Hawkins, K.A. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017), What the (Ideational) Study of Populism Can Teach Us, and What It Can't. Swiss Polit Sci Rev, 23: 526-542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12281>

**Populism has mixed effects on Democracy**

Populism maintains a difficult relationship with democracy. In fact, much of the academic and public interest in populism is related to its potential impact on democratic regimes. This is particularly true in the European debate, which is dominated by the study of populist radical right parties that have awakened a fear of the revival of fascism (e.g. Muller 2016; Rupnik 2016). Nevertheless, the consolidation of left populist leaders in € Latin America has also inspired a debate about an authoritarian drift in the region (e.g. Weyland 2013). Although this topic has been a longstanding preoccupation amongst those who study populism (c.f. Canovan 1999), it is only in the last few years that we have witnessed the emergence of empirical contributions trying to assess the positive and negative effects of populism over democracy (e.g. Hawkins 2016a; Houle and Kenny 2016; Huber and Schimpf 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). These studies present a mixed picture. While it is clear that certain instances of populist rule such as Orban in Hungary and Chavez in Venezuela have fostered a process of democratic erosion (e.g. Batory 2016) and democratic breakdown (e.g. Hawkins 2016b), respectively, it is also true that the coming into power of populist actors in Austria during the 2000s (e.g. Heinisch and Fallend 2016) and in Bolivia more recently (e.g. Anria 2016) have had a much more moderate impact on democracy. To a certain extent, this mixed picture is reinforced by some of the articles of this special issue. For instance, Huber and Ruth (2017, this issue) assess the influence of populist parties on political participation and democratic representation by combining sources of data for 31 European countries from 1990 until 2014. Although the results are not conclusive and more research is certainly needed, they find that populist radical right parties seem to have a positive effect on electoral participation, while leftist populist radical left parties appear to foster ideological congruence between voters and their parliamentary representatives. In addition, the piece on contemporary Greece by Andreadis and Stavrakakis (2017, this issue), already discussed above, reveals that the coalition between the left populist SYRIZA and right populist ANEL offers a program that appeals to different sectors of the electorate, and in consequence, helps to improve the overall responsiveness of the political system. In summary, despite the fact that there are good reasons for worrying about the rise of populism, scholars are probably putting too much emphasis on the downsides and thus not considering potential positive effects of populist forces (Stavrakakis and J€ager 2017). For example, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 79-96) have recently argued that in 6 Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser © 2017 Swiss Political Science Association Swiss Political Science Review (2017) authoritarian settings populism can foster democratization. It is also important to acknowledge that the very emergence of populism is related to democratic shortcomings and that the strategies employed by mainstream actors to deal with populism can potentially generate more harm than good (Stavrakakis 2014). By fighting fire with fire, liberal democracy runs the risk of damaging itself: if established political actors and parties present themselves as the good ones attacking the bad ones, populist forces not only become more visible but can also plausibly argue that their struggle against “the corrupt establishment” is more valid than ever (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In addition, academics and policy-makers should be aware of the undemocratic tendencies of liberalism, which are often highlighted by populist forces of a different kind. As Sheri Berman (2017: 30) has recently indicated, “[a]ltough it is certainly true that democracy unchecked by liberalism can slide into excessive majoritarianism or oppressive populism, liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into oligarchy or technocracy”.