Left populism and foreign policy:
Bernie Sanders and Podemos

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Populism has become 'the concept that defines our age'.[1] Since the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, the term 'populism' has proliferated in academic and public discourses, including in International Relations (IR). While early studies—particularly in IR—used populism rather imprecisely as 'a blanket descriptor for radical or "insurgent" politics of all persuasions',[2] ranging from far-right leaders such as Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to leftist, anti-austerity parties and movements such as Podemos and Syriza, during recent years IR scholars have made significant progress in systematizing research on the effects of populism on foreign policy and global politics.[3]

These significant achievements notwithstanding, work remains to be done as scholars continue to struggle to identify exactly how populism affects foreign policy.[4] We argue that this is due at least in part to remaining conceptual

[1] Cas Mudde, 'How populism became the concept that defines our age', *Guardian*, 22 Nov. 2018, https://www. theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/populism-concept-defines-our-age. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 10 July 2024.)

[2] Bice Maiguashca, 'Resisting the "populist hype": a feminist critique of a globalising concept', *Review of International Studies* 45: 5, 2019, pp. 768–85 at p. 769, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000299.

[3] Two early studies must be credited with moving IR beyond the use of 'populism' as a descriptor for any and all non-mainstream positions (or, alternatively, the far right) and towards thinking more systematically about populism in IR: Angelos Chryssogelos, 'Populism in foreign policy', in William R. Thompson, ed. *The Oxford research encyclopedia of politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy', in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 384–405. Since then, a number of symposia, special issues and edited volumes have been devoted to the phenomenon, including Angelos Chryssogelos et al., 'New directions in the study of populism in International Relations', *International Studies Review* 25: 4, 2023, https:// doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad035; Sandra Destradi, David Cadier and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (introduction)', *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 19, 2021, pp. 663–82, https://doi. org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4; Georg Löfflmann, 'Introduction to special issue: the study of populism in International Relations', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 403–15, https://doi. org/10.1177/13691481221103116; Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, eds, *Populism and world politics: exploring inter- and transnational dimensions* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[4] See the introduction to this special section: Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi and Michael Zürn, 'The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1819–33, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae217.

weaknesses that undermine efforts to analytically separate populism from—to use Cas Mudde's widely applied terminology[5]—the more substantive host ideologies with which it is usually combined. The result is a form of analytical slippage in which often elements of the (usually radical right-wing) host ideologies—such as chauvinistic nationalism, nativism or anti-globalism—are folded into the populism concept, ultimately making the analytical distinction between radical right politics and populism impossible, and conflating a populist with a radical right foreign policy outlook.

   In order to counter this problem, this article focuses on left populism and makes the case for moving away from an understanding of populism as (thin) ideology that is combined with a host ideology in favour of the discursive approach pioneered by Ernesto Laclau and others,[6] which, aside from a few notable exceptions, has only received limited attention in IR populism research so far.[7] Contrary to other approaches that search for populism's ideological core (its essence), whose effect on foreign policy can subsequently be traced, Laclau proposed a formal understanding of populism as a 'political logic'[8]—that is, 'a way of articulating [certain] themes', independent of the specific content.[9] Shifting our attention from specific content to the 'processes of collective mobilization' by which certain political demands, themes and policy contents are articulated and legitimized has significant consequences for analysis.[10] Most importantly, it means a move away from trying to discern (uniform) effects of populism as such towards an analysis of how different constructions of specific categories like 'the people' and 'the elites' make certain courses of action possible (that is, more appropriate, rational or morally acceptable) and preclude others. As such, the effect of populism is to make these

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[5] Cas Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 23.

[6] Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005); Benjamin De Cleen, Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon, 'Critical research on populism: nine rules of engagement', *Organization* 25: 5, 2018, pp. 649–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418768053; Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, 'Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19: 2, 2014, pp. 119–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266; Giorgos Katsambekis, 'Constructing "the people" of populism: a critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 27: 1, 2022, pp. 53–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1844372; Lasse Thomassen, 'Representing the People: Laclau as a theorist of representation', *New Political Science* 41: 2, 2019, pp. 329–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2019.1596687.

[7] A few studies in IR have drawn on Laclau's conception of populism, yet fewer have embraced Laclau's formal understanding of populism as a political logic without any specific content; see David Cadier and Kacper Szulecki, 'Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy: the case of Poland's Law and Justice government', *International Politics* 57: 6, 2020, pp. 990–1011, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00252-6; Angelos Chryssogelos, 'State transformation and populism: from the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state?', *Politics* 40: 1, 2020, pp. 22–37, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718803830; Erin K. Jenne, 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 323–43, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa230; Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Trump, populism, and American foreign policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16: 3, 2020, pp. 292–311, https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz021; Thorsten Wojczewski, *The inter- and transnational politics of populism: foreign policy, identity and popular sovereignty* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Thorsten Wojczewski, 'The international cooperation of the populist radical right: building counter-hegemony in international relations', *International Relations*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231222888.

[8] Laclau, *On populist reason*, p. 117.

[9] Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 141.

[10] Ernesto Laclau, 'Populism: what's in a name?', in Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the mirror of democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 44.

different policies more appealing to democratic audiences by articulating them as the will of 'the people'.

We apply these theoretical arguments using in-depth illustrative case-studies of Bernie Sanders in the United States and Podemos in Spain—two countries which have seen the rise of both left- and right-wing populism. We have chosen to focus exclusively on left populism, to supplement previous IR populism research that has largely focused on right-wing populism. Although we do not provide a systematic comparison between left- and right-wing populism, we contrast our cases with the extensive findings of previous IR research on right-wing populism to make the case that the foreign policy choices made by left populists are very different. Therefore, populism is better analysed as a political logic. We have chosen the cases of Sanders and Podemos since they are two of the most high-profile recent cases of left populism and can be classified as intensive case-studies.[11] In order to strengthen the validity of our results, we chose two cases from different continents with different democratic systems. Importantly, we are not aiming to demonstrate that all left populist actors are identical, but simply that the elision between populist foreign policy and far-right foreign policy is erroneous. Nor are we aiming to compare our two cases, since this is beyond the remit of this article.

The article is structured as follows. The first section briefly sums up the achievements and most important findings of IR research on (mostly right-wing) populism and outlines its remaining shortcomings. The second section sketches the Laclauian, discursive approach to populism. The third and fourth sections discuss the two case-studies on Bernie Sanders and Podemos, contrasting them with previous findings on right-wing populism. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and discusses implications for theory and practice.

Populism in International Relations

We can roughly distinguish between two generations of IR populism research. The first generation consists of mainly policy-oriented articles that focused primarily on the potential threat posed by (mostly far-right) 'populists'.[12] Although these early studies rightly warned of the potential danger of these actors, they did not systematically draw on previous populism research outside the discipline of IR and often used the term 'populism' either as a blanket descriptor for any type of non-centrist politics or as a synonym for the far right. At the same time, they often made sweeping causal statements, claiming, for instance, that populists display 'hostility to the very idea of institutional constraint',[13] seek 'to weaken or destroy

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[11] Robert Yin, *Case study research: design and method* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014).

[12] See for example Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'Will the liberal order survive?', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 1, 2017, pp. 10–16, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive; Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The liberal order is rigged', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, 2017, pp. 36–44, https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-04-17/liberal-order-rigged; Fareed Zakaria, 'Populism on the march: why the West is in trouble', *Foreign Affairs* 95: 6, 2016, pp. 9–15, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-17/populism-march; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241.

[13] Daniel W. Drezner, 'The death of the democratic advantage?', *International Studies Review* 24: 2, 2022, https://

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institutions such as legislatures, judiciaries and the press',[14] or 'attack the rules-based order'.[15]

In contrast to that, based on a more systematic engagement with the conceptual literature on populism, second-generation scholars have pointed to the risk of conflating populism and related phenomena. Drawing primarily on the works by Mudde, second-generation scholars point out that populism is best understood as a 'thin-centred ideology' marked by two central tenets: anti-elitism and people-centrism.[16] Because of that thinness, populism does not appear in reality by itself but only as an amalgam, combined with more substantive, thick or full 'host ideologies' like neo-liberalism, socialism or conservatism.[17] This poses the risk of misattributing causal effects to populism that are in fact due to the respective host ideology.[18]

Trying to systematically separate the effects of populism from those of the respective host ideology,[19] second-generation scholars have developed a number of theoretically guided predictions for a 'populist foreign policy', including:

- An emphasis on national sovereignty and a 'strong prioritization of the (narrowly understood) "national interest"', leading to scepticism towards international organizations and multilateral cooperation, including European integration;[20]
- A reluctance 'to contribute to the provision of global public goods';[21]
- Opposition to the liberal international order (LIO);[22]
- A rejection of economic and cultural globalization in favour of more protectionist and nativist, anti-immigration policies;[23]
- A centralization and personalization of foreign policy decision-making, thus decreasing predictability;[24]
- A 'more confrontational foreign policy' and a reduced 'amenability to compromise'.[25]

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doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac017.

[14] Colgan and Keohane, 'The liberal order is rigged', p. 36.

[15] Niccolò W. Bonifai et al., 'Globalization and nationalism: contending forces in world politics', *International Studies Review* 24: 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac021, pp. 3–4.

[16] Mudde, *Populist radical right parties*, p. 23.

[17] Mudde, *Populist radical right parties*.

[18] Mudde, *Populist radical right parties*.

[19] See for example Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy: the case of India', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 283–301, https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/ory010.

[20] Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy', p. 287; Chryssogelos, 'State transformation and populism', from p. 22; Jenne, 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', from p. 331.

[21] Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy', p. 287.

[22] See Erin K. Jenne and Christopher David LaRoche's contribution to Angelos Chryssogelos et al., 'New directions in the study of populism in International Relations', *International Studies Review* 25: 4, 2023, p. 5; Fredrik Söderbaum, Kilian Spandler and Agnese Pacciardi, *Contestations of the liberal international order: a populist script of regional cooperation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[23] Chryssogelos, 'Populism in foreign policy'; Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy', p. 674; Löfflmann, 'Introduction to special issue', from p. 404; Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, 'Introduction: ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 3, 2019, pp. 214–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1596612; Amy Skonieczny, 'Populism and trade: the 2016 US presidential election and the death of the Trans-Pacific Partnership', in Stengel, MacDonald and Nabers, eds, *Populism and world politics*, pp. 337–64.

[24] Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy', p. 288; Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy', p. 665.

[25] Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy', pp. 672 and 673.

Left populism and foreign policy

Some of these expectations have been complicated by contradictory findings. Scholars have found that governments regarded as 'populist' do not necessarily pursue a more confrontational foreign policy than more mainstream governments, nor are all populists opposed to European integration, multilateral cooperation, or even international organizations.[26] This lends support to the early prediction by Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove that populism's influence would likely be overshadowed by that of the respective host ideology.[27] Indeed, on closer inspection, it is less clear whether the above-cited predictions necessarily are a product of populism rather than the respective host ideologies they are combined with. For instance, prioritizing the national interest seems at least as much a result of nationalism as of populism, as does a preference for national sovereignty over multilateral cooperation and policy-making within international organizations. Equally, opposition to cultural globalization and immigration are closely associated with the radical right's nativism. Thus it appears that—all efforts notwithstanding—avoiding the contamination of predictions by the host ideology continues to pose a challenge.

Although predictions are often a product of the host ideology instead of populism *per se*, IR scholars continue to frame their analyses in terms of populism (rather than, for instance, authoritarianism or the radical right), often *de facto* treating populism as a substantive ideology. Thus, even the second-generation studies regularly claim to analyse the policies of 'populist governments',[28] 'populist parties'[29] or 'populist foreign policy',[30] or associate populism in general with specific foreign-policy preferences, such as opposition to internationalism, multilateralism or global public good provision.[31] Thus, scholars have argued that 'racism, xenophobia and nationalism' are 'inevitably implicated in populist politics',[32] that populists challenge the LIO by promoting 'alternative illiberal orders'[33] or that populism 'is hampering foreign aid and global development cooperation'.[34]

[26] Verbeek and Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy'; Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy'; Marina Henke and Richard Maher, 'The populist challenge to European defense', *Journal of European Public Policy* 28: 3, 2021, pp. 389–406, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1881587.

[27] Verbeek and Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy'; see also Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy'; Mihai Varga and Aron Buzogány, 'The foreign policy of populists in power: contesting liberalism in Poland and Hungary', *Geopolitics* 26: 5, 2021, pp. 1442–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1734564; Leslie E. Wehner and Cameron G. Thies, 'The nexus of populism and foreign policy: the case of Latin America', *International Relations* 35: 2, 2021, pp. 320–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820944430.

[28] Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy'; Daniel F. Wajner, 'Exploring the foreign policies of populist governments: (Latin) America First', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 24, 2021, pp. 651–80, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-020-00206-8.

[29] Verbeek and Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy'.

[30] Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy'.

[31] Chryssogelos et al., 'New directions in the study of populism in International Relations'; Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy'; Michael Zürn, 'Is populism a threat or a chance for representative democracy?', in Claudia Landwehr, Thomas Saalfeld and Armin Schäfer, eds, *Contested representation: challenges, shortcomings and reforms* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Feliciano de Sá Guimarães and Irma Dutra de Oliveira e Silva, 'Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro's ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 345–63, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa220.

[32] Steele and Homolar, 'Introduction', p. 215.

[33] Chryssogelos et al., 'New directions in the study of populism in International Relations', p. 5.

[34] A. Burcu Bayram and Catarina P. Thomson, 'Ignoring the messenger? Limits of populist rhetoric on public support for foreign development aid', *International Studies Quarterly* 66: 1, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab041.

What adds to the confusion is that the overwhelming majority of empirical studies focus on right-wing populism, often while making inferences about populism in general.[35] Simply substituting 'populism' for 'right-wing populism' will go a long way towards obscuring cause/effect relationships, as the framing of current challenges to liberal democracy (in particular Trumpism in the United States) as a 'populist danger' or 'populist threat' demonstrates.[36] Equally, labelling certain policy practices such as nativist and racist immigration policies, opposition to global governance and/or the LIO, and economic protectionism as 'populist'[37] further blurs the line between populism and the far right, and runs the risk of mainstreaming the latter by suggesting that it reflects the legitimate concerns of the 'common people'.[38] Furthermore, by conceptualizing populism as moralistic and anti-pluralist, the Muddean approach and those scholars following it *a priori* delegitimize all forms of populism and their critique of the political and economic mainstream as a threat to liberal democracy and the LIO, in effect making it impossible to distinguish between different types of populism as well as between harmless—and potentially legitimate—criticism of any elites and the status quo, and dangerous criticism.[39] Below, we suggest seeing populism as political logic, which refutes the idea that populism has a substantive ideological position. We will further demonstrate that the foreign policy positions of the populist left are radically different from those of the populist right, which further shows the need to disentangle the term 'populism' from the radical right.

Populism as a political logic

We draw on Laclau's discursive conception of populism as a 'political logic'—that is, a particular way of presenting (framing) political content to the public and of

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[35] For example, existent special issues on populism in IR include either no or only one case-study on left populism. See Steele and Homolar, 'Introduction'; Löfflmann, 'Introduction to special issue'; or 'Tracing the impact of populism on European foreign policies', a special issue of *Comparative European Politics* 19: 6, 2021, edited by Christian Lequesne and David Cadier. The main exception is the case of Latin America and, in particular, the left-wing populism of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. See for example Wajner, 'Exploring the foreign policies of populist governments'; and Wehner and Thies, 'The nexus of populism and foreign policy'. Recently, Chryssogelos has supplemented this focus on Latin America with a study on the coalition government formed by Syriza and the Independent Greeks. See Angelos Chryssogelos, 'The dog that barked but did not bite: Greek foreign policy under the populist coalition of SYRIZA–Independent Greeks, 2015–2019', *Comparative European Politics* 19: 6, 2021, pp. 722–38, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00258-1.

[36] Yascha Mounk, 'Pitchfork politics: the populist threat to liberal democracy', *Foreign Affairs* 93: 5, 2014, pp. 27–36, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2014-08-18/pitchfork-politics; Jan-Werner Müller, 'The populist danger', *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, no. 50, 2018, https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/50/the-populist-danger.

[37] See e.g., Angelos Chryssogelos et al., 'New directions in the study of populism in International Relations'; Steele and Homolar, 'Introduction'; Löfflmann, 'Introduction to special issue'.

[38] Giorgos Katsambekis, 'Mainstreaming authoritarianism', *The Political Quarterly* 94: 3, 2023, pp. 428–36, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13299; Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary democracy: how racism and the populist far right became mainstream* (London and New York: Verso, 2020); Yannis Stavrakakis et al., 'Extreme right-wing populism in Europe: revisiting a reified association', *Critical Discourse Studies* 14: 4, 2017, pp. 420–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1309325; Frank A. Stengel, 'Forget populism!', *Global Discourse* 9: 2, 2019, pp. 445–51, https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15628418445603.

[39] Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?'; Mounk, 'Pitchfork politics'; Seongcheol Kim, 'Taking stock of the field of populism research: are ideational approaches "moralistic" and post-foundational discursive approaches "normative"?', *Politics* 42: 4, 2022, pp. 492–504, https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211007053.

constructing a collective identity in the process, centred around the notion of 'the people' (as opposed to, for example, the nation or the proletariat).[40] Hence, this approach shifts our attention to how collective identities are constructed through populist politics, uniting different social groups and building support for a party, a leader or a social movement. Rather than focusing on the potential effects of populism (on democracy, foreign policy, the LIO and so on), seeing populism as a logic zooms in on how different populist projects construct 'the people' differently, what makes some attempts—'hegemonic projects' in Laclauian terms—more likely to succeed than others, and what political consequences ensue if people accept and identify with one political project (including some groups but excluding others) over alternative ones.[41]

According to Laclau, for a political project (including a populist one) to be successful, three basic conditions have to be met. First, the project needs to unite a wide range of social groups and their disparate or even contradictory demands (e.g. for economic freedom and workers' rights) into a single project by simply declaring them as actually going hand in hand.[42] The way this happens—the second of our necessary conditions—is by creating a division. This would take the form of an 'antagonistic frontier', between 'the people' on one hand, and an unresponsive elite—'the Ancien Régime, the oligarchy, the Establishment … '—on the other, that either ignores or actively works against the will of 'the people'.[43] If the claim is accepted that (in the case of populism) the elites are to be blamed for demands remaining unfulfilled, this means that previously disparate demands and their advocates will become united, at least in so far as they now all want to overcome the obstacle standing in their way. Third, any successful project needs a powerful symbol—an 'empty signifier' in Laclau's terminology—for people to rally behind.[44] This can be a leader, or a party, but it can also be a broad demand like 'justice', 'freedom', the goal to 'make America great again' or to make the will of 'the people' heard. What is important is that the symbol is open enough for a broad range of people to project their specific demands onto it and thus to affectively invest into the newly emerging collective identity.[45] Importantly, populism by itself does not determine how exactly 'the elites' or 'the people' are understood or what demands are represented in the project. As populism is purely a political logic of formulating or framing certain political positions so as to create a new political project that appeals to wider audiences, it is the way 'the people' and 'the

[40] Laclau, *On populist reason*, from p. 117; Laclau, 'Populism', p. 34; Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Distinctions and articulations: a discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism', *Javnost—The Public* 24: 4, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083.

[41] Martin Nonhoff, 'Hegemony analysis: theory, methodology and research practice', in Tomas Marttila, ed., *Discourse, culture and organization: inquiries into relational structures of power* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 63–104 at p. 76.

[42] In Laclau's terminology, to form a 'chain of equivalences'. See Ernesto Laclau, 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?', in Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 36–46 at p. 39.

[43] Laclau, 'Populism', p. 39. Note that only in the case of populism does the division have to be between 'the people' and the elites. In principle, this antagonism can take any (nationalist, antisemitic, anti-capitalist, etc.) form.

[44] Laclau, 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?'.

[45] Laclau, *On populist reason*, pp. 130–2. See Emmy Eklundh, 'Populism and emotions', in Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, eds, *Research handbook on populism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024).

elites' are discursively constructed in a specific context (as local or international, left or right, democratic or authoritarian, etc.) that influences which foreign policy options (isolationism or internationalism, militarism or pacifism, multilateralism or unilateralism, and so on) appear more or less appropriate, rational and moral.

This explains the malleability of populist politics, and the unlikely alliances it can produce. The Brexit vote serves as an excellent example of Laclau's theory. Here, disenfranchised voters in deprived areas of northern England and Wales joined forces with the affluent home counties around London. Brexit as an empty signifier, the deliverance of unachieved identities, became both the gelling agent for and an articulation of a new political identity in UK politics. 'The people' of the United Kingdom became a way to connect voters from different backgrounds, not through a particularly coherent policy programme, but through affective investment in quite an abstract project.[46] This can be termed as a populist logic. The fact that people *affectively* invest in the newly formed identity also explains the 'grip' that populist discourses like Trumpism have on people even in spite of good reasons to doubt the veracity of Trump's statements.[47]

Thus, not only is the Laclauian approach perfectly situated to analyse contemporary politics; it can also shed light on the lack of engagement with the *concept* of populism in IR. Excellent research on the 'populist hype' explains how populism moves beyond a mere analytical tool into a normative assessment.[48] Researchers carry a hostile predisposition to populism, which is seen as the main threat against liberal democracy, as per Jan-Werner Müller.[49] In this sense, the concept of populism is performative. It not only describes other phenomena, but itself creates political division. The distinction between the populist and the non-populist, in other words, becomes simply an exercise of who belongs to the mainstream and who does not, rather than an analysis of any specific ideological position.[50]

While Laclauian scholarship has focused on how populism can be used to construct political identities, and thereby rally different social groups and demands behind a common political cause in domestic politics,[51] we analyse how this *political logic* can be employed in the field of foreign policy. The political logic of

[46] Chiara Degano and Federico Giulio Sicurella, 'A dialogue on populism? A study of intellectual discourse about populism in the Brexit debate in Italy and the UK', in Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze, eds, *Imagining the peoples of Europe: populist discourses across the political spectrum* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2019); Michael Freeden, 'After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22: 1, 2017, pp. 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1260813.

[47] Jason Glynos, 'The grip of ideology: a Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6: 2, 2001, pp. 191–214, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310120053858; Dirk Nabers and Frank A. Stengel, 'Discourse, fantasy and anxiety in Trump's America', in John P. Allegrante et al., eds, *Anxiety culture: the new global state of human affairs* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming 2024).

[48] Benjamin De Cleen, Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon, 'Critical research on populism: nine rules of engagement', *Organization* 25: 5, 2018, pp. 649–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418768053; Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon, 'The political logic of populist hype: the case of right-wing populism's "meteoric rise" and its relation to the status quo', in Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespín, eds, *Populism and passions: democratic legitimacy after austerity* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

[49] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[50] Emmy Eklundh, 'Excluding emotions: the performative function of populism', *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 13: 1, 2020.

[51] See for example Stavrakakis et al., 'Extreme right-wing populism in Europe'; Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis, *The populist radical left in Europe* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

populism allows, for example in the case of left populism, a political actor to formulate leftist demands for economic redistribution, labour rights and international solidarity as a democratic struggle of 'the people' against 'the elite' that goes beyond class antagonism and embodies and integrates a range of frustrated societal demands.

Below, we analyse the left populism of Bernie Sanders in the United States and Podemos in Spain by showing how they articulate their leftist foreign policy positions on immigration, multilateralism and trade and thereby also forge distinct political identities such as 'the people'. Here, we depart from some other Laclau-inspired IR studies that treat these identities as given, and aim to analyse their effects on foreign policy,[52] instead examining how these identities are (re)produced in the first place and how this is evident in foreign policy. We demonstrate that Sanders and Podemos defend a radically different foreign policy and notion of 'the people' from any right-wing populism, thus refuting the statement that populism has any ideological core.

Bernie Sanders

A veteran member of the United States Congress and self-declared democratic socialist, Bernie Sanders made two bids for the US presidency, in the 2016 and 2020 contests. Though he ultimately lost the Democratic Party nomination to Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, respectively, Sanders was not only the most promising contender to vie against the two Democratic heavyweights, but also mobilized a big grassroots movement. In his campaigns, Sanders adopted a blatant populist rhetoric by pitting 'the people' against an unresponsive 'establishment'. For example, he tweeted: 'We have an economic and political crisis in this country and the same old, same old establishment politics will not effectively address it.'[53] Employing this populist logic to articulate a democratic-socialist programme, Sanders' discursive project identifies the extreme wealth inequality and the massive concentration of economic and political power in the hands of big 'corporations', 'Wall Street' and 'wealthy campaign contributors' as the root cause of this crisis that he claims has eroded US democracy.[54] Sanders's left-populist project constructs this antagonism between 'the people' and 'the establishment' not only in domestic politics, but also in foreign policy.

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[52] For example, in her otherwise very insightful study Jenne claims that 'populists argue that working-class people constitute the legitimate sovereign community and that economic elites must be excluded from government' and reject 'authority of supranational organizations such as the EU or UN … '. See Jenne, 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', pp. 331 and 332. In our opinion, these claims are somewhat at odds with the Laclauian approach, according to which populism has no essence or content and it is thus not possible to predetermine the identity of the people or its programmatic goals.

[53] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'We have an economic and political crisis in this country … ', 19 Nov. 2015, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/667421673742815232.

[54] Tara Golshan, 'Read: Bernie Sanders defines his vision for democratic socialism in the United States', *Vox*, 12 June 2019, https://www.vox.com/2019/6/12/18663217/bernie-sanders-democratic-socialism-speech-transcript.

Immigration

Immigration has been a central issue in Sanders' campaigns. Scholarship often highlights the links between populism and immigration, associating populism with sentiments against migrants, minorities and multiculturalism. While far-right politicians such as Trump regularly rail against immigrants and refugees and accuse the political establishment of putting their interests over the well-being of native citizens of a country,[55] Sanders, by contrast, blamed establishment politicians, and the Trump administration in particular, for 'demonizing … asylum-seekers' and 'the undocumented immigrants in this country'.[56] As part of his immigration reform proposal, Sanders promised to provide legal status to the eleven million undocumented immigrants in the US and to pursue a 'humane policy' that would welcome 'refugees, asylum-seekers, and families who come to the United States in search of the American Dream'.[57] In particular, Sanders criticized and promised to end the securitization and criminalization of migrants, both in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US[58] and more recently by the Trump administration.[59]

Sanders' proposed immigration policies provide important insights into the way in which he defines 'the people' he claims to represent. According to Sanders, his campaign is about 'building a multicultural, multiracial, multigenerational movement. It is about empowering working people in a system that has ignored them for far too long'.[60] In contrast to Trump, who has propagated a notion of 'the people' as a largely homogeneous and closed ethnocultural group and pitted it against ethnic and religious minorities or migrants,[61] the Sanders discourse establishes a commonality[62] between different societal groups under the label—or empty signifier—of the 'working people' who are pitted against an illegitimately wealthy and powerful 'billionaire class' who have rigged the political system through campaign donations and lobbyism.[63] Hence, in keeping with the Laclauian approach, Sanders does not simply mobilize a pre-existing people: rather, he forges a common political cause with which different groups in society can identify. By accusing the political establishment of privileging the 'billion-

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[55] Wojczewski, 'Trump, populism, and American foreign policy', pp. 303 and 305; Carlos de la Torre, 'Trump's populism', in Reinhard Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Oscar Mazzoleni, eds, *Political populism: handbook of concepts, questions and strategies of research* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024).

[56] Bernie Sanders, speech at town hall meeting, Concord, New Hampshire, 10 March 2019, https://www.pscp.tv/w/1DXxyNlevkVKM.

[57] Bernie Sanders, 'A welcoming and safe America for all', undated, https://berniesanders.com/issues/welcoming-and-safe-america-all.

[58] Bernie Sanders, 'Ending America's endless war', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 June 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-06-24/ending-americas-endless-war.

[59] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'My first executive orders will be to reverse every single thing President Trump has done to demonize and harm immigrants, including his racist and disgusting Muslim ban', 27 Jan. 2020, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1221934077466509312.

[60] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'Our campaign is about bringing millions of people into the political process for the first time … ', 7 Feb. 2020, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1225571635538857987.

[61] Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods, *The new nationalism in America and beyond: the deep roots of ethnic nationalism in the digital age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[62] Or 'chain of equivalence' in Laclau's terminology.

[63] 'Full text: Sen. Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign kickoff speech', *VTdigger*, 2 March 2019, https://vtdigger.org/2019/03/02/full-text-sen-bernie-sanders-2020-presidential-campaign-kickoff-speech.

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aire class' over native and migrant 'working people', the discourse constructs an identity of 'the people' as a disenfranchised demos and civic-nationalist community that is open to and has a moral responsibility to help national out-groups. In September 2019, Sanders tweeted: 'Trump wants to divide us up… We are about bringing people together and sharing in a common humanity'.[64] He expanded on this in early 2020: 'By joining our movement, you're joining a fight for human solidarity. You're standing against all forms of racism, bigotry and discrimination.'[65] In contrast to common assertions that 'contemporary populism' is 'anti-internationalist' and opposes 'cosmopolitanism',[66] this shows that the conception of 'the people' in Sanders' discourse goes beyond the borders of national states and has a cosmopolitan dimension, also demonstrated by his involvement in the launch of the 'Progressive International' in 2018.[67] This is not to suggest that Sanders wants to do away with the national state. Like establishment politicians and parties, Sanders acknowledges the nation-state context of contemporary (world) politics. Yet, he combines this with an internationalist vision centred around the idea of human solidarity, and aims to promote progressive change beyond his own polity.

Multilateralism

Based on this vision, Sanders made multilateralism the cornerstone of his foreign policy: ' … the key doctrine of the Sanders administration would be no, we cannot continue to do it alone; we need to work in coalition'.[68] This foreign policy approach is motivated by both practical and normative considerations. On the one hand, Sanders believes that almost all contemporary issues, ranging from terrorism to climate change, can only be addressed effectively by multilateral cooperation.[69] On the other hand, Sanders argues that the US has a moral and political responsibility to 'lead the world in improving international cooperation in the fight against climate change, militarism, authoritarianism, and global inequality'.[70] Instead of 'withdrawing from the global community', Sanders warned, 'we have got to help lead the struggle to defend and expand a rules-based international order in which law, not might, makes right'.[71] This decisively multilateral and internationalist foreign policy approach contrasts sharply with Trump's 'America First' dogma

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[64] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'Trump wants to divide us up … ', 28 Sept. 2019, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1177964204298575872.

[65] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'By joining our movement, you're joining a fight for human solidarity … ', 3 Feb. 2020, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1224127263869931521.

[66] Zürn, 'Is populism a threat or a chance for representative democracy?', pp. 240 and 254.

[67] David Adler, 'Announcing the Progressive International', Open Democracy, 11 May 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/announcing-progressive-international/.

[68] 'Bernie Sanders in MSNBC Democratic primary debate on eve of New Hampshire primary', *On the Issues*, 4 Feb. 2016, https://www.ontheissues.org/Archive/2016_MSNBC_NH_Dems_Bernie_Sanders.htm.

[69] In terms of climate change, Sanders, for example, noted: 'Sensible foreign policy understands that climate change is a real threat to every country on earth, that it is not a hoax, and that no country alone can effectively combat it. It is an issue for the entire international community … '. Alex Ward, 'Bernie Sanders's big foreign policy speech', *Vox*, 21 Sept. 2017, https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/21/16345600/bernie-sanders-full-text-transcript-foreign-policy-speech-westminster.

[70] Bernie Sanders, 'A responsible, comprehensive foreign policy', undated, https://berniesanders.com/issues/responsible-foreign-policy.

[71] Ward, 'Bernie Sanders's big foreign policy speech'.

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and his disregard for international institutions, international law and the concerns and well-being of others.[72]

However, Sanders does not simply propagate a continuation of the establishment's liberal internationalism, but rather conjures a people/elite antagonism in US foreign policy[73] and exposes the notion of the 'benevolent global hegemony' as a disguise for an often neo-imperialist, militaristic and unilateral foreign policy that has caused both domestic and global instability, insecurity, inequality and human suffering: 'Our goal should be global engagement based on partnership, rather than dominance. This is better for our security, better for global stability, and better for facilitating the international cooperation necessary to meet shared challenges.'[74] Notably, Sanders envisions a US global leadership role in a range of progressive causes such as combating climate change, militarism, the 'massive and growing wealth and income inequality', authoritarianism and the 'far-right'.[75]

For Sanders, a multilateral foreign policy starts at home and includes preventing the US president from taking 'unilateral action'[76] in important foreign policy matters and to 'reassert [Congress's] constitutional authority over matters of war'.[77] Sanders has been a staunch critic of the centralization of foreign policy-making in the White House and 'Trump's weakening of the State Dep[artmen]t'.[78] Countering these tendencies and encouraging 'a more vigorous debate about foreign policy',[79] in 2018 Sanders sponsored, for example, a bipartisan Senate resolution invoking the War Powers Act of 1973 to stop the Trump administration's support of Saudi Arabia's military campaign in Yemen.[80] The way in which Sanders uses foreign policy to conjure a people/elite antagonism and demand a multilateral foreign policy at home and abroad shows that he does not—as the Muddean thin-ideology approach suggests—define this antagonism in moral terms. Rather, he frames it as a political divide, by highlighting the post-democratic character of foreign policy-making and the negative effects of the centralization of power in domestic and world politics.

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[72] Georg Löfflmann, 'America First and the populist impact on US foreign policy', *Survival* 61: 6, 2019, pp. 115–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1688573.

[73] In Sanders' words: 'when we talk about foreign policy, and our belief in democracy, at the very top of our list of concerns is the need to revitalize American democracy to ensure that governmental decisions reflect the interests of a majority of our people, and not just the few—whether that few is Wall Street, the military industrial complex, or the fossil fuel industry'. Ward, 'Bernie Sanders's big foreign policy speech'.

[74] Ward, 'Bernie Sanders's big foreign policy speech'.

[75] Ward, 'Bernie Sanders's big foreign policy speech'.

[76] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'If Congress wants to go to war … ', 6 Jan. 2020, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1214316966141284353.

[77] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'Trump makes decisions impulsively, without explanation or congressional consultation … ', 4 Jan. 2020, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1213488748584943616.

[78] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'Trump's weakening of the State Dept, whose budget he now wants to cut by 23%, is extremely dangerous … ', 11 March 2019, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1105206546370347008.

[79] Ward, 'Bernie Sanders's big foreign policy speech'.

[80] Benjamin Wallace-Wells, 'Bernie Sanders imagines a progressive new approach to foreign policy', *New Yorker*, 13 April 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-political-scene/bernie-sanders-imagines-a-progressive-new-approach-to-foreign-policy.

Trade and finance

Sanders also conjures an antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' in trade policy. He blamed 'unfettered free trade' agreements—such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico, and the granting of Permanent Normal Trade Relations to China—for 'the decline of the manufacturing sector' and massive job losses in the US: 'Not only has our trade policy cost us millions of decent paying jobs, it has led to a race to the bottom. American workers are forced to compete against desperate workers abroad who make pennies an hour.'[81] By accusing the political establishment of pursuing a trade policy that 'benefits large multinational corporations and Wall Street, but which is a disaster for working families',[82] not only does Sanders' discourse construct an identity of the American people as underdogs, it also appears to propagate an anti-free trade narrative that corresponds to Trump's economic-nationalist 'America First' policy and that has led scholars and journalists to view the opposition to free trade as a common populist cause.[83] Indeed, we can find a dose of Trump's economic nationalism in Sanders' rhetoric: 'We have got to tell corporate America that if they want us to buy their products, they damn well better manufacture them in America'.[84]

   On closer scrutiny, however, there are clear differences between Sanders and Trump, showing that populism is merely a political logic of articulating different non-populist demands and solutions. While far-right actors such as Trump formulate a reactionary critique of neo-liberal globalization by blaming anti-national elites, immigrants and other countries for economic hardships, Sanders conjures a socialist antagonism between corporations and workers and claims that 'workers in the U.S. and abroad'[85] are victims of a flawed trade policy that benefits large corporations by allowing them to maximize profits and exploit workers on a global scale. Sanders has underscored that economic nationalism is not the solution, stating in a *Vox* interview in 2015: ' … I am an internationalist. I want to see poor people around the world see their standard of living increase.' Earlier in the same interview, he had asserted: 'I think what we need to be doing as a global economy is making sure that people in poor countries have decent-paying jobs, have education, have health care, have nutrition for their people.'[86] Accord-

[81] Bernie Sanders, 'U.S. trade policies proved disastrous for Detroit, Flint', *Detroit Free Press*, 5 March 2016, https://eu.freep.com/story/opinion/contributors/2016/03/05/us-trade-policies-proved-disastrous-detroit-flint/81339976.

[82] Bernie Sanders, 'So-called "free trade" policies hurt US workers every time we pass them', *Guardian*, 29 April 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/29/so-called-free-trade-policies-hurt-us-workers-every-time-we-pass-them.

[83] Richard Fontaine and Robert D. Kaplan, 'How populism will change foreign policy: the Bernie and Trump effects', *Foreign Affairs*, 23 May 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-05-23/how-populism-will-change-foreign-policy; Ben White, 'Trump and Sanders' common cause', Politico, 4 March, 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/04/donald-trump-bernie-sanders-trade-221506.

[84] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'We have got to tell corporate America … ', 20 May 2016, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/733689250588168192.

[85] Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders) via Twitter/X, 'I have a radical idea … ', 26 Feb. 2016, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/703335238437511172.

[86] Ezra Klein, 'Bernie Sanders: the *Vox* conversation', *Vox*, 28 July 2015, https://www.vox.com/2015/7/28/9014491/bernie-sanders-vox-conversation.

ingly, he proposed a 'fair trade' policy that makes sure that 'strong and binding labor, environmental, and human rights standards are written into the core text of all trade agreements'.[87]

Sanders' opposition to free trade reveals the emancipatory potential of populism, when he exposes the post-democratic character of free trade agreements. According to Sanders, this post-democratic character manifests—for example—in the fact that the CEOs and lobbyists of large corporations, which stand to gain enormous financial benefits from free trade agreements, are actively involved in drafting these agreements and in the self-disempowerment of Congress by granting the US president a fast-track authority.[88] Thus, conflating Sanders and Trump's trade policies under the derogatory label of populism often means that the significant differences between them are not recognized. As Sanders' proposals aim to create a level political playing field, by disempowering corporations and very wealthy individuals and redistributing wealth through higher taxes for the latter to finance his social and public investment programmes,[89] the resistance against these policies is hardly surprising and serves the preservation of existing privileges, power structures and inequalities.

Podemos

In 2014, a group of academics founded the Podemos ('We Can') party, which has been heralded as a prime example of left-wing populism in Europe.[90] Following the December 2019 general election, Podemos entered the governing coalition in Spain, led by Pedro Sánchez of the social democratic Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and also including members of the left-wing Izquierda Unida, which had fought the election in alliance with Podemos. In keeping with populism, Podemos constructed a clear divide between 'the people' and 'the elite'. However, the Podemos case also demonstrates that in terms of foreign policy there simply is no universal ideological ground that all populisms share. Rather, Podemos merely articulated its political programme through the populist logic as an expression of a people/elite antagonism and used foreign policy to reinforce this antagonistic relationship.

Immigration

Immigration is a topic of intense debate in the context of Spain, which has the European Union's only land border with Africa, formed by the small enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on Morocco's Mediterranean coast. The Spain–Morocco border has become increasingly militarized, and now consists of several layers of

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[87] Bernie Sanders, 'Fight for fair trade and workers', undated, https://berniesanders.com/issues/fair-trade.

[88] 'Sanders: Trade pact terms must be disclosed', Bernie Sanders, US Senator for Vermont, 5 Jan. 2015, https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/sanders-trade-pact-terms-must-be-disclosed.

[89] Bernie Sanders, 'How does Bernie pay for his major plans?', undated, https://berniesanders.com/issues/how-does-bernie-pay-his-major-plans.

[90] Pablo Iglesias, 'Understanding Podemos', *New Left Review*, vol. 93, 2015, pp. 5–22; Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, *Podemos: in the name of the people* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2016).

fences to deter and prevent crossings. These policies have been implemented by left-wing and right-wing governments alike, but the conservative Partido Popular (which was in government between 2011 and 2018) has been particularly keen to stop immigration into Spain. In this context, Podemos has emerged with a clear political alternative which does not follow the general trend of curbing immigration—demonstrating how the party uses foreign policy to constitute its political project by demarcating it from the political mainstream.

Podemos believes that 'the people' of Spain is not limited to native Spaniards. Rather, like Sanders, the party argues that a just society is built on an open and inclusive approach, which means protecting human rights. This has become particularly evident when Podemos entered into coalition government with PSOE. Podemos has pushed through the closure of several detention centres, arguing that they were inhumane and that asylum seekers should not be imprisoned.[91] Anti-racism lies at the heart of Podemos's ideology, and the party believes that citizenship, not nationality, should be the primary locus of politics. Podemos is also in favour of remodelling FRONTEX, the EU's border control agency, to focus more on rescuing migrants at sea in the Mediterranean, instead of simply controlling migration flows.[92]

This all emanates from a very different conceptualization of the nation in Podemos, which clearly distinguishes it from the populist right. For Podemos, the nation, or the homeland (*la patria*), which it commonly invokes in its rhetoric, is not based on blood lines and is not an ethnic category.[93] Instead, this means a commitment to shared values and contributing to the community, such as by paying taxes. This supports the idea that populism is a political logic of articulating particular political positions and not an ideology, since the differences could not be stronger between the populist right and the populist left in Spain.[94] In contrast, like other European populist right parties, Spain's Vox has strong anti-immigration rhetoric, and claims that the country is being destroyed by immigration.[95]

Multilateralism

Unlike the populist right in Spain and elsewhere, Podemos, like Sanders, is convinced of the value of multilateral institutions, especially when it comes to

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[91] Unidas Podemos, 'Programa de Podemos: 146: Cerrar los centros de internamiento de extranjeros (CIE)', undated, https://podemos.info/bloque/garantias-democraticas-ciudadania.

[92] 'Unidas Podemos señala que Eurocámara es "cómplice" de Frontex por un informe tibio con las devoluciones en caliente', Europa Press, 14 July 2021, https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-unidas-podemos-senala-eurocamara-complice-frontex-informe-tibio-devoluciones-caliente-20210714175632.html.

[93] Jacopo Custodi, 'Nationalism and populism on the left: the case of Podemos', *Nations and Nationalism*, 27: 3, 2021, pp. 705–20, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12663; Paolo Gerbaudo and Francesco Screti, 'Reclaiming popular sovereignty: the vision of the state in the discourse of Podemos and the Movimento 5 Stelle', *Javnost—The Public* 24: 4, 2017, pp. 320–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330089.

[94] This shows that 'the people' in populist discourses serves as an empty signifier that can be inscribed with fundamentally different meanings.

[95] Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte, 'Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox', *Research and Politics* 6: 2, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019851680; Davide Vampa, 'Competing forms of populism and territorial politics: the cases of Vox and Podemos in Spain', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28: 3, 2020, pp. 304–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1727866.

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protecting human rights and distributing wealth more evenly at the global level. Podemos even goes so far as to argue that states are faced with a choice between 'cooperation or barbarism', with a clear nod to the Marxist legacy of Rosa Luxemburg.[96] The party asserted in 2021 that 'in the face of reaction, identitarian rallies and exclusionary nationalisms, a new internationalism is more important than ever before'.[97] Podemos positions itself as representative of the majority, who face challenges from a violent minority. While this could be seen as typical populist rhetoric, the policy content of this articulation is very different from that of the populist right. Podemos's strong support for civil society, and in particular for the international feminist and environmentalist movements, demonstrates how the party believes in a type of multilateralism. Podemos has a longstanding commitment to human rights and the promotion of global justice, and advocates for international aid to be increased to meet the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) set by the United Nations General Assembly in 1970.[98] While this target has yet to be achieved by Spain, the level of its international aid rose after Podemos entered government alongside the PSOE, reaching 0.34 per cent of GNI by October 2022.[99] This stands in stark contrast to the stance of populist right parties that typically argue for lowering the level of international aid.[100]

Another central issue for Podemos is the environment. The party contends that 'we need to make use of the opportunity that the existing international framework offers and raise its ambition'.[101] Podemos also emphasizes the social costs of climate change and argues, in opposition to right-wing populists,[102] that any Global Green Pact must also transfer resources to those most affected economically by environmental challenges.

Podemos's commitment to multilateralism also became very evident during the COVID–19 pandemic. While many right-wing populists in Spain and elsewhere opposed lockdowns and argued against following the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO), Podemos stood at the forefront of implementing lockdown measures in early 2020.[103] As such, it is difficult to argue that there is a coherent 'populist' response to the pandemic, which supports our view that populism is a political logic of articulating different non-populist demands. We can clearly see that Podemos's ideological content is vastly different than that of

[96] Podemos, *Documento político*, 2021, p. 51, https://podemos.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021_07_Doc_politico.pdf.

[97] Podemos, *Documento político*.

[98] Podemos, *Queremos, sabemos, Podemos. Un programa para cambiar nuestro país : elecciones generales 20 de diciembre de 2015* (Secretaría de programa y proceso constituyente de Podemos, 2015), p. 230.

[99] Government of Spain, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperations, 'Exteriores duplica en dos años el presupuesto de la AECID hasta los 700 millones', 12 Oct. 2022, https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/Comunicacion/NotasPrensa/Paginas/2022_NOTAS_P/20221012_NOTA081.aspx.

[100] Falk Ostermann and Bernhard Stahl, 'Theorizing populist radical-right foreign policy: ideology and party positioning in France and Germany', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 18: 3, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac006.

[101] Podemos, *Documento político*, p. 54 (authors' translation).

[102] Matthew Lockwood, 'Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: exploring the linkages', *Environmental Politics* 27: 4, 2018, pp. 712–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1458411.

[103] Government of Spain, 'Boletín oficial de Estado, Número 67', 14 March 2020, https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2020/03/14/pdfs/BOE-A-2020-3692.pdf.

Vox, for instance. The latter has consistently criticized multilateral organizations and is particularly hostile to WHO policies.[104]

Trade and finance

Podemos exhibits clear populist characteristics in the way it interpellates and mobilizes 'the people'.[105] In the party's view, it is clear that popular power has been on an ever-decreasing trajectory, and this has become painfully evident in the aftermath of the eurozone crisis.[106] Spain was forced into a period of structural adjustment after the 2008 financial crisis, when conditions stipulated cuts in public spending which were detrimental to the welfare of the Spanish population.[107] In 2013 unemployment in Spain exceeded 26 per cent.[108] Interestingly, the commitment to austerity was present both in the centre-right and centre-left in Spain, which made it very easy to posit a political alternative and construct a people/elite antagonism in domestic politics and foreign policy.[109] For Podemos, the main antagonist which prevents popular sovereignty is *la casta*, the economic and political elite. Importantly, this does not contain ethnic elements present in ideologies on the far-right, where the term 'globalists' often carries clear anti-Semitic connotations.[110] Rather, Podemos points to structural inequalities within the eurozone as the main cause of Spain's problems. Indeed, the design of the eurozone, with its one-size-fits-all interest rates,[111] has had a very uneven impact which has been particularly detrimental for economies in southern Europe. While joining the euro (and the EU) has often been seen as a positive development for Spain, critical voices claim that this collaboration has been seen to benefit countries in the European centre but not those at the periphery.

Like Sanders, Podemos explicitly advocates for a new form of international financial governance—unlike many right-wing populist elements. Podemos is in favour of a Tobin tax on financial transactions and implemented, as part of the coalition government with PSOE, this tax in Spain in January 2021.[112] The party also opposed the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)

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[104] Lisa Zanotti and Stuart James Turnbull-Dugarte, 'Surviving but not thriving: VOX and Spain in times of COVID-19', *Government and Opposition*, publ. online 22 March 2022, p. 5, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.7.

[105] Alexandros Kioupkiolis, 'Podemos: the ambiguous promises of left-wing populism in contemporary Spain', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21: 2, 2016, pp. 99–120, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1150136.

[106] Donatella Della Porta, Hara Kouki and Joseba Fernández, 'Left's love and hate for Europe: Syriza, Podemos, and critical visions of Europe during the crisis', in Manuela Caiani and Simona Guerra, eds, *Euroscepticism, democracy and the media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 219–40.

[107] Kevin Featherstone, 'Conditionality, democracy and institutional weakness: the Euro-crisis trilemma', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54: S1, 2016, pp. 48–64, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12411; Guillem Vidal, 'Challenging business as usual? The rise of new parties in Spain in times of crisis', *West European Politics* 41: 2, 2018, pp. 261–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1376272.

[108] International Labour Organization, 'ILOStat explorer', https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer15/.

[109] Hence, in the Laclauian terminology, Podemos forges a 'chain of equivalence' between different demands that transforms these demands into a common cause by pitting them against a common enemy that is blamed for frustrating these demands.

[110] Wojczewski, 'The international cooperation of the populist radical right', pp. 12–13.

[111] Featherstone, 'Conditionality, democracy and institutional weakness'.

[112] Podemos, *Queremos, sabemos, Podemos*, p. 220; Fernando Heller, 'Spain's new Google and Tobin taxes to generate about €1 billion this year', *Euractiv*, 18 Jan. 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/spains-new-google-and-tobin-taxes-to-generate-about-e1-billion-this-year/.

and wants to instate a blacklist of tax havens in order to combat tax evasion.[113] Podemos thus posits international financial elites as directly opposed to the people. It is important to note here that right-wing populists tend to favour a more *laissez-faire* approach to trade and finance than left-wing populists, and are not advocating for stronger rules in financial governance.[114]

Spain's trade policy is controlled by its EU membership, but Spain's voice in the EU is nevertheless important. The PSOE–Podemos coalition did not make any radical moves when it came to implementing free trade beyond European borders. Given that Spain is a major agricultural producer in the EU, the coalition was in favour of restricting the import of agricultural goods from third countries, which is currently strictly regulated. Like Sanders, Podemos does not believe in unfettered free trade, believing that it gives too much power to the market.[115] For Podemos, the state has a crucial role to play, and has been the main motor in economic recovery after the COVID–19 crisis.[116] Much of Podemos's foreign policy therefore has a clear economic focus: Podemos argues that the injustice committed by the 'troika' (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) requires a new sense of politics, and a partial return to the nation-state.[117] This return to the nation-state does not necessarily indicate a xenophobic or intolerant world-view, but in contrast to much of right-wing populist politics, Podemos envisions 'the people' as a more inclusionary unit and propagates an internationalist foreign policy.[118]

Conclusion

In this article we have provided a critique of the predominant use of the populism concept in current IR research and the widespread association of populism with radical right politics. We propose the Laclauian conception of populism as political logic as an alternative, which, as we have illustrated with an analysis of two prominent cases of left-wing populism, is more suited to the malleability of populism.

The predominant use of populism in IR, we argue, is analytically unsatisfactory and has unintended negative consequences for the kind of political solutions to the 'global rise of populism' it informs.[119] Specifically, we argue that the bulk of IR populism research still falls short of its goal to distinguish populism from related phenomena. This, we caution, is particularly problematic for any analyt-

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[113] Podemos, *Queremos, sabemos, Podemos*, p. 220; Podemos, *Documento politico*, p. 53.

[114] See for example Valentina Ausserladscheider, 'Constructing a neoliberal exclusionary state: the role of far-right populism in economic policy change in post-war Austria', *Comparative European Politics* pp. 128–52, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00315-3.

[115] Podemos, *Documento político*, p. 46.

[116] Podemos, *Podemos ante el acuerdo para la reconstrucción de la UE*, 21 July 2020, https://podemos.info/podemos-ante-el-acuerdo-para-la-reconstruccion-de-la-ue/.

[117] Podemos, *Documento final del programa colaborativo*, 27 May 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20140527140956/http://podemos.info/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Programa-Podemos.pdf; Podemos, *Podemos ante la negativa del Eurogrupo de adoptar medidas contra el COVID-19*, 25 March 2020, https://podemos.info/podemos-ante-la-negativa-del-eurogrupo-de-adoptar-medidas-contra-el-covid-19.

[118] Podemos, *Documento político*, pp. 34–6 and 50.

[119] Benjamin Moffitt, *The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

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ical endeavour concerned with the effects of populism, which are impossible to know if the phenomenon is defined so broadly that it effectively merges with related phenomena such as nationalism or authoritarianism.[120] Ultimately, by blurring the line between dangerous and harmless (or even decidedly democratic) 'populist' actors, this conflation also undermines our ability to formulate adequate policy responses. For instance, any effective response to challenges to the current LIO will require at least a broad idea of whether these challenges are motivated by populism, nationalism, authoritarianism or a critique of neo-liberal economic policies[121]—to name just a few factors that might possibly explain why different 'populists' are united in a critique of (different aspects of) the status quo.

Based on the Laclauian approach, we have advanced the argument that populism is better understood as a political logic and thus as an ideologically empty messaging vehicle that can be used to pursue fundamentally different political goals and ideologies in foreign policy. Hence, populism cannot be analysed as a stand-alone phenomenon in IR, because it does not predetermine the identity of the people, the programmatic goals or the actions of the politicians, parties and movements that employ the populist logic. The Laclauian conception captures what all different types of populism have in common—they articulate collective demands and identities by drawing an antagonistic boundary between 'the people' and 'the elite'—but avoids, through the notion of the populist logic of articulation, concept-stretching and the conflation of different political phenomena under the label of populism. IR scholarship generally assumes that we can neatly separate the populist ideology from the non-populist host ideology and then analyse the effects of populism on foreign policy. Instead, our Laclauian approach not only notes that populism lacks the political substance to be called an ideology, but asserts that the populist logic merely articulates non-populist political demands, from the far left to the far right. It also asserts that such political demands decisively shape how populism's core categories are defined, as well as the programmatic goals of a particular political project.

Using the cases of Bernie Sanders and Podemos, we have demonstrated that these two left-wing populist actors propagate an explicitly internationalist, multilateral and pro-immigrant foreign policy and thus the exact opposite of what most scholars and practitioners typically associate with 'populist' foreign policy. Hence, while populism can influence the form in which political positions and identities are articulated, and the manner in which they use foreign policy as a potential site for constructing the people/elite antagonism, by projecting popular grievances onto a flawed foreign policy, it does not result in any shared foreign policy outlook. Rather, the very different ways in which 'the people' and 'the elites' are conceptualized in different political projects shape foreign policy preferences and actions. At the level of politics, our analysis shows that populism does not

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[120] Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'How should we analyze the connections between populism and nationalism: a response to Rogers Brubaker', *Nations and Nationalism* 26: 2, 2020, pp. 314–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12575.

[121] Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy', *Political Studies* 47: 1, 1999, pp. 2–16 at p. 4, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184.

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necessarily lead to a personalization, centralization and simplification of foreign policy-making, as suggested by some IR studies.[122] The case of Podemos shows that left-wing populists in power do not necessarily bypass or delegitimize intermediary institutions and propagate simple solutions to complex policy problems such as climate change. Sanders, in contrast, strongly criticized the centralization of foreign policy-making and sought to promote its democratization by strengthening the US Congress and encouraging a more vigorous public debate on foreign policy matters. At the polity level, Podemos and Sanders are primarily concerned with restoring and widening democracy, rather than fundamentally revising domestic and global political institutions.

The main implication of this analysis is that we should always understand populism as a dimension of specific political projects, in so far as populist actors adopt a specific antagonistic view of society and political identities, but populism itself does not define their political programme and actions. Thus, it neither makes sense to analyse the foreign policies of 'populists', nor to devise a strategy for dealing with 'populists'. By foregrounding the concept of populism and referring to politicians and parties such as Trump in the US or the Alternative für Deutschland, Front National/Rassemblement National in France or Vox in Spain simply as populists, IR scholars, journalists and policy-makers have unintentionally contributed to the mainstreaming of a regressive foreign policy agenda characterized by chauvinistic nationalism, xenophobia, racism and anti-globalism. By discussing these positions under the label of populism, actors frame them as the legitimate, but frustrated democratic demands of the 'common people'. The reified association of populism with these foreign policy preferences is the result of the selection bias in favour of right-wing populism and the lack of a more systematic engagement with left populism in the US and Europe. By searching—in keeping with the Muddean ideational approach—for the common ideological denominator between radically different political actors (for example, moralism, a homogeneous idea of the people, or the personalization and centralization of political power), IR scholarship risks delegitimizing potentially legitimate criticism of the establishment's foreign policy, which does at times need to be questioned to avoid counterproductive policy results.

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[122] See, for example, Plagemann and Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy'.