Week 6
civics and community engagement

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

POPULISM

A Very Short Introduction

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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."

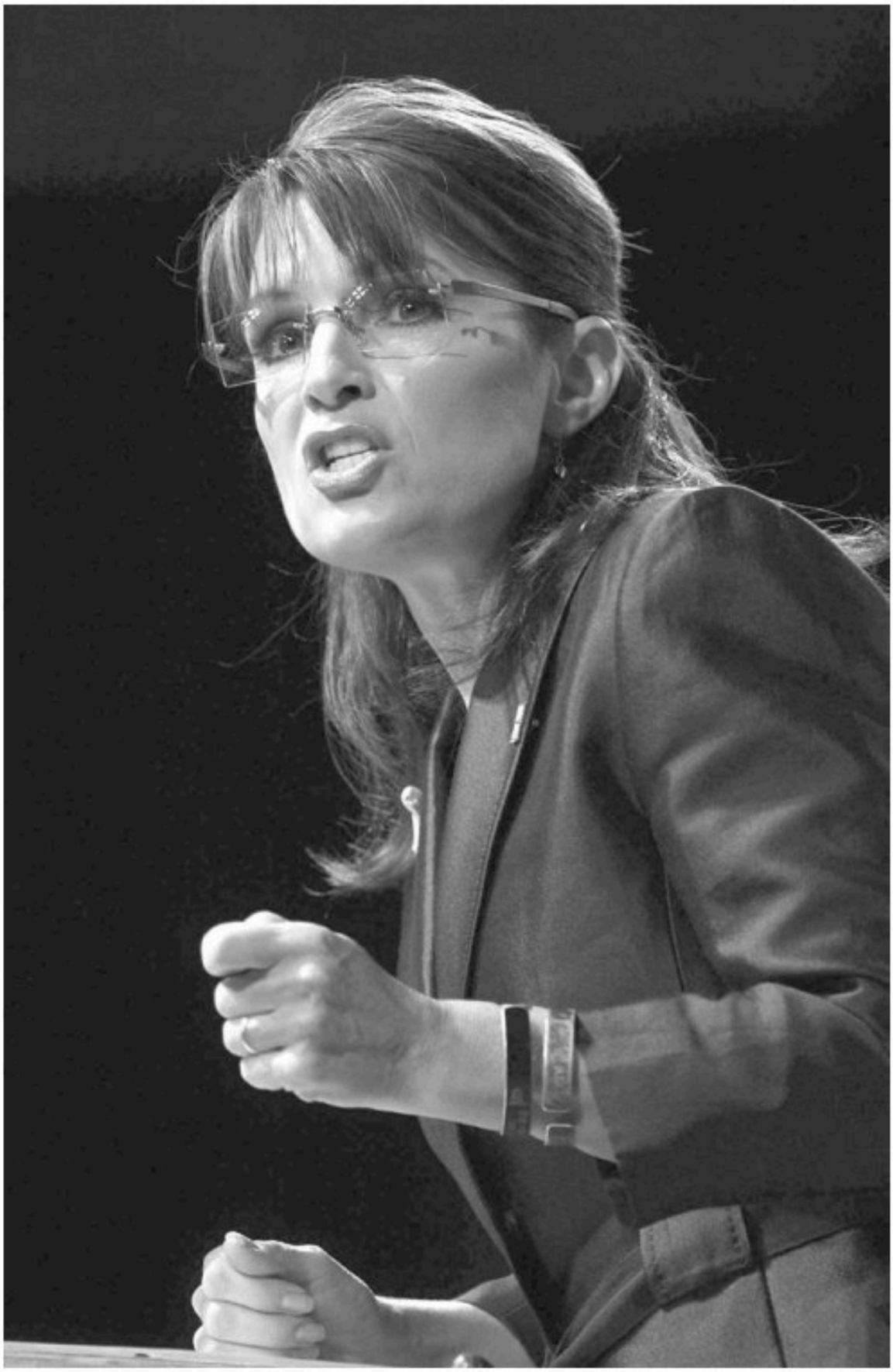
Linking the elite to economic power is particularly useful for populists in power, as it allows them to "explain" their lack of political success; i.e., they are sabotaged by the elite, who might have lost political power but who continue to hold economic power. This argumentation was often heard in 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.