

Does populism
threaten democracy?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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 a close form of collective identity which 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 essay contends the argument that, populism is not just seen as a threat to democracy, it is also seen as a challenge to democracy. On the bases of being a threat, populism is seen as somewhat an alternative to democracy. It also creates situations that disrupt the processes of democracy. On the other hand, populism as a challenge to democracy

highlights the problems within a democracy and pushes for the political elites and institutions to attend to such problems.

This argument will be achieved through the following aims. Firstly, the existing relationship between populism and democracy. Secondly, how populism is a threat to democracy. Thirdly, how populism is a challenge to democracy. This essay will then conclude by giving final thoughts on this topic of populism and a summary of what this essay has addressed.

Populism and Democracy

This section will look at the definitions of populism and democracy in brief. The importance of this section is to solidify why this topic is an issue in the first place by exploring the relationship between populism and democracy.

The origin of the populism concept can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, which when the so-called *Narodniki* in Russia and the Populist Party in the United States and emerged (Canovan, 1981, p 5 – 6). Urbinati (2014) defines populism as a virtue of political mobilisation (p 128). It is the idea of people of a popular sovereignty and a political 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 the other hand, is a highly contested concept in the social sciences which is as old as time. All adjectives aside, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) define democracy as “*the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule*” (p 10). In other words, it is a political system in which people rule (Przeworski, 2010, p 8 – 9).

The relationship between populism and democracy is that, populism emerged partly as a by-product of democracy. Since democracy is based on elections, it provides a mechanism by which 'the people' can channel their dissatisfaction with the political establishment (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p 17). In theory, the relationship between populism 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 majority rule. As Ardit (2004) has indicated in his dialogue with Canovan (1999) there are good reasons to think that populism follows democracy like a shadow. For example, if aspirations generated by democracy are not satisfied with, political discontent is created thus leading towards the rise of populism. Scholars like Green (2006) argue that populism is democratic in nature even if many populist leaders may not democratically incline once they reach power. Therefore it is expected that populism plays a role during the first part of democratisation by giving a voice to 'the people'. This in turn attacks authoritarian establishments and push for the realisation of a free and fair election (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, p 18).

In the form of representation, scholars such as Taggart (2002, p 17) argue that populism is fundamentally opposed to representation. However, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, p17) argue that this is an overstatement. This is because populists rally only against the wrong kind of representation, not representation in general. The wrong kind of representation here is the kind that fails 'the people' and limits itself away from the plebiscitary instruments. Populists criticise parliamentary 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). Populists therefore accept representation by some of 'the people' and not of the elites.

In its liberal form, Meny and Surel (2002, p 6) argue that this relationship exists solely on the contradictions of liberal democracy i. e. the promise of majority rule and the protection of rights. Populism here advocates for the former as opposed to the latter because it believes in " *the general will of the people* ". Thus it is hostile towards the pluralist idea of 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 be limited by anything, not even the constitutional protection of minorities, that is vox populi, vox dei* ".

Populism seeks to implement an agenda in hostility against liberalism and its principles of minority rights (Urbinati, 2014, p 128- 129).

In the words of Dahl Robert (1956), populism gives the demos total and final control over the political order, in other words, the control of the majority. Laclau (2005) adds that it takes the advantage of the government by opinion and makes the impression 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 to democracy. Hence arguments arise on whether populism is a threat to democracy or not.

A Threat to Democracy

This section shows how populism is a threat by ways of its deep demarcation between 'the people' 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, how Donald Trump's presidential 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 the populists versus the non-populists, which impedes the formation of stable political coalitions. Canovan (1999) presents populism as a shadow of democracy. She argues that the populist mobilisation arises in the gap between 'the people' and the elites, primarily as a way to counteract the pragmatic excesses of established democracies (Arditi, 2004, p 28).

Populism can hardly exist without the politics of personality (Urbinati, 2013, p 161), thus it can transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a significant matter. Alternatively, this gap between 'the people' and the elites becomes a justification for using "*...strong arm tactics against political adversaries*" (Arditi, 2004, p 30). The populist disdain for institutional checks and balances can encourage a rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behaviour while still maintaining a democratic façade. This is because for populism, popular sovereignty is the chief importance of democracy. Populism not only accepts the existence of a dividing line between 'the people' and the elites, it also seeks to construct 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 powers back into the hands of 'the people', thus voters lose trust in the problem-solving capacity of the democratic constitutional system (Mair (2002, p 84). This democratic form of system then becomes less and less attractive for the electorate.

Another way in which 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 their definition of 'the people'. For example populist parties usually oppose to immigrants, Lega Nord (a regional political party in Italy) takes a hard-line towards Muslim foreigners. Alternatively, Diamond furthers this example by arguing that populism has a possibility of transforming into an illiberal threat to democracy (2017, p. 8). This is because it targets certain social groups such as immigrants. While the members of this targeted group are naturally not full citizens, some of them are. Diamond further argues that if the rhetoric of European nativist parties such as the Front National (FN) is studied, it will not be difficult to detect that such parties hold a broader narrative on racism and this narrative also applies to people of the targeted group of national origin who have in fact become citizens or are even native born as well (2017, p 9). Bryder (2009, p 11) argues that populism breeds a hostile environment towards intellectual and political elites.

The legitimisations of populists' political opponents are ridiculed thus implying that they are not seen as adversaries but as evil enemies. This

ridicule hence creates a permanent situation of conflict which is not conducive for democracy to exist. As Carlos de la Torre (2010) has argued, almost every Latin American populist leader is likely to describe political opposition as a full on war between 'the people' and their enemies. From this viewpoint, the respect of certain rules of the democratic game is ignored (Kaltwasser, 2012, p 199). Subsequently, a great portion of the Latin American populace are living in poverty and suffers different forms of exclusion, populism as a phenomenon has a higher possibility of fostering inclusiveness but at the same time, at the cost of public contestation. Diamond (2017, p 6) shares this same view. He argues that populism becomes a threat to liberal democracy when it becomes culturally exclusionary. Secondly, populism is a threat also when it clings to its hegemonic pretensions by exhibiting contempt for pluralist notions which intrinsically, respects differences and opposition (p 6 - 7). Furthermore, he argues that populism becomes a threat to democracy when it rejects democratic pluralism and presents that its leader and its party are the only true and legitimate manifestation of the popular will of 'the people' (p 7). Therefore, populism rejects an emblematic structure in which the political stage for a democratic political debate is defined (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p 411).

Furthermore, populism threatens democracy in its political assumptions. It can lead to high levels of moralisation in politics making compromise and consensus extremely difficult. Enyedi (2017) argues that populism is a threat to democracy chiefly because it holds the possibility of providing the state with a moral status that is usually absent. He also argues that when a state

turns into this epitome of 'the virtuous people' the defence mechanisms that were established against tyranny (such as freedoms, the rule of law, checks and balances, autonomous social institutions, tolerance, individual and group rights, or pluralism) are predictably under threat (2017). Once the limitation of the oppressed people is achieved, there is no self-limitation programme into the populism structure. Populism is often 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 becomes undermined. Thus the quality of the decision making processes within a democracy becomes diminished (Decker, 2003, p 64). Subsequently, the populist theory of voting can lead to a tyranny of the majority. If the outcome of an election is deemed to be a reflection of the popular will of 'the people', it is implemented immediately into public policy (Haskell, 2001, p 12). This means that populism uses the notion and praxis of a majority rule to evade minority rights.

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

A Challenge to Democracy

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

Populism does not aim to abolish the democratic system, instead, they want to restore and reform it in such a way that it emphasises the fundamental principle of its existence, which is the direct rule of the sovereign will of 'the people'. In the same manner, populism is treated as a reminder that democracy is not something that is automatically given, but something that should adjust to changing circumstances of the needs of 'the people' (Akkerman, 2003, p156-158).

Populism is deemed as constructive towards democracy when circumstances arising from extreme inequality are objectively setting in motion, a limited circle of privileged elite against the large portion of the populace. Scholars like Meny and Surel (2002, p 15) see populism in a good light, a "*fever warning*", as they both put it. They argue that populism serves as a signal highlighting the defects of a representative democracy. Taggart (2000) proposes populism as a health indicator in representative political systems because it draws attention to any sporadic malfunctioning that transpires in a political system thus, the elites become aware that they need to 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 this is done by way of introducing new issues of political agenda or by deconstructing the political consensus on old issues of political agenda. Populism depoliticises and brings revitalisation to dull and stationary political discourse of mainstream parties. According to Decker (2003, p 56), populism challenges and forces elites to deal with matters by resolving them within the system which in turn, prevents the channelling of discontent into violence and sectarianism procedures (Bryder, 2009, p 12).

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

Populist parties do not only pose challenges by being in the margins of a political scene, they also challenge the notion of parliamentary democracy. Radical populism contends the argument that all legislative power belongs to ‘the people’ and that parliament thus legislative power should not be separated (Akkerman, 2003, p 156). Balancing power through non-elected judges for instance is therefore opposing to populist principle (Akkerman, 2003, p 159). Radical version of populism disregards the principle of separation and spreading of powers. Normal Populist movements fight over the meaning of representation in democracies. This is because populist

politicians present themselves as leaders above party pluralism and make claims in the name of the will of 'the people' (Fleurbaey, 2016). Thus the constitutional procedures for election and representative governance are challenged. Such strains can open the door to regime change in the direction of better representation (Fleurbaey, 2016). Politicians are regularly accused of having lost touch with the concerns of the "common people". Mostly in consolidated democracies, populism can lead to electoral apathy. When 'the people' experience social distress arising economic inequality, their governing leaders become indifferent (Fleurbaey, 2016). In such case, 'the people' can turn away from practical politics and seek a break from the established norms of democracy (Fleurbaey, 2016).

Globally, populism as argued by Fleurbaey (2016) plays two roles. Firstly it denounces social inequality and decreases the privileges of the elite few. It also calls for a renewed national unity in the name of 'the people'. Secondly, by highlighting ethical understandings of democratic popular sovereignty, it lays bare the weakness of many liberal democratic norms, and shows how dependent on underlying social conditions modern representative democracy can be. The consequence of neoliberal supremacy is the creation of an oligarchic regime which is reflected on the socio-economic and political levels of a democratic society (Mouffe, 2017). Mouffe further argues that it is this presence of oligarchy in European societies and politics that allows for the success of right wing Populist parties. Populist parties are usually the ones who denounce this 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 in xenophobic demands. Additionally, Wodak (2017) argues

that these right wing populist political parties claim that only they represent the 'real people' (in a nativist and culturist sense). This philosophy is a deep manifestation of an authoritarian mind set. Wodak further explains that these right wing populist parties tend to construct and reinforce threat and danger situations. However, Mouffe argues that such populism is not needed in this situation. She calls for a progressive kind of populism, a creation of a progressive 'people' which will not lead to the establishment of a political frontier between an 'us' versus a 'them' which pits some dominated groups against others. Instead, there should be a progressive construction of an 'us' that challenges the post-democratic regression caused by the hegemony of neo liberalism.

Conclusion

Populism arises from 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 between populism and (representative) democracy, is to say that populism arises as the result of a crisis of representation. Populism also arises as a reaction to 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 and opinion 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 body of this essay. Populism is often presented in the press to define some recent political developments with a negative connotation.

However, some observers see populism in a more optimistic light, as a form of direct democracy.

Although this essay is limited to text based research, it has however been able to expand on the thesis that populism is a double edge sword. While populism threatens the structure of democratic procedures and infrastructures, populism is also deemed to challenge democracy. Populism views democracy as a hegemonic conflict in which the views of the elites dominate the views and opinions of 'the people'. Populist movements serve as a teller to the political elites within a democracy that they are not doing something right to reflect the needs of 'the people'. As Kaltwasser (2012) argues that " *Populism can provide an ideological bridge that supports the building of important social and political coalitions, of ten across class lines*". Hence in a way, re-connects the democratic governments with its peoples' needs.

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

Bibliography

Abts, K and Rummens, S. (2007). Populism versus Democracy. *Political Studies*, 55(2), 405-424.

Akkerman, T. (2003). Populism and Democracy: Challenge or Pathology? *Acta Politica*, 38(2), 147-159.

Arditi, B. (2003). Populism, or, Politics at the Edges of Democracy. *Contemporary Politics*, 9(1), 17-31.

Arditi, B. (2004). Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan. *Political Studies*, 52(1), 135-134.

Bryder, T. (2009). *Populism: A threat or a challenge for the Democratic System?* University of Copenhagen Faculty of Social Science Department of Political Science Winter, 10 ECTS. Available from http://politicalscience.ku.dk/international_students/present_international_students/taking_exams/past_papers/Populism__a_threat_or_a_challenge_for_the_democratic_system.pdf [Accessed 22 April 2018].

Canovan, M. (1981). *Populism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies*, 47, 2-16.

Dahl, R. (1956). *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Deiwiks, C. (2009). Populism. *Living Reviews in Democracy*. Available from <https://lrd.ethz.ch/index.php/lrd/article/viewPDFInterstitial/lrd-2009-3/11> [Accessed 20 April 2018].

Decker, F. (2003). The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy. *Cite Seerx*. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.560.306&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [Accessed 22 April 2018].

<https://assignbuster.com/does-populism-threaten-democracy/>

Diamond, L. (2017). When Does Populism Become a Threat to Democracy? *FSI Conference on Global Populisms*. Stanford. 3-4 November. Stanford: Stanford University, 1 -10.

Enyedi, Z. (2017). Five views: Is Populism Really a Threat to Democracy? *LSE*. Available from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/07/24/is-populism-really-a-threat-to-democracy/> [Accessed 23 April 2018].

Fleurbaey, M. (2016). Why Populism Challenges Democracy from Within. *The American Prospect*. Available from <http://prospect.org/article/why-populism-challenges-democracy-within> [Accessed 22 April 2018].

Green, J. (2006). The Rebirth of Populism. *Global Policy Forum*. Available from <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/162/27963.html> [Accessed 22 April 2018].

Haskell, J. (2001). *Direct Democracy or Representative Government? Dispelling the Populist Myth*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Kaltwasser, C. (2012). The Ambivalence of Populism: threat and Corrective for Democracy. *Democratisation*, 19(2), 184-208.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Mair, P. (2002). Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy. In: *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Mény, Y. and Surel, Y. (eds.), New York: Palgrave.

Meny, Y. and Surel, Y. (2002). The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism. In: *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Meny, Y. and Surel, Y. (eds.), New York: Palgrave, 1–21.

Mouffe, C. (2017). Five views: Is Populism Really a Threat to Democracy? *LSE*. Available from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/07/24/is-populism-really-a-threat-to-democracy/> [Accessed 23 April 2018].

Mudde, C. (2010). The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy. *West European Politics*, 33(6), 1167–1186.

Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, R. (2012). Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis. *ResearchGate*. Available from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292566457_Populism_and_Liberal_democracy_A_framework_for_analysis [Accessed 22 April 2018].

Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, R. (2013). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, R. (2015). Vox Populi or Vox Masculini? Populism and Gender in Northern Europe and South America. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1-2), 16-36.

Panizza, F. (2005). *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London: Verso.

Pankowski, R. (2010). *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots*. London: Routledge.

Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
<https://assignbuster.com/does-populism-threaten-democracy/>

Taggart, P. (2002). Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics. In: *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* . Meny, Y. and Surel, Y (eds.), New York: Palgrave.

Torre, C. (2004). *Populist Seduction in Latin America* . Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Urbinati, N. (2013). Sismonde de Sismondi's Aristocratic Republicanism. *European Journal of Political Theory* , 12(2), 153-174.

Urbinati, N. (2014). *Democracy Disfigured* . Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.

Wodak, R. (2017). Five views: Is Populism Really a Threat to Democracy? *LSE* . Available from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/07/24/is-populism-really-a-threat-to-democracy/> [Accessed 23 April 2018].