

Populism in Power and Different Models of Democracy

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Populism is both prolific and resilient. By now, populist forces around the globe have managed to enter the highest echelons of power (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016). It is no wonder that the contemporary academic debate has shifted its focus to exploring the consequences of populism in power, particularly its impact on democracy. Although populism and democracy are not synonymous, the representation of “the people” is a central claim to both. Most populism scholars agree that “all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to ‘the people’” (Canovan 1981, 94). However, depending on which democratic ideas are emphasized over others—as well as which political practices and structures are favored to institutionalize these ideas (Dahl 1991; Held 2006; Lijphart 2012)—the basic tenet of the “rule by the people” may have many different meanings.

Given that most countries where populism has been on the rise adhere to the principles of liberal democracy, it is understandable that the debate on populism and democracy is largely concerned with this particular model (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Pappas 2019). Yet, to fully understand the potential recasting of the political system supported by populist forces in power, it is helpful to first sketch the normative-theoretical debate of populism and its link to different models of democracy. Aligned with the ideational approach (see the symposium introduction), this article therefore traces the implications of “taking ideas seriously” and focuses on three interconnected domains (Held 2006, 7): (1) a coherent set of theoretical claims (ideas); (2) their expression as practices and institutions; and (3) the models of democracy that populists in power dislike or favor. The burgeoning empirical evidence, however, points to important contingencies that warrant further scrutiny—for example, of how the institutional setting, the political context, or the host ideology might moderate the impact of populism on democracy.

THE STARTING POINT: POPULIST IDEAS

Populism targets the core of the paradox of democratic legitimacy—that is, the boundaries of “the people” and the legitimation of political authority. As a category, “the people” are constructed as a determinate, homogeneous group that can be clearly delimited (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). This so-called historical account of the people rejects the prominent

boundary problem of the *demos* in democratic theory (Ochoa Espejo 2017). Populists also assert the existence of an identifiable, unified popular will as unmediated political expression of sovereignty (Caramani 2017; Mudde 2007). Combined, these ideas culminate in a literal understanding of popular rule—that is, the supremacy of the popular will as the only legitimate ground of democratic decision-making authority (Canovan 2004; Ochoa Espejo 2017). Indeed, a prominent populist critique of the current state of mediated (i.e., representative, liberal) democracy is that popular sovereignty has been curtailed and must be restored (Aslanidis 2015). This people-centrism has led some theorists to locate populism in the vicinity of classical or radical democratic theories, such as direct democracy and radical majoritarianism (Canovan 1999; Urbinati 2019).

Similarly, populists construct “the elite” as an identifiable, homogeneous category: a section of society with extraordinary and illegitimate access to political power (Canovan 1999) and a group that has been “corrupted” by special interests and therefore is undermining the common good (Mudde 2007; Stanley 2008). Accordingly, this direct juxtaposition of *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism* positions populists in stark opposition to the views of elitist democracy and the responsible party government model (Held 2006, 125–57; Mair 2002). The resulting moralistic and antagonistic notion of politics—a *Manichean worldview* dividing the political realm into good and evil—leaves little space for compromise (Müller 2016). It justifies the vilification of opponents (Hawkins 2010), thereby violating the basic principles of pluralism and consensus-seeking models of democracy (Lijphart 2012).

PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONS: POPULIST DEMOCRACY?

The three core elements of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manicheism underpin the populist understanding of the political world. Considering the consequences of populism in power through the lens of the ideational approach shifts the focus to the importance of these ideas for political behavior (Busby et al. 2025). Beginning with the most basic—the electoral model of democracy—and then moving to more demanding conceptualizations, we emphasize the ideational overlap and/or tension between populism and different conceptions of democracy. Although this allows us to formulate theoretical expectations of how populists in power might mold

democratic institutions, mixed empirical evidence on the matter points to the contingency of the impact of populism—a point that we discuss further in the article’s conclusion.

ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

In its minimalist, elitist conception, electoral democracy is defined as an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people’s vote” (Schumpeter 1942, 269). Hence, by means of contested and inclusive elections, this model emphasizes the idea of political equality—that is, one person, one vote (Møller and Skaaning 2010). A more demanding conceptualization of electoral democracy can be attributed to Dahl (1971) and his pluralist definition of democracy (i.e., polyarchy), which enhances the idea of equality with the guarantee of basic political freedom as a necessary condition of meaningful elections (Held 2006). Thus, in this more ambitious conceptualization of electoral democracy, regular, competitive, free, and fair elections presuppose the presence of civil liberties—including the freedom of expression and association as well as the freedom of the press—to assure the availability of alternative sources of information (Dahl 1971). Distinguishing among the three defining attributes of electoral democracy—competitiveness, inclusion, and political freedom—helps us to disentangle some of the ambiguities identified in the democracy–populism nexus. Populists, for instance, should embrace electoral contestation to identify the will of the people and to legitimize their rule (Urbinate 2019). However, because this true democratic will is perceived homogeneously, the moralistic dualism between “the good people” and “the evil elite” justifies anti-pluralist practices. This has the potential to undermine both inclusiveness and the protection of basic civil liberties—both of which are cornerstones of a pluralist democracy (Dahl 1971; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

Comparative empirical research in this area is extensive, yet results frequently highlight the moderating role of potential correlates and contextual conditions. The most consistent finding in comparative studies (spanning cases from Latin America to Eastern and Western Europe) pertains to a negative association of populism in power with electoral contestation as well as political freedoms meant to ensure meaningful elections. In this sense, populists tend to skew the level playing field between governing and opposition forces (Juon and Bochsler 2020; Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Ruth-Lovell and Grahn 2023) and engage in the vilification of the press or political opponents (Kenny 2020; Pirro and Taggart 2023).

The impact of populism in power on the inclusiveness of electoral participation, however, appears to be more contingent on both regional differences and the host ideology of populist governments. Findings range from not detecting any significant association between populism and electoral turnout in Latin America (Houle and Kenny 2018) to mixed results in the European region (Leininger and Meijers 2021). Studies that focus on ideology, meanwhile, attest either right-wing populists (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Huber and Ruth 2017) or left-wing populists (Juon and Bochsler 2020) a positive effect

on electoral participation. Moreover, cross regionally, Ruth-Lovell and Grahn (2023) highlight that the negative effect of populism in government on (pluralist) electoral democracy is moderated by the previous strength of electoral democracy.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The normative ideas underlying liberal democracy comprise the electoral model of democracy as defined previously (i.e., the democratic element) plus a liberal element—that is, the protection of (negative) freedom from intrusive political authority (Plattner 1999). Constitutional checks and balances, the protection of minority rights, and the rule of law correspond to the institutional expressions of liberal democratic ideas (Held 2006, 78–79; Møller and Skaaning 2010). Modern liberal democracies thus navigate an inherent tension between popular rule and liberal protections that curtail majoritarian impulses (Mudde 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Populists who question the legitimacy of these liberal practices and institutions undermine the democratic element. Indeed, for Laclau (2005, 167), populism promotes “forms of democracy outside the liberal symbolic framework.” Other scholars have characterized populism as an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (Mudde 2021) and directly as a synonym for democratic illiberalism (Pappas 2019).

These accounts appear to be reflected in comparative empirical studies that consistently link populism in government to the erosion of horizontal-accountability mechanisms as well as the rule of law (Houle and Kenny 2018; Juon and Bochsler 2020; Ruth 2018). In the European context, regardless of being either a junior or a major partner in government, populists in government negatively impact fundamental rights (Vittori 2022). Moreover, results seem to be moderated by host ideology such that inclusionary populists are less harmful than their exclusionary brethren (Huber and Schimpf 2017; Vittori 2022).

PARTICIPATORY, DELIBERATIVE, AND EGALITARIAN DEMOCRACY

Populism is neither the only nor the first critical voice against mediated (i.e., representative, liberal) democracy (Tormey 2020). By emphasizing the ideas of freedom and equality and the importance of direct citizen participation in political decision making, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian models of democracy place stronger emphasis on the capability of citizens to actively participate in politics and govern themselves (Coppedge et al. 2011). However, these more demanding models of democracy are not seen as alternatives to electoral or liberal democracy but instead as a desirable extension of them (Fung and Wright 2001).

The participatory model of democracy (Pateman 2012) has received the most attention among populism scholars because populism’s ideation of the political world aligns with the model in its view of “the people” as the ultimate power in politics. However, contrary to populist conceptions, participatory democracy scholars embrace the idea of a pluralist definition of the people (Held 2006). Ultimately, this results in different expectations concerning the impact of populism in power on participatory innovations, such as mechanisms of

direct democracy and local and regional democratic innovations. Indeed, populist ideas can resonate well with mechanisms of direct democracy (Mény and Surel 2002). Yet, recent research on the introduction or use of direct democratic mechanisms by Latin American presidents (Rivas, Bohigues, and Colalongo 2024; Ruth-Lovell and Welp 2023), as well as the use of referendums by European populist elites (Gherghina and Silagadze 2020), indicates a rather strategic as opposed to ideational affinity. Populists seem to favor direct democratic mechanisms only if they dispose of considerable popularity among citizens.

Populist ideas may not align well with the deliberative model of democracy, which emphasizes respectful dialogue and reasoning in pursuit of the public good (Sharon 2019). For example, because the popular will is unified and identifiable, it does not need deliberation because majoritarian elections suffice to reveal this unified will (Hawkins 2010; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). With its focus on social and political equality as preconditions for meaningful participation in the political process, the relationship with egalitarian democracy may prove more elusive to recognize. On the one hand, egalitarian

people” and “the elite” can be filled with context-specific meaning (see, especially, Laclau 2005) and also differ across host ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), providing diverse framings of the populist narrative of democratic failures (Busby et al. 2025). Moreover, existing evidence suggests that external factors, such as the strength or weakness of democratic institutions, can constrain populists in transforming democracy once they yield the power to do so (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012).

Future research will need to further disentangle these contingent effects. Fruitful multidimensional approaches to capture the impact of populism exist (Caiani and Graziano 2022) but remain largely confined to European cases, which hinders a thorough assessment of the impact of populism across diverse institutional contexts. Researchers who study populism in power also should consider the willingness of citizens to avert democratic backsliding (Jacob 2024). The burgeoning literature on how populist voters understand democracy provides an important steppingstone (Wegscheider, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Van Hauwaert 2023; Wiesehomeier and Singer 2025; Zaslove and Meijers 2023). Additional correlates of populism,

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as well as populist ideas point to the unequal distribution of economic resources that underpin unequal political power, which would imply a positive relationship (Cerovac 2020). On the other hand, however, this may be highly contingent on how those categories are constructed—that is, which in- and out-groups are specifically identified and whether particular social groups are excluded from access to resources, thereby inhibiting their equal participation (De Cleen 2019). Comparative, empirical evidence on these issues is scarce, underscoring the context sensitivity of populism’s impact. In their cross-regional study covering European and Latin American cases, Ruth-Lovell and Grahn (2023) find that populist-led governments tend to undermine deliberation, albeit moderated by previous levels of deliberative democracy. Focusing on Latin American presidents, Rivas, Bohigues, and Colalongo (2024), however, link populist presidents to improvements in both deliberative and egalitarian democracy, as long as they governed under politically stable conditions.

CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The central ideational tenets of populism suggest likely practices and preferred institutional arrangements that populists in power will pursue. However, the recent and still scarce comparative empirical evidence underscores important contingencies. When varieties of populism meet varieties of democracy, taking ideas seriously matters. Stated differently, the ideational nexus is not rendered insignificant but the precise outcomes will depend on the complex interplay of moderating factors, including actor-specific correlates and the institutional and political context. For example, “the

including the role of party organizations and political leadership, should be considered (Van Kessel and Albertazzi 2021). Finally, we believe that the scope of analysis needs to be broadened even further to include under which conditions populism resonates with different models of autocracy. In particular, the fine line between minimal democracy and competitive authoritarianism deserves further attention (Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Levitsky and Way 2002).

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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

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