Is populism a part of European democracy or a threat to it?

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Introduction
Populism has become an incredibly significant word in European political discussions the past few years. It has been used by both the right and left to demonise and discredit their rivals; it has accompanied both the Brexit and anti-mass immigration movement and the 2017 French and German elections. In recent years, scholars have begun to further research whether the rise of populism could be a threat to democracy— the very building block of the European Union. This essay addresses that exact question. The definitions of European democracy and populism shall be discussed first, followed by the link between demagoguery and populism, which leads us into a historical example of populism in Europe. Then, the current political climate in Europe will be analysed in the context of populism, after which there will be a conclusion of to what extent populism is a part of European democracy and to what extent is it a threat to it.

Definitions of European democracy and populism in the 21st century

Democracy is a type of government and society that has existed in some form since Ancient Greece. It is a way of governing where the citizens of the country have the power to either directly vote on legislature or to elect representatives. In the 21st century, European democracies are often representative democracies with specific laws coordinating the freedom of the press and the separation of power. The European Union requires a democratic regime in order to become a member state, however it lacks the specific definitions for it. At the very least, safe and fair elections must be held regularly and there must be laws in place to protect freedom of expression.

Populism is a very widely used term with an equally wide possibility of definitions that are difficult to narrow down. In order to analyse populism, it is still important to first fully understand its spectrum of definitions before even attempting to understand this phenomenon that has been sweeping across Europe. The vast majority of European populist parties are part of the right-wing movement, and tend to fiercely oppose immigration and non-traditional families. There have been many new parties formed in European member states that have been criticised as populists by the media and many have voiced their concerns about the rise of populism.

There is, however, no uniformly agreed upon definition for populism. In fact, it is often split into three categories: populism as an ideology, populism as a discursive style and populism as a political strategy. Populism as an ideology has been specifically researched by the political scientist Cas Mudde. He describes populism as a “thin-centred ideology” that divides people into the “common people” and the “corrupt elite”. He further argues that since populism is thin-centred, it needs to be combined with another ideology, to be substantial. This means that populism can be observed everywhere the political spectrum, as it is not restricted to one
worldview of what the ideal economic system or social welfare system consists of. Other political scientists argue that populism is first and foremost a type of political discourse characterized by simple slogans. They suggest it has an aim to establish unity among those who feel left out of the mainstream political discussion, and separate the public into the marginalized and the elite. Lastly, populism is also sometimes seen as a political strategy, a way to gain support from the general public during politically or economically tense times. Professor Argandona from the IESE Business School states that in fact, it is a strategy that almost all political parties end up using. Why? The answer is simple—populism appeals to the public as a refreshing change from the corrupt elite who is to blame for the people’s problems, allowing to gain political popularity.

It is important to note that the three definitions are not mutually exclusive. Depending on the point of view of the analyst, populism could be one, two, or all three of the proposed definitions, as all of them share a common denominator – dividing society into one homogenous and one antagonistic group in an attempt to gain public support. Whether it is a political ideology, a type of political discourse or a political strategy, it always claims to be the sole representative of the “real silent majority” of the French, Turkish, British, etc. population. It bases its ideas off the majority rule – what over 50% of the citizens vote for should be made into law. It seems to be appropriate in a democratic country, as democracy was founded as a representation of the people, but shouldn’t a democracy protect the rights of all people (including minorities), not just the majority?

Connotations in Europe

In Europe, the word “populist” has negative connotations much more often than not. In times of political adversity, the label is thrown on almost everyone one might disagree with, in order to dismiss them as someone who cannot be taken seriously. For example, in a European Parliament debate on May 10th, 2011, Mr. Nigel Farage, a member of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) claimed that Mr. José Manuel Barroso had said the following: “those who dare to vote no in referendums, they’re populists; when they want to control their own borders, they’re populists” and then proceeds to let Mr. Barroso know who he really thinks the populists are: Democrats. Because populism has such negative connotations in Europe, any politician that is associated with it risks his or her popularity, therefore explaining the desperate attempts to deny any accusations of populism and to label one’s adversary as the one who is populist. That is why it is incredibly useful for a left-wing party when a right-wing party (and vice versa) is widely recognised as populist, as it often discredits one’s arguments.

But why, if the proposed definitions share the idea of keeping the elite accountable for their actions to protect the people? Isn’t that the definition of democracy? Well, yes, but populism is often tied with demagoguery, the more simplistic definition of which is the act misleading people by exploiting their fears and desires. This can be an incredibly valuable political tool in times of political and economic uncertainty when the government is unstable and the people hungry for a saviour. An excellent example of it is Germany during the Great Depression.
The popularity of the NSDAP is suddenly rose from 2.6% in 1928 up to 37.3% in the 1932 Reichstag elections. This can be tied to the worldwide economic crisis that caused unemployment and distrust in the current government to rise, which is quite a textbook case for a perfect breeding ground for populism. The people’s fears were exploited in order to use Jews and Communists as scapegoats for all of Germany’s problems, as they were part of the “corrupt elite”. In fact, in Nazi propaganda, Jewish Communists were regarded as the sole cause for Germany’s economic depression and political collapse in the 20th century. This quickly escalated to one of the cruelest dictatorships the world has ever seen, to the extermination of 2/3 of the Jewish-European population, and to the deadliest war in human history.

Perhaps, it is no wonder then that Europe seems to be nervous about the new rise of populism. However, is it justified, or should we let go of the past already?

Current political climate in Europe in the context of populism

The years 2016 and 2017 have been rich in European political events that are relevant to this topic. Populism has mainly been discussed during the Brexit referendum, French presidential elections, and German presidential elections, all of which have shocked the world in their very own special way. The Leave campaign in the UK was widely criticised for its use of demagoguery, notably with the false statement that after leaving the EU, the UK could give their National Health Service an additional £350 million per week. Now, that the Article 50 has been invoked, British Prime Minister Theresa May has in fact stated that she cannot guarantee any extra money for the health service post-Brexit, which serves as final proof that the claim had absolutely no basis. It is too late to change one’s vote now though, and some even feel as though they were lied to. As absurd and populistic as it was, the £350 million claim was a seemingly easy and tangible benefit of leaving the EU. It appealed to those who have little access to quick medical care under the NHS and reinforced the idea that UK’s EU membership was solely to blame for its internal social welfare issues. The UKIP is well known for its populist techniques, which consequently led to one of the most extreme political surprises in the 21st century Europe and tensions within the European Union.

10 months later during the French presidential elections, it was expected for Marine le Pen from the far-right Front National to succeed in one way or another. After multiple terror attacks in the last few years and a rising unemployment rate, the French seemed to be desperate for a radically different leader. Brexit had shown that the rules political correctness could easily be ignored, and that it is beneficial to advertise oneself as a fierce opponent to the current government and establishment. The leader of the NF, Marine Le Pen, ran against Emmanuel Macron in the final round of the elections, winning 32% of the popular vote against Macron’s 68%. This time, just the promises of EU membership referendums, tougher immigration policies and putting “France first” (whatever that might mean) were not enough for the French people. The attempt at appealing of gaining political power by exploiting people’s fears regarding the obligations for immigration when being a part of the EU, as well as the fear of Islamic terrorism was unsuccessful this time, however with 32% of the popular vote, Marine Le Pen proved that her party is a force to be reckoned with.
The German Bundestag elections were quite surprising as well. While the Centre-Left Union parties won the most votes, the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) entered the Bundestag as the third largest party, which was a shock for German politics, as the AfD is widely known as a strong opponent to Merkel’s liberal immigration and economic policies. Their manner of communication is also very populist, appealing to common fears among the German population, including out of control immigration, rises in crime rate, and a lack of care for the native Germans. While unable to win the majority, their debut in the Bundestag was immediately as the third largest party (an incredibly quick success), which is, as mentioned before, is very common for populism. Newcomers who have been previously uninvolved with politics and/or the establishment, are much more likely to appeal to the people as a part of the “common people” and not the conspiring “corrupt elite”, therefore fulfilling the unwritten requirement for a populist. The party is also very young, as it was founded only in April 2013, offering fresh, new perspectives that appeal to the general public who is dissatisfied with the current political climate. The entrance of the AfD to the Bundestag was definitely one of the most significant events of European politics in 2017.

Populism in the context of democracy
After exploring what populism really means, we must come back to the original purpose of this essay – is it a threat to democracy in Europe? It is an intriguing and very important question, after all democracy is one of the building blocks of the European Union and Europe in general. In the late 80’s and early 90’s, populism was a widely used revolutionary technique in the occupied Soviet Union member states to encourage people to stand up to oppression. No one spent hours debating about what kind of policies should be put in place in their future free country, how the parliament would be structured, or any logistics for that matter. What was important, was to be free from the oppressors, as most of the people did not want to be under Soviet rule. After being free from the Soviets, everything would surely be much better, and no country could have a bright future in the Soviet Union. There could be a parallel drawn to this narrative from our 21st century populism. Populist parties seem to always emphasise that “what is important now, is to be free from the oppressors, as most of the people do not want to be under globalist/elitist/pro-immigration rule. After being free from the corrupt elite, everything would surely be much better, and no country could ever possibly have a bright future in a globalist/elitist/pro-immigration country”. Interesting, isn’t it? During the collapse of the Soviet Union, big promises were made, people were given hope and a future to look forward to. It didn’t matter if everything wasn’t completely true, what mattered was simply gathering enough people to be able to overthrow one of the most powerful regimes on this planet. Now, 26 years later, most of the European ex-Soviet states score as a full or flawed democracy, Ukraine as a hybrid regime and only Belarus as an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, in the states classified as full or flawed democracies, there are strong unelected governmental institutions and a guaranteed freedom of expression! So, populism helps countries closer to democracy, right?

Well, by definition, yes. Populism is a movement that “worships the people”, according to professor Ghita Ionescu. The will of the people and inclusion of all voices is the very basis of democracy. Dismissing someone’s argument because one might be slightly offended by it, is
something that violates the laws of freedom of expression. As being dismissed happens frequently to populists, freedom to break barriers of political correctness is often one of the main problems that populists raise to the table. Populism also offers a diversity of views. According to political scientist Dr Kaltwasser, populist politics provide an alternative perspective on tensions that have been persistent in a specific region by giving a voice to those whose opinion has been previously deemed politically incorrect. Populists also often mobilise people from various social classes and age groups, which is quite inclusive and as their policies tend to be quite general when it comes to economics, they do not discriminate on the basis of financial situation. Furthermore, since populists always stress the importance of a “true” democracy led by “the people” and not by professional politicians, they almost always advocate for referendums to take place and give a platform for people who are deeply dissatisfied with the current way that things are run. It sounds like populism is an essential part of a democracy, right?

Not so fast! There surely must be a reason why EU president Herman Van Rompuy declared populism as “the biggest danger to Europe” already in 2010. While populism can be useful in times where a social group has been ignored by the government for a while or during times of crisis when decisions must be made quickly with the support of the public, it has its own flaws as well. As mentioned earlier, European populism focuses on the wants and needs of the majority, excluding the minorities. Populist politicians tend to disregard minorities’ concerns, as it is not a part of their main voter public and therefore not a priority when it comes to policies.

However, is the very basis of a democratic society not the protection of the rights and the well-being of all people, no matter if they are part of the majority or a minority? In a democracy, everyone’s voice matters equally by definition, but the exclusionary nature of populism rising to power is a slippery slope in a democratic nation. LGBT rights can quickly deteriorate, immigration policies tighten, and religious freedom become more limited, as those are not issues that necessarily concern the majority of the population. Minorities can even be considered members of the “corrupt elite”! For example, members of the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia have suggested multiple times that the government is favouring gay and lesbian couples over traditional families, and have accused the government of supporting so-called “gay propaganda”. This shows that even though European right-wing populists have the capacity to unite people to some extent (and to a high extent in Latin America!), they tend to be highly divisive – uniting one group of people as the “real, common people” and alienating another group as the “corrupt elite”.

Furthermore, populism in government can quickly destabilise democratic institutions and unelected governmental bodies, such as the education system, the media, or the state’s Supreme Court, which is often in charge of ensuring that the head of government is competent and following the constitution. In Silvio Berlusconi’s case in Italy, populist parties had a large influence on how the multiple court cases were portrayed in the media, which violates the principle of free media in a democratic society. After an attempted coup in Turkey, around 2000 prosecutors and judges were arrested, despite any evidence that any one of these judiciaries was involved in the coup. 179 media outlets were shut down and over 21,000 public education staff were fired. Turkey’s right-wing populist government has also been in the public eye for almost a year because of their campaign to significantly amend the
constitution, which would grant much more power to the President. This shows that populism can be quite dangerous to democratic institutions when in power, especially in unconsolidated democracies.

It seems like we have two very different aspects at play – populism has been used to achieve democracy and can insure that everyone’s voices are heard in a democracy, however it can also undermine the rights of minorities and unelected democratic institutions. One key difference is that the positive impacts of populism that were mentioned can almost exclusively be observed when populism is in the opposition. Populist parties often draw attention to issues that might be slightly uncomfortable to deal with, such as people’s opposition to immigration and prevent those pressing problems from being overlooked. However, as populist parties tend to be appealing to people, there is a good chance that their support increases and that they become a part of the government, or even the largest political party in the state. As one of the key ideas of populism is protecting the nation from the “corrupt elite”, countries with populist governments often observe a kind of purge, whether it would be from apparently corrupt judges, misleading media, or from brainwashing educators. This silences opposition and scares the general public. Another problem is that the judgement can be made at the discretion of the leading politicians, which increases the risk of corruption. Corruption definitely undermines democracy along with its institutions.

Conclusion
Therefore, we can conclude that populism can enhance public discussion by adding to the diversity of opinions in a democracy when it’s in the opposition. Populist parties help to draw attention to issues that may be difficult to deal with and uncomfortable to address. However, populist parties in a government increase the likelihood of the independence of unelected democratic institutions being in danger, which itself increases the likelihood of corruption.

Populism is an incredibly complex political phenomenon that seems to pop up everywhere in different ways, which makes it difficult to analyse. However, with the use of both historical and more recent examples, we can make assumptions about the benefits and consequences of populism in a democratic society. Based on the information I gathered, I conclude that populism in opposition is beneficial to a European democratic society and is even becoming essential, as political times are changing. It helps to draw the government’s attention on groups and opinions that have previously been ignored, as well as enhance public discussion with a multitude of views. However, when populist parties rise to power, the consequences seem to outweigh the benefits, as people are divided into the “common people” and the “corrupt elite”, minorities’ rights deprioritised and democratic institutions more likely to be undermined.

Finally, it is crucial to actively continue researching the implications of populism in order to avoid a situation similar to Germany in the 1930s in a European nation.
References


