been much discussion about the fact that, despite the outcome of the referendum, Brexit might still not occur. A large majority of MPs – 73%, including 56% of Conservative MPs – voted remain (Smith, 2016). Consequently, some have speculated that the House of Commons may prevent the triggering of Article 50 of the EU treaty, which commences the process of exit.

Yet the politics belies this. For all the relative closeness of the aggregate result, research by Chris Hanretty has suggested that 421 of 574 English and Welsh parliamentary constituencies voted to leave (Hanretty, 2016). And both major political parties face significant pressure from their electorates that militate against defying the popular will. Significantly, fewer than 50% of Conservative voters voted to remain (42% or 39%, depending on which poll you believe) (Curtice, 2016b).

On the Labour side, for all the fact that the majority of Labour supporters voted Remain, a significant proportion – around a third – voted to leave. And the ongoing political implications for the Labour Party are significant. In many of its traditional heartlands, Labour faces a potential challenge from UKIP. At the 2015 General Election, UKIP came second to Labour in 44 seats. The referendum underlined Labour's vulnerability. In many traditional strongholds, a strong vote to leave the EU pointed to the popularity of core UKIP messages, particularly around immigration (precise comparison is difficult because the geographical areas used to count the referendum votes were not the same as the constituencies used for general elections) (Menon, 2016).

Consequently, it is hard to imagine MPs from either major party being willing to attempt to overrule

the electorate by preventing the triggering of Article 50 (even should they be offered the opportunity to do so). And as the Brexit process commences, so public opinion will continue to weigh on the choices made.

The debate about Brexit now revolves around the kind of relationship that the UK might end up having with the EU once it has ceased to be a member. Simply put, the options range on a spectrum from 'membership lite' – the so-called 'Norway option' of full participation in the single market – via 'Canada' (a detailed free trade agreement) to a relationship based on WTO rules.

The Remain camp struggled to confront 20 years of negative newspaper stories. The period from the end of the Prime Minister's renegotiation of the terms of British EU membership in February to the referendum in June was simply not long enough to permit the crafting and embedding of a credible positive message about the benefits of EU membership.

Each option involves trade-offs. For many British businesses, continued membership of the single market should be a red line in the negotiations to come. For many Leave voters, the notion that Britain, having voted to leave, would have to pay into the EU budget, accept the primacy of EU laws, AND accept the free movement of workers (as Norway does) is nonsensical.

And here, we can expect politicians to be sensitive to public opinion. Early polling in the wake of the referendum reveals support for continued free market membership. Yet the crucial issue was whether this was seen as more important than limiting free movement, and here the evidence is more mixed. In late June, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner asked respondents whether control over immigration or access to the single market was more important. 40% said immigration control and 44% said market access. In early July, ComRes found 66% prioritising access to the single market and 31% restriction of free movement (All polls accessed via Curtice (2016a)). However, polling by Lord Ashcroft in mid-August and published on 5 September showed 52% giving priority to controlling immigration and 28% to

single market access (Lord Ashcroft, 2016). John Curtice has suggested that the different result in the Lord Ashcroft polling might reflect different wording, and the fact that respondents were offered a 1-10 scale rather than a binary choice (Curtice, 2016a).

More detailed post-referendum polling by ICM for a British Future report published in August suggested that public attitudes to future immigration levels – not just from the EU – vary strongly depending on the type of immigration at issue (Katwala, Rutter and Ballinger, 2016). The vast majority of respondents wanted the numbers of skilled migrants coming to the UK to increase (46%) or stay the same (42%). However, 40% of respondents wanted to see fewer construction workers coming to the UK in the future, and 49% fewer waiters and bartenders. 65% wanted to see fewer unskilled workers in general coming to the UK.

EU leaders have been quick to claim that membership of the single market involves acceptance of all ‘four freedoms’ – movement of goods, capital, services, and people. A recent report pointed out that the lattermost is a political rather than a functional requirement when it comes to the workings of the market (see Pisani-Ferry et al., 2016), but this should not lead us to underestimate the level of political commitment to the principle.

In his mid-August polling, Lord Ashcroft also probed respondents’ views of the conditions under which they would consider the UK to have left the EU – ‘Brexit means Brexit’ – and the referendum result to have been honoured. 61% percent of respondents felt that having full access to the Single Market was compatible with Brexit. 77% felt that allowing non-UK EU nationals already living and working in the UK to stay would also not violate the Brexit result.<sup>3</sup> However, 79% said that allowing further EU nationals an automatic right to come to the UK – in other words, free movement – was not compatible with Brexit.

And free movement may not be the only issue that hangs over the negotiations to come. One of the most well-known claims for the Leave campaign was that the UK pays £350 million per week to the EU. The veracity of this claim was challenged loud and long, not only by campaigners but also by experts. Nevertheless, the notion that the UK was contributing money to the EU, whatever the precise amount, proved an effective

campaigning tool. And it continues to be so. In Lord Ashcroft’s poll, 81% said that the UK would not have left the EU if it continued to pay into the EU budget (Lord Ashcroft, 2016).

### III. Conclusion

Many reflections about Brexit and the relationship between the UK and EU that will emerge from it have adopted a functional approach. Businesses (and a majority of economists) argue that losing membership of the single market would have profoundly negative consequences for the British economy. Yet the politics appears to be moving in a different direction. Pressure on the two main political parties, along with the continued resonance of key Leave messages among the public, mean that the negotiation of such membership might prove highly problematic. The implication is that Brexit might be hard, and messy.

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<sup>3</sup>The ICM polling for British Future showed 84% of respondents saying that EU nationals already in the UK should be able to stay.

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## Populism and the Brexit vote

by Stephanie Rickard

London School of Economics

In a surprise result, fifty-two percent of voters in the UK referendum on European Union membership chose to leave the EU. Was this unexpected outcome the result of populist politics? If so, what can we learn from 'Brexit' about populism?

### *I. What Role did Populism Play?*

Brexit is viewed by many as a triumph of populism. "Populist anger against the established political order finally boiled over" (Yardley, 2016). While some aspects of the campaign appear populist in nature, others sit uneasily with conventional accounts of populism. Anti-hegemonic language used by outsiders who challenge the establishment defines populism for many (Laclau, 2005; Barr, 2009). Yet, the Leave campaigners cannot be described as outsiders by any stretch of the imagination. The former mayor of London and Member of Parliament, Boris Johnson, along with the Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove, led the Leave campaign. The referendum itself did not arise from popular discontent. Former Prime Minister David Cameron called the referendum in an attempt to paper over divisions about Europe within the Conservative party and ward off electoral threats from the euro-sceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP). These characteristics of the referendum campaign do not fit squarely with conventional accounts of populism. Yet, others do.

As a mode of political expression, populism builds on a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' (Kazin, 1998). Just such a dichotomy was at the heart of the Leave campaign. 'Them' invariably referred to immigrants. The dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' gained traction with voters due to growing frustration with globalization. Since 2007, the average British worker experienced a 10 percent decrease in their real wages (OECD, 2016). Many blame globalization. Britain's economy is nearly twice as exposed to foreign trade as America's (The Economist, 2016a). While trade has brought big benefits to Britain overall, the gains from trade are unevenly distributed. Some people win from international trade but others lose. British workers in industries highly

exposed to foreign imports earn less and spend more time out of employment than those in other industries (Pessoa, 2016). This may explain why areas disproportionately affected by Chinese import competition were especially likely to vote for Brexit (Colantone and Stanig, 2016). Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown blamed globalization, writing: our industrial towns have been hollowed out "as a result of the collapse of manufacturing in the face of Asian competition. These towns are home to a disproportionate share of the semi-skilled workers who feel on the wrong side of globalisation and who opted to vote Leave" (Brown, 2016).

Yet, Brexit was not inevitable. Elected leaders could have done more to pacify discontent about globalization. Government spending of various sorts can build public support for economic openness. Government spending can minimize the impacts of globalization and help to compensate citizens for their trade-induced losses. Government-funded subsidies for domestic producers, for example, help to offset the effects of increased import competition (Rickard, 2012). In the United States, legislators fund programs specifically designed to help workers who lose their jobs because of trade (Rickard, 2015). An analysis of US Congressional roll call votes from 1980–2004 reveals that pro-trade legislators who represent relatively more exporters are more likely to vote for increased spending on Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), a program that provides financial assistance to workers who lose their jobs or experience a reduction in wages due to increased foreign trade (Rickard, 2015). Exporters do not benefit directly from TAA programs. Yet, exporters and their elected representatives support increased TAA funding. Even Republicans, who often oppose spending increases, fund TAA programs when a substantial portion of their constituents are employed in exporting industries (Rickard, 2015). This evidence suggests that legislators fund compensation programs to minimize public opposition to economic openness. Current discontent regarding international trade in the United States suggests additional funding is needed.

If the British government wanted to secure public support for the EU, investment in similar compensation programs, as well as public services and public housing, would have been one way to do it. Increased spending on compensation programs would have muted opposition to globalization. Of course, concerns about globalization were not the only reason why people voted



Leave. But reducing opposition to globalization would undoubtedly have reduced the number of Leave voters. Yet, the British government failed to adequately fund compensation programs. The British government could have, for example, applied for money from the EU's 'globalisation adjustment fund' for training and support for workers displaced by foreign competition. It didn't. Neither did they adequately fund active labor market policies to assist unemployed workers in re-skilling ([The Economist, 2016a](#)). In the run up to the referendum, the government cut expenditures instead in an attempt to return the government finances to a surplus by 2020. The government recently abandoned the 2020 budget target. Yet, spending on job training and support for mass layoffs via the UK's equivalent to TAA – Rapid Response Service – was just £2.5 million last year - less than 1% of the US TAA program ([The Economist, 2016b](#)).

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Increased spending on public services and public housing would have muted the impression that a zero-sum game exists between natives and immigrants ([O'Rourke, 2016](#)). This was just one of many reasons why people voted to leave the EU, but polling shows concerns about access to public services were an important issue in the referendum. The Leave campaign repeatedly argued that migration from the EU put pressure on public services, like the National Health Service (NHS), lengthening queues for doctor appointments and surgeries. Perceived reductions in access to the National Health Service and public housing were often attributed to immigration, rather than government spending decisions. A survey by NatCen revealed that 63 percent of respondents think the National Health Service is being stretched by immigration. One of the most effective Leave campaign messages was that an extra £350 million pounds per week would be available

to spend on the NHS after Brexit thanks to savings in the UK's EU budget contribution. This claim was repeatedly shown to be false, yet it resonated with many. Polling shows it was the single most remembered figure from the campaign ([BBC News, 2016](#)). Greater government funding for the NHS and other programs could have eased voters' concerns about trade and immigration. As the economic historian [O'Rourke \(2016\)](#) succinctly stated, "too much market and too little state invites a backlash." In this case, the backlash was Brexit.

## *II. What Can We Learn from 'Brexit' about Populism?*

Brexit provides a unique opportunity to examine and refine theories of populist politics. Many possibilities for exploration exist. First, Brexit provides an opportunity to examine the contagion of populism across national borders. In the immediate aftermath of the vote, Brexit seemed to embolden populists in other countries. In Italy, for example, the leader of the populist Northern League tweeted: "Now it's our turn" ([The Economist, 2016a](#)). Yet, the subsequent political and economic turmoil increased popular support for the European Union in other countries. In Denmark, for example, a notoriously euro-sceptic country, support for the EU rose eight percentage points following Brexit. Similar increases occurred in France, Germany, and Finland. The extent to which populism 'diffuses' across national borders remains unclear, but it likely depends on the perceived success of populist politics.

Second, Brexit may spur a realignment of political parties – or even change the composition of the United Kingdom. Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU with 62 percent of Scottish voters choosing Remain. The outcome renewed calls for Scottish independence and politicians warned that Scotland would not be taken out of the EU "against our will" ([Johnston, 2016](#)). In addition to whipping up nationalist sentiment in Scotland, the vote also threw the Conservative and Labour parties into chaos. Contentious leadership contests followed the vote in both parties. Although the Conservative contest ended without much carnage, Labour's ongoing leadership contest threatens to split the party apart. How existing political parties respond to Brexit will reveal just how much ground populists have gained.

Third, Brexit offers an opportunity to test the micro-level foundations of populist politics. Why were some

individuals more susceptible to populist mobilization than others? Goodwin, Hix and Pickup (2016) explore this question using an on-line survey experiment, embedded in a panel design. They test the effects of a range of different pro-Remain and pro-Leave frames. They report that the effectiveness of pro-Leave arguments depends on individuals' party-identification and level of education.

Finally, how the UK actually exits the EU will shed new light on the power of populist politics. Populists see the primary task of political institutions as tools for translating the majority will into political decisions (Urbanati, 1998). Will Westminster's institutions faithfully translate the majority's will into action? Months after the vote, the British government has yet to trigger Article 50, the formal mechanism by which countries leave the EU. The new Prime Minister, Theresa May, sought to reassure the majority by stating, "Brexit means Brexit". But the details of Britain's exit from the EU remain to be negotiated. Britain's exit may be relatively 'soft'. For example, many have suggested that the UK could remain in the single market or adopt Norway's type of relationship with the EU. Are such options politically viable? Would a 'soft' Brexit be viewed as a betrayal by the 17 million voters who chose Leave? A new political divide is emerging between those who want a soft Brexit and those who demand a 'hard' Brexit. How this debate plays out will shed further light on the power of populism.

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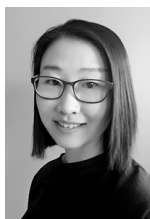
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