

# Populism and Democracy: Mapping the Field and the Road Ahead

## Populism and Democracy: Mapping the Field

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**T**he rise of populism as a global phenomenon has captured the attention of scholars and raised concerns about its impact on democracy. Thanks to a growing academic consensus around an ideational definition of populism, one can observe the generation of important cumulative knowledge on the relationship between populism and democracy. Political science has been at the forefront of this development, and this symposium seeks to both offer state-of-the-art information on this topic and discuss blind spots that future studies should try to address.

Extant academic research shows that in abstract terms it is pertinent to define populism as a set of ideas maintaining that society is divided into two groups—the pure people versus the corrupt elite—and that politics should respect the general will of the people. Scholars working with this conceptual approach emphasize that it facilitates not only the differentiation of populism from other set of ideas such as elitism and pluralism but also empirical research on the actors who develop populist narratives of different kinds (supply side) and on the citizens who believe in the populist ideas (demand side). For an overview of the ideational approach and its advantages, see, among others, Hawkins et al. (2019) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017).

At the same time, there is increasing academic research showing that in principle populism supports a very narrow understanding of democracy (without adjectives); however, in practice populism maintains an ambivalent relationship with liberal democracy. Given that liberal democracy is the current dominant model, populism certainly represents a challenge.

The problem lies in the fact that liberal democracy is a complex political regime that not only defends popular sovereignty and majority rule but also transfers power to independent institutions that specialize in the protection of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and minority rights. However, populism is deeply opposed to these independent institutions and argues—not always without reason—that the time has come to give power back to the people, rather than to unelected bodies, which cannot be adequately controlled.

To provide a more nuanced overview of what do we know about the ambivalent relationship between populism and liberal democracy, we invited a diverse set of colleagues to cover different dimensions of this topic. All these contributors are familiar with the ideational approach to populism and use it to address these five questions:

1. What is the impact of populist forces in opposition?
2. What is the impact of populist forces in government?
3. Which concepts of democracy are endorsed by populist citizens?
4. What kind of political regime do populist governments prefer?
5. What can be done to deal with populism?

In this introduction, we present the main ideas of each article, including the concluding piece that we wrote, in which we reflect on the symposium's main findings and discuss how studying broader issues beyond the populist phenomenon may enrich our understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy.

The symposium starts with an article by de Lange and Böckmann, who examine populists in opposition and their relationship to democracy. Because populist forces are normally in the opposition rather than in government, it is quite relevant to explore how they can affect the liberal democratic regime. The authors look at the influence of populists in opposition in three areas. First, they examine the impact on liberal democracy and find that there is a mixed picture of which aspects, such as the rule of law or minority rights, are most affected. Second, they look at their impact on citizens' perceptions of democracy, finding again a mixed picture: some but not all studies do show an impact on levels of political trust. Third, they turn to the effect on mainstream parties and find an impact on policy but little influence on their adopting populist stances. Moreover, de Lange and Böckmann suggest

that research should focus on differentiating between left-wing and right-wing versions of populism to examine their different effects. They also recommend that scholars undertake more cross-regional in-depth comparisons and give more attention to subnational politics to yield a greater comparative range of cases.

The next article looks at the other side of the coin: Hawkins and Mitchell consider populists in power and their impact on democracy. They suggest that many populist politicians claim they are seeking to revitalize democracy as a corrective to democratic decline, but in practice they tend to damage democratic contestation. Their analysis shows the negative impact of incumbent populists in both single case studies and in broader comparative studies, leading them to suggest a role for populists in the wider phenomenon of democratic backsliding. They found little evidence of beneficial effects, but there is some work showing left-wing populism having positive effects in some cases on voter turnout and representation. This resonates with the argument put forward by de Lange and Böckmann about differentiating between left-wing and right-wing versions of populism. Interestingly, Hawkins and Mitchell call for more cross-regional comparisons with standardized measures and suggest complementing the ideational approach with other conceptual strategies, which can generate new comparative knowledge.

Considering the increasing number of studies on support for populist ideas at the mass level, Van Hauwaert and Huber explore how citizens with populist attitudes think about democracy. Given that previous research has shown that diffuse support for democracy is characteristic of populist citizens, they argue that populist attitudes might drive citizens' opposition to the liberal component of existing democratic regimes. Seen in this light, frustration with the ways in which democracy functions might lead to growing public support for populist ideas and they suggest that this is why populist citizens may be classified as "dissatisfied democrats." Van Hauwaert and Huber also argue that populist citizens favor direct democratic mechanisms when they are seen as a way of constraining elites. The authors suggest that both democracy and populism are often dealt with holistically and that it would be fruitful to disaggregate these concepts into their component parts. They end with a call for extending the regional study of populism and for analyzing the effects of populists in government and opposition on populist citizens.

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Next, Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier's contribution considers what model of democracy is deployed by populists in power. They propose that, even though the ideology of populisms should lead them to value the electoral arena, in practice, research demonstrates that populists when in government tend

to skew the playing field against the opposition. But they also show that this effect not only differs between left-wing and right-wing populists but also hinges on the strength of electoral democracy in different regions. Although populists in government show an antipathy to the liberal elements of democracy, Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier maintain that they do embrace participatory democracy as an alternative unless them strategically to do so. These populists in power also do not endorse deliberative models of democracy. The authors conclude that the ideology of populism does relate to the models of democracy that those in power endorse in practice, but this link is highly mediated by actor-specific and contextual factors.

The symposium also includes one piece that addresses the thorny question of how to deal with populism. Malkopoulou and Moffit's article suggests that there is a large body of academic literature on what responses to populism work and what do not work, but that it is largely descriptive and does not consider the potential democratic implications of responses to populism. To better understand this problem, they propose a powerful typology of three ideal-typical responses. The authors suggest that the "militant" approach of attempting to legally exclude populists from politics is both normatively problematic and rarely used. It runs the danger of overreach and is focused on the liberal rather than the democratic element of liberal democracy. They see the mirror image of this in the "tolerant" approach of not excluding populist actors but forcing them to conform to democratic norms. This is used more frequently but may give populists the opportunity to learn the rules of the game and thereby "game" the system; it also runs the risk of being ineffective. Finally, they identify a "social" approach, whereby mainstream actors attempt to address social grievances that give rise to populism. However, it is hard to pin down this approach in practice except in rare cases, and they argue that it is not suitable as a short-term measure. Malkopoulou and Moffit see the potential for a blend of tolerant and social responses but argue that there is the need for a clear-eyed focus on populism, its differentiation from associated forms of politics, and the evolution and meanings of democracy.

The symposium concludes with our contribution, in which we reflect on the key lessons to be drawn from the contributions discussed here. We place particular emphasis on two promising avenues for future research on the relationship between populism and democracy: the top-down and bottom-up perspectives. The top-down perspective highlights the importance of examining how elites can promote populist

agendas with potentially harmful consequences for democracy. In contrast, the bottom-up perspective calls for greater attention to the beliefs of citizens and the extent to which they embrace populist ideas that challenge the liberal democratic framework. As populism continues to be a defining feature of


twenty-first-century politics, we are confident that both academic and public debates on its impact on democracy will continue. We hope this symposium contributes meaningfully to these discussions and inspires further innovative research.


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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST


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


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