Responses to Populism: Militant, Tolerant, and Social

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What should we do about populism? In recent years, this question has become more urgent as populist leaders and parties have taken center stage in many countries across the globe. No longer a "minor" political phenomenon, populism has forced scholars to grapple with how to address its potential "threat" to "liberal democracy while also harnessing its "corrective" properties (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). In this debate, the two questions of *who* "we" are—that is, who should respond—and *how* to do it often have taken different forms.

In the empirical literature, three broad trends have emerged. The first has focused on the role of *"mainstream" parties* in responding to populism (van Spanje and de Graaf 2018). Here, the question is how these parties can take "issue ownership" over the favored policies of populist parties or "parrot" their discourse as a way of hijacking their political appeal. The second trend has focused on how *democratic regimes* can become more resilient as government systems in the face of patterns of autocratization, as well as which actors tend to resist such patterns and how (Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023). The third trend focuses on *societal responses* to populism—that is, the role of civil society in resisting populists (Ellinas and Lamprianou 2021; Laumond 2023). This interest in civil-society initiatives stems from an increased appreciation of their role, particularly in cases where populists are in government and thus in control of state institutions, or where viable legal avenues are either not available or insufficient.

This empirical literature, taken as a whole, has been valuable in providing a "big-picture" view with a broad comparative scope of what works and what does not when addressing populism. It has provided scholars, policy makers, and practitioners who are interested in responding to populism with a large and increasingly systematic evidence base on which to draw. However, this research also has remained largely descriptive: whereas it states what has been done and evaluates the consequences, it does not sufficiently engage with the larger questions behind the assumptions that it tends to make. In particular, there is scant reflection on the often-ambiguous nature of the relationship between populism and democracy, with populism often automatically or implicitly assumed to be a "problem." There also is little discussion of several important aspects of the responses themselves: their democratic legitimacy (i.e., Do they overstep the mark and harm democracy in the process of supposedly "protecting" it?); their substantive characteristics (i.e., What is the broader rationale and the directionality of the response?); and What conception of democracy are

these responses enshrined in given that they purport to provide a form of "democratic self-defense" against populists? Finally, there is a real risk in treating populists as a monolithic "they" to be dealt with: populism can be expressed in numerous ideological guises—left, right, and valence (Zulianello and Larsen 2021); inclusionary and exclusionary (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Ignoring this basic fact denies that each of these forms poses different democratic challenges and thus likely requires different responses.

This article addresses these bigger questions by systematizing and labeling responses to populism under three broad approaches: *militant*, *tolerant*, and *social* (Malkopoulou and Norman 2018). We identify the key tenets of each approach and their philosophical antecedents and then compare them with one another across several factors. We consider the (democratic) implications of these approaches and identify challenges that mark the "responses to populism" field and should be considered in future work.

THREE APPROACHES TO RESPONDING TO POPULISM: MILITANT, TOLERANT, AND SOCIAL

How democracies address domestic political threats is not only a matter of strategy. The actions of state authorities and political agents have a direct bearing on the most fundamental democratic principles. In fact, few constitutional questions involve as many of these principles—such as participation, pluralism, and liberty—as the question of how democracies can withstand internal political pressures. As a result, each approach to responding to populism comes with a distinct set of philosophical considerations.

A widely discussed approach is that of *militant democracy*. It refers to the *a priori* repression of suspect political actors based on their antidemocratic aims or behaviors, which may include their ideas or a combination of actions that otherwise may be viewed as legal. At first glance, this approach seems appropriate to use against a phenomenon as challenging for democracy as populism. There seems to be nothing illegal about populists, and yet they spread messages (e.g., anti-immigration, racism, and patriarchy on the populist right) or tend to enact policies (e.g., court packing and constitutional entrenchment of policy choices on both the populist right and left) that can slowly undermine democratic ideas such as tolerance, equality, diversity, and inclusion, or gradually erode basic rights. *A priori* repression can be initiated by national and international state actors, involving—for example—expulsion from the European Union (EU) or surveillance measures, or by political actors, as exemplified by the infamous December Agreement that aimed to systematically exclude the Sweden Democrats from influencing decision making (Aylott and Bolin 2019).

As tempting as militant repression in the name of protecting democracy may sound, the idea is controversial. First, it requires a minimal consensus on what democracy—which repression is set to protect—means. Depending on ideological and other contextual factors, democracy can be understood as anything from pure majoritarianism to liberal constitutional-

occur. They involve rights restrictions against the Alternative for Germany (AfD)—namely, their surveillance by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (i.e., *Verfassungschutz*) and reporting on their political activity (Laumond 2023). Likewise, at the EU level, the activation of Article 7 proceedings of the Treaty of the European Union

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ism. The theorists who offered justifications for militant repression had different views of what is to be protected. Schmitt (1932/2004) argued that the political and civil rights of an actor can be restricted in the name of preserving a regime that mirrors the existential identity of a sovereign people. Parties that threaten this identity are "enemies" who—at the logical conclusion of this argument—must be annihilated. This polemical aspect has haunted militant-democratic thinking ever since. Loewenstein (1937), who coined the term "militant democracy" in the 1930s, described democracy's enemies as "irrational" actors, who defeated the rationality of constitutional government and therefore could not be confronted with anything but extraordinary measures. More recently, Rawls (2005) described these actors as being illiberal and "unreasonable," meaning that they refuse to engage in fair terms of cooperation and treat others as equals, as required in a liberal society governed by principles of justice. Many commentators today would find that populists—especially far-right populists—indeed display such "illiberal" commitments: they do not treat others (i.e., liberal elites, immigrants, and women) as equals, are not "rational" interlocutors, and do threaten the existential identity of liberal democracy. Some even go so far as to use illiberalism as a synonym for populism (Pappas 2019).

However, to adopt militant restrictions against populists means to view them as "enemies" who threaten the survival of a sovereign people, a constitutional government, a liberal and just society, or other political ideals that claim to be—but are not—synonymous with democracy. Ultimately, it is not democracy per se that measures of democratic repression protect but rather existing institutions (Nitzschner 2023) that mirror these different views of democracy. For example, courts are viewed by many as the main victims of the democratic majoritarianism that populists profess and, to withstand, need to be fully insulated from political decisions. However, in that case, what is being defended is a reduction of democracy to a set of counter-majoritarian institutions that dispense liberal justice.

Fortunately, today militant repression is not the most common go-to mechanism against populist parties, even those on the far right. It is mostly in Germany, the country with the most emblematic militant constitution—which allows for banning political parties "that seek to undermine or abolish the free democratic basic order" (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, Article 21[2])—that such attempts

against Poland and Hungary in 2017 and 2018, respectively, and the new rule of law conditionality in EU budgets (for an evaluation, see Blauberger and van Hüllen 2021), are attempts to limit political freedoms in the name of democracy protection. Overall, however, militant measures today are rarely invoked against populists.

It is the second *tolerant approach* that is used most often against populists. This approach advocates inclusion, treating populists as ordinary political adversaries who should not be silenced but instead confronted with counter-speech, alternative policy proposals, and even compromise and cooperation. For many, this is the only justifiable strategy in present-day democracies, which claim to have a high degree of tolerance, inclusion, and diversity and which strive to increase citizens' political participation. There is no room in this approach for exceptions to the general rule of democratic inclusion—not even for populists.

There are several rationales for this tolerant approach. One is the idea that democracies must be consistent in applying their own principles; exceptions to the rules of free and universal participation will only open "Pandora's box" in terms of deciding who is an "enemy" of democracy (Invernizzi Accetti and Zuckerman 2017; Kelsen 2006). Another justification is that the free competition of ideas will produce not only the most popular but also the best governments and policies (Mill 1859/1977). A more practice-dependent rationale is the belief that treating opponents as legitimate transforms them into democratic partisans. The premise is that the experience of regular participation in everyday politics inevitably will tame populists, familiarizing them with the ethics of partisanship and making them value cooperation and compromise (Rosenblum 2010). Indeed, a widely cited view today is that populists potentially can "correct" democracies by voicing dissent and asserting counter-hegemonic views (Mouffe 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). From this perspective, populists have a legitimate place in contemporary democracies.

Various conceptions of democracy inform this tolerant approach. The general view, however, is that of democracy as a self-regulating system of fair and neutral procedures that channels dissent and appeases conflict. It is the ultimate peacemaking system because it enables competition and encourages compromise. Therefore, it has nothing to fear from the intensity of political struggle.

Aligned with this thinking, most countries address populism as a matter of "normal" politics (Bourne 2023). This involves including populists in coalition governments, as is the case, for example, with the Finns Party since 2023 and partly the Sweden Democrats since 2022. Such permissibility is counterbalanced with checks and balances that are already in place. For example, the courts have formally blocked controversial executive orders put in place by populist-right leaders in the United States, India, Turkey, and Brazil (Barbash and Paul 2019; Barroso 2022), and the media in these countries have exposed potential abuses of power by populists. However, this all is obviously contingent on the fact that populists in power in these places may not have had the time to remove or hinder these forms of power control, unlike in countries such as Hungary and Venezuela. Alternatively, populists face regular lawful controls like any other legal subject. For example, members of Italy's M5S were convicted for defamation and forged documents (Campo 2023); the German AfD faced investigations for illegal party funding and fraud (among other crimes) (Laumond 2023); and France's Marine Le Pen, like many other far-right leaders, was accused of breaking hate-speech laws (Jacobs and van Spanje 2020). Criminal charges filed against Donald Trump are also part of such a pattern of applying *regular* laws to populists. The key point in all of these cases is that there is no intention to deliberately contain populists, only to force them to "play by the rules." However, it may become an endless "cat-and-mouse chase" that only teaches populists how to better navigate the system to their own advantage.

A third, broader response to populism is to address the socioeconomic conditions that fuel it. This *social approach* shifts the focus from political actors to the structures that produce injustices and foster discontent with democracy. Responses take the form of socioeconomic arrangements that redress these injustices and provide better material prospects for the many. Those who view populism as a "plebeian" reclaiming of economic and cultural power (e.g., Vergara 2020) may find that this is the only way to tame it.

The tendency to trace democratic threats to economic turmoil owes much to social democratic thought, but this intellectual pedigree is neither uniform nor exclusive. Drawing on earlier social democratic thinkers, some authors, for example, attribute antidemocratic sentiment to gross economic and intellectual inequality (Wilkinson 2021). Others, drawing on the same tradition, link it instead to economic insecurity and uncertainty (Näsström 2021). Catholic social thought has blamed democratic instability on the corrosion of a society's organic unity that occurs when family households face material anxiety (Kalyvas and van Kersbergen 2010). Similar views about social anxiety as a source of populism abound today. Indeed, empirical research identifies socioeconomic grievances as a crucial "demand-side" explanation for the success of populist parties (Eichengreen 2018; Rodrik 2021). These grievances may not reflect absolute economic deprivation but rather relative deprivation, social envy, and perceived "status loss" (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). As with antidemocratic sentiment, the rise of populism

is attributed to dissatisfaction with the current socioeconomic situation.

The broad view, shared by these different traditions, is that democracy is not only about formal rules and procedures but also depends on the socioeconomic conditions experienced by citizens. It presupposes a high degree of equality and social integration, which is necessary to bridge the distance between the rulers and the ruled and to succesfully identify the general will (Heller 1928/2000). From another perspective, democracy requires emancipation, which is understood as the equal sharing of the burden of material and other uncertainties (Näsström 2021). That is, the key instrument for defending democracy using this logic is proactive social-egalitarian interventions, which may include extensive economic redistribution (to fight inequality), universal social insurance (to relieve uncertainty), and effective access to employment and education (to serve the goal of social and civic integration).

In practice, it is difficult to identify clear cases where states or governments have implemented socioeconomic reforms in response to populism or related phenomena. There are historical examples, however, such as social democratic Sweden in the 1920s, where universal social-welfare programs and mass-employment policies were supported explicitly as ways to prevent the rise of Nazism, and postwar Christian Democratic Germany, where the welfare state was seen as an obstacle to an authoritarian backlash. Heller's (1928/2000) proposal to constitutionalize social justice also found a place in the German constitution of 1949. A recent example is the UK Conservative government's pledge to improve the situation of "the left behind" in order to meet the challenge of the Brexit Party in 2019—although this move was limited and mainly rhetorical. Complicating the picture is the fact that left-wing populists in government have meanwhile implemented far-reaching socioeconomic reforms, while many right-wing populists have promoted economic protectionism. Consider, for example, Viktor Orbán's symbolic move to constitutionalize economic policy in Hungary and his rhetorical self-branding as a champion of social welfare. At the same time, however, he dismantled the welfare state and proletarianized the middle class (Misetics 2014). Because populists tend to over-politicize and manipulate social-welfare policy, it is difficult to reconfigure it as an instrument that truly will benefit the many, strengthen the material foundations of democratic society, and leave populists without much support. Yet, the idea behind this social approach to democratic defense is precisely this: to limit support for populism by addressing the legitimate socioeconomic grievances that directly or indirectly drive that support.

COMPARING THE APPROACHES

Having defined these approaches, we now compare them on four bases: the responding actor, the central method of response, whether they are broadly directed at populists in power or opposition, and the critiques that are directed at them.

With regard to the first two criteria, three types of actors are implicated as the "responders" in each account: state

Table 1
Comparisons of Responses to Populism

	Militant	**Tolerant**	**Social**
Responding Actor	State authorities, political parties, and civil society	State authorities, political parties, and civil society	State authorities, political parties, and civil society
Directed at Populists in Opposition or Government?	Both	Both	Opposition
Central Method of Response	Militant repression through legal means	Open competition and debate; inclusion in "the system"	The introduction of egalitarian socioeconomic reforms
Critiques	Potential overreach; concerned with liberalism over democracy	Can be ineffectual; can "legitimize" populist actors	Does not address populism in the short term; ignores sociocultural factors

authorities, other political parties, and civil-society actors. Each of these actors may adopt initiatives that corresponds to the chosen approach. State actors can be militant or tolerant depending on whether they enact laws to contain or merely to "responsibilize" populists. Political actors also can be either militant or tolerant, depending on whether they choose to exclude and ostracize or to deliberate and even collaborate with populists. Similarly, civil-society actors can adopt either a militant stance—for example, by sabotaging populist events and attacking their premises—or a more tolerant stance in which they engage in peaceful counterdemonstrations (Bourne 2023). The social approach entails for state actors the adoption of redistributionist policies; for political actors, systematic campaigning for such policies (instead of, e.g., parroting populist campaign messages); and for civil-society actors, similar attention to "bread-and-butter" issues, such as housing, education, and welfare, instead of merely defending civil and political rights.

The question of who is responding to populism is also linked to the question of whether such approaches primarily target populism in opposition or in government. The militant approach—although it is arguably more effective in suppressing opposition actors (given the power that the entire state can press on them)—is also theoretically able to push back against populists in government. However, this would see a conflict between populist parties in power and the courts (and potentially security services). The tolerant approach also targets populists in opposition or in government. The premise is that they are legitimate and relatively "normal" political competitors and, therefore, whether or not they are in power, they need to be defeated in the arena of public debate or through regular rules (rather than special rules made specifically to target them). The social approach, conversely, really applies only to populists in opposition (or to stemming the "demand" for populism more broadly in the future). That is, once a populist party is in power, there is little room for opponents to maneuver in terms of obtaining more equitable socioeconomic policies in the short term.

Finally, how do the critiques leveled against each approach compare? In some regards, the criticisms of the militant and tolerant approaches are mirror images of one another. The militant approach, as discussed, has an inherent risk of overreaching, particularly when dealing with a phenomenon as democratically ambiguous as populism. Moreover, this approach is clearly more concerned with defending the liberal rather than the democratic aspect of liberal democracy. Conversely, the tolerant approach risks being ineffectual: by treating populist actors as normal, it can seriously underplay the risks that populist parties—particularly when they are in power—can pose to democracy. This approach can even legitimize, in a potentially unintended way, populists by framing them as ordinary actors. Most often, it causes a spillover of populist ideas and policies to other parties (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021), which ultimately mainstreams populism, thereby turning the entire political system populist. Finally, the social approach can be criticized for failing to address populism in the short term: it seeks to stem the "demand" for populism. However, this takes time and, as such, is more a medium- to long-term rather than a short-term solution. Moreover, this approach can be criticized for unduly focusing on the socioeconomic rather than the sociocultural, when numerous studies have shown that both are at play in driving populist success (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019). Table 1 illustrates these comparisons.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

This article identifies three central theoretical approaches behind many of the suggestions in the academic literature about how we should respond to populism: militant, tolerant, and social. As discussed, there are significant differences among them, not only in terms of their philosophical influences but also more broadly in their sense of how democracy should operate and the question of how challenges to the system are addressed.

Although there certainly are scholars who strictly adhere to these individual approaches, it is important to note that there are numerous other scholars who adopt a "hybrid" approach by combining aspects of the different approaches—at least regarding the practical design of policies. For example, there is little standing in the way of combining the tolerant approach in the short term with the social approach in the long term. That is, take on populists as worthy adversaries now, yet try to stem the demand for populism in the future by enacting more egalitarian social policies.

As populists continue to enjoy success worldwide, there are at least two significant challenges facing political science. The first is maintaining focus on populism as a distinct political

form and not treating it synonymously with other, arguably more severe and dangerous forms of politics (e.g., authoritarianism, fascism, and extremism). As argued previously (Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023), this tendency to confound dissimilar terms can lead to significant normative and empirical problems in determining responses to the phenomenon. The second challenge is to assess not only the efficacy but also the legitimacy of responses as the line between populism and "normal" politics becomes blurrier. That is, as populists become more "mainstream" and mainstream actors adopt elements of populism, the question of who can legitimately target whom becomes more difficult to answer. These challenges prove that clear definitions—of both populism and what defenders of democracy mean when they use the term "democracy"—will remain of key importance to the research ahead.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ∎

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