Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

# POPULISM

## A Very Short Introduction

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# Contents

# Chapter 1
# What is populism?

Populism is one of the main political buzzwords of the 21st century. The term is used to describe left-wing presidents in Latin America, right-wing challenger parties in Europe, and both left-wing and right-wing presidential candidates in the United States. But while the term has great appeal to many journalists and readers alike, its broad usage also creates confusion and frustration. This book aims to clarify the phenomenon of populism and to highlight its importance in contemporary politics.

It offers a specific interpretation of populism, which is broadly shared but far from hegemonic. Its main strength lies in offering a clear definition of populism that is able to both capture the essence of most of the political figures who are generally described as populist and yet distinguish between populist actors from nonpopulist actors. Hence, it counters two of the main criticisms of the term, namely (1) that it is essentially a political *Kampfbegriff* (battle term) to denounce political opponents; and (2) that it is too vague and therefore applies to every political figure.

We position populism first and foremost within the context of liberal democracy. This choice is more informed by empirics and theory than by ideology. Theoretically, populism is most fundamentally juxtaposed to liberal democracy rather than to

democracy per se or to any other model of democracy. Empirically, most relevant populist actors mobilize within a liberal democratic framework, i.e., a system that either *is* or *aspires to be* liberal democratic. Although this focus is particular, and obviously limiting, it means that we neither consider liberal democracy to be flawless, or any alternative democratic system by definition undemocratic, nor apply the approach only within a liberal democratic framework.

## An essentially contested concept

While no important concept is beyond debate, the discussion about populism concerns not just what it is, but whether it even exists. It truly is an essentially contested concept. A perfect example of the conceptual confusion is found in the seminal volume *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* in which different contributors define populism, among others, as an ideology, a movement, and a syndrome. To make things even more complicated, in different world regions populism tends to be equated, and sometimes conflated, with quite distinct phenomena. For instance, in the European context populism often refers to anti-immigration and xenophobia, whereas in Latin America it frequently alludes to clientelism and economic mismanagement.



Part of the confusion stems from the fact that populism is a label seldom claimed by people or organizations themselves. Instead, it is ascribed to others, most often with a negative connotation. Even the few rather consensual examples of populism, like the Argentine president Juan Domingo Perón or the murdered Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, did not self-identify as populists. As populism cannot claim a defining text or a proto-typical case, academics and journalists use the term to denote very diverse phenomena.

While our so-called ideational approach is broadly used in a variety of academic disciplines, as well as more implicitly in much journalism, it is but one of several approaches to populism. An

exhaustive overview of all the different approaches goes well beyond the possibilities, and purpose, of this short book, but we do want to mention the most important alternatives, which are more commonly used in certain academic disciplines or geographical regions.

The popular agency approach holds populism to mean a democratic way of life built through popular engagement in politics. It is particularly common among historians in the United States and among authors of volumes on the original North American populists—adherents of the Populist Party—of the late 19th century. Perhaps best represented in Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, the popular agency approach considers populism essentially as a positive force for the mobilization of the (common) people and for the development of a communitarian model of democracy. It has both a broader and a narrower interpretation of populist actors than most other approaches, including almost all progressive mass movements.



The Laclauan approach to populism is particularly current within political philosophy, so-called critical studies, and in studies of West European and Latin American politics. It is based on the pioneering work of the late Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau, as well as on his more recent collaborative work with his Belgian wife Chantal Mouffe, in which populism is considered not only as the essence of politics, but also as an emancipatory force. In this approach liberal democracy is the problem and radical democracy is the solution. Populism can help achieve radical democracy by reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo.

The socioeconomic approach was particularly dominant in studies of Latin American populism during the 1980s and 1990s. Economists such as Rudiger Dornbusch and Jeffrey Sachs have understood populism primarily as a type of irresponsible

economic policy, characterized by a first period of massive spending financed by foreign debt and followed by a second period marked by hyperinflation and the implementation of harsh economic adjustments. While the socioeconomic approach has lost support in most other social sciences, largely because later Latin American populists supported neoliberal economics, it remains current among economists and journalists, particularly in the United States. In a more popular form "populist economics" refers to a political program that is considered irresponsible because it involves (too) much redistribution of wealth and government spending.

A more recent approach considers populism, first and foremost, as a political strategy employed by a specific type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers. It is particularly popular among students of Latin American and non-Western societies. The approach emphasizes that populism implies the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses. Seen from this perspective, populism cannot persist over time, as the leader sooner or later will die and a conflict-ridden process for his replacement is inevitable.



A final approach considers populism predominantly as a folkloric style of politics, which leaders and parties employ to mobilize the masses. This approach is particularly popular within (political) communication studies as well as in the media. In this understanding, populism alludes to amateurish and unprofessional political behavior that aims to maximize media attention and popular support. By disrespecting the dress code and language manners, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also as courageous leaders who stand with "the people" in opposition to "the elite."

Each individual approach has important merits, and various aspects are compatible with our own ideational approach. Hence,

we do not disregard these approaches here out of disagreement; rather, we seek to provide one clear and consistent approach throughout this short book. We believe this will help the reader better understand this highly complex but important phenomenon, even if through a specific lens.

## An ideational approach

The long-standing debate over the essence of populism has led some scholars to argue that populism cannot be a meaningful concept in the social sciences, while others consider it primarily as a normative term, which should be confined to media and politics. While the frustration is understandable, the term *populism* is too central to debates about politics from Europe to the Americas to simply do away with. Moreover, it is feasible to create a definition that is able to accurately capture the core of all major past and present manifestations of populism, while still precise enough to exclude clearly nonpopulist phenomena.



In the past decade a growing group of social scientists have defined populism predominantly on the basis of an "ideational approach," conceiving it as a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview. While we are far from securing a consensus, ideational definitions of populism have been successfully used in studies across the globe, most notably in western Europe, but increasingly also in eastern Europe and the Americas. Most scholars who adhere to the ideational approach share the core concepts of our definition, if not necessarily the peripheral concepts or the exact language.

Beyond the lack of scholarly agreement on the defining attributes of populism, agreement is general that all forms of populism include some kind of appeal to "the people" and a denunciation of "the elite." Accordingly, it is not overly contentious to state that populism always involves a critique of the establishment and an adulation of the common people. More concretely, we define

populism as *a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous 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.*

Defining populism as a "thin-centered ideology" is helpful for understanding the oft-alleged malleability of the concept in question. An ideology is a body of normative ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purposes of society. Simply stated, it is a view of how the world is and should be. Unlike "thick-centered" or "full" ideologies (e.g., fascism, liberalism, socialism), thin-centered ideologies such as populism have a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—other ideologies. In fact, populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public. Consequently, by itself populism can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate.



This means that populism can take very different shapes, which are contingent on the ways in which the core concepts of populism appear to be related to other concepts, forming interpretative frames that might be more or less appealing to different societies. Seen in this light, populism must be understood as a kind of mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality. It is not so much a coherent ideological tradition as a set of ideas that, in the real world, appears in combination with quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ideologies.

The very thinness of the populist ideology is one of the reasons why some scholars have suggested that populism should be conceived of as a transitory phenomenon: it either fails or, if successful, "transcends" itself into something bigger. The main

fluidity lies in the fact that populism inevitably employs concepts from other ideologies, which are not only more complex and stable, but also enable the formation of "subtypes" of populism. In other words, although populism as such can be relevant in specific moments, a number of concepts closely aligned to the morphology of the populist ideology are in the long run at least as important for the endurance of populist actors. Hence, populism seldom exists in pure form. Rather, it appears in combination with, and manages to survive thanks to, other concepts.

One of the main critiques against ideational definitions of populism is that they are too broad and that they can potentially apply to all political actors, movements, and parties. We agree that concepts are useful only if they not only include what is to be defined, but also *exclude* everything else. In other words, our definition of populism only makes sense if there is non-populism. And there are at least two direct opposites of populism: elitism and pluralism.



Elitism shares populism's basic monist and Manichean distinction of society, between a homogeneous "good" and a homogeneous "evil," but it holds an opposite view on the virtues of the groups. Simply stated, elitists believe that "the people" are dangerous, dishonest, and vulgar, and that "the elite" are superior not only in moral, but also in cultural and intellectual terms. Hence, elitists want politics to be exclusively or predominantly an elite affair, in which the people do not have a say; they either reject democracy altogether (e.g., Francisco Franco or Augusto Pinochet) or support a limited model of democracy (e.g., José Ortega y Gasset or Joseph Schumpeter).

Pluralism is the direct opposite of the dualist perspective of both populism and elitism, instead holding that society is divided into a broad variety of partly overlapping social groups with different ideas and interests. Within pluralism diversity is seen as a strength rather than a weakness. Pluralists believe that a society

should have many centers of power and that politics, through compromise and consensus, should reflect the interests and values of as many different groups as possible. Thus, the main idea is that power is supposed to be distributed throughout society in order to avoid specific groups—be they men; ethnic communities; economic, intellectual, military or political cadres, etc.—acquiring the capacity to impose their will upon the others.

Likewise, it is important to establish the fundamental difference between populism and clientelism, as these terms are often conflated in the literature (particularly with regard to Latin American politics). Clientelism is best understood as a particular mode of *exchange* between electoral constituencies and politicians, in which voters obtain goods (e.g., direct payments or privileged access to employment, goods, and services) conditioned on their support for a patron or party. Without a doubt, many Latin American populist leaders have employed clientelist linkages to win elections and remain in power. However, they are not the only ones to do this, and there is no reason to think that populism has a particular affinity to clientelism. While the former is first and foremost an ideology, which can be shared by different political actors and constituencies, the latter is essentially a strategy, used by leaders and parties (of different ideologies) to win and exercise political power.



The only probable similarity between clientelism and populism is that both are unrelated to the left-right distinction. Neither the employment of clientelistic party-voter linkages nor the adherence to left or right politics is something that defines populism. Depending on the socioeconomic and sociopolitical context in which populism emerges, it can take different organizational forms and support diverse political projects. This means that the thin-centered nature of populism allows it to be malleable enough to adopt distinctive shapes at different times and places. By way of illustration, Latin American populism appeared mostly in a neoliberal guise in the 1990s (e.g., Alberto Fujimori in Peru), yet

in a mainly radical left variant in the 2000s (e.g., Hugo Chávez in Venezuela).

## Core concepts

Populism has three core concepts: the people, the elite, and the general will.

### The people

Much of the debate around the concept and phenomenon of populism centers on the vagueness of the term "the people." Virtually everyone agrees that "the people" is a construction, at best referring to a specific interpretation (and simplification) of reality. Consequently, various scholars have maintained that this vagueness renders the concept useless, while others have looked for more specific alternatives, such as "the heartland." However, Laclau has forcefully argued that it is exactly the fact that "the people" is an "empty signifier" that makes populism such a powerful political ideology and phenomenon. Given that populism has the capacity to frame "the people" in a way that appeals to different constituencies and articulate their demands, it can generate a shared identity between different groups and facilitate their support for a common cause.



While "the people" is a construction, which allows for much flexibility, it is most often used in a combination of the following three meanings: the people as sovereign, as the common people, and as the nation. In all cases the main distinction between "the people" and "the elite" is related to a secondary feature: political power, socioeconomic status, and nationality, respectively. Given that virtually all manifestations of populism include some combination of these secondary features, it is rare to find cases in which only one of the mentioned meanings of the people comes to the fore.

The notion of the people as sovereign is based on the modern democratic idea that defines "the people" not only as the ultimate

source of political power, but also as "the rulers." This notion is closely linked to the American and French Revolutions, which, in the famous words of U.S. president Abraham Lincoln, established "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people." However, the formation of a democratic regime does not imply that the gap between governed and governors disappears completely. Under certain circumstances, the sovereign people can feel that they are not being (well) represented by the elites in power, and, accordingly, they will criticize—or even rebel against—the political establishment. This could set the stage for a populist struggle "to give government back to the people."

In other words, the notion of 'the people as sovereign' is a common topic within different populist traditions, which functions as a reminder of the fact that the ultimate source of political power in a democracy derives from a collective body, which, if not taken into account, may lead to mobilization and revolt. Indeed, this was one of the driving forces behind the U.S. People's Party (also called the Populist Party) at the end of the 19th century, as well as other populist manifestations in the United States during the 20th century and today.



A second meaning is the idea of "the common people," referring explicitly or implicitly to a broader class concept that combines socioeconomic status with specific cultural traditions and popular values. Speaking of "the common people" often refers to a critique of the dominant culture, which views the judgments, tastes, and values of ordinary citizens with suspicion. In contrast to this elitist view, the notion of "the common people" vindicates the dignity and knowledge of groups who objectively or subjectively are being excluded from power due to their sociocultural and socioeconomic status. This is the reason why populist leaders and constituencies often adopt cultural elements that are considered markers of inferiority by the dominant culture. For example, Perón promulgated new conceptions and representations of the political community in Argentina that glorified the role of previously

marginalized groups, in general, and of the so-called shirtless ones (*descamisados*) and blackheads (*cabecitas negras*), in particular.

To address the interests and ideas of "the common people" is indeed one of the most frequent appeals that we can detect in different experiences that are usually labeled as populist. It is worth noting that this meaning of the people tends to be both integrative and divisive: not only does it attempt to unite an angry and silent majority, but it also tries to mobilize this majority against a defined enemy (e.g., "the establishment"). This anti-elitist impetus goes together with a critique of institutions such as political parties, big organizations, and bureaucracies, which are accused of distorting the "truthful" links between populist leaders and "the common people."

The third and last meaning is the notion of the people as the nation. In this case, the term "the people" is used to refer to the national community, defined either in civic or in ethnic terms—for example, when we speak about "the people of Brazil" or "the Dutch people." This implies that all those "native" to a particular country are included, and that together they form a community with a common life. Accordingly, various communities of "people" represent specific and unique nations that are normally reinforced by foundational myths. Nevertheless, the definition of the boundaries of the nation is anything but simple. To equate "the people" with the population of an existing state has proven to be a complicated task, particularly because different ethnic groups exist on the same territory.



## The elite

Unlike "the people," few authors have theorized about the meanings of "the elite" in populism. Obviously, the crucial aspect is morality, as the distinction is between the *pure* people and the *corrupt* elite. But this does not say much about *who* the elite are. Most populists not only detest the political establishment, but they also critique the economic elite, the cultural elite, and the

media elite. All of these are portrayed as one homogeneous corrupt group that works against the "general will" of the people. While the distinction is essentially moral, the elite are identified on the basis of a broad variety of criteria.

First and foremost, the elite are defined on the basis of power, i.e., they include most people who hold leading positions within politics, the economy, the media, and the arts. However, this obviously excludes the populists themselves, as well as those within these sectors that are sympathetic to the populists. For example, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) would regularly critique "the media" for defending "the elite" and not treating the FPÖ fairly, but with one notable exception: *Die Kronen Zeitung*. This popular tabloid, read by almost one in five Austrians, was for a long time one of the staunchest supporters of the party and its late leader, Jörg Haider, and it was therefore considered a true voice of the people.



Because of the fundamental anti-establishment position of populism, many scholars have argued that populists can, by definition, not sustain themselves in power. After all, this would make them (part of) "the elite." But this ignores both the essence of the distinction between the people and the elite, which is moral and not situational, and the resourcefulness of populist leaders. From former Slovak premier Vladimir Mečiar to late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez populists in power have been able to sustain their anti-establishment rhetoric by partly redefining the elite. Essential to their argument is that the *real* power does not lie with the democratically elected leaders, i.e., the populists, but with some shadowy forces that continue to hold on to illegitimate powers to undermine the voice of the people. It is here that "the paranoid style of politics," as the famous progressive American historian Richard Hofstadter described populism, most clearly comes to the fore.

Not unrelated to the definitions of the people, described above, the elite would be defined in economic (class) and national

(authentic) terms. While populists defend a post-class world, often arguing that class divisions are artificially created to undermine "the people" and keep "the elite" in power, at times they do define the elite in economic terms. This is mostly the case with left-wing populists, who try to merge populism with some vague form of socialism. However, even right-wing populists relate the ultimate struggle between the people and the elite to economic power, arguing that the political elite are in cahoots with the economic elite, and putting "special interests" above the "general interests" of the people. This critique is not necessarily anti-capitalist either; for example, many Tea Party activists in the United States are staunch defenders of the free market, but they believe that big business, through its political cronies in Congress, corrupts the free market through protective legislation, killing competition and stifling small businesses, considered the true engines of capitalism and part of "the people."



Linking the elite to economic power is particularly useful for populists in power, as it allows them to "explain" their lack of political success; i.e., they are sabotaged by the elite, who might have lost political power but who continue to hold economic power. This argumentation was often heard in post-communist eastern Europe, particularly during the transitional 1990s, and it is still popular among contemporary left-wing populist presidents in Latin America. For instance, president Chávez often blamed the economic elite for frustrating his efforts at "democratizing" Venezuela, while Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras, leader of the left populist Coalition for the Radical Left (Syriza), accused "the lobbyists and oligarchs in Greece" of undermining his government (incidentally, neither allegation was unfounded).

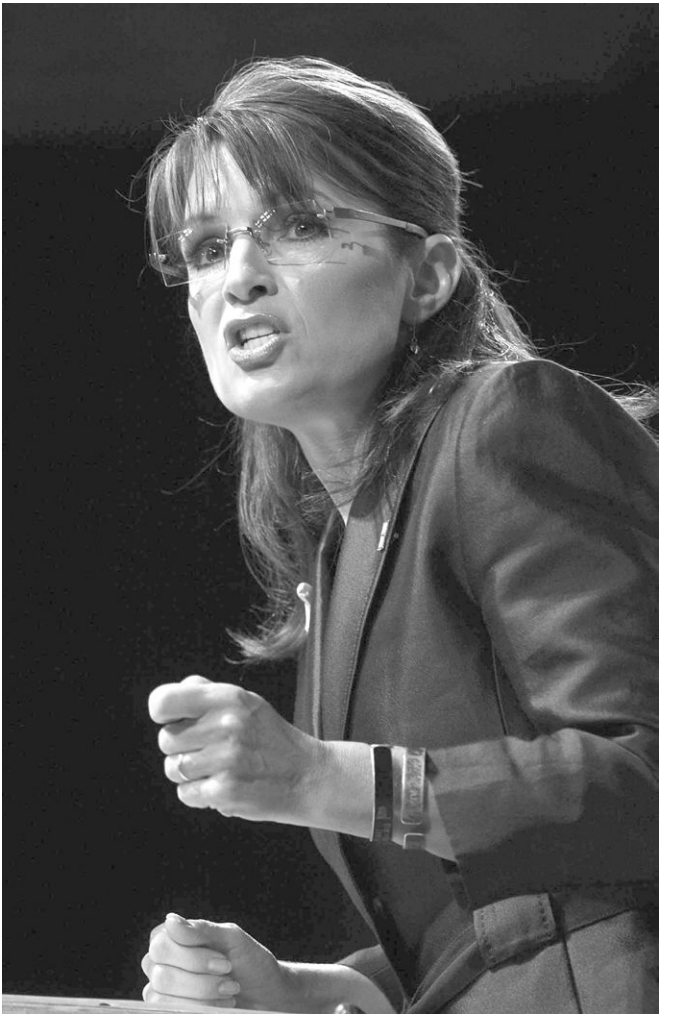
Populists also often argue that the elite is not just ignoring the interests of the people; rather, they are even working against the interests of the country. Within the European Union (EU) many populist parties accuse the political elite of putting the interests of the EU over those of the country. Similarly, Latin American

populists have for decades charged that the political elites defend the interests of the United States rather than those of their own countries. And, combining populism and anti-Semitism, some populists believe the national political elites are part of the age-old anti-Semitic conspiracy, accusing them of being "agents of Zionism." For example, in eastern and central Europe leading politicians of right-wing populist parties such as Attack in Bulgaria and the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) have accused the national elites of being agents of Israeli or Jewish interests.

Finally, populism can be merged completely with nationalism, when the distinction between the people and the elite is both moral and ethnic. Here the elite are not just seen as *agents* of an alien power, they are considered alien themselves. Oddly enough, this rhetoric is not so much prevalent among the xenophobic populists in Europe, given that the elite (in whatever sector) is almost exclusively "native." Leaving aside the anti-Semitic rhetoric in eastern Europe, ethnic populism (or "ethnopopulism") is most evident in contemporary Latin America. For example, Bolivian president Evo Morales has made a distinction between the pure "mestizo" people and the corrupt "European" elites, playing directly at the racialized power balance in Bolivia.



While the key distinction in populism is moral, populist actors use a variety of secondary criteria to distinguish between the people and the elite. This provides them flexibility that is particularly important when populists acquire political power. Though it would make sense that the definition of the elite would be based upon the same criteria as that of the people, this is not always the case. For example, xenophobic populists in Europe often define the people in ethnic terms, excluding "aliens" (i.e., immigrants and minorities), but they do not argue that the elite are part of another ethnic group. They do argue, however, that the elite favors *the interests* of the immigrants over those of the native people.



**1. Sarah Palin became prominent after her nomination as the 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate in the United States. Although she has been influential in the populist Tea Party movement, the group has maintained a not always smooth relationship with the Republican Party.**

In many cases populists will combine different interpretations of the elite and the people, i.e., class, ethnicity, and morality. For example, contemporary American right-wing populists such as Sarah Palin and the Tea Party describe the elite as latte-drinking and Volvo-driving East Coast liberals; contrasting this, implicitly, to the real/common/native people who drink regular coffee, drive American-made cars, and live in Middle America (the heartland). Pauline Hanson, leader of the right-wing populist One Nation party, would juxtapose the true people of rural Australia, proud of their British settler heritage, to the intellectual urban elite, who "want to turn this country upside down by giving Australia back to the Aborigines."

## General will

The third and last core concept of the populist ideology is the notion of the general will. By making use of this notion, populist actors and constituencies allude to a particular conception of the political, which is closely linked to the work of the famous philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau distinguished between the general will (*volonté générale*) and the will of all (*volonté de tous*). While the former refers to the capacity of the people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest, the latter denotes the simple sum of particular interests at a specific moment in time. Populism's monist and moral distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite reinforces the idea that a general will exists.

Seen in this light, the task of politicians is quite straightforward: they should be, in the words of the British political theorist Margaret Canovan, "enlightened enough to see what the general will is, and charismatic enough to form individual citizens into a cohesive community that can be counted on to will it." Chávez provided a prime example of this populist understanding of the general will in his 2007 inaugural address:

> Nothing…is in greater agreement with the popular doctrine then to consult with the nation as a whole regarding the chief points upon which governments, basic laws, and the supreme rule are founded. All individuals are subject to error and seduction, but not the people, which possesses to an eminent degree of consciousness of its own good and the measure of its independence. Because of this its judgment is pure, its will is strong, and none can corrupt or even threaten it.

By employing the notion of the general will, many populists share the Rousseauian critique of representative government. The latter is seen as an aristocratic form of power, in which citizens are treated as passive entities, mobilized periodically by elections, in which they do nothing more than select their representatives. In contrast, they appeal to Rousseau's republican utopia of self-government, i.e., the very idea that citizens are able to both make the laws and execute them. Not surprisingly, beyond the differences across time and space, populist actors usually support the implementation of direct democratic mechanisms, such as referenda and plebiscites. By way of illustration, from Peru's former president Alberto Fujimori to Ecuador's current president Rafael Correa, contemporary populism in Latin America is prone to enact constitutional reforms via constituent assemblies followed by referendums.

Hence, it can be argued that an elective affinity exists between populism and direct democracy, as well as other institutional mechanisms that are helpful to cultivate a direct relationship between the populist leader and his/her constituencies. To put it another way, one of the practical *consequences* of populism is the strategic promotion of institutions that enable the construction of the presumed general will. In fact, adherents of populism criticize the establishment for their incapacity and/or disinterest in taking into account the will of the people. And this critique is often not without reason. For instance, populist parties of the left and the

right in Europe condemn the elitist nature of the project of the European Union (EU), while contemporary left populists in Latin America criticize the (former) elite for ignoring the "real" problems of the people.

Rather than a rational process constructed via the public sphere, the populist notion of the general will is based on the notion of "common sense." This means that it is framed in a particular way, which is useful for both aggregating different demands and identifying a common enemy. By appealing to the general will of the people, populism enacts a specific logic of articulation, which enables the formation of a popular subject with a strong identity ("the people"), which is able to challenge the status quo ("the elite"). From this angle, populism can be seen as a democratizing force, since it defends the principle of popular sovereignty with the aim of empowering groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment.



However, populism also has a dark side. Whatever its manifestation, the monist core of populism, and especially its notion of a "general will," may well lead to the support of authoritarian tendencies. In fact, populist actors and constituencies often share a conception of the political that is quite close to the one developed by the German political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). According to Schmitt, the existence of a homogeneous people is essential for the foundation of a democratic order. In this sense, the general will is based on the unity of the people and on a clear demarcation of those who do not belong to the demos and, consequently, are not treated as equals. In short, because populism implies that the general will is not only transparent but also absolute, it can legitimize authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of the people.

Some commentators go so far as to argue that populism is essentially anti-political because populist actors and

constituencies seek to create anti-political utopias, in which, supposedly, no dissent exists between (or within) "we, the people." This is perfectly captured in Paul Taggart's notion of "the heartland"—the populist's imagined community and territory that portrays a homogenous identity that allegedly is authentic and incorruptible. But this is only part of the picture. Claiming to oppose "political correctness" and break the "taboos" imposed on the people by the elite, populists promote the repoliticization of certain topics, which either intentionally or unintentionally are not (adequately) addressed by the establishment, such as immigration in western Europe or the policies of the so-called Washington Consensus in Latin America.

## The advantages of the ideational approach



Adopting an ideational approach, we have defined populism as a thin-centered ideology, which has come to the fore not only in different historical moments and parts of the world, but also in very different shapes or "subtypes." While populism has been conceptualized in other ways, such as a multiclass movement or a specific type of mobilization or political strategy, the ideational approach has several advantages over alternative approaches, which will be developed in more detail in the following chapters.

First, by conceiving of populism as a thin-centered ideology, it is possible to understand why populism is so malleable in the real world. Due to its restricted ideological core and concepts, populism necessarily appears attached to other concepts or ideological families, which are normally at least as relevant to the populist actors as populism itself. Most notably, political actors have combined populism with a variety of other thin- and thick-centered ideologies, including agrarianism, nationalism, neoliberalism, and socialism.

Second, contrary to definitions that limit populism to a specific type of mobilization and leadership, the ideational approach

is able to accommodate the broad range of political actors normally associated with the phenomenon. Populist actors have mobilized in many different manners, including through loosely organized social movements as well as through tightly structured political parties. Similarly, while a certain type of leadership is prevalent, populist leaders come in many different shapes and sizes. They all do have one thing in common, however: a carefully crafted image of the vox populi.

Third, the ideational approach is uniquely positioned to provide a more comprehensive and multifaceted answer to the crucial question in debates on populism: what is its relationship with democracy? The relationship between populism and democracy is not as straightforward as its many opponents or its few protagonists claim. The relationship is complex, as populism is both a friend *and* a foe of (liberal) democracy, depending on the stage of the process of democratization.



Fourth, and finally, defining populism as an ideology allows us to take into account both the demand side and the supply side of populist politics. Where most accounts focus exclusively on the populist supply, as they define populism as a style or strategy used by the political elite, our approach enables us to also look at the populist demand, i.e., the support for populist ideas at the mass level. This helps us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of both the causes of populist episodes and the costs and benefits of democratic responses to populism.

# Chapter 5
# Populism and democracy

The relationship between populism and democracy has always been a topic of intense debate. Although we are far from reaching a consensus, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the conventional position is that populism constitutes an intrinsic danger to democracy. Probably the most famous recent proponent of this position is the French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon, who argues that populism should be conceived of as "a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of representative democracy." But throughout time dissenting voices have appeared, some even proclaiming populism to be the only true form of democracy. Among the more recent defenders is Laclau, who believed that populism fosters a "democratization of democracy" by permitting the aggregation of demands of excluded sectors.

Both interpretations are to a certain extent correct. Depending on its electoral power and the context in which it arises, populism can work as *either* a threat to *or* a corrective for democracy. This means that populism per se is neither good nor bad for the democratic system. Just as other ideologies, such as liberalism, nationalism, or socialism, can have a positive and negative impact on democracy, so can populism. To better understand this complex relationship, we start by presenting a clear definition of democracy, which helps to clarify how the latter is positively and negatively affected by populist forces. We then present an original

theoretical framework of the impact of populism on different political regimes, which allows us to distinguish the main effects of populism on the different stages of the *process* of both democratization and de-democratization.

## Populism and (liberal) democracy

Just like populism, democracy is a highly contested concept in the academic realm and public space. The debates not only concern the correct definition of democracy, but also the various types of democracy. Although this is not the place to delve too deeply into this debate, we need to clarify our own understanding of democracy, before we can discuss its complex relationship with populism.

Democracy (*sans* adjectives) is best defined as the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule; nothing more, nothing less. Hence, democracy can be direct or indirect, liberal or illiberal. In fact, the very etymology of the term *democracy* alludes to the idea of self-government of the people, i.e., a political system in which people rule. Not by chance, most "minimal" definitions consider democracy first and foremost as a *method* by which rulers are selected in competitive elections. Free and fair elections thus correspond to the defining property of democracy. Instead of changing rulers by violent conflict, the people agree that those who govern them should be elected by majority rule.



However, in most day-to-day usages the term *democracy* actually refers to *liberal* democracy rather than to democracy per se. The main difference between democracy (without adjectives) and liberal democracy is that the latter refers to a political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities. When it comes to protecting fundamental rights, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and, in consequence, liberal democratic regimes have adopted very

different institutional designs. For instance, some of them have a strong written constitution and Supreme Court (e.g., United States), while others have neither (e.g., United Kingdom). Despite these differences, *all* liberal democracies are characterized by institutions that aim to protect fundamental rights with the intention of avoiding the emergence of a "tyranny of the majority."

This interpretation is very close to the one proposed by the late U.S. political scientist Robert Dahl, who maintained that liberal democratic regimes are structured around two separate and independent dimensions: public contestation and political participation. While the former refers to the possibility to freely formulate preferences and oppose the government, the latter alludes to the right to participate in the political system. Moreover, to ensure the optimization of both dimensions, he believed a demanding set of so-called institutional guarantees is required, including freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, alternative sources of information, among others.



Now that we have clear definitions of democracy and liberal democracy, it is time to reflect on how they are affected by populism. In short, populism is essentially democratic, but at odds with *liberal* democracy, the dominant model in the contemporary world. Populism holds that nothing should constrain "the will of the (pure) people" and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the "institutional guarantees" that should protect them.

In practice, populists often invoke the principle of popular sovereignty to criticize those independent institutions seeking to protect fundamental rights that are inherent to the liberal democratic model. Among the most targeted institutions are the judiciary and the media. For example, Berlusconi, who has been in and out of court for decades, would attack the judges for defending the interests of the Communists (hence, the term "Red Robes"). In pure populist fashion he once stated: "The

government will continue to work, and parliament will make the necessary reforms to guarantee that a magistrate will not be able to try to illegitimately destroy someone who has been elected by the citizens." As expected, populists in power have often transformed the media landscape by turning state media into mouthpieces of the government and closing and harassing the few remaining independent media outlets. This has been the case, most recently, in Ecuador, Hungary, and Venezuela.

Populism exploits the tensions that are inherent to liberal democracy, which tries to find a harmonious equilibrium between majority rule and minority rights. This equilibrium is almost impossible to achieve in the real world, as the two overlap on important issues (think of antidiscrimination laws). Populists will criticize violations of the principle of majority rule as a breach of the very notion of democracy, arguing that ultimate political authority is vested in "the people" and not in unelected bodies. In essence, populism raises the question of who controls the controllers. As it tends to distrust any unelected institution that limits the power of the *demos*, populism can develop into a form of democratic extremism or, better said, of illiberal democracy.



In theory, populism is more negative for democracy in terms of public contestation and more positive in terms of political participation. On the one hand, populism tends to limit the scope of competition because it often maintains that those actors who are depicted as evil should be allowed to neither play the electoral game nor have access to the media. While it goes too far to call populism "the paranoid style of politics," populist forces are prone to highly charged rhetoric and conspiracy theories. For instance, Syriza politicians in Greece would refer to domestic opponents as "the fifth column" of Germany and one of its (now former) ministers even called the EU "terrorists." In the United States, a country in which some citizens are fascinated with conspiracy theories, many right-wing populists are convinced that elites among both Democrats and Republicans are working to establish

a "new world government," which would put the United States under UN control.

On the other hand, populism tends to favor political participation, since it contributes to the mobilization of social groups who feel that their concerns are not being considered by the political establishment. As its core belief is that the people is sovereign, *all* the people and *only* the people should determine politics. It is worth noting that specific forms of populism, such as the populist radical right in Europe, might try to limit political participation by excluding certain minority groups. But these groups are excluded from the *native* people and not the *pure* people; in other words, it is the nativism and not the populism that is at the basis of the exclusion.



**Table 1. Positive and negative effects of populism on liberal democracy**

| Positive effects | Negative effects |
|---|---|
| Populism can give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the political elite. | Populism can use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent minority rights. |
| Populism can mobilize excluded sectors of society, improving their integration into the political system. | Populism can use the notion and praxis of popular sovereignty to erode the institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights. |
| Populism can improve the responsiveness of the political system, by fostering the implementation of policies preferred by excluded sectors of society. | Populism can promote the establishment of a new political cleavage, which impedes the formation of stable political coalitions. |
| Populism can increase democratic accountability, by making issues and policies part of the political realm. | Populism can lead to a moralization of politics whereby reaching agreements becomes extremely difficult if not impossible. |

In summary, populism can play both a positive and a negative role for liberal democracy. For instance, by giving voice to constituencies that do not feel represented by the elite, populism works as a democratic corrective. Populists often do this by politicizing issues that are not discussed by the elites but are considered relevant by the "silent majority." Indeed, without the presence of populist radical right parties in Europe, immigration would probably not have become a significant topic for mainstream political parties in the 1990s. The same can be said about the economic and political integration of excluded sectors in contemporary Latin America. This topic has become one of the most pressing matters in the last decade, to a large extent due to the rise of left-wing populist presidents, such as Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia, who successfully politicized the dramatic levels of inequality in their countries.



But populism can also have a negative impact on liberal democracy. For instance, by claiming that no institution has the right to constrain majority rule, populist forces can end up attacking minorities and eroding those institutions that specialize in the protection of fundamental rights. As a matter of fact, here lays the main threat posed by populist radical right parties to liberal democracy in Europe. Aiming to construct an ethnocracy, a model of democracy in which the state belongs to a single ethnic community, they undermine the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, such as Muslims in western Europe and Roma (gypsies) in eastern Europe.

Something similar occurs in contemporary Latin America, where left populist forces have drafted new constitutions that seriously diminish the capacity of the opposition to compete against the government for political power. A case in point is contemporary Ecuador, where President Correa has used constitutional reform not only to put loyal supporters in key state institutions, such as the electoral tribunal and the judiciary, but also to create new electoral districts and rules to favor his own


**8. The Bolivarian government of Venezuela printed this stamp after the death of Hugo Chávez, a populist leader who was president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013. Chávez wears the presidential sash, and crowds of his supporters assemble behind him.**

political party. An almost identical process has recently taken place in Hungary.

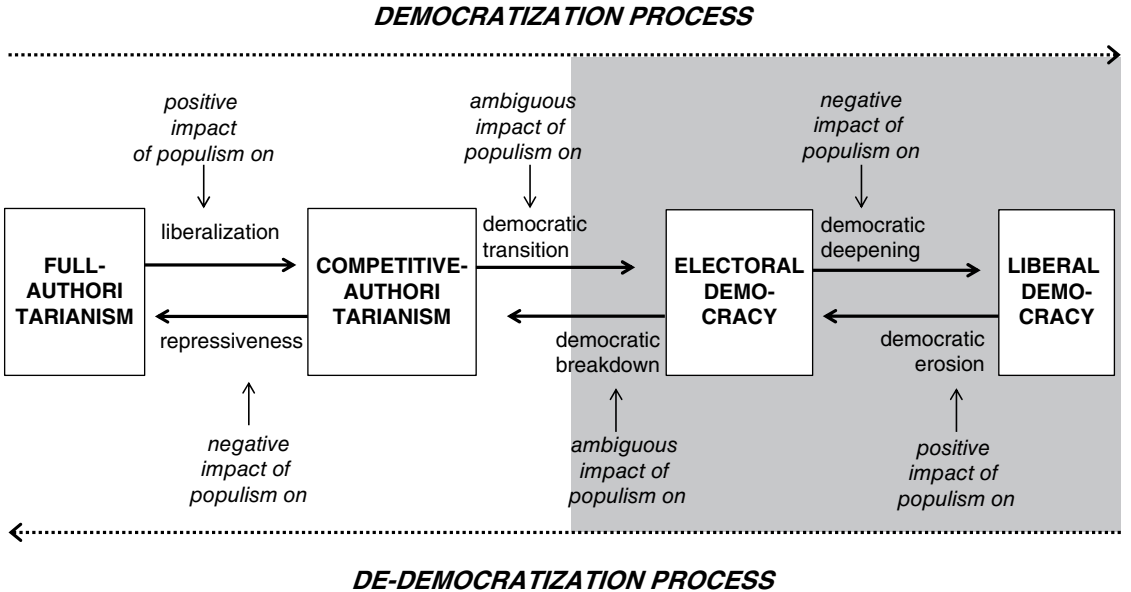
## Populism and the process of (de-)democratization

While a lively debate is ongoing on the role of populism in established liberal democracies, almost no attention is paid to the impact of populist forces on other political regimes and on the potential transition processes to either more or less democracy. What are the effects of populism on a (competitive) authoritarian regime or on fostering transformations toward more democracy? This is a blind spot that needs illumination.

Democracy is always incomplete and can at any time experience either deterioration or improvement. Therefore, it is important to think not only about *regimes* of (liberal) democracy, but also about *processes* of democratization (and de-democratization). Although there is no such thing as a "paradigmatic" democratization path, it is possible to recognize the existence of different episodes in which a movement toward either democratization or de-democratization occurs. Each of these stages alludes to the transition from one political regime to another, and we suggest that populism has a different effect in each. Let's begin by explaining the four most common political regimes in the contemporary world.



We can distinguish two different regimes within the authoritarian and the democratic camps, respectively: full authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism, on the one hand, and electoral democracy and liberal democracy, on the other. In full authoritarianism there is no space for political opposition and there is systematic repression, while competitive authoritarianism does allow for limited contestation but within an uneven political playing field between incumbents and opposition. Competitive authoritarian regimes tolerate the presence of an opposition and conduct elections, but the latter are systematically violated in favor of officeholders.




**9. Populism can have positive and negative effects on different political regimes. In fact, populist forces can trigger episodes of institutional change that might well lead to both democratization and de-democratization.**

Electoral democracy is characterized by the periodic realization of elections in which the opposition can potentially win. Nevertheless, electoral democracy has a number of institutional deficits that hinder respect for the rule of law and exhibit weaknesses in terms of independent institutions seeking the protection of fundamental rights. While liberal democracies are not perfect regimes, immune to accountability deficits, compared to electoral democracies the governed have more opportunities to hold the authorities accountable, ranging from a robust public sphere to independent judicial oversight.

It is worth noting that each of these four political regimes have their own political dynamic, but once they are in place they tend to remain relatively stable. Consequently, they are not *necessarily* in transition toward (more) authoritarianism or (more) democracy. Nevertheless, the rise of populist forces can trigger changes within each of these regimes. We theorize about the particular kind of impact that populism has on each of the transition episodes and illustrate this on the basis of one case each.



The impact of populism on the democratization process can be divided into three episodes: liberalization, democratic transition, and democratic deepening. During the first stage of *liberalization*, when an authoritarian regime loosens restrictions and expands some individual and group rights, populism tends to be *grosso modo*, a positive force for democracy. Because it helps articulate demands of popular sovereignty and majority rule, which call into question existing forms of state repression, populism contributes to the formation of a "master frame" through which opposition leaders can mobilize (all) those opposed to the regime. A good example of this can be found in the role that populism played in some of the broad opposition movements in communist eastern Europe, most notably the Solidarity trade union in Poland.

Solidarity was an anticommunist umbrella organization, harboring a broad and loose coalition of actors who agreed on the

problem of the communist present almost as much as they disagreed on the preferred post-communist future. While Solidarity as such was not a populist movement, some leaders and constituencies of the movement adhered to populism, which was particularly expressed at mass demonstrations by its iconic leader Lech Walesa. Fundamentally, Solidarity represented "the people" against "the elite" of the Polish United Workers Party (PZSR) in both ethnic (nationalist) and moral (populist) terms. It is not a coincidence that (leading) members of the Solidarity movement would found various populist parties in the post-communist period, of which the most notable is the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party of twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyńsky.

In the stage of *democratic transition*, i.e., the transition from a competitive (or fully) authoritarian regime to an electoral democracy, populism plays an ambiguous, but still rather constructive role, fostering the idea that the people should elect their rulers. Given that populist forces are characterized by claiming that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost, they will attack the elites in power and push for a change in the form through which access to political power is warranted. This means that they will support the realization of free and fair elections. An interesting case in this regard is Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in Mexico and the formation of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) at the end of the 1980s.



The PRD split from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which—under a succession of names—had been in power since 1929 and, despite its democratic façade, ruled a competitive authoritarian regime. Once Cárdenas and others realized that it was not possible to change the neoliberal economic policies of the PRI from within, they opted to build a new political vehicle that would not only oppose neoliberalism, but also demand the full implementation of free and fair elections. Since its beginning, the PRD adopted a populist language in order to present its party

leader—initially Cárdenas and later Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)—as a "humble man of the people," interested in building a real democracy for all Mexicans. Although the PRD was not able to win the presidency itself, it did help pave the way for the historic deals that enabled the "founding elections" of 2000, in which the conservative National Action Party (PAN) won the presidency.

Finally, during the stage of *democratic deepening*, pending reforms that are crucial for improving institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights and the development of a fully-fledged liberal democratic regime are completed. Theoretically, populists are at odds with the process of democratic deepening, as they support an interpretation of democracy based on unconstrained popular will and the rejection of unelected bodies. The latter are normally portrayed by populism as illegitimate institutions, which seek to defend the "special interests" of powerful minorities rather than the "real" interests of the people.



Three-time Slovak prime minister Vladimír Mečiar provides an excellent example of populist opposition to democratic deepening, particularly during his third and last coalition government (1994–1998), which consisted of three populist parties. When Mečiar came to power in 1994, Slovakia was in the group of democratic frontrunners for accession to the European Union (EU) in post-communist central and eastern Europe. As a consequence of the government's illiberal politics, which included both disregard for laws as well as (attempted) efforts to change laws—such as the redrawing of electoral districts to undermine the opposition parties—the country slowly but steadily retreated into the category of democratic laggards. The EU even threatened to exclude Slovakia from the first round of accession.

The last decades have served as a reminder that democracy can be not only deepened, but also diluted, and even abolished. Populism

can play a significant role in this process of de-democratization too, which can also be divided in three episodes: democratic erosion, democratic breakdown, and repressiveness. The stage of *democratic erosion* includes incremental changes to undermine the autonomy of those institutions that specialize in the protection of fundamental rights, such as diminishing judiciary independency, jettisoning the rule of law, and weakening minority rights. Populist leaders and followers are inclined to trigger episodes of democratic erosion because they support, in essence, an extreme majoritarian model of democracy that opposes any groups or institutions that stand in the way of implementing "the general will of the people." Probably no better illustration of the ways in which populism can lead to a process of democratic erosion can be cited than the current situation in Hungary.

After losing the 2002 elections, a loss he only grudgingly acknowledged, Viktor Orbán and his right-wing populist Fidesz party adopted a radical opposition outlook that even included violent street protests. Upon his return to power in 2010, he used his party's electoral majority to force through a new constitution that ensures, in the words of some academic observers, that "(t)he current government now has very few checks on its own power, but the new constitutional order permits the governing party to lodge its loyalists in crucial long-term positions with veto power over what future governments might do." Although foreign governments and international organizations have been reluctant to criticize the Orbán government too harshly, both the EU and the United States have expressed growing concerns with the "crackdown" on democracy in Hungary.

The second stage in the process of de-democratization is *democratic breakdown*, denoting a regime shift from electoral democracy to competitive authoritarianism (or full authoritarianism in an extreme case). Populist actors are expected to play an ambiguous, but still rather supportive role during democratic breakdown, because they are inclined to tilt the rules

of the game in favor of populist forces and/or attack "the corrupt elite" for not permitting the expression of the general will of the people. Fujimori's regime in Peru is a case in point.

Fujimori came to power as a populist outsider in 1990, campaigning against the political establishment and in favor of a gradual approach to solve the economic crisis that the country was facing. Given that Fujimori neither had a strong party behind him nor was interested in establishing alliances with the existing parties, the country experienced a real deadlock between the executive and legislative powers. To break the deadlock, Fujimori suspended the constitution and closed the parliament in 1992, arguing that he was simply following "the will of the people." After this *autogolpe* (self-coup), Peru continued to be governed by Fujimori for eight more years, during which the regime was certainly closer to competitive authoritarianism than to electoral democracy. In fact, Fujimori established an alliance with military sectors—in particular with the intelligence service and its director Vladimiro Montesinos—with the aim of not only destroying the Shining Path guerrilla movement, but also skewing the playing field to the disadvantage of the opposition.



Finally, the last stage of de-democratization is *repressiveness*, the movement from a competitive authoritarian to a full authoritarian regime, a process that usually unfolds gradually and is related to the occurrence of crises. Given that populism inherently supports popular sovereignty and majority rule, we believe that populists will generally oppose this process of repressiveness. There are almost no recent cases of repressiveness, in which a populist actor has been relevant.

One of the few exceptions is probably Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenka, who—despite opportunity and rising opposition—has not transformed his competitive authoritarian regime into a fully authoritarian one. The main reason that Lukashenka has supported a competitive authoritarian regime,

based on (increasingly rigged) electoral support, rather than the fully authoritarian "clan politics" of other post-Soviet countries, is his populist ideology. He justifies his (competitive authoritarian) regime on the basis of a populist argumentation, in which the opposition is painted as a "corrupt elite," aligned to foreign (i.e., Western) powers. However, for Lukashenka to be able to claim to be the true representative of "the pure Belarusian people" with some legitimacy, he needs a popular contest with his opponents, even if it is through elections that are not truly competitive.

## Intervening variables

This theoretical framework distinguishes, first and foremost, between the effects of populism in the six distinct stages of the processes of democratization and de-democratization. However, within each stage the nature and strength of the effect can vary too, depending on at least three intervening variables: the political power of populist forces, the type of political system in which populist actors operate, and the international context.



The most important factor is the political power of the populist actor. Whether populist forces are in opposition or in government can affect not only the strength, but also the nature of their impact on the process of democratization. In general, populists-in-opposition tend to call for more transparency and the implementation of more democracy (e.g., founding elections, referendums, recall votes) to break the alleged stranglehold of the elite, either in a (competitive) authoritarian or in an (electoral) democratic context.

Populists-in-power have a more complicated relationship with the use of direct democracy and respect of the rules of public contestation. Although it is true that populists defend majority rule, only some of them have more or less consistently used plebiscitary instruments. Most notably, Chávez organized several referendums, including a successful one to overturn term limits for the presidency, which allowed him to win reelection for the

second time, and an unsuccessful one to change the constitution. Populist politicians have also used their political power to tilt the electoral playing field in their own favor, as both Correa and Orbán have done through constitutional reforms.

A second important factor is the *type* of political system. Like all political actors, once populists come to power in a democratic system they are more or less constrained by the specific features of the political regime in which they operate. While presidential systems make it easier for populist "outsiders" to gain power, they often lack support at other levels to push through their agenda—particularly when they lack a strong party organization. In contrast, parliamentary systems tend to limit the power of populists-in-power because they often lead to coalition governments, in which populist parties have to work together with mostly stronger nonpopulist parties—as was the case with the FPÖ in Austria, for example. However, if a populist actor, or coalition of actors, acquires a parliamentary majority, they have fewer counterbalancing forces to contend with—as is most strikingly illustrated by Hungary, where Orbán for a long time could count on a qualified parliamentary majority, allowing him to change the constitution without any impedimentary action by the opposition.



Finally, the international context plays an important role. If a country is integrated into a strong network of liberal democracies, such as the EU, it is more difficult, but not impossible (again, see Hungary under Orbán), for a populist actor to undermine key features of liberal democracy without a major international backlash. Not by chance, the recent coming to power of left populist governments in various Latin American countries has been accompanied by efforts to construct new regional institutions, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which are trying to defend their own model of democracy. In fact, UNASUR has developed its own system of electoral observation to compete with the system of the

Organization of American States (OAS), the main intercontinental organization in the Americas, in which Canada and the United States are also member states.

## Populism and democracy revisited

The complexity of the relationship between populism and democracy is reflected in theory and practice. In essence, populism is not against democracy; rather it is at odds with *liberal* democracy. It is a set of ideas that defends extreme majoritarianism and supports a form of illiberal democracy. Populism strongly champions popular sovereignty and majority rule but opposes minority rights and pluralism. But even its relationship with liberal democracy is not one-sided. Around the world populist forces seek to give voice and power to marginalized groups, but they also tend to combat the very existence of oppositional forces and transgress the rules of political competition.



In practice, populists usually cite and exploit a tension inherent in many liberal democracies of the contemporary world: they criticize the poor *results* of the democratic regime, and, to solve this problem, they campaign for a modification of the democratic *procedures*. When the liberal democratic regime does not deliver what certain constituencies want, political entrepreneurs can adopt the populist set of ideas to criticize the establishment and argue that the time has come to strengthen popular sovereignty. Put another way, populists tend to claim that the rule of law and the institutions in charge of the protection of fundamental rights (e.g., electoral tribunals, constitutional courts, supreme courts, etc.) not only limit the capacity of the people to exercise their rightful power, but also give rise to growing discontent with the political system.

Populism does not have the same effect in each stage of the democratization process. In fact, we suggest that populism tends

to play a positive role in the promotion of an electoral or minimal democracy, but a negative role when it comes to fostering the development of a full-fledged liberal democratic regime. Consequently, while populism tends to favor the democratization of authoritarian regimes, it is prone to diminish the quality of liberal democracies. Populism supports popular sovereignty, but it is inclined to oppose any limitations on majority rule, such as judicial independence and minority rights. Populism-in-power has led to processes of de-democratization (e.g., Orbán in Hungary or Chávez in Venezuela) and, in some extreme cases, even to the breakdown of the democratic regime (e.g., Fujimori in Peru).

If the democratic system becomes stable, populists will continue to challenge any limitations on majority rule, and when they become strong enough, they can cause a process of democratic erosion. However, it is unlikely that they will threaten the existence of the democratic system to the point of producing its breakdown, as they will experience strong resistance from multiple actors and institutions that defend the existence of independent bodies specialized in the protection of fundamental rights. To a certain extent, this is the scenario that some European countries are experiencing today, in which populist forces have become electorally dominant (e.g., Greece or Hungary) but do not have absolute leeway to revamp the whole institutional design of their countries.