

A Perennial Threat to Democracy: Why populism undermines democracy¹

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1. Introduction

On June 16th of 2015, when Donald Trump declared his bid for the presidency at Trump Tower in New York City, he began with claiming that Mexico was sending ‘drugs, crime, [and] rapists’ to the United States.³ Trump also proclaimed the “death of the American dream” and promised to “bring it back bigger and stronger than ever before” – his only mention of addressing economic issues, which initially drew potential voters in. He employed a populist rhetoric, drawing in ordinary citizens by framing certain groups – in this case, immigrants and ethnic minorities—as their perceived enemies and scapegoats for their economic concerns. Instead of focusing on the general issue of illegal immigration or economic instability, Trump’s approach involved stirring strong emotions with provocative, inflammatory rhetoric.⁴

Democracy and populism are two forces often pitted against each other, engaging in a delicate interplay that shapes social rhetoric and trajectory of governance.⁵ The relationship between democracy and populism is not only a theoretical academic exercise, but a dynamic that unfolds on the global stage, influencing policy decisions, electoral outcomes, and the very nature of political discourse. This paper seeks to examine whether populism is always an undermining danger to democracy, regardless of whether it is right-wing or left-wing.

There is no shortage of discussion regarding both populism and democracy in politics, media and social discourse - in journalism and everyday discussions, “populism” has become almost the main political insult, where a “populist,” accordingly, is a person who makes empty promises and tries to come to power exploiting popular fears and anxieties.⁶ There is also a certain level of fearmongering

³ Presidential Announcement Speech, 16 June 2015; Ben Terris, ‘Donald Trump begins 2016 bid, citing his outsider status’ (The Washington Post, 2015) https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-is-now-a-candidate-for-president-of-the-united-states/2015/06/16/5e6d738e-1441-11e5-9ddc-e3353542100c_story.html

⁴ Kurt Weyland & Raul L Madrid (eds.) *When Democracy Trumps Populism* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) 1

⁵ Jeremy Webber, “Understanding populism” S. & L.S. 2023, 32(6), 849-876

⁶ De la Torre, C, ‘The resurgence of radical populism in Latin America’ (2007) *Constellations*, 14(3), 384-397

when it comes to populism. In its 2018 World Report, the Human Rights Watch cautioned world democracies against “capitulation” to the “populist challenge”,⁷ whilst Tony Blair’s Institute for Global Change constantly warns against the “infection” of populism, laying out in no uncertain terms the dangers of submitting to populist rhetoric.⁸ However, different types of populism have been identified, along with their associated risks. Depending on their ideological affiliation and values, populism can present as either right-wing or left-wing, with varying degrees of exclusionary or inclusionary rhetoric.⁹

Recognizing right-wing, exclusionary populism as a destructive threat to democracy is by no means novel. It is generally accepted that right-wing populist leaders and groups, especially those employing blatant nativism and xenophobia, undermine democratic principles and have the ability to trump over the unsubscribing minorities they marginalize. Along right-wing exclusionary populism, there is also its left-wing, inclusionary counterpart, which is not generally acknowledged or seen as a threat to democracy on its own terms or to the same extent.¹⁰ In no way should the two opposing manifestations of populism be equated. Rather, left wing populism should be examined for its potential threat to democracy on its own merits.¹¹

My aim in this working paper is to show that left-wing populism also clashes, in principle, with core democratic values. The purpose of this differentiation is to establish the inherently incompatible

⁷ 2018 World Report (Human Rights Watch, 2018) <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018> ; Peter C Baker, ‘We The People: The battle to define populism’ (The Guardian, 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jan/10/we-the-people-the-battle-to-define-populism>

⁸ Tony Blair’s Institute for Global Change, <https://www.institute.global/tags/populism> ; Peter C Baker, ‘We The People: The battle to define populism’ (The Guardian, 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jan/10/we-the-people-the-battle-to-define-populism>

⁹ Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (APRIL 2013), pp. 147-174

¹⁰ Samir Ganesha, “Understanding Right and Left Populism” in Jeremiah Morelock ed. *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* (University of Westminster Press, 2018) (pp. 49-70)

¹¹ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds), ‘*Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework for analysis*’, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press 2012), p. 4

nature of populism as a tool with core principles of democracy, regardless of political affiliation of the group or individual seeking to employ it. Further, not only is populism generally incompatible with democratic values, but is also in principle corrosive to them. Part one, divided into three sections, offers a discussion of key concepts that will lead to an examination of common ground and tension between populism and democracy. Then, part two, consisting of three sections, will focus on applying the key principles to real-world examples of left-wing populism.

Part One

2. Balancing Majority Rule, Democracy, and the Rule of Law

To test the compatibility or lack thereof of populism against democracy, it is vital to lay out the theoretical basis of what ‘democracy’ entails. Democracy is a complex term that encompasses a variety of factors.¹² It commonly denotes ‘rule by the people’, which while conveying the direct meaning, still remains rather abstract.¹³ This vagueness results in a diverse scope of use and applications, such as, for instance, the EU asserts its foundation on “the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights”,¹⁴ whereas the US’s constitution opens with the infamous ‘We the People’.¹⁵ Both assert to be democratic structures and to be the protectors of democracy, yet nowhere do they directly mention, specify, or define a democratic regime.

Despite this broad use of the term, theoretical underpinnings of democracy generally entail several more key elements that ensure its proper functioning; these include rule of law, political equality, free

¹² David Owen, “The Concept of Democracy” in Richard Bellamy *Political Concepts* (Manchester University Press 2003) (pp. 105-117)

¹³ Weale A, *Democracy* (2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 19

¹⁴ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2016] OJ C202/13, art 2

¹⁵ Constitution of the United States of America 1787

and fair elections, protection of fundamental rights, and citizen participation.¹⁶ Each element contributes to the formation of a democratic system, which can manifest to various degrees based on differing democratic theories and practices.¹⁷ Different models of democracy, however, centre different components as essential.¹⁸ Understanding these models is key to discussing the tension between democracy and populism, as they reveal the varying ways democracy can be interpreted and practiced.

One of the key aspects of democratic regimes is the rule of law, which ensures that everyone, including government officials, is subject to the law.¹⁹ While it lacks a universal definition, it guards against arbitrary rule and ensures fairness and justice by applying laws consistently.²⁰ Its complexity stems from its legal, moral, and political dimensions, which vary across cultures and societies.²¹ This adaptability allows the rule of law to fit diverse democratic systems, but it is also what makes defining it difficult. Its flexibility, while useful, leads to contested interpretations and misuse, particularly in democracies facing challenges today.²² The rule of law is generally considered a key factor in most democratic models, yet there are instances in which a self-proclaimed democratic regime had slowly disregarded, or outright rejected, principles of the rule of law.²³ Therefore, it becomes imperative that a distinction be made, whether there can exist a non-rule-of-law democracy at all.

¹⁶ Robert Post, "Democracy and Equality" (2006) *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 603, Law, Society, and Democracy: Comparative Perspectives, pp. 24-36

¹⁷ Tilly C, *Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 11

¹⁸ *Ibid* 12

¹⁹ Jeremy Waldron, "The Rule of Law", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/rule-of-law/>

²⁰ Tom Christiano, and Sameer Bajaj, "Democracy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/democracy/>

²¹ Barro, R., "Democracy and the Rule of Law", in B. de Mesquita and H. Root (eds.), *Governing for Prosperity* (Yale University Press, 2000)

²² Von Bogdandy, Armin, and Michael Ioannidis. "Systemic deficiency in the rule of law: what it is, what has been done, what can be done." (2014) *Common Market Law Review* 51.1

²³ Cristina Nicolescu-Waggoner, *No Rule of Law, No Democracy: Conflicts of Interest, Corruption, and Elections as Democratic Deficits* (State University of New York Press, 2016) 94

Consider the example of Hungary since 2010; under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's party, Hungary has experienced substantial democratic backsliding, marked by a deliberate rejection of the rule of law and the erosion of EU values.²⁴ Orbán's government has weakened independent institutions, undermined and constrained judicial independence, and restricted media freedom, all of which are key elements of the rule of law.²⁵ This has led to a decline in democratic accountability and the concentration of power within the executive. In July 2014, Orbán delivered his now-famous "illiberal democracy" speech.²⁶ In this address, he outlined the key differences between a fully democratic "Western" system, and what he described as an "Eastern" approach, characterized by a strong state, weak opposition, and reduced checks and balances. Calling principles of justice "abstract" and proclaiming the plan to build a new, "illiberal state, a non-liberal state," Orbán openly challenged the foundational principles of liberal democracy, particularly within the context of the European Union, which is built on values such as human rights, the rule of law, and pluralism.²⁷

Despite this, in his speech Orbán never outright proclaimed to be departing from democracy, as it would cause unprecedented turmoil within the EU.²⁸ On the contrary, Orbán had doubled down, stating Hungary to simply have a different 'understanding' of democracy and that no policy in Hungary contradicts the rule of law.²⁹ In reality, however, by prioritizing majority rule and centralizing authority, Orbán has transformed Hungary's representative system into a majoritarian

²⁴ John Erik Fossum, "In what sense does right-wing populism pose a democratic challenge for the European Union?" S. & L.S. 2023, 32(6), 930-952

²⁵ Angela K. Bourne, "From militant democracy to normal politics? How European democracies respond to populist parties" E.C.L. Review 2022, 18(3), 488-510

²⁶ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 26 July 2014, Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tușnad), Romania, available at <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

²⁷ Oliver Mader, "Enforcement of EU values as a political endeavour: constitutional pluralism and value homogeneity in times of persistent challenges to the rule of law." (2019) Hague Journal on the Rule of Law 11 133-170.

²⁸ Robert Sata, "Performing crisis to create your enemy: Europe vs. the EU in Hungarian populist discourse." (2023) Frontiers in Political Science 5

²⁹ "What is going on in Illiberal democracy Hungary?" (Amnesty International, 31 May 2018) available at <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/what-is-going-on-in-illiberal-democracy-hungary>

state with lax rule of law constraints, where the interests of the ruling party dominate and minority rights and checks on government power are diminished.³⁰

Aristotle, in the *Politics*,³¹ makes a broad distinction between two types of democracy – one, in which the rule of law is preserved and relied upon, and the second, where the rule of law does not guide governance, and therefore there is no order at all, a limitless democracy leading to a tyranny of the majority.³² While direct democracies are prone to turning majoritarian, a representative system can also become majoritarian if it systematically weakens the controls imposed by the rule of law, such as that of Hungary, discussed above.³³ In such cases, while the system remains formally a representative democracy, it functions in a manner that exclusively exalts majority rule over institutional checks and balances.³⁴

Athenian democracy, or direct democracy, is often idealized as the "truest" form of democracy, as it allows citizens to participate directly in governance without intermediaries.³⁵ However, its historical context - where participation was limited to a small, defined group - made it more manageable than would be feasible in modern, large-scale societies.³⁶ Today, direct democracy is largely impractical due to population sizes and governance complexities. Without institutional constraints, unlimited citizen participation in legislative or executive matters could lead to instability and inefficiency.³⁷ The

³⁰ Péter Krekó, and Enyedi Zsolt "Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's laboratory of illiberalism." (2018) *Journal of Democracy* 29.3, 39-51

³¹ Aristotle, *The Politics* (c. 350 BC), IV 1292a Stephen Everson (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988

³² Eckart Schütrumpf, *The Earliest Translations of Aristotle's Politics and the Creation of Political Terminology*, (Morphomata Lectures Cologne, 2014) 33

³³ Zoltán Pozsár-Szentmiklósy, "Supermajority in parliamentary systems—a concept of substantive legislative supermajority: Lessons from Hungary." (2017) *Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies* 58.3, 281-290

³⁴ Gábor Halmai, "'False' Populists' Abuse of Majoritarianism and Political Constitutionalism." (2024) *The People's Constitution: The Populist Transformation of Constitutional Law?*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 53-64.

³⁵ Robin Osborne, *Athens and Athenian democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

³⁶ Mogens Herman Hansen, "The Nature of Athenian Democracy." (2021) *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy* 27-56

³⁷ Kenneth I. Winston, 'Principles and Touchstones: The Dilemma of Dworkin's Liberalism' (1986) *Polity*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 42-55; Arthur Lupia and John G. Matsusaka. "Direct democracy: New approaches to old questions." (2004) *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 7.1, 463-482.

rule of law, therefore, plays a crucial role in limiting the absolute power of governing agents, including those who claim to represent the majority, ensuring stability and preventing potential abuses of power.³⁸

One of the key issues with direct democracy that operates without the constraints of rule of law or constitutional checks and balances, is that it is inherently majoritarian and provides fertile ground for populism by simplifying complex issues into binary choices and rejecting constraints on majority rule.³⁹ This overlap creates a blurred line between democracy and populism, as populist movements often claim to represent the “true will” of the people, simultaneously undermining institutional constraints. While populism may initially appear to enhance democracy by amplifying popular participation,⁴⁰ it ultimately risks transforming democracy into a system where the majority’s interests override legal protections and pluralism. Without rule-of-law safeguards, majoritarian democracy can easily devolve into tyranny of the majority, and therefore, there cannot be a non-rule-of-law democracy, as it simply becomes majoritarianism.⁴¹

In contrast, a rule of law democracy extends beyond majority rule by enforcing legal constraints, institutional checks, and protections for democratic processes and individual rights. It ensures that governance is not solely about electoral victories but also about upholding fundamental rights, equality, and legal accountability.⁴² A liberal democracy, a key sub-model, integrates these principles

³⁸ Anna Christmann, "Direct Democracy and the Rule of Law—Assessing a Tense Relationship." (2012) *Direct Democracy and Minorities*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 47-63

³⁹ Guillermo O'donnell, "The quality of democracy: Why the rule of law matters." (2004) *Journal of democracy* 15.4, 32-46; Steffen Mohrenberg, Robert A. Huber, and Tina Freyburg. "Love at first sight? Populist attitudes and support for direct democracy." (2021) *Party Politics* 27.3, 528-539

⁴⁰ Takis Pappas *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2019) 13; Eva Anduiza, Marc Guinjoan, and Guillem Rico. "Populism, participation, and political equality." (2019) *European Political Science Review* 11.1, 109-124

⁴¹ Stephen Skinner, "Fault Lines in the Rule of Law: Europe's Present and the Presence of its Past." (2024) *International Journal of Law in Context* 20.2, 133-151

⁴² Michael Johnston, "Good governance: Rule of law, transparency, and accountability." (2006) *New York: United Nations Public Administration Network* 1, 32

with broader liberal values, particularly individual rights and freedoms.⁴³ Liberal democracies often adopt a “thin” conception of the rule of law, prioritizing clarity, consistency, and predictability while refraining from imposing on individuals’ specific life plans or values.⁴⁴ This neutrality allows for pluralism and preserving the analytical balance between the rule of law from other concepts like human rights, while maintaining essential legal safeguards.⁴⁵ However, populist movements frequently challenge these constraints, portraying the rule of law as an elitist obstacle to the majority’s will, presenting it as a liberal hindrance to the will of the people.⁴⁶ In this way, Orban’s criticism of the rule of law focused on it as a “political and ideological weapon,” claiming it was wielded as a proverbial stick to target Hungary specifically due to its rejection of immigration – a policy supposedly reflecting the will of the Hungarian people.⁴⁷

Thus, the core tension between democracy and populism lies in balancing popular sovereignty with institutional protections. Unchecked democracy, by prioritizing majority rule, aligns with populist tendencies, which seek to weaken legal safeguards and institutional checks, threatening to erode existing democratic systems.⁴⁸ In contrast, rule of law democracy, and liberal democracy emphasize legal constraints, rational debate, and the protection of democratic values, highlighting how populism threatens democratic underpinnings and integrity by eroding pluralism, minority rights, and institutional legitimacy.⁴⁹

⁴³ Bojan Bugarcic, “Populism, liberal democracy, and the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe.” (2008) *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41.2, 191-203

⁴⁴ Peter Rijkema, “The rule of law beyond thick and thin.” (2013) *Law and Philosophy* 32.6, 793-816.

⁴⁵ Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning. “Systematizing Thin and Thick Conceptions of the Rule of Law.” *The Justice System Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2012, pp. 136–53

⁴⁶ Bojan Bugarcic, and Alenka Kuhelj. “Varieties of populism in Europe: Is the rule of law in danger?” (2018) *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 10, 21-33

⁴⁷ “Morawiecki and Orbán step up attacks on EU over rule of law debate on eve of summit” (Euronews with AP, 18/11/2020) available at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/11/18/morawiecki-and-orban-step-up-attacks-on-eu-over-rule-of-law-debate-on-eve-of-summit>

⁴⁸ Andreas Kyriacou, and Pedro Trivin. “Populism and the rule of law: The importance of institutional legacies.” (2024) *American Journal of Political Science*

⁴⁹ Richard H. Fallon Jr, “Judicial supremacy, departmentalism, and the rule of law in a populist age.” (2017) *Tex. L. Rev.* 96, 487

3. The Dual Nature of Popular Sovereignty in Democracy and Populism

For the purposes of this paper, a minimal democratic model of liberal democracy will be used as a starting point, to simplify the examining of left-wing populism against democratic regimes. Liberal democracy, as a governmental model, merges the framework of representative democracy with the tenets of liberal political philosophy.⁵⁰ It features elections involving several distinct political parties, the division of powers across branches of government and the rule of law in daily affairs within an open society, along with consistent safeguarding of human rights, civil rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms for all individuals.⁵¹ In the term ‘liberal democracy’, ‘liberalism’ and ‘democracy’ can be separated, democracy as a foundational idea of popular sovereignty, and liberalism as a doctrine that protects the rights of its citizens.⁵² Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, the concept of liberal democracy, with its modern checks and balances of majority rule, is used.

Despite the potential antagonism between democracy and populism based on populist criticism of democratic failures, there is distinct common ground outlined above, the majority rule aspect and the call for popular sovereignty.⁵³ Popular sovereignty is a foundational political concept rooted in democratic theory, expressing the principle that the legitimacy and authority of a government derive from the collective will of the governed people.⁵⁴ Developed by Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke⁵⁵ and most influentially Jean-Jacques Rousseau,⁵⁶ the notion stipulates that political authority

⁵⁰ Rhoden, T. F. “The liberal in liberal democracy” (2013) *Democratization*, 22(3), 560–578

⁵¹ Marc F. Plattner, ‘Liberalism and Democracy: Can't Have One without the Other’ (1998) *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 2, pp. 171–80; *ibid*

⁵² Gordon Graham, ‘Liberalism and Democracy’ (1992) *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 149-160

⁵³ Oliver Schmidtke, "The ‘will of the people’: The populist challenge to democracy in the name of popular sovereignty." (2023) *Social & Legal Studies* 32.6, 911-929

⁵⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *I am the people: Reflections on popular sovereignty today* (Columbia University Press, 2019)

⁵⁵ Alex Tuckness, "Locke's Political Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/locke-political/>

⁵⁶ Ewa Atanassow, Thomas Bartscherer, and David A. Bateman (eds.), *When the People Rule: Popular Sovereignty in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2023)

of any kind is only legitimate, as long as it is consented to by all the people, who have subsequently entered into a social contract to be governed on the belief of common good and protection.⁵⁷ Central to this concept is the belief that the ultimate source of political power resides within the citizens, positioning them as the primary voices to their governance structures,⁵⁸ both the creators and subsequent subjects of the political order, who exercise this power directly through participation in democratic processes or indirectly, through elected representatives.⁵⁹

‘Democracy’ literally meaning ‘rule by the people’ or ‘power of the people,’ reflects the belief in the equality and importance of individuals within the political community.⁶⁰ There is a line to be towed between the representing and advocating for the people, the ‘demos’, and being inherently populist.⁶¹ Despite the outlined common ground of popular sovereignty between democracy and populist rhetoric, a notion which will be explored further, is that while democratic regimes typically institute certain mechanisms to safeguard against abuses of power by the majority, populist rhetoric takes the same notion of popular sovereignty to the extreme, eroding said mechanisms and undermining democracy.⁶² This is also furthered by the fact that the representative model which exists today is regarded as a democracy; simultaneously by championing the ‘true’, unadulterated direct democracy and its extremist instance of popular sovereignty as the ideal, the people are pushed towards or away similarly extreme political opposites with no middle ground for democratic processes to function as a result.⁶³

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ Akkerman A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A ‘How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters.’ (2014) *Comparative Political Studies*, 47(9), 1324-1353, 1327

⁵⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Popular sovereignty as procedure." (1997) *Deliberative democracy: Essays on reason and politics* 35, 67

⁶⁰ Anthony Arblaster, *Democracy* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2002)

⁶¹ Katsambekis, G ‘Constructing ‘the people’ of populism: A critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective’ (2020) *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1-22.

⁶² Duncan Kelly, “Populism and the History of Popular Sovereignty” in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (ed.) et al. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

⁶³ Simon Torney, "The contemporary crisis of representative democracy." (2014) *Democratic Theory* 1.2, 104-112

Therefore, there are certain aspects, in which populism may share common ground with some aspects of democracy, such as popular sovereignty and its call for majority rule. Ultimately, however, it conflicts with broader democratic principles generally heralded as foundational, especially those found in rule-of-law and deliberative models, where cautionary limits on power and meaningful participation are central to the democratic process.⁶⁴

4. Defining Populism: Core Principles and Rhetorical Strategies

A fundamental rhetoric of populism is the moralised distinction of ‘us’, the uncorrupted, working masses, versus ‘them’, the corrupted elites.⁶⁵ It is populism’s intent to polarize the dissatisfied majority to whom it appeals.⁶⁶ This formula can be applied whichever way the interpreter desires; for the ultra-right nationalist groups, those not of native ethnic origin is ‘them’, while for ultra-left parties, capitalist conservatives embody the ultimate elite.⁶⁷ For instance, both Golden Dawn and Syriza in Greece are radical parties at the opposite sides of the political spectrum – yet both utilised appropriate populist rhetoric with the intent to appeal to their demographic and polarize against their perceived ‘enemy’.⁶⁸ Populism often promises the ‘fixing’ of current issues, democratic renewal, and overall increase in the quality of life.⁶⁹ These offered solutions are often over-simplified, aggressively emotionally charged and offer no concept of consequences, only focusing on how easy it is to fix the issue with little righteous effort and reap the immediate reward.⁷⁰ However, it is most often these

⁶⁴ Oliver Schmidtke, "The "will of the people": the populist challenge to democracy in the name of popular sovereignty" *S. & L.S.* 2023, 32(6), 911-929

⁶⁵ Huguet-Cabot, Pere-Lluís, et al. "Us vs. them: A dataset of populist attitudes, news bias and emotions." (2021) arXiv preprint arXiv:2101.11956

⁶⁶ Francisco Panizza (ed), ‘Populism and the Mirror of Democracy’ (Verso, 2005) 3

⁶⁷ Taggart, P, *Populism* (Open University Press, 2000) 13

⁶⁸ Bart Bonikowski, "Three lessons of contemporary populism in Europe and the United States." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* (2016) 23.1, 9-24

⁶⁹ Paulina Ochoa Espejo, "Populism and the people." (2017) *Theory & Event* 20.1, 92-99.

⁷⁰ Sandra Obradović, Séamus A. Power, and Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington. "Understanding the psychological appeal of populism." (2020) *Current opinion in psychology* 35, 125-131.

solutions society ends up reaping the consequences of, once the short-term exaltation wanes, as will be seen on the example of Syriza further. At the same time, populism, especially left-wing, offers the idea of increased political representation and diversity, since the groups they appeal to often feel themselves be left out and accidentally or purposefully forgotten by the current regimes.⁷¹

The word “populism” first appeared in response to the injustice of the distribution of economic, political and social benefits within a democratic society.⁷² At the end of the 19th century, the People's Party appeared in the United States,⁷³ a left-wing movement that accused the government of corruption and its policy-based division of American society into a “beggar class” and a “millionaire class.”⁷⁴ For them, all decisions, naturally, were made only so the rich become richer - and the poor would only become poorer, which resulted in the People's Party setting as its goal radical reforms in the interests of the poor. The word “populism” in its current meaning is the party’s most important legacy: journalists almost immediately began calling the People’s Party populist.

Modern populism takes its roots in the widespread dissatisfaction at multiple issues and encompasses a variety of factors, but it is almost impossible to divorce it from socio-economic frustrations.⁷⁵ For the euro-sceptics, the discontent is directed at the EU and its policies and byproducts of austerity measures and bureaucratic processes, frames as undemocratic and overpowering policies of the EU.⁷⁶ At the same time, domestic dissatisfaction with constitutional regimes and democratic shortcomings

⁷¹ Surjit Singha, "Inclusive Responses to Diversity-Driven Populism." In *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2023) 1-7.

⁷² Jerry Simpson, “The Political Rebellion in Kansas,” *Farmers' Alliance History and Agricultural Digest*, Nelson A. Dunning, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Alliance, 1891) pp. 280-83

⁷³ Charles Postel, ‘American Populism, 1876-1896’ (San Francisco State University Press) <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/illinois/gildedage/populism> accessed 12 December 2023

⁷⁴ William L. Garvin and S. O. Daws, “Co-operation and Exchange,” *History of the National Farmers' Alliance and Cooperative Union of America* (Jacksboro, Tex.: J. N. Rogers, Steam Printers, 1887) pp. 84-90

⁷⁵ István Benczes, "Taking back control over the economy: From economic populism to the economic consequences of populism." (2022) *European Policy Analysis* 8.1,109-123.

⁷⁶ Jarrel De Matas, "Making the Nation Great Again: Trumpism, Euro-Scepticism and the Surge of Populist Nationalism." (2017) *Journal of Comparative Politics* 10.2

provided for the backbone of the general feeling of repression amongst the masses.⁷⁷ Adaptable nature⁷⁸ of populism can be seen on the examples of countries facing economic difficulties and problems of inequality are characterized by stronger manifestations of left-wing populism, while problems of uncontrolled migration or national security breed right-wing populists.⁷⁹ It is easier for populist politicians to mobilize the population by focusing on specific issues that concern them.

Characterized by the appeal of its rhetoric to the sentiments of the common, dissatisfied majority, populism often takes on a more direct and emotionally charged approach.⁸⁰ The populist wave manifests itself in charismatic leaders who claim to champion the "will of the people", whoever that demographic is, and challenge 'the establishment' (institutions, and sometimes, the very foundations of liberal democracy).⁸¹ Populism implies anti-elitism, anti-pluralism and self-identification with the popular will; however, populism understood in this strictly theoretical way is not self-sufficient as an ideological political association, and requires some additional ideological or issue-based element.⁸² Nationalism, formed on the basis of the constructivist idea of ethnicity, as loyalty of an individual to a cultural community, with which he has strongest identity-based ties, allows us to link the nationalist phenomenon with a wide spectrum of populist manifestations, ranging from moderate to radical.⁸³ It is often nationalism that distinguishes right-wing populism as a certain strategic and ideological

⁷⁷ Cas Mudde 'The Populist Zeitgeist' (2004) *Government and Opposition*, 39(4): 541–63

⁷⁸ Linden FR, 'How "empty" Is the Signifier "the People"?' Impasses of the Poststructuralist Approach in Ernesto Laclau's Political Ontology' (2023) *Journal of political ideologies* 1

⁷⁹ Yannis Stavrakakis, et al. "Contemporary Left-wing populism in Latin America: Leadership, horizontalism, and postdemocracy in Chávez's Venezuela." (2016) *Latin American Politics and Society* 58.3, 51-76; Hugo Marcos-Marne, "A tale of populism? The determinants of voting for left-wing populist parties in Spain." (2021) *Political studies* 69.4, 1053-1071

⁸⁰ Guillem Rico, Marc Guinjoan, and Eva Anduiza. "The emotional underpinnings of populism: How anger and fear affect populist attitudes." (2017) *Swiss Political Science Review* 23.4, 444-461; Mikko Salmela, and Christian Von Scheve, "Emotional roots of right-wing political populism." (2017) *Social Science Information* 56.4 567-595; Donatella Bonansinga, "Who thinks, feels. The relationship between emotions, politics and populism." (2020) *Partecipazione e conflitto* 13.1, 83-106.

⁸¹ Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?." (2005) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* 48

⁸² Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds), 'Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework for analysis', *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press 2012), p. 4

⁸³ Roger Eatwell & Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (Pelican, Penguin Books, 2018)

movement, from theoretic populism as a general political strategy.⁸⁴ The use of dichotomy of “exclusive” and “inclusive” nationalisms has fully proven their relevance for the purposes of identifying specifically right-wing populism.⁸⁵ Most of the literature on inclusionary, left-wing populism is limited to the Latin America of the past and there growing, yet little research on the rise of left-wing inclusionary populism in Europe and its effects, therefore the following study will focus primarily on this, to assess the extent of their benefit or damage to democracies.

Philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe establish that populism is not an ideology, but a political instrument;⁸⁶ politicians (both right and left wing) with the help of polarizing rhetoric do not change the world but try to attract the attention of those whom the “system” has forgotten.⁸⁷ In theory, this is meant to reinvigorate political participation and bring back into politics people who have lost hope of achieving social justice, yet in practice this creates a gateway to political fracturing.⁸⁸

Part Two

5. Inclusive Populism and Its Democratic Dilemmas

In the context of populism, ‘demos’ retains its basic meaning as the populace. Populist movements often invoke the concept of ‘demos’ to emphasize their claim that they represent the true will of the ordinary, democratic people against an alleged corrupt elite.⁸⁹ Despite echoing core principle of popular sovereignty, populist rhetoric somewhat diverges in its use of the idea, since it portrays it as an ever-present struggle between the virtuous voice of the ‘demos’ and a detached, demonized,

⁸⁴ Dani Rodrik, "Why does globalization fuel populism? Economics, culture, and the rise of right-wing populism." (2021) *Annual review of economics* 13.1, 133-170; Patricia Rodi, Lazaros Karavasilis, and Leonardo Puleo. "When nationalism meets populism: examining right-wing populist & nationalist discourses in the 2014 & 2019 European parliamentary elections." (2023) *European Politics and Society* 24.2, 284-302.

⁸⁵ Cas Mudde and Cristo'bal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America' (2013) *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 147–174

⁸⁶ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, Verso, 1985) 4

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 12

⁸⁸ Hans-Georg Betz, "Xenophobia, identity politics and exclusionary populism in Western Europe." (2003) *Socialist Register* 39

⁸⁹ Koen Abts, and Stefan Rummens. "Populism versus democracy." (2007) *Political studies* 55.2, 405-424.

establishment of elites, rather than focusing on the will of the people for its own sake.⁹⁰ Popular sovereignty is blown out of proportion by the populist rhetoric. Populism's tendency toward an oversimplified narrative, and potential for exclusionary practices, like media manipulation,⁹¹ selective inclusion and cultural alienation, shows that no matter what it proclaims, populism is always contentious and draws its strength upon division of society. This strains the inclusive and deliberative ideals of popular sovereignty, even in cases of inclusionary populism, which will be explored further. It can also lead to a descend of democratic practices into a form of majoritarianism mentioned above, where the views of the majority are prioritized, often at the expense of minority rights and democratic checks and balances.⁹² In such cases, the populist interpretation of popular sovereignty veers towards a narrow definition of the "true" people, purposefully excluding dissenting voices.⁹³ Since every populist movement calls for placing control with the majority, the danger of majoritarianism is inevitable.⁹⁴ Dissent (and deliberation and development that stem from it) are crucial to the functioning of democracy, since it upholds pluralism, accountability, innovation, and protection of individual rights.⁹⁵ By silencing dissenting voices, populism prevents the democratic process from being dynamic, responsive, and inclusive, and from reflecting the diverse perspectives of the people.⁹⁶

Inclusive populism, despite its seemingly positive connotations of bringing diverse voices together, harbours inherent dangers that merit careful consideration. While the term 'inclusive'

⁹⁰ Albertazzi, D., McDonnell, D. (eds) *Twenty-First Century Populism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

⁹¹ Jennifer Hochschild, 'How Did the 2008 Economic Crisis Affect Social and Political Solidarity in Europe?' (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen; Institute for Human Sciences) <https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/how-did-the-2008-economic-crisis-affect-social-and-political-solidarity> accessed 3 January 2024

⁹² James Allan, "Majoritarianism." (2017) *Bond L. Rev.* 29, 187.

⁹³ Kekhronguu Dazo, and K. M. Sreelakshmi. "Populism, Democracy, and Dissent." In *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century*. (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023) 1-6.

⁹⁴ Gábor Halmaj, "'False' Populists' Abuse of Majoritarianism and Political Constitutionalism." *The People's Constitution: The Populist Transformation of Constitutional Law?* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024) 53-64.

⁹⁵ Sarah M Stützlein, "Political dissent and citizenship education during times of populism and youth activism." (2022) *Theory and Research in Education* 20.3, 217-236

⁹⁶ Stuart Sim, *A Call to Dissent: Defending Democracy Against Extremism and Populism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 14

suggests a broad representation of the population and all its diversity, the potential pitfalls of this form of populism become evident when scrutinizing its impact on democratic principles, political discourse, and governance.⁹⁷ Inclusive populism, with its emphasis on a unified voice for the people, may lead to the erosion of democratic institutions such as the judiciary, by preventing dissent, as mentioned earlier.⁹⁸ By presenting ‘the majority’ to be a faceless single-minded hive, populism strengthens the idea of identity-politics, stripping away and neglecting secondary concerns of the people it sought to unite.⁹⁹ Populism then, in any form, is not conducive to dissent as its ultimate goal is to vest power within the majority.¹⁰⁰ Once the common identity of the majority is formed and encouraged by populist rhetoric, dissent is not allowed to flourish, and those who attempt to engage in it, are swiftly dubbed to be the alienated ‘other’ and ‘them’ in contrast to the majority.¹⁰¹ Even when pursuing inclusive rhetoric, populist leaders are reluctant to establish checks and balances on their own regime, seeing it as another limitation on representatives of the true will of the majority.¹⁰² This centralizes power and restrains the independence of institutions that safeguard democratic values.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Benjamin L McKean, "Toward an inclusive populism? On the role of race and difference in Laclau's politics." (2016) *Political Theory* 44.6, 797-820.

⁹⁸ Carol-Anne Hudson, and David Close. "From Neo-Liberal Populism to Inclusive Liberalism." (2011) *Canadian Review of Social Policy* 65/66, 76-91.

⁹⁹ Amy Gutmann & Daniel Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Harvard University Press, 1996) 16

¹⁰⁰ Jean L Cohen, "Populism and the Politics of Resentment." (2019) *Jus Cogens* 1, 5-39.

¹⁰¹ Neil Walker, "Populism and constitutional tension." (2019) *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 17.2, 515-535.

¹⁰² Muhammad Nur Abdul Latif Al Waroi, Stanislaus Riyanta, Muhammad Reza Rustam, "Populism and the Erosion of Democratic Checks and Balances: A Systematic Literature Review across Regions" (2024) *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis* 7/10, 4728-4738

¹⁰³ Wolfgang Muno, and Christian Pfeiffer. "Populism in power—A comparative analysis of populist governance." (2022) *International Area Studies Review* 25.4, 261-279.

6. Application of Left-Wing Populism: The Occupy Wall Street Movement and the Syriza Party

6.1. The Occupy Wall Street Movement

The international financial crisis of the late 2000s hit Western democracies hard, resulting in politicians struggling to foresee the scale of the difficulties and failing to immediately cope with the consequences.¹⁰⁴ Civil disappointment became the reason for the emergence of new political forces and in the hardest-hit countries, they brought about change in the political landscape.¹⁰⁵ In Greece, the radical left movement *Syriza* won the elections in 2015 and in Spain, the conglomerate of leftist movements *Podemos* temporarily became the second most popular force in the country, later entering the coalition government.¹⁰⁶

The most notable left-wing movement borne of this crisis though, was the Occupy Movement. A socio-political movement of diverse participants that emerged in the United States in the fall of 2011, the movement was characterized by a series of peaceful protests, demonstrations, and occupations of public spaces.¹⁰⁷ Rooted in grievances of stark economic inequality, corporate influence in politics, and injustices within the financial system, the Occupy movement sought to draw attention to issues

¹⁰⁴ Philip Stephens, "Populism is the true legacy of the global financial crisis." (*Financial Times*, 2018) available at <http://www.francodebenedetti.it/http://www.francodebenedetti.it/wp-content/uploads/populism-legacy-crisis-FT.pdf> accessed 05/04/2025

¹⁰⁵ Angela K. Bourne, 'From militant democracy to normal politics? How European democracies respond to populist parties' *E.C.L. Review* 2022, 18(3), 488-510

¹⁰⁶ Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser & Kirk A. Hawkins, 'Populism - the eternal ideology' (Open Democracy, 16 May 2016) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/explaining-populism/> accessed 26 November 2023

¹⁰⁷ Craig Calhoun, "Occupy wall street in perspective." (2013) *British journal of sociology* 64.1, 26-38.

of wealth disparity and advocate for social economic justice.¹⁰⁸ Using symbolic slogans of "We are the 99%," the movement employed populist rhetoric to gain attention and widespread support.¹⁰⁹

The Occupy movement, despite its fervent advocacy for economic justice and social equity, encountered inherent structural and strategic limitations that impeded its capacity to represent popular will and achieve substantial economic policy changes.¹¹⁰ One notable feature of the Occupy movement was its decentralized and leaderless organizational structure, reflecting a commitment to participatory democracy.¹¹¹ This structure was viewed as a strength by participants, as it allowed for inclusivity and equal opportunity for decision making, which they called for, at legislative level.¹¹² However, in practice, the lack of a set organisational structure made it difficult to articulate specific demands or negotiate with established authorities.¹¹³ Therefore, the movement faced challenges in sustaining momentum, since it could not produce specific policy proposals, nor navigate tensions within its diverse participant base, which instead produced the very structure Occupy was against.¹¹⁴

Inclusive populism, as a rule, advocates for an increase in diversity of representation in politics, and for strengthening of transparency, by accumulating support in numbers, 'to mobilize a

¹⁰⁸ Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. "The fight for 'real democracy' at the heart of Occupy Wall Street." (*Foreign affairs* 2011) available at https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/32521998/Real_Democracy_at_the_Heart-libre.pdf?1391198001=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Fight_for_Real_Democracy_at_the_Heart.pdf&Expires=1746442081&Signature=Yg56Dtrj0~zn1YBp27bPXi01Rv-llID8~jPXoTnKOmtSy6ukrJajaD~aoXnIsUM8C07vEmtV6lLyVbjlhK3aaZuzpKWEY6DzBFXq-z5DKWqU7EGQtSK6MYCkhhb7F~KFSxuvYh6Z4SGtHP2EqxTvuDYgLVGJ7C6Tq2rE1pWDXiD9H3pYqWg114YMyQzdtli5DdZuqJ-03aLTveAwJ86jylYRd5UNn-hzcPY0JTvYQIwa9QgRcbwbg7aBKWB5Z~IdJSOZ-JyCgZ5Df2fJRphL68caz2XRID7gzGjxc6zXr2KLLSx2qYlkrNVJs47DI2B8am5PRL5GKUSJhYFLbkKA_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA accessed 04/04/2025

¹⁰⁹ Craig Calhoun, "Occupy wall street in perspective." (2013) *British journal of sociology* 64.1, 26-38; Manissa McCleave Maharawal, "Occupy Wall Street and a radical politics of inclusion." (2013) *The Sociological Quarterly* 54.2, 177-181

¹¹⁰ John Ehrenberg, 'What can we learn from Occupy's failure?' (2017) *Palgrave Commun* 3

¹¹¹ Ben Brucato, "The crisis and a way forward: What we can learn from Occupy Wall Street." (2012) *Humanity & Society* 36.1, 76-84.

¹¹² Mark Chou, *Occupy Democracy: Democracy Against Itself and the Global Occupy Movement* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014) p 152

¹¹³ Gianmarco Savio, "Coordination outside formal organization: consensus-based decision-making and occupation in the Occupy Wall Street movement." (2015) *Contemporary Justice Review* 18.1, 42-54.

¹¹⁴ John Ehrenberg, "What can we learn from Occupy's failure?." (2017) *Palgrave Communications* 3.1, 1-4

collective identity and multi-class alliances.’¹¹⁵ These voters come from varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and prioritise different issues, but all are called to unite under the collective flag of the populist inclusive agenda.¹¹⁶ While on the surface it satisfies the popular-sovereignty need of a democracy discussed earlier, it also creates challenges no left-wing inclusionary populist group has dealt with. Tensions are bound to arise within the group, like they had during the Occupy movement, mostly from stripping away the participants’ identity¹¹⁷ – if there are no additional structural implementations preventing fractures or safeguarding the diversity in the group, it is bound to be stuck in its own discourse, rather than pursuing the original goal in the best case scenario, resulting abuse of power by the majority in the worst.¹¹⁸ Moreover, in a movement like Occupy, proclaiming to be the ‘99%’, there was still limited diversity and inclusivity of participants, trampling over voices from communities that face different forms of economic injustice.¹¹⁹

This reflects the danger of inclusive populism which calls for a unified voice, failing to address the challenges of such blind unification.¹²⁰ This was reflected in the obvious lack of intersectionality within the movement.¹²¹ The overwhelming majority of participants were white and despite the presence of people of colour, there had been a general lack of security for them to raise issues of internal White privilege among Occupy itself. Ultimately, through sheer numbers, it is not conjecture

¹¹⁵ De la Torre, C, ‘The resurgence of radical populism in Latin America’ (2007) *Constellations*, 14(3), 384-397

¹¹⁶ Brennan G & Lomasky L *Democracy and Decision* (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

¹¹⁷ Andrés Velasco, "Populism and identity politics." (2020) *LSE Public Policy Review* 1.1; Marta Marchlewska, et al. "Populism as identity politics: Perceived in-group disadvantage, collective narcissism, and support for populism." (2018) *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 9.2, 151-162.

¹¹⁸ Rafal Riedel ‘Populism and Its Democratic, Non-Democratic, and Anti-Democratic Potential’ (2017) *Polish Sociological Review*, No. 199, pp. 287-298

¹¹⁹ Thomas H Allison et al. "Occupy Wall Street ten years on: How its disruptive institutional entrepreneurship spread and why it fizzled." (2021) *Journal of Business Venturing Insights* 16

¹²⁰ Amy Gutmann & Daniel Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Harvard University Press, 1996) p14

¹²¹ Nick J. Sciallo, "Social Justice in Turbulent Times: Critical Race Theory & Occupy Wall Street." (2012) *Nat'l Law. Guild Rev.* 69 225; Lisa Leitz, "Review of ‘Are We the 99%? The Occupy Movement, Feminism, and Intersectionality’." (2022) *Social Forces*, Volume 100, Issue 3, e11

to characterise Occupy as a “white-led movement that primarily deals with concerns of white middle-class youths.”¹²² Then, Occupy cannot qualify to be a successful exercise in deliberative democracy which it was praised to be, if it did not account for true diversity and intersectionality within itself, within its debates and developments, ultimately failing to reflect the ‘true will’ of certain participants to the full extent.¹²³

This reflects the populist tendency to generalise its demographic based on one uniting quality, in this case, a struggle against financial inequality. However, it would be meaningless to discuss financial inequality in regards to certain groups like people of colour, without also addressing the stark differences in treatment they face, that the remainder of the movement do not.¹²⁴ And despite displaying admirable general togetherness on the surface, by failing to acknowledge the diversity and inherent difference in standing within the movement, it failed to advocate for specific goals.¹²⁵

6.2. The Syriza Party

The rise and subsequent governance of the Syriza party in Greece from 2015 to 2019 provides a compelling case study on both the manipulation of the economically struggling population and the failures of leftist populism in managing economic and social challenges.¹²⁶ It also presents an example of the dangers left-wing populism presents to democratic regimes. Upon assuming power, Syriza, led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, promised to renegotiate Greece's bailout terms, end austerity measures, and usher in a new era of economic stability and social justice.¹²⁷ However, the party's run

¹²² Emahunn Raheem Ali Campbell, “A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier” (2011) *The Black Scholar, Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 41:4, 42-51

¹²³ John Ehrenberg, "What can we learn from Occupy's failure?." (2017) *Palgrave Communications* 3.1, 1-4

¹²⁴ Megan Tobias Neely, *Hedged out: Inequality and insecurity on Wall Street*. (University of California Press, 2022)

¹²⁵ Jamila Osman, *Navigating intersectionality: how race, class, and gender overlap* (Enslow Publishing, LLC, 2018)

¹²⁶ Sofia Vasilopoulou, Daphne Halikiopoulou and Theofanis Exadaktylos, "Greece in crisis: austerity, populism and the politics of blame" *J. Com. Mar. St.* 2014, 52(2), 388-402

¹²⁷ Anna Ratajczak, "Greece under SYRIZA government and the European Union." (2018) *Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej* 12, 243-254.

was marked by a series of alienating policy missteps and an inability to navigate the complex economic and social landscape, resulting in near-failure to achieve its objectives of ‘uniting’ the Greek people.¹²⁸

One of the key dangers that can be gleaned from Syriza’s example, was its confrontational approach towards Greece's international creditors, primarily the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank (the Troika), which was called for by a large percent of the population, but also opposed by the pro-European minority, whose will was not only neglected, but actively ostracized.¹²⁹ Tsipras and his government sought to challenge the austerity measures imposed by the Troika, advocating for debt relief and a more lenient fiscal policy,¹³⁰ which would have been beneficial, if not for the confrontational stance led to a breakdown in negotiations and a temporary closure of Greek banks in 2015, causing extreme economic disruption and uncertainty.¹³¹ The lack of diplomatic finesse and an underestimation of the interconnectedness of Greece within the Eurozone contributed to the failure to secure more favourable bailout terms, proving populist leaders not only unable to apply their promises into real-world practices due to lack of tools and thick-ideological drive Mudde refers to,¹³² but also disregard for democratic values of representation and checks and balances of executive and legislative power.¹³³ This compromise exposed the limitations of Syriza's ability to unilaterally reshape economic policies with simply the will of the Euro-sceptic majority,¹³⁴

¹²⁸ A. Doxiadis and M. Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece* (Counterpoint, 2012) 43

¹²⁹ Maria Karamessini, "Greece as an international test-case: economic adjustment through a Troika/state-induced depression and social catastrophe." (2015) *Divisive integration: The triumph of failed ideas in Europe—revisited* 95-126

¹³⁰ Joseph N Lekakis and Maria Kousis. "Economic crisis, Troika and the environment in Greece." (2013) *South European Society and Politics* 18.3, 305-331

¹³¹ Alexia Katsanidou, and Zoe Lefkofridi. "A decade of crisis in the European Union: Lessons from Greece." (2020) *J. Common Mkt. Stud.* 58, 160.

¹³² Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Feb. 2017), available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780190234874.001.0001>, accessed 03/02/2025

¹³³ Arnaud Castaignet, ‘Political lessons from Syriza to European Progressives’ (2017) Open Democracy <https://www.open-diplomacy.eu/blog/political-lessons-from-syriza-to-european-progressives> accessed 3 January 2024

¹³⁴ A. Doxiadis & M. Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece* (Counterpoint, 2012)

highlighting the inherent challenges of implementing a purely populist economic agenda built on an emotionally charged idea that went against the fundamental representative nature of democratic politics,¹³⁵ almost leading to threatening of the rule of law and the rights of all Greece's citizens, not just those who had elected Syriza based on populist rhetoric.

Syriza's actions revealed a lack of contingency planning and an inherent 'empty' nature of populism which not only led to economic challenges,¹³⁶ but also proved to be a failure in terms of inclusivity it had inherently advocated. By adopting a radical left-wing stance, it had promised to champion the will of the people, however with its own practices had proven to exclusively champion the will of the majority, corroding the meaning of democracy.¹³⁷ By ostracizing the remainder of the population with its un-inclusive policies and limitations on other political parties, Syriza came closer to majoritarianism, rather than elected, representative democracy.¹³⁸ This tension between populist promises and actual social and legal responsibility exposed the inherent contradictions in Syriza's rhetoric and contributed to the erosion of both democratic institutions and public trust.¹³⁹ Syriza failed to embrace the pluralism inherent in a liberal, deliberative democracy. Such democracies are inherently characterized by disagreements, negotiation, and the coexistence of diverse perspectives - elements fundamentally at odds with populism's goal to claim a singular, unified representation of "the one true people."¹⁴⁰ By opposing dissent and promoting a monolithic political identity, populism, the case of Syriza clearly illustrates that whether left- or

¹³⁵ Tom van der Meer and Bastiaan Rijpkema, 'Militant democracy and the minority to majority effect: on the importance of electoral system design' *E.C.L. Review* 2022, 18(3), 511-532

¹³⁶ Myrto Tsakatika, "Assessing Syriza's two years in power: How successful has the party been in office?", *EUROPP – European Politics and Policy*, academic blog run by the London School of Economics and Political Science, January 26, 2017) <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/01/26/syriza-two-years-in-power/> accessed 3 January 2024

¹³⁷ Owen Jones, "Greece's fight is for democracy in Europe. That's why we must support it" (*The Guardian*, July 6, 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/06/greece-democracy-europe-eu> accessed 3 January 2024

¹³⁸ Emmanouil Tsatsanis, and Eftichia Teperoglou. "Greece's Coalition Governments: Power sharing in a majoritarian democracy." in Matt Evans ed., *Coalition Government as a Reflection of a Nation's Politics and Society* (Routledge, 2019) 224-243

¹³⁹ Cas Mudde, *SYRIZA: The Failure of the populist promise* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*

right-wing, populism clashes with the core democratic principles revealing the inherent incompatibility between populism and genuine democratic governance.¹⁴¹

7. Conclusion

There is more to failures of left-wing inclusive populism, than simply the challenges faced by democracies, outlined above. As explored earlier, in a liberal democracy, mechanisms exist to prevent the slide to majoritarianism. If we consider voting to be the primary instrument for solidifying the majority's will, it is the 'strongest' one for the people to govern.¹⁴² However, if we acknowledge that voting in its true form requires some social, political and general intelligence, we can also acknowledge that one can vote incompetently due to lack of or mis-information, manipulation or propaganda.¹⁴³ This is a risk in all democracies, liberal or populist, however populist rhetoric, arguably left-wing even more so, deliberately utilizes this risk to present a challenge to democracy. In these instances, the so-called rule by the people, becomes rule against the people, through the adoption of negative-impact policies by the intentionally roused and manipulated majority,¹⁴⁴ that despite everything, still does not represent all of the population, as seen on the Occupy movement and Syriza.¹⁴⁵ When in these instances there is a minority that holds an opposing opinion, or does not subscribe to corrupt, but legitimately elected policies, their conduct can be deemed as undemocratic, since it is against the expressed will of people.¹⁴⁶ Post 9/11, the US society united under the flag of anti-terrorism measures in their full power.¹⁴⁷ Those opposing the disastrous actions of the US in

¹⁴¹ Emmanouil Mavrozacharakis, Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis, and Dimitrios Kotroyannos. "Mediterranean left-wing populism: the case of Syriza." (2017) *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities* 6.2, 40-53

¹⁴² Pietro Speroni di Fenizio, and Daniele A. Gewurz. "The space of all proportional voting systems and the most majoritarian among them." (2019) *Social Choice and Welfare* 52.4, 663-683

¹⁴³ M Hannon, "Are knowledgeable voters better voters?" (2022) *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 21(1), 29-54

¹⁴⁴ Rafał Riedel, "Authoritarian populism and collective memory manipulation" in Oswald, M. (eds) *The Palgrave handbook of populism* (Springer International Publishing, 2021) 195-211

¹⁴⁵ Silvia Suteu, 'The populist turn in Central and Eastern Europe: is deliberative democracy part of the solution?' *E.C.L. Review* 2019, 15(3), 488-518

¹⁴⁶ Gordon Graham, 'Liberalism and Democracy' (1992) *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 149-160, 156

¹⁴⁷ Mathilde H Roza, *'America Under Attack: Unity and Division after 9/11'* (Amsterdam University Press, 2009)

Afghanistan and Iraq, however, found themselves to be pariahs, labelled ‘undemocratic’ and ‘unpatriotic’, their dissent downright treasonous and ‘unamerican’.¹⁴⁸ And while this was led by right-wing leaders, there was an inclusive element to the policies, since they appealed to and called upon all American citizens.¹⁴⁹ Looking back, it is widely accepted that US’s actions post 9/11 were catastrophic and led to further breaches of rule of law, however at the time, were praised by the majority of its citizens, fuelled by fear-mongering and nationalist rhetoric.¹⁵⁰ It can be seen that populism, even the inclusive kind, ultimately breeds an uninformed, emotionally charged populus, who is open and willing to disregarding the rule of law and attack fundamental democratic values.¹⁵¹

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