

Populism and democracy: The road ahead

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Pundits and academics alike are increasingly concerned about the health of democracy worldwide. Much of this concern is tied to the rise of populism, a global phenomenon presenting challenges to both long-established and relatively young democracies. Political science has been at the forefront of this debate, and thanks to a growing—but not universal—consensus on the ideational definition of populism, our understanding of the subject has deepened considerably. This symposium maps key debates on the complex and often ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy. In this concluding piece, we build on the arguments presented throughout the symposium and related academic discussions to outline two paths for future research on the populism and democracy nexus: a top-down and a bottom-up perspective.

POPULISM: A TOP-DOWN PERSPECTIVE

Reflections on the rise of populism often lead to discussions about why people end up endorsing political projects with illiberal tendencies. Frequently, academics and pundits alike argue that voters lack sufficient political knowledge, making them susceptible to political actors who claim to govern for “the people” but may harm the democratic system once in power. This argument presupposes that the primary challenge is the inability of large segments of the electorate to see the dangers posed by populism. Although it is important to explore the extent to which voters support a peculiar understanding of democracy that contrasts with liberal democratic norms (see the article by Van Hauwaert and Huber in this symposium), it is shortsighted to mainly blame “the people” for making “wrong decisions,” such as voting for populist forces. We believe it is crucial to shift the perspective and examine the role that elites play in facilitating the promotion of populist projects. Specifically, it is important to investigate the direct and indirect ways in which elites can foster populism.

The first way elites can foster populism is quite direct: they can be the ones advancing populist ideas. Paradoxically, actors who originate from the elite or are well connected to the establishment often use populist rhetoric. Before winning the election and transforming the Republican Party into a populist radical right formation, Donald Trump was a billionaire and media celebrity deeply connected to U.S. power circuits. Similarly, Jean-Luc Mélenchon had a long career in

the French Socialist Party before founding the populist radical left party La France Insoumise (LFI). And Nayib Bukele, who began his political career with the established left-wing party of El Salvador (FMLN) at the subnational level, later won the presidency by building a personalist electoral platform that combined populist rhetoric against established political parties with strongly conservative stances on moral issues. By depicting “the elite” as a corrupt group in power, populist actors can claim that they are willing to represent the ideas and interests of “the pure people.” Populist actors frequently present themselves as outsiders, even when they are not. This allows them to craft a narrative of lost national greatness, which they claim they will restore and so address a collective sense of humiliation (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021).

Even in cases where populist actors are genuine outsiders, if they gain power and remain in government for an extended period they eventually become part of the establishment and—as noted by Hawkins and Mitchell, as well as by Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier in this symposium—often damage the democratic system. Once in power, populists reframe their discourse by claiming that they cannot govern effectively because of the presence of “shadow forces” that are powerful enough to obstruct the reforms supposedly demanded by the people. Here, conspiratorial thinking directed at both national and international agents can play a significant role, because it helps emphasize that the populists’ power is being undermined (Balta, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Yagci 2022; Pirro and Taggart 2023). One should not underestimate the ability of populist forces to continually reframe who are the “true” members of the establishment and to present themselves as the ones who are fighting for the underdogs.

From a top-down perspective, populist actors can significantly disrupt the political landscape. While campaigning, populists often adopt an antagonistic stance, portraying themselves as outsiders to maximize their appeal. Once in power, some populists shift toward more conventional governance, delivering tangible outcomes for their constituencies. For example, Poland’s “Law and Justice” party focused on economic transfers to promote family values (Bill and Stanley 2020), and Modi in India pursues a Hindutva agenda, moving away from the secular, multi-ethnic state that was the previous status quo (Jaffrelot 2021). However, some populists, like Trump in the United States (e.g., Roberts 2024) and Bolsonaro

in Brazil (e.g., von Bülow and Abers 2024), retained their oppositional posture even after assuming office, fostering instability and institutional chaos. They governed as though they were still campaigning, positioning themselves as opponents of the political establishment. Their continued support, despite the ensuing upheaval, underscores the potency of opposing “politics as usual,” rather than democracy itself.

Additionally, populism’s appeal lies in its discomfort with politics as an institution and activity. Populist leaders often portray themselves not just as outsiders to the political establishment but as figures beyond the sphere of traditional politics. This stance resonates with those who feel alienated by mainstream political practices. Seen in this light, populism draws support from voters who are disillusioned or disengaged from conventional politics. Populists exploit this disaffection, offering an alternative to those who view traditional politics with disinterest or distrust: they thereby capitalize on widespread disenchantment to try to build an alternative model of democracy (see Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier in this symposium).

The experiences of Chávez in Venezuela (e.g., Hawkins 2016), Orbán in Hungary (e.g., Pirro & Stanley 2022), Modi in India (e.g., Jaffrelot 2021) and Erdoğan in Turkey (e.g., Castaldo 2018) clearly demonstrate that when populist forces remain in power for extended periods, they can erode democratic systems and initiate a process of autocratization from within. Despite initially coming to power through electoral means, these populist leaders have skewed political competition by implementing discriminatory electoral rules, orchestrating partisan takeovers of the judiciary and of other independent institutions, and launching constant attacks on the media. Although there is significant academic agreement on the damaging effects of many populist actors in government, we think that it is crucial to acknowledge a bias in this discussion: the focus on instances where populist forces have undermined democracies has often overshadowed cases where populist leaders in government have failed to dismantle democratic systems. As Kurt Weyland (2024, 6) aptly notes in his recent book, “Not all populist chief executives managed to sate their power hunger—far from it: in many cases, democracy survived populist governance.” By way of illustration, neither Bolsonaro in Brazil (Melo and Pereira 2024) nor Trump in the United States managed to destroy democracy (Weyland and Madrid 2019). Studies should therefore pay more attention to both positive and negative cases: populist governments that have succeeded *and* those that have failed in eroding democracy from within. This kind of research is crucial to better understand the extent to which democratic institutions are resilient and which kind of policies might be more effective in constraining populist incumbents.

The second way that elites can promote populism is more indirect: they can act as enablers, facilitating the rise of populist forces. Populist leaders rarely possess enough power on their own to win elections and exert political influence. They typically require support from establishment members who can provide material, symbolic, and organizational resources. These supporters may be motivated by self-interest, ideological alignment, or both. In the former case, their backing of the populist project is driven by expectations of direct benefits, whereas in

the latter, it results from alignment with the populist discourses and policies being promoted. Consider, for example, the gradual transformation of the U.S. Republican Party from a mainstream right-wing party into a far-right party. Although many of the leaders who supported this shift share the extreme ideas endorsed by Trump, others may disagree with the content but view it as an opportunity to enhance their influence and political power (Roberts 2019). Similarly, mainstream right-wing parties across Europe are experiencing growing internal tensions caused by the rise of actors who largely subscribe to populist radical right ideologies, but others view this shift as merely an opportunity to maintain power. At the time of writing, it remains an open question whether these radical factions will gain enough influence to take over mainstream right parties and transform them into an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right. Unfortunately for democracy, this question is becoming increasingly pressing across Europe and beyond (e.g., Bale 2023; Mudde 2022; Rovira Kaltwasser 2024).

If part of the success of populist forces is indeed connected to the presence of enablers, academics and pundits should delve deeper into investigating these actors. For example, de Lange and Bockmann, in this symposium, argue that populist actors in opposition often influence mainstream parties. These parties may establish relationships with populists not necessarily to mimic their populist discourse but to adopt some of their policies and practices. In this case, contagion effects do occur and are driven by the willingness of certain elites to adopt ideas and behaviours initially advanced by populist forces. Here lies indeed one of the blind spots of Weyland’s (2024, 24) novel approach, who by maintaining that “in politics, actions are decisive, not discourse” overlooks the reality that populist ideas do matter and can have important consequences. In fact, the real impact of populist forces should be assessed not solely or primarily by the number of votes they obtain but by the readiness of mainstream political actors to alter their approach. In other words, one cannot take for granted the “mainstream nature” of mainstream actors: either on purpose or by accident, they can foster the normalization of the illiberal democratic responses originally promoted by populist forces of different kind (Mudde 2021).

It is worth stressing that considering populism as a political project that gains traction with the support of (factions of) the elite has important implications for how we reflect on its impact on democracy. As Larry Bartels (2023) recently noted, democratic regimes erode from the top: once members of the elite and the organizations they control begin to disregard key norms that are fundamental to liberal democracy, the likelihood of significant democratic deterioration dramatically increases. From this point of view, the issue at stake is not so much a widespread erosion in public attitudes toward democracy or liberal values. Instead, the main problem is that leaders often misjudge the actual political power of populist forces. Although there is usually a reservoir of latent populist sentiment among the population, elites can inadvertently amplify the influence and impact of populist forces by enabling their demands. In fact, an important way to counter the effects of populism is not only to defend democratic institutions but also to address the social grievances that fuel populist sentiments.

This is a key message of the contribution by Malkopoulou and Moffitt in this symposium.

POPULISM: A BOTTOM-UP PERSPECTIVE

Debates about populism regularly use medical metaphors, in which populism is depicted as a disease that is affecting democracy across the world. This approach therefore searches for the “medications” that can help cure the problem and make democracies resilient. The contributions to this symposium reveal that this way of understanding populism can be short-sighted, because it gives little space for thinking about what shortcomings of liberal democratic regimes might pave the way for the rise of populist forces. As Sheri Berman (2019) has aptly noted, populism should be thought of as the symptom that something is not working properly, rather than as the (main) cause of democratic backsliding. This means that scholars should try to better understand which failures of real existing democracies might pave the way for giving more credibility to populist critiques against the establishment.

Populism should be thought of as the symptom that something is not working properly, rather than as the (main) cause of democratic backsliding.

Van Hauwaert and Huber in this symposium convincingly argue that one way forward is to empirically examine which citizens express populist sentiments and the concept of democracy they support. Common measures of public support for democracy typically assess adherence to the abstract idea of democracy but do not explore what citizens actually mean by democracy. Scholars are now attempting to capture the specific concept of democracy endorsed by the voting public and the extent to which they are willing to disregard certain democratic procedures in pursuit of specific gains (e.g., Claasen et al. 2024; Svolik et al. 2023). It is crucial to link this research with the study of populist attitudes: doing so can provide a clearer picture of the micro-foundations of populism, democracy, and their interaction. After all, it could be that structural changes—such as the decline of catch-all parties, the extension of higher education, the growth of multicultural societies, and the rise of social media—have facilitated the emergence of a new kind of citizenry that is increasingly inclined to express populist sentiments and sometimes demand illiberal forms of governance. If it is true that populist citizens care more about the output dimension than the procedural aspect of democracy, it would not be surprising that they are in accord with disrespecting the rule of law.

We can also consider the impact on democratic institutions when populists remain as insurgent or challenger parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Historically, populism has displayed a pronounced antipathy toward the institutions of representative democracy, such as parliaments, the judiciary, and political parties (Taggart 2000). This opposition extends beyond the political institutions themselves, fostering a deeper ambivalence toward the very structures of democracy. This is

evident in the populist embrace of direct democracy, particularly referendums, as a means of bypassing parliamentary processes; the demonization of the judiciary as “enemies of the people” when rulings favor the “establishment”; and the alternative ways in which insurgent populist parties often organize themselves—such as the corporate structure of the UK Reform Party or the early use of the internet by Italy’s Five Star Movement. However, populist citizens are not inherently committed to direct democracy, weakening the judiciary, or alternative forms of party organization. Rather, these practices reflect a broader discomfort with and disinclination toward established liberal democratic institutions. As the articles in this symposium suggest, we must pay greater attention to the models of democracy that both populist leaders and their supporters endorse.

More than 60 years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) published a seminal work arguing that the consolidation of democracy depends not only on economic strength but also and more importantly on two prerequisites: efficacy and legit-

imacy. Efficacy refers to the ability to govern effectively and meet the demands of the electorate, whereas legitimacy involves the public belief that democracy is the only valid system for resolving political conflicts. This concern about legitimacy resurfaced in the early 1990s, when the end of the Cold War sparked growing academic debates about transitions from authoritarian rule and whether democracy could become “the only game in town” (Linz and Stepan 1996). In hindsight, it is not far-fetched to suggest that scholars overestimated the extent to which liberal democracy has become the preferred model of democracy for *all* citizens. Today, the legitimacy prerequisite can no longer be taken for granted, as evidenced by the rise of various populist forces whose supporters seems to be at odds with a liberal understanding of democracy (Wegscheider, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Van Hauwaert, 2023).

However, as several contributions to this symposium highlight, scholars must examine whether the problem lies in populism itself or in the “host ideologies” that typically accompany the populist agenda. Indeed, research on the populist radical right reveals that authoritarian and nativist ideas are key drivers of the process of democratic backsliding (Pirro & Stanley 2022; Vachudova 2020). Moreover, extant research on contemporary Latin America shows that populist radical left administrations, such as Chávez in Venezuela, Correa in Ecuador, and Morales in Bolivia, were not very progressive on the sociocultural dimension (De la Torre 2017; Friedman 2018)—something that it is probably related to values of the core constituencies of those who voted for these political projects.

Another way of thinking about populism as a bottom-up phenomenon is related to discussions about backlash politics.

Taking a long-term perspective, one could argue that liberal democratic regimes have been quite successful in expanding the democratic horizon: in most democratic countries of the world, historically marginalized groups have been able to gradually gain more power and visibility. Democracies have been moving in this direction through a host of public policies, such as quota laws and positive discrimination programs, as well as a reformulation of school curricula to stop transmitting discriminatory content. Just consider the role of women in democratic countries in the 1980s and their situation today: despite ongoing discrimination against women, there is little doubt that they have obtained increasing economic and political power, acquiring many more positions of prominence and symbolic recognition than before.

However, not everyone is happy with this movement toward more integration of historically marginalized groups into society. As Bustikova (2020) persuasively argues, those voters who are angrier with the expansion of the democratic horizon are the ones who in theory should be more willing to endorse populist forces that demand a backlash, a recalibration back to the status quo ante. Indeed, in their much-discussed book *Cultural Backlash*, Inglehart and Norris (2019) contend that liberal democracies are experiencing a battle between younger generations who champion progressive values and older generations who defend authoritarian positions. Seen from this perspective, we can be optimistic about the future of democracy: “In light of the ascendant generational profile of emancipative values, the momentary challenges to democracy are unlikely to completely revert democracy’s long-term rise” (Welzel 2021, 1012).

Yet, new empirical studies reveal that it is not clear that polarization of attitudes between younger and older cohorts is occurring, and there are growing indications that young voters are increasingly likely to support populist radical right parties (Abou-Chadi 2024; Schäfer 2022). This does not mean that backlash politics is a fiction, but it raises the question about how many—and which kind of—voters are in favor of restoring traditional hierarchies and limiting the (further) integration of historically marginalized groups. Interestingly, extant research provides compelling evidence that there is no large swing in public opinion against progressive values. For instance, Walter (2021) shows that at the mass level one cannot identify a clear trend in the direction of a backlash; rather there are important levels of stability. At the same time, Abreu Maia, Chiu, and Desposato (2022) demonstrate that in Latin America there is no evidence that public opinion reacts negatively to the extension of civil rights to the LGBTQ+ community. In summary, it is not far-fetched to suggest that a backlash is being demanded only by a faction of the electorate, which has specific characteristics and does not necessarily represent the majority.

Finally, when thinking about populism from a bottom-up perspective it is useful to consider the growing literature on negative partisanship: the rejection by segments of the voting public of specific political parties. Although it is true that populist forces are in many places relatively new political formations that seem to be gaining electoral ground, one should study both levels of public support and of animosity

toward them. Given that both populist radical right and populist radical left parties often advance polarizing discourses, it is possible to imagine that important sections of the electorate might be at odds with them (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). For instance, novel research for Western Europe shows that populist radical right parties are disliked by more than 50% of the population (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser; Rovira Kaltwasser 2024); a recent study reveals a very similar pattern of rejection of the populist radical right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2024). Whether these political formations might become normalized and more tolerated by the voting public is an open question, which scholars should investigate.

CONCLUSION

This symposium offers authoritative insights into the various debates, issues, and literatures that explore the relationship between populism and democracy. In this conclusion, we have sought to build on these contributions. The rise of populism and the expanding academic discourse on the state of democracy provide a rich foundation to draw from, and the articles in this symposium offer succinct summaries of existing work while also outlining agendas for future research.

It is essential to examine the relationship between populism and democracy from both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. Although much of the focus is on the drivers of populism from below, we suggest that equal attention should be given to the actions of elites—both populist and nonpopulist—and their roles in promoting populism and undermining democratic health. Furthermore, it is valuable to distinguish between populism’s impact on democratic institutions and on the “host ideologies” that typically accompany populist radical right and populist radical left forces.

What unites these top-down and bottom-up perspectives is the realization that the relationship between populism and liberal democracy is far from monolithic. We already know that populists vary widely in terms of ideology, with populism fusing with different ideological currents. In addition, there are significant differences in how populist sentiment emerges among citizens and how populist actors seek to secure support, both in and out of power. The proliferation of populism and the challenges to democracy are neither singularly related nor unified phenomena. For scholars, the main challenge lies in tracking the diverse ways in which populism and democracy interact while maintaining a broader comparative outlook that transcends traditional regional analyses and fosters cross-regional studies.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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