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Of Populism and Democracy: A Problematic Answer to a Fundamental Issue

A Master Thesis in Political Science – Political Theory

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1. Introduction:

About a year ago, during Swiss National Day 2021, the president of the right-wing Swiss People's Party denounced "parasitical policies" enforced by "left-wing cities". Depicting a certain group of people as responsible, and rallying the rest of the people against it, isn't specific to Switzerland and to the Swiss People's Party. Such depictions can be found all around the world, and come from both ends of the political spectrum, from *Podemos* and *La France Insoumise*, to the UK Independence Party and *Fidesz*. These parties and their ideologies are commonly described as being populist.

Dividing the world and human society in separated, opposing groups, isn't a novel thing. The Old Regime of former monarchies and its subsequent revolutions, Marx's call for a union of workers against *bourgeoisie*, segregationist policies in North America, among other historical examples. Times have seemingly changed: democracy is now ubiquitous and found all around the world. Its ideal of equality and promise of equally shared political power should lead to an increase in overall equality and a decrease in popular resentment. Such isn't the case, and at times, it feels like democracy actually creates such resentment, allowing the aforementioned populist parties to express their ideas.

Criticism of democracy is perfectly legitimate: in cases of representative democracy (one of the most frequent flavors of democracy), the main issue resides in the fact that citizens may not always be perfectly represented, and political power be *de facto* limited to a smaller fraction of the citizenry. Such cases go against the democratic ideal of equality among the citizens, and should be avoided at all costs. The fact that populism purportedly denounces this democratic elitism is seemingly a good thing, and the popular resentment it generates would actually be for the better.

The question remains though: is populism able to address and solve the issues it denounces? This will be the main interrogation of this essay. Independent cases and instances of democracy and populism can vary wildly, I will thus discuss this question at a conceptual and ideal level. Establishing the fundamentals of democracy, representation, its issues and populism, I find that the basic features of populist thought make it inherently unfit to solve the very issues it claims to address.

Starting with a clarification of the leading research question (section 2), establishing accounts of democracy (section 3) and populism (section 4), this essay will then determine how democratic elitism represents a conceptual threat to democracy (section 5). Eventually, those accounts of democracy, populism and elitism will show that populism is conceptually unfit to address the issues it claims to address (section 6). Finally, the argument will show that those issues all boil down to representation issues: at this point, the findings of all previous sections will point towards a conceptual contradiction between what populism claims to be and what it actually is (sections 7 and 8).

2. Research question:

Given the fact that populism seems to appear in cases where popular resentment grows, asking whether populism is actually fit to address whatever issues democracy runs into is a legitimate question. An issue appears within democracy: is the proposed alternative able to fix what democracy seemingly can't? This essay being a theoretical one, I plan on addressing this question from an ideal and conceptual standpoint. From there, as explained, the essay will begin with accounts of all those concepts, democracy, representation, populism...

Being at a conceptual level, this essay will necessarily need to rest on accounts of fundamental characteristics of all those concepts, and how they interact. More specifically: since populism usually claims to answer to representation issues (what I call democratic elitism), it must be determined whether populism's features allow it to conceptually answer and fix those representation issues.

I thus propose to address the following research question:

Do the fundamental features of populism allow it to address the issue of democratic elitism?

This research question, in order to be properly answered, will need general and conceptual accounts of democracy, representation, details and insight of its issues, and populism. Only then will this essay be able to provide the theoretical grounds for an adequate answer.

The research question only covers populism insofar as it denounces representation issues. Populism may absolutely denounce and claim to address non-representation issues. This essay is only concerned with populist answers to representation issues, and nothing else. Studying the "fundamental features" of populism makes sense, from a conceptual standpoint: once that a conceptual argument has reached a conceptual conclusion about "populism", any and all practical cases included within the concept of "populism" will be subject to the same conclusion. Working on empirical cases of populism may lead to similar conclusions, but those cannot be generalized to other instances of populism (inductive reasoning).

As explained in the introduction, democracy is ubiquitous, and its representative variant is found in most democratic countries. Due to the sheer variety of democratic systems, studying a particular one and generalizing it would only lead to inductive reasoning. In this sense, giving an account of its fundamental features will allow the argument to cover a great many democratic systems. The same applies to the conceptual issues democracy may run into (what I call “democratic elitism”, or representation issues).

3. An account of democracy:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes democracy as “A method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process”¹. This very broad and overarching definition gives us several key elements that all variants of democracy should share: a “method”, i.e. a “system” within which the democratic process happens and is determined. Some sort of “equality” between the participants of this system, this equality being found and enforced at “an essential stage of the decision-making process”. This last part means the participants must be equal as far as the decision-making process is concerned, and have their say when it comes to decisions that will substantially affect the political output of the system.

This democratic fundamental is developed in many different flavors of democracy. Countries like the United Kingdom and Spain (parliamentary monarchies), the United States and South Korea (presidential republics), Germany, India and Finland (Parliamentary republics) and Switzerland (semi-direct democracy), among many others, are considered democracies in their own right, yet they all present very distinctive characteristics. That said, the basic definition of democracy seems to apply to all those examples: usually, the “equality among the participants” takes the form of free and equal elections of representatives (for either of the three different political powers). Details can vary, such as the length of the legislature, the structure of Parliament, the electoral system, the availability of direct democracy tools, etc. But one very common (perhaps universal) characteristic is, as mentioned, the exercise of collective power through the election of representatives, who will produce political outputs according to the will of the people who elected them.

This essay will focus on an ideal conception of representative democracy. A vast majority of countries around the world have adopted such a democratic system, and even though the application of this ideal isn’t perfect (as most ideals), this fact allows for this theoretical essay to be applied in a vast number of practical cases. Besides, it will be shown in section 4.4 that populism, the main topic of this essay, can conceptually only appear within a representative democracy setting. Discussing

¹ CHRISTIANO, Tom and SAMEER, Bajaj. "Democracy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

and determining the aims and goals of democracy is a needed step before going any further, however.

3.1 Why democracy?

John Rawls, in his milestone book, “A Theory Of Justice”², stipulates the importance of the “public good”. I will obviously not tackle the issue of defining what this “public good” is, nor is it the aim of this essay. That said, it can be inferred that all societies and all social and political models have a *raison d’être*, a goal. Rawls’ “Theory Of Justice”, for example, provides and describes one such goal. I will not delve into the specifics of Rawls’ definition of the “public good”, nor try and devise my own definition. This “public good” will change among authors, as well as among different political systems (a totalitarian or oligarchical regime will not share the same goals and definitions of “public good” as a religious-based regime or a democracy). For the sake of this essay, simply keeping in mind that political systems have a goal, something to protect, to strive for or to avoid, will suffice. In so doing, this essay will keep a more general, conceptual and ideal tone, whose conclusions can be applied to a wide range of democratic systems sharing the same foundations.

Thomas Hobbes’ “Leviathan”, by illustrating what the “state of nature”, or absence of social institutions, implies, gives us an indication of what society aims to prevent³. Humans, by banding together and agreeing to a limitation of their own natural rights and freedoms, ensure their remaining rights and freedoms are protected and satisfied, and don’t need to constantly look over their shoulder, worrying about their safety. Thus, according to Hobbes, society’s merit is to avoid the ills of the state of nature, which leads to the aforementioned Leviathan.

This essay will not give an account of what this “public good” is, nor will it delve more deeply in what an absence of society or political system entails. The argument will only need to acknowledge human societies and political systems are constituted for some reason, in order to attain some goal. Two preliminary conclusions, then: society (and the political system it adopts) aims to reach and produce something beneficial (described by Rawls as “public good”, for example) and avoid something detrimental (the state of nature, as defined by Hobbes, for example), both things being apparently impossible to attain (or prevent) outside the reach of human society. Any

2 RAWLS, John, “A Theory Of Justice”. Cambridge, MA: *Harvard University Press*. 1971.

3 HOBBS, Thomas, “Leviathan”. London, 1651.

political system, then, is one way or another designed and shaped in order to attain something “good” and avoid something “evil”.

Varying examples can be found in both contemporary and ancient societies. Theocracies and religious societies generally aim towards glorification some deity or pantheon, and the avoidance of divine wrath. In so doing, some of those societies (like in Central and South America) resorted to human sacrifice in order to appease their divinities. Authoritarian systems will usually see any form of critique very negatively, while going to great lengths to protect and safeguard their leadership. The same could be said of monarchies, with *lèse-majesté* being harshly punished, for example. This stands in contrast to most contemporary regimes, who will instead actively safeguard (to some degree) freedom of speech and criticism of State activities and politics. Communist and collectivist ideologies will generally put the well-being of the group above the well-being of individuals, those ideologies being thus at odds with instances of capitalism or liberalism.

This applies to democracy as well. By offering a vast assembly of people the power to decide and create political output that will shape and influence society, it is implicitly accepted that the people as a whole is able to reach (or approach), through its decisions, political output that will produce something good and avoid something detrimental (as defined previously). Controversially, believing a democratic “people” cannot produce such output leads mechanically to the conclusion that democracy is an ineffective political model and should be rejected. Agreeing to democracy means, at the very least, to agree that the power will be shared, in one way or another, among an assembly of citizens, with equality being a key feature of said assembly.

Besides, even though offering political power to a vast assembly of citizens does not guarantee its decisions will favor the “public good”, the equality inherent to democracy creates the possibility, for citizens, to debate and decide accordingly. Such debates are absolutely possible within different, non-democratic political systems, but they do not necessarily produce political output (systems that do not use popular and citizen input as a means to produce political output), whereas democracy, by definition, uses some sort of popular input as a way to produce political output.

3.2 Representative democracy and its features:

Given the strong prevalence of representative democracy nowadays, a more refined definition of it must be devised before going any further. Within representative democracy, thus, the ideal of “equality among the participants” is fulfilled by offering participants the right to partake in free and equal elections of representatives, who will produce political outputs in the name of the people. This particular flavor of democracy is justified because of practical issues when it comes to realize the democratic ideal. In any given society, there will be people unable to fully partake in a democratic system. This can be attributed to a lack of time (working citizens may have no time to actually participate), lack of understanding and knowledge (social and political issues are often complex and complicated), or simply geographical constraints (moving from home to wherever politics are debated can be an issue). Those practical issues make direct democracy a difficult endeavor, especially with large territories and populations. In this sense, electing representatives and giving them the practical means (resources, time, money...) to act in the name of the people makes sense and helps negating (to some extent) the practical issues faced by direct democracy⁴.

This representation can take many forms. Representatives may be elected for any of the three powers of the State. The citizens of France, Mexico or Brazil, among others, elect a president, leader of the executive branch of their respective governments. Many other countries (Switzerland, Germany, Australia...) also elect representatives for the legislative branch of their respective governments. Finally, the judiciary branch of the government can also be headed by representatives (the Swiss canton of Geneva, for example, organizes popular elections for the post of attorney general). The specifics may wildly between systems (length of term, mode of election, conditions for being part of the citizenry...), but one universal feature of representative democracy is the election of representatives.

Within representative democracy, issues regarding representation and the distance between the citizenry and its representatives can arise. More specifically, representatives not representing their electors, their interests, etc. In other words, the responsiveness of representatives can vary wildly. This has practical origins: when democracy grows, when citizens are more numerous, when the geographical area covered by the democratic State extends, more and more people face increasing issues representatives are expected to deal with. Eventually, representatives will have to

⁴ DAHL, Robert Alan. “Democracy and its critics”. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. 1989. Pages 29-30.

represent the opposing interests of opposed citizens who nonetheless elected the same representative. Also, private lobbies and interest present serious issues to the fundamental principle of equality and, more generally, to the very idea of representation: lobbies wouldn't be an issues if all groups within the society could also lobby for their interest. Quite often, unfortunately, this is not the case.

All those issues regarding representation will not be tackled in this essay. That said, it will be shown in section 4 that populism arises from those very issues. A better understanding of the concept of representation is thus needed.

3.3 Pitkin's account of political representation:

Pitkin's milestone book "The Concept of Representation"⁵ is described as "one of the most influential and oft cited works in the literature on political representation"⁶. In Pitkin's view, "representation" can be either of four different concepts.

Formalistic representation is described as the procedures through which one attains power and becomes a representative. Symbolic representation deals with the symbol the representative becomes towards the people. Descriptive representation is concerned with whether the representative resembles (or not) the represented people and citizens. Finally, substantive representation is about whether the activity and political output of the representative serves the interest of those represented.

All those different concepts are pertinent, in one way or another, for political representation within a democratic representative system. Formalistic representation actually ensures there is a proper and legal system to allow for representatives to be elected. It determines the structure and workings of elections. Symbolic and descriptive representations, while more empirical concepts, will determine whether the representative is accepted as such by the people, and will give some degree of legitimacy to said representative. Substantive representation, finally, allows to develop a critique of representatives and, more importantly, of their activity: have representatives been acting

5 PITKIN, Hanna. "The Concept of Representation". Los Angeles: *University of Press*. 1967.

6 DOVI, Suzanne. "Political Representation". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. ZALTA (ed.),

on behalf of their electors, faithfully and diligently accomplishing the will of the majority that elected them?

Pitkin also gives the distinction between delegate⁷ (someone who follows the will of their electors) and trustee⁸ (someone who does what they think is right). This essay is concerned about what populism has to say whenever representation fails. An account of populism (section 4) will show that populism, through its fundamental definition, will tend to follow a delegate conception of representation. Whether populism encompasses trustee conceptions of representation will not be addressed in this essay. Finally, it will be shown (Section 4.6) that populist critiques can actually encompass all four conceptions of political representation.

3.4 Defining the people

Another feature of democracy (and its representative variant) is the definition of its citizenry. In other words, how does the system differentiate between citizens and non-citizens? What are the boundaries of this “people” invested with the right to partake in political activities? What are the characteristics that each and every citizen must satisfy in order to be considered so? Finally, what is the process through which citizenship is granted (or revoked)?

There is no clear cut answer to those questions: States and regimes across the years have found various criteria and processes. Age is one of the most ubiquitous, and is still used nowadays: usually, children and minors do not have citizenship, in the sense they usually cannot vote and be elected. Nationality is another common criteria, with foreigners usually not able to vote or be elected either. But even those two very common conditions have their exceptions: some Swiss *cantons*, for example, have experienced with citizenship granted to minors, or voting rights to foreigners under certain conditions (usually having lived on Swiss territory for a certain time). Furthermore, the age of adulthood changes across countries (16 in Scotland, 18 in France, 20 in New-Zealand, 21 in the American State of Mississippi...). Other criteria such as wealth, ownership or diplomas have been used in the past to determine the boundaries of the citizenry and allow (or not) people to partake in elections.

⁷ PITKIN, Hanna. *Op. Cit.*, page 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 176.

All those examples help to understand that the very process of defining the people is, by itself, a democratic act and necessity. This essay is not concerned with determining, either empirically or normatively, which process should be favored.

3.5 A minimal definition of (representative) democracy:

The multiple ways this democratic fundamental ideal is applied in countries all across the world, along with the fact that democracy is not the main topic of this essay, a minimal and fundamental definition of this concept is needed.

Using the base definition given in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy⁹, which posits the idea of equality of the citizens in the collective decision-making process, several other features can also be considered as necessary. First, as with every other social and political system, democracy has an ideal end, which is preserving some “good” and avoiding some “evil” (section 3.1). Choosing to focus on representative democracy, the citizens’ input takes the form of equal elections of representatives, who will then give their own input in different State branches and sectors (section 3.2). Finally, the need to determine who can and cannot be part of the citizenry is also a fundamental part of the democratic process (section 3.4). All those basic and essential features of democracy will be needed in order to better understand the populist critique of democracy.

⁹ CHRISTIANO, Tom and SAMEER, Bajaj. *Op. Cit.*

4. An account of populism:

As evoked in the introduction, the academic study of populism is defined by the vagueness of its definition. The very act of “studying” populism is also widely discussed and debated. This section will review the literature on the topic of populism.

As explained by Bonikowski and Gidron (2016), at its very core, populism can be thought as “a form of politics predicated on a moral distinction between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter being viewed as the legitimate source of political power”¹⁰. The specifics and applications of this definition vary wildly between authors. In practical cases, they may very well define “corrupt elites” and “the virtuous people” quite differently in different contexts. For example, if one considers the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) as being a populist party, its policy clearly establishes the British population as the “virtuous people”, with pro-Europe politicians and administrations presented as acting against the interest of the country and its “people”.

Another example is provided by Urbinati (2013) with contemporary Italian politics: the *Lega Nord* is depicted as a populist party claiming to represent the people properly, as opposed to existing parties and established parliamentary politics. In Urbinati’s words, “They attack parliamentary politics as elitist and anti-democratic because of its distance from common people’s opinion”¹¹.

4.1. Three traditions in populism studies:

A further refinement of this account of populism can be made. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) establish three different traditions, three different ways to study populism¹². These distinctions are primarily theoretical ones, which make them relevant for this paper.

10 BONIKOWSKI, Bart and GIDRON, Noam. “[Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis](#)”. *APSA Comparative Politics Newsletter*. 2016, 26 (12), page 7.

11 URBINATI, Nadia, “The Populist Phenomenon”. *Raisons Politiques*. 2013, 3 (No 51): page 144.

12 GIDRON, Noam and BONIKOWSKI, Bart. “[Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda](#)”. *Weatherhead Working Paper Series*. 2013, No. 13-0004.

4.1.1 Populism as an ideology:

Populism can be understood as an ideology¹³. In this case, populism is seen as a set of ideas, which political actors may or may not adhere to. Mudde (2004) defines populism as “an ideology 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”¹⁴.

Such a definition does not lock populism to either side of the political spectrum. It implies all actors may adhere to this populist ideology, which will shape their political action and worldview. It also means political actors are fundamentally populists, or they are not. In this case, actors would be considered populist the same way they would be considered liberal, conservative or any other ideology they may adhere to. One such concrete example can be found in marxism: this particular ideology implies that most, if not all, kinds of human interaction (whether they be historical, social, economical, political...) be understood and depicted under the prism of class struggle. Such an ideology shapes the way the world and human interactions are interpreted, and the concept of class struggle seems to fit quite nicely with Mudde’s definition.

The example of marxism leads to another question that must be answered: if both marxism and populism are ideologies, how can they overlap? How can populism be at the same time a feature of radically opposed and antagonist ideologies? Mudde (2004) further refines his definition by adding that populism is a “thin-centered ideology”¹⁵. This means that populism isn’t a “full” ideology like the ones mentioned above, but can rather become one of their ideological components, so to say. In this sense, populism can absolutely be an ideological component of radically different and opposing “full” ideologies (marxism, fascism, nationalism, socialism...). Thus, marxism opposes the proletariat to the *bourgeoisie*, nationalism opposes patriots and traitors, objectivism and libertarianism opposes hard-working people and free-riders, etc. All fundamentally different worldviews and depictions of human societies, but with populism as a common denominator and feature. Examples of right-wing populist parties and movements have already been given previously in this essay: the notion of “thin-centered ideology” allows to understand and explain how populism can be found in so many different practical cases.

13 *Ibid.* page 5

14 MUDDE, Cas. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” *Government and Opposition*. 2004, 39.4, page 543.

15 MUDDE, Cas, *Op. Cit.*, page 544

4.1.2 Populism as a discourse:

Populism can, on the other hand, be seen as a discourse¹⁶, a rhetorical means for political actors to communicate. In this case, actors are not fundamentally populists, but may chose to shape their political discourse following a populist frame (power to the people, us versus them, etc.). Thus, populism isn't seen as a personal characteristic of political actors, but rather a characteristic of their discourse. Most importantly, it implies all actors may resort to populism, and to different degrees. It also implies a particular political actor may change their discourse over time, using a populist style at some points, while resorting to a more classical style at some other points. Finally, the discourse style may change depending on the subject debated and evoked.

Let us imagine a left-leaning political figure advocating, at first, for more economical and financial redistribution. The discourse of this political actor may, quite naturally, adopt populist undertones when it begins to advocate for heavier taxation of wealthy taxpayers. Such a discourse, in this example, will adopt the populist framework of "us vs. them", by rendering the idea of more redistribution appealing to low-income citizens (the people) and portraying wealthy citizens (the elite) as not doing enough for the well-being of society. At the same time, the same left-leaning political figure may also advocate for the protection and respect of an ethnic minority, for example by demanding a special status be created for members of said ethnic minority. This particular claim does not present the fundamental characteristics of populist rhetoric.

We thus see, with this fictional (but plausible) example that populism as a discourse doesn't imply a populist ideology and worldview. One can adopt a populist rhetoric on specific topics, while adopting at the same time a different kind of discourse on other topics. As explained, this also does not need the adherence to a populist worldview.

4.1.3 Populism as a strategy:

Finally, populism can be seen as a political strategy¹⁷, this perception being mostly prevalent within Latin American literature and politics. In this case, populism either means adopting, promoting and enforcing a political program aiming to benefit the "masses" against the "powerful",

¹⁶ GIDRON, Noam and BONIKOWSKI, Bart, *Op. Cit.*, page 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 10.

or alternatively a top-down political strategy and organization, with a “leader” claiming to represent the people and its interests against the “corrupted elite”. Whichever flavor of populism as a discourse is retained changes among authors, but it’s basics remain the same: in this fashion, political actors resorting to populism are not bound to either side of the left-right scale. Furthermore, they position themselves as “true” representatives of the people’s will and desires, implying other political actors do not represent (or not as well) the people.

This approach differs from the ideological one in the sense that the populist leader resorting to a populist strategy does not necessarily have to embrace a populist ideology. Populism is seen as a means to an end. It differs from the rhetorical approach since it doesn’t just shape the discourse of the populist leader, but also the way they’ll campaign and raise popular interest. This discursive populism doesn’t simply shape the structure of individual discourses about particular issues or topics: the entire discourse and electoral strategy is aimed towards the gathering of a large part of the “people” in order to reach a majority and gain electoral and political power.

An example would be as follows: a candidate to a democratic election fails to gather enough support and votes to be elected. At the same time, it so happens that only 30% of the citizenry actually voted. Rather than convincing those 30%, a populist strategy would be to gather the interest and support of the remaining 70%. Such a populist strategy, besides understanding why the turnout is so low, may be to gather the remaining 70% with a political program featuring measures aimed towards responding to the needs and desires of the population, an economical program appealing to the majority, the promise that the leader will be responsive to the people once elected, etc.

4.1.3.1 An issue with populist strategies:

This has an interesting implication which must be addressed: since a populist strategy aims to win elections or to attain political power, a democratic majority must be reached first. In this case, if a majority agrees to whatever program the political leader campaigned for, where is the issue? The strategy led to an increase in political participation (which can hardly be seen as a bad thing in a democratic setting) and has been legitimated through the democratic process. By mobilizing non-voters, this kind of populist strategy seems to actually reinforce the equality in the democratic process, by ensuring as many people as possible partake in elections. Finally, criticizing a populist strategy as being a means to an end (being elected, attaining power) makes no sense, as

the same criticism could also be formulated towards any other kinds of political strategies, and all candidates to elections (who may seek to be elected for selfish and personal reasons).

A further refinement of our account of populist strategies is needed: Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) describe “three variants that focus on different aspects of political strategy: policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization”¹⁸. In order to be considered populist, all those aspects of strategy must follow the idea of “virtuous people” versus “corrupted elites”.

The policy choices and political organization of a populist strategy would be no different than those chosen by a populist ideology. There is no reason to believe someone who embraces the world-view of a “virtuous people” versus “corrupted elites” will not embrace policy choices and a political organization following this particular world-view. On the other hand, regarding populist strategies and policy choices: what happens once political candidates following populist strategies get elected? In order to remain consistent with their campaign, they will necessarily have to enforce their populist policies and follow their populist political organization, which follow the “us versus them” concept.

In short, the populist ideologist will choose such policies and organization because of their ideology, whereas the populist strategist will choose similar policies and organization because it will lead them to victory. But there is no reason to believe the same causes will lead to different effects. The same applies to forms of mobilization, with the caveat that a populist mobilization could conceptually be done following non-populist policy choices and political organization.

Therein lies the crucial difference. There is no reason to believe the results of populist policies and political organizations inspired and shaped by a populist strategy will be different than those inspired by a populist ideology.

In other words, it is absolutely possible that a populist strategy will end up having the same effects and results as a populist ideology, more specifically in the way policies and political organization are shaped by the populist movement (whether its populism is an ideology or a strategy). Thus, the conclusions related to populist ideologies can, by analogy, be applied to populist strategies (populist forms of mobilization excluded).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 10.

4.2. Liberal, radical and minimal populism:

Another feature of the research about populism is to determine whether it is a blessing or a threat to democracy. Kaltwasser (2011) pinpoints the concepts of liberal, radical and minimal populism¹⁹.

The liberal²⁰ approach sees populism as a threat to representative and liberal democracy, and a perversion of its fundamentals and ideals, which tends to arise in times of turmoil and democratic unrest. The democratic fundamental of equality (as defined in section 3.) can be put at risk by populism: when the “elite” targeted by the populism movement is part of the citizenry, it amounts to an attack towards the equality of the people, of citizens.

At certain times, socioeconomic factors will give rise to populist movements, claiming to solve the issues affecting “the people”, which is purportedly badly represented by the existing authorities. Examples include the many right- and left-wing political movements in 1930’s Europe, which, in most cases, originated in the aftermath of the financial world crisis of the late 1920’s. More recently, the effects of globalization can allow populist movements to flourish: for example, the closing of local industries and factories in favor of offshoring may absolutely create resentment among the weakened local population.

Although populism appears as a reaction, it is to be understood as being a pathology, itself unable to fix the issues raised in the first place and contrary to democratic values. For one, the ills and wrongdoings of right-wing movements in 1930’s and 40’s Europe call for no further explanation. More generally, and without resorting to these extreme examples, according to this liberal approach, populist movements and reactions are to be understood as offering simplistic answers, ones that will ultimately do more wrong than good, to complex issues.

The radical²¹ approach, on the other hand, sees populism as a feature of democracy, with democratic systems being more or less populist, to some extent. In this sense, the issue of defining what “the people” is exactly is no different than defining what the citizenry of any given political system is. This approach creates a positive link between democracy and populism, for one feature

¹⁹ KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira. “The ambivalence of populism: threat and corrective for democracy”. *Democratization*. 2012, 19(2): 184-208.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, page 186.

²¹ *Ibid.*, page 189.

of democracy is the delimitation of its citizenship: determining who is and who isn't a citizen, who can and who can't participate in the democratic system, and how citizenship is attributed, and to whom. Populism, in a similar fashion, according to the radical approach, serves to illustrate the failings of the democratic system to properly and adequately define its citizenry. With such an approach, the way the "people" has been defined and delimited in the past is no longer satisfactory, and populist movements are a way to address those shortcomings and provide a new definition of this "people".

According to this approach, populism is to be understood and perceived as a way to alert and draw attention on existing political and/or socioeconomic issues, which current and classic politics are unable or unwilling to address. In such a case, according to the radical approach, populism is the democratic means through which discontent is expressed. When discontent becomes widespread, populism appears as a way to aggregate the people's demands. In this case, the notions of "pure people" and "corrupt elite" become highly dependent on the context, and "do not exist prior to the populist experience"²². Several grassroots movements can be given as examples: the "Yellow Jackets" movement in France from 2018 onward, the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and its followers, the "Extinction Rebellion" movement, among others. All grassroots social movements with political demands and one shared trait: the belief that the established political order is unable (or unwilling) to address several issues otherwise denounced. All those movements thus also follow the populist idea of a "pure people" (yellow jackets, concerned citizens, etc.) rebelling against the nefarious power of an established and influential "elite" (political rulers, financial and economical authorities, etc.). According to the radical approach, however, those movements must be considered as the purest form of popular expression, outside the limits of the established democratic order which failed to properly take into account the demands of a concerned fraction of the people.

Those two first approaches provide normative links between democracy and populism. They share similarities, in the sense that they portray populism as a reaction to overarching and existing issues. They differ, however, in the normative perception of the populist phenomenon. The liberal approach depicts populism as a pathology that has nothing to offer besides its critique and the issues it raises and claims to address. In this view, populism appears when the democratic system itself fails to adequately address those issues and represent the people supportive of populism, but isn't a democratic expression of the will of the people. The radical approach, however, embraces populism

²² *Ibid.*, page 191.

as a pure democratic way of expression, and accepts that dissatisfied groups may want to act outside the bounds of the current political system.

The minimal²³ approach, finally, rejects such normative links between democratic and populism, and advocates for a thin conception of the latter. It doesn't make any statement about whether populism has effects on democracy and indeed provides a minimal conception of populism. Since the previous normative approaches (liberal and radical) are rejected, there only remains the possibility of an empirical analysis. Finally, this minimal approach is fundamentally ambivalent as far as the link between democracy and populism is concerned. More specifically, it rejects all normative claims and assumptions about democracy itself, and thus all links populism could have with it.

That said, this ambivalence, and the possibility to apply this flavor of populism to a variety of practical cases, also means this approach leads to general, vague and fundamental features of populism, which can be used in a more analytical and/or conceptual study. Obviously, such analytical work falls well outside the range of this essay. Furthermore, a general conception of populism, free of any normative assumption, will allow this essay's argument to be as conceptual and ideal as possible, only focusing on the very basics of democracy and populism, without rejecting either one because of normative assumptions (that may or may not be justified). Rather, as explained, relying on the interaction between those basic features of both concepts in order to reach a conclusion.

Choosing to abandon all normative assumptions about populism, and resting only on its fundamental features and how they interact with democracy, will allow to produce a conceptual and broad argument, which will cover the core concepts of democracy and populism. This essay is not concerned with empirical analysis and case studies, but a minimal approach of populism will help to reach such a general conclusion. Liberal and radical views of populism will thus be discarded.

4.3. Four minimal features of populism:

Federico Tarragoni (2019), although writing more from a sociological and linguistic standpoint, provides such minimal and necessary features of populism²⁴. First, populism is radical,

²³ *Ibid.*, page 192.

²⁴ TARRAGONI, Federico. "L'esprit démocratique du populisme". *Editions La Découverte*, Paris. Pages 26-27.

and harbors a revolutionary dimension. Second, populism rests necessarily upon heterogeneous social movements unhappy with the current state of affairs. Third, populism needs a charismatic leader, in order to keep heterogeneous claims in check and united. Finally, populism adheres to an opposition of “the people” and “the elite” with a plebeian mind-frame.

Tarragoni’s four minimal features are compatible with Kaltwasser’s minimal approach: they do not make any normative claim, nor do they imply any normative preconception, about the nature of populism and its link with democracy. They are quite broad and vague, in the sense that they can be applied in a variety of empirical cases, which tends to suggest they can be also used in a conceptual and/or analytical study.

Tarragoni’s minimal account, finally, is compatible with the ambivalence of Kaltwasser’s approach. None of those four features of populism are inherently good or bad, and none may lead exclusively to positive or negative outputs.

A further refinement would be to search and find those four minimal features in the three depictions of populism, as described in Section 4.1 (ideology, discourse, strategy).

4.3.1. Ideologies:

There are plenty of historical examples that show how populist ideologies harbor and pursue revolutionary intents (fascism, marxism...). Less extreme examples can still be given: most populist European parties have nowadays anti-European policies, aiming towards diminishing the range of the European Union and, in some cases, its dissolution. More generally, having a “us versus them” worldview and mindset will lead quite naturally to revolutionary intents and undertones: as soon as the democratic system fails to favor this ill-defined “us”, the only logical (according to the ideology) course of action would be to change the imperfect system that failed to properly take into account the will of “us”, the true “people”.

The second feature, heterogeneous movements, is less obvious: since populist ideologies put “the people” against “elites”, there must be some common denominator to unite those heterogeneous movements and people. It can be the designation of a common “enemy” of the people, for example. More generally, populist ideologies will try and assemble under their guise groups of people otherwise opposed. Marxism, for example, calls for the union of all workers,

putting aside all existing divisions like nationality, origin, gender, occupation... Similarly, right-wing populism (See, for example, the Swiss People's Party or the UKIP) can put forward a nationalist ideology that will diminish or outright erase regional peculiarities and identities.

A charismatic leader can be such a common denominator. This is the third feature, and the previous examples of fascism and marxism are rather self-explanatory. More generally, even though leaders and leading persons can be found in most political parties, populist ones are more prone to show its leaders as examples, or as personifications of the party's ideals (see again fascism and marxism).

The last point, a plebeian mind-frame, is a bit circular and redundant in the case of populist ideologies, which have at their center such plebeian ideologies (marxism is a prime example).

4.3.2. Discourses:

It is difficult, at first glance, to argue whether a rhetoric or discourse, even a populist one, could harbor any of Tarragoni's four features. A discourse is spoken or written, and it may have an influence akin to that of a populist ideology or strategy once listened to, read and followed. The speaker or writer of said discourse may or may not adhere to a populist ideology, or pursue a populist strategy. The populist character and features of a discourse must thus be found within the argument itself, its conclusions and its developments.

Going back to the previously used example of a left-leaning political figure arguing for more redistribution (section 4.1.2), heterogeneous movements and a charismatic leader can seemingly be taken out of the equation: this particular discourse about redistribution could be held by a perfectly regular, non-populist political figure speaking on behalf of a homogeneous group or party. The speech or written discourse itself, on the other hand, may call for a union of workers under the guise of a strong leadership in order to ensure redistribution policies be enforced, even though the speaker or writer does not adhere to such an ideology or follow a populist strategy.

A discourse can absolutely have radical implications and conclusions: spoken in a strongly capitalist system, the redistribution argument can perfectly be perceived as implying radical aims and a radical change. Finally, the plebeian mind-frame structures marxist thought entirely:

discourses and rhetoric can follow such a mind-frame, as illustrated by the previous example of redistribution.

That said, a discourse that fits this account begs the question of whether the speaker holds a populist ideology or follows a populist strategy: an isolated and lone populist argument doesn't imply that this person is actually populist. Repeatedly resorting to populist rhetoric, on the other hand, will essentially lead to the same effects as a populist ideology or strategy.

The issue of precisely determining the limit remains: how do we determine whether the speaker or writer of populist rhetoric is actually populist? That said, this is not the main focus of this essay: I will not try and devise a mean to determine the populist character of a speaker or writer on the basis of their populist discourses. What remains for now is the idea that populist discourses can be separated from populist ideologies and strategies, since they won't necessarily lead to the same effects and conclusions, and the delimitation just evoked is not that clear.

4.3.3. Strategies:

The radical trait of populist strategies is found mainly in their policy choices and organization: a policy imbued in the "us versus them" mind-frame will tend to favor "us" and go against "them". It could be, for example, a change in social spending policy, increasing social spending in favor of those included in this "us", and diminishing what "they" receive. The radical character appears when those policy changes become widespread and systematic, as they imply a radical change within the established democratic system. The organization, finally, can be created in such a way that it will be more responsive towards the "people" and less towards the "elite".

The previous example of aiming at the 70% of citizens who didn't vote is quite clear: such a strategy will necessarily rest upon heterogeneous groups voting for the same candidate. The same example also shows how populist strategies rest upon charismatic leaders to make sure those heterogeneous groups are held together. Finally, it's inherently following a plebeian mind-frame, since the strategy implies depicting the voting 30% of people as benefiting from the inaction of the remaining 70%.

4.4. Populism is inherent to representative democracy:

Nadia Urbinati (2013) makes this interesting claim: populism, as defined in previous sections, can only appear within representative democracies²⁵. By definition, it cannot appear within direct democracy. For example, populism cannot appear or exist within a Swiss *Landsgemeinde*, for citizens are not represented, but actually and personally participate in the decision-making process. Claiming that the people is badly represented would make no sense whatsoever. Speakers and political parties may resort to populist rhetoric and/or strategy in order to generate political support for individual topics, but by no means could a populist conception and worldview may durably exist and flourish within such a direct democracy setting. Populist rhetoric may be used, and may even lead to success and victory before the citizenry.

In such a direct democratic setting, however, the rule of majority applies: if a majority follows the populist argument against the elite, then the elite cannot be considered to be an elite. Such a populist argument could be as follows: “wealthy landowners should be taxed more heavily in order to benefit tenants and people who own nothing”. This is clearly populist (as defined previously), and it may convince a popular majority to effectively vote heavier taxation of wealthy landowners. In this case, the so-called “elite” isn’t able to exert its influence and reach a democratic majority. On the other hand, if the same populist rhetoric fails to foster support for its cause, and fails before the citizenry, it can hardly claim to represent the people, since the same “people” just rejected it.

In other words, potential elites within a direct democratic setting are held in check by the very fact that a grassroots movement may very easily gather support and topple the influence or power of said elite. One issue remains, though: sophism, demagoguery, lies and prejudice may still lead to objectively wrong, yet democratically justified decisions, even within direct democracy. This essay will not address this issue: it falls outside the realm of populism, since non-populist movements and leaders may resort to sophism and lies in order to induce the people to act a certain way. The same issue could actually be found in most political systems and societies: it becomes thus a problem in its own right, and this essay does not pretend to address it.

This account only covers the citizenry, and assumes all inhabitants and residents are actually citizens. In the case of non-citizen residents, populist rhetoric may target such non-residents, who

²⁵ URBINATI, Nadia. *Op. Cit.*, page 145.

would have no political means through which defend themselves. One may still try, and be able to foster resentment towards groups of people, ethnic or religious minorities, the wealthy, the poor... whether they are among the citizenry or not. For example, in 2021, the Swiss People's Party shifted its focus towards left-wing, urban "parasites" living off the rest of the country. Before that, the party was used to blaming foreign immigration and European politics for several issues purportedly plaguing the country and its inhabitants. This falls well within our definition of populism, and shows how populism may otherwise exist within a direct democracy: either by targeting a subsection of the citizenry, or targeting non-citizens.

All this does not contradict Urbinati's statement, though. As explained previously though, if all citizens can directly vote on specific issues and topics, populist ideology and/or strategy cannot conceptually flourish. Populist discourses may find their target, but this issue is more related, as explained, to issues regarding sophism and lies within political discourses, which are different issues entirely. That said, whenever a fraction of the population cannot participate in the democratic system, this particular group of people could claim they have no way to defend themselves politically, since they have no way to show or represent their interests. In such a situation, populism could exist, since the fundamental idea of "us" versus "them" is grounded in reality: us, the non-citizens, versus them, citizens. And contrary to issues of demagoguery and prejudice within direct democracy, this absence of political power for non-citizens can legitimately be linked to issues of representation within representative democracy.

This is schematically similar to what can be observed in representative democracies, with issues regarding representation. This leads to envision the idea that populism flourishes whenever representation issues are prevalent. This will be addressed in the following section.

4.5 Populism and representation:

Since populism seems to be primarily a phenomenon that arises from representation issues within representative democracy, a discussion of populism's interactions with the concept of representation is needed. Following section 3.3 of this essay, I'll describe how populism can be found in all four of Pitkin's views of representation.

A populist issue with formalistic representation could be to denounce the democratic institution as not allowing part of the people to properly elect their representatives and hold them

accountable. For example, a democratic system could only allow candidates who have received official support from other elected representatives (as is the case in France's presidential elections). This point could be denounced by populist movements as preventing potential candidates from participating in the election. The accountability may be denounced as being ineffective, for example when a democratic system allows a representative to be elected several times in a row, preventing new potential representatives to be elected. Those examples can be formulated following a populist logic (the "pure people" can only be represented by certain representatives, but the system don't allow them to be elected, leaving room to representatives of the "elite").

As for symbolic representation, Tarragoni's third feature of populism (a charismatic leader) leads to the following issue: the current political leader is depicted as no longer being a symbol of the "people", but only of the "elite", while the populist leader will be a better symbol for the "people". For example, a president entangled in political or economical scandals could be depicted by a populist challenger as having lost the respect and faith of the people, with said populist challenger standing as a model of political virtue.

Populist issues with descriptive representation are quite easy to imagine: the representative is different from the people, and thus cannot represent it properly. The populist leader, on the other hand, can be shown and depicted as closer to the people, with a better understanding of its woes and worries. Fictional but plausible examples could include any and all cases of representatives (either executive or legislative) holding college degrees: populist leaders may perfectly depict those representatives as being disconnected from the reality and lives of the "people" who didn't have the opportunity to attend college.

Substantive representation, finally: the populist leader may point to particular policies or political acts and depict them as only benefiting the "elite", while the "people" receives no such favors. The established political leader may then be depicted as only listening to the needs of the "elite", while remaining deaf to the needs of the "people". The populist leader or movement is then presented as listening to the "people" and willing to act in their favor.

All those examples help to understand that populism primarily reacts to issues of representation (in all four meanings of the concept) of the people. There could be, of course, other issues that populist leaders and movements may choose to address. That said, as explained in section 4.4, populism is a phenomenon that can conceptually only appear within representative

democracy. Populist-like movements and rhetoric may appear within other settings, but they are not the main focus of this essay. Populism may not, conceptually, appear and flourish within an ideal democratic setting. Introducing representation in this democratic system, on the other hand, allows populism to conceptually exist and deploy its effects.

4.6 A minimal account of populism:

Both Tarragoni and Urbinati insist on the vagueness of “populism”, its core concept, definition and usage are not clearly identified and agreed upon. Given this fact, I choose to adopt a minimal conception of populism which only retains its fundamental characteristics, those being adequately evoked by Tarragoni (its radical/revolutionary claims, its reliance on new, heterogeneous social movements, a charismatic leader to unite those varied social movements, and a plebeian-inspired “people versus elite” mindset and discourse), Gidron and Bonikowski (populism can be either an ideology, a discourse or a strategy) and Kaltwasser (populism is ambivalent, neither inherently good nor bad for democracy, and holds with the latter no positive or negative link).

This ambivalence makes populism rather tricky to study from a theoretical or conceptual standpoint. To study populism in such a way for a political theorist implies to retain the thinnest of definitions, one that doesn’t rely on practical cases and comparative studies. Abandoning all normative assumptions is also needed. All instances of “populism” may thus be found in any cases covered by any combination of the previously mentioned features. They may lead to normative conclusions about specific cases of “populism”, but all normative assumptions must be discarded. Finally, populism is deeply rooted in issues regarding the concept of representation, and thus in representative democracy.

Even though one of the characteristics of populism is the representation of the people (usually through a leader), it still works within the democratic system, which populism tends to claim is flawed. Rather, if representation wasn’t an issue, and if the people was adequately represented, there would be no need for populism, and it wouldn’t be met with success. Thus, we are lead to the following question: is this flawed representation simply a bad execution of the democratic ideal? Or is democracy itself inherently flawed?

A better understanding of those issues regarding representation is needed. Only after reaching a general account (and not only a populist one) of those issues can those populist objections be addressed.

5. Democratic elitism and its issues:

Since democracy is first and foremost defined by the equality of its participants, the issue of determining a way to transform the will of the citizens into actual political outputs is of utmost importance. It has been explained that delimiting the scope and range of the citizenry is another democratic fundamental. Following the ideal of equality, the citizenry should be as broad and encompassing as possible. On the contrary, having a narrow definition of citizenship means more and more people are excluded from partaking in the democratic process, and thus less equal than those part of the citizenry.

Dahl (1989), by discussing the concept of majority rule and its alternatives, provides mainly empirical and practical objections to the justification of majority rule²⁶. In so doing, however, the notion that the citizenry should be as broad as possible remains unharmed. Indeed, an oligarchy (power to a select few) could hardly be said to respect the ideal of equality and thus to be considered democratic. Debating whether majority rule (or any other kind of democratic rule) is best for any given democratic system cannot be conclusively demonstrated (this demonstration being rather part of the democratic process which defines the citizenry)²⁷. That said, the ideal of equality remains: in order to be considered democratic, this equality should be applied to a greater number of individuals (as opposed to other, non-democratic systems, in which the political power is unequally shared among the population).

Once this democratic process (whether it is majority rule or another one) has been empirically decided, and the citizenry defined, any and all phenomena tending to the concentration of political power within a minority of the citizens should be avoided. The terms of “democratic elitism” reference those particular phenomena. One example is given by Dahl when he evokes the alternative of supermajorities. In such cases, the system may allow minorities to actually prevent majority rule: the minority becomes then privileged²⁸.

Within representative democracy, those phenomena take the form of representation issues. Retaining the substantive view of representation, representatives should ideally act as the people (or

26 DAHL, Robert Alan. “Democracy and its critics”. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. 1989. Pages 144-149.

27 *Ibid.*, page 156.

28 *Ibid.*, page 153.

their electors, at least) would want them to. Fundamental issues arise when representatives do not act in such a way. The political decisions and will of citizens aren't directly applied, but are executed and voted by their representatives. Whenever a representative does not act according to the will of their electors, they become *de facto* not represented, and are thus unable to participate in the collective process of decision making. Unresponsive representatives thus represent a fundamental threat to representative democracy: they create inequality within a system whose core concept is equality.

5.1 An account of elitism:

Unresponsive representatives are a threat to the ideal of equal representation. In presence of such unresponsive representatives, those who accurately represent their electors become mechanically more represented, on the "more equal" side of the issue. In this case, the decisions of responsive representatives may very well go against the needs and wishes of unrepresented citizens, the latter having no responsive representatives to speak in their name. Such a situation becomes an instance of democratic elitism. Whenever a fraction of the citizenry is under-represented (or over-represented), elitism appears. This elitism is fundamentally anti-democratic (violates the principle of equality) and must be avoided in order to safeguard the idea of democracy.

Such situations of inequality represent a fertile ground for populist movements and leaders. Populism can then appear as a way for unrepresented people to express themselves and hopefully reach a situation of equality. Its promises of better responsiveness do seem to provide the opportunity to strengthen the equal character of democratic systems. The next section, however, will show that populism, in providing answers to democratic issues, itself goes against the ideals of democracy.

6. How populism seems unfit to solve the issue of elitism:

A first intuition is as follows: no matter what form of populism is evoked (liberal, radical, minimal, or any of Kaltwasser's three approaches), a part (or the entirety) of the "elite" may very well be part of the citizenry which, according to democratic fundamentals, has the right to partake in elections and participate in the political life of the system. Examples can be found in several countries and territories across the world. Such examples include populist movements targeting ethnic or religious minorities.

One example would be that of the Geneva-based Mouvement Citoyens Genevois (MCG), which developed and keeps developing a populist rhetoric in which France-based commuters are considered the "corrupt elite", as defined in section 4: most of those commuters are of French origin and citizenship, but more and more of them are actually Swiss people from Geneva living across the border. In such an example, the populist program defended by the MCG targets France-based Swiss and Geneva citizens, who still retain part of their citizens' rights even when living abroad. In this sense, it could be said the populist rhetoric of the MCG leads to a contradiction (or, at the very least, an inconsistency) between its anti-commuters program and its populist character (some of those commuters are part of the citizenry of Geneva).

6.1 Populism raises legitimate concerns:

More generally, parties developing populist rhetoric centered around the rejection of any religious or ethnic group may fall in this contradiction, where members of the "elite" are actually also members of the citizenry. An objection could be raised: even though the "elite" is part of the citizenry, it represents a privileged subset, and thus goes against the democratic ideals developed previously. Indeed, representatives may be more responsive towards a certain subset of the citizenry. In such a case, populism seemingly represents a way to address this inequality of representation. Besides, the process of determining the citizenry is inherently democratic: populist movements may thus appear as part of the democratic process (as assumed by the radical view of populism). It may be that any populist movement denouncing this inequality is right, and that the democratic process that ended up in this situation is flawed and needs to be changed.

The equality of representative democracy residing not only in the participation in elections, but also in the responsiveness of representatives, any situation in which substantive representation becomes unequal should be addressed at once. In this fashion, populist claims of an unequal “people” being poorly represented may absolutely be true and legitimate. The fact that populism is inherently built on an exclusionary basis (us versus them), however, leads to doubts as to whether it will be able to fix those representation issues.

6.2 Populism leads to more populism:

The logic of populism leads to an endless spiral: the “elite” craves better representation just as much as the “people”. Within a representative democracy setting, the populist leader or movement will seek to be elected in order to represent those who elected them. Such a representative will represent its electors, but will fail at representing anybody else. More specifically, they will explicitly and necessarily refuse to represent those they consider as the “elite”, since their ideology and/or strategy is inherently built on a strict distinction between the “pure people” and the “corrupted elite”. Given such a premise, there is no reason to believe the populist movement or leader will stop once the inequality they denounce has been fixed. The fundamental dichotomy of “us” versus “them” commands populism to keep going: the stronger the dichotomy, the more populist movements and leaders will be inclined to pursue exclusionary politics towards the “elite”. Remembering Mudde’s (2004) definition of populism, “an ideology 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”, it can be deduced that the “pure people” only is seen as being the legitimate source of political power. Any and all movements and leaders adhering to this definition are considered populist and, most importantly, will only recognize the input of “the pure people” as legitimate.

But, as it’s been established, this “elite” also craves representation (just like the “people”, just like anybody within representative democracy). Let’s imagine the populist effort succeeds in “fixing” the representation issues: it won’t stop there and will tend to actively “fight” those considered as being part of the “elite”. It may very well end up with the “elite” being badly, or even not represented. In this case, accepting the idea and principles of populism would possibly lead to the appearance of opposing populist movements, themselves denouncing and claiming to address representation issues affecting their own “people” and profiting some other “elite”, all those

movements being in turn prone to attacking the rights of those they don't consider as being part of the "pure people".

6.2.1 Being fair to populism:

One may argue this argument is nothing but a strawman, an extreme and caricatural depiction of otherwise moderate instances of populism. My answer is as follows. Conceptually, let's not forget that populism is defined as harboring radical and revolutionary intents. Arguing this revolutionary intent actually aims to reform the idea of democracy is besides the point, and would only reinforce the strawman retort. Even when being charitable and fair towards populism and supposing it won't attack the democratic ideal, the revolutionary character remains: even if populism doesn't aim towards the destruction of the democratic ideal, its radical characteristic still implies there is no conceptual or ideological brake that could stop populist movements or leaders from turning radical towards democracy itself. No ideological feature that would potentially sway a populist hand from corrupting, even partially, some democratic rule in order to better serve its ideology or strategy. In other words, if we understand the "radical" characteristic as meaning "unbound by the democratic rules", or "unwilling to absolutely play by the democratic rules", the risk conceptually exists. On the other hand, non-radical movements will not be conceptually tempted to alter the democratic order. Of course, this radical trait isn't exclusive to populism, and may be found in non-populist movements.

I will leave this answer with a rhetorical question: if "radical" or "revolutionary" doesn't mean "altering the democratic order", then what does it mean? How could a movement possibly be considered "radical" or "revolutionary" if it completely and utterly accepts and respects the rules of the system?

6.3 A populist inconsistency:

Here emerges an apparent inconsistency: how can populism claim to better represent the "true people" when the criticized "elite" is actually part of said people? It has been shown that in so doing, populism will lead to more populism, and its radical character implies there is no conceptual brake that would stop it from eventually attacking democracy in order to respect its "us versus them" mind-frame. Even using a minimal approach to populism, its characteristics (most notably the radical intent and a strong "us versus them" dichotomy) imply there is no incentive to

necessarily play by the democratic “rules” and principles. This conclusion applies to populist ideology and strategy (because populist strategies will essentially have the same effects as populist ideologies, see section 4.3). This does not apply to populist rhetoric and discourses, however. In other words, There is no reason so believe the effects of the populist answer to representation issues won’t lead to more populism, more resentment, more polarization and, eventually, the corruption and perversion of democratic order.

It doesn’t mean, however, that representation issues denounced by populists are unfounded. As shown previously, representative democracy can be (and often is) plagued with issues regarding the equal feature of representation. In such cases, populism may appear as a reaction. It has been shown that populism, because of its characteristics, is unfit to address those issues while at the same time respecting the democratic order. The representation issues remain, though. The next step in this argument is now to determine whether those issues are structural or empirical, that is, are those issues caused by a badly constructed democratic system? Or is any democratic system doomed to face those issues anyway?

7. Is this democratic flaw fixable?

If elitism is a structural issue, there is a conceptual possibility to reach a representative system that won't generate inequality, and thus won't allow populism to flourish. In this case, particular instances of inequalities and subsequent populist phenomena can conceptually be addressed without resorting to populism, by different means. If the issue is about unresponsive representatives, replacing them may lead to improvements. If entire subsets of the population are not represented, the democratic system may change the definition and boundaries of the citizenry in order to ensure everybody is able to be properly represented and partake in elections. Measures could be taken to accommodate minorities and ensure they aren't neglected. All in all, in this case, through trial and error, it is conceptually possible to reach a situation of equality, where representation is fair and equal, with populism being an ultimately non-existent phenomenon.

If elitism is a conceptual issue, on the other hand, nothing short of a radical change will be able to solve it. Such a situation of perfect representation would be conceptually impossible, and populism would eventually appear, with good reason. Populism, through its radical character, may represent such a radical change. It has been shown, however, that populism would not lead to the desired conclusion of fixing the aforementioned flaw, and would even lead to its worsening.

The previous account of populism tends to lead to the latter. The very fact that populism is allowed to appear at all tends to show that people, movements and leaders will find the representation issue so unsolvable that they're willing to resort to an extreme, revolutionary ideology or strategy in order to make the situation better. There may be other, non-populist, answers or reactions to the representation issue, of course. Populism, though, because of its extreme character, shows how deeply rooted this representation issue is.

The former would automatically lead to the conclusion that populism cannot change the structural issue. The latter remains, and so does the initial interrogation: can populism have a revolutionary intent? It has been shown that yes, radical intent is actually a trait of populism. In this case, to what may it lead? Another flavor of democracy? A different system altogether? Would this new system actually avoid the democratic structural flaw?

8. Conclusion: blame not populism, but rather the system that allowed it to flourish.

Another question arises. If the representation flaw isn't fixable, what should democrats strive for? The democratic ideal, flawed as it is? This would be justifiable, if one assumes democracy is the system that allows best to reach whatever good is valued (see section 3.1). Or perhaps recognize representative democracy is ultimately flawed and, in order to avoid populism, one should propose another system. In the end, it all depends on what one values above all: the idea of democracy? Or whatever good and evil democracy aims to reach and avoid?

Although populist discourses are less of an issue, populist ideologies and strategies do seem to lead to abandonment of the flawed democratic ideal, with their answers to representation issues actually worsening the democratic issues. Far from putting democracy on a pedestal, those findings show those representation issues are so strong, populist movements may appear and try and undo this democratic order.

This essay does not pretend to give a definitive answer to the issues representative democracy faces and to those last questions. Mudde (2004) calls "*Zeitgeist*" this particular view of populism: something rooted in the very basics of contemporary representative democracy and reacting to its flaws²⁹. This leads to important conclusions to democrats and defenders of the democratic ideal: representative democracy is flawed, and reactions towards populism should never neglect this, lest they reinforce the popular discontent that lead to populism in the first place. As Urbinati (2019) writes, an awareness of what democracy really is, is needed: "Making democracy into an ideology inhibits a critical understanding of its forms and achievements (...) It narrows democracy to an abstract paradigm of normativity that cannot explain ideological constructions, partisan divisions, and the rhetorical work of justification, which is neither impartial nor disembodied"³⁰. Remembering that democracy aims towards reaching something good and avoiding something evil, the question remains: what should democracy strive for?

Supporters of democracy would be wise to remember the flaws their ideal system may run into. Any and all claims of non-responsive representatives and unrepresented citizens should not be

29 MUDDE, Cas. *Op. Cit.*, pages 562-563.

30 URBINATI, Nadia. "Political Theory of Populism". *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2019. Page 124.

discarded, but rather addressed with the knowledge that the issue may be conceptual. One should not fear thinking beyond democracy in order to safeguard whatever it is this system strives for, lest the answer be provided by those whose preoccupations are fundamentally incompatible with those democratic ideals.

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