

# [Does populism threaten democracy?](https://assignbuster.com/does-populism-threaten-democracy/)

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, Latin American and America have witnessed a re-emergence of popular political parties and populist actors. This emergence is usually due to the crisis of democratic systems and most importantly, crisis of the representation form of democracy. When ‘ the people’ do not feel that they can properly voice their dissatisfied-opinions effectively, or when they feel their interest are not with the (democratic) government, populism can begin to arise. According to Abts and Rummens (2007, p 418), democracy is based on the idea of an open and diverse integrate society. Populism on the other hand, is based on aclose form of collective identitywhich represses individuality. Place side by side, it is apparent that populism is deemed a threat to the very existence of democracy. Therefore there have been growing scholarly debate about the concept of populism and its impact on democracy. Kaltwesser (2012, p 147) argues the growing interest in the topic of populism is due to the common opinion that populism embodies a sort of dangerous trend. This dangerous trend lays emphasis on the idea of popular sovereignty (which may pursue exclusion) as a problem for democracy. Nonetheless, some scholars like Akkerman (2003) and, Meny and Surel (2002) see populism as a progressive and a challenging tool towards democracy.

Thus this essaycontends the argument that, populism is not just seen as a threat to democracy, it is also a seen as challenge to democracy. On the bases of being a threat, populism is seen as somewhat an alternative to democracy. It also createssituations that disrupt the processes of democracy. On the other hand, populismas a challenge to democracy highlights the problems within a democracy andpushes for the political elites and institutions to attend to such problems.

This argumentwill be achieved through the following aims. Firstly, the existing relationshipbetween populism and democracy. Secondly, how populism is a threat todemocracy. Thirdly, how populism is a challenge to democracy. This essay willthen conclude by giving final thoughts on this topic of populism and a summaryof what this essay has addressed.

## Populism and Democracy

This sectionwill look at the definitions of populism and democracy in brief. The importanceof this section is to solidify why this topic is an issue in the first place byexploring the relationship between populism and democracy.

The origin ofthe populism concept can be traced back to the end of the 19 th century, which when the so-called Narodniki inRussia and the Populist Party in the United States and emerged (Canovan, 1981, p 5 – 6). Urbinati (2014) defines populism as a virtue of politicalmobilisation (p 128). It is the idea of people of a popular sovereignty and apolitical style that strives on the division between ‘ the people’ (i. e. a “ we”)and the elites (i. e. the leaders who claim to speak for the will of ‘ the people’).

Democracy on theother hand, is a highly contested concept in the social sciences which is asold as time. All adjectives aside, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) define democracyas “ the combination of popularsovereignty and majority rule ” (p 10). In other words, it is a politicalsystem in which people rule (Przeworski, 2010, p 8 – 9).

The relationshipbetween populism and democracy is that, populism emerged pertly as a by-productof democracy. Since democracy is based on elections, it provides a mechanism bywhich ‘ the people’ can channel their dissatisfaction with the political establishment(Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p 17). In theory, the relationship betweenpopulism and democracy is a positive one as argued by (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p 17) because it is viewed in support of popular sovereignty and majorityrule. As Arditi (2004) has indicated in his dialogue with Canovan (1999) thereare good reasons to think that populism follows democracy like a shadow. Forexample, if aspirations generated by democracy are not satisfied with, political discontent is created thus leading towards the rise of populism. Scholarslike Green (2006) argue that populism is democratic in nature even if manypopulist leaders may not democratically incline once they reach power. Therefore it is expected that populism plays a role during the first part ofdemocratisation by giving a voice to ‘ the people’. This in turn attacksauthoritarian establishments and push for the realisation of a free and fairelection (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, p 18).

In the form ofrepresentation, scholars such as Taggart (2002, p 17) argue that populism isfundamentally opposed to representation. However, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, p17) argue that this is an overstatement. This is because populists rally onlyagainst the wrong kind of representation, not representation in general. Thewrong kind of representation here is the kind that fails ‘ the people’ andlimits itself away from the plebiscitary instruments. Populists criticiseparliamentary democracy because it takes the opinion of a part of ‘ the people’and merge it with the will of the state (Urbinati, 2014, p 128). Populiststherefore accept representation by some of ‘ the people’ and not of the elites.

In its liberalform, Meny and Surel (2002, p 6) argue that this relationship exists solely onthe contradictions of liberal democracy i. e. the promise of majority rule andthe protection of rights. Populism here advocates for the former as opposed tothe latter because it believes in “ thegeneral will of the people ”. Thus it is hostile towards the pluralist ideaof the protection of minorities.  As Mudde(2010, p 1175) has argued, the primacy of the political i. e. “…the general will of the people cannot belimited by anything, not even the constitutional protection of minorities, thatis vox populi, vox dei”. Populism seeks to implement an agenda in hostilityagainst liberalism and its principles of minority rights (Urbinati, 2014, p 128– 129).

In the words of DahlRobert (1956), populism gives the demos total and final control over thepolitical order, in other words, the control of the majority. Laclau (2005) addsthat it takes the advantage of the government by opinion and makes theimpression that the opinion belongs to one public (Urbinati, 2014, p. 132-134). Thus it can be said that populism is like a parasite that attaches itself todemocracy. Hence arguments arise on whether populism is a threat to democracyor not.

## A Threat to Democracy

This sectionshows how populism is a threat by ways of its deep demarcation between ‘ thepeople’ and the elites, its explosive nature, its exclusive nature and lastly, its automatic political assumptions.

Populism as a threat to democracy is exemplified through the way the term populism is given a negative connotation usually by the press, and when leaders reject the term as a description of themselves or their strategies (Panizza 2005). Populism is often used as disqualifying label for example, howDonald Trump’spresidential win has been presented (Fleurbaey, 2016). Some scholars connect the advent of populism with the suggestion that the democratic regime is not functioning appropriately. Thus its appearance is perceived as a threat about the defects, limits and weaknesses of a representative system.

Mudde and Kaltwasser(2015) argue that populism establishes a political cleavage between thepopulists versus the non-populists, which impedes the formation of stablepolitical coalitions. Canovan (1999) presents populism as a shadow ofdemocracy. She argues that the populist mobilisation arises in the gap between‘ the people’ and the elites, primarily as a way to counteract the pragmaticexcesses of established democracies (Adriti, 2004, p 28). Populism can hardlyexist without the politics of personality (Urbinati, 2013, p 161), thus it can transformleaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a significantmatter. Alternatively, this gap between ‘ the people’ and the elites becomes ajustification for using “…strong armtactics against political adversaries” (Arditi, 2004, p 30). The populist disdainfor institutional checks and balances can encourage a rule by decree and allsorts of authoritarian behaviour while still maintaining a democratic façade.  This is because for populism, popular sovereigntyis the chief importance of democracy. Populism not only accepts the existenceof a dividing line between ‘ the people’ and the elites, it also seeks toconstruct a political model in which representative institutions are not essential(Kaltwasser, 2012, p 188), representative institutions are essential to(representative and liberal) democracy. Populist leaders claim to put powersback into the hands of ‘ the people’, thus voters lose trust in the problemsolving capacity of the democratic constitutional system Mair (2002, p 84). This democratic form of system then becomes less and less attractive for theelectorate.

Another way inwhich populism is a threat to democracy is their explosive nature. Bryder(2009, p 10) argues that politically, populism discourses are often intolerant, they legitimise on the exclusion of others who do not fit within theirdefinition of ‘ the people’.  For examplepopulist parties usually oppose to immigrants, Lega Nord (a regional politicalparty in Italy) takes a hard-line towards Muslim foreigners. Alternatively, Diamondfurthers this example by arguing that populism has a possibility oftransforming into an illiberal threat to democracy (2017, p. 8). This isbecause it targets certain social groups such as immigrants. While the membersof this targeted group are naturally not full citizens, some of them are. Diamond further argues that if the rhetoric of European nativist parties such asthe Front National (FN) is studied, it will not be difficult to detect thatsuch parties hold a broader narrative on racism and this narrative also appliesto people of the targeted group of national origin who have in fact becomecitizens or are even native born as well (2017, p 9).  Brdyer (2009, p 11) argues that populismbreeds a hostile environment towards intellectual and political elites. Thelegitimisations of populists’ political opponents are ridiculed thus implyingthat they are not seen as adversaries but as evil enemies. This ridicule hencecreates a permanent situation of conflict which is not conducive for democracyto exist. As Carlos de la Torre (2010) has argued, almost every Latin Americanpopulist leader is likely to describe political opposition as a full on warbetween ‘ the people’ and their enemies. From this viewpoint, the respect ofcertain rules of the democratic game is ignored (Kaltwasser, 2012, p 199). Subsequently, a great portion of the Latin American populace are living inpoverty and suffers different forms of exclusion, populism as a phenomenon hasa higher possibility of fostering inclusiveness but at the same time, at thecost of public contestation. Diamond (2017, p 6) shares this same view. Heargues that populism becomes a threat to liberal democracy when it becomesculturally exclusionary. Secondly, populism is a threat also when it clings toits hegemonic pretensions by exhibiting contempt for pluralist notions whichintrinsically, respects differences and opposition (p 6 – 7). Furthermore, heargues that populism becomes a threat to democracy when it rejects democraticpluralism and presents that its leader and its party are the only true andlegitimate manifestation of the popular will of ‘ the people’ (p 7). Therefore, populism rejects an emblematic structure in which the political stage for ademocratic political debate is defined (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p 411).

Furthermore, populism threatens democracy in its political assumptions. It can lead to highlevels of moralisation in politics making compromise and consensus extremelydifficult. Enyedi (2017) argues that populism is a threat to democracy chieflybecause it holds the possibility of providing the state with a moral statusthat is usually absent. He also argues that when a state turns into this epitomeof ‘ the virtuous people’ the defence mechanisms that were established againsttyranny (such as freedoms, the rule of law, checks and balances, autonomoussocial institutions, tolerance, individual and group rights, or pluralism) are predictablyunder threat (2017). Once the limitation of the oppressed people is achieved, there is no self-limitation programme into the populism structure. Populism isoften swayed by public opinions due to its plebiscitary view on democracy, decision becomes more responsive as oppose to being negotiated (Bryder, 2009, p11) as done in democracies. The legitimacy of democratic institutions becomesundermined. Thus the quality of the decision making processes within ademocracy becomes diminished (Decker, 2003, p 64). Subsequently, the populisttheory of voting can lead to a tyranny of the majority. If the outcome of anelection is deemed to be a reflection of the popular will of ‘ the people’, itis implemented immediately into public policy (Haskell, 2001, p 12). This meansthat populism uses the notion and praxis of a majority rule to evade minorityrights.

Notwithstandingthese arguments on the threats that populism poses for democracy, there aresome scholars who argue on a different line. These scholars believe that populism has been painted in a bad light andthat in fact, populism rather exercises democracy, and it challenges democracy.

## A Challenge to Democracy

This sectionengages with the notion that populism is not just a bad phenomenon towarddemocracy (as viewed in the previous section). Rather it presents itself as achallenging tool toward problems of inequality, the party system and lastly, itpresents populism as a challenging tool toward global democracy.

Populism doesnot aim to abolish the democratic system, instead, they want to restore andreform it in such a way that it emphasises the fundamental principal of itsexistence, which is the direct rule of the sovereign will of ‘ the people’. Inthe same manner, populism is treated as a reminder that democracy is notsomething that is automatically given, but something that should adjust tochanging circumstances of the needs of ‘ the people’ (Akkerman, 2003, p156-158).

Populism isdeemed as constructive towards democracy when circumstances arising fromextreme inequality are objectively setting in motion, a limited circle ofprivileged elite against the large portion of the populace. Scholars like Menyand Surel (2002, p 15) see populism in a good light, a “ fever warning ”, as they both put it. They argue that populismserves as a signal highlighting the defects of a representative democracy. Taggart(2000) proposes populism as a health indicator in representative politicalsystems because it draws attention to any sporadic malfunctioning thattranspires in a political system thus, the elites become aware that they needto take politics to ‘ the people’ (Deiwiks, 2009, p 4 and Akkerman, 2003, p 154). Populism more than anything, tries to challenge the status quo. Of which thisis done by way of introducing new issues of political agenda or by deconstructingthe political consensus on old issues of political agenda.  Populism depoliticises and bringsrevitalisation to dull and stationary political discourse of mainstream parties. According to Decker (2003, p 56), populism challenges and forces elites to dealwith matters by resolving them within the system which in turn, prevents the channellingof discontent into violence and sectarianism procedures (Bryder, 2009, p 12).

Populism notonly posts a challenge to democratic system as a whole, but for party systemwithin democracy as well. Although populists organise themselves in politicalparties because they want to be able to compete against mainstream parties, oneof their main postulates is the eliminations of political parties (Bryder, 2003, p13). Some populist parties can also try to “ join the club ” or “ take over ” weakest members as explained by Meny and Surel (2002, p 19). Populist partiessuch as the British populist radical right party, Veritas (a split from UKIP)won 27 seats in parliamentary elections in 2005 in which shows the politicalforce populist parties have against mainstream parties. Bryder (2013, p 20)argues that this populist style of leadership (that is, the direct relationshipbetween the leader and the followers) and form of organisation are often copiedby mainstream political parties. This is because it is believed that thepopulist tactics will help gain lost electorates and also, sometimes mainstreamparties use populist challenge to out-vote authoritarian laws, which in usual democraticpolitical conditions will not be promising to establish.

Populism partiesdoes not only post challenges by being in the margins of a political scene, they also challenge the notion of parliamentary democracy. Radical populismcontends the argument that all legislative power belongs to ‘ the people’ and toparliament thus legislative power should not be separated (Akkerman, 2003, p 156). Balancing power through non-elected judges for instance is therefore opposingto populist principle (Akkerman, 2003, p 159). Radical version of populismdisregards the principle of separation and spreading of powers. Normal Populistmovements fight over the meaning of representation in democracies. This isbecause populist politicians present themselves as leaders above partypluralism and make claims in the name of the will of ‘ the people’ (Fleurbaey, 2016). Thus the constitutional procedures for election and representativegovernance are challenged. Such strains can open the door to regime change inthe direction of better representation (Fleurbaey, 2016). Politicians areregularly accused of having lost touch with the concerns of the “ commonpeople”. Mostly in consolidated democracies, populism can lead to electoralapathy. When ‘ the people’ experience social distress arising economicinequality, their governing leaders become indifferent (Fleurbaey, 2016). Insuch case, ‘ the people’ can turn away from practical politics and seek a breakfrom the established norms of democracy (Fleurbaey, 2016).

Globally, populism as argued by Fleubaey (2016) plays two roles. Firstly it denouncessocial inequality and decreases the privileges of the elite few. It also callsfor a renewed national unity in the name of ‘ the people’. Secondly, byhighlighting ethic understandings of democratic popular sovereignty, it laysbare the weakness of many liberal democratic norms, and shows how dependent onunderlying social conditions modern representative democracy can be. Theconsequence of neoliberal supremacy is the creation of an oligarchic regimewhich is reflected on the socio-economic and political levels of a democraticsociety (Mouffe, 2017). Mouffe further argues that it is this presence oroligarchy in European societies and politics that allows for the success ofright wing Populist parties. Populist parties are usually the ones who denouncethis oligarchy situation and assure to ‘ the people’ to give back the power to them, which has been confiscated by the elites. However, this is often achieved inxenophobic demands. Additionally, Wodak (2017) argues that these right wingpopulist political parties claim that only they represent the ‘ real people’ (ina nativist and culturist sense). This philosophy is a deep manifestation of anauthoritarian mind set. Wodak further explains that these right wing populistparties tend to construct and reinforce threat and danger situations. However, Mouffe argues that such populism is not needed in this situation. She calls fora progressive kind of populism, a creation of a progressive ‘ people’ which willnot lead to the establishment of a political frontier between an ‘ us’ versus a‘ them’ which pits some dominated groups against others. Instead, there shouldbe a progressive construction of an ‘ us’ that challenges the post-democraticregression caused by the hegemony of neo liberalism.

## Conclusion

Populism arisesfrom due to the problems of democracy, be it in its representative, institutional, parliamentary or constitutional form. Benjamin Arditi(2003, p 21) argues, that the usual way of identifying the relationship betweenpopulism an (representative) democracy, is to say that populism arisesas the result of a crisis of representation. Populism also arises as a reactionto either the inability or the rejection of elites to address the concerns of‘ the people’. For populism to arise there has to be this singular collective of‘ the people’. The populist ideology is a radical contestation of power anopinion and should not be mistaken as an ideology of dispersion or antagonism. Although populism claims to be in tally with popular opinions and popular will, it is however, not totally friendly towards democracy, as presented in the bodyof this essay. Populism is often presented in the press to define some recentpolitical developments with a negative connotation. However, some observers seepopulism in a more optimistic light, as a form of direct democracy.

Although thisessay is limited to text based research, it has however been able to expand onthe thesis that populism is a double edge sword. While populism threatens thestructure of democratic procedures and infrastructures, populism is also deemedto challenge democracy. Populism views democracy as a hegemonic conflict inwhich the views of the elites dominate the views an opinions of ‘ the people’. Populist movements serve as a teller to the political elites within a democracythat they are not doing something right to reflect the needs of ‘ the people’. AsKaltwasser (2012) argues that “ Populismcan provide an ideological bridge that supports the building of importantsocial and political coalitions, of ten across class lines ”. Hence in away, re-connects the democratic governments with its peoples’ needs.

As presented bythis essay, there is no one single answer to the question. Thus, populism canbe seen as both a threat to democracy and a challenge to democracy.

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