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Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

Academics are increasingly using the concept of populism to make sense of current events such as the Brexit referendum and the Trump presidency. This is certainly a welcome development, but two shortcomings can be observed in the contemporary debate. On one hand, new populism scholars often start from scratch and do not build upon the existing research. On the other hand, those who have been doing comparative research on populism stay in their comfort zone and thus do not try to link their work to other academic fields. In this article, we address these two shortcomings by discussing some of the advantages of the so-called ideational approach to the comparative study of populism and by pointing out four avenues of future research, which are closely related to some of the contributions of this special issue, namely, (a) economic anxiety, (b) cultural backlash, (c) the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, and (d) (negative) partisanship and polarization.

Keywords

populism, democracy, extremism, comparative politics, polarization

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Introduction

Although populists had been making headlines across the globe for at least two decades, the British European Union (EU) referendum and the rise of Donald Trump have led to an unprecedented proliferation of articles, news coverage, and op-eds on populism. Not by chance, the Cambridge dictionary declared "populism" the word of the year 2017. Although the concept of populism is indeed helpful to understand contemporary politics, an increasing number of academics and pundits are using it mainly as a buzzword. This means that populism is often poorly defined and used in wrong ways. Yet, there is a growing group of scholars who work with similar, though not identical, definitions, broadly referred to as the "ideational approach," which is particularly well-suited for comparative research on populism, be it qualitative or quantitative in method.

In this introduction to the special issue, we argue that new populism scholars should not start from scratch, but rather build upon the lessons that the existing academic literature offers. At the same time, scholars who have been doing (comparative) research on populism should try to link their work to other academic literatures and traditions, as this will permit the scholarly community to explore new avenues of research with the aim of producing new and better knowledge. We will discuss in more detail how insights from various related literatures, most notably electoral and party studies as well as scholarship on the radical right, can be better integrated into future populism research.

We first address the advantages of the so-called ideational approach to the comparative study of populism and then point out four avenues of future research, which are closely related to the contributions of this special issue, namely, (a) economic anxiety, (b) cultural backlash, (c) the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, and (d) (negative) partisanship and polarization. We hereby draw upon some of the work that we have written in the last few years, upon the research of colleagues studying populism as well as related topics (such as the radical right), and on the four contributions of this special issue of *Comparative Political Studies*.[1]

Defining Populism

Academic scholarship on populism has been devoting increasing attention to advancing clear conceptualizations, which can be employed to undertake empirical research in a cross-national and cross-regional fashion. For instance, the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, & Ostiguy, 2017) offers three distinct

conceptual approaches—an ideational, a political-strategic, and a sociocultural approach—which are used by different scholars interested in comparative research. This is an important achievement in the academic debate on populism since not long ago there was still an abundance of ad hoc definitions that often treated the specificities of national or regional manifestations of populism as generalizable ("Trumpism" is a recent example of this problematic tendency). Fortunately, there is a growing cumulative knowledge on populism and, in consequence, a more coherent body of research that can and should be used to build upon.

As with many other concepts in the realm of the social sciences, populism is still a contested one and it is difficult to imagine that the definitional debate will ever come to an end. However, an ever-growing number of scholars are employing an ideational approach, according to which populism should be defined as a set of ideas that not only depicts society as divided between "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," but also claims that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost (Mudde, 2004a; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Scholars using the ideational approach have a similar understanding of populism, but tend to disagree about the genus of the phenomenon. Among the most common terms used are "discourse" (e.g., Stravakakis & Katsambekis, 2015), "frame" (e.g., Aslanidis, 2016a), "moralistic imagination" (Mueller, 2016), "political claim" (e.g., Bonikowski & Gidron, 2015), "style" (e.g., Moffitt, 2016), "thin-centered ideology" (e.g., Mudde, 2004a), and "worldview" (Hawkins, 2010). Although each of these terms has its own specificities, the differences between them are minor, and irrelevant to many research questions. We, therefore, believe that the various definitions point to fairly similar phenomena and populist forces, which means that most research on populism based on the ideational approach is overall complementary and cumulative. This constitutes an important advantage of the ideational approach, as it fosters a much-needed dialogue between scholars working with different methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and regional expertise.

At least three important lessons can be drawn from the ideational approach. First, while populism should be conceived of as a specific set of ideas, it is distinct from classical ideologies such as a fascism and liberalism, because it has a limited programmatic scope. This is why we prefer to define populism as a thin-centered ideology, that is, as a belief system of limited range (Freeden, 2003). In fact, populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public. For instance, right-wing exclusionary versions of populism usually rely on nativism to depict a narrow ethnic understanding of who the members of "the pure people" are, whereas left-wing inclusionary

types of populism normally rely on socialism to advance a definition of "the pure people" that embraces the socioeconomic underdog (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

By combining populism with other sets of ideas, populists are able to politicize grievances that are relevant in their own context. This is why one can observe the formation of very different types of populist forces across place and time, combining populism with such a diverse range of "host ideologies" as agrarianism, nationalism, neoliberalism, and socialism. Although all populists share the moral and Manichean distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," a significant level of variance exists in terms of the definition of each term. Still, in essence, the content is always determined by the specific way in which grievances are addressed. Therefore, the ideational approach shows that we need to study populism not in isolation, but rather in combination with different ideologies, which are crucial to develop programmatic profiles that can be more or less attractive for large segments of the population in specific societies and time periods.

Second, the ideational approach helps us to better understand the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy. Given that "the people" *is* seen as honest, whereas "the elite" *is* portrayed as fraudulent, populists are prone to claim that nobody has the right to bypass the popular will. This has important consequences for the type of government that populist actors support in both theory and practice. They favor what is most often termed minimal or procedural democracy, defined as popular sovereignty and majority rule. At the same time, they have serious problems with liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers (including independence of the judiciary and the media).

In short, populism is at odds with liberal democracy rather than with democracy per se. Nevertheless, when defending liberal democracy over populist forces, what most scholars tend to forget is that "[. . .] liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into oligarchy or technocracy" (Berman, 2017, p. 30). In fact, populism is in many ways an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism. Hence, although there are good reasons to worry about the rise of populism, we should not overlook that more often than not there is some truth in their criticism, as they stress the fundamental democratic issue of how to control the controllers (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014).

Although populism is mostly discussed within the context of (consolidated) liberal democracies, in both empirical and theoretical studies, many populist actors operate, or have operated, in very different political contexts. For example, within Latin America populists of the first and second wave mobilized at best within democratizing countries. The relationship between

populism and the various phases of the (de-)democratization process remain understudied and, until recently, undertheorized (see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Rather than simply assuming that populism is good or bad for democracy, empirical research based on the ideational approach allows to analyze the conditions under which populist forces can have a positive or a negative impact on real existing democracies as well as during different phases of (de-)democratization (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

The third lesson to be drawn from the ideational approach is that we should undertake empirical research on both the supply side and the demand side of populism. Regarding the supply side, a growing number of scholars have been assessing who proposes populist sets of ideas by empirically gauging its presence in newspaper articles (Rooduijn, 2014), speeches of political actors (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2015; Hawkins, 2009), party manifestos (Manucci & Weber, 2017; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), and television programs (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This is a particularly important advantage of the ideational approach, because it permits the empirical analysis of populist discourse, which helps us to better assess which instances should be considered instances of populism and which not. By undertaking this type of research, it becomes clear that the supply of populist ideas is related not only to personalist leaders, but also to political parties, social movements, and even media outlets.

Systematic research on the demand side is quite recent, since only a couple of years ago scholars started to look at the existence of populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012) and the extent to which they are linked to feelings of anger rather than fear (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017), can be used to explain support for leftist vis-à-vis rightist populist parties (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018), or help us understand the formation of anti-establishment political forces (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).[2] This is another major contribution of the ideational approach, as it invites us to think about the reasons why there is demand for populism at the mass level, thereby permitting us to undertake survey research to detect the role of populist ideas in electoral behavior. In other words, instead of assuming that populist ideas are manufactured from above, the ideational approach allows scholars to analyze whether these ideas are widespread across certain segments of the electorate, irrespective of the presence of populist actors, and under which conditions they tend to get activated.

In summary, the ideational approach has several advantages over other conceptual traditions, which might be useful for examining specific subtypes of populism, but not for developing a broader comparative research agenda

on populism per se. Although this is not the place to discuss alternative definitions of populism, there are at least two other relevant conceptualizations in the political science literature: the political-strategic approach and the socio-cultural approach.[3] The former defines populism as a political strategy employed by a charismatic leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers (Weyland, 2017). The latter conceives populism as folkloric style of politics used by leaders who behave improperly and break taboos with the aim of building a connection with (certain segments of) the electorate (Ostiguy, 2017).

The main problem with these definitions is that they highlight specific features that might be relevant for certain cases of populism, but not necessarily for all the populist forces identified by the ideational approach. For instance, the political-strategic approach puts too much emphasis on the leader and, therefore, is blind to the existence of populist forces that do not rely on charismatic figures (e.g., both the U.S. Populists and the more recent Tea Party), whereas the political-cultural approach has problems with examining populist leaders that do not inexorably behave improperly and can be indeed rather sophisticated in cultural terms (e.g., Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands or Pablo Iglesias in Spain). The ideational approach is better suited to study populism empirically, because we can rely on different methodologies to examine the demand side and supply side of populist politics (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). At the same time, it offers a conceptualization that is able to not only accurately identify past and present manifestations of populism, but also distinguish populism from its opposites: elitism and pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 7-8).

After having presented the ideational approach and its advantages for advancing a comparative research agenda on populism, we discuss in the following pages four topics that are addressed by some of the articles of the special issue and we believe are particularly promising for the future study of populism. First of all, we discuss the role that economic anxiety plays in the rise of populism and highlight that the key lies less in objective indicators (e.g., absolute deprivation) and much more in subjective indicators (e.g., relative deprivation). We then turn our attention to the cultural backlash thesis, which is more useful for understanding the electoral success of the populist radical right than for populism per se. In the third section, we focus on the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, an argument particularly relevant to understanding the growing relevance of populists around the globe, before we discuss how the literature on (negative) partisanship and polarization can be linked to understanding the (recent) rise of populism. We close with a short conclusion that summarizes the main ideas of the contribution.

Economic Anxiety

The shock outcomes of Brexit and Trump took both academics and pundits by surprise. Struggling to come up with a quick explanation, two camps emerged. One argues that Brexit and Trump are the consequences of "economic anxiety," the other hold that "cultural backlash" is the key explanation. Thousands of news articles have since been published on the merits of both approaches, while a new coterie of academic research has started to build up around it too. Much of the debate has been influenced by the working paper "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash" (2016) by Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris—an updated version of which was published as "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse" in *Perspectives on Politics* (2017).

Unfortunately, there are some major problems with this discussion. First, they assume that both Brexit and Trump were expressions of a populist vote. But while both campaigns had a populist tone, at least in part, they were as much expressions of support for "the elite" as opposition to them. After all, the initiative for the EU referendum came from *within* the establishment Conservative Party, rather than from the populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and it was prominent Tories such as Michael Gove and Boris Johnson who dominated the "Leave" campaign. Similarly, Trump did not run as a third-party candidate, but as the candidate of one of the two established parties in the United States. A resounding 89% of self-declared Republicans voted for Trump, the clear majority of which had voted for nonpopulist Republican candidates before. In other words, most "Trump voters" were Republican voters, basing their vote on partisanship (see below), not populism.

Second, the dichotomy "cultural backlash" versus "economic anxiety" comes from the literature on populist radical right parties, that is, parties that combine nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). In fact, it has been debated, and we would argue that it was decided, decades ago (in favor of cultural backlash). Although there obviously is a conceptual overlap between the populist radical right and populism, and therefore some theoretical overlap too, the two are not the same. The populist radical right does not derive its xenophobic tendencies from its populism but from its nativism, that is, the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that nonnative ("alien") are threatening to the alleged homogeneity of the nation-state. As it stands, both the cultural backlash and the economic anxiety suffer from empirical and theoretical weaknesses, at least when linked to populism per se rather than the populist radical right in particular.

The economic anxiety thesis is closely related to the so-called "losers of globalization" thesis, which is extremely popular in both academic and public debates. It holds that economic transformations, generally associated with "neoliberal globalization," have created economic winners and losers and that the latter—which are described in terms such as "the left behinds" (Ford & Goodwin, 2013) or the "Somewheres" (Goodhart, 2017)—translate their "economic anxiety" in a vote for "populist" parties. In one way or another, this theory goes back decades, including to Seymour Martin Lipset's (1955) "status politics thesis" or Ernest Gellner's (1983) "modernization theory," but in almost all previous cases, it explained nationalism or the radical right, not populism per se.

This is because these theories argued that economic anxiety was mediated by ethnic prejudice, or in U.S. terms was "racialized." In short, the "losers of globalization" thesis holds that economic transformation results in the formation of a new underclass, which feels threatened by the arrival of immigrants as well as the ongoing societal transformations, and thus votes for reactionary political forces that promise to return to an idealized image of the past characterized by its ethnic homogeneity and social cohesion. In that sense, the "losers of globalization" thesis is really a combination of the economic anxiety and cultural backlash approaches. It argues that electoral support for populist radical right parties is explained by the *cultural framing* of economic anxiety. Leaving aside its limited applicability to populism per se, as it logically only applies to nativist populists, the "losers of globalization" thesis is theoretically underdeveloped and lacks empirical support at both the aggregate and individual level.

At first sight, the thesis that the populist radical right profits from economic anxiety makes little sense. Populist radical right parties are particularly successful in European countries marked by economic prosperity, low unemployment, and generous social welfare policies (e.g., Austria, Netherlands, and Switzerland). In contrast, they have very modest success in the poorest European countries, and the Great Recession has not fundamentally changed this pattern (see Mudde, 2016). Although initial studies did find a correlation between levels of unemployment and votes for radical right parties at the national level (Jackman & Volpert, 1996), later studies either rejected (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Swank & Betz, 2003) or qualified that (Arzheimer, 2009; Golder, 2003).

Empirical evidence at the individual level has hardly been more supportive. When defined in terms of absolute deprivation, such as low income or unemployment, "losers of globalization" constitute only a minority of the electorates of populist radical right parties (e.g., Arzheimer, 2011) and do not seem to disproportionately vote for these parties (Norris, 2005). If anything,

these "losers" are more defined by nonvoting than by voting for populist parties. But even when defined in terms of relative deprivation, which is more relevant for political behavior, most studies show that there is only a weak relationship between (relative) "losers of globalization" and voting for populist radical right parties (e.g., Spier, 2010).

Does this mean that scholars of populism should forgo the modernization loser thesis all together? Our answer is no. Instead of disregarding, researchers should refine and better explain it. Interestingly, some of the papers of this special issue offer insights into how this could be done. Let us begin by Matthijs Rooduijn and Brian Burgoon, who argue that scholars should make an effort to study the factors that moderate the relationship between economic well-being and voting for populist parties on both the left and the right. Their analysis of various waves of the European Social Survey provides significant findings regarding the causes of populist voting. In more concrete terms, they show how aggregate socioeconomic circumstances (i.e., country levels of unemployment, inequality, social welfare spending and the GDP per capita) strongly condition how individual economic hardship is perceived (i.e., personal evaluation of economic wellbeing) and play out for voting. As Rooduijn and Burgoon (2018, p. 1720) argue "(e)conomic hardship leads to radical right voting when the socioeconomic circumstances are favorable, and to radical left voting when net migration is modest." They call this "a genuine paradox of radicalism: Individual economic suffering might foster left and right radicalism, but mainly when that suffering takes place amid favorable conditions at the aggregate level."

Rooduijn and Burgoon maintain that this paradoxical behavior is related to a relative deprivation mechanism, according to which "the less-well off living under favorable socioeconomic conditions might well benchmark their own economic hardship against the positive socioeconomic circumstances at the national level, feel that they do not get what they deserve" (p. 27). This comes close to the concept of "social envy," often discussed but rarely theorized in studies on electoral behavior or populism. The advantage of the concept of "social envy" is that it can be applied not just to the "horizontal dimension" of nativism, that is, ethnic insiders and outsiders, but also to the "vertical dimension" of populism (Brubaker, 2017), that is, the people and the elite within the group of ethnic insiders.

In a similar vein, the contribution by Justin Gest, Tyler Reny, and Jeremy Mayer (2018) provides useful information for assessing the validity of the "losers of modernization" thesis. Based on original survey data from the United Kingdom and United States, they demonstrate that support for radical right voting has less to do with economic hardship and more with a perceived drop in status—a process the late political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset

(1955) dubbed "status politics" more than half a century ago. Gest and colleagues construct an index to measure the individual *sense* of economic, political, and social deprivation and the empirical analysis reveals that the greater the perceived threat to, or loss of, status, the higher the chances that voters end up supporting radical right actors. They further demonstrate that this finding holds true for those who identify with conservative forces but not for those who identify with progressive forces, meaning that partisan identity is a crucial factor when it comes to explaining voting patterns for and against populist contenders. As they state, "radical right support is the product of a latent psychological phenomenon [. . . called] nostalgic deprivation—the discrepancy between individuals' understandings of their current status and their perceptions about their past" (2018, p. 1695).

There is, however, no theoretical reason that "nostalgic deprivation" is exclusively linked to the populist right. Today, almost all political parties sell some type of nostalgia (Mudde, 2018, chap. 29), and this is certainly the case with populist parties, which often refer to a mythical time of a shared heartland—A version of the past that celebrates an uncomplicated and nonpolitical territory of imagination from which populists draw their own vision of their unified and ordinary constituency (Taggart, 2000). If nostalgic deprivation is operationalized in more neutral terms, that is, without explicit reference to ethnic minorities, and more in line with the mythical populist past of a shared heartland, it might be found to relate to all populist parties. For instance, it could be operationalized in terms of nostalgia for a "socialist" past, of economic equality and lavish welfare states, to research nostalgic deprivation of left populists. Not by chance, some early studies of populism in the Netherlands and Spain have shown that voters of left-wing populist parties are more supportive of economic equality (see Akkerman, Zaslove, & Spruyt, 2017 and Rico et al., 2017, respectively).

Cultural Backlash

Just like economic anxiety, the cultural backlash thesis has been at the heart of the debate about the rise of radical right parties, which has produced thousands of articles and books over the past three decades. Simply stated, it holds that the rise of populist radical right parties is linked to mass immigration and multiculturalism, and support for these parties is mostly an expression of nativism.

Before continuing, it is worth remembering that the ideational approach defines populism as a set of ideas characterized by the Manichean distinction between "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and the defense of popular sovereignty by all means. In other words, populism and nativism are two

different phenomena: whereas the former alludes to the *moral* clash between "the pure people" (the good ones) and "the corrupt elite" (the bad ones), the latter refers to the *ethnic* division between insiders (natives) and outsiders (aliens). By combining populism and nativism, populist radical right parties are able to advance a frame according to which "the pure people" are the natives and the (native) establishment is corrupt because of its alleged alliance with the aliens. The usual argument is to point out that the business community benefits from immigration, as this contributes to keeping wages low, while political elites are supposedly seeking to win new voters by incorporating immigrants who, benefiting of the welfare state, will end up supporting the established parties.

Three decades of empirical research in Western Europe has shown at best a mixed picture of the causal relationship between the (objective) number of "aliens" and electoral support for populist radical right parties (e.g., Rydgren, 2007). The debate is complicated by the different levels of analysis, that is, at the national or subnational level, and operationalization of "aliens," that is, as asylum seekers, foreigners, immigrants, or non-European immigrants (and their descendants). Although some scholars do find a significant correlation (e.g., Lubbers et al., 2002; Swank & Betz, 2003), others do not (e.g., Norris, 2005; Stockemer, 2015).

Given the absence of a clear pattern of mass immigration, the cultural backlash thesis must be investigated with reference to the much more stable "indigenous minorities," such as Jews, Roma, or Hungarian- and Russian speakers, in Eastern Europe. A cursory analysis shows inconclusive results for both ethnic diversity and ethnic polarization (Mudde, 2007, pp. 214-216). This should not be surprising, as economic and social situations must be "politicized" before they can become "issues" and affect party politics. The electoral strength of populist forces is related to their capacity to politicize issues, that deliberately or not, have been ignored by the establishment. Consequently, Lenka Bustikova (2014) finds that the electoral success of radical right parties in Eastern Europe is not so much related to the number of minorities but to "the politics of minority accommodation."

Similarly, many studies have demonstrated that the electorates of the (populist) radical right in Western Europe are most concerned about the immigration issue, linked to other issues such as the economy and security, and hold more negative attitudes toward immigration and immigrants. Even studies of the stereotypical "losers of globalization," that is, the White-working class, show that they are more motivated by "questions of community and identity" than by economic grievances (Oesch, 2008). Although populist radical right parties might not create nativist attitudes (e.g., Berning & Schlueter, 2016; Bohman & Hjerm, 2016), they do help shape them, among

others by linking immigration and immigrants to criminality and social unrest (Rydgren, 2008). At the same time, these parties use populist rhetoric to blame "the elite" for help bringing the "aliens" into the country and for ignoring the problems that "natives" are suffering.

Unfortunately, the cultural backlash argument, at least as operationalized in most accounts, is of limited use to the study of populism. Theoretically, it can only be related to populist parties that also advance a nativist agenda, mostly the populist radical right, but not to radical left populists such as Podemos and SYRIZA, which are among the least nativist parties in their respective countries. The fact that some recent studies have nevertheless found a significant correlation between cultural backlash and electoral success of (all) populist parties (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2017) is more an artifact of the fact that the vast majority of populist parties, and voters, in their data set were populist radical right.[4]

This is not to say that the cultural backlash thesis is necessarily irrelevant to the study of populism. After all, cultural distinctions between "the elite" and "the people" are key to the populist message. Hence, we need to revise the interpretation of cultural backlash, and tailor it more toward populism than nativism. Populists favor the authentic (pure) "low culture" of the people over the unauthentic (corrupt) "high culture" of the elite (Ostiguy, 2017). Hence, its leaders portray themselves as "men of the people," and, occasionally, "women of the people," who like to drink beer in the pub (Nigel Farage), eat fast food (Donald Trump), love football (Silvio Berlusconi), or use vulgar language (Hugo Chávez). It is this backlash against the unauthentic, global culture of "the elite," or in the populist terms of David Goodhart "the Anywheres," that all populists share. After all, both left and right populists argue—not necessarily without reason—that liberal elites represent an extremely privileged minority, which is too powerful when it comes to shaping political outcomes, and responsible for forcing through liberal reforms in an undemocratic way.

The Tension Between Responsiveness and Responsibility

Another explanation for the growing electoral strength of populist and radical forces of different political persuasions is related to the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, which is becoming more and more acute across the world. This argument has been advanced by the late Peter Mair (2009, 2013), who argued that the increasing influence of global markets and international institutions is seriously limiting the maneuvering room of political actors at the national level. Consequently, political parties feel increasing

pressure to behave as responsive agents at the supranational level by implementing policies that are not necessarily supported by the electorate, and in consequence, they have a hard time justifying the extent to which their decisions respond to the real demands of their voters. More worrying, mainstream parties often devote little attention to explaining their decisions to the voting public, which then feels betrayed and transform their anger into support for populist forces that blame "the elite" for its incapacity to understand the concerns of "the people" (e.g., Rico et al., 2017).

Mair's argument became more valid during the Great Recession, the economic crisis that started in the United States with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and that quickly spread to many countries of the world, particularly the EU (Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2018). Incumbents were forced to implement austerity measures that were opposed by large segments of the population, leading to the emergence of populist social movements, the so-called *Indignados* (Outraged), which rejected the welfare cuts and enabled the rise of new political leaders that attacked the establishment (Aslanidis, 2016b, 2017). As Wolfgang Streeck (2014) has argued, the Great Recession has put democracy under serious stress, because the very implementation of austerity is eroding the social legitimacy of the market economy, and it remains unclear if popular sovereignty, or rather the will of powerful minorities, is being respected.

There are, of course, two key European examples of this populist backlash against the austerity politics of the Great Recession. In both Greece and Spain, populist social movements took to the street to protest the austerity measures demanded by the EU and their national governments. Although technically not the official party representatives of these social movements, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and Spanish Podemos translated the street politics into electoral results, shaking the established party system to the bone. SYRIZA came to power in January 2015, in coalition with the Independent Greeks (ANEL), a new right-wing populist anti-austerity party, having accused the established parties New Democracy (ND) and Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) of being the "Trojan Horse" of the Troika—the EU, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which administer the austerity politics in Greece (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Similarly, Podemos claims that "the establishment" (*la casta*) is out of touch with the real concerns of Spanish society and that "the people" should retake control of its sovereignty (Errejón & Mouffe, 2015; Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, in press). Attacking the Spanish Social Democratic Party (PSOE) for its support for austerity measures and the Spanish mainstream right Popular Party (PP) for its corruption, Podemos experienced a dramatic increase of votes in a short period of time,

transforming the traditional Spanish two-party system into a multiparty system (Bosch & Durán, 2017; Orriols & Cordero, 2016).

The argument about the tension between responsiveness and responsibility is a driving force for the rise of populist forces of different kind is valid beyond Europe too, not in the least in Latin America. This region has the richest tradition of populist forces of different kind and their continuous (re) emergence is linked to the existence of elites that often have little capacity—and sometimes interest—to respond to societal demands that are shared by the majority of the population. The wave of populist radical left leaders who came to power in countries such as Bolivia (Evo Morales), Ecuador (Rafael Correa), and Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), at the onset of the 2000s, cannot be explained properly without considering the claims by previous governments that they had to act in a responsible way toward the international market, implying that it was impossible to be responsive to the desires of the voting public. Profiting from increasing fatigue with the existing state of affairs as well as a commodity boom, these populist radical left leaders were able to convince majorities of partly new voters that there are alternatives to the policies of the so-called "Washington Consensus," implementing major institutional reforms with controversial legacies (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Panizza, 2009; Weyland, Madrid, & Hunter, 2010).

In this regard, the contribution by Matthew Singer (2018) is particularly interesting, as he confronts us with an uncomfortable truth that should be empirically explored beyond Latin America: when populist forces in power are able to generate benefits, their supporters are willing to curb the opposition to eliminate the possibility that the obtained gains might be lost in the near future. In the words of Singer,

> [c]itizens who see the sitting executive as a representative of their interests or who observe positive policy outcomes under him or her may thus be less tolerant of the rights of opponents who would rock the boat and endanger the current prosperity while seeing few disincentives to empowering a leader that they support to override opposition from other branches of government. (p. 1756)

LAPOP survey data (2006-2012) show that voters who say that the economy is strong, or that their personal situation is improving, are less likely to support civil liberties, protect free speech, or advocate for opposition rights.

A replication of this study in the United States would be particularly interesting, given Donald Trump's combination of tax reform, xenophobic discourse, and populist rhetoric. Moreover, it could be combined by the relationship between segregation and favoritism in public goods provision, which Simon Ejdemyr, Eric Kramon and Amanda Lea Robinson (2017)

observed with regard to ethnic groups in Malawi. Their argument is that "when ethnic groups are sufficiently segregated can elites efficiently target coethnics with local public goods." This could be particularly beneficial to polarizing leaders in the United States, where Democrats and Republicans are more and more geographically segregated, not just in terms of Heartland versus Coasts or Red States versus Blue States, but even at the residential level (e.g., Gimpel & Hui, 2015). At the same time, it would be worth exploring if similar patterns can be identified in Central and Eastern Europe, where politics has become increasingly polarized around a new "populist center-periphery cleavage" (see also Mudde, 2004b).

In summary, Singer's findings could help us think about the massive support for radical populist leaders in contemporary Latin America, and beyond, who once in power have undertaken constitutional reforms that have seriously diminished the checks and balances (Mueller, 2016). According to his argument, we can explain the coming to power of populist forces, at least in part, by the willingness of certain segments of the electorate to prioritize the rise of a "responsive" government over a liberal democratic one. Otherwise stated, the emergence of populist forces can help to increase electoral responsiveness at the cost of political responsibility, particularly if the elected administration is able to generate policy outcomes that are appreciated by a significant part of the voting public.

As noted before, this argument reveals an inconvenient fact that deserves further exploration: there is enough evidence that not all citizens have the same level and type of commitment to liberal democracy—although it is doubtful that this is a particular vice of millennials.[5] If this is true, practitioners and scholars should devote much more attention to the importance of civic education and probably the necessity of socializing voters into the main values of the liberal democratic regime (e.g., Callan, 1997). As Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) argued almost 60 years ago, we should think more seriously about the existence of certain *prerequisites*, which are crucial for the very survival of (liberal) democracy.

(Negative) Partisanship and Polarization

Populism and polarization are connected in different ways. First, as has been extensively discussed in the radical right literature in the 1990s, populist parties profit from the opposite of polarization, that is, ideological convergence between the main (left and right) parties. More specifically, populist radical right parties emerged after the center-left and center-right converged on both socioeconomic and sociocultural issues in the late 1980s—the height of the Integration Consensus, where all major parties supported, often more

so in rhetoric than policies, neoliberal economics, European integration, and some form of multiculturalism. Moreover, the Great Recession forced mainstream parties in Southern Europe to converge on a "responsible" pro-austerity program, which sparked the rise of populist radical left parties such as Podemos and SYRIZA, but also profited idiosyncratic populist parties such as the Cypriot Citizens' Alliance (SYPOL) and the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S).

According to Piero Ignazi (1992), the populist radical right backlash was heightened by a short period of polarization that preceded the centrist convergence. He argues that the rise of neoconservatism in the 1980s, itself a response to Inglehart's (1977) famous "silent revolution," pushed the mainstream right to re-emphasized authority, patriotism, and traditional moral values. This push "provoked, directly or indirectly, a higher polarization both in terms of ideological distance and in terms of ideological intensity" (Ignazi 1992, p. 19), which led to a decline in identification with established parties and, *in extremism*, with the political system. This created a political space for populist radical right parties, particularly when mainstream right-wing parties moved back to the center to fend off "Third Way" center-left parties over centrist voters. Although Ignazi probably overstated the strength of the neoconservative movement in Europe, which remained relatively weak outside of the United Kingdom, his theory seems particular useful to help understand the rise of Donald Trump in the United States (see Mudde, 2018, chap. 26).

The argument that a lack of polarization leads to the rise of populism is also at the heart of the influential theory of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. They see populism as the radical democratic alternative to a stale, depoliticized liberal democracy, in which an enforced consensus has taken the politics out of politics (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2000, 2005). In contrast to the dominant opinion within mainstream political science, Laclaueans argue that liberalism is the problem, whereas populism is the savior of real, that is, radical, democracy. Although this interpretation is fundamentally at odds with our own—we maintain that empirical research is the best way to analyze the positive and negative effects of populist forces on (liberal) democratic regimes—we do agree that populism leads to the re-ideologization and often polarization of politics. Given that populists (re)politicize certain issues that the establishment, deliberately or not, has overlooked, and do so in essentially moral terms, they polarize the political system by mobilizing segments of the electorate that are angry with the current state of affairs against the "corrupt" elite.

But while populists might be the initiators of polarization, they are not always its only source. When populist parties and politicians become more relevant, and start to set the political agenda, established political actors often

increasingly embrace an anti-populist discourse, which is also homogenizing and moralistic. In the anti-populist discourse the Manichean division is between the "good democrats" and the "evil populists." As Yannis Stavrakakis (2014) has provocatively argued, antipopulism has sharply increased in the wake of the Great Recession, and is now a similar, if not bigger, danger to democracy as the (left and right) populism it attacks.

This process of polarization has profound implications for party politics in a country. In two-party systems, such as the United Kingdom and particularly the United States, it might strengthen party identification, or partisanship, that is, "an affective attachment to an important group object in the environment" (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 143). Nevertheless, for several decades, most scholars overlooked that the classic study of partisanship involved the analysis of not just positive but also *negative* party identities. The latter should be thought of as the psychological repulsion for a specific political party, and its study can help us better understand voting patterns in the contemporary world (Caruana, McGregor, & Stephenson, 2014; Medeiros & Noel, 2013). After all, it could be that individuals vote for a specific party or leader not because they have a strong positive image of them but rather because they hate the alternative. As Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster (2016, p. 14) find for the case of the United States, "while the feelings of Democrats and Republicans about their own party have changed very little, their feelings about the opposing party have become much more negative." The rise of (negative) partisanship is mostly a consequence of elite polarization (Hetherington, 2001), which so far has not been followed by similar mass polarization (e.g., Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017).[6] However, studies of polarization at the mass level tend to focus on specific issue positions, whereas polarization might be taking place more in terms of negative partisanship (see Mason, 2018). The (empirical) question is how this process will play out under a populist president—or at least a president who employs populist rhetoric.

Within multiparty systems, negative partisanship plays a somewhat different role. In an early study on Central and Eastern Europe, Richard Rose and William Mishler (1998) describe it as "the identification of a party that an individual would never vote for" and found that it was much more widespread than positive partisanship in post-communist Europe (p. 217). In fact, in the four countries they studied (Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia), they found more than half of the people holding negative partisanship toward at least one party, but positive partisanship toward none. They also established that people held negative partisanship in particular toward parties with a radical ideology (notably communist parties) or with an exclusive electorate (based on either ethnicity of occupation, i.e., agrarian parties). Moreover,

in a recent study on partisanship in Brazil, Samuels and Zucco (2018) argue that it is wrong to depict the country as an example of an inchoate party system, which solely hinges on clientelist networks and charismatic leaders. They show that, since the redemocratization in the 1980s, Brazil has experienced the emergence of strong positive and negative political identities toward one party in particular: the Workers' Party (PT). Hence, despite the existence of several political parties in the country, voting behavior is driven mainly by sentiments for and against the PT.

In many West European countries, the party with the highest negative partisanship is the populist party, which is generally considered to hold a radical ideology. A prime example of this is France, where Marine Le Pen's "demonization" strategy has barely changed the polarized visions of her and the FN. While 70% of French considered FN a "danger to democracy" under the leadership of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, 58% still held this view in 2017 (Courtois, 2017). Before the May 2017 presidential elections, opinion polls showed that the population was deeply divided over Marine Le Pen: roughly one third said they would vote for her and two thirds said they would *never* vote for her. This is the key reason why both Jean-Marine (in 2002) and Marine Le Pen (in 2017) were roundly defeated in the second round of the presidential elections, which was more an anti-Le Pen than a pro-Chirac in 2012 or a pro-Macron vote in 2017.

But unlike in two-party systems such as the United Kingdom and the United States, negative partisanship does not so easily translate in (positive) partisanship or voting behavior in multiparty systems, where voters have a choice of many other parties. That said, when a populist party becomes so big that it challenges the whole system, that is, what Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1995) referred to as the "party cartel," political competition could be redefined as a struggle between "liberal democracy" (represented by the strongest "democratic" parties) and "populism" (represented by the populists). At the same time, when mainstream parties present themselves as the good ones, and depict the populist contenders as the bad ones, they end up developing a "fire with fire" strategy, which gives more validity and visibility to the moral distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" advanced by populist forces (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2014).

This antipopulist strategy is a mirror image of the populist strategy, which argues that all (other) parties are the same and it is a struggle of "all against one, one against all," as the Belgian populist radical right party Flemish Bloc (now Flemish Interest, VB) would say. Whether it is "UMPS" (France) or "la casta" (Spain), populists portray the multiparty system as fundamentally a two-party system, in which there is only one party that is different from, and fundamentally opposed to, all the other parties. Hence, for voters susceptive

to the populist message, negative partisanship works essentially the same as in a two-party system: a vote against the "party cartel" is inevitably a vote for the populist party. This could explain why some populist personalist leaders in Latin America have been able to generate long-lasting political identities, which have given rise to deeply polarized political systems. Just think of Peronism versus Anti-Peronism in Argentina, Fujimorismo versus Anti-Fujimorismo in Peru, and Chavismo versus Anti-Chavismo in Venezuela.

Although we have over three decades of research on electoral success of populist radical right parties, similar scholarship of populist parties in general is still relatively new and rare. Moreover, so far there is not too much overlap in empirical studies of negative partisanship, polarization, and populism. The rise of Trump will undoubtedly push this to the fore in the United States, but it is important that studies of other countries not simply copy the models and theories from the United States, but adapt them to the (multiparty) context of their country or region. For instance, Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) use survey data from contemporary Chile to show that it is possible to identify a segment of the electorate that has a negative identity toward all established political parties and is prone to populist appeals. At the same time, their study reveals that "apartisans," that is, those who are apathetic and without strong feelings to existing political parties, tend to reject populist ideas.

Although more empirical studies are needed to prove the validity of these findings in other countries, this type of research is a promising way to empirically assess the link between political identities and populism. In particular, future studies will have to entangle the close, but undoubtedly complex, relationship between negative partisanship and populist support in both two-party and multiparty systems. The Chilean study seems to indicate that negative partisanship fuels populist attitudes, even in the absence of a strong populist actor. In countries with a strong populist politician or party, populist identification and negative partisanship might strongly overlap, but theoretically the causal relationship could go both ways.[7] In other words, a positive identification with a populist actor could lead to strong negative partisanship to all mainstream actors, including the populist actor after having disappointed in power or opposition, whereas negative partisanship to all mainstream actors could transform into support for populist actors, as "the voice of the forgotten."

The issue of polarization, and negative partisanship, also raises the important question of how to overcome it. This is particularly salient in a world where more and more people live in homogeneous populist or antipopulist "echo chambers," isolated from those who hold different, and often opposing, views. Here the well-established literature on ethnic prejudice could provide an excellent starting point. As several studies have shown, contact across

groups does not automatically lead to decreased prejudices. Both the context in which the contact takes place and the relative status of the people who connect, play a role. Moreover, as Jonathan Homola and Margit Tavits (2018) show in this special issue, the effect of contact can be mediated by ideology. Employing original survey data from Germany and the United States, they demonstrate that people respond to contact with immigrants according to their left–right partisan ideology. This means that voters have political value systems that determine how they process information and evidence to reinforce their preexisting views. Future studies will have to find out whether similar processes play out with regard to populists and antipopulists alike.

Concluding Remarks

Academic and public interest in populism is growing at a fast pace. This is certainly a welcome development, since not long time ago research on populism was relegated to the margins of political science. But many of those who are starting to undertake comparative research on populism overlook an important wealth of knowledge that they could, and should, build upon. At the same time, those who have been doing comparative research on populism for several years, if not decades, usually do not leave their comfort zone and thus fail to link their own studies to other fields of study, which can help explore fruitful, new avenues of research. The four contributions to this *Comparative Political Studies* special issue are particularly interesting for future research on populist politics, as we have tried to summarize by relating them to four central topics: (a) economic anxiety, (b) cultural backlash, (c) the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, and (d) (negative) partisanship and polarization.

To undertake this type of research, it is crucial that scholars work with clear definitions of populism and delimit the boundaries of the phenomenon. Instead of developing ad hoc concepts, which treat the specificities of national or regional manifestations of populism as generalizable, they should incorporate some of the lessons that the existing scholarship offers us. In this regard, the so-called ideational approach to populism is extremely helpful, because it is employed by many scholars with different epistemological and methodological backgrounds to undertake comparative research on both the demand side and the supply side of populist politics.

Last but not least, we would like to close this introduction to the *CPS* special issue by pointing out one potential challenge of the future research agenda on populism. Our attention should go beyond the number of votes that populist actors get, as we should also study how mainstream political forces are changing because of the rise of populism. As we have mentioned at the

beginning of this article, a great deal of the increasing interest in populism is driven by the shock results of Brexit and Trump, but these two events are closely related to the behavior of the establishment.

At the very least, these events reveal that under certain circumstances segments of the establishment can end up promoting populist ideas—and perhaps even transform into populist actors, as has recently happened in Hungary and Poland. This means that the success of populism is also related to its capacity to both set the political agenda and shape public policy. In other words, when studying populism, we should keep in mind that its impact on democracy is strongly mediated by the role of mainstream political forces and by the extent to which they undergo a process of programmatic adaptation and, sometimes even, transformation.

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Notes

1. While it is true that the four contributions do not strictly focus on populism per se, they provide important insights for the analysis of populists in the Western world and beyond.
2. There have been some earlier attempts to measure populist attitudes, but they were isolated and generally worked with fairly idiosyncratic understandings of populism. Probably the first such attempt was by Robert Axelrod (1967).
3. Another conceptual tradition is mostly popular among economists and defines populism as a type of irresponsible policy approach that promises economic growth and redistribution via active state intervention (e.g., Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991). There are several problems with this conceptualization; most notably that it refers to an economic policy that is neither exclusive to populists nor relevant to all populists.

4. This is not the place to discuss the work of Inglehart and Norris (2017) in detail, but we do want to note two important shortcomings of their influential article. First, even though the word "populism" appears in the title, abstract and across the text, no definition of the concept is provided in the article. Second, and related to the first point, it remains unclear what "populist authoritarian parties" exactly are. It seems that the authors are talking about a very specific family of political parties, namely, the "populist radical right" (Mudde, 2007), and, consequently, that the article is not so much about populism but about nativism.
5. See the debate on Roberto Foa and Yasha Mounk's (2017) provocative article "The Signs of Deconsolidation" in the *Journal of Democracy* and on its website.
6. We thank Alexa Bankert for this insight.
7. We thank Alexa Bankert for raising this issue.

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