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Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis

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The Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election have attracted newfound public attention to populist politics. Despite its recent salience, however, the phenomenon has a long history on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, populist parties on both the right and the left have been gaining strength since the 1990s (March, 2007; Mudde, 2007), and populist appeals have been a staple of Democratic and Republican candidates in the United States for much of the 20th century (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Kazin, 1998). Latin American politics, of course, is well known for its populist leaders (Hawkins, 2009; Roberts, 1995, 2006). Indeed, scholars have been studying populism for decades, typically relying on case studies of individual countries or regions. This rich tradition has generated a wealth of research findings, but less consensus on how populism should be conceptualized and empirically analyzed.

The diversity of approaches to the study of populism is in part a result of the growing importance of comparative research on the topic. Theoretical orientations that prove insightful in one region are often found wanting when applied to structurally disparate cases, leading to the proliferation of definitional approaches and empirical strategies. The lack of a single shared research framework is also a consequence of the amorphous nature of populism itself. The ideal of “the sovereignty of the people” (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, 323) takes on myriad forms and shares much in common with commonplace democratic principles, which complicates a precise bounding of the concept.

Nonetheless, amidst this multiplicity of theoretical perspectives, there is some consensus concerning a minimal definition of populism, one that lends itself to comparison even if it does not capture all aspects of the phenomenon. We can think of populism as a form of politics predicated on a moral distinction between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter viewed as the sole legitimate source of political power (Laclau, 1997; Mudde, 2007). Just who the elites are varies across context, as do the boundaries of “the people”, but the binary structure of populist claims is largely invariant. In addition to its moral logic, populism’s anti-elite orientation often lends itself to a wholesale rejection of intermediary institutions.

This core definition is relatively uncontroversial, but scholars differ in how they interpret, operationalize, and elaborate on it. This conceptual variation can be reduced to three dominant approaches, which view populism as (i) a strategy of political mobilization, (ii) an ideology, and (iii) a form of political discourse. Although these distinctions are primarily theoretical, they have implications for how populism is measured in empirical research. In addition, there is a separate debate concerning the relationship between populism and democracy, with some scholars seeing the two as standing in tension to one another, and others arguing that they are deeply interrelated. We are ambivalent about the normative implications of populism, but we do take a position on its conceptualization: we make a case for the analytical advantages of the most minimal, discursive definition of populism that treats the phenomenon as an attribute of political claims rather than actors. We end with a series of unresolved research questions that a discursive approach to populism can help address. It is our hope that this brief — and necessarily partial —

review will serve as useful starting point for further discussion, in this volume and elsewhere.

I. Three Traditions in Populism Research

The literature broadly reflects three main (non-mutually exclusive, as discussed below) approaches to the study of populism: as a political strategy, as an ideology, and as a discursive style. These research traditions not only rely on distinct theoretical underpinnings, but they also suggest different levels of analysis for the study of populism.

Populism as a Political Strategy. Research on populism as a political strategy has been especially prominent among social scientists working on Latin America. From this perspective, what is unique in populist mobilization is the unmediated relationship between leaders and their supporters. As defined by Weyland (2001, 4), “populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.” Levitsky and Roberts (2011, 6-7) similarly define populism as a “top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established political or economic elites on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo.”

Studies in this tradition focus primarily on the determinants of populist mobilization. For instance, Roberts (2006) argues that different combinations of strong or weak civil society and high or low institutionalization of partisan institutions give rise to distinct forms of populist mobilization (for instance, by parties or unions). Other scholars point to the role of leaders in shaping populist mobilization: according to Pappas (2012, 2), for instance, populism becomes a potent political force “when a certain political entrepreneur is able to polarize politics by creating a cleavage based on the interaction between ‘the people’ versus some establishment, thus forging a mass political movement.” In contrast, Barr (2009) notes several examples of non-charismatic populist leaders and concludes that populist leadership depends less on charisma than on actors’ self-proclaimed “outsider” position (see also Pappas, 2012).

Populism as a Political Ideology. A second approach to populism is less interested in the attributes of political leaders, and instead emphasizes the content of their

ideology. This tradition has dominated the literature on European populism in the last decade. Mudde’s agenda-setting work has paved the way for many others, with its definition of populism as,

“a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, 543).

Ideology here means an interconnected set of ideas that derive meaning from their relationship to one another (Freeden, 1996, 2003). In the case of populism, these ideas revolve around the Manichean contrast between the corrupt elite and the morally pure people (Stanley, 2008). By characterizing this ideology as “thin-centered,” scholars stress that populism is not a complete worldview that offers consistent answers to a wide range of important political questions; instead, populism attaches itself to other full-fledged ideologies such as socialism or nationalism. There is some evidence that this conceptual approach “has recently won ground in the definitional debate” (Pauwels, 2011, 99).

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Research on populism as an ideology often begins with close readings of textual materials — such as partisan manifestos — in order to ascertain which political actors engage in populist appeals. Once parties or leaders have been classified as populist, scholars look at their base of support, leadership style, political organization, and performance once in power (see, for instance, Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014; Arter, 2010; Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Pankowski, 2010). Since the close reading of partisan materials is labor intensive, research in this tradition has, at least

until recently, focused on within-case analysis or small-N comparisons.

Populism as a Discursive Style. Another body of literature conceptualizes populism as a discursive style that is predicated on the fundamental conflict between the corrupt elite and the people (Hawkins (2009, 2010)).¹ Rather than a set of core ideas embedded within constitutive texts, populism as discourse is better thought of as a rhetorical style used by political actors of diverse ideological persuasions.

Although the ideological approach (or at least, its common applications) typically considers populism as a largely fixed attribute of political actors, the discursive tradition views populism as an attribute of the message and not the speaker (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn and Akkerman, Forthcoming). This makes it possible for political actors to use different degrees of populism under different circumstances. Of course, some political actors may be more populist than others, but this can only be established by examining the within-actor variation in discursive styles. This perspective, then, opens the possibility for studying the contextual determinants of populist discourse and their variation across historical periods and geographical regions.

It is more useful to think of populism not as a constitutive ideology, but rather as a frame through which other kinds of political claims, from those on the far left to those on the far right, can be expressed.

In our own work, for instance, we have employed the discursive approach to examine the conditions under which U.S. presidential candidates were more likely to rely on populist discourse during the second half of the 20th century (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). In line with historical research (Kazin, 1998), we found that the prevalence of populism fluctuated over time on both sides of the ideological divide. Yet we also demonstrated that this variation was highly patterned: the degree to which candidates relied on populism depended on their target audience, the stage of the campaign, and the degree to which candidates were able to claim an

outsider position. These factors explained not only differences between candidates, but also between multiple campaigns run by the same candidate.

Importantly, the three approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive. For instance, Jansen (2011) weaves together the mobilization and discursive approaches to define populism as “any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people” (p. 82; see also Filc (2009)). Other works suggest a synthesis between the ideological and discursive perspectives (Pauwels, 2011; Hawkins, 2009).

At the same time, however, the three approaches lend themselves to distinct analytical strategies that privilege different levels of analysis. If populism is an ideology, then the appropriate place to observe it is in ideological texts. If populism entails not only talk but also a particular mode of mobilization, then analyses of populism must place the relationship between political actors and their constituents within broader patterns of power relations. Finally, if populism is a mode of discourse, then the starting point for analysis should be distinct speech acts.

Given that methods and theory are often closely linked, these analytical approaches also suggest different sets of research questions. Ideological approaches tend to focus on party systems, examining the changing configuration of electoral coalitions, whereas mobilization scholars often focus on the ability of populism to appeal to otherwise excluded political constituencies. Studies of political discourse are well suited for the investigation of micro-level mechanisms that account for within-actor heterogeneity in populist rhetoric.

Nonetheless, because the definition of populism employed by the discursive approach is the simplest and least encumbered by multiple necessary conditions (such as ideological stability or a particular mobilization style), we view it as the most suitable for comparative research. Our position, which we elaborate below, does not imply that discourse is more important than ideology or political practice; rather, we argue that a minimal discursive definition offers the most precise and parsimonious conceptualization of populism that can serve

¹For a review, see Poblete (2015).

as a foundation for any study of populism, regardless of geographic focus or the ideological orientation of the populist claims in question.

II. The Case for an Analytically Thin Approach to Populism

In developing his definition of populism as a “thin-centered ideology,” [Mudde \(2004\)](#) argues for a minimal conceptual approach that involves as few necessary conditions as possible. This is indeed the intention behind the “thin-centered” qualifier borrowed from [Freeden \(1996, 2003\)](#). In principle, viewing populism in this light should lend itself to a wide range of research questions. In practice, however, scholars who employ the ideological definition often treat the phenomenon as having more coherence and stability than is warranted, by assuming that political actors either do or do not subscribe to populist ideology. This problem is partly a matter of data availability, but also of the theoretical implications of the term “ideology.”

Thin-centered or not, ideologies are objects of belief, whether whole-hearted or tentative, and relatively stable drivers of behavior. We claim, instead, that populism is something political actors use strategically when the conditions are appropriate. Therefore, it is more useful to think of populism not as a constitutive ideology, but rather as a frame through which other kinds of political claims, from those on the far left to those on the far right, can be expressed. It is possible that some political actors use populism relatively frequently, but others may use it sparingly. Whether populism is stable or variable within actors should be an empirical question rather than an *a priori* assumption of populism research.

By treating populism as an attribute of specific political speech acts rather than political actors, it is possible to systematically analyze the conditions that generate incentives for populist talk. To do so, it is important to understand why populism is not used in specific circumstances, particularly by actors who are otherwise likely to view it as an attractive strategy. This approach also elides the need for examining the sincerity of populist beliefs — what matters is that actors employ populism in some circumstances but not others.

What analytical leverage might we gain from a focus on populism as a feature of political speech? Our work suggests that doing so can help illuminate the

mechanisms that shape the dynamics of populist contention. In our work on U.S. presidential elections, for instance, we have shown that populism is primarily the language of political challengers: both those who have had shorter political careers and those who served in positions removed from the center of political power ([Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016](#)). Moreover, populism fluctuates based on the target audience: challengers become less populist when they shift from their base to the general electorate, whereas incumbents become more populist over time in reaction to the challengers.

Our research on legislative discourse in the European Parliament (EP) further suggests that political actors’ long-term aspirations shape their likelihood of using populist frames: European parliamentarians with ambitions in national politics are more likely to use populist language than those who intend to remain in the EP in the future ([Bonikowski and Gidron, 2015](#)). We also observe a socialization effect (which may interact with a cohort effect), whereby longer-serving parliamentarians are less populist than more recent entrants into the EP. Finally, access to power plays a role here much as it does in our U.S. research: members of national parties that serve in national governments are less likely to rely on populist rhetoric than those whose parties are in opposition or are relegated to the periphery of the national political arena. These findings point to the benefits of measuring populism at the lowest level of analysis (i.e., individual speeches) and aggregating up as necessary to a variety of higher-order units, such as electoral campaigns, politicians, parties, and geographical regions.

Importantly, we want to emphasize that by treating populism as a feature of political rhetoric, we are not suggesting that a discursive approach should displace the focus on party-level use of populism or on populist mobilization. The mobilization and ideology approaches have their unique advantages: the former is holistic and theoretically rich and the latter is flexible and lends itself to straightforward party classification. Instead, we want to argue that defining populism as a measurable aspect of political speech can serve as a foundation for these — and other — theoretical perspectives, while avoiding unnecessary definitional disagreements. An ideological approach can still treat individuals or parties as fundamentally populist if it first demonstrates that actors rely on populist discourse across contexts (if it cannot do so, its conclusions would need to be more modest). Similarly, a mobilization

approach can begin with populist talk, but then supplement this with other variables of interest, like the leadership style of a given party or the composition of its support base. In other words, treating populism as discourse and measuring it at the level of speech acts should not be viewed as the sole end of populism research, but rather as an important and necessary starting point for empirical analysis — and a definitional common ground that can help bring into conversation disparate research traditions.

III. Is Populism Necessarily Exclusionary?

Besides definitional difficulties, there is some ambivalence in the scholarly literature on the normative status of populism in democratic politics. For some, populism is democracy's inescapable shadow (Canovan, 2002; Arditì, 2007), which can serve as a barometer of popular grievances and restrain excessive power at the hands of political elites, but which can also threaten democracy's central institutions. For others, populism is a perversion of democracy that promises the empowerment of the people but instead delivers authoritarianism and social exclusion.² Although we remain agnostic on these normative questions, it is worthwhile considering how populist claims may demarcate symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), given the phenomenon's fundamentally moral nature.

At its core, populism draws sharp distinctions between social groups, portraying some as virtuous and others as corrupt. Charges of moral failing against powerful actors, such as political power-holders or business leaders, can have their own negative consequences, like the erosion of public trust in intermediary representative institutions, but they do not necessarily generate or perpetuate social inequalities. It is when this initial moral classification is extended beyond a powerful elite to other social groups that populism becomes more deeply exclusionary. Attacks on immigrants and racial and religious minorities have become the hallmarks of right-wing populism. These marginalized groups are frequently portrayed as responsible for the cultural and economic grievances experienced by segments of the voting public (in Europe and the United States, typically white, native-born, predominantly male voters), and elites are faulted for appeasing these groups' interests instead of those of the 'true' members of the national community.

This type of populism is quite distinct from more inclusive varieties of the phenomenon, such as efforts by Latin American political leaders to expand full political membership to indigenous populations. Madrid (2008), for instance, notes that the most successful Latin American populist movements are "inclusive, ethnically based parties that adopt classical populist electoral strategies," such as an emphasis on redistributive policies. In this case, inclusive populism is associated with progressive ideology, but it would be a mistake to definitively associate populist inclusion/exclusion with the political left/right: organized labor, for instance, has a long history of ethnic stigmatization in defense of 'working people' (Olzak, 1989) and charges of political corruption from the right need not vilify immigrants. These differential outcomes are likely to be shaped by the structure of party competition and coalition building in specific cases. Thus, the degree to which populist claims attack elites alone or extend their moral critique to marginalized social groups should be subject to careful empirical analysis that does not conflate populist politics with partisan ideology.

By focusing on the common features of [populism] across contexts — without ignoring the specificities of its particular instantiations — social scientists are in a position to make important gains in identifying mechanisms that have shaped the recent successes of radical politics on both sides of the political spectrum.

In thinking about the loci of exclusion, Filc's (2009) work offers a useful starting point. In his research on Israel, Filc identifies three forms of populist boundaries: material, symbolic, and political. Material exclusion is related to the implications of specific social policies; symbolic exclusion is located in discourse itself; and political exclusion has to do with the organization of party structures and access to political representation. This typology highlights the fact that exclusionary or inclusive populist appeals need not be accompanied by exclusionary or inclusive policies and mobilization strategies; whether they do is a matter for empirical in-

²For an overview, see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012).

quiry.

IV. Directions for Future Research

The literature on populist politics is rich in empirical findings. Thanks to a growing theoretical consensus, it is also increasingly coherent in its ability to generalize beyond specific cases. We know a lot, for instance, about the bases of support for, and political behavior of, populist parties in Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2008) and in Latin America (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). There is growing evidence for the centrality of anti-immigrant sentiment in fueling both the supply and demand sides of populist politics in Western Europe and the United States (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Rydgren, 2008). Efforts to expand political inclusion in Latin America (Madrid, 2008) can teach us important lessons about the logic of populist appeals in other regions, given that those appeals depend on perceptions (however accurate) of political and economic marginalization. For all these advances, however, there are still many unanswered questions that this literature can address.

Effects on mainstream parties. One important question for future research is whether and to what degree populism is contagious. Has the rise of fringe parties that rely on populist discourse led to the diffusion of populism to the mainstream? Some research on this question has focused on the diffusion of policy positions, especially welfare chauvinism (i.e., support for welfare benefits restricted to the native-born), between radical and mainstream parties (Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016). Yet populism may also diffuse separately from specific policy positions. Research on party platforms has observed little evidence of this process thus far (Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug, 2014), but party platforms are not the only form of communication between elected representatives and their constituencies. Future research could examine social media content, political speeches, and other forms of communication that are particularly suitable to subtle changes in discursive strategies.

When populists gain power. Actors who rely on populist messages position themselves in opposition to power holders, but their ability to do so becomes more difficult once they themselves gain access to power. Whether and how electoral victories and membership in governing coalitions alter actors' reliance on populism is highly consequential, because it points to the long-

term effects of populism on the political system. Some scholars have suggested that radical-right parties that gain power "will invariably be pressured to tone down the radicalness of their agenda and political presentation" (Heinisch, 2003, 101). Others have come to the opposite conclusion and argued that the persistence of populist politics is likely to have negative implications for the quality of liberal democracy (Pappas, 2012). It is possible that the answer depends on the structure of electoral institutions in specific countries, but this has not yet been systematically established. A challenge for studies that may demonstrate the dampening effect of mainstream success on populist discourse is endogeneity: it may be the case that access to power dampens populism, but it is also possible that signaling a willingness to tone down populist language may help actors assume power in the first place. This suggests the need not only for further theoretical development, but also for novel research designs that can help address these empirical difficulties.

Effects of populism outside of politics. Most research on populism is interested in explaining the increased support for and electoral gains of parties that rely on populist claims. Yet, populism is likely to have lasting consequences even when its proponents lose elections or are excluded from governing coalitions. Populism's representation of social groups in binary moral terms is often reductive and essentialist, which has the potential to reproduce widely held stereotypes and incite intergroup conflict. In particular, when exclusionary populism that vilifies marginalized populations gains traction in dominant discourse, it risks normalizing racism, nativism, and xenophobia. Forms of talk and behavior that were previously relegated to private spaces can become legitimized in the public sphere, which can in turn influence the character of routine interactions between members of dominant and marginalized groups. Reports of growing discrimination and violence against Eastern Europeans and Muslims after Brexit and of rising Islamophobia as a result of Donald Trump's nomination provide some suggestive evidence for populism's social consequences (Bayoumy, 2016; Khalleeli, 2016). Systematic research is needed, however, to determine whether such incidents are part of a broader trend, and if so, whether they are a result of populism itself or of the exclusionary ideologies associated with its right-wing varieties. Finally, populist discourse may have other consequences regardless of its ideological content; by reducing complex policy issues to moral dichotomies,

it risks impairing the quality of informed political debate and reducing the potential for meaningful policy change.

Populist attitudes and support for populist politics. A number of recent studies have sought to identify public attitudes that favorably predispose voters toward populist politics. For instance, building on the work of Hawkins, Riding and Mudde (2012), Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) propose a scale for the measurement of populism in attitudinal surveys that includes dispositions toward political elites, views about the rightful role of the people in shaping political decisions, and tendencies toward binary moral thinking. Oliver and Rahn's (2016) research on Trump supporters similarly cites the importance of "people's feelings towards the political process, experts and common wisdom, and attachment to an American identity." Other studies, however, argue that political support for radical parties stems not from abstract populist orientations, but from an assortment of psychological dispositions (e.g., authoritarianism, strong in-group identity) and social attitudes (e.g., anti-immigrant sentiments, low levels of generalized trust) (Ivarsflaten, 2008; MacWilliams, 2016; Mols and Jetten, 2016). This raises the theoretical question of whether we can meaningfully talk about "populist attitudes" or whether populist politics activate (and perhaps exacerbate) other preferences linked to the ideological positions that are expressed in populist terms. This in turn further underlines the importance of analytically separating populism as a mode of political claims-making from political ideology. In light of the growing interest in the basis of support for radical candidates across Western democracies, the status of populist attitudes is of central importance to populism research.

Populism scholarship, including the stellar work of the contributors to this issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter, has matured over the past few years into an increasingly cumulative body of knowledge that is less occupied with conceptual disagreements than with the generation of theoretically motivated empirical findings. We view this as a highly positive development. It is our hope that by sketching out a broad overview of the field and proposing an integrative, minimal definition of populism, we can further encourage discussions across disciplinary and subfield boundaries and regional specializations. It is becoming increasingly clear that populism is an important feature of modern democracies, from Europe and the United States to Latin Amer-

ica and beyond. By focusing on the common features of the phenomenon across contexts — without ignoring the specificities of its particular instantiations — social scientists are in a position to make important gains in understanding the recent successes of radical politics on both sides of the political spectrum.

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