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Populism and Democratic Theory

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Abstract

Commentators routinely describe "populism" as vague. Some argue that the early US populists, who coined the modern usage, were not populists. We disagree and identify this common conceptual core: the "people" in a moral battle against "elites." The core definition fits all cases of populism: those on the left and right, those in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. In addition to this minimal common core, we identify strongly suggested and frequently correlated non-core characteristics. These include the people's homogeneity and exclusivity, direct rule, and nationalism, as well as a single leader, vilification of vulnerable out-groups, and impatience with deliberation. The US Populist Party and Spain's Podemos Party fit the core definition but have few of the other characteristics. The core can be good for democracy, we argue, while the associated characteristics are often dangerous. Populism in opposition can be good for democracy, while populism in power carries great risks.

INTRODUCTION

In this article we attempt the impossible. We give populism a definition that we hope will stick. Its core meaning, of the people in moral battle against the elites, is definite, not vague, and is referenced in some way by every scholar we have read who ventures a definition. We suggest a "core-plus" approach that distinguishes between this core meaning and the other characteristics that also frequently characterize populist movements. We begin a classification system for these other characteristics aimed at producing a common framework in which others can place both their own work and the work of other scholars.

We then analyze the relation of populism to democracy. First, we argue that the core elements of populism, pitting the people in moral battle against elites, often benefit democracy by taking democratic politics back to its normative roots in the wants and needs of ordinary citizens and challenging, on egalitarian and justice grounds, elite political, economic, and cultural domination. We warn, however, that the moral antagonism inherent in populism's core elements has the potential to undermine the democratic commitment to treating all members of the polity, including members of the elite, with respect. That antagonism also undermines the capacity of democracy for negotiation and compromise.

Second, we create two categories of non-core characteristics. The first category includes characteristics that the core elements strongly suggest but do not require: the homogeneity of the people, its exclusivity, greater direct rule, and nationalism. The second category includes characteristics frequently correlated with the core elements: a single leader embodying the people, antagonism to vulnerable out-groups, and a collection of characteristics that we have labeled "the people know." These strongly suggested and frequently correlated characteristics often pose great dangers to the tolerance and inclusion vital to pluralistic democracies.

We further distinguish, with many others (e.g., Judis 2016; Kazin 2017b; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016; Urbinati 2014, 2019a), between populism in opposition and populism in power. Populism in opposition often revitalizes democracy when the populist ideals and moral fervor animating antagonism to entrenched elites crack through a prevailing political and discursive hegemony, bringing concerns that had been ignored or suppressed into the political arena. Yet populism in power poses risks to democracy. The same moral fervor and us/them dichotomy that help disrupt the entrenched political and cultural order when populists are in opposition militates against the mutual respect, tolerance, forbearance, negotiation, compromise, and respect for constitutional institutions necessary for egalitarian and pluralist democratic politics when populists take power.

POPULISM: DEFINITION, CORE ELEMENTS, SUGGESTED AND CORRELATED CHARACTERISTICS

Core

The four core elements of populism are (*a*) the people (*b*) in a morally charged (*c*) battle against (*d*) the elites. As the name suggests, all populist movements claim to represent "the people." All conceive the ordinary or common people as morally good or oppressed and elites as corrupt or otherwise morally in the wrong. All see the relationship between the two as antagonistic. We thus define populism minimally as *the people in moral battle against elites*. We treat other aspects of populism separately from this minimal definition.[1]

[1] For parallels, see Arato & Cohen (2017, p. 286); Bonikowski & Gidron (2016a,b); Inglehart & Norris (2016, p. 18); Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, p. 5). This definition does not cover all uses of the term populism in ordinary

In our definition of populism, the "people" means the common people but leaves open their precise identity. The question of who is included in the "people" is much contested in the history of political thought: It often comprises the entire citizenry or the entire demos.[2] For practitioners and theorists of populism it always means the common man, or as we would say today, the common citizen, although the specific identity varies. In the original US nineteenth-century populist movement,[3] the "people" referred to the producers of goods (as against the parasitic financiers, railroad owners, and monopolists), a category that included farmers and tenants, workers and small business owners, rural and urban dwellers (Kazin 2017b, pp. 2–4). Since then, "the people" has often meant the hardworking and "oppressed underdog," in contrast with the economic, political, and cultural elite (Laclau 2005, p. 87). Laclau and Mouffe note that in conditions when the major parties and institutions have neglected or actively marginalized non-elite interests, the "people" often have to be constructed, suggesting that they have no shared identity until they are mobilized.[4] The strong implication of populism when in opposition, often made explicit, is that the people are the majority, yet unfairly marginalized and ignored, when their interests ought to be central in a democracy. This claim, at least implicit in all versions of populism, does not entail that the people is in other respects homogeneous.

In most populist movements, the elites have a clearer identity than the people. Elites can be economic, political, military, or cultural elites. In the original US populist movement, the targeted elites were economic, although those economic elites heavily influenced and therefore often appeared in tandem with the political elites who controlled state decisions over banks, railroads, and

speech but covers the vast majority of uses in the social sciences. We do not call populism an ideology, even a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6), because there is no common populist program or set of principles. We do not even consider the core as producing "a set of distinct claims" (Müller 2016, p. 23), although we agree that there is an "inner logic" (p. 23) in which the core suggests (without requiring) some claims and is predictably correlated with others. Others have advanced "minimal" or "core" definitions that include more elements. Mudde's (2007, pp. 18–19) early "minimal definition" of populist European radical right parties put "nativism" in the core. Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 5–19) subsequently suggested the three "core concepts" of the "people," the "elites," and the "general will," the last of which included for them homogeneity among the people. More generally, see Freeden (1996) on "core" and "peripheral" concepts in ideologies, although our use of "core" and "peripheral" tracks Mudde & Kaltwasser more than Freeden. We also divide the "peripheral" meanings into the two categories of those strongly suggested by the core and those merely correlated with it. By our definition, certain popular leaders in ancient Rome could be described as populist, as perhaps could some passages in Machiavelli's *Discourses* (McCormick 2011).

[2]See Ochoa Espejo (2017) and Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 9–11). As Müller (2016, p. 22) puts one set of meanings,

> Since Greek and Roman times, "the people" has been used in at least three senses: first, the people as the whole (which is to say, all members of the polity…), second, the "common people" (the part of the res publica made up of commoners, or in modern terms: the excluded, the downtrodden, and the forgotten); and third, the nation as a whole, understood in a distinctly cultural sense.

[3]We refer throughout to the original US populists, including the members of the People's Party (the Populist Party), who first used the term politically in English. (We use lower case for the movement, upper case for the party.) The name of another group, the Russian *narodniks* in the 1860s and 1870s, could also be translated as "populists." Canovan (1981) lists them as populists, and some of their views could be considered populist using our definition, but these were not a popular movement but rather a group of urban intellectuals who went out into the country to serve the people, propagandize, and foment revolution (see, e.g., Pedler 1927, Walicki 1969). They do not figure in our analysis.

[4]See Laclau (2005, p. 202) and Mouffe (2018, pp. 23, 83, and especially p. 84): "The 'people' can be constructed in different ways." See also Errejón (2018): "Comme le peuple n'existe pas, sa construction est une bataille culturelle et politique permanente." We note, however, that a people's identity cannot be constructed entirely through political struggle, because the boundaries of the political community that confers some identity are usually given, especially when a political party is contending for power within that community (see Arato 2015, p. 32).

economic monopolies. Although some antipathy to cultural elitism colored early US populism, it appeared as a marginal theme not directed at specific cultural elites. By contrast, most recent populist movements, both left and right, have seen political, economic, cultural, and sometimes even military elites as integrated or at least in common cause against the people.

Many commentators note the moral antagonism central to populism. In general, populists see the common people as virtuous and the elites as corrupt. Moral arousal does not require a belief that elites are corrupt, because one can be morally aroused against an elite that is simply culturally arrogant, haughty, disdainful, or perhaps just too rich or too remote. In practice, however, all populist movements say or imply that some segments among the elite are corrupt in comparison with the common people, and all use moral language to condemn elite domination.[5] Such rhetoric can be unfair, misguided, or both.

Strongly Suggested but Not Entailed

The four core elements of populism strongly suggest four other characteristics: (*a*) a homogeneous people, (*b*) an exclusive people, (*c*) greater direct popular rule, and (*d*) nationalism.

A homogeneous people. The opposition of the common people to the elite does not require that either group is unified, but populist discourse often strongly suggests such unity among the people. The clear danger is that ascribing unity to the people, who are also considered to be good or virtuous, assumes away some of the central problems of democratic politics, such as genuine disagreement, diversity of interests, and the need for deliberation, negotiation, and compromise.

To some degree, the assumption of homogeneity within the categories of both the people and the elite reflects the way human thought, in the necessary process of categorizing, tends to make all instances in each category more homogeneous than they usually are. When we think of tables, we tend to think of pieces of furniture that have four legs. We may also think of them as brown and perhaps round. Conceptually, we marginalize three- or eight-legged tables, green tables, and octagonal tables (Bartlett 1990). We engage in this categorical homogenization unconsciously with almost all of our categories of thought, so it is not surprising that we also do so with the category of the people. In a separate process, human beings habitually classify other human beings into in-groups and out-groups, not only seeing each group as more homogeneous than it is but also favoring the in-group.[6] Our tendency to ignore variation within categories makes it easy to slide in practice from the core element of pitting the people against the elite to the perception that the people are not only virtuous but unified: unplagued by divisions or faction. Moralizing this antagonism—a move based on both justice and political advantage—then implicitly denies legitimacy to those who oppose the people and their values and aims.

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[5] Kazin (2017b, p. 35, also pp. 34–38) describes early US populists as attempting to create a "moral community of self-governing citizens," which excluded only those who "preyed on human weakness" (via the sale of liquor or gambling) and those who "made a lucrative income without having to work very hard for it" (such as bankers, speculators, and lawyers). See also Mudde (2004, 2007) and Müller (2016). Mudde (2017) considers morality "the essence of the populist division." We thank George Kateb for the point that moral arousal against elites does not require a belief that those elites are corrupt. We also thank Lluis de Nadal Alsina for bringing to our attention the subtle quality of the moralized discourse of Podemos, e.g., when Errejón comments, "We subvert the left/right symbolic dimension, but replace it *not with some sort of moral frontier*, but with a politics of clear national-popular content: the real country, that of the majority, of those below, as opposed to those at the top; or of democracy/oligarchy in more analytical terms" (in Errejón & Mouffe 2016, p. 106, emphasis ours).

[6] See Tajfel (1970) and others in the "minimal group" experimental line of research. It takes little encouragement to segue from favoring the in-group to experiencing the in-group/out-group relationship as antagonistic [Sherif et al. 1961 (1954)].

Recent theorists disagree on whether or not this homogenizing and unitary antipluralism is a centrally defining feature of populism. Laclau (2005), Mouffe (2018), and the leaders of Podemos in Spain deny that it is.[7] In contrast, Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 9, 16–19) make a unified "general will" one of their three core concepts of populism along with the people and elites,[8] and Müller (2016, pp. 3, 20) argues that "populists are always antipluralist." Many other theorists agree.[9] In practice, the claim to a unitary people occurs frequently, but not always, in populist movements. We conclude that the core elements of populism as we understand it do not require antipluralism. The claim to a homogeneous people was not a feature of the original populism of the late nineteenth century, nor has it been embraced by all populist parties subsequently. It is explicitly not a feature of the Podemos party in Spain, which self-identifies as populist and incorporates our core elements of populism but also embraces "national diversity."[10] For these reasons we place antipluralism—understood in terms of a "united will," or any other form of homogeneity, including ethnic, racial, or national homogeneity—outside of the conceptual core.

An exclusive people. Closely related to the claim of the people's homogeneity and unity is the claim that the people, as represented by the populist movement or party, are the only legitimate actors in a democracy. Thus, Müller writes, "This is the core claim of populism: only some of the people are really the people."[11] He accordingly argues that the US Populists at the end of the nineteenth century, who coined the term populism and set the stage for its later emergence, were not populists. The reason is that they were not "pretending to represent the people as a whole" (p. 88). "Indeed, the Populists rarely ever claimed to be the people as such" (p. 90). This strikes us as arbitrarily stipulative: It excludes many who think they have a rightful claim to march under the banner of populism, including the original US Populists. Today's Podemos party in Spain, which

[7]Laclau (2005, p. 182) makes central to his work on populism the discussion of how concepts and terms themselves can bring a kind of unity out of heterogeneity (via, in his terms, a "floating signifier"); e.g., to succeed politically, the term working class had to "become the rallying point of a largely heterogeneous mass, so that 'working class' would operate as the metaphorical center of a variety of struggles which would constantly go beyond a strict working-class provenance." Mouffe (2018, p. 11, also p. 63) congruently defends a "left populist strategy… informed by an antiessentialist theoretical approach that asserts that society is always divided" and "a 'people' resulting from the articulation of heterogeneous demands" (p. 83). See also Errejón & Mouffe (2016, pp. 120–21).

[8]For Rousseau [1997 (1762), book 2, chapter 3, paragraph 1], who coined the term, the general will is unitary and, under the right conditions, obvious: "The general will is always right and tends to the public advantage"; "there are no embroilments or conflicts of interests; the common good is everywhere and clearly apparent, and only good sense is needed to perceive it" (book 4, chapter 1, paragraph 1). However, centuries of conflict over interpreting these words attest to the difficulty of knowing exactly what he meant. Grofman & Feld (1988) suggest that the concept is compatible with choosing the public-maximizing option in a collective action problem.

[9]See, for example, Abts & Rummens (2007), Albertazzi & McDonnell (2008), Canovan (2002), Galston (2018), Hawkins (2010), Inglehart & Norris (2016), Kriesi (2014), Panizza (2005), Rosanvallon [2008 (2006)], Stanley (2008), Urbinati (1998, 2014, 2019a), and Wodak (2015).

[10]Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias (2015, quoted in Ivaldi et al. 2017, p. 364; see also Errejón 2018): "Il faut des institutions pour conserver, protéger et maintenir le pluralisme politique." On the basis of the Podemos party manifestos of 2015 and 2016, Ivaldi et al. (2017, p. 364) conclude, "The party's ideology embraces…a new 'popular sovereignty' that defends the rights of immigrants and all the socially marginalized sectors," noting that Podemos party leaders explicitly take inspiration from Laclau. We thank Victoria Alsina Burgues for directing us to these sources. Space limitations prevent our addressing the practices and claims of Syriza in Greece. US Senator Sherrod Brown (2017) of Ohio, who calls himself a "populist," also explicitly stresses the inclusion of difference within populism (Kazin 2017a).

[11]Müller (2016, p. 21; see also pp. 20, 22, and re ancient Rome, p. 23). Müller's nice example of both unity and exclusivity comes from presidential candidate Donald Trump's May 7, 2016, words: "The only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything" (p. 22).

sets itself forcefully against "la casta" (the elites) and has proudly claimed the name of populist from its inception, also does not claim to be the entire people (Ivaldi et al. 2017, table 1).

Greater direct popular rule. The moral superiority of the common people, a core characteristic of populism, also suggests, although it does not require, the corollary that the people should rule more directly. The nineteenth-century US Populists demanded direct election to the Senate and term limits on the presidency. Podemos espouses greater participatory democracy, and its leader, Pablo Iglesias, has used internet plebiscites to command victories within the party (De Nadal 2018). Other populist movements have espoused a greater role for referenda, internet voting, and other ways by which citizens can bypass the perceived (and often real) distortions of popular will through representative legislative and administrative processes. Far more problematically, populism can also include demands that majorities should prevail against constitutional constraints and minority rights or that a leader should cut through parliamentary complexity, constraints, and paralysis for the sake of the people. These demands, which usually result from an oversimplification of political issues and interests coupled with an affirmation of the people as sovereign and unified, undercut the basic structures of liberal democracy.[12]

Nationalism. By nationalism, we mean broadly the large family of political theories that locate democratic politics in bounded political communities, or peoples. While recognizing that nationalism is often associated with political communities based on shared ethnicity or race, we include within it the liberal and civic versions that ground special ties among citizens in geographically specific histories of shared governance.[13] Those special ties can be a legitimate source of pride. Although a connection to nationalism is not conceptually entailed by the core elements of populism, it being possible to imagine a global "people's revolt" against international institutions such as the World Trade Organization or International Monetary Fund, in practice the words "the people" in extant populist movements have meant the people of a single nation or bounded political community: a distinct historical and geographical entity (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 11). Some recent theorists have argued for *demoi* that have bases other than the nation-state (e.g., Bohman 2005), or for replacing the concept of *demos* with the proposition that "all affected" by a decision should have a voice in that decision (in some theories a voice proportional to the degree to which they are affected) (Goodin 2007). Yet the self-restraint, mutual tolerance, and mutual acceptance required for democratic self-governance usually must build on the solidarity within a nation generated by a history of mutual interdependence. We thus distinguish between pride in morally valuable aspects of a history that generates such solidarity and claiming that one nation's source of solidarity is intrinsically better than all others.[14]

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[12] See Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, p. 10), who thus argue that populism is democratic, but not liberal democratic. See also Urbinati (2019a). Ober (2017), however, shows that democracy before liberalism requires many features such as free speech subsequently associated with liberal democracy. For this reason among others, we agree with Müller (2016, p. 6) that illiberal populism is bad for democracy per se, not just liberal democracy.

[13] For liberal, social democratic, and civic versions of nationalism, see Rawls (1999), Stilz (2009), Tamir (1993), and Walzer (1983, especially chapter 2); see also Galston (2018, pp. 5, 63).

[14] When such claims for solidarity derive from an ethnically, racially, or religiously exclusive concept of the nation, nationalism segues into the different concept of nativism, which Mudde (2007, p. 19) defines as "an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state." We do not code for nativism per se but divide the concept of nativism beyond nationalism into (*a*) a claim for homogeneity among the people (treated separately above) and (*b*) a claim that certain vulnerable out-groups are not members of the people (treated separately below).

These four characteristics (homogeneity, exclusivity, greater direct rule, and nationalism) are, we argue, not integral to the core elements of populism but are strongly suggested by the core elements. Because the suggested characteristics have such a strong relationship to the core elements, and because these suggested characteristics create significant dangers for democracy, any populist movement, particularly any populist movement in power, should be intensely aware of those dangers and consciously guard against them.

Frequent Correlates

Three further characteristics frequently accompany the core elements and suggested characteristics: (*a*) the embodiment of the people in a single leader, (*b*) opposition to vilified vulnerable out-groups, and (*c*) the valorization of the authentic folk knowledge of the people combined with the devaluation of deliberation and expertise.

One leader embodying the people. In the versions of populism that have this characteristic, one person—often charismatic in some way—claims to stand uniquely for the people, representing their essence in a way that their multiple and divided elected representatives cannot. This possibility requires and reinforces the concept that the people are one, with one set of values and a single will. There is no great danger to democracy in people uniting in practice by temporarily rallying around and identifying with a single individual. It is dangerous, however, when the connection between leader and people is unmediated, bypassing and surpassing all mediating institutions, often through plebiscitary (and recently, digitally plebiscitary) techniques (see Urbinati 2019a). A strong leader around whom a party organizes thus differs from a leader who claims to stand uniquely for the people, although in practice the one may slide easily into the other. In electoral politics, a political party may need the personal charisma and political skills of a single individual to provide the focal point and the critical leverage to trigger an inchoate set of grievances built up over many years into coordinated action. In the Spanish Podemos party, for example, one leader, with existing media popularity and considerable capacity to speak and connect across traditional divisions, was almost certainly necessary to create a party quickly from a base of great diversity and potential internal conflict. In this case, ironically, the party's very insistence on a plural and diverse people, at least in combination with a nonexistent prior party organization, required a single leader to stand as a unifying symbol, although he did not claim to be the voice of the people.[15]

In the more usual case, a single leader claims to represent in his person a unified "people," expressing their general will. Such a leader voices the "common sense" of the people, using simple language, and often proffering oversimplified solutions (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 18; see section titled The People "Know" below). The leader typically draws on the core antagonism of people versus elite in populism to evoke, with inflammatory rhetoric, a Manichean opposition of absolute good versus absolute evil that can justify impatience with the necessary compromises and

[15] De Nadal (2018) documents this evolution in Podemos. Success in national elections demands that a populist party draw from other existing parties; dislodge existing attachments; find support in many corners to make the claim of representing the people; appeal to those who have previously not voted; and create the excitement, even fervor, needed to win. A popular, well-known, and charismatic leader promotes those goals. Laclau and Mouffe's theories of populism expect, perhaps require, such a leader (De Nadal 2018). Yet a party that organizes around such a leader puts itself in a dangerous position, particularly when it is new or for other reasons has not developed the internal structures that can check such a leader. The problem of how to combine the ideals of "horizontalism" (participatory, egalitarian organization) with the candidate focus required for electoral politics has not been adequately theorized.

frustrations of pluralist democracy, the demonization of professional politicians, the delegitimization of ordinary politics, and the breaking of constitutional constraints. Because this feature of a "strong leader" is so often associated with populism, many writers include it among the essential characteristics of populism (e.g., Inglehart & Norris 2016, Urbinati 2019a). Yet this characteristic of coordination around a single leader who channels the will of the people is not required or strongly suggested by the four core elements of our definition. The US populism of the late nineteenth century did not have this characteristic. Nor, arguably, does Podemos today.

Antagonism toward vulnerable out-groups. In the versions of populism that have this characteristic, the people stand in an antagonistic relation not only to the elite but also to one or more vulnerable scapegoat groups, usually depicted as parasitic on or aimed at undermining the people (e.g., Blacks, Jews, the foreign-born). This possibility can flow from the unitary assumption that the people are one, with values, characteristics of birth, or other features seen as essences that groups conceived as other (or even antagonistically evil) do not share. These outsiders, although often vulnerable politically, can be cast as powerfully evil, even part of the elite, as with the Jews. They are often of a different "blood" from the people, as in the variant of populism that Laclau (2005, p. 196) terms "ethno-populism" and Mudde (2007, p. 19) terms "nativism." Antagonism to a vulnerable and politically weak out-group in conjunction with antagonism to powerful elites is a common, possibly invariant, characteristic of right-wing populism (Judis 2016). It does not, at least so far, characterize left-wing populism.[16] It is not suggested by the core elements of our definition. It was not a major characteristic of the original US populism that arose at the end of the nineteenth century. Nor, again, is it a feature of Podemos or the politicians and activists in the United States today who call themselves populists.

The people "know." In the versions of populism that have this characteristic, the common good is obvious, knowable, easily expressed, and opposed in practice only because of the elites' material or ideological interests. The values that a populist party considers part of the essence of the people, along with the public policies that put those values into practice, are not typically forged through deliberative or agonistic processes that respect a plurality of values but are accessed more directly in ways that easily access in-group/out-group cognitions and feelings. Like the single leader and attacks on vulnerable out-groups, the other two correlates of populism in this category, this belief in the innate wisdom of the people, with its link to passion, the will, and direct action, as well as its impatience with the niceties of deliberation, has some conceptual similarities to classic fascism.[17] It also taps some of the psychological characteristics of authoritarianism, including impatience with constitutional trappings that impede direct action for a clearly seen good against a clearly seen bad (Hetherington & Weller 2009). Venezuela's populist leader Hugo Chávez (quoted in Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 17) described this characteristic of the people as follows:

> All individuals are subject to error and seduction, but not the people, which possesses to an eminent degree of consciousness of its own good and the measure of its independence. Because of this its judgment is pure, its will is strong, and none can corrupt it or even threaten it.

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[16] Judis (2016) accordingly characterizes right-wing populism as "triadic," involving a three-way relation between people, elite, and out-group, in contrast to left-wing populism, which is "dyadic," involving only the people versus the elite.

[17] See Mussolini & Gentile [1935 (1932)] on fascism, stressing its capacity for action in contrast to liberal democracy's dithering and party antagonism. Yet unlike fascism (Urbinati 2019a) or some strains in the revolutionary left, populism depends on elections. See Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 16–18, 64) on the general will, a penchant for action, simple language, and "common sense."

In this realm, a laudable use of frankness, plain language, and metaphor based in common life can, particularly when coupled with a strong male leader, slide into the use of rough, even sexualized, language that communicates force and a link to the common people (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 64). The frequent use in politics of emotional and overblown rhetoric intensifies this tendency. In their anti-intellectual and anti-expert trajectory, populist leaders often promote overly simple, unsustainable, and even counterproductive solutions to complex policy problems. For many (e.g., Rodrik 2018a), such unrealistic oversimplification is a defining feature of populist politics. In the worst cases, a populist strongman can practice a willing disregard for truth or simply "not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly" (Frankfurt 2005, p. 17).

A "Core-Plus" Analysis

We do not intend our list of four core elements, four suggested but not necessary characteristics, and three correlated characteristics to exhaust all the salient or important characteristics of populist movements past and present. We do intend our core-plus analysis as a starting point for further exploration. We also intend this core-plus understanding of the meaning of populism as a remedy for the despair of many commentators in finding a coherent definition. As Laclau (2005, p. 3, also pp. 4–16) summarized the inconclusive results of a 1967 two-day conference convened to define populism: "A persistent feature of the literature on populism is its reluctance—or difficulty—in giving the concept any precise meaning." More recent commentators agree that the term's "definitional precariousness is proverbial" (Urbinati 2019b, p. 114).

Against this view, we contend that the concept of populism is no vaguer, more inchoate, or less precise than feminism, socialism, environmentalism, or many other concepts that shape our lives. Although some social and political movements, such as communism and fascism, have developed an intellectual history with relatively well-worked-out ideologies, many have not. Yet many such movements nonetheless have a core conceptual apparatus that is not vague, accompanied by many contested, diverse, and sometimes contradictory suggested features and frequent correlates.

No populist party so far exemplifies only the core and none of the associated characteristics. US populism at the end of the nineteenth century comes close, but it had the characteristics of demanding greater direct rule, some nationalism, and some antagonism toward vulnerable outgroups. The Spanish Podemos movement comes very close, although it embraces a relatively benign version of nationalism and may have moved toward the model of a leader speaking uniquely and directly for the people.

How can we distinguish our core definition of populism as a moralized antagonism between the common people and a tainted elite from the common practice of political challengers painting their opponents as elites out of touch with the people? As Müller (2016, p. 2) puts it, "After all, every politician—especially in poll-driven democracies—wants to appeal to 'the people.'" Any political challenger can accurately describe an opponent as a member of the elite through the mere fact of the opponent's being currently in power. For a challenger, the further claim that the opponent is out of touch with the constituency is almost necessary. The difference between this standard political ploy and the stance of a populist individual or party is the underlying moral charge that the elite is morally corrupt or has interests or values antagonistic to those of the common people, whose values, by contrast, are seen as sound, trustworthy, and perhaps even "pure." In many versions of the charge, the elite has achieved its wealth or power unfairly. In the extreme, populists can consider the elites so corrupt that their interests are ipso facto illegitimate, so that they, and those they favor, become enemies of the people, unworthy of political respect. This, as we emphasize below, is the great antipluralist danger.

COUNTING THE CHARACTERISTICS

To get a sense of the importance of various characteristics in populism for thinkers today, we derived a list of studies of populism primarily from a search of Google Scholar citations and then augmented the list with works we knew the search had missed. We chose the last decade, roughly speaking, for our search because the literature on populism has grown exponentially in that time.[18] We created the list of characteristics in a five-stage process of induction from the literature. First, we decided from our own knowledge of the field what the preliminary coding categories should be. Second, a scholar specializing in comparative political and economic institutions, Chase Foster, read the 25 works we had collectively decided were most relevant, noting when a characteristic describing populism was present, emphasized, or explicitly rejected, and reporting when other characteristics appeared that we had not originally recognized. Third, further analysis refined the categories. Fourth, Foster reread and recoded the materials with the refined categories. Fifth, a second coder independently coded the materials with the refined categories.[19] This quantitative analysis reinforced our core-plus definition of populism, along with our related conceptual clarifications.

Unsurprisingly, the quantitative analysis of recent works on populism shows that every one of the sources we consulted that involve a definition noted or emphasized the core concept of people versus elite, almost all with moral and antagonistic connotations.[20] No other characteristic exhibited this unanimity. Regarding the strongly suggested concepts, only 15 of the 25 sources note or emphasize the homogeneity or unity of the people, 15 note or emphasize its exclusivity, 20 note or emphasize more direct democracy, and 8 note or emphasize nationalism. Regarding the frequent correlates, 20 note or emphasize the importance of a leader in some way, 10 note or emphasize antagonism to vulnerable out-groups, and 14 note or emphasize some version of "the people know." This exercise suggests that populism need not be described as an "essentially contested" concept,[21] a set of "family resemblances,"[22] or even an "empty" or "floating" signifier.[23] It is, rather, a clear core concept associated conceptually, linguistically, and often in practice with several other specific conceptual clusters and practices that vary by context, historical era, and the ideological bent of the movement or the theorist describing a movement.

Apart from the core, when we compare the occurrence of characteristics identified by writers on populism over the past decade with their occurrence in the original US populist movement of the late nineteenth century, as captured in the collection of primary sources Tindall (1966) assembled in *A Populist Reader: Selections from the Works of American Populist Leaders*, we find relatively little

[18] See **https://books.google.com/ngrams** for the recent significant increase in the use of the term in English.

[19] See Mansbridge et al. (2019) and appendices for the methodology, the full coding, updates, and details of the coding process. We see this analysis as suggestive, not definitive, and as no more than the beginning of a process.

[20] The one study coded as zero, for no mention (Ivarsflaten 2008, p. 9), did not venture a definition or characterization of populism but simply analyzed the seven West European political parties that "were commonly identified in the previous literature as belonging to the populist right."

[21] See Gallie (1955–1956); cf. Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017, p. 2). Gallie coined this term to denote not any ill-defined or contested concept but instead a class of concepts "the *proper* use of which inevitably involves endless disputes," because these concepts involve "a head-on conflict of interests or tastes or attitudes, which no amount of discussion can possibly dispel" (p. 162, emphasis ours). In his definition, an essentially contested concept is always "appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued [or, we would add, devalued] achievement" (p. 172), so that disagreements over its meaning inevitably involve disagreements over what is good or bad. An essentially contested concept thus has its major function as a vehicle for substantive normative disputes.

[22] See Canovan (1981, p. 7), citing Wittgenstein [1967 (1953)]; see also Judis (2016, p. 17).

[23] For "empty," see Laclau (2005, p. 131); for "floating" (the term originated with Lévi-Strauss 1950), see Laclau (2005, chapter 5), explaining how the term could apply to both left and right.

overlap. As noted, among the 25 scholars of populism over the last decade or so whom we tracked, 15 listed unitary or homogeneous ideas of the people as characteristic of populism. Yet none of the nineteenth-century populist texts that we consulted characterize the people as having such a singular identity. To the contrary, several of those texts emphasize the diversity of the people even as they assert their common interests in important economic questions. So too, none of these texts suggested that only some of the people counted as "the people," confirming Müller's (2016) observation. The US populist texts in Tindall did promote greater direct popular rule, but not in ways that evinced antipathy to legislatures, judiciaries, or constitutional restraints. They professed a prideful nationalism but did not claim their nation was better than others. We found no mentions or calls for a strong leader to represent the people in any of the nineteenth-century American texts that we consulted.

The question of attacks on vulnerable out-groups is more complex. In the Tindall collection, two references could be placed in this category: an anti-Semitic characterization of bankers (Tindall 1966, pp. 52, 54) and a reference to a system of popular sovereignty rooted in "Christian enlightenment" (p. 71). In a possible third reference, which we decided not to code into this category, an 1882 addendum to the National People's Party platform supports urban labor by demanding not only the enforcement of the eight-hour law but also the restriction of "undesirable" immigration in the "present system, which opens our ports to the pauper and criminal classes of the world and crowds out wage-earners" (p. 95).

From sources other than Tindall, we learn that the western populists often expressed animus against Asian immigrants, a stance that gradually spread eastward.[24] So too anti-Semitic comments on the moneyed elite were relatively common in this era.[25] On the other hand, before it disintegrated, the People's Party aimed to unite white and black farmers and sharecroppers against their moneyed oppressors. By 1890, more than a million African Americans were members of the Colored Farmers' Alliance associated with the populist Farmers Alliance. In 1892, the founding platform of the People's Party included a plank whose term, "the whole people," was known to mean the unity of blacks and whites, and the party had several African Americans among its officials.[26] In the same year, Thomas E. Watson, the leader of the People's Party in the House of Representatives, envisioned the Party saying to both blacks and whites,

> You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both. (cited in Tindall 1966, pp. 125–26)

At rallies, Watson often asked his white listeners to hold up their hands in promise to defend the Negro's constitutional rights (Woodward 1938, p. 21). By 1896, the Party had planks denouncing lynch law and the Ku Klux Klan, demanding justice for the Negro, and demanding the abolition of the convict lease system, which fell most heavily on blacks (Woodward 1938, p. 19). The Populist Party, however, fell apart after the defeat of Williams Jennings Bryan for president in 1896,

[24]Kazin (2017b, p. 36, citing Saxton 1971 and McNall 1988) reports that in the late 1840s and 1850s, anger at cheap Chinese "coolie" labor spread first in California and then to the east, where by the 1880s "derogatory references to 'Asiatics' and 'Mongolians"' became "commonplace in the literature of the Knights of Labor and Farmers' Alliances, which aimed to attract working class support."

[25]Woodward (1959–1960, p. 60) notes how common it was at this time to see the financial elite as both Jewish and British. Racism was even more common.

[26]See the National People's Party platform (the "Omaha platform") of 1892 (Tindall 1966, p. 92). For the meaning of the "whole people," see Thomas Watson's 1882 speech, cited by Woodward [1973 (1938), p. 86]. For officials, see Woodward (1938, p. 19).

while Watson himself, after a hiatus from politics, turned into a virulent racist, anti-Catholic, and eventual anti-Semite [Woodward 1973 (1938)].

A final possibly common characteristic involves the claim that the people "know," with its frequent appeal to common sense and denigration of intellectualism. We separate these two attributes. The populists in the late nineteenth century stressed frankness, simplicity, and the language of the common folk. Their rhetoric also encompassed overstated claims and heated metaphor. Yet they did not usually denigrate deliberation, intellectual activity, or expertise. To the contrary, the movement included an intellectual apparatus of history and policy statements that assumed, in the populist language of the time, a "thinking" common man.[27] Did they promote unsustainable, overly simple solutions? Many of the measures they advocated, such as an end to the gold standard, the direct election of Senators, term limits for the presidency, a graduated income tax, a shorter workweek, and public ownership of the railroads, were thought extreme at the time but were later adopted in the United States or, in the case of the railroads, in European countries. All told, in this category we do not consider the US populists to have adopted stances toward knowledge that were dangerous to democracy.

Our coding of the characteristics of the founding US populist movement at the end of the nineteenth century suggests why the term populist does not carry the same derogatory overtones in the United States that it does in Europe.[28] More importantly for conceptual purposes, it makes the larger point that a movement and a political party built upon the deep moralized antagonism of the "plain people" (National People's Party Platform of 1892, cited in Tindall 1966, p. 92) to a vampire-like elite need not carry with it to any significant degree the characteristics of a homogeneous or exclusive people that the core elements suggest, or the frequently correlated characteristics of single leadership, the vilification of vulnerable out-groups, or the opposition to expertise and complex deliberation that have characterized many populist groups. Populists can carry on a moral crusade against an elite without falling into any of those traps.

IS POPULISM GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY?

The core elements of populism are not antidemocratic. On the contrary, when a large group has designated itself "the people" and has come to see itself in a moral battle against "the elites," the members of that group have often had significant interests and values that political elites have neglected or even denigrated. At these moments, populism is democracy's way of saying, "Listen harder." Although ordinary citizens are not policy experts, they are in a position to judge how their lives are going, and when they have long-standing grievances that powerful elites have not effectively addressed, organizing in protest is a rationally and emotionally appropriate democratic response. Because citizens are frequently ignorant about and lack interest in the details of public policy, democracies need political elites to attend to growing grievances, listen to what citizens are

[27] Frank (2017) analyzes the intellectual and educational orientation of the US Populists, quoting Garvin & Daws (1887, p. 87) that the Farmers' Alliance "was initially organized for the purpose of studying and investigating questions having direct reference to economic legislation"; Mitchell (1987, p. 93; also pp. 3–23) that the party had a goal of creating "dauntless, intelligent citizens"; and Goodwyn (1976, p. 33) that the Alliance wanted to "more speedily educate ourselves in the science of free government." "Knowledge is Power" was an Alliance slogan, and contemporaries often called it the "reading party" and the "writing and talking party" (Frank 2017, p. 9). The Populists had a "vast lecturing network, hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers, inexpensive books and pamphlets, lending libraries, book clubs [with many]… articles on tax policy, commercial regulation, the financial and monetary system, but also on American history and political theory, cooking tips, and home economics" (p. 11).

[28] See Müller (2016, p. 8), Mouffe (2018, p. 81), and Urbinati (2014) on this differential usage.

saying, and respond with policies tailored to their real needs. Populism arises when elites do not listen.[29]

Democracy particularly needs the populist impulse at certain historical moments. Elites often develop interests and values that diverge from those of the less affluent, less educated, and less privileged who live far from centers of political, economic, social, and cultural power. They often talk primarily with one another and reinforce one another. Power tends to beget more power. When groups with more power neglect the values and interests of the less powerful for too long, populism is what we want from democracy—the capacity to let the needs and values of the less powerful break through and thrust themselves on the increasingly insulated political, economic, social, and cultural ruling classes.

Laclau (2005, p. 177, emphasis in original), for example, has argued that "populism presents itself both as *subversive* of the existing state of things and as the starting point for a more or less radical *reconstruction* of a new order whenever the previous one has been shaken." It "proceeds by articulating fragmented and dislocated demands around a new core.…[Thus] some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism." This analysis leads Laclau to endorse "the notion that populism is the democratic element in contemporary representative systems" (p. 176).

Economic loss often produces the required crisis. For economic loss, inequality, or social dislocation to trigger populism, however, the losers have to consider either the causes of these losses or the government response to these losses unfair. The perception of injustice is central to the moral component of populism. It arises most easily when the government is already perceived as corrupt.[30] It also arises when policies give too little attention to the policy preferences of the average citizen.[31] As Rodrik, a distinguished economist, writes, "Part of today's populist backlash is rooted in the belief, not entirely unjustified, that…multinational corporations and investors have increasingly shaped the agenda of international trade negotiations, resulting in global regimes that disproportionately benefit capital at the expense of labor." He gives stringent patent rules, international investor tribunals, and independent central banks as examples, adding that in the European Union, "where economic rules and regulations are designed at a considerable remove from democratic deliberation," in almost every member state the "political gap…has given rise to populist…parties" (Rodrik 2018a). Even in the highly consultative parts of the EU administration, the committees consult and negotiate almost exclusively with high-level stakeholders, such

[29]On grievances, we note below that many observers, including economists (Autor et al. 2016; Rodrik 2018a,b,c), empirical political scientists (Gilens & Page 2014), and political theorists (Galston 2018), have concluded that in the economic realm elites have paid less than democratically appropriate attention to the interests of some groups, many of whose members now support populist parties. On citizens' lack of information, see Schumpeter (1942), Converse (1964), and Achen & Bartels (2016), all with problems in their analyses but also tapping important realities. On the ideal of greater "recursive," or mutually responsive, communication between representatives and constituents, see Mansbridge (2019).

[30]In the United States, a long-standing belief in government corruption has intensified along with rising inequality, leading more than 70% of Americans since 2010 to report believing that "corruption is widespread throughout the government in this country" (Galston 2018, p. 99). The meaning of "corruption" in such surveys is unclear. Although direct bribery has very probably decreased in Congress over the past century, the importance of money in politics ("institutional" corruption, as per Lessig 2011) has increased, to a point at which 64% of Americans had concluded by 2012 that "the rich buy elections" (compared to 17% in Germany in 2013; see ANES 2012, Norris 2015, World Values Survey 2013).

[31]Gilens & Page (2014) show that in the United States from 1981 to 2002, controlling for the political preferences of the top 10% and the interest groups, the preferences of the "average citizen" (preferences at the fiftieth income percentile) had a "near-zero" effect on the policies enacted.

as unions, which rarely consult their constituencies.[32] The result has been to exclude from democratic discussion and debate important policies that deeply affect the public.

A continuing decline in the size of the industrial working class has also meant that by the turn of the twenty-first century such workers nowhere comprised a majority of the citizens (see Przeworski & Sprague 1988 for implications). In the United Kingdom, this brute fact influenced the turn to the middle class in New Labor. Elsewhere, Social Democrats began to rely increasingly on educated professionals for their core activists and voters. In the United States, similar dynamics have been exacerbated by the dramatic decline in union strength and the increasing reliance of the Democratic Party on money from the financial classes. Piketty (2018) has demonstrated how the left-wing/social democratic parties in France, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have evolved into what he calls "Brahmin left" parties, so that highly educated elites tend to vote for the left, while high-income/high-wealth elites (the "Merchant right") tend to vote for the right, producing a "multiple-elite party system" that leaves other groups behind—a recipe, he suggests, for populism.[33]

As the traditional parties of the working class turn to highly educated elites for support and voice their concerns, many of those left behind both in the industrial working class and in nonmetropolitan areas experience not being heard.[34] In response, populist leaders often engage in "an aesthetic production of 'proximity to the people,'" sometimes making an ostentatious show of listening to individuals from the relevant classes and responding with visibly immediate government action.[35] At the same time, many members of the US and European cultural elite are becoming increasingly deaf to and separated from the mores, language, and sources of self-respect that are central to the lives of less cosmopolitan citizens, while those left behind sometimes feel unable to speak when what they think appears to be or is racist or xenophobic. As a representative of the Social Democrats in the poorer section of one German city put it, "The way the people in my district talk about refugees, they say things for which you'd get thrown out of the party" (Bennhold 2018). The explosion of release when a populist leader "says what [the people] think" (e.g., Müller 2016, p. 34; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 35) accounts for part of those leaders' popularity.

Right-wing populist parties draw on perceptions of status loss and disrespect (Gidron & Hall 2018). An economic worry, such as the fear that one might not be able to get work, becomes magnified and the cause of moral indignation when the worry (for example, that "Polish plumbers" or immigrants might take one's job) is turned into an object of elite derision. Adapting from Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth concepts that these theorists devised for other circumstances, we might say that populism typically includes a "struggle for recognition" arising from the perception of "social contempt" [Honneth 1995 (1992); see also Taylor 1992, Fraser 1995].

We conclude that in certain historical moments, the politically, economically, and socioculturally powerful fail to respond to the felt needs and values of others in their society for long enough to provoke, and sometimes to justify, a democratic revolt. The causes may be primarily economic, but such grievances have almost always been mixed with perceptions of cultural denigration and

[32] For EU consultations and the resulting process of "dynamic accountability," see Sabel & Zeitlin (2008).

[33] See also Hall's (2019) figure 5 for decreases in economic and increases in cultural issues in the party manifestos of western democracies and figure 2 for decreases in class-based voting, 1945–1990.

[34] See, e.g., Cramer (2016) on small-town Wisconsin US citizens "feeling overlooked, ignored, and disrespected," with legislators and administrators "simply not listening to what the people have to say" (pp. 40, 52; also p. 105; for disrespect, see pp. 66, 71, 224, and cites). See also, e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018, p. 72) on Peru, Macedo (S. Macedo, manuscript under review) and Mansbridge (2019).

[35] See Müller (2016, p. 43) commenting particularly on Chávez and Orbàn; see also Albright (2018, p. 160) on Putin.

status loss. In moments when the political system has become so rigid or elite-centered that it fails to acknowledge popular demands, populism is a democratic way to shake up the status quo. Thus, while warning that "we should constantly be wary of populism that stifles political pluralism and undermines democratic norms," Rodrik (2018a; see also 2018b,c) concludes that "economic populism" (revoking the insulation from politics of autonomous economic policy arrangements such as trade agreements or central banks) "is occasionally necessary."

CONCLUSION: DANGER LESS IN THE CORE THAN IN THE PERIPHERY AND LESS IN OPPOSITION THAN IN POWER

We take Rodrik's caution seriously. The vast majority of recent scholarship on populism today rightly stresses its dangers. We have argued that the moralized antagonism built into the core of populism can be dangerous to democracy. It undermines the tolerance and inclusion, civility and moderation crucial to pluralistic democracy. It has the potential for creating differences of kind, not degree, that are deeply inimical to democratic equal respect. The rejection of elites can degenerate into a rejection of appropriately complex solutions to complex problems. Yet we still argue that the greatest dangers to democracy lie less in the core than in the periphery: in the suggested characteristics of homogeneity, exclusivity, greater direct rule, and nationalism and the frequently correlated characteristics of a single leader, opposition to vulnerable out-groups, and the belief that the people "know."

Along with others, we also conclude that populism is sometimes healthy for democracy in opposition but rarely healthy in power. To take only one example, the deep antagonism internal to its central appeal makes it extremely difficult, although not impossible, for populists in power to negotiate with, for example, the economic elites who in most imaginable circumstances retain considerable power. It is doubly difficult, when in power, for populists to explain to their constituency why and how they are negotiating with those elites. Populists in opposition can prepare for this eventuality and educate themselves on both the necessity for eventual negotiation with elites and the means by which one can negotiate without compromising one's deepest values. But such preparation requires considerable awareness both of the need for such eventual negotiation and compromise and of the means for maintaining strong connections with the constituency while doing so.

For those who are not populists, and are repelled by the racism, xenophobia, and other characteristics that populism can take on, what stance toward populism is best for democracy? Even Müller (2016, pp. 84, 99), who of all the theorists we have surveyed has the most antipopulist stance, councils us to "engage" and "bring in those currently excluded." Negotiation theory would go further to say, "Look for the interests behind the positions" (Fisher et al. 1991, Lax & Sebenius 2006). Non-populists can look closely into the populist demands to see which interests they can address constructively consonant with their own deepest values. For progressive cosmopolitans, this means addressing populist complaints about wages, immigration, and cultural issues creatively, while rejecting racism, xenophobia, and attacks on constitutional democracy.

We argue that in the best circumstances, the current populist moment could produce a democratic awakening. We do not argue that we are living in those best circumstances.

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