

The meaning of ‘Populism’

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*For Hilary Putnam, the inventor of
mild rational reconstruction, too late*

“Who speaks in our times of ‘population’
Instead of ‘the people’
Already avoids supporting many lies”
(Bertolt Brecht, *5 Difficulties in writing the truth*, 1938)

Populists promise to “take back control” or to “take our country back” from power-wielding elites and to do away with the politics-as-usual that empowers them. I take this to be *the* deliberately vague and multiply ambiguous core promise and appeal of populist platforms.¹ The term ‘populism’ is agreed among journalists, theoreticians and participants in *contemporary* political discourse to express the generic idea of a platform or politicians who perform confrontational anti-establishment politics aimed at displacing the governing elites in representative liberal constitutional democracies and everything that politically enabled them. In this generic sense, populism is a particular phenomenon, a *stance* exercised towards liberal democracy and not merely an *anomaly* –like a transitory anti-system protest vote² intended to shake traditional parties up— owed to special circumstances. Instead, it is a sort of permanent possibility in liberal representative democratic politics, like “democracy’s shadow.”³ It becomes actual when there is a principled reason or cause for political decision-makers in representative democracies to ignore most “social questions” that their policies open, and social disintegration is produced by the accumulation of many unmet needs.⁴

¹ Discussions of populism with this result are Kriesi (2014), and Kallis (2018).

² Downplaying the phenomenon underlies the practice of taking the term ‘populism’ to be a mostly derogatory epithet (Cohen (2018)) or ‘combat’ concept (Hellmuth (2015)) to discredit proposals of adversaries who enjoy massive support (Fukuyama (2016, 68; see also Canovan (2002)’s criticism of Arendt), just like that of considering populist platforms in liberal democracy as a “transitory phenomenon” (Mény & Surel (2002: 2)) or a theoretically ephemeral “tradition of rhetorical protest” (Frank (2018: 6)). Refusing to give populist platforms more traction by taking them seriously is an understandable tactic, but now clearly has given way to the urgent sense that ‘it could happen here’ (Cf. the work collected in Sunstein (2018); Habermas (2016)).

³ Canovan (1999), Arditi (2003: 20).

⁴ Gidron, N. & Hall, P.A. (2017, 2017a).

Most commentators and theoreticians of *contemporary* populism⁵ agree that realizing globalized neoliberal capitalism in representative liberal constitutional democracies was such a cause. The resulting distinct position that the term ‘populism’ tracks is characterized *in relation to liberal representative democracy* by the ‘thin’ ideological position of confronting the dysfunctions of liberal representative democracy under globalized neoliberal capitalism with anti-establishment, non-cooperative (‘us vs them’) politics.⁶ Despite many *other* theoretical differences, this *generic* feature seems to be what everyone using the term *must* understand on pain of speaking of something else, and therefore *constitutive* of the *concept* of populism (it is the term’s ‘semantic marker’). But it is insufficient to distinguish inclusionary mass-protest from populism and its authoritarian tendencies, while the latter easily mislead into identifying populism with fascism despite the former’s explicit rejection of totalitarianism. More precision is thus needed. Apart from this generic sense of the populist challenge in *practice* there are wide disagreements *in theory* on the precise *meaning* (if any) of the concept, on the common structure of the *political position* occupied by populist platforms (e.g. as opposed to other massive anti-establishment protest), and on the *political nature* of populism.

In this essay, I aim at a “mild rational reconstruction”⁷ of all three related issues along the lines of Haslanger (2012)’s model of “reconstructive projects,”⁸ employing analytic techniques of conceptual clarification that permit specifying the *political phenomenon* populism as a *political kind*,⁹ as a type of response within the political system to dysfunctions of representative liberal

⁵ As Finchelstein (2017) observes, *contemporary populism* is related merely by family resemblance to social movements *under different conditions* that were called ‘populist’ mainly by theoreticians, like the decolonial social movements in Africa and Asia in the 1960s that gave rise to Ionescu & Gellner (1969)’s congress volume usually taken (together with Berlin & al (1968)) as the origin of populism studies, the Latin-American post-fascist populist movements anchoring Laclau (1977)’s theorizing, or the Russian and American rural populist movements of the late 19th century, which gave rise to Canovan (1981)’s and Taggart (2000)’s pioneering works.

⁶ Vittori (2017: 57)’s ‘minimal definition’ captures this ‘semantic marker’, but (because of his attempt to avoid the normative) not the whole concept’s sharpness (as his definition includes anti-elite social movements).

⁷ Putnam (1992), with reference to his aim in Putnam (1975).

⁸ Haslanger (2012: 214).

⁹ The claim of such a reconstruction is to find a specification of the concept and a characterization of the phenomenon that is *most serviceable* for the various theoretical, political, and practical purposes in which distinguishing political proposals as populist play a role. Vorländer (2011: 188)’s “heuristische Beschreibungssemantik” or Berezin (2019) recommend a similar approach: “[we should] view the terms fascism and populism as heuristic devices that are good to think with and clarify our expectations of what we think a viable and inclusive democracy would be.” (18.13) Methodologically, I use for the *semantic* analysis the paradigms

democracy under globalized neoliberal capitalism. I first aim at clarifying the *meaning* of the *concept* underlying these discussions and apt to *most usefully* designate the peculiar position in political space identified by calling a political platform or a politician ‘populist’. Doing so requires first attending to the *descriptive* task to spell out in some detail the typical appearance of populist *politics* in the context of liberal representative democracy, or the stereotype of populist platforms as identified in the extant research (sec. I). This will allow characterizing the commitments of populist politics that stake out the peculiar *political position* it occupies in political space as neither inclusionary nor fascist (sec. II), and thus *verify* the stereotype’s aptitude at identifying paradigmatically populist positions. On this basis I then address the *normative* task to identify the “conception of the political”¹⁰ or particular *stance towards* liberal representative democracy, its institutions, and its ideals (in particular the ideals of popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy of political authority) that *explains* at the same time what unifies the political position previously described, and how populist politics can be compelling to citizens who are guided by these ideals. The *normative core* or *populist ideology*¹¹ that guides populist politics in relation to the ideals of liberal democracy turns out to merely

developed in the tradition initiated by Carnap (1950)’s ‘method of explication for theoretical concepts’ (for a recent discussion of the structure and problems of this method, see Dutilh Novaes & Reck (2017)) for the clarification of technical terms that have already been successfully in use for the delimitation of phenomenon-specification. This method was further developed by Hempel (1952) and critically overhauled by Putnam (1975)’s theory of ‘kind terms’. In the field of political theory, a precedent is Sartori (1984), recently taken up for the purpose of ‘defining’ the term ‘populism’ in Pappas (2016) and used in the proposals by Stavrakakis (2018). However, their ‘definition’-based Aristotelian semantics for general terms is subject to so many objections in semantics (cf. Hempel 1952: 5-6) that it remains quite sterile. The same is true of the ‘lowest common denominator’ prototype-approach in Rooduijn (2014) or Vittori (2017), although its procedure and some of its results are a precursor to the present proposal. The tradition of explicating theoretical terms used here, in contrast, allows identifying them as *kind-forming concepts-in-use with real-world referents as semantically relevant and semantically constraining exemplars* for the purpose of identifying and tracking cognitively important real-world kinds and things, not mere ‘empty signifiers’ (Stavrakakis 2018) with arbitrary ‘definitions’ regulating their use. An examination of the role of stereotypes in Putnam’s semantic theory and pragmatics is Mueller 2001, ch.5.
¹⁰ Urbinati (2014: 147 passim).

¹¹ The critical concept of ‘ideology’ used here is of the kind suggested in the work of recent analytical ideology-critique like Haslanger (2017) and (2017a), Stanley (2015, 2018), Mills (2017: 79 & ch.5 passim) and in an intellectualist form, Shelby (2003). These conceptions construe ideologies’ power to *shape* social attitudes and to *regulate* social practices implicitly as owed to their constituting complex *social* as well as mental patterns of behavior. Like Manne (2018), they emphasize that the generalized social exercise and ‘enforcement’ of ideologies as shared attitudes is crucially *embodied and practical*. Earlier related approaches are Young (1980), particularly her elaboration of the ‘social connection model of responsibility’ (Young 2011, ch.1 & 4), as well as Geertz (1964) and Habermas (1987: ch.VIII.2.C.). This concept of ‘ideology’ differs in important respects—above all with regard to the explicitness of (avowable) attitude required for counting as holding an ideology—from the empirical concept prevalent in social sciences that e.g. the ideational school (Canovan, Taggart, Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser etc) uses.

require two general principles of legitimizing political authority by elections (sec. III). Surprisingly, the normative core does *not* require a *separate* anti-pluralist or exclusionary commitment. This is surprising because it has very widely been taken to be a distinctive democracy-undermining trait of populism necessary for specifying the concept by liberal commentators¹² and disputed as essential by theoreticians from the left.¹³ The model presented here identifies this commitment as obliquely *contained* in the two principles without which a political phenomenon isn't distinctly 'populist' in *either* the left or the liberal usage of the term. On the demand side, such obliqueness explains (without recurring to problematic manipulation-assumptions) why citizens without avowed exclusionary attitudes but with a firm commitment to legitimation of political authority by universally inclusive elections can nonetheless, by their choice of an option in political space, become supporters in practice of an essentially anti-pluralist and exclusionary political position. Given the tension between exclusionism and democracy, the model then needs to take a stand vis-à-vis the most contested question in the theoretical discussion of populism: whether populism, once properly distinguished from *cooperation-demanding* anti-establishment mass protest, and once given its *normative commitments*, can be *at any time* (regardless of whether in power) a 'corrective to democracy' or democracy-enhancing, as the core populist promise to 'take control (back)' seems to suggest. In sec. IV and V, I defend the negative answer in virtue of the normative core alone, and do so vis-à-vis *two* conceptions of democracy, a minimal and an ambitious one. Contrary to the widely accepted hypothesis that while populism is incompatible with *liberal* democracy because of its "illiberalism" it is possibly 'democracy-enhancing' in a less ambitious (or more anti-neoliberal, 'radical') sense of 'democracy', the reconstruction of the normative core of populist ideology enables a novel, much stronger argument. It shows that given its own normative core, populism is incompatible with the continued democratic legitimation of political authority *even in the normatively most austere* conception of 'electoral democracy', i.e. one that doesn't specifically demand liberal safeguards of democratic rule (sec. IV). Populism's incompatibility with a more ambitious conception of democracy that construes the latter as the only social realization of generalized political autonomy (and thus demands rule of law and

¹² Jagers & Walgrave (2007), Baggini (2015), Mueller, J.-W. (2016), Galston (2018).

¹³ Mouffe (2017), Boos (2018), Moeller (2017) and (2019).

certain constitutionally secured minority protections for legitimacy) is generally accepted. The model nonetheless produces an argument that helps understanding why the crucial populist promise of increasing or ‘taking back control’ of the population over political decision making *cannot* be fulfilled by populists (sec. V).

I will now first analyze contemporary populist scripts at the substantive *political* level to specify the particular form of appearance of contemporary populism in the context of liberal democracy under global capitalism (sec. I). This will allow outlining the particular *political position* that populism occupies in contrast to others with whom it is often confused (sec. II). On this basis, the *core normative commitments* (=ideology) of populist platforms which are responsible for the widely observed characteristics and determine its relationship to democracy can be analytically extracted (sec. III). This will conclude specifying the *meaning of the concept*.

I. Unstructured stereotype of ‘populism’ –The specification of a populist platform

To delimit the political significance of the term ‘populism’, I now want to sketch what Putnam (1975) calls the “stereotype”, an idealized mini-theory that allows distinguishing under normal conditions things of a kind designated by a concept. I call the position characterized in this sketch a *populist platform*. It is distilled out of extant research of the programs, discursive practices and fundamental normative choices found in most contemporary populist movements in liberal constitutional representative democracies under neoliberal globalized capitalism. The individual elements of the platform can be taken as basic *discursive patterns* or scripts that are typically displayed in populist interventions. They are socially recognized *salient* features that allow participants in political debate to reliably identify a position, discourse or person as *populist*. I follow most populism research in assuming that ‘populism’ is a concept-in-use employed for referring to an ideologically and otherwise distinct position in the political public space of contemporary liberal representative democracy at the *first order political* level and, in analyzing this distinct phenomenon, as a *theoretical category* in political science and

philosophy.¹⁴ This means treating ‘populism’ *syntactically* as a descriptive *political kind term* (as opposed to, e.g., an expressive signal of derogation) and taking the phenomenon it refers to as a really existing political kind. To identify a populist platform *politically* (and thus give the term a distinguishable meaning or application) the following widely agreed observations of some of the main ‘schools’ in populism research are helpful.¹⁵

Common political scripts of populist platforms

Cas Mudde, one of the main empirical investigators of contemporary populism of the ‘ideational’ school “define[s] populism as a *thin-centered ideology* that considers *society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps*, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”¹⁶ Of note are the moralizing indications in the polar opposition of people and elite: the people are by definition ‘good’, and those with different interests thereby ‘bad’.

Mudde (2004), Laclau (2005, 2005a), Rodrik (2018), Fraser (2017, 2017a) and most other approaches furthermore observe that populist platforms can oppose elites either on a horizontal, culture-based conservative vs. progressive scale or on a vertical, class- or economy-based non-elite vs. elite (or ‘down’ vs ‘up’) scale.¹⁷ This produces the possibility of conservative as well as progressive anti-elite positions. Taking *generic* ‘populism’ as coextensive with ‘anti-elitism’, it thus follows according to all major populism-approaches that populism *transcends the left-right* spectre of traditional party-political classifications. Thus, Hugo Chávez’ as well as Orbán’s, Putin’s or Perón’s politics are all counted as uncontroversially populist despite their radically distinct ideologies on the left-right spectrum. This diagnostic qualifies populism as

¹⁴ Finchelstein (2017: 142-3).

¹⁵ The pre-2013 literature is well surveyed according to theory-types in Gidron & Bonikowski (2013).

¹⁶ Mudde (2004: 543); cf. also Mudde/Kaltwasser (2013a: 619), Mudde/Kaltwasser (2017: 6).

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis along these scales, cf. Inglehart/Norris (2016). A critical appraisal of the left-right transcending feature of populism is Gandesha (2018).

ideologically ‘thin-centered’¹⁸ in the sense of equally compatible with the *thick* ideological platforms like socialism, fascism, liberalism, all of which *compete for electoral support in contemporary representative liberal democracy*. In contrast to them, populist platforms –similar to other ‘thin-centered’ abstract political directions like nationalism¹⁹—gain *mass-support* as challenges to *basic priorities of liberal democracy itself*. For this challenge they select piecemeal-combinations of ‘host’-ideological items with an eye to, relative to the national and historical context, maximal response among voter-anxieties. Often, populist platforms emerge during the ‘erosion of representation function of traditional parties’²⁰ (e.g. in consequence of a technocratic consensus among them on certain governance-essentials²¹) as movements against the democratic claim of institutionalized forms of representation *as such*²² that collect grievances without being bound by allegiance to traditional parties.

Following the tradition of Taggart (2000) and Canovan (1981), J.-W. Mueller (2016)’s ‘ideal type’ adds: “In addition to being *antielitist*, populists are always *antipluralist*.”²³ Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people,” “they actually rely on a *symbolic representation of the “real people”*” (Mueller 2016: 9, 25) Mueller helpfully contrasts the populist exclusive representative claim with the appeal to the people in inclusionary social movements: “those fighting for inclusion have rarely claimed ‘We *and only we* are the people.’ On the contrary, they have usually claimed ‘We are *also* the people’” (Mueller 2016: 54) While Mueller’s emphasis on anti-pluralism apparently echoes ‘illiberal democracy’, the observation of the constructivist nature of the reference to ‘the people’ is of crucial importance because of its implicit entailment of a characteristic populist representational monism (as the opposite to pluralism) that conflicts normatively with core *democratic* tenets like the legitimacy of opposition.²⁴

¹⁸ Cf. Stanley (2008).

¹⁹ Frede (1998).

²⁰ Mair (2002), Kriesi (2014).

²¹ Katz & Mair (1995, 2009) –and Mair’s further work—identify this phenomenon as emerging ‘cartel parties’.

²² Cf. Rosanvallon’s diagnostic of ‘counter-democracy’ (2006: 271–77). Also [Urbinati \(1998\)](#), Kriesi (2014), Tormey (2015: ch.1).

²³ Baggini (2014). Galston (2018) construes populism as *mainly* anti-pluralist and therefore anti-liberal.

²⁴ [Mueller, J.-W. \(2017\)](#).

One particularly influential paradigm in populism-studies regards this constructive-symbolic type of reference in political discourse even as revealing of what real-world politics is *as such*. Defenders of populism’s democracy-enhancing potential in Laclau/Mouffe’s tradition stress the combination of *polarization*, expressed in the opposition of “people/’elite’” or “people/’powerbloc’”, with mobilizing the former part of the dichotomy as *forming one ‘unity’* against the established structure of hegemonic power. Thereby, ‘elite’ and ‘people’ are, as by the ideational school, equally *homogeneously* conceived. The constant ‘agonic’ fight for dominance in ‘populist moments’ when the dominated are mobilized presents not only democratic exercises of self-constituting popular sovereignty but even ‘the essence of representation/the political’²⁵ and “the royal road to understanding [...] the political as such.”²⁶ This ‘essence’ is understood as *defining* populism: the elite-antagonist moments in a society’s ‘populist’ political activity are to be understood as the “act of making the people the constituent power again”, or even of “constructing the people”.²⁷ Agonist defenders of populism endorse the homogeneousness-assumption of ‘the people’ *normatively*: they are, if constituted, one group of like members with an undisputable ‘*right to rule/decide*’. Polarization and its effecting a dual homogenization are thus the core elements of populism according to agonists. We could call the compound of mobilizing techniques that produce and sustain polarization *antagonizing polemics*. Some agonists observe that combining homogenization and the right to rule has non-pluralism as an –for them unwelcome—invariant effect, which thus also becomes a characteristic of populism.²⁸

²⁵ Laclau (2005a: 110, 163); Mouffe (2005: 6-9). For an excellent elaboration, see Moeller (2018, 2018a).

²⁶ Laclau (2005: 67).

²⁷ Mouffe (2018 : ch. 3).

²⁸ This remains true of the attempt in Mouffe (2018) or Moeller (2017) to describe a ‘democratic’ constitution of ‘the people’, for the *aim* in this constitutive activity *remains* a body of persons without ideological fissure vis-à-vis the political; or else, as in Moeller (2019)’s ‘reflexive’ (=pluralist) constitution or Riofrancos (2017)’s ‘left populism’, the proposal is to move from populism to pluralist deliberative inclusive will-formation. There simply is no room in the Schmittian basic approach for a *cooperation despite political disagreements*, which is the paradigm of politics for deliberative or pluralist democrats. For this criticism see Riofrancos (2018), [Elbe \(2018\)](#), Fassin (2018) and Hart (2019).

A formally more developed account of populism for the purposes of comparative political science, the socio-cultural approach articulated e.g. by Ostiguy (2017)²⁹, usefully defines the typical populist *style of politics* aimed at appealing to ‘the people’ as “flaunting the low” (2017: 73) and distinguishes dimensions of *rapport* (performative), *script* (content) and *cultural transgression* (relative to the mores of the political upper class) (2017: 74-80). In the script, this approach focuses on *anti-minoritarianism* and *cultural majoritarianism* that vindicates unrest and anger among large parts of the population as *righteous* and *indicative of illegitimately being put down by minorities*. The ideological content presupposed in this approach is thus largely the same as that identified in the ‘ideational’ school. Meanwhile, *cultural style* identified by this approach is not distinctive of the particular phenomenon at issue but tends to be a general feature of political discourse in *mass democracies* where ‘street credibility’ is needed to motivate large swaths of voters to cast their ballot.³⁰ Nonetheless, it is distinctive of populists’ success at *exploiting* polarized situations in society to utilize these means of communication in mass democracies in *transgressive* ways to undermine *civic respect for minorities* and for *core institutions of liberal representative constitutional democracy*.³¹ “Flaunting the low” thus is a frequent mark of populist platforms’ *style* and choice of rhetorical and performative conveyance of ideological content, although not necessarily *uniquely distinctive* for populism.

Envirioning normal conditions for the emergence of support for populist platforms

As many have observed, populist platforms in many cases (1980s Latin America, Brexit, Erdogan, Trumpism) are *compatible with and actually deepening domestic neoliberal redistribution and privatization policies*. The anti-elitism is thus mainly directed against *foreign*

²⁹ This approach shares many analytical categories and theoretical strategies with the school considering populism as a “style” (Jagers & Walgrave (2007)) or “discursive frame” (Aslanidis 2016, Bonikowski 2016) of political rhetoric, which in turn elaborates Laclau’s claim that “a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are” (Laclau 2005: 33). Other representative work in this direction is Moffitt (2016), Moffitt & Tormey (2014), Stavrakakis (2018), Brubaker (2017, 2017a).

³⁰ Ostiguy (2017: 75) thus counts e.g. Valerie Giscard D’Estaing and David Cameron as satisfying his criteria, who definitely fail to represent populist *ideology* in any more specific sense.

³¹ Bonikowski (2016: 22-23); cf. also Urbinati (2014).

or *global* actors and their *domestic representatives* (=global corporate and financial actors, migrants). In fact, the social stressors resulting from massive global and domestic inequality and injustice work *in favor* of populist platforms and their mobilization technique to portray themselves as alternatives to business as usual. Populist platforms more often than not look more like a cynical means of *exchanging elites* rather than *abolishing elitist inequality*.³² Their taking global neoliberal capitalism as an *inevitable envioning condition* is thus not surprising. This does not mean that all contemporary populist platforms are neoliberal, but that the *normative core* of populist ideology is *compatible* with neoliberal policy-commitments. Environing conditions under which populism *arises* should thus not be confused with its *ideological* features. Populism is in this sense neither intrinsically pro- nor anti-neoliberal.

The final typical features of populist platforms concern the *direct* relationships of populist discourse and actors with democratic institutions. Almost all populism researchers find populist platforms' emphasis on 'taking back control' and 'the people themselves' *vexing*³³ when put together with the actual effects on democratic institutions of populist platforms *in power* and their authoritarian tendencies.³⁴ Few populist governments do not disassemble core institutions of the democratic states that helped them into power, and in particular those institutions most closely associated with mechanisms of popular control and accountability, like the independent judiciary capable of checking illicit government activities, the free press, scientific and academic institutions. I want to call this feature of populism its *normative ambivalence* towards *democracy as we know it*.³⁵ Representative democratic politics are, as Urbinati (2014), (2016), Rosanvallon (2008), Finchelstein (2017) argue, best seen as part of the *envioning normal conditions under which populist platforms can gain mass support*. One condition under which populist platforms gain mass support is a general perception of a party-system as aligned with respect to certain constraints (internal by capture or external by globalization-dependent commitments) and thereby limited in offering much of a

³² Fawcett (2018) is a sharp analysis of 'populism as an [inter-] elite phenomenon' (2018: 9). Urbinati (1998, 2014 & 2017)'s analysis, too, suggests that the mechanism of populist empowerment is crucially tied to inter-elite conflicts under conditions of a representation-crisis in representative democracy. Marcetic (2017) documents the US-case.

³³ Deiwiks (2009: 5) calls its ambivalent relation to representative democracy an "institutional paradox".

³⁴ Levitsky (2017) demonstrates this for the South American context.

³⁵ Rovira Kaltwasser (2012), Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2017).

representation of interests of the population against those represented by parties in government. This produces the general sense of ‘post-democracy’ and ‘establishment parties’ against which populist platforms take shape.³⁶ In this sense, *contemporary* populism and representative democracy are inseparable. But strategic acquiescence in envioning conditions of emergence should not be confused with ideological commitment. Populist platforms generally *reject dictatorship* and *totalitarianism*. This enables populist platforms *in different environments* like dictatorships or colonial regimes to look ‘democratizing’.³⁷ But it is crucial not to confuse the *envioning condition* of representative democracy for *contemporary* populism with an *ideological potential for democratization*. For, populists combine this rejection with a selective repudiation of core ‘liberal’ as well as ‘constitutional’ elements of democracy as *normatively optional* or even *noxious to the empowerment of the people’s only legitimate representative* when starting in democracy as we know it, where (as I will argue in sec. IV) among these institutions *some* are *democratically* indispensable. Joined with the anti-minoritarianism, this yields what Finchelstein (2017) calls an ‘authoritarian form of democracy’ as the *political promise* of populist ideology.³⁸ Populist politics is opposed to and suspicious of *emancipatory ideals* underwriting the institutions of democracy (not just liberalism) as currently *constitutionally instituted*. The vexing feature is then that populist platforms promise an authoritarian exercise of democracy—in opposition to (elite-)dictatorship and democratic deficits—to undermine ideals and selectively remove institutions of democracy as we know it.

In sum, the following are the generally observed features characterizing populist platforms:

³⁶ Mair (2002) and Crouch (2004: 70-77) are landmark works studying these conditions for populism’s emergence. Tormey (2015), Mounk (2018: chs.1-3) connect representation-dysfunctions and recent emerging populism.

³⁷ The first to discover that the origin of populism’s ambivalence towards democracy lies in the difference of context of origin in dictatorships or democratic regimes (which means that populism itself is *not* democratizing as such) was Urbinati (1998), 112 ff. Cf. Finchelstein (2017: 150-174) for the very distinct role of populism in Latin America and North America. Likewise, Vorländer (2003: 191-192) explains the democratizing appearance as an effect of the need for corrections *under conditions of a disintegration* in constitutional democracy of the liberty-securing juridified public power and the communicative power of liberty-exercising legal subjects.

³⁸ Fournier (2019) makes a compelling case for this based on the standard legal significance of constitutional law. Habermas (2001) demonstrates the inseparability of emancipatory, liberal and republican elements in the concept of *democracy* as it is objectively canvassed in modern democratic constitutions.

Under the *environing normal conditions* of³⁹

- A. a democratic political system with representative government electorally determined by majority-principle among political parties,
- B. a culturally heterogeneous society, and
- C. a globally acting capitalist (at least private-property-based) economy,

Populist platforms typically are or contain

1. *Thin-centered* ideology the variance of the contents of which
2. *transcends the left-right specter* but always
3. *rejects dictatorship and totalitarianism* (as a function of **(A)**) and presents
4. society as separated into two *homogeneous* and *antagonistic* camps, ‘the virtuous people’ vs ‘corrupt elites’ (&/or all minorities, as a function of **(B)**) arguing that
5. Politics = expression of the *volonté générale* of only the people (→‘*anti-elitism*’).
6. *Anti-minoritarianism*: the populists alone represent ‘the real people’ (→‘*anti-pluralism*’).
7. Reliance on a *symbolic representation of the “(real) people”* (≠ the empirical population).
8. Polarized opposition ,people/powerbloc’, where the former are ,unified’ and thus ,homogenize both’ in *antagonizing polemics*.

Figure 1

I now want to develop an analytical normative model that identifies among these features the ‘normative microstructure’ or core principles of populist ideology from which its appearance (i.e. the other features) can be derived. In order to do so, I first want to clarify what political position populist platforms, given these characteristics, occupy relative to other positions in representative democracies, given conditions (A) – (C) (sec. II). This will yield a contrastive clarification of the relative position of populism in the political landscape. Afterwards, I will propose a set of normative principles *taken from a peculiar construal of the democratic process* that allows deriving most of populist platforms’ features naturally (sec. III). Given the unifying function of normative principles for a political position’s other features, these principles can be seen as populism’s *ideological core*. This normative core will suffice to demonstrate the incompatibility of populist ideology and minimalist or a-liberal (sec. IV) and ambitious or emancipatory (sec. V) democracy.

³⁹ I will reference feature **N** on the list as ‘**Fig 1 #N**’.

II. Rational reconstruction, part 1: The political location of populism in the context of contemporary democratic politics

Populism vs Fascism: Rejection of totalitarianism and commitment to minimized democracy

To roughly locate the contemporary phenomenon of populism⁴⁰ in order to appreciate its political significance, it is useful to point out that populism is neither Authoritarian Messianic anti-democracy (like fascism or one-party communism)⁴¹ nor just Cynical Majoritarian Tyranny, nor just any old massive anti-establishment social movement arising out of massive protest against injustices or (post-)colonial regime-elites.⁴²

⁴⁰ Like Finchelstein (2017), and in contrast to many authors who regard populism as a larger and somewhat transhistorically constant category (Canovan (1981), Mudde (2004), Mudde/Kaltwasser (2017) and many others), I regard it as more useful to understand contemporary populism as a distinctive phenomenon. Some political movements who self-identified as ‘populists’—like the Russian, American, and French peasant movements before WW I or of the interwar period—thus come to not count as populists. Following Finchelstein’s proposal (2017: 28, 81-97), one could stress their connection with contemporary populism by calling them ‘pre-populist’ or ‘proto-populist’. The other option, followed in this essay, is to regard them as emerging from normal conditions so different that the identification as populist would yield a surface similarity but not a correct kind-identification. Finchelstein (2017) and Copsey (2013) trace contemporary populism historically from fascism as its *failed precursor*. Contemporary populism therefore is a crucially *post*-fascist, post-WW II, and post-Cold-War phenomenon. This only apparently contrasts with work on contemporary populism (like Snyder (2016) or Stanley (2018)) that discerns in it *proto*-fascist structures. Being post-fascist *historically* leaves open that contemporary populist ideology constitutively aims at carrying over *as much as feasible under the constraint of having to gain power in the context of representative democracy* from its fascist ancestry. It also leaves open that a form of authoritarian dictatorship is the most likely future of longer holds on political power by contemporary populists (e.g. Argentina’s fascist takeover from Peronism 1976, hardening rule in Venezuela, Russia, Hungary, Turkey).

⁴¹ Kellner (2017), Habermas (2016), Piccolino & Henrichsen (2017). An excellent exercise in distinguishing both and drawing accurate faultlines is Runciman (2018).

⁴² By making this distinction between massive social movements for the displacement of dominating elites in often post-colonial contexts (which usually fail the background condition for contemporary populism of an existing moderately established representative democracy), I propose counting many of the de-colonial social movements (such as in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) and many contemporary social movements opposed to the injustices caused by neoliberal globalization (such as SYRIZA, Podemos, Occupy) as different in *kind* from populist movements. This is a deliberate classificatory revision that affects many of the movements (mostly left) that political theorists defending a ‘democratizing role’ of populism try to profile as co-paradigmatic, suggesting a difference in *degree* of democracy-support between these movements and populist ideology; this confusion is analyzed with acuity in De la Torre (2019). While my approach agrees in result with Mueller (2016) and Urbinati (2013), (2014), (2017) on empirical and normative explanatory, not merely semantic grounds, it avoids a weakness of Mueller’s ‘ideal typical’ method identified in Isaac (2017) by not requiring liberalism as a part of democracy, and it remains free of commitment to the—quite unsettled (cf. Gidron & Bonikowski (2013: 10-14), Mudde & Kaltwasser (2014a))—question of whether populism *structurally* requires a *leader* embodying ‘the people’, as Urbinati (2019)’s conception seems to imply. The crucial difference between *inclusionary* social movement (‘horizontal democratic protest movement’) and political party, as well as the normative requirement of democratically responsible and minority-responsive power-use after electoral victories (and thus incompatibility with exclusionism) is excellently argued in Arato & Cohen (2017), sec. 2-3, on the basis of Arato & Cohen (1992), as

Fascism is characterized by the political fanaticism aimed at *eliminating* the minority and dissent on account of a messianic mission.⁴³ Contrary to that, populism needs the minority as a delegitimized mobilizing social motive and permanently reiterated justification of populist's empowerment as winners. Populism also uses the presence of the minority in society as proof to the society's population that it is not autocratic (item #3) in that it preserves popular sovereignty, i.e. the idea that the people and no one else are in control. Populist ideology respects those parts of representative democracy that are required for elections and referenda, as well as the mechanisms of public scrutiny about fairness in counting votes etc. It is committed to acquiescence in 'minimal representative electoral democracy' (item #A), the view that the legitimate government is constituted by those elected by majorities in procedures of fair competitive elections (i.e. under participation of opposition parties) with universal suffrage and unbiased, accountable determination of results and the peaceful transition between governments after elections.⁴⁴ This is populist ideology's *definition* of the normative essence of 'democracy' as 'non-dictatorship' (Orban's "illiberal democracy", Putin's "managed democracy" meet *that* concept).

It is key to correctly understand the political nature of populist ideology to see its claim that the exercise of *popular sovereignty* in mass democracies requiring representative procedures for the determination of who governs amounts to no more than majority authorization in

well as Mueller (2016) and (2018); Kriesi (2014) arrives at the same result in the inverse direction of analyzing conversions of populist movements into parties. An excessively broad notion of 'populism' as polemic mass-mobilization around injustices against ruling elites is Aslanidis 2017. By counting protest against exclusionary effects of market-injustice, he overlooks the *logical entailment relation* between the core populist commitments and exclusionism, which distinguish it in kind from the *inclusion-demanding* social movements he calls 'grassroots populism'.

⁴³ An excellent study of the connections and continuities between populist and former fascist formations is Copesey (2013:10): "the fascist 'minimum' takes the form of a mobilizing mythic core of revolutionary ultra-nationalist rebirth (*palingenesis*)."⁴³ Griffin (1991) previously elaborated the notion of 'palingenesis' to authoritative degree. The recent careful comparison by Eatwell (2017) further marks commitments to "the new man" and state authoritarianism, which are incompatible with populist ideology's need for representative democracy's empowerment mechanisms and its focus on the contrast between elites and the 'common man', respectively. Bar-On (2014) traces the *genealogy* of contemporary European populist parties to a nimble re-framing of formerly fascist party programs into 'fascism light'.

⁴⁴ For this 'minimalist' definition of 'electoral democracy', see Diamond (1999: 32)'s elaboration of Przeworski & al. (1996: 50-51); the criteria are equivalent to Dahl (1989: 108-118; 2000: 38)'s 'criteria for the democratic process'. The crucial element of procedural democracy in the sense of Dahl's 'equal opportunity for effective participation' or Saffon & Urbinati (2013) that is missing from populist ideology is any proviso expressing value of the opposition.

minimalist procedures, and that *democratic legitimacy* of political decision-making likewise is *exhaustively* characterized by being a decision taken by those elected in such procedures. This characteristically *reductionist model of the normative democratic ideals* of popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy forms part of the *core* of populist *ideology*.⁴⁵ The idea that democratic legitimacy cannot amount to more than this helps undermine these ideals from the inside of the normal normative expectations required as civic competences from members of representative democracies who operate politically under the assumption of the democratic ideal. The corresponding *normative eliminativism* (or nihilism) also underwrites populism's preference for non-cooperative, adversarial zero-sum politics ('we will finally have real victories') centered on action (item #8) –which is distinct from democracy-enhancing polarizing politics centered on communication.

Populism vs inclusion-demands by social mass movements: Focus on non-cooperative politics

A certain kind of uncooperative default sets populist ideology apart from social movements such as Occupy, Podemos or SYRIZA. The latter engage in massive contestatory action and *democratic polarization*⁴⁶ against established decision making to acquire fair hearing on behalf of incorrectly disregarded interests, illicit ignorance, and lack of recognition of interests as relevant.⁴⁷ But their claim on the establishment ('anti-elitism') is grounded in the commitment to move normal decision making in liberal constitutional democracies to re-enter or create *cooperative* modes of collective action with these interests.⁴⁸ The polemics are a means of

⁴⁵ How this in turn makes populist ideology amenable to (if not identical with) with 'electoral autocracy' is nicely summarized and illustrated by examples in Krennerich (2017), as well as the literature cited therein. See below, sec. IV, second subsection.

⁴⁶ Habermas (2016).

⁴⁷ For an overview and partial analysis of inclusionary anti-capitalist mobilizations, see Gerbaudo (2017), for the conflicts of self-conceiving emancipatory anti-capitalist movements as populist or transformative of unrepresentative party-politics, see the contributions in Garcia Agustin & Briziarelli (2018), and Sotiris (2018). Arato & Cohen (2017) offer an exemplary exploration of the incompatible logic of populism and social movements at the *normative* level. The complex interaction of both categories of social mobilization with political agendas at the *empirical* level under a conception of populism as mere 'anti-elitism' is discussed in Balibar (2017).

⁴⁸ For the case of SYRIZA, the clear commitment to inclusionism and a universalist agenda, as well as the Weberian commitment to 'responsible politics' of cooperation and compromise once in power as a party is clearly articulated in the narrative of Douzinas (2017), Varoufakis (2017), Kalloniatis (2019); also Azmanova (2018). Inclusionary anti-

protest with the normative content of *removing exclusion* or ignorance of legitimate interests.⁴⁹ Populism, in contrast, is mass mobilization for the *non-cooperative* exercise of majoritarian *dominance*.⁵⁰ The polemics here are a means of consolidating an exclusionary cultural majority for the normative end of *political domination of the sum of all minorities*. Anti-elitist antagonizing polemics (item #8) alone are thus (*contra* Laclau) *not* essential for a political movement to count as populist –there are also versions of this in *inclusionary* protest movements. It is antagonizing polemics *under the condition of non-inclusionary, anti-cooperative* politics (item #6) that makes the difference to democracy-enhancing social movements fighting for *enhanced inclusion*. ‘Non-cooperative’ in this context entails two incompatibilities with inclusionary social movements: first, majority *dominance* under populist premises is (to be) exercised by using the electorally secured political authority *at the expense of and often against the electoral minorities* and, second, in *authoritarian* fashion, i.e. without consideration of (and often by repression of) contestatory activities of civil society *outside the supporters*, and by undermining the opposition’s access to constitutional avenues of appeal or electoral opportunities of majority-reversal.⁵¹

Populism vs Cynical Tyranny of the Majority: Normative claim to ‘representing the people’⁵²

However, unlike *unideological* majoritarian tyranny, populist ideology makes a claim of being representative of the *whole people* (item #5). This results from the inverse of identifying the results of minimalist democratic procedures as authorization ‘by the democratic principle of popular sovereignty’ (item #A), by which election results inherit the claim of being expressions of the will of the people as a whole. Those electorally authorized are thus to be taken as not

establishment *right wing* movements do exist under the name of ‘libertarian populism’, but they fail to be *massive* as their anti-government stance under neoliberalism coincides with a pro-corporate capitalist stance (cf. WW (2013), Beutler (2013)).

⁴⁹ The constitutive role of democratic polemics for the removal of ignorance –and thus increasing ‘truth’-dependent policies— in contestatory deliberative democracy is argued in Brunkhorst (2018).

⁵⁰ Urbinati (2017) sees this as the heart of populist ideology’s subversion of liberal constitutional democracy.

⁵¹ An excellent recent survey of social activism *contending populism* and the reasons for the incompatibility of populism with massive social protest movements with inclusionary claims on elite-dominated or ‘captured’ representative democracies is Siim, Krasteva, Saarinen (2019).

⁵² This passage owes much to Urbinati (2017).

just representative of a majority of the population whose will can be imposed on the minority purely instrumentally, as a realist cynic committed to ‘turn taking at aggravating the losers’ might have it. How much normative commitments matter for what types of exercise of political power are seen as compatible with ‘democracy’-as-so-disinterpreted can be gleaned by looking at populist *governance*: it tends to create, from the initial conditions of democracy as we know it, conditions that maintain an emphasis on electoral democratic procedures and even plebiscitarian participatory practices of legitimation of political power (item #3) while at the same time demonizing and systematically undermining the actual possibilities for participating in the exercise and control of political power by dissenting oppositions (item #8). This is how the apparent paradox of Finchelstein’s “authoritarian exercise of democratic power” is *realized*: by legally ensuring structures of political action that, given a certain population’s cultural tendencies and socio-political organizations, determine the outcomes of electoral procedures to stabilize *de facto* a one-party government. The *justification* for this virtually universal pattern of populist political power relies on a notion of ‘popular sovereignty’ that entails the *permission to keep the opposition away from political authority* because, given election results, ‘the opposition’ as the minority has the status of political authority of those who *ought not to govern* (items #6 & #7 & #A). Populism claims that it not only *can* impose the will of the majority but that doing so is *right in the name of popular sovereignty*. This, not mere electoral success, is what ‘take back control’ signals. The *normative* stance enabling the anti-minoritarian attitudes characteristic of populists in power is the subject of the next section.

In sum: as opposed to cynical majoritarianism, populism *is* founded in an ideology (of what representative democracy can normatively justify), and as opposed to fascism, this ideology does not appeal to a metaphysical mission for the people (it is ‘thinner’ than this, cf. item #1), but merely to ‘the people’s will as expressed in elections’ (*but* interpreted according to the ideology) as the norm of legitimate government. Since the latter is *also* indispensable part of any concept of democratic legitimacy without possible legitimacy of one-party government, populist ideology is a (reductionist) stance *about the normative depth of* democratic legitimacy.

III. Rational Reconstruction, part 2: The normative structure of Populist Ideology

The Core Principles of Populist Ideology

My claim is that the exclusionary effects of populist government or prevalence in a society, the expressions in its discourse in public debate ('we won you lost'), and the non-cooperative homogenization and polarization of society aimed at the politics of majoritarian dominance are *non-accidental features* deriving from populism's specific *ideology*. On close inspection, the extent of core principles of populist ideology among the stereotypical commitments is surprisingly small, while they allow deriving all the remaining features of the unstructured stereotype in Fig.1; the latter *normatively depend* on the core principles in this precise sense. As the considerations in the last section display, the normative profile of populist *platforms* turns mainly on the anti-minoritarian, anti-pluralist (item #6) interpretation of the legitimacy conferrable by elections in representative democracies (item #A). This transforms into populist *ideology* by the normative reductionism that democratic legitimacy *cannot come to more and cannot require more than* this, i.e. that electoral majorities *are unique indicators of a unique authorizing 'will of the people'* (items #4, #5, #6). Accordingly, populist ideology (the normative core sufficient to produce all the other characteristics) has but two elementary principles:

1. Normative Indexical Majoritarianism
2. Constructivist conception of 'the people'

From these two elements of populist ideology, a third fundamental trait of populist ideology follows:

3. Exclusionism

In the following, I want to briefly explain these elementary principles and the way how they generate other features of populist platforms.

Normative indexical majoritarianism (=normative majority communitarianism)

Normative majoritarianism is the view that there is no higher authorization and no other source of legitimation for political decision making and governing a country in representative systems than the majority will expressed in elections. Political decision making ought to track only the majority will. The critical twist in populist ideology is to *link majoritarianism to identity and moral value* via an *indexical* mechanism. Asked why ‘the people’ is so privileged that no one else should govern, the populist elicits the answer ‘because it is *ours*’ –just as the only will we control is ours. That alone makes it (trivially, like any shared goal) a valuable good *for us* to realize it.⁵³ This means: wherever there is a majority, it ought to govern, and *no one else should* co-govern or share in government (item #4). On this normative basis alone does it follow that politics *can be* nothing but zero-sum adversarial, non-cooperative struggle for dominance by assembling a *electoral majority identity* (items #6, #8, #3). The inverse restatement of this normative majoritarianism is also indexical: *we*, the people should not be governed by anyone but the majority –i.e., given the indexical component: *ourselves* (item #6). The characteristic slides between frames of reference in these inferential connections are impossible without the indexical mode of presentation (i.e. they could be revealed as partly equivocal upon non-indexical disambiguation), which at the same time assures the most immediate appeal.

Constructivist Conception of ‘the People’

The second core principle, populism’s constructivist conception of the people, is the feature of populist ideology that is crucial for its ability to correctly deny that it is fascism (and assert that it is democratic, item #3) *and* its ability to make a stronger claim to authority than mere

⁵³ The inseparability of collectively accepted goals and group-integration as the social and normative pre-conditions of the use of the “we”-pronoun in public speech to express a characteristic “we-mode” of social action shared by each constituent member of an addressed group has been convincingly argued and analyzed in Tuomela (1995) and Tuomela (2007). For those identifying as a group including them that a speaker refers to as “we” or “us”, it is trivial that the collectively adopted or constructed goals are *a reason to act in the we-mode* and thus good because the group is *constituted* by reference to these goals. The “us” has no other contextually specific reference (since a public speaker obviously does not *per impossibile* use “we” in either the “I-thou” or the “I-these-over-there” coordinating indexical senses to successfully address each audience member personally face-to-face).

democratically minimal, unideological tyranny of the majority (item #5).⁵⁴ The basic claim of the constructivist conception of the people is a *fundamental reductive identification*:

(FRI) the people is (=) the subject of the majority will.

This reductive identification can be justified from a *generic unspecific form* of a basic principle of democratic authorization, the principle that it is the people who should govern and no one else (= that ‘the people is the sovereign’, i.e. that political decisions ought to track the will of the people and nothing else), together with majoritarianism (that the people shouldn’t be governed by anyone but the majority). The justification runs as follows: From normative indexical majoritarianism, it follows that the majority is the only legitimate ‘sovereign’, and from the principle of popular sovereignty (that the only legitimate sovereign is the people) it follows that the majority is the sovereign, hence the (‘real’) people (item #4). The reductive identification is constructivist, not empirical, because it is opposed to the *population* of the national state, or *all those subject* to political decisions, which empirically also contain the minority as a matter of legal fact (item #7). While the legal-empirical identification ‘the people = all those subject to the laws \approx the population’ is *impartial* and locates legitimacy in the *generalizability* of political decisions, the constructivist conception completely dislodges legitimacy from parts of the population that are not part of the electoral majority and thus remains *by design* partial or *partisan* (item #8).

The Constructivist Conception of the People is the move that reveals populist platforms as based on an *ideology* because it doesn’t appeal to a publicly given and impartially appreciable *reality* but to a *construct*. Nonetheless, populist ideology is not messianic, i.e. overtly ideological, but *covertly* ideological. It *surreptitiously* puts its own construction in the place of an empirical reference to the people in the normative principle of popular sovereignty as it is supposed to be understood by every member of a democratic society regardless of their political allegiance. Everyone is entitled to take it to demand that *all the people living under a government’s jurisdiction* ought to control *as subjects to its generally applied decisions* political

⁵⁴ Previous authors who noted this as a crucial element in different frameworks are Arato (2013), and Mueller, J.-W. (2016). A metaphysical conception of populism taking this constructivism as the essence of the political is, of course, Laclau (2005), and Mouffe (2018)’s talk of the ‘construction of another people’.

decision making. The latter is in this sense the *implicit actual ideal* expressed in democratic institutions. Populism's replacement of the actual implicit ideal by (FRI) eliminates the reference to *all* those subjects to rule and transfers legitimacy claims by attributing sovereignty only to those who get to govern in virtue of legitimate majority votes, away from the population at large to those empowered in majority votes and whom they represent alone. This *undermines* the ideal of democracy (=sovereignty of all subjects) *by normatively disabling it* rather than, like fascism, *competing with democracy* (by identifying something else than the people as legitimacy-conferring) or, like left or right wing parties, competing *within* representative democracy for particular policy-proposals' *general* endorsement.

I now want to draw attention to the key entailment of the core assumptions that guides most populist interactions within public political life in representative democracy: Implied Exclusionism. It is a *mandatory* entailment of populist ideology's two core principles.

Implied Exclusionism

The reason normative liberal accounts⁵⁵ most commonly mention to explain why populist ideology's version of the ideal of popular sovereignty makes democracy as we know it impossible is its exclusionary anti-pluralism (item #6, in defiance of item #B, given item #A). One of the most surprising features of the present reconstruction is that it puts on display that populist ideology's two decisive moves –normative indexical majoritarianism and a constructivist conception of the people—have *exclusionism (and delegitimization) of the minorities defeated in voting procedures as a logical entailment*.⁵⁶ Anti-pluralism –often denied as unfairly attributed to their position by positions committed to the two core principles as the 'essence of the political'— can be derived either from the majority or from the minority side. In order to avoid it, populist ideology would have to give up one of its core principles –and thereby cease to be populism.

⁵⁵ Baggini (2014), Galston (2018).

⁵⁶ 'Inclusionary populism' (cf. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2013)) is thus, for all models sharing the description of populist platforms given here, *incoherent* (=either inclusionary politics and thus not populist or not inclusionary).

Exclusionism of the minority follows from populist ideology's constructivist conception of the people applied to the construction of the civic status of the minority coexisting with the majority in the same society. This can be done, first, explicating the construction of the status of the majority and indirectly deriving the illegitimacy of the minority or, second, directly by explicating the status of the minority in light of the core principles. First, if the majority will, as that which should govern, is the will of the people and nothing else, the contrary will, that of each minority, is the will of someone else than the people. But popular sovereignty demands that only the people are the legitimate rulers. Thus not only are minority wills not part of the will of the 'real' people (=the majority authorized to rule by winning an election), but in virtue of that, *holding a minority interest is holding an interest that cannot possibly be legitimate*. Therefore, popular sovereignty –the demand to execute in political government nothing except the will of the people—demands, armed with the populist construction of who the real people is, to exclude the minority from the right to participate in political decision making (or the right to be respected as co-legislators). Second, exclusionism is *directly* entailed by using the constructivist conception of the people to construe the minority as the complement set of the construct 'the people'. If the majority is the subject of the only will that ought to count, hence (by constructive definition) 'the people', then the minority (the complement) is the subject of all wills that ought not to count, hence (by constructive definition) the *non-people* or, to use the customary Greek prefix for complement: the *anti-people*.

The meaning of 'populism' in normal form

Identifying the two core normative assumptions normative indexical majoritarianism and the constructivist conception of the people allows organizing the stereotype according to what is *constitutive for the concept* (the semantic marker) of populism, what the *typical identifying features* of the phenomenon of populist platforms under normal conditions (items #A-C) are (the stereotype), and what the normative microstructure *constitutive for the phenomenon* (=responsible for the stereotypical features), as well as what paradigmatic examples are.

SYNTACTIC MARKER	SEMANTIC MARKER	STEREOTYPE ('ideological substance' or means of mass mobilization)	NORMATIVE ESSENCE & PARADIGM EXAMPLES
POLITICAL KIND TERM for a <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1st order: <i>distinct position in the political public space of contemporary liberal representative democracy</i> 2nd order: theoretical conception of or in relation to <i>legitimate political authority in democracy, popular sovereignty, 'the political'</i> 	POSITION is at least essentially anti-elitist	A PLATFORM of this position typically displays <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Thin-centered' ideology Transcending the left-right specter Rejecting totalitarianism and dictatorship Manichean separation of society in 'virtuous' people and 'corrupt' elite Emphasis on politics as expressive of <i>volonte generale</i> Antagonizing polemics (=homogenization + polarization) Non-cooperative politics & intolerance to minorities. 	The platform MUST BE COMMITTED TO <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Normative Indexical Majoritarianism Constructivist Conception of the People = (FRI) ⇔ <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Exclusionism/Anti-Pluralism SIMILAR TO HOW 1.-3. are exemplified in Perón's Argentina, Berlusconi's Italy, Orbán's Hungary, Kaczyński's (PIS) Poland, Chávez/Maduro's Venezuela, Erdoğan's Turkey, Brexit-campaign's England, Trump's 'America First', Salvini's Italy, [...] DISSIMILAR TO Merkel, Churchill, Mujica, Mao, Stalin, Hitler, Xi's China, [...]

Figure 2

Resulting principle of legitimacy from popular sovereignty according to populist ideology

Populist ideology's 'achievement' as an *argument* is to lead citizens who believe in the actual ideal of popular sovereignty to perform a stepwise reasoning that convinces them to slide into assenting to the following principle of legitimate 'control' of political decision-making:

(PopulistSov) *Not all* subjects to universally enforceable political decisions (=members of the population) *can* be entitled to exercise legitimate *control* (and to respect as equal owners of this right) *at all times* on *political decision making*.

IV. The Incompatibility of (even minimal) democracy and Implied Exclusionism

Calling attention to the logical directness of this way of arriving at exclusionism (=the denial of rights to the minority in the same way that aliens are denied civil rights) is important mainly to demonstrate that Exclusionism is an *entailed feature* of the two core normative moves in

populist ideology. The fact that it is a merely entailed but not explicitly stated feature explains populist ideology's *cognitive efficiency*: democratic citizens who are (as they must) firmly committed to the minimal requirements of electoral political legitimacy and then brought to believe that this is democracy's *whole realistic point* are inevitably cognitively convinced of the political tolerability of exclusionism *even if they regard themselves 'morally' as non-exclusionists*. Implied exclusionism's derivation being a matter of logic in populist ideology allows it being conveyed without being explicitly demanded from the audience. But implied exclusionism's role is not limited to its being an oblique part of populist ideology manipulating initially democratic publics. It is also of *substantive import*. Implied Exclusionism denies the minority participatory rights in political decision making by making it *normatively* inadmissible (via Normative Indexical Majoritarianism). This means at least that the contributions of the citizens finding themselves in the electoral minority are *normatively negligible*.

Populism vs Totalitarianism: Ideological minority delegitimation but not legal Exclusionism

It is important to prevent an easily exploitable misconception of the way in which populist ideology and democracy as we know it are incompatible. The *exclusionism entailed by populist ideology* is one at the (normative) level of *justification of the exercise of power*, not demanding a constraint at the (empirical) *legal* level, like e.g. Apartheid in South Africa before 1994. The exclusionism is the political one of *delegitimizing the opposition*. Populist ideology doesn't advocate the enactment of discriminatory laws or violations of *formal civic equality*; it officially rejects totalitarian moves like this. Given the majority *ought to govern and no one else represents the people*, it is 'in the name of popular sovereignty' that the minority wills are excluded from *consideration as legitimate concerns or potentially reason-giving epistemic or rational constraints* in decision-making. This displacement from sovereignty is populist ideology's anti-democratic strain because the delegitimized parts of the population no longer have the right to co-govern themselves.

But isn't this just how majority rule works? Why is 'co-governing by the minority' mandatory for democracy in the first place? Doesn't this smuggle in liberal demands for pluralist

accommodation of minority views? Given populist ideology's claim to *empower no one but the majority*, one might ask whether it is *democracy* that *prohibits* exclusionism as the one entailed in populist ideology or rather *liberal* democracy, so that populism could still count as democratic, but 'illiberal'.⁵⁷ Post-electoral exclusionism of losers might be a matter of 'realism' as long as pre-electoral legal participatory equality for all citizens isn't violated. A demonstration that populist ideology is incompatible with *any extant* conception of democracy *as we know it* thus ought not to simply *stipulate* democracy as implying non-exclusionism or else risk reducing the investigation to a verbal dispute.⁵⁸

Populism vs the imperative of inclusion: Disabling democratic opposition and accountability

In sec. III., we saw that sidelining the opposition politically to the extent that one-party rule becomes possible is a *typical* feature of populist rule. Having identified populist ideology's normative core, we can now show –following an argument by Nadia Urbinati⁵⁹-- that this is a *non-accidental* feature following from the *strategic* role that the majority-principle acquires within a mechanism of empowerment⁶⁰ when embedded in *normative eliminativism*. According to populist ideology's core principles, those losing the elections, the opposition, have no legitimate entitlement to co-govern because normative majoritarianism entails that *no one else* can correctly claim to represent the people. But then the opposition *also* must be prevented from *remaining competitive* –more so because according to the constructivist conception of the people, they are the *anti-people*.⁶¹ Thus, the (procedural) role of the majority principle as an *open-ended mechanism of potentially alternating acts of political authorization* depending on mechanisms of accountability to the electorate is *completely eliminated* in favor of the *empowerment of majoritarian politics* combined with a *permanent mandate*.⁶² Even the

⁵⁷ Cf. [Mudde/Kaltwasser \(2017\): 95](#). Overviews of the various positions and the conclusion to 'define' populism as illiberal democracy are given by [Deiwiks \(2009\)](#) and [Pappas \(2016\)](#).

⁵⁸ [Isaac \(2017\)](#).

⁵⁹ [Urbinati \(2017\)](#) & [Urbinati \(2014: ch 3\)](#).

⁶⁰ [Priester \(2011\)](#) and (2012) similarly defines populism as primarily "a strategy of empowerment" (2012: 3).

⁶¹ [Mueller, J.-W. \(2017\)](#).

⁶² A related argument is offered by [Levitsky & Loxton \(2012: 167\)](#).

extremely thin surrogate of a *normative* constraint on decision making by popular sovereignty that construes democracy as a procedure of decision-making that passively adapts to the interests of the population via self-correcting trial-and-error in alternating opposed policy agendas cannot be justified by the populist core principles. The normatively reductive construal of democratic legitimacy and popular sovereignty accomplished by the two core principles of populist ideology suffices for justifying permanent opposition disablement in the name of said sovereignty, and the absence of legitimate government turnover results in authoritarian rule.

Given the *mandatory* role allotted by even the most austere current conceptions of democracy to the controlling and monitoring role of the *opposition*, and the priority of *accountability for government decisions* towards an open-ended judgment of political decisions by the electorate, populist ideology thus cannot justify –nor demand—what is minimally mandatory for the continued exercise of democratic rule while condoning what is incompatible with democratic rule (one-party rule).

Why populist ideology undermines (even minimal) democracy, not (just) liberalism

The incompatibility of populism and democracy is thus no artifact of an unduly ambitious (or illicitly liberal) notion of democracy but arises for *even the most austere procedural conceptions*. The reason is that populist ideology and democracy as we know it conceive the *majority's role* in the realization of democracy's ideal of popular sovereignty in deeply incompatible ways.⁶³ Democracy's ideal is prepared to adapt to mass-society's demands by accepting the majority *principle* as an element of political *pragmatics*. This *pragmatic* adoption of majority decisions, however, is conditional (=normatively controlled) in applying only as long as it does not conflict with the ideal's demand that for a decision to be legitimate, each and every one subject to the decision (and its consequences) must be entitled to be, and capable of identifying themselves as potential co-author of the decision they are subject to. The *operative* legitimacy-constraint imposed by popular sovereignty is accordingly acceptability by the

⁶³ In some ways, the following argument overlaps with observations of Abts & Rummens (2007) and Rummens (2017) despite focusing on a different fundamental concept for democracy.

population under the jurisdiction of the decision. Thus not every majority decision is legitimate –only those meeting the operative constraint are. Populist ideology, in contrast, elevates *rule by majority*-decisions to the normatively controlling (=definitive) element of *legitimate political authority* which becomes unconditional because no legitimation demands beyond it are appropriate. Therefore, there can be no procedurally adequate majority decisions that are *illegitimate*. Given the constructivist notion of the people as those entitled to govern by majority-yielding voting processes accessible to all those subjected to the decisions, the *delegitimation* of the minorities as mandatory legitimacy-constraints on decision-making or *normative exclusionism* follows.⁶⁴ The difference between interpreting the ideal of popular sovereignty and the concept of legitimate political authority either, as democrats, along the lines of a pragmatic majority principle incapable of issuing universalizable legitimacy in isolation or, like populist ideology, along the lines of constitutive (legitimation-sufficient) majority rule is easily overlooked for its subtlety when in fact they're worlds apart. The minimalist democratic ideal demands inclusion of *all* those subject to decisions even beyond those currently entitled to vote, where the populist ideal inevitably entails *exclusion* from legitimacy-relevance, even within those currently entitled to vote.

V. Normative evaluation –The impossibility of ‘inclusive’ populism

The Actual Democratic Ideal

The austere, procedural notion of democracy used so far for the sake of argument *per se* does not entail or require inclusion but merely fair procedures universally accessible to those already included and capable of ensuring an open-ended process of accountability-sensitive electoral government determination and possible alternation. Nonetheless, if the legitimacy of decisions depends on accountability to, representation of, and participation by those subject to the decisions, then there is a very natural step from those already included to demanding the inclusion of all those subject to decision making and affected by its consequences in order to

⁶⁴ An illuminating discussion of the interaction of these constraints is Galston (2018: ch.2-3). This interaction makes domesticating populism, as Wolkenstein (2015, 2016) proposes, seem incoherent.

improve the legitimacy of decision making.⁶⁵ The step from the practical problem of ensuring mass-coordination by a voting- and majority-dependent practice of decision-making to the demand of legitimacy of this sort converts the normatively austere notions of popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy as we know it into normatively ambitious ones. From now on, taking the incompatibility of populist ideology and democracy as we know it to be established, I will identify the argument underlying populist ideology with this more ambitious conception of democracy in mind. The task of spelling out the *democratic* ideal of popular sovereignty correctly can now be put brief: it must not entail or permit exclusionism. *That* if any is the lesson of dealing with populism for democrats: the task to articulate a *permanently* inclusionary, majority-respecting ideal of popular sovereignty. It needs to frame those who happen to be in the minority as having the same right to *co-govern* and the same entitlement to respect as subjects of rights of *co-citizens, even as losers of elections*. Doing so requires adopting an ambitious normative interpretation of the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty. A suitable approach is the concept of *political autonomy* along the lines developed in Habermas' theory of the liberal democratic constitutional state.⁶⁶ According to the conception of deliberative democracy underlying this theory, liberalism and democracy are *inseparably linked* which gives another reason to object to the very idea of 'illiberal democracy' and thus to suspect that populism, even if it were correct (which it isn't as the last section showed) that it is (mainly) anti-liberal, is already thereby *incompatible with democracy*. However, this obviously is contingent on accepting this conception of representative liberal constitutional democracy under capitalism as mandatory; otherwise, this conclusion about populism might be suspected to be manufactured by the decision over the democratic theory. Given the argument in the last section, however, this suspicion turns out to be erroneous. My reason for choosing the deliberative conception of democracy is that I think that it much better captures the *actual ideal* underlying the acceptance and appreciation of democratic government as imbued with more *emancipatory* potential than any other form of government. In this sense, it offers the proper *counter-conception* to the populist normative eliminationism

⁶⁵ This step is most compellingly argued in all its complexity in Young (2002: chs. 1 and 3).

⁶⁶ Cf. Habermas (1996, 2001); similar conceptions of democracy's ideal can be found, apart from Young (2002)'s, also in Anderson (2010)'s Deweyan conception of democracy.

with regard to the core ideals of democratic legitimacy and popular sovereignty in terms of *political autonomy*.

The normative point of the latter can be condensed in two connected principles underlying the rational compellingness of democratic decisions for citizens:

- (1) All subjects to political decisions (= members of the population under the jurisdiction of the generally enforceable decisions, institutions & consequences) are entitled to exercise (their equal part of) control (and to respect as equal owners of this right) over political decision making at all times, *even when in minority & in contexts of disagreement*.

- (2) Only those decisions to whom anyone is subject can claim legitimacy of which she can simultaneously regard herself as author. Collectively, only those generally enforceable decisions and institutions are legitimate that can reasonably claim rational acceptance by all those subject to them when subjected to public and testing deliberative processes, and no unaddressed reasons against them remain unaccommodated.

Clearly, this goes far beyond populist ideology's reductionist construal of popular sovereignty as procedurally irreproachable majority empowerment to govern. The democratic ideal so conceived allows understanding the mutual irreducibility and interdependence of liberal institutions and the *uncoerced cooperative actual permanent exercise of collective political will formation* which is essential for the legitimacy-conferring nature of universally inclusive, deliberative decision-making.

According to it, political decision making ought to track the free, equal and universal mutual rational acceptability of all political decisions for *all* the people who are (in fact and as a matter of law) *subject*⁶⁷ to them (= their enforceable consequences). This is what interpreting popular sovereignty in terms of *public political autonomy* requires. Given that this arguably construes all

⁶⁷ A still more ambitious form of the principle of inclusion requires legitimacy to provide rational acceptability of political decisions to all those affected by them (cf. Habermas (1996: 107), Christiano (2008: 243-249)).

the components of democracy as we know it from the procedural requirements on legitimacy to their legal manifestation and thereby their realization as enforceable behavioral constraints on all citizens as resulting from one and the same normative commitment, it can be called the *actual or operative* normative ideal of liberal constitutional representative democracies and their adaptive development.

Under its assumption, positions that are against liberal institutions, as well as the exclusion of non-majoritarian perspectives from processes of decision-legitimation are *ipso facto* incompatible with democratic legitimacy *unless a particular such institution* (e.g. a law, constitutional provision) can be shown, in public debates, to be responsible for effects of a generally enforceable legal norm or institution that are rationally unacceptable for a particular group of subjects while not to others (= unjust).

This change of theoretical perspective simultaneously accomplishes two things that are relevant in the discussion of the political nature of populist ideology. On the one hand, the sensitivity to the legitimation-input by all those subject to constraints that are generally legally enforceable demanded in (1) entails a *principle of inclusion*. On the other hand, assuming that popular sovereignty is nothing less than political autonomy as characterized above, (2) can be read as a normative demand on *legitimacy to permanently ensure* compliance with Rousseau's axiom 'the will is either general or not'.⁶⁸ The result combines in the following normative Principle of Popular Sovereignty:

(NormPopSov) Political decision making ought to track the will of *all* the people (= population subject to political decisions in jurisdiction) *all the time*.

This remains in particular valid in contexts of disagreement and majority decisions in representative democratic politics. The opposition can always legitimately contest “#WeTooMatter”, require a fair hearing and response to their reasons for rationally refusing to regard a decision as correct *with an open-ended process of rational evaluation*, and each

⁶⁸ Similarly, Garsten (2010: 107) construes liberal democracy as a form of political government to “encourage the multiplication and contestation of claims to represent the people” as to ensure *legitimacy* according to the standard of *popular sovereignty* as (universally shared equal) political autonomy.

minority can always legitimately contest “#WeToo”. Even with a majority in government, it must never be impossible for the minority to turn out to be right in contesting that a certain political decision *isn't legitimate* (and so acquire a right to prevent its realization) because it isn't equally rationally acceptable to all those who are subject to it (= unjust).

The dependence of the legitimacy of any institution with general application to the population on the rational acceptability by all those subject to it accomplishes, first, bringing liberal institutions under the reign of popular sovereignty exercised in the form of permanent and all-inclusive public contestatory politics, and, second, the *permanent* use of communicative power at the service of assessing deliberative decision making and –unmaking.

The first accomplishment of understanding popular sovereignty as public political autonomy, as (NormPopSov) shows, is *incompatible* with populist ideology's entailed exclusionism. The second accomplishment disarms the suggestive association of oppositional anti-establishment politics and mass protest with political activism that needs to go, as populist platforms claim, beyond and against liberal constitutional representative democracy and its institutions ('the political system') as a whole. Only populism, but not inclusionary polemic mass protest challenges the constitutional protections of minorities or their claim to be represented as part of political decision making even where they did not win elections.

Loss of democratic control when populism reaches its goals

Identifying the actual ideal of liberal constitutional democracies with its principled demand of inclusion, and of equal respect and co-legislative, potentially contestatory entitlement for *all those subject at all times*, and the incompatibility of populist ideology's core normative commitments with these democracy-constitutive principles finally allows one simple contrasting consideration over the question of whether populism *can* deliver on its core promise of 'taking back control'. Given the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty as public popular autonomy, the conferral of legitimacy to decisions is *normatively* dependent on the actual communicative processes of public reason justifying them *by all those subject to decisions*, that is: the whole population in the jurisdiction of the decision *at all times*.

(PopSov) *All* subjects to consequences of political decisions (=members of the population) are entitled to exercise (their equal part of) control (and to respect as equal owners of this right) *at all times* over political decision making (*even when in minority & in contexts of disagreement*).

In contrast, as we saw at the end of sec. III.2., given the populist reductionist interpretation of the same ideal, popular sovereignty, a part of the people is sufficient to have a claim on legitimation in virtue of ‘speaking for the people’, so that the principle of populist sovereignty is

(PopulistSov) *Not all* subjects to universally enforceable political decisions (=members of the population) *can* be entitled to exercise *control* (and to respect as equal owners of this right) *at all times* over *political decision making*.

Except in cases of complete unanimity or total abstention, a part of the population (= electoral majority) is a smaller quantity than *all members* of the same community (= electoral majority + all minorities). Therefore, in comparison with governing according to liberal constitutional democracy’s actual ideal, populist ideology’s success at reaching its goal (= govern according to populist ideology) will always *diminish* the extent of popular control of political decision making. It is a democratic deficit enhancer.

Populism’s *nature* can then best be understood neither as an ideology (although it *uses* a ‘thin-centered’ core of normative stances towards democratic ideals) nor as merely a style or rhetoric (although for its *efficiency* certain styles are more apt than others), nor as the essence of the political in democracy (although the target of its politics are the essentials of, not merely policies within, democracy). Instead, it recruits all these as means of articulating *a complex argument* aimed at dislodging the emancipatory, inclusionary and egalitarian understanding of democratic ideals that guide the policies, civic interactions, and normative expectations of normal democratic audiences by default. Replacing them with something less, the successful populist argument not only diminishes popular control, but also *undermines* the population’s

practical and intellectual emancipatory grip on democratic ideals. In the sense of Stanley (2015), it is *propaganda* against (the ideals of) democracy as we know it.

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