# Populism Revisited

*Michael Bernhard* [iD] *, and Daniel O'Neill*

You cannot be a political science journal editor these days without being inundated with manuscripts on populism. A high percentage of these start with the lament that despite its widespread use, there is no consensus over what populism is, that it is conceptually imprecise, and difficult to define. What usually follows is a discussion of several different influential conceptual works. This often begins with Laclau's notion of populism as a countermovement to the failure of democratic representation under neo-liberal capitalism (2005). After dancing around Laclau's arguments about populism, popular sovereignty, and what constitutes democracy, most writers, ultimately, get around to Mudde's widely cited definition and often adopt a version of it:

> A thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 6)

By Sartori's criteria of good concept formation, this is a very precise minimalist definition. It is, in fact, quite exemplary. Why are scholars so confused about the concept then? First, Mudde is defining an ideology, but populism refers to several different referents beyond ideology. The ideology is employed by actors—social movements, parties, and leaders. And when these actors attain power, we have populist governments and populist regimes. Second, for Mudde populism is a thin ideology. As a result its policy prescriptions and even the notion of who constitutes the central category of the "people" is only defined with reference to a thicker political ideology. That choice can lead to radically different and radically opposed populisms, even in the same country. In other words, no single set of core ideational commitments defines populism—which arguably makes it empty from the standpoint of shared core beliefs—and it is thus capable of spanning the political spectrum from the far left to the far right. Third, because populism usually is product of a crisis of representation in democratic systems, it has the potential to represent and incorporate populations that have been denied equal representation in the past. Yet at the same time the record of populists in power is usually associated with a deterioration in democracy, if not outright autocratization. While populism has democratic potential, its record in power has been more authoritarian.

Because it is a minimal definition, the term "populism" can thus be applied to a large number of referents that differ strongly on other dimensions. Both Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party were populist movements, as was the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. Syriza in Greece; Lega Nord, Forza Italia, and the Five Star Movement in Italy; the Movement for Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia; PAIS in Ecuador; the United Socialist Party of Venezuela; Fidesz in Hungary; and ANO in the Czech Republic are all populist parties. In Poland, we have a populist government under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), and we recently have seen the fall of populist governments under Trump in the United States, Janša in Slovenia, Borissov in Bulgaria, and Babiš in the Czech Republic. However, in Serbia Vučić was reelected, as was Viktor Orbán in Hungary. And in a handful of places historically, we have seen the crystallization of populist regimes as under Perón in Argentina, and Vargas in Brazil. With Orbán's fourth consecutive election, we may be seeing the consolidation of a new form of authoritarian populist regime describing itself with the *contradictio in adjecto* "illiberal democracy" in the heart of the European Union.[1] That such a dizzying array of ideological commitments can all march simultaneously under the banner of populism is surely one of the reasons why there are so many manuscripts on the concept, many of them claiming to offer new and improved understandings of the phenomenon. Populists themselves cannot agree on what political ideas populism stands for or against, so it is little wonder that scholars seek clarification.

If our current understanding of populism is dominated by the notion of populism as an ideology, and populists nevertheless do not agree with one another at the ideational level, perhaps we need to recall the purposes to which ideology is put. Programmatically, political ideology should be first and foremost understood as a justification for the gaining or holding of power.

Whether we are talking about commitments to party or other organizational affiliations, voting for governments, or obedience to a system of rule, the internalization of shared beliefs is what allows one set of actors to command authority over others. Keeping this in mind allows us to problematize the most important question with regard to the significance of populism for the future—the logic of populism in power.

On the one hand, populism in government has become increasingly commonplace as the host of examples above attests, but the question remains whether the current wave of populism will be ephemeral or whether it will change the nature of contemporary rule in a more permanent fashion. It may become permanent by changing the party system. In many places established party systems have collapsed. The most recent example of this is the French party system, where the long-established political parties—conservatives, socialists, communists, and Gaullists—are shadows of their former selves or even gone. And in this sense, the remaking of the Italian party system anticipated what has occurred in France. In France, the last two presidential elections were contested by a novel centrist, Emmanuel Macron, and Marine Le Pen, the scion of a far-right post-fascist party which until recently had been seen as marginal. In the long-established American party system, which is locked into a permanent two-party alternation due to its plurality electoral system and a series of institutional privileges that the two parties have written into law to advantage themselves, the Republican Party has been taken over by the Trump faction and the radicalized base of the party. The United States is now lodged in a pattern where it seems inevitable that we will have alternating periods of right-right populist and non-populist rule, and periods of power-sharing between them. Thus, the question remains whether democratic party systems can endure permanent competition between populist and non-populist actors.

The attempt of the Trump administration and its followers to overturn the American election on January 6, 2021, as well as the gutting of almost all forms of accountability by the successive Orbán governments in Hungary calls into question whether populists in office will freely give up power. The next test will come in Turkey if President Erdoğan loses the elections scheduled for June 2023. The willingness of Babiš of the Czech Republic, Fico in Slovakia, Borissov in Bulgaria, and Janša in Slovenia to accept electoral defeat gives some hope that alternation between populist and non-populist parties may work in parliamentary multiparty systems.

One place to begin answering this question is the extant literature on historical populism in Latin America. Here there is a different definitional emphasis that foregrounds the role of charismatic leadership. One of the most cited alternatives to Mudde's conceptualization of populism is Weyland's:

> populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninsitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. This direct, quasi-personal relationship bypasses established intermediary organizations or deinstitutionalizes and subordinates them to a leader's personal will … . A charismatic leader wins broad, diffuse, yet intense support from such a largely unorganized mass by "representing" people who feel excluded or marginalized from national political life and by promising to rescue them from crises, threats, and enemies. The leader appeals to the people for help in his heroic efforts to regenerate the nation, combat the privileged groups and their special interests, and transform the "corrupt" established institutions. (2001, 14)

While no more committed to a particular set of beliefs than Mudde's definition, charismatic leadership has a particular political logic whether in the context of movements, parties, governments, or regimes. The charismatic bond that exists between a leader and their followers obligates the latter to follow the former based on an exceptional characteristic, such as heroism, piety, or wisdom. If the leader continues to demonstrate this "gift," usually by continuing success and goal attainment, the authoritative bond between leaders and followers remains strong. Because of this stringent performance criterion, charismatic authority tends to be fragile. One wrong move can undermine the obligation to obey, and charisma rarely survives the succession of the original leader. Even successful charismatic movements cannot survive indefinitely because of the yearning of the movement's followers for a return to something like "normal" life. Thus, enduring charismatic leadership maintains itself by institutionalizing the bond between leaders and followers by a process of routinization (Weber 1978, 241-2, 1120).

Charisma is routinized in the direction of one of the other two ideal types of authority, the rational-legal or the traditional (Weber 1978, 246, 1121). It can be rationalized as it has following struggles for democracy or neo-traditionalized like in so many movements of faith or revolutions. Democracy was able to successfully institutionalize and persist by subjecting the relationship between leaders and those subject to their authority to rational-legal electoral procedures. Elections preserve but invert the charismatic bond, making the right to rule subject to ratification by the people. And indeed, the differences between charismatic obedience and belief in rational-legal proceduralism are presently on display in this country as the followers of Donald Trump persist in the belief that their man won the elections despite all evidence to the contrary.

The other path of routinization is traditionalization. Quite often revolutionary movements follow neo-traditional paths. In the USSR, the combat ethos that drove

Leninism as a movement to gain power was replaced by a strange combination of bureaucratic authority and patrimonial empire building (Jowitt 1992). While it was successful for many years, it eventually fell victim to a corrupt logic where the interests of the local agents of the party-state trumped those of party-center principals, and attempted reform led to elite defection and collapse under Gorbachev.

There are not many illustrative examples of institutionalized populist regimes. Perhaps the most relevant cases, the populist regimes of Perón and Vargas in Argentina and Brazil, were plebiscitary in nature and utilized patrimonial cliques around the dictator to oversee the distribution of welfare goods to the poor and working-class constituencies mobilized by the dictator. Vargas had greater success in rule from 1930–1945 in both more democratic and outright dictatorial phases. And while he even returned to the presidency during the postwar period, that ended when he committed suicide in office over his inability to cope with sustained opposition to his exercise of power. In Perón's case the Argentinian military prevented him from ever establishing durable rule. Even though Peronism was never successful in institutionalizing itself as a system of rule, the power of his charisma persists as a durable legacy in the party system (Capelato 2021; Calvo and Murillo 2012).

In the previous issue of the journal, the reflection by Stephen Hanson and Jeffrey Kopstein (2022) discussed the reemergence of patrimonialism as a force in countries ruled by "narcissistic male leaders" as a challenge to democracy and rational-legal administration. This way of exercising power allows populists to undermine the horizontal accountability provided by the rule of law, thus providing a potential pathway to institutionalize new forms of populist autocracy. Patrimonial bureaucracy allows populist leaders to use the resources of the state to buy the continued loyalty of their followers in a way that transcends fragile charismatic obedience with a system of material rewards that addresses the grievances that the initial crisis of representation made salient. We see this in the programs of right-wing populism in power. In the United States, Smith and King (2021) describe the spending and policy priorities of the Trump administration as "white protectionism." Magyar (2016) describes Orbán's Hungary as a "mafia state" because of how Fidesz uses the coffers of the Hungarian state and European Union to enrich itself and to secure the support of Fidesz faithful.

The case of Hungary, the site of the recent Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) meeting in which Viktor Orbán dispensed plentiful advice to his American admirers, gives us perhaps our best idea of what an institutionalized populist regime in the current age might look like. The constitutional structure of Hungary's previous liberal democracy has been undermined by the disassembly of mechanisms of vertical, horizontal and social accountability (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012). The basic regime architecture is competitive authoritarian, where the charismatic authority of the leader is confirmed regularly by the mechanism of plebiscitarian elections. These elections are still relatively free, but they are by no means fair. The electoral system has been manipulated to favor Fidesz candidates, while media has been effectively monopolized by state control and the purchase of a large share of private sector outlets by Fidesz-supporting oligarchs. This makes it difficult for the electoral opponents of the regime to get their message out. Horizontal checks on the regime have been undermined by capture of the legal system by the regime, stacking of the regulatory bodies with Fidesz partisans, and the existence of a special class of legislation, cardinal acts, which can only be revised by a two-thirds majority. These features will make it difficult to undo Fidesz's many advantages and reverse its policies even in the case of an electoral defeat. Finally, the public sphere is subject to increased state encroachment due to the aforementioned control of the media, politicization of higher education and culture, and the remaking of school curricula. When combined with the evolving system of patrimonial rewards, the ruling Fidesz clique around Orbán has the ability to materially reward the oligarchs who bankroll them and the constituencies that support them. In this regard, the success of Orbán in institutionalizing a durable populist regime goes well beyond that of Perón or Vargas, and seems aimed at creating the kind of patrimonial hegemony that kept the PRI in Mexico in power for an extended period of time (Greene 2007).

## The Special Section

Our "Populism Revisited" section includes five articles and three reflections. We have a mix of selections that also look at the structural conditions that promote the emergence of populist actors, and those that focus on their behavior. Michael Zürn opens with a more structural contribution on "How Non-Majoritarian Institutions Make Silent Majorities Vocal: A Political Explanation of Authoritarian Populism." He moves beyond the usual economic and cultural conditions and looks at how the postwar Keynesian compromise between labor and capital led to the creation of what he calls non-majoritarian institutions that have locked in liberal policies, e.g., central banks, the court system, and international organizations. Combined with an established cartel party system, this promoted the failure of representation in liberal democracy and led to the emergence of a silent majority with feelings of exclusion from the system. This is the population from which populist leaders have gained support.

In a classic behavioral take on the issue, Ariel Malka, Yphtach Lelkes, Bert Bakker, and Eliyahu Spivack consider the correlates of support for authoritarian populist

politics in "Who Is Open to Authoritarian Governance within Western Democracies?." Looking at fourteen Western publics using recent attitudinal data, they seek to find which ideological groups are willing to subvert democracy in order to achieve their preferred political outcomes. The most important single correlate they find is cultural conservatism. In half of the sample, including all the English-speaking countries in their sample, they find that a combination of attitudes which they call a "protection-based attitude package" promotes authoritarian political values. This package includes traditionally leftist preferences for redistribution fused with cultural conservatism.

Duncan McDonnell and Stefano Ondelli look at the rhetoric of populist leaders in "The Language of Right-Wing Populist Leaders: Not So Simple." Here the authors show that the widely held assumption that populists use simpler formulations than their competitors to signal their opposition to elites is not ironclad. They investigate the language of rightwing populist leaders in the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy by performing an analysis of the texts of their speeches. They find that Donald Trump is only slightly simpler than Hillary Clinton, and show that French and UK populists show greater linguistic complexity, while the picture in Italy is somewhat more muddled. Their findings call for a reconsideration of this widely held assumption about the rhetoric of populist leaders.

Anu Pauliina Patana takes a decidedly spatial perspective in "Residential Constraints and the Political Geography of the Populist Radical Right: Evidence from France." She uses this approach to discern who supports the parties of the radical right. She identifies areas where voters are unable to affect their circumstances by moving to a better location. Her finding is that the radical right performs best in places where local services are poor and employment opportunities are slim, and the efforts of inhabitants to relocate are blocked by residential constraints.

In "Illiberal Communication and Election Intervention during the Refugee Crisis in Germany," Nikolay V. Marinov, Harald Schoen, Konstantin Gavras, Ashrakat Elshehawy, and Federico Nanni examine how the intervention of a powerful external actor can benefit antisystem parties in democratic states. They examine how Russian state propaganda on refugees was picked up and internalized by political actors in Germany in the midst of the European refugee crisis of the mid-teens in this century. By creating a corpus of over a million news stories, they show how external actors can affect the discourse on highly politicized issues in democratic states in ways that are subversive of democracy.

The first of our reflections, "The Myth of Global Populism," by David Art takes a critical perspective on the "rise of global populism" as the central political narrative of the present decade or so in economically developed democracies. He argues that leftwing populism has quickly waned and that the novelty of our age is instead the success of radical right parties pursuing nativist agendas. These parties have been a constant. What differs about our age is their growing strength. However, calling these actors "populist" endows our interpretation of these actors with potentially redeeming qualities, which obscures the noxiousness of their agenda and the threat they pose to democracy.

In his reflection piece, "Metapolitics and Demographic Anxiety on the New Right: Using and Abusing the Language of Equality," Michael Feola considers the recent discourse surrounding the notion of a "Great Replacement," or an immigration crisis fueled by liberalism that threatens the cultural integrity of Western nations. This was part of the belief system professed recently by the racist mass murderer in Buffalo, NY. Feola argues that the New Right and its identitarian allies across Europe and America are actually engaged in a broader sort of "metapolitical" project that does not aim to simply turn liberal normative vocabularies centered on ideas such as equality toward antiliberal objectives, but ultimately seeks to hollow out the normative substance of the very terms it takes over, with deeply deleterious consequences for a democratic public.

We close out the section with a piece by Bernard Grofman on the "Prospects for Democratic Breakdown in the U.S.: Bringing the States Back In." As we began the section with a discussion of the ways in which institutional structures can pose populist threats to democracy, we close with this consideration of how American federalism has the potential to turn false claims of electoral fraud into reversals of electoral results. Among the common features that promote such an outcome are institutional mechanisms of minoritarian control such as partisan gerrymandering, malapportionment in the U.S. Senate, and new legislation by states giving state-level bureaucrats the ability to challenge and even overturn electoral outcomes.

## Other Content

As usual, in this issue we also have a wide array of excellent articles outside the thematic focus of the special section. These range across various subfields.

James Hodgdon Bisbee, Kevin Munger, and Jennifer M. Larson present an analysis of how social media is used in the discipline in "#polisci Twitter: A Descriptive Analysis of how Political Scientists Use Twitter in 2019." They examine how political scientists use Twitter to disseminate their work, and the effectiveness of it as a medium to do so. They find that Twitter-use is more common among females and those on the tenure track. Despite this, they ultimately find that research shared by

men is more likely to be passed on by men than research by women.

In "*Chevron, State Farm*, and the Impact of Judicial Doctrine on Bureaucratic Policymaking," Alan E. Wiseman and John R. Wright analyze how these two landmark supreme court cases have limited the ability of Congress and the president to control the bureaucracy. In doing so, they show how standard bureaucratic analyses in the discipline fail to take the impact of judicial doctrine into account. They then illustrate how the judiciary has come to exercise increasing control over the federal bureaucracy through a discussion of regulatory rollback. They illustrate the implications of these cases for recent debates regarding regulatory rollbacks in the Trump administration and argue that bureaucratic control over the past forty years has tilted in favor of the judicial branch of American national government.

Adam Cayton and Ryan Dawkins address a seeming contradiction in legislative behavior in "Incongruent Voting or Symbolic Representation? Asymmetrical Representation in Congress, 2008–2014." The expectation is that members of Congress should take positions favored by a majority of their constituents, but they observe that they do just the opposite in one-third of rollcall votes. Further, they find that Republicans cross their constituents more frequently than Democrats, yet are not punished more frequently by the voters. This expectation is based on the notion that voters are only interested in their policy preferences, but when they factor in identity-based symbolic preferences they find that voters take both sets of preferences into account.

In "Clientelism from the Client's Perspective: A Meta-Analysis of Ethnographic Literature," Miquel Pellicer, Eva Wegner, Markus Bayer, and Christian Tischmeyer attempt to bridge the gap between quantitative and ethnographic work on clientelism. They code the characteristics of clientelistic transactions in the ethnographic literature and then use quantitative techniques to analyze those data. They identify three core areas of clientelism: "vote-buying," "relational," and "collective." They then use principal component analysis to identify two important dimensions of clientelism: equal-unequal and individual-universal and explore the ramifications of these dimensions for the welfare of the clients.

In "Economic Migration: On What Terms?" Anna Stilz asks whether wealthy democratic states should liberalize economic migration and, if that is the case, under what conditions they should do so. She argues that even if we grant that states have a right to control their borders and to prioritize the interests of their inhabitants, there are nevertheless still good reasons to liberalize permanent low-skilled migration, so long as such a commitment is paired with appropriate social policies.

In "Small Money Donating as Democratic Politics," Jennifer Rubenstein assesses the normative implications of the skyrocketing increase in small monetary donations to political causes. Building on the conceptual distinction between monetization and economization, she argues that small-money political donations are potentially democratic not only because they are small, but also because they are monetary. Specifically, she argues that the mobility, divisibility, commensurability, and fungibility of money help make small-money political donations potentially democratic, by making them potentially accessible, non-intrusive, and collective.

We continue our commitment to sponsor serious discussion of research ethics in the discipline in "Ethics, Epistemology, and Openness in Research with Human Participants," by Diana Kapiszewski and Elisabeth Jean Wood. They connect epistemological debates over "ways of knowing" with the debate over research ethics and transparency. By integrating the epistemological dimension with the ethical dimension of how to conduct research, the authors seek to change how we understand research transparency, by seeing it as just one aspect of research openness. Their work argues that the heterogeneity of human participant research makes it inappropriate to develop blanket rules for pursuing openness without reference to the epistemological context.

Our last contribution is a reflection from Matthew Wilson and Carl Henrik Knutsen on "Geographical Coverage in Political Science Research." They collected data on 27,690 publications in eight major political science journals from their inception and analyzed the geographical focus of their subject matter. They find that our discipline concentrates on a small sample of countries in North America and Western Europe. However, they also find that the discipline has begun to become more global in recent decades, as this bias has diminished with the incorporation of studies of a broader number of countries. They raise the issue that past and continuing sample bias may well undermine the universality of the descriptive and causal claims of the discipline, as well as the theories based on those findings.

## Note

1 We do not mean to imply that all democracies must be liberal, simply that illiberalism and democracy are in contradiction to each other. There are forms of democracy that are aliberal (e.g., electoral, majoritarian) or supra-liberal—participatory or deliberative. None of these are illiberal.

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