
NOTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN

POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY**POPULISMO Y DEMOCRACIA**

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ABSTRACT

Discussions on the relation between populism and democracy have become growingly frequent in the literature. Some authors consider that there is a virtuous relation between both phenomena, while others define the relation between populism and democracy as ambiguous, and a third stream views populism as a threat for democracy. In this article I review three books that are paradigmatic examples of the mentioned currents, and I support the following position: populism is compatible with democracy, and it reinforces its participatory dimension, but it presents certain tensions with political pluralism. In addition, the analysis performed in the present article suggests that the relation between populism and democracy takes specific forms in each case, and systematic comparative research on populist and non-populist actors is needed to better identify the distinctive features of populism.

RESUMEN

Los debates sobre la relación entre populismo y democracia son cada vez más frecuentes en la literatura. Ciertos autores consideran que existe una relación virtuosa entre ambos fenómenos, mientras otros definen la relación entre populismo y democracia como ambigua, y una tercera corriente ve el populismo como una amenaza para la democracia. En este artículo analizo tres libros que son ejemplos paradigmáticos de las mencionadas corrientes y sostengo la siguiente postura: el populismo es compatible con la democracia y refuerza su dimensión participativa, pero el populismo presenta ciertas tensiones con el pluralismo político. Además, el análisis realizado en el presente artículo sugiere que la relación entre populismo y democracia adopta formas específicas en cada caso, y se necesita investigación comparada sistemática sobre actores populistas y no populistas para identificar mejor las características distintivas del populismo.

KEYWORDS

Democracy; Pluralism; Political Participation; Populism; Rights.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Democracia; Derechos; Participación Política; Pluralismo; Populismo.

The discussion on the relation between populism and democracy has become one of the most vivid contemporary debates on populism, due to the recent rise of parties and political leaders broadly considered as populist in Europe and the United States. The scholarly interest in the relation between populism and democracy is also explained by the fact that both have expanded globally in parallel during the last 150 years. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 4) have pointed out: “As an ideology that exalts the general will of the people, populism profits from the growing global hegemony of the democratic ideal as well as from both the possibilities of electoral democracy and the frustrations with liberal democracy”.

The most frequent positions on the relation between populism and democracy can be synthesized into three streams: authors who consider that there is a virtuous relation between populism and democracy, those who defend that these phenomena have an ambiguous relation, and scholars who see populism as a threat to democracy. The present article reviews the three positions, and argues that populism is compatible with democracy, and it reinforces its participatory dimension, but populism presents certain tensions with political pluralism. The discussion is addressed through three books that are paradigmatic of the three streams described above: Chantal Mouffe’s *The Democratic Paradox* (2003); Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser’s *Populism, a Very Short Introduction* (2017); and Jan-Werner Müller’s *What is Populism?* (2017).

The Democratic Paradox is one of the key works of Chantal Mouffe’s theory of agonistic democracy, which takes part of the post Marxist reflections developed by Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Ever since, the positions of both authors have evolved towards the defense of progressive populism, as explained in Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* (2005) and Mouffe’s *On the Political* (2005) and *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (2013). In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe criticizes the aversion of Western liberal democracies to conflict and advocates instead “agonist pluralism”, a conception of democracy in which conflict plays a core role in the context of a pluralist polity. This key book lays the foundations for Mouffe’s advocacy of populism in later works and her support for left-wing populist parties such as Podemos and France Insoumise.

In *Populism, a Very Short Introduction* (2017), Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, respectively associate professors at the University of Notre Dame (USA) and the Diego Portales University (Chili), condensate their years of work on populism. Mudde is the author of *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (2007) and Rovira Kaltwasser co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017), among other works. *Populism, a Very Short Introduction* addresses topics such as the definition of populism, the variety of empirical manifestations of populism around the world,

the mobilization strategies of populist actors, populist leadership, and the relation between populism and democracy. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser perform a balanced analysis of the relation between populism and democracy, arguing that populism can foster political participation, although it threatens liberal institutions, pluralism and the rule of law.

The last volume included in this review is *What is Populism?*, written by the German political scientist and Princeton professor Jan-Werner Müller, who is also the author of *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (2011). Müller’s *What is Populism?* is scheduled to be translated into twenty languages, which suggests that it has had a major impact on academia. Müller’s book is a paramount example of the academic stream that considers populism as a threat to democracy, because it allegedly rejects pluralism and several constitutive elements of liberal democracies — such as an independent judicial system and institutions specialized in protecting human rights.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, I propose a definition of ‘democracy’ and ‘populism’. Secondly, I address the relation between populism and the *liberal dimension* of liberal democracy (political pluralism, checks and balances, institutions that protect fundamental rights, and the rule of law). Lastly, I look at the relation between populism and the *democratic dimension* of liberal democracy (popular sovereignty and majority rule).

1. DEFINING DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM

The first difficulty of the debate on the relation between democracy and populism is the contested character of both terms. Thus, it is necessary to propose minimal definitions of populism and democracy that allow us to address the different positions of the authors to be reviewed here.

Regarding democracy, it is key to distinguish between ‘democracy’ and ‘liberal democracy’. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, “democracy without adjectives” can be defined as “the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule”, while the term ‘liberal democracy’ also implies the existence of institutions to protect fundamental rights, defending individuals against an eventual “tyranny of the majority” (pp. 80-81), and respect of political pluralism. The concept of ‘liberal democracy’ also includes the rule of law, which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the “authority and influence of law in society, especially when viewed as a constraint on individual and institutional behavior”. In a similar vein, Mouffe defines contemporary Western democracies as the result of the articulation between two political traditions: “the liberal tradition, constituted by the rule of law, the defense of human rights and the respect or individual freedom; [and] the democratic tradition,

whose main ideas are equality, identity between governors and the governed, and popular sovereignty” (p. 20). In the present article I will focus on liberal democracy, which is defined as a political regime that combines popular sovereignty and majority rule, political pluralism, check and balances, institutions to protect fundamental rights, and the rule of law.

The conceptual disputes on populism are even more intense. Different authors have defined populism as a strategy (De la Torre and Peruzzotti 2008; Weyland 2001), an ideology (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), or an intervention (Panizza 2014). However, most of the definitions have a minimum element in common that allows insightful debates on populism: the establishing of a discursive division between the people (depicted as ‘pure’) and the ‘corrupt’ elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Insofar as populism often appears in combination with other ideological traditions (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 150) (there are both left-wing and right-wing populists), each populist actor proposes a different definition of the people and the elite.

2. POPULISM AND THE LIBERAL DIMENSION OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Liberal democracy combines majority rule and popular sovereignty with some limits to popular will, namely institutions to protect human rights and the rule of law, which also guarantee respect for political pluralism. In this section, I look at how populism relates to the *liberal dimension* of liberal democracy.

Populism and Liberal Institutions

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser sustain that populists reject liberal institutions because they “constrain ‘the will of the (pure) people’” (p. 81). In a similar vein, Müller states that “populism can never be combined with liberalism, if one means by the latter something like a respect for pluralism and an understanding of democracy as necessarily involving checks and balances (and, in general, constraints on the popular will)” (p. 9). By contrast, Mouffe does not identify any incompatibility between populism and the mentioned liberal institutions.

The first focus of Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller is the allegedly undemocratic inner organization of populist parties. Müller considers that “Populist parties are almost always internally monolithic, with the rank-and-file clearly subordinated to a single leader” (p. 37). His analysis is based in examples such as Netherlands’ Geert Wilders’ PVV, which is officially composed of two members: Wilders himself and a foundation whose only member is him. According to Müller, populists keep a hostile stance towards parties because “Parties formed govern-

ments and legitimate oppositions; their very existence as legitimate ‘parts’ (as opposed to ‘the whole’) had an antipopulist meaning” (p. 79). For their part, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser consider that the political organizations created by populist leaders are not genuine political parties but “personalistic electoral vehicles”, because “in many cases the organization is largely a facade, as there are few members, committees, or internal structures” (p. 44). Populist political organizations such as Wilders’ PVV wholly match this definition, but a previous systematic comparative analysis of the inner organization of populist parties is needed before proposing a general diagnosis. One of the few existing works on this issue performs a comparative analysis of European left-wing populist parties Podemos and France Insoumise, reaching the conclusion that no specific form of inner organization can be attributed to populism (Castaño 2018).

Secondly, Müller analyses in detail the supposedly hostile attitude of populists in power towards state bureaucracies and the judiciary, which are responsible for guaranteeing the neutrality of the administration, the rule of law and protecting fundamental rights. In Müller’s words “populist governance exhibits three features: attempts to hijack the state apparatus, corruption and ‘mass clientelism’ [...], and efforts systematically to suppress civil society” (p. 4). Some of the examples provided are the attacks on the independence of the judiciary by Polish Law and Justice Party and Hungarian Fidesz (president Viktor Orbán’s party), and the legal reforms promoted by Fidesz to allow the ruling party to place its militants in bureaucratic positions that should be nonpartisan. Besides, Müller denounces that media authorities have been “captured” by Orbán’s far-right populist government (p. 45), while Repoll (2010, pp. 63–64) accused Argentina’s former populist president Cristina Fernández of attacking the press. Mouffe does not explicitly address this issue in *The Democratic Paradox*, but she has expressed her support to populist parties in countries such as Venezuela and Argentina (Mouffe 2015).

It is undeniable that many populist leaders have shown hostile attitudes regarding liberal institutions, but there is not enough empirical ground to sustain that populists restrain human rights or jeopardize the rule of law more often than non-populist politicians. The 2017/18 Annual Report of the NGO Amnesty International (2018), which provides a comprehensive account of the situation of human rights around the world, does not allow for the drawing of a net distinction between populist and non-populist governments regarding violations of fundamental rights. The report denounces the limitations of protest-related rights in countries led by president that can be qualified as populists, such as Venezuela, as well as the assault of fundamental freedoms justified by so-called the ‘war on terror’ in countries governed by non-populist lead-

ers: “Europe has continued to slip towards a near-permanent state of securitization. France, for example, ended its state of emergency in November, but only after adopting a new anti-terror law, which embedded in ordinary law many of the provisions of the emergency regime” (Amnesty International 2018, pp. 12-14). In a similar vein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed concern that (both populist and non-populist) European governments have “created barriers to migrants’ full enjoyment of their human rights” (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2017, p. 7). Comparative empirical analysis of the behaviours of populist and non-populist actors regarding liberal institutions and human rights are needed before affirming that populists generally promote “illiberal democracy”, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser sustain (p. 82).

Populist Constitutionalism

The promotion of new constitutions or deep constitutional reforms is considered by Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller as a key aspect of populist governance. According to Müller, populists in power seek constitutional change with the aim of retaining power (p. 63). He devotes considerable attention to the constitutional processes promoted by left-wing Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia. According to Müller, “the new constitutions [...] seriously constrained the capacity of the opposition to compete in a free and fair manner against the populist governments” (p. 32). Regarding European far-right populists, Müller denounces that governing parties with large majorities can “enact a new constitution justified as an effort to appropriate the state for the “real Hungarians” or “real Poles” (p. 57). Müller mixes here the xenophobic or racist character of some populist leaders with the peculiarities of populism itself. By contrast, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue that other populists have not used constitutions to promote exclusionary ethnic-based conceptions of the people — on the contrary, the constitutions promoted by left-wing populist leaders in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia have reinforced the protection of indigenous rights. The constitutionalism practiced by European far-right populists and Latin American left-wing ones share one major feature, according to Müller: “They used constitutions to set up conditions for the perpetuation of populist powers” (p. 66).

Two major objections can be levelled against Müller’s analysis. First of all, he sees with a critical eye the very fact of a party promoting constitutional reforms or the convocation of a constituent assembly. However, the periodic reform of constitutions or the elaboration of new ones are normal features of democratic constitutionalism, as pointed out by authors such as Pisarello (2014), who has analysed how constitutional ruptures are often periods of democratic and social progress. Secondly, Müller’s criticism of the restriction of the

opposition’s rights by the constitutions promoted by Chávez, Correa and Morales is at the very least exaggerated. These constitutions contain the same kind of liberal check and balances than European constitutions (namely an independent judiciary and constitutional courts). In addition, they include mechanisms that are absent from most European constitutions, such as the possibility of revoke elected officials, term limits for representatives, and strong electoral courts. Nevertheless, it is true that at least some of the mentioned constitutions reinforced the power of the executive, as De la Torre (2016) has explained. For instance, the Ecuadorian constitution gives the president the power to veto any law for a period of a year. Even though this kind of provision exists in other constitutions (such as the United States one), the length of the period is longer in the case of Ecuador.

In conclusion, some European far-right populists have promoted illiberal constitutional reforms (for instance, in 2013 Fidesz modified the Hungarian constitution to allow the president’s intervention in the judiciary) and Latin American left-wing populists have reinforced the power of the executive. However, the latter constitutions contain power-limiting mechanisms that are absent from most European constitutions, such as the possibility of revoking elected officials, term limits for representatives and strong electoral courts. Therefore, it is far-fetched to affirm that populist constitutions are generally disrespectful of liberal mechanisms, as suggested by Müller.

Is Populism Anti-Pluralist?

Respect towards political pluralism is widely conceived as one of the basic features of liberal democracy. Thus, discussions on the compatibility between populism and political pluralism are key to understanding the broader relation between populism and liberal democracy. Mouffe, on the one hand, and Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller, on the other, hold quite different positions on this issue.

The importance of political pluralism is explicitly acknowledged by Mouffe, who considers that “pluralism must be taken seriously”, which should lead us to “abandon the dream of a rational consensus” (p. 111) allegedly proposed by authors such as Jürgen Habermas (1995). Instead, Mouffe advocates “agonistic pluralism”, a conception of politics in which it is possible to build an ‘us-them’ relation where “the ‘them’ is not perceived as an enemy that must be destroyed but as an ‘adversary’, someone whose ideas we tackle but whose right to defend those ideas we don’t question” (p. 114). This proposal leads Mouffe to explicitly defend an ‘agonistic’ form of left-wing populism in later works (e.g. Errejón and Mouffe 2015). Mouffe’s ‘agonistic pluralism’ is a particular kind of ‘soft’ rivalry between the people and the elite that intends to make populism compatible with pluralism — and therefore, with liberal democracy.

By contrast, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser consider that all populist actors oppose pluralism, as “populism holds that nothing should constrain “the will of the (pure) people” (p. 81). In other words, “populism is essentially democratic, but at odds with liberal democracy” (p. 81). Müller holds a similar stance: he considers that populism is always a threat to political pluralism, because populist actors “claim that a part of the people is the people — and that only the populist authentically identifies and represents this real or true people” (pp. 22-23). As a consequence, populists “refuse to recognize any opposition as legitimate” when they are in power (p. 3). The three authors also coincide in highlighting that populism “moralizes” political conflicts, presenting their opponents (the elite) as corrupt, and this moralization of politics makes it very difficult to reach agreements (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 83).

The idea that populism is incompatible with pluralism due to the moralization of politics performed by populist actors has sound empirical support. When populist parties have negotiated coalitions with non-populist formations that they had previously depicted as part of the elite, either populists have softened their tone on them (as Podemos did regarding the Spanish Socialist Party after the 2015 regional and local elections), or reaching agreement has proved impossible — in Italy, the virulent rhetoric of the populist Five Star Movement on the Democratic Party (PD) contributed to hampering the negotiations to form a joint government after the 2018 legislative election, and the Five Star Movement ended up finding an arrangement with far-right Northern League. In conclusion, the concern about the anti-pluralist trend of populism raised by Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller seems confirmed by practice, even though Mouffe’s concept of ‘agonism’ challenges exaggerated assertions that present populism as an almost totalitarian force seeking to eliminate any opponents, as implied in Müller’s idea that populists “refuse to recognize any opposition as legitimate” (Müller 2017, p. 3).

3. POPULISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC DIMENSION OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Discussions on the compatibility of populism with liberal democracy tend to focus on the liberal dimensions of contemporary democracies, but it is also necessary to look at the relation between populism and popular sovereignty, which is the very foundation of democracy. Several authors have underlined the capacity of populists to politicize unattended social concerns, foster the political participation of previously marginalized groups, and increase the use of forms of direct democracy. This reflection is particularly important if we take into account the crisis of legitimacy in Western democracies, a concern shared by all the authors included in this review.

Liberal Democracy in Crisis

Mouffe considers that Western democracies suffer a “democratic deficit” expressed at least through two trends: “A growing number of people feel that traditional parties no longer take their interests into account, and far-right parties are experiencing major progress in many European countries” (p. 95). The crisis of Western democracies has become more serious in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, when the bureaucracy of the European Union took control of the bulk of the economic policies of the member states. Müller also takes a critic stance on the increasing power of technocracy in the European Union (pp. 96-97) and considers that Mouffe’s criticism on the delegitimization of conflict in contemporary democracies “needs to be answered” (p. 60). For their part, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser sustain that certain social groups do not feel represented by the “establishment” in contemporary Western democracies, for mainstream parties fail to meet their demands (pp. 18-19).

The concern about the crisis of liberal democracies has led the mentioned authors to look at the potential capacity of populism to “democratize democracy”, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos famously put it (2004). Mouffe considers that ‘agonistic pluralism’ would enrich democracy in the following way: “Insofar as it prevents us against the illusion that a completely achieved democracy can be feasible, it forces us to keep democratic controversy alive. It allows a margin for discrepancy” (p. 117). For their part, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue that “populism can be seen as a democratizing force, since it defends the principle of popular sovereignty with the aim of empowering groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment” (p. 18). By contrast, Müller considers that populism cannot have any positive effect on democracy, as it will be further explained.

Politicizing Unattended Social Concerns

First of all, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser point out that populism can be a democratizing force by promoting the “repoliticization of certain topics, which either intentionally or unintentionally are not (adequately) addressed by the establishment” (p. 19). That is, populist parties bring to the political discussion legitimate social concerns that had been excluded from the public debate by traditional political forces.

For her part, Mouffe warns about the spread of “extreme forms of individualism that threaten the social tissue” (p. 109) in contemporary democracies. According to her, “the growing of various religious, moral and ethnic fundamentalisms is the direct consequence of the democratic deficit that characterizes most liberal democratic societies” (pp. 109-110). In a later book, Mouffe defends that left-wing populism can politicize in a progressive way social unrest that could otherwise be politicized by the far right (Errejón and Mouffe 2015).

The capacity of populist actors to politicize previously unattended concerns seems to be confirmed in practice — the attention paid by traditional parties to issues such as inequality and poverty has increased due to the apparition of populist parties that have politicized those concerns, both in Latin America and Europe.

Including the Excluded

In the previous section, I have addressed the capacity of populism to politicize hitherto unattended social demands. The second positive effect of populism on democracy, identified by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, is its capacity to “mobilize excluded sectors of society, improving their integration into the political system” (p. 83). There are populist radical right parties that seek to exclude certain groups from political participation, particularly ethnic minority groups, but Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have rightly pointed out that it is their xenophobic orientation that explains this exclusion, not their populist character (p. 83). This is a key distinction, which challenges the tendency of certain authors (Müller is one of them) to blame populism for the behaviours of all kinds of populist actors that they consider incompatible with liberal democracy. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have explained, populist constructions can be progressive or conservative, which has led them to establish a distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

The capacity of populist actors to integrate previously excluded groups in political life has also been highlighted by De la Torre (2000). In some cases, this integration has amounted to the political mobilization of social sectors that had been previously de facto excluded from politics, such as the working class in Juan Perón’s Argentina, and indigenous peoples in Evo Morales’ Bolivia. In other cases, the political integration promoted by populism has taken a legal form, such as the approval of female suffrage in Argentina in 1947.

Direct Democracy

Lastly, the literature on populism sustains that populist actors promote the direct involvement of citizens in politics by frequently convoking referenda and other forms of direct democracy (De la Torre 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017), because populists see representative democracy as “an aristocratic form of power, in which citizens are treated as passive entities” (p. 17). Müller considers that populist leaders only use referenda as a tool to confirm the leader’s power, an affirmation that must be put into relation with broader discussions in the literature on referenda. Research on referenda has often addressed two questions: whether governments only convoke referenda when they are certain that they will win, and whether they succeed in controlling

plebiscites. Qvortrup (2000) reviewed 128 referenda celebrated in several countries throughout the second half of the 20th century, reaching a twofold conclusion: most governments only convoke plebiscites when they are convinced that they will win, but they hardly ever obtain the desired result.

Indeed, it seems that populist leaders tend to call for referenda more often than non-populist ones. Besides, contemporary populism provides sound examples of Qvortrup’s conclusions: both Chávez and Morales convoked referenda to eliminate the term limits set by constitutions, and both lost, while Orban’s referendum on EU migrant quotas was invalid because less than 40 percent of the electorate took part in it. In conclusion, Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller are right in identifying the frequent recourse to direct democracy instruments as a distinctive feature of populism. It must be added that (both populist and non-populist) governments tend to convoke referenda when they believe that they will win, but they hardly ever succeed in controlling the result. Thus, as Qvortrup (2000, p. 824) sustains, referenda can be an effective check on governments and parliaments.

CONCLUSIONS

Relations between populism and democracy provoke intense debates in academia. The interest raised by this issue is not surprising, taking into account the central place that democracy holds in contemporary politics and the rise that populism has experienced since the beginning of the 21st century, first in Latin America and later in Europe and the United States.

The present article has reviewed the three more frequent scholarly positions on the relation between populism and democracy. Some authors defend that they maintain a virtuous relation, others see an ambiguous relation between both phenomena, while other scholars consider that populism is a threat to democracy. One representative book of each stream of thought has been reviewed: Chantal Mouffe’s *The Democratic Paradox* (2003); Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser’s *Populism, a Very Short Introduction* (2017); and Jan-Werner Müller’s *What is Populism?* (2017). The joint analysis of the three works suggests that populism is compatible with democracy, and it reinforces its participatory dimension, but populism presents certain tensions with political pluralism. This means that a virtuous relation between populism and liberal democracy can take place *in some cases*, but it is not guaranteed. In the following paragraph, some tentative conclusions based on the analysis of the three books are drawn.

In the first part of the paper, the relation between populism and the *liberal dimension* of liberal democracy was analysed, reaching a twofold conclusion. On the one hand, there is neither enough empirical data to sustain that the inner organisation of populist parties is generally less democratic than that of other

parties, nor to sustain that populist leaders are more hostile to liberal institutions than non-populist leaders, nor that they promote less liberal constitutions than other political actors. On the other hand, there is a tension between populism and the respect of political pluralism, which is a constitutive feature of liberal democracy. In the second part of the article I have looked at how populism influences the *democratic dimension* of liberal democracies, reaching the conclusion that populist actors can reinforce these political regimes in three ways: politicizing social concerns previously unattended by mainstream parties, including social groups that were previously not effectively integrated in political life, and increasing the recourse to direct democracy mechanisms such as referenda and recall votes.

Despite the interest of the reviewed books, they do not facilitate the establishment of a general relation between populism and democracy. Müller gen-

eralizes particular features of European populist far-right parties as distinctive characteristics of populism, which prevents him from reaching convincing conclusions on populism in general. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser include more cases of left-wing populists in their analysis, but they do not adopt the systematic comparative approach that would be needed to reach firm conclusions on the relation between populism and the various features of liberal democracy. For her part, Mouffe carries out a rather abstract reflection that does not allow to draw any such conclusion either. To sum up, the main conclusion of the present article is that a general relation between populism and democracy cannot be established on the grounds of existing research. Systematic comparative analysis of the behaviour of populist and non-populist political actors will be needed in order to reach conclusive empirical-based findings on the relation between populism and democracy.

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