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Populists in Opposition: A Neglected Threat to Liberal Democracy?

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When the impact of populism on liberal democracy is examined, the focus often is on populists in power. After all, when in office, populists have the possibility to change legislation, thereby negatively affecting individual freedoms and rights, and to transform the political system, often toward democratic decline and illiberalism (Pappas 2019; Ruth-Lovell and Grahn 2023).¹ Far less attention has been devoted to populist parties in opposition, even though this is the position in which populists find themselves most frequently.² Prominent examples of Western European populist parties with a decades-long position in opposition include the *Rassemblement National* in France and the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium on the right and *Die Linke* in Germany and the *Socialistische Partij* in the Netherlands on the left. Outside of Western Europe, populist parties often have less longevity and more frequently assume office. However, many of these parties spend years in opposition before taking on government responsibility and/or have returned to the opposition benches afterwards (e.g., *Partido Justicialista* in Argentina and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* in Poland).

In the literature, it is commonly assumed that populist parties will have a positive impact on democracy when they are in opposition whereas they will have a negative effect when in office. When in opposition, populist parties primarily are vote-seeking and therefore are likely to concentrate on electoral mobilization, increasing political participation, and a reduction of inequalities in representation. However, in their groundbreaking cross-regional collection of case studies, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) concluded that, on average, populist actors in opposition do not have a substantial impact on democracy. At the same time, they noted that, under certain conditions, populist parties in opposition can improve democratic responsiveness by influencing the agendas of mainstream parties and the policies that they implement when in government. According to these scholars, it also is not self-evident that inclusionary populists—in practice, populist radical left parties (PRLPs)—will have a positive effect on democracy, whereas exclusionary populists—in practice, populist radical right parties (PRRPs)—will have a negative effect (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Our contribution to this symposium builds on these initial findings and analyzes the outcomes of theory-testing research in three areas: (1) the impact of populist parties in opposition on (indicators of) the quality of democracy; (2) their impact on the democratic engagement of citizens; and (3) their indirect impact through mainstream parties.³ We demonstrate that the limited number of studies that have been conducted in these areas result in contradictory findings, partly due to differences in geographical scope, methodological approach, and topical focus; therefore, it is too early to draw firm conclusions. We observe that if effects are present, they often are not the same for PRLPs and PRRPs, which calls into question to what extent populism is the lens through which we should view the impact of these parties on democracy, including on democratic backsliding. We argue that perhaps nativism and authoritarianism are more important objects of study. In light of our conclusions, we identify four key avenues that can guide future research to improve our understanding of the impact that populists in opposition have on democracy.

POPULISTS IN OPPOSITION AND THEIR IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY

When considering the relationship between populist parties and democracy, it is important to acknowledge that democracy is a multidimensional concept and populists can be both a threat and a corrective to it. As highlighted in the introduction to this symposium, democracy without adjectives consists of popular sovereignty and majority rule, whereas *liberal* democracy also includes institutions that aim to constrain sovereign power, such as the rule of law and constitutionally guaranteed rights for minorities. Considering this, we assess populist parties' impact on "polity, policies, and politics" (cf. Caiani and Graziano 2022). The three domains refer to (1) the formal and informal institutional framework of a political regime, including the decision-making process in legislative and executive arenas and the legislation that is implemented as a result of it; (2) citizens and their behaviors and attitudes toward the political system; and (3) the dynamics resulting from competition between parties in the electoral arena. This article discusses the relationship between populist parties in opposition and democracy along these dimensions.

Impact on Quality of Democracy

The publication of large datasets that identify populist parties and measure the quality of liberal democracy has made it possible to test statistically whether populism has a negative effect on democracy and whether the effect differs between populist parties in government and opposition. Most studies that adopt this approach conclude that populist parties in government have a negative effect on the quality of liberal democracy, especially concerning civil liberties, horizontal accountability, and the quality of elections (see Hawkins in this symposium). However, only five studies (i.e., Angelucci, Rojon, and Vittori 2024; Huber and Schimpf 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Juon and Bochsler 2020) test explicitly whether the government/opposition status of populist parties moderates the relationship between their success and the quality of democracy.⁴ Huber and Schimpf (2016a) conclude that populist parties in Latin America have a positive effect on democracy, especially in political systems that are not strongly consolidated. However, their studies focusing on populist parties and PRRPs in Europe observe that the relationship is far less straightforward; first and foremost, it is driven by the host ideology of populist parties. When studying PRRPs, they find no general effect of these parties in opposition on democratic quality, irrespective of the level of consolidation. However, when specific indicators of democratic quality are assessed, it becomes apparent that PRRPs in opposition have a positive effect on individual liberties but a negative effect on the rule of law (Huber and Schimpf 2016b). When European PRLPs also are included in the analysis, both types of populist parties in opposition negatively affect the mutual constraints that exist among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches (Huber and Schimpf 2017). Moreover, Angelucci, Rojon, and Vittori (2024) observe that—contrary to populists in government—populist parties in opposition are more likely to initiate or support referenda, which may shift the balance more toward majoritarianism in political systems. Only PRRPs, however, have a negative effect on minority rights when in opposition, whereas PRLPs influence them positively (Huber and Schimpf 2017). Juon and Bochsler (2020) reach more pessimistic conclusions, finding no differences in the negative effect of populist parties in opposition and government on democratic indicators such as individual liberties, rule of law, transparency, and constraints.

Impact on Democratic Engagement

If a positive relationship between populism and democracy is to be found, it is mainly through populist parties' impact on citizens and their own supporters, in particular. Populist parties are expected to mobilize (new groups of) voters and alleviate citizens' concerns about the functioning of representative democracy through the representation of societal concerns, which benefits democratic engagement and support (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Considering the people-centric nature of populist parties and their preference for an unmediated expression of the popular will, populist parties also advocate for the use of direct democratic tools and the establishment of additional channels of democratic

participation (Angelucci, Rojon, and Vittori 2024). Although research on this topic is still scarce and mostly has been conducted in a European context, initial studies provide a mixed assessment of this assertion. Populist parties do not seem to generally affect the average level of voter turnout at elections (Huber and Ruth 2017; Leininger and Meijers 2021). However, positive effects have been documented about populist representation prior to elections on turnout in Central and Eastern European countries (Leininger and Meijers 2021) and of PRRPs on the equality in turnout among social groups (Huber and Ruth 2017). Regarding political trust, there is evidence that populist parties have a positive effect on this key indicator of democratic support. Mauk (2020) concludes that in political systems that are less democratic, the success of populist parties in parliament increases political trust. Moreover, Hajdinjak (2022) notes that when populist parties are in opposition, the supporters of populist parties who believe that the country is being governed democratically exert higher levels of trust than non-populists. On the contrary, Kołczyńska (2022) finds that supporters of populist parties in opposition generally display the lowest levels of trust but that there is little difference between populist voters when the populist party is a junior coalition partner. Furthermore, Kołczyńska (2022) observes that when populist parties are in opposition in highly democratic countries, supporting a populist party is associated with lower political trust than supporting a non-populist party. Finally, Larsen (2023) finds no significant effect of the success of PRRPs on institutional or social trust.

Indirect Impact Through Mainstream Parties

When the core ideology of populist parties is studied, it becomes apparent that their impact on policy making to a great extent is indirect and takes place through agenda setting and positional effects (Minkenbergh 2001). Through processes of mainstreaming, which Mudde (2019) defines as an increasing similarity between populist and mainstream parties due to a radicalization of the latter, the distinction between mainstream and populist parties becomes increasingly blurred. A substantial body of literature demonstrates, for example, that mainstream parties have accommodated PRRPs on issues such as Euroscepticism (Meijers 2017); immigration and integration (Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Bale et al. 2010; Han 2015; Van Spanje 2010); law and order (Wenzelburger and König 2019); and welfare chauvinism (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). Wagner and Meyer (2017) observe an impact on the party system as a whole, as both center-left and center-right parties have veered to the right in response to PRR success and also have increased their emphasis on issues that typically are owned by these parties (see also Abou-Chadi 2016). However, concerning populist stances itself (Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014), as well as proposals to reform democracy (Bedock et al. 2023), contagion effects remain absent. When PRRPs have an impact on mainstream parties' proposals in this area, it is predominantly negative in the sense that mainstream parties become less rather than more enthusiastic about introducing elements of direct democracy (Weisskircher 2023).⁵

It has been demonstrated that accommodation leads mainstream parties to implement policies that are in line with those of PRRPs when in office (see Akkerman 2012 on immigration policy; Howard 2010 on citizenship policies; and the country chapters in Biard, Bernhard, and Betz 2019 on a range of policy issues).⁶ These “spillover” effects from populist parties in opposition to mainstream parties in government eventually can affect the quality of democracy—for example, by leading to the erosion of minority rights, as has been demonstrated for the PRR in Central and Eastern Europe (Minkenberg and Végh 2023).

CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Because research on populist parties in opposition is scarce, and the few existing studies often do not contain consistent patterns, we encourage scholars to conduct more research on this topic. Focusing explicitly on populist parties in opposition can help us to better understand whether they also can be a corrective to democracy, and not only a threat—and, if so, under what conditions. Existing research reveals that populist parties, first and foremost, influence the policy positions of mainstream parties. Therefore, it could be the case, for example, that the composition of the government—of the left, centrist, or right—affects the impact of PRLPs and PRRPs in opposition. Moreover, we call on scholars who are statistically testing the impact of populist parties on any dimension of democracy to always include a variable that measures their government/opposition status (including an intermediate position for populist parties that support minority governments). The studies that have adopted this approach demonstrate that this is an important moderator. Following are four additional recommendations for studying the relationship between populist parties in opposition and democracy.

Focusing explicitly on populist parties in opposition can help us to better understand whether they also can be a corrective to democracy, not only a threat—and, if so, under what conditions.

First, one of the most consistent findings of the studies discussed previously is that PRRPs and PRLPs often affect outcomes differently. This conclusion aligns with recent work by Schwörer and Koß (2023), who show that PRLPs have a more developed understanding of democracy than PRRPs, and that the latter communicate conflicting and muddled visions of democracy and instrumentalize their democratic agenda for strategic purposes. Given this conclusion, it is of the utmost importance to disentangle the effect of populism from those parties’ host ideologies: socialism for the PRL and authoritarianism and nativism for the PRR. It is plausible that some if not most of the negative effects that are documented for PRRPs are a consequence of their authoritarian and nativist conceptions of democracy rather than their populist ones.

Second, scholars should focus more on the causal mechanisms that underpin the negative effects that populism may have on democracy. Discursive studies identified what

populists claim about democracy, and statistical studies reveal effects of populist success on various dimensions of democratic quality. However, far less is known about what it is that populists *do* to bring about these effects. In the case of populist parties in opposition, this means—first and foremost—studying their behavior in parliament. In this arena, populist parties are less likely to engage in policy making and more likely to vote against proposed legislation (Otjes and Louwse 2021). Moreover, in some countries, they also are more likely to engage in scrutiny practices, such as asking oral and written questions (Louwse and Otjes 2019). When asking these questions, they tend to concentrate on fewer issues to emphasize that they are different from the elite (Cavalieri and Froio 2022). They also adopt polarizing strategies on such issues (Schwalbach 2023) and engage in polarizing performative actions, such as the use of uncivil language (Lugosi-Schimpf and Thorlakson 2021), which leads to “mutual disassociation” between mainstream and populist parties (Lewandowsky et al. 2022). These developments also can be observed outside of the parliamentary arena. Marien, Goovaerts, and Elstub (2020), for example, demonstrate that populist politicians are less likely to properly justify their stances in televised debates, and PRRPs have more disrespectful interactions with their political opponents in this setting. These findings raise questions about how these types of populist party behavior affect citizens’ democratic engagement; the quality of legislative decision making; and, ultimately, democratic principles, such as horizontal accountability. Moreover, given that the government-opposition distinction is fundamental for understanding parliamentary behavior (Louwse et al. 2017), it is highly likely that populist parties in opposition will have a different effect on democracy in the arena than populist parties in government.

Third, this overview focuses on theory testing on large-N statistical studies that pool observations in particular regions across time. In our opinion, future research should engage more in focused, in-depth comparisons to systematically test hypotheses about the differences between PRLPs and PRRPs; between populist parties in consolidated and non-consolidated democracies; between consensus and majoritarian democracies; and among American, Asian, and European cases.⁷ The disadvantage of pooled cross-sectional designs is that they cannot focus on the dynamic nature of the phenomenon under study. Therefore, they cannot distinguish easily between the effect of the breakthrough of populist parties and their sustained representation in parliament or, for example, their impact in opposition after they have been in government. Moreover, it is difficult to control for party and political-system characteristics in these designs, beyond general indicators such as degree

of consolidation and a presidential- versus a parliamentary system.

Fourth, to facilitate meaningful comparisons, scholars should focus more on local politics, where there is more variation in the core ideology and government-opposition status of populist parties. By studying populist parties that are in opposition in regional or municipal councils, it is possible to keep party and political-system characteristics constant and to isolate the impact populist parties have, for example, on decision-making procedures and the relationship between executive and legislative bodies. Studies of populist parties in local government, such as those by Paxton (2023) and Thomeczek (2023), already have demonstrated that this is a promising avenue for further research.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. A Scopus search for abstracts including “populist(s)/m in power” or “populist rule” yielded 108 results, whereas a similar search for “populist(s)/m in opposition” or “populist(s)/m in parliament” produced 13 results. However, we acknowledge that already in the 1980s, the indirect impact of populist parties on mainstream parties had been examined (Minkenberg 2001)—although without explicitly referring to the opposition status of these parties because this was their default position in political systems in many countries.
2. We define populist parties in opposition as parties that are neither part of a governing coalition nor an official support party to a minority government.
3. The hypothesis-testing studies discussed in this article were identified on the basis of a systematic review that included a Scopus search, a Google Scholar search, cross-checking of all references in the relevant studies identified through those two sources, cross-checking of all references in subsequently identified studies, and a public call to scholars in the field to report relevant studies.
4. When we refer to the success of populist parties, it was operationalized differently by individual studies—for example, as the presence of populist parties in parliament or the seat share of these parties either individually or combined.
5. To our knowledge, subtler forms of contagion have not yet been investigated. It remains to be seen whether mainstream parties have actually embraced a more majoritarian view on democracy (cf. Caramani 2017) or if they have an increasingly moralist conception of politics, which might complicate compromising and consensus building.
6. Regarding law and order policies, Wenzelburger and König (2019) find an effect only for those mainstream right parties in office that own law and order issues. Moreover, Chueri (2019) finds no indirect effects on welfare chauvinist policies.
7. Although this article focuses on theory-testing research, we explicitly value (comparative) case studies that study the relationship between populist parties and democracy more inductively. We want to highlight important recent research in this area, such as Herman and Muldoon (2019) and Minkenberg and Végh (2023).

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