UNDERSTANDING POPULISM

BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

EDITED BY PETRA GUASTI
AND MATTIA ZULIANELLO

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Understanding Populism
Between Myth and Reality

Petra Guasti
and Mattia Zulianello
(eds.)

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CONTENTS

Preface 11
List of Abbreviations 13
Understanding Populism Between Myth and Reality by Mattia Zulianello 15

Part I. Populism and Non-Populism 49
1. What populism… is not! (*Davide Vittori*) 50
2. Not everyone can be a populist: the ideological boundaries of populism (*Stijn van Kessel*) 53
3. Looking beyond populism… to better understand populism (*Bartek Pytlas*) 56
4. Populism: left or right? (*Dani Filc*) 59
5. Populist communication—style over substance? (*Lone Sorensen*) 62
6. The strategic use of populism (*Michael Hameleers*) 65
7. Complementary opposites: technocracy and populism (*Petra Guasti*) 68
8. Populism and Euroscepticism: convergences and overlaps (*Antonella Seddone*) 72
9. What is sovereignism? (*Nicolò Conti*) 75
10. Anti-populist communication (*Vlastimil Havlík and Alena Kluknavská*) 78
11. What have we learned? (*Petra Guasti*) 81

Part II. Ideology and Political Positions 83
1. Brothers of Italy is not a post- or neo-fascist party, but it might pose an illiberal challenge (*Leonardo Puleo and Gianluca Piccolino*) 84
2. Boom to bust: where next for Matteo Salvini's League? (*Arianna Giovannini and Davide Vampa*) 87
3. Are "common sense" and "good practices" right-wing or left-wing? The ideological roots of techno-populist rhetoric (*Enrico Padoan*) 90
4. The emotional core of left- and right-wing populism (*Donatella Bonansinga*) 93
5. Why Italian political parties use populist rhetoric on social media (*Andrea Ceron, Silvia Decadri and Fedra Negri*) 96
6. Femonationalism (*Francesca Feo*) 98
7. Populism and gender issues in Le Pen and Meloni (*Marianna Griffini and Laura Montecchio*) 101
8. Europe, an ideological resource for the populist radical right (*Marta Lorimer*) 104
9. The position of Italian parties on the war in Ukraine (*Mara Morini*) 106

10. The same thing? The foreign policy of the extreme right and the radical right (*Jakub Wondreys*) **109**
11. Why Putin's no populist (*Luke March*) **113**
12. Ukrainian modern populism: the case of Volodymyr Zelensky (*Kostiantyn Yanchenko*) **116**
13. The resurgence of agrarian populism (*Matthijs Rooduijn and Sarah De Lange*) **119**
14. Peronism in Argentina exemplifies the chameleonic nature of populism (*Wolfgang Muno and Christian Pfeiffer*) **122**
15. The rise of left-wing populism in Europe: ideological divergence and a nationalist turn (*Mattia Collini and Michel Perottino*) **126**
16. United in delegitimization? Czech and German branches of the sovereign citizens movement (*Aleš Michal*) **130**
17. Evolution of radical right movements in Czechia (*Jan Charvát*) **133**
18. Many faces of one creature: populism in local manifestos of SPD (*Petr Voda*) **137**
19. ANO's evolution (*Tomas Cirhan*) **141**
20. The fusion of nationalism and communism in contemporary Slovak discourse (*Filip Žiljak*) **144**
21. What have we learned? (*Petra Guasti*) **147**

Part III. Leadership and Organization **151**

1. Myth: all populist leaders are "charismatic" (*Adrian Favero*) **152**
2. Narendra Modi: India's "vulnerable" strongman populist leader (*Proma Raychaudhury*) **155**
3. Populism, (perception of) authenticity, and political communication (*Diego Ceccobelli*) **158**
4. Populism and platform leadership (*Federica Nunziata*) **161**
5. Populism and celebrity politics (*Donatella Campus*) **164**
6. Populism: going beyond the myth of the charismatic leader (*Sabine Volk*) **167**
7. Legitimacy and visibility: the mainstreaming of the populist radical right at the local level (*Adrian Favero*) **170**
8. Beyond grievances: the path to populist radical-right party membership (*Sofia Ammassari*) **173**
9. Left-wing populism and social movements: the French and Spanish cases (*Laura Chazel*) **176**
10. Populism in the digital environment. What can be learned from the experience of the Five Star Movement and the Rousseau platform (*Filippo Tronconi*) **179**
11. Techno-populism: from the people 2.0 to the digital plebs? (*Michal Malý*) **182**
12. Chatbot politicians: who are they, and what is their connection to populism? (*Silvija Vuković*) **185**
13. What have we learned? (*Petra Guasti*) **188**

Part IV. Political Opportunity Structure **189**

1. Why is Italy more populist than any other country in Western Europe? (*Michelangelo Vercesi*) **190**
2. Populist zeitgeist à la Française (*Petra Guasti and Michel Perottino*) **193**
3. Crises and populism: the case of Slovakia (*Petra Guasti, Michal Malý and Aleš Michal*) **197**
4. Why right-wing populist parties are more successful in some countries than in others (*Léonie De Jonge*) **201**
5. Social media: populists' partners in crime (*Laura Jacobs*) **204**
6. The right's "female face": media framing of populist radical right women leaders (*Alexandra Snipes and Jakub Wondreys*) **207**
7. Towards the consolidation of a new cleavage? The evolution of the "demarcationist" bloc in Europe (*Vincenzo Emanuele*) **210**
8. Neo-Traditionalism in Central and Eastern Europe (*Francesco Melito*) **214**
9. Populist instrumental use of religion: the cases of Bolivia and Turkey (*Greta Lanza*) **217**
10. Nostalgia and populism (*Ezgi Elçi*) **220**
11 Social democratic responses to populism: a comparative analysis (*Petra Guasti, Aleš Michal and Michal Malý*) **223**
12. Deliberation is no silver bullet for the "problem" of populism (*Kristof Jacobs*) **227**
13. Populist attitudes as thermometers of democratic quality (*Marie-Isabel Theuwis and Rosa Kindt*) **230**
14. Responding to populism with caution (*Anthoula Malkopoulou*) **233**
15. What have we learned? (*Petra Guasti*) **236**

Part V. Populist Voters and Their Context **239**

1. Don't exaggerate the importance of populism (*Yaoyao Dai*) **240**
2. Who is a populist? Let the citizens speak (*Matteo C. M. Casiraghi, Luigi Curini, and Alessandro Nai*) **243**
3. Populism and the nexus of illiberalism (*Marcel Lewandowsky*) **246**
4. Populist citizens do not reject liberal democracy (*Maurits Meijers and Andrej Zaslove*) **249**
5. The myth of the typical far-right populist voter (*Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou*) **252**
6. Populism and protest at the ballot box (*Alexander Langenkamp and Simon Bienstman*) **255**
7. The populist radical right in Spain and Portugal: from the margins to normalization (*Luca Manucci*) **258**
8. The geography of European populism: unveiling nuances beyond stereotypes (*Mirko Crulli*) **261**
9. Populism and rural areas: a matter of recognition (*Giovanni Carrosio*) **265**

10. School and hospital closures increase support for right-wing populist parties (*Niels Nyholt*) **268**
11. Welfare chauvinism and populism. Is it the economy (stupid)? (*David Andreas Bell*) **271**
12. Exploring populist supporters' complex relationship with journalism (*Clara Juarez Miro*) **273**
13. The relationship between populism and conspiracy theories (*Federico Vegetti and Moreno Mancosu*) **276**
14. Science-related populism and populist electoral performance (*Fabio Bordignon*) **279**
15. Populist radical right voters do not have a monopoly on nostalgia! (*Luca Versteegen*) **282**
16. Activating populist attitudes in times of crisis: evidence from the Czech COVID-19 experience (*Jakub Stauber*) **285**
17. What have we learned? (*Petra Guasti*) **288**

Part VI. Impact and Consequences **291**

1. Understanding the illiberal challenge in Europe (*Gianfranco Baldini and Hugo Canihac*) **292**
2. Populism and constitutional democracy (*Giuseppe Martinico*) **295**
3. Populists in power, constitutional change, and democratic backsliding (*Jasmin Sarah König and Tilko Swalve*) **298**
4. Populism in parliament and the impact on representation (*David Jágr*) **301**
5. "The people" go to the Capitol (*Lasse Thomassen*) **305**
6. How populist parties survive "mainstreaming" once in power (*Anca Turcu*) **308**
7. Do European left-wing populists in government become more moderate? (*Jan Philipp Thomeczek*) **311**
8. Populist governments as a threat from within the state (*Michael Bauer*) **314**
9. How populists damage governments (*Mauricio I. Dussauge-Laguna*) **317**
10. Marching to the populist drum? The military's role in populist governance (*Hakkı Taş*) **320**
11. Populism and the public sector in Italy (*Anna Longhini*) **324**
12. Lost in the shuffle: local politics in populism studies (*Eliška Drápalová*) **327**
13. Small homelands: the populist radical right, territories and localism (*Elisa Bellè*) **330**
14. We cannot ignore the populist radical-right impact on the welfare state (*Juliana Chueri*) **333**
15. Populist radical-right parties are threatening international cooperation (*Motoshi Suzuki*) **336**
16. Javier Milei: a different populist outsider (*Jaroslav Bílek*) **339**
17. Rights for women and gender equality under Giorgia Meloni (*Alessia Donà*) **342**
18. Why we must resist illiberalism's attacks on higher education (*Andrea Pető*) **345**

19. Three myths about populism in international relations (*Angelos Chryssogelos*) **348**
20. Populism and foreign policy (*Fabrizio Coticchia*) **351**
21. Animosity and politics: the populist radical right in the age of affective polarization (*Sorina Soare and Mattia Zulianello*) **354**
22. Exploring tensions: affective and ideological polarization in Generation Z (*Paolo Frare, Marco Montanari and Martina Sguazzin*) **358**
23. The stigmatization of the policy proposals of the populist radical right (*Niklas Bolin*) **361**
24. What have we learned? (*Petra Guasti*) **364**

Bibliography **367**
Contributors **405**

PREFACE

This book is distinctive as it aims precisely to deliver on its title: helping the reader understand populism. The idea originated from our conviction that, despite significant attention devoted to the phenomenon, the conversation on populism remains dominated by persistent myths. Our goal here is to debunk these myths.

This is a somewhat "heretical" volume, consisting of 101 brief chapters authored by 113 contributors, ranging from recent graduates to internationally renowned academics. The book spans diverse approaches, themes, and national contexts, serving as a practical toolkit to comprehend a complex, contested, and significant phenomenon. We do not aim for comprehensive coverage. Instead, we provide a broad overview, integrating traditional perspectives alongside innovative and niche topics. The primary objective is to spark initial interest and serve as a springboard for further exploration, discussion, and curiosity. Readers can approach the volume according to their own needs and preferences, engaging with it either entirely or selectively. The language employed throughout is intentionally clear and accessible, with footnotes omitted and bibliographic references limited to essential works to maintain readability.

The book is structured as follows: an introductory chapter sets the stage by "imagining" a dialogue with a typical student, directly confronting prevalent myths. Subsequently, the volume is divided into six main sections, each dedicated to critically addressing one of six prominent myths about populism. Specifically, through a total of 101 brief chapters, we challenge the following myths: that populism is an elusive concept, inherently tied to specific political positions, dependent on charismatic leaders, exclusively arising during objective crises, represented by a singular type of voter, and inherently disconnected from mainstream politics. Each section concludes with a succinct summary titled "What have we learned?" highlighting key insights from the preceding chapters.

This volume would not have been possible without the European Consortium for Political Research's (ECPR) blog, The Loop. We extend our deep gratitude to Martin Bull, Johanne Døhlie Saltnes, and Kate Hawkins for their exceptional editorial support and for suggesting and assisting with our blog series, "Future of Populism." From its first article (Zulianello & Guasti, 2023),

the series organically evolved into a significant source of scholarly debate, continuously enriched by new contributions (a complete list of entries is available at theloop.ecpr.eu).

The core of this book comprises selected posts from our "Future of Populism" series. To enrich and broaden our analytical scope, we have also included several original contributions written specifically for this publication.

Mattia Zulianello acknowledges financial support from the Italian Ministry of University and Research and the European Union's Next Generation EU within the PRIN 2022 project "The Visual Politics of Populism" [Project ID: 20222ERHBA, Principal Investigator: Mattia Zulianello]. Petra Guasti's research and contributions were supported by the Systemic Risk Institute, Nr. LX22NPO5101, funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).

We also extend heartfelt gratitude to all the students whose questions, objections, and enthusiasm inspired the creation of this book. Special thanks go to David Chalopupka, Greta Lanza, and Helena Ocelková for their invaluable assistance, to our home institutions—the University of Trieste and Charles University in Prague—and to everyone who participated in this project.

M. Z. and P. G., February 2026

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfD	*Alternative für Deutschland*, Alternative for Germany (Germany)
AKP	*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
AN	*Alleanza Nazionale,* National Alliance (Italy)
ANEL	*Anexartitoi Ellines*, Independent Greeks (Greece)
ANO 2011	*Akce nespokojených občanů,* Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (Czech Republic)
BBB	*BoerBurgerBeweging*, Farmer – Citizen Movement (Netherlands)
BJP	*Bharatiya Janata Party*, Indian People's Party (India)
BSW	*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*, Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit, *Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance*, Reason and Justice (Germany)
BZÖ	*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, Alliance for the Future of Austria (Austria)
CEU	Central European University
CHEGA	*Chega!*, Enough! (Portugal)
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease
DF	*Dansk Folkeparti*, Danish People's Party (Denmark)
ECPR	European Consortium for Political Research
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters (South Africa)
ER	Yedinaya Rossiya, United Russia (Russian Federation)
ESS	European Social Survey
FIDESZ	*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség, Fidesz* – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Hungary)
FdI	*Fratelli d'Italia*, Brothers of Italy (Italy)
FI	*Forza Italia*, Forward Italy (Italy)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
FN	*Front National*, National Front (France)
FPÖ	*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, Austrian Freedom Party (Austria)
FUQ	*Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque*, Common Man's Front (Italy)
Hlas-SD	*Hlas – sociálna demokracia*, Voice – Social Democracy (Slovakia)
IdV	*Italia dei Valori*, Italy of Values (Italy)
INC	Indian National Congress (India)
IV	*Italia Viva*, Italy Alive (Italy)
KSČM	*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Czech Republic)
LAE	*Laïkí Enótita – Anipótakti Aristera*, Popular Unity (Greece)
LFI	*La France Insoumise*, France Unbowed (France)
LIO	Liberal International Order
LN	*Lega Nord*, Northern League (Italy)
LREM	*La République En Marche!*, The Republic on the Move! (France)
M-15	*Movimiento 15-M*, 15 May Movement (Spain)
MAGA	Make America Great Again, (United States)
MSI	*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, Italian Social Movement (Italy)
M5S	*Movimento 5 Stelle*, Five Star Movement (Italy)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPM	New Public Management

OĽaNO	*Obyčajní Ludia a Nezávislé Osobnosti*, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Slovakia)
OECD	*Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development*
PA	Public Administration
PaP	*Potere al Popolo!*, Power to the People! (Italy)
PBI	Pseudoscientific Beliefs Index
PD	*Partito Democratico*, Democratic Party (Italy)
PDS	*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany)
PdG	*Partido de la Gente*, People's Party (Chile)
PdL	*Popolo della Libertà*, People of Freedom (Italy)
PiS	*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, Law and Justice (Poland)
PMP	*Partito Monarchico Popolare*, People's Monarchist Party (Italy)
PS	*Perussuomalaiset*, The Finns Party (Finland)
PSOE	*Partido Socialista Obrero Español,* Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Spain)
PVV	*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, Party for Freedom (Netherlands)
RN	*Rassemblement National*, National Rally (France)
SD	*Sverigedemokraterna*, Sweden Democrats (Sweden)
Smer-SD	*Smer – sociálna demokracia*, Direction – Social Democracy (Slovakia)
SMP	*Suomen maaseudun puolue*, Finnish Rural Party (Finland)
SN	*Sluha narodu*, Servant of the People (Ukraine)
SPD	*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, Freedom and Direct Democracy (Czech Republic)
SVP-UDC	*Schweizerische Volkspartei – Union Démocratique du Centre*, Swiss People's Party – Democratic Union of the Centre (Switzerland)
SYRIZA	*Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras – Proodeftikí Symmachía*, Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance (Greece)
EU	European Union
VOX	*Vox*, Voice (Spain)
WASG	*Arbeit & soziale Gerechtigkeit – Die Wahlalternative*, Labour and Social Justice – The Electoral Alternative (Germany)

UNDERSTANDING POPULISM BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

BY MATTIA ZULIANELLO

INTRODUCTION

This book does not aim to be a traditional textbook, nor does the introduction follow the typical academic approach, where knowledge is "parachuted" from the writer to the reader in a unidirectional manner. My goal is for the reader to understand the main characteristics of populism and its causes, impact, and consequences. While I do not offer exhaustive coverage (which would require several dedicated volumes), I intend to provide readers with the essential tools to navigate the entire book or specific sections independently.

To ensure everything is as simple and clear as possible, I decided to write an unconventional introduction, departing from the traditional academic style. Specifically, I have structured this introduction as a hypothetical dialogue between a student and myself. Starting with a back-and-forth exchange, where a student raises observations and questions and I respond, can help students and curious readers take their first steps into a topic as complex and controversial as populism.

I have developed these observations and questions based on my teaching experience, creating a series of queries that reflect what a typical political science student might ask. Some of my students (to whom I am grateful) have contributed by suggesting points they found most important, complex, or controversial about populism. Through this hypothetical dialogue, I will outline the main themes necessary to begin understanding populism while addressing six myths still widely prevalent in public and academic debates. Debunking these myths is essential to avoid a stereotyped, incomplete, misleading understanding of a crucial phenomenon in contemporary politics.

This introduction aims to communicate key information in an accessible manner while maintaining a rigorous approach. In my responses, I have sought to minimize bibliographic references to provide a clear and concise overview for those encountering populism for the first time. However, readers wishing to explore the topics further will find a curated bibliography of freely accessible works online at the end of the introduction.

MYTH NO. 1: POPULISM IS AN ELUSIVE PHENOMENON

Everyone talks about populism, but it seems to mean everything and nothing at the same time…

Indeed, everyone seems to talk about populism. The terms "populism" and "populist" have become indispensable in contemporary debates. However, one must ask if these terms are used accurately and whether they successfully differentiate populism from non-populism. Listening to mass media and journalists, it often seems that the "populist" label is applied to anyone—for example, it is difficult to think of an Italian politician who hasn't been labelled as such, perhaps following a particular policy proposal or specific behavior. The press, often acrobatically, brands a wide array of figures as populists.

The term populism is frequently used in an instrumental and pejorative manner to discredit some political actors. Consider, for example, the countless times we have heard someone labelled "populist" to criticize their ideas or behavior. It seems that populism can mean everything and nothing, depending on convenience. However, we must distinguish between two different realms: the journalistic use of the term and its academic use. While the media and journalists often employ it imprecisely, inconsistently, and derogatorily, among scholars—particularly political scientists and sociologists—there is a growing consensus about the essential characteristics of populism, grounded in the analytical tools of the social sciences.

In academic debates, populism has been analyzed through various approaches and interpretive models, which cannot be exhaustively summarized here. Over the past few decades, there has been an unprecedented growth in the body of scholarly work on the subject, much of which has focused on clarifying the nature of populism. Although disputes remain (and likely always will, as with any significant political and social phenomenon), a substantial portion of political science literature agrees on the definition of populism.

So, what are these ideas?

The essential feature of populism lies in the dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite": the underlying premise is that the primary goal of politics is to fulfil the general will of the people at all costs (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Specifically, populists view the conflict between the people and the elite as the essence, the very core, of politics. Consequently, populism is a set of ideas characterized by the simultaneous presence of three essential elements: the pure people, the corrupt elite, and the general will of the people. This framework significantly improves our ability to study populism by facilitating cumulative knowledge, fostering

academic dialogue, and enabling cross-country and multi-level research (transnational, national, and subnational).

What is the "pure people," and what is their "general will"?

The crucial point is that the distinction between "the people" and "the elite" is not objective or directly observable; rather, it is a political construct shaped by actors using essentially moral and Manichean criteria, opposing "good" against "evil." For populists, the people are pure, virtuous, homogeneous, and devoid of internal divisions. They embody the values of "goodness," a sense of authenticity, and genuineness. For these reasons, the people are viewed as the ultimate authority in a democracy, the sole compass guiding political action and decision-making processes. All political actors appeal to the people, but the people invoked by populists have distinctive traits tied to the notion of "people-centrism."

According to this concept, the people exhibit moral purity and lack internal divisions; all members share certain core values. Using a metaphor, if we imagined the populist's "pure people" as a sphere and divided it into a million pieces, each fragment would be identical to the other fragments, possessing the same characteristics of moral purity, authenticity, and genuineness. Those who lack these moral values are not only excluded from the group of the pure people but are also seen as a threat, as the populist worldview revolves around a battle between good and evil.

Populists consider "the people" as homogeneous, morally superior, and the idealized guardians of authentic and genuine values. Moreover, attributing moral superiority to the people is accompanied by the idea of a general will, which must be respected, heeded and glorified. Because of its moral supremacy, the general will is seen as an absolute good, self-evident, and non-negotiable. For this reason, populism is inherently opposed to pluralism, if not openly anti-pluralist. Populists not only tend to ignore the fact that diverse interests and values characterize society but also view these as artificial divisions introduced with the deliberate aim of fragmenting the people.

While pluralism sees diversity of opinion as a strength, populism perceives it as a threat to the unity and homogeneity of the people and their most intimate, authentic values. According to populist logic, the only meaningful opposition is between the people and the elite. By interpreting the people's will as singular and supreme, there is no room for compromise or negotiation, as these would not merely be political agreements but moral betrayals.

So, the elite are the sworn enemy of the people...

Exactly. According to populists, this is the essential conflict. Good is embodied in the people and their will; on the other side, evil is represented by the elite. The elite is considered the antithesis of the people—a malevolent, powerful

entity indifferent to the needs of ordinary citizens. This belief is known as anti-elitism. Specifically, populists accuse the elite of betraying the people, and systematically and deliberately acting to deprive them of their sovereignty. The elite is also seen as a homogeneous group, working in concert to maintain their status and power, driven by self-serving interests or subordinated to obscure and/or foreign forces. In this case, their homogeneity derives from their shared moral characteristics, which are the opposite of those attributed to the people. In other words, the elite becomes a repository of negativity—everything that is politically, socially, and/or economically wrong.

But who belongs to the pure people? And who constitutes the corrupt elite? As mentioned earlier, the distinction between the people and the elite is a political construct (Canovan, 1984). However, to fully grasp this distinction, it's important to introduce a crucial aspect of Mudde's (2004) definition that I have yet to discuss. Populism is a set of ideas that invokes a "thin-centered" ideology. This "thinness" is as significant as it is misunderstood. However, understanding it is necessary to determine who belongs to the pure people and who falls within the corrupt elite.

MYTH NO. 2: POPULISM IMPLIES SPECIFIC POLITICAL POSITIONS, ESPECIALLY RIGHT-WING ONES

Okay… But what does it mean that populism is a "thin-centered" ideology? Unlike ideologies with a "thick core" (also known as "complete" ideologies), such as communism, fascism, liberalism, and socialism, populism refers solely to a moral opposition between the people and the elite. It tells us that the best way to conduct politics is to follow the will of the people. Beyond this, however, populism offers no inherent stance on major socioeconomic or sociocultural issues. In particular, thick ideologies can provide specific theoretical perspectives on significant social, economic, and cultural problems; thin-centered ideologies (sometimes also referred to as "incomplete" or "weak") cannot. To do so, they must interact with other ideas, often referred to as "host ideologies."

Populism tends to interact with other ideological or programmatic elements necessary to shape broader political projects that can address major issues in political debates (and attract voter support). This is why populism has taken on so many diverse forms over time. By interpreting populism as a thin-centered ideology, we can trace its modern manifestations back to the late 19th century with the US People's Party and Russian agrarian populism. In more recent times, scholars have associated populism with a variety of actors, including individuals like Hugo Chávez, Narendra Modi, Matteo Salvini,

Donald Trump, and Alexis Tsipras; political parties like Alternative for Germany (AfD), Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa, the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, Podemos in Spain, and Servant of the People (Sluha narodu) in Ukraine; and social movements, such as the Canadian Freedom Convoy, the Yellow Vests in France, or the "tractor protests" across Europe. These examples illustrate populism's ability to interact with a wide range of other ideas, even ones that are vastly different, enabling the creation of broader political projects.

The key point is that ideologies are not always comprehensive, "heavy," or coherent; they can also consist of more or less incomplete or inconsistent ideas that tell us something significant in at least two respects: they diagnose how society is today (what works and what doesn't) and propose a prognosis for what should be done (how society should be in the future). In this sense, populism qualifies as an ideology, albeit a thin-centered one: it asserts that society today is characterized by an essential conflict between the people and the elite and that, in the future, the general will of the people should dominate the political scene. In this sense, populism acts as a pair of glasses through which political reality is analyzed and interpreted.

The primary advantage of interpreting populism as a thin-centered ideology is that it allows us to classify political parties, leaders, and other actors as populist or non-populist. In other words, it enables a crucial distinction based on the presence or absence of this ideological trait. However, this does not mean that the core ideas of populism—people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the general will—cannot be occasionally used by all political actors as a communication tool. Research suggests that during election campaigns, all parties, even non-populist ones, adopt populist-style communication to some degree. The same applies to non-populist parties in opposition to governing parties. By viewing populism as a set of ideas, we can classify political actors as either populist or non-populist (a categorical distinction) and measure the extent to which populists and non-populists use populist communication elements (a gradational distinction). Importantly, while any political actor can occasionally employ populist communication, for some, populism is a central element of their identity and worldview. For these actors, populism becomes an ideological characteristic, albeit thin, rather than a strategic tool for short-term contingencies.

However, populism cannot be considered part of a cohesive ideological tradition precisely because it is something subtle that, in the real world, combines with other ideologies and programmatic aspects, sometimes even contradictory ones. Populism does not imply specific positions on economic or sociocultural issues, and this also applies to determining who belongs to the pure people and who belongs to the corrupt elite: it depends on the other ideas and/or ideologies with which populism interacts.

It seems to me that populism is very close to right-wing ideas...

It is often believed that populists are only "right-wing" or have a natural tendency toward that part of the political spectrum. However, as we have seen earlier, populism is merely a moralistic way of interpreting the world, characterized by a conflict between the pure people and the corrupt elite.

In particular, populism alone does not imply a specific political agenda or program; these depend on the other ideas with which it interacts, as the meaning attributed to the terms "people" and "elite" is shaped by interaction with other ideological and/or programmatic elements. This makes it a "highly chameleonic" phenomenon (Taggart, 2004, p. 275). Populists always emphasize the moral and Manichean opposition between the people and the elite and celebrate popular sovereignty, but precisely because of its nature as a thin ideology, populism tends to associate with other elements.

As a result, populist actors can be identified at various points along the political spectrum. Certainly, the majority of contemporary populists are on the (radical) right, but this is purely an empirical observation: it undoubtedly tells us that this is a successful competitive formula, but it should not be understood as a natural predisposition of populism to align with right-wing ideas.

What is right-wing populism?

The term "right-wing populism" refers to political actors who endorse a vision of the pure people that excludes certain groups based on ethnic criteria, often prioritizing the values, identity, and culture of the native population. Alternatively, they may use a sociocultural idea of merit, distinguishing between those who "produce" and those who "consume" resources. In other words, right-wing populists are characterized by an "exclusive" conception of the people (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Within right-wing populism, there are three main subtypes: neoliberal populism, national-conservative populism, and—most notably—populist radical right. Neoliberal populists combine populism with a focus on minimal government and free markets, portraying "the people" as overburdened taxpayers and bureaucrats as parasitic elites. National-conservative populists, on the other hand, embrace a hierarchical view of society centered on traditional values such as nationhood, community, patriotism, and state paternalism. While these two subtypes are relatively rare today, the most widespread form of the populist right in Europe—and beyond—is the populist radical right. This variant includes actors commonly associated with populism in media discussions, such as Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and Lega in Italy, Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats) in Hungary, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, the National Rally (formerly National Front) in France, the Freedom Party (PVV)

in the Netherlands, VOX in Spain, Indian People's Party (BJP) in India, and the Republican Party in the USA.

What are the defining characteristics of the populist radical right?

The populist radical right is a party family characterized by three core ideological elements: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). Among these, nativism is the most significant, manifesting as a preference for the native population of a given country (e.g., "Italians First"), which constitutes the pure people in this framework. Nativism can take cultural forms (e.g., glorifying the intangible heritage of a particular nation), economic forms (e.g., prioritizing natives in the labor market), or forms related to the welfare state (e.g., welfare chauvinism, where natives are seen as having priority access to public services).

The second defining feature of the populist radical right is authoritarianism, which refers to a belief in a strictly ordered society where violations of authority must be severely punished. This is often expressed through proposals and policies associated with "law and order," emphasizing punitive measures over rehabilitative ones. Populist radical right actors often also support traditional views of family, gender, and sexuality. It is essential to clarify that, in this context, authoritarianism does not refer to a desire to establish a non-democratic regime (though this can be a possible outcome of populists' actions in general, not just those of the populist radical right). Instead, authoritarianism reflects a "severe" interpretation of society.

Finally, there is populism itself. In the context of the populist radical right, the pure people are defined as natives, while the corrupt elite are a broad array of actors seen as promoting multiculturalism. Specifically, the populist radical right's anti-elitism often takes a sociocultural form, condemning the "tyranny" of political correctness. This is associated with the idea that an elite of traditional parties, politicians, media, and intellectuals has betrayed the native population by embracing multicultural and internationalist ideas, allegedly "selling out" the country to serve obscure interests. Nevertheless, populism is the least important ideological element of the populist radical right. While the media often portray it as the defining trait, this is only partially accurate. Indeed, while its importance should not be overstated, it remains a decisive and characteristic aspect of the populist radical right: the moral charge derived from populism amplifies the competitive potential of nativism and authoritarianism.

To use a culinary metaphor, nativism and authoritarianism are the main courses for these parties, while populism is the seasoning. Seasoning alone is insufficient, but a dish without seasoning is certainly unappealing. The same applies to most other forms of populism.

Even for left-wing populists?

Yes, in this case, too, populism is an important element of the ideological profile of such actors, but it is not the most important. Left-wing populists tend to adopt a radical left position, combining populism with a more or less abstract form of socialist ideology. This includes marginalized and disadvantaged groups, both socioeconomically and socioculturally, in conceptualizing the pure people (Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis, 2019). In other words, they are characterized by an "inclusive" conception of the people (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Left-wing populists emphasize egalitarianism, equality, inclusion, social justice, environmentalism, and feminism. While they do not categorically reject capitalism, they strongly criticize neoliberalism and consumerism (March, 2011). In Europe, left-wing populism is far less widespread than right-wing populism, appearing only in a few countries, such as Greece, France, Ireland, and Germany. Elsewhere, such as Latin America, it has had a much greater impact, with emblematic examples like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

Left-wing populists identify elites primarily (though not exclusively) in socioeconomic terms, targeting the so-called 1% of the population that controls the vast majority of global resources. Therefore, the enemies of the pure people are big corporations, multimillionaire bankers, wealthy elites, self-interested private individuals, and some supranational institutions, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) being a prominent example.

It is necessary to highlight some important differences between radical left-wing populists and "old" communist parties. While left-wing populists share concerns about redistribution and egalitarianism with these parties, the concept of "class" is not the centerpiece of their appeal (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). For communists, the party was seen as a vanguard leading the people (or, more specifically, the working class) rather than following them. This is precisely the opposite of the populist logic. Furthermore, the fundamental principles of class struggle, particularly the concept of "false consciousness," are antithetical to the ethics of populism. According to populism, the people are not only morally superior but also fully aware of their own needs and necessities, capable of expressing a clear and incorruptible general will.

You mentioned the difference between radical left-wing populists and old communist parties, but what is the difference between the radical right and the extreme right?

The radical right and the extreme right share two essential ideological characteristics: nativism and authoritarianism. However, they differ decisively in their stance toward democracy: the extreme right rejects the very essence of

democracy, its very ideal, while the radical right is not opposed to democracy per se but rather to a specific form: liberal democracy.

The extreme right has an intrinsically revolutionary nature and a clearly elitist character, which are incompatible with populism. Additionally, the extreme right is incompatible with populism because it seeks to create a "new man," entirely different—for example, the "new man" of Benito Mussolini's vision. This is at odds with populist logic, which exalts the common person as the bearer of authentic, genuine, and morally superior values.

In contrast, the radical right does not oppose democracy as an ideal; it is better understood as a form of democratic illiberalism (Mudde, 2013). In particular, its compatibility with populism is evidenced by the fact that in the contemporary world, the radical right is almost always populist as well. However, the populist radical right conception of democracy is hyper-majoritarian, often at odds with minority rights and the role of intermediary bodies and institutional "checks and balances." This tension arises because populism, in general, is at least theoretically democratic but in conflict with liberal and representative democracy.

Often, especially in Anglo-Saxon journalistic language, the term "far right" is used to refer to both the extreme right and the radical right—for details, see Zulianello (2025). However, while some actors may evade a clear categorization as either extreme right or radical right, it is important to distinguish between the two groups, particularly in specialist language. The differing stance toward the democratic ideal between the extreme right and the radical right is not a trivial matter, either ideologically or competitively.

Okay, but is populism necessarily either right-wing or left-wing?

No, although these are the two most common varieties. As the terms suggest, "right-wing" and "left-wing" indicate positions on the political spectrum. However, not all forms of populism are tied to a clear ideological variety—for an update and extensive overview, see Zulianello (2026).

And what are they?

Valence populists represent an example, but before proceeding, it is important to explain the difference between positional and non-positional issues briefly. Positional issues can divide the electorate into distinct groups with contrasting preferences. For example, some citizens are willing to accept higher taxation in exchange for improved public services, while others are not; some support increased immigration, others do not; some favor abortion and others oppose it. These are all examples of positional issues where it is realistic to expect voters to take opposing sides.

However, there are also non-positional issues which have no "opposite." These are issues broadly shared by the electorate. Examples include fighting corruption, improving the quality of democracy, and enhancing transparency

and the performance of the political system. Who would not want more honest and capable politicians? Who wouldn't want a better-functioning political system? These are classic non-positional issues, receiving broad consensus among voters or having no opposing pole.

Examples of valence populist parties are found mainly in contexts where (all else being equal) there is a high perception of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and/or high levels of corruption. These include Italy's *Five Star Movement* (M5S), at least until the 2022 elections, the *Action of Dissatisfied Citizens* (Akce nespokojených občanů, ANO 2011) in the Czech Republic, and various parties in other Central and Eastern European countries. For valence populists, the pure people are essentially the citizens, viewed as a politically relevant entity. At the same time, the elites are typically identified as the political class and their "accomplices," especially the media and journalists, portrayed as a caste interested only in maintaining their privileges and undermining the sovereignty of the people.

Even valence populists can take clear stances on some positional issues (such as M5S's stance on universal basic income), but the key point is that their overall ideological profile is shaped by populism in itself rather than its interaction with other full-fledged ideologies. For example, nativism offers a set of ideological constraints and opportunities for the populist radical right, just as egalitarianism does for the populist radical left.

Due to significant ideological constraints, a leader of a populist radical right party cannot overnight transform their platform to support open borders. Similarly, a leader of a populist radical left party cannot suddenly advocate for large-scale privatization. Valence populists, on the other hand, with their sole defining ideological element being something as "thin" as populism, enjoy significant freedom of movement. They tend to hold contradictory, ambiguous, and shifting positions on many political issues, especially in opposition.

I've often heard about the "tractor protests" in recent months. Is this a populist movement?

The tractor protests, which began in late 2023, are an example of agrarian populism—a variety of populism that seemed to have faded but is now making a comeback. The ideology of agrarian populists is characterized by a mix of agrarianism and ruralism, emphasizing the defense of the countryside and the broader rural world, its values, and interests, which are often seen in opposition to—or even as fundamentally incompatible with—those of urban areas (Canovan, 1981).

Over the last century, political actors of this kind have played a role in various European countries, in addition to late 19th-century experiences in the United States with the Populist Party and the *Narodnik* in the Russian

Empire. Interestingly, these cases remind us that the first variety of populism observed in modern times was agrarian populism.

Although rare in contemporary Europe, this form of populism has gained new momentum in recent years thanks to the tractor protests and the rise of the Netherlands's Farmer-Citizen Movement (BoerBurgerBeweging, BBB). This party has successfully channeled the demands of farmers and those of rural residents more broadly. The latter are viewed as the pure people, leveraging a widespread perception of neglect, if not outright hostility, by urban elites.

So what are the main positions of populists on sociocultural and economic issues?

The short answer is that it depends on the other ideas with which populism interacts. Delving deeper, certain essential tendencies can be observed. According to the literature, the two main dimensions of political conflict in contemporary Europe are economic and sociocultural (Jolly et al., 2022).

The economic dimension focuses on the contrast between state intervention and free markets, covering issues such as public spending, taxation, privatization, regulation, welfare, economic globalization, and protectionism. This political space ranges from a poll advocating greater state involvement in economic life to one calling for less. The sociocultural dimension, on the other hand, involves a wide range of issues, including abortion, divorce, gender issues, national identity, immigration, and religious and/or traditional values. This space ranges from socially permissive policies to more traditional ones.

That said, populist radical right parties are characterized by very clear and defined positions on the sociocultural dimension, particularly on issues tied to nativism (such as national identity, immigration, and asylum) and authoritarianism (such as crime and security). However, their positions on the economic dimension are far less clear (Rovny, 2013). This ambiguity stems from their reliance on nativism: in other words, they support greater state intervention if it benefits natives (e.g., child bonuses) but oppose it when it comes to other groups.

Conversely, radical left parties have very clear positions, particularly on the economic dimension, advocating for greater state intervention in economic life to reduce inequalities (Rovny, 2013). However, they sometimes display heterogeneity on the sociocultural front due to contradictions between the old left and new left issues.

Moreover, populist radical right and populist radical left have clearer positions on issues tied to their respective host ideologies and assign greater salience to these dimensions: the former focuses more on sociocultural issues, while the latter prioritizes socioeconomic ones.

Valence populists, by contrast, are defined solely by populism, a "thin" ideological element, and lack a "thicker" host ideology (Zulianello, 2020). For this reason, they exhibit blurry positions on both the economic and sociocultural dimensions and tend to address non-positional issues more frequently, such as fighting corruption (Zulianello, Larsen, 2024).

Finally, agrarian populism remains relatively rare in providing an exhaustive answer in the contemporary world. Historically, however, these actors have emphasized issues tied to the city-countryside cleavage rather than the traditional left-right space and have proposed various economic and non-economic measures in favor of farmers and the rural world.

At this point, I imagine that populists' positions on the European Union are more varied than they might seem...

Exactly. Euroscepticism is a theme often associated with populism, particularly in journalistic contexts. However, the two concepts are distinct: in the definition of populism I previously discussed, Euroscepticism does not appear. Empirically, though, it is true that most populist actors in Europe (and beyond) exhibit more or less pronounced Eurosceptic tendencies, especially those on the right. However, there are also various Europhile populists. Moreover, even among Eurosceptic populists, there is no uniform intensity in how criticism of the European Union is articulated, which may relate to socioeconomic, cultural, legitimacy, or political aspects (Pirro, Taggart, van Kessel, 2018).

Additionally, populists, like any other political actors, can express either "soft" or "hard" opposition to the European Union (EU) (Taggart, Szczerbiak, 2002). Soft Euroscepticism focuses on criticizing specific policy areas and/or emphasizing national interests over those of the EU. However, it targets certain aspects of the supranational integration project rather than rejecting it outright. On the other hand, Hard Euroscepticism entails a fundamental rejection of the EU project, often advocating for the country's withdrawal from the Union or opposing membership altogether.

Today, the vast majority of European populists (including those on the right) adopt soft Eurosceptic positions. However, even these vary in nature and intensity, not only between different parties but also within the same party over time. In this regard, strategic considerations often play a key role, more than ideological ones: parties, including populists, tend to be more Eurosceptic when in opposition than in government. More broadly, all the points discussed so far are extremely important because they highlight the diversity of political positions among populists.

MYTH NO. 3: POPULISM IS ENTIRELY DEPENDENT ON THE FIGURE OF THE LEADER

But populists' political positions don't matter at all. Everyone knows that everything depends on the presence of a leader: without one, populism wouldn't even exist.

This is not true. Populist parties are often seen as political actors entirely dependent on their leader's figure. Populist leaders have long been associated with the idea of the "strongman." However, prominent female leaders, as evidenced by cases like Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, similarly embody the role of the "strong woman."

In populism, the leader's figure is commonly considered central and indispensable, but this view oversimplifies the matter. First, leadership plays an increasingly important role for all political actors. Indeed, the traits of leaders are highly significant in explaining voter behavior in general, both for populist and non-populist parties. However, the presence of a leader (strong or otherwise) is not a defining feature of populism. For example, neither the Russian Narodnik movement nor the American Populist Party had strong leadership.

That said, leaders are important figures, and the presence of specific qualities enhances populism's appeal.

What are these qualities?

A combination of ordinariness and extraordinariness (Taggart, 2000) is closely tied to the characteristics of populist ideology itself. Successful populist leaders display their ordinariness—being similar to ordinary people—while emphasizing their distance from the elites. This is primarily an ideological design, justified by the desire to restore full sovereignty to the people, but it also has a strong symbolic component.

Populist leaders embody the will of the people by adopting behaviors that mimic those of ordinary individuals, whether in speech, eating habits, or dress. However, as noted, this ordinariness is complemented by extraordinariness. Populist leaders claim to possess a kind of "intuition," not necessarily technical expertise, but three skills closely linked to populist values: 1. Understanding the needs, desires, and thoughts of the people. 2. Unmasking the machinations and conspiracies of the elites. 3. Simplifying complex issues to make them understandable to ordinary people. It is unsurprising that populist leaders are often perceived as "saviors" of the people, tasked with freeing democracy from the grip of corrupt elites through immediate solutions that fully implement the general will—the *vox populi*.

The essential characteristic of the prototypical populist leader is the ability to balance ordinariness and extraordinariness. They must demonstrate

exceptional qualities to gain the trust of their supporters but must never appear too distant from ordinary people. They must convey to their followers that they are fundamentally like them while showcasing the ability to maximize the potential shared by all members of the pure people. As such, leaders do not merely present themselves as political representatives but as the authentic and genuine voice of the people—an embodiment of the vox populi.

So is it true that all populist leaders are charismatic?

The adjective "charismatic" is often used to describe populists, typically based on journalists', observers', or media assessments of how these leaders present themselves or their oratorical skills. However, despite common perceptions, charismatic leadership is not a defining feature of populism, which, as we have seen, is a "thin" ideology. Indeed, even in the contemporary world, there are several examples of populism without strong or charismatic leadership.

It is important to clarify what charisma means. Charisma is a relational property: "What matters is how the individual is truly perceived by those subject to charismatic authority, by their 'followers' or 'disciples'" (Weber, 1978, p. 242). In other words, determining whether a leader is charismatic depends on the perceptions of their supporters and the relationship established between the leader and the followers, not on the leader alone. Charisma manifests when followers attribute unique and extraordinary powers to the leader, resulting in unconditional acceptance of their personal authority and strong emotional attachment (McDonnell, 2016). By these criteria, very few populist leaders establish a fully realized charismatic relationship.

Do party structures matter to populists?

The leader, even if not charismatic, can be a crucial factor in populism's electoral success, especially in the short term, due to the visibility and centrality of leadership in influencing voting behavior in contemporary politics. However, successful populist leadership also requires creating stable and functioning organizations to sustain long-term success.

The balance between ordinariness and extraordinariness in populist leaders can help maintain internal cohesion and order within the party—essential traits for projecting an outward image of unity. Loyalty to the leader equates to loyalty to the people, and dissenters within the party are often labelled as traitors and marginalized.

For populism to succeed in the medium and long term, solid and functional organizations must be built, typically characterized by hierarchical structures and decision-making processes centralized around the leader or a small group of key figures (Heinisch, Mazzoleni, 2016). However, for a party to develop a life of its own, independent of the leader's will—particularly if

they are the founder—it is crucial for the leader to invest resources (both material and immaterial) into developing an organization with robust structures and activists.

Populist parties that fail to establish effective organizational structures are more likely to collapse and disappear after their first electoral defeat. Conversely, populist actors that create organizational routines somewhat independent of the leader have successfully survived the critical moment of transitioning from the founding leader to a new one, signaling that the party's institutionalization was successful.

The survival of populist parties over the long term depends on several organizational factors (Art, 2011). A key aspect is providing incentives for activism among members, particularly tied to a sense of shared purpose (e.g., connected to ideology or political goals) or belonging to a community of peers (e.g., being part of not just a party but a "family"). This fosters unity of purpose among activists and strengthens community, cohesion, and solidarity among members (Albertazzi, van Kessel, 2023). Another important factor is developing mechanisms for the "silent" resolution of conflicts, preventing internal tensions or disagreements from becoming public. The ability to project an image of unity is crucial for enhancing the party's electoral appeal, as voters tend to view parties with internal divisions and conflicts negatively.

In general, populist parties can incentivize activism for two reasons directly tied to populism as an ideological characteristic: 1. Having activists on the ground helps demonstrate proximity to ordinary people and their needs. 2. Activists enable parties to convey their message directly to voters, bypassing the perceived hostility of traditional media.

MYTH NO. 4: POPULISM ONLY OCCURS IN CONTEXTS WITH OBJECTIVE CRISES

Are there contexts that can be considered immune to populism?

I would say no. Populist parties exist in a wide variety of contexts. Suppose we focus on the countries of the European Union. In that case, the dominant force is the populist radical right, whose parties exist—or have existed—in nearly all countries, albeit with significant variations depending on national contexts and specific elections. At the same time, other ideological varieties of populism are found only in specific geographic areas.

How is that possible?

No context is completely immune to the emergence and success of populism. Factors related to the political, institutional, or cultural environment in which populists operate are often referred to as the "political opportunity

structure" (Mudde, 2007). This does not mechanically cause the rise of populism but rather plays a facilitating role. To understand this, it is important to place populists at the center of the explanation.

In other words, populists themselves—through their ideological, programmatic, strategic, and organizational choices—shape their success or failure, not the context itself. A key point is populists' agency: their ability to act intentionally, adapt, and respond to their environment's constraints and opportunities. This explains why populism can emerge and thrive in very different countries and regions. An additional aspect concerns how populists interact with the broader context, particularly with crises.

Does this mean populism is the result of an objective crisis?

Not exactly. Populism is often thought of as something that follows a political, social, economic, or other type of crisis—as a "product" of a "critical" context. However, crises are not neutral or self-evident phenomena (Moffitt, 2015) but primarily social constructs. In other words, something is considered a crisis because society interprets it as such.

Thus, it is important to consider the more or less objective elements of a crisis and how these events or facts are socially interpreted and politically "exploited." A key aspect of the relationship between crises and populism is to avoid interpreting the latter as a mechanical and inevitable outcome of the former. Instead, populism itself performs and dramatizes crises. Populists actively create a favorable context for their messages. In other words, populists are not necessarily at the mercy of events or objective crises; on the contrary, they play an active role in spreading—or not spreading—a sense of crisis.

The way populists perform a crisis is closely tied to their worldview, which frames it as a confrontation between the pure people and the corrupt elite. However, not all populists seek to spread a sense of crisis. At times, it can be counterproductive, as seen during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zulianello, Guasti, 2025). Still, there is one crisis that all populists typically "perform."

And what is that?

The political crisis. All populists accuse traditional parties and politicians of being part of the establishment, at best incompetent and indifferent, and at worst corrupt and malicious. The success of populists in elections, influencing the political agenda, or impacting public policies is closely tied to their ability to develop a credible narrative of this crisis that elevates their message.

Constructing a compelling "story" to attract voters requires ideological, programmatic, and organizational skills. This reminds us that populists ultimately determine their success or failure. Specifically, populists politicise or

re-politicise issues perceived as inadequately addressed by traditional parties or emphasize the notion that these parties have become an impregnable castle.

Once again, the choice of specific issues depends on the other ideologies with which populism interacts: for example, immigration for the populist radical right, redistribution for the populist radical left, corruption for valence populists, and rural concerns for agrarian populists. The emphasis on perception is crucial, as what matters is not whether something is "objectively" a problem but whether the pure people perceive it as such. Perception often outweighs objective facts in motivating political behavior.

However, populists' crusade against the establishment is "aided" by the real phenomenon of programmatic convergence between major center-left and center-right parties over recent decades. The decline of significant programmatic differences has made it easier to depict them as "all the same"—a homogeneous, self-referential, elitist power bloc. This behavior by traditional actors has played a decisive role: populism tends to thrive in contexts where the ideological and programmatic differences between the main political alternatives diminish (Roberts, 2022).

This allows populists to position themselves antagonistically against the mainstream, presenting themselves as the ones who can dismantle the "cartel" and as champions of those who feel abandoned, overlooked, or betrayed by the elites.

Moreover, depending on the ideologies with which populism interacts, certain crises may be more relevant than others. Populists have been particularly successful in contexts marked by political crises, but economic crises (e.g., the Great Recession) or sociocultural crises (e.g., the refugee crisis) have differently influenced populist performance depending on their ideological variety (Caiani, Graziano, 2019). For example, economic crises are especially significant for left-wing populism, while sociocultural crises matter more for right-wing populism.

Crises involving severe or systemic corruption scandals are particularly relevant for valence populists. Though empirical data is still limited, perceived threats to rural interests should be significant for agrarian populism. Crises are, instead, opportunities that populists can actively shape rather than external factors exerting deterministic influence.

I think it all depends on social media: without them, populism wouldn't even exist...

Populists often use social media to amplify their message, reaching voters directly and bypassing traditional communication channels. These are often perceived as hostile and aligned with corrupt elites.

However, it is important to remember that the first contemporary forms of populism emerged in the late 19th century and that a significant wave of populist radical right parties appeared in the 1980s—well before social media existed. Still, platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok enable immediate and viral communication, allowing populist leaders to bypass traditional media criticisms and speak directly to citizens, creating an illusion of closeness.

Social media is often considered the perfect vehicle for spreading populism (Manucci, 2017). Populists frequently claim that traditional media serves elite interests and emphasize that social media is the only arena free from the influence of powerful entities.

The direct, unfiltered communication on social platforms fosters a sense of proximity between populists and ordinary people, giving them an aura of authenticity. Informal communication styles on social media enhance this sense of closeness and allow populists to employ a simple, emotionally charged message rather than a reflective and rational one.

However, the notion that all populists use social media better than non-populists or that social media popularity always translates into votes is a misconception. Similarly, while populist communication—especially online—is often seen as simpler and more emotional than that of non-populists, the reality is more nuanced. Populist leaders do not necessarily use simpler language than their rivals (McDonnell, Ondelli, 2022), nor are they the only ones who employ emotional appeals in their communication (Widmann, 2021).

Viewing populists as mere social media manipulators underestimates voters, portraying them as naïve and political communication as a "magic bullet" that elicits immediate reactions. This is not the case. While social media does not cause populism, it can amplify its key messages. Political communication was already moving toward spectacle, dramatization, and personalization long before social media, though these platforms have introduced new dynamics. While contextual factors like social media can influence populism's success, they depend on an electoral "demand" for populist messages.

MYTH NO. 5: THERE IS ONLY ONE TYPE OF POPULIST VOTER

Is there a prototype of a voter who supports populist parties?

The answer is no. An important study found that the electorates of different kinds of populist parties have very little in common. The populist voter does not seem to exist (Rooduijn, 2018). In fact, *"there is no consistent proof that the voter bases of populist parties consist of individuals who are more likely to be unemployed, have lower incomes, come from lower classes, or hold a lower*

education. Moreover, neither Euroscepticism, nor political distrust and attitudes toward direct democracy turn out to be attitudes that unify the voter bases of populist parties"(Rooduijn, 2018, p. 364).

How is that possible?

The lack of a common trait among all populist voters is closely tied to the peculiar nature of populism, which, as we have seen, is best understood as a thin ideology. Voters seem to support populist parties based on their positions on other relevant issues, depending on the broader ideological profile. In other words, people often vote for populists not because of populism itself but because of the complete ideologies or programmatic aspects associated with it.

For example, negative attitudes toward immigration are particularly relevant for motivating support for the populist radical right, favorable attitudes toward economic redistribution for the populist radical left, concern about corruption for valence populists, and rural issues for agrarian populists.

So populist voters have nothing in common?

So far, I have discussed populism as a phenomenon linked to the supply side, that is, the characteristics of political actors. However, one of the main advantages of the ideational approach is its ability to analyze not only the supply side of populist politics but also the demand side—that is, the characteristics of voters.

In this regard, we talk about "populist attitudes" (Akkerman, Mudde, Zaslove, 2014), meaning the extent to which people can be considered populist. We have seen that populism is a concept consisting of three key elements (people-centrism, anti-elitism, and general will), and several studies have translated these characteristics into survey questions to measure *how populist* voters are. Research suggests that populist attitudes are an important characteristic of those who vote for populist parties.

However, some clarifications are necessary. First, even populist attitudes do not automatically translate into a vote for populists. Although such attitudes are widespread among the electorate, only a portion of all voters with these characteristics support populist parties.

One study (Van Hauwaert, van Kessel, 2018) found that populist attitudes are indeed more common among populist voters compared to supporters of other parties, suggesting that populist ideas have electoral relevance. Specifically, the results of this study indicate two main mechanisms.

On the one hand, populist attitudes may encourage a voter to choose a populist party with positions that do not align with their own on economic or sociocultural issues if they lack strong preferences on these matters. On the other hand, populist attitudes become irrelevant in voting choices when

a voter has strong or even extreme positions on economic or sociocultural issues.

Thus, by emphasizing the populist appeal of its message, a party can attract individuals who do not necessarily share its economic or sociocultural positions. More generally, this shows that it is incorrect to view populist voters merely as protest voters who necessarily vote "against" something. Often, it is more accurate to interpret the populist vote as a vote *for* the chosen party—either for its positions on key issues or for its populist character.

This does not mean that protest voting does not exist, but it is decidedly a minority phenomenon, except in exceptional cases. Still, as mentioned earlier, the share of voters who support populists is only a portion of those with populist attitudes.

The key point is that, as a thin ideology, populist attitudes are a kind of inclination that can remain dormant. In other words, they require activation by a context that makes them relevant (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, Andreadis, 2020). In this regard, broader contextual factors play an important role. These are not "simple" short-term factors like an economic crisis. Instead, populist attitudes are activated when poor quality—or clear failures—of democratic governance can be attributed to *intentional* behavior by elites (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, Andreadis, 2020).

Specifically, populist attitudes can be seen as predispositions that become politically relevant in contexts characterized by pervasive corruption. Thus, they influence voting behavior once activated, but even then, they cannot override voter preferences and positions on other relevant dimensions and do not necessarily result in a vote for populists.

How are populist attitudes formed?

In this regard, three main approaches can be identified, emphasizing psychological, communicative, or sociological aspects (Marcos-Marne, de Zuniga, Borah, 2023). Regarding psychological aspects, emotional responses to crises (of various kinds) often act as triggers, as does their interaction with feelings of nostalgia and conspiracy beliefs. On the other hand, communication focuses on how populist messages disseminated by leaders and parties can influence populist attitudes. However, findings reveal that not all individuals are equally susceptible to these influences. Finally, from a sociological perspective, objective indicators such as economic deprivation, low levels of education, difficult working conditions, and living in peripheral areas play a significant role. However, while these indicators may foster the emergence of populist attitudes, it is essential to include the subjective aspect: perception.

An important study (Elchardus, Spruyt, 2016) linked populist attitudes to the idea that society is evolving negatively, a diagnosis known as "declinism,"

and to an individual's identification with a group perceived to be treated negatively in society, a phenomenon evoking a sense of relative deprivation. In other words, populist attitudes involve a social perception, not strictly a personal one, and also a subjective perception, not necessarily an objective one, of specific factors or problems. This pertains particularly to perceptions compared to other groups, especially elites, and is reinforced when there is a sense that these elites act solely in their own interests.

It seems to me, however, that only the less educated vote for populists…
This is a fairly common interpretation, but it often carries a clear normative undertone rather than an empirical basis. Indeed, anti-populism can take the form of *"accusations levelled at supporters of right-wing populists as being backward, uneducated simpletons from rural backwaters or forgotten industrial towns who have been manipulated by populist Svengalis, or the supporters of left wing populists as hopelessly idealistic and unrealistic political naïfs or smelly hippy students who have no idea how the world 'really works'"* (Moffitt, 2018, p. 8) We have seen that voters often support populists based on their political preferences. As for education levels, research findings are rather mixed.

What do you mean?
The literature is divided on this point. Several studies suggest that individuals with lower socioeconomic status are more inclined to support radical right-wing parties: such voters tend to have lower levels of education, come from lower social classes, and are often unemployed (Rooduijn, Burgoon, van Elsas, van de Werfhorst, 2017). However, this may be linked not to education levels per se but to the fact that people with higher levels of education tend to hold more progressive views, trust political institutions more, and have more tolerant attitudes toward immigrants.

Moreover, social desirability bias may play a role. According to Gilles Ivaldi (2021), highly educated individuals may be less likely to admit voting for the populist radical right. A recent study (Cordero, Zagórski, Rama, 2022) highlights a more complex trend: In areas with a high presence of immigrants, voters with lower education levels are more likely to support populist radical right parties. However, when the proportion of skilled immigrants is high, even highly educated voters tend to support these parties.

At the same time, the relationship between education and left-wing populism is also complex. Support for such parties forms a U-shaped pattern concerning education levels, attracting both the least and the most educated (Ramiro, 2016). Additionally, the least informed citizens often abstain rather than vote for populists (van Kessel, Sajuria, Van Hauwaert, 2020).

Is it true that losers of globalization vote for right-wing populists?

Political dynamics in Western Europe have undergone significant changes in recent decades. A key body of research (Kriesi et al., 2008) suggests the emergence of a new cleavage between the "winners" and "losers" of globalization. The winners include those who benefit from international competition, such as highly educated entrepreneurs, while the losers are those who feel threatened by globalization processes, such as workers in traditionally protected sectors with lower education levels.

This shift has implications for voting behavior: In many countries, populist radical right parties have crafted messages particularly appealing to the "losers" of economic transformations and growing cultural diversity (Kriesi et al., 2008). However, perceptions often outweigh objective conditions, as there is no perfect correspondence between being objectively a loser of globalization and perceiving oneself as one or between social structure and self-perception (Steiner, Mader, Schoen, 2024).

Despite some evidence of the impact of economic hardships, a recent study (Bolet, 2023) highlights that the perception of declining social status compared to their parents is a characteristic not only of radical right voters but also of radical left voters. However, status anxiety plays a different role depending on its interaction with specific orientations: when combined with anti-immigration attitudes, it leads to support for the radical right; when combined with favorable attitudes toward economic redistribution, it supports the radical left.

This again underscores the crucial role played by the host ideologies with which populism interacts. Finally, it is worth noting that populist radical right voters are often very heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status and employment conditions. However, they are united by similar positions on sociocultural issues, such as crime, immigration, and asylum policies (Ivarsflaten, 2005). Although support for these parties is fairly cross-sectional, two social groups are overrepresented: small business owners (shopkeepers, artisans, and self-employed professionals) and blue-collar workers. Overall, it seems that the populist radical right parties can attract diverse socioeconomic groups, but these groups share common sociocultural concerns.

But I've heard that it's mostly men who vote for the populist right…

It is often stereotyped that populist radical right voters are just "angry white men." This, too, is a myth—at least in part. Indeed, several studies have identified the existence of a "gender gap": men appear more inclined to support populist radical right parties, though there is considerable variation depending on the context.

While a gender difference generally emerges, there are some countries where the gap does not exist. A study (Harteveld, van Der Brug, Dahlberg,

Kokkonen, 2015) shows that most men are not more nativist, authoritarian, or disenchanted with democracy than women; they are even slightly less so on average. For women, however, these attitudes are less strongly correlated with voting for the populist radical right.

The findings suggest that differing positions on these issues do not explain why women are less likely to vote for such parties but rather that women consider these issues less important. Additionally, women seem more concerned about being socially stigmatized for supporting the populist radical right, a concern that is less prevalent among men.

That said, the gender gap in voting for the populist radical right tends to narrow, particularly where a woman leads or has led such a party (as in the cases of Giorgia Meloni or Marine Le Pen).

It is also worth noting that about half of the Western European electorate states would never vote for populist radical right parties (Meléndez, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). Nonetheless, these parties have become increasingly significant on the political stage, as demonstrated by their participation in governments in many countries.

MYTH NO. 6: POPULISM IS OUTSIDE MAINSTREAM POLITICS

But if populists come to power, they become part of the establishment and stop being populists…

That's not the case. To fully understand this point, it is important to recall Mudde's (2004) definition of populism, particularly how the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" are identified. The key point is that the construction of these two categories is based on moral criteria, not specific situations. In other words, it does not depend on contingent and/or objective circumstances because a moral distinction is founded on enduring ethical principles or values. For populism, the people represent goodness and authenticity, while the elite embody corruption and manipulation. However, this does not mean populists automatically become part of the elite simply by entering government.

Populists in power often manage to maintain their anti-establishment stance by claiming that, even as members of the government, they have not become part of the morally reprehensible elite they so vehemently oppose. They argue that they remain, above all, at the service of the people. This narrative, which is both communicative and symbolic, also distinguishes the power of the government from that of the establishment. Populists often claim that true power does not lie in the hands of democratically elected leaders—such as themselves—but is instead held by "dark forces." These forces, depending on the specific ideological variety of populism, may include cultural elites, lobbies, unelected bureaucrats, the media, international

financial institutions, or others. Such a narrative allows populists to present themselves as the true defenders of the people, even while in government, in perpetual struggle against a powerful elite determined to maintain the status quo. In short, populism is an ideology that can be articulated more or less convincingly both in opposition and in government. An emblematic example is former Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło (PiS), who declared in a speech to the Polish Parliament in May 2017: "We want to help the people, not the political elites." When confronted with the fact that, as prime minister, she herself was part of the elite, Szydło replied: "We are the good elite" (cited in Buštíková, Guasti, 2019, p. 304).

So, they continue to represent the general will of the people even in government...

Exactly. General will is perceived as an absolute value—indisputable and inherently just—due to the moral superiority of the people. Populists ideologically position themselves as its champions. The moral superiority of the people and their will, considered unique and supreme, leaves no room for compromise. This is tightly connected to populism's opposition to the liberal and representative principles of contemporary democracies. As we have seen, the emphasis on the general will, understood in this way, inherently places populism in tension with pluralism. Pluralism is viewed as a negative value and an obstacle to expressing people's desires and needs.

Consequently, populism denies the legitimacy of any divergent interests in society and the necessity of representing them, treating such divisions as artificial constructs designed to weaken the unity of the people. Moreover, populism views representative institutions and intermediary bodies of liberal democracies with great suspicion, often expressing aversion to any form of mediation that might hinder the direct and complete expression of popular will. This glorification of the people sometimes manifests in support for direct democracy instruments, such as referendums.

At this point, it is useful to introduce the distinction between accountability, responsibility, and responsiveness (Bardi, Bartolini, Trechsel, 2014): Accountability refers to the principle of "being accountable," particularly evoking the electoral and procedural aspects of democracy, and relates to the ability to "reward" or "punish" political representatives; responsibility pertains to the capacity to make "good" decisions with a particular focus on the long term and consideration of audiences beyond the national scope; finally, responsiveness emphasizes the importance of addressing the short-term demands of voters, media, or other actors. These three characteristics capture different aspects of the legitimacy of political action, particularly concerning varying temporal frameworks of justification. Populists emphasize the here and now, responsiveness: they aim to demonstrate their ability to understand

what the people want at this very moment, aligning perfectly with the needs and demands expressed by the general will. This inherently clashes with the mechanisms and "timing" of liberal democracies, including but not limited to electoral deadlines.

Does this mean that populism is always a threat to liberal democracy?
In reality, depending on its specific political relevance and the political and institutional characteristics of the context, populism can either pose a threat or act as a corrective to liberal democracy (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Due to its monistic and Manichean character, populism can lead to undemocratic tendencies, especially concerning the concept of the "general will." As we have seen, populists perceive this as absolute and univocal, which can justify attacks on anyone deemed a threat to the homogeneity of the people. Populism embraces a hyper-majoritarian conception of democracy that can lead to the limitation of minority rights and the weakening of institutions designed to protect fundamental rights. Additionally, populism combined with anti-populism can exacerbate political polarization, hindering the formation of stable coalitions and reducing governments' capacity and decision-making quality. Finally, the "populism versus anti-populism" logic can lead to the extreme moralization of politics on both sides, making compromise difficult, if not impossible. More generally, even if populists do not intentionally pursue anti-democratic goals, their ideology can create illiberal tendencies in the long term, progressively weakening institutions essential for functioning liberal democratic regimes, such as checks and balances.

However, populism can also have positive effects on liberal democracy. It can effectively give voice to groups that feel excluded (for various reasons, legitimate or not) from elites and political life. This inclusivity can help reduce the gap between those who govern and those who are governed, improving an important aspect of democratic quality. Additionally, populism can politically re-engage and reintegrate marginalized sectors of society, fostering their participation in political life. These aspects can enhance the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions. Populism can also improve the responsiveness of the political system as a whole. Populists often address the concerns of their "pure people" constituency quickly and directly, introducing new issues to the political agenda and enriching public debate with topics often overlooked. This can stimulate counter-responses from more traditional mainstream political parties.

Okay, so populist parties can remain populist even in government. But can we consider them part of the political mainstream?
It depends on what we mean by "mainstream," a term often overused and highly controversial, even among scholars. Populism is often perceived as

a phenomenon tied to outsiders challenging traditional politics. In recent years, populists—especially those on the radical right—have achieved notable success in Europe and other regions, from Oceania to Asia and North America to Latin America. Populists have long been seen as a temporary phenomenon destined to disappear quickly. However, many have been present on the political stage for decades, joining national coalitions and governments, demonstrating remarkable adaptability and longevity even while in power (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2015). If we define mainstream as participation in political coalitions and national governments, then yes, populists are undoubtedly part of the mainstream. However, this tells only part of the story. It is more accurate to say that populists are increasingly integrated into the mainstream of liberal democracies but without fully sharing their foundational values. Elsewhere, this phenomenon has been described as the "negative integration" of populists (Zulianello, 2020).

What does negative integration mean?

Populists have long been described as outsiders on the margins of the political scene, deemed unfit to survive as governing actors. Populism is often thought of as a phenomenon inherently tied to opposition and protest, destined to perish under the weight of governing responsibilities and the complexities of politics. However, empirical evidence abundantly proves the contrary: the integration of populists—particularly the populist radical right—into the political mainstream has become the rule, not the exception.

As discussed earlier, populism is in tension with core elements of liberal democracy, especially intermediary structures of representation, the foundational value of pluralism, and the protection of minority rights. This is precisely the crux of negative integration: populist parties have moved from the margins of the political scene, becoming "coalitionable" and central actors in the political landscape without drastically altering their fundamental ideology. Their ideology, however, remains in open conflict with the values of liberal democracies. By exalting the general will and embracing a hypermajoritarian conception of democracy, populists challenge intermediary institutions, institutional checks and balances, and pluralism. The adjective "negative" does not imply a judgment of value on whether the integration of populists is appropriate—that is beyond the scope of a political scientist's role. Instead, it describes the essential characteristics of this phenomenon. Specifically, populists become part of highly visible dynamics (e.g., electoral alliances or government coalitions) essential for the functioning of a political regime (liberal democracy), while not fully embracing its foundational values, such as pluralism and minority protections.

Indeed, the integration of populist parties into fully developed liberal democracies is, by definition, "negative" (Zulianello, 2020) precisely because

of the persistent tension between populist ideas and the values of liberal democracy. Put differently, negative integration refers to populists who integrate into a liberal democracy without moderating ideologically—that is, without ceasing to be populists. Empirical evidence suggests that in most cases where populist parties have entered government, they have not stopped to be populist, even when forced to cooperate with the traditional parties they criticize, typically through coalition governments or electoral alliances. The data is clear: Over 40% of populist parties in Europe have experience in national governments, and about two-thirds are variously accepted as (potential) allies by other mainstream political parties. These parties are essentially "within" but "against" the system. For this reason, negative integration results in "contradictory impacts" on the functioning of political systems (Zulianello, 2019a, p. 22; see also Seddone, Zulianello, 2023). Examples of negative integration abound among many, consider FdI, Lega, and M5S in Italy, PVV in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD), ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic, SYRIZA in Greece, and Modi's BJP in India.

Negative integration is really contradictory. But how do they survive?
As previously discussed regarding organizational aspects and contextual factors, it is crucial to avoid interpreting populists as passive actors, at the mercy of events, and incapable of acting strategically. The key is maintaining credibility (at least among their voters) in two respects: organizational and competitive-communicative.

First, maintaining internal cohesion—especially preventing internal conflicts from becoming public—is essential for achieving long-term electoral success or at least political survival. This can be seen as a precondition, a necessary but not sufficient aspect of surviving integration, particularly participation in government.

Regarding the competitive-communicative aspect, populists face the challenge of balancing partially conflicting demands. On the one hand, they must continue to emphasize their moral distinction from their opponents, demonstrating that they are not like the other parties, particularly traditional mainstream ones that have "forgotten" the people and become part of the establishment. Anti-elitism is a fundamental element of their ideological profile, regardless of the specific variety of populism, and it must be communicated convincingly. This requires specific strategic skills. Additionally, populists—depending on their ideological variety—must convince their voters that they still hold issue ownership, i.e., credibility and reliability on issues they claim to champion (Walgrave, Lefevere, Tresch, 2012). For example, reducing immigration for right-wing populists, promoting social justice for left-wing populists, or fighting corruption for valence populists.

In particular, issue ownership can be associative, where a party is perceived as caring most about a problem regardless of concrete results, or competence-based, where a party is seen as the most capable of addressing a particular issue. Suppose populists fail to claim competence-based issue ownership on key topics, possibly due to limited governmental achievements. In that case, they can still maintain voter trust by projecting an image of proactive actors. By demonstrating that they have retained associative issue ownership, they differentiate themselves from traditional parties morally and programmatically. Maintaining this credibility allows them to convey their commitment to an issue, which can become an advantage if the lack of results can be attributed to external causes—often blaming resistance from the powerful establishment. Notably, populists often manage to keep "one foot in and one foot out" of government, striking a balance between acting responsibly when strategic and "elbowing" their way to defend essential themes and positions (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2005).

In conclusion, populist parties must skillfully manage both the organizational and competitive-communicative sides to maintain their credibility despite integration. It is not enough to maintain a clear opposition to the elite and a connection to the people; it is also essential to demonstrate that they have kept their key issues in line with their overall ideological profile while preserving internal cohesion.

Can populists integrate in other ways?

Populists can also integrate positively (Zulianello, 2020), though this can occur in two radically different ways. Before proceeding, it is important to note that the term "positive" in this context does not imply a judgement of value (just as the concept of "negative integration" does not). Instead, it refers simply to the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship that can develop between the party's ideas and the core values embodied by the broader system. In other words, there is alignment between what the party (or political actor) "wants" and what the broader context in which it operates "wants." The first possibility of positive integration, likely more intuitively understood though empirically less frequent, is that the party ceases to be populist. In this way, the tension between the actor's ideas and the foundational principles of the system in which it operates is eliminated.

However, positive integration can also occur in a completely different way. This is exemplified by FIDESZ in Hungary, a party that has progressively eroded liberal democracy, hollowing it out and transforming it to shape a new regime based on its ideological preferences. Until some years ago the case of FIDESZ could have been seen as an instance of negative integration (since the system was still a liberal democracy); however, Hungary has gradually moved in a different direction, where the illiberal values of Orbán and his party are

now fully embedded in the political regime. In this case, FIDESZ's positive integration resulted in Hungary's transformation into an illiberal democracy.

To summarize, in a liberal democratic context, populists can integrate negatively or positively. If populists remain populist (i.e., not ideologically moderate), their integration into a liberal democracy is, by definition, negative, as it remains in tension with pluralism and minority protections. Populists can integrate positively in two ways. The first is by fully "converting" to the values of liberal democracy, thereby ceasing to be ideologically populist. In this case, the party aligns its values with those of the context, namely liberal democracy. The second way is diametrically opposed: transforming liberal democracy into an illiberal regime. Here, the party transforms the political context's values, "converting" them to its own. The fact that this has occurred in a member state of the European Union, where such scenarios were once thought impossible, should prompt reflection on the challenge posed by illiberalism in the contemporary world. Of course, the Hungarian case is not the only instance where positive integration has occurred through a populist party's ability to transform the political regime in line with its ideological preferences and initiate processes of de-democratization. Looking beyond Europe, one needs only consider the cases of Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

Are there populists still on the margins?

Only a minority of contemporary European populist parties (about a third) remain on the margins of the political scene. This means they are considered non-coalitionable by other major political actors and/or perceive themselves as such (Zulianello, 2020). In these cases, populists still suffer from a legitimacy deficit, as potential cooperation with non-populists in electoral or government coalitions is excluded not only for contingent reasons but also as a matter of principle. In these instances, populist parties are effectively anti-system: not only do they have an ideological profile that is in tension with liberal democracy, but they also act as a kind of systemic "constraint," as they cannot and/or will not be included in potential governing majorities. To reiterate: this exclusion is principled, not contingent. The most evident examples include some populist radical right parties, such as AfD in Germany, RN in France, and Chega in Portugal, but there are also cases of populist radical left parties, such as the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit, BSW).

However, it is important to emphasize two points. First, political reality is not immutable, and what may long have been a principled refusal can dissolve under the pressure of contingency, necessity, or opportunity. Indeed, many populists were initially deemed unsuitable for alliances with more traditional parties, but things later changed. Moreover, the process of integration can

vary significantly in its timing, ranging from a few days to several decades, depending on a wide range of factors concerning both internal aspects (e.g., leadership, program, communication, organization) and external ones (e.g., responses from other parties, power dynamics, extra-political variables). For example, in several cases, it was enough for the populist party to become effectively (and not just theoretically) necessary for government formation: the mutual hostility between the populists and other parties quickly dissipated on both sides. In other words, when political conditions were favorable, the process of mutual legitimization between populists and non-populists, at least those programmatically closer, was swift. In other cases, however, this process of mutual legitimization was extremely protracted. For instance, the Sweden Democrats (SD) took over thirty years before being considered viable allies by more traditional parties.

The second point to highlight is that even where populist parties remain on the margins of the political scene, successful populist parties have had a significant impact on public debate and often on the agendas of mainstream parties. This is especially true for the populist radical right, which has frequently managed to exert a strong influence on issues of immigration and security, not only on center-right parties but also on center-left ones. Significantly, the convergence of positions between populists and non-populists on certain key issues has created the preconditions for mutual legitimization.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Below you will find a carefully curated mini bibliography to help further explore and challenge each of the six main myths discussed in the previous sections. Each myth is accompanied by a recommendation of five selected articles that offer deeper insights and additional evidence. To ensure accessibility for interested readers, we have prioritized resources freely available online, either as open access publications or through equivalent unrestricted access.

MYTH NO. 1

Canovan, M., 1984, "'People', Politicians and Populism," *Government and Opposition*, 19(3), pp. 312–327. Canovan draws attention to the central category of populism, the people, and introduces three notions of the people: the people as nation, the people as "underdogs" and the people as common people, thus outlining the different variety of populism.

Hawkins, K. A., Rovira Kaltwasser, C., 2017, "What the (Ideational) Study of Populism Can Teach Us, and What It Can't," *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), pp. 526–542. The authors explain the foundations of the idealistic approach to populism and highlight two crucial aspects: first, populist ideas also exist among individual voters and are important for political behavior; Secondly, the consequences of populism on democracy can be positive or negative.

Hunger, S., Paxton, F., 2022, "What's in a Buzzword? A Systematic Review of the State of Populism Research in Political Science," *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(3), pp. 617–633. Hunger and Paxton offer a quantitative and qualitative review of the literature on populism between 2004 and 2018, inviting us to distinguish populism from other concepts.

Mudde, C. 2004, "The populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp. 541–563. In this fundamental piece, Mudde defines populism as an ideology from the subtle core, explaining its three essential characteristics: people-centrism, anti-elitism and general will.

Pytlas, B., 2023, "Beyond populism: The diversity of thin anti-establishment contestation in turbulent times," *Party Politics*, 29(4), pp. 648–660. Pytlas examines the mediatic campaigns of different parties in order to explore the variety of the anti-establishment positions.

MYTH NO. 2

Buštíková, L., Guasti, P., 2019, "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism," *East European Politics and Societies*, 33(2), pp. 302–330. This article examines technocratic populism, which leverages technical expertise to appeal to the public, undermine opponents and promote civic apathy.

Van Kessel, S., 2013, "A matter of Supply and Demand: The Electoral Performance of Populist Parties in Three European Countries," *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), pp. 175–199. Van Kessel explains the electoral performance of populist parties, focusing on the agency of political parties, the responsiveness of more traditional parties and the credibility of populist parties.

Otjes, S., Ivaldi, G., Jupskås, A. R., Mazzoleni, O., 2018, "It's Not Economic Interventionism, Stupid! Reassessing the Political Economy of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties," *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24(3), pp. 270–290. The authors analyze the radical right-wing populist parties, showing that their economic policies are shaped by nativist, populist and authoritarian ideologies.

Rooduijn, M, A. Pirro, L.P., Halikiopoulou, D., Froio, C., van Kessel, S., de Lange, S.L., Mudde, C., Taggart, P., 2023, "The PopuList: A database of populist, far-left, and far-right parties using expert-informed qualitative comparative classification (EiQCC)," *British Journal of Political Science*, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123423000431. The authors present PopuList 3.0, a database of populist, ultra-right, ultra-left and Eurosceptic parties in Europe since 1989.

Zulianello, M., 2020, "Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From state-of-the-art to applying a novel classification scheme to 66 parties in 33 countries," *Government and Opposition*, 55(2), pp. 327–347. Zulianello classifies 66 populist parties in 33 European countries, identifying their main ideological characteristics and the interactive modes of party systems.

MYTH NO. 3

Albertazzi, D., van Kessel, S., 2023, "Why Do Party Elites Incentivise Activism? The case of the populist radical right," *Party Politics*, online first, DOI: 10.1177/13540688231189362. The article examines the motivations that drive the elites of radical right-wing populist parties to promote the creation of small communities of activists who conduct electoral campaigns, legitimize the party and ensure the survival of the organization.

Ammassari, S, 2023, "Disaffected but Efficacious: Why people join populist radical right parties," *Government and Opposition*, pp. 1–20, online first doi:10.1017/gov.2023.8. Ammassari examines resentment and effectiveness as triggers for membership in radical right-wing populist parties. Three elements are fundamental in the path: disaffection, affiliation and action.

Gherghina, S., Soare, S., 2021, "Electoral performance beyond leaders? The organization of populist parties in postcommunist Europe," *Party Politics*, 27(1), pp. 58–68. The authors examine the organizational determinants of populists' electoral performance in Eastern Europe, highlighting the negative effects of underdeveloped party organizations and the limited effect of strong and charismatic leadership.

McDonnell, D., Ondelli, S., 2024, "The Distinctive Vocabularies of Right-Wing Populists," *Government and Opposition*, pp. 1–23, online first doi:10.1017/gov.2024.10. The article compares the language used by right-wing populists and more traditional mainstream politicians. The main result is that populists do not necessarily use a simpler language than rivals.

Nai, A., Martínez i Coma, F., 2019, "The personality of populists: provocateurs, charismatic leaders, or drunken dinner guests?" *West European Politics*, 42(7), pp. 1337–1367. The authors examine the personality traits of populist leaders and find that they score lower in terms of pleasantness, emotional stability and conscientiousness. At the same time, they get higher scores in extraversion, narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellism.

MYTH NO. 4

De Jonge, L., 2021, "The Curious Case of Belgium: Why is there no right-wing populism in Wallonia?" *Government and Opposition*, 56(4), pp. 598–614. De Jonge explains the variation in the success of radical right-wing populist parties with two variables: the reaction of mainstream parties and that of the media, which can choose between their exclusion ("cordon sanitaire") or their accommodation.

Moffitt, B., 2015, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition*, 50(2), pp. 189–217. Moffitt outlines a two-way relationship between populism and crisis: populism can benefit from an objective crisis, but a sense of crisis is also triggered and executed by populist actors.

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Schäfer, A., 2022, "Cultural Backlash? How (Not) To Explain the Rise of Authoritarian Populism," *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), pp. 1977–1993. Schäfer tests the theory of cultural backlash by Norris and Inglehart, concluding that it does not hold up to empirical evidence: there are no major differences in the attitudes of younger cohorts compared to older cohorts.

Zulianello, M., Guasti, P., 2023, "The Demand and Supply of Pandemic Populism: A Global Overview," *Government and Opposition*, pp. 1–20, online first doi:10.1017/gov.2023.35. The authors offer an overview of the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and populism. The analysis reveals that complexity is the characteristic that characterizes both the demand and supply of populism during a pandemic.

MYTH NO. 5

Arzheimer, K., Berning, C., de Lange, S., Dutozia, J., Evans, J., Gould, M., ..., van der Meer, T., 2024, "How Local Context Affects Populist Radical Right Support: A Cross-National Investigation into Mediated and Moderated Relationships," *British Journal of Political Science,* online first doi:10.1017/S0007123424000085, pp. 1–26. The article explores the variation in the success of the radical populist right in different regions, testing the effects of economic and cultural contextual factors.

Hawkins, K. A., Rovira Kaltwasser, C. R., Andreadis, I., 2020, "The Activation of Populist Attitudes," *Government and Opposition*, 55(2), pp. 283–307. The authors propose a populist voting theory focused on explaining what populism activates among voters.

Ivarsflaten, E., 2005, "The Vulnerable Populist Right Parties: No Economic Realignment Fueling Their Electoral Success," *European Journal of Political Research*, 44(3), pp. 465–492. Ivarsflaten tests the theories of economic realignment and argues that right-wing populist parties in Western Europe are able to attract voters who share different economic preferences but share common cultural concerns.

Rooduijn, M., 2018, "What Unites the Voter Bases of Populist Parties? Comparing the Electorates of 15 Populist Parties," *European Political Science Review*, 10(3), pp. 351–368. Rooduijn points out that "the populist elector" does not exist: the populist electorate has no univocal characteristics. The voters of these parties are not always made up of "globalization losers" with Eurosceptical attitudes, low levels of political confidence and preferences for (more) direct democracy.

Spierings, N., Zaslove, A., 2017, "Gender, Populist Attitudes, and Voting: Explaining the Gender Gap in Voting for Populist Radical Right and Populist Radical Left Parties," *West European Politics*, 40(4), pp. 821–847. Spierings and Zaslove find that the gender gap in voting for the populist radical right stems from differences in how politics and society are conceived.

MYTH NO. 6

Albertazzi, D., Mueller, S., 2013, "Populism and Liberal Democracy: Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland," *Government and Opposition*, 48(3), pp. 343–371. The authors highlight how populist parties in government constantly adopt policies that clash with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, such as the protection of minorities, individual rights and institutional checks and balances.

Caiani, M., Graziano, P., 2022, "The Three Faces of Populism in Power: Polity, Policies and Politics," *Government and Opposition*, 57(4), pp. 569–588. The article explores the impact of right-wing and left-wing populist parties in government and outlines four scenarios: radicalization, compromise and moderation, split, or defeat.

Mudde, C., 2013, "Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties in Western Europe: So What?" *European Journal of Political Research*, 52(1), pp. 1–19. Mudde analyses the impact of radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, focusing mainly on immigration policies. The author identifies some potential factors of greater influence in the future, but concludes that a significant transformation of the political system is unlikely.

Taggart, P., Rovira Kaltwasser, C., 2016, "Dealing with Populists in Government: Some Comparative Conclusions," *Democratization*, 23(2), pp. 345–365. The article explores the different reactions of a plurality of actors towards populist governments.

Urbinati, N., 2019, "Political theory of populism," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, pp. 111–127. Urbinati points out how populism in government tends to transform the foundations of democracy: people and majority, elections and representation.

PART I
POPULISM AND NON-POPULISM

The first part of the book addresses significant definitional challenges related to populism. It clarifies what populism is not, discussing its ideological boundaries. It emphasizes that looking beyond populism can offer deeper insights and considers whether the phenomenon aligns neatly with either the political right or left. The section highlights how populist communication is not merely stylistic but substantive, emphasizing the strategic use of populism. Additionally, it examines the relationship between populism and technocracy, the link between Euroscepticism and populism, and concludes by discussing the concepts of sovereignism and anti-populism.

1. WHAT POPULISM... IS NOT!

DAVIDE VITTORI

Populist parties have gained significant electoral successes in recent years. But Davide Vittori shows that populism is not everywhere, even in public opinion. We are in danger of simplifying what populism is, and assuming that all anti-establishment phenomena are "populist," when they are not.

POPULISM AS A COMPLEX PHENOMENON

Populism as a political concept is becoming so blurred that it is difficult to disentangle its conceptual borders—what populism is and what it is not. It is not surprising, then, that myths about it abound (see introduction). Populism is the sum of different concepts. We should not treat any of the parts that make up populism as a whole. For example, populists are anti-elitists, but anti-elitism is not a synonym of populism. If this were the case, we would consider anyone critical of economic or political elites as populist. Yet, populism is also fiercely against an ultra-majoritarian vision of democracy. Populism is not just people-centrism, either. Nor is it just a Manichean conception of political conflict. Regardless of the disagreement over its definition, political scientists agree (for the most part) that populism is a complex phenomenon. Thus, only the simultaneous presence of all sub-components makes a political actor a "populist" actor, or a citizen with populist attitudes (Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen, 2020).

The paradoxical consequence of treating populism as a single-dimension phenomenon is that we might end up categorizing a majority of citizens as populists because surveys show that most citizens want politicians to follow the will of the people. This is something that a minority, in principle, would disagree with, since the opposite pole of this conception would be a political class that consciously goes against people's wishes. This would lead to a large overestimation of populist attitudes in our societies, with all the unintended consequences.

POPULISM AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY: A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

Equally important, we should not consider populists as direct democrats (Gherghina and Pilet, 2021b). There have been fruitful attempts to link populist attitudes to a preference for direct democracy among citizens. However, the relationship is more complicated than it appears, because other individual characteristics (e.g., education) influence preferences on how decisions should be made.

More importantly, at the party level, the link between populism and direct democracy is weak (Gherghina and Pilet, 2021a). Populist parties are not overly eager to promote direct democracy; nor are they obsessed with it. In fact, they do not talk about it that often.

Even when in government, these parties seem uninterested in promoting a participatory vision of democracy (Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, 2023). At the same time, populists seem to be comfortable with, for example, technocracy (when not directly promoting this decision-making process), although we still need more data to corroborate these findings. This might be due to the fact that populism and technocracy, as Caramani (2017) shows in his work, share some fundamental characteristics opposed to the representative democracy ideal-type.

Whatever the causes may be, populism is not just being in favor of direct democracy. People and political actors, including populists, have more complex process preferences than pure ideal-types.

TRUST THE PEOPLE, DISTRUST THE INSTITUTIONS?

It might be tempting to equate populism with distrust in institutions. But despite the strong correlation between the two, we should never consider distrust and populism synonymous. Nor should we use distrust as a proxy for populism (Schäfer, 2022). Political distrust is related to the idea that, generally speaking, institutions are not delivering for the individuals. It is a judgement about how politics is working. But it says nothing about how politics should work or the role of the people in decision-making.

Populism, in contrast, also embodies a vision of how politics should work. It embodies clearly a more people-centric model of government. Not all citizens with low political trust would share this view. If we treat distrust as a proxy of populism, we end up considering fiercely anti-populist views as populist: technocrats, for example, are distrustful of institutions and elitists.

There are always good reasons to make things simple. Debates about concepts in academia are often convoluted and difficult to grasp. Simplifying difficult concepts, therefore, is a much-needed effort. However, as concepts are important to define the world around us, oversimplifying them is problematic.

A final example: if we consider populism as a "threat" to democracy, labelling all anti-establishment manifestations as populist might lead us into thinking that populism is everywhere. If we consider populism (or at least some specific types of populism) a "corrective" to democracy, its omnipresence should comfort us.

Yet, both conceptions would be highly misguided. The starting point is wrong. Even at the cost of asking citizens to reflect a bit more on the words they (we) use, we should never give in to the temptation of oversimplifying something like populism, that is, by definition, complex.

2. NOT EVERYONE CAN BE A POPULIST: THE IDEOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES OF POPULISM

STIJN VAN KESSEL

Conflating populism with nativism is problematic (see introduction). While populism and nativism are very compatible, and often intertwine in practice, they are essentially different concepts. Populism, as a set of ideas (Hawkins et al., 2018) or "frame" (Aslanidis, 2021), conveys a normative distinction between "the people"—emphasizing the principle of popular sovereignty—and the out-of-touch or corrupt "elites." Nativism, meanwhile, refers to a xenophobic variant of nationalism. It defines "the natives" in an ethno-cultural manner, and prioritizes them in the distribution of material and non-material resources. According to Cas Mudde's widely adopted definition, the concepts of nativism, authoritarianism and populism merge in the ideology of the populist radical right (PRR) (Mudde, 2007). The PRR portrays the "people" and the "natives" as one and the same.

Yet academic literature generally acknowledges that populism does not necessarily identify "the people" based on their ethno-cultural characteristics. So-called left-wing populists tend to define "the people" they appeal to with reference to their purported economic status. These are then the underprivileged and economically excluded, versus the privileged elite minority that holds power. This "inclusionary populism," as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) call it, rhetorically appeals to the majority of "disadvantaged people." It differs from the PRR's "exclusionary populism," which defines "the people" mainly by identifying outgroups (not least immigrants and ethnic minorities).

BEYOND LEFT VERSUS RIGHT

Mattia Zulianello (see introduction) is right to point out that we should not limit ourselves to placing cases of populism in the dichotomous categories of "left versus right" or "inclusionary versus exclusionary." The key elements of populism can be adopted by political actors beyond the (socio-cultural) radical right and (socio-economic) radical left. There may be other prominent subtypes, such as "valence populists" which mobilize support with an emphasis on non-positional issues, as well as idiosyncratic cases (Zulianello, 2020).

What is more, as Heinisch (2023) emphasized in his contribution, populists may in fact thrive on ideological ambiguity. It allows them to adapt effectively to changing contexts and public demands.

Does that then mean that populism can be connected to any ideological project? That anyone can essentially be a "populist?" The answer to this question lies partly in the theoretical approach to populism that one adopts.

POPULISM AND ILLIBERALISM

Populism is often portrayed as inherently illiberal (or even at odds with the logic of democracy (Abts and Rummens, 2007)) because it appears to conceive of 'the people' as a homogeneous entity with a singular will. According to this interpretation, populism is inherently anti-pluralist. It ignores or rejects the fact that society is diverse, comprising individuals or groups with different values and preferences. The implication is that various political ideologies are fundamentally incompatible with populism. If populism is genuinely anti-pluralist, this, by definition, excludes political actors who celebrate cultural diversity. The same applies to those who merely accept that political opponents can be legitimate representatives of a certain social group. One might wonder if the label is suitable for presumed (left-wing) populist actors such as Podemos, Syriza, Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, and whether populism can be "left-wing" or even "centrist" at all.

Other scholars, especially those following the "discursive" approach inspired by the social constructivist work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, disagree with the premise that populism is inherently anti-pluralistic, and therefore illiberal. According to them, populism, as a logic of political mobilization, can bring together a variety of societal demands and identities. It thereby links diverse constituencies that share a grievance with power holders.

Many of the scholars who follow this approach reject xenophobic and authoritarian forms of populism. Yet they emphasize that populism can also take more benign forms characterized by respect for minorities and progressive values. Mouffe (2018) even explicitly defends "left-wing populism" as a means to challenge the neoliberal mainstream consensus as well as the far right, and to revitalize the democratic process.

"THE PEOPLE"

The above discussion indicates that the identification of cases of populism hinges very much on which conceptual approach and theoretical tradition

one follows. Yet it is plausible to argue that populism does at least have an illiberal streak. The construction of "the people" makes the exclusion of some individuals or groups (whether immigrants, power holders, the rich, etc.) almost inevitable. The easiest way to define "the people" is by pointing out who does not belong to this category.

That said, if we want to be open to the idea that populists can exist beyond the PRR, we may need to water down the premise that populists consistently and explicitly portray "the people" as a homogeneous entity, and that they see the people's will as singular and indivisible. Not all forms of populism are xenophobic, and the construction of "the people" can, to a great extent, be inclusionary. We can also accept that actors who are not usually proponents of democratic renewal and redemptive politics (Canovan, 1999) may sporadically use populist rhetoric.

DON'T EXAGGERATE THE PRESENCE OF POPULISM

But that does not mean that political actors across the board use populism almost indiscriminately. We should beware of assuming that populism is equally compatible with all ideologies and that it appears randomly across the ideological spectrum. Certain "host ideologies" lend themselves much better to anti-elitist messages and appeals to unfiltered popular sovereignty than others. In short, it is important not to exaggerate the presence of populism in contemporary political and party systems.

3. LOOKING BEYOND POPULISM... TO BETTER UNDERSTAND POPULISM

BARTEK PYTLAS

The introduction of this book invites us to take a fresh look at a long-overdue debate on how to approach the often (over)used term populism. As "populism" becomes a buzzword (Hunger and Paxton, 2022) in public and academic discourse, we should remain wary of its inflationary uses. By overemphasizing populism, we risk overlooking or misidentifying other important phenomena behind today's increasingly turbulent politics (Margetts et al., 2016). These include "thick" ideologies such as nativism, and different "thin" ideas on what constitutes "good representative politics" (Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro, 2015), such as non-political expertise or political will (Pytlas, 2023).

The inflationary use of "populism" has revived proposals to discard the notion altogether (Art, 2020). While I understand this perspective, I do not think that scrapping populism is the ideal solution. The discursive impact of populism is too extensive, and the related matters such as democracy too relevant, to simply ignore. Populism therefore remains important both as a concept and as part of several parties' rhetorical toolbox.

What we need instead, I suggest, is a more differentiated and dynamic approach to populism. We need to be clear not only where populism begins, but also where it ends. Accordingly, we must contrast populism with "thick" cultural and economic ideologies, and different "thin" ideas on representative politics and democracy. In addition, we must account for the flexible and sometimes paradoxical ways parties use these distinct ideas in practice. It is therefore important to look beyond mere populism and to embrace the chameleonic character of anti-establishment politics. By so doing, we might better understand specifically when and how populism can play into contemporary political turbulence.

POPULISM IS NOT THE WHOLE STORY

We have already gained important insights into populism's key features. But we should focus more on contrasting populism with other ideas (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). There is growing awareness that we must avoid conflating primary cultural and economic ideologies with thin ideas like

populism (Hunger and Paxton, 2022). As noted in the introduction, overemphasizing populism can lead us to underestimate the key relevance of core ideologies. One example is the crucial role of nativism for the radical right.

Concurrently, we should also be wary of conflating populism with other thin notions of "good representative politics" or "true elites." While populist politics is always anti-establishment, not all anti-establishment politics is (solely) populist. Political parties do not only link a fundamental "people-elite" conflict to the idea that politics should be bound to or embody infallible popular will. Once we account for various thin ideas beyond just populism, it turns out that over the last decade, anti-establishment parties across the ideological board have contested conventional politics from different, sometimes surprising, angles. In addition to—or often even instead of—extensive appeals to populist general will and technocratic extra-political expertise (Buštíková and Guasti, 2019), they have increasingly enacted an extraordinary political vocation (Pytlas, 2023): exceptional political will, skills and virtues presented as necessary to "revive" formal-representative politics itself.

The Italian Five Star Movement (M5S), for example, stated that: "The big difference between us and them is that in M5S there is, and always will be, political will."[1] In France, Emmanuel Macron called for reinvigorating political life which was to "remain a vocation and not a profession." Particularly after 2015, several other less or more established actors such as the radical-left Podemos in Spain, but also the radical-right FPÖ in Austria, used strong appeals to formal-representative skills and competence, embracing competition logic typically reserved for conventional parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020).

POPULISM IS NOT ALWAYS EFFECTIVE

So, populism is not the whole story. For example, once we focus on different ideas of representative politics, it turns out that populism is not a universally effective "thin" mobilization strategy, all else being equal. Anti-establishment parties which use more populism do not perform better electorally than those which rely on it less (Pytlas, 2023).

Instead, anti-establishment parties across the political board benefited more when they emphasized their appeals to political vocation, promising to revive an imagined ideal of conventional, formal-representative politics itself. We should thus be careful not to view the electoral gains of every anti-establishment party as a success of "populism."

1 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155785199900813

EMBRACING THE CHAMELEON

Being clearer about populism's contours helps us address another challenge (see introduction): populism's chameleonic character. Recognizing that populism is not the whole story invites us to embrace the populist "chameleon." Acknowledging that not all anti-establishment parties are populist helps to grasp the flexibility of anti-establishment and populist politics in parties.

Rather than simply looking at whether parties use less or more populism, these combined perspectives allow us to assess how parties can combine and meander between distinct thin ideas and strategies in practice. This encourages us to see the chameleonic character of anti-establishment politics not as a "bug" but as a feature.

SUBSTANTIVE CHARACTERISTICS AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

In no way does this question the importance of identifying varieties of substantive ideological and systemic party characteristics (Zulianello, 2020). In times when radical-right politics in particular has become increasingly normalized, it is important to contrast parties' political rhetoric with substantive ideas (Mudde, 2019). Observing how parties combine different ideas and strategies allows us to assess how radical parties rhetorically navigate appeals of both distinctiveness and "normality" behind their often unchanged substantive positions (Pytlas, 2024). It can also help us to explore intra-party conflict and competition between ideologically similar actors within a single party system.

A more differentiated and dynamic approach helps to identify specifically when and how populism might play into current political turbulence. Paradoxically, in order to get the most out of "populism," we need to look beyond populism alone.

4. POPULISM: LEFT OR RIGHT?

DANI FILC

Mattia Zulianello argues (see introduction) that the idea that populism is either left-wing or right-wing is a myth. He supports his claim by describing two sub-groups of populism that do not fit the left-right dichotomy: valence and agrarian populism. His conceptualization of valence populism as a non-ideological populism is also enlightening!

There are, after all, populist movements that are both left- and right-wing. Peronism is one of the most longstanding populist movements, reaching government in five different historical periods after 1945 (Muno and Pfeiffer, 2023). But it had strong right and left wings, making it very difficult to classify as either. Techno-populism, as analyzed by Bickerton and Accetti (2021), is yet another phenomenon that cannot be easily classified as left or right.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT

More generally, considering populism as either left-wing or right-wing is problematic because the differentiation between left and right is less straightforward now than in the past.

Norberto Bobbio (1996) offers us a way to differentiate between left and right based on the approach of each to equality. He argued that leftists believe that human beings are basically equal, that inequalities are a social product, and that social practices and policies should aim to increase equality. Those on the right, meanwhile, believe that social inequalities are the unavoidable result of natural inequalities concerning gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, or class.

But when discussing whether specific political parties are left-wing or right-wing, we should consider their stands along three different axes. These are economic structure and policies, cultural and identity issues, and the conceptualization of democracy. There certainly are political parties that are leftist or right-wing along all three axes. But there are others, among them several populist parties, that adopt contradictory stands on these three axes. They might mix egalitarian stands on gender and identity issues with more elitist conceptualizations of democracy, or support for neoliberal policies. Or, they might combine support for heterodox or non-neoliberal economic

policies with nativism. Using this more complex combination of egalitarian and anti-egalitarian positions along three different axes makes it difficult to categorize populist movements as simply left- or right-wing.

POPULISM AND THE PEOPLE

We can broaden the reflection on whether populist movements are dichotomic by considering the dichotomy between inclusionary and exclusionary populism, which is sometimes confused with the left-right dichotomy. Whether this dichotomy is a myth is less clear. Zulianello adopts (see introduction) a minimalist definition of populism. They understand it as a moralist view of society characterized by the conflict between the virtuous people and the corrupt elites.

This definition raises the question of how populist movements define the people. As Guy Hermet (2001) argued, the term "people" has three different meanings. The first is the people as the whole political community, such as when we speak of "the French people" or "the Italian people." However, if "the people" are the whole political community, there is no place for antagonism between the virtuous people and the elite. Thus, this conceptualization of the term is not relevant for our discussion of populism. The second meaning of the term "people" is plebs or commoners; social groups not part of the aristocracy or the powers that be. The third meaning is the people as a homogeneous and closed ethno-cultural unit.

Some populist movements, the inclusionary ones, stress mainly the second meaning. They understand the people as the popular classes. Other populist movements, the exclusionary ones, stress the third meaning and adopt a nativist view. Every populist movement has a certain way of understanding who the people are, which implies some kind of choice between the second and the third meanings. As a consequence, the dichotomy between inclusionary and exclusionary populist movements seems unavoidable. Is this the case?

THE LIMITS OF POPULIST INCLUSION

In reality, populist inclusion is always limited, since the claim to inclusion is not universal. In this, it contrasts with liberalism, in which all individuals are equal before the law and all bear equal rights; or socialism, with equality of output for all and equal ownership of means of production. The populist claim to inclusion—"we are also part of the people"—maintains the differences between the people and others. Thus, inclusion is always partial.

On the other hand, while exclusionary populist movements stress the meaning of the people as a homogenous and closed ethno-national unity, they still adopt the people/elites division. Thus, they must in some way take into account the interests and aspirations of the popular classes. As a result, they are not wholly exclusionary, either, as is the case for fascist or radical nationalist parties.

DEFINING POPULISM

Finally, we should address the definition of populism. Zulianello's definition of populism is a minimalist one: movements or parties are populist if they revolve around a moralist opposition between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite.

This is a necessary element of any populist movement. But it seems to me that this sole element is insufficient to define populism. Populist movements present a number of other characteristics. They emerge in societies which present a conflict around the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups. They become a pathway to political mobilization (see introduction), through the implementation of the moralist opposition between the virtuous people and the corrupt elites. As Cas Mudde (2004) claims, they understand democracy solely (or mostly) as the expression of popular sovereignty. And, finally, they emerge as an alternative to the hegemonic social order.

POPULISM'S COMPLEXITY

In sum, populism is the complex result of specific conditions of emergence, a relatively "thin" ideology, and a means of mobilizing that challenges the hegemonic order. The very complexity of populism challenges any attempt to classify it simply as either left or right.

5. POPULIST COMMUNICATION—STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE?

LONE SORENSEN

Political communication is often devalued as a "soft" approach to politics. People deride it as lacking substance or dealing only with surface-level matters. But political communication establishes and configures the relationship between political representatives and citizens. It is the means through which democracy plays out. We see the result of it in the voting booth, but the real substance of a liberal democracy—and the nature of an illiberal one—lies in the communicative relationships (or lack of them) that take form in-between elections. Do citizens feel their representatives listen to them? Do elected representatives keep citizens adequately informed about the business of government?

Appreciating the value of political communication doesn't mean that we should dismiss ideologies as unimportant. Rather, it suggests that we approach ideologies as intricately tied up with their communication. Media and communication studies long ago established that processes of mediation change the idea that is being communicated. Think, for example, of when language captures an idea discursively, when journalists contextualize a quote, or when netizens adapt their content to a particular social media platform. Ideas are shaped through social relationships, anticipation of audiences, industry norms and technological interactions. When we don't account for this, we end up with a disconnect between political theory and empirical reality.

IDEOLOGY OR STYLE?

This debate goes to the heart of the ongoing dichotomy between the ideational and performative classifications of populism. Both approaches make important points but both also have shortcomings. The ideational perspective acknowledges that ideas mobilize people, and that there is substance behind populist leaders' spectacular performances. But the nature of this ideational content remains difficult to pin down. This is partly because it is so very malleable and context-dependent. But it is also because it often relies on myth and perceived grievances rather than actual states of affairs. Ideational approaches also tend to assume that ephemeral ideas simply manifest themselves in pure form when populists write a manifesto or a Facebook post.

The performative approach captures something equally important about populism. Certain stylistic and performative traits—like norm-breaking or disruption—help us capture not only populist behavior but also how such practices create meaning. Populism is not simply "style without substance." It establishes a genuine connection with people because it is able to speak to their grievances, hopes and fears. These perceived grievances are situationally specific so we can't capture them in a definition of populism. However, we can acknowledge them as categories that direct the populist performance. As a scholarly community, we need to think more about how such performative elements relate to host ideologies. We need to think about how performance and ideology intersect.

POPULISM AS A COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS

In my book Populist Communication: Ideology, Performance, Mediation (Sorensen, 2021), I argue that populism is a communicative process that involves both content and form in the meaning-making process. In fact, they shape each other: the form through which you communicate an idea changes its meaning, and the content of an idea affects the form of its communication. Importantly, I'm concerned with this making of meaning rather than the manifest form or underlying content in and of themselves. My focus is process. Conceiving of populism as a communicative process means that its form and content become properties of communication rather than of the populist actor. With ideational approaches, ideas reside in the actor. The communication approach, as per Michael Hameleers (2023), sees populism as a gradational phenomenon.

On the ideational side, this process concerns how ideas come about. Populism is particularly spongy. Its ideational component is therefore "bottom up": populist politicians perceive and absorb the grievances of people in a particular context. The notion that populism's ideas are thus not necessarily programmatically coherent is a myth dispelled in the introduction of this book. But there is also a performative aspect to the process. This entails externalizing and projecting these ideas onto a constructed people in ways that anticipate audiences' interests and needs, including the media's.

POPULISM AS A META-POLITICAL NARRATIVE

In populism, ideology and performance come together in a meta-political narrative frame. It tells a story about politics gone wrong that relies on archetypes of villains (the elite), victims (the people) and saviors (populist

politicians). This story is performed through political communication, but is also about political communication. It captures people's dissatisfaction with a political elite that panders to the media rather than listens to their constituents. These elites are obsessed with their own image instead of with the public good (Sorensen, 2024). The process of populist communication is concerned with the meaning-making relationship between content and form through signification. And through storytelling, it is also concerned with the social relationship between the key actors in a democracy.

Approaching populism as a communicative process allows us to dissect how populists themselves—not just the elites they criticize—adapt their communications to different media technologies, audiences, and industry norms and values. Populists create spectacle through disruptive behavior and language. This strategy serves to delegitimize the stale norms of the elite and attract journalists' attention. Think, for example, of Nigel Farage's Brexit campaign, in which he set out on a yacht on the Thames wearing a captain's outfit.

But populists' approach to mediation is not always as crude as that example suggests. Often their disruptions form part of elaborate performative assemblages that cater to a range of complementary media and audiences. Mainstream politicians often struggle to appear authentic and consistent in their communications in different media because their demands on form and content are at odds. A soundbite appropriate to a serious TV news interview, for example, is not sufficiently informal and emotive for a Facebook or TikTok post. Populists, however, whose norm-breaking includes the codes and conduct of media discourse, can be consistent in both.

6. THE STRATEGIC USE OF POPULISM

MICHAEL HAMELEERS

The introduction shows that populism is a broad phenomenon. Populism is not restricted to certain (right-wing) political positions or anti-establishment actors that attack the mainstream. Populist ideas are flexible. They may pertain to various political positions. And mainstream political actors can use them, too. In this light, I argue that populism is not an "on-versus-off" label with which to categorize parties and politicians. Populism may define certain movements, politicians, and political parties. However, various actors can also use it as an idea or strategy to gain profit—or cause harm—in the political arena.

Essentially, during elections, non-populist politicians can communicate strategically the idea of pitting ordinary people against corrupt and self-interested elites. By so doing, they gain attention and gain ground against populist opponents. Concerns are rising about disinformation and mounting factual relativism. In this context, populists blame allegedly corrupt mainstream media for deceiving the ordinary people.

POPULISM AS A STYLE

In that sense, we can also regard populism as a style, idea or strategy that actors can exploit to varying degrees. Populism's proponents can emphasize it more or less, depending on the (political) context. Some political leaders who the Popu-List (Rooduijn et al., 2024) categorizes as populist may consistently emphasize antagonism between ordinary people and corrupt elites. Other politicians may use this master-frame only in the lead-up to elections, or in the aftermath of a political crisis, in response to citizens' disenchantment.

Populist ideas that simplify issues in terms of a binary "us versus them" divide are persuasive. Given this, populism may also be strategically utilized through (alternative) media platforms, celebrities, or political influencers. Distinguishing between the ideological core of populism that relates to the ideas of parties and politicians, versus populism as a style or rhetoric that can be communicated by different actors, helps us better understand the different ways populism may have permeated politics and society.

We have to be careful not to overstretch populism and apply it to all we see. Not all references to "the people" are populism, and not all anti-elitist ideas classify as populist. However, when politicians pit ordinary people and the centrality of their will against corrupt, failing, and/or self-interested elites, we can call these ideas populist.

POPULISM IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE POLITICAL ELITE

Most scholarship defines populism in terms of the divide between ordinary people and corrupt political elites. However, populist ideas may not shift blame only onto political elites. We are in the midst of an epistemic crisis, with increasing distrust in established experts, science, and the mainstream media. In this context, populist ideas may also stress the antagonism between "honest" ordinary people and "deceptive" or "lying" elites. These elites could be politicians, but may also be from the realms of science, big business, or the media. A key example are the accusations of "fake news" from populist politicians, especially after the 2016 US elections. When applied to issues such as COVID-19 or climate change, populists also delegitimize scientists and experts. Populists claim such people are part of a corrupt, dishonest "elite" that deliberately hides reality from "the people" to further their own agendas (Thomassen in this book).

In this way, populist ideas attack conventional knowledge and experts by stressing that such people are part of a dishonest elite that threatens ordinary people. Populism can thus take on an epistemic and delegitimizing shape. These types of populist ideas pertain mainly to the strategic use of populism. Populists can delegitimize the ideas, knowledge and evidence that contradicts the issue positions and interests of (political) actors, if they label such ideas and knowledge as fake and dishonest.

THE RISK OF CONCEPTUAL CONFLATION

Purists or critics may argue that applying populism to anti-media or anti-science sentiments is conceptual conflation and overstretching. Although I recognize the risk, I respectfully disagree. It is true that not all critiques of science, the media, or elites are populist. We have other concepts such as cynicism, negative campaigning and the effects of hostile media to describe such sentiments and ideas. We should not, therefore, label anti-elitism on its own as populist.

However, when we juxtapose the anti-elite perspective with a people-centric, moralist appeal to ordinary, honest or pure people, attacks on the

media, corporations, or science are in line with the classical definitions of populism and its ideational core. Why would we not call it populist when it helps us understand the causes, consequences and potential remedies for these sentiments?

THE RISK OF CONCEPTUAL OVERSTRETCHING

Consensus on the core elements of populism is greater than the existing literature might have you think. However, the scholarship around populist ideas still contains many divergent perspectives. Some use populism to identify political parties and politicians. Others use it as a label for many different expressions outside of the political realm. Both perspectives have their merits, but we should not overstretch the concept beyond antagonism between ordinary people and corrupt elites.

What matters is that when we talk about populism, we emphasize the core concept of a fundamental divide between ordinary people versus corrupt elites. Different politicians may emphasize this divide, and may address different scapegoats, including political elites, the mainstream media, or conventional scientific knowledge. In an age in which expert and conventional knowledge are subject to delegitimization and doubt, we can define populist ideas as an epistemic cleavage between honest people and lying elites.

7. COMPLEMENTARY OPPOSITES: TECHNOCRACY AND POPULISM

PETRA GUASTI*

Populism and technocracy challenge the traditional representation model of party democracy by emphasizing the importance of a unitary interest, rejecting pluralism, advocating for unmediated relationships between people and elites, and disregarding traditional forms of accountability. In technocratic populism, the interaction between populism and technocracy significantly shapes governance dynamics and policy outcomes.

TECHNOCRACY

Technocracy is a type of power but also a source of legitimacy and an elitist logic of governance in which decision-making and representation delegate power not to elected representatives but vested in experts and professionals (cf. Caramani, 2020). At the heart of technocracy is the belief that solving complex societal issues effectively for all citizens/the common good requires knowledge and specialized expertise. The five key features of technocracy are expertise as a guiding principle of policy-making, efficiency as a way to optimize outcomes, rationality as a decision-making rationale focusing on effectiveness and feasibility, problem-solving through innovation and technical advancement—especially the use of data, and finally, meritocracy as a system of reward.

THE CHALLENGE OF TECHNOCRACY

In his book, Caramani (2020) identifies the main challenges of technocracy as depoliticization, holism, neutrality, and autonomy. Technocracy challenges politics by fundamentally opposing politics itself—it rejects conflict and claims to remove politics from policy by operating under the belief that a

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universal common interest exists beyond the clash of specific interests and that political choice can be eliminated by discovering "good policies" through rational analysis. In holism, technocracy challenges pluralism by prioritizing the whole over the part seeking solutions that benefit society, ignoring trade-offs between winners and losers. Technocracy is anti-ideological or a-ideological—it promotes neutrality. It claims to be pragmatic when, in fact, it ignores competing ideological visions and proposals that it labels as "bad for the whole." By claiming the primacy of responsibility and autonomy over responsiveness and self-rule, technocracy renders itself beyond the accountability of the electorate—placing areas of decision-making beyond popular control and empowering non-elected actors (e.g., the role of central banks on fiscal policy).

KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POPULISM AND TECHNOCRACY

Daniele Caramani (2017) summarizes the key differences between populism and technocracy in the following way: distinct in their approaches to identifying objective interests, relationship with the electorate, legitimacy and accountability. While populism relies on the people's will to identify the general interests, technocracy employs rational speculation and scientific procedures. Populism aims for maximum inclusiveness and directly mobilizes people via direct votes and non-institutional channels. On the contrary, technocracy seeks a minimum level of inclusiveness—involving people indirectly and intermittently. Populism often relies on emotional mobilization and symbolic representation, deriving its legitimacy from affirming the people's will, while technocracy derives legitimacy from expertise and rationality. Populism dismisses accountability by claiming that the leader embodies the people. At the same time, technocracy avoids accountability by claiming to act in the best interest of the people incapable of understanding their interests.

KEY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN POPULISM AND TECHNOCRACY

Notwithstanding these important differences, populism and technocracy share four key features: they view themselves as forms of anti-politics and, more specifically, alternatives to representative party democracy. Technocracy and populism reject political parties as carriers of particular interests, focused solely on electoral competition and occupying government positions, thus neglecting the responsibility of political action for the common good—the interests of society as a whole. They claim to be external to politics

and anti-ideological. Both reject mediation as a form of interest articulation and accountability as an oversight (cf. Caramani 2017, 2020).

Furthermore, in their work, Guasti and Buštíková (2020) show that populism and technocracy can combine in technocratic populism, which for Zulianello (2020), is a subtype of valence populism. Technocratic populism emerges when existing party systems weaken, combining the promises of populism and technocracy by primarily addressing frustrations with poor governance by established parties rather than nativist grievances or the plight of economic underdogs (cf. Canovan, 2005). Technocratic populism directly connects voters with leaders through the leader's expertise, thus representing a form of output-oriented populism. Technocratic populism arises in response to governance crises and crises of political parties. It challenges and transcends the traditional left-right axis of political confrontation (Bickerton, Invernizzi Accetti, 2017), thus offering a catch-all appeal unrestrained by the need for ideological coherence.

Technocratic populism is rooted in anti-political sentiment, with leaders having a proceduralist view of democracy, rejecting pluralism and embracing a unified general interest while politicizing expertise for legitimacy. Leaders cultivate authenticity and proximity to ordinary people, simultaneously claiming to embody the people and expertise—hence being both

Table 1. Differences and similarities between populism and technocracy

		Populism	**Technocracy**
Differences	Approach to identifying objective interests	Relies on the people's will	Relies on rational speculation & scientific procedures
	Relationship with the people	Directly mobilizes via direct democracy and non-institutional channels	Involves indirectly and intermittently
	Source of legitimacy	Affirmation of the people's will	Expertise and rationality
	Accountability	Dismisses—claims the leader embodies the people	Avoids—claims to act in the best interest of the people
Similarities	Self-perception	Claims to be external to politics—anti-politics	
	Ideological standpoint	Opposed to mediated politics—representative democracy & Anti-ideological	
	Stance on political parties	Rejects political parties as carriers of particular interests	

descriptively similar and distinct from the people. The simultaneous proximity and distance enable technocratic populists to electorally mobilize the people to select the leader and subsequently turn the people into spectators of leaders' decision-making processes.

PERILS OF TECHNOCRATIC POPULISM

In summary, while both populism and technocracy challenge traditional forms of party government, they differ fundamentally in their approaches to identifying the common interest, their interaction with the electorate, the role of descriptive representation, sources of legitimacy, and mechanisms of accountability. However, the relationship between populism and technocracy is not always straightforward and, in some cases, can be symbiotic, as populist leaders may co-opt technocratic language or policies to bolster their legitimacy. Combined, technocratic populism poses a significant challenge to pluralistic forms of representative democracy, as leaders prioritize policies for immediate popularity rather than long-term solutions, instrumentalizing selected expertise for validation of populist policies—for example, by selecting experts to lend their credibility by endorsing populist policy proposals; appointing experts to key positions in order to demonstrate commitment to non-political, practical solutions.

8. POPULISM AND EUROSCEPTICISM: CONVERGENCES AND OVERLAPS

ANTONELLA SEDDONE

Populism and Euroscepticism share numerous characteristics, and the extent of their overlap often renders it challenging to disentangle their distinct manifestations. (Rooduijn, 2019). Nonetheless, they remain distinct phenomena, and their trajectories do not entirely coincide. Commonly Euroscepticism refers to critical evaluations by citizens or political actors towards the EU, its institutions, and its policies (Taggart, Szczerbiak, 2002; Boomgaarden et al., 2011; de Vries, 2018). These stances can range widely in intensity, depending on diverse aspects of how European institutions operate and what role they play in domestic politics dynamics.

For this reason, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) distinguish between "hard" and "soft" forms of Euroscepticism. The former consists of an opposition that questions the fundamental principle of EU membership, calling for withdrawal. The latter, instead, while not questioning EU membership per se, concentrates its aversion on particular facets of the European project that are seen as a threat to national interests. Due to the heterogeneous nature of Eurosceptic tendencies, it can be challenging to properly classify political groups within the hard/soft dichotomy. For instance, in many cases, positions of governmental responsibility place Eurosceptic parties in roles that allow them to actively partake in European governance, while simultaneously enabling them to voice criticism of European institutions and maintain antagonistic stances. In such scenarios, Reinhard Heinisch et al. (2021) have introduced the term *equivocal Euroscepticism* to capture the ambiguous positioning of parties—especially from the populist radical right—that oscillate between cooperation with hardline Eurosceptics in Europe and alignment with moderate actors at home (Taggart, Pirro, 2021).

IS EUROSCEPTICISM A MAINSTREAM PHENOMENON?

The phenomenon of Euroscepticism is not new, and it is not solely associated with populism. Conversely, there has always been some skepticism concerning the European integration process. However in the early stages these were mostly context-specific and marginal positions inside a larger and wider support framework, even though with low-intensity (Usherwood, Startin, 2013).

Euroscepticism has become increasingly mainstream in recent years and, more importantly, now cuts across traditional ideological divides (Brack, Startin, 2015). The referendum crises that accompanied the ratification of European treaties in the early 2000s (Verney, 2011) paved the way of the decisive shift to "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe, Marks, 2009). The permissive consensus that had enabled political elites to advance the European integration project came to an end when French and Dutch citizens rejected the EU constitutionalizing agenda (Kriesi, 2009). Furthermore, since the 1990s, the consolidation of the European integration project has led to growing intervention in domestic political agendas, (re)defining the European Union's function as a constraint rather than an opportunity (Pasquinucci, 2022).

The 2008 financial crisis and the economic crisis that followed transformed this salience into politicization, even if the European project's strengthening had previously given European institutions more relevance (De Wilde, 2011; Statham, Trenz, 2015; Hutter et al., 2016). Political actors that are Eurosceptical or Euro-enthusiastic position themselves around European concerns, which have turned into a platform for competing for public support, creating a polarized environment. Adopting Eurosceptical (hard or soft) stances enables non-governing populist parties to create a credible challenge to the mainstream parties, both left and right, that have continuously backed the European project in this era of growing discontent with European institutions (Beaudonnet, Gomez, 2024). Moreover, the nature of European decision-making processes—which certainly does not facilitate citizens' ability to assess their functioning and representativeness—has reinforced a sense of distance and estrangement that in times of crisis has easily turned into mistrust.

EUROSCEPTICISM AND POPULISM, A FREQUENT BUT NOT OBVIOUS COMBINATION

From the point of view of populist discourse, the so-called democratic deficit (Boyce, 1993) makes the EU a near-certain target. Therefore, the anti-elite rhetoric characteristic of populism and sovereignism overlaps with the Eurosceptic discourse (Basile, Mazzoleni, 2020). However, Euroscepticism does not consistently feature as a central element of populist discourse (Pirro et al., 2018), and the relationship with European institutions is interpreted differently depending on the competitive context in which parties and political actors operate (Pirro, Taggart, van Kessel, 2018; Harmsen, 2010). In this regard, the Lega (Nord) is a prime example: Although staying within the populist framework, the party has changed its attitude from pro-EU in

the early 1990s to severe Euroscepticism and then back to a mild position only recently.

Although both right-wing and left-wing populism oppose national elites, as well as international ones, their interpretations of Euroscepticism differ. For radical left populism it takes the form of an alternative vision of Europe, advocating for increased attention to socioeconomic issues, while the radical right manifests Euroscepticism in nativist and sovereigntist terms (Kneuer, 2019), condemning European meddling in domestic affairs (Kriesi, 2020). On the other hand, the relationship between valence populist parties and European institutions is frequently expressed in an ambivalent manner, alternating between pro-EU and Eurosceptical stances based on domestic political circumstances (Zulianello, Larsen, 2021; 2024).

Thus, populism, particularly right and left populism, easily aligns with Eurosceptic discourse. The two phenomena share their roots in common ground, the uneasiness brought on by the recurrence and repetition of economic and social crises, and the share of some antagonists, particularly European institutions. The idea of the people is expanded to a supranational community that is threatened by the same elites represented by European institutions, that embody Eurosceptical contestation (Sørensen, 2020). The populist narrative may include resistance to European institutions, yet the contours and depth of opposition may manifest in diverse ways. Populist parties frequently adopt vague and malleable views by moderating or radicalizing their Eurosceptic stances in response to strategic considerations or external circumstances. Therefore, while there are similarities between Euroscepticism and populism, criticism of European institutions appears to be more of an accessory than a core component of populist discourse.

9. WHAT IS SOVEREIGNISM?

NICOLÒ CONTI

When discussing "sovereignism," it is important to differentiate it from the concept of "sovereignty." Sovereignty describes how governing institutions exercise political authority within a specific territory. Historically, the state has been the greatest political authority exercised inside a bordered region (Keating, 2003). Since the emergence of democracy, through systems that enable the governed to exert control over and impose sanctions on those in power, state sovereignty has been more and more tied to popular will. The progressive loss of spheres of sovereignty brought about by the delegation of powers and competences to higher decision-making levels (for example, of the EU), introduced tensions concerning this traditional Westphalian conception of sovereignty, which is centered on the state and, later, on the control of citizens.

Increased supranational integration gives rise to the idea of sovereignism, which is a project for the state to regain its sovereignty. Sovereignty disputes have ancient origins (though they are still current in many situations) and have coincided with the nation-state-building phase and several interstate conflicts (Bickerton et al., 2022). Sovereignism is a more recent phenomenon, that emerged in the context of intense supranational integration and consists in the defense of sovereignty within a state's border against any kind of deterritorialization or dispersion in favor of higher-level and larger-scale territorial entities.

THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SOVEREIGNISM

Sovereignism is thus set up as a response to a growing level of supranational integration, of which European integration is undoubtedly a model example. Other forms of global governance that have been established in domains like international trade, finance, defense, and environmental protection, to mention a few, must also be added. Regaining control over the exercise of political authority at the state level (Kallis, 2018) in opposition to forms of economic, political, and cultural integration among states or on a global scale (Basile, Mazzoleni, 2020) is the common concept that underpins claims of sovereignty.

Sovereigntist demands are frequently supported by the protection of public sovereignty, which is exercised through representational processes (such as elections), that don't have a correspondence with the supranational institutions' use of authority. Economic globalization, political-institutional integration, and, more generally, the establishment of supranational levels of *governance* pose serious challenges to state sovereignty by generating dividing and conflicting interests (as well as winners and losers). This is partially due to the diminished opportunities for citizen participation (and opposition) in the absence of the mechanisms of selection and sanction typical of representative democracy at the state level (Grimm, 2015; Sassen, 2008).

In response to these problems, under the guise of protecting the interests of its citizens, sovereignism aims to restore an order in which the state regains authority over laws, public policies, and interstate relations (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017). Sovereignism can manifest in its most extreme forms or in more constrained ways that concern the restoration of state sovereignty in specific fields.

SUPPORT FOR SOVEREIGNISM

According to recent studies, the sovereigntist movement is becoming more prevalent in Western nations, especially in Europe, where levels of continental-scale integration have never been higher. Over time the alignment of political supply and demand shows a trend toward the consolidation of sovereignism. According to Davide Angelucci and colleagues (2024), the sovereigntist field has grown over time and has acquired left-wing characteristics in addition to its original radical right-wing connotation, creating a rainbow of points of view and ideological inclinations. The same study demonstrates how the demands of citizens who are more sensitive to the state regaining control over political authority have become more in line with the sovereigntist political supply. Since the radical right appropriated them, sovereigntist claims have progressively become more transversal, encompassing both radical and non-radical forces, populist and anti-populist, right- and left-wing, and manifested along a variety of ideological lines. Public opinion has been moving in the same direction as some political parties' shifts toward more sovereigntist stances over time. From this correlation, the sovereigntist perspective interprets a growing alignment between political supply (parties) and demand (citizens).

Other research (Carrieri, Conti, 2023) has underlined the inclination of political forces to highlight sovereigntist claims in line with related electoral demand. This approach is particularly clear among those political forces the voters believe to be more reliable in supporting sovereigntist ideas. These

forces then emphasize sovereignism in response to boost their support. Eventually, in the framework of (and in response to) more supranational integration, sovereignism progressively appears as a major factor in political and electoral competition as well as a motivating force for mobilizing people and political players.

10. ANTI-POPULIST COMMUNICATION

VLASTIMIL HAVLÍK AND ALENA KLUKNAVSKÁ*

THE CONCEPT

One of the most significant developments in European party politics has been the rapid rise of populist political actors. Populist parties have not only gained ground in national elections, but their growing electoral success has also expanded their influence—either as potential governing parties or as actors with significant "blackmail potential," meaning they can shape the strategies and interactions of other parties in the system, including coalition formation. However, unlike previous waves of new political parties, such as the Greens, the scale of populist success, combined with its often illiberal or even undemocratic tendencies (Müller, 2016), has sparked intense debates on how to respond.

A key reaction to the rise of populism has been the explicit mobilization against populist parties and leaders in the electoral arena. While scholarly conceptualizations of this mobilization vary, it is broadly understood as anti-populist opposition to populism (Moffitt, 2018). As such, anti-populism challenges the core positions of populism or populist actors and seeks to defend an alternative, anti-populist, political vision. Anti-populist actors have developed communication strategies that counter populism and mobilize public support by framing politics as a struggle between populism and anti-populism. Building upon the negative connotations of populism in the media and among the public, these strategies have significantly influenced, and in some cases reshaped, the dynamics of party competition across Europe.

Interestingly, anti-populist messages are not necessarily created as a direct counterpoint to academic definitions of populism. Instead, anti-populist communication strategies construct a polarized political conflict by emphasizing populist and anti-populist identities as two opposing entities. In this context, anti-populist narratives seek to enhance the positive image of anti-populists while casting populists in a negative light. Anti-populism thus shares a common perception of populism as a severe and immediate threat to

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democratic politics. The specific content and style of these anti-populist narratives may vary across time and space but incorporate ideological positions and performative communication elements aiming to create perceptions of populism and anti-populism.

EMPIRICAL CASES

One example of an anti-populist movement is the Sardines Movement in Italy. In the late 2010s, this grassroots movement organized demonstrations against the rise of the populist radical right, particularly Matteo Salvini's Lega. The Sardines criticized Salvini's party for its verbal aggression, vulgar rhetoric, and confrontational political style. They explicitly positioned themselves as anti-populist actors and called for an anti-populist response by promoting politeness and civility in Italian political discourse, while rejecting the continuous use of hateful online campaigning by populists. Their focus on political style extended beyond the content of messages to include expressive elements in anti-populist communication and, more broadly, the way politics is conducted. The movement framed this contrast as a battle between the "virtual" and the "physical," opposing the online incivility, manipulation, and cyberbullying associated with populism to the respectful, honest, and face-to-face engagement of anti-populist politics (Hamdaoui, 2022).

In the Czech Republic, after nearly a decade of populist governments, two electoral coalitions of opposition parties, Together (SPOLU), and the Pirate Party and Mayors and Independents (PirSTAN), reframed their electoral campaign strategies ahead of the 2021 general election. The anti-populist actors set to create perceptions of their own and populist political identities, emphasizing ideational (what is populism and anti-populism about) and stylistic (how is populism and anti-populism performed) elements. Ideationally, populists were presented as economically irresponsible and pro-Eastern, while anti-populists put forward their own image as economically responsible and pro-Western political actors. Stylistically, populists were portrayed as divisive, amoral, and dishonest, whereas anti-populist forces were considered unifying, moral, and truthful. These frames, emphasizing a stark divide between populism and democracy, help anti-populists not only outrightly reject populism but also position themselves as its direct opposite: populism and its representatives were depicted as a fundamental threat to Czech society and democracy and anti-populists positioned as the nation's savior, reclaiming a country undermined by populist governance. This constructed divide between illiberal or undemocratic populism and democratic anti-populism has become more pronounced over time, overshadowing previous ideological differences among anti-populist parties (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022).

To further substantiate our argument, Greece also provides an example how contextual nature of anti-populist narratives is evident in the cultural dualism that underpins the populist/anti-populist divide. The non-populist forces—PASOK and New Democracy—portray populism, as represented by the radical right ANEL and the radical left SYRIZA, as a form of cultural and political backwardness. They frame populism as a remnant of "Eastern/Balkan immaturity," contrasting it with their own self-image as representatives of democratic and rational Europe. In doing so, they position themselves as the guarantors of modernization and progress (Markou, 2020).

CONSEQUENCES

The construction of populist and anti-populist divides has far-reaching implications for party politics. By emphasizing this conflict, anti-populists' communication often overshadows existing ideological and policy-based cleavages, shifting the focus from substantive political debates to broader questions about how politics should be conducted and who should govern. One worrisome consequence of the rise of populism and the anti-populist response, and thus the increasing importance of populism/anti-populism divide, has been the diminishing importance of traditional policy discussions.

Importantly, while anti-populists frequently emphasize rationality and depolarization in their public statements and election campaign, research suggests that their messages are nevertheless often emotionally charged and discussed in negative terms. This can, in turn, albeit unwittingly, contribute to further polarization. Ultimately, the emergence of populist/anti-populist divides has become one of the most significant transformations in contemporary European party politics.

11. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

PETRA GUASTI

The first section of this volume emphasized the need to distinguish populism from non-populism and drew four main lessons. First, there are several phenomena often confused with populism, such as sovereignism, Euroscepticism, anti-establishment appeals, and nativism. Nicolò Conti clarified the meaning of sovereignism, which advocates for the restoration of state authority: while populism emphasizes the primacy of the people, sovereignism calls for reclaiming the state's priority over laws and policies to protect national interests from global integration. Similarly, in her discussion of populism and Euroscepticism, Antonella Seddone highlighted that although the two are often linked, they remain distinct concepts. Davide Vittori cautioned against mistakenly labelling all anti-establishment appeals as populist. Like Conti, Seddone, and Vittori, Stijn van Kessel warned against conflating populism with another commonly misunderstood concept—nativism. In sum, as van Kessel and Vittori argue, populism is not equally compatible with all host ideologies.

Second, we should consider the multifaceted nature of populism and resist the tendency to oversimplify by forcing it into a conventional political spectrum. Bartek Pytlas stressed that the term "populism" is often used too broadly and emphasized the need to contrast it with other ideas and examine how political actors use populist and non-populist ideas in practice. Dani Filc challenged the conventional left-right dichotomy in understanding populism, arguing that populism transcends traditional political dimensions. Both Pytlas and Filc thus advocate for a more nuanced and dynamic approach to analyzing the phenomenon.

Third, Petra Guasti examined the relationship between populism and technocracy, showing how both challenge the traditional party government model of representation. Despite notable similarities, populism and technocracy must be treated as distinct phenomena. Populism and technocracy both emphasize a unified interest, reject pluralism and traditional forms of accountability, and promote an unmediated vision of politics. However, there are significant differences in how they conceptualize "the people" and identify the sources of legitimacy in decision-making processes.

Finally, we focus on populist and anti-populist communication. Lone Sorensen emphasized how populist ideology and performance interact in

shaping meaning, highlighting the role of communication in contemporary democracies. Michael Hameleers analyzed the strategic use of populist appeals, especially where facts are contested and experts delegitimized. Vlastimil Havlík and Alena Kluknavská showed that anti-populist actors often mirror populist logic, countering populism with appeals to reason, responsibility, and democratic renewal—yet risking emotional escalation and depoliticization. Understanding populist and anti-populist communication styles is crucial to grasp democratic discourse today.

PART II
IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL POSITIONS

This part explores various ideological aspects and positions of populist actors. It explains why Fratelli d'Italia is neither post-fascist nor neo-fascist, explores the future of Salvini's Lega, investigates the ideological roots of techno-populist rhetoric, and examines the emotional dimension of populism. It studies the use of populist rhetoric on social media, the phenomenon of femonationalism, and gender issues in the cases of Le Pen and Meloni. Further, it analyzes how Europe serves as an ideological resource for the radical right, investigates Italian parties' positions on the war in Ukraine, and explores the foreign policy positions of the radical and extreme right, why Putin is not populist, characterizes Zelensky's populism, agrarian populism in the Netherlands, Peronism in Argentina, Sovereign Citizen movements in Germany and the Czech Republic, the fusion of nationalism, populism and communism in Slovakia, and the evolution and transformation of Left-wing populism in Europe. Finally, the chapter outlines the evolution of ANO and the radical right in the Czech Republic, and the subnational variation in populist radical right manifestos of the Czech SPD.

1. BROTHERS OF ITALY IS NOT A POST- OR NEO-FASCIST PARTY, BUT IT MIGHT POSE AN ILLIBERAL CHALLENGE

LEONARDO PULEO AND GIANLUCA PICCOLINO

Labelling populist far right parties as fascist is misleading, write Leonardo Puleo and Gianluca Piccolino. Vague accusations of fascism gloss over the genuine threats the radical right poses to democracy. Plenty of myths flutter around populism and the far right. The Loop series on populism has already demystified some of the most recurrent sins (see introduction). Yet, conceptual confusion can also arise from the intertwining and layering of historical experiences, individual histories, and political ideas. One such myth is the conflation of the radical populist right with fascism. In recent years, leaders from Bolsonaro to Trump have had charges of fascism raised against them. The political party Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI)—winners of the most recent Italian general election, with 26% of the vote[1]—is an excellent case through which to address distinctions among claims of fascism, neo-fascism and post-fascism. Our plea to resist attaching post- or neo-fascist labels to the radical right is not because we underestimate the threat it poses. Quite the contrary. We suggest that rather than making vague, misplaced accusations of fascism, journalists and social scientists should carefully indicate the threats contemporary radical-right actors pose to the separation of powers, to individual rights, and to minority groups.

DISTINGUISHING FASCIST FROM RADICAL-RIGHT PARTIES

FdI was founded in 2012, a splinter group from the center-right People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL), then led by Silvio Berlusconi. FdI inherited a large part of its genetic heritage from National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), which had previously co-founded the PdL. AN, in turn, was an evolution of the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI). MSI had kept fascism's legacy alive in Italy from 1945 until the party's dissolution, in 1995, into AN. FdI even adopted an updated version of AN's symbol, containing the tricolor flame, which had also been central for MSI (Jones, 2022).

1 https://dait.interno.gov.it/

There's an often-overlooked rule in political science for distinguishing fascists from the radical right: their relationship with democracy. The idea goes back to the work of Hans-Georg Betz (1993) and Piero Ignazi (1992) who, in the 1990s, stressed that scholars should not treat the far right as a homogeneous entity.

POST AND NEO-FASCISM

Fascism, by definition, unequivocally rejects any kind of democratic process. Its ideology favors a utopian, organic and corporatist ultra-nation. The words of the Italian historian Emilio Gentile elucidate some of fascism's ideological tenets: "Fascism entails a brutal and direct repulsion against freedom, equality, happiness, and peace as ideals. Fascism is an ideology exalting irrationality, the will to power, the willingness of chosen minorities, the obedience of the masses, the individual sacrifice in favor of the nation." (Gentile, 2021, p. 13). Neo-fascist actors explicitly stake out direct continuity with historical fascism. We can thus justify using the prefix neo- in light of such actors' double standards in terms of rhetoric, and the strategies they use to exist in a democratic context (i.e. electoral participation). MSI's transition to AN has been described as post-fascist. The party sought legitimacy in Italy's early 1990s party system—during a period of tumultuous change.

However, while AN abandoned past references to fascism, it failed, in its early years at least, to construct a distinct ideological identity. As a 'post-fascist' party, AN's profile was in transition between the old ideological identity and a new one still under construction.

BROTHERS OF ITALY IS NOT FASCIST...

Looking at FdI's ideological core, we see that the party's acceptance of democracy, and—especially—electoral legitimacy, is sincere. This means we cannot label the party, or its leader, either fascist or neo-fascist. FdI also supports programmatic proposals that contrast with the historical pillars of fascism. This includes, for example, embracing many cornerstones of neoliberalism. Neither does it seem useful to categorize FdI as post-fascist. Almost 30 years have passed since the birth of AN, and although the process of detachment from fascism presents several grey areas, a large part of FdI leadership has socialized into a party that renounces the fascist legacy. However, elements of nostalgia survive in party elites and sympathizers. This is well epitomized by the infamous footage from the home of Senate House Speaker Ignazio La Russa, during which he gathers up busts of Mussolini and other fascist

memorabilia (Ricciardi 2022). Yet these examples relate more to the individual experiences of political activists than to ideological adherence to a fascist political project.

...BUT A POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT-WING PARTY

We can better characterize FdI as a populist radical right-wing actor (Puleo and Piccolino, 2022). Such actors do not frame their political project in the name of the authority of chosen elites. Nor are they concerned with restoring the alleged value of the ultra-nation. In contrast, although they don't want to abolish representative democracy, they are certainly skeptical about political and societal pluralism. Respect for minority rights, freedom of choice in ethical issues, checks and balances in contemporary polities—all these FdI regard as limitations on the will of Italians. While these actors don't want to abolish representative democracy, they are certainly skeptical of pluralism. Refusing to use the term fascism to describe these phenomena is not only an exercise in nominalist purism. It is a plea for a better understanding of the contemporary challenges to the liberal pillar of contemporary democracy (Laruelle, 2022). And conceptually overstretching the term fascism runs an additional risk. A misleadingly wide understanding would prevent us from identifying the authentic neo-fascist groups operating in the public sphere. In Italy, actors such as CasaPound and Forza Nuova have reclaimed their link with historical fascism. Such actors are also prepared to use violent persecution against discriminated minorities (e.g., migrants) and their political opponents (Gattinara, 2018). These groups might see in radical-right parties—and specifically in FdI—an institutional interlocutor. This is precisely why scholars and the media should focus on the relationships and structural ambiguity that radical-right parties maintain with fascist groupuscules.

2. BOOM TO BUST: WHERE NEXT FOR MATTEO SALVINI'S LEAGUE?

ARIANNA GIOVANNINI AND DAVIDE VAMPA

The League (Lega) is one of the oldest parties currently active in Italy. However, in recent years, it has undergone a profound transformation from a regionalist party "of the North," to a nationalist nativist one (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, 2018). Matteo Salvini, the party's most recent leader, spearheaded this process. It resulted in success for him, and for his party.

But the personalization and nationalization of the League essentially changed its ideological soul. In particular, this process brought in the risk of alienating the party's regionalist old guard, especially in its Northern strongholds. For a while, however, electoral success was the glue that held different currents of the party together. At the 2018 general election, the League gained 17.4% of the vote. At the following year's European election, they emerged as the largest Italian party, with a stunning 34.3%.

In 2019 Salvini's party won almost a quarter of the votes in the South. This constituted a historic result for an organization that for years had not spared criticism (or even insults) towards southern Italians. Italy had thus become (once again) a political laboratory in Europe. For the first time, a regionalist movement had asserted itself on a national scale. The populist chameleon Salvini seemed able to transpose the old struggle of the North against Rome to a new European level. Now, the whole of Italy had become a political entity seeking emancipation from Brussels.

BUST

Three years later, Salvini is picking up the rubble of a political project that crashed from the dizzy heights of sudden success. The League has now returned to being a marginal player in the South, surpassed even by Berlusconi's Forza Italia. But it has also collapsed in the North. In 2018 the Lega was the largest party in 28 Northern provinces[1]. Now even in its traditional strongholds like Lombardy and Veneto, the party is not only far behind its

1 https://lapolis.org/pubblicazioni/mapping2022_risultati_provincia/

2018 results, but also below those of 2008. In 2022, it is perilously close to the disastrous performance of 2013, when it was on the brink of extinction.

From North to South, the League has been overtaken by its right-wing ally/competitor, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI). This indicates a clear transfer of support between radical-right populists. However, unlike the League, Giorgia Meloni's FdI has never strayed far from its core principles.

THE PRICE OF SELLING ONE'S SOUL

Salvini's "nationalist turn" was meant to lay solid foundations for a new sovereigntist party. Instead, it ended up compromising the credibility of the Lega, because Salvini failed to capitalize on the 2018–2019 success.

After trying to force an early election, Salvini was ousted from the government with the Five Star Movement (Jones and Ognibene, 2019). During the pandemic, he was relegated to opposition, and he returned to power only to join a grand-coalition government led by Mario Draghi. In another twist, the chameleon Salvini, who had even organized a "Dump the Euro" tour around Italy in 2014, became one of the main supporters of the European Central Bank's former president.

But while Salvini focused on building a nationalist-sovereigntist movement, in the northern regions the League remained under the control of more pragmatic leaders. These are actors close to the business sector, who never fully forgot the regional(ist) roots of the party. Thus, they care more about territorial autonomy than Eurosceptic nationalist campaigns. Eventually, Salvini ended up caught between the attempts of the party's old guard to reassert itself and the contradictions of his approach in and out of government. This tarnished the League's image, opening a political vacuum that FdI quickly filled. Ideological coherence, an unwavering opposition to Draghi's government, and Meloni's leadership and communication skills helped FdI attract support from many right-wing voters who had turned to the League in previous elections (Giuffrida, 2022).

WHERE NEXT FOR SALVINI'S LEAGUE?

Salvini is clinging to the helm. But the League's internal cohesion, and its role in the new government, will likely be tested over the coming months. Some are now calling for a Congress to redefine the party line and recalibrate the weight of its different currents (Tondo, 2022). Meanwhile, longstanding activists in the North want a proper "reckoning." They claim that Salvini's nationalist turn has abjured the League's core values, and should be reversed.

League founder Umberto Bossi has even called for the creation of a "regionalist faction" within the party, to bring it back to its roots and regain support in the North.

Short of electoral success, Salvini's biggest challenge could now come from core regions like Veneto where, after a successful regional referendum in 2017, local leaders are still pushing for greater decision-making powers, and for fiscal autonomy (Giovannini and Vampa, 2020). This leaves Salvini between a rock and a hard place. Regional autonomy seems key to avoid revolts within the party ranks but is also fundamentally irreconcilable with the national(ist) agenda of the new right-wing government led by FdI.

A NEW IDENTITY

To ride out the storm and survive, the League urgently needs to find a new identity for itself in a political space dominated by Meloni (Capoccia, 2022). What remains unclear is whether and how it will achieve this. Should the League challenge FdI on its own ground? Or should it diversify its political offer and return to regionalism?

This is not the first time the League has had to redefine its strategy after election defeat. But with the failure of Salvini's radical experiment, the soul of an entire political community is now at stake. Years of twists and turns have strained the ideological-programmatic core of the party. To restore trust among disoriented (and disappointed) voters and activists, the League might now need a new leader—as well as a more coherent identity.

3. ARE "COMMON SENSE" AND "GOOD PRACTICES" RIGHT-WING OR LEFT-WING? THE IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF TECHNO-POPULIST RHETORIC

ENRICO PADOAN

Political scientists Chris Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi created the terms "techno-populism" and "techno-populist parties" (Bickerton, Invernizzi Accetti, 2021). Techno-populism is known as the "new [and main] logic of democratic politics [...]" that has arisen after the demise of ideological politics predicated on the conflict between organized interests. This new logic results from the need to close the gap between politics and society (between voters and parties) by opposing certain "good public policies" to "particular interests" (the technocratic component) and creating new, unmediated relationships (the "populist" component) (Weyland, 2001).

Conversely, techno-populist parties are fully integrated into the techno-populist logic and are thought of as a new political family (Bickerton, Invernizzi Accetti, 2017). Techno-populist parties have five characteristics, according to Bickerton and Invernizzi: a) low coalition potential—therefore "anti-system" parties (Zulianello, 2019a), though not necessarily "anti-democratic" (Zulianello, 2019b); b) the dichotomy between the corrupt political class and the good people (Barr, 2009); c) anti-pluralist ideology (Mudde, 2004) and anti-elite discourse; d) a technocratic view of politics as a problem-solving activity; e) the identification of an ill-defined "collective intelligence," or "common sense," as a basis for claiming superior political competence.

THE M5S AND THE PARTIDO DE LA GENTE (PDG) AS TECHNO-POPULIST PARTIES

In my paper (Padoan, 2023), I analyzed two unquestionably techno-populist parties in order to draw attention to the profound ideological division that would otherwise be hidden by a study that only examined the idea of techno-populism. According to Bickerton and Invernizzi themselves, the M5S is a prime example of a techno-populist party. The M5S declined to form any parliamentary or electoral alliance for almost a decade following its founding in 2009 (low coalition potential). At the heart of the M5S's initial political discourse was the dichotomy between a moral populace and a corrupt political

class, or "casta." Finally, as a corollary to a technocratic conception of politics comprehended as problem-solving through a form of collective intelligence ("la Rete"), the M5S's rhetoric included a strong anti-pluralist element.

The Chilean Partido de la Gente (PdG) is a more recent and less well-known example of a party that can legitimately be categorized as techno-populist. The PdG was established in December 2019 by an economist and former independent presidential candidate (Franco Parisi), known for his educational videos in colloquial language, and the head of a financial consulting firm (Gino Lorenzini). The PdG achieved relevant results in its first elections in 2021, when Parisi placed third with 13% of the vote.

The PdG also demonstrates that it has every feature that distinguishes a techno-populist party. It has not yet chosen a side in the presidential runoff or joined any electoral coalition. Its frequent charges against political parties and political ideologies for "distorting representation" make the division between the general public and the elites abundantly evident. The PdG targets political elites rather than populists; in contrast to the M5S, its programs do not criticize financial and economic "strong powers." Although they are undoubtedly present, technological utopian elements are less prevalent in PdG rhetoric than they were in early M5S discourse. The PdG aspires to forms of "digital democracy" even though it only occasionally engages in online consultations with members on issues. Moreover, particularly in its online communication, the PdG widely appeals to "common sense" and "ordinary people."

BEYOND THE COMMON LABEL: THE IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN M5S AND PDG

The PdG positions itself as "at the center" of the Chilean party system, in contrast to the M5S's long-standing assertion that it is "beyond left and right." During the Great Recession and the austerity period, the M5S gained popularity and strengthened its support base while criticizing a form of "fake competition" among mainstream parties. Since the M5S mainly concentrated on non-positional issues like the fight against corruption (see the concept of "valence populism," Zulianello, 2020), it has long been characterized as ideologically "syncretic" (Vittori, 2020). However, the M5S has consistently shown a number of left-leaning programmatic components (such as environmental, social, and economic policies) (Padoan, 2020), support for a multipolar international order, and left-leaning identity markers (anti-Berlusconism). Its recent alignment with the progressive field therefore also presents several elements of continuity (Padoan, 2022).

The PdG's ascent and consolidation occurred in an environment of protests (De La Fuente, 2023), against the Chilean neoliberal system (Padoan,

2020). The PdG, however, condemns the "extremism" of the Chilean left and right-wings rather than asserting that they are interchangeable. As a result, the PdG aims to win over voters who want more efficiency but are leery of drastic changes. The PdG incorporates aspects of the neoliberal populism that was popular in South America in the 1990s (Weyland, 1999) and what has been called "technocratic populism" (Tudzarovska, 2023), which is focused on the idea of a state that, as the saying goes, should operate like a business (Buštíková, Guasti, 2019).

IN CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF SCRATCHING BENEATH THE TECHNO-POPULIST LABEL

To sum up, simply labelling the M5S and the PdG as techno-populist parties risks hiding their differences in terms of where they stand within their respective party systems and where their ideologies come from. With its appeals to pragmatism, common sense, and/or scientific evidence to resolve and contain social conflict, techno-populism is essentially a rhetorical tool, (sometimes a successful one), that was largely inherited from the neoliberal hegemony. It may even be more than a political logic, and even more than a party family (Tan, 2012). Although ideological orientations that are not always completely reducible to the left-right axis can be concealed by techno-populist rhetoric, these orientations frequently surface and have an impact on these parties' short- to medium-term strategic developments (see Introduction). If populism is, as commonly asserted, a thin ideology (Mudde, 2004), it is important to know how "thick" the host ideology alongside it is. In most situations, the answer is "very much so" (Castanho Silva, Neuner, Wratil, 2023).

4. THE EMOTIONAL CORE OF LEFT- AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

DONATELLA BONANSINGA

Conventional wisdom often equates populism with an "irrational" or "emotional" way of doing politics. Supporters of populist parties are accused of voting out of rage, anger, fear and "gut feelings" rather than "rational" decision-making. This is, however, a myth about populism, and emotions more broadly, that advances in scientific research have dispelled.

EMOTIONS AND REASON: ALLIES, NOT FOES

The Enlightenment era and its glorification of "reason" fostered an understanding of emotions as a lower grade, unreliable and undesirable source of decision-making. Yet psychological research has shown emotions' pivotal contribution to the way individuals process information and make decisions (Brader and Marcus, 2013). Indeed, emotions work hand in hand with cognition, and have clear "diagnostic" powers, passing on valuable intel on the surrounding environment to the brain (Donatella Bonansinga, 2020). For example, the emotion of fear communicates to the brain the presence of a potential threat. Anger signals to the brain that something stands in the way of a previously set goal.

Moreover, emotions interact with cognition because they affect attention levels. For example, fear and anxiety generate more attention as, following a fear or anxiety signal, the brain needs to be on the lookout for more information to understand and assess the danger. Finally, the emotions-cognition nexus is responsible for the motivation to act. Anger fosters risk-taking and confrontational behavior; fear produces risk-averse, more defensive responses. As emotions and cognition work physiologically together, all interactions with the social world, including politics, will be somewhat "emotional" Focusing on what may be peculiar about the relationship between emotions and populism (rather than asking whether populism is an emotional phenomenon), is therefore a more useful research endeavor.

STATES OF INSECURITY

Research on populism and emotions is still an emerging field. Studies show, however, that this relationship starts at the structural level (Donatella Bonansinga, 2020). Populism finds fertile ground in specific affective states of insecurity that characterize advanced post-industrial societies, where some feel "left behind" in a world dominated by globalization, individualism and capitalism. These structurally-produced insecurities can generate individual experiences of shame in those who feel they are "incapable" of succeeding in the globalized world (Salmela and von Scheve,2017). Shame is a painful emotional experience directed at oneself. Indeed, most people tend to externalize it as anger towards those they feel are responsible for the precarious present, such as "the government," "elites" or "foreigners" (Salmela and von Scheve, 2018). Populist rhetoric pinpointing these actors as the source of citizens' current insecurities guides these processes of blame attribution. Populist communication can also foster nostalgic longing (Kenny, 2017). It encourages supporters to view the past and the world "as it used to be" as preferable to the unrecognizable present.

More generally, populist actors respond to this wide range of affective requests channeling negative emotions towards elites and outgroups. It's a phenomenon scholars have labelled the politics of fear (Wodak, 2021) or angry populism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Populist communication, however, is very complex and we cannot narrow it down to a monolithic emotional experience. Indeed, populist narratives have important positive characteristics such as the celebration of the value and virtues of "ordinary people." Such values glue together the in-group, generating a prideful sense of belonging (Bonansinga, 2019). Populists also offer heroic narratives that present the populist leader as the only person capable of seizing the unfortunate present and offering hope for a better future. All these are key determinants for the arousal of hope in receiving audiences (Bonansinga, 2022).

LEFT AND RIGHT POPULISM

Left- and right-wing populists share the appeal to both negative and positive emotions. The content of their affective messages, however, can vary. My recent study (Bonansinga, 2022) compares the narratives of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen, representing, respectively, the populist left and right in France. The results revealed three key points of divergence. First, while both politicians appeal to fear, the threats each leader pinpoints are different. Cultural threats such as immigration are more salient for Le Pen, whereas Mélenchon emphasizes wider societal insecurity that concerns

climate change, democratic backsliding and international conflict. Second, while both communicate pride with narratives that exalt the virtues and qualities of the "good people," in right-wing populism the content of these appeals assumes a more hostile nationalistic tone. Unlike Mélenchon, Le Pen tends to emphasize positive characteristics of "the French" in direct contrast with the enemies of right-wing populism, most notably foreigners and Muslims. Finally, while both Mélenchon and Le Pen foster hope, the directionality of their appeals is sharply different. Right-wing populists propose actions that go backwards, suggesting the source of hope is the restoration of security. For left-wing populists, on the other hand, security is something they aim to achieve, rather than to restore. Mélenchon links hope to the symbolism of renewal and political change, and actions that move forward.

OUTDATED IDEA

Thinking about populism as an "emotional" phenomenon in a "rational" world is an outdated idea. All politics can be emotional. But it is important to recognize that populism is linked to specific affective dynamics that contribute to its rise, development and success. Structural processes have created a fertile affective ground that individuals process differently. Populists have politicized these salient insecurities with narratives that pinpoint who is "the danger," who is "in danger" and who is "to blame."

5. WHY ITALIAN POLITICAL PARTIES USE POPULIST RHETORIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA

ANDREA CERON, SILVIA DECADRI AND FEDRA NEGRI

There is strong compatibility between populist messaging and the modes of communication that social media platforms demand. This makes it a hugely promising environment for studying populist rhetoric (Ceron, Gandini, and Lodetti, 2021). The opposition between corrupt elites and virtuous people—the core of the populist message—aligns well with the simplification, speed of expression, and polarization that guide social media storytelling (Jacobs, 2023).

Social media platforms allow politicians to address sympathizers, voters, and journalists directly. They bypass, on the one hand, the institutional gatekeepers of their party affiliations and, on the other, traditional media. By removing intermediaries, social media enables politicians to convey a less formal image of themselves, closer to the needs and concerns of the "common people." Social media also allows for analysis without direct interaction between researchers and the actors under investigation. This reduces the likelihood of people altering their behavior in response to the awareness of being observed. Compared with other widely used data collection methods, such as surveys, social media analysis maximizes the likelihood of observing genuine behaviors and interactions (de Vreese, Esser, Stanyer, 2018).

POPULIST RHETORIC AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS IN ITALIAN POLITICIANS' COMMUNICATION

Using sentiment and dictionary analysis techniques, we analyzed more than 390,000 posts published by over 700 Italian politicians on Twitter-X, from 1 January 2020 to 18 April 2022. Our analysis shows how politicians tend to adjust their communication style in response to contingent events. In particular, during moments of strong uncertainty and instability for the country, politicians increase their use of populist rhetoric and references to negative emotions (Bellandi et al., 2022). These two linguistic registers—populism and negative emotions—tend to be associated with each other. In times of crisis, politicians exploit the fears and frustrations of the electorate. They present a simplified view of the political landscape consisting of inadequate elites deserving of blame, and politicians "of the people" on whom to rely. Although

all Italian politicians use these linguistic registers, Lega, Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) stood out during our period of analysis.

VALENCE, "HOT" TOPICS, AND EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Topic modelling allows us to understand which particular issues Italian politicians care most about when they engage on Twitter-X. We observed a widespread tendency to prioritize catch-all topics, which are most likely to meet their followers' consensus. Among these are the valence themes and characteristics that all voters appreciate or dislike to the same extent, such as honesty versus corruption, and competence versus incompetence. Politicians discuss far less those policy issues which are more complex and potentially divisive, such as public education and energy transition. These issues find space on their social media agenda only if they are "hot"—if they have strong salience in public discourse. Finally, politicians who use populist rhetoric most often are also more inclined to engage in discussions about topics with a strong emotional and value connotation. Such topics include supporting victims of violence and anti-elitism, or comments on popular culture such as sporting events and celebrity news.

POPULIST RHETORIC GENERATES MORE ENGAGEMENT

Politicians' use of populist rhetoric on social media is widespread (Ceron, Pagano, and Bordignon, 2023). But does this rhetoric capture users' attention and influence their voting intentions? To find out, we analyzed Italian parties' electoral campaigns on Facebook during the 2019 European elections and the 2022 national elections. We discovered that posts "written in a populist manner"—that is, containing one or more of the elements of populist rhetoric listed on the vertical axis—generate more positive reactions (black triangle)—such as "like," "love," "wow"—shares (black circle) and comments (grey square) than other posts. We see this positive effect of populist rhetoric on engagement, to varying degrees, for all parties. Followers of more populist parties like Lega, M5S, and FdI prove more receptive, yet followers of more conventional parties like the Partito Democratico are not immune to the charms of populist rhetoric. Our results indicate that even followers of non-populist parties are more likely to like, comment and share posts that present at least one populist rhetoric element. This, of course, makes such posts more likely to go viral. Could supporters and voters of mainstream parties—even those who define themselves as "anti-populist"—secretly harbor populist sentiment? Our research indicates that this may well be the case.

6. FEMONATIONALISM

FRANCESCA FEO

In recent years, partly due to the renewed mobilization of feminist movements in Italy and across Europe, issues related to LGBTIQ+ rights and gender equality have gained unprecedented prominence in political and public discourse. Today, there is broad consensus that women have the right to self-determination and freedom from discrimination in both public and private spheres. Unlike in past decades—when only progressive parties rooted in social-democratic, green, or libertarian traditions championed causes such as women's emancipation and gender equality—populist radical right parties now also adopt rhetoric supporting these issues. Some parties which characterize themselves as left-wing populist, such as Spain's *Podemos* and Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S), incorporate both populist and feminist ideologies showing that populism and feminism are not inherently incompatible (Feo & Caravantes, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, skepticism arises when right-wing populist parties—driven by nationalist and conservative values—show discursive support for gender equality, while they often reduce women to their role of mothers, charged with upholding family and national values.

This contradiction, very present in the communication of many populist radical right parties (De Giorgi, Cavalieri & Feo, 2023) is captured by the term *femonationalism* (Farris, 2019), which refers to the strategic use of feminist discourse by populist radical right parties to advance racist and nationalist agendas—particularly against (male) migrants, and especially Muslims.

WHAT IS FEMONATIONALISM?

Femonationalism describes the instrumental use of women's rights rhetoric to promote anti-immigration and nationalist policies (Farris, 2019). This discourse rests on several key components. First, it constructs a threatening "Other"—typically non-Western men and migrants, especially Muslims—depicted as inherently misogynistic and culturally backward (Farris, 2019; Puar, 2007). Second, it casts both native and migrant women as passive victims needing rescue from these men's patriarchal violence.

What makes femonationalism particularly noteworthy is its selective inclusion of migrant women within the national community—what Farris (2019, p. 110) calls their "reserved inclusion"—even as it excludes migrant men based on ethnonationalist criteria.

CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC ROOTS OF FEMONATIONALISM

To understand the differing treatment of migrant men and women, one must examine both the cultural foundation of femonationalism and its political economy (Farris, 2019; Farris & Scrinzi, 2018).

Sara Farris underscores the role of racism in this framework, highlighting two intersecting processes. According to the author, the *sexualization of racism* constructs gendered stereotypes: migrant men are seen as sexual predators or oppressors, while migrant women are viewed as either helpless victims or exoticized objects of desire. Second, the *racialization of sexism* positions patriarchy as a problem unique to non-Western, especially Muslim, cultures—depicting them as "sexist hells for women" (Farris, 2019, p. 111), and thus justifying their stigmatization. These narratives are not limited to far-right circles; discourses emerging from radical feminist circles have, to some extent, reinforced them, driven by the belief that Western values—such as secularism, emancipation, and individual rights—are better equipped to ensure gender equality (Farris, 2019, p. 79).

However, both processes distort reality. For instance, femicide statistics in Italy show that most gender-based killings occur within intimate or domestic settings (94 out of 115 cases in 2023; Ministry of the Interior, 2023), clearly debunking the far-right framing of femicide as a result of migration flows in Western countries. Clearly, men from the national in-group in Western societies are not exerting patriarchal violence. Furthermore, women—whether migrant or not—are not merely passive victims; they actively navigate and negotiate their relationships with their own cultural and religious frameworks, which they may not experience as oppressive.

On the economic front, the apparent inclusion within the national in-group of migrant women by femonationalist logic stems from broader transformations in Western societies—particularly the crisis in social reproduction under neoliberal capitalism. As aging populations increase the demand for care work and welfare systems fail to meet this growing need, migrant women have become indispensable in filling care roles (Farris, 2012). This has led to a global trend of female migration, driven by the growing care gap in the Global North (Scrinzi, 2017). Femonationalist discourse, then, serves both *economic imperatives* and *political expediency.*

FEMONATIONALISM IN ITALY

Femonationalism is not foreign to the Italian political landscape. An analysis of the social media strategies of two populist radical right parties—the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia—shows that both have embraced femonationalist narratives. Their leaders, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, frequently condemn violence against women, particularly when committed by non-Italians (De Giorgi, Cavalieri & Feo, 2023; Feo & Lavizzari, 2021).

7. POPULISM AND GENDER ISSUES IN LE PEN AND MELONI

MARIANNA GRIFFINI AND LAURA MONTECCHIO

In 2022 populist radical right parties enjoyed notable electoral victories. In the French presidential election, Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National, RN) received more than 40% of the vote. With a startling 26% of the vote in the general elections, Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI) became the first female prime minister of Italy and the head of the first populist radical right-led government in Western Europe (Zulianello, 2022).

GENDER IN THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

Populist radical right parties have engaged in heated debates concerning gender-related issues, including abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the *hijab* (see, for instance, Snipes, Mudde, 2020). The populist radical right's stances on these issues reflect its conservative ideology, which supports a reversal of so-called "postmodern values" (Norris, Inglehart, 2019), including feminism, multiculturalism, and pro-abortion and pro-LGBTQ+ movements. It is in this context that Le Pen and Meloni operate.

MARINE LE PEN: GENDER AND NATIVISM

Marine Le Pen inherited from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen the most significant populist radical right party in France, the Front National (FN), founded in 1972, and later renamed Rassemblement National (RN) in 2018. With its conservative values, the FN positioned itself as a defender of the so-called "traditional" family, based on the distinct figures of a mother and a father. Additionally, the FN opposed divorce and abortion (e.g., the FN's electoral posters in 2002 and 2007) and pioneered Islamophobia in France, well before it became fueled by the 9/11 terror attack.

When Marine Le Pen assumed the leadership of the FN in 2012, she significantly altered her father's radically conservative ideology, beginning with promoting women's self-determination. Le Pen presents herself as an entirely independent woman who is not reliant on anyone in either the political or the economic sphere. Notably, Le Pen is in favor of divorce (also given

her personal history) and of LGBTQ+ rights, as well as a champion of women's rights. In this regard, she painstakingly stressed the importance of defending women's rights and dignity in a post on Twitter (now X) on International Women's Day in 2023. Along similar lines, on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2025, Le Pen wrote: "My thoughts are with all women who are victims of physical or sexual violence. To act to eradicate this plague requires efforts at all levels of the state" (Le Pen, Twitter, 25 November 2022).

However, Le Pen does not hold an inclusive vision of woman open to all ethnicities and religions. On the contrary, Muslim women who wear the *hijab* are the target of a combination of conservative and nativist ideology typical of the RN and inherited from the former FN (see Mudde, 2019). On this specific point, Le Pen positions herself as a champion of Muslim women's freedom, condemning the hijab as "an act of women's submission" and Islam as "an ideology that must be fought" (Le Pen, Twitter 11 March 2022). This phenomenon that frequently emerges from Le Pen's discourse is known in the literature as *femonationalism*, namely the radical populist right's self-presentation as defender of women's rights with the purpose of portraying Islam and Muslim people as enemies of Western values (Farris, 2012).

GIORGIA MELONI: AMBIVALENCE ON GENDER ISSUES

Like Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni has made her status as a woman one of her trademark features, but she has proven more moderate than Le Pen when it comes to femonationalism. Over approximately ten years, Meloni oversaw the transformation of FdI, which was established in 2012, from a minor opposition party to one of the most significant political parties in Italy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic years. This transformation culminated in the party's victory in the general elections of 2022.

As soon as she was elected, Meloni emphasized the uniqueness of her role as the first female prime minister. Her maiden speech in Parliament made this point very clear, as she thanked all the women who had previously stood up for their rights and, thus, helped her overcome the so-called "glass ceiling" to become prime minister. On International Women's Day in 2023, Meloni gave a similar speech in support of women and their rights in an interview with the magazine *Grazia*.

However, Meloni's pro-women's rights speeches are at odds with her hostile views on abortion and same-sex parent rights, as well as her stubborn championing of motherhood as essential to being a woman. Although during the election campaign Meloni promised that Law No. 194 (that lays out the requirements for obtaining a termination of pregnancy within the first

ninety days) would not have been modified, the FdI's 2022 electoral manifesto explicitly features the willingness to safeguard all life from the moment of conception and to, elusively, "prevent abortion."

This viewpoint is shared by Eugenia Roccella, the Minister for Family, Birth Rate, and Equal Opportunities, a staunch advocate of the so-called "traditional family" and strong opponent of same-sex parenting. Therefore, it is not surprising that FdI along with the Lega, in 2021 voted against the Zan bill, which sought to amend the Mancino Law, in order to criminalize discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, individuals with disabilities, and victims of misogyny.

CONCLUSION

Meloni and Le Pen portray themselves as defenders of women's rights. Notwithstanding the distinctions between the two leaders mentioned above, populist radical right parties' conservative and nativist ideologies have a significant overall impact on how they view women's rights. Indeed, Le Pen's rhetoric supporting women's rights mirrors the femonationalist ideology inherited from FN. In contrast, Meloni portrays herself as a matriarch who supports the "traditional family," strictly crystallized in the figures of a mother and a father, natality, and "prevention of abortion" (as stated in the 2022 FdI manifesto). This highlights Meloni's peculiar anti-abortion and same-sex parents' rights stance.

8. EUROPE, AN IDEOLOGICAL RESOURCE FOR THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

MARTA LORIMER

Populist radical right parties are known for their anti-EU views, even though they have been net beneficiaries from the European integration project. Their entry into the European Parliament has been made easier by the proportional electoral system and the low salience of European elections. As members of the European Parliament, they had access to substantial financial resources (Reungoat, 2014) and the chance to collaborate internationally with like-minded parties (McDonnell, Werner, 2019). Ironically, the EU has made material and symbolic resources available to parties that are deeply Eurosceptic (Fieschi, 2000).

Additionally, the radical right has used Europe as an "ideological resource" (Lorimer, 2021, 2024). Incorporating European issues in their platforms enabled them to *refashion their political message in a way that could attract new voters without losing existing ones* (Ibidem). This process was made easier by two features of European integration. First, the relative newness of EU integration meant there was no established party line on it. This increased the flexibility of radical right parties and enabled them to take stances that broadened their support base. Second, radical right parties were able to exploit the divisions generated by European issues. As evidenced by the numerous EU referendums (including Brexit), European integration causes division among parties and voters, and when there is no consensus, disagreement is less stigmatized. This gave radical right parties even more space to craft a more appealing message. Additionally, they could portray themselves as more unified by taking advantage of the rifts created by European themes within conventional parties.

EUROPE AS AN IDEOLOGICAL RESOURCE: THE CASE OF THE RASSEMBLEMENT NATIONAL

A great illustration of these dynamics is the Rassemblement National, (RN, until 2018 known as the Front National, FN), one of Europe's oldest radical right parties. Since its founding in France in 1972 and its initial electoral victories in the 1980s, the RN has progressively strengthened and today it is France's leading radical right party.

PRO-EUROPEAN, ANTI-EU

The RN/FN has frequently asserted that it is "pro-European but anti-EU." Since the 1980s, it has portrayed itself as a guardian of European civilization against the political project of the EU. For instance, Marine Le Pen, the party's leader, stated in a 2017 speech that "even though we are resolutely anti-EU, we are resolutely European; I would even say that it is precisely because we are European that we oppose the European Union" (Le Pen, 2017).

Pro-Europe but anti-EU statements help the party appear less nationalistic and draw in new supporters. Expressing concern for European peoples softens the RN/FN's French nationalist image. At the same time, asserting a European identity relies on a strong idea of identity, particularly one that is closed to the outside world. This reintroduces the stark dichotomy of "us versus them" that defines radical right nationalism on a European scale.

FREE NATIONS IN A FREE EUROPE

In order to criticize the EU, the RN/FN also invokes ideas of sovereignty, independence, and autonomy. The 2004 European elections program is a clear illustration of this strategy, when the party claimed that "a nation's sovereignty is its ability to make decisions freely and for itself. And it alludes to a government's exercise of political power and the idea of independence. The history of the European construction consists in depriving states of their sovereignty" (Front National, 2004).

The use of the concepts of sovereignty, freedom, and independence is perfectly compatible with the party's nationalism because it emphasizes the need for nations to govern themselves independently. It also enables the party to show that they are committed to the core values of the nation-state. This makes it possible for the RN to reach new voter segments that share these ideals but are less drawn to the party's identitarian rhetoric. Another benefit of questioning the EU's influence on national sovereignty is that it echoes criticisms of the "democratic deficit" of European institutions, which are frequently voiced even by non-radical right actors. This lends credibility to the criticism.

BEYOND EUROSCEPTICISM

In conclusion, Euroscepticism can be an ideological resource for the populist radical right and help it appeal to both new and existing voters. In other words, the EU might have unintentionally contributed to the success of its most ardent detractors.

9. THE POSITION OF ITALIAN PARTIES ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

MARA MORINI

Since World War II, in Italian historiographical and media debates, Italy's relationship with Russia has been characterized as a "privileged relationship" in comparison to other European nations. Despite the fact that different Italian governments have consistently shown a strong and consistent Atlanticist spirit, this belief has spread due to the cultural and commercial ties between Rome and Moscow, as well as the personal friendship between Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin (Natalizia, Morini, 2020).

Italian-Russian relations have been *de facto* weakened by Russia's revisionist turn after President Putin was re-elected in 2012, which has affected the instability of the global environment. The *From Russia with Love* operation during the COVID-19 emergency, the arrest of an Italian soldier who was suspected of giving Russian officers classified documents, multiple cyberattacks against Italian institutional websites, and foreign policy decisions that frequently deviate from the Russian government's interests are all examples of *data mining* suspicions.

However, the controversy surrounding political pacts between some Italian parties and United Russia (Yedinaya Rossiya, ER), the ruling party of the Kremlin, has rekindled the discussion about the nature of the two nations' relationship. Examples of these include Matteo Salvini's Lega (at the time known as Lega Nord, LN), which signed a political agreement with United Russia in 2017; the political recognition given to the M5S, which was backed by Giuseppe Conte's governments; and explicit appreciation towards the Putin regime from members of FdI.

As a matter of fact, pro-Russian parties in Italy act as a platform for Russian propaganda and *fake news* in the Italian political information, with the goal of destabilizing the Western world (see Wondreys, 2023 for a comparative analysis).

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON THE CENTER-RIGHT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine immediately immediately affected certain Italian parties and leaders' stances on two issues: military support for Ukraine *versus* pacifism.

The leaders of the parties frequently labelled as pro-Russian—M5S, Salvini's Lega, FdI, and Forza Italia (FI) (primarily because of Berlusconi and Putin's friendship) —redefined their communication and political approach toward Russia. Salvini, who was once Putin's greatest *supporter*, tweeted back in 2015. "I'll trade two Mattarella for half a Putin!" and in February 2022 said, "My opinion of Putin has really changed during the war, because when someone starts invading, bombing, sending tanks into another country, well, everything changes." Berlusconi, who in 2010 asserted that "Vladimir Putin is a gift from the Lord," waited 38 days before showing disappointment towards the Kremlin, although he did not conceal his ties to Putin, and criticized Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (Morini, 2023). Between 2014 and January 2022, FdI leader Giorgia Meloni advocated for the use of the Sputnik vaccine and denounced European sanctions against Russia (Bruno, 2022). Meloni only took a position in line with the departing Draghi administration at the beginning of the 2022 political election campaign.

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON THE CENTER-LEFT

On the center-left, through a divisive discussion between proponents and opponents of military assistance to Ukraine, the war has reignited long-standing themes of pacifism and anti-Americanism. As an example, consider the M5S split, in which Luigi Di Maio, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, created his own party after clashing with Conte, who advocated for peace and opposed the deployment of weapons. During the Conte II administration, the M5S's foreign policy was also characterized by a strong pro-Chinese and pro-Russian stance (Coticchia, Vignoli, 2020). Following the Russian intervention in Ukraine, Di Maio stopped supporting this position. Additionally, the Italian Left and Greens demanded that "the supply of military equipment be halted," while Potere al Popolo (PaP) adopted a stance that was equally ambivalent— "neither with Putin nor with NATO"—and supported a diplomatic solution.

In contrast, the PD upholds a strong Atlanticist stance, despite occasional skepticism regarding arms shipments and the party's secretary Elly Schlein's initial ambivalence, stating: "It is a real ethical dilemma for those like me who come from a culture of disarmament. Weapons, in my opinion, never bring about peace. However, I also don't want to disparage people who complied with a straightforward request from the Ukrainian resistance" (Canepa, 2023). Lastly, Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva (IV) and Carlo Calenda's Azione, both centrist parties, are decisively in favor of military assistance for Ukraine.

FROM A MARRIAGE TO A DIVORCE OF CONVENIENCE

Based on ideological and programmatic similarities, pro-Russian Italian parties and the Kremlin had a "marriage of convenience" prior to the conflict in Ukraine (Makarychev, Terry, 2020). However, no political force has defended the Russian invasion since February 2022, and the pro-Putin rhetoric of Italian pro-Russian parties has disappeared. After Berlusconi's death, FI and FdI stated their steadfast support for government action for Ukraine in line with other Western governments, while the leader of the Lega changed his vision, avoiding any reference to President Putin and limiting himself to wishing for an end to the conflict.

The M5S has echoed Russian propaganda by giving voice to the demands of the pacifist movement, while center-right parties have opportunistically chosen a "divorce of convenience" (Carlotti, 2023) from Putin's Russia.

Nevertheless, we are unable to completely rule out the possibility of a future rapprochement with Putin's Russia because of several political factors, (including the outcome of the war, the elections for the European Parliament, and the U.S. presidential election).

10. THE SAME THING? THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE EXTREME RIGHT AND THE RADICAL RIGHT

JAKUB WONDREYS

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the West swiftly adopted a number of policies to support the Ukrainian people and punish Russia. However, European extreme and radical-right parties found themselves in a potentially difficult situation. Supporting Ukraine may entail aligning with the West and opposing a regime that might serve as an alternative model to the liberal-democratic order in the West, which these parties tend to oppose (Van Herpen, 2013). Supporting the invasion of a sovereign European state, at the same time, could be counterintuitive for parties whose primary ideological feature is nativism, especially considering that the alleged Ukrainian nativism was used as a pretext to justify the attack by Russian propaganda, as well as historically negative experiences with Russia in some European countries (Wondreys, 2023).

The Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas launched an attack on Israel in October 2023. Similar to the situation in Ukraine, following this first invasion of the Jewish state since 1948, the majority of the Western world supported the attacked nation. However, many extreme and radical-right parties found it challenging to adopt a stance. Given that both kinds of parties are overtly anti-Islamic, it would seem reasonable to back Israel in its conflict with Muslim Palestinians (Schori Liang, 2007). However, the West also remains Israel's most important ally, and not all of these parties have completely renounced the antisemitic stances of their forebears (Camus, 2013). Furthermore, (semi)authoritarian anti-Western regimes, which are frequently admired by the extreme right but also by some radical-right parties, support the Palestinian struggle for independence, which can also be seen through a nativist lens.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTINCTION

In a recent paper (Wondreys and Zulianello, 2024), we explicitly compared the stances on the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts taken by 26 radical-right and 16 extreme-right parties in 21 EU countries. Given the increasing emphasis on similarities, rather than differences, between

the extreme right and the (populist) radical right, especially through the use of the label "far right" (Pirro, 2023), the exercise was even more important.

We know that the extreme right and the radical right share two fundamental ideological characteristics: authoritarianism and nativism. We also know that they have different views on democracy: the radical right opposes a specific kind of democracy, liberal democracy, whereas the extreme right rejects democracy as an ideal (Mudde, 2007). Our article's main argument is that this significant distinction contributes to the explanation of the extreme and radical-right parties' differing stances on the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts. In short, the ideological differences between the two party types and, consequently, the different competitive incentives they face, are what largely explain the different responses adopted by political actors.

THE EXTREME RIGHT: ANTISEMITISM AND RUSSOPHILIA

Because of its fundamentally anti-democratic and revolutionary stance, the extreme right frequently occupies the periphery of politics. As a result of this isolation, ideological purity and commitment are prioritized over the pragmatism required to win over more moderate voters and/or to facilitate collaboration with other parties. Therefore, even though many people find it unacceptable, the extreme right does not find it particularly problematic to be antisemitic and sympathetic towards Russia.

According to Jean-Yves Camus (2013), it is because of its antisemitism that the extreme right frequently supports militant Islam and opposes Israel. The fact that Ukrainian President Zelensky is Jewish should therefore be also important to antisemitic parties when it comes to Russia-Ukraine conflict. In addition, Putin's regime is often depicted as the opposite of the despised Western democratic order (Van Herpen, 2013) and Ukraine as a victim of Western imperialism that can only be rescued by Russia. Indeed, according to the findings of our research (see also Wondreys, 2023), the majority of extreme-right parties combine anti-Israel with pro-Russian foreign policy positions (Fig. 1).

THE RADICAL RIGHT: ISLAMOPHOBIA AND PRAGMATISM

Conversely, the radical right, which is not (at least nominally) anti-democratic and is becoming increasingly incorporated into national political systems (see Zulianello, 2020), needs to balance its ideological commitment with pragmatism in order to cater to a broader group of voters and establish

a trustworthy reputation as a potential governing force. Overt Russophilia and antisemitism may stand in the way of achieving these goals.

In addition to potentially boosting support from domestic Jewish communities, or at the very least avoiding their opposition, support for Israel can, in this sense, serve to further solidify the perception that these radical-right parties have nothing to do with antisemitism. Furthermore, Israel can be viewed as a useful ally in the fight against Islam (see also Schori Liang, 2007, p. 26). Potential sympathy towards Israel is further reinforced given the ideological alignment between the parties in the current Israeli government and the European radical right (Zur, Bakker, 2023).

On the other hand, support for Russia, despite the frequent opposition to the liberal Western model, a position the radical right shares with the extreme right, has become problematic in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, given that in most European countries public opinion has sided with the victim. The results of our research indeed show that the majority of the radical-right parties combine pro-Israel positions with stances hostile to Russia, although there is more variation regarding the latter (Fig. 1).

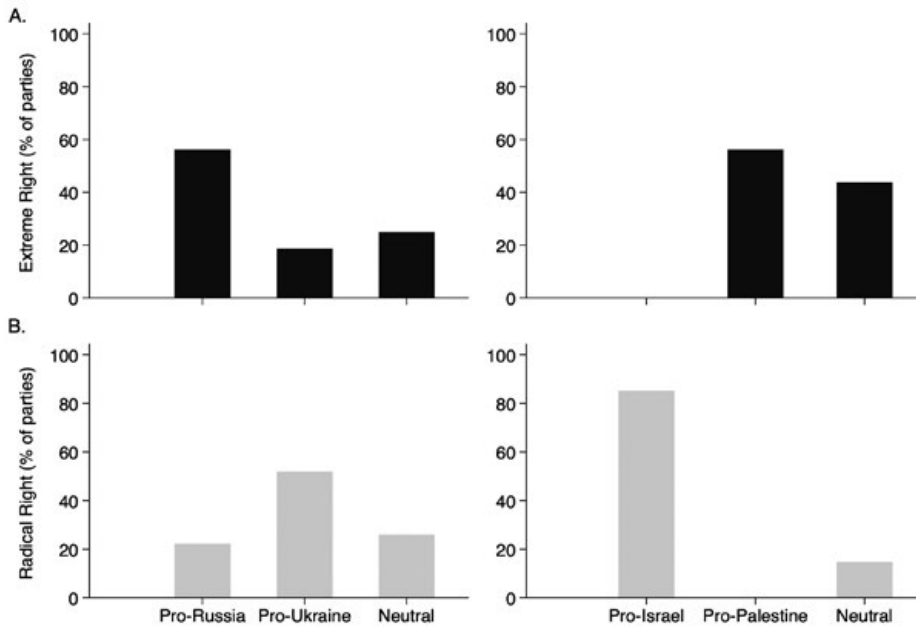


Figure 1. Positions of the extreme right and radical right on the two conflicts
Source: Re-elaboration from Wondreys and Zulianello, 2024

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEOLOGICAL AND COMPETITIVE INCENTIVES

According to our analysis, addressing the foreign policy of the extreme right and the radical right thus requires highlighting ideological distinctions and opposing competitive incentives. The great majority of voters and political actors find the extreme right to be an isolated and unacceptable political actor due to the rejection of democracy in general. Because its competitive priority is to emphasize ideological coherence rather than broaden its electoral base, the extreme right does not necessarily have an issue with adopting positions often clearly motivated by antisemitism and Russophilia (both also frequently based on anti-Atlanticism). The radical right, on the other hand, opposes liberal democracy, a particular type of democracy, rather than democracy in general. As a result, voters find it more acceptable, and it becomes more integrated into the political process. Radical-right parties are therefore more likely to be pragmatic, particularly when handling potentially contentious topics.

This has a further significant implication: the radical right's stances might shift more frequently than the extreme right's. After all, the radical right needs to be able to adjust to shifts in public opinion in order to stay competitive and build or maintain a reputation as a credible governing force; while the extreme right has no reason to pursue pragmatism given its isolation within the political scene.

11. WHY PUTIN'S NO POPULIST

LUKE MARCH

As argued in the introduction, the role of populism is often exaggerated. Indeed, it has relatively little meaning or effect without a "host ideology," and its role needs to be carefully disentangled from the latter (Dai, 2023). Unfortunately, many claims that Putin is a populist use imprecise definitions, confusing nationalism for populism and/or focusing on his "closeness to the people." Such people-centrism is better seen as "demoticism" and is necessary but not sufficient for populism. Putin can be thoroughly analyzed by combining insights from the main analytical approaches: populism as a (communication) style, a mobilizing strategy, or a set of ideas. Such "complexity-oriented approaches" help contextualize and not over-estimate populism (de la Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019).

PUTIN'S POPULIST INTERNATIONAL?

Putin's populism is ostensibly most evident in his support for populists worldwide, not just executive leaders (e.g., Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald J. Trump), but a range of opposition actors (e.g., Marine Le Pen and the French National Rally; Trump since leaving office), who allegedly share a mutual "love affair" (Rohac et. al, 2017). But whereas Russia certainly courts allies and proxies (no doubt occasionally using covert incentives), populism is hardly the motivating aspect here. Russia seeks allies across the political spectrum in a "trans-ideological" (Braghiroli and Makarychev, 2016) approach that adapts the Kremlin's message to diverse supporters. To the degree that there is ideological contiguity, it is around the conservative nationalism of Trump and Le Pen. However, the Kremlin also courts the radical left's anti-US anti-imperialism and seeks business partners in political establishments everywhere. Moreover, the 'love affair' has soured abroad. Even before Russia's 2022 reinvasion of Ukraine, many populists (e.g., in the Nordic countries) were Russia-critical, while others have hurried to distance themselves since (Wondreys, 2023).

PUTIN'S MACHO POPULIST STYLE?

Putin's most superficial resemblance to populists such as Trump and Bolsonaro is his macho "Superman" image, whereby he rides topless on horses, flies fighter jets and uses crass, sexist language to buttress his image as a thuggish outsider and street fighting man. But this is a partial reading of Putin's multifaceted leadership. Although it is undoubtedly gendered, and embedded in Russian *muzhik* ("manly man") traditions, Putin's central image is as Russia's CEO, and from this follows other facets—the military leader, devout Orthodox believer, sober statesman, etc. Above all, Putin is an "organization man," the curator of its (perceived) tradition as a Great State and someone who is no outsider but inspires veneration in state power.

PUTIN THE CHARISMATIC LEADER?

Strategic definitions of populism emphasize charismatic leaders who inspire devotion from large numbers of followers. On the face of it, Putin fits such a definition completely. He has maintained stratospheric levels of popularity and has a "cult of personality" (the Russian Orthodox Patriarch once called his rule a "miracle of God"). Moreover, he oversees a number of initiatives (e.g., youth groups, his annual Direct Line TV event) which reinforce his direct communion with supporters. At the same time, Putin's support base is highly choreographed and manipulated (especially his meetings with "ordinary" Russians). He maintains a distinct aloofness that (unlike genuine populists) aims to co-opt and *suppress* political mobilization. His inaugurations are more reminiscent of coronations, while his governing style invokes support for state institutions and completely avoids consistent anti-elite mobilization (e.g., the Constituent Assemblies of Latin American populists).

PUTIN'S IDEAS—STATISM NOT POPULISM

If we examine Putin's key speeches, there is scant evidence of populism (March, 2023). Like many politicians, Putin is "demotic" and represents himself as close to the people. Over time (particularly since 2012) Putin has become more nationalistic, with a greater focus on Russia's supposed traditional (illiberal) values, including people's shared patriotism in opposition to the West. However, these people are never seen as independent of paternalist state power, and Putin simultaneously invokes both the authorities' duty to look after people and people's patriotic duty to the state. Moreover, unlike genuine populists, Putin does not envisage increasing popular power except

in the banal, nebulous terms of many politicians, such as public openness or the responsiveness of (local) elites. When he explicitly invokes sovereignty, this is invariably state or national sovereignty that doesn't see the people as an *agent* of change but always subordinates them to state interests.

HOLLOW ANTI-ELITISM

The most marked difference from genuine populists is the absence of consistent anti-elitism. Putin occasionally lambasts big-business oligarchs or the Bolsheviks, but generally reinforces state power. Latterly, he has increased his quasi-populist invective in foreign policy, especially against the Ukrainian "Kiev junta" or the Western elites who back Ukraine. However, at no point does Putin turn this anti-elitism into calls for the Ukrainian people to overthrow their government and establish a just regime. Rather, he interprets Ukraine through a nationalist-imperialist prism. The Ukrainian people have little agency outside Russian protection. His anti-elitism is largely to give context to the so-called "Russophobic" acts of foreign regimes toward Russia or Russian-speaking minorities.

NOT POPULISM, BUT WORSE

Were he a more genuine populist, Putin would place the people vs. elite dichotomy central to his politics, try to mobilize this people against elites and (at least rhetorically) aim to empower his people. But while his "trans-ideological" approach draws on multiple ideologies (including populism), he is fundamentally more nationalist, imperialist (vs. Ukraine) and (above all) statist. Indeed, it's fully possible to examine Putin's core ideology without *any* reference to populism. One such study finds that "Putinism elevates an idea of imperial-nationalist statism amplified by Russian greatness, exceptionalism, and historical struggle against the West" (Snegovaya et al., 2023, p. 2). The implications of this are more troubling than if he were simply a populist. Not only is he ideologically more eclectic, and so more attractive to a diverse range of supporters, including among Western establishments. But also being a populist necessarily implies a modicum of (however insincere) support for democratic rhetoric. But such democratic niceties, as well as genuine people power, are encumbrances to which Putin is more implacably opposed than ever.

12. UKRAINIAN MODERN POPULISM: THE CASE OF VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

KOSTIANTYN YANCHENKO

Populism is commonly viewed as a thin-centered ideology that attaches itself to a firmer ideological core (Mudde, 2004). This creates variations like right-wing or left-wing populism, which combine people-centrism and anti-elitism with some version of nationalism and socialism, respectively.

Zelensky's populism, however, diverges from this typical pattern. Rather than combining populist appeal with a strictly right-wing or left-wing political agenda, Zelensky has instead concentrated on what are called "non-positional" political issues (Zulianello, 2020). These issues, such as anti-corruption, political transparency, and moral integrity, cannot be meaningfully situated on the ideological spectrum because different electoral groups perceive them equally positively. During the 2019 presidential and parliamentary campaigns, non-positional issues became the focal points for Zelensky and his *Servant of the People* (SN) party. At the same time, he afforded less attention to the key positional issues in Ukrainian politics, such as foreign policy orientation or language politics.

Several scholars have pointed out this feature of Zelensky's populism. For instance, Yanchenko and Zulianello (2023) have described Zelensky and SN as illustrating *valence populism*. This populism variety escapes the traditional left-right spectrum by focusing on non-positional issues and taking blurry positions on the economic and socio-cultural dimensions. In a parallel vein, Ash and Shapovalov (2022) have categorized SN as an *anti-polarization* populist party. The authors provided empirical evidence that SN's core voters held moderate or neutral positions on Ukraine's major positional issues in 2019.

Regardless of the preferred terminology, understanding the non-positional foundation of Zelensky's populism at the time of his electoral breakthrough is vital for future research. This will allow us to bypass the theoretical pitfall of equating him and his SN party with Western European and American populist actors, which often fit into typical left-right cleavages. Instead, a comparison with other valence populist parties of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) may be more valid.

ZELENSKY'S INCLUSIVE APPEAL

Another important feature of Zelensky's brand of populism is its inclusive appeal. Research often links inclusionary populism with leftist political actors citing Spain's *Podemos* or Bernie Sanders in the U.S. as examples. However, Zelensky's rhetoric has never been centered around the integration of underprivileged social groups. Moreover, as the previous section showed, his populism does not align with the traditional left-right spectrum. Instead, the inclusionary appeal of Zelensky's populism results from his focus on non-positional issues aimed at gathering the broadest societal support. In stark contrast to the divisive "Two Ukraines" narrative exploited by numerous Ukrainian politicians to date, Zelensky mobilized voters by emphasizing similarities over differences. This approach played an important role in him gaining an extraordinary level of support during the 2019 election campaigns and beyond.

Thus, Kulyk (2023) analyzed Zelensky's Facebook communication between the years 2019–2022, focusing on his representation of "the Ukrainians." He found that Zelensky's populism maintained its inclusiveness, even amid crises and existential threats to the state that are generally prone to foster nationalism. Particularly, Kulyk notes that during Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine, Zelensky's addresses to Ukrainians remained inclusionary, "stressing the common struggle of different social groups rather than excluding some of them from the 'virtuous people'" (2023, p. 19). Zelensky's inclusive rhetoric stems naturally from his and his party's valence populist core. By stressing non-positional issues that appeal to broad population sections, he effectively mitigated polarization. Therefore, Zelensky's inclusionary approach should be seen as a strategic element within his broader valence populist strategy, particularly during times of crisis and national unity.

THE VARIABILITY OF ZELENSKY'S POPULISM

One of the most puzzling aspects about Zelensky's populism is how changeable it is. The unique features of his populism and how much he uses it in his communication have shifted several times. As a result, accurate insights into Zelensky's populism at specific points in time cannot always be easily generalized.

To illustrate, consider Kim's (2023) study of Zelensky's wartime speeches. Kim noticed that Zelensky sometimes used what the author calls *antiwar transnational populism*. This approach involved Zelensky addressing people in other countries, especially Russians and indigenous groups in the Caucasus and Siberia, to encourage them to oppose their leaders and resist the war.

However, Kim admits this kind of populism was brief and specific to that time (Kim, 2023, p. 1). Therefore, Zelensky's antiwar transnational populism would be hard to identify and analyze outside the early stages of the Russia-Ukraine full-scale war.

In a similar way, when looking at Zelensky's 2019 presidential campaign, Yanchenko (2023) found that post-truth dynamics played a big part in Zelensky's populist communication. Specifically, Zelensky often used the fictional character President Holoborodko, whom he played in the TV show "Servant of the People," to connect with voters. However, references to this character or other fictional narratives became rare later in Zelensky's presidency and disappeared entirely during his wartime speeches. Even with basic populism elements such as anti-elitism, its presence in Zelensky's communication has varied significantly. For example, anti-elitist messages were a key part of his communication during the 2019 election campaigns. However, criticism of the elites diminished after SN achieved a mono-majority in the Ukrainian parliament in 2019, and somewhat paradoxically, became part of the elite itself.

To address this challenge, one could categorize Zelensky's political communication into at least three broad phases: pre-election, post-election, and post-onset of the full-scale Russian invasion. Populism was most prominent in the initial pre-election phase, but its significance diminished considerably in the third phase, with some authors not even mentioning populism at all when analyzing Zelensky's wartime communication (Onuch and Halle, 2023). Understanding these context-dependent fluctuations is important for adequate analysis of Zelensky's communication, as well as for future research on populism in Ukraine.

13. THE RESURGENCE OF AGRARIAN POPULISM

MATTHIJS ROODUIJN AND SARAH DE LANGE

In the last decade or so, whole libraries have been written about populism. Most of the books, reports, articles and other sources concern one specific type of populism: radical right-wing populism. This is not strange. A vast majority of the most successful populist parties and leaders of the last few centuries have had a clear radical-right outlook. Think, for instance, of the Rassemblement National of Marine Le Pen in France, the American Republicans under Donald Trump, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro.

AGRARIAN POPULISM: A MARGINAL PHENOMENON?

Yet, in the libraries of contemporary populism you will also find several shelves dedicated to other types of populism. Radical left-wing populism (March, 2007), neo-liberal populism (Pauwels, 2010), and valence populism (Zulianello and Larsen, 2024) are just a few. But you would probably find very few works dedicated to "agrarian populism." This type of populism emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between the virtuous peasants and people from the countryside on the one side, and the evil and corrupt urban elites on the other (Canovan, 1981). Examples include the nineteenth century People's Party in the US and the French politician Pierre Poujade, who enjoyed success during the 1950s.

The lack of attention to this type of populism is striking. Agrarian populism, after all, is the first form in which populism fully expressed itself in the nineteenth century (Taggart, 2000). But it's understandable that contemporary scholars write so little about it. Most "traditional" agrarian populist parties have ceased to exist. Some have developed into fully-fledged radical (right-wing) populists; the Finns Party, for instance, is a direct successor of the Finnish Rural Party (Arter, 2023). In other cases, existing parties have incorporated their key messages, making the agrarian populists themselves obsolete. As we concluded in a book chapter written a decade ago, agrarian populism has become a "marginal phenomenon" (de Lange and Rooduijn, 2015).

UPSURGE OF AGRARIAN POPULISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

Recent developments, however, show that our analysis needs updating. This year's regional elections in the Netherlands marked the remarkable upsurge of what might be classified as a typical agrarian populist party: the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BoerBurgerBeweging, BBB). Founded in 2019 as a party representing the interests of farmers and peasants, the party combined a rural-versus-urban message with a clearly populist people-versus-elite discourse, and managed to win one seat in the 2021 general elections. In the wake of this electoral breakthrough on the national stage, support grew rapidly. In the 2023 provincial elections, BBB gained 24% of the vote, making it the largest party in the Netherlands. One reason for BBB's increasing appeal was the so-called "nitrogen crisis." In 2019, the Dutch government announced plans to reduce nitrogen emissions by cutting livestock numbers. The plans sparked large-scale protest movements across the country. In the summer of 2022, protestors blocked roads and food distribution centers, and occupied public spaces. Citizens across the country—mostly those in the countryside—hung the Dutch flag upside down in support of the protesters.

MOBILIZATION ON THREE LEVELS

More generally, BBB's success can be explained by the mobilization of three levels of discontent. First of all, the party succeeded in galvanizing protesting farmers' severe political discontent. Support from this relatively small group of citizens, however, would never have been enough to give BBB victory in a national election. The party therefore embarked on a strategy of broadening the in-group it claimed to represent, from farmers in particular to people in the countryside in general. They emphasized not only the interests of farmers, but also the values and ideas of people living in rural areas more broadly. BBB tapped into a widespread feeling of being ignored by those in power—in particular by self-absorbed, city-dwelling elites.

So-called "regional resentment" is the feeling that one's region is unappreciated culturally, ignored politically and disadvantaged economically. Studies show that such resentment is prevalent across the Netherlands (de Lange, van der Brug, and Harteveld, 2023).

The third element of the party's strategy was to connect this feeling of not being appreciated to broader discontent with politics. Two high-profile political scandals in Dutch public debate offered BBB convenient examples to help make this connection. One involved tax authorities violating the rule of law by wrongly accusing thousands of parents of fraud, thereby plunging them into debt (Otjes, 2021). The other concerned the extraction of natural

gas in Groningen in spite of citizen protests (Neslen, 2022). In other words, BBB employed a typical agrarian populist discourse to connect several stories about how urban and political elites have systematically ignored the interests and values of ordinary (rural) citizens.

THE FUTURE OF AGRARIAN POPULISM

For the Netherlands, interesting political times lie ahead. BBB is still a very young party. How will it develop? Will it become an ideologically moderate party, operating in the political center, able to compromise with parties on both the left and the right? Or will it evolve into a radical-right force, securing a more radical position on the edges of the political spectrum, as many other agrarian populists have done in recent decades? Both options are still on the table.

Importantly, the relevance of this trend goes beyond the Dutch political context. In many countries, green issues are increasingly becoming part of the cultural division between progressive cosmopolitans on the one hand and conservative nationalists on the other. Farmers have not only been protesting in the Netherlands. They have also taken to the streets in Germany, France, Belgium and elsewhere. Widespread worries about the green transition provide fertile breeding ground for agrarian populism across the globe. We might well see a shift towards this type of populism in the years to come.

14. PERONISM IN ARGENTINA EXEMPLIFIES THE CHAMELEONIC NATURE OF POPULISM

WOLFGANG MUNO AND CHRISTIAN PFEIFFER

The introduction tackled several myths around populism, encouraging researchers to discuss further. And in Latin America, where populism is the political norm and social inequality deeply rooted, there is certainly plenty to discuss.

The upper class and establishment detachment from large segments of the population fosters populism in all countries of the region. Notably, the integration of marginalized groups has been a key facet of Latin American populism. Here, we aim to address each of the three myths using Peronism in Argentina as an example.

PERONISM AS THE MAINSTREAM

Since the mid-1940s, Peronism has constituted the political mainstream in Argentine politics. This contradicts the myth that populism inevitably drifts to the political spectrum's edges and is represented by outsiders. Nikolaus (Werz, 2012) even posits that Peronism renders the Argentine political system sui generis. And Alejandro (Grimson, 2019) asserts that failing to grasp Peronism would be akin to deciding not to understand Argentina in its entirety.Juan Domingo Perón initially served as Argentina's Minister of Labor and Welfare. Starting in 1943, he implemented measures that substantially improved the social situation of people previously excluded from politics. He continued this approach during his first presidency from 1946 to 1955, but his authoritarian and anti-pluralistic governing style attracted substantial criticism. After the military coup of the "Liberation Revolution" Perón was forced into exile, in Spain. However, from afar, Peron remained Argentina's defining political figure until his return to the presidency in 1973.

THE EVOLVING FACES OF PERONISM

We agree with the introduction that anti-pluralism is a key feature of populism. As our research underlines, anti-pluralism, moralizing and a Manichean

friend-foe distinction form the crux of populist politics (Muno and Pfeiffer, 2022). Consequently, under populist rule, harmonious solutions to conflicts between different ideas, individuals or social forces are not pursued. Populists, drawing from populist logic, lay claim to exclusive representation in the people's name.

Peronism exemplifies this. In its diverse forms, it exemplifies populism's chameleonic nature, as emphasized by Paul (Taggart, 2003). Following his return to power in 1973, Perón faced a divided supporter base, with the left and right wings clashing relentlessly. Perón aligned with the right, but remained in power for only one year, until his death in 1974. The ideology of Juan Domingo Perón, however, lives on.

PERONISM AFTER PERÓN

In 1989, Carlos Menem ran as the Peronist presidential candidate. Anti-elite rhetoric marked his campaign; it scarcely addressed substantive issues, except for traditional appeals to the grassroots and vague promises. Nevertheless, he secured almost 50% of the vote in the 1989 election.

Previously, Peronism had leaned towards a state-centered approach. But Menem surprised everyone with a neoliberal turn, which resulted in the privatization and deregulation of the economy.

From 2003 to 2015, Argentina was once more governed by a left-wing populist Peronist government, initially under Néstor Kirchner, followed by his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Kirchnerist economic policies were executed through a robust, development-oriented state and propped up by a commodity boom. An expansive social policy and increased minimum wage led to notable social improvements.

In summary, Peronism under Perón was developmentalist and nationalist-protectionist, establishing a conservative welfare state. It was, in general, more conservative. Under Menem, there had been a neoliberal shift and, overall, the ideology was generally more economically liberal and socially conservative. The Kirchners' era, meanwhile, saw a resurgence of developmentalism, protectionism, and economic nationalism. Their period of governance was markedly more progressive left, as evidenced, for example, by support for LGBTQ+ rights.

IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE

But why, despite its chameleonic policies, does Peronism continue to attract votes from a relatively stable base? The answer, as we argue elsewhere, lies in populism's nature as a political identity (Pfeiffer and Muno, 2023). For instance, workers and the poor were divided over economic policies. In retrospect, they clearly suffered as a result of neoliberal reforms. But blue-collar voters still predominantly supported Carlos Menem's government because it was Peronist. Menem's cultivation of a traditional political style, as well as his repeatedly professed allegiance to the "classical" values of Peronism and to Perón, reinforced the Peronist identity. This identity is primarily defined by recurring narratives of shared history, particularly the historical and mythical figures of Perón and his wife Eva.

The narrative incorporation of Peronism's traditional base appears to be significantly more vital than the actual outcomes of Peronist policies. The pragmatism of Peronism has proven to be highly effective. It leads not only to programmatic flexibility, but also to corresponding diversity and, as a result, to an internal heterogeneity within the Peronist movement. The diversity of programmatic declarations has a genuine catch-all character; an adherent of Peronism could always find some support within its ideology. Peronism's programmatic ambiguity is counterbalanced by the personal style that most Peronist politicians adopt. This bolsters clientelist ties with charismatic elements.

DEPICTION OF POLITICAL ADVERSARIES

An integral element of Peronism, like all populism, is its emphasis on the political adversary, a sort of counter-image to Peronism and its base. Historical Peronism professed to represent the authentic, working-class Argentine. Meanwhile, the political opponent was associated with Europeanisation, cosmopolitanism, imperialism and the oligarchy. Even today, Peronists often depict their adversaries as enemies of the people, and thus anti-Peronist and anti-national.

Fundamentally, since Peronism's inception, deputies, judges, and the public have tended to unquestioningly support "their" president. The political agenda is thus perceived as a "national mission," with loyal backing mobilized from the top down, and the opposition dismissed as illegitimate, even traitorous. (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018) have characterized this as "Manichean distinction"—and it was conspicuous in all three variants of Argentine populism. Manichean distinction has contributed to a highly polarized

political atmosphere. The enduring appeal of Peronism lies in the fact that it has maintained a strong political identity, created effective narrative myths, and adeptly discredited political adversaries. It is testament to the persistent power and appeal of populism in Latin American politics.

15. THE RISE OF LEFT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE: IDEOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE AND A NATIONALIST TURN

MATTIA COLLINI AND MICHEL PEROTTINO*

The global rise of populism has also impacted the radical left, leading to the emergence of left-wing populist parties beyond their traditional strongholds in Latin America. In Europe, this trend became prominent following the 2009 economic crisis, with Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, later followed by France Unbowed (La France Insoumise, LFI).

Here we identify two distinct left-wing populist trends in Europe. The first is the traditional populist radical left, which integrates populist discourse while maintaining a strong radical left identity. The second is the rise of a national-populist tendency within some far-left parties, where nationalism plays a central role in their rhetoric and mobilization strategies. Notable examples include Germany's Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) and the Czech Republic's Stačilo! alliance, closely linked to the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). By comparing these cases with Podemos and LFI, we aim to examine the ideological shifts and strategic adaptations within contemporary left-wing populism.

THE RISE OF THE NATIONALIST-POPULIST LEFT

The phenomenon of nationalist left-wing populism is not entirely new but has generally been tied to contexts where it merged with demands for national recognition or autonomy (i.e. Scotland, Catalunya, the Basque countries) or confined to the fringe, radical movements or small parties, often dubbed "red-brown" parties. Recent scholarly works have also examined the importance of patriotism within certain radical left movements and parties, following decades of dominance by "cosmopolitanism" (Custodi, 2023). Nevertheless, this phenomenon has only gained significant traction in recent years, with two of its most prominent examples emerging in Czechia and Germany. Indeed, in our analysis, we identify the nationalist-populist left as combining left-wing economic and social principles with a strong(er)

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national-conservative connotation antithetical to the cosmopolitan left. This is also evidenced in expert survey analysis, showing a tendency towards TAN positions on a GAL/TAN scale that distinguishes parties on socio-cultural issues, from green, alternative, libertarianism (GAL) to traditionalism, authoritarianism and nationalism (TAN) —see for instance the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES), assessing the position of parties on a socio-cultural dimension labelled GAL-TAN.

The Czech Republic's traditionally stable party system, relatively well-demarcated along the right-left axis, was disrupted by the rise of populist parties, notably Public Affairs (2010) and ANO 2011, led by Andrej Babiš. ANO's dominance after 2017 weakened the two traditional left-wing parties (the Social Democrats of ČSSD and the KSČM), ultimately pushing them out of parliament in 2021. In response, Czech communists engaged in a complex national-populist transformation, culminating in the Stačilo! coalition for the 2024 European elections. This shift, appealing to a conservative and pro-Russian electorate, reflects both a survival strategy and a deeper nationalist tendency within the KSČM, echoing ideological currents from the Normalization period (1969–1989).

The German BSW shares some similarities with the KSČM/Stačilo! transformation. The BSW originated as a breakaway faction from Die Linke (The Left) during a period of electoral decline and increasing competition from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). In both cases, the primary discourse has revolved around the question of left-wing identity in the post-communist Eastern bloc (Czech Republic and former East Germany). In both instances, national rhetoric has played a role—although less nativist in Germany—with a pronounced pro-Russian stance. Furthermore, both parties take conservative stances on cultural issues, positioning themselves as left-wing in rhetoric (often claiming to represent "true communism") while adopting right-wing or conservative policies on some issues. This has led them to align with radical populist radical right on topics such as Euroscepticism, anti-immigration, and opposition to LGBT rights. This shift reflects broader trends in the post-communist left, where nationalist rhetoric and populist strategies are increasingly adopted as survival mechanisms, challenging the long-standing divide between radical left and far-right populist discourse.

Both parties also exhibit a highly centralized, top-down leadership structure, relying significantly on their respective leaders, particularly for external communication. This characteristic further underscores their divergence from traditional radical left movements, historically emphasizing grassroots organization and democratic decision-making processes.

THE TRADITIONAL POPULIST RADICAL LEFT

"Traditional" populist radical left movements and parties, such as Podemos, Syriza, and LFI, integrate left-wing politics with populist rhetoric, advocating themes such as anti-capitalism, social justice, pacifism, environmentalism and anti-globalization. They reject reactionary, nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionary, and anti-European discourse, instead framing their struggle around popular sovereignty, social justice, and democratization for a Europe of solidarity (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019; Damiani, 2020).

Looking at their organization, LFI and Podemos, unlike BSW or Stacilo!, were bottom-up creations, at least in their discursive dimension: both emerged following the onset of the 2009 economic and financial crisis, building on pre-existing social movements (Now the People, Indignados, Occupy Wall Street). Indeed, Podemos, being founded earlier, played a crucial role as a model for LFI. The bottom-up nature of these movement parties—comprising sympathizers rather than formal members—was loosely structured (partly digitalized) and heavily reliant on the role of their spokespersons (Pablo Iglesias Turrión and Jean-Luc Mélenchon). This structure was further reinforced by a strong and explicitly populist rhetoric, partly rooted in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and their post-Marxist definition of populism.

The central role played by the leader, particularly in the case of Mélenchon, is one of the main issues. A key challenge faced by such parties lies in their strong dependence on a charismatic leader, who, on the one hand, plays a crucial role in party communication—this personalization is one of the key factors in the rise of populist movements more broadly—but, on the other, undermines the fundamental principle of collective democratic action that they claim to uphold, and weakens the long-term survivability of the party. Podemos was already in decline when its historical leader, Pablo Iglesias, resigned, but its crisis became even more pronounced after his departure—a fate that similarly affected Syriza in Greece.

DIFFERENT POPULISMS FOR A DIVIDED LEFT

From a general perspective, both Podemos (later Sumar) and LFI clearly align with the traditional radical left, eventually adding the climate perspective (eco-socialism), in contrast to the more nationalist orientation of KSČM/Stačilo! and BSW. Perhaps the most apparent similarity between these two sets of parties lies in their populist strategy, which reinforces pre-existing ideological foundations while developing them into a new dimension.

A comparison of these four ostensibly radical left-wing populist movements suggests that the primary divergence lies in the legacy of authoritarianism in the former Eastern Bloc, in contrast to the Western populist movements. Indeed, this new breed of nationalist populist left seems to be gaining traction mainly within the former communist bloc. This highlights the enduring influence of the former communist regimes and the continued existence of post-communist political dynamics.

16. UNITED IN DELEGITIMIZATION? CZECH AND GERMAN BRANCHES OF THE SOVEREIGN CITIZENS MOVEMENT

ALEŠ MICHAL*

The "sovereign citizens" movement emerged in the United States during the 1970s as an expression of resistance against the federal government. It was built upon the longstanding activities of *posse comitatus* groups that emphasized the strict application of sovereignty in opposition to perceived oppressors (Sartechi, 2021). In the United States, the movement has tens of thousands of active supporters (SPLCenter.org). In the last decade, globalization and the growth of social media have enabled the core ideas of this movement to spread to European countries. The active presence of influential figures on these platforms has allowed for empirical research into the movement's evolution and the identification of its internal factions.

SOURCE OF LEGITIMACY

At the heart of the movement lies an existential opposition to the legitimacy of the contemporary political system and the state apparatus. This perspective positions the sovereign citizens movement as extremist. Unlike other anti-system or populist actors (e.g., Zulianello, 2018), it aims to completely dismantle the democratic order, although it attempts to become mainstream by embracing moderate approaches. Conceptually, it corresponds with features of "anti-government extremism" (van Buueren, 2023), which is driven by extreme distrust of the current government, yet its goals are long-term. In a praxis, strategies include acts of political violence as a tool for advocating interests, which requires the initial radicalization process, resulting in smooth mobilization. The negative conception of sovereignty, defined by a wholesale rejection of the state and its institutions, urges the formulation of an alternative source of legitimacy. In this context, historical epochs serve as a natural substitute for the present order, while a distinct ideological framework intertwined with extreme-right ideas provides normative grounding.

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In particular, the attraction to currently defunct state forms has rendered sovereign citizens visible in European countries that have experienced significant state transformations. In the United States, creating a historical argument proved problematic and ended up in naming 1933—the year at which the American administration ceased backing the dollar with gold. This emphasizes the movement's economic dimension. In contrast, the legitimacy claimed by European sovereign citizens is anchored in fully developed state systems. In Germany, for instance, *Reichsbürger* groups refer partly to 1871 and the first unification of the German territories and more frequently to the notion of borders as defined during the Third Reich. Even within the Czech Republic, the movement is not entirely unified. A minority of adherents derive legitimacy from the post-communist democratic federation of Czechs and Slovaks (1990–1992), whereas the dominant faction insists on the legal continuity of the Czechoslovak Federation throughout its existence (1960–1992) despite its Communist background.

IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The ideological framework of the movement draws upon its American roots. In the case of the *Reichsbürger*, this is reflected in the presentation of neo-Nazi positions. The German *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution* monitors members as extremists and neo-Nazis with high risk. In the Czech context, references to historical local fascism or neo-Nazism are less pronounced. The unifying element is instead a combination of chauvinism and nationalism. In recent years, this has involved rhetoric directed against migrants and opposition to COVID-19 vaccination. Similarly, the *Czech Ministry of the Interior* includes the movement to extremist and prejudiced-hateful organizations primarily for activities on social networks. The depth of ideological convictions in both cases is closely related to the level of group integration and institutionalization.

ASPECTS OF MOBILIZATION AND STRATEGY

Two additional aspects are inseparable from the ideological profile of the movement. The first is the effort to mobilize supporters through economic arguments. This is a routine in the United States, where numerous local groups have arisen as resistance to tax laws or as strategies by individuals seeking to avoid criminal prosecution. In Germany, this trend has manifested in the creation of alternative communities. One such "parallel polis" was organized in the vicinity of the town of Wittenberg, where initiatives

included establishing and accepting a local currency and the construction of an independent bank. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the Czech Republic. One faction of the Czech sovereign citizens is organized around entrepreneur Jan Macháček, who, during the 1990s, litigated against the Czech state over alleged lost profits. Following partial judicial recognition of his claims, he assembled the group of the "Legitimate Creditors of the Czech Republic," whose autonomous extralegal decisions effectively nullified the state's authority. For these groups, using economic-based strategies sometimes takes precedence over ideology.

The second defining feature of the extreme right is the role of political violence. In the case of the *Reichsbürger*, violence has played a role in their evolution. In December 2022, several adherents were arrested on charges related to planning actions against state representatives. In the Czech context, violent confrontations have been observed in the form of clashes at court buildings, where prominent figures of the movement were gathered for their prosecutions in matters of extremist statements. A distinctive element of the sovereign citizens' strategy is "paper terrorism," a phenomenon likewise imported from the United States. As a necessary component of delegitimizing the state, individual adherents inundate public offices with an excessive number of baseless demands submitted by mail, thereby complicating the functioning of these institutions. For these activities, sovereign citizens employ pseudo-legal arguments to request responses or judicial actions from courts and governmental agencies. While there have been no documented cases in Europe of such actions significantly impairing governmental functions, similar tactics in the United States have indeed led to disruptions.

In conclusion, the extremist sovereign citizens movement in these two selected European countries fundamentally derives from its American prototype, yet the arguments of its regional branches are adapted to local conditions. Even in the relatively small groups in Germany and the Czech Republic, the organizations remain fragmented and pursue divergent objectives using various means. For some, affiliation with the extreme right is definitional, while for others, the ideological profile is more subdued, with a primary focus on mobilizing support through the promise of economic gain. It is no coincidence that scholarly literature frequently opts to describe these entities as "groups of individuals" (Sartechi, 2021) rather than emphasizing conventional organizational structures.

17. EVOLUTION OF RADICAL RIGHT MOVEMENTS IN CZECHIA

JAN CHARVÁT*

The Czech far right has undergone a dynamic evolution since the fall of communism in 1989, shifting through four distinct cycles. I trace the far right's trajectory across four phases: the Origins (1989–1998), Fragmentation (1999–2014), the Refugee Crisis (2015–2019), and COVID-19 (2020–2021).

ORIGINS AND THE RISE OF SUBCULTURAL NATIONALISM (1989–1998):

During the period of the communist dictatorship, no far-right structures existed in the Czech Republic. The post-revolutionary transition in the Czech Republic created fertile ground for nationalist and far-right ideas. Amidst societal anxieties over political and economic uncertainty, the far right capitalized on themes such as anti-communism, opposition to Germany, and growing anti-Roma sentiments. The Republican Party (SPR-RSČ) emerged as the dominant political force within the far right, gaining parliamentary representation and reaching its electoral peak in 1996 with 8% of the vote. However, its extremist rhetoric and inability to build coalitions marginalized it within mainstream politics (Charvát, 2007).

Simultaneously, the extreme-right movement, rooted in the skinhead subculture, gained prominence. Influenced by Western trends, neo-Nazi groups such as Bohemia Hammer Skins and Blood and Honour flourished, engaging in racist violence and establishing a presence in underground music and street movements. (Mareš, 2003).

By the mid-1990s, increased public scrutiny and state repression challenged both the party and subcultural branches of the far right. Media portrayal shifted from initial indifference to moral panic, and legal measures were enacted to criminalize racist violence and hate speech. The disbanding of violent skinhead factions and the Republicans' electoral failure in 1998 marked the end of this cycle, leaving the movement fragmented and without a clear political foothold (Charvát, 2007).

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FRAGMENTATION AND THE RISE OF POPULIST NATIONALISM (1999–2014)

The early 2000s saw a restructuring of the far right in the absence of a dominant political force. Various ideological currents, from neo-Nazism to ultranationalism, coexisted but failed to unify into a coherent movement. Efforts to create a successor to the Republican Party resulted in the formation of the Workers' Party (Dělnická strana, DS) in 2002, later banned in 2010 for its links to extremism and violent demonstrations against Roma communities (Charvát, 2007).

While subcultural groups, such as National Resistance (Národní odpor) and Autonomous Nationalists, remained active, the real turning point came with the emergence of right-wing populism. In 2013, Tomio Okamura, a Czech-Japanese businessman, founded the Dawn of Direct Democracy (Úsvit přímé demokracie), a party that harnessed public dissatisfaction with corruption and economic instability. Unlike earlier far-right leaders, Okamura avoided open racial rhetoric, instead framing his agenda around nativism, anti-Roma sentiments, and criticism of political elites. His success (6.88% in the 2013 elections) demonstrated the far right's potential to break into mainstream politics by moderating its image. The end of this period will be marked by the disintegration of the last subculture groups that have formed the basic framework of the Czech far right since 1990 (Slačálek, Charvát, 2019).

THE REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF XENOPHOBIA (2015–2019)

The 2015 European refugee crisis provided a new political and discursive opportunity for the Czech far right. Despite the Czech Republic receiving only a small number of refugees, public fear of immigration surged, fueled by media coverage and political rhetoric. This environment amplified anti-Islam sentiments, allowing new actors to gain influence. The "We Do Not Want Islam" in the Czech Republic (IVČRN) movement, originally an online initiative, transformed into a grassroots force, staging protests and mobilizing public opinion against refugee quotas and the EU (Svatoňová, 2021).

Amid this climate, Okamura rebranded his political project into Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). In the 2017 elections, SPD secured 10.64% of the vote, becoming the dominant far-right party. This success reflected a shift away from traditional neo-Nazism and racial nationalism toward a broader populist nationalism, which defined its enemies as Muslim immigrants, liberal elites, and EU bureaucrats (Prokůpkova, 2018).

Despite the growing acceptance of xenophobic narratives in mainstream discourse, Czech political elites largely distanced themselves from the most radical elements, allowing moderate nationalist rhetoric to flourish while rejecting overt extremism. The cycle ended with the stabilization of SPD as a parliamentary force, but its inability to capitalize on broader societal discontent limited further growth.

COVID-19 AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE (2020–2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new crisis, providing an opportunity for the far right to expand its appeal beyond traditional supporters. Opposition to government restrictions, vaccine skepticism, and conspiracy theories about a "globalist agenda" became central themes in far-right mobilization.

Unlike previous cycles, this phase was not dominated by a single far-right actor but instead featured a decentralized movement. The anti-lockdown initiatives attracted a diverse coalition, including former far-right leaders, libertarians, and conspiracy theorists. Meanwhile, the SPD adopted an anti-vax stance, positioning itself as the sole parliamentary force opposing pandemic restrictions.

While conspiracy theories about COVID-19 resonated across broad sections of society, the far right struggled to dominate the movement. Many protestors had no prior links to extremism, and mainstream political actors also co-opted elements of the anti-lockdown discourse, limiting the far right's ability to claim ownership over the issue.

After the start of the war in Ukraine, most of these groups continued their activism but shifted to anti-war or anti-Ukrainian themes. While in the third wave the majority of political parties accepted anti-immigration positions, this cycle has seen a split in the political scene along the fault lines of the war in Ukraine. The pro-government parties strictly support Ukraine (partly resonating the anti-communism or anti-Russia sentiment of the Czech established right on this issue), while the opposition parties are speaking out against support.

FAR-RIGHT POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The development of the Czech far right follows a cyclical pattern, with each phase triggered by crises that generate political opportunities. However, the movement has consistently faced internal fragmentation, preventing it from sustaining long-term electoral success. While subcultural elements

dominated early cycles, later phases saw the rise of populist parties that adapted their rhetoric to broader societal concerns. The study suggests that the far right's ability to mobilize beyond its traditional base depends on its ability to abandon rigid ideological identities and capitalize on single-issue mobilizations—a trend evident in the third and fourth cycles.

18. MANY FACES OF ONE CREATURE: POPULISM IN LOCAL MANIFESTOS OF SPD

PETR VODA*

Political parties are often viewed as unitary actors, particularly in the case of populist parties tightly controlled by their leader (Stauber, Cirhan, 2024). However, when we focus on regional or local levels of governance, such a view turns into illusion. Local branches of the party operate in different social and economic conditions, with different people in charge, with various relation to central party organization and in different party systems. All these differences may affect the ideological profile of the party. This chapter examines the variation in populist and radical-right elements in the local electoral manifestos of the SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) during the Czech local elections of 2018 and 2022.

Local politics can provide fertile ground for populist discourse. The proximity to citizens and the presence of direct democracy tools allow parties to articulate populist claims more easily (Paxton, 2020). Localism, often inherent to municipal governance, is also a recognized feature of populist narratives (Kübler et al., 2024). Moreover, local policy areas such as education and infrastructure provide opportunities to merge populism with radical-right themes like nativism and nationalism (Sant and Brown, 2020; Beveridge, Naumann, and Rudolph, 2024).

On the contrary, a limited scope of responsibilities of local government can constrain populist radical right rhetoric. In the given context, promotion of local democracy and targeting elites may be a bit problematic, because people already have access to tools of direct democracy and because of the very fragmented nature of Czech local politics, local elites are usually deeply rooted in their communities which provides an obstacle to separate them from the people. These competing expectations provide the main source of relevance for actual analysis of populist radical right manifestos on local level.

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LOCAL ELECTORAL MANIFESTOS

The primary source of information for this study is a corpus of local electoral manifestos of the SPD gathered from websites, facebook pages and municipal information leaflets. The analysis examines key aspects of radical-right populism: populist elements (divided into "construction of the people" and "construction of the elites") and radical-right themes (nativism, nationalism, anti-immigration, and Euroscepticism).

The coding results reveal substantial variation. Some manifestos contain no populist or radical-right content, while others clearly construct "the people" and "the elite" in populist terms, and endorse nationalist or anti-immigration positions. In several cases, both populist and radical-right narratives coexist. However, the dominant pattern—present in two-fifths of cases—is the absence of both populism and nativism. Populism or nationalism alone appears in roughly a quarter of the manifestos. Overall, the findings suggest that despite scholarly claims about the advantages local politics offers to radical right populists, SPD's local branches often fail—or choose not—to leverage these opportunities effectively.

CHANGE OVER TIME: FROM RADICAL TO RELATABLE?

Comparing the 2018 and 2022 elections reveals a shift: local SPD branches increasingly emphasized populism while softening radical-right rhetoric, particularly by moving away from the immigration issue. It must be noted, however, that this conclusion pertains only to manifestos and cannot be generalized to campaigns or social media messaging of local branches.

The populist construction of "the people" was rare in 2018 election manifestos, appearing in only six cases. When present, it depicted a shared interest the party aimed to serve or directly linked the party to the people. By 2022, this rhetoric became more widespread, with manifestos defining "the people" in broader terms (see table 1 for summarization of changes). SPD's manifestos, for instance, explicitly represented "our" decent working citizens, the elderly, families with children, and disabled individuals—implicitly excluding ethnic minorities, immigrants, and elites. While "the people" was clearly defined, "the elite" appeared sparsely and mainly in opposition to "the people." In 2018, elites included politicians, entrepreneurs, and the "political mafia." By 2022, the list expanded to include the national government, lobbying groups, and the wealthiest citizens. However, local governments were rarely framed as enemies, and the national government was only targeted in 2022, as it was led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), unlike the 2018 populist-led coalition.

Nativism was prominent in SPD's local manifestos in both elections, with strong anti-immigration stances favoring native citizens. In 2018, over two dozen manifestos explicitly opposed immigration, varying in tone from calls for coexistence to extreme rhetoric labeling migrants as invaders or jihadist. By 2022, the focus shifted to opposing new asylum centers and foreign labor. Other aspects are present in similar ways and extent in both elections. The Roma minority was a target with rhetoric against "positive discrimination" and in favor of "our citizens." In education, SPD opposed inclusive schooling, implying segregation of disabled and Roma children while promoting national traditions over "multicultural ideology." SPD also favored local businesses and opposed privatization, particularly of water resources.

Table 2. Summarization of changes in manifestos

	2018	**2022**
The people	Rare	Frequent and diverse
The elite	Rare	Still rare, but more diverse
Nativism	Present	Present
Anti-immigration	Frequent	Rare

EXPLAINING THE VARIATION: THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTORS

To understand the sources of variation, I conducted a series of crosstab analyses and logistic regressions, using variables such as municipality size, local economic indicators, SPD support in national elections, and connections to the central party. None of these factors showed significant influence on the presence of populist or radical-right elements in the manifestos. These findings suggest that local SPD branches do not adopt consistent messaging strategies, even under similar conditions. Despite the party's centralized organizational structure, local leaders appear to have considerable autonomy in crafting their manifestos—shaped, perhaps, by personal priorities or local concerns without following some given pattern. For example, one regional capital's 2018 manifesto leaned toward liberalism, while another manifesto focused almost entirely on healthcare. However, there is some regional coordination visible in the graphic outline and used formulations. It is thus possible that the variation does not reflect any visible structure, because some local branches have just copied the manifestos tailored to a different condition.

CREATURE WITH MANY FACES

The main findings of this chapter reinforce its central metaphor: the SPD at the local level is a creature with many faces. Some local manifestos strongly reflect the character of radical-right parties, while others are barely distinguishable from those of centrist liberal parties. Therefore, the perception of the SPD as a highly centralized and ideologically cohesive radical-right populist party cannot be consistently upheld at the local level. This observation opens important avenues for further research, particularly in light of the absence of identifiable structural explanations for the observed variation. Future studies may focus on the actual process of manifesto creation, examining the perceptions, motivations, and goals of local branch members, as well as their interpretations of local conditions. Objective indicators such as unemployment may have limited explanatory value if party officials lack accurate knowledge or operate based on subjective assessments. Arguably, the most significant—yet unobserved—factor is the motivation of local leaders. Some manifestos appear to be crafted more to appeal to party officials than to the citizens of their respective municipalities, suggesting that internal party dynamics may play a critical role in shaping local political communication.

19. ANO'S EVOLUTION

TOMAS CIRHAN*

The 2013 general elections marked the start of a new era in Czech political development. ANO's rapid success embodied not only a major electoral shift from the established parties, but also manifested the beginning of a period of populist prevalence in Czech politics.

Right-wing neoliberalism (ODS) and left-wing social democracy (ČSSD) that dominated the political scene before 2010s ended. It was replaced by interest-driven politics represented by populist challengers. The first party to utilize these changing sentiments was Public Affairs (VV) built on a shallow ideological platform combining anti-corruption and anti-elite appeals. However, its fortune was short-lived. Fueled by the collapse of ODS's government in 2013, ANO successfully occupied the vacuum left by VV. It ran on the same populist anti-corruption, anti-establishment ticket. This chapter maps ANO's evolution, distinguishing between its internal and external dimensions.

THE STORY OF A PARTY IN CONSTANT EVOLUTION

Several ideological shifts took place gradually over time. First, ANO combined its anti-establishment and anti-corruption stances with a vaguely liberal facade, embodied for instance by its membership in ALDE fraction, or by supporting same sex marriages. During this stage, its ideology evolved into so-called technocratic populism. This concept is based on effective country management made possible by reliance on a-political experts—contrasting with the incompetent political establishment (Havlík and Voda, 2018). ANO's version involved chiefly propagating a slim state, under slogans like leading the country as a private firm. Support for entrepreneurs or building vast infrastructure projects were tailored to the preferences of former voters of right-wing parties.

However, these components were relatively shallow, making it difficult to situate ANO spatially on the ideological map. ANO opposed the classifications

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made by existing research categorizing populist parties into either left-wing, right-wing, or centrist dimensions, or looking at populism as a thin element of thick host ideologies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Consequently, some researchers have referred to parties, which elude these clear spatial categories as valence populists. As this chapter shows, ANO seems to fit this category well, considering how non-positional and ideologically-fluid it became. The existing research sees the ideological ambiguity of such parties as a result of intentionally blurring their positions within party systems (Zulianello and Larsen, 2024). This non-positional approach to political competition allows parties like ANO to pick strategies flexibly, adopting them based on the changing moods in society. This is a major advantage unavailable to competitors with clearly-defined positions.

EXTERNAL DIMENSION

Due to this chameleonic populist nature, ANO found no challenge in undergoing several ideological shifts. Since its participation in the ČSSD´s cabinet, it gradually started to adopt a strategy symbolized by growing focus on the left-leaning parties' voters with lower socioeconomic status. In its initial technocratic-populist stage, ANO emphasized the importance of a-political technical expertise. However, while in government coalitions with ČSSD and the Communists (KSČM), its priorities shifted: it adopted policy positions aimed at the electorate in the left spectrum. ANO's new socially-sensitive image included investment of significant political capital into social-welfare spending, an increase in the wages of state employees, and in particular a boost in pensions. It helped ANO to attract voters of its former political allies that lost their parliamentary representation, pushing ANO into opposition. This shift however shows how ANO did not hesitate to adjust its ideological and policy strategy to reflect demand for left-leaning voters.

Since then, the sentiments in Czech society has changed in the midst of new crises, notably the war in Ukraine and skyrocketing inflation. ANO's strategy reflected these changes. To capture growing discontent, ANO glanced at the far-right segment of voters. It included nationalist elements into its rhetoric. ANO joined the Patriots for Europe group, and strengthened its cooperation with figures like Viktor Orbán. ANO's shift is especially evident in its increasingly anti-Ukrainian discourse, often masked as a pro-peace stance. This evolution shows that ANO is flexible, adapting when advantageous, lacking clear position, fitting into the category of valence populists.

INTERNAL DIMENSION

ANO's above-mentioned ideological fluidity mirrors its ability to adapt to changing public mood, utilizing data from polls and surveys. In fact, ANO was one of the first Czech parties that understood the importance of mapping societal moods. It also learnt to use communication tools, working with public sentiments and tailoring its strategy to fit them. For this reason, ANO invested significant resources, hired experts in polling and built a social media team.

Beside reliance on experts and polls, internally ANO works as a well-oiled machine. From the very beginning, it was set up on the platform between the party leader's business and party structures, hence falling into the category of entrepreneurial and business-firm parties. This party model pioneered by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia was perhaps even perfected by ANO (Cirhan, 2023). It is reflected in the way territorial party structures were set alongside the business presence of the party leader's firms or in the restrictions on party membership (Cirhan and Stauber, 2018). Close ties with the party leader's business is also reflected in personnel overlap with ANO's elite (Cirhan and Kopecký, 2017).

Such a business-firm party setup, rewarding loyalty to the leader did not evolve much over time. It proved successful in controlling party organization, and in the efficiency of parting with those involved in scandals. It helped keep ANO's anti-corruption image alive. After ANO's first elections, a personnel turnover took place, as some of the elites that were important in the communication strategy, especially those with the intellectual background, left. ANO managed to generate a new generation of party elites from successful local politicians and from the state apparatus. Modification of party statutes signaled a tightening of the loop. The new rules gave significant veto powers to the leader—a sign of personalization at the cost of intra-party democracy.

IDEOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY AS A STRATEGY

The infiltration of corporate structures into ANO's organization allowed its elite to control the party and make decisions swiftly. This reflected directly in the external ideological shifts discussed above. ANO represents a specimen of populist party that is well-equipped to flexibly change its strategy based on the changing public mood. This quality has so far been highly electorally advantageous.

20. THE FUSION OF NATIONALISM AND COMMUNISM IN CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK DISCOURSE

FILIP ŽILJAK*

On January 10, 2024, Robert Fico, leader of Direction (Smer-SD), accompanied by his vice-chairman Ľuboš Blaha and SNS chairman Andrej Danko, visited the grave of Gustáv Husák. They paid tribute to the former communist leader on the 111th anniversary of his birth. Fico praised Husák for his role in the Slovak National Uprising (SNP), his resilience during imprisonment, and for ensuring national stability during the 1970s and 1980s Normalization period. Danko called him one of the most important Slovak personalities. A few months earlier, at the 79th anniversary of the SNP, Blaha had emphasized the communist contribution to the uprising and warned against "rainbow fascism." These events raise a fundamental question: why do self-proclaimed nationalists and social democrats celebrate figures associated with the communist regime and why does this resonate with the electorate?

This chapter argues that this fusion of nationalism and communism is not an ideological contradiction, but a populist strategy grounded in selective historical reinterpretation and affective political communication. Drawing on the concept of ideological flexibility (Stanley, 2008), it suggests that this fusion is possible because populism, as a "thin-centered" ideology, allows for the instrumental combination of seemingly contradictory ideological elements. Furthermore, the resonance of national-communist rhetoric today can be partially explained by the persistence of what Buzalka (2018) describes as "post-peasant" memory—a nostalgic understanding of the people's economy rooted in late socialist modernization.

NATIONALISM, COMMUNISM AND POPULISM

Populism constructs politics as binary logic between the pure "people" and the corrupt "elite." Its ideological thinness allows it to combine with other, often contradictory, ideologies such as nationalism or socialism (Stanley, 2008). While Laclau in his original essay (1978) attempted to ground populism in

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class antagonism, critics such as Stanley (2008) have pointed out that the failure to consider "the people" as an ambiguous and heterogeneous subject. This tension makes populism fundamentally different from class-based ideologies like communism, which are rooted in materialist analysis and fixed social categories. As such, scholars have questioned whether populism can genuinely align with ideologies like Marxism-Leninism that emphasize structural and economic explanations of power. A similar debate exists around the relationship between populism and fascism—despite superficial rhetorical overlaps, key ideological divergences remain (e.g., Eatwell, 2017). These discussions underscore the need to critically assess how populist actors instrumentalize fragments of more rigid ideologies in pursuit of contemporary political aims. The fusion of nationalism and communism in Slovakia therefore should not be understood as a coherent ideological fusion but rather as a populist strategy of selective historical reinterpretation and emotional appeal.

SLOVAK NATIONAL COMMUNISM AND POST-PEASANT NOSTALGIA

This strategy draws on historical precedents. In the Czechoslovak context, the so-called "National Communists" were Slovak communists advocating for greater national autonomy, federalization, or even secession. After the communist takeover in 1948, these figures were marginalized and later imprisoned but regained prominence following their rehabilitation in 1963. After 1968, during the Normalization period, Slovak communists gained significant power. Slovakia officially became a federal unit and unlike its Czech counterpart, it experienced relative national development reflected not only in economic but also in populational and cultural growth (Rychlík, 2002, p. 20). However, this historical experience does not resonate primarily because of its association with communism. Rather, it evokes a form of post-socialist nostalgia grounded in the lived experience of social stability and national advancement. Buzalka (2018) argues that the appeal of such memory is not rooted in nostalgia for the socialist/communist system per se, but in what he calls the "post-peasant people's economy." This economy was an unintentional product of late socialist modernization of Slovakia; merging industrial development with pre-modern peasant structures such as "informal networks, familism and high level of self-subsistence" (Buzalka, 2018, p. 1001). For a large part of the Slovak electorate, especially in rural or post-industrial regions, this memory continues to shape perceptions of economic stability, justice and social cohesion.

The current populist actors—like Fico, Blaha and Danko—revive this memory through symbolic acts (e.g., commemorating Husák, highlighting the

role of communists in the SNP) and rhetorical strategies that fuse anti-liberal nationalism with socially conservative and economically leftist themes. As it was the case with Blaha, they emphasize the communist legacy of anti-fascism, solidarity and class resistance, while simultaneously framing their message in nationalist and culturally conservative terms. This flexible populist narrative enables the mobilization of a broad electoral base. Primarily, former industrial workers and people living in the rural parts of Slovakia; those who do not only feel like losers of economic transformation and are alienated by liberal cosmopolitanism but those who feel shared nostalgia for a post-peasant economic model.

NATIONALISM AND COMMUNISM AS A STRATEGIC COLLECTION OF SYMBOLIC AND AFFECTIVE RESOURCES

In conclusion, the Slovak case demonstrates how populist discourse can fuse elements of nationalism and communism not as a coherent ideology but as a strategic collection of symbolic and affective resources. This fusion is made possible by the thin-centered nature of populism, and it resonates because of the enduring appeal of post-peasant memory. Rather than resolving ideological contradictions, populist actors strategically navigate them—mobilizing selected fragments of national and communist narratives to evoke a sense of cultural belonging, historical legitimacy, and economic justice. Recognizing this fusion as a populist logic, rather than a paradox, allows us to move beyond binary labels and better understand how contemporary political actors mobilize history and identity to construct political legitimacy and popular support in post-socialist contexts.

21. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

PETRA GUASTI

The second part of the volume explores the variety of populist positions. The contributions shed light on three main aspects: the characteristics of right-wing populism, other ideological varieties, and their communicative and emotional components.

Populist radical right parties can change their core positions over time. As Arianna Giovannini and Davide Vampa show, despite a surge in support between 2018 and 2019, Matteo Salvini's Lega experienced a dramatic electoral decline due to the abandonment of its regionalist roots—alienating its historic electoral base and undermining the party's credibility. Conversely, Petr Voda explores how the populist radical right SPD adapts its national discourse to the local level, maintaining key populist themes such as anti-elitism and nativism, while adjusting its appeals to resonate with municipal concerns.

In the Italian context, Leonardo Puleo and Gianluca Piccolino warn against the misleading labelling of radical right parties as fascist, which obscures the real threats they pose to democracy. Francesca Feo further shows the complex relationship between radical right populism and feminism. In recent years, many populist radical right parties, traditionally skeptical or hostile toward feminism and promoting conservative views of gender roles, appear to align with gender equality using pseudo-feminist rhetoric. Feo explains this paradox through the concept of "femonationalism." Similarly, Marianna Griffini and Laura Montecchio highlight how Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni position themselves as defenders of women's rights, yet within a framework infused with reactionary and nativist ideological traits.

Marta Lorimer reveals the paradoxical relationship between the EU and radical right populist parties: although known for opposing supranational integration, the EU has inadvertently given them visibility, funding, and legitimacy, as shown in the case of France's RN. Jakub Wondreys distinguishes between the extreme and the radical right by analyzing their divergent positions on key international issues like the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and Russia's war on Ukraine, emphasizing ideological and strategic incentives behind their foreign policy stances. In the Italian context, Mara Morini explores the impact of the war in Ukraine on the positioning of Italian governing and opposition parties. Finally, Luke March argues that Putin, often labelled a

populist, is better described as a statist nationalist and imperialist who uses populism instrumentally and selectively, revealing the complexity of his political strategies.

These findings resonate with the Czech and Slovak cases discussed in this section. Jan Charvát maps the evolution of radical right movements in Czechia, showing how a fragmented and ideologically inconsistent scene gradually crystallized into a coherent, electorally viable political force. Tomáš Cirhan analyzes the transformation of ANO, originally founded as a technocratic, populist project, into a dominant populist party combining technocratic efficiency with personalized leadership and increasingly authoritarian tendencies. Filip Žiljak, focusing on Slovakia, examines how nationalist and communist legacies fused in the discourse of political actors like Robert Fico, blurring ideological boundaries and contributing to a specific form of illiberal statism. Aleš Michal's chapter on the sovereign citizens movement reveals how Czech and German branches mirror each other in their conspiratorial anti-state narratives, positioning themselves as anti-system actors beyond the conventional ideological spectrum.

Turning to other forms of populism, Wolfgang Muno and Christian Pfeiffer explore Latin American populism through the lens of Peronism, which blends elements of left-wing populism—especially a focus on social justice, workers' rights, and class-based identity—with a long trajectory of ideological shifts from its origins under Juan Domingo Perón through neoliberal and contemporary iterations. In the Netherlands, Matthijs Rooduijn and Sarah de Lange identify fertile ground for the resurgence of agrarian populism, once absent from Europe's political landscape. On valence and technocratic populism, Enrico Padoan critically assesses techno-populism through a comparison of Italy's M5S and Chile's PdG, while Kostiantyn Yanchenko explores three aspects of Zelensky's valence populism: its non-positional character, appeal structure, and fluctuating political relevance. In this context, Mattia Collini and Michel Perottino's chapter further contributes to the debate by tracing the evolution of left-wing populism, focusing on its ideological differentiation and nationalist turns in the European context, thus expanding the ideological palette explored in the volume.

Finally, while populists are often portrayed as emotional and opposed to rational mainstream politics, Donatella Bonansinga challenges the dichotomy between rationality and emotionality, arguing that all politics can be emotional. More broadly, Andrea Ceron, Silvia Decadri, and Fedra Negri show how populist rhetoric generates engagement: focusing on the Italian case, they find that populist communication increases the likelihood of posts going viral—even among non-populist voters. This emphasis on communication is echoed by Czech case studies: Collini and Perottino identify the emotional and antagonistic logic of left-wing populist discourse; Cirhan illustrates

ANO's communicative evolution from technocratic appeal to mass-personalized populism; and Voda shows how the SPD tailors populist appeals across different political arenas. Together, these contributions highlight that populists rely heavily on affective and symbolic communication to frame political conflict and mobilize supporters.

PART III
LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

This section shifts focus to the leadership and organization of populists. It debates whether all populist leaders are charismatic, analyzes perceptions of authenticity, the role of leadership on digital platforms, and celebrity politics. It explores organizational strategies of the radical right at the local level and investigates pathways to membership in these parties. Furthermore, it examines the relationship between left-wing populism and social movements, populism in digital environments, and the emergence of chatbot politicians.

1. MYTH: ALL POPULIST LEADERS ARE "CHARISMATIC"

ADRIAN FAVERO

Here, I address a myth related to populism which is described as a micro-organizational factor within parties (Pedahzur and Brichta, 2002)—the charisma of populist leaders (Volk, 2023). In the past, political and military leaders were repeatedly described as charismatic, as were the caudillos in 19th century Latin America (De la Torre, 2020). Today, we often associate charisma with populist leaders. On the right, we have Silvio Berlusconi from Forza Italia (Newell, 2009), Marine Le Pen from the French Rassemblement Nationale (Geva, 2020), and Republican US president Donald Trump (Light, 2023). Similarly, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Weyland, 2003) or Brazil's current president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) on the left have also earned this "charismatic" label (French, 2022).

Many studies on charismatic leadership refer to Max Weber's theory, which asserts that leaders are not intrinsically charismatic. Instead, followers recognize the leader's extraordinary personal attributes and invest them with charismatic authority. But this is precisely the point where conceptualizations of charisma become complicated.

We sometimes equate charisma with personal characteristics such as self-confidence or assertiveness (Klein and House, 1995). Roger Eatwell (2006), for instance, mentions behavioral aspects when examining former fascist leaders in Europe. Such aspects include an idealistic missionary vision, a symbiotic hierarchy with followers combined with self-presentation as "ordinary people," and the demonization of internal and external enemies. Some argue that charisma is more about the rhetorical skills and the leaders' style and capacity to inspire the people (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Conversely, charismatic leadership has also been described as part of a disruptive performance, combining political incorrectness, discrimination, and charisma (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014).

This plethora of assumed attributes shows that scholars largely agree on the nature of charismatic appeal. It is, by most definitions, followers' validation of a leader's qualities. However, scholars disagree on the actual qualities that make a leader appealing and that create a charismatic bond with their followers (Weber, 1968).

CHARISMATIC LEADERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS

Do populist parties require the presence of a charismatic leader? Alluding to Weber's understanding of charisma, some scholars (Klein and House, 1995) describe this presence as an element that ignites followers' commitment and loyalty. Eatwell (2006) further distinguished between types of charisma. The first of these is coterie charisma, the leader's appeal to the inner core of followers. Then there is centripetal charisma, or attracting broad support from the masses. Finally, there is cultic charisma, the creation of an almost religious aura around the leader.

In contrast, some scholars (Mudde, 2004) identify the charismatic leader as an element that facilitates rather than defines populism and its success. These scholars believe that other aspects, such as the centralization of power to maintain political authority, matter more (Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016). Taking a follower perspective, some studies (Metz and Plesz, 2023) find that populism makes people want charisma in their leaders. However, populism does not necessarily establish an emotional bond with specific leaders. Similarly, Takis Pappas (2016) argues that we should not treat a leader's charisma as an essential aspect of populism, but should acknowledge that it still helps populist parties to be electorally successful.

What these studies show is the nuanced nature of charismatic leadership in the direct interaction with followers and as an element for populist parties' success. The charismatic bond is not stable. We need to be cautious in carefully analyzing charismatic leadership as the product of populist leaders, their followers, and the circumstances.

FOUNDING FIGURES VS CHARISMATIC TAKEOVERS

Another important aspect in the analysis of charismatic leadership is party organization. Some leaders founded their party, and are therefore synonymous with its very existence. This group includes Umberto Bossi and Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord), Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom), and, to a certain extent, Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia).

Others have effectively taken over and radicalized an existing party. Some of these include Frauke Petry of Alternative für Deutschland, Christoph Blocher of the Swiss People's Party, and Jörg Haider of the Freedom Party of Austria.

The difference between the former "personal" or "charismatic" (Panebianco, 1988) parties and the latter "personalized" parties affects the charismatic authority these leaders have. Voters are more likely to regard a founding figure as charismatic because they embody the party. However, this position

may also prevent further party institutionalization. Charismatic leaders are often described as a hindrance because this process requires depersonalization.

PARTY STRUCTURE MATTERS

Some studies (Pedahzur and Brichta, 2002) go a step further, arguing that institutionalization of such parties is possible. However, these parties remain vulnerable if they cannot routinize the party leader's charisma. In my study (Favero, 2022) on charismatic leadership in the radicalized Swiss People's Party, I found that Blocher lost strength and authority over time. The populist party structure he built, meanwhile, remains strong. However, the party has still not fully decoupled from Blocher. It is currently in a situation where it walks a fine line between personalization and depersonalization, and between seeing the leader simultaneously as an asset and a liability.

In short, charismatic leadership in populist parties is a contested concept. The usefulness of this concept has been the subject of much debate. Nevertheless, charismatic leaders do influence "their" parties in one way or another—positively and negatively. They will continue to be the perceptible heads of their parties. It is therefore essential to understand the charismatic relationship between them and their followers, while also being conceptually accurate when labelling populist leaders charismatic.

2. NARENDRA MODI: INDIA'S "VULNERABLE" STRONGMAN POPULIST LEADER

PROMA RAYCHAUDHURY

Populist actors continue to become well-integrated into mainstream party systems across the globe. This is also true in India, where the party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been in power since 2014. The BJP is a populist radical-right party (Ammassari, Fossati, and McDonnell, 2023). It is affiliated with a gamut of Hindu right-wing associations collectively designated the Sangh Parivar (Sangh Family). The BJP is distinct from Western Europe's relatively new radical populist (left- and right-wing) parties. Grounding the BJP's ideological foundations is the exclusivist doctrine of Hindutva, which offers an ethnocultural definition of a Hindu (Jyotirmaya 2015). Hindutva propagates a vision of India as an essentially Hindu nation; a Hindu Rashtra. As a result, it casts Muslims and Christians as aliens to India's cultural ethos.

The BJP has been a dominant partner in governing coalitions in the past. But under Narendra Modi's personalized leadership, it has enjoyed spectacular electoral successes. Since 2014, the BJP has consistently strengthened its vote share. Analysts describe this period of BJP electoral dominance as India's "Fourth Party System" (Vaishnav and Hintson, 2019). Modi's popularity endures amid aggressive nationalism, Hindutva, technocratic managerialism, a system of direct benefit transfers to economically marginalized citizens, and a pliant mainstream media. All this has enabled the BJP to weather the challenges of anti-incumbency and economic underperformance. Modi's leadership has even managed to survive global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his leadership style, Modi offers an amalgam of nativist populism. He emphasizes Hindutva and hyper-nationalism, and styles himself a technocrat. He practices a style of governance that is corporate investment-friendly. The party and its leader continue to consolidate and expand their support base to newer demographics (Chhibber and Verma, 2019). This includes voters who belong to oppressed castes, women, and young people. The BJP's electoral consolidation and expansion persist even as India's ruling regime faces criticism for its harassment of religious minorities, dissidents, and the opposition (Filkins, 2019).

MODI THE SELF-STYLED POPULIST

Modi's effective communication skills are key to the resilience of the BJP regime. He has fashioned himself as a populist: a combination of a non-elite outsider in Indian (and global) politics, a strongman, a practitioner of pro-business 'good governance', and a political renunciate (Vittorini, 2022).

As research on the body politics of populist leaders suggests, Modi's leadership performance forges an embodied synecdochic connection with "the people" he claims to represent (Casullo and Colalongo, 2022). His sartorial style deliberately differs from other leaders' established modes of dress. Modi is a chameleon. Sometimes, he appears in colorful clothing that represents neoliberal aspirations, sometimes in the austere style of Hindu ascetics.

Modi is open to donning the traditional headgear of different religious and regional communities, and this has deepened his support base. But his refusal to wear a Muslim-style skullcap has also burnished Modi's image as a Hindu Hriday Samrat (Emperor of Hindu Hearts) among his core right-wing supporters (Chatterji, 2019). Modi's symbolic dress choice enables him to sustain an unmediated connection strengthened by vishwas (trust) with the people he represents (Sircar, 2020). Modi imagines his support base as morally righteous, and he expects his supporters to rise to his defense, in social media and elsewhere.

Such emotional attachments give Modi crucial advantages, during and beyond election cycles. For committed voters, Modi and his regime embody the promise of achhe din (good days) ahead. Skeptics, on the other hand, see Modi as presiding over inflation, unemployment, malnourishment, and more.

One popular state-sponsored anecdote claims Modi worked 18–19 hours a day during the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Such tales are intended as propaganda to counter the negative publicity generated by the ruling regime's poor pandemic management (Krishnan, 2021). Recent BJP victories in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat suggest that spreading such anecdotes does indeed work.

HYPER-MASCULINITY COMBINED WITH VULNERABILITY

Emotional connections among populist leaders and their supporters are driven primarily by vulnerability. So while we should examine populist leaders' strongman posturing, we must also consider their displays of vulnerability (Chaudhury, 2022). Modi often sheds tears in public. But such shows of

1 https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pm-modi-working-18-19-hours-to-tackle-coronavirus-surge-piyush-goyal-116187934455517.html

emotion don't detract from his hyper-masculine image (Vittorini, 2022). On the contrary, in his supporters' eyes, crying humanizes Modi, accentuating his vulnerability. When Modi cries in public, it is often at rallies during which he hurls demagogic insults and denounces perceived conspiracies against him.[2] These emotionally charged performances are designed to provoke his audience to rise up against rival political parties such as the Indian National Congress and civil society dissidents. Such performances have proven effective mobilizers of voters (Jha, 2019), and shields against democratic accountability—particularly in moments of crisis.

The gendered implication of displays of vulnerability by populist leaders can complicate their hyper-masculine image. These displays also shed light on the interdependence between populist leaders and their followers. They can offer answers to the puzzle of resilient populist regimes, and help destabilize the leader-centrism of populism studies (Maiguashca, 2019).

2 https://www.financialexpress.com/elections/pm-modi-lists-out-abuses-hurled-at-him-says-congress-did-not-even-spare-his-mother-1572354/

3. POPULISM, (PERCEPTION OF) AUTHENTICITY, AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

DIEGO CECCOBELLI

Over the past two decades, political communication has increasingly been recognized as a "privileged battleground" for populist actors, offering them a comparative advantage over their rivals (De Vreese et al., 2018). This is due, in part, to populism's adaptability to various media logics that define today's hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017).

The current media environment in which political actors operate is defined by the coexistence of "old" media logic associated with traditional mass media (Mazzoleni, 2008) and "new" logic inherent in digital and social media platforms (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). This emerging logic, some argue, align particularly well with the communicative styles and ideological tenets of populist movements (Manucci, 2017). On the one hand, populist politicians have proven adept at attracting attention from legacy media, often even shaping its agenda. On the other hand, their perceived advantage in the digital sphere is amplified by the rapid expansion of social platforms characterized by simplified messaging and a proclivity for polarization (Gerbaudo, 2018).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULISM AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Within this context, scholars have hypothesized the existence of a distinct "populist political communication" style—one that effectively conveys the core tenets of populist ideology through specific rhetorical and strategic elements (Reinemann et al., 2016). This style has gained exponential visibility across major digital platforms, utilized by both political elites and the public.

A parallel and increasingly salient debate concerns the notion of authenticity—a concept that has garnered renewed interest amid the digital transformation of the public sphere (Enli, 2015). Some scholars posit that a political actor's ability to be perceived as authentic—genuine, trustworthy, and transparent—represents a new "Holy Grail" of political communication, key to both electoral success and the retention of power. Conversely, the loss of this perception is seen as potentially fatal to a political career, particularly in systems where power is conferred through popular vote.

While reducing complex political phenomena—such as electoral victories or governance capacity—to a single variable is clearly reductive, (the perception of) authenticity has nonetheless emerged as a focal point in contemporary research on political legitimacy and performance (Ceccobelli & Di Gregorio, 2022).

THE PERCEPTION OF AUTHENTICITY

In recent years, the perception of authenticity has become the subject of a vibrant scholarly debate, particularly within the study of political communication. It is widely acknowledged that credibility and trustworthiness are essential attributes for any political figure. However, the mechanisms through which political actors gain and maintain a reputation for authenticity appear to have undergone significant transformation in the digital era (Luebke, 2021).

Notably, authenticity has become increasingly difficult to preserve due to what has been termed the "cannibalization of leadership" (Salmon, 2017)—a dynamic in which political figures are rapidly abandoned by their constituencies, often due to the unfulfilled hyperbolic promises they felt compelled to make to gain electoral traction.

Italy offers compelling examples of this phenomenon: the Democratic Party under Matteo Renzi received 41% of the vote in the 2014 European elections, only to lose ground dramatically thereafter; Matteo Salvini's Lega experienced a similar rise and fall around the 2019 elections; Mario Monti's transformation from "savior of the nation" to the leader of a party unable to cross the 10% threshold in 2013 further underscores the volatility of political legitimacy. These cases illustrate how the perception of authenticity—highly sought after—is also exceedingly fragile.

BEYOND POPULISM

However, authenticity should not be understood as merely a derivative of populism. While many scholars suggest a close association between populism and authenticity—arguing that populist actors are especially adept at cultivating a perception of sincerity and proximity to "the people" (Enli, 2024)—this correlation is not exclusive.

In fact, numerous successful political figures who do not align with populist ideology are nonetheless perceived as authentic. Leaders such as Pedro Sánchez, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Justin Trudeau, and historically, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and Jacinda Ardern, exemplify this phenomenon.

It thus remains an open question whether scholarly discussions around populism—particularly within political communication—will continue to intersect with the literature on (the perception of) authenticity. While authenticity has become a prominent analytical lens, it is unlikely to displace populism altogether. The term "populism" continues to wield considerable discursive power, attracting sustained attention from both the media and academic communities.

4. POPULISM AND PLATFORM LEADERSHIP

FEDERICA NUNZIATA

The rise of *platform leaders* is one of the most significant phenomena in the recent political landscape (Nunziata, 2021). This type of political leadership, shaped by both personalization and digitization (Calise, Musella, 2019), mobilizes grassroots support through unconventional digital strategies. Platform leaders operate in synergy with digital platforms, which are crucial for building consensus, relying on organizational structures that are independent of—yet parallel to—traditional parties.

Donald Trump is a key example of this phenomenon, having effectively used the online environment to galvanize support. His ascent represents the clearest case of platform leadership. In Italy, Matteo Salvini pioneered this model by transforming the League and boosting its electoral success through major investments in new technologies (Zulianello, 2021). On a broader scale, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India have demonstrated the pivotal role of digital platforms in contemporary politics, though their campaigns have also raised concerns about the use of computational propaganda during elections.

A core feature of platform leadership is populism as a style of communication (Jagers, Walgrave, 2007). This discourse tends to equate the leader's image with the very essence of democracy itself (Dal Lago, 2017). In my doctoral thesis (Nunziata, 2022), I examined the specific characteristics of the populist style adopted by platform leaders, focusing on the narratives of Trump, Bolsonaro, and Modi as case studies.

DONALD TRUMP'S "VULGARI ELOQUENTIA"

During the election campaign that led to his (almost) unexpected victory and his rise to the presidency of the United States, Donald Trump skillfully employed a populist style of communication. His famous slogan, MAGA (*Make America Great Again*), evoked a nostalgic image of the American *heartland*, a past condition to be restored in order to address the problems of the present (Taggart, 2000). His rhetoric resonated with a neglected segment of the electorate that "thinks and speaks in a language, and with values, that are simply opposed to what is considered common sense" (Calise, 2020). Trump

positioned himself as the voice of the silent majority: those left behind by globalization and the post-industrial economy. By invoking national greatness and condemning those who threatened it, he appealed to a population yearning for the old American dream. He attacked a corrupt political elite, portrayed as incapable of addressing citizens' needs and beholden to special interests.

In addition to populism, Trump built a strong and recognizable personal brand. His communication style—marked by exclamations, capital letters, and a simple, informal, and politically incorrect tone—reinforced his image of authenticity (Kreis, 2017; Ott, 2017). This sense of genuineness was further supported by a discursive style reminiscent of Dante's *vulgari eloquentia*, featuring deliberate use of attacks, insults, and profanity (Stromer-Galley, 2019). His rhetoric fit seamlessly into the digital media landscape, which was central to the communication and organization of his successful campaign.

"O MITO" BOLSONARO

Within the context of a deep political crisis (Nocera, 2019), the 2018 Brazilian election was notably shaped by the Manichean logic of "us against them." The rise of Jair Bolsonaro is also linked to the effective use of populist rhetoric, particularly on digital platforms, which served as the main battleground during that election. Capitalizing on the electorate's growing disaffection with political parties, Bolsonaro delivered a message that blended extreme nationalism, militarism, a staunch anti-left stance, and conspicuous religiosity. He pledged to combat social movements, gender ideology, and what he described as excessive sympathy for minority groups. He demonized the political left, portraying it as the root of all societal problems. At the same time, he idealized the military regime of the past, and emphasized religious values, encapsulated in his campaign slogan: "Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos" ("Brazil above everything, God above everyone").

Bolsonaro crafted an image of himself as a hero, outraged by a corrupt system he vowed to change (Machado, Pimentel, Garcia, 2021). This heroic, vulnerable persona, both righteous and wounded, resonated deeply with supporters. In return, he was nicknamed "O Mito" ("The Myth"), reinforcing the perception of a strong leader capable of restoring order and resolving the national crisis.

"MODI-FIED" INDIA

Populism was a defining feature of Narendra Modi's political strategy. In 2014, he broke a long period of coalition governance, and in 2019, he was re-elected with a landslide victory and a record increase in both vote share and parliamentary seats. Modi placed himself at the center of the BJP's narrative, which was deeply rooted in digital engagement. His campaign set new standards for political communication in India, combining personal branding with *high-tech* populism (Jaffrelot, 2015; Zain, 2019).

Modi strengthened his bond with the electorate by embracing anti-elitism and portraying himself as an outsider to the political establishment. Central elements of his rhetoric included attacks on minorities and anti-Pakistani sentiment, both instrumental in fostering a unified Hindu majority identity that transcended caste divisions. While the 2014 campaign focused on the development of the country, the 2019 campaign shifted toward security, adopting a more nationalist tone grounded in *Hindutva*—an ideology defining Indian culture in Hindu terms—through exclusionary rhetoric aimed at Muslims.

Modi presented himself as the sole strong leader capable of protecting the nation from terrorism and securing international respect, something he claimed India had historically lacked (Sinha, 2017). By dominating the digital space, Modi became not only a political figure but also a brand, a style, and a populist project that ultimately realized the goal of a "Modi-fied" India.

THE LEAST COMMON DENOMINATOR

Although expressed through different narratives and shaped by distinct national contexts, populism emerges as the common denominator among successful leadership strategies across diverse political and geographic settings. Through digital populism—reflected in their styles, formats, and content—platform leaders expand their pervasive presence in the online sphere, within what is known as the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). At the same time, they foster political consensus-building offline.

5. POPULISM AND CELEBRITY POLITICS

DONATELLA CAMPUS

Politicians increasingly act like celebrities, whether in music, entertainment or television. John Street (2004) defined political celebrity in the early 2000s and distinguished between two primary categories: real politicians, who are portrayed as celebrities, and well-known individuals from non-political domains who use their celebrity to further political or humanitarian causes or to back political parties or candidates.

Politicians who become celebrities become the main characters in entertainment-focused media, appearing on the pages of tabloid magazines, lifestyle and gossip magazines, and appearing as guests on television shows that primarily cover *soft news*. Private life is the main source of narrative fuel in these media arenas. For politicians, this is indistinguishable from what happens to celebrities, whose public interest extends beyond their career endeavors to other facets of their lives.

In a broader sense, politicians are at the epicenter of a process known as "intimization" (Stanyer, 2013), which introduces family, lifestyle, and private space content into the mediatized public sphere. The same politicians use their social accounts to talk about themselves without the intermediation of newspapers. They actually post a wide variety of pictures, including ones of their holidays, ones with their kids, as well as pictures of their meals and pets. They share almost every detail of their everyday lives with their followers, some of whom may be regarded as real fans.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULISM AND CELEBRITY

What connection exists between celebrity and populism? Two levels of analysis must be distinguished in this case. The first relates to the two phenomena' shared origin and their incomplete overlap. According to Street (2015), celebrity is part of a larger trend known as the popularization of politics, which believes that pop culture, and the entertainment industry can be used to spread political ideas (Van Zoonen, 2005; Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). The populist focus on "the people" as the representatives of the ideals to be propagated naturally aligns with this. However, as noted by John Street (2015), the popularization of politics is far more expansive than populism because it can

be aligned with other political approaches and ideologies. This explains why politicians who do not fit into the populist category can still use pop communication techniques and become celebrities.

The character of populist leadership is the second level that links populism and celebrity. Undoubtedly, some well-known politicians are not associated with populist movements or parties. Nonetheless, populist leaders with celebrity status are not uncommon. The primary explanation is that if the populist leader is elected to represent "the people," they will undoubtedly have to show that they understand what the people like and what they experience on a daily basis. The relationship between the two factors is particularly related to populist leaders' communication decisions, specifically the media outlets they decide to support in order to strengthen their image and deliver their message.

POPULISTS AND POPULAR MEDIA

Populists find it useful to use popular, non-elite media and to blur the boundaries between entertainment and politics (Moffitt, 2016, p. 81). Thus, media outlets and TV shows that cover pop culture and celebrity news, as well as the infotainment industry, are ideally suited to populists' self-presentation style. They may show up in these situations in their most impromptu form, as a typical member "of the population." However, it is still true that for a populist leader, it might make sense to adopt the persona of the *everyday political celebrity* (Wood et al., 2016). This means that rather than portraying oneself as a unique individual, one should aim for direct interaction with the public, both in person and on social media, and even disclose personal flaws if doing so promotes identification.

It is also necessary to take into account that a common feature of populism is the subversion of more formal and conventional forms of communication, sometimes to the extent of exhibiting what Benjamin Moffitt (2016) refers to as "bad manners." This also explains the resonance that can arise between politicians looking for platforms for self-expression and the general public, as popular outlets and formats, those more likely to spectacularize political content, are more likely to embrace colloquial and colorful language and media seeking to increase their audience and boost ratings.

POPULISM AND OUTSIDER LEADERSHIP

The fact that some populist leaders were already well-known outsiders before entering politics is another factor supporting the indisputable link between

populism and celebrity. Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi, for instance, rose to prominence in other fields before beginning their political careers in this hub of attention and notoriety. However, they are not the only ones. This type of trajectory has been made possible in multiple instances by the entertainment industry. For example, Volodymyr Zelensky, the current president of Ukraine, portrayed a president who had been elected as a champion of renewal in the television series *Servant of the People* before entering politics.

As a matter of fact, an outsider leadership is not only acceptable but also arguably more qualified than others due to populism's strong anti-establishment orientation, which is characterized as mistrust of a professional political class. Thus, even if not all outsider leaders are populists, and not all outsiders were celebrities prior to entering politics, the combination of these factors can therefore prove to be a winning card, especially in the early stages of a populist movement or party, particularly in those political actors where the figure of the leader plays a central role.

6. POPULISM: GOING BEYOND THE MYTH OF THE CHARISMATIC LEADER

SABINE VOLK

Who is a populist? Most of us first think of flamboyant figures, typically men, such as Donald Trump, Jean-Marie Le Pen, or Hugo Chávez. With a political style that often features harsh rhetoric (Wodak, 2021), bad manners (Moffitt, 2016), and transgressive political style (Aiolfi, 2022), such politicians frequently hit the headlines.

Fewer of us will associate populism with social movements and grassroots actors. But ignoring these elements risks overlooking some empirically interesting case studies. It also means we miss out on novel insights gained by looking through the lens of collective action.

A bottom-up approach can contribute significantly to our understanding of the phenomenon of populism. In particular, we should adopt the framing approach developed in social movement studies (Benford and Snow, 2000).

THE MYTH OF THE CHARISMATIC LEADER

The concept of "charismatic leadership" does not form part of the seminal definitions of populism (Mudde, 2004). Yet, the specter of the charismatic leader that appeals, top-down, to the masses, haunts theoretical accounts and empirical studies. Borrowing from Zulianello (see introduction), it constitutes a further die-hard myth about populism. The concept of charismatic leadership appears more than fifty times in the Oxford Handbook of Populism (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Surely, the concept of charismatic leadership has many merits. Reinhard Heinisch's contribution to this series shows how the empirical focus on charismatic leaders advanced the study of populism (Heinisch, 2023). Such leaders often "reshape and reconstitute the polity, making populism an inexorable part of the power game in national politics."

NEW CASE STUDIES

Nevertheless, the tenacious emphasis on charismatic leaders as key agents of populism obscures the fact that other forms of populist mobilization exist

and have political impact. The Oxford Handbook contains a chapter by Paris Aslanidis on Populism and Social Movements. In it, Aslanidis (2017) lists some of these impactful populist collective actors who claim to represent the people, and who stoke antagonism between the people and elites. Some of the earliest, much-cited empirical instances of populism are the nineteenth-century US People's Party (Populist Party) and the Russian Narodniks. These movements are associated with grassroots mobilization rather than charismatic leadership. Populist movements helped topple late-communist Central European regimes, notably Polish Solidarity and the Monday Demonstrations in East Germany. In more recent years, populist collective actors on both ends of the political spectrum have shaped politics across the globe. In Europe, key examples are left-wing anti-austerity movements, such as Spain's Podemos, and right-wing anti-immigration protests, like PEGIDA in Germany (Volk, 2022).

THE POPULIST MASTER FRAME

Research into populist grassroots actors yields important theoretical insights (Volk and Weisskircher, 2024). Examining such actors through the lens of collective action allows populism scholars to borrow from the elaborate theoretical and methodological toolkit of social movement studies. Social movement theory and methodology offer us a useful definition of populism as a discursive frame; or, to put it in social movement studies parlance, a 'collective action frame' (Aslanidis, 2016).

Discursive frames are patterns of political interpretation used by social movement organizations to mobilize participants (Snow et al., 1986). When a frame is rather generic, social movement scholars speak of a "master frame" that resonates with large numbers of social movement organizations and activists (Benford, 2013). Arguably, populism is one such generic master frame. Populism may even be the master frame of political mobilization, so ideologically malleable that it appeals equally to people from the left and right of the political spectrum.

The advantage of the framing approach is that it helps us move away from discussing what populism is to what populism does. And what populism does is to mobilize people, either to take part in elections or take to the streets (Castelli Gattinara, Froio, and Pirro, 2022). Significantly, it allows us to explain populism's mobilizing potential even in contexts of "closed" political opportunity structures (Kriesi et al., 1998), such as when the political context should prevent the rise of populism (Jonge, 2021). This framing approach also helps us understand populism's ideological malleability. The populist frame constantly integrates new issues, ranging from classic themes such

as economic policy (on the left) and immigration (on the right) to pandemic politics. Populist framing can arrange such diverse issues into a (partially) coherent pattern of interpretation.

AN EMPHASIS ON POPULIST PERFORMANCE

Seeing populism through a lens of collective action draws attention to the performative dimension of populism. How can populist actors embody populism's key category, the people, rather than merely appealing to it rhetorically? I have conducted research into the right-wing populist group PEGIDA in Germany (Volk, 2020). My research discovered that the performative angle of public event analysis sheds light on some of the many ways a populist collective actor sustains its claim to represent the people by (aiming at) embodying it on the streets (Moffitt, 2016). Non-institutional populist actors differ from "bad-mannered" but powerful populist leaders. They need to display, at least to some extent, what Charles Tilly (2004) calls WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment). Among these classic criteria for the public acceptance of mobilization, displaying "numbers" is a key concern for all types of grassroots mobilization. But it becomes a crucial factor for movements that claim to represent the social whole of the people rather than just a social minority.

A NEW (PARTIAL) ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Researching populism beyond charismatic leaders promises new empirical and theoretical insights, especially into what populism does, and how it does it (Volk, 2022). It is high time scholars devised a new framework capable of analyzing the diverse organizational forms of populism. They include top-down and bottom-up populism, institutional and grassroots populism, electoral and "street" populism, individual (leader) and collective (movement) populism. Based on comparative work, this framework would empower researchers to distinguish systematically between the vast array of populist manifestations.

7. LEGITIMACY AND VISIBILITY: THE MAINSTREAMING OF THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

ADRIAN FAVERO

Political actors, the media, the public, and even scholars frequently make a distinction between the populist radical right parties and the so-called "mainstream parties" when discussing them (de Lange, 2012). In order to shed light on an area that has not received enough attention in the literature, in this contribution I examine the various meanings of the terms "mainstream" and "mainstreaming." Moreover, I look at the ways that consolidated populist radical right parties actively work to legitimize their ideologies locally to highlight an aspect overshadowed in literature.

POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES ENTER THE MAINSTREAM

In many European countries, radical right-wing populist parties have successfully participated in coalition governments, such as in Switzerland, Italy and Austria, or have acquired informal power by supporting center-right governments, for example in Norway, The Netherlands and Denmark (Zaslove, 2012). In the same way, these parties have grown in political power and are no longer marginal in Central and Eastern Europe. Many have gained legitimacy in mainstream politics and are now governing actors.

Furthermore, as in the cases of Poland and Hungary, some have challenged the liberal democratic order (Pytlas, 2018). The question of how populist radical right parties gain legitimacy while advancing their ideology is brought up by these developments (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2015).

KEY CONCEPTS

To prevent conceptual misunderstanding, it is important to distinguish between the terms "mainstream" (noun or adjective) and "mainstreaming" (verb). In particular, mainstream parties are referred to as actors that generally hold centrist positions and/or participate in government (Meguid, 2008) or that have widespread electoral support (Odmalm, Hepburn, 2017). It has also been used to differentiate them from radical actors such as anti-establishment parties (Abedi, 2004) or as anti-system parties that oppose

the status quo (Zulianello, 2019a). However, mainstreaming can mean different things if viewed as a process. According to Akkerman et al. (2016), it can indicate the radicalization of mainstream parties toward more divisive ideological stances or, on the other hand, the movement of radical parties toward more accepted and normalized stances.

According to other academics, mainstreaming is the process through which more conventional parties and the media take up the stances of populist radical right parties. Voters typically favor the original over the copy, so this tactic frequently fails (Lewandowsky, Wagner, 2023). Moreover, the same radical right-wing populist parties actively seek to mainstream and normalize their political message and ideology, resorting to discursive tactics such as contrasting good people with bad migrants, the corrupt political establishment or the urban elite (Cammaerts, 2018). Reducing aggression without changing the party's ideology is an additional choice. Geert Wilders, the leader of the populist radical right party PVV, softened his rhetoric during the recent national election campaign in the Netherlands, but he remained steadfast on his stances against immigration, the EU, and Islam.

He may have achieved an unprecedented victory in the 2023 elections thanks to this tactic (The Guardian, 2023).

However, little is known about how the national political mainstream uses the organizational traits of populist radical right parties that are already in power to further support the mainstreaming process.

MAINSTREAMING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Mainstreaming mechanisms are typically examined at the national level, as the above mentioned examples indicate. Nonetheless, some populist radical right parties spend a lot of money keeping up a high degree of organizational ties with their local and regional branches, which helps them reach citizens and spread their messages (Favero, 2021; Hatakka, 2021; Sijstermans, 2021; Zulianello, 2021). Analyzing these parties' subnational legitimation and mainstreaming strategies is crucial in this regard, particularly given the lack of research on their local activities and perceived importance (Akkerman, de Lange, Rooduijn, 2016; Paxton, Peace, 2021).

However, the local level, the one closest to people's concerns and daily lives, offers a crucial analytical perspective for analyzing the tactics used by populist radical rights to appeal to the general public. A few case studies have looked at the populist radical right subnational mainstreaming. For example, Carlo Ruzza and Laura Balbo (2013) explain how the Lega made investments in its local institutionalization by focusing on learning the skills necessary to effectively manage local administrations and establishing connections with

social institutions and political actors in the area. In their examination of the RN in France, Fred Paxton and Timothy Peace (2021, p. 546) note "the strategic use of local government [...] to project an image of moderation." They specifically point out that, in contrast to other parties and the local press, the RN makes an effort to portray itself locally as the genuine representative of the people.

Adrian Favero and Mattia Zulianello recently conducted a comparative study in which they analyzed the Lega in Italy and the SVP-UDC in Switzerland, two mainstream actors with a long history of involvement in national government, to investigate the motivations behind populist radical right parties' local activism. Despite favoring distinct strategies, most notably, the Lega's extensive use of social media, both parties deal with the local population with the primary goal of increasing their visibility and, above all, their legitimacy.

Importantly, the results demonstrate that the Lega and the SVP-UDC still see themselves as the objects of public stigmatization even though they are actors who have been assimilated into the political mainstream as a result of their combined experience as national government forces. Local grassroots activism is crucial in combating this. As a matter of fact, "both the Lega and the SVP link their pursuit of legitimacy to a populist understanding of their role in society, emphasizing closeness to the people and the goal of addressing their needs, thanks to the presence of activists on the territory." Thus, local activism allows the populist radical right to promote the notion that their activists and members are regular people who are dedicated to supporting their communities rather than extremists (Favero, Zulianello, 2023, p. 11).

WHY THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT CONTINUES TO INVEST IN MAINSTREAMING

An understudied aspect that can contribute to the explanation of electoral success is the focus of research on mainstreaming mechanisms generally, and particularly at the local level. The results demonstrate that more funding for mainstreaming at the local level is not hindered by the populist radical right party's integration into the political mainstream. Specifically, these political actors frequently gain more legitimacy and visibility as a result of subnational actions and activities.

8. BEYOND GRIEVANCES: THE PATH TO POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT PARTY MEMBERSHIP

SOFIA AMMASSARI

The stereotypical supporter of a populist radical-right (PRR) party is someone filled with negative feelings. Usually, they are angry at mainstream politicians for having left people like themselves behind; fearful of societal transformations caused by globalization; and resentful towards outgroups such as immigrants and refugees. Undoubtedly, some support for these parties comes from individuals who fit the above stereotype. However, as these parties enter the mainstream, the profile of their supporters is changing. For example, that they are not inherently motivated by discontent (Halikiopoulou, Vasilopoulou, 2023) or nostalgia (Versteegen, 2023).

So, why do people get involved in the populist radical right? In my article (Ammassari, 2023), I present a nuanced analysis of some of the myths surrounding this phenomenon. My research focuses on a specific group of supporters: PRR party members. I interviewed 82 members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, Lega in Italy, and the Sweden Democrats. My interviews show that the people who join these parties do indeed hold grievances against outgroups and mainstream politics. However, they are also politically efficacious individuals who want to improve the situation of their ingroup. PRR party membership, therefore, is not just about fighting "the Elites" and "the Others," it is also about saving "the People."

WHY JOIN A POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT PARTY?

Most people are motivated to join a political party for two main reasons: to support its policies and to express their belief in the party's ideology. Those who enroll in PRR parties, therefore, generally do so to voice their populist, nativist, and authoritarian worldviews. Yet, these motivations for joining do not exist in a vacuum—they need to be activated by triggers (Power, Dommett, 2020). To give an example, one is not born with anti-immigration attitudes: these arise due to individual and contextual factors.

Drawing on studies about why people protest, I thus argue that there are two triggers behind the decision to join a PRR party: grievances and efficacy (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, 2013). We already know that grievances are central to populist radical-right politics. For instance, feelings of relative

deprivation—the perception that one is worse off in comparison with the past and/or with other people—are strong predictors of support for these parties (Gest, Reny, Mayer, 2017).

More counterintuitive is the idea that efficacy—the feeling that one can influence the political process—is a trigger for joining PRR parties. Some scholars have portrayed PRR supporters as not very sophisticated when it comes to political matters (Ostiguy, 2017). Moreover, being populist, they should be skeptical of institutions like parties, which mediate between popular sovereignty and "the People" (Canovan, 1999). Why, then, should efficacy play a role in the path to PRR party membership? Not everyone with populist, nativist, and authoritarian worldviews will join these parties. Most people will limit themselves to voting for them—ultimately, voting would still allow people to help the party achieve its goals. Those who do eventually decide to become party members must believe that doing so can make a difference.

POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT PARTY MEMBERSHIP: BETWEEN GRIEVANCES AND EFFICACY

My interviews (Ammassari, 2023) with 82 members of the BJP, Lega and the Sweden Democrats provide strong evidence for my argument. In particular, they reveal three common elements of the path to PRR party membership, each with a distinctive set of triggers and motivations.

The first element is a sense of disaffection with local or national societal developments. This originates from the experience of being in contact with outgroups (religious minorities, immigrants and refugees). Outgroups are cast as a threat to the native culture, physical safety, and economic welfare of "the People." These grievances against "the Others," in turn, encourage soon-to-be PRR party members to support nativist policies such as curbing immigration.

The second element is a feeling of affiliation with the populist radical-right party. The latter is perceived as the only party close to "the People" and thus capable of addressing the causes of their disaffection. Other parties are criticized for being out of touch and for favoring outgroups. These grievances against "the Elites" trigger PRR supporters' desire to oppose mainstream politics and to voice their populist beliefs.

The third element is a moment of action. Ultimately, PRR supporters realize that, by joining these parties, they can redress the societal and political wrongs mentioned above. The main trigger here is a strong sense of efficacy: the idea that, if they enroll in a PRR party, they can improve the situation of "the People." They can do so, first, by providing assistance to the party, in the

form of ideas and professional experience; and second, by making use of its resources, in particular public and party offices.

A COHERENT GLOBAL PHENOMENON

What are the main takeaways of my study? First, my interviews show that PRR party members are not just fearful, angry and disaffected citizens. The reasons for their involvement go beyond negative emotions and being against something. In the end, their main goal is proactively improving the situation of "the People."

Second, my findings emphasize how populism and nativism are distinct concepts (see introduction). The two provide different mobilization mechanisms on the path to PRR party membership. Nativism makes members feel under threat from "the Others." Populism allows them to identify who is responsible—"the Elites."

Third, regardless of whether they were living in a village in rural India or an apartment in the center of Stockholm, the members I interviewed reported similar triggers and motivations for joining. This confirms how the populist radical right has become a coherent global phenomenon. It is thus crucial that the study of PRR parties moves beyond the "usual suspects" in Europe. Only by doing so can we fully understand how PRR politics is shaping today's world.

9. LEFT-WING POPULISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE FRENCH AND SPANISH CASES

LAURA CHAZEL

In Europe and in the United States (US), the 2008 Great Recession led to a multiplication of protest movements, both institutionalized (political parties) and spontaneous (social movements), whose rhetoric opposed a virtuous people to a corrupt elite and the need to "democratize democracy." Both have been defined as different types of populism as they drew an antagonistic line between the people and the power and were based on a Rousseauian vision of democracy, i.e. a direct rather than a representative democracy.

The existing literature has already examined these links, through the notion of "movement parties" (Kitschelt, 2006), showing that anti-austerity parties (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, Mosca, 2017) could be defined in this way, partly because they were inspired by the organization of social movements. My research (Chazel, 2021) proposes to analyze the links between left-wing populist parties and "leaderless populisms" (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). I focus on the French and Spanish cases: La France insoumise (LFI) / Yellow Vests (YV) and Podemos/15-M.

LEADERLESS POPULISMS

In the 2010s, in the streets, citizens claimed to (re)take power by opposing the "voice of the people" against the bankers (Pots and Pan Revolution, Iceland, 2009–2011), the 99% to the 1% (Occupy Wall Street, US, 2011), "those at the bottom" to "those at the top" (Indignados/15-M, Spain, 2011), and, more recently, by defending "the honor of the workers" (Yellow Vests, France, 2018–2020). These social movements can be defined as leaderless populisms, one of whose main characteristics would be to oppose the "technocratic and oligarchic capture of democracy" (Tarragoni, 2019).

The emergences of social movements in France (YV) and in Spain (15-M) in the 2010s must be understood in this broader context of changes in the repertoires of collective action, i.e. the "means of action available to protest groups." They were characterized by their spontaneity, their emphasis on democracy, the people-elite opposition, their rejection of traditional political parties/trade unions and of left-wing identity. In Spain, the anti-austerity movement of 2011 (Flesher Fominaya, 2014), known as the 15-M, brought

together thousands of people in streets and squares across the country, demanding a "real democracy now" by attacking traditional politicians and bankers. In France, the YV was born in October 2018, initially to oppose rising fuel prices by occupying roundabouts and blocking roads and organizing demonstrations every Saturday. Very quickly, the demands broadened (Clemens, 2019), and the main demand became the introduction of the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC).

LEFT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

The electoral breakthroughs of the European populist left in the years 2010–2020 have also been based on populist elements and on a rejection of the "left" label. This was, for instance, the case in France (LFI) and in Spain (Podemos) (Alexandre, Bristielle, Chazel, 2021; Chazel, Fernández Vázquez, 2019). When comparing the French and Spanish cases, we are faced with two different situations. Left-wing populist parties belong to the radical left family and socialism is their host ideology, but they rather call upon the "people" more than upon the "working class" (March, 2008). Their anti-capitalism is materialized by a critique of the "establishment" and of a corrupt elite (March, Mudde, 2005). They are also less attached to orthodox Marxism and attribute less importance to "doctrinal purity" (March, 2011). On the one hand, Podemos was born in 2014, three years after the 15-M movement and initially presented itself as the "institutional translation" of this movement. On the other hand, LFI was born in 2016, two years before the emergence of the Yellow Vests and LFI has not claimed any direct link with the movement, although the party has tried to present itself as the best political outlet for it.

PODEMOS AND THE 15-M

The founding members of Podemos regularly repeated that "the 15-M movement existed without Podemos, but Podemos could not have existed without the 15-M." They saw the 15-M as a historic moment that succeeded in establishing a "counter-hegemonic" discourse (Errejón, 2011). The 15-M influenced Podemos in at least two ways: its program and its rhetoric. Podemos' first program (2014), was titled "move the pieces: converting indignation in political change," and took up several of the 15-M's demands, among which: the designation of the "caste" and its selfishness and the need for greater horizontality and transparency. Since its creation, the founders of Podemos regularly refer to the Indignados and attempt to represent the "people" of 15-M (Chazel, Fernández Vázquez, 2019).

LFI AND THE YELLOW VESTS

In his political analyses, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of LFI, regularly mobilizes the concept of a "citizens' revolution" (Alexandre, Bristielle, Chazel, 2021) inspired by Rafael Correa. This concept implies a democratic and constitutional revolution through the ballot box. He analyzes the emergence of the Yellow Vests as another step towards the advent of this revolution. He explains LFI's strategy with regard to this movement: "[LFI] has linked itself directly to the movement in the fullest respect for its characteristics of autonomy and self-direction" (Mélenchon, 2018). During the YV movement, LFI MPs—e.g., Mathilde Panot (Panot, 2018) and François Ruffin (France 3 Occitanie, 2018) —participated in the YV and made numerous interventions in defense of the movement. The symbology of the YV is present at LFI's events (e.g., songs popularized during the YVs and the wearing of yellow vests). The various LFI leaders also highlighted the similarities between the demands of the YV and their program (La France Insoumise, 2018). These included 40 proposals/amendments as progressive taxation, the fight against tax fraud, retirement at 60, the introduction of the RIC.

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In a nutshell, I argue that the links between new social movements and left-wing populism need to be analyzed in the light of their similarities and the wider context of changing modes of protest. Both are now tending more and more to reject left-wing identity (in favor of a people-elite opposition) and to reject traditional frameworks (trade unions or the label of "political party"). My research (Chazel, 2021) found that in Spain and France, analysis of left-wing populist parties cannot be understood without examining the dynamics they maintain with these new social movements and their influence on their program, theoretical approach, strategy, and rhetoric.

10. POPULISM IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT. WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT AND THE ROUSSEAU PLATFORM

FILIPPO TRONCONI

"Participate, don't delegate. In Italy we did it!" This is how Davide Casaleggio (2019) encouraged his YouTube channel's viewers, in a promotional video for the Rousseau platform, which the Five Star Movement (M5S) used to manage its organization from 2016 to 2021. The populist political project has always placed a strong emphasis on limiting the influence of political parties as go-betweens for the public and institutions. Even when they are party leaders themselves, populist leaders gain support by vowing to restore sovereignty to its rightful owners after professional politicians have usurped it. Citizens should keep a close eye on the talks and negotiations that take place in the "palace," forcing representatives to strictly adhere to the political directive that the people have given them.

This vision can occasionally manifest as direct democracy, where the people themselves make the most important decisions (as in referenda), participatory democracy, where the people cooperate with political institutions to shape decisions, or monitory democracy (where the people have access to the "corridors of power" and the instruments to assess the performance of their elected representatives, even in-between elections).

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AS TOOLS FOR POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

For a few years, digital technologies seemed to hold the key to the realization of these democratic visions, that until the end of the twentieth century seemed largely utopian, if not at local level. Specifically, web 2.0, where users create most of the content on online platforms, appeared to be ideal for political use. It was supposed to increase participation, making it transparent, and releasing it from party apparatuses.

The Pirate Parties were the first to take steps in this direction, using the LiquidFeedback platform (Jääsaari, Šárovec, 2021). Following this route, the M5S, led by actor Beppe Grillo and manager Gianroberto Casaleggio, for many years were the most sophisticated and electorally successful experiment

in the use of digital communication tools for political ends (Tronconi, 2015). Members could engage in party life through a variety of sections of the above mentioned Rousseau platform. For instance, they could vote for candidates for important elective positions (such as mayors, members of parliament, members of the European Parliament, and regional councils), they could help write electoral programs, propose legislation to be presented in parliament, or debate bills written by elected officials. Users could take part in online political training sessions in other platform sections and promote fundraising campaigns.

Most importantly, the digital platform was used or should have been used to circumnavigate the need for the bureaucratic machinery, common in mass parties of the twentieth century. No more outdated congressional procedures, internal hierarchies, or positions to climb. If political life is conducted through the platform all members have instant access to all information and decisions. Additionally, everything is organized horizontally. Commissions, political committees, executive offices, and secretaries are unnecessary. Every interaction on the platform takes place on an equal basis; everyone can run for elected office, participate, and express their opinions on topics of interest. "One is worth one," as Beppe Grillo loved to repeat.

But these lofty pledges soon revealed their limitations. Following a brief period of excitement, there was a sharp decline in participation in internal votes and debates around MPs' legislative initiative. More significantly, the votes' democratic nature occasionally seemed questionable, to put it mildly. For example, members were asked to choose a five-person directorate in November 2014. However, they were required to approve a pre-selected list of five names put together by Beppe Grillo, rather than selecting them among a list of candidates. The leadership unilaterally overturned the results of candidates who won online votes in certain local elections (Tronconi, 2018). Journalistic investigations following the 2018 elections showed that the electoral program, which members voted on and approved online, had since been modified to tone down some proposals and to add entire chapters (Il Foglio, 2018). Few people participated in the discussions of bills that elected officials presented in parliament, which resulted in jumbled lists of comments that legislators mostly ignored and had virtually no impact on the texts that were later submitted to parliament (Mosca, 2020; Tronconi, Bailo, 2025). In internal referenda, the votes almost always turned into plebiscites in favor of the positions openly supported by the leaders (Gerbaudo, 2021).

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND DEMOCRACY: A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP

The experience of Rousseau and the M5S can teach us some general lessons. First, it is now evident that digital platforms are not always impartial instruments for voting and discussion management. On the contrary, there are few or no avenues for dissent, and the leadership maintains firm control over the agenda (determining what to vote on and when). Members are only able to engage in reactive participation, which can only be triggered when the leadership calls for it and in ways that it specifies.

Naturally, a lot depends on the way platforms are designed and managed, specifically on the types of interactions they permit both horizontally (among members) and vertically (between leaders and members). However, it is not just a matter of creating better platforms than Rousseau. In complex organizations (whether states or parties), decisions made through democratic processes necessitate a variety of information sources, thoughtful deliberations, assurances of voting transparency, checks and balances on power. All of this results in procedures that are frequently challenging for non-experts to comprehend and can occasionally be intricate and even burdensome.

Thus, engaging in politics, whether in person or online, takes time, sufficient cognitive resources, and specialized knowledge. It is important to educate citizens about this complexity in order to increase participation, which is in itself a noble goal. In this regard, if properly designed, digital tools can be useful allies. However, the M5S experience shows us that simply putting decision-making online does not result in more participatory, democratic or transparent processes.

11. TECHNO-POPULISM: FROM THE PEOPLE 2.0 TO THE DIGITAL PLEBS?

MICHAL MALÝ

Techno-populism represents a distinct political phenomenon combining populist anti-establishment rhetoric with technocratic promises of competence and rational governance. Early discussions by Lipow and Seyd (1995) highlight techno-populism as an anti-party sentiment linked with optimism regarding digital technologies, proposing that these technologies could eventually replace traditional parties and enhance direct democratic ideals.

According to Bickerton and Accetti (2018), techno-populist parties like the Five Star Movement (M5S) and Podemos represent a new political family characterized by pragmatic, problem-solving politics that rejects traditional ideological divides. These parties mobilize populist critiques of established elites and simultaneously promote technocratic efficiency and expertise, thus situating themselves as alternatives to conventional political structures and ideologies.

Technocratic populism, by contrast, specifically integrates technocratic logic and populist dynamics. As Guasti (2025) explains, technocratic populism combines populist direct appeals and symbolic mobilization with technocratic legitimacy based on expertise and rationality. While techno-populism broadly synthesizes populist and technocratic promises to disrupt traditional party politics, technocratic populism explicitly leverages expertise as a core component of its legitimacy, connecting voters directly with leader-experts who claim to embody both popular will and specialized knowledge. Therefore, although related, techno-populism and technocratic populism differ in their emphasis on technocratic expertise and the directness of their appeal to voters.

THE PEOPLE 2.0

A uniquely techno-populist characteristic of M5S and Podemos lies in their belief that political competence and decision-making capacity reside primarily in citizens themselves, viewing them as true experts on everyday life problems. Both parties deployed digital platforms to effectuate this principle, albeit in distinct ways.

The M5S, through its online platform Rousseau, emphasized the notion of "collective intelligence," enabling members to propose legislation, participate in online primaries, and provide direct feedback to elected representatives on legislative drafts. Rousseau combined direct democracy mechanisms and proposal submissions with representative democratic structures by creating structured feedback loops between citizens and parliamentarians (Mosca, 2020).

Podemos grounded its digital practice in the concept of "common sense," implying everyday citizens possess intuitive political wisdom superior to traditional political elites. The party operationalized this concept through platforms such as Participa and Plaza Podemos, digital spaces designed to empower grassroots members by facilitating open communication and collective deliberation. Technologically, Participa enabled members to engage in online discussions, submit proposals, and participate in primaries or party referendums, highlighting the transformative potential of digital technologies to amplify grassroots participation (Gerbaudo, 2019).

In both cases, techno-populism utilizes digital technology not merely for mobilizing political support but fundamentally to amplify the voice and agency of ordinary citizens, explicitly linking populist ideals of popular sovereignty to innovative, digitally enabled forms of participation.

NOT THE PEOPLE BUT THE DIGITAL PLEBS?

Although techno-populist parties like the M5S and Podemos initially promised citizen empowerment through digital platforms, these online mechanisms demonstrated a primarily plebiscitarian rather than genuinely deliberative nature. Platforms such as Rousseau (M5S) and Participa (Podemos), while enabling direct and seemingly unmediated citizen involvement, often structurally limited true deliberation, channeling participation predominantly into controlled voting processes rather than fostering genuine debate or agenda-setting (Gerbaudo, 2019).

In the M5S case, initial ideals of citizen participation proved inadequate in practice. Citizen-generated legislative proposals rarely translated into parliamentary initiatives, and member feedback on draft legislation was mostly disregarded during legislative reviews. Similarly, intra-party voting often functioned as a plebiscite endorsing leadership proposals rather than reflecting genuine grassroots decision-making. Voting processes occurred within brief windows, often during working hours, with questions phrased to suggest preferred outcomes subtly guiding voter decisions. Additionally, only party leaders had authority over introducing agenda items, effectively excluding grassroots influence from setting party priorities. These systemic

limitations led to dissatisfaction, reflected in declining participation rates in internal votes, diminished member engagement, and a contraction of the party's membership base (Mosca, 2020).

Similarly, Podemos embraced digital participation but, in practice, maintained centralized control. Crucial strategic decisions were typically framed by party leadership, relegating online member engagement largely to ratification rather than genuine deliberation. High quorum thresholds (10 % of the membership) for initiating bottom-up consultations created substantial barriers, effectively limiting ordinary members' capacity to influence party decisions. As with M5S, this centralized participatory model resulted in declining voter turnout on internal platforms and the gradual erosion of the party's membership (Gerbaudo, 2019).

DIGITAL ILLUSIONS—FROM TECHNO-OPTIMISM TO NEW HIERARCHIES

Despite their rhetoric of citizen empowerment through digital innovations, techno-populist parties ultimately engaged members in a plebiscitarian exercise rather than a participatory and deliberative process. While movements like the M5S and Podemos framed digital platforms as tools of citizen empowerment, in practice, these platforms relegated citizens to ratify leadership-driven decisions in plebiscites, to become passive spectators—a digital plebs.

Rather than fostering meaningful member-engagement, participation was tightly controlled, with leadership dictating the agenda and framing choices in ways that steered outcomes. This structure ensured that digital democracy reinforced rather than dismantled elite control. Over time, control became highly centralized, and constraints led to declining engagement, shrinking membership, and disillusionment among participants.

In the cases of M5S and Podemos, digital platforms created the illusion of participatory politics while concentrating power within the leadership. Citizens were not empowered as experts shaping policy, but rather as a symbolic mass—an audience performing the role of "The People" in a carefully orchestrated display of 'performative legitimization. Voting was reduced to a ritual of leader affirmation rather than a mechanism of influence, ultimately establishing the hierarchical structures these movements claimed to challenge.

12. CHATBOT POLITICIANS: WHO ARE THEY, AND WHAT IS THEIR CONNECTION TO POPULISM?

SILVIJA VUKOVIĆ

Political parties are already using artificial intelligence, particularly political chatbots, mainly as technical support in election campaigns (Kim and Lee, 2023). Chatbot politicians, however, are a different matter entirely. These are AI-driven entities developed specifically to run for political office.

The argument in favor of chatbot politicians is that technology is neutral and uncorruptible. Chatbot politicians, their proponents claim, work for the good of humanity using impartial, expert, objective knowledge and data analysis.

I argue, however, that chatbots are not neutral, because they must first be created by fallible human beings with desires and opinions. Indeed, chatbots are very much political—and one of the positions they may take is populism.[1] They may also perpetuate techno-populism, a concept previously explored in this blog series (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021). Chatbot politicians use artificial intelligence and data analysis to make decisions and talk to people. Their advocates present them as technologically advanced, neutral, objective experts. They claim that chatbots are uninfluenced by human biases or selfish interests, but rather champions of the will of "the people." This very idea is populist in nature (Moffitt, 2016), presenting society as divided between a "corrupt elite" and "the good people" (Mudde, 2004).

POLITICIANS OF THE FUTURE?

In 2017, Nick Gerritsen in New Zealand created the first virtual politician, SAM. Gerritsen presented SAM as the "politician of the future," claiming it was a neutral representative of all New Zealanders.[2] Next came Alisa, developed by Russian tech giant Yandex. Yandex presented Alisa as a potential candidate in the Russian 2018 presidential elections, on a promise to bring

1 https://populismobserver.com/2022/12/06/chatbot-politicians-artificial-intelligence-and-next-level-populism/

2 https://www.digital.govt.nz/showcase/sam-meet-your-politician-of-the-future

"the political system of the future, built exclusively on rational decisions made on the basis of clear algorithms."[3]

Also in 2018, a humanoid robot ran in the Tama mayoral elections in Tokyo. Its developer, Michihito Matsuda, acted as the robot's human proxy. Matsuda (2018) promoted AI as an objective entity. He claimed it would collect data from citizens by analyzing their opinions and requests. The robot would use this data to create policies that would benefit the majority of Tama's population. Matsuda presented his creation as a new form of direct democracy.

The latest chatbot politician is Leader Lars, designed and programmed by the artistic collective Computer Lars. Lars leads Denmark's Synthetic Party (registered May, 2022), an "AI-driven, anti-political party combination." The Synthetic Party's main goal is to advocate for AI-human coexistence.

TECHNOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE

Defending AI's technological neutrality and objectivity, supporters of chatbot politicians accuse human politicians of being subjective and incompetent to lead citizens. Matsuda (2018), for example, praised his AI politician, while claiming humans are corrupt and "stupid." Chatbots, then, because they lack humans' corrupt nature, can create the illusion that they represent the interests of ordinary people. Chatbot developers, meanwhile, present themselves as political outsiders with blameless reputations.

Another chatbot technique is to analyze data with the aim of objective decision-making. By so doing, their proponents argue, chatbots can bypass the traditional structures controlled by the elite. Chatbot supporters claim they can return power to the people by enabling them to participate in decision-making through direct democracy. Matsuda, for example, argued his AI politician would use data analysis to listen to people's voices simultaneously. He even ventured that in the future, we will have no need for elections because AI will "automatically detect the political will of every single person in a country, in real time" (Matsuda, 2018).

Clearly, chatbots cannot claim to be one of "the people" in the physical sense. However, they can still promise to work for the prosperity of humanity. Through their objectivity and data-based decision-making, they can claim to be impartial (technological) experts working in the people's best interests. Chatbots can personalize their language and style to appeal to every individual, and they can communicate instantly (Shumanov and Johnson, 2021). For instance, anyone can communicate with Leader Lars on the Discord channel,

3 https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/12/07/artificial-intelligence-robot-alisa-nominated-for-russian-president-a59845

whenever they want to. Chatbots can appeal to people's personal desires, and their ability to interact one-on-one helps foster a sense of closeness and reliability with voters. And all this, of course, aligns with the populist notion of being the voice of, and for, the people.

AI IS NOT SO NEUTRAL

The general idea that technology is neutral and rational, while humans are led by their emotions, is strongly present in discourse around AI. However, more recently, the political aspects of AI have come under closer scrutiny (Coeckelbergh, 2022). AI-driven chatbots have to be programmed by humans. Their positioning and objectivity depend strongly on the data on which they are trained. When this information is not transparent, it is particularly hard to understand a chatbot's true nature. Indeed, chatbots are in a constant state of development, using machine learning along with data from everyday interactions with humans.

In 2016, Microsoft developed an AI chatbot, Tay, designed to learn from human interaction (Hunt, 2016). After spending less than a day on Twitter, users had already taught Tay how to use racist expressions. To offer empirical proof that chatbots take political positions, scholars found that ChatGPT leans toward the left of the political spectrum. If this chatbot could vote, it "would have voted most likely for the Greens both in Germany (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) and in the Netherlands (GroenLinks)" (Hartmann, Schwenzow, and Witte, 2023).

Chatbot politicians recirculate human ideas and discourses. Chatbots can take populist positions, exploiting their technological features to project expertise and neutrality. Regardless of their position, incorporation of AI into political decision-making has consequences for democratic principles that demand careful consideration. It is crucial we educate citizens about the nature of AI's connection with politics. If we do not, liberal democracy itself is at risk.

13. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

PETRA GUASTI

The third part of the volume explored various key aspects of populist leadership and organization. First and foremost, the importance of leader characteristics emerged clearly. Adrian Favero emphasized how populist leaders are often mistakenly considered charismatic. In reality, populist followers frequently do not perceive their leaders in this way, and such leaders are not even essential for the party's survival. Diego Ceccobelli highlighted the centrality of *authenticity*, a quality that makes a leader's message more credible and relatable. Federica Nunziata added further depth to our understanding of how populist leaders use communication strategies to connect with their audiences—particularly in the digital age. Donatella Campus, in her study on populism and celebrity politics, examined how populist leaders draw on popular media and social platforms, blurring the lines between public and private persona. Finally, focusing on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Proma Raychaudhury's research shed light on the expressions of vulnerability among populist *strongmen.*

As for more strictly organizational aspects, Adrian Favero examined the mainstreaming of populist radical right parties, identifying their organizational tactics and strategies for gaining legitimacy at the local level. In connection with this, Sofia Ammassari argued that we should not think of members of these parties solely as angry or disaffected citizens; they can also be proactive and politically effective. Ammassari highlighted the role of resentment and political efficacy in shaping motivations for joining such movements. Sabine Volk stressed the importance of bottom-up mobilization and collective action in defining populism.

Focusing on the Five Star Movement and its Rousseau platform, Filippo Tronconi offered insights into how digital tools influence party organization, revealing how participatory mechanisms often coexist with a strong centralization of power within the leadership. Michal Malý further explored techno-populism as a blend of anti-elitism and technocratic appeal, showing how digital platforms like Rousseau and Participa promised empowerment but delivered plebiscitarian participation, reinforcing rather than challenging centralized control.

PART IV
POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

In this part, attention turns to the political opportunity structures, the context within which populist parties and leaders operate. It explores the roots of populist success in Italy, France, and Slovakia, and discusses the role of traditional media and social media, alongside the emergence of new lines of competition. The section delves into neo-traditionalism, the instrumentalization of religion, the media framing of female populist leaders, the relationship between populism and nostalgia, and social-democratic responses to populism. Finally, it considers the effectiveness of deliberation, populist attitudes as indicators of democratic quality, and the importance of responding to populism with caution.

1. WHY IS ITALY MORE POPULIST THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY IN WESTERN EUROPE?

MICHELANGELO VERCESI

The Italian government that took office in October 2022 is not only the country's first executive led by a woman (Giorgia Meloni), but also the first in the history of the Republic in which the largest party in the coalition, FdI, is a populist radical right party (Zulianello, 2022). In addition to members of this party, representatives of two other right-wing populist parties, the League and FI, also joined the Council of Ministers.

This is nothing new. Electoral support for populist parties has been rising since the breakdown of the former party system in the early 1990s. The aggregate proportion of votes for populists increased from 30% in the general election of 1994 to almost 70% in 2018. No other major West European democracy has witnessed such levels of support for populists (Henley, 2018). Why is Italy "more populist?" The answer lies in a combination of widespread anti-institutional and anti-party sentiments, and the strategic response of party leaders.

THE DEEP ROOTS OF POPULISM IN ITALIAN SOCIETY

Economic and political crises help explain circumscribed populist outbreaks. Yet they fall short in accounting for the pronounced and persistent inclination of the Italian electorate to vote for populists. The demand for populism in Italy derives from the traditional mistrust towards politics of Italian society. This makes Italian voters more likely to vote for populists (Bowler et al., 2017). Such a tradition of disaffection has its roots in the formation of the unitary state of 1861. Following this, the Catholic Church and large sectors of southern elites took a firm position against the new polity and its elites. The original lack of legitimacy of the new state and its institutional weakness initially nurtured anti-institutional and anti-political sentiments in the population. Fascism simply fanned the flames.

Over generations, deep political disaffection (Segatti, 2006), skepticism about party politics (Urbinati, 2019), and even dissatisfaction with democracy reproduced themselves (Martini and Quaranta, 2015). Between them, they created a "cultural medium" for the growth of populism.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS

In democracy, party leaders develop policy programs and political discourses to maximize voters' support. Given societal predilections for populism, Italian political leaders have used populist messages as a strategic way to get votes. These strategies became particularly profitable from the 1990s onwards, when former voters' political loyalties declined sharply, if not disappeared (Curini, 2020). Until then, the presence of mass-based party organizations had kept the populist electoral market closed (Tarchi, 2002).

These organizations were rooted in society and, in the absence of strong political institutions, gave legitimacy to the Italian political system. When the party system effectively collapsed in the early 1990s, the populist market opened up. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, only two minor populist parties gained representation in parliament. These were the Common Man's Front and the People's Monarchist Party. However, in the early 1990s, the Italian party system broke down. Around this time, the birth of the so-called Second Republic resulted in six significant populist parties entering parliament (Hopkin, 2015). The Northern League (later the League), The Network, Forza Italia (later the People of Freedom), Italy of Values, the Five Star Movement, and the Brothers of Italy—all these parties have promoted, to varying degrees, anti-elitism, people-centrism and anti-institutionalism.

DIFFERENT POPULIST VARIANTS IN DIFFERENT TERRITORIAL SETTINGS

The rise of Italian populism also followed the breakdown of traditional, territorial political differences which had shaped postwar electoral outcomes (Ignazi, 1991). In fact, three voter types—"of belonging," "of opinion," and "of patronage" —characterized distinct portions of the territory during the postwar period (Pellicani, 1978). Despite the deep changes in voting from the 1990s onwards, these geographical macro-areas have continued to shape voting patterns (Vassallo and Shin, 2019). At the 2018 general election, for example, the North voted mostly for the center-right coalition. The South voted overwhelmingly for the 5-Star Movement, while the former "red belt" (traditionally left-wing) shrank further. The Democratic Party won only in the regions of Trentino-Alto Adige / South Tyrol and Tuscany. In response to these territorial political differences, Italian populist parties have differentiated their populist discourses. In so doing, they have effectively created three main types of populism: plebiscitary, technocratic and identity: The electoral success of parties of the same type has appeared to depend on territorial variations and ideological orientations. Technocratic populists have

adopted centrist positions. We can associate the other two types with (radical) right-wing positions.

In general, populist parties have occupied the political space left empty by the dissolution of pre-1990s governing parties. Technocratic populism has been characterized by a balanced distribution of votes between North and South; plebiscitary populism has received more votes in the South; identity populism has been particularly successful in the North.

POPULISM FOR ALL

We should understand the exceptionally high support for populism and the existence of a variety of populist parties in Italy as the consequence of anti-institutional sentiments within Italian society. The roots of this sentiment lie in the formation of the unitary state.

Political entrepreneurs created populist parties to benefit electorally from disaffected voters. At the same time, different types of populist parties with similar ideological positions have proved particularly successful in specific parts of the territory, characterized by distinct traditions of voting behavior. Italian populism serves an important purpose of forging a variegated political consensus. It is, therefore, well rooted in Italian democracy, and unlikely to disappear any time soon.

2. POPULIST ZEITGEIST À LA FRANÇAISE

PETRA GUASTI AND MICHEL PEROTTINO*

Few countries better illustrate the rise of populism, the variation of populist subtypes, competition between populisms and related phenomena as contemporary France. This chapter focuses on the implosion of the traditional party system as a key factor fostering the rise of populism while also outlining the various types of populism that now represent the main political power in France.

THE IMPLOSION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

In the second half of the 20th century, the dominance of the French Fifth Republic under Charles De Gaulle blurred the left-right divide, especially during periods of right-wing governance. The shift to left-wing governance in 1981 under François Mitterrand marked a significant change, but subsequent economic challenges led to a liberal policy turn. This ideological convergence between left and right on economic issues diminished their traditional differences, leaving only distinctions in social positioning (cf. Perottino, Guasti, 2020).

The implosion of the traditional party system culminated in the 2017 presidential election, with Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen emerging as the final candidates. The election marked a shift from the established two-party system towards a more fragmented and populist-dominated political landscape. Previously, the French electoral system—single-member district plurality—supported a stable bipartite structure. However, two-round elections enabled greater fractionalization within the two major party blocs, thus enabling the rise of populist challengers on the right, on the left and in valence/technocratic populism (Zulianello, 2020).

The FN's ascent since the 1980s challenged the stability of the party system, eventually leading to a breaking point in 2017. Macron's centrist

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movement, La République En Marche! (LREM), and Le Pen's FN capitalized on widespread dissatisfaction with the traditional parties, reshaping the political landscape. The 2017 election highlighted the flaws in France's electoral system, which enabled transformations in the party structure.

THE RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT OPENED THE DOOR FOR A POPULIST TAKEOVER

The recent wave of right-wing populism in France dates back to the 1980s when the Front National (FN) made significant electoral gains in all elections, from local and national to European and presidential (Rydgren, 2008). In the 2002 presidential election, Le Pen's support surged, allowing him to qualify for the second round, albeit ultimately losing to Jacques Chirac. Similarly, in 2017 and again in 2022, Marine Le Pen qualified for the second round of presidential elections, losing both times to Emmanuel Macron. This electoral success underscored the enduring impact of right-wing populism in French politics.

Supply-side studies (Mayer, 2005; Ivaldi, 2023) show that ethnonationalism and grievances over immigration are central to FN voters, with anti-elite sentiments only secondary. Populism, in this context, manifests as hostility toward the "corrupt elite," representative democracy, portraying "the people" as unified against "the political class" and claiming to represent the true voice of the people based on emotions rather than rationality. However, the rise of the populist radical left and valence populism indicate that the disillusionment with political elites is widespread across the political spectrum. The populist critique targets mainstream parties for neglecting real issues, dismissing differences between traditional parties, and filling the vacuum left by the decline of establishment parties to the mainstream left and the mainstream right (cf. Rydgren, 2008).

COMPETITION AMONG POPULIST PARTIES: 2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The rise of Emmanuel Macron and his technocratic populism must be understood within the context of French politics and society. While Macron's success might also be attributed to his charisma, political acumen, and successful strategy, the main factor was the state of the French party landscape and politics. Macron's rise can be traced back to the economic and financial crisis of the late 2000s, which highlighted the ineffectiveness of the French government's solutions. However, deeper roots lie in the progressive disappearance

of the traditional left-right cleavage in French politics (Perottino, Guasti, 2020).

The economic and financial crisis further highlighted this convergence and paved the way for populist, anti-establishment critique from the right and the left. The French left has historically rejected populism, but Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a radical left leader, embraced populism in 2010, calling upon the energy of the masses against the privileged elites (cf. Marlière, 2019). In the 2012, 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, Mélenchon positioned France Insoumise (Unbowed France) as a movement of the people against the establishment, in line with other left-wing populist movements like Podemos in Spain.

In the run-up to the 2017 presidential elections, scandals within the moderate right contributed to Macron presenting himself as the sole alternative to the established political order and the populist radical right. Macron's rise was facilitated by the decline of the Socialist Party, allowing him to attract left-wing voters disillusioned with mainstream politics. The failure of mainstream parties on both the left and right positioned Macron as the candidate capable of defeating Marine Le Pen in the 2017 elections.

COMPETITION WITHIN THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT: 2022 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By 2022, populist challengers dominated the French political landscape. In addition to the competition between populist radical right and technocratic populism, another phenomenon became evident—the competition within the populist radical right. In 2022, two electorally significant populist radical right parties competed: Marine Le Pen's RN and Éric Zemmour's Reconquête! receiving 23.2% and 7% of the vote, respectively.

Front National (FN), the predecessor of today's RN, was a quintessential populist radical right party for decades, amalgamating nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Since assuming leadership in 2011, Marine Le Pen has sustained the nativist, authoritarian, and populist agenda of the FN while endeavoring to address crucial issues of credibility, identity, and strategy. Her "de-demonization" strategy aimed to cleanse the party's radical reputation by distancing it from overtly extremist rhetoric, professionalizing its structure, and recruiting more competent members.

Consequently, the 2022 elections witnessed the rapid ascent of a new far-right figure, Éric Zemmour. Zemmour outflanked Marine Le Pen on the right by focusing on nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Examining the competition between Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in the 2022 French presidential election, Ivaldi (2023) showed the supply side of this competition—Le

Pen's social populist appeal to lower and working-class voters created space for Zemmour to pitch free-market liberal policies aimed at a socially conservative segment of France's bourgeois electorate. While Le Pen pursued a strategy of credibility, normalization, and economic issues, distancing herself from extremism, Zemmour adopted a "hardline" approach and emphasized cultural grievances by overlooking economic anxieties.

Still, in 2017 and 2022, Emmanuel Macron portrayed himself as a representative of modern France, offering reforms to address long-term social and economic challenges. Macron's narrative resonated with voters seeking change and modernization (Mayaffre et al., 2017).

France's political landscape showcases the rise of populism, marked by the implosion of the traditional party system and the emergence of various populist subtypes. The 2017 presidential election highlighted a shift towards a fragmented, populist-dominated political scene, with Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen as prominent contenders. Right-wing populism, epitomized by Le Pen's FN, has challenged the established order, while Macron's centrism capitalized on disillusionment with mainstream political parties. The 2022 elections intensified competition between populist factions, exemplified by Marine Le Pen's RN and Éric Zemmour's Reconquête!, reflecting broader dynamics within France's evolving party landscape.

3. CRISES AND POPULISM: THE CASE OF SLOVAKIA

PETRA GUASTI, MICHAL MALÝ AND ALEŠ MICHAL*

Examining Slovakia offers insights into the intricate interplay between populism and crisis. In recent years, Slovakia has been beset by economic, political, and health crises, fostering increased fragmentation and volatility within the party system and an erosion of democratic norms.

POPULISM AND CRISIS

The relationship between populism and crisis is multifaceted. Benjamin Moffitt (2015) emphasizes the nuanced nature of this association, highlighting that while crises may catalyze populist movements, the correlation is not always direct or linear. Instead, populism actively shapes and exploits crises, reframing them as opportunities to mobilize support. Thus, crises are not solely objective occurrences but constructed narratives manipulated by political actors, particularly populists, to further their agendas.

According to Moffitt (2015), crises are socially and culturally mediated phenomena, challenging traditional views that perceive them as external drivers of political change. Populist leaders engage in a systematic process of crisis performance, including identifying failures, framing them within broader contexts, portraying them as conflicts between "the people" and elites, and offering simplistic solutions while advocating for strong leadership. Although not always sequential, this approach provides a framework for understanding how populists leverage crises for their benefit.

TECHNOCRATIC POPULISM

Technocratic populism is a subtype of valence populism (Zulianello, 2020) that combines elements of expertise in governance with a direct appeal to ordinary people, focusing in particular on issues such as anti-corruption and

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good governance. It politicizes technocratic competence to gain legitimacy, deliver a populist message and bypass traditional democratic institutions. Policy-making by technocratic populists tends to be inconsistent and erratic but also targeted and responsive—catering to specific voter blocks and short-term gains rather than offering universalistic and responsible governance (Buštíková, Baboš, 2020).

TECHNOCRATIC POPULISM IN CRISIS

During times of crisis, technocratic populists govern with a blend of responsiveness and opportunism, leveraging their direct connection to ordinary citizens while wielding power with impulsive and reactive measures. As Lenka Buštíková and Pavol Baboš (2020) in their analysis of technocratic populists in power during the pandemic in Czechia and Slovakia show, the economic policies of technocratic populists target specific constituencies without concern for budget constraints, appealing to left-leaning working-class voters while avoiding responsibility for long-term fiscal sustainability. Populist leaders employ social media extensively to maintain direct communication with citizens and to respond rapidly to public issues, often engaging in personalized efforts to resolve individual but salient issues. Despite the reactive nature of such measures, they bolster the leaders' popularity and visibility, showcasing the technocratic populist approach to governance in times of crisis, characterized by personalized responsiveness and ad-hoc policy-making.

THE RISE OF TECHNOCRATIC POPULISM BY PERFORMING CRISIS

The 2018 murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and the subsequent revelations of deep linkages between high-level politicians and public figures and organized crime shocked Slovakia. It resulted in major societal mobilization against Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. Prior to this deep political crisis, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO, Ordinary People) movement and its leader, Igor Matovič, were valence populists hovering around 5% support. The crisis turned a small challenger party into a major player. Matovič capitalized on his track record on anti-corruption by strategically connecting the crisis to a broader framework of suboptimal governance in Slovakia, framing the narrative as "the people" versus those responsible for the crisis (especially the government led by PM Fico), utilizing social media to disseminate his narrative of political corruption and hypocrisy of the

mainstream parties—that either took part in the corruption or its cover-up and offering simplistic solutions and advocating for strong leadership by himself (Moffit, 2015).

Matovič surged to capture a quarter of the vote thanks to these strategic choices and the electoral system. One of the most effective strategies was highlighting Fico's scandals in short videos while integrating various ideological streams under his personalized leadership of—the 2020 success of the Ordinary People. Matovič's success was further bolstered by effectively utilizing the electoral system—leveraging preference voting to secure favorable positions on the electoral list. Moreover, the party's inclusive approach to candidate selection, which included popular figures from various ideological backgrounds, helped broaden its appeal, attracting support from socially conservative voters (Haughton et al., 2022).

THE FALL OF TECHNOCRATIC POPULISM—MISHANDLING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Following his success in the 2020 elections, Matovič became Prime Minister by forging a coalition with smaller center-right parties. However, his popularity swiftly dwindled with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Buštíková, Baboš, 2020). Matovič's government initially rapidly responded, establishing the Permanent Emergency Task Force (PETF) to oversee the pandemic-related agenda. Nevertheless, the formation of the PETF sidestepped constitutional guardrails and lacked transparency, sparking concerns regarding accountability and legality. Matovič's penchant for populist tactics, including direct engagement with citizens via social media, occasionally clashed with official decision-making, resulting in hasty measures and inconsistent policies. Matovič's governance was marred by internal strife, chaotic crisis management, and an ambiguous solo attempt to procure the Russian Sputnik vaccine without consulting anybody.

Amid escalating tensions, Matovič resigned in 2021, paving the way for an even deeper governance crisis—a series of caretaker governments failing to maintain political support in the parliament, ultimately leading to early elections in 2023. Matovič is broadly perceived as the main culprit of the deepened political crisis. His politicization of expertise and eroding institutional norms led to a steep decline in his popularity among the Ordinary People. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, Ordinary People gained 8.9% in 2023 compared to 25% in 2020.

DYNAMICS BETWEEN POPULISM AND CRISIS

In conclusion, Slovakia's experience underscores the intricate dynamics between populism and crisis. While populism may rise amid crises—populists exploit the favorable political opportunity structure of a crisis—governing during genuine crises poses formidable challenges that test the agency of populists. Mishandling crises, as evidenced by Matovič's tenure and fall, undermine the credibility of valence populists. Crisis tests whether the claim of competence is matched by the ability to handle a crisis. In the case of Igor Matovič, it was not.

4. WHY RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES ARE MORE SUCCESSFUL IN SOME COUNTRIES THAN IN OTHERS

LÉONIE DE JONGE

Over recent decades, net support for right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) has increased across the European continent (Mudde, 2007). However, the success of these parties is by no means uniform. RWPPs have formed part of national governments in countries including Austria, Norway and Italy. But they have failed to rally broad popular support in countries such as Ireland, Portugal and Luxembourg.

The Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) provide useful comparative case studies to explore this variation. Despite numerous commonalities, including a shared history and similar electoral systems, RWPPs have been more successful in the Netherlands and Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) than in Luxembourg and Wallonia (the southern, Francophone part of Belgium). In my recent book, I explain why (De Jonge, 2021b).

THEORIZING SUCCESS AND FAILURE

The electoral performance of RWPPs is often conceptualized as a marketplace, where success and failure are contingent on "public demand" and "party supply" (Van Kessel, 2013).

Demand-side explanations highlight factors that create a breeding ground for RWPPs, notably socioeconomic conditions that make voters more prone to support these parties. Supply-side theories look at mechanisms that enable RWPPs to translate lingering demand into actual votes. These include party organization and leadership, as well as institutional features such as the electoral system.

Although demand- and supply-side explanations provide a useful starting point to understand the different electoral trajectories of RWPPs in the Benelux region, they do not offer a full explanation.

PUBLIC DEMAND

Demand for RWPPs is relatively constant across the Benelux region. If anything, existing theories would lead us to expect the popular appetite for RWPPs to be strongest in Wallonia, a region still recovering from industrial decline (De Jonge, 2021a). However, it turns out that voters in the Benelux region hold similar views on sociopolitical issues. Demand-side explanations are therefore not particularly helpful in explaining the asymmetrical success of RWPPs in the region.

PARTY SUPPLY

Supply-side explanations are more useful. Indeed, the supply of RWPPs has been stronger in the Netherlands and Flanders. Some institutional features (notably the proportionality of the electoral system in the Netherlands and the availability of an extensive support network in Flanders) have made it easier for RWPPs to enter the political arena. But still, supply-side explanations provide little insight into how RWPPs succeeded in making their voices heard in the first place.

GATEKEEPERS: MAINSTREAM PARTIES AND THE MEDIA

To understand fully the asymmetrical success of RWPPs in the Benelux region, we must examine the wider context in which party competition takes place. In particular, we need to take into account the role of mainstream parties and the media. Taken together, they act as gatekeepers in the sense that they can facilitate or hinder access to the electoral market. As such, they determine the "openness" of the electoral market.

First, the behavior of center-right and center-left parties helped pave the way for the rise of the populist radical right in the Netherlands and Flanders. Such parties narrowed the opportunities for right-wing populist challengers in Wallonia and Luxembourg. Indeed, in the Netherlands and Flanders, mainstream parties failed to keep traditional lines of conflict "frozen." Instead, they contributed to the politicization of new issues, notably immigration, which created favorable opportunity structures for RWPPs to thrive. By contrast, in Wallonia and Luxembourg, traditional cleavage structures have stayed comparatively intact. Support for mainstream parties has therefore remained relatively stable. As a result, demand for the populist radical right in Wallonia and Luxembourg is less pronounced than in Flanders and the Netherlands. Second, related structural changes in the media landscape have

made the media more compatible with the "populist logic" (De Jonge, 2019). These changes include audience fragmentation, along with the twin processes of privatization and commercialization. The Dutch and Flemish media landscapes are more accessible to right-wing populist challengers than those in Wallonia and Luxembourg. Media in Luxembourg and Wallonia categorically demarcate and ostracize RWPPs. By contrast, Dutch and Flemish media have become more accommodating over time, frequently offering RWPPs a platform.

IS THERE AN "ANTIDOTE" TO THE POPULIST RIGHT?

The main conclusion of my book (de Jonge, 2021a) is that the spread of right-wing populism is not simply a matter of chance or accident, but a matter of choice. The choices that mainstream parties and the media make play a crucial role in its rise and spread. Luxembourg and Wallonia are certainly not immune to the far right. Yet these polities are unlikely to witness the rise of a right-wing populist contender—as long as media practitioners and mainstream politicians continue to uphold their strict non-engagement policy.

The timing and rigidity of the demarcation strategy play a key role in its effectiveness (Heinze, 2018). In Luxembourg and Wallonia, mainstream parties and the media have created a fully "airtight" cordon. By doing so they have narrowed RWPPs' opportunities to break through. Nipped in the bud, RWPPs are checked before they become big enough to matter. Whether this is ultimately good or bad for the quality of democracy in these polities is an entirely different question. What is quite clear, however, is that far-right ideas have become increasingly normalized throughout the Benelux. This normalization appears to have progressed more rapidly in the polities with successful right-wing populist contenders (the Netherlands and Flanders), where mainstream parties and the media have fallen into the trap of right-wing populism (Wodak, 2015).

5. SOCIAL MEDIA: POPULISTS' PARTNERS IN CRIME

LAURA JACOBS

In 2022, several populist parties rose to power across Europe. In Italy, it was Giorgia Meloni's government led by Fratelli d'Italia. And in Sweden, the populist Sweden Democrats support a center-right minority government. Yet, legitimization by mainstream parties is only one reason for the growing normalization of populist parties. We should not overlook the role of social media in the process of mainstreaming populism. Populism's success, at least in part, is down to its omnipresence on social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AS ALLIES OF POPULISM

Populist parties have quickly harnessed the power of social media, integrating them fully into their political communication toolkit (Jacobs, Sandberg, and Spierings, 2020). In this regard, social media platforms are populist actors' key allies, providing requirements that resonate closely with populist objectives (de Vreese et al., 2018). Social media offer unmediated access to a broad audience, bypassing the gatekeeping role of traditional news and journalists. They offer unprecedented opportunities to mobilize support, to interact directly with supporters, and to shape public opinion. They facilitate personalized discourses and emotional appeals. Finally, social media permit microtargeting: using algorithms to reach very specific audience demographics. Populist parties have adapted well to this new digital environment, fully exploiting the opportunities it affords.

As "early adopters," populists have invested astronomical sums of money in their social media accounts and online advertising. Populist communication is closely guided in content and style by populists' goals (de Vreese et al., 2018). From a political communication perspective, the methods for spreading populist ideology are crucial. Populist communication combines populism's key content elements (people-centrism, anti-elitism) with distinctive stylistic elements. Simplification, personalized discourse and emotional appeals are all common ingredients.

HOW THE MEDIA MAINSTREAMS POPULISM

To understand how populism goes mainstream, we must examine how populist ideology spreads. First, populist actors reach a broad audience via social media, amplifying their message. Messages that go viral tend to be picked up by traditional news media and circulated yet further. The content and style of populist actors and their messages are considered newsworthy—and this encourages sharing.

Often, therefore, populist actors and their preferred issues tend to be highly salient on the public and media agenda. For instance, radical right-wing populist parties typically own the immigration issue (Damstra et al., 2021). Visibility of this issue correlates positively with electoral support for parties that own these issues (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2007).

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Several challenges for the quality of democracy lie ahead. First, social media facilitates the spread of dis- or misinformation (intentional and unintentional misleading content) by political actors. Social media platforms can be a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation (Enders et al., 2023). The flourishing of false messages risks eroding media trust, harming citizens' capacity to make well-informed decisions. Trust in traditional news is indeed on the decline. A growing number of citizens consume their daily news via social media. This runs parallel to the rise of alternative news media (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich, 2019). The formation of alternative media ecosystems gives populist leaders complete control over their narratives, allowing them to shape public opinion. Factchecking and debunking messages (such as the work done by factcheck.org) might work only under conducive conditions (Walter et al., 2020).

Second, algorithms typically prioritize content people are likely to interact with. This risks producing echo chambers in which citizens receive only messaging that reflects and reinforces their existing beliefs (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, 2016). Since populist messages tend to be sensational, algorithms might disproportionally reward and spread them. Moreover, microtargeting allows political actors to tailor their messages to specific groups in order to maximize their effects (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Such reinforcement of people's pre-existing beliefs risks polarizing politics yet further, and threatening democracy.

Third, hate speech by political actors on social media platforms is a huge problem (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas 2021). How to counteract it remains the subject of fierce debate. Social media facilitate free expression and

exchange of ideas and opinions. Still, the line between where free speech ends and hate speech begins is difficult to draw. Regulation of hate speech and insulting content remains a tough task for social media platforms and governments. Typically, populist parties tend to rely on freedom of speech to justify their rhetoric. Nevertheless, hate speech can erode social cohesion, undermine democratic norms and jeopardize minority rights.

MEDIA MAINSTREAMING OF POPULISM: NO MYTH

So, the potentially detrimental effects of social media are clear. But no short-term solutions are in sight. Government regulation and self-censorship raise ethical questions. Moreover, practical obstacles limit their effectiveness. Elon Musk's recent acquisition of Twitter and newly introduced policies (including the return of Donald Trump) all add to the uncertainty (Spalińska, 2022). Notwithstanding these difficulties, to gain an in-depth understanding of mainstreaming, scholars must examine the factors that create a fertile breeding ground for populism. The introduction debunked several myths about populism. Alongside this, political scientists must identify the factors which expedite populism's spread. Social media play a key role in helping populism go mainstream. That, for sure, is no myth.

6. THE RIGHT'S "FEMALE FACE": MEDIA FRAMING OF POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT WOMEN LEADERS

ALEXANDRA SNIPES AND JAKUB WONDREYS

Populist radical right parties are generally perceived as Männerparteien—political parties of men, by men, and for men. Traditionally, such parties were led by "strong men," who promoted a traditional image of hypermasculinity and propagated misogynist positions. Yet, while men still dominate the leadership of these parties (and all other parties), the most prominent radical right leaders in Europe are increasingly women.

Two of the most successful European populist radical right leaders are Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, president of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party and leader of the Brothers of Italy, and Marine Le Pen, former president of the French National Rally and presidential candidate in the last three elections. We explore how media representations of these women reflect interactions between different aspects of their identities as women and as populist radical right vanguards. Further, we discuss the way in which the crosscutting nature of gendered and radical right frames in the media may be strategically useful for parties seeking to "soften" their image and become more acceptable to voters.

GENDERED FRAMING IN THE MEDIA

Media framing refers to *how* issues are reported by news media as well as *what* is emphasized in such reporting. Inevitably, media framing of political phenomena are not gender-neutral, and gender bias permeates press coverage in subtle and overt ways. Previous research has uncovered various gender stereotypes at play in media coverage of women politicians.

Women politicians must navigate gender frames that associate political leadership with masculine characteristics (e.g., ambition, strength, toughness) while being expected to display feminine traits (e.g., softness, compassion, warmth). It is argued that these gender-stereotypical associations place women politicians in a double bind—if portrayed as warm or compassionate, women appear ill-suited for "masculinized" policy arenas like defense or crime; if portrayed as competent or tough, they risk alienating voters uncomfortable with counter-stereotypical behavior (Campus, 2013).

Previous research confirms that the media links "male issues" (e.g., security, foreign affairs, economy) to male politicians and "female issues" (e.g., education, welfare, health care) to female politicians. Men also receive greater attention to their experience, accomplishments, and policy positions, while women leaders are often described through their personal characteristics. Women politicians are less likely to have their policy positions featured in the news despite making these issues central to their campaigns. Additionally, media coverage disproportionately emphasizes women's physical appearance and family roles as wives, mothers, or daughters (Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008).

WOMEN OF THE RADICAL RIGHT IN THE MEDIA

While radical right ideas are a major source of marginalization of minorities, and (though in decreasing ways) of women, too, they are often stigmatized in the mainstream media. The common frames for such parties: (1) focus on *instrumental* personality traits (e.g., aggressive); (2) rarely mention professional accomplishments; (3) link them mainly to masculinized issues (e.g., immigration, security); and (4) give little attention to nonpolicy issues (e.g., family life) (Bos, Van der Brug and De Vreese, 2011). In essence, mainstream media typically portrays these parties negatively, emphasizing controversial aspects of their agenda while giving little attention to humanizing aspects of party members.

We suggest that this media treatment causes a qualitatively different kind of framing in the coverage of women politicians. Specifically, we argue that the "softer" gendered frame and the "harder" radical right frame often work in opposition, potentially weakening rather than strengthening overall bias. This crosscutting effect distinguishes radical right women leaders from both their male counterparts and women politicians in other parties (Snipes and Mudde, 2020).

This dynamic is particularly visible in the cases of Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen. Content analysis of major newspapers in Italy (*La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*) and France (*Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*) reveals how these competing frames manifest in coverage. The interaction of bias related to the gendered and radical right frames leads to a largely neutralized frame. For both women, traditional indicators of gender-biased coverage were largely absent—only a small minority of articles emphasized expressive personal traits, linked them to "softer" issues, or stressed nonpolicy issues. Instead, most articles mentioned their professional traits and accomplishments and emphasized instrumental personality traits. Notably, a majority of articles across both conservative and liberal newspapers tended to frame these

parties as mainstream, frequently portraying these leaders as more "moderate" and "sophisticated" strategists.

IMPLICATIONS: A MAINSTREAMING OF THE RADICAL RIGHT?

The media representations of populist radical right women reflect complex interactions between different aspects of their identities, challenging traditional frameworks for analyzing gender in political media coverage. Interestingly, the different identity constructions of Le Pen and Meloni as radical right leaders and as women politicians interact in a way that reduces indicators of gendered media bias. Yet, newspaper coverage in both countries do increasingly frame these parties as part of mainstream politics, often highlighting their leaders' "distinctive" ability to "soften the tones of the past."

Our analysis supports recent findings that such contradictions may benefit both the politician and radical right movements more broadly (Ben-Shitrit, Elad-Strenger and Hirsch-Hoefler, 2022). Such media framing could make radical right agendas and policies appear more acceptable, as feminine stereotypes applied to a radical right woman may counter the authoritarian, aggressive image of these parties. In short, a framing steeped in feminine gender stereotypes might provide strategic advantages, soften a party's extremist, masculinist image while maintaining its core appeal.

The success of radical right parties in gaining political power depends on their ability to be seen as legitimate by other political actors and the electorate. To understand how these movements shift their illiberal positions into mainstream politics, further research should examine the specific processes that help them gain public acceptance. A crucial element in this dynamic is the increasing visibility of women within radical right politics, particularly in the media, where their representation may shape public perceptions and contribute to the broader normalization of these movements.

7. TOWARDS THE CONSOLIDATION OF A NEW CLEAVAGE? THE EVOLUTION OF THE "DEMARCATIONIST" BLOC IN EUROPE

VINCENZO EMANUELE

In recent years, an increasing number of academics have started to discuss the existence of a new political conflict in Europe, which some have defined as a true and proper cleavage. This conflict would replace the traditional cleavages that are currently declining (class, religion, and territory), and divide society into the "winners" (entrepreneurs, qualified employees in industries that are open to international competition, and cosmopolitan citizens), and the "losers" (entrepreneurs, qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, unskilled workers, and citizens who strongly identify with their country) of globalization (Kriesi et al., 2008).

Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2018) claim that this new conflict was generated by a number of "critical junctures," including the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the World Trade Organization (1993–1994). It was then strengthened by the migration crisis (2015) and the eurozone crisis that followed the Great Recession (2008). This leads to the emergence of a new transnational *cleavage* that is structured along economic (free trade and globalization), cultural (immigration and multiculturalism), and institutional (integration into the European Union) dimensions. This cleavage divides European politics into "integrationist" parties that support the current macro-processes (pro-globalization, pro-cosmopolitanism, and pro-European Union) and "demarcationist" parties that oppose these processes and align themselves in defense of the traditional economic (protectionism), cultural (nativism), and institutional (sovereignism) borders of the national community.

Which parties are part of the Demarcationist bloc? In what ways has their consensus evolved in European nations? Does the demarcationist mobilization represent a real cleavage? We attempted to address these issues in our article (Emanuele, Marino, Angelucci, 2020).

WHO ARE THE PARTIES OF THE DEMARCATIONIST BLOC?

In order to ascertain this, we analyzed the election manifestos of the European parties from 1979 to 2018 using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2018), focusing in particular on three variables representative

of the demarcation conflict, that is, free trade, European Union and multiculturalism. We have therefore built an index based on the positioning of the parties on these three themes and the space devoted to them in their respective election manifestos.

Based on this classification, in 20 of the 28 countries examined, 51 demarcationist parties are found. Of these, 42 are part of the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2023) and 33 are specifically categorized as populist in that source. Concerning the political orientation, radical right-wing parties, including the FPÖ in Austria, the PS in Finland, the RN in France, the AfD in Germany, the FdI and Lega in Italy, the PVV in the Netherlands, the VOX in Spain, the SD in Sweden, and, lastly, the UKIP and Brexit Party, clearly dominate. Nevertheless, there are also extreme left-wing parties, such as the Swedish Left Party, the LFI in France, the SYRIZA in Greece, and the Communist parties of the Czech Republic, Greece, Luxembourg, and Portugal.

HOW HAS THEIR SUPPORT CHANGED IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES?

In recent years, there has been a notable average increase in support for the demarcationist bloc. If the bloc received about 10% of the vote between 1989 and 2004, its support started to increase in 2009, shortly after the Great Recession hit, and in the 2019 European elections, it averaged 21.4% of the vote. Italy stood out in those elections, supporting the demarcationist bloc with 40.8% of the vote, second only to Poland (49.1%).

Voters gradually switched from traditional parties that supported integration to demarcationist parties, which also increased "bloc volatility" (Bartolini, Mair, 1990).

CAN WE SPEAK OF A TRUE AND PROPER CLEAVAGE?

Although this new cleavage is still far from being consolidated and "mature," the increase in both electoral support and volatility toward the demarcationist bloc appears to indicate that a progressive electoral mobilization process is taking place around it. Based on the analytical model developed in our article (Emanuele, Marino, Angelucci, 2020), Figure 2 depicts the stage of development of the demarcationist cleavage in Europe.

Five of the 20 nations where a demarcationist bloc has formed still exhibit a cleavage in the "embryonic" phase, where demarcationist parties have electoral support that is below the average for Europe. However, the "mobilization" stage has already been reached in Italy and eight other nations.



Figure 2. The demarcationist cleavage in Europe after the 2019 elections
Source: Emanuele, Marino and Angelucci, 2020

In this case, demarcationist parties are supported by a larger proportion of voters than in the 2014 European elections; summed to a high degree of electoral volatility in favor of the demarcationist bloc. This is because a growing portion of the electorate is turning away from traditional parties that compete along old lines of conflict and toward parties that emphasize demarcation.

Additionally, the demarcationist cleavage has advanced to the "maturity" stage in three nations. Their main feature is that, even though the demarcationist bloc received a sizable portion of the vote, the bloc volatility across the cleavage line is minimal. In other words, voters do not move from one side of the cleavage to the other because they believe it to be highly relevant. Lastly,

three nations are currently experiencing a "crisis": demarcationist parties have lost votes in these countries in relation to the European elections of 2014, and the high level of electoral mobility suggests that voters are shifting away from the demarcationist front and toward the cleavage line.

8. NEO-TRADITIONALISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

FRANCESCO MELITO

Populism is still one of the most common terms used to describe the so-called "illiberal turn" in several Central and Eastern European countries. In the name of popular sovereignty reclaimed after 1989, criticism of liberal democracy is frequently coupled with criticism of the establishment (especially the European and pro-European one). Nevertheless, as in other contexts, there is a risk that any challenge of power may be dismissed as populism, thus overlooking the various dimensions of non-liberal discourses (Lewandowsky, in this volume). According to Jan Zielonka and Jacques Rupnik (2020), what we are witnessing is an illiberal counter-revolution, even more than a populist one.

In this region, the so-called populists not only target the political elite, but the entire liberal ideology (whether in the form of neoliberal economic policies or the liberal culture) that has dominated since the fall of communism. The term "neo-traditionalism" refers to the cultural component of this counter-revolution. It provides a perspective that goes beyond populism, demonstrating that the typical populist antagonism of "people vs. elite" represents only one facet of a broader clash between competing worldviews.

WHAT IS NEO-TRADITIONALISM?

Neo-traditionalism is a term used in anthropology and post-colonial studies to describe a political tactic that sets the native political class against Western colonists. The local political elite employs neo-traditionalist rhetoric to present itself as the legitimate representative of "authentic culture," invoking precolonial customs and rejecting Western cultural interference (Friedman, 1994). This same political strategy is used in former colonies of the Global South, and similar anti-colonial narratives can be found in Central and Eastern Europe (Korolczuk, Graff 2018; Melito, 2022). However, in this context, liberal Western Europe is portrayed as the colonial power endangering the values of an authentic and Christian Europe.

More specifically, neo-traditionalists in this region reject the liberal culture based on individual freedom that was introduced with the 1989 revolution and is perceived as a foreign imposition. At the same time, they seek

to establish themselves as the legitimate elite of their country by proposing an alternative (and therefore non-liberal) model centered on "authentic" traditional European values, national identity, and the Christian religion. In other words, they reject the progressive values of the West and emphasize the role of tradition. In contemporary Europe, the dissemination of illiberal ideas is a fairly common phenomenon. So why, in this region, have they been accompanied by an anti-colonial narrative?

THE ROOTS OF NEO-TRADITIONALISM: CASE OF POLAND

Take the example of Poland, looking at the country's trajectory after 1989. There are two main elements to consider. The first is the convergence of the main post-communist political actors around the idea of a "return to the West." The cultural sphere was one of many areas of society where this "liberal consensus" was prevalent (Bill, Stanley, 2020). However, the almost-colonial approach that shaped the democratic transition and European integration processes (Holmes, 2003) created a sense of external interference (Melito, 2021). Alternative voices, until then relegated to the margins of political debate, emerged only after NATO and EU accession, claiming their diversity from the post-communist elite. This dynamic explains both the success of populist rhetoric against the post-1989 establishment, and the rise of a neo-traditionalist discourse as a reaction to the transformation of the society's foundational values.

The second factor lies in the formation of a (more or less formal) alliance of conservative intellectuals who, over the years, developed and spread a reactionary ideology, instead of advocating for a "return to liberal West." In 1996, Polish historian Andrzej Nowak (in Behr, 2023) explicitly invoked Antonio Gramsci when urging conservative civil society to fight for cultural hegemony in the country. Aleksander Nalaskowski (2019), another scholar linked to conservative circles, also referred to Gramsci in his call for a "crusade" against political correctness. PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński (2019) likewise condemned the cultural dominance of liberal permissiveness coming from the West and promoted by the post-communist elite at the expense of the Church and national tradition. It is impossible to determine the exact number of "organic intellectuals" of neo-traditionalism who have consciously adopted the strategies of right-wing Gramscism, or Gramscisme de droite, but it is clear that a significant part of Polish civil society has contributed to promoting and defending traditional values. This has been a key factor in fostering an environment favorable to the subsequent rise of illiberal parties (Mudde, 2007).

NEO-TRADITIONALISM: A REVOLT AGAINST THE MODERN WORLD

Those familiar with the concept of populism will recognize the division of political space between the foreign elite (liberals or colonizers) and the heirs of "authentic culture" (ethnic groups or defenders of tradition). However, the antagonism between the (indigenous) people and the (foreign) elite is only one dimension of neo-traditionalism.

The two concepts are distinct, as stated earlier. The general will of the people is not necessarily the main concern of neo-traditionalists. Instead, they position themselves as the voice of the "genuine and authentic culture" rooted in tradition. Therefore, the clash is primarily between two contrasting worldviews. One, liberal, is tied to personal liberty and fluid identities. The other, traditionalist, posits stable traditions and identities as guiding principles. According to neo-traditionalists, the former is a source of insecurity; the latter, an anchor in an uncertain world (Zybertowicz, Zybertowicz, 2017). To quote the vivid words of Polish nationalist politician Robert Winnicki (2020), the freedom of the modern Western world, which "says only to drink, do drugs, smoke and have sex," is countered by a rebellion based on "patriotism, tradition and identity." Thus, compared to populism as a thin-centered ideology, the concept of neo-traditionalism better captures the complexity of illiberal narratives in the region. In short, it blends anti-colonial narratives (which are in some respect populist) with an anti-progressive discourse that places tradition at its core.

9. POPULIST INSTRUMENTAL USE OF RELIGION: THE CASES OF BOLIVIA AND TURKEY

GRETA LANZA

In populist mobilizations, such as the Bolivian one of Evo Morales and the one of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, religion plays an essential role. As a matter of fact, together with other contextualizing factors, religion is used by populists to define who belongs to the people and who belongs to the elite. Moreover, the populist use of religion focuses more on the "sense of belonging" rather than on "faith" (Marzouki, McDonnell, 2016, p. 2), focusing on the restoration of native religious and traditional identities, in spite of theological doctrines. This restoration emphasizes the social importance of specific religious and cultural symbols, and in order to achieve it populist leaders build their political agenda around the battle with two types of elites. Those who deny or underestimate the religious tradition of the people, and the elites who impose their religion and values on the native population (Marzouki, McDonnell, 2016, p. 2). In cases such as Turkey under the Erdoğan administration, the demarcation line between politicized religion and sacralized politics is unclear, resulting in the creation of an intertwined dimension where authority and religion unite.

The case studies of Bolivia under Morales and Turkey under Erdoğan, highlight how both populist leaders, even though operating in two totally different contexts, managed to strategically consolidate power and defined a national identity by instrumentalizing religion.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGION IN BOLIVIAN ETHNO-POPULISM

Morales, elected in 2009, was the first indigenous president in the history of Bolivia. His ethnic origin in the Aymara group and his background as a coca grower influenced Morales in rebuilding the Bolivian identity by highlighting the importance of history and indigenous culture of the country (Poter, 2010). As a matter of fact, Morales is the symbol of ethno-populism, a particular form of political populist mobilization where a leader finds support in a specific ethnic group (Cheeseman, & Bertrand, 2019). Among the factors related to Morales' ethno-populism there are religion and its exploitation in favor of inclusive policies promoted by him. Bolivia, even though

historically a Catholic country, has seen the revival of indigenous traditions under Morales, such as devotion to deities Pachamama and Ekeko, which are often intertwined with Catholic beliefs (Mathews-Salazar, 2006). With reference to his past and showing sympathy to all the population, Morales did not exclude the catholic component, instead he even promoted pluralist policies encouraging inclusion of religion and indigenous tradition in the whole society. In order to spread and develop this inclusiveness Morales also promoted a secularization between the state apparatus and the Catholic religion.

THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF RELIGION IN ERDOĞAN'S TURKEY

In recent years, first as prime minister and then as president of the republic, since 2014 Erdoğan has dominated Turkish politics, which is defined by the conflict between Islamism and secularism. Thus, Erdoğan has reached a breaking point with Turkish secular culture by strategically praising and taking advantage of conservative aspects inherent in the Turkish people in order to counter Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularist ideology and advance a conservative Sunni agenda (Yilmaz, 2021).

Furthermore, the instrumentalization of Islam allowed the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), led by Erdoğan, to gain popularity and influence in Turkey, giving it more power to pursue its political goals. The role of the Diyanet, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, is another illustration of how religion has become politicized. This state organization has gotten stronger over time in backing the AKP's use of Islam to justify its policies (Öztürk, 2018). This combination of state and religion has allowed the party to strengthen its hold on power through oppressive measures, and undermining democratic institutions in the process.

COMPARING THE USE OF RELIGION IN BOLIVIA AND TURKEY

Two different forms of populism have emerged as a result of Bolivia and Turkey's cultural, geographic, and historical differences: Erdoğan's radical right-wing Islamic populism and Morales's inclusive ethno-populism. Though using different strategies and tactics, both leaders have used religion as a tool to further solidify their positions of authority and rebuild national identities in their respective nations.

At a time when secularism and Islamism were at odds, Erdoğan used Islam as a tool to consolidate power and further the goals of the AKP in Turkey, while indigenous traditions and Catholicism coexisted in Bolivia's

sociopolitical context under Morales in support of pluralism (Ayoob, 2020). Additionally, Erdoğan increased the power of state religious groups like the Diyanet by obfuscating the distinction between religion and the state. On the other hand, Morales promoted secular policies in an attempt to keep religion and state apart while also enacting constitutional amendments, educational reforms, and social reforms to respect indigenous spiritual traditions. This difference in approach to secularization highlights the two leaders' different populist visions: Erdoğan opposed the people, who were identified as Muslims, to the elites, specifically the secular bourgeoisie, while with a more inclusive approach, Morales embraced Bolivia's religiously pluralistic context and opposed the indigenous population, who were understood as the people, to the conservative elites (Brubaker, 2020).

Despite their differences, the two populist leaders use religion somewhat similarly. Both acknowledged the emotional influence of religion on voters and used it to rally support and justify their authority.

Beyond emphasizing the intricate processes involved in the creation of national narratives and power structures, Morales and Erdoğan's instrumentalization of religion in Bolivia and Turkey also reflects broader trends in the relationship between religion and politics. As a result, examining the strategic actions of the two leaders provides a more thorough understanding of the nuanced ways in which religion influences populist political discourse, serving as a social unifier and a political instrument.

10. NOSTALGIA AND POPULISM

EZGI ELÇI

In early October 2022, Spanish populist radical-right party Vox held a festival (Llach, 2022). During the celebrations, right-wing populist figures, including Donald Trump, Giorgia Meloni, and Viktor Orbán, sent video messages to the audience. At the same event, the band Los Meconios performed a song opening with the line "We're going back to '36," a reference to the year Franco launched the coup d'état that started the Spanish Civil War. There are many other examples. "Make America Great Again" and "Take Back Control" are the catchiest slogans of populists nostalgic for a better past. Viktor Orbán and Hugo Chávez frequently refer to a paradise lost. In short, in contemporary politics, the interplay between nostalgia and populism has become increasingly prominent. Nostalgia has shaped the narratives and agendas of various populist movements and parties across the globe.

WHAT IS COLLECTIVE NOSTALGIA?

Collective nostalgia corresponds to a yearning for a time before societal decline; a time characterized by certainty and authenticity (Stauth and Turner, 1988). Unlike personal nostalgia, which evokes individual memories, collective nostalgia is tied to social identities and the events or objects associated with those identities (Wildschut et al., 2014). Its significance lies in its ability to foster identity continuity during times of collective threat (Davis, 1979). Research shows that collective nostalgia is closely linked to terror management (Routledge et al., 2008), identity continuity (Sedikides et al., 2015), and social identity (Smeekes, Verkuyten, and Martinovic, 2015). It is a powerful tool for populist leaders seeking to create division between the "pure people" (us) and the "immoral elites" (them). Understanding collective nostalgia is thus essential to comprehend populists' political strategies.

THE POPULIST RECIPE: MIXING NOSTALGIA WITH POLITICAL VISION

Populist leaders often use rhetoric steeped in nostalgia. They are fond of harking back to an imagined golden age which, they claim, has now been

tainted by corrupt elites. This golden age of old is presented as a vision for the future; a return to a time when authenticity prevailed (Taggart, 2000). Nevertheless, populists are not fixated on the past per se. On the contrary, they view nostalgia as a means of designing the future. Populist narrative typically focuses on corrupt elites who, in the past, hijacked the sovereignty of the pure people, and betrayed their trust. Populist movements promise to take back control from these elites and return it to the people. This narrative resonates with those who long for an era when the elites had less dominance and society was more authentic and familiar. Turkey provides an illuminating example of this phenomenon.

OTTOMAN VERSUS KEMALIST NOSTALGIA

Populism in Western Europe or Latin America often centers on nativism or anti-imperialism. Populism in Turkey, by contrast, takes a distinct form (Elçi, 2022). In the Turkish context, the primary driver of populism is the divide between Islamists and secularists. In Turkey, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) constructs and exploits a fault line between authentic Muslim people and corrupt secular elites. AKP strategically leverages Ottoman nostalgia to critique secular elites for severing the connection between the people and the glorious Ottoman Empire. AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan portrays his party as the heirs of the Ottoman legacy. He has pledged to restore power to "the people" and reestablish Ottoman-era values. In Turkey's political landscape, two competing forms of nostalgia stand out: Ottoman and Kemalist. Ottoman nostalgia emerged as a response to Kemalist modernization efforts and a distancing from the Ottoman legacy in pursuit of a modern, secular nation-state. The AKP exploits Ottoman nostalgia to legitimize contemporary policies, glorifying and reinterpreting the Ottoman past. Conversely, Kemalist nostalgia emerged during the 1990s as a reaction to changing socio-political and socio-economic structures (Özyürek, 2006). Kemalists felt challenged by political Islam and neoliberal policies. Thus, they began to yearn for the era of Kemalist reforms in the 1920s and 1930s.

THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND POPULISM

Invoking collective nostalgia creates fertile ground for populist us-versus-them political agendas. This dynamic is not exclusive to Turkey but resonates globally. A number of countries appeal to different forms of nostalgia. Populist politicians harness these sentiments strategically, to secure electoral

gains. While populists are often associated with the instrumentalization of nostalgia, this phenomenon is not unique to them. Mainstream political parties have also recognized the power of longing for the past in swaying public opinion. However, the crucial difference lies in the degree and intensity of nostalgia. Populist movements, driven by discontent with the establishment, tend to embrace nostalgia more fervently. Their parties' leaders pledge to return nations to a perceived paradise lost. In contrast with their non-populist counterparts, populists can also exploit nostalgia vengefully, fueling strong resentment towards elites.

NOSTALGIA'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

I should include a caveat that evoking collective nostalgia does not necessarily have a detrimental impact on politics. When politicians become wistful for a bygone democratic era, nostalgia can catalyze democratic aspirations. Indeed, it can bolster support for a democratic system. The real peril arises when the masses are persuaded to yearn for an illiberal or authoritarian past.

A TIMELESS HUMAN IMPULSE

The intertwining of nostalgia and populism is a complex phenomenon that has gained prominence in contemporary politics. Whether it's the exploitation of collective nostalgia by populist leaders or the strategic use of the past by mainstream parties, the influence of nostalgia in shaping political narratives is undeniable. Specific forms of nostalgia, and their effects, may vary from one country to another. The human impulse to reminisce about a bygone era, however, remains timeless. As long as societies continue to grapple with challenges and uncertainties, yearning for the past will continue to play a significant role in the political landscape, molding the visions of the past and future in the minds of the electorate.

11. SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC RESPONSES TO POPULISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

PETRA GUASTI, ALEŠ MICHAL AND MICHAL MALÝ*

The electoral trajectory of social democracy over the past century reflects the ascent and decline of a specific electoral coalition—the industrial working class and public-sector workers. The coalition began to unravel in the 2000s due to globalization and technological shifts, diminishing the influence of industrial workers. Attempts to attract younger, urban professionals further eroded support from industrial workers, leaving social democrats increasingly reliant on public-sector employees. However, constraints on public spending post-Great Recession rendered this strategy ineffective (Benedetto et al., 2020). The waning support for social democratic parties correlates with the rise of the populist radical right. Søren Frank Etzerodt and Kristian Kongshøj (2022) elucidate various factors contributing to the decline of social democratic parties, such as populist radical right challengers, shifts in voter preferences due to globalization, economic insecurities, and cultural changes. Social democratic parties face the challenge of navigating diverse policy preferences within their electorates while striving to maintain ideological coherence, particularly regarding redistribution and social integration issues. While many social democratic parties worldwide continue to decline, the Danish Social Democrats, as illustrated by Etzerodt and Kongshøj (2022), have successfully adapted by balancing welfare policies with a more conservative stance on immigration, thus making substantial inroads into the DPP (Danish People's Party, Dansk Folkeparti) electorate. However, the Danish populist radical right pioneered the notion of "welfare chauvinism" —meaning that benefits should only be accessed by the natives—a successful formula that was subsequently adopted by other populist radical right parties in Europe (Schumacher, Van Kersbergen, 2016).

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ALONE AGAINST EVERYBODY—THE CZECH SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND IMMIGRATION

One of the most salient issues that challenges social democratic parties, especially in power, is immigration. During the 2015 "migration crisis," the Czech Social democrats led a coalition government with valence populist ANO (Akce nespokojených občanů, Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) as their junior partners. Immigration became a central issue in party competition, linked to economic concerns and opposition to state support for refugees. While immigrants settling in Czechia are generally accepted, those passing through or settling in neighboring countries are feared and demonized. The issue of immigration is framed as a matter of national sovereignty and Euroscepticism, and political parties advocating for refugee acceptance face backlash, while fearmongering for ideological (populist radical right) and strategic (valence populists) reasons, particularly against Muslim non-European refugees, is prevalent during elections and mobilizes voters (Buštíková, Guasti, 2024).

Between 2015 and 2017, social democrats attempted to defend Czech commitments to the EU and refugee solidarity. However, they faced criticism from both the opposition and their coalition partner ANO, who sought to capitalize on the anti-refugee public opinion. While in government, ANO strategically distanced itself from the official government stance on refugee policy, aligning with anti-immigrant sentiments of the opposition, including the radical right SPD (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, Freedom and Direct Democracy) and the radical left Communists (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia). ANO and its leader portrayed itself as a pragmatic problem-solver. They emerged as a winner in the politicization of the refugee issue while weakening their senior government partner, the social democrats.

In subsequent 2017 elections, the immigration issue remained salient. ANO capitalized on its anti-immigration rhetoric, winning with a significant margin, while the Social Democrats suffered a considerable loss of support. ANO won the October 2017 elections with 29.6% of the votes. The social democrats, tied to the unpopular EU refugee policies, suffered defeat and lost 65% of their support. They won only 7.3% of the vote compared to 20.5% in the 2013 election. The downward trend was confirmed in the 2021 parliamentary elections, in which social democrats remained below the 5% threshold. Unlike the Danish social democrats, the Czech social democrats failed to accommodate the anti-immigration issue; as a consequence, their voters moved to the valence populist ANO and the radical right SPD.

RADICALIZATION OF SLOVAK SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

The story of Slovak social democracy highlights the alternative path to the Czech social democrats—more in line with that of the Danish social democrats. Since 1998, the left-wing Direction—Social Democracy (Smer-SD), led by Robert Fico, steadily gained strength. Direction assumed government in 2006–2010 and 2012–2020, consistently advocating for social measures, redistributive policies, and the augmentation of state ownership in strategic enterprises. Over time, Smer-SD has undergone significant ideological shifts, radicalizing under the burden of its corruption scandals. It sought to replace the voters lost to challenger parties such as OLaNO (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) on the corruption issue by integrating nationalist anti-immigration narratives while also implementing new redistributive policies consistent with a more traditional left-wing agenda.

The murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018 exposed Direction's connections to organized crime and led to a splintering of the party into Fico's Direction that continued the radicalization trajectory and the Voice—Social Democracy (Hlas-SD) that presented itself as a more mainstream option. In the subsequent term, many government figures faced investigation and trial, and numerous high-profile figures associated with Fico's Direction were jailed or facing jail. The Voice figures were not completely immune to investigations but continued to present programmatically milder versions of the Direction's redistributive and anti-immigration policies. This strategy paid off as in the 2023 parliamentary elections, the parties won 37.6% of the vote (22.9% and 14.7%, respectively, compared to 18.3% in the previous 2020 elections and the peak Direction support of 44.4% in the 2012 elections), enabling Fico to form a coalition government of Direction, Voice, and minor Slovak nationalists on the agenda of strong statism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY BETWEEN DECLINE AND RADICALIZATION

The comparison of the recent developments of social democratic parties in Czechia and Slovakia sheds light on two fundamental aspects of populism: the decline of social democratic parties and the radicalization of mainstream parties. In Czechia, the social democrats failed to accommodate the anti-immigration sentiment, resulting in a significant loss of support for populist ANO and radical rights. Since the 2021 elections, they are no longer present in the national parliament. Conversely, Slovak Social Democracy, exemplified

by Smer-SD, underwent significant ideological shifts, embracing nationalist anti-immigration narratives while maintaining redistributive policies. Despite corruption scandals and fragmentation into two parties, Slovak social democracy continued its radicalization trajectory, culminating in forming a coalition government with a strong emphasis on statism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.

12. DELIBERATION IS NO SILVER BULLET FOR THE "PROBLEM" OF POPULISM

KRISTOF JACOBS

Populists are not satisfied with the way democracy works these days. They do not reject liberal democracy outright but want it to change (Zaslove, 2023). Indeed, they feel the political elite is unresponsive. Not surprisingly, then, populist parties thrive in settings where there is a widespread feeling that politicians do not listen to the people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

What if… decision-makers gave citizens a voice in the decision-making process? In fact, this is happening across the globe. Democratic innovations (Elstub and Escobar, 2019), that is, decision-making processes that aim to deepen citizens' participation and engagement in political decision-making (Jedzini, 2023), are ever more popular (Wordliczek, 2023). They come in many shapes and forms, such as referendums, deliberative mini-publics or participatory budgeting. Deliberative democratic innovations in particular are popular, as is evidenced by the many nation-level citizens' assemblies on climate change. We have seen such assemblies not only in France, but also in the UK, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Denmark, Spain and Austria. Scholars of deliberation are optimistic about the potential of such deliberative events. In one often-cited piece in *Science*, several prominent scholars of deliberation contend that "[d]eliberation promotes considered judgment and counteracts populism" (Dryzek et al., 2019). But is that optimism warranted? What does the available empirical research tell us? To examine this, one must distinguish between populist citizens and populist parties.

POPULIST CITIZENS AND DELIBERATION

Much research has examined the effect of participation in deliberative mini-publics on political attitudes in general. Review studies (Gastil, 2018) on the effects of deliberation have found that mini-publics can influence trust in political institutions or faith in the efficacy of governance, for example (Michels, 2011). But what about populist attitudes? While empirical research on this topic is still in its infancy, several patterns are starting to emerge.

To begin with, it seems that populist citizens are more likely than their non-populist counterparts to support the use of deliberative democratic innovations (Heinisch and Wegscheider, 2020). When participating in democratic

innovations that involve an element of deliberation, they are just as satisfied with the process as non-populist citizens (Jacobs, 2023). Moreover, populists evaluate the quality of the deliberation as positively as their non-populist counterparts. After taking part in deliberative democratic innovations, citizens' populist attitudes even decreased (Theuwis and Kindt, 2024). While populism is sometimes equated with anti-pluralism, these results suggest that for populist participants, the picture is more nuanced.

Effects on the broader public are less clear. In general, studies examining such effects are very scarce, and to the best of my knowledge, no such research exists regarding populist citizens' reactions to deliberative democratic innovations (Goldberg, 2023). Citizens with more populist attitudes were likelier to accept their loss after a referendum (Werner and Jacobs, 2022). However, we do not know whether this type of effect also occurs for deliberative democratic innovations.

POPULIST PARTIES AND DELIBERATION

For parties, however, the picture is different. In general, political parties are more instrumental when it comes to democratic innovations (Bedock, 2017). They support such innovations when they are in opposition, or when they believe they produce the outcomes they themselves prefer anyway (Jacobs, 2011). When looking at the outcomes of deliberative democratic innovations, political parties, especially those in government, tend to cherry-pick the ones that align with their policies (Font et al., 2018). One would perhaps think that populist parties are different. After all, populist parties are often seen as credible change agents who say they want more power for the people (Heinisch 2023). Yet research on when populist parties support referendums already suggests that they may not be that different after all (Gherghina and Silagadze 2020). The scarce research on populist parties' reactions to deliberative democratic innovations also corroborates this.

In the case of the French Climate Assembly, for instance, I found that the two main populist parties, La France Insoumise and the Rassemblement National, reacted completely differently to the assembly's outcomes (Jacobs, 2023). The former was positive, the latter negative. And both reactions were in line with their prior positions. Moreover, even La France Insoumise, while positive, still clearly indicated that where the outcomes of the assembly did not align with its own election manifesto, the manifesto was superior.

POPULIST CITIZENS VERSUS POPULIST PARTIES

All in all, then, the available empirical research tempers the optimism of some deliberation scholars. It is thus better to have realistic expectations of the potential of deliberation. There may be effects on populist citizens, but populist parties are very instrumental in their use and reaction to deliberative democratic innovations: they support such innovations only when they deliver the outcomes the populists like.

This is a sobering message for reformers hoping to win over populist parties by implementing deliberative democratic innovations. Again, it seems that populists are no outsiders, but rather simply very similar to other parties: they are not different from other parties just because they say they want more power to the people (see introduction).

13. POPULIST ATTITUDES AS THERMOMETERS OF DEMOCRATIC QUALITY

MARIE-ISABEL THEUWIS AND ROSA KINDT

Populism has an ambivalent relationship with democracy. It affirms the core democratic principle of power to the people, but is rigorous to the point of zealousness in its pursuit of this principle. This leads, for instance, to the rejection of mediated representation. Such tendencies uphold the idea that populism is a threat to democracy (Urbinati, 2019) or even—when referring to its radical-right manifestation—a "democratic pathology" (Mudde, 2010). To stay in medical terms, we could also take populism as a symptom: a sign of something going on deeper under the surface.

Others have therefore posited that the populist fixation on popular sovereignty means populism emerges when the democratic practice falls short of the democratic ideal (Canovan, 1999). That is, when political elites are revealed to be indeed corrupt (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis, 2020). But that is also when the everyday realities of how representative democracy works in practice leave too little room for "the voice of the people" (Mair, 2009). Research shows that populist citizens are especially likely to pick up on the gap between democratic practice and democratic ideal (Rovira Kaltwasser and Hauwaert, 2020). This is because they are democratic idealists: they strongly support democracy as an ideal and even support most liberal democratic values (M. M. Zaslove Andrej, 2023). The flipside of this is that populist citizens are more likely than other citizens to express dissatisfaction with a perceived lack of responsiveness to "the will of the people."

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING AS A CURE

The purpose of democratic innovations is to deepen or extend the role of citizens in democratic decision-making (Dryzek et al., 2019). Participatory budgeting (PB) does so by giving citizens authority to decide on the allocation of part of the local budget. Usually, citizens discuss in groups how to spend the budget, after which they make the final decision through a vote (Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke, 2008). Even though PB sometimes falls short of this ideal (Godwin 2018), its design enhances the level of popular sovereignty in a democracy (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2014).

Populist citizens perceive that popular sovereignty in our representative democracies is lacking. The question, therefore, is whether they would perceive a tool that seeks to address this shortcoming as a viable solution. Previous research has shown that populist citizens are highly supportive of decision-making processes that take power away from the elite and give it back to the people. This support extends to direct democratic decision-making (referendums) (Jacobs, Akkerman, and Zaslove, 2018) and, contrary to what one might expect, deliberative forms of democratic decision-making (citizens' assemblies) (A. Zaslove et al., 2021). Support in the abstract has no real connection with perceptions in practice (Trüdinger and Bächtiger, 2023). We thus still know very little about how populist citizens experience democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting, when they take place. Do such citizens indeed perceive participatory budgeting as increasing the power of the people?

STUDYING POPULIST PARTICIPANTS IN A PARTICIPATORY BUDGET

In a recent study (Theuwis, Kindt, 2024), we went beyond populist citizens' support in the abstract and studied whether there is a change in level of populist attitudes among participants to real-life participatory budgeting events. We attended four local PB meetings and measured populist attitudes among all participants before the PB and directly after it. This allowed us to create a dataset with which to study change in populist attitudes as a direct result of participation in a PB. We also conducted interviews with populist and non-populist participants to gain further insight into how they experienced such a decision-making process.

We found that among populist participants, participation in a PB led to a significant decrease in populist attitudes. Non-populist participants' populist attitudes did not significantly change. This suggests that something happened during the PB that directly connected to populist attitudes, but the data could shed no further light on that.

However, from the interviews with populist participants whose populist attitudes dropped, we gained two key insights. Firstly, they perceived that the process engaged them in political decision-making. Second, they felt that the politicians and authorities present afforded them respect and recognition. Participants saw how the latter listened and appreciated citizen input. This suggests strongly that populist participants experienced the process as truly and respectfully giving some power back to the citizens. As one populist citizen noted afterwards: "…politicians go to the residents and listen to what they have to say, but also the other way around. Look, now residents have a

little influence on politics, and vice versa. It should be a two-way street and not a one-way street."

POPULIST ATTITUDES ARE RESPONSIVE TO PERCEIVED DEMOCRATIC QUALITY

Taking these findings beyond our study, we think they suggest that populism in citizens is closely related to whether citizens feel they have influence and authority in democracy. Populist citizens are "dissatisfied democrats" who feel there is not enough popular sovereignty in modern democracies. Democratic innovations such as PBs give authority and influence to citizens. Participation in a PB decreased the level of populism among these "dissatisfied democrats." This indicates that in those citizens' eyes, participatory mechanisms did indeed diminish the gap between democratic ideal and democratic practice.

Is populism a pathology or a symptom of some underlying problem? Is populism a threat or a corrective to democracy? Our research shows that populist citizens respond to processes that bring actual democracy closer to their ideal democracy. This could indicate that, among citizens at least, populism functions as a symptom of a perceived concentration of power in the hands of the elites at the expense of popular sovereignty. Moreover, populist citizens do not necessarily prefer non-democratic forms of decision-making, but are rather opposed to mediated representation. Instead, when democratic practice approaches more participatory forms of democracy, populist citizens' satisfaction increases.

14. RESPONDING TO POPULISM WITH CAUTION

ANTHOULA MALKOPOULOU

The discussion about how to respond to populism is often fraught with pitfalls. These are, in part, caused by misguided myths within our understanding of populism (see introduction). To respond to these myths, we must correctly diagnose the causes and nature of populism, and fairly evaluate our strategies of response and their legitimacy. Our disagreements concern not only what populism is or how we should deal with it, but also what we expect from democracy.

Each type of response attaches a certain meaning to populism (Malkopoulou and Moffitt, 2023). This meaning extends to how populism relates to democracy, which we must define for this purpose. Thus, disagreement concerns not only what populism is or how we should deal with it, but also what we expect from democracy. On these grounds, two myths have been prominent in the debate on responses to populism.

MYTH 1: DEMOCRACIES MUST REPRESS POPULIST PARTIES

Some scholars, many of whom are associated with the school of "militant democracy," support strategies of repression. They contend that state and non-state authorities may legitimately repress parties and movements that act prima facie legally but oppose basic liberal democratic principles, as populists often do.

In short, if populists do not subscribe to certain key democratic beliefs, they should be contained, as András Sajó (2004) argues. For example, their state funding should be cut. They should not receive permission to gather in public spaces, or opportunities to run for elections, or invitations to committees, governing or voting coalitions. On social media, they should be deplatformed. And so on. But for strategies of repression to make sense, we must interpret populism as an anti-democratic phenomenon. This is because militant strategies of oppression were designed to deal specifically with fascist, Nazi, and similar extreme-right parties (Müller, 2012).

IS POPULISM ANTI-DEMOCRATIC?

But to think of populists as far-right anti-democrats is to forget that, as a political style or discourse, we can find populism in both left-wing and right-wing varieties. It can combine with xenophobic and nativist views, but also with more inclusionary stances and social-egalitarian ideas (Moffitt, 2020). As such, it can become a "threat" to democracy, promoting strong leadership and quenching intermediary institutions. But it can also "correct" democracy by bringing out its grassroots anti-hegemonic potential (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Repression of populism misses this double dynamic (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2022).

In fact, populism is not the same as authoritarianism. It is true that populists can become authoritarian. But when they do so they have mutated, and we should not label them as simply populists any more (Moffitt, 2020).

In addition to a biased understanding of populism as by definition proto-authoritarian, strategies of repression rely on a biased understanding of democracy as by definition liberal. Repressing populists implies that democracy cannot exist without liberal intermediary institutions. However, these strategies imply, democracy can exist without the full expression of popular will. Repression also renders democratic exclusion and rights restrictions in principle acceptable, as temporary means to secure democracy in the long run. Once these implications become clear, many would reject a militant-democratic approach to populism. But the opposite strategy, of not doing anything about populism, may also be problematic.

MYTH 2: DEMOCRACIES MUST TREAT POPULISTS AS ORDINARY OPPONENTS

From the perspective of a non-militant, tolerant democracy, the right strategy for dealing with populism is inclusion. Populists, they say, must be treated like ordinary political adversaries. They should be invited to debates, engaged with politically, and even defended as rightful dissidents. Many argue that treating opponents as legitimate eventually transforms them into democratic partisans (Rosenblum, 2010). The experience of regularly participating in day-to-day politics will inevitably tame populists, familiarize them with the ethics of civility and partisanship, and move them to value cooperation and compromise. Meanwhile, institutional checks and balances such as high electoral thresholds and the power of independent courts to reverse undemocratic decisions complement and counterbalance this inclusiveness. In addition, applying regular criminal law will prevent the worst, punishing

only acts that are directly harmful. Otherwise, political activity will remain unrestricted.

ARE POPULISTS HARMLESS?

But such a criminal law strategy is more suitable against extremist parties (Malkopoulou, 2021). Populists do not, as a rule, openly disregard the law. When they weaken judicial independence, media freedom and the separation of powers, they do so through formally legal procedures. Thus, they evade the usual mechanisms through which tolerant democracies guard themselves. But neither are populists harmless. Not only do they often undermine political and social structures, they also tend to claim ultimate legitimacy for their actions, thanks to their extensive popular and electoral support. Including populists as ordinary adversaries carries the risk of mainstreaming their messages. This can lead to the alteration of central frames of political discourse and the erosion of democratic attitudes in the long run. This is why center-right parties are heavily criticized for adopting populist rhetoric or providing shelter to populist parties (Müller, 2017). As a result, supporting tolerant strategies towards populism reveals an understanding of populism as either too immersed in illegal practices or, the opposite, as relatively harmless.

ALL OR NONE OF THE ABOVE?

Given the problems associated with both repressing and tolerating populists, should we be tempted to mix these strategies (Rummens and Abts, 2010)? Unfortunately, there are problems here, too. The mix is vulnerable to the charge of opportunism. It is also likely to be normatively inconsistent, combining mutually contradictory ideas about populism and democracy. The same problem of normative incoherence persists when we choose to respond to populism ad hoc with whatever strategy seems convenient on each occasion. However, advocating normative rigidity is not the point. What matters is to appreciate how important it is to design responses on the basis of a well-grounded understanding of what is good and bad about populism. In addition, we must have an honest appreciation of what is good and bad about the current state of democracy. Taking into account the democratic risks involved in both over- and under-reacting to populism is a good start.

15. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

PETRA GUASTI

The fourth part of the volume focused on three key types of political opportunity structures relevant to populism: the role of the media and political parties, the decision-making context, and historical, political, and social cleavages.

First, mainstream media and traditional parties play a significant role. Léonie de Jonge argued that right-wing populism is not inherently contagious—it spreads only when mainstream parties and media amplify it. This helps explain why right-wing populist parties have been more successful in the Netherlands and Flanders than in Luxembourg and Wallonia. Similarly, Laura Jacobs showed how social media amplifies populist messages, fueling disinformation, political polarization, and the spread of hate speech. Building on the media dimension, Alexandra Snipes and Jakub Wondreys examined how the portrayal of populist radical right women leaders such as Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni reveals a crosscutting media logic. While gendered and radical right frames would typically reinforce negative biases, their interaction often neutralizes them. Their analysis of major French and Italian newspapers shows that these women are frequently depicted in more professional and moderate terms, contributing to the broader mainstreaming of radical right movements. This strategic framing may help soften these parties' public image, increasing their electoral appeal and legitimacy.

On parties, Petra Guasti and Michel Perottino illustrated how the collapse of traditional parties in contemporary France facilitated the rise of multiple populist subtypes and competition among them, making populism the dominant political force in the country. Focusing on social democratic parties, Guasti, Michal, and Malý examined both their decline and the radicalization, using recent developments in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as case studies. The inability of traditional parties to handle crises effectively has further fueled populism. In another contribution, Guasti, Malý, and Michal highlighted how Slovakia—a context marked by economic, political, and health crises—has experienced electoral volatility, party fragmentation, and democratic norm erosion.

Second, in terms of the decision-making context, citizen participation appears to play a role in countering populism. Drawing on their research on populist participants in democratic innovations, Marie-Isabel Theuwis and

Rosa Kindt argued that populist attitudes serve as a barometer of democratic quality, responding to perceived improvements in the democratic system. Similarly, Kristof Jacobs suggested that deliberation offers grounds for optimism when it comes to populist citizens, though a much more pessimistic picture emerges in the case of populist parties. Anthoula Malkopoulou concluded by cautioning against overreactions, such as advocating for the suppression of populism or confusing it with undemocratic tendencies. However, at the same time, Malkopoulou contends that if populists are viewed as mere political rivals, their threats could be underestimated.

Finally, historical, social, and political cleavages have also proved fertile ground for populism. Michelangelo Vercesi analyzed how state formation legacies, specific electoral strategies, and prolonged government crises have made Italy the Western European country with the highest electoral support for populist parties. More broadly, Vincenzo Emanuele identified a new political cleavage in Europe that could restructure electoral competition through the rise of "demarcationist" parties. These parties mobilize the "losers" of globalization by opposing global integration, multiculturalism, and European integration, emphasizing protectionism, nativism, and sovereignty. Turning to more strictly cultural factors, Francesco Melito introduced the concept of neo-traditionalism to explain the "illiberal turn" in Central and Eastern Europe, where populist criticism of elites masks a broader rejection of liberal and Western values. Greta Lanza, in contrast, showed how Evo Morales in Bolivia and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey—despite their differences—both leveraged the emotional power of religious identities for populist mobilization. Finally, Ezgi Elçi explored the link between past and present by illuminating the role of Ottoman nostalgia in contemporary Turkey.

PART V
POPULIST VOTERS AND THEIR CONTEXT

This section explores the characteristics of populist voters. It emphasizes the need not to overstate populism's role as an explanation for voting behavior, identifies who citizens consider populist, and analyzes the illiberal nexus present among voters. It discusses how populist citizens mobilize, but do not necessarily reject liberal democracy and challenges the myth of a typical far-right voter. It addresses protest voting behavior, the normalization of the radical right in Spain and Portugal, the geography of European populism, and recognition dynamics in rural areas. The section examines the impact of closures of schools and hospitals, economic perceptions, and the complex relationship between populism and journalism, as well as the role of conspiracy theories, pseudoscientific beliefs, and nostalgia.

1. DON'T EXAGGERATE THE IMPORTANCE OF POPULISM

YAOYAO DAI

Populist parties and candidates have gained increasing media attention and electoral support across the globe. However, besides being populist, those parties and candidates vary in their programmatic agenda. Populism alone does not offer clear policy positions (see introduction). Populism is primarily about who has the legitimate power to make decisions (Norris, 2020). In reality, parties and politicians have to combine populism with other ideologies. Those other ideologies provide populist parties with the bulk of their policy orientations. This causes some challenges when evaluating populism's effects.

We don't know whether and how much the electoral success of populist parties and candidates is due to populism. However, since populism is, in reality, always combined with host ideologies, most observational studies explain the success or rise of far-right or far-left populist parties. For example, personal opposition to immigration is often found to predict support for right-wing populist parties. Lower socioeconomic status, meanwhile, often predicts support for left-wing populist parties (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). But these findings alone cannot say whether the electoral gains of populist parties are due to their programmatic policies, populism, or a combination of the two.

THE (IN)EFFECTIVENESS OF POPULISM

It is true that populist parties are gaining increasing electoral support. But three recent experimental studies that separate populism from its host ideologies all find that host ideologies, or programmatic policies, matter more than populist appeals in attracting votes. Using a nationally representative German sample, (Neuner and Wratil, 2022) respondents were provided with pairs of hypothetical political candidates to choose from. The candidates varied in their populist and programmatic policy priorities. For populist appeals, Neuner and Wratil included people-centric priorities such as strengthening direct democracy, and anti-elitist priorities such as fighting political corruption.

It was found that while people-centric priorities attract more votes, anti-elitist policy priorities do not seem to attract respondents' support in the

German context. Moreover, anti-immigration and pro-redistribution policy positions have consistently stronger effects in attracting votes. A US replication of the German study during the Trump administration found similar results (Silva, Neuner, and Wratil, 2023). Populist policy priorities are less effective in earning votes than their host ideologies.

A more recent experiment, by myself and Alexander Kustov, studies the effectiveness of populism in US political discourse (Dai and Kustov, 2024). We embedded populist and non-populist rhetoric, left and right economic policies, and open and closed immigration policy positions in realistic campaign messages in the US House primary election during the Biden administration. Respondents chose their preferred candidate from a pair of randomly generated candidate campaign messages with different combinations of populist rhetoric and policy positions.

Our study confirms the relative ineffectiveness of populism in gaining votes. We find that congruent policy priorities consistently matter more. Our findings were similar to the previous experiment during the Trump administration. This suggests that the relative null effect of populism holds, regardless of whether the incumbent president is populist or not.

POPULISM'S EFFECT ON KEY POLICY POSITIONS

Our study aimed to discover whether populism fared better with certain policy positions, and vice versa. In academic terms, is there an interactional effect between substantive policy positions and populism? We tested the interaction between the two and found no significant interactional effect between populist rhetoric and key policy positions. Although people often associate anti-immigration policies with populism, a populist frame does not make the anti-immigration position more appealing to voters, or vice versa.

POPULISM IS NOT MORE EFFECTIVE AMONG POPULIST VOTERS

If, typically, populism does not seem to be effective in attracting votes, is it because populism only attracts or matters more to populist voters? All three experiments measured respondents' populist attitudes and found a good proportion of respondents supported populist ideas. But all three studies found that populist voters are not more likely than non-populist voters to support populist candidates. When it comes to vote choice, voters who endorse populist values care more about programmatic policies, just like non-populist voters.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF POPULISM?

Thus, it seems that a substantial part of the electoral success of populist parties and candidates may lie in their programmatic policy positions instead of in populist appeals. Host ideologies like socialism or nativism, rather than populism, provide programmatic policy positions. Therefore, mixing up populism and its host ideology might lead us to exaggerate populism's effects.

However, this does not mean that populism is not important or entirely useless. While it might not influence voters' vote choice much, populism might be effective in attracting media attention and thus gaining more public exposure. For example, populist communication is found to generate more political engagement on social media (Hameleers et al., 2018). It might also be more effective in mobilizing voters to vote.

In all, we should beware both overestimating populism's ability to gain votes and underestimating populism's role in other meaningful political and social arenas. However, to correctly identify the effects and consequences of populism, it is crucial to disentangle populism from its host ideology.

2. WHO IS A POPULIST? LET THE CITIZENS SPEAK

MATTEO C. M. CASIRAGHI, LUIGI CURINI,
AND ALESSANDRO NAI

In recent years the nature of populism, its causes, and its effects on the political system have all been the subject of numerous scholarly investigations. The controversy surrounding the phenomenon has had significant effects on public discourse, where the term "populist" has become one of the most frequently used terms, often adopted as a personal attack and less frequently used as a compliment (Caiani, Graziano, 2019; Moffitt, 2016).

In one of our articles (Casiraghi, Curini, Nai, 2023), we adopted a new perspective and inquired about the opinions of the public and how they identify populist politicians. We still don't fully understand how voters perceive and recognize populism, even with the abundance of scholarly research. For instance, we might expect that Europeans would believe that male politicians are more populist than female politicians, or that right-wing politicians are more populist than centrist ones (Bos et al., 2013; Casiraghi, Bordignon, 2023).

In order to shed light on these issues, we carried out an experimental survey in which we asked Italians to name the politicians they believed to be the most populist in a variety of fictitious situations (usually called "cartoons"). Results show that the main factor that leads respondents to label a politician as populist is the language they employ. It doesn't appear that other traits like ideology or occupation (whether or not they are career politicians) have a significant impact.

IS POPULISM IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER?

Based on scholarly research and public discussion, we formulated some theories regarding how people recognize populism. Initially, we expected that Italians would recognize a populist politician by their rhetoric. People should always recognize a politician as populist if they make reference to the two traditional populist themes of anti-elite sentiment and the importance of common people in politics (Decadri, Boussalis, 2020).

Second, we took into account the politician's ideology (center, center-right, etc.), gender, and previous employment. According to diverse studies, populist leaders are less likely to be professional politicians and are more

likely to be men and right-wing supporters. The cases of Salvini and Berlusconi from Italy, as well as those from other nations such as Boris Johnson in the UK or Wilders in the Netherlands, serve as examples. Therefore, despite some exceptions, such as Jeremy Corbyn, a left-wing man, or Meloni, a right-wing woman, we expected that for citizens, the typical figure of a politician using populist rhetoric would be a right-wing man who is not a professional politician (Rooduijn, Akkerman, 2017).

Finally, we examined whether citizens' personal traits had an impact on their assessment of populism. We questioned citizens about their political ideology, degree of education, trust in political institutions, and proximity to populist viewpoints. For instance, we anticipated that people who strongly dislike populism and have high levels of political trust would be more likely to label a politician as such (Bos et al., 2013).

AN EXPERIMENTAL SURVEY

We used an experimental survey, officially known as a conjoint survey experiment (Hainmueller et al., 2014), with a representative sample of 1,000 Italian citizens to test our hypotheses. Following their responses to a series of questions about their political preferences and sociodemographic traits, we gave them a hypothetical scenario that described two made-up politicians. When asked which of the two they thought was more populist, respondents had to choose one.

Politician 1, for instance (Tab. 3), is a woman who identifies as center-left, expressed a blatantly anti-elite statement, and was formerly employed in the public sector. The two politicians in Table 3 are chosen at random from a list of predetermined attributes based on their specific traits, including gender, statement, ideology, etc. For example, there are 160 possible scenarios, such

Table 3. Survey design examples

	Politician 1	**Politician 2**
Declaration	"The bulk of people who run this country are corrupt. It would be right to abolish all forms of public funding for political parties"	"We cannot tolerate exponents of organized criminalization escaping justice on account of bureaucratic mistakes"
Gender	Woman	Man
Previous occupation	Public employee	Professional politician
Ideology	Centre-left	Right

as gender, male or female, previous occupation, public servant, politician, manual laborer, etc. As a result, each respondent was asked to rate two fictitious politicians whose traits were mixed randomly.

The results were then examined using a technique called marginal means analysis. The goal was to determine which characteristics of politicians most commonly resulted in their being labelled as populist and whether the significance of these attributes changed based on the characteristics of the respondents. For instance, if everything else is equal, the analysis may show that voters, especially those on the left, consistently perceive male politicians as being more populist than female politicians.

POPULISM IS RHETORIC

Our analysis's most significant finding is that the primary way that people recognize populist politicians is through their use of populist rhetoric. Other traits, such as gender, profession, or ideology, are irrelevant. At least not in Italy, right-wing and male politicians are not commonly labelled populists anymore.

When considering the traits of citizens, the most significant element, is their own populist inclination. Because populism is typically associated with negative connotations in popular language, populist citizens view classic anti-elite rhetoric as less populist. Also education level is an important factor: citizens with higher levels of education are better equipped to discern between statements that are populist and those that are not.

Beyond academia, our analysis has significant ramifications. For instance, the literature ought to focus more on how the general public perceives populism. Since citizens do not view the ideological dimension (right, left, etc.) of populism as a crucial characteristic for identifying populists, our findings actually demonstrate that the conclusions drawn by various studies regarding this dimension are incorrect, or at the very least, incomplete. Furthermore, there are political ramifications to our research. Specifically, by providing insight into how the public perceives and defines populism, politicians can create engaging targeting tactics that, depending on the audience, present their messages in a more or less populist manner.

3. POPULISM AND THE NEXUS OF ILLIBERALISM

MARCEL LEWANDOWSKY

As this Loop blog series curated by Mattia Zulianello and Petra Guasti (2023) clearly shows, the topic of populism is in vogue in political science. Rightly so: as Nadia Urbinati (2019) has pointed out, populism poses the greatest challenge to contemporary democracies. Furthermore, populist parties and movements are shaping the fortunes of countless countries. The United States under Trump, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government in Hungary, and Poland under the Law and Justice Party (PiS) are just three well-known examples. However, it does seem that researchers' hyper-focus on populism risks blinding them to the genuine heterogeneity of illiberal attitudes. Populism is only one part of a broader variety of illiberal attitudes that are challenging contemporary democracies.

SUPPORT FOR POPULIST PARTIES

Let us briefly consider populist politics as the material outcome of support for populist parties. The effects of populism in office are obvious (although not homogenous) across countries (Pappas, 2019). They include assaults on democratic institutions (mainly by levelling the division of power), polarization, and patronage. This applies particularly to populist radical-right parties in power (Huber and Schimpf, 2017).

The Greek left-wing populist party Syriza has expressed contempt for institutions, sometimes even bypassing them altogether (Pappas, 2019). Despite this, Syriza has worked to improve the quality of democracy in Greece, by reforming the electoral system and strengthening direct democracy (Lorencka and Leonidi, 2019). And left-wing populist governments in other countries (notably Venezuela) are simply flat-out authoritarian.

When campaigning for office, populists provoke, and fuel, sharp political polarization. They discredit democratic institutions such as parliaments and constitutional courts, accusing them of being run by a faceless elite. Remember Trump's "drain the swamp" metaphor? Populists present themselves as those who will take over and clean up in the name of "the people."

WHY DO POPULISTS GET ELECTED?

Yet if populists abolish liberal democracy, why do people (re-)elect them? There is much to say about conditions in the long term (Manow, 2018) and on the macro level (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Yet, despite a plethora of studies, findings about the effects of populism on individual attitudes remain inconclusive.

Scholars of populism are only beginning to understand the sentiments that fuel support for actors who propose illiberal democratic alternatives (Mudde, 2021). I make two observations.

First, several studies show that populist (radical-right) parties get support from citizens who harbor populist sentiments (Donovan, 2019). People who hold authoritarian attitudes also provide support. Crucially, although some individuals have populist and authoritarian orientations, these groups share no correlation (Schäfer, 2022). Hence, it appears safe to say that populist radical-right parties benefit from an invisible coalition of groups embodying variations of illiberal views on democracy.

Second, a parallel research strand has discovered that even individuals who do not display illiberal sentiments will, under certain circumstances, support illiberal political actors.

For the US, Matthew Graham and Milan Svolik (2020) have pointed to the importance of partisan loyalty: only a small fraction of Americans prioritizes democratic principles in their electoral choices when doing so goes against their partisan identification or favorite policies

A study on Germany has produced similar results (Lewandowsky and Jankowski, 2023). If an illiberal candidate is closer to the voter on a specific issue than the liberal alternative, even voters without strong illiberal attitudes will support the illiberal candidate. This applies even more strongly to voters with populist or authoritarian attitudes (also uncorrelated in the respective study). It holds across voters' political affiliations, ideological profiles, satisfaction with democracy and other covariates.

Therefore, illiberal parties (of which populists are the most significant variant) are profiteers of the demand for illiberal policies as well as of democratic indifference. To an extent, the latter echoes Foa and Mounks (2016) findings for younger cohorts in several Western democracies. People's desire to live under a democratic system has decreased, and skepticism towards democracy has risen.

"INVISIBLE COALITION"

These observations refer, first and foremost, to the state of research itself, and so does the remainder of this piece. Fellow scholars mustn't take offence from my conclusions. Indeed, these conclusions contain more than a grain of self-criticism.

A great number of studies appear satisfied to find merely that "populists are elected by populists." But scholars often fail to delve deeper into what this finding implies in terms of voters' underlying ideas of democracy. Populism as a concept is now so established that we hardly bother to interrogate what it truly means. In this regard, it might be fruitful to study multiple types of illiberal attitudes, and to examine the phenomenon of "invisible coalition," too.

Most importantly, "democratic indifference" remains understudied. If positional proximity and partisan loyalty trump democratic values, scholars of democracy and populism should examine the drivers of indifference. In this context, you might imagine that established instruments for examining political orientations are incapable of capturing fine-grained attitudes that are illiberal but not openly anti-democratic. Clearly, the illiberal nexus is a broad field worthy of more in-depth study.

4. POPULIST CITIZENS DO NOT REJECT LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

MAURITS MEIJERS AND ANDREJ ZASLOVE

The introduction identified six die-hard myths about populism. Another myth concerns the relationship between populism and liberal democracy. Most research on this subject has focused on political parties and leaders, but not on populist citizens themselves. For example, Nadia Urbinati (2019) and Jan-Werner (Müller, 2016) argue that populism is antithetical to liberal democracy.

POPULISM'S ANTI-PLURALISM

As a defining worldview, populism posits that political power should reside with the people, and with the people alone (Mudde, 2018). Popular rule, the argument goes, is hampered by the efforts of corrupt elites. Hence, populists believe that the interests of "the people" and "the elite'" are in essence incompatible. To these scholars, politics is a struggle for power between the "virtuous" ordinary people and the deceitful elites.

"The people," moreover, are considered a homogenous group with similar interests and preferences, and with a joint "general will." This essentialized, uniform view of "the people" is at the heart of the argument of theorists such as Urbinati and Müller, who write that populism, by definition, remains incompatible with pluralistic forms of political thought. After all, if "the people" are unified in their interests, there is no need for debate and accommodating diverse interests.

Contrastingly, liberal democracy centers around the idea of safeguarding pluralism in politics. On the one hand, liberal democracy entails free and open competition between different political parties in a public sphere with free and open debate. On the other hand, liberal democracy underlines the importance of the separation of powers and the rule of law, which constrain the executive branch vis-à-vis the legislative and judicial arms of government. And indeed, comparative research has shown that populist movements do not bode well for liberal democracy. Populist governments have eroded checks and balances on the executive (Houle and Kenny, 2018), attacked media freedom (Juon and Bochsler, 2020), and have targeted minority rights (Huber and Schimpf, 2017).

POPULIST BELIEFS

While populism was initially studied at the party level, the degree of populist beliefs can also be measured among citizens (Castanho Silva et al., 2020). Research on "populist attitudes" has found that some citizens hold a set of populist beliefs. Previous research has found that highly populist citizens were equally, or even more, supportive of the principle of democracy.[1] Given the emphasis on popular rule in populist beliefs, this is perhaps not surprising.

But how do highly populist citizens see liberal democracy? In recent research, we examined whether the incompatibility between populism and liberal democracy is also true for citizens (Zaslove and Meijers, 2024). Concretely, we examined, for a representative sample of Dutch citizens, whether high levels of populist beliefs correlate with the rejection of key principles of liberal democracy pertaining to political pluralism and the separation of powers.

We found no evidence that populist citizens reject liberal democracy. However, we found that highly populist citizens tend to reject the idea that political parties are important for a democracy. Highly populist citizens were equally likely to support most liberal democratic principles as citizens with no or low populist beliefs. What is more, our evidence suggests that populist citizens are more likely to embrace liberal democratic principles. This includes the idea that everybody should be able to express their opinion, that governments follow set rules and procedures, and that courts treat all citizens equally.

While our study focused on the Netherlands, our evidence aligns with the findings of multiple other recently published studies. Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2023) find that populist citizens in France, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom are, overall, not more likely to reject the rule of law than non-populist citizens. Wouter van der Brug et al. (2021), moreover, show that people who vote for populist parties are not less supportive of most liberal democratic principles than voters for other parties.

NATIVISM

Our evidence suggests that populist citizens are not any less supportive of most principles of liberal democracy. However, Andrej Kokkonen and Jonas Linde (2023) found in recent research that citizens with nativist views are

1 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/07/21/there-is-little-evidence-citizens-with-populist-attitudes-are-less-democratic/

more likely to reject key elements of liberal democracy. As Cas Mudde (2018) explained, nativism introduces the idea that all "non-native" elements in society form a threat to the "nation-state." Hence, if we want to point to political beliefs that form a precursor to anti-liberal democratic ideas, radical-right nativist beliefs should be of greater concern than populist beliefs.

POPULIST CITIZENS AND THEIR SUPPORT FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Recent research suggests that the negative relationship between populism and liberal democracy does not directly affect citizens with populist beliefs. On most indicators, our evidence suggests that populist citizens are no less supportive of liberal democracy than non-populist citizens.

At the same time, that does not mean that all is well. Despite widespread support for the principle of democracy among populist citizens, research has found overwhelmingly that citizens with strong populist attitudes are very dissatisfied with how democracy works. Rather than a principled rejection of the system of liberal democracy, populist citizens are unhappy with what governments deliver.

As such, it should come as no surprise that such dissatisfaction increases the appetite for unorthodox political solutions. Marcel Lewandowsky and Michael Jankowski (2023) find that populist citizens are willing to vote for a candidate with illiberal positions if those positions are associated with "better" policies. At the same time, Eelco Harteveld et al. (2021) find that nativist voters become much more satisfied with democracy once governments include radical-right parties.

Populist citizens are no less supportive of key liberal democratic principles. But they are discontent with the way politics works, and with the policies that governments pursue. Ultimately, it is this factor that might prepare the ground for anti-democratic movements to take root. We should therefore advise mainstream political actors to take citizens' discontent seriously, while safeguarding key liberal democratic principles in office.

5. THE MYTH OF THE TYPICAL FAR-RIGHT POPULIST VOTER

DAPHNE HALIKIOPOULOU AND SOFIA VASILOPOULOU

Research on electoral support for far-right populist parties focuses on the common features of the typical far-right populist voter. This is likely to be a poorly educated, male individual, with strong anti-immigrant attitudes (Stockemer, Halikiopoulou, and Vlandas, 2021) and limited prospects in the labor market (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2016). Such people are also likely to be discontented with the democratic process and to distrust political institutions (Erisen and Vasilopoulou, 2022).

Empirically, however, findings are not clear with regard to the relationship between low trust in institutions and far-right voting. Certain individuals who evaluate the democratic process positively may also vote for the far right. In our new article, we identify two routes to far-right voting: discontent and ideology (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2024). Discontented voters who negatively evaluate the democratic process are more likely to be motivated by dissatisfaction. They also vote primarily against the system as opposed to in favor of the far right. Ideological voters, meanwhile, are "nationalist" core voters who are principled and support the far right because they identify with the entirety of its platform. This ideology centers on prioritizing in-groups over out-groups in every policy domain.

DEMOCRACY

Citizens experience democracy through their everyday interactions with institutions: the quality of public services, crime, benefits and so on. These interactions shape their perceptions of the democratic process and its management of resources.

Citizens assess two components of the democratic process. First, they assess the diffuse component; or, in other words, the broad democratic system, through trust in institutions. Second, they assess specific components, such as satisfaction with system performance and policy outputs. The extent to which citizens trust institutions and expect effective policies is likely to shape their voting preferences. Declining institutional trust and negative evaluations of system performance and policy outputs are likely to damage

mainstream parties, which become associated with poor policy choices that negatively impact citizens' personal everyday experiences.

Voters with low or declining levels of trust, as well as those voters who negatively evaluate system performance and policy outputs, are likely to reward political parties that challenge the establishment and existing political norms.

PROTESTERS

Far-right populist parties are among the prime beneficiaries of these processes. Such parties offer nationalist solutions to all socio-economic problems (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2015). They focus on a purported conflict between in-groups and out-groups, and put forward policies that always prioritize the in-group. These parties challenge the establishment, both in terms of their populist component, which questions the legitimacy of elites (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, 2014), and their anti-liberal democratic component, which questions the existing mechanisms of democratic representation (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2018).

Research shows that far-right parties are often electorally successful when the quality of government is low and democratic discontent high (Vrakopoulos, 2022). Empirically, however, voting for the far right is not exclusive to discontented voters. Given that political parties often receive electoral support from a broad range of voters, it is theoretically and empirically possible that far-right core voters behave differently from peripheral voters (Damhuis and Damhuis, 2020). While the latter are often motivated by protest, core voters are more likely to have an ideological motivation.

NATIONALISTS

So who are the core far-right voters? We relate anti-immigration attitudes directly to the core far-right party ideology, which combines nationalism with xenophobia. The primary far-right party target constituency includes voters who identify fully with the far-right parties' platforms. These voters tend to have strong nationalistic attitudes (Lubbers and Coenders, 2017). These are accompanied by unfavorable attitudes towards immigrants who they see as a threat to the homogeneity, security, and prosperity of the nation-state.

Core far-right voters prioritize the protection of the in-group from the out-group and vote ideologically based on a principled endorsement of far-right party agendas. The voting behavior of these individuals is likely to hinge on questions of deservingness and selective solidarity—i.e. questions

about entitlement to the collective goods of the state (Magni, 2021). Individuals with strong nationalist and anti-immigrant attitudes are more likely to oppose sharing public goods with ethnic others. They have a narrower perception of deservingness because they are more likely to see the state and its institutions as benefitting the native majority. They are more likely to support a conditional version of the welfare state that differentiates access between immigrants and natives. Therefore, where an individual has anti-immigrant attitudes, a positive evaluation of the democratic process is likely to translate electorally to voting for parties that emphasize restricting institutional access to the in-group.

FINDINGS

Our data comes from nine waves of the European Social Survey (2002–2018). At base, our findings emphasize two things. First, individuals who trust the domestic political institutions in their country, and positively evaluate system performance and policy outputs, are less likely to opt for a far-right party in a national election. Meanwhile, those who lack these attributes may become peripheral far-right voters, driven by discontent.

Second, evaluations of the democratic process are positively associated with far-right party support among some anti-immigrant voters. These are core far-right voters, driven by nationalism. For some nationalist voters, as evaluations of the democratic process improve, their likelihood to opt for the far right increases. This reveals that positive assessments of the democratic process may have a potentially galvanizing effect among some anti-immigrant voters.

THE MULTIFACETED APPEAL OF THE FAR RIGHT

By focusing on political trust and system performance, we show that there is no typical far-right populist voter. When citizens perceive the broad framework of collective cooperation to be working well, they are less likely to resort to the far right. Meanwhile, for those core far-right supporters with extreme views on immigration, the mechanism is different.

Therefore, positive evaluations of the democratic process among the population hinder the ability of the far right to expand its appeal. Such positive evaluations may, however, intensify support among some segments of the core far-right electorate. This highlights the multifaceted nature of far-right populist appeal to voters with different preferences and incentives.

6. POPULISM AND PROTEST AT THE BALLOT BOX

ALEXANDER LANGENKAMP AND SIMON BIENSTMAN

Populist parties during the last decade have experienced repeated electoral successes (Rooduijn, 2019). As a result, political actors, media, and scholars alike have become increasingly interested in understanding the causes of these successes. One central question troubling scholars for years is whether populist voters have universally shared traits.

However, as Zulianello rightly points out in the introduction, populism is a very diverse concept. Populist voting tendencies thus seem to be independent of a fixed political position. There is no doubt that ideological alignment between citizens' attitudes and a populist party's demands predicts voting for populist parties. But the ideological diversity of those parties and actors makes it difficult to identify any universal characteristics shared by populist voters across cases, whether socioeconomic, attitudinal, or personal.

THE DIVERSITY OF POPULIST VIEWS

For instance, across Europe, there is no consistent evidence that populist parties' voter base is especially Eurosceptic (Rooduijn, 2018). They are also no more likely to be uneducated, or part of a specific age group. Likewise, citizens with populist beliefs are just as likely to reject liberal democratic values as those without populist beliefs (Zaslove, 2023). With no consistent ideological throughline, is there such a thing as "the" populist voter? All this seems to suggest an odd conclusion: that there is no such thing as "the" populist voter (Rooduijn, 2018). But this is false. As Davide Vittori (2023) argued, populism seems to be "the sum of different concepts," and has become obscured and oversimplified.

VULNERABILITY AND DISCONTENT

However, assuming populism is a single social phenomenon, there must be common aspects that appeal to the populist voter base, independent of the populist party's ideological leaning. Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou (2023) argue that one important driver of right-wing populist parties

is political discontent (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2024). That is, dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy.

Our research (Langenkamp, Bienstman, 2022) builds on this perspective. We argue that casting a vote for a populist party is not necessarily an expression of agreement with and support for populist attitudes. Rather, it is an expression of generalized vulnerability and discontent. This argument builds on the central characteristic of the definition of populism as a "thin" ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). What unites populist parties is the narrative they convey, of a society divided into two groups. These are a homogeneous and righteous population of "the people," and a diametrically opposed elite that betrays "the will of the people." Of course, depending on the underlying host ideology, parties may be classified as populist right, populist left, or valence (populism without an ideological position) (Zulianello, 2020).

NEGATIVE WORLDVIEW

Regardless of host ideology, a particular worldview, of eroding living standards, with a corrupt elite causing personal and societal misfortune, is inherent in this populist narrative (Krämer et al., 2021). As such, the citizen may perceive a populist actor or party as a vehicle through which to express their discontentment with policy decisions, such as COVID-19 restrictions, or their discontentment with society, such as the so-called "culture wars." Alternatively, populist parties may be simply a platform through which citizens can air general dissatisfaction and call for a better future.

Populist parties campaign on a narrative of conflict, fighting the status quo, and related messages of progressive or regressive social change (Ivaldi, Lanzone, and Woods, 2017). As a result, they render themselves outlets through which citizens can express their feelings of vulnerability. This vulnerability can range from economic fears, to cultural concerns, to a sense that they don't "belong" socially. The messages populist parties and actors use abound with narratives of social division (elites vs. the people) and fear (of cultural, social, or economic decline). Unsurprisingly, this resonates strongly with individuals who perceive themselves as vulnerable (Spruyt, Keppens, Van Droogenbroeck, 2016).

VARYING SOCIOECONOMIC BASES

However, depending on the predominant social divide and fears in a given case study, the socioeconomic strata and subjects targeted by the populist actor or party vary. Substantially, the diversity of populist movements means

that there are no common socioeconomic characteristics. Rather, we see a common set of emotions within the populist voter base: vulnerability, discontent, and a yearning for a simple solution.

Viewing populist parties as a projection of discontent may help us understand their varying electoral bases. This perception differentiates between voters drawn to the populist narrative, and those drawn to the host ideology. As such, one powerful driver for populist successes might be, surprisingly, apolitical. This driver is a generalized sense of vulnerability and dissatisfaction (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016), which has an emotional affinity with the typical populist narrative that is independent of any ideological underpinning (Langenkamp and Bienstman, 2022).

PROTEST AT THE BALLOT BOX

Following this line of reasoning, we can understand much populist success as a symptom of "protest at the ballot box." Empirically, recent pioneer studies support this argument. They show that populism is indeed embedded in feelings of discontent, some political (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016), others concerning societal matters (Lindholm and Rapeli, 2023).

Despite the diversity of populist parties and actors, a common emotional state fosters populist turnout: discontent. Support for populist actors represents a protest against the status quo. Populists receive support not only for their specific demands, but also for their challenge to a world perceived as responsible for individual misfortunes and fears.

7. THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL: FROM THE MARGINS TO NORMALIZATION

LUCA MANUCCI

In Spain and Portugal, populist radical right parties have historically been irrelevant to political elections. This is because these parties were seen as a return to earlier authoritarian and dictatorial experiences (Manucci, 2020). This lasted until 2019, when the so-called "Iberian exceptionalism" was broken by VOX in Spain and Chega in Portugal (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). This phrase was chosen because the populist radical right had already won major elections in other parts of Europe for decades (Manucci, 2021). Still, who are the voters who back these two parties, and what motivates them to do so? We attempted to address these issues in a 2021 study (Heyne, Manucci, 2021).

WHO ARE THE VOTERS OF CHEGA AND VOX

It is believed that voting for the populist radical right is a response to globalization and modernization. Citizens who believe that these processes threaten their social standing are the ones who tend to appreciate these parties (Gidron, Hall, 2020). Additionally, voting for the populist radical right is interpreted as a sign of disenchantment with traditional parties and discontent with the way democracy operates (Rooduijn, Van der Brug, de Lange, 2016). As a matter of fact, voters for these parties are more likely to be male, identify as right-wing, be relatively older, have low educational attainment, and be dissatisfied with the way democracy operates (Turnbull-Dugarte, Rama, Santana, 2020).

Our research partially supports these findings, but it also reveals an intriguing difference: both VOX and Chega draw in young people. Therefore, a new generation of young people drawn to the populist radical right makes up the majority of Chega and VOX's voters rather than older people who harbor nostalgia for earlier authoritarian regimes. Additionally, we discover that Chega voters are more likely to reside in rural rather than urban areas, and that both Chega and VOX voters are more religious than the average person.

WHAT FACTORS EXPLAIN THE VOTE FOR CHEGA AND VOX

Consistent with earlier research, we demonstrate that voters of both parties disenchanted with the party system and the political establishment, reject traditional politics, and are unhappy with how democracy operates. The idea that the so-called "losers of globalization," or workers who are more economically vulnerable and hostile to social change processes such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and feminism are the voters of the populist radical right was then put to the test.

There is strong evidence that voters of both the VOX and Chega parties believe they have lost out on cultural globalization. They think the economy is doing poorly and are against globalization, immigration and feminism. However, they do not face economic vulnerability. Conversely, Chega voters have average incomes and wealth levels, while VOX voters typically have higher incomes and more wealth than voters of other parties.

We also looked at the kinds of media that VOX and Chega voters use to get political news. As expected, we discover that both parties' voters frequently use Facebook and online forums (for VOX). Moreover, they read tabloids more often than other newspapers.

Lastly, the most prominent topics in the two nations' public discourse are crucial. Voters for VOX favor a centralized government and oppose Catalan autonomy. Voters for Chega are in favor of cutting back on public services and privatizing the healthcare system.

THE NORMALIZATION OF THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

These findings indicate that voters of VOX and Chega share characteristics with the European populist radical right. Thus, Portugal and Spain appear to be following in the footsteps of numerous other nations, where these parties have established themselves as a consistent aspect of the political landscape and frequently hold positions of authority. This does not, however, imply disregarding the unique characteristics of every nation. As a matter of fact, the topics at the forefront of public discourse, such as the welfare system in Portugal and Catalan separatism in Spain, are essential to comprehending the swings in the populist radical right's electoral success (Manucci, 2024).

The era of Iberian exceptionalism is over. Chega and VOX are currently among the top three most voted parties in Portugal and Spain, following their initial, historic success in 2019. If they hope to retain or grow their support, both parties will need to take advantage of areas that other parties overlook or of problems that voters believe are not being sufficiently addressed.

One thing is for sure: the taboo has been broken, and the populist radical right electorate in the two Iberian nations has finally been mobilized after decades.

8. THE GEOGRAPHY OF EUROPEAN POPULISM: UNVEILING NUANCES BEYOND STEREOTYPES

MIRKO CRULLI

The ongoing rise of populism has redrawn political geography. Nonetheless, accounts of the geography of "discontent" (Dijkstra, Hugo, and Rodríguez-Pose, 2020) and populism (Koeppen et al., 2021) have only gained momentum since Brexit and the election of Donald Trump (Beckett, 2016). Support from voters in peripheral-rural areas played a huge part in both these events (Jennings and Stoker, 2019).

Due to this delayed emergence of literature on the "places of populism," much research has carried out national- and individual-level analyses of the populist wave. Yet this glosses over the significance of places themselves. Indeed, a 2019 editorial in Political Geography lamented the absence of "substantive debate about the place of populism in geography" and "how populism should be spatially thought through" (Lizotte, 2019).

POPULISM IN THE "PLACES THAT DON'T MATTER"... AND BEYOND

Happily, scholarship is paying renewed attention to local contexts in studying populist and radical-right politics (Fitzgerald, 2018). There is thus now consensus around the thesis of the places "left-behind" (Gordon, 2018) or "that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). This suggests that populist victories represent a retaliation by lagging-behind towns and regions, which feel neglected by policymakers amid socioeconomic changes brought on by globalization. The polar opposite of such declining populist-supporting places would be large, vibrant cities, which research depicts as being immune to populism.

Therefore, in the "places left-behind" thesis, the cleavage between populist and pluralist-libertarian orientations corresponds to a territorial fracture (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Booming metropolises are pitted against struggling rural or small-town areas. This thesis is appealing, has overall validity, and a major merit: it brings geography into the equation explaining populist success. However, accepting the thesis in total may lead us to adopt a stereotypical definition of the phenomenon. In fact, the "left-behind" thesis seems

to ignore several factors that make the territorial character of contemporary European populism much more complex.

GRANULAR PATTERNS HIDDEN BETWEEN "URBAN" AND "RURAL"

First, populists are successful in certain rural areas but not in others (Harteveld et al., 2022). The same goes for cities (Crulli and Pinto, 2025). Secondly, most large metropolises encompass not only urban but also suburban/peri-urban and low-density environments (Damon et al., 2016). Indeed, globalization, de-industrialization and post-industrialization eroded the historically rigid urban-rural cleavage (Lipset, Rokkan, 1967).

In this regard, some authors claim that the mix of proximity and separateness of peri-urbans from proper urban centers can fuel resentment towards the latter (Bourdin and Torre, 2023). This could explain why some populist parties are strong in such areas, or the "suburbanization" of radical-right populism (Crulli, 2022). Research also suggests that suburban dwellers support populist parties to "reclaim urban space for daily use and as a defensive strategy in view of metropolitan change" (van Gent, Jansen, and Smits, 2014). In short, focusing solely on the division between dynamic "big cities" and lagging "non-cities" is inadequate, because a metropolis is not a monolithic territorial unit.

NOT SO MUCH POPULISM, BUT THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

The latest wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) can help explore the nuanced geographical patterns in populist and radical-right support.[1] This dataset comprises questions on populist and radical-right (nativist and authoritarian) attitudes, and on respondents' vote and residency type.

Using the ESS, I conducted a regression analysis, displayed in the figure below. My analysis revealed that the distinction between cities and suburban-rural areas in populist attitudes and votes is not clear-cut. Populism exists across various types of residences, and there is no continuum running from alleged less-populist cities to alleged more-populist urban or rural peripheries. However, a greater divide emerged concerning radical-right attitudes and votes. This divide becomes stronger the more we move toward less densely

1 https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data-portal

populated places. In short, radical-right orientations appear to have a much stronger association with territorial rifts compared with populist ones.

POPULIST STRONGHOLDS WITHIN THRIVING CITIES

Following the "places that don't matter" leitmotiv, the focus in populism geography literature has mostly been on regional and city-towns/villages comparisons. Scholarship has paid less attention to how populist support varies within municipalities. But recent works relying on fine-grained electoral data emphasize that populist pockets exist within clearly not-left-behind metropolises, including Vienna and Milan (Essletzbichler and Forcher, 2022). For instance, a study on the "urban roots" of populism found that a populist party has won general elections at least once in roughly 35%, 55%, and 80% of the precincts in Milan, Turin, and Rome, respectively (Crulli and Pinto, 2025).

BEYOND COMPOSITION VS. CONTEXT

What are the mechanisms driving this geographic heterogeneity in populist support? Two classical explanations relate to compositional and contextual effects (Maxwell, 2019). Compositional effects assume that "the people make the place." That is, it is an individual's socioeconomic background—not where they live—that primarily determines their behaviors. Contextual effects suggest that the experience of residing in a certain place can also influence people's orientations. Therefore, socio-economically similar people may think differently depending on their daily life context.

Many studies have highlighted the role of compositional factors—especially age, education, income, and occupation—in shaping the rise of populist and radical-right actors. But there is also evidence that local contextual factors matter (Crulli, 2024). Populism geography cannot be explained entirely by voter composition (Patana, 2020). Therefore, a budding strand of research has stressed the relevance of contextual factors such as house price deflation (Adler and Ansell, 2020), lack of public services and transportation (Adler and Ansell, 2020), and the degradation of socio-cultural hubs (Bolet, 2021).

Finally, scholars have started uncovering more sophisticated mechanisms. Among these, "place resentment"—the perception that one's area and its dwellers are ignored, misunderstood, or disrespected—seems decisive in explaining geographic variations in populist radical-right attitudes. Studies on Germany (Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2024) and the Netherlands (Huijsmans, 2023) show clear evidence of this.

GEOGRAPHY MATTERS, BUT HOW, FOR WHOM, AND TO WHAT EXTENT?

Except for a Dutch agrarian populist party—the Farmer-Citizen Movement—contemporary European populism does not normally target specific urban or rural voters; its socio-territorial bases are variegated. And while populists are overall stronger in remote places "left behind," they have also reaped successes in highly urbanized contexts. Therefore, we should avoid giving both no and too much importance to geography in explaining populism. Territorial polarization characterizes radical-right phenomena more than purely populist ones.

9. POPULISM AND RURAL AREAS: A MATTER OF RECOGNITION

GIOVANNI CARROSIO

For a few years, the voting maps have shown electoral geographies that contrast rural and urban areas, large cities and medium-sized provincial towns, centers and suburbs of large urban agglomerations. This differentiation is repeated in most Western countries at least since Brexit. Andrés Rodriguez-Pose and colleagues (2023) have brought together all areas of the populist vote—rural, medium-sized cities, suburbs, declining industrial districts—under the definition of "places left behind," literally places left behind by globalization and the policies that have supported it. The populist vote would be a reaction to a condition of social and economic regression.

An alternative interpretation places greater emphasis on territorially based disparities of recognition (Honneth, 2014). These relate to the belief held by the local population that the ruling class ignores their unique characteristics when making choices, formulating public policies, and governing society. Negative emotions brought on by misrecognition can foster hostile attitudes. Thus, populist voting is the process by which "people in places" try to gain recognition.

A STUDY ON THE DEMAND FOR RECOGNITION IN ITALIAN RURAL AREAS

Some pertinent aspects of the rise of populism in rural areas appear to be captured by the theme of recognition. This is the conclusion drawn from a study carried out in Italy's marginal rural areas between 2016 and 2020 (Carrosio, 2020). The following issues related to the theme of recognition were examined through 72 *focus groups*, collective meetings where specific topics were discussed and involved residents, administrators, farmers, social, health, and school workers, as well as small business owners. Specifically, it concerned how rules and regulations impacting everyday life in rural areas are perceived; whether experts and technicians value local practices and knowledge; what attitudes exist toward social and political organizations; and whether dominant narratives recognize local values, identities, and cultures.

AREAS OF RECOGNITION

Examining these issues, the demand for recognition surfaced in five thematic areas: rules, values, representation, participation, and knowledge. Below we can examine the relationship between each area and the need for recognition.

Rules The role of rules came to light when participants were asked to think about the reasons behind the economic and social marginalization of their territories. It appears that laws pertaining to the economy and public services are primarily created with cities and major metropolitan areas in mind, ignoring the unique characteristics of rural communities. Cheesemakers, for instance, gripe about overly strict regulations that affect production, standardizing goods and undermining the uniqueness of regional farming. In a similar vein, school and healthcare personnel feel that urban economies of scale limit population services.

Values The unique bond that rural residents have with their environment is another indication of the need for recognition. Some environmental protection measures are seen as cultural colonization imposed by urban elites and are not in line with local needs. Protests against the return of wolves and bears, for instance, are perceived as a threat to local safety and farmers, leading to tensions between urban environmentalists and local residents.

Participation A lot of people express dissatisfaction with the frequent use of participatory tools and the widespread presence of experts in this area, which are linked to the execution of local development policies. At the same time, they highlight the decision-making processes' lack of inclusivity. Contrary to popular belief, the methods employed frequently ignore rural context-specific modes of interaction and encourage participatory approaches that, in reality, have little impact on actual decisions.

Representation There is a widespread perception of the lack of representativeness of intermediate organizations, especially those related to agriculture, and of a local political system conditioned by clientelistic logics that limit generational change in the political class. The lack of trust in intermediary organizations is reflected in the search for charismatic figures, without mediation by organizational structures.

Knowledge It seems that territorial governance undervalues or ignores local knowledge. Traditional, situated knowledge is subordinated to expert, universal knowledge, which is frequently reluctant to adjust to local contexts. As a result, local capacities to recognize needs and solutions are perceived as being undervalued.

RECOGNITION, POLITICAL DIVISIONS, AND COMMON SENSE

People's and social groups' preferences are mobilized around certain divisions in our current historical moment, which can be linked to the issues discussed. The "center-periphery" and "urban-rural" divisions reappear. The first reflects differences in identities and values, while the second refers to the re-emerging notion of the center as the administrative and political center where bureaucrats and politicians live without regard for territorial boundaries, where flow-based economies are preferred over place-based ones. These distinctions are overlapping with others, such as local versus expert knowledge, conservation versus active management of natural resources, representation versus representativeness, and local versus universal values and identities.

According to Stein Rokkan and Derek Urwin (1982), these are not so much new political divisions as they are tensions that serve as the focal point of the Italian rural areas' demand for recognition. The new populism's success in these areas does not depend on its ability or desire to re-establish these areas as focal points of political discourse or to adequately represent their interests in policies and initiatives. This success instead results from the capacity to relate to the "common sense" of rural regions (Inglehart, Norris, 2016). In other words, to integrate a variety of evocative issues into a more comprehensive discourse that reflects the diverse demands arising in various social and territorial contexts.

10. SCHOOL AND HOSPITAL CLOSURES INCREASE SUPPORT FOR RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

NIELS NYHOLT

Voters' everyday experiences of political decisions with adverse local effects make right-wing populist claims about a disconnect between the mainstream parties and the people more compelling (Nyholt, 2024). A central tenet of right-wing populist parties' appeal is their anti-elitism (Rydgren, 2007). By portraying mainstream parties as a homogeneous political class that only look out for themselves, right-wing populist parties position themselves as the genuine champions of the people. In true fairytale fashion, the populists arrive and fight back on their behalf.

When politicians in power close a school or hospital, the locals take it personally. Residents see such closures, often made in contempt of local concerns, as devaluing their neighborhood. It therefore strikes a chord with affected residents when right-wing populists describe politicians as arrogant and out of touch. Closures demonstrate clearly that the elite does not care about the local community. In such situations, right-wing populist parties can appear an attractive outlet for frustrated voters.

CLOSING SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS

But why would politicians downgrade local communities to begin with? They know that closures risk attracting the ire of their electorates, and politicians depend, after all, on continued electoral success. Nevertheless, the closure of public institutions in thinly populated areas is a common phenomenon across western democracies.[1] In Denmark alone (the empirical basis of my research), 315 schools and 30 hospitals closed between 2005 and 2019. Politicians may find amalgamating institutions at fewer locations an appealing option because it enables them to claim that they are improving service delivery and cutting costs simultaneously. Service delivery may improve because public employees can further specialize in subfields when they are part of larger entities. Politicians can also argue that expected economies of scale will cut costs. Amalgamating public institutions at fewer locations may thus

1 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/school-size-policies_5jxt472ddkjl-en.html

appeal to politicians from both the left and right. Furthermore, as people settle increasingly near major cities, politicians need funding for new institutions to accommodate the new residents. They thus end up closing institutions in rural areas where the population base has moved away, and where the absolute size of the disgruntled electorate is minimal.

EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON RIGHT-WING SUPPORT

In my article (Nyholt, 2024) wanted to test whether right-wing populist parties do indeed profit from local school closures. Using data from polling stations in Danish local elections, I measured the change in support for these parties in areas that experienced local school closures against the trend in areas that did not. By comparing the changes, I isolate the difference in support that cannot be attributed to common changes across areas, nor to the time-invariant difference in support for right-wing populist parties between areas affected by closures and those areas not affected by closures (Nyholt, 2024). I plot the estimated difference in changes in support for right-wing populist parties before the closure (p-2), in the first election after the closure (p), and in the second election after the closure (p+2). In the election held after the schools' closure, support for right-wing populist parties jumps by about one percentage point in the severely impacted precincts compared with precincts in which no schools closed. This increases to about a three-percentage point advantage in the second election after the closure. Given that right-wing populist parties managed to win about 10% of the votes in these local elections throughout the entire study period, this is a significant effect. There is little to no difference in the change in support for right-wing populist parties between the lightly affected and unaffected precincts. Thus, people do seem to take the severity of the policy into account.

All groups appear to follow similar trends in support for right-wing populist parties before the school closures. This should strengthen our confidence that voters react specifically because of the school closures, and not because of other differences between the studied precincts.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Previous studies explaining the demand for right-wing populist parties have emphasized both economic (Kriesi et al., 2006) and cultural grievances (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). However, part of right-wing populist parties' appeal is their critique of the way mainstream parties wield power. As Katherine J. Cramer (2016) documents, residents of peripheral regions often feel excluded

from decision-making bodies. When political decisions manifested in people's local area through the closure of public institutions such as schools, my research shows that residents may find right-wing populist parties increasingly appealing. To accommodate the grievances of rural and deindustrializing communities, governments across western countries have implemented plans to reverse local decline and shift public resources back to these communities.[2] However, it is worth remembering that political decisions such as school closures are motivated in part by depopulation and efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of public service delivery. Dealing with the development of rural and declining regions thus inevitably involves real trade-offs between the interests of those who have left, and those who are left behind.

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom

11. WELFARE CHAUVINISM AND POPULISM. IS IT THE ECONOMY (STUPID)?

DAVID ANDREAS BELL

For several decades now, most European welfare states have seen their immigrant populations grow considerably. Debates surrounding immigrants and their place within these welfare states have become a mainstay of political conversation (Green-Pedersen and Otjes, 2019).

The concept of welfare chauvinism is now a central focus of modern radical right-wing populist parties (Chueri, 2023). This emphasis has also spilled over to the discourse of more mainstream parties (Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016).

ORIGINS OF WELFARE CHAUVINISM

The term welfare chauvinism was coined to explain the structural changes and new cleavages in 1990s Europe (Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990). Radical right-wing populist parties began to support the idea that the welfare state should exist primarily for the native population. The immigrants who live in a welfare state, they argued, should be excluded from receiving state benefits and services (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). This idea combined more left-wing economic positions with right-wing values and cultural ideology.

Welfare chauvinism has become a staple position of radical right-wing populist parties throughout Europe (Fenger, 2018). Research has also begun to discuss welfare chauvinistic attitudes, including the unwillingness of native populations to offer immigrants the benefits of the welfare state. This is a specific type of anti-immigrant attitude within the field of social policy.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND WELFARE CHAUVINISM

A reasonable assumption is that people become more welfare chauvinistic when a country is struggling economically. This makes sense, because immigrants often become scapegoats (Vogt Isaksen, 2019) for problems that arise on a country level (Bello, 2017). Therefore, when times are tough, we might expect society to oppose immigrants accessing the welfare benefits. When the welfare state has less wealth to go around, in theory, the natives would

want to see the state prioritize their own needs and limit the resources allocated to immigrants.

Surprisingly, our recent research finds that this seems to be of little relevance (Bell, Valenta, and Strabac, 2023). Rather, it is how people perceive economic conditions which seems to explain welfare chauvinistic attitudes across Europe. A person in a country with a flourishing economy can still be more welfare chauvinistic if they believe that the economy is struggling.

FLAWED PERCEPTIONS

This is important, as people's perceptions of the world are often quite flawed. We often have several misperceptions regarding both immigration (Citrin and Sides, 2008) and the economy (Bussolo et al., 2021). When questioned, citizens often wildly inflate how many immigrants they believe live in their country. For example, an Ipsos poll found that, on average, the French believed that around 31% of the population were Muslims. The real number was 7.5%.[1]

Populist leaders often paint a pessimistic picture, creating a sense of crisis and fueling discontent.

Additionally, populist politicians often shape these perceptions, creating a sense of crisis and discontent (Caiani and Graziano, 2021). For example, several populists on the right influenced the debates surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, occasionally speaking out against government measures, and even arguing against vaccination (Zulianello and Guasti, 2025). Consequently, some members of the public refused to get vaccinated or to wear a face mask.

DRIVERS OF WELFARE CHAUVINISM

European populism is generally exclusionary in its form (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). It tends to consider the welfare state to be under threat from outside forces, often immigrants. We also know that populists can construct disaster narratives and exaggerate them on a macro level. This creates a sense of turmoil, which may eventually pay dividends at the ballot box.

How these parties distort reality, amplifying fears of immigration and economic instability, combined with people's flawed perceptions of the world, are important drivers of contemporary welfare-chauvinistic attitudes in Europe. Seeing is believing, of course, but when it comes to the economy, some people can only see what the populists want them to.

1 https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/perceptions-are-not-reality-what-world-gets-wrong

12. EXPLORING POPULIST SUPPORTERS' COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP WITH JOURNALISM

CLARA JUAREZ MIRO

Populist elites frequently accuse journalists of attacking them, and of being "corrupt elites." Journalists, they say, openly lie, and hide important events from the public to prevent populist parties' success. Populist supporters' perceptions that news media service elites (Fawzi, 2019), and that their coverage is biased against populist political views (Schulz, Wirth, and Müller, 2020), appears to mirror this rhetoric. So much so, in fact, that populist supporters have used social media to censor and harass journalists (Waisbord, 2020).

Surprisingly, despite populist supporters' apparent contempt for journalists and their work, they tend to consume more news than non-populist citizens (Schulz, 2019). This is true even when we control for other relevant variables like political interest, need for cognition, political orientation, and media skepticism. Furthermore, although populist supporters generally prefer commercial and tabloid news (Fawzi, 2019), as well as alternative and partisan media, mainstream news sources remain central in their news media diets (Fletcher, 2019). All this begs the question: how do populist supporters understand and engage with news?

A POPULIST WORLDVIEW

Using interviews with populist supporters, my recent research examined this question (Juarez Miro, 2025). To acknowledge populism's complex, chameleonic nature, participants were ideologically diverse American and Spanish populist supporters (Filc, 2023). We know that subtypes emerge when populist movements intertwine with other ideas (see introduction). Considering this phenomenon, I conducted 33 interviews with supporters of Donald Trump, Santiago Abascal, Bernie Sanders and Pablo Iglesias.

This investigation of populist supporters' relationship with journalism revealed a "populist worldview," which also permeated populists' relationship with journalists and their work. This worldview encompassed, on the one hand, positive concepts and emotions that supporters associated with leaders and fellow members of "the people." Among these was the notion that ideals of informed citizenship were a morally desirable driving force for popular sovereignty. On the other hand, the populist worldview also comprised negative concepts and emotions associated with everything populist supporters

perceived to be opposed to "the people" and their sovereignty. This included journalists and their work, which they judged serviced elites through bias and was, therefore, morally corrupt. Following this populist worldview, participants gained pleasure and pride from perceiving themselves as meeting normative ideals of informed and rational citizenship.

POPULIST SUPPORTERS' FOLK THEORIES ABOUT JOURNALISM

These emotions intersected with populist supporters' folk theories of journalism (Nielsen, 2016); their interpretations of what journalism is and should be. Three popular interpretations emerged:

"Everything is biased" Populist supporters believed that news is inherently partisan. In response, they sought the truth by consuming information from diverse sources.

"It's a way of seeing what other people think" Many participants articulated this folk theory to explain their perception of social media and news as reflecting public opinion, which they found useful for feeling informed.

"It's a pleasurable news source" Participants regarded the ideological leanings of news sources and social media platforms' affordances as helping to manage their mood while also keeping them informed.

Populist supporters' understandings of journalism and related patterns of engagement with news allowed participants to derive positive emotions from feeling and staying informed. Their attitudes toward journalism, however, remained negative. This highlights the importance of considering populist supporters' perspectives and interpretations when examining their relationship with journalism. My study accomplished this by speaking directly with populist supporters to unearth their folk theories of journalism (Juarez Miro, 2023). Nevertheless, social desirability biases may have led to an overestimation of participants' enjoyment derived from staying informed and their interest in engaging with diverse news sources.

Hence, analyzing interactions among populist supporters as they use and interpret news without a researcher present can help us better understand how populist supporters engage with news sources.

NORMATIVE IDEALS OF NEWS ENGAGEMENT AND DELIBERATION

Benjamin Toff and I analyzed posts referencing the populist party Vox between 2013 and 2019 on Spanish message board ForoCoches (Juarez Miro

and Toff, 2023). Our research revealed that to support their arguments in political conversations, users shared links to both cross-cutting and mainstream news sources. Similar to the folk theories study, this research identified apparently normatively desirable behaviors, this time in the absence of a researcher. Our results suggest that political discussions on message boards like ForoCoches may resemble normative deliberative spaces from a democratic standpoint (Gamson, 2002). However, users may employ them to endorse illiberal and extreme political views. In this sense, our findings continue to challenge conventional notions about the consumption and discussion of diverse news sources.

The conclusions of the folk theories study emphasized the role of emotion in populist supporters' news engagement. In much the same way, our discourse analysis revealed how emotionally charged were the political discussions on ForoCoches. Our analysis also identified widespread social identity markers employed by users to signal support for Abascal and Vox, alongside the use of slang within the broader message-board community. This suggests an important role for emotion and (social) identity expressions at the individual and group levels of populist supporters' engagement with news.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL FACETS OF SUPPORT FOR POPULISM

These studies shed light on wider implications for journalists and their work, which frequently encounter hostility from populist elites and their followers. Of particular significance is the role of emotion and social identities in populist supporters' worldviews, which in turn shape their perspectives on journalism. The findings suggest that studies on populism would benefit from applying theoretical frameworks that put identity- and community-building processes at the center (Juarez Miro, 2021).

These studies also provide insights for journalists into potential paths forward. The current high-choice media environment, including particular social media affordances, can allow populist supporters to retain control over their news use and emotional well-being (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Taken together, this research suggests that sustaining a pluralistic democratic society may require news organizations to carefully acknowledge their audiences' emotions and agency. This consideration is crucial to ensure that populist supporters, among other audiences, persist in consuming news and continue to rely on it to enhance their sense of being well-informed.

13. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

FEDERICO VEGETTI AND MORENO MANCOSU

The connection between populism and conspiracy theories seems almost obvious in a world where mainstream politics frequently converge with more radical political currents, particularly when considering the Italian context. Attention turned to the connection between populism and conspiracist theories when the Five Star Movement (M5S) successfully entered Parliament in 2013. Since then, posts and statements made by the party's MPs that sparked well-known conspiracy theories about subjects like banking seigniorage, the Bilderberg Group, the moon landing, and vaccine risks have come to light due to the media and public opinion.

However, unlike M5S at the start of its political career, this trend is not just an Italian quirk or exclusive to opposition or minority parties. According to research by Andrea Pirro and Paul Taggart (2023), some of the most charismatic and divisive leaders in the world, including Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US, and Chávez in Venezuela, have adopted and spread conspiracy theories. These populist leaders have frequently employed such narratives to attack their political rivals and divert attention away from their own errors or shortcomings, creating an engaging plot that subverts reality and piques voters' interest. Furthermore, political leaders are not the only ones affected by this phenomenon. According to a number of political psychology studies, people with more populist views are also more likely to believe in various conspiracy theories. However, what is the source of this association? What processes account for the connection between conspiracy theories and populism?

Recent studies on the subject have painted a fairly clear picture, showing that conspiracy theories are expressions of a larger theme that populism and conspiracy theories share: a general distrust or dislike of institutions. But, in order to comprehend this, one must understand what the deep-seated convictions that lie behind respectively the conspiracy beliefs and the populist attitudes are.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND CONSPIRACIST MINDSET

To begin with, what exactly is a conspiracy theory? Generally speaking, it is an explanation of significant social or political occurrences that pinpoint

a covert conspiracy by influential people or organizations as the ultimate cause. In light of this assumption, why do some individuals believe in these explanations while others do not? This question has been posed by political psychology numerous times over the years, but especially since the early 2010s. People may adopt such theories for several reasons that have been identified. According to a review by Karen Douglas and colleagues (2019), these motivations fall into three categories: epistemic (to comprehend phenomena that are challenging to interpret), existential (to feel in control in uncertain situations), and social (to uphold a positive self-image).

According to a pattern that appears in almost all empirical studies, people who believe in *one* conspiracy theory are likely to believe in *others*. This occurs even when there is no logical connection between the theories, and they deal with quite different subjects. The one thing that all of these theories have in common is the existence of a shadowy group of actors whose actions are always intended to increase their control over the populace, or at the very least, to keep people from acting freely and in their own best interests. These results have prompted different researchers to postulate the existence of a "conspiracist mindset," which is the term used to describe an individual's propensity to employ such explanations. This way of thinking, or epistemic approach, basically reflects what Karl Popper (2018) called the "conspiracy theory of society," which is "the belief that the explanation of a social phenomenon consists in discovering the men or groups interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon [...] and who have plotted and conspired to promote it."

CONSPIRACIST MINDSET AND POPULIST ATTITUDE

As was previously mentioned, according to the ideational approach to populism, populist ideas are characterized by a general dislike of power elites (also known as anti-elitism), a belief that the people are uniform and essentially moral, and a propensity to see political disputes in Manichean terms, as a conflict between good and evil. In this instance, the literature establishes that, particularly when we considering two of the three essential components of populism, such an attitude is consistent with an epistemic approach based on the conspiracy theory of society discussed above. The anti-elitist element of a populist matrix resonates in citizens' beliefs in a similar way to conspiracy claims that call for distrust from the ruling classes, experts and mainstream media (Fawzi, 2018). Because it depicts political struggle as a conflict between good and evil, the Manichean element also fits well with the notion that conspirators are the epitome of evil, which is frequently understood to mean that the elites are the devil's emissaries (Barkun, 2003; Uscinski et al., 2023).

This theoretical idea has been validated by using questionnaires to measure populist sentiments and conspiracist mindset and observing the strong correlation between the two. According to a recent study by Joseph Uscinski and colleagues, the populist attitude exhibited the strongest correlation with conspiracist mindset when compared to other psychological, social, and political factors (2022). This implies that people who have a populist perspective on politics are also more likely to accept conspiracy theories and other conspiratorial explanations for what happened. Similarly, Michael Hameleers (2021) looked into how politicians spread populist conspiracy theories and how that affects people's loyalty to them. The study demonstrates through a qualitative-quantitative analysis that exposure to populist ideas without conspiratorial elements does not activate populist attitudes as strongly as the so-called "populist conspiracy theories."

From this brief analysis emerges how the examinations of the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories identifies a significant link, which can offer ideas for reflection on the contemporary dynamics of political communication and the formation of public opinion.

14. SCIENCE-RELATED POPULISM AND POPULIST ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE

FABIO BORDIGNON

The spread of science-related populism expands and reframes both classic opposites of populist ideology: the pure people and the corrupt elites. While exalting the natural, uncontaminated wisdom of the people, populist narratives promote the pseudo-expertise of alternative scientific authorities.

In parallel, science and scientists find growing prominence among the corrupt elites targeted by populist actors. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular and given the increasing salience of issues such as (anthropogenic) climate change, science has become a political battleground. In light of the recent pandemic, and the increasing salience of climate change, science has become a political battleground. Here I aim to reinterpret the complex and changing nature of populism. I argue that such a reinterpretation necessarily involves considering the role of science.

PSEUDOSCIENCE AND POPULIST POLITICS

Is there an empirical link between the popular spread of pseudoscientific beliefs and the electoral performance of populist parties? Research findings support this idea. My recent article in the Journal of Contemporary European Studies draws on existing literature on science-related populism (Bordignon, 2023). In it, I investigate the relationship between pseudoscientific beliefs, the spread of epistemological populism, and electoral preferences, using survey data collected by Demos&Pi and Unipolis in France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (May, 2021).

I constructed a Pseudoscientific Beliefs Index (PBI) to study the social and political determinants of such beliefs. Results show that exposure to scientific information does not "protect" against unsound scientific claims, unless it is complemented by a correct understanding of the division of labor between expert scientists and laypersons. As one might expect, there is a strong association between pseudoscientific views and distrust of official science. But pseudoscientific views also correlate with reliance on alternative sources and alternative scientific authorities. Survey subjects took their advice from non-mainstream sources of scientific information. These sources were a mixture of ordinary people, and "authorities" (and celebrities) from other domains.

The study also suggests an association between the embrace of "alternative" scientific views, science-related conspiracy theories, and the rejection of traditional categories of left and right. But the main political pattern detected consistently across Western Europe links the adoption of pseudoscientific views to support for populist parties. The relationship with party proximity is positive and statistically significant for 10 of the 11 parties PopuList classifies as populist (Van Kessel et al., 2023; Rooduijn et al., 2024).

CLUES FROM THE ITALIAN POPULIST LABORATORY

Among the national cases in this study (Bordignon, 2023), the Italian one was particularly interesting for at least two reasons. Italy was one of the European countries most affected by the first wave of the pandemic. The 2018 general election saw double populist success for the radical-right Lega and the post-ideological or valence populist Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). This particular election therefore configured a relevant 'populist experiment.' In 2021, four of the five major Italian parties were classified as populist: M5S, Lega, and the two center-right parties, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). For all four, party proximity emerged as significantly associated with pseudoscientific beliefs. My survey results detected no relationship for the center-left Partito Democratico (PD).

The multi-country survey took place while Mario Draghi's newly established technocratic government (2021–2022) led the country. His tenure followed the fall of the yellow-green (M5S-Lega: 2018–2019) and yellow-red (M5S-PD: 2019–2021) governments. Draghi, a former President of the European Central Bank, enjoyed the support of an extra-large majority excluding only FdI and other minor parties. The Draghi administration's most important COVID-19-related measure was the so-called Green Pass. This was a vaccine passport imposing restrictions on travel and access to (indoor) public spaces. In the months following its introduction, even parties belonging to the government majority expressed doubts, or open criticism, of these measures. In general, M5S and Lega increasingly felt the call of the (populist) wild, amplified by the approaching end of the legislature and the booming rise of FdI (Piccolino, 2023).

Examining the electoral pattern of pseudoscientific beliefs at the end of the legislature thus offers important insights into populist parties' evolution. A LaPolis-University of Urbino Carlo Bo survey immediately after the September 2022 election allows us to update the relationships between the PBI index and voting choice (Bordignon, Ceccarini, and Newell, 2023). It recorded significantly higher values for FdI and the other parties of the (winning) center-right coalition.

PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC BELIEFS AND ELECTORAL CHOICE IN ITALY

M5S still displayed higher values than the PD and other center-left parties. Its estimated value, however, was approximately the PBI average. This trend is particularly notable when examined in light of M5S's overall trajectory toward institutionalization. Its current leader, Giuseppe Conte, led the government through the harshest phases of the pandemic, which required the implementation of a national lockdown.

Preliminary results suggest a partial loss of M5S's populist traits and populist appeal. Voters sharing pseudoscientific views appear to have aligned themselves predominantly with center-right parties, or chosen to abstain from voting. The 2022 elections saw the unprecedented growth of abstention, which reached an all-time high of 36%. We can read this as an effect of the partial exhaustion of the populist political supply after 2018.

It seems to suggest that science-related populism—and perhaps the demand side of populism in general, in Italy and elsewhere—may find different electoral outlets in different political phases. Alternatively, it may even remain dormant (and then explode again). Of course, these preliminary findings are not enough to assert a direct effect of pseudoscientific beliefs on the 2022 vote. However, they emphasize that populism is a moving target. It comes in different degrees and kinds, continually finding new social triggers and electoral avenues.

15. POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT VOTERS DO NOT HAVE A MONOPOLY ON NOSTALGIA!

LUCA VERSTEEGEN

With the rise of populist radical-right parties across the globe, we have seen an explosion of attempts to explain their success. These parties' voters are often of particular interest. Who are they? What do they think? What do they feel? Such questions often carry an undertone: what is wrong with these people? Researchers, journalists, and voters for other parties have put forward many ideas.

As Zulianello points out (see introduction) in this series, there are several myths surrounding populism. Many concern these parties' ideologies or issue positions. But besides this, some of these myths concern populist radical-right voters themselves. One common myth presents these voters as the left behind. But it remains unclear what left behind means, let alone whether this is an accurate description—or even whether it applies only to populist radical-right voters.

TRACING THE LEFT BEHIND

Who are the left behind? To some observers, it means those living in isolated regions who politicians largely ignore in their decision-making (Wuthnow, 2018). Others suggest it describes people whose traditional, materialistic values seem weirdly misplaced in a modern, post-materialist world (Norris and Inglehart,2019). Often, scholars think of this group as people who experience or anticipate an economic decline. The latter explanation is concerned with status loss, the experience or concern that oneself or one's group will be worse off than in the past (Mutz, 2018). Importantly, radical-right voters are not necessarily those who have lost. They often simply fear that they could lose their wealth or privilege in the future (Jetten, 2019).

All these explanations matter to some extent. But, increasingly, researchers are trying to dig deeper into radical-right voters' perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Their research shows, for example, that anger (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2017) and resentment (Capelos et al., 2021) drive support for these parties, and how radical-right rhetoric fuels anger, fear, disgust, and sadness (Widmann, 2021). But beyond that, emotions can be another way to describe the left behind. So, are certain emotions particularly prevalent

among members of this group? One emotion that comes to mind is nostalgia, a rose-tinted longing for the past (Wildschut et al., 2006).

Left-behind people, so the idea goes, are those who constantly dream of the past as a golden era or the glory days. Intuitively, radical-right parties' pledges to "Make America Great Again" or "Take Back Control" fit nicely with the image of left-behind voters longing for the good old days. Unsurprisingly, scholars have examined individuals' nostalgia and migration attitudes, nostalgia and populism (Smeekes and Jetten, 2019), and politicians' nostalgic rhetoric (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022). But is nostalgia really so unique to populist radical-right voters?

ZOOMING INTO THE NOSTALGIA OF DUTCH CITIZENS

In my recent article (Versteegen, 2024), I examined the prevalence and contents of nostalgia using representative panel data. Who experiences nostalgia? How often? And what do people actually long for? To answer these questions, I used data from more than 10,000 people in the Netherlands.

I found that people longed for many different things. Most notably, they longed for music, family memories, or places they have been to. Church or religion were less often the subject of nostalgia. Besides this variety of content, I found that nostalgia was frequent! About 61% of the sample experienced nostalgia at least once or twice a month. There were differences between education, occupation, and gender groups. But, generally, nostalgia was a common emotion.

CONTENTS OF NOSTALGIA

But is nostalgia particularly common among radical-right voters? That is, do the purported left behind experience nostalgia particularly often or experience specific types of nostalgia?

The answer is yes, but it is nuanced. Radical-right voters tend to be particularly nostalgic about societal conditions, such as the way society was or the way people were. This likely reflects their preferences for the more traditional, homogeneous societies of the past (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022).

They also tend to be more nostalgic about personal matters (e.g., family, music, pets), but this relationship is much weaker. When differentiating these group-based and personal forms of nostalgia, only the former predicts radical-right vote propensity, sympathy towards these parties and politicians, and conservatism.

In sum, we must be careful about drawing any conclusion that populist radical-right voters, the alleged left behind, are distinct in their longing for the past. My results suggest a more nuanced answer. Longing for the societal past motivates support for the populist radical right, but nostalgia about the personal past is common across voters in all camps.

THREE TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FINDINGS

First, we must be more careful when ascribing nostalgia to populist radical-right voters. It is true that nostalgia plays a role in motivating this ideology, but this emotion is not unique to this electorate.

Second, my findings call for nuance when explaining these voters' emotions. Observers tend to lump together various emotions like fear, anger, or resentment. This ignores the fact that different emotions predict different behaviors (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen, 2000), and that only some of these emotions matter to the radical right (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2017). Third, we need to ask ourselves whether broad ascriptions like the left behind have much use.

Yes, it is vital to explain support for these parties. But myths that isolate them from a purported mainstream may just further fan the flames. Ultimately, conceiving radical-right voters—including their emotions—as not so different from the rest may also be good news. If we share specific emotional experiences, this can unite us. If most of us long for our childhood from time to time, why not share these memories, and perhaps find common ground therein?

16. ACTIVATING POPULIST ATTITUDES IN TIMES OF CRISIS: EVIDENCE FROM THE CZECH COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

JAKUB STAUBER*

In this chapter, the hypothesized mechanism of mobilization is based on the concept of *attitude activation* (Dilliplane, 2014). The concept refers to the process by which latent long-term political views or beliefs become suddenly more salient as a direct consequence of facing external stimuli—i.e. the COVID-19 crisis in our case. It is known that populist attitudes, such as anti-elitist or anti-establishment stances, exist in the electorate regardless of the crisis, but it is their political relevance which seems to be highly variable over time.

In the context of crisis, populist attitudes are expected to play an extraordinarily strong role because the political solutions to these societal-level events require a relatively high level of trust in elites and compliance with suggested policies. However, mobilization over certain issues more likely occurs when three conditions interact: 1) ideological predisposition, 2) economic anxiety, and 3) concrete policy dissatisfaction.

When crisis policies are perceived as unjust or ineffective, they trigger a backlash among voters predisposed to skepticism toward the establishment. People with pre-existing populist attitudes are more likely to interpret crisis policies as elite overreach. Financial hardship increases resentment toward establishment, intensifying support for populist movements. This interaction explains why crises do not always lead to populist mobilization but do so under specific conditions where discontent is politically channeled. This specific combination of factors is further responsible for triggering an emotional response leading to activation of political behavior grounded in latent populist attitudes (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021).

MEASURING THE MOBILIZATION OF POPULIST ATTITUDES

The COVID-19 pandemic, especially, restrictive policies, such as large-scale lockdowns, travel restrictions, and almost compulsory population-wide

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testing and vaccination, provided a fertile ground for attitude activation in terms of mobilization of specific groups within the electorate into opposition against the policies or the expert opinions and scientific consensus.

The causal identification of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mobilization of latent populist attitudes represents a relatively sophisticated methodological task. Using advanced econometric methods, Lall et al. (2023) show that similarly to economic crises, the effect of COVID-19 on the increase of populist attitudes is comparable in size and, surprisingly, it is underpinned by a similar set of mechanisms such as reduced trust in public institutions and a high level of nativism and xenophobia.

To understand the mechanism of populist attitudes activation during COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia, it is possible to rely on panel survey data from "Life During the Pandemic" (Prokop et al., 2024) collected bi-monthly and covering the period between January 2021 and January 2023. To causally identify the effects of restriction on populist mobilization, we could analyze how voters or different parliamentary parties from 2017 changed their responses about compliance with restrictions over time, i.e., in which phase of the COVID-19 pandemic the activation exactly occurs.

PHASES OF POPULIST MOBILIZATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Most of the published studies are focused on the beginning of the pandemic. Still, there is only limited data availability and research on what happens in the later phases (see, e.g., Knudsen et al., 2023). The data from the Czech panel survey show relatively common patterns consistent with the general understanding of crisis dynamics.

The analysis of populist mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia follows three distinct phases. In the early phase, between January and June 2021, the "rally-around-the-flag" effect led to high compliance with restrictions, even among populist voters. In this initial phase of uncertainty, there was no significant difference between voters of populist and mainstream political parties in terms of compliance.

In the middle phase, from July 2021 to June 2022, increasing policy inconsistencies and electoral competition increased the politicization of restrictions. The availability of vaccines, changing restriction policies, and the electoral campaign provided an opening for populist actors to frame anti-restriction stances as opposition to the establishment. The activation of populist attitudes mainly occurred in this phase, as skepticism toward restrictions transformed into a broader political issue.

In the late phase, from July 2022 to January 2023, the strongest mobilization of populist attitudes occurred, as initial dissatisfaction evolved into full

political opposition. As predicted by the activation framework, this confirms the theoretical expectation that mobilization requires both perceived policy failure and elite contestation of crisis responses. The opposition was not just anti-restriction but transformed into a more comprehensive anti-establishment stance.

EXPLAINING THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION UNDER STRESS

The phases of mobilization are interconnected with the emergence of political polarization. The findings demonstrate that even right-wing populist attitudes do not automatically result in non-compliance or lower solidarity. Instead, the rise of polarization was sudden, occurring when the politicization of the topic intensified. Furthermore, polarization was concentrated almost entirely on voters of the far-right populist SPD, whereas voters of ANO, a centrist populist party, exhibited a significantly higher level of compliance behavior. This difference can be partially explained by the fact that ANO was the governing party for a substantial portion of the pandemic, leading its voters to remain more aligned with government policy.

While populism played a crucial role in shaping polarization during the COVID-19 crisis, it was not the sole driver. Instead, its activation in response to crisis conditions suggests that pre-existing populist attitudes provided a fertile ground for polarization.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POPULISM BEYOND COVID-19

Czechia offers a suitable case study of how crises activate and mobilize populist attitudes. By examining policy responses, partisan dynamics, and ideological stances, we can better understand the interplay between crisis-related uncertainty and populist sentiment. The observed results suggest that populism as a thin ideology is not a sufficient condition explaining the rise of polarization during the COVID-19 crisis. The proposed activation framework provides a decent explanation of the underlying mechanism. Initially, there were latent populist attitudes within specific segments of the electorate. Nevertheless, it must be activated first to transfer it to the political opposition.

17. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

PETRA GUASTI

The fifth part of the volume addresses three main aspects of populist voters: their socioeconomic, psychological and emotional characteristics, and other relevant factors shaping their electoral behavior.

First, regarding socioeconomic factors, the contributions examine issues such as welfare chauvinism, territorial inequalities, the notion of "left behind" places, and voters' everyday experiences as important drivers of populist voting. David Andreas Bell focused on welfare chauvinism, arguing that perceptions—rather than objective conditions—of one's economic situation play a decisive role. Giovanni Carrosio emphasized the territorial dimension and suggested that recognition inequalities help explain the rise of populism. Similarly, Niels Nyholt showed that right-wing populist parties appeal to citizens who feel abandoned due to the withdrawal of essential public services, while Mirko Crulli demonstrated that populist strongholds can also exist within thriving urban centers.

Second, with regard to the psychological and emotional dimensions of populism, Alexander Langenkamp and Simon Bienstman argued that populist parties target citizens who feel vulnerable and dissatisfied. Luca Versteegen contended that specific emotions such as nostalgia are not exclusive to populist radical right voters. Federico Vegetti and Moreno Mancosu examined the link between populism and conspiracy theories, showing how populist movements exploit conspiratorial narratives to gain support, revealing a strong correlation between populist attitudes and a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Along similar lines, Fabio Bordignon explored the relationship between pseudoscientific beliefs and support for populist parties, noting that this connection varies depending on the political trajectories of populist actors and their paths toward institutionalization. Finally, Clara Juarez Miro highlighted the importance of emotions and social identities in shaping populist supporters' worldviews and their attitudes toward journalism.

Third, turning to other relevant factors, several interesting insights emerge. Yaoyao Dai warned that, empirically, populism alone has limited effects in attracting votes, emphasizing the key role played by the accompanying host ideologies. Similarly, Marcel Lewandowsky argued that much populism research overlooks the broad variety of illiberal attitudes, of which

populism is only one variant. Based on a survey conducted in Italy, Matteo Casiraghi, Luigi Curini, and Alessandro Nai showed that citizens tend to identify a politician as populist based on their rhetoric, while other traits appear less important. In contrast, in his research on the rise of the radical right in the Iberian Peninsula, Luca Manucci discussed the end of Iberian exceptionalism and provided a portrait of the voters of such parties in Portugal and Spain. Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou highlighted the multifaceted appeal of the far right for voters with varying preferences, noting that positive evaluations of the democratic process can hinder their attractiveness.

Adding a dynamic perspective, Jakub Stauber analyzed the mobilization of populist attitudes in Czechia during the COVID-19 crisis. He showed that pre-existing populist sentiments became politically activated in response to perceived policy failures and elite contestation. Using panel survey data, Stauber identified three phases of mobilization, culminating in a shift from anti-restriction discontent to broader anti-establishment opposition—particularly among far-right voters.

Finally, Maurits Meijers and Andrej Zaslove challenged the "myth" that citizens with populist beliefs are inherently harmful to liberal democracy, showing that highly populist individuals are no more likely than others to reject liberal democratic principles.

PART VI
IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

The final part of the volume analyzes the impact and consequences of populism. It begins by exploring the illiberal challenge, constitutional changes, and autocratic legalism. It then studies populist survival in mainstream politics and the moderation of left-wing populists in government. The section investigates state transformation, damage caused by populism in governance, the roles of the armed forces and bureaucracy, and populism's impact on local governance and territories. Subsequently, it examines the radical right's impact on public discourse, the welfare state, international cooperation, gender issues, higher education, and, more generally, populism's influence on international relations and foreign policy. Finally, attention is directed toward affective polarization, ideological tensions within Generation Z, and the stigmatization of policy proposals from the populist radical right.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE ILLIBERAL CHALLENGE IN EUROPE

GIANFRANCO BALDINI AND HUGO CANIHAC

Over the last two decades, a great deal of scholarship has attempted to apprehend the "chameleonic" populist phenomenon (Taggart, 2000) by exploring its relationship with democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Scholars define it either as a threat to democracy or, to the contrary, as an element of democratic rejuvenation. However, these debates often leave unattended an equally pressing issue. How is populism related to the other building block of contemporary democracies-political liberalism?

Rapidly growing literature generally assumes that there is a tension between populist movements and political liberalism (Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes ,2022). This tense relation has found expression in the concept of "illiberalism," as popularized by Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Assaults against institutions and values at the heart of political liberalism—the rule of law, separation of powers, judicial independence, minority rights, pluralism and toleration – have become a hallmark of populist movements across Europe (and beyond) (Crulli, 2024).

It is thus fundamental to understand the nature of the contemporary challenge to liberal democracies, and how those democracies are addressing it. Building on our Section at the 2023 ECPR General Conference in Prague, we propose a novel perspective on the illiberal challenge.

POPULISM AND THE ILLIBERAL CHALLENGE IN EUROPE

In a widely cited article published in 2004, Cas Mudde initiated an influential reflection on the "populist Zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004). Twenty years on, and after many populist parties (especially, though not exclusively, on the radical right) have entered government across Europe, contemporary liberal democracies are facing an illiberal challenge that overlaps with, but is not identical to, the populist challenge (Kriesi, 2014). The latter relates to democratic institutions, norms or practices. The former is concerned specifically with political liberalism, whether constitutional safeguards, judicial independence, basic freedoms or toleration (Laruelle, 2024).

Clearly, populists are especially eager to reject some elements of political liberalism. And yet, not all populism is concerned with attacking every aspect

of liberalism—as the liberal rhetoric of minorities' rights mobilized by several populists in Northern Europe to attack migration policies clearly shows. Conversely, not all attacks against liberalism emanate from populist movements. Indeed, illiberal practices are also widespread in otherwise liberal settings (Glasius, 2021). In contrast with Latin America, in Europe non-radical-right populists are less dangerous for the functioning of liberal democracy. Conflating "populism" and "illiberalism" thus results in more confusion.

To face this problem, we conceptualize the distinct illiberal challenge along three interrelated dimensions. First, it is a challenge stemming from historically liberal societies. Second, it is a challenge to well established liberal institutions. Finally, it is a challenge for liberals because they have to respond to illiberal contestations.

POPULISM AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ILLIBERALISM

The first dimension focuses on illiberalism as a challenge that has emerged in and from liberal societies. It looks at the foundations on which current illiberalism has built its success. Many accounts of illiberalism's recent surge tend to focus on overarching causes, including neoliberalism, unresponsive institutions, and relative frustration. This fosters a deep-seated opposition to liberalism that populists can mobilize readily in the name of a "true," restored democracy. But these rather mechanistic explanations overlook how these different causes play out in practice. And they fail to consider their differentiated effects when it comes to challenging liberalism.

Moving away from grand narratives, we must undertake empirical analysis of the emergence of contemporary illiberalism—analysis that focuses on illiberalism's grassroots conditions. Thus, it is crucial we focus on the different mechanisms that explain concretely the rise of illiberalism (Lewandowsky, 2023). Across Europe, research shows the importance of memory and its uses in the success of illiberal movements (Rosenfeld, 2023). This is true especially, but not only (Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci, 2022), in the East (Verovšek, 2021). Other key elements include the ideological construction (Canihac, 2022) of illiberalism and individual attitudes (Bartels, 2023). Taken together, these aspects are crucial in explaining, for instance, the varying agendas towards minority rights in different parts of Europe (Moffitt, 2020).

LIBERAL INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES IN POPULIST HANDS

The second dimension analyses populists' illiberal practices in otherwise liberal settings. It explores how populist leaders (try to) implement the "illiberal

playbook," once they have secured power, thus transforming liberal institutions and policies (Pirro and Stanley, 2022). Here, the focus is on how illiberal leaders manipulate institutions typical of modern liberal polities, such as political parties or citizenship, to transform their meaning and practice.

Another crucial area of investigation is how illiberal leaders target liberal public policies, such as those fostering gender equality or welfare provisions, to implement their ideological preferences. Ultimately, this investigation will help refine the articulation of "ideological" and of "disruptive" illiberalism proposed by Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King (2020). It will explore how the former can transform into the latter, or fail to do so. In the ideological case, illiberalism unfolds at a rhetorical level; in the disruptive case, by contrast, it converts into actual policies.

LIBERAL RESPONSES TO ILLIBERAL CHALLENGES

The third dimension investigates how liberal institutions respond to the challenge raised by illiberalism (Bourne and Olsen, 2023). In particular, it is interested in the dilemma liberal institutions face: it might be appealing for liberals, too, to defend liberalism through illiberal means. Responses can range from strict containment (cordon sanitaire) to partial adoption of illiberal discourses and policy proposals (Malkopoulou and Moffitt, 2023). However, all these strategies run the double risk of missing their target while exposing liberals to the accusation of themselves resorting to illiberal practices. Thus, these strategies contribute, ultimately, to the erosion of liberalism.

Of course, this speaks to the classical question of "militant democracy." This is currently very relevant in the German debate (Laumond, 2023), but elsewhere, too. Analyzing the answers to this dilemma deepens our knowledge of the various strategies deployed by liberals in resisting populists' illiberalism (Labanino, 2023). It also offers insights into the broader issue of the future of liberalism.

Only by combining these three dimensions can we better understand the nature of the most important challenge Europe faces today.

2. POPULISM AND CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

GIUSEPPE MARTINICO

To understand the relationship between populism and constitutional democracy, it is necessary to recall two key ideas about the connection between constitutionalism and political power. These ideas are essential for grasping the foundations of constitutional democracies. First of all, in democratic contexts, constitutions are not merely a codification of power relations or the outcome of the political process; rather, they are a set of rules that seek to bind political actors. In other words, they represent a higher source of law (higher law), and the validity of ordinary laws depends on their compliance with the constitution. The second aspect to highlight concerns the role of so-called counter-majoritarian actors, particularly the courts, which in some democratic systems play a crucial role in protecting minorities. This is because they have the power to declare invalid the laws passed by the political majority (Bickel, 1986) in case they conflict with the constitutional text.

In this regard, constitutionalism and democracy are not mutually exclusive, as the Canadian Supreme Court affirmed in its seminal 1998 ruling Reference Re Secession of Quebec. On the contrary, constitutionalism enhances the idea of democracy by "anchoring" it to a legal order whose fundamental boundaries cannot be overridden by contingent political majorities: "It might be objected, then, that constitutionalism is therefore incompatible with democratic government. This would be an erroneous view. Constitutionalism facilitates—indeed, makes possible—a democratic political system by creating an orderly framework within which people may make political decisions. Viewed correctly, constitutionalism and the rule of law are not in conflict with democracy; rather, they are essential to it. Without that relationship, the political will upon which democratic decisions are taken would itself be undermined." (*Reference Re Secession of Quebec*, Canadian Supreme Court, 1998, para. 78).

In democratic contexts, constitutions affirm the principle that the legal order guarantees rights to all individuals, regardless of whether they belong to the majority or a minority. While the majority holds the authority to govern in a constitutional democracy, the very legitimacy of that majority depends on the protection of minority rights (Kelsen, 2010 [1929]).

DEMOCRACY, CONSTITUTIONALISM, AND MAJORITIES

These introductory considerations allow us to immediately grasp the conflict between the populists' hyper-majoritarian conception of democracy and the principles of constitutional democracy. For populists, democracy can be reduced to the rule of the majority; for supporters of constitutionalism, by contrast, democracy is part of a broader vision—one that includes the protection of rights, the rule of law, and institutional checks and balances: "Canadians have never accepted that ours is a system of simple majority rule. Our principle of democracy, taken in conjunction with the other constitutional principles discussed here, is richer." (*Reference Re Secession of Quebec*, 1998, para. 76, Canadian Supreme Court).

All these considerations stand in stark contrast to the monolithic conception of the majority espoused by populists, who portray it as a morally superior entity—opposed to the corrupt elites—and as the automatic source of political truth.

It is no coincidence that populists often view constitutions and the counter-majoritarian constraints of constitutionalism as inherently anti-democratic. For this reason, courts are frequently targeted by populist forces, and their independence systematically undermined, as seen in the so-called illiberal democracies of Hungary and Poland.

But why is constitutionalism so wary of the majority principle? Because the majority is not a natural or self-evident reality; it is an artificial construct, shaped by political choices and legal norms that determine who is included in or excluded from the democratic process. One need only consider how the right to vote has historically been regulated—decisions that profoundly influence the composition of the majority (Ruffini, 1927; Steinbeis, 2017).

Comparative constitutional law confirms this insight: political actors often exercise significant discretion in defining who constitutes the "majority of the day." For example, under the Clarity Act, the Canadian House of Commons holds considerable discretion in determining whether a "clear majority" exists in the event of a referendum on secession. Similarly, under Schedule 1 of the Good Friday Agreement, it is the UK Secretary of State who decides whether the conditions are met to call a referendum on Irish unification.

CONSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINS AND CONSTITUTIONAL FORMS

Populists often regard constitutionalism as merely a series of constraints, overlooking the importance of constitutional forms (contra Schmitt, 1922),

which are explicitly acknowledged, for instance, in Article 1 of the Italian Constitution. This provision states that popular sovereignty must be exercised "within the forms and limits of the Constitution." This is a crucial point, particularly in countering the identity-based approach characteristic of some forms of populism. Constitutions rarely reflect the identity of a pre-existing, culturally homogeneous popular subject; more often, they play a formative role in shaping the identity of the constitutional subject (Rosenfeld, 2022). They do so by focusing on procedures and enabling the transformation from a multitude into a people—understood as a political subject—through the inclusive and pluralist values embedded in those procedures.

After all, one only needs to consider the constitutional experiences of multinational systems such as Canada, India, Switzerland, and Belgium, as well as the controversy surrounding the existence of a federal people in the United States. This was especially evident in the years immediately following the ratification of the federal Constitution of 1787, despite the phrase "We the people" that opens its Preamble and merely formally legitimized the U.S. constitutional text, which at the time of ratification was viewed primarily as an "agreement" between sovereign states (Morgan, 1989).

The performative function of constitutions thus allows us to challenge the populist notion of a static identity and to oppose it with a relational and dynamic conception of identity—one that is shaped through engagement with the other and reinforced by constitutional procedures, functioning not only as a wall but also as a mirror (Cerutti, 1996).

3. POPULISTS IN POWER, CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

JASMIN SARAH KÖNIG AND TILKO SWALVE

Populism stands in conflict with two key features of liberal democracy: pluralism and minority rights. This is one of populism's most-discussed defining features (see introduction). The tension between populism and liberal democratic values lies at the heart of populist ideology. The idea of a homogenous "people" with a unified will as the only legitimate input in the political decision-making process is at odds with the system of checks and balances in liberal democracies. Ideas such as minority rights, pluralism, and power-sharing are central to liberal democracy, and often enshrined in a country's constitution.

This often leads to the assumption that populists use constitutional changes to consolidate their power and dismantle democracy. We call this phenomenon "constitutional regression." Recent events such as the January 6 US Capitol attack (Feuer, 2022), the PiS party's disregard for judicial rulings in Poland (Sadurski and Sadurski, 2019), or Netanyahu's attempt to curb judicial power in Israel speak volumes on the threat populists can pose to constitutional democracy (Kershner, Boxerman, and Pérez-Peña, 2023). But some argue that the populist approach to constitutionalism is not undemocratic. Rather, they say, it is simply a different idea of democracy, one that views the constitution as a living document that changes with the people's general will.

What happens around the world when populists change constitutions? In our recent paper (König, Swalve, 2023b), we conducted an empirical analysis of the relationship between populists in government, constitutional changes, and democratic quality. We argue that the relationship between populism and constitutional regression is anything but clear-cut, and requires further investigation.

EXPLORING THE DATA

To do this, we focused on democracies in Europe and Latin America. We estimate the effect of constitutional changes, firstly on the quality of liberal democratic institutions, and secondly on participation, conditional on the degree of populism in the government. To explore the data, we have created an interactive tool that allows users to see how constitutional changes under

populist governments have affected different aspects of democracy in the countries included in our study.[1] It shows that the effects of constitutional changes on democracy differ between contexts. After choosing a country, you can decide between three different data sets on populism. In some cases, we also allow you to choose how populism in government should be calculated. The options are government mean populism score, government weighted populism score, head of state populism score, or scoring only by senior party. In the last step, you can choose which democracy indices from the V-Dem dataset you want to explore. We added three more indices in this tool that do not appear in our paper. Our software allows users to track constitutional changes and their correlation with different indices of democratic quality in a variety of countries.

Overall, the data reveal a complex relationship between populism, constitutionalism, and the quality of liberal democracy. Constitutional changes under populist governments in Hungary were, obviously, detrimental to liberal democratic quality. But in countries such as Costa Rica, or Ecuador, the relationship appears more ambiguous. In Costa Rica, the populist government does not seem to have had a lasting impact on democratic quality, while in Ecuador, a populist government was responsible for a strong decrease in democratic quality, as well as its subsequent recovery.

CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

What does exploration of the data show? Primarily, that we should be careful not to infer a general causal relationship between populism and constitutional regression from a few salient cases. Constitutional changes in the US, Hungary, Poland, and Israel are worrisome with respect to the quality of liberal democracy. But we are more likely to pay attention to cases in which populists have used (or tried to use) constitutional changes to dismantle liberal democracy than those where they have not.

Populists in power in Latin America have, overall and contrary to expectations, implemented constitutional changes that improved liberal democratic institutions. But their changes failed to improve the quality of participatory democracy overall. In Europe, on the other hand, populists have used constitutional changes to decrease the quality of both democratic characteristics.

Our results speak to the findings (Huber and Schimpf, 2017) of many other papers that demonstrate the extent of the variance between populist parties'

1 https://observablehq.com/@jasminsworkspace/constitutional-regression

behavior toward democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). These findings imply that it is not only populist ideology driving governments' use of constitutional changes. What other forces drive this, exactly, cannot be answered by our research right now. However, existing scholarship points to the host ideologies (Huber and Schimpf, 2017), the political system, or to a country's previous democratic quality as potential explanations (Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, 2023).

LATIN AMERICA VS EUROPE

Our research finds that the effect of constitutional changes under populist governments differs substantially between Latin America and Europe. European populists cause participatory democracy to decline—and they tend to worsen the quality of liberal democracy, too. The effects in Latin America, meanwhile, are more complex. This ambiguous relationship between populism and constitutionalism points towards a larger gap in populism research.

While we now know more about populist voters, populist policy positions, and rhetoric, we still know relatively little about if, when, and how populist governments translate their ideology into law. So far, our knowledge on the intersection between populism and constitutionalism comes from a few salient cases. However, many of these cases involve parties who are not just populist: they are also far right. We propose more research at the intersection between populism and legal research. As a first step, we are investigating the use of judicial review as a measure of populist government performance (König and Swalve, 2023a).

4. POPULISM IN PARLIAMENT AND THE IMPACT ON REPRESENTATION

DAVID JÁGR*

Following the outbreak of the 2008 global financial crisis, representative democracy as a system came under pressure from non-pluralist conceptions of representation (Caramani, 2017). The Czech environment was not spared by the "populist zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004), with the party system undergoing a wide-reaching reconfiguration within a single decade (between the 2010 and 2021 elections). The end of the former stability of this party system was accompanied by new representation of populist parties (Public Affairs, Dawn, ANO, SPD), which brought challenges to the parliamentary environment. These challenges are the focus of this chapter. The unique situation of 2021–2024, wherein the Czech opposition was made up solely of populist movements, may be relevant to other multi-party systems.

POPULISM ANTE PORTAS!

Today, the expansion of parliamentary representation of European populist parties is common (Zulianello, 2020). In the context of Central Europe, the rise of populism can be seen as related to the global financial crisis and was accompanied by calls for a swift reshuffling of elites. This crisis was not only a challenge to the reputation and legitimacy of traditional political elites, but also deepened the crisis of representation.

This created the ideal springboard for populist appeals against elites and the establishment, as well as the mechanisms of representative democracy. Populist actors simply respond to the long-term skepticism of citizens toward parliaments. Even though populism in power is a relatively new phenomenon, there are examples of its success in Central Europe. In fact, between 2010 and 2021, the Czech government always featured at least one populist party, initially Public Affairs and subsequently ANO.

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POPULISM AND THE CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION

A fundamental characteristic of populism is the focus on direct connections between the citizens and their representatives and the criticism of indirect structures, including representative institutions. In populist democracy, then, there is nothing more important than the general will of the people and unmediated sovereignty of the people. It is, therefore, not surprising that populism criticizes parliamentary democracy as ineffective, elitist and anti-democratic.

A further fundamental aspect of populism is the key position of its leaders and the personalization of their parties. A populist leader not only secures a direct connection to the people, but they also originate among them and speak in their name. Andrej Babiš, the leader of the strongest Czech populist party, ANO, and a former prime minister, states in this regard: "Populism is a political approach consisting of an attempt to reach the ordinary people, who believe that the ruling circles do not advocate or overlook their interests. There are 2.4 million such people, and we represent them, so I am a proud populist" (novinky.cz, 2023).

From the viewpoint of representation theory, populism draws upon elements of symbolic representation (for example, viewing the leader as the embodiment of the nation) and descriptive representation (for example, by taking on the language of the general population). Populism also intensely operates with so-called representative claims, according to which the institutional form of representation does not hold center stage (Saward, 2006). Populist leaders claim to represent all citizens, a nation, or voters of parties outside parliament, even though these voters did not vote for them. Another example can be the claim to be external to politics (Guasti in this book). Populists do not, therefore, only focus on claims regarding representation but also misrepresentation. Finally, if the populist leaders embody the citizenry and their unified will, then populism must also undergo changes in representation formulas from a bottom-up to a top-down perspective.

IMPACTS OF POPULISM ON PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTIONS

The stances of populists on representative institutions may take the form of both rhetorical attacks or attempts to expand executive power. The stances of populists towards parliamentary institutions can be illustrated in the transition of the populist ANO movement from populist in government (2013–2021) to populist in opposition (2021–2025). Government ANO representatives called parliament a "talk shop," but as members of the opposition, through a multitude of obstructionist speeches, they set a number of records in oration

length. In fact, the leaders of opposition populist parties ANO and SPD competed with each other in the length of their speeches. Tomio Okamura (SPD) won this performativity contest with a record-breaking speech length of 10 hours and 44 minutes.

The performativity of politics brings with it even more parliamentary attention to political leaders. Social networks and marketing, in the meanwhile, often replace ideology and vision. For example, Alena Schillerová, the chairwoman of the ANO parliamentary group, has exchanged a focus on presenting legislative proposals to a focus on her TikTok audience, where she has appeared dressed as a serving of french fries. Elsewhere, the leader of the ANO movement, Andrej Babiš, filmed videos of himself talking with a rooster about Ukrainian grain.

A specific sign of performativity can also be found in parliamentary violence, such as the address of SPD ex-MP Lubomír Volný in 2021. The radicalization of political competition accompanying the presence of populism does not only take place through violence. Personal attacks and strong polarization of elites are also widespread. This antagonism is strengthened by the populist perception of politics as a Manichean worldview. Populist rhetoric about the need to abolish the Upper House is its own category of attack against legislative bodies.

The toxicity of the Czech parliamentary environment is further evidenced by an unprecedented number of night sessions, an absence of lunch breaks or a falling level of parliamentary culture. In the past, the opposition used obstructions for only a few bill proposals. However, the opposition populist parties, ANO and SPD, have employed this strategy for every media-followed issue. The overuse of obstruction has proven a strong tactic for the Czech populist opposition. During the 2021–2025 election cycle, this tactic resulted in a record number of days in session for the Lower House. This method has allowed a minority to block the majority. Obstructions also lead to an unpredictable timetable for both houses.

A comparison of populism in government and opposition shows that the former delegitimizes parliaments and, through executive power, also attacks other institutions. In contrast, populism in opposition exploits parliamentary tools to delay the legislative process and make it as difficult as possible to implement the government's agenda. This is accompanied by an emphasis on performativity and attacks on the ruling elites.

POPULISTS TRANSFORMING THE PARLIAMENT

As seen in the example of the Czech Parliament, criticism of mediating representative structures remains an effective populist strategy. Furthermore,

the existence of a populist opposition has the potential to weaken the parliaments, as evidenced by the transition of the Czech Chamber of Deputies from the ideal type characterized as a "working parliament" to a "talking parliament."

5. "THE PEOPLE" GO TO THE CAPITOL

LASSE THOMASSEN

In recent years, commentators, politicians, and judges have sought to make sense of what happened on January 6, 2021, at the Capitol building in Washington DC. Was it a populist mob that attacked democratic institutions? Or was it the people trying to make their voice heard? At stake is not just how we interpret what happened that day, but the relationship between populism and democracy.

According to some, the mob attacked the Capitol in what has become the epitome of our current populist moment. No doubt, American democracy was under threat, and Trump and his populist movement played a key role.

At the same time, on 6 January, the people went to Washington, to the Capitol. The mob is also the people, and they invoked the name of the people: "We the fucking people!"[1] as someone in the mob shouts. Invoking the name of the people does not make you the people. But nor is the elitist dismissal of the mob attractive if we think that everyone should have an equal say. Often, the dismissal of the mob is just yet another conservative defense of privileges.

THE OPENNESS OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy may be rule by the people, but the people may be the mob. There is something about democracy that allows for, maybe even requires, populism and the risk that populism may turn against democracy. There is something inherently open about democracy, and that is a good thing.

This openness extends to democracy itself. It is part of the essence of democracy that we can ask: what is democracy? What are the limits of democracy? What does it mean to act democratically? Who belongs to the people? If these questions are part of the essence of democracy, then democracy is essentially open. That openness is a good thing, because it means that democracy will be a lively place of discussion and contention. But the openness of democracy also means that populists may speak in the name of the people and of democracy in a way that threatens democracy.

1 https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-assault-on-america/id1583994242

TRUMP'S REAL PEOPLE

That is what Trump did in his speech at the Save America rally on January 6.[2] Trump wants "to save our democracy," he says. Democracy is about the people—the real people: "you're the real people," he tells the crowd, "You're the people that built this nation." Government should be of the people, by the people and for the people. Democracy is about the will of the people and popular sovereignty, and popular sovereignty is about strength.

The people are the subject of democracy, and are is divided from its enemies: the media (who suppress the truth and spread fake news); big tech (who suppress free speech and the truth); "radical left Democrats" (of course); and, finally, weak Republicans. "We will not let them silence your voices," Trump says. There is something ambiguous about the people, though. The people are victims of the Big Steal, an "egregious assault on our democracy." That is why Trump and the mob must save democracy and save America. The media, big tech (Panaro, 2020), the radical left Democrats, and the weak Republicans are corrupt and opposed to the real people—and this allows the mob to play by different rules.

DIFFERENT RULES FOR THE REAL PEOPLE

This is how Trump puts it: "When you catch somebody in a fraud, you're allowed to go by very different rules." It is a justification to break the law, but Trump also repeatedly refers to the Constitution. The people, democracy and the Constitution are on the same side—as opposed to the enemies of the people. But the people are not just victims. The people can also show its strength. The people gathered in Washington are "heroes" if they save American democracy from its enemies. And they have strength in numbers.

The size of the crowd is a sign of the strength of the people. The people are also strong because they are virtuous, and the size of the crowd shows that truth and justice are on the side of the people. "So," Trump concludes his speech, "let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue." The mob walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. The people went to the Capitol.

2 https://www.rev.com/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-save-america-rally-transcript-january-6

THE POPULIST MOB AND PROPER PEOPLE

The populist mob is out of place at the Capitol. They don't belong there except as tourists approaching the Capitol in awe. Populist politicians such as Trump are out of place when entering the institutions of deliberation and reasoning. Populists revel in impropriety. Trump is a great example of this with his outrageous claims, poor grammar, and disregard for the law—all of it as an extended middle finger to the norms about how proper people act (Hameleers, 2023). But what if populism is also the inappropriate voice that asks, "what is democracy?" Recall that it is essential to democracy that we can always ask, "what is democracy?" Yet, this also makes it impossible for us to say, once and for all, what is proper to democracy.

It is essential to democracy that we can always ask, "what is democracy?" But what if populism is the inappropriate voice that asks the question? Populists challenge what we think is proper to democracy. That may be a good thing because it may result in more equality, more freedom and more democratic participation. But there is no guarantee that it will. The Trump movement shows this. And yet, we cannot simply dismiss populist movements as anti-democratic because they also force us to ask "what is democracy?"—and that question is essential to democracy.

6. HOW POPULIST PARTIES SURVIVE "MAINSTREAMING" ONCE IN POWER

ANCA TURCU

In the introduction of this book Zulianello emphasizes that not all populist parties are extremist or fringe entities. Many are mainstream, often governing, parties. However, not being perceived as mainstream is crucial for their continued political success and electoral appeal. "Surviving mainstreaming" (see introduction), entails carefully cultivating an image as outsiders, indefatigable challengers to an entrenched, often flawed and possibly corrupt status quo.

BLAME GAME STRATEGIES

For populist parties in power, like Hungary's Fidesz and Turkey's AKP, maintaining their political appeal and a good chance at re-election means passing the buck. This is especially true when it comes to crises that force them to make potentially controversial decisions. Deferred responsibility or, more simply, blame game strategy (Williamson, 2023), is crucial for populist leaders who face challenging circumstances. Deflecting blame becomes a matter of political survival (Hood, 2002). This requires a large amount of time and effort, especially for governing parties that wield power (Hood, 2011). Some have been in government for more than a decade at a time.

Governing populists sell themselves as outsiders. One tactic is to convince their supporters that at least some decision-making powers are undeservingly in someone else's hands. Another is to diminish their accountability by placing the loci of authority outside of their purview. This tactic claims that foreign elites or institutions exclusively call consequential shots (Walker, 2020). Such external entities and those who control them putatively seek to sabotage national hierarchies. Their goal is to undermine legitimately elected (populist) national leaders and to replace their authority with that of a corrupt (foreign or supranational) establishment.

In this narrative, it becomes the duty of governing populist parties to stand up to such abusive entities, and to form an opposition to the corrupt establishment. A paradox ensues. To maintain their political and electoral appeal, governing mainstream populist parties portray themselves as being in a

perpetual state of opposition. In the case of failures or crises, accountability rests with the more powerful, nefarious foreign outsiders.

THE EU AS SUPRANATIONAL BULLY

For the ruling parties in Hungary and Turkey, embracing the strategies described above has delivered numerous consecutive electoral victories. It has also let them skillfully eschew the pernicious effects of mainstreaming. In doing so, both parties have followed similar, almost standard, modi operandi.

At home they portray a foreign entity (the European Union) as a supranational bully, relentlessly seeking to impose its will. Meanwhile, they themselves are perpetually engaged in heroic acts of opposition and resistance.

One example among many comes from Hungary's National Consultation Campaign of 2015 (Bocskor, 2018). This signaled to the Hungarian people that the Fidesz government was seeking their input and support as allies in a "crisis" that conflated immigration, asylum and terrorism. The government presented this crisis as the result of ruthless EU impositions. Fidesz and the AKP avoid electoral accountability by portraying a foreign entity, frequently the European Union, as a supranational bully. In Turkey, President Erdoğan has portrayed the EU as a bully on many occasions (Timur and Nordland, 2016). He did so most notoriously in November 2016, after a non-binding European Parliament vote to suspend EU accession talks. Erdoğan's speech claimed numerous instances in which arrogant European powers had not adequately compensated Turkey's efforts, or, worse, sabotaged them.

At a time of profound national emergency, like the 2015 Syrian migration crisis, both parties successfully avoided electoral accountability by pinning the blame on the EU.

"HOMELAND POPULISM"

Abroad, Fidesz and the AKP don the protective opposition mantle for the supposed benefit of large diaspora groups. These are primarily Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia, and Turks in Germany and the Netherlands. The two mainstream populist parties often invoke the "plight" of their citizens abroad, who they portray as vulnerable to unfriendly European host governments (Arkilic, 2021). This reinforces blame narratives that cast them as the perpetually vigilant opposition.

This approach creates strong connections with large, cohesive diaspora groups, leading to a phenomenon known as homeland populism (Jakobson,

Umpierrez De Reguero, and Yener-Roderburg, 2023). The two governing populist parties recruit and engage diaspora voters in ways that actively shape domestic politics. This narrative reinforces the tropes of national vulnerability and oppression at the hands of unfriendly foreigners. As a result, in both cases, diaspora voters have provided en masse support (Hockenos, 2025) that secured comfortable winning margins (Turcu and Urbatsch, 2020) in several consecutive national elections.[1]

PERPETUAL OPPOSITION

The examples above show that populists are well aware of the dangers of power. Winning elections and becoming a governing party can mainstream them in a way that might make them unappealing to their voters in future electoral cycles. Populist parties therefore need to maintain an illusory status of perpetual opposition to an equally perpetual perceived bogeyman.

In the case of Hungary and Turkey, that role is filled by the EU, or European powers more broadly. By convincing their electorates at home and abroad of the ubiquitous and nefarious power of the EU, Hungary's Fidesz and Turkey's AKP have repeatedly managed to pass the buck and avoid accountability for internal and external crises. And, what is more, their blame game strategy has been successful. Both parties have survived mainstreaming while continuing to stay in power for decades.

1 https://www.npr.org/2022/04/03/1090488798/hungary-viktor-orban-election

7. DO EUROPEAN LEFT-WING POPULISTS IN GOVERNMENT BECOME MORE MODERATE?

JAN PHILIPP THOMECZEK

The so-called "inclusion-moderation thesis" postulates that including radical parties in government could moderate their radical rhetoric (Tepe, 2019). The literature identifies two main mechanisms behind inclusion-moderation (Akkerman, Lange, and Rooduijn, 2016). Firstly, from the perspective of parties as vote maximisers, the spatial competition focuses on the political center. Therefore parties—including radical ones—in the electoral competition can force them to focus more closely on the center. Secondly, participating in government coalitions will pressure those parties to compromise and distance themselves from radical positions. This highlights the underlying "optimism" of inclusion-moderation regarding the transformative power of democratic systems.

Mixed empirical evidence exists for the claim that populists decrease their populist rhetoric when in power. However, two factors make generalizing findings difficult. Firstly, researchers have focused on case studies that differ in many respects. In Poland (PiS) and Hungary (Fidesz), populist parties have had an absolute majority for years.[1] In both cases, they have radicalized rather than moderated. However, a more common pattern for populists in Europe is that they join coalition governments. Secondly, while some researchers focus on short-term campaign effects, others analyze broader shifts over broader periods such as years or decades. Thirdly, many researchers focus on right-wing populist parties only. This raises the question: how do left-wing populist parties, which adhere to a combination of populist ideas with core ideas of the radical left (March, 2011), behave in government?

LEFT-WING POPULIST PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT IN GREECE

In the Greek elections of January 2015, Syriza, a left-wing populist party founded as an electoral alliance in 2004, rose to power and formed a coalition with right-wing populist ANEL (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Syriza's leader, Alexis Tsipras, became prime minister. The financial crisis

1 https://www.jofcp.org/assets/jcp/JCP-July-2020.pdf

rendered the initial government phase controversial. Greece's bailout conditions by the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF were put to a referendum vote in July 2015. Eventually, the voters rejected the bailout proposal, but the referendum strongly polarized the Greek population. The referendum campaign was a crucial driver for populism in Greece (Katsambekis, 2019). Greece, however, depended on loans. It settled another bailout agreement mere days after the referendum (Wearden, 2015).

In the aftermath of that decision, MPs from Syriza's radical wing refused to vote for stricter austerity measures. Tsipras announced his resignation, and snap elections were announced for September. Surprisingly, Syriza received the most votes in that election. The party experienced minor losses compared with the previous elections and continued to govern. Radical Syriza MPs opposed to Tsipras founded a new party, Popular Unity, but failed to pass the 3% threshold.[2] Consequently, the new Syriza parliamentary group was more moderate, because the radical wing opposed to the austerity measures had left the party.

LEFT-WING POPULIST PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT IN SPAIN

In Spain, left-wing populist Podemos, which campaigned within the Unidas Podemos electoral coalition, joined the government as a junior partner of the Pedro Sanchez minority government in 2020. The Spanish Social Democrats, PSOE, led the government. Podemos was founded as a radical-left populist party following the economic crisis and evolved from the anti-corruption M-15 protests (Kioupkiolis, 2019).

A recent study finds evidence that while Podemos moderated itself and accepted the constitutional constraints of Spanish democracy before joining the government, PSOE moved to the left (Oleart, 2023). Therefore, it seems that both partners moved ideologically closer to each other. Moreover, evidence indicates that Podemos moderated its populist rhetoric after it became part of the Spanish government (Schwörer, 2022). Indeed, Popu-List has classified Podemos as non-populist from 2019 onwards. Nevertheless, research is still ongoing, as Podemos only entered the Spanish government around four years ago and left the government after the 2023 elections last year.

2 https://ekloges-prev.singularlogic.eu/v2015b/v/public/index.html?lang=en#%7B%22cls%22:%22level%22,%22params%22:%7B%22level%22:%22epik%22,%22id%22:1%7D%7D

GERMANY'S LEFT-WING POPULIST DIE LINKE: GOVERNING AT THE STATE LEVEL

Besides Syriza and Podemos, Germany's Die Linke is among the most successful left-wing populist parties. Die Linke was founded as the result of a merger of the East-German PDS and the predominantly West-German WASG almost 20 years ago (Lees and Keith, 2010). PDS embodied core populist ideas and often framed them against the backdrop of the East-West divide (Hartleb,, 2004). The party pitted the West German economic elite against the East German people. However, some researchers have raised doubts about the classification of Die Linke as populist, largely because it is an exceptionally heterogeneous party with moderate and radical wings (Hough and Keith, 2019).

Although the party was never part of any national government, there is some evidence for the inclusion-moderation thesis at the state level. My research shows that Die Linke tends to use more populist rhetoric in the German states where the party is in opposition (Thomeczek, 2025). Currently, Die Linke is part of the state government in three states and has government experience in two additional states. We still do not know, however, whether this is a causal effect. Moderation could also be a pre-condition—rather than an effect—of joining the government.

LEFT-WING POPULISTS: MODERATE IN POWER, RADICAL IN OPPOSITION?

Podemos, Syriza and Die Linke indicate that European left-wing populist parties can, at least in some respects, become moderate through government inclusion. However, in other regions, like Latin America, some left-wing populists have started a process of democratic backsliding, as seen in Venezuela (Corrales, 2020). Therefore, we need to be careful with generalizing the argument of left-wing populist moderation in government in non-parliamentary systems outside Europe.

One of the most interesting aspects of this discussion is the comparison with populist radical-right parties in government. Here, the evidence for the moderation of the populist radical left is much clearer. The radicalization of PiS and Fidesz may be related to their de facto one-party government status, as discussed above. Neither, however, have we seen long-term moderation from parties in coalitions such as Lega in Italy, the Austrian FPÖ or the Swiss People's Party.

8. POPULIST GOVERNMENTS AS A THREAT FROM WITHIN THE STATE

MICHAEL BAUER

Populist governments pose a threat to liberal democracy by fostering a leadership cult, undermining minority rights, and disregarding norms of self-restraint. This behavior can also lead defenders of liberalism to resort to illiberal means. Thus, it can lead to a vicious cycle that may cause the dissolution of even more informal guardrails of political competition (Braley et al., 2023).

Does it, in fact, indicate objective deficits within our representative systems themselves? And what can defenders of liberal democracy do about it? Personally, I have doubts about whether populism, as a force of political opposition, should be considered a healthy phenomenon or corrective force (Mouffe, 2018). But I am certain that populists in government do pose a serious threat to liberal democracy.

POPULISTS IN GOVERNMENT

Perhaps the most worrisome scenario is that of populists engaging in state transformation from the top position as heads of state or government. Once liberal democratic structures, procedures, and core state institutions are undermined, it can be difficult for a state to simply bounce back to the previous status quo.

In fact, the state fabric may remain seriously de-pluralized in a populist manner.

Jan-Werner Müller refers to this danger when he writes about the "operational manual of the state" (Müller, 2017). He points out that populists will always seek to rewrite it in their own favor.

REWRITING THE MANUAL

There are many examples of how populists attempt this rewriting of the operational manual of the state. Donald Trump nominated federal judges and pushed candidates through to the Supreme Court (Collins and Eshbaugh-Soha, 2019). His actions will have long-lasting effects. Beyond that, if Trump had succeeded in implementing his Schedule F Executive Order, it would have

transformed a significant portion of the US career public service (Moynihan, 2022). Public servants would have become political appointees, subject to removal if they did not align with the president's goals.

Meanwhile, Jair Bolsonaro brought hundreds of loyalists from the armed forces into strategic management positions within the Brazilian federal administration (Hunter and Vega, 2022). Bolsonaro may be gone, but his loyalists remain in post to this day. During each term as prime minister, Viktor Orbán further entrenched illiberalism into the Hungarian civil service through comprehensive administrative reforms (Hajnal, 2021). If a liberal government were to take over in Budapest tomorrow, generations of civil servants would remain influenced by Fidesz's populist ideology. Orbán's civil servants were self-selected as patronaged militants or socialized as opportunists.

Another aspect of this may be underway in Italy, as Giorgia Meloni and her Fratelli d'Italia party aim to establish a presidential system. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has already implemented such reforms in Turkey. As Turkey's recent unfree elections demonstrated, they have proved strikingly successful in prolonging Erdoğan's reign (Altun, 2023).

WHERE DOES POPULISM IN GOVERNMENT LEAD?

One might argue that we should not equate populism with democratic backsliding or anti-system party politics (Zulianello, 2020). However, it would be short-sighted to exclude this aspect from the populist equation. Populism is not static, and its boundary with autocratic leanings is fluid. As with, arguably, Erdoğan or Orbán, starting off as a populist does not prevent ending up as an autocrat.

Understanding populist ideology remains important. So does explaining populist success in electoral battles, and the impact of populist policies regarding welfare, migration, and identity. However, the decisive battle will center upon who presides over the ongoing evolution of the core institutions of the working state (Bauer et al., 2021). Who is in charge at the critical juncture at which institutions can be reformed or even redesigned from scratch?

POPULISTS' SYSTEM DEFORMATION STRATEGIES

The main question, therefore, concerns the democratic polity and who will be able to initiate reforms and redesign its core institutions: the checks and balances, the legislative branch, the courts, the bureaucracy, the armed forces, and so forth. Even once populists are ousted from government, recalibrating

institutions back to liberal democratic standards might be a daunting task.

If you let populists transform your state institutions and instruments, they will also transform the range of options you can work with later. Perhaps it is better to say, therefore, that your options will become populistically deformed (Bauer and Becker, 2020). We need to take the threat posed by populists as system deformers more seriously. From there, we should focus our attention on populist strategies towards state structures and institutions, and how to stop, or at least hinder, their illiberal transformation.

9. HOW POPULISTS DAMAGE GOVERNMENTS

MAURICIO I. DUSSAUGE-LAGUNA

The literature says little about how populists affect governing patterns and institutions. In fact, it is only recently that scholars have started to think about the way populists' actions and decisions impact on bureaucracies and policy processes (M. W. Bauer et al., 2021). So far, the findings are not encouraging.

Some authors have detailed that populists capture or dismantle administrative structures (M. W. Bauer and Becker, 2020), while others suggest they politicize bureaucracies (Peters and Pierre, 2019). Scholars also show that populists put public sector innovation (Borins, 2018) and collaborative networks under stress (Stoker, 2019). In Mexico, things have not been much different. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's populist style has significantly damaged the country's administrative apparatus and policymaking patterns.

DOUBLESPEAK POPULISM IN MEXICO

Like other populist movements, López Obrador's style is chameleonic in nature (Muno and Pfeiffer, 2023). He is commonly seen as a leftist because of his support of cash transfers. But he was also perceived as a centrist during his 2000–2006 tenure as Mexico City's mayor (Bruhn, 2012). In his time as President (2018–2024), López Obrador has pursued an agenda associated with the right, downsizing the state apparatus and introducing austerity measures.

Beyond this, López Obrador has adopted what I call a "doublespeak populist" approach (Bruhn, 2012). He uses terms and rhetorical phrases that supposedly put "the people" first to disguise his true intentions. This kind of populist rhetoric has had a powerful legitimizing effect on his actions. For example, he has criticized what he calls a "golden bureaucracy" (burocracia dorada) to seek stronger personalistic control over administrative and political institutions. Meanwhile, the "austerity" mantra has served to justify his discretionary use of budget cuts and public funds. More broadly, López Obrador's "doublespeak populism" has helped introduce changes and measures with grave effects for Mexico's politico-administrative infrastructure.

POPULISTS DAMAGE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Michael Bauer (in this volume) recently argued that the arrival of populists in government can have a "devastating" effect on the state. The Mexican experience under López Obrador reaffirms this.

As part of his "transformation" agenda, he has implemented several administrative measures (Dussauge Laguna and Aguilar Aréval, 2022) which have dismantled administrative, policy, and state capacities (Ibarra Del Cueto, 2023).

Like other populists, López-Obrador has sought to extend political control over semi-autonomous regulators; attacked the reputation of independent agencies; used patronage appointments widely; terminated institutions for ideological reasons; and bypassed laws and administrative procedures.

Moreover, López-Obrador has substituted established bureaucratic channels to secure implementation of his pet projects. He has achieved this either through parallel structures (González-Vázquez, Nieto-Morales, and Peeters,,, 2024), or via the "militarization" of civil administration areas.[3] The overall result has been a Mexican administrative apparatus which is more obedient to the president's will, but less capable of performing government tasks effectively and in line with traditional public service standards (e.g. rule of law, efficiency, accountability).

POPULISTS DAMAGE POLICYMAKING PROCESSES

Another impact of populists in government is that they seek to reframe broader policymaking patterns (Bartha, Boda, and Szikra, 2020). Indeed, López Obrador's government in Mexico has further illustrated how populists distort every step of the policy cycle (Dussauge-Laguna, 2022). Claiming a monopoly over "the will of the people," López Obrador has significantly influenced the public agenda. He decides which areas of debate are relevant (or not) and undermines the legitimacy of other policy actors. Clientelist ambitions and lack of technical considerations have been the norm in his policy initiatives' design.

Like other strong populist leaders, López Obrador's implementation style has performative aspects (Raychaudhury in this volume). He builds narratives about how much his government does "for the people", e.g. its pandemic response (Peci and Dussauge-Laguna, 2023) and emphasizes his actions' symbolic aspects. Yet when his programs prove ineffective, he downplays

3 http://administracionpublica.cide.edu/los-militares-como-gerentes-publicos-o-la-militarizacion-de-la-administracion-publica/

their environmental and economic shortcomings. Using the populist tactic of identifying himself with "the people," López Obrador discredits external experts and resorts to "alternative facts" (otros datos) to affirm his agenda. He reports directly to the people in political meetings, disregarding monitoring, evaluation, and audit mechanisms.

THE NEEDS OF "THE PEOPLE" VERSUS THE POPULIST GOVERNING REALITY

On the campaign trail, populists claim to know what "the people" want and need. Yet their rhetorical skills are never matched by good governing abilities. On the contrary, and no matter how capable they are at managing their own party movements, populists in government have shown they are not good at leading public sector organizations or making effective public policies (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015).

The Mexican experience is yet another case of how populists damage governing institutions and policy processes. Like Viktor Orbán (Hajnal, 2021), Donald Trump (Moynihan and Roberts, 2021), and Jair Bolsonaro (Peci, 2021), López Obrador has politicized, captured, and diminished the policymaking ability of Mexico's bureaucratic apparatus. In short, under populist rule, the needs of "the people" remain largely unmet, while their government's capacity to provide good and effective public goods and services is significantly eroded.

10. MARCHING TO THE POPULIST DRUM? THE MILITARY'S ROLE IN POPULIST GOVERNANCE

HAKKI TAŞ

The military represents a major blind spot in contemporary populism studies.[1] Scholars tend to view populism through the prism of civilian mass politics, and to neglect the political role of the military elite. In Latin America, ironically, classical manifestations of populism emerged from military authoritarian regimes during the 1930s and 1940s.

Indeed, Latin America was the focal point for pioneering studies in both populism and civil-military relations. These studies were intertwined until the region's epochal third wave of democratization in the 1980s. During that period, the term "military populism" gained currency, characterizing regimes like those led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru or Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (Grayson, 1971). A blend of authoritarian governance and populist economic policies shaped these political landscapes.

Today, it is imperative to bring the military back into populism studies. The Global Populism Database shows that the armed forces remain a considerable political actor (Hawkins et al., 2019). Seven of the top ten populist countries have witnessed at least one successful coup d'état since 1946.

POPULISM AND THE DECLINE OF MILITARY VETO

My research (Taş, 2024) found that populism is conducive to the civilianization of politics. We associate the rise of populist power with less veto power from the military; namely, a military that is less likely to interfere with or block the government's decisions.

Populist leaders in military-dominated countries often clash with the powerful military establishment, fostering an anti-military sentiment among their populace. This pattern, however, only fully manifested in Turkey (2007–2013) (Taş, 2015) and Thailand (2005–2006, 2011–2014) (Chambers, 2013). The Turkish Kemalist regime and the Kingdom of Thailand conferred guardian status upon the military (Elçi, 2023). As a result, anti-military rhetoric stemmed from the fear of military intervention. Moreover, the prospect

1 https://www.populismstudies.org/military-and-populism-an-introduction/

of a coup—real or fabricated—has in the past been used as a tactic by some political leaders to rally public support.

In Venezuela, populist leaders Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro propagated conspiracy theories[2] of external plots to topple or assassinate them, and framed anti-government protests as attempts orchestrated by the US.

CAN POPULIST LEADERS REDUCE THE MILITARY'S POWER TO SAY NO?

Despite the prevalent anti-military rhetoric used in non-Latin American countries, the alignment[3] between populism and the military is more common in this region. Remarkably, many prominent populist figures, including Chávez in Venezuela, Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, boast backgrounds in the armed forces. Indeed, before they rose to power, Chávez and Gutiérrez both participated in coup attempts, in 1992 and 2000 respectively (Taş, 2024).

We see an affinity between populism and the military in anti-imperialist discourse, especially when the "elite" is associated primarily with an international entity.

INDIVIDUAL, COMMUNAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL

This populist-military alliance appears contradictory in the context of the civilianization of politics under populism. Nevertheless, the populist way is not objective civilian control of the armed forces based on civilian oversight mechanisms and military professionalism (Huntington, 2002). Instead, populist civil-military arrangements stem from a distrust of institutions common to populism.

This leads to a personalized concentration of executive power, which opens the door to direct control over the military. Many populist leaders politicize the military and align it with civilian spheres. They seek to establish individual, communal, or ideological connections to secure military compliance.

2 https://www.populismstudies.org/nicolas-maduro-a-populist-without-popularity/

3 https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/dangerous-alliances-populists-and-the-military

INDIVIDUAL LOYALTY

Populist leaders may choose to establish tight control over promotions. In Venezuela, Maduro promoted thousands of middle- and lower-ranking officers based on their personal loyalty to him (Rittinger, 2020).

In Thailand, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra pursued a strategy to personalize his influence over the police and military by favoring trusted circles and aligning their interests with his own (Chambers, 2013). He elevated his confidants, including former classmates and close relatives, to key positions within the armed forces, thereby establishing a dedicated faction within the army loyal to him alone. Another tangible manifestation of personalized control is the military purge. This tactic penalizes disloyal or less reliable officers, and instills fear among potential contenders, reinforcing the authority of those in power.

COMMUNAL LOYALTY

Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, endeavored to narrow the divide between civilians and the armed forces. Through initiatives like the Equal Opportunity Program, Morales fostered greater inclusivity of substantial indigenous communities within the armed forces (Rittinger, 2020). Similarly, in Ecuador, bolstered by indigenous support, former president Rafael Correa expanded the presence of indigenous-only units (Pion-Berlin and Ać acio, 2022). By adjusting the criteria for admission to military academies, Correa aimed to increase the number of indigenous officers within the army ranks.

Turkey, by contrast, is a stark example of the opposite trend, purportedly marked by the removal of Alevi officers, a group widely regarded as integral to the Kemalist secular army.

IDEOLOGICAL LOYALTY

The Chávez regime prized ideological loyalty above all. In so doing, the regime reshaped Venezuela's armed forces into a revolutionary entity. Enshrined in the 2008 law, the Venezuelan army was defined as anti-imperialist, revolutionary, and Bolivarian (Norden, 2021). Similarly, Correa and Morales leveraged the military's historical leanings towards leftist anti-imperialist beliefs to forge a shared ideological platform. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shut down the Kemalist-oriented military schools, replacing them with the National Defense University (Kars Kaynar, 2022). These are now

under the full control of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), consolidating influence over military education.

BOOMERANG EFFECT OF POPULISM

As discussed in the introduction, populism can be a threat to and a remedy for democracy. Likewise, populist leaders can embody both militarist and anti-militarist traits. Increasing support for populist leaders grants them the capacity to either suppress, negotiate with, or deploy armed forces as needed. However, within the framework of populist institutional erosion, a precarious atmosphere emerges: the very conditions that breed populism also foster military interventions.

11. POPULISM AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN ITALY

ANNA LONGHINI

"Bureaucracy" is just one way to define public administration. It is a term with negative connotations, but the closest to common perceptions of public administration: an administrative apparatus that formally applies the law, without necessarily considering the importance of achieving a desirable public result (Ongaro, Borgonovi, and Bouckaer, 2021). People bemoan bureaucratic "red tape"; excessive adherence to formal norms that slows down processes and the achievement of goals. Indeed, many citizens see bureaucracy as working against them rather than in their favor. Thus, bureaucracy widens the distance between "the people" and "the elite."

The power of the elite, moreover, lies not just in the exercise of its functions. It also lies in the power of not doing, of postponing, of slowing down, or even of preventing policymakers from acting. The configuration of this "administrative power" has led citizens to question the accountability of public administrations in complex democratic systems.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND THE PROBLEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY

At least two distinct conceptions of accountability exist. We can relate them to the two different administrative cultures typical of Continental European and Anglo-Saxon systems (Kuhlmann, Wollmann, and Reiter, 2025).

In its traditional conception, public administration should be generically "accountable"; that is, responsible and transparent to citizen-users, rather than to the changing political will of elected officials. This conception is closely linked to the separation between the public and the private sphere, or State and society. Yet, it also refers to a separation between politics and administration, which is a feature more typical of continental European countries. In the Italian case, the separation between politics and public administration is traceable to Article 97 of its Constitution. This complex relationship involves wide-ranging discretion, making it difficult to balance "the autonomy given to those exercising public power with appropriate control" (Scott, 2000). Article 97 also references the sustainability of public debt, which should prevail over spending public money without the appropriate financial coverage. This

Article, paradoxically, influenced the development of technocratic populism (Tudzarovska, 2023). A recent example is the Meloni government's controversial pension policies.[1] The country's political instability has affected the design and regulation of its public bureaucracy. It has exposed Italy's citizens to a multiplicity of regulations and bureaucracies. One such is the Regional Autonomy Bill, currently under discussion in parliament.

In Anglo-Saxon systems, public administrations have the purpose of realizing administered democracy and can do so through a mix of control, capacity, and reinforcement of values (Bertelli, 2021). Public administrations have the capacity to realign democratic values and make democracy work. In this sense, accountability is not a generic responsibility, but a real expectation to respond to a specific political mandate that citizens have entrusted to elected representatives. In systems where democracy precedes the formation of professional bureaucracy, Parliamentary sovereignty exercises control over public administration, holding it "politically accountable" (Kuhlmann, Wollmann, and Reiter, 2025).

ITALY AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE DEMOCRACY

Bridging the gap between public administration (perceived as an obstructive bureaucracy) and citizens is a problem. Indeed, it has been a constant challenge in Italy's attempts to reform its public sector. Reform attempts have been inspired by both Anglo-Saxon ideas of New Public Management (NPM) and pressures from the EU, usually described as an "external constraint" (Cassese, 2014).

Since the 1990s, NPM ethos has led to the introduction of managerial techniques and tools borrowed from the private sector, with the intention of making the public sector leaner and more efficient. Examples are the introduction of "standard costs" in the healthcare system, and various privatizations, including the Italian Post (Sanderson, 2015). As for the "external constraint," the best example would be the pressure the EU has placed on Italy for over two decades to reform its justice sector and sluggish courts. Italy has made some efforts to increase bureaucratic transparency, introducing a right of access to administrative Acts, and creating an Office for Public Relations.

The Italian government has made several attempts to increase transparency. One was introducing the right of access to administrative Acts. Another was creating an Office for Public Relations, effectively recognizing the idea of "administrative democracy." And, most recently, it developed e-government

1 https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2023/05/30/govt-at-work-to-avoid-pension-social-bomb-meloni_e9f3fca4-9287-4cef-9c75-86925cd99950.html

tools such as PagoPA, a platform that allows citizens to make digital payments to the public administration. Yet, in the absence of significant structural reforms, e-government—tools facilitating service provision through information technology—has not yet managed to bring public administration closer to a population demographically not very inclined to digitalization.

POPULISM AND (DIS)TRUST IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

In Italy, distrust in the public sector, also linked to public service deprivation in some areas, has undermined its smooth functioning (Cremaschi et al., 2024). This distrust resulted in significant cuts in human capital spending, while leaving overburdened administrative procedures in place, under the rationale that they are necessary to prevent deeply rooted corruption.

Cuts to the public sector aimed at streamlining an administrative machine deemed unproductive have prevented the hiring of a young labor force and pushed up the average age of public workers across all sectors. Among OECD countries, Italy now lies among those with the lowest numbers of public sector workers.

RECOVERY OF TRUST

Improving the relationship between governed and rulers through a recovery of "trust" in institutions should serve not only to improve the delivery of public services, but also to govern today's complex society. Cementing the trust relationship is also the best remedy for populism as an ideology. Populism, after all, feeds on progressive polarization of the people and the elite, portraying them as more at odds with each other than they actually are. As long as the problems of public administration accountability remain unresolved, populist targeting of the public sector as the cause of the malfunctioning of contemporary societies will continue to resonate.

12. LOST IN THE SHUFFLE: LOCAL POLITICS IN POPULISM STUDIES

ELIŠKA DRÁPALOVÁ

Populism researchers typically focus on national politics or the EU. They tend to treat local populist politicians as curiosities unless—like Boris Johnson in the UK or Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico—they have made the leap to national politics.

Yet, if we fail to see populism from a multi-level perspective, we risk not fully understanding future developments, and why populists persist. A local perspective can help identify different types of populist actors and their strategies. It can also help us understand the different facets of widening polarization in countries across Europe.

DIE-HARD MYTH: LOCAL POLITICS ARE NOT RELEVANT

This lack of interest in the local is not a problem only in populist studies. It runs deep in political science, too. Researchers tend to see local-level populists as fading examples of local color. Moreover, they view local elections as secondary events, and municipal policymaking (garbage collection, road maintenance) as the "politics of potholes" (Burnett and Kogan, 2017). Researchers consider these things irrelevant compared with the pressing problems of national politics.

Yet, contrary to what is generally assumed, in Europe and elsewhere, linkages between local politics and populism are strong in the countryside and in thriving metropolitan areas. One can hardly find a (capital) city without populist parties represented in local councils. Many populist parties govern at this level and play an essential role in shaping local politics, public services and administrative reforms. National populist leaders, like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, have successfully consolidated their power. This is, in part, because they set out to control local governments and created a strong local base. Parties that build a solid local support base have a better chance of surviving the next electoral cycle because local governments provide votes, financial revenues, and a pool of potential party recruits (Burnett and Kogan, 2017).

Populists' control over local governments can uproot traditional parties and prevent new parties taking root. Subordinating and disciplining

subnational governments is, therefore, a successful strategy for democratic backsliding that has passed under EU institutions' radar (Jakli and Stenberg, 2021).

LOCAL POLITICS PROVIDE NEW INSIGHTS

There is another reason researchers brush off local politics: they assume there are no interesting insights left to uncover. Many assume that populists find support in white-working-class neighborhoods of declining industrial centers and the countryside. They also assume that cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse cities will resist the populist appeal.

Yet, populist victories in Barcelona, Prague and Rome, and the growing appeal of populists in urban areas, show that there's more complexity than this center-periphery argument suggests (Chou, Moffitt, and Busbridge, 2022). Recent research has called into question the strong local community ties and the social capital commonly assumed antithetical to populism (Rodríguez-Pose, Lee, and Lipp, 2021).

LOCAL POLITICS AS A POPULIST TEST BED

Municipal politics is also a breeding ground for different populist types, and a test bed for their ideas. The nature of political representation in cities is much more direct, personalized and unmediated. Local politics is therefore exceptionally well suited for valence populism (Zulianello, 2020). At the local level, politicians must implement policies, handle licenses and deliver services. Mayors thus need management skills. Technocratic populists emphasize competence, and effective management—and they bring business-inspired tools into city halls. This style finds enthusiastic support from disenchanted voters who seek change. However, in a city, the gap between radical discourse and actual performance is not easy to disguise.

My research with Kai Wegrich discovered that the clash of technocratic and populist elements creates deep tensions in the longer term (Drápalová and Wegrich, 2021). Eventually, these tensions give way to patronage and personal loyalty. Municipal politics is also populated by numerous single-issue local parties that overlap with populist agendas and use populist rhetoric. These local parties and lists might campaign for more playgrounds, libraries, and dog shelters. Or, they might rally against large projects imposed from above, such as incinerators or housing centers for asylum seekers.

In Czechia, for example, these movements use local referenda to challenge nationally imposed policies (Dvořák, 2018). Tapping into the same discontent,

local movements can rival large national populist parties and hamper their progress at the local level more successfully than traditional parties.

BENEFITS OF A MULTILEVEL APPROACH

Scholars of populism should cast off methodological nationalism and adopt a multi-level perspective. Using a subnational focus, we can understand subtler mechanisms of democratic backsliding, evaluate the relevance of different populist sub-types, and identify the roots of polarization. Digging deeper beneath national-level politics could help us understand whether subnational dynamics reinforce polarization, or whether they give us clues about how to combat it.

Multi-level political tensions between populists and liberal political forces will have an impact on local autonomy and territorial governance. It is unclear whether we will see greater re-centralization of territorial governance with majoritarian systems or a deepening of local autonomy and political fragmentation with directly elected mayors. Either way, what happens at the local level will have important consequences for national and European politics.

13. SMALL HOMELANDS: THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT, TERRITORIES AND LOCALISM

ELISA BELLÈ

A deeper understanding of the current consolidation of the radical right across countries requires a territorial and context-sensitive approach. Much empirical evidence confirms the importance of the local dimension (Chou, Moffitt, and Busbridge, 2022).

During the Brexit referendum, for example, many coastal cities and former industrial centers voted Leave. Looking back in time, the Front National (now Rassemblement National) found its electoral stronghold in the southeast of France, a region with a deep-rooted military and colonial culture. Similarly, Italy's Lega Nord (now Lega) has, since its inception, established its most rooted electoral presence in small to very small municipalities, becoming the voice of the "deep province."

GLOBALIZATION AND LATE CAPITALISM

A major factor explaining the renewed relevance of local arenas is the structural transformation of the economic system. Globalization has contributed to the creation of new territorial cleavages, creating "winners and losers" not only in the labor market but also in territorial terms. One of the main cleavages is the contrast between new "superstar cities" with service, cultural and financial-based economies and depressed areas of deindustrialization (Le Galès and Pierson, 2019).

Intertwined with this are processes of institutional reform. Since the 1980s, these processes have decentralized decision-making power from the national to the sub-national level in Western democracies (Galès, 2021).

THE IDEOLOGICAL MOBILIZATION OF CLEAVAGES

The issue of places "left behind" and center/periphery cleavages must not, however, tempt us to simplify a complex issue such as the electoral geography of the populist radical right. One key point to note here is the ideological work these parties have done with respect to space and territories. In a

framework of structural changes, they intervene by exploiting cleavages and territorial tensions for ideological purposes.

Indeed, several studies have recently highlighted the radical right's emphasis on feelings of local attachment and identity (Fitzgerald, 2018). Localism is the new watchword (Drápalová, 2023). It reconfigures the liberalism/traditionalism cleavage, making the "little old world" of the province a place of supposed moral purity. This imagined local community stands in opposition to the metropolis, depicted as the realm of privileged and morally corrupt elites (identities we generally associate with cosmopolitanism). This mix of traditionalism, anti-intellectualism and authoritarianism allows to convey a political and cultural message, concealed within the folds of local sentiment.

LOCALISM, NOSTALGIA, AND COMMUNITARIANISM

This forced folklorization of the local has proved ideologically effective, binding the populist, the reactionary, and the authoritarian elements. It has exploited one of the most seductive suggestions of radical-right populism: namely, nostalgia for a mythical past, an invented golden age of harmony, order, law, and tradition. In a recent comparative ethnographic analysis, co-authored with Félicien Faury, we focus on two small to medium-sized towns governed by the Rassemblement National (Bellè and Faury, 2025). We show how this celebration of the local reinforces nativism and exclusionary politics. The populist local homeland retains communitarian features. In the sociological sense of Ferdinand Tönnies, this is the community of mechanical solidarity, as opposed to the complexity, fluidity and transience of contemporary social ties (Guasti and Bustikova, 2023). This imagined, idealized and ideologized local community is a place of and for natives. One belongs by blood, soil and "traditions."

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL POWER

But what does the empirical study of the radical right in local power tell us? And why is it important to engage more systematically in studying this level of power? First, we should remember that subnational politics is not a less important version of national politics. Local arenas are often crucial decision-making spaces, which can have larger-scale repercussions. One good example is the impact of large infrastructures and energy conversion on climate change. Moreover, access to local government by various populist radical-right parties allows them to gain entrenchment and legitimacy. This aspect can play a vital role in the public and scientific discussion on

mainstreaming and normalization of this political family in liberal democracies. Indeed, governing locally allows the populist radical right to manage power, consolidate electorally, and build networks of socio-political alliances with notable locals.

LOCAL ARENAS AS TESTING GROUNDS FOR LEGITIMIZATION

Local arenas provide the ideal setting to test policies that it can then extend on a larger scale. Some ideologically foundational issues for the populist radical right are particularly expendable at the local level. A key strategy is the implementation of security and law-and-order policies that tend to marginalize the "undesirable" from public spaces. Think, for example, of the 30-year policy of ordinances enacted by Lega Nord mayors in Italy to remove homeless people and beggars, close down "ethnic" shops, but also prevent political processions from passing through historic city centers.

Another major issue is local welfare policies, which radical right populists can remodel on an exclusionary and nativist basis. An example of this "localization of rights" is, again, provided by the Lega Nord (Gargiulo, 2017). The party has a longstanding agenda of local welfare chauvinism. This political program is usually founded on exclusionary criteria, such as the number of years a person has been resident in a place.

POLARIZATION AND PROGRESSIVE CIVIL SOCIETY

Finally, a relevant implication of the populist radical right's growth in a territorial context is its mainstreaming influence on the social fabric. An increasing body of literature points to the highly polarizing effect of populist radical-right parties' accession, which tends to sharply divide detractors and supporters (Harteveld, Mendoza, and Rooduijn, 2022).

These polarizing effects are often accompanied by the mobilization of parts of civil society. To understand them, we need to contextualize the conflict, by relating it to different subcultures and territorial political traditions.

14. WE CANNOT IGNORE THE POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT IMPACT ON THE WELFARE STATE

JULIANA CHUERI

The Introduction emphasizes that populism tends to be "chameleon-like," meaning it is not tied to a specific political agenda. There is certainly some truth to this observation, but it has also led the literature to treat the position of the populist radical right on redistribution as contextual. I argue that this perspective risks overlooking an important political transformation underway: Populist radical right parties are redefining the foundations of the welfare state in Europe.

THE WELFARE POLICIES OF THE RADICAL RIGHT

Radical-right parties re-emerged in many European countries in the early 1980s. They sought to restrict migration and enact tough-on-crime policies, while promoting a right-wing economic agenda. In the mid-1990s, however, such parties began turning their redistributive position to the "left."

The Danish People's Party (DF) led the way. It reaped enormous electoral success by proclaiming to be the "true defenders of the Danish welfare state." DF crafted a tailor-made message for the working class: we will defend your welfare state by excluding migrants from benefits (Rydgren, 2004). Most Western European radical-right parties swiftly adopted its rhetoric, referred to as "welfare chauvinism."

In the run-up to Sweden's general elections, Jimmie Åkesson, leader of the populist radical-right party Sweden Democrats, tweeted "Elections are a choice between mass immigration and welfare. The choice is yours." (Coman et al., 2015). Thus, Åkesson showed how radical-right parties can reinvent themselves as a new form of workers' party. In analyzing changes in the radical right's distributive agenda, however, most scholars have dismissed the marketing. Some researchers have described such parties' distributive positions as an inconsistent mishmash between left- and right-wing positions.

According to this view, the radical-right populists strategically "blur" their preferred social policy to attract an electorate with dissonant welfare preferences (Rovny, 2013), while, in fact, not viewing distributive issues as a priority (Mudde, 2007). This implies that we needn't take the distributive positions of the radical right either literally or seriously.

A NEW REDISTRIBUTIVE LOGIC

However, the suggestion that radical-right populists' distributive agenda is empty marketing is becoming increasingly implausible, because these parties are making the issue more and more salient in their electoral programs (Afonso and Rennwald, 2018). By adopting the view that the welfare state is not a real concern for radical-right populist parties, and by choosing not to scrutinize their social policy stances, we also risk losing sight of these parties' very real influence on policymaking on distributive issues. And we thereby miss an important ongoing welfare transformation. Radical-right parties' positions may seem incoherent and inconsistent when viewed through the lens of the traditional left-right division on welfare issues.

But in a recent study (Chueri, 2022), I write that this is only because it represents a new form of redistributive logic. Populist radical-right parties are developing a dualistic welfare state. This addresses "deserving" and "undeserving" welfare recipients in very different ways that go far beyond the notion of welfare chauvinism.

For the "deserving" (such as nationals with long employment histories, and pensioners), the populist radical right are defending a protectionist welfare state logic. For these people, they propose a welfare state based on generous and compensatory policies (pension, child benefits, and unemployment benefits).

But the radical right proposes that the "undeserving" (for example, foreigners and nationals seen as not contributing enough to the nation, such as the long-term unemployed) should not have full access to collective resources. Instead, they believe this group should remain subject to state discipline and surveillance. Such people's access to social benefits should be conditioned by workfare policies and the strong policing of welfare abuse. Although not introduced by the populist radical right, this coercive approach to the moral obligation to work fits aptly with its authoritarian rhetoric.

NOT MERELY EMPTY RHETORIC

These positions on the welfare state are, moreover, not empty rhetoric. My work finds that radical-right populists do prioritize distributive issues once in power, and that they do make a difference. In negotiations, parties push for policy reforms that align with their distributive agenda—and often succeed in influencing policy (Chueri, 2021).

Recently, Giorgia Meloni, the radical-right Italian Prime Minister and member of the populist radical-right Brothers of Italy, threatened to deny access to social assistance for those who refuse job offers, taking a hard line on

"welfare abuse" (Squires, 2022). Sweden's new government plan—under the Sweden Democrats' influence—envisages tax cuts for pensioners and tougher benefit rules for immigrants. Moreover, the impact of the populist radical right extends far beyond its direct influence on government policies. Mainstream right- and left-wing parties are adopting parts of their distributive agenda; in particular, the idea that nationals should take priority in welfare distribution.

A RADICAL-RIGHT WELFARE TRANSFORMATION

We should not underestimate the impact of the radical right's new vision for the European welfare state. Populist radical-right parties are transforming the moral dimension of welfare policies. They assert their agenda on issues previously "owned" by mainstream left-wing parties. They also legitimize the idea that the welfare state should be reserved for the "deserving" few. This contributes to the stigmatization and othering of various social groups.

The new model of the European welfare state suggests that it is not merely legitimate for the state not to address poverty among its population—but that tackling poverty can be morally wrong. Feeding into the moral separation between "deserving" and "undeserving" is legitimizing unprecedented levels of inequality—with the blessing of the same working class who have historically been supporters of redistribution, and the backing of mainstream parties. The European welfare state has suffered many shocks since World War II, yet it has remained reluctant to accept high levels of inequality or abject poverty among its population. This era, however, might soon be drawing to an end.

15. POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT PARTIES ARE THREATENING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

MOTOSHI SUZUKI

The myths outlined by Zulianello (see Introduction) suggest that the populist radical right behaves as if it were ordinary, non-extremist, and harmless to liberal democracy. It holds an elusive political position and occasionally allies with mainstream traditional parties in order to participate in government. In this way, we can deepen our understanding of the complex nature and political strength of the populist radical right.

ISSUE OWNERSHIP AS A SOURCE OF POLITICAL STRENGTH

Following these tenets, I argue that the populist radical right's strategic move to strengthen its issue ownership poses a grave threat to liberal democracy as a foundation for international cooperation (Suzuki, 2023).

I base my argument on the general characteristics of the populist radical right which differentiate it from other political advocates. These are nativism, anti-establishment, and anti-constitutionalism. Exploiting these characteristics, the populist radical right engages in strategic behavior.

POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT AS A STRATEGIST

Bonnie Meguid (2008) and Kimberly Twist (2019) argue that small parties, including those from the populist radical right, develop policy programs designed to work in shifting electoral and parliamentary environments. Their strategic behavior takes shape in at least two ways.

First, using nativist rhetoric, populist radical-right parties establish issue ownership over immigration to make substantial electoral gains. To maintain and improve this ownership, they then convince voters that they are indeed anti-immigration warriors. One standard way to stem immigration flows is to advocate restrictive border controls. Another is to use foreign aid to promote economic growth and increase job opportunities, thereby encouraging potential migrants to stay in their home countries. However, as Hein de Haas (2007) argues, aid has become ineffective in controlling immigration. This

is because aid-receiving governments misuse aid money and, indeed, send migrants to donor countries to lobby for yet more aid.

Consistent with this argument, populist radical-right parties in major donor countries have condemned the failure of aid to control immigration. We see this from the PVV in the Netherlands, the BZÖ in Austria, and the SVP in Switzerland. What, therefore, do these parties do with ineffective aid to defend their ownership of the immigration issue in government coalitions?

THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN COALITION

I find (Suzuki, 2023) that they do indeed pursue the coalitional strategies outlined by Meguid (2008) and Twist (2019). Populist radical-right parties exploit issue proximity to align with ideologically proximate mainstream right parties in coalition governments. In partnership with mainstream parties, they execute policy programs upon which both agree.

This finding partially contradicts the findings of Sarah Bermeo and David Leblang (2015). They find that the populist radical right's parliamentary strength leads to an increase in aid as a means to reduce immigrant inflows. Their study does not consider the possibility that aid ineffectiveness downgrades the radical right's issue ownership while in government. My research (Suzuki, 2023) shows that aid ineffectiveness prompts these parties to pursue a punitive strategy to maintain issue ownership.

THE THREAT TO CONSTITUTIONS

As Mattia Zulianello (2020) observes, populist radical-right parties integrate into the mainstream in a controversial way. Repeated interactions with mainstream parties do not moderate their extreme rhetoric. Moderation would mean a loss of the characteristics that enable them to thrive. Yet, populist radical-right parties go even further. They aim to weaken the constitutional arrangements of checks and balances to expand the scope of their strategic behavior.

My research (Suzuki, 2023) shows that the populist radical right's effect on aid is greater under weak constitutional arrangements of unicameralism, non-federalism, and plebiscitary democracy[1] than under strong arrangements of bicameralism, federalism, and judicial review. This means that populist radical-right parties have an incentive to weaken constitutional

1 https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/plebiscitary-democracy-plebiscitarianism/

arrangements, to strengthen the impact on policy and their issue ownership. If populist radical-right parties act on this incentive, tension intensifies between democratic politics and constitutionalism, both of which underscore liberal democracy. On the one hand, populist radical-right parties favor democratic politics by encouraging a silent electorate to raise voices and broaden the ideological spectrum of electoral and parliamentary processes. On the other, they act to dilute constitutional arrangements, motivated by the imperative to upgrade their issue ownership. In so doing, they upset the delicate balance between democracy and liberalism.

THE THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

A balanced liberal democracy provides a domestic foundation for international cooperation by promoting compliance with norms and treaties. This liberal-democratic ideal of internationalism was articulated in Immanuel Kant's plan for perpetual peace and Jean Monnet's proposal for a European Community. In their beliefs, international cooperation is an external reflection of liberal democracy.

However, the populist radical right disapproves of internationalism for being elitist and infringing upon the will of the people.

As Giovanni Capoccia (2022) and Vlad Surdea-Hernea (2023) argue, the rise of the populist radical right undermines international cooperation on peace, climate change, and development. One case in point is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strategic, albeit temporary, attempt to block Sweden's entry into NATO. Another is former US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw his country from the Paris Agreement on climate change. Both sought to uphold their ownership over security and growth at home, at the expense of international cooperation. Populist radical-right parties punish the poor in immigrant-sending countries with aid cutbacks, to upgrade their ownership over immigration issues. The rise of the populist radical right, therefore, is not just a matter of domestic concern, but an international problem.

16. JAVIER MILEI: A DIFFERENT POPULIST OUTSIDER

JAROSLAV BÍLEK*

The traditional problem of populist outsiders in Latin America is that while they often manage to win presidential elections, their practical political results are generally poor. They are frequently unable to engage constructively with democratic institutions and other political actors. Thus, the practical politics of populist outsiders in Latin America often lead, for example, to open conflict with Congress and, not infrequently, to the collapse of democracy. However, the current Argentine President, Javier Milei, is a unique case. Although he is a classic populist outsider and his party holds few seats in the legislature, he has managed to win support for his neoliberal economic reforms in both houses of the Argentine Congress during his first year in office.

POPULIST OUTSIDERS IN POWER

A key characteristic of political outsiders is that they typically lack extensive political experience. On the one hand, this is an advantage because they can more credibly challenge the existing political elites and established orders. This characteristic is therefore a definite advantage in an election campaign, but also a disadvantage once they come to power. They lack patience and experience with the functioning of democratic political institutions, such as parliaments or courts. At the same time, patient negotiation with the opposition and cooperation with political institutions do not align with their populist appeal for fundamental reforms of the existing system. Moreover, with few exceptions, populist outsiders in Latin America cannot even rely on their strong political party or already elected, influential regional politicians once they are elected to the presidency. In sum, then, it is almost inevitable that, over time, a sharp clash will arise between the populist outsider who has been elected president and existing democratic institutions (Levitsky

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& Loxton, 2013). Such a clash then leads to either the collapse of democracy or the ouster of the populist outsider in question.

JAVIER MILEI'S BACKGROUND

Javier Milei is a professional academic economist. He is not the author of any groundbreaking theories, but he boasts a successful career as a media commentator. As early as 2018, long before his candidacy for president or Congress, he had already established himself as a regular guest in the Argentine media, having made hundreds of appearances. In addition, he was a tantric sex teacher, cloned his dogs, and played in several rock bands. All these things, which did not fit the image of a boring academic in an ivory tower, increased his appeal to voters.

Javier Milei is a highly liberal economist by conviction, which significantly distinguishes him from other political competitors in Argentina. Furthermore, he does not come from a family that belongs to the country's political caste or bureaucratic elite. Moreover, Milei was bullied and abused as a child, which certainly did not make his path to the presidential palace any easier. In addition to being a staunch advocate of the free market, he gained fame primarily for his criticism of communists, Pope Francis, the left, and traditional politicians. From a political science perspective, he fits into the category of populist outsiders, who lack extensive political experience and seek attention through their charisma and by criticizing the existing elites. However, he is somehow different than other right-wing populists in Latin America. For instance, compared to Jair Bolsonaro, Milei did not endorse Argentina's authoritarian past. Moreover, his opposition to abortion is based on radical libertarian ideology rather than classic radical right-wing ideology (Kestler, 2022).

2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ARGENTINA

Javier Milei was the primary protest choice for many voters. Many Argentines did not vote for Milei in the presidential election in 2023 because they believed in his ideas or knew them in detail. They primarily wanted change and to hold the Peronist governments accountable for their long-term failure to address the country's poor economic situation and corruption. Voters also felt that Milei was authentic, even when they disagreed with his political views. Due to his professional background and the dire economic situation in Argentina, his programs were mainly economically oriented. He promised to revive the Argentine economy through deep cuts in government

spending and shock therapy, also symbolized by his most famous campaign stunt, which featured a chainsaw. His orientation towards liberal economic ideology and opposition to communism and socialism is also reflected in his cultural and social positions. He is a critic of neo-Marxism and feminism. During the campaign, he attracted attention by suggesting that selling one's vital organs should be legal.

MILEI IN POWER

Javier Milei hadn't even comfortably settled into the presidential chair in the Casa Rosada, Argentina's presidential palace, before he embarked on his promised battle with the Argentine political elite and what he sees as a greedy state. The vigorous ascent was marked not only by presidential decrees and fierce discourse, but also by the key "omnibus bill" he submitted to Congress. This document contained a staggering 664 articles. The essential weakness of Milei's efforts, however, was that, according to experts, he was the weakest president of Argentina since the country returned to democracy in 1983. Indeed, his political party, Freedom Advances, held only 15% of the seats in the lower house, 10% in the Senate, and no provincial governors. Adding this to the exceptionally aggressive rhetoric of Javier Milei, who routinely referred to his political opponents as parasites or thieves, it is not surprising that after 142 days, he had failed to push any of his reform proposals through Congress.

So, Milei decided to change tactics and abandon many of his proposals, negotiating support from right-wing and center parties in Congress. For example, he abandoned the planned privatization of selected state companies and the abolition of some state agencies. Moreover, he often acted quite subtly. For instance, although he did not abolish the Argentine Film Institute, he significantly cut its budget. He even went so far as to replace his campaign chief, Nicolás Posse, as head of his cabinet of ministers, with a long-standing member of the political cast, Guillermo Francos.

This change in strategy led to 232 of the original 664 proposals being approved by Congress. Given Javier Milei's starting position, this is an undeniable and, for many experts, unexpected success for his government. From the perspective of contemporary comparative political science, then, this example is significant because it demonstrates that recent assumptions are not absolute and that even a populist outsider can collaborate with a democratic congress in Latin America without attempting to dissolve it immediately.

17. RIGHTS FOR WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY UNDER GIORGIA MELONI

ALESSIA DONÀ

Wednesday, March 8 is International Women's Day. Its aim is to celebrate the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. Today, for the first time in the history of the Republic, a female Prime Minister leads Italy (Capoccia, 2022). Sadly, however, this does not represent a progressive turning point towards full gender equality in the country.

GOD, HOMELAND AND FAMILY

Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, or FdI) belongs to a family of radical-right political parties. It promotes the core radical-right features of nationalism, authoritarianism and conservatism. Such parties promote the idea that a nation is an ethnically homogeneous community, built around the "natural" family unit. FdI thus strongly associates the defense of the nation with the defense of the family. It defines "family" as the union between a man and a woman with children.

Radical-right parties are increasingly engaging with women's and gender issues. Their ideology might express a "neo-traditional" or a "modern-traditional" vision of gender roles, or a combination of both. In the case of FdI, the latter applies (de Lange and Mügge, 2015). The party manifesto promotes female participation in the labor market, and promises the recognition of equal pay for equal work. It champions the protection of maternity rights, improvements to childcare facilities, and the adoption of pronatalist policies. For example, the party's 2017 manifesto, boldly titled "The Thesis of Trieste," called for Italians to (re)discover, learn and transmit traditional values. These values, FdI claimed, would strengthen Italians' sense of national belonging. According to FdI, traditional values include the natural family as the basis of society, and the centrality of Christianity. Amid a declining Italian birthrate, FdI emphasizes the urgency of what it calls a "revolutionary welfare reform" that places the family at its heart.

As Meloni herself has claimed, "God, homeland and family are the cornerstone of the FdI agenda." No surprise, then, that FdI supports policies aimed at restoring traditional gender roles, defending the heterosexual family, and

fostering measures to prevent abortion. Moreover, the party positions itself against so-called gender ideology. It wants to delegitimize gender equality and undermine LGBT+ rights. According to their detractors, such rights herald "the destruction of the natural family and traditional gender roles."

FRATELLI D'ITALIA AND THE ITALIAN ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT

FdI, together with its center-right coalition partner Lega, radicalized its anti-gender positions after same-sex civil unions became legal in 2016. Leaders of both parties spoke at the 2019 World Congress of Families in Verona. The Congress is one of the main activities of the International Organization for the Family. IOF is a Christian fundamentalist movement with connections across many countries. Its main goal is the defense of the "natural family" against the recognition of LGBT+ rights. It also calls for more conservative school programs on gender/sex education. The Congress attracts influential anti-abortion, pro-family and religious-conservative actors from all over the world.

Advocacy groups influential on the Meloni government include the Pro-Life & Family Association, Defending Our Children and Generation Family. Giorgia Meloni supported these organizations' anti-abortion and anti-gender initiatives. She also opposed, within and outside parliament, any measures to safeguard sexual orientation and gender identity rights. In October 2019, Meloni concluded her speech with the words "My name is Giorgia. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian." In so doing, she expressed clearly the core aspects of FdI ideology: nationalism, religion and conservatism.

CATHOLIC EXTREMISM IN MELONI'S GOVERNMENT

The Meloni government includes a number of Catholic extremists. For example, she appointed the ultra-Catholic conservative Eugenia Roccella as Minister for Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities—a post previously known simply as Minister for Equal Opportunities. Roccella seeks to increase the Italian birthrate, and to give Italian women "the right not to have an abortion," as Meloni called it during her election campaign. Roccella is well known for her anti-abortion position, defending traditional family values promoted by Catholic associations. Among her first measures in the job was the decision to maintain the terms "father" and "mother" based on biological parenthood

instead of the gender-neutral "parent 1" and "parent 2," despite Italian courts ruling otherwise.[1]

Giuseppe Valditara is Meloni's Minister of Education and Merit. He defines himself as a neo-conservative whose aim is to fight what he claims is the damaging progressive cultural hegemony in society and the school curriculum. To counteract the education system's so-called "gender propaganda," Valditara believes in (heterosexual) parents' right to choose the kind of education given to their children, in accordance with their personal values. Recently, across many Italian regions and provinces, FdI, together with the Pro-Life & Family Association, proposed bills to defend exclusive parental rights in education. These organizations want to prohibit public schools from offering any classroom instruction "related to sexual orientation or gender identity."

WHAT'S COMING NEXT?

Right now, Italy's center-left opposition parties are weak, and fragmented. Under Meloni's radical-right government, gender equality policies are expected to backslide quickly, and deeply. It has already targeted the legitimacy and effectiveness of existing equality laws: 194/1978 on abortion rights and 76/2016 on same-sex civil union. Moreover, it has promoted measures supporting maternity and demographic growth to preserve the Italian nation and Italy's Christian identity. These could well be just the beginning of a broader conservative turn for Italy.

It's a scenario that recalls Margaret Atwood's dystopia The Handmaid's Tale. In the fictional theocratic Republic of Gilead, enslaved women exist only to serve, and to produce children for the ruling class. When a government is inspired by authoritarianism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism, female agency and individuality are constrained and subjugated, women's reproductive rights are suppressed, and gender diversity is denied.

1 https://www.lastampa.it/speciale/cronaca/diritti-lgbtq/2022/12/27/news/la_retromarcia_del_governo_meloni_restano_padre_e_madre_sulla_carta_didentita_dei_figli-12434045/

18. WHY WE MUST RESIST ILLIBERALISM'S ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

ANDREA PETŐ

Many of my colleagues working in higher education are confident that illiberalism will not impact on tenured academics, their academic freedom and the status of higher education in the global higher education landscape—or, rather, theirs is a sleepwalking approach to illiberalism. For their optimism seems to me unfounded. The threats to academic freedom in other countries offer insights into the script we can expect illiberalism to follow in the field of higher education (Irrera, 2023). These countries include European Union member Hungary, from where my university, the Central European University (CEU), was forced to escape to Austria (Pető, 2020). Illiberal states have introduced a number of policy measures in the field of higher education. These include direct control over university finances, deleting previously accredited study programs, and inventing new disciplines. All these were first tested in the Hungarian laboratory (Pető and Vasali, 2014).

For illiberals, higher education is not a space for critical reflection and the transfer of knowledge. Rather, it is a place to quickly and efficiently educate an adaptable workforce. It is a site to rule and dominate to achieve their ideological aims. Illiberals often couch this dismantling of the traditional university structure in the language of neoliberal managerialism, with words like "excellence," "impact" and "social outreach." This makes it difficult to fight against.

THE FOUR STRATEGIES OF ILLIBERALISM

Illiberalism uses four strategies when it comes to higher education (Ergas et al., 2022).

Breaking academic norms: The first is breaking the academic norms, or undermining established norms regarding academic freedom. Illiberal governments shut down gender studies and other academic programs they consider irrelevant in labor market terms. The Hungarian government used this argument in 2017 when they deleted a two-year MA in gender studies from the accredited study list. This was despite the fact that the MA program, taught in English at CEU, had fantastic placement data internationally. At the time of the ban, the MA program taught in Hungarian did not yet have any graduates.

Bending the rules (Pető, 2021): using existing laws (or policies) to undermine institutional structures. For instance, the government might use existing institutional regulations to diminish funding or close independent units. It might circumvent democratic election processes for university leadership, and parachute in new leaders who are close to the government. The domination of most of the Hungarian higher education systems happened in a period of just two weeks, during which the government appointed loyal commissars to university boards.

Extra-legal methods: use of personal and informal threats, rewriting regulations for ideological purposes, delegitimizing certain forms of inquiry and applying certain parameters—like manipulating the volume of student enrolments. All these may be generally relevant to higher education but their application may allow for administrative discretion over what is taught.

De-specification: involves reorganizing educational programs: integrating or dissolving programs through the redefinition of teaching content. This is also a form of "discourse capture" whereby, during the reorganization process, outside bodies and selected experts define and redefine teaching content in order to promote ideological aims. In the case of gender studies, this has involved rebranding educational programs and courses as "family studies." It is a process of de-specification which has been carried out in countries from Russia and Türkiye to Hungary.

LESSONS FOR ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES

Academics in Israel think that their academic ivory tower will resist the earthquakes caused by illiberal higher education policy. Their hopes are unfounded. They are based on the illusion that there have been illiberal tendencies in higher education before, such as its privatization. This has allowed parallel education structures to develop, in which the content is different from what is available in public higher education. It has also resulted in the appointment of commissars to leadership positions.

That, they argue, has not fundamentally changed the structural framework of higher education.

Now comes a new, shameless form of illiberalism. The coalition agreement of the new government sets a clear path for transforming the country, including its higher education, in an illiberal direction. It has introduced evaluation and scholarships not based on merit. It has connected the right to study with military service. All this has caused internal political conflict, and resulted in mass protests in Israel.

The takeover of public higher education institutions by the narrative of threat and hate will result in further securitization of higher education.

Syllabi will be controlled, classroom video surveillance systems installed. Campuses will advertise free digital applications for reporting teachers to the administration. Academic institutions and actors are global. The spread of these illiberal tendencies is therefore likely to happen faster than before (Pető, 2022). The examples from illiberal states like Hungary may be easy to implant in Israel. However, they will bring the danger of further global isolation, and a decrease in Israeli higher education academic exchanges.

CONTROL OF RESOURCES

Illiberalism in higher education operates outside of the previous consensual knowledge framework. It does not aim to produce facts nor to create a mirror image of reality. It is interested only in controlling educational resources, maintaining and possibly extending its own power structure. Ultimately, it wants to make sure nobody else has access to the resources.

In post-democratic states, new political programs have emerged from the re-articulation of the relationship between the state and citizens. This has led to the construction of new spaces. In these states, studying becomes a privilege rather than a human right. Citizens need to use these spaces to fight for the right to access resources. In this case, they must get access to higher education and determine the content of that education, as they did in 1968.

Illiberalism uses pseudo-scientific arguments to support its ideological aims. However, the desire for academic freedom, and humans' passion for learning, open up the possibility of intellectual resistance based on an alliance of students and faculty. We must do this even if it means establishing temporary alternative institutions, without official authorization, or moving into exile from one European Union member state to another, as has been the case for the Central European University.

19. THREE MYTHS ABOUT POPULISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ANGELOS CHRYSSOGELOS

Populism has become one of the most researched political phenomena of our times. There is a growing literature by scholars of international relations and foreign policy interested in questions around the international sources and impact of populism (Giurlando and Wajner, 2023). But just as in domestic politics, our understanding of populism in international relations remains warped by stereotypes (see introduction). Here are three international myths about populism that we need to dispel:

MYTH NO. 1 POPULISM BRINGS ABOUT A MAJOR CHANGE IN STATES' FOREIGN POLICIES

This myth reflects the belief that the foreign policy preferences of populists are fundamentally different from those of non-populists. Therefore, when populists enter power or influence government decisions, as junior coalition partners, for instance, we should expect major changes in a state's foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015). Examples of this are Donald Trump's assaults on NATO, and the EU lends credence to this, as does Brexit, and Turkey's de-alignment from the West under Erdoğan.

As much as numerous examples support this myth, there are just as many conflicting accounts. A recent comparative analysis of populist foreign policy in Europe, for example, found that populism rarely brings about complete foreign policy change (Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann, 2021). More often, populists accentuate foreign policy shifts that non-populist governments initiated. In other cases, changes in some areas go along with continuity in others. And in still other cases, populists pursue the same foreign policy as before.

Populism on its own says very little about foreign policy content (see introduction). Accusations that the "elites" betray the "interests of the people" may mean that these elites do not pursue longstanding national interests as strongly as populists think they should. Or, conversely, populism may challenge elements of a state's foreign policy and strategic consensus. This, they say, is because such elements are part of the elite conspiracy to keep the people subjugated. In either case, the main distinct feature of populism in foreign policy may not be the "what" of policies pursued. Instead, it is the

"how" —the specific way foreign policy is articulated and used to mobilize supporters around the people/elite division at home.

MYTH NO. 2 POPULISM IS INHERENTLY ANTI-INTERNATIONALIST

There is a widespread perception that populism is fundamentally a national sovereignty-centered project. Many associate populism with protectionist instincts and opposition to free trade, the undermining of and even departure from international institutions like the EU, and an antagonistic stance towards foreign foes (Ehrlich and Gahaga, 2023). In other words, with a sentiment of cultural or economic "closure" towards globalization (Kriesi et al., 2008). As a result, observers expect that populism will always undermine international cooperation, negotiations and interdependence. Again, however, many counter-examples belie this perspective.

Depending on the issue, their ideological profile, geopolitical pressures or the dynamics of domestic political competition, populists can just as easily engage with international processes. Thus, a populist leader like India's Narendra Modi can pursue active diplomacy in areas from climate action to UN governance (Plagemann and Destradi, 2019). Most populists, especially in the Global South, are strong proponents of free trade (Beattie, 2022).

This holds even in Europe. With the major exception of Brexit, most populists reconcile themselves with the EU and seek to influence it from the inside. And populism has an inherently transnational nature. This often makes such movements seek and establish cooperation with like-minded actors across borders (Wajner and Roniger, 2019).

The reality is that populism is fundamentally ambivalent towards sovereignty. Often, this depends on whether it is co-articulated with strong nationalism (Jenne, 2018). Populists may seek to enhance the international status of their country, which they consider unfairly marginalized. Or they may seek to reclaim sovereignty from international institutions deemed too intrusive and undemocratic (Chryssogelos, 2020b). Here, too, specific domestic and international contextual factors will determine which direction populism will go.

MYTH NO. 3 POPULISM IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Many observers view populism as fundamentally incompatible with an international order based on multilateralism, technical expertise, and economic

and cultural openness (Ikenberry, 2018). This liberal international order (LIO) is inherently linked with the political system of liberal democracy. Populism's domestic illiberalism is therefore seen as a further attack upon its foundations. In reality, historically, international liberalism has coexisted with and, in fact, relied upon domestic authoritarianism to reproduce itself. But many people retain and reproduce a highly idealized understanding of the LIO. They conflate three different forms of liberalism: political/institutional, economic and social/normative. Any challenge to one element of the LIO's liberalism seems instinctively incompatible with the LIO as a whole. But almost no populist movement in the world rejects all facets of the LIO concurrently. Trump is perhaps the only case to do so.

Most other populists adopt aspects of the LIO while framing their opposition to others as part of their struggle against international elites. Thus, left-wing populists oppose international neoliberalism but support efforts to combat climate change. Or right-wing populists like the PiS-led Polish government undermine human rights at home while posturing as defenders of Western values in Ukraine.

It is more accurate that populism politicizes the LIO and re-legitimizes it, albeit in a fragmented and contradictory way. In other words, populism is a feature, not a bug, of globalization (Chryssogelos, 2020a). Populist regimes, especially in the Global South, can generate mass support for integration in globalization in a way that an exhausted liberal democracy can no longer achieve. And in the West, the promises of liberalism have historically materialized only when juxtaposed or threatened by non-liberal alternatives (Jahn, 2018). In this sense, by enabling elite discourses about a new menacing internal and external peril, populism enters into a dialogue with liberalism which ultimately serves both sides.

20. POPULISM AND FOREIGN POLICY

FABRIZIO COTICCHIA

The causes of foreign policy decisions can be various. For a long time, research has examined the effects of external (such as alliances) or internal (such as regimes, leaders, or public opinion) factors. However, the role of parties in the creation and implementation of foreign policy (traditionally the main point of comparative politics) has only recently attracted the attention of International Relations.

Some studies (Haesebrouck, Mello, 2020), highlighted how party ideology—whether it be left- or right-wing—as well as their essential values (like multilateralism) have an impact on decisions about international politics. Ideology matters and plays a different role depending on the foreign policy issue, even though other factors (such as being in government) are equally important. For instance, development aid is typically more likely to be supported by left-wing parties. Lastly, the literature has also questioned how populist actors might influence decisions about defense and foreign policy.

According to some writers (Balfour et al., 2016; Mudde, 2004), it is challenging to categorize a "populist foreign policy" without taking into account the complex ideology (left- or right-wing) of populist parties. At the same time, the scholarly debate is defined by different interpretations of populism, not as an ideology but as a political style, discursive approach, or mobilization strategy. Different expectations about the possible influence of populism on global politics arise from each unique interpretation. Destradi, for instance, formulates some theories about foreign policy carried out by populists, who are more likely to diversify alliances and centralize decision-making through a personalized approach but less likely to compromise or make concessions in multilateral settings (Destradi, Plagemann, 2019).

POPULIST FOREIGN POLICY: CHANGE OR CONTINUITY?

Two important facets of populism's influence on foreign policy are highlighted by research. Despite the fact that these studies are relatively new and frequently have conflicting findings, there are some fundamental components to the discussion that dispel populism myths and stereotypes (Chryssogelos, in this volume).

The first factor relates to the kind of change that populism exposes. Overall, it can be claimed that the extent of *policy change* is typically modest, enhancing pre-existing characteristics. The change primarily impacts how it is carried out, (particularly in terms of mobilizing and increasing consensus), as well as the style and narrative of foreign politics (Cadier, Szulecki, 2020). The centralization and personalization of the decision-making process are two trends that seem to be prevalent in populist foreign politics. The Italian case, which is characterized by the frequent appearance of populists in government (take for example the yellow-green coalition), demonstrates that foreign politics change is generally limited and primarily symbolic (Coticchia, 2021). Regardless of the divergent ideologies at play, the impact of populism is conditioned by the political system, the existence of internal and external constraints, and the type of coalition (Verbeek, Zaslove, 2015). The degree of change also varies according to the foreign minister's background, the context (democratic or not), the degree of hegemony of the ruling populist party, and the relationship with the diplomatic corps and bureaucracy. The cases of Turkey and Poland are different from Austria and Italy, which exhibit stronger opposition to the influence of populists in power (Coticchia, Donelli, 2023; Lequesne, 2021).

The second research finding focuses on populists' relationship to the liberal order and the cultural and economic resistance to globalization. Sovereignism, or the desire to "reclaim control" (Chryssogelos, 2020a), is a characteristic of many populist parties; however, country-specific factors, the parties' role in the global arena, and other factors all influence the kind of interaction with global dynamics and actors. Free trade is supported by some populist figures from the "Global South." For instance, Modi's India has mobilized support at home and actively worked to improve its standing within multilateral governance frameworks. On the other hand, (as in Erdogan's Turkey) populism's anti-elitist wing typically wins out when a nation's international standing is seen as inadequately acknowledged, which challenges international elites and politicizes foreign policy to increase popular support (Destradi et al., 2021).

Depending on whether nationalism is a component of the populist party's ideology, the ambivalent relationship with sovereignty (and sovereignism) also varies. Finally, even though Trump is a prime example of a populist leader who challenges the liberal order, the assumption that populism and the global liberal order are incompatible ignores the existence of various forms of liberalism (political-institutional, economic, and social). No populist movement opposes every aspect of the liberal order at once. For example, left-wing populists may oppose international trade while supporting the fight against climate change, while right-wing populists in Europe may support

Western values but oppose international immigration norms (Chryssogelos, in this volume).

AN ONGOING DEBATE

Parties, including populist ones, influence foreign politics decisions and strategies. Since the literature is based on recent studies, more research—including comparative studies conducted in non-European contexts—appears to be required to generalize the findings.

Authors do, however, agree on the true impact of populism in international relations: aside from common characteristics such as the personalization and centralization of the decision-making process, the degree of change brought about by populists in power—which is *typically* limited—varies depending on a wide range of internal and external factors that must always be taken into account, from the political system to the party's ideology, and from the country's role to international constraints.

21. ANIMOSITY AND POLITICS: THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN THE AGE OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

SORINA SOARE AND MATTIA ZULIANELLO

In recent years political polarization has been the subject of numerous analyses (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018). As a matter of fact, the contemporary political scene appears more and more often as dominated by demonizing rhetoric, centered on a Manichaean argumentative structure based on the opposition "us against them" where compromise opportunities disappear, and it becomes increasingly difficult to express and discuss different political views.

WHAT IS AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Political polarization has traditionally referred to the widening ideological distance between voters and/or key political actors, such as parties, most commonly along the left-right spectrum (Sartori, 1976), but also across other dimensions of political conflict, including sociocultural values, attitudes toward the European Union, or positions on decentralization (Jolly et al., 2022). More recently, scholarly attention has turned toward the emotional and relational aspects of polarization, particularly the dimension of hostility that characterizes interactions between supporters of opposing political camps. In this context, affective polarization is defined by Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes (2012) as the tendency of individuals who identify with one political group to view opposing partisans negatively, mistrusting, disliking, or even despising them, while simultaneously holding positive feelings toward their own group (co-partisans).

The core argument is that such hostile attitudes stem from group-based affiliation processes that are deeply embedded in one's identity. According to both traditional social psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and more recent political science research (Mason, 2018), political identification leads individuals to perceive the world in binary terms of in-groups and out-groups. This division fosters positive affect toward one's own group and negative stereotypes and animosity toward the opposing side and its supporters (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

While individuals may identify with an almost unlimited range of personal and collective in-groups, political affiliation, such as identifying as "left-wing" or "right-wing," is only one among many sources of group identity.

Importantly, recent research suggests a shift in the dynamics of group-based polarization: whereas both positive feelings toward the in-group and negative feelings toward the out-group have traditionally played a role, negative out-group attitudes have become increasingly dominant (Druckman et al., 2021).

THE IMPACT OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Affective polarization is not so much about politics as it is about social interactions. It evokes the discomfort that people feel when they have to relate to others who have different political opinions (Broockman, Kalla, Westwood, 2023). Unlike ideological polarization, which focuses on divergences in political beliefs or policy preferences, affective polarization manifests in everyday life, shaping friendships, romantic relationships, workplace dynamics, and leisure activities. As such, the rise of affective polarization has significant implications, contributing to growing social fragmentation with far-reaching social, economic, and political consequences.

Affectively polarized people actually have a tendency to favor members of their own group over others, which leads to *bias* (prejudice). In particular, there is a tendency of the supporters of one party to group the world into two competing groups (Iyengar et al., 2019), which gives rise to favoritism toward the *in-group* and negative prejudices toward the *out-group*. People who are most influenced by affective polarization are reluctant to engage with members of the opposing group. For example, individuals with high levels of affective polarization frequently express discomfort with the idea of their children marrying someone with opposing political views, living in communities where their views are not dominant, or attending social gatherings with people who hold different political beliefs (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). While affective polarization was first extensively documented in the United States, recent studies have shown that similar patterns are now evident across several European democracies as well (Reiljan, 2020).

THE ROLE OF THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

The role of the populist radical right in fueling affective polarization has received a lot of scholarly attention. The general idea is that these parties tend to intensify in-group/out-group distinctions by promoting ideologies rooted in nativism, populism, and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007). While it is widely acknowledged that the populist radical right contributes to affective polarization, an ongoing debate concerns the symmetry of this phenomenon:

is the animosity between the populist radical right and other political actors mutual and equivalent, or is it primarily one-sided?

Some argue that mainstream political actors and their supporters exhibit high levels of hostility toward the populist radical right. Given the latter's electoral ascent and ideological challenges to liberal democratic norms, mainstream groups perceive the populist radical right as a threat to their status and core values. In response to the populist radical right's increasing prominence and success, mainstream parties and their followers may foster a sense of collective identity centered on exclusion, thereby intensifying affective aversion.

Empirical studies in the European context provide support for this asymmetry. Helbling and Jungkurz (2020) note that hostility is often more pronounced among supporters of mainstream parties. Reiljan (2020, p. 392), in his comparative analysis, concludes that "the conflict is highly asymmetrical, since supporters of other parties are much more hostile [toward the populist radical right] than the other way around." Similarly, Gidron, Adams, and Horne (2023, pp. 1007–1008) characterize the populist radical right as exhibiting "exceptionalism" in the affective landscape. While radical right supporters are disproportionately antagonistic toward other parties, they do not always mirror the intense hostility they receive.

Several empirical studies carried out in the European context provide support for what appears to be an asymmetrical level of animosity between followers of the populist radical right and those of other political forces (Helbling, Jungkurz, 2020). Reiljan (2020, p. 392), in his comparative analysis, argues that "the conflict is highly asymmetrical, since supporters of other parties are much more hostile [toward the populist radical right] than the other way around." Similarly, Gidron, Adams, and Horne (2023, pp. 1007–1008) characterize the populist radical right as exhibiting "exceptionalism" in the affective landscape. While radical right supporters are disproportionately antagonistic toward other parties, they do not always mirror the intense hostility they receive: "the radical right-wing parties are more strongly antipathetic than the political distances of the elites and coalition agreements imply. [...] The supporters of the radical right disdain the other parties in a disproportionate way, but they do not fully reciprocate the intense hostility that others turn towards them."

However, not all findings support the asymmetry thesis. Harteveld, Mendoza, and Rooduijn (2022, p. 722), in a detailed case study of the Netherlands, argue that affective polarization involving the populist radical right is relatively symmetrical. They find that these parties occupy a "unique position in the affective landscape [...] as [they] send and receive much higher levels of hostility compared to other parties and their supporters." Moreover, widespread societal rejection of these actors persists; approximately half of

Western European voters report that they would categorically refuse to support a populist radical right party (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021).

THE SPIRAL OF POLARIZATION

The entry of populist radical right parties into national parliaments has accelerated affective polarization through two reinforcing mechanisms. First, their electoral legitimacy emboldens supporters, who become more visible and assertive in expressing their views (Valentim, 2021). Second, this visibility provokes a counter-reaction from critics, further intensifying hostility and political segmentation (Bischof & Wagner, 2019).

Therefore, the literature agrees that it is critical to comprehend not only how the populist radical right contributes to affective polarization, but also what reactions it provokes. Responses to these parties often oscillate between substantive political engagement and outright moral condemnation. The latter, while emotionally satisfying for critics, may prove counterproductive by deepening polarization rather than bridging divides. Ultimately, this dynamic creates a self-reinforcing "spiral of polarization," wherein antagonism becomes both a cause and a consequence of political conflict.

22. EXPLORING TENSIONS: AFFECTIVE AND IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN GENERATION Z

PAOLO FRARE, MARCO MONTANARI AND MARTINA SGUAZZIN

In March 2023 we distributed a survey to 83 Political Science students at a medium-sized Italian university. As scholars in this field, we capitalized on our status as privileged observers. Motivated by a related study in the United States (McBeth, Belyea, Perry, 2021), our goal was to determine the degree of affective polarization among Generation Z youth.

This is a very relevant topic because affective polarization causes people's personal identities and political preferences to merge, which has an impact on people's social lives as well (Iyengar et al., 2019).

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Affective polarization affects friendships and romantic relationships in addition to political behavior and attitudes. Numerous studies carried out in the United States, a country where there are two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, clearly demonstrate this.

Research indicates that when two people have similar political views, they are more likely to be viewed favorably by others (Huber, Malhotra, 2017). Additionally, Iyengar and colleagues (Iyengar, Sood, Lelkes, 2012) demonstrate that over the past 50 years, the proportion of Americans who would be somewhat or very unhappy if their child married a supporter of the opposing party, has increased by roughly 35 percentage points, with Republican supporters being the most opposed. These findings are confirmed by the fact that the vast majority of married couples share the same party identification (Iyengar, Konitzer, Tedin, 2018).

In addition, the effects of affective polarization are also evident for friendly relationships. About 64% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans say they have "only few" or "no" close friends with the other political parties (Pew Research Center, 2017). Moreover, it decreases the likelihood of being friends with someone with different political views (Huber, Malhotra, 2017), and living in an area politically incongruent to one's personal positions makes it more difficult for people to make friends (Chopik, Motyl, 2016). Last, although it frequently does not prove to be the deciding factor in their decision,

many people say they would like to relocate to areas that are more politically compatible with their beliefs (Gimpel, Hui, 2015, Mummolo, Nall, 2017).

A PARTIAL TENDENCY TOWARD AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION, BUT A STRONG TENDENCY TOWARD IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

The literature, not only the American one, suggests that a key role in the dynamics of affective polarization is played by the radical populist right (Soare, Zulianello, in this volume). For this reason, to analyze the results of the survey we divided the respondents into three groups: students who declared themselves voters of the radical right-wing populist, those who placed themselves on the left on the right-left axis (self-placement between 0 and 3 on a scale ranging from 0—extreme left to 10—extreme right) and the others.

We specifically examined explicitly non-political elements in our analysis of affective polarization (e.g., a social moment like an aperitif, sharing a flat, the place where one lives). The findings do not appear to point to a propensity for affective polarization among Generation Z students (those born after 1997) in everyday settings: most students do not feel uncomfortable interacting with people who hold different political views in these settings. Some factors, though, appear to indicate the opposite.

Specifically, 65% of young left-wing voters say it is very or fairly important to live in an area where the majority of people hold similar political beliefs, compared to 30.8% of radical right-wing voters and 42.3% of voters from other parties. Furthermore, when asked, "How important would it be for you that your son/daughter shared your same political views?" affective polarization does not appear to have any bearing on the choice of a partner or acceptance of a hypothetical child's partner. Up to 55% of left-wing voters, 53.8% of radical right voters, and 46.2% of other party voters gave "very" or "fairly" answers.

According to our findings, the Generation Z students surveyed had a lower degree of affective polarization than those in the US study of the same name (McBeth, Belyea, Perry, 2021). Nevertheless, our research shows a clear propensity for ideological polarization: 95% of left-wing voters and 85% of populist radical right voters and 73% of all voters say they would never vote for one or more parties. Radical right parties emerge as particularly divisive since up to 60% of young voters say they would never vote for them. Radical right parties (FdI and Lega) are strongly disliked by 34.5% of left-wing voters. The populist radical right instead, specifically targets the Democratic Party

(PD), which has 36.4% of the vote, and the Five Star Movement (M5S), with 22.7%.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Prior to delving into the findings, it is crucial to acknowledge that, despite the fact that our analysis is predicated on a limited and non-representative sample, it facilitates a discussion with a comparable study carried out within the framework of an American university (McBeth, Belyea, Perry, 2021).

Young people are a reflection of the divisive effects of the convergence of populist ideology and social media (Hameleers, 2018), where users selectively expose themselves to content that supports their own opinions (Kubin, von Sikorski, 2021). Those who do not study political science may be less affected by this phenomenon because they would be exposed to less political content online if they had less interest in politics. This is our interpretation of the observed low affective polarization.

A further perspective of analysis looks at the growing centrality in public debate of issues such as sexual, ethnic and cultural identity. Minority claims can be perceived as a threat to populists, especially those of the radical right, who conceive the identity of the people as pure and homogeneous (Noury, Roland, 2020). This would also explain the different polarization compared to the United States, where the identity conflict has emerged earlier, and its greater degree among left-wing voters, historically associated with minority interests and civil rights.

23. THE STIGMATIZATION OF THE POLICY PROPOSALS OF THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

NIKLAS BOLIN

Right-wing populist parties fascinate and intrigue researchers and the general public, who often consider them fundamentally different from other parties. Their political agenda differs. They do not adhere to established political norms. And they are against the establishment. This distinctiveness has also manifested in the actions of other mainstream parties, who may isolate entirely the right-wing populist opposition, establishing so-called cordons sanitaires. Right-wing populist parties have thus long been considered outsiders, hindered by voter stigmatization (Harteveld, Kokkonen, Dahlberg, 2017). And while voters may sympathize with populist parties' policies, they consider it socially unacceptable to vote for them. Nowadays, however, many of those cordons sanitaires are being dismantled. As Mattia Zulianello points out (see introduction), the myth that populist parties are outsiders forever consigned to the political margins does not hold up well when faced with empirical reality. All over the world, populist forces have entered governments. Indeed, until not long ago, populist actors controlled three of the world's biggest democracies. And although Trump and Bolsonaro (unlike Modi) are no longer part of the executive, there remain plenty of examples of right-wing populists now sharing the spoils of office. But what happens to stigmatization when these parties are no longer outsiders? Given that party cues influence voters, increased acceptance from mainstream parties should lead to a decrease in stigmatization. Based on this expectation, we conducted two survey experiments (Bolin, Dahlberg, Blombäck, 2023). Our research examined whether Swedish voters' attitudes were influenced by knowing which specific party was presenting a particular policy proposal. We discovered that voters still tend to stigmatize the Sweden Democrats, despite the party having transitioned from the political margins to the mainstream.

THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS: NO LONGER OUTSIDERS

For a considerable period, the success of right-wing populists in Sweden stood out as an exceptional case (Rydgren, 2002). The Sweden Democrats first entered parliament as late as 2010. However, given the party's origins in overtly racist movements, at that time it faced complete isolation from

other political parties. For Sweden's mainstream parties, collaboration with the Sweden Democrats was unthinkable. The Sweden Democrats' isolation reached a peak with the 2014 December Agreement, which constructed a cartel explicitly excluding them from any influence (Aylott, Bolin, 2019). The 2015 refugee crisis, however, prompted many parties to tighten up their immigration policies. This policy shift weakened one of the main arguments for maintaining the cordon sanitaire around the Sweden Democrats. It also became increasingly evident that center-right parties might need the Sweden Democrats' support to form a coalition government. In early 2017, the leader of Sweden's largest center-right party announced it would be willing to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats. This marked a significant step toward acceptance of right-wing populists. Recent years have seen a gradual relaxation in the attitudes of Sweden's center-right parties. This growing acceptance also applies to voters; indeed, the Sweden Democrats have enjoyed improved ratings among center-right voters (Reiljan, Ryan, 2021). Swedish media, too, has helped normalize and legitimize the Sweden Democrats' political views and language (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow, 2020).

ONGOING STIGMATIZATION EFFECT

Given mainstream parties' increased acceptance of the Sweden Democrats, and the party's improved ratings among voters, you might expect the stigmatization to decrease. To find out whether this is the case, Dahlberg, Blombäck and I (Bolin, Dahlberg, Blombäck, 2023) conducted two independent survey experiments. The first, in 2011, we carried out shortly after the Sweden Democrats first entered parliament, when a cordon sanitaire was still in place throughout Sweden's political system. The second experiment, in 2018, coincided with the Sweden Democrats becoming the country's third-largest party. At that time, Sweden's center-right parties had begun to soften their stance towards the Sweden Democrats. We presented our respondents with a number of fictional political proposals. The 2011 experiment asked participants about a proposal to ban Muslim headscarves in schools. Some respondents were told that the proposal came from either a Sweden Democrat or a Liberal. Some received no information about the sender of the proposal. Alongside a control group receiving a proposal without a specified sender, the 2018 experiment participants were cued by the Sweden Democrats, the Social Democrats, or the Moderates. In this second experiment, our proposals were to ban street begging and to lower taxes on pensioners. The seven-year gap between these two experiments was significant. During this time, the Sweden Democrats transitioned from being a small outsider party to a substantial party more accepted by the political mainstream. Despite this,

we found that stigmatization persisted. Regardless of whether the proposals concerned headscarves, begging, or lowering taxes, respondents consistently gave a proposal a lower rating if it had been made by the Sweden Democrats.

WHY A LITTLE STIGMATIZATION MAY BE DESIRABLE

This persistent stigmatization suggests that the Sweden Democrats have not yet reached their full voter potential. Voters who sympathize with the party's policies still aren't voting for it. The outcomes of the 2022 election and the subsequent government formation allow us to investigate whether this is a temporary or longer-term problem for the party (Aylott, Bolin, 2023). The Sweden Democrats have an extensive cooperation agreement with the new center-right administration. Finally, they have one foot in and one foot out of government (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2015). At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that diminishing stigmatization may bring other challenges. When a party becomes part of the establishment, elite criticism appears less credible and, consequently, is less effective. It is likely that a certain degree of stigmatization is desirable for right-wing populist parties to maintain their unique selling points. From other parties' perspective, there is a delicate balancing act to sustain. Excluding right-wing populists outright risks portraying them as victims—and thus plays into their hands. A welcoming approach, however, risks normalizing discourse and policies that were once considered beyond the pale. Sweden, clearly, is stuck between a rock and a hard place.

24. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

PETRA GUASTI

The final part of the volume navigates the complex terrain of populism's impact and consequences. Four key themes emerge across the contributions, each clarifying a different facet of the intricate relationship between populism and governance: the impact of populism on liberal democracy, its influence on politics and policy-making, its role in political and social polarization, and its effects at the local and international levels.

The first set of contributions focuses on how populism—intrinsically in tension with liberal democracy—has affected democratic systems, its relationship with constitutional democracy, and how it can be addressed. Jasmin Sarah König and Tilko Swalve argue that constitutional changes introduced by populist governments can have ambiguous implications for democratic quality. Gianfranco Baldini and Hugo Canihac emphasize that to understand the illiberal populist challenge to liberal democracy, we must consider three dimensions: how illiberalism has emerged as a challenge *within* and *from* liberal societies; how populists implement illiberal practices; and how liberal institutions respond to these challenges. Lasse Thomassen illustrates this through an analysis of competing interpretations of the events of 6 January 2021 at the U.S. Capitol. He argues that how we interpret that day shapes our broader understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy today. Along these lines, Michael W. Bauer calls for more systematic attention to populist threats to the state and its institutions, warning that their long-term impact can be devastating.

Anna Longhini explores the interaction between bureaucracy, populism, and democracy in Italy, highlighting the perception of bureaucracy as an elitist force opposed to the people. She contrasts continental and Anglo-Saxon models of public accountability, with the former emphasizing general responsibility and the latter political accountability. Rebuilding trust in public institutions, Longhini argues, is essential to counter populism, which thrives on the perception of elite–people divides. Giuseppe Martinico challenges the populist claim that constitutional constraints are incompatible with democratic principles. Finally, Andrea Pető provides a detailed analysis of how illiberal leaders undermine academic freedom, offering practical suggestions for resistance.

On the impact of populism on public policy and administration, Mauricio I. Dussauge-Laguna points to López Obrador's Mexico as further, discouraging evidence of populism's negative consequences for governance. Motoshi Suzuki reinforces this argument, showing that populist radical right parties strategically work to undermine international development cooperation. Similarly, Juliana Chueri argues that these parties are transforming the welfare state by creating a moral divide between the "deserving" and "undeserving," extending benefits to working citizens while excluding immigrants and the long-term unemployed. Gender and reproductive rights are also central to the populist radical right agenda. Analyzing Italy under the Meloni government, Alessia Donà shows how it has launched a cultural war against "gender," politicizing sexuality, gender identity, and reproductive rights. In foreign policy, Fabrizio Coticchia finds that populist approaches are often marked by centralized and personalized decision-making, with change shaped by a range of contextual factors. On civil–military relations, Hakkı Taş demonstrates that countries governed by more populist leaders are less likely to have military veto players. On the contrary, populist centralization promotes greater executive control over the armed forces and shapes civil oversight.

Populism's effects on representative institutions are particularly evident in parliamentary practice. David Jágr's analysis of the Czech Republic highlights how populist actors, both in government and in opposition, disrupt the functioning of the legislature. Through rhetorical delegitimation, performative obstruction, and the strategic use of parliamentary tools, they contribute to a shift from "working parliaments" to "talking parliaments." This transformation undermines democratic deliberation and reinforces a vision of politics rooted in personalization, antagonism, and spectacle. The Czech case illustrates how populism can reshape institutional norms from within, without dismantling them outright.

Turning to party dynamics, Jan Philipp Thomeczek argues that European left-wing populist parties in Spain, Greece, and Germany become more moderate once in government. However, Anca Turcu shows that populists in power in Hungary and Turkey maintain their outsider appeal despite mainstreaming, ensuring their continued success.

As for the populist radical right, Sorina Soare and Mattia Zulianello examine its relationship with affective polarization, showing how these phenomena reinforce one another. Many voters perceive right-wing populists as fundamentally distinct from other parties. Focusing on the Sweden Democrats, Niklas Bolin explores the lasting effects of stigmatization and how it shapes these actors' political strategies. Paolo Frare, Marco Montanari, and Martina Sguazzin study affective and ideological polarization among Generation Z,

finding low levels of affective polarization but significant ideological polarization among political science students.

Finally, populism also affects governance at both subnational and international levels. In their two contributions, Eliška Drápalová and Elisa Bellè argue that neglecting the subnational level limits our understanding of populists' real-world effects. Local contexts, center–periphery divides, and the ideological use of localism all warrant closer attention to capture the developments taking place beneath the surface of national politics. On the international stage, Angelos Chryssogelos challenges the stereotypical view of populism as a uniform threat to the liberal international order, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of how populist governments navigate foreign policy. Jaroslav Bílek reinforces this point through his study of Argentine president Javier Milei. While Milei fits the mold of a populist outsider, his ability to negotiate with Congress and secure support for parts of his reform package defies expectations. Rather than dismantling democratic institutions, Milei's case suggests that even radical outsiders may adapt to institutional constraints—though not without risk to democratic norms.

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