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# IS POPULISM INHERENTLY ILLIBERAL? INSIGHTS FROM KIRCHNERISM AND SYRIZA IN POWER

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## ABSTRACT

This article delves into the academic discussion on the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, challenging the view that all populist movements, parties, and leaders are inherently illiberal. Drawing from a Laclauian perspective, which frames populism as an integral part of democratic politics that amplifies the voices of marginalized groups, we argue that populism can align with the principles of liberal democracy and/or does not necessarily lead to illiberal democracy or authoritarianism. Through the examination of left-wing populist cases in Argentina [Kirchnerism (2003-2015)] and Greece [SYRIZA (2015-2019)], we aim to demonstrate the inadequacy of approaches that understand populism as an inherently illiberal phenomenon, which often overlook the pluralistic and inclusive aspects of populism. Thus, we provide a response to this query: Is every populist case necessarily illiberal?

KEYWORDS: populism; liberal democracy; illiberalism; Kirchnerism; SYRIZA.

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that we reside in an era characterized by heightened political activity marked by remarkable populist figures and manifestos with a heretical discourse. Populists blast against mainstream (or establishment) parties that fail to meet political and economic challenges, sparking a debate within the academic community (and beyond) regarding

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the relationship between populism and liberal democracy (Lukacs 2005; Cannon 2013; Grattan 2016; Mudde 2016). The forceful return of populism to the political forefront internationally, especially after the outbreak of the global economic crisis, has alarmed the dominant political and economic establishment, as well as all those scholars and intellectuals who claim to defend a liberal, democratic, and pluralist society. The agony of the mainstream parties over a possible collapse of the West political system and the modern way of political governance, which, however, is fraught with major structural problems [see: postdemocracy (Crouch 2004)], has led to the development of anti-populist approaches, which often follow modernization theory, that present populism as a negative phenomenon for liberal democracy while associating it with irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, irrationalism and so on (Stavrakakis 2014; 2017).

Many scholars in populism studies adopt the rationale of an inherently illiberal form of the phenomenon. The notion of “illiberal populism” typically understands populism as a threat to liberal democratic values and institutions, emphasizing its supposedly negative aspects, such as its authoritarian and anti-pluralist tendencies, its disregard for minority rights, and its capacity to undermine liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> By way of illustration, the Greek political scientist Takis Pappas distinguishes the ways of governing modern democracy between a liberal and a populist one, rejecting their possible coexistence, while he considers that populists in power turn against the institutions of liberal democracy, such as freedom of the press and independent justice (Pappas 2020). Stefans Rummens (2017) observes that while populism serves as a symptom, revealing an inherent dysfunction within our liberal democratic system, it lacks the capacity to serve as the corrective solution. Rather, it should be regarded as a significant menace to democracy. Nonetheless, the subsequent inquiries emerge in this context: Is populism inherently at odds with the concept of liberal democracy? Is every populist case necessarily illiberal? Is it useful to characterize populist cases with pluralistic and inclusive dimensions as illiberal?

In this paper, recognizing populism as a discourse that unifies various social demands within a political alliance against the establishment/elite (a Laclauian approach), we critically examine approaches to populism that embrace the idea that populism is inherently illiberal (or authoritarian), given that “illiberal populism” is a concept that completely denies

1 Crouch (2004) supported that we live in a post-democratic era, namely in a period in which the political elite tends to be furthest removed from the people it is supposed to represent.

2 The concept of “illiberal populism” is not necessarily equated with a harsh authoritarian logic. For example, Pappas refers to populism as “democratic illiberalism” (Pappas 2012; 2014).

the development of populist mobilizations that do not necessarily harm the principles of liberal democracy. On the contrary, it even turns a blind eye to contemporary populist cases that either demonstrate respect for liberal values or occasionally defend certain aspects of them. Thus, initially, we outline the key arguments of the international literature concerning the relationship between populism and liberal democracy. After that, examining the political discourse, policies, and mode of governance of two left-wing populist cases in Argentina and Greece [(Kirchnerism (2003-2015) and SYRIZA (2015-2019))] we elucidate why the scheme of illiberal populism falls short in explaining the phenomenon. Specifically, while these two populist cases can be criticized for certain aspects of their politics, we do not believe that the concept of “illiberal populism” is particularly useful, as it does not fully capture the complexity of this phenomenon.

We approach political discourse through the discourse analysis of the Essex School, seeking to identify the internal core of the discourse (nodal points) (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 112-113), “the dichotomization of the social space” and “the discursive construction of an enemy” (Laclau 2005: 38-39). Simultaneously, we examine how populists articulate their discourse as well as the key concepts that accompany the nodal points, revealing the progressive/reactionary or inclusive/exclusive nature of each populist manifestation. Additionally, we shed light on the policies they implement in power and their modes of governance, by examining both the historical context and the critiques presented in the international literature.

## THE NEXUS BETWEEN POPULISM AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The debate over the populist phenomenon has escalated in recent years. Within international literature, numerous theories endeavor to address and delineate the populist phenomenon, while also scrutinizing its effects on liberal democracy. A significant number of articles and books have been written on the subject, in which various divergent theoretical traditions often collide with each other. It is apparent that scholars are deeply concerned with the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, recognizing the profound impact of populism on democratic processes and the operation of the political system.<sup>3</sup> How do they examine the relationship between populism and liberal democracy?

3 Paris Aslanidis attempted to categorize the contemporary literature on the relationship between populism and democracy. He identified two main groups: on one side, liberal-minded researchers emphasizing the negative impacts of populism on liberal democracy; on the other, two subgroups: the first subgroup that is influenced by mainstream liberal liter-

A significant portion of the literature on populism vehemently criticizes it, arguing that the *modus operandi* of populists contradicts the foundational norms of liberal democracy. This perspective identifies populism as an illiberal phenomenon that does not respect the rule of law and the separation of powers, undermines minority rights, and often relies on clientelism to sustain its grip on power over extended periods. Furthermore, several scholars who adhere to this approach believe that populism is necessary antidemocratic and authoritarian. Jan-Werner Müller, a theorist who recently contributed to the debate on populism with a highly polemical work, analyzing it through a moralistic lens (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2017), supports that “the opposite of populism is not elitism, but pluralism, and populism is by [...] definition illiberal.” (Müller 2011). According to him, populism “is a profoundly illiberal and, in the end, directly undemocratic understanding of representative democracy (Müller 2014: 484)”, while it is “ – inevitably moralizing and monist – and itself can hardly function as a corrective” (Müller, 2014: 491). In a similar vein, Yascha Mounk (2020) contends that populists erode the liberal facets of the political system by targeting the rights of marginalized individuals or unpopular minorities. They leverage their claim of representing the people to resist any attempt to limit their power, thus emerging as staunch adversaries of the principles of the rule of law and the separation of powers. This tendency embodies what he terms as “illiberal democracy” (Mounk 2020). Following the same reasoning, Takis Pappas argues that populism proposes a model of democracy that prioritizes fulfilling the interests of a specific segment of society (referred to as the “people”), even when this violates the principle of the universality of institutions (Pappas 2020), while he defines it as *democratic illiberalism* (Pappas 2014). As he points out, a necessary element of the ruling populism is the reduction of the institutions of liberal democracy, which presupposes the overthrow of the state and the partisanship of the public administration (Pappas 2019). On his part, Stefan Rummens (2017, 568) underlines that “the antagonistic relation between populism and liberal democracy implies that populism can never operate as a corrective to the democratic system”.

A number of scholars accept some aspects of the aforementioned approach, considering populism as almost incompatible with liberal

ature and adopts pejorative connotations of populism but restricts the label to radical right-wing phenomena and the second subgroup that challenges this normative stance, portraying populism as an originally progressive political outlook rather than an accusation, rejecting its use to characterize right-wing episodes. Additionally, he refers a large gray area where some scholars insist that populism is nothing more than “a Cold War-era insult” utilized to bolster the “theory of the two extremes,” which equates communism with fascism (Aslanidis 2015, 94).

democracy.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, apart from emphasizing a discussion around the negative aspects of populism, they also develop the perspective that populism can be a corrective for liberal democracy. In particular, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 84) support that populism can have both a positive and a negative effect on liberal democracy. For instance, as they argue, populism gives voice to constituencies that do not feel represented by the elite, while populist forces can end up attacking minorities and eroding those institutions that specialize in the protection of fundamental rights (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 84). Moreover, they emphasize that populism can take different forms due to its “chameleonic” character (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 153), underlining two different types, *inclusionary* and *exclusionary* form: some of the cases are primarily characterized by a socio-economic dimension (including of the poor), while others are predominantly defined by a socio-cultural dimension (excluding the “aliens”) (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 167).<sup>5</sup> Rummens (2017) criticizes those people who embrace an ideational approach to populism and acknowledge it both as a threat and a corrective for democracy. As he states, this understanding of the democratic potential of populism is deeply problematic because populism is incompatible with both the liberal and the democratic dimensions of liberal democracy. According to him “since the populist ideology implies a genuine commitment to the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous collective, it has an essentially exclusionary nature: it cannot accept those individuals who do not conform to its understanding of the collective identity as full members of society. As a consequence, populism cannot itself function as an inclusionary corrective for the malfunctions of liberal democracy” (Rummens 2017).

Despite the objections of Rummens, it is obvious that some scholars recognize the possibility of developing a populist mobilization with inclusive and pluralistic elements. For some of them, however, the inclusivity of left-wing populism is evident at a social level but does not extend to the political level. Specifically, Robert A. Huber and Christian H. Schimpf

4 According to (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 82), populism “tends to distrust any unelected institution that limits the power of the demos” and as a result it “can develop into a form of democratic extremism or, better said, of illiberal democracy”.

5 According to Dani Filc, who contributes to this interesting discussion on different types of populism, “inclusive populist movements stress the notion of the people as plebeians, thereby allowing the political integration of excluded social groups and, in the process, enlarging the boundaries of democracy”, while “exclusionary populism emphasizes the organic understanding of the ‘people’ as an ethnically or culturally homogeneous unit” (Filc 2015, 265). It is not coincidental that there are inclusionary populist parties that do not undermine the quality of democracy but rather enhance it through various means, prioritizing the construction of a pluralistic society. In the words of Stavrakakis et. al (2016, 459) in the Greek context, “right-wing populism is exclusionary and identity-focused, while left-wing populism is more inclusive and pluralist.”

(2017) examine the relationship between left-wing and right-wing populists and democracy. According to them, left-wing populism defines the people on a class basis, referring primarily to the poor, while right-wing populism defines the people on a cultural or nativist basis. Thus, left-wing populism differs from right-wing populism as it embraces an inclusive view of society. However, according to them, left-wing populism does not accept political competition and considers “political control through effective opposition and institutional power check mechanisms as obstacles that prevent them from implementing the people’s will.” As a result, left-wing populism appears inclusive at a social dimension but exclusive and anti-pluralistic in public discourse and power control (political dimension), whereas right-wing populism is exclusive in all dimensions (Huber and Schimpf 2017, 148).

Finally, some scholars oppose “mainstream” approaches, rejecting the examination of populism as a pathology of democracy, as illiberal phenomenon, or as an ideology with a homogeneous popular subject. Contrary to that, they recognize it as a discursive logic that divides society between “the people” and “the elites” and as a fundamental component of a democratic perspective, with its main representatives being Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Essex School of Discourse Analysis). As noted by Laclau, populism starts where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic alternative to the ideology of the dominant bloc (Laclau 1983, 195).<sup>6</sup> According to Mouffe (Apostolova and Christov 2018), there exists an intrinsic dimension of populism within democracy, as the establishment of a people’s constitution is imperative for the existence of democracy. Consequently, populism has the potential to enhance the quality of contemporary (post-) democracy. The fact that the economic crisis of the early 21st century and the issues arising from the neoliberal model have led democracy into a crisis has prompted Mouffe to conclude that there is an urgent need for a democratic populist strategy that will strengthen and radicalize democracy. Nonetheless, as she mentions “the process of radicalizing democratic institutions will no doubt include moments of rupture and a confrontation with the dominant economic interests. It is a “radical reformist” strategy that comports an anti-capitalist dimension but that does not require relinquishing liberal-democratic institutions” (Mouffe 2019, 9-10). The difference, of course, in the approach of

6 Arditì (2010) underlines that Laclau structures his theory of populism around six steps: “(1) When a series of social demands cannot be absorbed differentially by institutional channels, they become (2) unsatisfied demands that enter into a relationship of solidarity or equivalence with one another and (3) crystallize around common symbols that (4) can be capitalized by leaders who interpellate the frustrated masses and thus begin to incarnate a process of popular identification that (5) constructs “the people” as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of (6) demanding regime change” (Arditì 2010, 489).

the Essex School compared to ideational (and other) approaches is that it understands populism as a discourse in which unsatisfied (and heterogeneous) demands coalesce against the establishment/elite (Laclau 1983, 195). Specifically, populism articulates heterogeneous social demands against a common enemy who fails to satisfy these demands (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, 123), implying that it is imbued with a pluralist character when it does not take on a nationalist character.

Stavrakakis (2018) examines the relationship between populism and (liberal) democracy, contending that the nexus between them hinges on one's conceptualization of democracy, be it liberal, participatory, or radical. Moreover, he posits that populism can become a vehicle for advancing a radical democratic agenda by allowing marginalized sectors to emerge, gain concessions, and influence decision-making processes (Stavrakakis 2018, 35). In a similar vein of thought, De Cleen contends that populism does not inherently pose a threat to democracy and democratic pluralism. He posits that populism is not fundamentally anti-pluralist, as it does not necessarily seek to erase the distinctions between diverse groups and their respective demands encapsulated within the concept of "the people" (De Cleen and Galanopoulos 2016).<sup>7</sup>

Taking into account the aforementioned positions of the Essex School (Laclau, Mouffe, Glynos, Stavrakakis, De Cleen, etc.), in turn, we recognize populism as a constitutive element of democratic politics and underscore its ability to forge alliances that can contribute to the enhancement of democratic institutions under certain conditions. Hence, we understand populism as a logic that entails the presence of an antagonistic relation between "the people" (or the underdog, the ordinary people, etc.) and "the elite" (or the establishment/the powerful/the regime, etc.) that is structured around a vertical down/up (high-low) axis that refers to power, status and hierarchical position (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 311). According to this post-structuralist approach, the notion of "the people" occupies a central position in populist discourse, functioning as a nodal point. As outlined by Laclau and Mouffe (2001, 112) "any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, nodal points." Moreover, populism entails a reference to an equivalential process, bringing together different societal demands and identities ("chain of equivalence") which, despite its internal heterogeneity, is unified by a sentiment of frustration or perceived threat experienced by the popular classes towards the establishment (De Cleen,

7 We should not forget to mention that there is another theoretical approach that recognizes populism as "a plebeian reaction against oligarchic domination" and considers "the class-based plebeian identity of the people of populism" as "inclusive" (Vergara 2020).

Glynos, and Mondon 2018, 652). Based on the above, De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon, (2018, 653) argue that populism is not a “populist style, demagoguery or opportunism, a synonym for political outsider, a synonym for the radical right, nationalism and authoritarianism.” Regarding the issue of authoritarianism, the three scholars emphasize that “the logic of populism can be found in certain authoritarian politics, but not all populist politics are authoritarian, and not all authoritarian politics are populist” (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018, 653).

Consequently, within the context of a liberal democracy, populism is not necessarily a threat. It is important to clarify that we are not suggesting a fundamental alignment between populism and liberalism, particularly since liberal logic is not imbued with the characteristics attributed by populism to the political scene, such as passions<sup>8</sup> and antagonism [or “agonism” as argued by Mouffe (2000)]<sup>9</sup>. Rather, our emphasis lies in highlighting that populism does not consistently manifest as an illiberal and anti-pluralist (or authoritarian) phenomenon. Indeed, as we will demonstrate, there are populist administrations that do not threaten liberal democratic principles and institutions, while also showing concern for minority rights.

### LEFT-WING POPULISM IN ARGENTINA AND GREECE: DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES AND GOVERNMENTAL STYLES

Left-wing populism witnessed a resurgence in the early 21st century, particularly evident in Latin America and Southern Europe. This resurgence is exemplified by several notable instances, including SYRIZA in Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Markou 2017), Podemos in Spain (Kioupiolios 2016; Agustín and Briziarelli 2018), the Kirchners in Argentina (Levy 2017), Morales in Bolivia (Brienen 2016), Chavez in Venezuela (Hawkins 2010) and López Obrador in Mexico (Ulfsgard 2023), all of which mobilized popular support against the establishment/elites. Some of these cases present significant commonalities between them, not only in discursive logic and strategies but also in the socio-political context within which they emerged, as observed with the left-wing populists in Argentina and Greece.

8 According to Mouffe (2013, 6), “it is impossible to understand democratic politics without acknowledging ‘passions’ as the driving force in the political field”.

9 For Mouffe (2000), there is a distinction between antagonism (that is a struggle between enemies) and agonism (that is a struggle between adversaries). For her, envisaging from the perspective of “agonistic pluralism”, the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism. Agonistic model does not aim to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public but to mobilize them towards democratic designs. (Mouffe 2000, 16)



Latin America and the Balkan countries, regardless of the considerable distance between them, share plentiful cultural, historical, and political features (Mouzelis 1986). Argentina and Greece are noted for their significant similarities within these regions, characterized by parallel cultural trajectories and shared sociopolitical and economic features in modernity (Kefala 2007, 4). It is not coincidental that some scholars have recently proceeded with comparing these regions and countries, such as Costas Melas (2015), who conducted a comparative analysis of the economic developments in Argentina and Greece following the recent economic crises, and Enrico Padoan (2021) who compared anti-neoliberal populisms in Latin America and Southern Europe, including these countries in his analysis. One prominent similarity between Argentina and Greece lies in the prevalence of populism, exemplified by iconic figures such as Juan Domingo Peron and Andreas Papandreou. Not only that, but these countries exhibit also a persistent dichotomic political spectrum over time, marked by left-right and low-high (populist and anti-populist) axes, leading to a fervent contestation between populism and anti-populism. It is noteworthy that Argentina and Greece also present mutual anti-populist narratives, as evidenced by schemes such as “civilization or barbarism” in Argentina and “cultural dualism” in Greece (Markou 2021a; 2024).

In both countries, this shared trajectory of populist and anti-populist dynamics appears to have persisted in recent years. This is evidenced by the emergence of left-wing populist forces opposing the neoliberal policies implemented by anti-populist forces in response to the recent economic crises. Specifically, Argentina and Greece stand out as two countries where left-wing populist parties (Kirchnerism and SYRIZA, respectively) surged to power emphatically before some years. These parties positioned themselves against the prevailing political and economic establishment, advocating for economic reform and the resolution of their respective countries’ challenges through democratic processes. They espoused a populist rhetoric that opposed neoliberal forces, accentuating the prospect of enhancing living standards for the popular classes and upholding human rights (see: Markou 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Levy 2017). Certainly, in the Greek context, SYRIZA gradually modified its political agenda and discourse, while continuing to implement austerity policies by signing a new Memorandum (Markou 2021b).

The rise of these two populist examples provoked some reactions within the academic sphere. Specifically, some scholars take a critical stance towards the phenomenon of populism and posit that both political factions may have adopted illiberal tactics or veered toward authoritarianism during their tenure in governance. Regarding the case of Argentina, Andrés Velasco (2015), in an article against “illiberal governments”, char-

acterized the Kirchner era as arrogant autarchy, explaining that the two leaders did not hesitate to use the power of the state to perpetuate themselves in power, harassing opposition newspapers, manipulating judicial investigations, and abolishing the independence of the central bank. On their behalf, Mainwaring and Scully (2010, 384), explained that Argentina has developed a stable democratic regime, notwithstanding periodic episodes of governmental instability, most notably in 2001-2, and despite the “authoritarian instincts” of the Kirchners. Even Pablo Stefanoni, who highlighted the positive aspects of the Kirchner era, such as same-sex marriage, improvements in real wages, increased consumption, and significant developments in the trials of military figures involved with the dictatorship, emphasized, among others, that Kirchners turned towards authoritarian rhetoric (Stefanoni 2019).

Shifting our focus to Greece, some scholars have also characterized SYRIZA as an illiberal party and as a threat to representative democracy. For instance, a briefing paper from the V-Dem Institute positions SYRIZA on the illiberal left spectrum in a graph, but at some distance from left-wing parties in Latin America (such as SPUV, PAIS, MAS), having fewer degrees of illiberalism compared to those (Lührmann, Medzihorsky, Hindle, and Lindberg 2020: 1). According to Pappas (2019), during its governance, SYRIZA weakened the institutions and led the state to be overrun by politically appointed individuals. Moreover, it failed to perform adequately in critical sectors such as civil protection, energy, education, and healthcare while transforming the state administration into a mere tool for satisfying personal ambitions and party interests (Pappas 2019).

But is that the reality? Is it proper to characterize Kirchnerism and SYRIZA in government as illiberal? What about their inclusionary and progressive discourse and policies? Can we examine a governmental party without taking into account the political system, the political period, and the functioning of democracy in general? And, what about the role of anti-populists?

### THE CASE OF KIRCHNERISM (2003-2015)

Kirchner's ascent to power in 2003 was emblematic of a broader left-wing populist movement across Latin America, exemplified by leaders such as Chávez, Morales, and Correa, who endorsed a novel democratic vision and advocated for alternative economic models (Gratius 2007). In Argentina, the economic crisis of 2001 and the questioning of the neoliberal project of the previous decade provided an opportunity for the emergence of a new figure within the Peronist party through a broad political alliance (Frente para la Victoria), which incorporated diverse ideas internally. Néstor Kirchner's sudden emergence onto the national stage in 2003 was

significantly facilitated by the support of the outgoing interim president, Eduardo Duhalde (Levy 2017, 21). Kirchner (2003-2007) was succeeded by his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who served for two terms (2007-2015). Despite succeeding her husband in the presidency, she endeavored to establish herself as a “political powerhouse” in her own right (Casullo 2019: 65).

What kind of political discourse did Kirchnerism express? Applying the discourse analysis of the Essex School, we can argue that Kirchner’s discourse can be characterized as populist, as it largely relied on the nodal point of “the people”, dividing society between “the people” and “the establishment”. He constructed a heterogeneous popular subject, which included every citizen of the country, the working class, the poor, Indigenous people, youth, the people of favelas, activists, and various vulnerable social groups, alongside social organizations, human rights groups, and movements. Besides, Kirchner stood by human rights movements (e.g., Mothers and the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo), as well as movements against neoliberalism, poverty, and unemployment (Levy, 2017, p. 30). Overall, Kirchner’s populist discourse was inclusive and progressive, as he did not exclude any social group from his people for nativist reasons, unlike right-wing populists who often do. On the other hand, the enemies of the popular classes that Kirchner constructed were connected with the economic crisis of 2001, the social uprising, and the neoliberal model of the preceding governmental periods, including Menemism, neoliberalism, the political and economic establishment, the IMF, privatized companies, multinational corporations, parts of the military involved in the dictatorship, and the Supreme Court judges accused by Kirchner of corruption and favoritism (see more: Biglieri 2007, 61-84). Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the successor of Kirchner, continued to closely adhere to the populist logic and vision established by her predecessor. However, she also counted the mainstream media among her enemies. The way in which Ostiguy and Casullo present the differences between the two Kirchners is intriguing, stating that “Néstor Kirchner sought to unify most of the social and political national actors under the banner of the fight against transnational economic actors: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the foreign banks, the financial “vultures” [...], and their domestic partners and economic gurus,” while Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner “switched the direction of antagonism from the outside to the domestic scene: from foreign financial sectors to the old ‘oligarquía ganadera,’ urban upper middle classes [...] and very especially the media” (Ostiguy and Casullo 2017, 20-21).

Let’s now examine Kirchnerism’s governance, which presents two distinct and conflicting aspects. On the one hand, Kirchnerism gave voice

to the marginalized, fought for human rights, improved wages, implemented social and work programs, and strengthened aspects of democracy. According to Acosta and Freier (2024, 260), a “more liberal discourse” emerged following Néstor Kirchner’s electoral victory, with a particular emphasis on advancing human (and migrants’) rights. On the other hand, Kirchnerism was criticized for meddling in national statistics, manipulating inflation figures, authoritarian rhetoric, and issues of corruption (Stefanoni 2019). According to Manzetti (2014, 174), “the Kirchners’ deliberate concentration of authority in the executive branch severely weakened Argentina’s institutional checks and balances, resulting in greater opportunities for government officials to engage in corrupt activities.”

First and foremost, Nestor Kirchner was a political leader who endeavored to extricate Argentina from the mire of crisis, poverty, and injustice. His administration focused on safeguarding human rights and seeking justice for the victims of the brutal dictatorship (1976-1983). This commitment is evident in his support for humanitarian organizations, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Levy 2017, 44-45), and his advocacy for the annulment of the amnesty laws (Punto Final and Obediencia Debida) (Clarín 2003). Additionally, Kirchner promoted a more transparent method for the selection of judges<sup>10</sup> (Levy 2017, 26), emphasized social inclusion to mitigate poverty and inequality, and implemented new social programs (Kacowicz 2013, 182). His administration also reversed many privatizations carried out in the 1990s and renationalized several key industries, including the postal service, the radio and telecommunications sector, and water and sanitation services (Gezmiş 2018, 79).<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Kirchner’s tenure was not without significant drawbacks, including the concentration of power within the executive branch, which raised concerns about the erosion of democratic checks and balances (see: Levitsky and Murillo 2008). It is noteworthy to observe that during Kirchner era the Congress was bypassed and Kirchner governed through emergency decrees, issuing

10 In June 2003, President Néstor Kirchner initiated a Supreme Court reform that implied a restriction on the executive’s discretion in the appointment of justices, while including “new mechanisms of transparency and participation of civil society in the nomination process, a partial renovation of the court, and a reduction in its size” (Ruibal 2009, 59). According to Ruibal (2009, 60), “The Argentine Supreme Court reform cannot be understood as a way to restrict the exercise of power by other political actors. Instead, this process of institutional change was a movement of self-restriction in order to build legitimacy and credibility, for the government and the court, respectively, in a context of social and institutional crisis and pressure from civil society.”

11 Gezmiş (2018, 72) supports that neo-developmentalism that came after neoliberalism in Argentina “embodied a hybrid and complex process that maintained core elements of economic liberalism”.

249 during his 4½ years in office – nearly as many as Menem did over a decade (Muno 2019, 18).

Levitsky and Murillo offer a nuanced analysis of Kirchner’s presidency in relation to democracy, shedding light on its governing approach. According to them, “Kirchner’s presidency was characterized by a significant concentration of executive power”, however, Argentine politics under Kirchner did not take an authoritarian turn, as “the core institutions of democracy remain strong in Argentina: Elections are clean, civil liberties are broadly protected, and the military – author of six coups between 1930 and 1976 – has withdrawn from politics” (Levitsky and Murillo 2008, 19). Furthermore, as they state, “the Kirchner government’s record on civil liberties was good, and in some areas (such as police handling of public protest), it was clearly superior to the performance of his predecessors” (Levitsky and Murillo 2008, 19). Not only that, but Levitsky and Murillo highlight that Kirchner’s government reformed the Supreme Court for greater transparency, emphasized human rights by pushing to repeal the amnesty laws, and restored a minimum of public trust in government (Levitsky and Murillo 2008, 21-22). Nevertheless, according to them “despite his successes, Néstor Kirchner missed several opportunities to improve the qualities of Argentine democracy” (Levitsky and Murillo 2008, 27), while “did little to strengthen political institutions” (Levitsky and Murillo 2008, 28).<sup>12</sup>

As for the governance of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, things changed slightly. While she followed in Kirchner’s footsteps, implementing some nationalizations, supporting the lower social strata with social programs and labor measures, and defending the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, she simultaneously encountered fierce opposition from sectors of society, such as certain segments of farmers and large business interests, activating the conflictual dimension of politics.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, she faced more economic problems compared to her predecessor. Thus, protests against her governance increased, in contrast to the Kirchner era when social tensions had somewhat abated. In addition, one of the major challenges she faced was addressing the allegations of significant scandals involving her (and in some cases Kirchner’s) administration.<sup>14</sup> Overall,

12 On his part, Kurt Weyland (2024: 149) emphasized that while Kirchner tried to strengthen leadership through a burst of bold initiatives and deliberative confrontations with established power centers, he left the institutional framework and electoral procedures and guarantees of free and fair contests intact and did not promote an overhaul of the constitution. Kirchner did not need to push for institutional change to remain in power, as the possibility of alternating the presidency with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner provided them with the opportunity to establish a populist hegemony.

13 For her politics, see: Levy 2017.

14 One of the cases was “the Hotesur” (2014) (Rojas 2018).

Aytaç and Öniş (2014, 56) argue that “Kirchners, especially during their latest phases of rule, have been increasingly criticized for authoritarian tendencies, most notably in the realms of the freedom of the press, judicial processes, excessive concentration of power in the executive, and a lack of tolerance for the opposition.”

Summarizing, it is well-documented that Kirchnerism expressed a progressive and inclusive discourse while in power. However, in terms of policies and governance style, the Kirchners exhibited some ambiguity. According to Madrid, Hunter, and Weyland (2010, 174), during the Kirchners’ era, “Argentine democracy has received reasonably high marks for respecting political and civil liberties”, “elections have been free and fair, and freedom of speech and association has been largely respected”, although they “have been criticized...for centralizing power excessively”, “for politicizing the process of choosing Supreme Court justices” and for corruption. Nonetheless, the shortcomings of Kirchnerism’s governance cannot alone characterize every aspect of their administration, especially given that it did not erode liberal democracy or its institutions, defended human rights, gave voice to marginalized people, and implemented many governmental initiatives during this period that contributed to enhancing the quality of democracy. Therefore, we could not characterize the Kirchners’ governments as unequivocally illiberal (or authoritarian), and thus the concept of „illiberal populism” is not particularly useful in this case.

What about anti-populists? Most of the times we analyze the populist style of governance without examining how anti-populists govern. Hence, it is important to underline here that liberal anti-populists, who criticize populism for anti-democratic practices (even when it is democratic and pluralist), are frequently criticized for their approaches to governance. For instance, Macrism in Argentina opposed segments of the popular classes, such as poor immigrants, through the immigration legislation (Goñi 2017), as well as indigenous populations, whom, according to Amnesty International continued to be criminalized and discriminated against (Amnesty International 2018, 76). Populism scholar Paula Biglieri notes that Cambiemos rejected both the people and their leaders (Biglieri 2020, 10). Therefore, anti-populism is able to present an authoritarian threat, aiming to “eliminate” the people through direct repression of political practices, even though anti-populists are often paradoxically portrayed as ardent defenders of democracy (Biglieri 2020, 15-16). What we aim to convey here is that, although there are populist cases that respect democratic institutions and minorities, there are anti-populists who, despite presenting themselves as liberals and democrats, paradoxically pursue policies that deviate significantly from (liberal) democratic principles.

## THE CASE OF SYRIZA (2015-2019)

Following the outbreak of the economic crisis, Greece's entry into support mechanisms, and the rise of societal discontent with the political establishment, the Greek political landscape experienced significant changes across both the left and right spectrums. New organizations and parties emerged, radical ideologies gained strength, and populism resurfaced with renewed dynamism. SYRIZA, initially a small party within the radical left spectrum with a harsh anti-imperialist and radical character, succeeded under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras in gaining electoral strength, vying for power, and ultimately assuming it after a few years.<sup>15</sup>

SYRIZA in opposition and in power put special emphasis on the notion of "the people" (nodal point) articulating a populist discourse that appealed to the "underprivileged," suffering from the crisis and austerity policies, against the domestic and international political and economic establishment, traditional parties, corruption, Memoranda, and neoliberalism (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Markou 2017 and 2021b). Tsipras's discourse can be characterized as progressive and inclusive, encompassing diverse social groups and a range of social demands, while emphasizing human rights and the need to defend the equality of all people. Tsipras embraced the lower social strata suffering from the crisis as well as minority groups, emphasizing the defense of the rights of sexual minorities, as well as the ethnic and religious minorities of the country. In contrast to right-wing populists who often exclude social groups and individuals from their notion of "the people" for nativist reasons, SYRIZA invited everyone to join in the struggle against neoliberalism, the establishment, racism, and injustice.<sup>16</sup>

However, following its rise to power, particularly after its second electoral victory in September 2015, it is true that SYRIZA distanced itself from its radical roots. Although it maintained a populist veneer, over time, this diminished in intensity, gradually losing direct contact with the popular classes and adopting more pragmatic positions and policies. The party shifted towards a new direction, termed the "progressive alliance," strongly aligning with center-left ideologies and political realism.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, it signed a harsh Memorandum and consequently implemented austerity measures, while simultaneously enacting policies intended to protect the

15 For the case of SYRIZA, see: Spourdalakis 2013; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Markou 2017; Kouvelakis 2016; Aslanidis and Kaltwasser 2016; Venizelos 2023.

16 See more: Katsambekis 2019; Markou 2017 and 2021b.

17 It is true that Kirchnerism also adopted a more "realistic" governmental approach, differing from the paths of other radical populist movements in Latin America, such as Chavism.

lower strata of society (Markou 2021b). However, it failed to fully meet the expectations of the people, as reflected in the results of the subsequent elections.

At the level of policies, the government of SYRIZA recognized the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, it implemented policies for immigrants, such as the law granting Greek citizenship to children of immigrants (Katsambekis 2019, 38), attempted to address extreme poverty and social exclusion of Roma through significant interventions, and showed interest in the Muslim minority, emphasizing the need to improve their living conditions, abolishing the mandatory application of Islamic law (sharia) and making the jurisdiction of the mufti optional in the cases of Greek Muslims. In addition, SYRIZA proceeded with the reactivation of the public broadcaster (ERT), the reinstatement of dismissed public employees, the establishment of the Truth Committee on Public Debt, while it demonstrated respect for democratic institutions by adhering to court rulings (e.g., regarding television licenses), refraining from implementing radical changes to the political system, and not advocating for a new radical democratic orientation.<sup>18</sup> For instance, when the courts ultimately ruled the media procedure unconstitutional, effectively nullifying it, SYRIZA complied with constitutional mandates (Venizelos & Markou, 2024, 367). According to Venizelos (2023, 207), SYRIZA did not pose an illiberal threat to democratic institutions but instead operated within the bounds of established procedures.

Nevertheless, his tenure was not entirely positive, as his progressive policies were accompanied by stringent austerity measures. Indeed, the outcome of the referendum in 2015 was interpreted opportunistically. Nevertheless, SYRIZA promptly called for new elections before implementing the new Memorandum, aiming to secure a popular mandate. Additionally, the left-wing party can be critically assessed for failing to uphold democratic principles in some areas, such as the internal functioning of its party, certain political decisions (e.g. the abolition of the “Truth Committee on Public Debt”, its indifference towards the widespread social reactions to the Prespa Agreement), and the continuation of violent police repression (see: Alipranti 2019). Furthermore, it did not fully address the issues faced by minorities, leaving several critical problems unresolved. For example, although the cohabitation agreement for LGBTQ+ individuals was passed in Greece, they continued to be treated differently by the legislation, as the cohabitation agreement did not guarantee all their rights (e.g., widow’s pension, adoption, decision-making for urgent medical matters) (thepressproject.gr 2021). Another problem was the acceptance of a harsh policy towards migrants and refugees, who became trapped in

18 For an analysis on Syriza’s inclusionary policies: Katsambekis 2019; Markou 2021b.



the country and continued to live in extremely adverse conditions, a framework for which not only the Greek government was responsible but also the political direction of the EU. Vasilaki (2022) emphasizes that SYRIZA's decision to act as the EU's border guard by implementing the EU-Turkey agreement put an end to its pro-immigration approach. Thus, on the critical issue of refugees and migration, SYRIZA could not uphold its progressive and humanitarian values and principles, as it became evident that acting contrary to the directives of the European framework was challenging.

In summary, examining the discursive and governmental aspects of SYRIZA, it would be problematic to assert that this left-wing party with its progressive and inclusive agenda has been an illiberal party in power or that it posed a significant illiberal threat to democratic institutions. Besides, it is important to emphasize that liberal democracy in Greece has faced numerous problems for many years, which did not begin during SYRIZA's tenure. The impact of the economic crisis, Memorandums, technocratic governance, repression, poverty, and the undemocratic closure of ERT (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation) were among the events that negatively affected the political system and the Greek society before SYRIZA came to power. Indeed, this was the reason SYRIZA was elected – to address all these problems. Although SYRIZA may not have resolved these issues or initiated radical democratization of the system, it did not undermine political institutions and democratic processes (see: Venizelos 2023, 207).

What about the anti-populists who defend liberal democracy? Are they truly as liberal and progressive as they claim to be? The relationship between liberal democracy and governance in Greece has recently been brought to the forefront following specific decisions made by (the anti-populist) New Democracy (ND) (after 2019).<sup>19</sup> In the opinion of Mylonas (2020, 204) ND follows an executive form of governance, which reflects neoliberal authoritarian trajectories. For example, the recent surveillance scandal has raised new questions about whether the government upholds democratic values and respects citizens' freedoms. According to Lavelle (2022), this scandal highlighted the alarming authoritarian turn of ND, while the report by the V-Dem Institute underlines the degradation of democracy quality in Greece for 2022, characterized by the gradual deterioration of institutional checks and balances that constitute the principles of democracy and ensure that executive power is limited. It underscores that the legislative body and, to a lesser extent, the judicial

19 Even though ND positions itself as a liberal party, it presents a paradoxical case, embodying both liberal and conservative characteristics, as well as inclusive and exclusive discursive elements.

body, conventionally bulwarks of democracy, are significantly weakened in the country. Additionally, it highlights violations of freedom of expression (V-Dem Institute 2023, 17).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the anti-populist ND undermined the rights of certain minorities in the country, such as the Roma, as it failed to address their problems and led to their further marginalization. For instance, there have been many reports of police violence against the Romani people (documentonews.gr 2023). The above demonstrates that anti-populists, who accuse populism of anti-democratic practices, are the ones undermining often aspects of democratic politics. Hence, what if anti-populism in certain countries exhibits more illiberal elements than (left-wing) populism itself?

## CONCLUSION

Through the examination of left-wing populism in Argentina (2003-2015) and Greece (2015-2019), it is evident that populists articulated a progressive and inclusive discourse, advocating for the popular classes affected by the economic crisis and defending human rights. It is also observable that they did not directly threaten liberal institutions, respected political and civil liberties, conducted free and fair elections, and accepted the existing framework of governance, without undertaking radical interventions in the functioning of the democratic system, even though there were occasions when they overstepped certain boundaries. It is demonstrated that populist paradigms can be presented inclusively in a social dimension (e.g. toward minorities), without being exclusively or completely exclusively in a political dimension (mode of governance). Hence, we arrive at the conclusion that the concept of “illiberal populism” is not particularly useful, as it cannot be applied to every populist case. Indeed, there are several populist cases, such as those discussed here, which, despite facing harsh (yet justified) criticism for their handling of significant issues, did not pose a major threat to liberal democracy or minority rights, nor did they attempt to radically or authoritatively change the political system.

20 Recently, ND proposed a new bill regarding the establishment of private universities, which, according to some constitutional law experts, is unconstitutional. They emphasize that “Article 16 of the Constitution explicitly states that higher education is exclusively provided by legal entities of public law with full autonomy, that their professors are public servants, and that the establishment of higher education institutions by private individuals is prohibited,” arguing that “the operation of private universities, for profit or not, requires a constitutional amendment” (Tovima.gr 2024). Following the passage of the bill in the Greek Parliament, it is expected to undergo scrutiny by the Council of State, which will evaluate its constitutionality. The stance of the current government would be of interest if the bill is deemed unconstitutional.

A critical problem with approaches that embrace the concept of “illiberal populism” is that they view populism as a phenomenon predicated on the principle of homogeneity among “the people,” which leaves little or no room for political pluralism. Our answer is that by recognizing populism as a discourse that consolidates diverse social demands (heterogeneous people) against the establishment/elite, we can say that there are populist forces that are not necessarily illiberal or anti-pluralist. After all, there are numerous studies that have focused on the pluralistic and inclusive nature of certain populist parties (e.g. Markou 2017; Font, Graziano and Tsakatika 2019). Another problem with these approaches is that they deny that populism is an integral component of democratic politics, a fact that is evidenced by the rich populist experiences throughout world history. Hence, it is inaccurate to conflate populism exclusively with illiberalism (or authoritarianism), as there have been many populist instances where their parties and leaders advocated for (liberal) democratic ideals. It is essential not to overlook that the roots of the concept of populism trace back to the late 19th century in the United States, with the formation of the Populist Party, a mass workers’ party, that was founded to promote economic democracy and support the people at the bottom (Taylor 2024).

The existence of populist cases with a progressive and more liberal outlook in recent years is also confirmed by many notable scholars of the phenomenon. For instance, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019, 11) emphasize that there are “Libertarian-Populist parties and social movements with a more progressive philosophy” that “...use populist discourse railing against corruption, mainstream parties, and multinational corporations, but this is blended with the endorsement of socially liberal attitudes, progressive social policies, and participatory styles of political engagement.” According to them in this category, we can find, among others, both the Peronist tradition continued by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and SYRIZA. (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 11) In a similar vein is the approach taken by Bojan Bugarcic (2019, 395) who argues that “these examples of democratic, liberal, socially inclusive forms of populism quite clearly show that authoritarianism and anti-pluralism are not necessarily the key elements of populism. Despite the current hegemony of authoritarian populism, a far different sort of populism is possible: democratic and anti-establishment populism, which combines elements of liberal and democratic convictions.”

However, there is another significant issue here. The endorsement of the existing liberal (post-)democratic framework by left-wing populist forces, coupled with the implementation of their policies within an environment plagued by structural deficiencies and the rejection of substantial reforms for democratization, does not necessarily guarantee positive

outcomes for the working classes. The fact that the left-wing populists often embrace the political system and adhere to so-called democratic institutions suggests that, in practice, they do not address the fundamental challenges confronting contemporary democratic politics. In both cases here, populists operated within the bounds of established procedures. The representative system continued to function normally, despite its problems, while a form of “post-democracy” persisted. It appears that the rise of left-wing populism to power does not necessarily entail a comprehensive reform of the democratic system, and the continuation of the practices of previous (often anti-populist) administrations remains the most secure path for such governments. As Venizelos and Stavrakakis (2020) argue, “despite their radical rhetoric” populists “gradually get absorbed by so-called ‘democratic elitism’ and, trapped within the tensions of representation, and their agency is gradually reduced to largely cosmetic or secondary gestures. This means they fail to facilitate further democratization and substantive popular empowerment.” Consequently, while left-wing populists often articulate a progressive and humanitarian discourse and respect representative democracy, they fail to overcome the critical problems of the post-democratic framework, as they gradually become integrated into the existing operational framework.

Finally, we briefly highlighted in the article that there are also anti-populist parties and leaders in Argentina and Greece, which, while defending liberal values and critiquing populist forces for alleged anti-democratic practices, in reality, pursue often dangerous paths for the working classes and minority rights (Markou 2021a). At a time when many political forces oppose populism yet fail to consistently uphold liberal principles and institutions, a substantial portion of the academic community opts not to critically assess anti-populism. Instead, it focuses its critique on progressive populist forces that generally do not pose a significant threat to the quality of democracy. What if it is time to devote greater attention to anti-populism and its effects on democracy, society, and politics?

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