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Editorial

Editorial to the Issue on Populism and the Remaking of (Il)Liberal Democracy in Europe

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Abstract

Populism has become the issue of comparative political science today. The rise and continuing success of populist parties is by now evident across Europe, despite persistent cross-national variations. Populist parties' electoral success and their participation in government have raised questions about their impact: not just on established party systems, but also on the systemic core of European democracies. In theory, this impact can be both beneficial for, as well as a challenge to democracy in general, and the tenets of liberal constitutional democracy in particular. The presence of populist parties has, in several cases, increased electoral turnout and public participation, which is generally seen as a positive effect when measuring the quality of democracy. However, populist parties' rise also points to negative effects. In addition to profoundly reshaping European party systems, they advocate what the populist Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán calls "illiberal democracy". Both as an ideal and as an institutional practice when in government, the illiberal remaking of democracy implies eroding the separation of powers and subordinating constitutionally guaranteed individual civil and human rights to an alleged "general will" and a particular conception of "the people". The thematic issue explores the ideological supply, favorable conditions, political contexts and dynamics, as well as the impact of the populist surge in Europe in relation to the systemic consolidation of (il)liberal democracy on a theoretical and comparative empirical level.

Keywords

cleavages; discontent; Europe; ideology; illiberal; liberal democracy; nativism; party systems; populism; representative democracy

Issue

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1. The Fourth Wave of Populism and the Rise of Populist Parties in Europe: From Pariahs to Power Brokers

Populism has arguably become *the* issue of European politics and comparative political science today. The rise, relevance, and continuing success of populist parties is by now evident in party system change across Eu-

rope, despite persistent cross-national variations. This ongoing development has been conceived as the "fourth wave" of populism (Mudde, 2013).¹ It is remarkably different, however, from the previous wave, which was characterized by the initial breakthrough of new, modernized populist parties in the mid-1980s (Abromeit, Norman, Marotta, & Chesterton, 2015; Ignazi, 2003; Mudde, 2007). Almost exclusively carried by parties from the

¹ Von Beyme (1985) distinguishes three successive ways preceding the current wave of populist parties.

right, it affected a more limited number of European countries. These parties largely remained pariahs of European politics and their electoral and political impact remained rather limited (Mudde, 2013). Electoral successes were often followed by failures, and fluctuating parliamentary representations corresponded with a limited, mostly discursive or agenda-influencing political footprint, even if populists did take public office (mostly as junior partners) in government (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Frölich-Steffen & Rensmann, 2007; Minkenberg, 2001; Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016).

Observations that the electoral (and political) impact of populist parties has been very limited may have been valid in comparative terms until a few years ago (Mudde, 2013). They are, however, in need of re-assessment in view of the scope and force of the fourth wave of populism. After all, populist actors have improved their electoral fortunes considerably and have left their marks in party politics the world over. Indeed, they are in the process of reshaping party competition and politics in established Western liberal democracies. A steady, partly dramatic electoral rise enabled many of these parties to enter parliaments and governments, in Central Eastern Europe even as governing majorities. This includes the Hungarian *Fidesz* (governing continuously since 2010) and the Polish Law and Justice Party (*PiS*, governing with an outright majority since 2015). And in Italy there is by now a populist majority reflecting the collapse of the established post-war party system in the political earthquake of the *mani pulite* corruption scandals in 1992–1993 and subsequent political crises eroding trust in mainstream parties (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015).²

In 2016, populists celebrated unexpected successes in two of the oldest, most stable democracies: UKIP by winning the Brexit referendum it fought for, and, across the Atlantic, Donald Trump by winning the US presidency. Since then, the populist phenomenon has fully entered center stage of political debates and scholarly interest. Although the 2017 election cycle was overall perceived as producing mixed results—there was no populist sweep across Europe—populist parties gained votes in the Netherlands, 10.6 million voters opted for radical right-wing populist Marine Le Pen (*Front National*) in the 2nd round of the 2017 French presidential elections,³ while in Austria the populist FPÖ re-entered government after a successful xenophobic electoral campaign. Even in Germany, a right-wing populist party—the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD)—entered parliament for the first time and immediately became the third

largest party. Moreover, the AfD and the left-wing populist *Linkspartei* together received 21.8% of the popular vote, profoundly challenging one of the hitherto most stable party systems in Europe. Moreover, transnational ideological, organizational and discursive similarities are reinforced through mutual “learning effects” in a Europeanized and globalized context (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016).⁴

2. The Populist Challenge: Liberal Constitutional Democracies and Dimensions of Populist Politics of Discontent

The populist parties’ electoral success and their participation in government have raised questions about their impact. Not just with regard to established party systems, but also in relation to the systemic core of European democracies. In theory, this impact can be both beneficial for, as well as a challenge to democracy in general, and the tenets of liberal constitutional democracy in particular (e.g. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). The presence of populist parties can increase electoral turnout, public participation, and representation under certain conditions (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015). However, populist parties’ rise also points to potential negative effects. In addition to profoundly reshaping European party systems, they advocate what the populist Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán calls “illiberal democracy”. Both as an ideal and as an institutional practice when in government, the illiberal remaking of democracy implies eroding the separation of powers and subordinating constitutionally guaranteed individual civil and human rights to an alleged “general will” and a particular conception of “the people”. Recurring strategies and features of populist political mobilization appeal to these illiberal sentiments, alongside desires to break the rules of civil society and discourses of fear and crisis (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Rensmann, 2017a; Wodak, 2015).

The thematic issue explores the ideological supply, favorable conditions, political contexts and dynamics, as well as the impact of the populist surge in Europe in relation to the systemic consolidation of (il)liberal democracy on a theoretical and comparative empirical level. Avoiding generic claims about the “end of politics” (Mouffe, 2005) that are difficult to test, the authors engage with a dynamic, interactive understanding of populist parties’ ideological changes and responses by established parties (and liberal democracy) to the populist challenge (Kriesi, 2014). Notwithstanding its con-

² There is also a distinctly South European context and playing field. In Greece and Spain, where liberal democracy did not arrive until the 1970s, left-wing populist parties like *Syriza* and *Podemos* recently emerged as the most successful populist parties, in contrast to most other European countries. In Italy, the *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, which is ideologically neither left nor right but populist, quickly became a major organization, adding to the already large spectrum of populist parties.

³ The pro-European candidate Emmanuel Macron, to be sure, defeated her by a large margin (Rubin, 2017).

⁴ Radical right populist parties have recently also reinforced their cross-national organizational and political ties in the European Parliament and beyond. The political group “Europe of Nations and Freedom” in the European Parliament, launched in 2015, prominently includes the AfD from Germany, Geert Wilders’ single-member party *Partij voor de Vrijheit* (PVV) from the Netherlands, the *Front National* (FN) from France, the *Lega Nord* from Italy, the *Austrian Freedom Party* (FPÖ) from Austria, and *Vlaams Belang* (VB) from Belgium. Several of these actors also expressed support for US President Trump whose success they explicitly see as a model.

tested nature and presence as a fuzzy buzzword in political debates, “populism” has been successfully operationalized in systematic studies of contemporary actors challenging established liberal-democratic politics in Europe and beyond (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Indeed, “populism” properly conceptualized, is especially well suited to understand key features of the most significant, electorally successful—new or transformed—movement-party types and other political actors gaining ground in European politics today. And while there is a variety of challengers liberal and representative democracy and party systems face (Pappas, 2016), the most successful and relevant are populist parties.

To facilitate the discussions between the contributions in the issue and to be able to draw conclusion on the basis of the separate studies, we present two minimal definitions. We conceive of populism as a thin-centered ideology (or discourse) “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous 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). Because of its nature, populism can be combined with left- and right-wing, or other ideologies. In addition, we conceive of liberal democracy as consisting of two pillars: on the one hand, institutionalized forms of popular, democratic sovereignty (i.e. free and fair elections among equal members, forms of representative government, a free public sphere and media, and other democratic procedures of popular and pluralistic will-formation and inclusion), and on the other hand liberal constitutional rights and principles (i.e. individual civil, political and human rights and liberties, including freedom of expression, separation of powers, an independent judiciary; Plattner, 2010). Both constitutive pillars, the exercise of democratic public autonomy and the constitutionally guaranteed “private” autonomy of individual rights and liberties, can work as mutually reinforcing (or “co-original”, in Habermas’ words [1998]), but may also be in tension if output from the first pillar, which points to the particular will-formation of a particular political community, clashes with the inherently universalistic norms and undercurrents of the second (e.g. in a “tyranny of the majority”, or illiberal forms of democracy, threatening the latter) (e.g. Kornhauser, 1959). However, countries regularly holding free and fair democratic elections are more likely to protect individual rights, and vice versa (Plattner, 2010).

The debate about illiberal democracy thereby points to nativist or exclusionary, particularistic critiques of liberal democracy as well as to procedural criticisms of representative democracy in the populist mobilization of discontent. It points to a socio-cultural divide identified by Bornschieer (2010) affecting the character of liberal democracies and to an actual crisis of liberal democracy that is, however, simultaneously promoted, constructed and reinforced by its populist critics.

3. Populism and the Remaking of (Il)liberal Democracy in Europe: Findings

Based on cross-national studies, the thematic issue explores the relationship between populist discontent and liberal democracy (and its cultural undercurrents). Existing studies indicate that the causes of the rise of populist parties and the extent to which effects on liberal democracies materialize depend on the characteristics of the populist parties themselves (Akkerman et al., 2016) and on those of the political systems and political cultures in which these parties compete. The central question to which the different contributions of this thematic issue respond is two-fold: *What* are the political/cultural conditions or crises within liberal democracies that are favorable to the current rise of populist parties, and *how* does the emergence of populism impact on (the quality of) liberal democracy in Europe? In other words, the contributions seek to unravel through which mechanisms and under which conditions the presence of European populist parties and leaders, currently riding on a wave of electoral success, are engendered in different political, cultural, and media contexts, and have impact on various key characteristics of liberal democracies, such as levels of democratic inclusion and participation of citizens (and denizens), democratic political culture, civil, social and political civil rights, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and a free, diverse and pluralistic public sphere.

Theoretical reconceptualizations of conditions and dynamics, as well as comparative empirical research in this issue seek to rethink and systematize the extent to which the causes and effects of populist actors are conditional on certain factors, such as 1) the specific or shared “modernized” political ideologies of “left-wing” and “right-wing” or nativist populist parties, 2) the exclusion or inclusion of populist parties from government, 3) the type of government in which populist parties participate (i.e. type of coalition, formal or informal participation), 4) historical legacies and the degree of consolidation of (il)liberal democracy (especially taking account of differences between Western liberal democracies and post-Communist Eastern liberal democracies, where populists are on average more successful today), or 5) the contexts of political cultures and dominant social values in which populist parties operate (e.g. dynamics of social value change and backlash, dominant cultural/democratic self-understandings).

The studies show that the hitherto underexplored relationship between populism and (il)liberal democracy is more complex than initially conceived. Assessing the scope of a multi-faceted challenge, they yield mixed findings on the negative impact or threat to the future of liberal democracy and its robustness. Approaching the issue from both a comparative European perspective and a more specific regional focus, studies vary in their assessment of this relationship. While some suggest that

the transformative impact may be more limited than often claimed in recent public debates (especially on Central Eastern Europe, where populist majorities govern and recently have been reprimanded by the European Union), others argue that populism's negative impact on democratic political cultures—and the quality of democracy—in Europe is more profound and has rather been underestimated. In light of broader long-term shifts in cultural self-understandings and a traditionalist or authoritarian social value backlash against globalization, diversity, and liberal democratic principles often promoted or reinforced by populists, these studies diagnose an increased readiness to suspend or break with established norms and constitutional frameworks. This development is likely to further transform liberal democracies and consolidate populist successes.

In his article, Benjamin Moffitt (2017) questions the much-echoed equation of populism with illiberalism. Taking cue from right-wing populist parties in Northern European countries (i.e. the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway), Moffitt argues that the relationship between populist politics and liberalism is more complicated than usually assumed. Populism is not necessarily “profoundly illiberal”. He makes the case for a mode of “liberal illiberalism”, a selective, nationalist liberalism that is discursively employed to “put a more ‘acceptable’ face” on illiberal politics. In this way, Moffitt also implicitly shows that hesitance with regard to generalizations about populist politics allows for the articulation of regional variations and differences throughout Europe.

While recognizing politico-cultural specificities and significant cross-national variations, Lars Rensmann (2017b) argues that the rise of populist parties is part of a trans-national, illiberal backlash reflecting a deep cultural divide within European democracies that is increasingly reflected and mobilized in transformed political spaces. In his reconceptualization of European populist parties, he adds cultural dimensions that left- and right-wing populists share. In order to understand and assess the scope and origins of the fourth wave of populist politics in Europe, Rensmann proposes a cultural turn in the study of populism beyond conventional political science frameworks. His research takes this cultural turn into three directions, integrating insights from three currently still marginalized fields: political sociology, political psychology, and media studies. They help illuminate, it is argued, the cultural conditions from which today's populists benefit—a long lingering cultural counter-revolution, the socio-psychological dynamics of an authoritarian cultural revolt articulated by populists, and a transformed communicative environment shaped by social media.

Matthijs Rooduijn, Wouter van der Brug, Sarah de Lange, and Jante Parlevliet (2017) examine in their article whether exposure to populism makes citizens more cynical about politics. More specifically, they assess whether exposure to populist messages affect only those already favourably predisposed towards populist parties or all citizens, irrespective of their existing attitudes. On the

basis of survey experiment, in which a representative sample of Dutch citizens had to read a newspaper article containing either a populist or a non-populist message, they study the impact of populism on political cynicism. The authors find that the participants that read the populist message were more cynical afterwards than the participants that were exposed to a “neutrally formulated” message. Interestingly, they also conclude that not all citizens exposed to the populist message are equally affected. In fact, the effect of the exposure to populism is only significant for participants that support populist parties.

Robert Huber and Christian Schimpf (2017) empirically analyze differences and commonalities in the way populist parties of the left and right relate to democracy and democratic quality. They argue that populism should not be considered in isolation from its (left or right) host-ideology. Using data from 30 European countries between 1990 and 2012, Huber and Schimpf show that populist parties can exert distinct influences on minority rights depending on their left or right orientation while, however, the association between populist parties and mutual constraints is a consequence of the populist element.

Emphasizing Central Eastern European context specificity and differences within the region, Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti (2017) investigate the democratic backsliding, and the extent to which it is the result of rising populism, in the Visegrad countries. On the basis of a comparison of developments in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia they state that the notion of democratic backsliding, which is often used in the literature on democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, is flawed. The concept of backsliding suggests that in the Visegrad countries a clear break exists from a liberal trajectory to an illiberal one. The authors demonstrate that the countries under investigation have not gone through a linear process of democratization and consolidation in the 1990s and early 2000s, nor have they gone through a linear process of de-democratization and de-consolidation in more recent years. Instead, they observe a sequence of “episodes” delineated by elections, some of which can be characterized as “illiberal swerves”. In Hungary, and to a lesser extent in Poland, the swerving has persisted over multiple elections. In these countries the “illiberal swerving” has resulted in an “illiberal turn”.

In his review, which concludes this thematic issue, John Abromeit (2017) engages with five recent studies that have intervened in the empirical, conceptual and methodological debates on contemporary global populism. As each of these studies claim to make an innovative contribution to the field in their own right, Abromeit prudently assesses their merits and shortcomings. In doing so, his main criticisms revolve around constructivist approaches to populism and the use of history in some studies. Abromeit takes issue with the theoretical assumptions and (perceived) explanatory capacity underlying constructivist (e.g. discursive, performative) ap-

proaches to populism, but also hints at tendencies towards historical reductionism in some of the studies under review. Moreover, he acknowledges that the conceptual grammar of (group and social) psychology might contribute to the field, but in the same breath states that the ways in which such angles are employed offer little explanation for identification processes that are key to populist politics at large.

Be that as it may, the studies and new research all recognize that the current populist boom reflects a steady, consolidated ascendancy over a decade or more. It indicates that new and old populist actors maneuver more successfully through a changing political and (social) media landscape and actor environments, often outflanking the external supply side of established parties and appeals. This fourth wave of populism hereby benefits from what Cas Mudde (2004) once aptly called a “populist *zeitgeist*” and profoundly transformed demand side conditions in post-industrial, globalized societies: readjusted political, cultural and social value cleavages in a rapidly changing communicative social media environment as well as lingering socioeconomic and cultural crises of liberal representative democracy. It points to deep-seated discontent and a declining stability and cultural appeal of consolidated, representative liberal democracies. A crisis which populists seem to both construct and effectively exploit. While political scientists should be reluctant to make long-term predictions, the thematic issue suggests that there are few reasons that the populist phenomenon within liberal democracies is a transitory challenge likely to disappear any time soon. Rather, it is likely part of European liberal democracy’s future, thereby continuing to change the political cultures and party systems that shaped Europe’s post-war horizon.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Stefan Couperus is an associate professor of European Politics and Society at the University of Groningen. As a contemporary historian, he works on the intersection of history and the social sciences, particularly with regard to the urban governance and urban planning in 20th century Western Europe. Recently, he published the co-edited volume *(Re)Constructing Communities in Europe, 1918–1968* (Routledge 2017) on the pertinence and resonance of community thought and practice after the World Wars.