



Democratization

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

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Published online: 24 May 2011.

To cite this article: Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) The ambivalence of populism: threat and corrective for democracy, *Democratization*, 19:2, 184-208, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2011.572619](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.572619)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.572619>

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The ambivalence of populism: threat and corrective for democracy

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(Received 28 July 2010; final version received 21 January 2011)

Two images of populism are well-established: it is either labelled as a pathological political phenomenon, or it is regarded as the most authentic form of political representation. In this article I argue that it is more fruitful to categorize populism as an ambivalence that, depending on the case, may constitute a threat to or a corrective for democracy. Unfolding my argument, I offer a roadmap for the understanding of the diverse and usually conflicting approaches to studying the relation between populism and democracy. In particular, three main approaches are identified and discussed: the liberal, the radical and the minimal. I stress that the latter is the most promising of them for the study of the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy. In fact, the minimal approach does not imply a specific concept of democracy, and facilitates the undertaking of cross-regional comparisons. This helps to recognize that populism interacts differently with the two dimensions of democracy that Robert Dahl distinguished: while populism might well represent a democratic corrective in terms of inclusiveness, it also might become a democratic threat concerning public contestation.

Keywords: populism; democracy; Latin America; Europe; cross-regional research

Introduction

Populism is not a marginal phenomenon in the contemporary world. Since the 1990s, both in Europe and Latin America a (re)emergence of populist actors and parties has taken place. This has generated an intense scholarly debate, in which theoretical issues and practical questions are addressed. There has been an explosion of literature discussing not only the concept of populism, but also the impact of populism on democracy. The growing interest in the topic arguably is due to the common opinion that populism embodies a dangerous trend, which, by emphasizing the idea of popular sovereignty, may pursue problematic goals

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such as the exclusion of ethnic minorities. However, populism can also be conceived of as a kind of democratic corrective since it gives voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites, and forces them to react and change the political agenda.

Yet, in the literature on populism and its relationship with democracy there is a dearth of scholarly attention to cross-regional research. Virtually all studies that have investigated populism so far have focused their empirical and theoretical analyses on one specific region. To fill this research gap, this article sets out to examine the body of literature on European and Latin American populism with the aim of gaining insight into the relationship between populism and democracy. I argue that the European and Latin American experiences of populism are different both in terms of their purpose and strength. Accordingly, a comparison of the literature dealing with these experiences is a promising way of studying the various forms in which populism may affect democratic regimes.

Furthermore, I will show that the problems of analysing the relationship between populism and democracy depend to a great extent on normative assumptions and preconceptions of how democracy should function. While authors who adhere to the model of liberal democracy usually see populism as pathology, scholars who sympathize with the notion of radical democracy tend to think of populism as a positive force that strengthens political representation. Thus, the impact of populism on democracy has tended to be less an empirical question and more a theoretical issue, which is answered mostly by speculations deriving from an ideal standpoint of how democracy should be.

How to overcome this normative bias? I maintain that the most promising way is to follow those authors that develop a minimal approach to studying populism vis-à-vis democracy. The advantage of this kind of approach is that it focuses the debate on the core aspects of populism, and in consequence, does not make broader generalizations about the potential impact of populism on democracy. In other words, since minimal definitions of populism do not have a preference for an ideal model of democracy, they are less prone to develop normative biases that predetermine the findings. Moreover, minimal definitions are very useful for doing cross-regional research, because by offering a 'lowest common denominator' they help avoid conceptual stretching, that is, the distortion that can result when a concept developed for one set of cases is extended to additional cases for which the characteristics of the concept do not apply.²

The article is structured as follows. First, I offer an outline of what I call the liberal, radical and minimal approaches to studying populism vis-à-vis democracy. I show that each of these approaches proposes a particular relationship between populism and democracy, and I maintain that the minimal approach is the only one that permit us grasp that populism can be both a threat to and a corrective for democracy. Relying on this idea, in the following section I make use of Robert Dahl's³ distinction between two dimensions of democracy – inclusiveness and public contestation – arguing that each of them interacts differently with

populism. Finally, I present a short conclusion in which the main findings of the article are summarized.

The liberal approach: populism as a democratic pathology

The guiding question of the liberal approach to studying the relationship between populism and democracy is about the reasons behind the emergence of the populist 'syndrome', that is, why certain societies in a particular point in time develop features that permit the rise of populist forces. From this angle, populism is usually understood not only as a multi-class movement and/or political party, but also as a kind of passive consequence of macro-level socioeconomic developments.⁴ For instance, it is common to hear that in times of crisis – linked to developments like modernization, economic transformation or mass immigration – the electorate may change their preferences, facilitating the emergence of populist leaders.⁵ As I will argue, this implies that within this approach, populism is perceived as a reaction to the malfunctioning of democratic rule.

To a great extent, the liberal approach is rooted in the study of European nationalism and more specific in the analysis of fascism. In this regard, Lipset's⁶ study represents a seminal work. Based on an empirical analysis of the supporters of fascism, he revises the social basis of diverse modern mass movements, and concludes that the middle classes played a key role.⁷ Given that the latter embodied the core constituency of fascism, Lipset argues that in every social stratum it is possible to find both democratic and extremist political positions.⁸ It is worth noting that this thesis counters the common argument that the bourgeoisie is the driving force of democracy.⁹ In addition, it assumes that under certain conditions – for instance an economic crisis or growing political polarization – the middle classes tend to support extremist political positions.¹⁰

In the cited book, Lipset analyses not only fascism but also the rise of populism in Latin America. The cases that he has in mind are the emergence of Perón in Argentina and of Vargas in Brazil. For him, both examples represent a phenomenon similar to fascism, although here the core constituency did not come from the middle classes, but rather from the lower classes. Thus, the singularity of this 'Latin American variation of fascism' lies in its leftist roots, because it relied on social groups that normally tend to support communism or socialism.¹¹ Following this idea, Gino Germani elaborated his own interpretation of Latin American populism. In his view, this phenomenon is related to an abrupt modernization process. Since countries like Argentina and Brazil experienced a quick industrialization and urbanization, there were new masses available to mobilize. In consequence, Germani defines populism as a multi-class movement that '[...] usually includes contrasting components such as claim for equality of political rights and universal participation for the common people, but fused with some sort of authoritarianism often under charismatic leadership'.¹²

A problem that concerns the framework developed by Germani in particular and the liberal approach in general is its emphasis on the multi-class nature of

Latin American populism. From this point of view, populism's broad appeal gave their parties heterogeneous followings that were unwieldy but also very effective in both reaching newly enfranchised voters and mobilizing different social strata.¹³ Due to the formation of this more or less open alliance between very dissimilar groups, the leader is argued to be the most significant component of the movement in order to maintain and manage the coalition. Although this argument has some plausibility, it is worth noting that the generation of a broader alliance between different social classes is one of the key features of mass political parties, in which the *inner organization* and not necessarily the external leadership is decisive for electoral success.¹⁴ Accordingly, the multi-class character does apply, for instance, to the Christian and Social Democratic parties in Europe and not only to the Latin American populist movements.¹⁵

Despite this kind of problematic assumptions, Germani's work develops an interesting perspective for the study of populism and is a prime example of the liberal approach. His standpoint is actually very close to the historical sociology of Charles Tilly who argues that '*when* things happen within a sequence affect *how* they happen'.¹⁶ Indeed, Germani understands populism as a consequence of a singular path towards modernity experimented by Latin American countries like Argentina and Brazil, in which – as was previously stated – the rapid transformation of the social structure, not only impeded the formation of strong social democratic parties like in Western Europe, but also enabled the emergence of populist movements.¹⁷

Germani's perspective for the study of populism is still very influential for scholars working on Latin America. A good example of this is the position of Philip Oxhorn. In attempting to develop a theoretical framework for the study of populism, Oxhorn argues that in Latin America '[...] the heterogeneous class structure characterizing the popular sectors creates collective action problems that historically have resulted in popular sector mobilization by populist elites'.¹⁸ His standpoint rests upon some of Germani's arguments as well as new theoretical contributions, so that he is capable of developing a framework which can be seen as a contemporary example of the liberal approach. Oxhorn emphasizes that given its economic structure, Latin America is distinguished by a small working class and a big informal sector. Since this class structure is marked by societal inequality and heterogeneity, it makes it difficult to create encompassing collective identities that could serve as a basis for autonomous mass-based collective action. Instead of this, in Latin America populist movements are likely to appear when the existing political parties and representative institutions are incapable of responding to widespread frustration and discontent.¹⁹ From this it follows that if a country has a strong political party system and a functioning liberal democracy, there is little room for the formation and maintenance of populism.²⁰

Nevertheless, the vitality and up-to-dateness of the liberal approach can be noticed not only in the study of Latin America, but also of Europe. In effect, it is common to hear the idea that the contemporary emergence of right wing populism in Europe goes hand in hand with the constitution of a new social stratum: the

so-called 'modernization losers'.²¹ The latter is composed of those social groups that, during the last decade, experienced an objective or subjective loss of their own status due to the implementation of economic reforms that reduced the presence of the European welfare state. However, some authors criticize the empirical validity of this thesis.²² In fact, populist radical right parties have shown a great success precisely in those regions of Europe where the structural prerequisites for their rise were hardly existent: Norway, Switzerland, Flanders and the northeast of Italy are regions of Western Europe in which economic prosperity is very high and unemployment is very low. In this sense, it is plausible to say that '[...] every European country has a (relatively) fertile breeding ground for the populist radical right, yet only in some countries do these parties also flourish in elections'.²³ From this angle, the answer to the populism puzzle is not to be found in the formation of a new constituency in favour of populism, but rather in the establishment of parties capable of developing a new political ideology, that is, the party supply.

Beyond the differences between the analysis of Latin American and European populism, those authors that can be classified within the liberal approach tend to share the idea that populism is disadvantageous for democracy. In fact, they assume that populism is a democratic pathology because it brings about disruptive forces that transgress both individual rights and representative institutions. This challenge goes back to the classical analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville²⁴ and his concern with the emergence of a 'tyranny of the majority'. In saying this, he criticized the formation of a democratic rule in which the opinion of the majority achieves the same status as the king in an aristocratic rule, so that both the interests and existence of the minorities are likely to be in danger.²⁵ To overcome this challenge, de Tocqueville and many other authors advocate the institutionalization of a system of 'checks and balances'. In this model, the people do not govern directly, but rather through the control and selection of their representatives, although this does not mean that the latter have to implement the wishes of the electorate.²⁶

However, liberal democracy and representative politics do not always perform well. When the links between the demos and the political elite are failing it may lead to a breeding ground for the emergence of populism. In this sense, populism epitomizes a reaction to the malfunctioning of representative politics and their difficulties both in explaining and legitimizing complex policy initiatives, such as, for example, the governance structure of the European Union.²⁷ Based on the idea that popular sovereignty is the primary value of democracy, populism not only assumes the existence of a dividing line between 'the people' and 'the elites', but also aspires to construct a political model in which representative institutions are not necessary.²⁸ Paul Taggart has summarized this view clearly:

The fact that populism is a reaction against representative politics means that it has nothing substantial to offer in its place. [...] For positive alternatives populism has to turn to the ideologies to which it attaches itself. Populism *qua* populism has little to offer representative politics other than as an indicator of the latter's ill-health.²⁹

As this quote from Taggart shows, those who adhere to the model of liberal democracy tend to assume that populism is a 'syndrome' or 'pathology'. This standpoint is based on normative assumptions about the way in which democracy should function. The latter is seen as a regime that follows the rule of law with the aim of limiting the power of the state and allowing for a legitimate process of collective decision-making. Accordingly, the question of the legitimacy of the democratic regime is answered by saying that the people have the power to oppose the government and even sanction it via elections. However, the sympathizers of the model of liberal democracy usually overlook that the people might be conceived of not only as constituted power but also as constituent power, that is, the people can play an *active* role in terms of (re)founding and updating the higher legal norms and procedural rules that regulate the exercise of power. As Böckenförde³⁰ has argued, the constitution that defines the democratic character of the state is a human construction, in which the people as such define a set of rules in order to determine the nature of the constituted power. In other words, the legitimacy of the democratic order relies not only on the principles of majority rule and the rule of law, but also on the very idea that the people are the constitutional creator and, in consequence, at times might exceed and transgress the established political order.³¹

In summary, the model of liberal democracy does not offer a convincing solution to the so-called boundary problem: how to define which actors have the right to participate in collective decision-making?³² An answer such as 'the people are the adult population of the nation-state' is much too simple. The term 'the people' has often been defined as a narrower category than that of the population, sometimes because it designated an exclusive group of privileged citizens (for example, only whites, or only men), and sometimes – conversely and confusingly –, because it meant precisely those excluded from that elite (for example, the 'common people').³³ In fact, liberal as well as deliberative theories of democracy try to solve this boundary problem by referring to the 'contingent forces of history', that is, peoples are formed by accident, convention and more often than not, by wars.³⁴ From this angle, the question of the legitimacy of the democratic order emerges once the people are constituted, but there is little space for either being aware of the people as constituent power, or analysing how democratic the very process of generating, maintaining and transforming a political peoplehood really is. Not surprisingly, those who adhere to the model of liberal democracy are prone to argue that populism must be seen as a dangerous 'excess', because it is against political representation and constitutionalism.³⁵

The radical approach: populism as an essential element of democracy

In contrast to the liberal approach, the radical one considers populism to be an integral part of democracy and not as pathological expression of it. As Tännsjö³⁶ has formulated, populism can be seen as the purest form of democracy. From this point of view, the question is not about the populist threats to democracy, but rather about to what extent a particular democracy is populist. Hence, populism is defined as a

discursive practice characterized by a particular logic of articulation. To understand the peculiarity of this approach, I will first examine the foundational work of Laclau and Mouffe,³⁷ where a new theoretical framework for the analysis of contemporary democracy was outlined. Then, in a second step, I will focus on the radical approach to populism.

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*³⁸ is a book that had significant impact not only within democratic theory, but also – and in the long run most notably – within political theory. In consonance with the (revival of the) research on civil society, the authors emphasized the necessity of going beyond the state and the market in order to expand the democratic horizon. For this purpose, Laclau and Mouffe refer to Gramsci's theory of hegemony to identify an unnoticed problem: the new social movements defend and promote democratization, but they do not have the chances to articulate their different emancipatory demands with the aim of generating a new political order.³⁹ Whereas the civil society theorists looked at the new social movements as channels to generate more democracy, Laclau and Mouffe went a step further by asking about the possibility of building a new hegemony capable of challenging the existing political order.

Laclau and Mouffe wanted to criticize the economic determinism present in most interpretations of Marx and, by the same token, they argued that it was a mistake to think that working classes are the only or main agents of change.⁴⁰ The new social movements are 'new', precisely because they call into question some forms of oppression that usually are not seen as such either by the ruling or by the working classes. Examples include the ecological and feminist discourses or that of sexual minorities. Although this 'new' scenario implies a step forward towards democratization, for Laclau and Mouffe it is necessary to expand the chains of equivalents between the different struggles against oppression. Such a project can be achieved only through the construction of hegemony and hence the articulation between different democratic struggles.⁴¹

This position is quite different from that of the defenders of both liberal democracy and deliberative democracy. Whereas the first assumes that it is central to promote the rule of law and the respect of individual liberty, the second believes that it is crucial to support public debate and deliberative procedures. In neither model much space is given to the rise of social antagonisms and the construction of hegemony, that is, those elements that are vital for radical democratic politics.⁴² In fact, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the excessive emphasis on advocating for rational consensus and for a form of politics which pretends to go beyond left and right is jeopardizing the future of democracy. Moreover, Mouffe⁴³ sees precisely in this sacralization of consensus one of the main reasons for the emergence and expansion of populist right wing parties in Europe. In this increasingly 'one-dimensional' world that tries to go beyond left and right, they are – in many cases – the only ones trying to occupy the terrain of contestation deserted by the traditional parties.

A critical question to ask at this point is how these authors define populism. In line with their analysis of hegemonic relations, populism must be seen as a

discursive practice characterized by a particular logic of articulation. In view of the fact that this conceptualization of populism relies on an intricate jargon – at least for those who are not familiar with the work of both authors – it is helpful to introduce one important distinction between two forms of articulation: the logic of difference and equivalence. Let me paraphrase an example offered by Laclau⁴⁴ to explain the logic behind these two concepts. In a neighbourhood, a group of people want a bus route introduced to transport them from their places of residence to the area in which most of them work. Having the request satisfied or not by the respective authority (for example, the city hall), a particular and punctual demand has been put forward. There is no criticism of the right of the respective authority to take the decision. Each instance is a part of a highly institutionalized system, in which different demands do not have contact or potential aggregation. In this case, the mode of political articulation follows the *logic of difference*.

Let us imagine now that the request is rejected. Only one demand was not satisfied so there will be no big altercations. If, however, '[...] the variety of requests that do not find satisfaction is very large, that multiple frustration will trigger social logics of an entirely different kind'.⁴⁵ For instance, if the group of people that is frustrated in their request for better transportation notices that their neighbours are also unsatisfied in their claims regarding public security, schooling, and so on, some kind of solidarity will arise between them all. In this case, there is fertile soil for a mode of political articulation that follows the *logic of equivalence*: in spite of the existence of different demands, they tend to aggregate themselves, paving the way for the constitution of a popular subjectivity along with its opposite, that is, 'the establishment'. In other words, what is normally categorized as 'the people' does not exist prior to the populist experience but is instead constituted as a political subject through this experience.

This brief explication is helpful to get a better understanding of the radical approach to study populism. Populism is seen here as a discursive mode of political articulation, in which the logic of equivalence operates and in consequence different demands are integrated. Moreover, as a discursive logic of political articulation, populism follows a particular path involved in hegemonic politics: first the linking of heterogeneous demands, then the formation of a collective identity through the recognition of an enemy (that is, 'the establishment'), and finally the affective investment in one leader that represents 'the people'.⁴⁶ In summary, populism incarnates the *normative ideal* of a radical democratic project, that is, a form of political articulation that not only tries to aggregate different demands, but also emphasizes social antagonism.

However, Laclau goes a step further in his theoretical treatment of populism. He assumes not only that populism is intrinsic to democracy, but also that without populism there are no politics: 'Since the construction of "the people" is the political act *par excellence* – as opposed to pure administration within a stable institutional framework – the *sine qua non* requirements of the political are the constitution of antagonistic frontiers within the social and the appeal to new subjects of social change'.⁴⁷ This passage shows a relevant problem of

Laclau's theory of populism. Given that he assumes that 'the pure administration' extinguishes the political realm, 'a stable institutional framework' – as, for example, a functioning liberal democracy in which there is little space for the logic of equivalence – is anything but a political order. Nevertheless, instead of endowing populism with the attributes of the political, it is more fruitful to follow the main idea of the radical approach and, therefore, to argue that populism is *a* way of constructing the political.

As Ardití⁴⁸ rightly points out, Margaret Canovan⁴⁹ developed the outline for conceiving populism in this way. She argues that modern democracy implies an interplay between a redemptive and a pragmatic style of politics. Whereas the redemptive face of democracy means salvation through politics and popular sovereignty as the only source of legitimate power, the pragmatic face of democracy involves institutions and a way of coping peacefully with the conflicts of modern societies. The interesting point is that *every* democratic regime is confronted with these two faces, generating tensions between them that are not only inescapable, but that also provide the stimulus to the populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow.⁵⁰ By saying this, she implicitly assumes that populism should be seen as a body that always accompanies democracy. Thus, is it not possible to aspire to build a democratic order without the existence of (a certain degree of) populism. Accordingly, populism represents an internal periphery of democratic politics that usually is avoided by those who adhere to liberalism.⁵¹

To sum up, it is important to note the normative assumptions behind the radical approach of studying populism vis-à-vis democracy. For Laclau, the positive view of populism derives from the idea that it represents a particular type of discourse, which not only calls into question existing forms of subordination, but also allows for linking different demands and defining a struggle against the 'power bloc'. However, this positive account tends to overlook the tension between maintaining the autonomy of these different demands and constructing, at the same time, a common front.⁵² Moreover, this positive view about populism does not seriously take into account the negative role that the leader might play in the development of a radical democratic project. As authors like Ardití⁵³ and Žižek⁵⁴ have argued, Laclau deals only cursorily with the potential underside of a populist leader, which by incarnating the unity of the people, might produce a travesty of empowerment by subjecting 'the people' to his/her dictates.

The minimal approach: populism as a democratic ambivalence

Unlike the liberal and the radical approach to studying populism, the minimal one is less normative than the other two.⁵⁵ This approach is therefore more modest but at the same time ambitious, in the sense that it aims to offer a *minimal definition* of populism that encompasses quite different cases and that also can be employed in empirical research. Due to its emphasis on generating an unprejudiced conception of what populism is, the minimal approach is inclined to make no general statements about the effects of populism on democracy. This relationship must be

understood as contingent, depending of each particular case if there is (in)compatibility between democracy and populism.

This way of thinking about populism has important consequences. Most notably, it differs from usual interpretations that assume a clear relationship – either positive or negative – between populism and economic liberalism. For instance, it is common to hear that populism in Latin America is characterized both by the promotion of state-led economic development that permits economic redistribution to excluded sectors⁵⁶ and by an irresponsible economic policy that provides benefits to a wide part of the population, yet avoiding necessary reforms.⁵⁷ At the same time, some authors are of the opinion that European right wing populism is distinguished, among others features, by a neoliberal economic programme.⁵⁸ Instead of this, the minimal approach opposes the very idea that a certain economic doctrine is a primary issue or defining attribute of populism.

Kurt Weyland is one of the contemporary authors who vehemently argues against a conception of populism that links the term with certain economic policies or socioeconomic structures. Indeed, he defines populism as a political strategy with three characteristics: an appeal to a heterogeneous mass of followers, many of whom are subjectively or objectively excluded; a low level of institutionalization of the movement; and finally a direct relationship between the leader and the followers.⁵⁹ Having in mind the examples of Menem in Argentina (1989–1999), Collor de Mello in Brazil (1990–1992) and Fujimori in Peru (1992–2000), he refers to the unexpected affinities between neopopulism and neoliberalism. In his view, all these leaders used political populism to impose economic liberalism, and in turn used economic liberalism to strengthen their populist leadership. Neopopulism and neoliberalism, then, experienced a sort of ‘marriage of convenience’ during the 1990s in Latin America.⁶⁰

Since the majority of Latin American countries are currently governed by left wing leaders and some of them postulate a kind of populism that is beyond liberal democracy,⁶¹ Weyland’s thesis regarding the unexpected affinities between neopopulism and neoliberalism has lost some of its relevance. Nevertheless, he offered a minimal definition of populism that is precise and useful. It concerns a specific way of competing for and exercising political power in which there usually is no organizational intermediation between the leader and the followers. He posits: ‘By contrast to the strong organization provided by an institutionalized party and the stable connections established by patron-client ties, the relationship between populist leaders and their mass constituency is uninstitutionalized and fluid’.⁶² However, this idea has been criticized by some scholars, because it takes for granted that the informal sectors are disorganized and thus tend to be simply mobilized by a charismatic leader. For instance, Auyero⁶³ demonstrates in his ethnographic study about the political practices of the Peronist Party in shanty towns of Buenos Aires that the latter provides a series of informal networks that distribute resources, information and jobs to the poor. In this sense, it is problematic to assume that Latin American populist parties have little organization and the only thing that counts is the charismatic leadership.⁶⁴

The scepticism about establishing a clear relationship (either positive or negative) between populism and democracy is the defining condition of scholars that adhere to the minimal approach. Particularly in the last few years, some authors that deal with Europe have begun to reflect on the possible formation of a new kind of democracy that, among other features, is characterized by its populist nature.⁶⁵ What do these scholars mean by this? To some extent, they share the same thesis: Europe is experiencing an objective and/or subjective increasing separation of the political class from its base and therefore populism appears to be a very common way to deal within this new scenario. As such, populism cannot be described as anti-democratic *per se*, but rather as a way to fill the vacuum that is being left by the growing chasm between governed and governors.⁶⁶

Consequently, it is important to take into account the tensions inherent in contemporary democracy in order to develop a proper definition of populism. For this purpose, Mény and Surel⁶⁷ underline the existence of a tension between two pillars that are constitutive of modern democracies: popular will and constitutionalism. Whereas the first one implies the very idea that the demos is the sovereign and the majority principle must be enacted, the second one entails that institutional arrangements (for example, the rule of law) are necessary to protect the citizens from the government and the discretionary or arbitrary power of the people's representatives. Although there is no agreement within the scholarly community over the correct balance between both pillars, there is a broad consensus that modern democracies are founded on these two components.⁶⁸ Moreover, it is plausible to state that, particularly in Europe – in part due to the expansion of the European Union – constitutionalism is becoming more and more developed, but at the cost of the popular will. In fact, in most European democracies, the political decision-making has undergone some substantial changes during the last few decades. A new model has emerged, in which '[...] sometimes official bodies merely ratify proposals made by public bureaucracies after concertation with the representatives of organized interests. It is not an exaggeration to say that these procedures are frequently opaque and selective'.⁶⁹ This diagnosis of what is happening today in Western European democracy gives ground to suppose that populist politics, and its claim according to which the people have been betrayed by those in power, is going to have a prosperous career in the twenty-first century.⁷⁰

Where is the basis for such an assumption? The main reason for this lies in the fact that the European political parties are failing to perform their traditional functions. Indeed, they have growing problems in engaging the ordinary citizen. This can be illustrated by three empirical indicators: declining turnout, falling party membership and increasing voter volatility.⁷¹ Since the linkage between voters and governments was historically organized by political parties, their erosion implies a slow but steady transformation of the democratic order. Following this idea, Mudde⁷² offers a minimal definition of populism, which is not reserved for the study of xenophobic parties and movements of the far right. With the aim of fostering empirical research, he conceives of 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’.⁷³

By using the notion of ideology, Mudde proposes a discursive approach to populism. Nevertheless, his position is not related to the theory of authors like Laclau or Mouffe, but rather to the work of Freedén.⁷⁴ Based on his framework, Mudde defines populism as a ‘thin-centred ideology’, which has the notion of ‘the people’ as its core. This implies that particular expressions of populism are commonly combined with very different (thin and full) ideologies, such as for example, conservatism, liberalism, nationalism or socialism.⁷⁵ From this point of view, it is quite clear why populism *per se* neither can be characterized as left nor as right. Moreover, as Mudde states, this definition is broad and open to many usages, but ‘[...] this does not mean that all political actors are (at every time) populist. Despite the move towards a more catch-all profile, the ideological programs of most mainstream parties still accept the pluralist view of liberal democracy’.⁷⁶ The main point is that populist ideology is at odds with pluralism and, consequently, populism assumes that once ‘the people’ have spoken, nothing should constrain the implementation of its will. In other words, populism is a sort of democratic extremism, which is not shared by actors and parties that defend the existence of constitutional limits on the expression of the general will.

In sum, the minimal approach is characterized by the construction of a clear definition of populism – understood either as a political strategy (for example, Weyland) or an ideology (for example, Mudde) – which has several advantages for analysing populism’s ambivalent relationship with democracy. For the sake of clarity it is worth emphasizing the following three points. First, the minimal approach shows that there is no ground, on the one hand, to use medical metaphors and speak of populism as a democratic ‘pathology’, and on the other hand, to build a romanticized view of populism and refer to it as the ‘purest form of democracy’. As I have shown, these negative and positive accounts regarding populism rely on normative assumptions about the way in which liberal and radical democracy should function. By contrast, the minimal approach sketched above suggests that the effects of populism on democracy should not only be studied based on ideal models of democracy, but rather by also doing empirical analysis which may demonstrate to what extent populism represents a threat or a corrective to democracy in concrete cases.

Secondly, the minimal approach offers a two-strand analysis which helps to understand that the balance between popular will and constitutionalism is always precarious and in a continuous process of adjustment. From this angle, it is not possible to assume the existence of a people and from here on proceed with the discussion of legitimacy.⁷⁷ Populism reminds us that the definition of who the people are, is eminently a political operation by which a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is constructed. Furthermore, under certain circumstances the people might portray itself as the constituent subject *par excellence*, calling for a (re)foundation and update of the higher legal norms and procedural rules that regulate the exercise of power.⁷⁸

Thirdly and finally, the minimal approach proposes a minimal definition of populism that allows for the analysis of its impact on different democratic regimes. Actually, by establishing a 'lowest common denominator', minimal definitions are very helpful when it comes to comparing very dissimilar cases and undertaking cross-regional research.⁷⁹ In fact, this kind of definition permits, on the one hand, the observation of a common phenomenon in different parts of the world (for example, populism) and, on the other hand, the identification of subtypes of the common phenomenon in question in specific regional contexts (for example, exclusionary populism in Europe and inclusionary populism in Latin America⁸⁰).

So, in which ways is it possible to apply the minimal approach to study the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy? Without trying to provide a comprehensive answer to this question, which is beyond the scope of this article, in the following I will make use of Robert Dahl's approach to democracy, in order to hypothesize under which circumstances populism might become a threat or a corrective to democracy.

The ambivalence of populism: threat to contestation, corrective to inclusiveness

To demonstrate that populism maintains an ambivalent relationship with democracy poses a challenge, not only because of the notion of populism, but also because of the definition of democracy. Indeed, the concept of democracy is also a highly contested concept within the realm of social sciences.⁸¹ It is outside the scope of this article to enter into this debate. Instead I will simply refer to one of the most used and accepted theoretical frameworks, namely the one developed by Robert Dahl.⁸² In his classic book *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition*, Dahl⁸³ argues that democracy is above all an ideal, which in reality can never be fully achieved. The reason for this is that democracy refers not to a definitive state of affairs, but rather to a dynamic and open-ended process – democratization – that always remains incomplete.⁸⁴ Accordingly, Dahl reserves the notion of democracy for a desirable goal, and proposes the concept of 'polyarchy' to analyse the actual democratic systems.

With the aim of fostering empirical research, Dahl developed a list of eight guarantees⁸⁵ that must be provided in order to catalogue a particular regime as a polyarchy. At the same time, he remarks that these eight guarantees 'might be fruitfully interpreted as constituting two somewhat different theoretical dimensions of democratization'.⁸⁶ The first dimension is 'public contestation' and refers to the development of a system of political competition, which implies the possibility to oppose the government and to offer alternative points of view. The second dimension is 'inclusiveness' and denotes the breadth of the right to participate in the system of public contestation. It is important to note that both dimensions of polyarchy are independent, and consequently there are regimes that can be very advanced in one dimension, but not in the other (see Figure 1). For instance, the

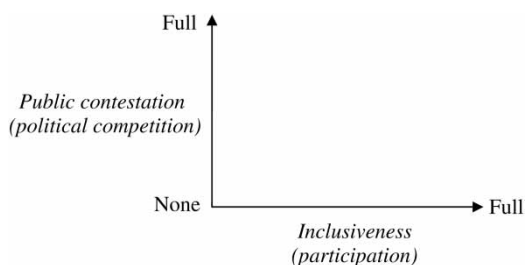


Figure 1. Two theoretical dimensions of democratization.

United States has a very highly developed system of public contestation, yet the black population in the South de facto obtained the vote only in the second half of the twentieth century. By contrast, Cuba is a country in which there is universal suffrage, but where a system of public contestation hardly exists.

It is worth mentioning that Dahl maintains that inclusiveness refers mainly to the right to participate in elections and office. But he is aware of the fact that inclusiveness consists also of the capacity of the people 'to participate on a more or less equal plane in controlling and contesting the conduct of the government'.⁸⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that he stresses that a high level of socioeconomic exclusion has a negative impact on inclusiveness, because it limits the capacity of achieving *effective* participation.⁸⁸ The latter consists not only of the right to vote, but also of the access to political resources – such as knowledge, skills, and incentives – that are used by the citizens to protect and advance their interests.⁸⁹ At the same time, the dimension of public contestation involves primarily the classic liberal freedoms, because they define a set of rules that permit the development not only of oppositional forces, but also of a peaceful competition between candidates and parties that aspire to win the elections. In order to achieve such a system of political competition, Dahl argues that both elites and masses must learn to cope with conflicts in a democratic way.

These two dimensions of polyarchy are crucial to analyse the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy. From a theoretical point of view, there are good reasons to think that populism may well be a threat to public contestation, but under certain conditions it can also be a corrective to inclusiveness. This might be particularly true for societies with high levels of socioeconomic exclusion, because then populism – understood as either a political strategy (for example, Weyland) or an ideology (for example, Mudde) – can be an effective method for fostering the participation of disadvantaged groups. It is Dahl himself who provides some arguments that support this thesis. By discussing the notion of 'the beliefs of political activists', he claims that when a vast group of the society has little possibility to exercise its rights, it is probable that this group will support more political participation at the cost of public contestation. The example that Dahl offers for this hypothetical case is the epitome of populism: Peronism. In his opinion, Perón's government in Argentina

thought to do what no previous regime had done, to incorporate the working strata into Argentinean life – economic, social, and political. [...] Not that Perón believed or supported polyarchy; under his rule oppositions were increasingly suppressed. Yet Peronism stood and even today stands for the full inclusion of the working strata in the political system, and although it may grant legitimacy to dictatorship it denies legitimacy to any system that excludes or discriminates against the working strata or their spokesman.⁹⁰

Dahl's interpretation of Peronism is very relevant, since it permits the hypothesis that in societies where there are significant problems in the dimension of inclusiveness, populism might well represent a sort of democratic corrective. In fact, by following the minimal approach developed above, it is possible to identify that all versions of Latin American populisms fight for the entrance of excluded masses into politics. This means that Latin American populism can be understood as a particular ideology and/or political strategy, which is promoted by leaders of different political colours with the aim of mobilizing excluded sectors of the society and improving their economic and political integration. In this vein, Collier and Collier⁹¹ have observed that one of the principal effects of 'classical populism' was its capacity to achieve the incorporation of certain groups – mainly the labour force – into the political arena. Moreover, authors like Roberts⁹² and Weyland⁹³ have convincingly demonstrated that neoliberal populists implemented economic policies that generated exclusion of a variety of organized sectors such as state employees, but also inclusion of the very poor thanks to targeted distributive policies. Finally, in the case of the current Latin American populist leaders, it is beyond question that they are trying to implement new policies of economic, cultural and political incorporation.⁹⁴

Without doubt, the way in which the different versions of Latin American populism have intended and intend to augment inclusiveness is problematic in terms of the other dimension of polyarchy, namely public contestation. As Carlos de la Torre⁹⁵ has pointed out, almost every Latin American populist leader tends to define political competition as a total war between the people and their enemies. From this angle, the respect of certain rules of the democratic game tends to be a secondary issue. In this sense, the minimal approach developed in this article does not imply either a defence of Latin American populism or a romanticized view of it. This approach, however, suggests that since a great part of the Latin American population lives in poverty and suffers different forms of exclusion, populism is a phenomenon that might well foster inclusiveness but at the cost of public contestation.

For those who are more familiar with the European context, the affirmation that populism could promote inclusiveness might be a surprise. Indeed, in this region populism is characterized less by promoting the inclusion of underprivileged groups,⁹⁶ but rather by seeking to exclude certain sections from society, particularly immigrants. Though this is true, it is relevant to stress that the minimal approach permits us to differentiate populism *per se* from certain features that are not necessary intrinsic to it. Mudde⁹⁷ has highlighted that in Europe populist

radical right parties share a core ideology of nativism, authoritarianism and populism. It is this particular combination of ideological features that makes the exclusionary nature of European populism. Since the latter is based on an ethnic definition of 'the people', it claims that immigration should be stopped or radically reduced, and immigrants already living in the country should assimilate.⁹⁸ By contrast, in Latin America populist actors do not necessarily rely on an ethnic definition of 'the people'. This is particularly evident in the case of Evo Morales, who until now has had a continuous electoral success precisely because of his *inclusionary* strategy, that is, his movement deliberately intends to attract support from members of different ethnic and social groups.⁹⁹

The example of Evo Morales shows us that populism is not necessarily linked to an exclusionary definition of 'the people'. This link seems to be true in the case of current Europe, where the debate on multiculturalism is much more important than in Latin America. Thus in the European context, populism and the radical right are experiencing since the 1980s a sort of 'marriage of convenience'. However, this does not mean that the former is always related to the latter. Moreover, we should be aware of the fact that populist radical right parties might help to give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the establishment, particularly by putting forward the topic of immigration. By saying this, I am not intending to deny that these parties represent a democratic challenge. The point is only that in Europe shortcomings concerning inclusiveness are much less pressing than in Latin America. After all, the European populist radical right parties – as well as most Latin American populist actors – show little respect for the rules of political competition. Since they tend to foster a moralization of politics, the antagonism between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' cannot be solved in a peaceful way. The political struggle is conceived as a zero sum game in which the flowering of one collective identity is only possible with the degradation up to the extermination of the identity of the other. From this angle, the main question is about the possibility of socializing the populist forces into the rules of public contestation.

Conclusion

Although there are no doubts about the inherent tension between populism and democracy, current scholarship shows no consensus on how the former impacts the latter. While many authors argue that populism should be seen as a pathological phenomenon, others are of the opinion that it embodies the purest form of political articulation. This article has sought to show that these opposing views are based mainly on normative assumptions about how democracy should function. From this angle, the variable that determines if populism must be conceived of as a threat to or a corrective for democracy is the preference for the ideal of either liberal or radical democracy.

I argue that to overcome this normative bias, minimal definitions of populism are very useful. In fact, the minimal approach offers a concept that can foster empirical research and that does not intend to answer *a priori* what populism

subtracts or adds to a certain ideal model of democracy. In this line of thought, Mudde¹⁰⁰ defines populism as a distinct ideology that conceives society to be separated into two antagonistic camps: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. In a similar vein, Weyland¹⁰¹ considers populism as a political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.

These kinds of definitions are a good starting point to study populism as such. This implies that it is possible to separate populism from features that might regularly occur together with it, but are not part of it. These additional features do certainly vary in different cases, and are probably related to the particular grievances of distinct societies. For instance, in Europe multiculturalism seems to generate a cleavage, which fosters the emergence of a type of populism that is marked by a xenophobic discourse. On the other hand, in Latin America populists of both the right and the left demonstrated having a propensity to develop clientelistic linkages with the electorate. As these illustrations reveal, it is important to disentangle features that in different national and/or regional contexts tend to appear with populism but are not necessarily inherent to it.

This article also suggests a line of inquiry for further research. Drawing on Dahl's¹⁰² approach to the study of democracy, I argue that populism seems to be negative with regard to public contestation, but it can be positive in terms of fostering inclusiveness. This hypothesis relies on the idea that when a society is characterized by high levels of economic, political and social exclusion, populism is a method through which disadvantaged groups may give their voice and lead to the implementation of policies that they prefer. In fact, existing research on Latin America reveals that populism tends to generate inclusion of sectors of the society that were previously excluded. However, this does not imply that Latin American populism has been a purely democratizing force, since it seems to be at odds with the rules of public contestation that are necessary for the endurance of any democratic regime.

Further studies should put much more emphasis on cross-regional research. Through wide comparisons it is possible to gain new insights about the conditions that may determine when, why, and how populism works as a threat to or a corrective for democracy. To address this puzzle, future research should examine the way in which populist actors define both 'the people' and 'the elites', since these concepts are empty signifiers that are always constructed in a particular manner determining who should be included and excluded from the polity. Moreover, it is also necessary to investigate if the impact of populism on democracy is related to the maturity of the latter, that is, if 'old democracies' are more resilient to the potential negative effects of populism, given that their rules of public contestation are much more internalized and institutionalized than in 'young democracies'. As these kinds of questions illustrate, cross-regional studies based on the minimal approach sketched in this article are necessary to develop a research agenda that produces far more empirical evidence to develop well-founded statements about the link between populism and democracy.

Acknowledgements

For helpful comments, I thank Martin Beckstein, Nancy Bermeo, Sofia Donoso, John Keane, Sascha Kneip, Alan Knight, Wolfgang Merkel, Cas Mudde, Kurt Weyland and the two anonymous reviewers. All remaining errors are mine alone. This research was made possible by a post-doctoral fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Notes

1. Previous versions of this article were presented at Nuffield College, Oxford University (May 7, 2010) and the XXIX International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Toronto (October 6–9, 2010).
2. Sartori, 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics'; Keman, 'Comparative Research Methods', 78.
3. Dahl, *Polyarchy*.
4. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 4.
5. Taggart, 'Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics', 69.
6. Lipset, *Political Man*.
7. *Ibid.*, chapter 6.
8. *Ibid.*, 127.
9. This thesis can be found in Moore's classic book. See Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.
10. Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.
11. Lipset, *Political Man*, 175–6.
12. Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism*, 88.
13. Conniff, 'Introduction'.
14. Michels, *Political Parties*.
15. Knight, 'Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America'.
16. Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, 14.
17. Angell, 'The Left in Latin America Since c. 1920', 77–8.
18. Oxhorn, 'The Social Foundations of Latin America's Recurrent Populism', 213–14.
19. Tanaka, 'From Crisis to Collapse of the Party'.
20. Navia and Walker, 'Political Institutions, Populism, and Democracy in Latin America'.
21. Decker, *Parteien unter Druck*; Kriesi, 'Movements of the Left, Movements of the Right'.
22. Betz, 'Rechtspopulismus in Westeuropa', 258; Norris, *Radical Right*, 12.
23. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 298.
24. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.
25. Schmidt, *Demokratietheorien*, 139.
26. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, 167.
27. Hayward, 'The Populist Challenge to Élitist Democracy in Europe'.
28. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*, 266.
29. Taggart, 'Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics', 78.
30. Böckenförde, *Verfassung, Demokratie*, chapter 4.
31. Kalyvas, 'Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power'.
32. For an insightful discussion of the boundary problem, see: Whelan, 'Prologue: Democratic Theory and the Boundary Problem'.
33. Canovan, 'Populism for Political Theorists?', 248.
34. Näsström, 'The Legitimacy of the People'.
35. See, among many others: Abts and Rummens, 'Populism versus Democracy'; Betz, 'Introduction', 3–4; Pasquino, 'Populism and Democracy', 16; Taggart, *Populism*, 86–8; Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*.

36. Tånnsjö, *Populist Democracy*.
37. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
38. Ibid.
39. Marchart, 'Eine demokratische Gegenhegemonie', 105.
40. Nonhoff, 'Diskurs, radikale Demokratie, Hegemonie', 12.
41. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 182.
42. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 6–7.
43. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 64–9.
44. Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a Name?'.
45. Ibid., 36–7.
46. Kleis Nielsen, 'Hegemony, Radical Democracy and Populism', 89.
47. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 154.
48. Ardit, 'Populism as a Spectre of Democracy', 139–40.
49. Canovan, 'Trust the People!'.
50. For a similar argument, although applied to the United States and related to the spectral role of the people as both constituent and constituted power, see: Frank, *Constituent Moments*.
51. Ardit, 'Populism as an Internal Periphery'.
52. For a similar criticism, in the sense of the underlying tension between radical and plural democracy, see: Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, chapter 3.
53. Ardit, 'Populism is Hegemony is Politics?', 490–1.
54. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 276–85.
55. Indeed, this approach is not absolutely value-free. Yet, it is necessary to elaborate empirical studies through which is it possible test the plausibility of theoretical and normative arguments about the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy.
56. Cardoso and Faletto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina*.
57. Dornbusch and Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*.
58. Betz, *Radical Right-wing Populism in Western Europe*; Betz, 'Introduction'; Kitschelt and McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe*.
59. Weyland, 'Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America', 5.
60. Roberts, 'Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America'.
61. Schamis, 'Populism, Socialism and Democratic Institutions'.
62. Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept', 13.
63. Auyero, *Poor People's Politics*.
64. de la Torre, 'The Resurgence of Radical Populism in Latin America', 393; Roberts, 'Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization', 130.
65. See, among many others: Decker, 'Die populistische Herausforderung'; Mair, 'Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy'.
66. Plattner, 'Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy'.
67. Mény and Surel, 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism', 7–11.
68. A good example of this consensus and the difficult balance between both pillars – popular will and constitutionalism – can be found in a recent book of Adam Przeworski. His standpoint is illustrated by the following formulation: 'I have sympathy for the position according to which fundamental rights should be monitored by specialized bodies, but in the end the laws and public policies must be decided by majoritarian procedures. This issue has been warped by an ideological formulation that juxtaposes rule of the majority to "the rule of law", as if the law could be something independent of the will of the majority structured within the institutional framework'. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*, 170.
69. Papadopoulos, 'Populism, the Democratic Question, and Contemporary Governance', 55.

70. Albertazzi and McDonnell, 'Populism and Twenty-First Century Western European Democracy'.
71. Mair, 'Ruling the Void', 34–45.
72. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist'.
73. Ibid., 543. It is worth noting that Kirk Hawkins proposes a similar concept for the analysis of Latin American populism, and offers an interesting methodology to measure populism through the speeches of chief executives. See Hawkins, 'Is Chávez Populist?'; Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*.
74. Freedén, *Ideologies and Political Theory*; Freedén, *Ideology*.
75. Stanley, 'The Thin Ideology of Populism', 99–100.
76. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', 545.
77. Näsström, 'The Legitimacy of the People', 628.
78. Kalyvas, 'Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power'; Frank, *Constituent Moments*.
79. Sartori, 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics'; Keman, 'Comparative Research Methods', 78.
80. On these two subtypes of populism, see: Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Voices of the People'.
81. See, among many others: Tilly, *Democracy*.
82. I would like to thank Kurt Weyland for directing my attention to the link between Robert Dahl's framework and the minimal approach to studying populism vis-à-vis democracy.
83. Dahl, *Polyarchy*.
84. This argument has been developed and discussed extensively by Whitehead, *Democratization*.
85. These are the following: (1) freedom to form and join organizations; (2) freedom of expression; (3) right to vote; (4) right of political leaders to compete for support; (5) eligibility for public office; (6) alternative sources of information; (7) free and fair elections; (8) institutions for making government policies depend on vote and other expressions of preference.
86. Dahl, *Polyarchy*, 4.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., 82. See also Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*, chapter 4.
89. Dahl, *On Political Equality*, 50–5.
90. Dahl, *Polyarchy*, 130–1.
91. Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*.
92. Roberts, 'Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America'; Roberts, 'Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization in Latin America'.
93. Weyland, 'Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America'; Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept'.
94. See, among many others: Filgueira and Luna, 'The Left Turns as Multiple Paradigmatic Crises'.
95. de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, 129.
96. One of the few current examples of European populism, which is clearly left-wing and does not have a xenophobic agenda, is the so-called 'Die Linke' (the Left) in Germany. Walter, 'Die Linkspartei zwischen Populismus und Konservatismus'; Decker, 'Germany: Right-wing Populist Failures and Left-wing Successes'; Hough and Koß, 'Populism Personified or Reinvigorated Reformers?'.
97. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.

98. Mastropaolo, 'Politics against Democracy'; Rydgren, 'Is Extreme Right-Wing Populism Contagious?'.
99. Madrid, 'The Rise of Ethnopolitism in Latin America', 485.
100. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*; Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist'.
101. Weyland, 'Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America'; Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept'.
102. Dahl, *Polyarchy*.

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