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Contested Issues Surrounding Populism in Public and Academic Debates

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ABSTRACT

Populism seems to be a well-established notion in public and academic debate alike. Nevertheless, several issues surrounding populism are still contested and thus merit closer attention. These contested issues encompass the extent to which populism is novel and ubiquitous; the scope of the phenomenon; the merits of the various definitions of populism; its political colour(s); the potential danger it poses to democracy; its appropriateness to govern; as well as populism's impact beyond national borders.

KEYWORDS

populism; public debate; populist radical right; populist left; populism and democracy; populism and government; populism and foreign policy

Much has been said and written about populism, especially since Cas Mudde published what proved to be a foundational article entitled the “The Populist Zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004). Undoubtedly, populism is currently one of the most popular topics in academia and public debate, in coffee houses and on online posts, possibly only rivalled by global warming, #metoo and sports. A quick search in Google Scholar for English language publications using ‘populism’ or ‘populist’ in their titles, suggests that academic interest in populism has proliferated since 2012 (see [Figure 1](#)).

On the one hand, there is reason to rejoice in such a lively discussion: to the extent that populism is linked to the public's interest in politics, it testifies to the vibrancy of open societies. On the other hand, it runs the risk of resembling the Tower of Babel: the various ideas of what is meant by the very term populism has produced a situation in which everyone is using the term, with different people employing different interpretations. The academic and public debate is thus ridden with contestation over various issues regarding populism. This may run the risk of producing misunderstandings. In this article, we seek to map out part of the confusion and identify such issues of contestation in order to contribute to a coherent research agenda and a more fruitful public debate. We address nine such issues.

Contested Issue 1: Is populism new?

Populism is sometimes presented as a new phenomenon, particularly in the public debate in which opinion leaders have become involved since the success of populists in Western Europe and, particularly, the rise of Donald Trump in the United States. Indeed, while recognising that academics have addressed populism for some time,

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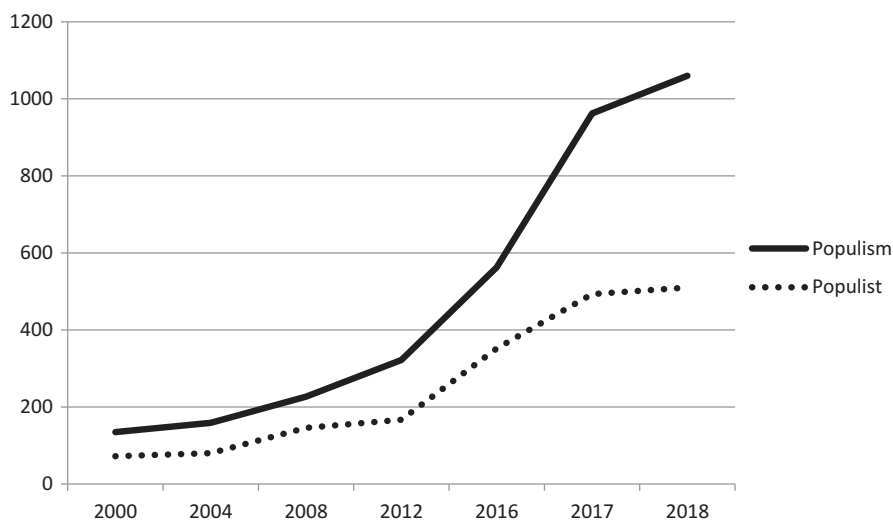


Figure 1. Scholarly publications with populism or populist in title (2000-18). Numbers are cumulative.

Source: Google Scholar (authors' own calculations)

The Guardian questions why populism has become “sexy” particularly over the past years (Rooduijn 2018). To be sure, populism has now reached new heights. In the European context, populist parties are now found across the left/right political spectrum. Moreover, quite a few governments are founded on populist parties: Austria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Norway boast such governments. In addition, it is suggested that the wave has produced a new type of leadership: depending on how one views populism, one could argue that populist leaders rule Bolivia, Ecuador, Hungary, the Philippines, and the United States.

The most radical suggestion of the newness, found in both academia and the public debate, is the suggestion that populism heralds the end of liberal democracy as we have known it for most of the post-Second World War period, and ushers in a new type of political system, sometimes called illiberal democracy, which rejects liberal elements such as checks and balances and minority rights. This is the case in public as well as academic debate: witness the manifesto of 30 intellectuals against populism (*Libération* 2019) and Yascha Mounk’s *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk 2018).

Often, the economic and financial crisis that started in 2007 is portrayed as a catalyst: from this perspective, populism reflects the resistance of those who stood on the losing side of globalisation and became aware of this when the financial crunch came. The crisis thus fed into feelings of insecurity that had been developing since 9/11 when the world, as the West saw it, collapsed and Islam-inspired terrorism made many people afraid of plural societies.

However, if we look over time, we find that there has been a gradual, but significant increase in support for populist parties for some time now, well preceding the financial crisis and even 9/11. If we look at aggregate numbers, populist radical right parties were

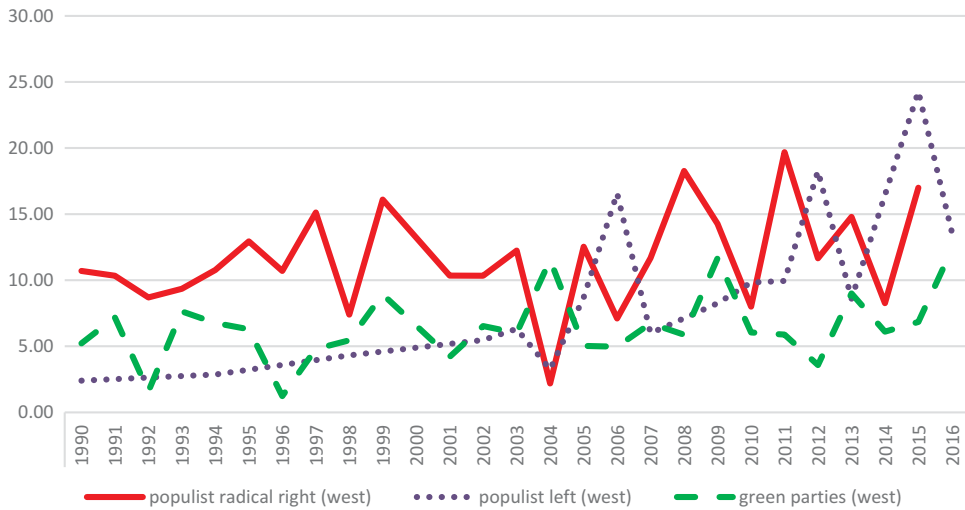


Figure 2. Average vote (%) for the populist radical right, populist radical left, and Green parties in Western Europe in national elections between 1990 and 2016.

Source: Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018b, 5 (reprinted with permission).

already gaining 10 percent of the vote in the 1990s (see Figure 2). On average, by then, they were already doing better than Green political parties. To be sure, there were fewer populist left parties at that time. However, to imply that populist parties are a new phenomenon is empirically not correct. It is important to note that if we tally up left and right populism, we see more populists than ever. In some extreme cases, such as in Italy, populist parties can compose up to 50 percent of the vote (in both the 2013 and 2018 elections). Nevertheless, one should be careful not to speak of an explosion of populism.

Indeed, populism far precedes the post-Cold War era. To the extent that it is philosophically related to the ideals of the Enlightenment centring around radical forms of direct democracy (going back to Rousseau and possibly Calvin), populism has long been present in movements and parties that have embraced such forms of direct democracy. It was present in some of the ideas of the French Revolution; it was present in the radical council ideas at the turn of the 19th century and again in the 1968 movement; it was present in the push for decentralisation and referenda in many countries after World War II. In as much as it is in some ways philosophically related to an almost pre-modern longing for an Arcadian society in which the people are a self-sufficient community, the American Populist Party (19th century), the French Poujadists (1950s), Argentine Peronism (1945-55 and 1973-74), the Dutch Farmers' Party (1960s/1970s) and possibly Nordic anti-tax parties (1970s) belong to that tradition.

Contested Issue 2: Is populism ubiquitous?

Populism seems to be dramatically on the rise, indeed ubiquitous. However, this is not the case and often emanates from contested definitions of populism (see below). This leads to a paradoxical finding: whereas populism is less present than is often claimed, it is also more

present than is often claimed (Hawkins *et al.* 2017). Let's ponder the first claim: many actors or events are considered to be populist while in essence they are not populist at all. Three examples serve to illustrate: firstly, some claim that, in 2016, US presidential candidate Donald Trump, Jr. was campaigning as a populist. For example, Kirk Hawkins and Levente Littvay (forthcoming) argue that Trump is "half populist", scoring higher on anti-elitism than on people-centrism; secondly, dramatic events such as Brexit are often considered to be evidence of populism; and thirdly, mainstream politicians are often described as populists (Iakhnis *et al.* 2018). For instance, the media often portray Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte as populist since he uses 'folksy' expressions such as "sod off" when speaking about badly behaving youth (Korteweg 2018).

However, in these examples use of the term populism obfuscates the issues and hinders the development of a precise meaning of the term. In essence, Trump's populism is a borderline case (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018): analysis shows that Trump was less populist at the beginning of his campaign. He became more populist later when he made explicit claims to represent the people versus the corrupt elite. The latter is the litmus test if we are to claim that Trump is a populist (see below). Regarding Brexit, although many actors such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and arguments used to support Brexit may be considered populist, it would be a stretch of the imagination to call the entire Brexit movement populist. Indeed, Brexit itself is part of a broader debate over issues that are not populist in and of themselves, ranging from immigration and economic sovereignty to a surge in English nationalism after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum (Colantone and Stanig 2018; Dennison and Geddes 2018). Last, if mainstream politicians such as Rutte tap into popular sentiments, this is not enough to qualify them as populist.

This brings us to an important difference between being a populist and being close to the people. In this respect, Luke March has made a very useful distinction between populism and *demoticism*. The latter refers to being close to the people; it denotes using a common language and suggests the connotation of being part of the people. As March writes,

What passes for 'mainstream' or 'thin' populism is not really populism at all but demoticism (closeness to ordinary people), which is necessary, but by no means sufficient for populism. Therefore, analysts should not call parties 'rather populist' just because their rhetoric is demotic (March 2017, 284).

Demoticism is different from populism insofar as it does not employ the antagonism between the people and the elite: being part of the people is not one and the same thing as being anti-elitist.

Although many actors who are often seen as populist thus are, in fact, not populist, we have to be equally careful not to deny the presence of populism when it is actually present. Because of our focus on political parties and individual politicians, we overlook the possibility that populism is present elsewhere in society, particularly in civil society organisations and more broadly amongst the population in their political attitudes. Examples from civil society are the Occupy Movement across the globe (Gould-Wartofsky 2015), which was preceded by the *Indignados* movement in Spain (Castañeda 2012).

Underlying the rise of populists as distinct political actors is often a cultural undercurrent that offers fecund soil for political populism to prosper. The intellectuals' *Nuova Destra*

(New Right) movement in Italy is a case in point (Capra Casadio 2014). Similarly, the US Tea Party, a grass roots organisation that operates within the Republican Party, is based on an intellectual movement that combines traditional ideas about sovereign individuals uniting against a strong (federal) state with conservative religious ideas (Skocpol and Williamson 2016). On the left, populism has intellectual roots in the works of Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 2018), for example, and the group of intellectuals around Pablo Iglesias (Kioupkiolis 2016), laying the foundation for *Podemos* (We Can) in Spain.

Indeed, populism is present more broadly among the population than is often appreciated. This is borne out by new developments in measuring populism in Europe as well as in Latin America (see Akkerman *et al.* 2014; 2017; Hawkins *et al.* 2018). Political scientists have been measuring populist attitudes in a variety of contexts for some time with remarkable results: first, populist attitudes are found not only in countries where there are populist parties, but also in countries without populist parties (Hawkins *et al.* 2018). Second, citizens who are more populist in attitude are more likely to vote for a populist party but may also vote for non-populist parties (Akkerman *et al.* 2014). Populism may thus be more dormant and bigger than is often claimed, reinforcing the claim in the previous section that populism may not be new, but rather a more permanent feature of parts of the electorate. The question that should be addressed is: how and under what conditions is it mobilised?

Contested Issue 3: Can we agree on what populism means?

Different conceptualisations of populism abound in the scientific and popular literature. Often these differences are presented as a debate between irreconcilable camps. We maintain, however, that this need not be the case. Rather, different conceptualisations may lead to different, yet relevant and sometimes related, research questions (cf. Miller-Idriss 2019).

1) Populism is sometimes equated with politicians who promise (and give) the people what they want. This would identify populism with *political opportunism*. Actually, this is the Cambridge Dictionary definition. However, this categorisation makes it very hard to distinguish populism as a separate phenomenon: most politicians take an opportunity when they see one and are prepared to cater to voters' preferences. Few, however, would be so opportunistic as to risk the political damage of being seen as inconsistent and unreliable. Every politician is interested in power, but will seek it on the basis of a fairly consistent and stable political platform, which puts limits on the ease with which they can alter their position.

2) Populism is sometimes defined as a *political strategy* (Weyland 2017). This remains close to the opportunist notion of populism, but clearly differs from it in that the strategic objective (gaining power) is achieved via a consistent hammering on specific issues such as security, protectionism, and/or strong leadership. Nevertheless, the tendency of politicians to emphasize such themes is hardly new. It thus cannot explain the current (and past) popularity of populist movements and parties. However, it does help us understand the behaviour displayed by various mainstream parties that compete with populist parties: they often emulate both the rhetoric (although playing it down somewhat) and the issues of populists, and thus are often 'accused' of being populists themselves, particularly by anti-populists (see for example, Van Klingeren *et al.* 2017).

In the Dutch parliamentary election campaign of 2017, Liberal Party leader (and Prime Minister) Mark Rutte took it so far as to declare that his party, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD) represents “good populism” (NOS 2017). The concept of populist strategy may thus be a relevant concept in studying populism.

3) Third, it is sometimes claimed that populism represents the antagonism towards the elite felt by the broader public. Most would maintain that populists are *anti-incumbent*, *anti-establishment*, and/or *anti-mainstream*. Indeed, reduced electoral turnout, lack of trust in government or even feelings of resentment are often invoked to describe the playing field of populists (cf. Sikk 2009; Barr 2009). Yet, only seldom is populism identified with anti-system movements or parties, such as the communist or Gaullist parties of the past, even though Italy's Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) and Spain's Podemos have been described as anti-system (cf. Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018).

Nevertheless, if we embrace this conceptualisation we run the risk of identifying populism exclusively with sentiments felt by the people towards their rulers. In doing so, we would not be able to understand what such citizens seek from a political system that they are dissatisfied with, but do not wish to overthrow altogether. This requires a notion of populism that encompasses leaders as well as followers and is capable of proposing a political programme beyond the total rejection of the political system.

4) The notion of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (cf. Mudde 2017) is capable of meeting the shortcomings of the previous conceptualisations. This notion is ideological because it claims that all populists present politics as a conflict between those they conceive to be the pure people and the corrupt, or evil elite. In this sense, it sometimes harks back to Rousseau-like notions of the general will (Mudde 2017, 33-34) or invokes a different, pre-modernist notion of an Arcadian society. However, the ideology is thin-centred because the juxtaposition of people and elite does not in itself produce a comprehensive outlook on society. Hence, populists borrow elements from existing ideologies (socialism, liberalism, conservatism, Christian democracy, environmentalism) and marry them consistently with their baseline: the people-elite juxtaposition. This focus on ideology has two analytical advantages: first, ideology is a property that applies both to leaders, their movements and parties, as well as to their followers. It thus encompasses much of the other populist conceptualisations; second, it allows for a comparative study without having to give in to the idea that every populist movement is idiosyncratic because of unique temporal and geographic circumstances (cf. Halikiopoulou 2019, who combines populism's thin ideology with nationalism).

All in all, we can roughly agree on what populism means: populism is something very specific, primarily a set of ideas (Mudde 2017). We need not be troubled by most other conceptualisations: starting with the notion of thin-centred ideology, we can ignore opportunism, we can allow for strategy (mainly as a response of populist opponents), we can study voters, politicians, movements as well as parties. Importantly, embracing the thin-centred ideology notion, we have a proper tool for comparative analysis across time and space (cf. Mudde 2017, 38).

Contested Issue 4: Is populism right-wing?

In the past, research into populism, especially its European variety, focused on radical right-wing populism. It remains unclear why this is the case: it could be the longstanding fear of neo-fascism; perhaps the presumed parallel between democracy's weakness in the interbellum and illiberal democracy today; perhaps the appearance of and suggested need for strong leaders. This emphasis seems odd, given that populism in the United States started rather as an agricultural movement, and that early Latin American populism (e.g., Peronism) seemed to be in a class of its own. Indeed, early comparative academic work on populism (Ionescu and Gellner 1968; Canovan 1981) presented a broad notion of the concept.

An emphasis on radical right populism had two disadvantages: first, it ignored the possibility of other manifestations of populism such as left-wing populism; second, it created an analytical straitjacket into which 'deviant cases' had to fit, for instance, Dutch Pim Fortuyn's List (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, LPF) was classified as right-wing because of its migration policies, but effectively displayed a mixture of liberal and social-democratic ideologies.

The concept of a thin-centred ideology serves to tackle this problem and it does so in two ways. First, all populist parties share a notion of the pure people versus the corrupt elite. However, these notions may, and do, vary across parties: right-wing populists often have a nativist perspective on the pure people and decry the ruling class as the enemy; left-wing populists often define the pure people in terms of class or the underprivileged, juxtaposing them to financial and business elites (See Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Note that this may transcend the classical class divide, as specific entrepreneurs, and specific ethnic groups (e.g., in Bolivia or Ecuador) may be victims of global capital as well.

Second, all populist parties have to borrow from other ideologies in order to be able to present a comprehensive perspective on society and politics. Indeed, some borrow from liberalism [e.g., the Dutch LPF or Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI, Go Italy); Alberto Fujimori in Peru; John Howard in Australia]; other may borrow from socialism [e.g., Podemos in Spain or Syriza (*Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás*, Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece; Hugo Chavez in Venezuela; Rafael Correa in Ecuador]. Yet, others may take their ideological cues from regionalism [like the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) in Italy in the 1980s or *Vlaams Blok* (VB, Flemish Block) in Belgium in the 1990s] or nationalism [*Fidesz* (*Magyar Polgári Szövetség*, Hungarian Civic Alliance) in Hungary]. Populism can be found on the left and the right of the political spectrum.

Contested Issue 5: Is populism a danger?

Most qualifications of populism in the media have a negative ring to them. This can be cast in disapproving or more pejorative wordings. In a disapproving formula this is done by portraying populists as 'irresponsible' or 'unfit to govern'. They are not expected to be prepared to practice the art of the possible and accept compromises, and are thus declared unfit to govern. At best, populists are seen as giving voice to unspoken criticism, but in the end they threaten the daily art of deal-making, partly also because they polarise public debate with their divisive debating style. In more pejorative language, populists are depicted as xenophobic, racist or anti-democratic (e.g., Tisdall 2018). Sometimes populists are likened to actors of the fascist and Nazi regimes of the 1920s to 1940s. In this context, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's suggestion that

'good populism' does exist (meaning mainstream parties that listen to the people) is a rare exception in the public debate.

In academia, populism is generally treated with proper academic distance, but here also it is sometimes seen as a threat to stable democracy, especially because of the polarising effect of populist views (Galston 2018; Mounk 2018). Populism's success is seen as contributing to the fragmentation of political systems. And even in academia, the alleged current rise of illiberal democracy, the continued lack of trust in politicians, as well as the rise of strong leaders have prompted comparisons to the interbellum when the competition from totalitarian ideologies and polarisation, combined with fragmentation, spelled the collapse of a number of democracies in Europe and Latin America (cf. Berman 2016).

Undoubtedly, from the point of view of political theory, one can and should question the position taken by any political movement or party, hence also of populists. And, certainly, objections can be raised with regard to specific populist positions. However, the preoccupation with populism should not exempt us from considering the possible positive effects it may have (had) on democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). There are at least three:

- (1) Populist parties can shake up party systems where government has long been dominated by the same (combination of) parties. In democratic theory, alternation is an important feature of democratic systems. Robert Dahl (1971) even defined alternation (public contestation) as one of the defining characteristics of "real life democracies" or polyarchies. In several democracies, this quality had been weakened by the late 1980s: for example, until 1992, Social Democrats dominated Swedish governments; until 1994, Italian governments were dominated by the Christian Democratic Party (DC), which regularly changed one junior coalition partner after another; Christian Democrats also dominated coalitions in the Netherlands until 1994. In other countries, such as Austria and Germany, some major parties alternated in government but kept outsiders out. Populist parties ended this real or perceived dominance of established parties and added options for alternation. One could even go so far as to argue that in Italy the populist parties made possible the formation of a legitimate centre-right government that would not automatically be discarded as marginal or neo-fascist.
- (2) Populism can give voice to those who are not represented (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017): the presumably reduced salience of the classical, clear-cut left/right and religious and social cleavages has left quite a portion of the electorate without a natural harbour. Also, regional integration and economic and financial globalisation have bereft voters – especially those on the losing side – of the idea that national governments are in control and will act as a 'safety net of last resort'. This has contributed to a feeling among such voters of not being represented by the system and its major parties, reinforced by the mainstream parties that still pretend to be in control of society and its economy. Populists offer a harbour to such wandering citizens because they provide a clear explanation (the national elite! The global financial elite! The eurocrats!) and promise a return to control by hammering on national sovereignty and instruments of

direct democracy. The example *par excellence* here is the Italian Five Star Movement. By presenting a critical Italian voice in Brussels and elements of a deliberative democracy at home, M5S has offered rescue to those who feel abandoned by the traditional Italian left and who feared Berlusconi's liberal populism.

- (3) Populism can improve political responsiveness (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The rising popularity of populist parties in the polls may cause other parties and governments to move closer to populist positions. Populists' continuous pounding on the perceived threat of migration has caused most governments to develop stricter migration policies, at both the national and European level (Swedish migration policies surrounding the 2018 elections are a case in point). The rise of anti-EU sentiments, often voiced by populists, has coincided with a tougher position of many EU member states on EU integration; this has been the case particularly in the Netherlands since the 2005 referendum on the European constitutional treaty (cf. Odmalm and Hepburn 2017). Mainstream parties thus have become more responsive to distinct parts of the electorate. Interestingly, in most countries this increased responsiveness has seldom led to a weakening of populist parties.

Importantly, these effects of populism are achieved in different ways in different systems: populist parties are more likely to profit from electoral systems that approach pure proportional representation. In majoritarian systems, alternation seems to be institutionalised in the system itself. Populists thus have more difficulty in giving voice to the unrepresented. Sometimes they have to wait for opportunities such as the European Parliament elections, which provide proportional representation (which explains the relative successes of UKIP in the UK and FN in France), or moments of direct democracy such as referenda (e.g., the Brexit referendum in 2016). Sometimes they have to operate from within the system: the Tea Party exploiting the Republican Party as a vehicle for its ideas; or, to the extent that they can be considered populists, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders deciding to seek power through established parties rather than as independent candidates – the latter a guarantee for failure in the American majoritarian system.

Contested Issue 6: Are populists unfit to govern?

In the media, populists are often presented as unfit to participate in government. In the 2000s, *The Economist* has run several covers suggesting Italian populists are incapable of governing; on the occasion of the 2013 Italian elections, the cover depicted Berlusconi and Grillo as two clowns (*The Economist* 2013). Although they may have positive qualities in shaking up the system and giving voice to previously neglected citizens, many commentators would not recommend populists in government because they thrive on polarisation and fear losing electoral support if they compromise on issues. Indeed, some commentators would stretch that argument and claim that one should incorporate populists in government because it would expose their lack of responsibility and their proclivity to conflict, or turn them into mainstream parties – all arguments that presumably would lead to a weakening of support for populist parties. Populist governments are thus expected to be short-lived. Yet, looking at the

Table 1. Populists in government in Europe

Country	Type of populist party			
	Radical right	Liberal	Left wing	Maverick*
Austria	FPÖ, <i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i> , Freedom Party (2000-03; 2003-07; 2017-present) BZÖ, <i>Bündnis Zukunft Österreich</i> , Alliance for the Future of Austria (2005-07)			
Denmark	DF, <i>Danske Folkeparti</i> (2000-11)**			
Greece			SYRIZA (2015-present)	
Finland	True Finns, <i>Perussuomalaiset</i> , PS (2015-17)			
Hungary	Fidesz (1998-2002; 2010-present)			
Italy	Lega Nord (2001-06; 2008-11; 2018-present)	FI/PdL, <i>Popolo della Libertà</i> , People of Freedom (1994; 2001-06; 2008-11)		Lega Nord (1994) M5S (2018-present)
Netherlands	PVV, <i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> , Freedom Party (2010-12)**	LPF (2002)		
Norway	Progress Party <i>Fremskrittspartiet</i> , FrP (2013-present)			
Slovakia			SMER, <i>Sociálna Demokracia</i> , Social Democracy (2006-10)	
Switzerland	SVP, <i>Schweizerische Volkspartei</i> , Swiss People's Party (1929-2007; 2008-present)			

*Maverick parties combine elements of the other types. In 1994, the *Lega Nord*, as of 2018 simply *Lega* (League), was more regionalist than radical right; M5S presents such a diverse combination of ideological elements that it is hard to classify.

** Danish governments and Dutch Rutte I are minority coalitions supported by populist parties in formal agreements.

empirical record, we find many examples of governments in which populist parties of all sorts have participated (either formally or in an explicitly supportive role) (see Table 1).

Several observations are in order: first, populist parties are regular participants in government. The Swiss case is peculiar because of the consociational arrangement of its Federal Council. Second, very few governments with populists are really short-lived. While this was clearly the case for the first Berlusconi government in Italy (1994) and the first Balkenende government in the Netherlands (2002) and possibly also for the first Rutte government in the Netherlands (2010-12), these constitute a minority of all governments supported by populists. Third, populists do not seem to be punished by participating in government, neither by their coalition partners nor by the electorate. The only exception being the Netherlands: both the LPF's and PVV's participation in two short-lived governments was partly motivated by the intention of mainstream parties (Christian Democrats and Liberals) to try to fight populists by either turning them into mainstream parties or showing their irresponsibility. Having been blamed for the governments' collapse, both LPF and PVV fell back in the elections held immediately afterward.

Contested Issue 7: Do populists oppose EU integration?

Much has been said about populists and their critical relation to EU integration. Indeed, many populists are sceptical of EU integration. Thus, radical right populists, such as the French National Front (*Front National*, FN, now *Rassemblement National*, RN) and the Dutch Freedom Party campaign against EU integration, linking it with immigration and a loss of national sovereignty. In a similar vein, UKIP was, of course, a prime motor and backer of Brexit.

However, caution is needed. Early in the 1990s, many populist parties were less critical of EU integration. Thus the Northern League in Italy was pro-Europe, viewing the EU as an alternative to the corrupt national politicians and an instrument in promoting regional autonomy (Zaslave 2011). Even parties such as the French FN were not overtly opposed to EU integration. With the rise of left-wing parties such as Podemos, the German Left Party (*Die Linke*) and the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), it has become increasingly clear that opposition to the EU is not an essential feature of populism. For one, a party such as Podemos is critical of the EU but does not advocate withdrawing from the EU. Also Dutch and German left-wing populist parties are often critical of EU integration on economic grounds, but may even be supportive of increasing EU powers when it comes to questions of immigration. Other parties, such as the Five Star Movement in Italy can often be ambiguous. Indeed, the founder of the 5SM, Beppe Grillo, is more critical of the EU than the current party leader Luigi Di Maio. At the same time, the current Italian coalition consisting of the Lega and the Five Star Movement has gone to great lengths to emphasize that the coalition will not seek to hold a referendum on the euro nor will it support withdrawing from the EU.

Contested Issue 8: Is populism a temporary phenomenon?

In the public debate, the implicit expectation is that the rise of populism is circumstantial, that mainstream parties are capable of picking up the lost electorate, that the electorate will understand the dangers populism poses to society and that populists, once invited to govern, will either fail or transform into a mainstream party. However, academic studies suggest that populism is not a temporary phenomenon as it is embedded in larger structural, thus more permanent, transformations: socio-economic changes, changing party systems, and changing notions of authority (Zaslave 2008; Kriesi *et al.*, 2012; Mudde 2018).

The variety of populisms that exist must be seen in the context of the structural changes emanating from the changing nature of our economies, the changing nature of employment, and also the advent of developments such as international migration (cf. Kriesi *et al.* 2012). As noted above, populism is a thin-centred ideology. Thus, there is not a single populist response to these events. Rather populist movements that combine populism with an attached ideology have become important actors representing those who feel the brunt of unemployment, economic restructuring, and/or the changing fabric of their neighbourhoods.

As Cas Mudde (2018) points out, the rise of cognitive mobilisation (that is, the notion that citizens are more critical of their political leaders and are less likely to follow them blindly) implies that the voters' relationships with elites have changed. Populists are also part and parcel of the changing nature of party systems. Former mainstream

parties (esp. Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties) no longer dominate party systems, which have become more fragmented with the rise of a plethora of new actors, some of which are populist. These developments have created new opportunities for populist actors (for an extensive argument, see Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018a).

Thus, even in the very unlikely situation that pressing issues such as immigration and economic restructuring were to be solved, it is unlikely that populism would completely disappear (Mudde 2018). When politicians and media pundits speak about defeating populism, their comments are misplaced. For instance, in 2017, relief was expressed when Dutch populist Geert Wilders' PVV failed to become the largest party in parliament (BBC 2017). Similar reactions occurred with respect to the FN after the French elections that year (Erlanger and Smale 2017). Nevertheless, 2018 witnessed the rise of the Lega and M5S in Italy. Populism is mostly likely to remain a political force for the foreseeable future. How strong and successful it will prove to be will depend in large part on the actions of the populist parties and their non-populist opponents.

Contested Issue 9: Is populism a domestic phenomenon?

One of the weaknesses of the Comparative Politics discipline is its dismissal of International Relations as an important explanatory factor for domestic politics (the reverse, but to a lesser degree, could be said of the IR discipline). Yet, in order to understand the rise and electoral fortune of populist parties, it is vital to take the consequences of international politics into account. Moreover, IR considerations can occasionally affect the substantive ideology that the thin-centred ideology populists choose to embrace. Consequently, this also helps understand what kind of foreign policies such populists are likely to pursue.

International politics create an ideological vacuum that offers populists opportunities. The surge of contemporary populism is intimately linked to the end of the Cold War around 1989-92. The disappearances of democracies' mortal geopolitical and ideological enemy meant that the tacit or explicit premise of postwar democratic politics had disappeared: the unspoken agreement between centre-right and centre-left parties that competition for power should take place among parties that accepted Western democracy and that would prevent the rise to power of communist or other anti-systemic parties. In the past, dominant coalitions or single-party rule were taken for granted: this might run against the democratic idea of alternation, but at least they kept the anti-democrats at bay. After 1992, this was no longer necessary.

Indeed, we witnessed an end to the dominance of Christian Democrats in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands. Although Social Democrats first rejoiced at the end of the ideological dominance of the centre-right, it soon became clear that they would be punished too; Sweden saw the first non-Social Democratic government since the 1920s. In Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and France, the centre left was unable to continue to occupy the centre ground, despite the optimistic lure of the Third Way. In Latin America also, the geopolitical changes ensured that Russia and the United States were less intimately involved in the domestic politics of the region, thus altering the political opportunity structures for domestic political forces.

Of course, the rise of populist parties was not the case across all Western European democracies: the Lega Nord in Italy, the SVP in Switzerland, and the People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*, DF) in Denmark had been successful long before the Berlin Wall came down. Also

the rise of Green parties since the 1970s had slowly created a fissure in Western democracies. Yet, the end of the Cold War created a vast momentum in which citizens did not embrace Fukuyama's proclamation that history had ended in favour of democracy as we know it, but started to pose questions regarding the future of their societies. This momentum gained prominence particularly in Europe because the end of the Cold War coincided with the intensification of the European integration process and the advent of an intensified phase in economic and financial globalisation. Combined, these international political developments made citizens uncertain of having control over European and global processes, as well of the capacities of their governments to control such developments, thus ushering in a latent legitimacy crisis of democratic government. Such doubts regarding effective policymaking capacity have re-entered the debate with the migratory flows that ensued from international and civil conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War opened up the can of worms that the First World War and the interbellum had sealed off for decades. The geopolitical conflicts in the Balkans that had been left open at Versailles, the frustrated democratic experiments in Czechoslovakia, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the interbellum, coupled with the delegitimisation of the communist discourse produced fertile grounds for populists riding the nationalist wave. They reintroduced old cleavages regarding national identity, complicated by the need to position themselves vis-à-vis the old communist order.

International politics offers new ideologies to combine with populism's thin-centred ideology. This process operates in two ways: international developments offer new modes to juxtapose the pure people versus the bad elite. Globalisation offers populists global moguls, especially in finance, to blame for the plight of the trampled-upon people. This position is often espoused by left-wing populists, such as the Dutch SP, the Greek Syriza, France's *La France Insoumise* (Unsubmissive France), and Germany's *Die Linke*. European integration offers an opportunity to point a finger at technical eurocrats, especially in the European Commission. This has been the centre argument of UKIP and has, in different phases, been the position of the Dutch PVV, the Italian Lega and M5S, and the French FN (now RN). The breakup of communism has provided an opportunity to blame the elite for having agreed to the post WWII territorial status quo. This is particularly true in Hungary where Fidesz, pressured by the even more nationalist Jobbik (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*, Movement for a Better Hungary) pursues a nationalist agenda, but also in FPÖ-governed Austria which, after the end of the Cold War, raised the issues of the Sudeten Germans and, recently, politicized the South Tyrol issue when it started to grant South Tyrolians Austrian citizenship in addition to their Italian citizenship. International politics have also offered opportunities to mobilise like-minded populists: in Latin America in the 2000s, Venezuelan Hugo Chavez' anti-Americanism not only helped him mobilise domestic supporters, but also strengthened the hand of left-wing populists in Ecuador and Bolivia.

At the same time, international developments offer opportunities to embrace a specific ideology to complement populism's thin-centred ideology. The end of the Cold War (and the advent of globalisation) have helped invoke old fashioned nationalism. Globalisation has made it possible not only to embrace transnational socialism but also to welcome the free market (as in the cases of the Dutch LPF and the Italian FI).

Populists affect a country's foreign policy. The international/domestic nexus also operates in the other direction. The more popular populists become and the more their success is linked

to policy issues that are related to global affairs, the more likely it is that governments will take populist positions into account in their foreign policies. This need not be the case only with a populist party in government, such as the Austrian FPÖ, or M5S and Lega in Italy. It can also affect mainstream parties which, fearing the polls, feel they can only ride the populist wave if they move closer to them. The effect of populist parties on foreign policy depends on three factors: a) the relative vulnerability of government to populist politics; b) the specific definition of the pure people and the corrupt elite; and c) the specific ideology a populist party chooses to borrow from. Notably, countries may adjust their policies in different directions: more protectionist in trade, less committed to multilateralism, less open to refugees and migrants, less open to deepening integration schemes, unless this is part of challenging a regional hegemon (as in Latin America where populists have attempted to become less dependent on the US) (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017).

Conclusions

Above we have identified nine contested issues surrounding populism. They make it possible to approach populism in a more analytical manner without necessarily abandoning the firm defence of contemporary democracy. Importantly, we need to develop different, yet related research programs based on the different dimensions of the populist phenomenon. The notion of a thin-centred ideology looks particularly promising because it offers a conceptualisation that allows for comparison across time and space. In addition, it makes it possible to link up populist leaders (parties) and followers in a systematic fashion. The dual quality of the notion of a thin-centred ideology, allowing for variation in both the people/elite divide and the 'added ideology', will prevent systematic biases towards any one type of populism. The additional concept of populism as a strategy permits the incorporation of mainstream parties as part of the playing field. Having thus mapped out the players, we need to be aware of context: international developments as well as electoral and party systems affect the way the game is being played. Only in this way will academia ride the populist storm.

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