Populism and Democracy on the Individual Level: Building on, Yet Moving Beyond the Supply Side

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The connection between populism and democracy is widely researched. Most of the literature focuses on populist actors (e.g., parties, leaders, and governments) as it examines the intricacies of this relationship. Some of the resulting takeaways have become embedded firmly in scholarship and are currently considered accepted knowledge across the discipline. Scholars have only recently started focusing on the individual-level relationship between populism and democracy. As a result, our knowledge remains limited and is often based on the assumption that what holds for populist actors also will hold for populist citizens. The first part of this article briefly reviews the state of the art on the individual-level relationship between populism and democracy. Drawing from this review, we identify several theoretical and empirical gaps and limitations in the literature that future research should address. We conclude that contemporary scholarship has made important contributions, but more nuanced and targeted research is necessary to comprehensively understand the intricacies between populism and democracy on the individual level.

Other articles in this symposium describe how populist actors can affect the state of democracy. Understanding populist actors is invaluable in explaining the populist challenge to democracy. At the same time, political actors do not operate in a vacuum. Citizens have a vital role in facilitating or hindering the success of populist actors, which means that public support is an important boundary condition for their emergence and consolidation (Ruth 2018). How citizens with populist attitudes think about democracy is essential to fully understand the relationship between populism and democracy. After all, recent literature suggests that citizens may vote for populist actors not only despite their stances on democracy but also because of them (Graham and Svolik 2020; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023). Therefore, our analysis of the relationship between populism and democracy should not be limited to the elite level of politics; it also should examine what is happening at the mass level.

The transition from arguments related to political actors to theoretically guided hypotheses related to citizens is more complex than it may appear. After all, political actors and citizens operate in different ecosystems and face different (strategic) incentives for their behavior. With that in mind, we discuss the current state of the art of individual-level research on the intersection between populism and democracy. We outline four key challenges that scholars face today that should guide their future research. First, scholars should give specific attention to the dimensionality of both populism and democracy. Given the multifaceted nature of populism and democracy, a precise understanding of the various causal mechanisms and a detailed measure of the core concepts are essential. Second, disentangling the effects of populism's co-constituent terms (e.g., authoritarian and socialist attitudes) on democracy is essential to understand whether and to what extent populism is the driver of citizens' attitudes toward democracy. Third, and related, the current literature overwhelmingly relies on observational data. Future research should explicitly explore ways for more detailed causal inference. Fourth, the relationship between populism and democracy may differ depending on a country's historical legacy or its political culture. Therefore, research should extend its prototypical case selection beyond the "usual suspects" in Latin America and Western Europe.

POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY ON THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Much has been written about the relationship between populist actors and democracy. Recent scholarship complements this research by also examining the relationship between populism and democracy among individuals. This is necessary because individuals with populist appeals are not per se democratic or authoritarian. Much like populism on a party or a leader level, the combination of populism and host ideology is highly relevant for how they are positioned vis-à-vis various dimensions of democracy.

An increasing number of articles survey individuals to examine how populist they are. The common term for this individual-level manifestation of the ideational approach of populism is *populist attitudes*. Hence, individuals with high levels of populist attitudes hold a set of beliefs consisting of anti-elitism, people centrism, and a Manichean outlook—that is, as a struggle between "the pure people" and "the corrupt

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establishment" (Hawkins et al. 2019). Of course, the existence of populist ideas at the mass level does not imply that populist forces automatically receive public support. The remainder of this article uses high levels of support for populism (i.e., populist attitudes) and citizens who hold populist attitudes (i.e., populist citizens) interchangeably (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020). The corresponding literature provides three consistent takeaways that relate to the relationship between populism and (1) democratic support, (2) democratic dissatisfaction, and (3) different conceptions of democracy.

How citizens with populist attitudes think about democracy is essential if we want to fully understand the relationship between populism and democracy.

Populism and Democratic Support

Despite some scholars claiming that populists (and their supporters) are essentially authoritarians or anti-democratic, an extensive conceptual literature argues and finds that populism is *not* per se hostile to democracy as a regime type but rather may oppose liberal elements attached to democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 2017; Taggart 2000). After all, the very notion of democracy indicates that power comes from the people, who hold the ultimate power and are the only source of legitimate authority (Canovan 1999). In that sense, populism and democracy are not opposites but instead positively intertwined concepts that share a primacy of "the people."

Empirical research on the individual level further confirms this claim. Populist citizens are not necessarily "enemies of democracy" or "authoritarians in disguise." They have not (yet) turned their back on democracy. Moreover, populist citizens are not less supportive of democracy and its ideals than non-populist citizens (Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020). They simply support different principles and institutions that promote the "will of the people" (e.g., free and fair elections), as well as the majoritarian core of representation and governance (Landwehr and Steiner 2017). They prefer democracy, despite all of its flaws, to other forms of government, such as (competitive) authoritarianism (Urbinati 2017). Furthermore, populist citizens' diffuse support for democracy as a political regime is a consistent finding across countries, regardless of the aggregate levels of democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020). Research highlights the importance of simultaneously considering citizens' ideological leaning and how policy positions also may influence support for some dimensions of democratic attitudes (Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018; van Kessel, Sajuria, and Van Hauwaert 2021).

Populism and Democratic Dissatisfaction

Although the scholarship is clear that populist citizens support democracy as a political ideal, this does not mean they are convinced about how these ideals currently are being implemented. Populist citizens typically believe that the democratic system is not working properly because "the people" are ignored and "the elites" seem to care only about themselves (Hawkins et al. 2019). Or, more generally, they believe that the democratic system does not serve its main purpose, which is to translate the "will of the people" into political outputs (Mair 2013). The corresponding gap between "what-is" and "what-should-be" democracy can strain core democratic tenets and representative principles.

In that sense, populist citizens feel slighted by democratic functioning and the (perceived) lack of government responsiveness and representation (Kriesi 2020). Although they are supportive of the theoretical principles of democracy, they are disgruntled with their practical implementation. Populist citizens, therefore, are not critical of the democratic system itself but rather of its day-to-day functioning. Thereby, this reflects the bigger-picture debate on specific and diffuse support for democracy described by Easton (1965). Overall, such deep-seated disenchantment with democratic politics and the corresponding crisis of representation is a consistent finding across countries—even across world regions—regardless of a country's historical legacy, traditions, or political culture (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020).

These two findings combined indicate that although they are dissatisfied with the way democracy is implemented, populist citizens remain strong supporters of the democratic system and its key notion of representation. They "merely" believe that the contemporary dynamics of mediated representation are flawed, and they identify traditional politics as the origins of any failures in representation (Taggart 2002). This confirms that populism and democracy are not inevitable opposites (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012) and, to some extent, substantiates populism as a "pathological normalcy" rather than a "normal pathology" (Betz 1994; Mudde 2004, 2010). It further shows that populist citizens cannot be reduced to disenfranchised and alienated voters, authoritarians, or anti-establishment electorates. Rather, those who support populist ideas more accurately are described across the literature as "dissatisfied democrats." Recent research supports this claim by highlighting that populist citizens put higher emphasis on the role of ordinary citizens but otherwise may not be so different from their non-populist counterparts in terms of their conceptions of democracy (Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen 2023).

Populism and Different Conceptions of Democracy

Drawing from the observation that populist citizens are dissatisfied democrats, a third takeaway from this literature relates to how populist citizens understand democracy (for

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an overview, see Rehus and Van Hauwaert 2024). This allows us to comprehend whether their dissatisfaction has an epistemic nature—that is, whether it is rooted in a specific conceptualization of what democracy means.[1] This scholarship is still in its infancy; nevertheless, two preliminary observations stand out.

We know from the conceptual literature that populism clashes with the ideas and institutions of liberal democracy, primarily because of its incompatibility with pluralism (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Recent empirical research on the individual level highlights that populist citizens are skeptical—even hostile—toward liberal protections of individuals and that they dismiss liberal values such as minority rights, political equality, and freedom of expression (Wegscheider, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Van Hauwaert 2023; Zanotti and Rama 2021). They may even reward rather than punish candidates who put forward illiberal positions (Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023). Populist citizens view liberal institutions as unnecessary hindrances to the public's legitimate authority and as a structural impediment to the more hardline majoritarianism that it typically embodies (Koch 2021). They are suspicious of any constitutional restraints to democratic principles, including checks and balances and the division of powers. For populist citizens, these bounded institutions and procedures limit public power and impede majorities from advancing the "general will."

Recent literature also reveals that populist citizens are more likely to support direct citizen participation (Huber and Van Hauwaert 2024). Populism values the direct, unmediated, and unconstrained expression of the will of the people, unfragmented by traditional political parties and representation (Taggart 2000). Direct democracy can provide the instruments for this through majoritarian institutions (e.g., referenda) and deliberative forms of participation (e.g., citizen juries and town hall meetings). It therefore is not unsurprising that there is strong evidence to suggest that populist citizens are more likely to support these tools (Jacobs, Akkerman, and Zaslove 2018; Werner and Jacobs 2022).

Considering that contemporary democracies have structural difficulties in giving a voice and power to the people (Mair 2002), direct democracy often is used strategically by populist actors to promote their policy agenda; they justify this by "giving power back to the people." Hence, it also is an attractive alternative for populist citizens because it enables them to re/acquire agency and more directly engage with politics. This is most likely the case when they are in opposition. Populist citizens favor direct citizen participation to overcome the power of the elite. Considering the anti-elitist nature of populism and populist citizens' distrust of political parties, this preference follows the same underlying strategic logic as populist parties in opposition.

CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This section identifies different pathways of the literature on the demand-side relationship between populism and democracy for which we deem future research efforts necessary. Because ongoing scholarship provides important insights, we must not neglect to take the necessary steps to gain a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of this relationship.

Whereas more general claims about the relationship between populism and democracy are made easily, the concrete causal mechanisms often run through specific dimensions of either concept. Specifically, the causal mechanisms may run through either individual subcomponents of populism (e.g., anti-elitism and people centrism) or populism as a holistic construct and may not address democracy as a whole but rather as individual components. To illustrate this, we reasonably could argue that populist citizens are less supportive of individual liberties because doing so runs against the notion of a homogeneous people. Thus, the causal mechanism linking populist citizens and these characteristics runs through people centrism. In contrast, the support for direct democracy may run through either anti-elitism (as populists seek to bypass elites in decision making) or people centrism (to return decision-making power to the sovereign; therefore, the people). It also is important to simultaneously consider other co-constituent terms because they may serve as important explanatory factors complementing populist attitudes (Bonikowski 2017; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018).

Essentially, for theoretical and empirical purposes, scholars must give attention to the subdimensions of both populism and democracy and its multifaceted nature. Currently, the literature focuses mostly on the measurement of populism and democracy as two holistic concepts. Yet, important debates remain regarding whether this is even possible or useful (Castanho Silva et al. 2019; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azavedo 2020; Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen 2020). Rather than arguing about the big-picture relationship between populism and democracy, it may be worthwhile to rationalize the relationship between components of populism and democracy. This observation has important implications for precisely and accurately measuring the concepts. Depending on the causal mechanism, it may be important to use populist attitude scales that capture subdimensions (for a comparison, see Castanho Silva et al. 2019). Minimizing the gap between theoretical argumentation and empirical modeling is essential to expand our understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy on the individual level.

Underlying the previous point on the measurement of populism and democracy is the desire to credibly identify causal relationships between populism and democracy on the individual level. Most of the literature discussed previously relies on observational survey data and correlational methods (e.g., regression). Although this is a reasonable starting point for the development and first test of empirical arguments, such techniques are inherently limited. At the same time, experimental methods—as a more causal tool—are limited in inducing changes in populist attitudes. Attempts have been made to experimentally activate populist attitudes (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019; Busby et al. 2019); however, there is no clear and easily applicable strategy to vary populist attitudes exogenously. Thus, future research should explore new methodological advances to overcome current shortcomings in the attribution of effects to populism (and its co-constituent terms) and also to collect new data that allows for a more in-depth

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investigation over time. Direct manipulations, as outlined by Busby and colleagues, as well as more indirect attempts to consider the relationship between populism and democracy (Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023) are promising endeavors that may inspire new empirical approaches to the matter.

The extant literature teaches important lessons about the differentiated behavior of populist actors in government and opposition. Currently, however, literature on citizens has not followed suit. So far, we remain relatively uninformed about the possible difference in public (and populist) attitudes of citizens in countries that have populist actors in government and opposition. Two reasons stand out as to why we might expect differences. First, we know that once populist actors get to power, populism matters less, and they tend to revert more to "thick" ideologies to support their policy making (Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015). Could this also be the case for citizens?

Second, recent findings suggest that public attitudes among electorates might differ depending on populism in power or opposition (Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020; Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino 2021). More precisely, we remain oblivious about how citizens may (or may not) change their interpretation and understanding of democracy when they face or support populists in power. Initial evidence emphasizes that citizens are affected by changes in the government status of populist parties (Krause and Wagner 2021; Muis, Brils, and Gaidytė 2022); however, this dimension has not received much attention. Other recent research reveals that appreciation for various aspects of democracy differs among countries and is conditional on positive and negative partisanship (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Wegscheider, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Van Hauwaert 2023). It is only a small leap to think that governmental status is also playing a role here.

Finally, as is too often the case, the contemporary case selection that substantiates our insights into the individual-level relationship between populism and democracy is skewed. Most studies focus on Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, Latin America. Other countries and world regions remain significantly underexplored, and our insights into them are minimal. Although we cannot "blame" scholars for this skewed case selection, both regions are relatively homogeneous in their respective historical legacies and political culture. We remain oblivious about how specific historical legacies and political cultures (e.g., from Africa and Asia) may (or may not) influence the relationship between populism and democracy. These two crucial factors shape the relationship between populism and democracy; therefore, we should extend our case selection to countries with different political traditions. After all, this limited case selection seriously restricts our ability to generalize with confidence or, worse, it contributes to incomplete or incorrect conclusions and ignorance about important boundary conditions.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Of course, there are ongoing debates about how to best measure populist attitudes and attitudes toward democracy. Knowing that populism and democracy are both multidimensional concepts, the empirical relationship between them is not always straightforward and obvious to observe or even understand. This is still an important avenue for further research. For more information on the empirical multidimensionality of populism, see Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azavedo (2019, 2020), Castanho Silva et al. (2019), and Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2020), among others. For more information on the empirical multidimensionality of democratic understanding, see Wegscheider, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Van Hauwaert (2023) and Rehus and Van Hauwaert (2024), among others. Hence, scholars must consider the various attempts on how to measure the current concepts. Although much has been done to adequately capture populist attitudes, we have not reached a "perfect" measure, and scholarship in this area continues to be necessary.

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