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Shaping the narrative, framing the debate, captivating the 'people',
upending the mainstream, capturing power

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Populist agenda-setting Shaping the narrative, framing the debate, captivating the ‘people’, upending the mainstream, capturing power

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ABSTRACT

Populist agenda-setting is under-theorized, in part because of the fragmentation of scholarship on populism and agenda-setting. Policy studies has concentrated on the ideas, agents, and mechanisms of mainstream agenda-setting; comparative political economy, political sociology, comparative politics have centred on the sources of populism; and party politics, social movement, and political communication studies have focused on the characteristics of the populists themselves. This article builds on all such literatures to theorise the interactive effects of populism on agenda setting when populists are on the outside, in elective office, or in government. Using the four ‘Ms’ of populists’ ‘discursive construction of discontent’ – message, messenger, medium, and milieu – the article examines how populist messages shape the policy narrative; how populist messengers frame the debate; how they use the media to captivate ‘the people;’ and why, depending on milieu, populists are able to leverage ‘the people’s’ support to upend the mainstream and/or capture power.

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Introduction

In recent years, populism has become the label for a seemingly new kind of anti-system politics pushed by confrontational social movements and challenger political parties led by charismatic leaders with extremist policy agendas. What makes this populism different from previous versions is not only how successful it has been in disrupting the long-standing political practices of compromise and consensus-seeking in Europe’s liberal democracies. It is also that contemporary populists have managed to influence policy agenda-setting in liberal democracies in unprecedented ways. They have

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done this by several means and methods. While all so-called populists blame the elites for all the ills of society and challenge mainstream policy narratives, those on the extremes of the right have been focused on scapegoating migrants, limiting minority rights, casting doubts on climate change, and reinforcing more exclusive identities whereas those on the extremes of the left have been intent on decrying globalisation and rising inequalities, promoting climate action, and reinforcing more inclusive identities. In so doing, both sides have often bent the truth through a 'post-truth' style of discourse, sometimes with distorted stories, wild myths, and whispered conspiracy theories (especially on the right). Moreover, with their taboo-breaking, us-versus-them, anti-elite discourse, populist leaders have framed the debate with narratives that they have widely disseminated through the social media, which have then been amplified by the traditional media. With those narratives, populists have captivated an increasingly large audience made up of people whom they claim to be 'the people', with whose support they have not only increasingly disrupted politics as usual, whether in public debates, at the polling booths, or in the streets. They have also upended the mainstream, putting centrist parties and political leaders on the defensive and pushing them to shift their agendas to accommodate populist policy demands in efforts to maintain their own party bases. Finally, more and more populists have also captured power, and in so doing have learned how to set the agenda on their own or with other parties, sometimes to the detriment of the tenets of liberal democracy, other times to its benefit.

Populist agenda-setting has thus come to exercise an increasingly powerful influence on liberal democracies. But that power and the causal mechanisms by which populists influence agenda-setting have not been analysed effectively, mainly because of the ways in which scholarship on policy agenda-setting and populist politics has been disciplinarily fragmented. Equally problematic is that there is little agreement on the definition of populism.

Defining populism is no easy task, since there are so many definitions, including as a political style, a discursive frame, a political ideology, an attitude toward elites, a characteristic of certain political parties, a risk to liberal democracy, or a potential corrective (e.g., Berman, 2021; Laclau, 2002; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Mouffe, 2018; Mudde, 2017; Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2019; Rosanvallon, 2020; Schmidt, 2022; Urbinati, 2019). But the term itself is nevertheless useful to identify a similar kind of anti-establishment rhetorical style accompanied by diverse anti-status quo policy content (the message) articulated by anti-system social movements, political parties and charismatic leaders (the messenger) who have managed to harness the new social media as well as the traditional media (the medium) to their advantage, as they build on citizen's economic,



social, and political discontents (the milieu) (Schmidt, 2022). The definition of populism developed herein is thus broader than many, because understood in terms of the four 'Ms' (message, messenger, medium, and milieu) as the discursive practices of anti-system messengers with us-versus-them messages using the new as well as old media in different milieux to upend the mainstream. As such, and in keeping with the discussion in the introduction to this special issue (Jones and Thomas, this issue), populism can equally be seen as different forms of behaviour, each of which may have an influence on agenda setting in public policymaking.

Complicating matters for any assessment of the impact of populism on policy agenda-setting is that there is a certain lack of clarity on how the scholarly literature applies to populism across a range of fields, as well as on how they interrelate. These include policy studies, political economy, political sociology, comparative politics, political parties, social movements, and communication studies.

The policy studies literature on agenda-setting has for the most part had little to say about populism. It has concentrated mainly on traditional policy-formulation by mainstream parties and groups with clear policy preferences achieved through strategic behaviour, reasoned arguments, and expert analysis following established pathways of policymaking (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Haas, 1992; Kingdon, 1984; Sabatier, 1993). Given such assumptions, that literature has difficulty accounting for populists' agenda-setting power, with their malleable policy preferences and emotional arguments which exert pressure largely from outside conventional avenues. Nevertheless, the insights of the policy literature can be fruitfully used to understand populism, including by borrowing from its theories about how policy actors set the agenda using narratives, frames, symbols, and images (e.g., Schön & Rein, 1994; Stone, 1988) while promoting policy change through mechanisms of identification, reinvention, diffusion, and learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Campbell, 2004; Dobbin *et al.*, 2007; Hecló, 1974; Jobert, 1989; Rose, 1991; Swidler, 1986).

The literatures in political economy, political sociology, and comparative politics also pay little attention to populist agenda-setting, or indeed to the populists themselves. But by concentrating on the underlying sources of populist discontent, whether socio-economic, socio-cultural, or political (e.g., Berman, 2021; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Hopkin, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rodrik, 2018), they deepen our knowledge of the 'demand' side of populism. In contrast, the literatures on political parties, social movements, and communication studies shed light on the 'supply' side of populism, by elucidating how populists are able to exploit that discontent through policy ideas and political discourse that serve to frame the public debate (e.g., Della Porta *et al.*, 2017; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Kitschelt, 2007; Mudde, 2017), in particular through the media (Baldwin, 2018; McCombs & Shaw,

1972; Waisbord, 2018). These literatures drill down into how populist social movements, parties, and leaders develop and thrive on popular discontent by exerting pressure through activist networks and public debates using both social media and traditional media. But they engage in relatively little discussion of the sources of that discontent and only sometimes explore how it affects agenda-setting, except once populists gain power.

This paper builds on all these literatures to explore *why* and *how* populists have had a major influence on agenda-setting. In so doing, the paper uses a discursive institutionalist approach to examine the content of populist policy ideas and the discursive processes of populist policy coordination and political communication in institutional context while also considering the impact these have had on mainstream parties' policy agendas (Schmidt, 2008, 2022). For the specifics of this discursive institutionalist approach applied to populism, the paper adopts for its analytic categories what Schmidt (2022) has defined as the four 'M's of populism's 'discursive construction of discontent': the message, including political style and policy content; the messenger, consisting of leader, activist networks, and followers; the medium, made up of social media and traditional media; and the milieu, encompassing experiential and institutional settings. While the message and the messenger lend insight into discursive institutionalist agency through populists' ideational constructions and discursive interactions, the medium and the milieu set the context in which populists operate. This context encompasses the lived experiences – socio-economic, socio-cultural, and political – that are the sources of popular discontent as well as the background 'macro-structures' – including the structural forces, formal institutions, and informal practices – which may serve to empower and/or constrain populists in pursuit of agenda-setting power.

To explain *why* populists have exerted influence over agenda-setting, this article begins by exploring the ways in which populist messages have shaped the narrative through policy mechanisms of identification and reinvention, then follows with how populist messengers as entrepreneurial leaders and activist networks have used their messages to frame the debate. To explain *how* populists have exercised agenda-setting power, the article next looks at how populists have used the mechanism of diffusion to spread their messages via the medium of social media platforms and traditional media outlets so as to captivate 'the people'. It subsequently considers the milieu that has enabled populists to leverage popular support to upend the mainstream agenda, including peoples' lived experiences and countries' macro-structural background factors. In so doing, this section considers how populists have influenced the mainstream agenda and what they have learned when on the outside, on the inside in elective office, or in government, once they captured power. Each section begins by theorising populist agenda-setting, followed by empirical illustrations.



The contributions of this article are three-fold. First, the article adds to the scholarly literatures of a number of subfields in political science as well as outside the discipline by showing how they can be used in an integrated theorisation of populist agenda-setting. Second, it deepens our understanding of populism by illustrating its impact on agenda-setting with a wide range of examples from countries across Europe. Finally, as part of the Special Issue on Populism and Policy, the article focuses in on the causal mechanisms that connect populist discourse and discursive practices (message, messenger, medium) in different experiential and institutional contexts (*milieu*) to their influence over policy agenda-setting. As such it touches on all four of the most important connections between populism and policy, but with special focus on political discourse and, to a lesser extent, party competition.

The message: shaping the narrative

Populism is as much about a political style of discourse as it is about the policy content. The populists' anti-elite, 'us versus them' discursive style in and of itself can be seen to embody an ideology with a particular vision of a democracy in which the leader speaks and acts in the name of 'the people', without the intermediation of liberal democratic institutions (Rosanvallon, 2020; see also Urbinati, 2019). Populists' style of discourse generally involves breaking taboos while expressing moral outrage, with an 'uncivil' style of discourse that often creates a post-truth universe through exaggerations, distortions, 'bullshit', 'fake news', or lies (Frankfurt, 2005; Mudde, 2017; Mutz, 2015; Waisbord, 2018). As such, it may undermine liberal democratic norms of tolerance in speech and behaviour, with a potentially deleterious impact on mainstream politics, in particular where mainstream leaders also adopt populist styles of discourse (Caramani, 2017). But it could alternatively revitalise liberal democracies, by 'telling it like it is' in terms of peoples' discontents, thereby spurring reform.

But while populists' messages all follow a similar anti-establishment political style, their policy content differs significantly, depending upon where they sit on the extremes of the political spectrum on the right and the left, or in the radical centre. Wherever they sit, however, their messages are all very far from the mainstream. One therefore might ask: How do they serve to set the agenda? The traditional policy agenda-setting literature can be helpful here on the different forms populists' ideas may take – e.g., narratives, frames, stories, and images – as well as on the two mechanisms – identification and reinvention – through which their ideas may serve to reshape people's understandings. But the policy literature helps only if we repurpose an approach that is primarily focused on mainstream policymaking.

Theorising populist messaging

The traditional policy literature elaborates on how mainstream policy agents articulate their ideas through symbols and images to gain media attention and public support (Stone, 1988); through narratives, stories, and storylines to shape public perceptions of policy problems and possible solutions (Roe, 1994; Stone, 1988); and through frames and frameworks to outline the structures, demarcate the boundaries, trace the schemata, and indicate the stories that give a sense of what the problem is and how to address it (Jobert, 1989; Muller, 2015; Schön & Rein, 1994). It also defines different levels of the agenda, from the universe of ideas that could be taken up in any given polity, the systemic agenda of all issues commonly perceived as meriting public attention, the institutional agenda of those issues likely to be actively taken up by authoritative decision-makers, and finally those issues that make it to the decision agenda (Cobb & Elder, 1983, pp. 85–86).

Importantly, this literature not only describes the many ways in which policy ideas are crafted, it additionally identifies two main ideational mechanisms used by policy agents to help set the agenda: identification and reinvention. *Identification* is the process through which policy ideas serve as conceptual anchors that enable people to identify with one another despite differing perceptions of interests, whether by acting as ‘coalition magnets’ that bring people together around a single core idea (Béland & Cox, 2016), *référentiels* that provide simple frameworks through which to understand the world (Jobert, 1989; Muller, 2015), or ‘empty signifiers’ which telegraphs the ‘real’ problems through a single word or phrase (Laclau, 2002). *Reinvention* is the process by which new ideas emerge, whether through the *bricolage* that recombines elements from previous ideas (Carstensen, 2011; Swidler, 1986) or through the renovation of the *repertoires* of cultural and discursive practices (Jabko, 2019).

These definitions developed by the policy studies literature of the forms taken by policy ideas and discourse and the causal mechanisms by which they may take hold can serve as useful tools for identifying populists’ own anti-system policymaking. Populists’ anti-mainstream messages also create narratives, frames, symbols, and images, but they do so in order to reject the ‘system’ and the institutional pathways through which policy actors have long sought to influence the policy agenda (even though they may sometimes seek to exploit the system’s institutions for their own ends). Moreover, although populists can also be seen to use mechanisms of identification and reinvention to foster policy change, they do so by evoking anti-system conceptual anchors that enable diverse followers to identify with their movements while reinventing their anti-system ideas and discourse. Finally, while their ideas may be in the universe of possible agendas, they start out far from the systemic agenda, with little or no influence on the institutional or decision



agenda. The puzzle, then, is how do populists' 'extremist' policy ideas nevertheless find their way onto the policy agenda. One answer can be found in the ways in which populists shape the agenda through their narratives, frames, and images using anti-system mechanisms of identification and reinvention.

Shaping the populist narrative

While the political style of populists' messages tends to be similar, the specific content of their messages generally differs depending upon where they sit in terms of country and where they are on the political spectrum. Extreme right parties' main policy frames tend to be exclusionary on identity and revolve around socio-cultural narratives that emphasise the importance of promoting nationalism, ending immigration, reinforcing family values, and limiting the rights of minorities, women, and LGBTQIA+, although socio-economic concerns about reducing globalisation and free trade, increasing social protection 'for our own', and climate skepticism may also come in, along with Euroskepticism (e.g., Kitschelt, 2007; Mudde, 2017). Examples of such parties include France's National Rally (RN), Italy's League and Brothers of Italy (FdI), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Sweden Democrats, the Finns, and more. Extreme left parties' frames tend to be inclusionary on identity and centre on socio-economic issues, with narratives that insist on the need to reduce globalisation and free trade, combat inequality, and increase social protection 'for everyone', although socio-cultural concerns about ensuring human rights for all and saving the planet are also important, along with Euroskepticism (De Vries, 2018; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Mudde, 2017). Examples include Greece's Syriza, Spain's Podemos, and France Unbowed. In the 'radical center', made up of parties with 'polyvalent' values (Pirro, 2018), finally, the main frames tend to be an eclectic mix of socio-economic and socio-cultural narratives that pull ideas from both extremes, with saving the planet and increasing social protection accompanied, say, by anti-immigration and anti-euro sentiment, and championing direct democracy. The sole example of parties in the radical centre currently is the Five Star Movement (M5*), but both the AfD and Britain's UKIP initially also fit this profile, albeit not for very long (Schmidt, 2020, Ch. 10, 2022).

Populists' frames and narratives serve to attract popular support not only through their persuasive messages but also through causal mechanisms of identification and reinvention. Identification may use a single word as an empty signifier, such as 'globalization', to unite anti-globalisation activists on the extreme left. It may use slogans such as the Leave campaign's 'Take back control' or images such as the 'Brexit bus' to serve as a coalition magnet that gathers together citizens with very different ideas, including those nostalgic for 'Little England', those influenced by UKIP's implicitly

racist narrative, or those moved by Boris Johnson's speeches focused on rescuing British democracy from the EU's centralising, anti-democratic impact (Schmidt, 2017). Subsequently, moreover, British Prime Minister Theresa May's catchphrase, 'Brexit means Brexit', provided a framework, or *référentiel*, that served as a powerful rhetorical tool used to justify just about any course of action her government chose to take (Morrell, 2016).

Populists also use mechanisms of reinvention through ideational *bricolage* and discursive *repertoires* to attract and retain followers. Arguably the earliest and most innovative *bricolage* was in the Netherlands in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the maverick politician Pym Fortyn added new anti-immigration, anti-Muslim elements to traditional Dutch normative ideas by insisting on the need to be intolerant of the intolerant because the Netherlands was a tolerant society and wanted to keep it that way (Schmidt, 2019). But hard right and hard left parties have also reinvented themselves in order to appeal to a larger swath of their country's citizens through processes of *bricolage*. In France, for example, Marine Le Pen took the National Front from a hard right party ideologically to a populist one as she 'de-demonized' the party (Perrineau, 2014) while normalising the discourse by shifting from a patently racist, anti-Muslim discourse to one that accused the elite and mainstream parties of failing to uphold the values of liberal society by being complacent to the rise of multiculturalism and Islamisation. In Italy, in an even more pronounced narrative *bricolage*, whereas Umberto Bossi as head of the hard right Northern League vilified Southern Italians, his successor Matteo Salvini shifted the narrative to further south (read Africa) while informally changing the name of the party to *Lega*, the League (Crocoli, 2018).

As for renovations in *repertoires* of discursive practice, one of the most uncivil (and theatrical) was invented by the Italian Five Star Movement's leader Beppe Grillo. In his 'Vafancullo' (go f*** yourself) rallies, held in piazzas across Italy between 2007 and 2013, he would call out the names of elite politicians he deemed corrupt, followed by the crowd roaring the expletive with him (Fieschi, 2019, p. 103). More recently, extreme right parties picked up on the complaints of the apolitical social movement of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) in France to challenge mainstream discursive *repertoires* on climate change by lambasting elites for only talking about 'the end of the world' when most ordinary people were instead most worried about 'the end of the month'.

The messenger: framing the debate

With all this populist creativity in terms of shaping the narrative, we also have to ask about who crafts the messages so as to frame the debate with the mainstream. Populist messages are generally articulated by the *messenger*,

in particular the populist leader who tends to have charisma and authenticity. The populist messenger, however, is not limited to the leader alone, but for the most part also encompasses a wide range of other actors, including close intellectual advisors along with the trusted cadre to lead the party and/or social movement, along with activist networks of supporters and followers. This said, however large the party or movement, the hierarchical concentration of authority tends to be in the populist leader, who claims to speak for while embodying the majority of ‘the people’ directly, and therefore sees no need for any intermediating representative institutions. As a result, it risks ‘disfiguring’ liberal democracy by making the principles of democratic legitimacy the possession of only one part of the people as articulated by only one leader (Urbinati, 2019). Here, the literatures on policy, political parties, and social movements tend to be most useful to illuminate the ways in which populist messengers manage to frame the debate so as to attract popular support.

Theorising populist messengers

The policy literature on the agents of mainstream policy agenda-setting can also help expand our theoretical insights, but again only if repurposed. This literature focuses on the policy entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities, and discourse coalitions seeking to persuade, manipulate, and/or pressure mainstream policymakers to take up their particular cause (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Haas, 1992; Kingdon, 1984; Sabatier, 1993). And it for the most part depicts such policy actors as acting strategically while providing reasoned arguments and expert opinions in the hopes of getting their ideas on the agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Kingdon, 1984).

But as already noted, populists are anything but strategic (in the typical rationalist sense) with regard to agenda-setting. Rather than deploying ‘reasoned’ arguments and expert opinions, they use emotional diatribes that reject the politics of expertise and, indeed, mainstream policymaking in general. As such, populist messengers can be seen as policy entrepreneurs whose messages serve to spark the creation of anti-system discursive communities, advocacy coalitions, and alternative think-tanks and ‘experts’ that seek to reset the policy agenda.

Populist messengers begin with charismatic leaders. These are generally strong personalities who claim a radical, Manichean mission to defend ‘the people’ – whom they claim to embody as they lead them – against the elites and ‘the other’ (Eatwell, 2017). Such leaders are also notable for their ‘authenticity’, for their ability to speak to ‘the people’ through the common-sense simplicity of the message, the combative style of ‘straight-talk’ that blames ‘the other’ for all the ills of the country, and for the post-

truths and lies that simply reinforce authenticity (Fieschi, 2019, pp. 35–39). Such leaders tend to dominate the social movement or party of which they are the founder or anointed successor, claiming a direct and unmediated connection with their base.

The social movements literature also provides valuable theoretical perspective on how populists can influence the policy agenda from the outside. This literature has long focused on how those without power have been able to push elites to change their agendas through activist networks of contestation in a wide range of areas, from human rights to animal rights (e.g., Epstein, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). It can (and often does) therefore offer great insight into the ways in which populists may exert influence as they mobilise support and build networks on the outside looking in (e.g., Caiani *et al.*, 2012; Della Porta *et al.*, 2017).

The party literature is additionally useful here for defining populist parties and differentiating them from mainstream parties, from one another, and from more hard right or hard left parties. Populist parties tend to be more centralised than mainstream parties around one figure, the charismatic leader (Eatwell, 2017). On the extreme right, their members often have less ‘elite’ profiles than the mainstream, with a lower level of education, as in the cases of the Lega in Italy, the FPÖ in Austria, and the SVP in Switzerland (e.g., Mazzoleni *et al.*, 2023). This is equally true for the radical centre Five Star Movement in Italy (e.g., Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). In contrast, populist parties on the left often tend to attract younger, more highly educated voters, as in the cases of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece.

Framing the debate

Populist parties are generally defined by their charismatic leaders. But charisma is naturally in the eye of the beholder, and populist messengers are fully embedded in their country’s culture, history, and politics. In Italy, for example, the founding leader of the Five Star movement, Beppe Grillo, is a comedian who shifted to populist politics initially to decry corruption and promote environmental values. His populist predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, a rich businessman and media mogul, was also a charismatic populist leader because of his us-versus-them style of discourse and attacks on the ‘communists’ and the judiciary, despite a largely centre-right policy agenda (Pappas, 2019). In the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš greatly resembled Berlusconi as a rich businessman, and was aptly called Babisconi (by *Foreign Policy* April 10, 2015). But while Victor Orban of Hungary could be seen as charismatic, and has been in full control of party and government, it is hard to see Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński as charismatic; but he, too, has been in full control of the Polish Law and

Justice Party and the government (until its electoral defeat in October 2023).

While charismatic leaders are generally the ones who articulate the messages, with an intuitive sense of what to say or even how to elicit ideas from ‘the people’ at rallies and events, they are often accompanied by close intellectual advisors—‘organic intellectuals’, in Gramsci’s terms – who help them hone their messages. Examples include Dominic Cummings for Boris Johnson during Brexit (see the movie, *Brexit: The Uncivil War*), GianRoberto Casaleggio for Beppe Grillo in Italy (Biondo & Canestrati, 2019), or Florian Philippot for Marine Le Pen until her disastrous 2017 debate in the French Presidential elections.

Beyond this of course are the activist networks of followers who may act as anti-system epistemic communities and advocacy coalitions, organise as social movements, and eventually develop into political parties that win elections. Examples abound, such as the extreme right AfD party or its social movement counterpart, PEGIDA, which mobilised support to unprecedented levels in Germany (e.g., Berbür *et al.*, 2015); the left wing *Podemos* in Spain, which began as the *indignados* social movement and morphed into a party by the 2015 elections (Kioupkiolis and Seaone Perez, 2019); the radical centre Five Star Movement in Italy, which burst onto the political scene in the parliamentary elections of 2013 (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018; Fieschi, 2019); and the left wing Syriza in Greece, with its victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016).

Successful messaging by populist entrepreneurs, activist networks, and parties alone is not enough, however, to influence agenda-setting. Also necessary is a medium of communication, to spread the messages to ever-increasing numbers of people, in order to frame the public debate.

The medium: captivating ‘the people’

While populist narratives, frames, images, and symbols generate new ideas and discourse through causal mechanisms of identification and reinvention, they gain increasing traction as populist messengers use them to frame the policy debate by disseminating those ideas via the social and traditional media through mechanisms of diffusion, mimesis, transmission, and translation. Diffusion of populist messages via the new social media in particular has served to ‘de-center’ democracy through bottom up politics at the same time that populists have also exploited the old media to disseminate their messages out beyond their ‘true believers’ to the more general public. They count on the traditional media not just to transmit their social media posts but also, of course, to cover their rallies, protests, and even riots, with making the headlines another way in which they seek to frame the debate.

Theorising populist diffusion via the media

The traditional literature in public policy and international relations provides great insight into the causal mechanism of diffusion, which involves patterns of successive or sequential adoption of policies and practices within as well as across countries or venues. Diffusion itself covers a number of different processes through which ideas may spread, including by simple imitation or emulation, dissemination of information, transmission of norms, or translation, which serves to transform as it adapts ideas and discourse to local contexts (Ban, 2016; Campbell, 2004; Dobbin *et al.*, 2007; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Such processes apply to populism as much as to the mainstream, but somewhat differently with regard to the *medium* of diffusion. While the mainstream for the most part relied on traditional media to disseminate information and transmit norms until very recently, populists messengers mainly diffused their messages and transmitted alternative norms at first through the medium of the social media, while often emulating populists in other countries and translating their ideas into their own contexts. But they soon also became past masters at spreading their messages via the traditional media.

Here, while the communications studies literature elucidates the ways in which populists use the social media to frame public debate (e.g., Baldwin, 2018; Bobba, 2019), the social movement literature illuminates how populist-inspired protests and demonstrations reported in the traditional media enabled their ideas to find their way into public debate, if not also onto the policy agenda (Tarrow, 2022). The social media in particular serve to de-centre power and influence. By delivering populists' messages directly, without other news-based intermediation, social media provide open, bottom-up access and communication to populist messengers, leaders and followers. In so doing, they also facilitate the discovery of like-minded people across the country and the world – enabling them to exponentially increase the number of their 'followers' and potential supporters (Caiani *et al.*, 2012). As such, the 'new' social media can be seen as more democratically populist than the 'old' media of radio and TV, providing populists with direct communication channels with 'their' people.

The traditional media tend to amplify the messages developed in the echo chambers of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Baldwin, 2018; Mutz, 2015; Waisbord, 2018). Populists have been highly successful in spreading their messages not only because it is easier to post simple messages that condemn mainstream politicians and their policies as corrupt, unfair, oppressive, and/or against 'the people' than it is for mainstream politicians to explain the complexities and compromises behind the choice of any given policies. It is also because the messages' emotive appeals – to anger and disgust – are the ones picked up and circulated most by the social media



platforms' algorithms. As a result, the new social media can be seen to have an 'elective affinity' with populism (Waisbord, 2018)

The traditional media then follow suit, reporting the tweets as news, thereby further disseminating populists' messages. But rather than the unwitting instruments of the populists, the traditional media have generally seen reporting on populist sensationalism as good for viewership and ratings. The increasing polarisation of the media, moreover, with some news media owned by billionaires supportive of the populists and/or their anti-system messages, has only further fuelled the rise of populism, as has the 'uncivil' language and confrontational style of news debate programmes (Mutz, 2015).

Captivating the people

Populist messengers, including leaders, parties, and social movements, were the first to diffuse their messages via the new social media to communicate with their followers, and have relied on it more than have traditional parties (Ernst et al., 2017). In France, Jean Marie Le Pen as leader of the National Front used the precursor to the internet, the Minitel, to communicate under the radar with his supporters as early as the mid 1980s (Fieschi, 2019, p. 54). In Spain, the extreme left *Podemos*, in the face of the hostility of newspapers and television outlets, relied on Facebook posts and YouTube channel streaming to reach a younger audience, while also appearing on TV talk shows in the traditional media to attract an older audience (Kioupkiolis and Seaone Perez, 2019). In Italy in the 2000s, Beppe Grillo launched the radical centre Five Star Movement via the internet, and used direct democracy via interactive voting to decide on policies and candidates for election (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). And by the 2010s, again in Italy, Matteo Salvini of the extreme right League was using social media to great effect (Bobba, 2019), with a team of twenty-somethings sampling public opinion on a daily basis so as to ensure that his tweets and Facebook posts fit with the national mood of the day (Schmidt, 2022).

But while Facebook posts and Twitter feeds enable populist leaders to speak directly to 'the people', the traditional media also help amplify their anti-system messages, even when negatively reporting on them. Some traditional media also intentionally diffuse populist messages and showcase populist messengers through talk radio or cable news stations often owned by powerful individuals or institutions. Examples include the Polish ultra-right Catholic radio station Radio Maria, the French CNews cable television channel, owned by billionaire Vincent Bolloré, or newspapers like the British Sun, owned by media magnate Rupert Murdoch. Naturally, where the populists are in government and control the traditional media, then the populist message may be the only one heard. In Hungary, Orbán had

his oligarch friends buy up most of the independent media in the country and then consolidated it in a ‘foundation’ under his control. In Italy, Berlusconi controlled the traditional media through his own media empire combined with his authority over appointments to head the government media. Under the doubly populist Italian government of the League and the Five Star Movement of 2018, moreover, each party had its own government channel through which to broadcast their messages. The result of all this has been an increasingly polarised and fragmented media sphere, which has also made it easier for populists to telegraph their messages to their base while making it more difficult for mainstream parties to get their messages out (Engesser *et al.*, 2017).

The trans-national reach of both social media and traditional media has also meant that populist messages ‘travel’ through the mechanism of diffusion. The dissemination of populist ideas and discourse had a great boost in 2016, with the Brexit referendum and the Trump election, not only through chat-bots’s false news but also as populist European leaders started emulating Trump’s manner as well as discourse. Moreover, Trump’s erstwhile advisor, Stephen Bannon, even sought to spread the message directly by trying (but failing) to set up a transnational extreme right movement, with headquarters outside of Rome. But dissemination of the populist discourse doesn’t always translate – as when US alt right activists sought to use ‘Freddie the Frog’ to reinforce extreme right sentiment in France in the run up to its 2017 presidential election, not realising that ‘frog’ has long been a negative stereotype applied to the French, and therefore would not resonate (Schmidt, 2019).

The milieu: upending the mainstream and capturing power

The closer populists come to electoral power, as populist messengers captivate ‘the people’ through their anti-system messages diffused through social and traditional media, the more leverage they have to disrupt traditional agenda-setting. Many scholars worry that once in power, populists will subvert the very democratic processes that brought them to power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Müller, 2016, p. 102). And by promoting political polarisation at the expense of consensus and majoritarianism at the expense of the rule of law, they see populists in power as teetering between democracy and authoritarianism (Pappas, 2019). Other scholars, however, are more optimistic. They see benefits to populism, including drawing attention to the problems of the existing system, with populists’ ‘agonistic’ approach especially from the left serving to revitalise democracy (Mouffe, 2018). They also show that there are many differences among populist anti-system parties going from the exclusionary extremes on the right to the inclusionary ones on the left (Hopkin, 2020; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019), with a

significant difference between democratic populists and authoritarians (Bugaric & Tushnet, 2021), and between populists in opposition and those in power (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019).

Potential differences with regard to populists' impact on liberal democracy, however, depend not only on the ways in which populist anti-system parties and movements develop and disseminate their messages to build their popular support but also on the more general context, or *milieu*, in which they develop and thrive. This is where the literatures on political economy, political sociology, and comparative politics are so valuable, by focusing attention on people's lived experiences in terms of the socio-economic realities, the socio-cultural concerns, and the political circumstances to which populists appeal while building messages that resonate. Equally significantly, however, the milieu lends insight into the background macro-structures, including structural forces and political institutional constraints (and opportunities) that can impact the ways in which populists may engage in their anti-system politics. Populist parties' own stages of development, from the outside to the inside and in government also make for differences in how well they understand the institutions and policymaking system and on how they decide to act within them as they seek to influence the agenda. Here, the policy literature on the mechanism of 'learning' can also help to lend insight into what kind of learning takes place, how much 'learning' may be involved, and which 'lessons' may be learned, whether for the better or for the worse when it comes to liberal democracy.

Theorising the populist milieu

The milieu helps to explain why populist messengers and the content of their messages tends to be specific to context, as populists build on the *ressentiment* of people in particular places and times. Populists draw on the discontents of people who feel left behind (Hopkin, 2020); who fear a loss of social status and worry about the changing demographics (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019); and/or who have lost trust in mainstream parties on the centre right and centre left, whose policies they blame for the current state of affairs (Berman, 2021; Schmidt, 2020, 2022). The differences in content also play out geographically, often in response to crisis. For example, during the Eurozone crisis, extreme right populist parties focused on socio-cultural issues were more prevalent in Northern Europe whereas extreme left parties focused more on socio-economic issues gained more support in Southern Europe (e.g., Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Rodrik, 2018).

But milieu naturally also matters in terms of the macro-structural factors that may constrain or empower populists in any given country or political community. Structural forces such as market pressures on a country or its economic fundamentals may affect the kinds of populist issues that resonate

and/or populist parties' room for maneuver, as do the institutional constraints or opportunities built into any given country's formal institutions, constitutional laws, and governance practices. Sometimes, populist parties can use the institutions to their own advantage. This was the case of the AfD in Germany, which has used the court system to further its anti-euro agenda. In the case of Hungary, moreover, the electoral rules and constitutional framework that gave Victor Orban a supermajority in parliament enabled him to revise the constitution in ways to ensure his monopoly on policy agenda-setting and to consolidate his power (Scheppele, this issue). Other times, the institutions may constrain populist parties – the case of European countries that fell foul of the Eurozone rules and found themselves in conditionality programmes, such as Syriza in Greece in 2015 with the 3rd bailout programme (Stavrakakis, 2015). Yet other times, they should but they don't, the cases of Hungary and Poland on EU rule of law issues (e.g., Kelemen, 2017; Kovács & Scheppele, 2018).

The policy literature on learning can also lend insight into populists' trajectories to power. Learning through the updating of policy ideas or beliefs (Kamkhaji & Radaelli, 2017) encompasses a range of processes, including technical or political 'social learning' (Heclo, 1974); technical lesson-drawing or political learning through collaboration and/or contestation (Rose, 1991); and 'single loop learning' through use of new instruments and strategies or 'double loop learning' entailing more fundamental changes in core policy ideas and goals (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020). Populists have for the most part rejected technical learning while engaging in political and social learning. But they have drawn different lessons from their experiences at different stages of their trajectory in terms of instruments, strategies, and core ideas.

Where populist parties and social movements sit, whether completely on the outside, on the inside in local or national office, or in power, naturally matters a great deal for their learning experiences and their ability to set the agenda. Equally important is whether populists' transition to power involves formally participating in government or informally supporting a centre-right or centre-left government in power (De Lange, 2017; Minkenberg, 2017). And of course, which agendas are set when populists are in government is of great significance. While some populist parties in power seem to engage in 'single loop' learning by doubling-down on their extremist agendas and undermining the institutions of liberal democracy, as in the cases of Hungary and Poland (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2019), others have engaged in 'double-loop learning', as they moved closer to the mainstream and/or continued to respect liberal democratic norms, the cases of Syriza in Greece or the Five Star Movement in Italy (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Milieu matters here too, since the populist trajectory in power depends on the robustness of liberal



democratic institutions, the loyalty of the electorate, the strength of the messages as conveyed through social and traditional media, and most importantly the response of mainstream parties (Berman, 2021).

Upending the mainstream

The more populists develop convincing narratives with compelling stories that frame the debate using the media in ways that expand peoples' identifications, disseminate their policy ideas, and reinvent the policy discourse, the more they can upend the mainstream. Such upending involves not just challenging mainstream policymakers' monopoly on setting the policy agenda but also mainstream parties' monopoly on electoral power. As they leverage people's support by gaining seats in parliament, populists' demonstrated electoral attractiveness may worry mainstream parties enough for them to listen to the populist messages, incorporate them in their own agendas, and even rely on populists' support either formally or informally.

Another way to think about populist's impact is by their ability to exercise both 'push' and 'pull' leveraging effects on the mainstream. Populists push mainstream parties to consciously reset their agendas for fear of loss of electoral support, but they also pull them towards them, simply by the power of attraction of their messages. The messaging of the extremes of the left, for one, by mobilising on bases of social justice and human rights, or against inequalities and in favour of progressive taxation, has served as a positive pull on mainstream centre left parties (away from 'third way' neo-liberal agendas). But the push has been equally significant where centre left parties have needed extreme left support in government, including in Portugal when the centre left won the 2015 elections in Portugal (Perez & Matsaganis, 2018) and in Spain, when PSOE began governing in coalition with Podemos in 2018.

On balance, however, populist parties of the extreme right are the ones that appear to have exerted the most influence on political debates and the policy agenda so far. Since the 1980s, whenever an extreme right party registered sharp gains in seats or votes, the mainstream right moved their positions closer to those of the extreme right in response (Norris, 2005, p. 266), in particular where these are anti-immigration parties (Von Spanje, 2017). In a number of countries, this 'contagion of the right' has also led many conservative parties to abandon their traditional collaborations with centrist or centre left parties to establish coalition governments in partnership with or informally supported by extreme right parties (Bale, 2003). But the contagion from extreme right agendas has also influenced the centre left (Bale *et al.*, 2010). The case of Denmark nicely illustrates the contagious effects on both centre right and left. Beginning in the early 2000s, the Danish People's Party (De Lange, 2017) gave its informal support to the

Conservative party on condition that it implement its highly restrictive anti-immigration agenda, and flourished as a result (Rydgren, 2004). In 2019, however, the Social Democrats essentially adopted the People's Party framing of the immigration agenda, with the unforeseen effect in the 2019 election of reducing the People's Party to a pale shadow of its former self (dropping from 21 to 8.7 per cent).

Finally, arguably the most successful upending of the mainstream has been in the UK, where the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) not only managed to craft the anti-EU narrative and frame the anti-immigration debate but was also able to reset the agenda for the Conservative party and, ultimately, the entire nation by pushing Conservative party leaders to call the referendum on UK exit from the EU.

Capturing power

How, where, and when populists capture power naturally also has a major impact on agenda-setting. It is one thing to be in a coalition government as a junior partner or outside as a conditional supporter, where the mainstream parties are the major players, another when populists themselves are the main party in government, whether alone or in coalition. Here, populists' transitions from outside government to inside and then to power are instructive with regard to the mechanisms of 'learning', including technical and political learning as well as 'single-loop' or 'double loop learning'.

When on the outside, populist parties and social movements for the most part have very rudimentary ideas about the exercise and administration of government. But as they slowly move from the outside into positions of responsibility, in particular as members of parliament, if not also into government, a great deal of 'social learning' takes place. Most evocative in this regard was Italian populist leader Beppe Grillo's claim prior to the Five Star Movement's electoral success in 2013, when the party entered Parliament, that it would open up the governing system 'like a can of tunafish' (*come una scatola di tonno*). But it was one thing to excoriate the policymaking system from the outside, another to work within it to influence the agenda. While single-loop learning may have characterised the early years in parliamentary opposition, holding power in successive coalitions gradually produced double-loop learning as the party evolved and came to be more of a 'progressive' left party than a populist one.

Syriza in Greece had an even steeper learning curve, given that its trajectory in power involved not just compromise but capitulation to the demands of the Troika in the 3rd bailout negotiations in 2015 (Stavrakakis, 2015). But it, too, could be seen as having experienced double-loop learning, with changes in core ideas that transformed that party into a progressive force on the left, seen not only in its actions but also in the slow transformation of its discourse

to one less focused on an ‘us-versus-them’ antagonism. This was equally the case for Podemos, which increasingly moderated its discourse once in parliament and even more so when in coalition government, in response to changing political and social conditions (Roch, 2022), despite occasionally protesting outside parliament what it had just voted for inside as part of the coalition government with PSOE.

Finally, while learning can lead to compromise moves toward the mainstream – as it has been for the most part for European parties on the extremes of the left – it can instead lead to a doubling down on the extremist agendas and an authoritarian drift – as it has been for Hungary and Poland. Here, single-loop learning may reflect what has transpired in Poland and Hungary, as the instruments may have changed but the core right-wing conservative ideas remained anchoring concepts as they dismantled the structures and values of liberal democracy (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020; Kelemen, 2017; Kovács & Scheppelle, 2018; Rupnik, 2018; Scheppelle, 2022). What kind of learning will characterise Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s Fdl is more open to question. While her policy agenda in the first months in power appeared relatively mainstream, the Fdl’s post-fascist ideology of ‘National Conservativism’ closely mirrors the ideas of Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Hungary’s *Fidesz* (Vassalo & Vignati, 2023, Ch. 6). So it is too early to tell whether the Fdl will experience a single-loop learning curve with an authoritarian drift or whether it will engage in double-loop learning akin to Syriza, Podemos, and the Five Star Movement.

Conclusion

Populism, as defined herein, thus consists of the discursive practices of anti-system messengers with us-versus-them messages using the new as well as traditional media in different milieux to upend the mainstream. Such populist practices come in many different manifestations, as populist messengers on the extremes of the right, the left, and in the radical centre in different milieux use the social and traditional media to construct anti-system messages through narratives that bend the truth, frame the debate, captivate attention, upend mainstream parties, and capture power. As we have seen, the scholarly literature in a wide range of fields can be helpfully repurposed to identify the many variables and causal mechanisms through which populists may influence agenda-setting.

Populist anti-system messages, although very different in content depending upon whether from the extremes of the right, left, or radical centre, are articulated using a similar discursive style, via narratives, frames, and images. Such messages appeal to the emotions while serving to attract followers through mechanisms of identification, which use conceptual anchors such as coalition magnets, *référentiels*, or empty signifiers, and of

reinvention, which generate new policy ideas through bricolage and discursive repertoires.

The populist messengers who articulate such anti-system messages include charismatic policy entrepreneurs, anti-system social movements, and activist networks of followers organised in epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, and political parties. Such messengers frame the debate by pushing and pulling mainstream parties to adopt their messages as well as by spreading their messages via mechanisms of diffusion, whether by disseminating post-truth information, transmitting anti-system norms, or translating their ideas and discourse into other local contexts. Such diffusion operates through the democratically decentring, bottom-up channels of the social media while benefiting from the amplifying effects of the traditional media.

Whether populist messengers' messages resonate is equally dependent upon the milieu, which encompasses not only people's lived socio-economic, socio-cultural, and political experiences that serve as sources of their discontent but also the structural forces and political institutions that serve as background constraints on (or opportunities for) populists. Mainstream parties' responses also matter. Populists' own trajectories on the outside, in parliament, and in power are additional factors to consider, in particular with regard to mechanisms of learning – whether single-loop learning in which populists double down on their anti-system agendas in ways that may undermine liberal democracy or double loop learning in which they may moderate their agendas in ways that serve to reinvigorate liberal democracy.

Populism, in short, is a multi-variate phenomenon. It requires considering the political style and content of the messages; the personality and networks of the messenger; the media, social and traditional, through which the messengers diffuse their messages; and the milieu, including lived experiences and background macro-structures, in which populists seek to set their agenda from the outside, the inside, and in power.

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