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Populism and alternative models to representative democracy

Jean-Benoit Pilet[a] and Sergiu Gherghina [b]

[a]Department of Political Science, Universite libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium; [b]Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue provides an overview of the state of the art in the study of populism and democracy. It outlines the current debates and identifies several questions that remain unexplored or underexplored. It elaborates on how the different articles in this special issue address these gaps in the literature in order to advance and consolidate our knowledge about the relationship between populism and alternatives to representative democracy. Those articles make a significant contribution to this debate and open important avenues for future research.
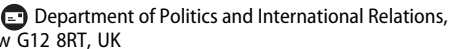
Introduction

Contemporary populism articulates two core ideas: people-centrism and anti-elitism (Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde, 2004). In the populist discourse, these two ideas are reflected into a general critique of representative democracy and into a call for a more central role for the people in the decision-making process. Scholars observed that populists have a redemptive vision of democracy in which the people are 'the only source of legitimate authority, and salvation is promised as and when they take charge of their own lives' (Canovan, 1999, p. 10). In their quest for an unmediated expression of people's will, 'populist movements speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people' (Meny & Surel, 2002, p. 9). Accordingly, there would be a general expectation that populists would propose a model of democracy that increases the power of the people, while reducing the role of elected elites that should be held at check. But views may diverge as how it translate into concrete acts. For many, populists' models of democracy are related to a greater use of referendums as the 'closest institutional arrangement in which an unmediated people's will is expressed' (Caramani, 2017, p. 62) and an efficient way to keep the elite under scrutiny.

The relationship between populism and democracy has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Most of the attention has been paid to the debate whether the two concepts are compatible both in terms of their ideological foundations (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 1999; Müller, 2016; Taggart, 2000; Urbinati, 2014) as well as in the attitudes

and behaviours of populist parties and citizens (Huber & Schimpf, 2021; Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Pappas, 2019; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove et al., 2021; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). More recently, several scholars have started to examine the link between populism and support for alternative models to representative democracy (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Dijk et al., 2020). They share the same premises, that is that populism denounces the centrality of elected politicians who are judged to be corrupt, inefficient and detached from citizens' concerns, to examine what reform of the political system populists would propose without shifting to an authoritarian regime. In particular, research focuses on populists' attitudes towards models of government that give a greater role to citizens (direct, participatory and deliberative democracy), as well as towards model that would empower independent non-elected experts (technocracy).

In this introduction to the special issue, we come back to those developments and identify questions that remain unexplored or underexplored. We then elaborate on how the different articles in this special issue address these gaps in order to advance and consolidate our knowledge about the relationship between populism and alternatives to representative democracy. Those articles make a significant contribution to this debate and open new avenues for future research. The following section provides an overview of the research on populism and alternative models to representative democracy. It highlights the state of the art and identifies several gaps in the literature.

Populism and alternatives to representative democracy

The link between populism and democracy has been studied both in a more historical approach that goes back to the first populist movements in Russia and the United States (for a review, see Borriello and colleagues in this special issue) and in works discussing the representations of populism around the world (Gherghina et al., 2013; Heinisch et al., 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Stockemer, 2019). The core question of these works has been whether populism is or could be democratic.

This question has been first examined by looking at the ideological foundations of populism (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 1999; Urbinati, 2014). It builds on a tension between populism and some of the dimensions of liberal democracy. On the one hand, populism can be described as a democratic emancipatory vision of politics, based upon the desire to give a greater and more direct role to the People. The people-centrism of populism and its appeal for more political equality between citizens at the expense of a dominant elite has been a core feature of populist movements throughout history (Canovan, 1999; Tarragoni, 2019). On the other hand, populist movements may also promote an extreme majoritarian vision of democracy that may be at odds with core principles of liberal democracy such as pluralism, minority rights or the rule of law (Mudde, 2021; Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2014).

This debate on the (un)democratic nature of populism is far from being settled, as we will see in several contributions to this special issue. It has also widely animated scholars who study populist parties and elected populist leaders (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Vittori, 2022). Their democratic ambivalence has also been a core topic of research, in two directions. The first has been to examine more in detail how they translated the people-centrism of populism that is widely present in their discourse (Engler et al.,

2019; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) into actual behaviours. This line of research has become especially prevalent once more and more populist parties and leaders gained government positions and had the possibility to have a direct say in adopting policy decisions. A second line of research looked at the potential authoritarian inclination of populist actors expressed in their support for strong leadership or in their no-compliance to some core liberal democratic principles (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013; Müller, 2014; Pappas, 2019). Several studies identified a negative effect of the recent presence of populist parties in power on the quality of democracy (Houle & Kenny, 2018; Juon & Bochsler, 2020; Vittori, 2022).

There is also burgeoning research on populist citizens with emphasis on their norms, attitudes and behaviours. These studies have produced mixed evidence in a similar way to the studies mentioned above. There is some evidence that populist citizens hold democratic rather than authoritarian views especially when it comes to diffuse support, i.e. when asked if they consider democracy as the best political regime (Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020; Zaslove et al., 2021). Moreover, people with populist attitudes also appear to adhere to most of the principles of liberal democracies. They support free speech, are not especially anti-pluralists, and are concerned with minority rights (Ellenbroek et al., 2023; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023) although they might be in favour of stronger leaders (van der Brug et al., 2021). However, some studies also underlined caveats in populist citizens' democratic attitudes. It appears that they prefer direct rule by the people rather than being constrained by constitutional principles or by the intervention of judges (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). The support for liberal democracy principles among populist voters was stronger when the populist party they supported was in the opposition. Once these parties got into government, the citizens would like those populist parties not to be constrained by the principles of liberal democracy. These findings are especially true for supporters of radical right populist parties (van der Brug et al., 2021).

Next to this first strand of research on populism and democracy, other scholars have tried to examine populist views towards alternatives to representative democracy. They start from the observation that a core dimension of populism lies in its critique of elected politicians, of their lack of trustworthiness, competence and connection to the demands of the 'real people' (Akkerman et al., 2014; Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Schulz et al., 2018; Stoker & Hay, 2017). Then they try to understand what alternative model(s) of government populism would promote (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). The most discussed alternative to representative democracy that has been examined in studies on populism and populist actors is direct democracy. As the call for greater democratisation and giving a greater role to the people has been a core defining feature of populism across history, scholars have naturally wondered whether it has led populist actors to promote widely direct democracy and referendums. Several scholars have confirmed that it was the case for populist citizens (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove et al., 2021), but other findings have been more puzzling. Populist voters do not appear to always be more supportive of referendums (Bowler et al., 2017; Rooduijn, 2018) and populist parties do not appear to be calling that much more for direct democracy than other parties (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021; Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020).

These studies on the relationship between populism and direct democracy have recently extended into a few studies that have tried to examine how populism and

populist actors would apprehend another alternative to representative democracy that gives a greater role to citizens: deliberative democracy. On the one hand, it could be expected that populism would be positively associated to this model of government since it empowers the people in the decision-making process. On the other hand, deliberative democracy rests upon several principles that are less in-line with a populist vision of democracy. It insists on the need to seek compromise and consensus, and stresses very much the pluralist nature of society (Bächtiger et al., 2018). This ambivalent perspective is reflected in earlier findings. The studies at party level indicate that there are more non-populist than populist parties that use deliberation (Borge & Santamarina, 2016; Deseriis, 2020; Fishkin et al., 2008; Gherghina et al., 2020). All these in the context in which ideology is related to the use of deliberation with left-wing parties making more references to it and using it more (Font & Motos, 2023). Earlier research at individual level identifies support for deliberative democracy among populist citizens (Zaslove et al., 2021).

A third alternative to representative democracy is technocracy or expert-driven. On a theoretical level, the similarities and differences between technocracy and populism have been widely discussed by Caramani (2017). They share a strong critique of party politics and of elected politicians. They believe in the existence of an external common good that could be objectively accessible if not distorted by political struggles. But they also diverge on several accounts. While populism is built upon a profound trust in people's capacity to govern, technocracy rests upon the assumption that only a few experts have the necessary skills to govern. Studies on political parties speak about the emergence of techno-populist parties that combine in several ways the populist and technocratic appeals (Bickerton & Accetti, 2021). Research on citizenry provides mixed evidence about the relationship between populist attitudes and support for technocracy. Some studies find a correlation between populist attitudes and support for giving a greater role to independent experts in shaping policy decisions (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). In contrast, other studies have shown that populist citizens were holding rather negative views towards science and scientific experts (Eberl et al., 2023; Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

Gaps in the literature

This summary of the literature on populism and democracy may give the impression that everything has already been covered about the link between populism and democracy. However, the sustained intensity of the scholarly debate illustrates that it is far from being the case. There are several blind spots to be explored.

First, from a more theoretical perspective, we may observe that the discussion is very much dominated by what populism is today especially in Europe and in Latin America. References to the longer history of populism and to populism outside those two continents cover much ground, but they are not exhaustive. There is a need for more long-term historical approaches and for a wider geographical scope to grasp more comprehensively the link between democracy and populism as an ideology. We miss information about how this relationship emerged and developed over time.

Second, while the debate on whether populism is democratic is very lively and keeps on inspiring new publications, we know much less about the detailed conceptions of democracy that populism and populist actors promote (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). It

remains unclear what model of government populists would support and what instruments they would implement once they gain access to decision-making (i.e. in parliament or in government). One of the most sophisticated discussions of how populism in action would translate into transforming the democratic system has been proposed by Urbinati (2019a) who argues that populists would keep some of the core foundations of representative democracy especially electoral and direct democracy mechanisms. They would transform those fundamentals of democracy towards a form of extreme majoritarianism in which the 'populist majority' would be conceived as the only authentic and legitimate majority, embodied in a strong leader that uses elections and referendums as plebiscites, and that delegitimize completely the opposition. These observations are anchored in the experiences of populists in power like Orban in Hungary, Trump in the US, or Chavez in Venezuela (Urbinati, 2019b).

The goal in this special issue is to follow this example and to dig deeper into how populist actors develop and implement their vision of democracy in concrete terms, by looking at how they mobilise and use institutional instruments. Several specific elements deserve more attention. While it is well established that populists are calling for greater direct rule by the people, it must be clarified how they want to put that into practice. Most research on populism evokes the role of referendums in the vision of democracy populists develop. But it rarely goes into much detail. Urbinati (2019a), for example, elaborates that referendums may be used by populist leaders in addition to elections to confirm their popular support. The referendums can also embody the unmediated link between populist leaders and 'the people'. Many questions remain open such as: What is populists vision on direct democracy and on its actual use? How do they integrate referendums with other forms of citizens participation like deliberative democracy? Are there specific issues that populists perceive as more appropriate for referendums? Exploring further on these questions is one of the goals pursued in this special issue. Moreover, while there is a burgeoning literature about how populist leaders, parties or citizens may be attracted by some alternatives to representative democracy (like technocracy), there are isolated attempts to dig deep about what model of government populists call for and what are their process preferences (Hibbing et al., 2023; Pilet et al., 2023). Knowing that populists would like more referendums to be held does not provide the full picture regarding what should be the role of other actors (politicians, experts, judges) and institutions (parliament, government, the judiciary, the civil service).

Finally, we know that populist parties emerge as challenger parties, but they have remained most of the time on the opposition benches. Yet, over the last decade, more and more populist parties have been associated to power, as external supporters of minority government (like in Denmark or Sweden), as junior coalition partner (like in Finland and Austria) or as the largest government party (like in Brazil, Greece, Hungary or Italy). What we still do not know is how those populist parties behave once they reach government office. Do they call referendums more often, or appoints technocrats? Do they challenge decisions by courts and tribunals? The picture of how democracy is affected by populists in power is a blur although there are isolated attempts to shed light on this question (König & Swalve, 2022).

We must also acknowledge, however, that there are other blind spots in the literature on populism and democracy that this special issue does not cover. In particular, research on this question has been dominated by scholars looking at populist actors in European,

Latin American or Asian countries. There have been recent developments in specific countries, especially Turkey (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Castaldo, 2018; Elçi, 2022). Some of the articles in this special issue try to follow this path but future research would need to dig deeper into the complex relationship between democracy and populism at the country level.

Contributions and content of the special issue

The articles in this special issue bring important theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of the relationship between populism and alternative models to democracy. They address both the supply side – populist political parties and politicians – and the demand side – citizens with populist attitudes, or voting for populist parties. In terms of alternative models of democracy, most contributions focus on the relationship with direct democracy and one study refers to deliberative democracy. To begin with the supply side, two articles include theoretical and analytical perspectives that nuance the existing knowledge and provide strong bases for further research. One invites to reconsider the common assumptions about the relationship between populism and democracy by illustrating that historically there is no tension between the two (Boriello et al.). A second article draws the correspondence between rhetoric and policies on several key ideological dimensions (Enyedi).

The contribution by Boriello et al. studies the history of the first movements that have called themselves populists and draw on an understanding of populism as an egalitarian impulse against oligarchic tendencies, centred on anti-elitism and the defense of a democratic common sense. The study connects the diversity of conceptions of democracy with populist thought and practices, illustrating that populists have contextual attitudes towards democratic institutions and representation. They provide evidence to indicate the absence of an intrinsic connection between populism and anti-pluralism, or between populism and authoritarian leadership. The democratic institutions favoured by populists heavily depend on their diagnosis of the failings of representative institutions in the context in which they operate.

Enyedi's work proposes an ideology-centred interpretation of the Orbán regime in Hungary. The article explores the role of ideological frames in post-2010 Hungary and investigates the correspondence between rhetoric and policies on several key ideological dimensions. Going beyond the Hungarian case, it advances a set of criteria to be considered when the role of ideology in the functioning of political regimes is concerned, emphasising that ideology-driven voters constrain the elites even in hybrid regimes. Three ideological constructs are introduced – illiberal conservatism, civilizationist ethnocentrism and paternalist populism – that are shown to answer the questions of what a virtuous life is, what is the nature of the represented community, and what is the relationship between citizens and the state. These constructs are linked to specific decisions about allocation of resources and signature policies. The article questions those accounts of democratic backsliding that focus on social tensions or on the preferences of leaders and it directs attention to the constitutive role of ideology.

The empirical contributions of the next two articles lie in their comparisons between the appetite of populist and populist parties for direct democracy. Gherghina et al. conclude that populists talk in general about referendums in their manifestos although they

call more frequently for their use compared to non-populists; most of their references to referendums are policy blind. Vittori and Angelucci look specifically into the difference in the use and promotion of direct democracy between populist parties in government and in opposition. In more detail, Gherghina et al.'s article explores how populist parties talk about referendums in their election manifestos. It seeks to identify what type of referendum populist parties tend to support, and to analyse whether their support for referendums is generic or policy specific. The findings confirm earlier findings that populists call for a great use of referendums but indicate that the references to referendums are mainly general claims about the transformation of democracy, from a predominantly representative model to a model that combines representative institutions with direct democracy. Moreover, populist parties rarely provide details about what types of referendums they wish to implement, how they would like them to be organised, or on what topics. There is no difference regarding the references to referendums between populist parties in government and in opposition. The article of Vittori and Angelucci brings evidence about how populist and non-populist parties promote referendums to a similar extent, but the populists tend to make greater use of these instruments when in opposition. They indicate that populists facilitate the use of direct democracy when they are a major partner in the government, especially the citizens-initiated referendums. This effect is largely contextual and dependent on party system institutionalisation and the age of democracy.

A final contribution on the supply side refers to the identification of strategic anticipation effect in the decisions of populist politicians about institutional change. Ruth-Lovell and Welp investigate the relationship between populism in power and the expansion of mechanisms of direct democracy in Latin America. It tests the extent to which the introduction of new or additional direct democracy mechanisms is more likely to occur under populist than non-populist presidents due to core populist ideas. This can be conditioned by a political strategic calculus of populist presidents. The findings indicate that expansions of direct democracy practices are promoted more by populist presidents only when they can count on high levels of public support.

The scientific relevance of the articles referring to the demand-side is threefold. At theoretical level, the work of Setälä and Christensen argues about the importance of interplay between thick and thin populist attitudes to understand their consequences in relation to direct democracy. Heinisch et al. advance the state of the art both theoretically and empirically by refuting the conventional assumption that populist-oriented citizens are guided by normative considerations when supporting referendums. Instead, they are driven by instrumental considerations. Jacobs makes a relevant contribution to the literature by looking at what changes populist attitudes. He studies the effects of participating in a citizens' assembly of populist attitudes and thereby tests the claim that deliberation can 'remedy' populism.

More specifically, Setälä and Christensen's article examines whether populist attitudes affect the attitudes towards and the use of the Citizens' Agenda Initiative in Finland. They study whether people with populist attitudes have positive attitudes towards the citizens' initiative and have a higher propensity to use the citizens' initiative. In doing so, they focus on the interplay between anti-elitism, anti-immigration and anti-pluralism as driving forces behind attitudes towards and using the citizens' initiative. Their results

illustrate that populist attitudes are in general not related to support or use of citizens' initiatives. Anti-elitism is tied to satisfaction with the citizens' initiative, while anti-pluralism to using this direct democracy practice. Our results also demonstrate that it is important to examine the interplay between thick and thin populist attitudes to understand their consequences.

Heinisch et al. argue that citizens follow instrumental reasoning, using cues from parties, independent experts and the population to decide whether to hold a referendum. They find that citizens' support depends mainly on their attitudes towards the respective policy and the opinion of their preferred party, while views of experts and the public play only a subordinate role. There are no systematic differences between populist and non-populist citizens. Their results refute the conventional assumption that populist-oriented citizens are guided by normative considerations when supporting referendums. They illustrate that, regardless of context and political orientation, instrumental considerations explain citizens' preference for holding a referendum.

Jacobs' work offers a theoretical framework to analyse the impact of deliberation on populism. It tests it empirically by examining the extent to which citizens with a high degree of populist attitudes became less populist after participating in a deliberative event. The results show that populist attitudes decrease, but without clear indication that this is due to the quality of deliberation. Equally important, citizens' assemblies can increase populist attitudes when people are involved in a process they disagree with. As such, the study illustrates that deliberative events are no panacea for populism and can backfire for some participants.

The different contributions of the special issue do not close the debate on populism and democracy, but they advance our understanding of the complex relationship between the two. The articles illustrate that the reality cannot be reduced to categorising these two as intrinsically intertwined or as deeply incompatible. It is crucial to consider the context in which populist actors operate such as in which countries, during with period of history, and in what position – in opposition or in government. It is also fundamental to take into account the complex interplay between value-driven and interest-driven considerations by populist actors when they evaluate how to relate to democracy and models of government. In other words, more in-depth examinations of the complex relationship between populism and democracy are needed, and this is the avenue pursued by this special issue.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Jean-Benoit Pilet is a Professor of Political Science at Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium. He is specialized in elections, electoral systems, political parties, Belgian politics, and democratic innovations.

Sergiu Gherghina is an Associate Professor in Comparative Politics at University of Glasgow. His research interests lie in party politics, democratization, political participation, and direct democracy.

ORCID

Sergiu Gherghina 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-5598

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