



POPULISM AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY: IS IT A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

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Some authors have been highly critical of populism and naturally, this has raised the question of whether populism is dangerous for democracy or not. I wish to provide a critique of this claim and instead suggest that populism is sometimes necessary for established democracies. Developing this argument, this paper proceeds as follows: Firstly, I will outline Urbinati's criticism of populism. Secondly, using Popper's paradox of tolerance, I will show how Urbinati's view is teleological and becomes a defence of the status quo thereby impeding political progress. Thirdly, I will show how populism's relationship with democracy is best conceptualised as a creatively destructive one and how populists, once having accepted the Popperian condition of tolerance, can be a force for good in democracies by illuminating issues which were previously left outside the realm of mainstream politics.

Keywords: Populism; Democracy.

Introduction

The word democracy derives from the combination of the Greek words *demos* and *kratos*. Democracy therefore means that the people (*demos*) hold the power (*kratos*) (Christiano 2018). Similarly, the word populism traces its origins to the Latin word *populus* which literally means people (Friedman 2017). Populists from Chavez to Trump also wish to give power to what they perceive as the true people. Indeed, as Mudde's classic definition puts it, populism should be conceived as a "as a thin-centered ideology" that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps – "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite", and also argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale*¹ of the people" (Mudde 2004, 532). Therefore, both populists and democrats raise one of the most fundamental questions of political theory, namely how to define the people.

While democracy is a system of governance, populism is a "thin centered ideology" which provides a means to take over the democratic government. In turn, this has raised the question of whether populism is dangerous for democracy or not. Some authors have been highly critical of

populism. For instance, Taggart (2002) has argued that populism is a "pathology" of democratic politics while Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) suggest that populism endangers democratic life altogether. In particular, Urbinati has argued that populism is a "disfigurement" of democracy which leads to authoritarianism through the process of monopolizing public opinion for the sake of unity (Urbinati 2014). In this paper, I wish to provide a critique of this argument and instead suggest that populism is sometimes necessary for established democracies². In turn, I will adopt Urbinati's diarchic definition of democracy and focus not on *procedural* side of democracy such as the checks and balances on power, but rather on the *opinion* side of democracy which is more concerned with.

Democracy Disfigured: Urbinati's Critique of Populism

The core criticism which Urbinati directs towards populism is that it is a "disfigurement of democracy" (Urbinati 2014). She conceptualises democracy as a diarchy because of its dual nature. There is the *procedural* side which underpins the democratic process through constitutional checks and balances, but there is also an *opinion* side in

¹ A phrase meaning "general will".

² In this essay I will focus on established democracies which can experience periods of political stagnations. My theoretical arguments do not extend to newly established democracies which tend to have weaker institutional checks and balances and where the effects of populism would be different.

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which deliberative procedures and the freedom of expression are a necessary supplement to those institutions. Therefore, a society is democratic not only because of the free, competitive elections but also because of the promise to facilitate "effective political competition and debate among diverse competing views" (Urbinati 2012, 180). Institutions cannot exist without the competition of opinions and visa-versa.

In turn, populists attempt to monopolize the opinion side of democracy for the purpose of the creation of a hegemonic people. For Urbinati, this has negative implications for the relationship between the state and civil society as such a relationship is characterized by the existence of political and social conflicts. Given this tension, the state is an institution which serves to mediate among the varying interests. Populism seeks to infiltrate this tension and reclaim the unifying and subjecting role of representation. As she puts it herself:

"Populism presumes the people (in the singular) is always right – this makes it blur the diarchic structure and prioritize the domain of opinion (unified within one narrative) ... both the character and the practice of populism underlines, and more or less consciously derive from a vision of democracy that can become deeply inimical to political liberty insofar as it dissolves the political dialectics among citizens and groups, revokes the mediation of political institutions, and maintains an organic notion of the body politic that is averse to minorities and individual rights"(Urbinati 2012, 130-156).

From this it follows that populism is a call for the concentration of power. By claiming to completely represent the people, "unified within one narrative", populism shifts away from democratic politics towards authoritarianism (Urbinati 2012, 156).

Urbinati invokes a contrast between a *Lockean social contract* and a *Hobbesian* one to illustrate this (Urbinati 2014, 200). As populists monopolize the sphere of public opinion under the singular voice of the true people, they are symbolically endowed with a *Hobbesian sovereignty* in which there is no right to revolt. By contrast, democratic society requires a *Lockean social contract* in which the body politic retains the right to revolt against the opinion of those in government. Urbinati's

concern is that populism impedes the freedom of expression by monopolizing the domain of opinion through the hegemonic discourse of the people (Urbinati 2014, 223). In turn, this opens the door for *Caesarism*³ (Urbinati 2014, 224). This essentially equates to authoritarianism which in its extreme form consolidates into a total control of the *corpus politicum*⁴.

Populism's rejection of individual rights makes it prioritise unity over equality. In the "one man, one vote" system of democracy this is highly problematic. By simplifying social forces into a singular voice, populism leads to the "verticalization of political consent" (Urbinati 2014, 170). This goes contrary to the democratic mantra of widening consent to all. Therefore, instead of being a force for popular change, populism "inaugurates a deeper unification of the masses under a charismatic leader" (Urbinati 2014, 170).

The distinction between law and opinion is a fundamental feature of democracy which populist attempt to trump. In the "*Origins of Totalitarianism*", Hannah Arendt has argued that:

"[Totalitarianism] can do without the consensus iuris⁵ because it promises to release the fulfilment of law from all action and will of man; and it promises justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of the law" (Arendt 1951, 462).

By verticalizing consent and personifying it, populism blurs the distinction between opinion and law. For Urbinati this leads to *Caesarism* but we can clearly observe a common theme between her ideas and Arendt's. The state, for both theorists, becomes a tool of those in power, not a mediator of interests. It does so by monopolizing opinion. Therefore, populism becomes not a "a politics of inclusion but primarily of exclusion" because only one opinion is valid (Urbinati 2012, 150). In Urbinati's view, populism is not the embodiment, but the disfigurement of democracy.

Qualifying Urbinati's Critique

To this point, I have established that Urbinati's critique of populism is about the *opinion* side of the democratic diarchy. Populism verticalizes

³ A term used to denote an authoritarian or autocratic political philosophy inspired by Julius Caesar.

⁴ A phrase meaning "body politic".

⁵ A phrase meaning "law by consent".

political consent by uniting the will of the people into a singular voice. This creates exclusion, not inclusion. At the heart of this critique lies the concept of tolerance.

Urbinati's argument is essentially that populists do not accept tolerance of opinion which is a necessary element of democracy. **By prioritizing unity over equality, populism rejects pluralism which in its extreme form can lead to totalitarianism:** a concern echoed by Hannah Arendt.

However, a closer look at what tolerance consists of reveals that all politics, to various degrees, is about exclusion. **Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance** illustrates this tension (Popper 1957).

Democracies aspire to be tolerant societies. Each tolerant society is faced with a dilemma once exposed to intolerant views. The concept of tolerance demands toleration of all opinions. As Voltaire famously argued: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" (Hall 1906). However, this ideal-type vision of tolerance does not work. Only those who accept tolerance as a principle can be tolerated. In *"The Open Society"*, **Karl Popper has argued that the survival of the tolerant society requires an intolerance of those who are themselves intolerant.** If we tolerate intolerant parts of society, there is a risk that once they come to dominate public life, they will end toleration thereby suspending tolerance altogether (Popper 1957, 23-40).

Urbinati's critique of populism follows a similar logic. Populism is a dysfunctional form of democracy because it distorts representation for the sake of unity instead of seeking tolerance by accepting equality and pluralism. This is done in the name of the true people and by definition it means that those who do not fit within the "organic notion of the body politic" are excluded (Urbinati, 2012, 224). This could be used to justify an authoritarian form of government which makes populism inimical to democracy⁶. Yet, this argument must be

⁶ For example, using a similar line of thought, Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest that Trump's election is an illustrative case-study showing that "democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 5). According to them, one of the essential tests for democracies is whether such figures are allowed to participate in political parties, or they are prevented from gaining power in the first place. This way "populism tests the tolerance of representative

qualified. **Urbinati misses a critical caveat which undermines her critique of populism.**

For her, all populists can be measured by reference to a commonly accepted standard of what democratic politics should look like. As such she neglects the nuances that exist between different types of populist movements. In turn, her view becomes *teleological*. It does not treat the political future as open-ended and contingent, but rather as a moving in a certain direction and populism represents a retrogression from this direction. Through this, populism becomes a symptom of democratic failure rather than the expression of legitimate resentment. Such a view legitimizes the *status quo* and instead of being progressive, it actually becomes a conservative defence which impedes political progress.

As a thin-centred ideology which divides the people into two homogenous groups, it is necessary to understand that such a division can lead to Urbinati-style *Caesarism* only if these two groups are defined in ethnic or "organic" terms. If this is the case, populism becomes intolerant as the division which it advocates for cannot be overcome by a re-arrangement of the political order. It can only be done through the exclusion of groups which do not fit the organic notion of the *corpus politicum*. Therefore, in such a scenario, populism is dangerous for democracy as it does not accept the *Popperian condition of tolerance*.

However, Urbinati's critique focuses only on the supply-side of populism and it treats the populist leader as an exploiter who is willing to side-line minority rights in the name of unity. From such a perspective, democracy appears to be a self-correcting process in which the populist leader represents a temporary malfunctioning of the system. Crucially, such a view fails to acknowledge that there is a demand-side in which populism can represent a legitimate source of unrest which is ultimately good for democracy. Without it, such an issue may not have come to the forefront of politics at all and this would have made politics less democratic as the people are not truly represented.

In sum, **populism is only dangerous to democracy if it invokes an organic concept of the homogenous people.** If a populist movement

politics" and it is "most extreme forms" it may be in danger of spilling over into authoritarianism and moving away from democracy altogether" (Ibid., 79).



does that, it means that according to the *Popperian paradox of tolerance*, it can legitimately be excluded from the political process because it is dangerous for democracy. Once in power, such a populist leader may overthrow the democratic process for the sake of the unity of the homogenous people which are defined in ethnic, blood and soil terms. However, if this attempt to polarize society is triggered by legitimate concerns about socio-economic or moral issues, then populism instead should be viewed as a means to rejuvenate democracy. This is the theme of the final section.

The Populist Creative Destruction

Instead of treating populism as a disfigurement of the democratic process which is dangerous, populism should instead be seen as a means to reinvigorate democracy.

As previously mentioned, the only reason why populism might be treated as a pathology of democracy is if the populist movement in question does not accept tolerance, because as Popper has demonstrated only those political movements which accept that principle can form a legitimate government.

If populists accept Popper's condition, then they should be perceived as a means to progress democratic politics further rather than to subvert it. Populists do not completely manufacture their consent as Urbinati suggests, but rather they often invoke on issues which are of wide concern to the body politic but have not been addressed by the political elite⁷.

In theory, democracy is justified as a political system which is responsive to all citizens. Such ideal can never be achieved in practice because of the principle of *majoritarianism* on which democracy is based. Some citizens will be considered political losers in elections, others political winners. Even so, democracy should never be static. Its institutions should always change, and injustices denounced under a process of ongoing

monitoring. Accountability is at the core of what democracy is about.

Total agreement on issues is almost impossible to achieve through democratic means due to the complexities of modern societies. Instead, what we often observe are consensuses. For instance, the post-war consensus in Britain on the social-economic order after 1945 or Reagan's neoliberal consensus in the United States in the late 1970s (Heffernan 2002). Each of these was a consolidation of democratic politics around a set of issues which were broadly supported by the electorate. However, such consensuses are also double-edged swords. On the one hand, they could lead to sustained periods of growth and social equality, but on the other hand they could systematically underrepresent groups in society. Such periods can lead to a crisis of representation in which the body politic becomes disillusioned with politics. In turn, populism can emerge as a counter-weight to the political establishment by pushing the agenda in the direction of those who are underrepresented.

Indeed, as Ernesto Laclau has argued, populism does two things that are democratic (Laclau 2007, 167). First, it polarizes society by creating two fronts of confrontation. Second, it produces through polarization a new unification of the people around issues that are on the side of the many. From this process, a new political consensus emerges which aligns with the greater needs of a greater number of people. This view is also shared by Margaret Canovan who views populism as a corrective to democracy (Canovan 1999). From this it follows that democratic politics is about conflict which is almost always in flux. The alignment and de-alignment of consensuses around a set of ideas is what makes democracies move. It is at the heart of political progress.

In order for such process to occur, populism must create discontent first. To create a new consensus, the old census must be destroyed. This is the essence of the logic behind the idea of creative destruction (Roberts 2017). Progress can only be achieved through the disruption of established practices.

Polarization should be seen as a vital pre-conditional for a new consensus in politics. As democratic politics is about conflict in which certain groups lose while others win, division is

⁷ This is clearly evidenced in structural approaches to the causes of populism which focus on the demand-side. For example, the works on growth regimes of Blyth and Hopkin (2018) and Kaufmann's *Whiteshift* (2018) are two examples which trace the causes of populism to larger socio-economic changes and provide evidence that populists are not pure opportunists but actually address some issues which have been side-lined by the political establishment.

inevitable. Populism is, in a sense, politics because it creates division.

Nonetheless a key issue emerges: What if populism only creates destruction? If populists do not offer any solutions, this can lead us to concluding that the creativity of their destruction has a limited utility for democratic politics. From such a perspective, populism is a pathology of democratic politics, not a re-invigorating force, because it does not offer any solutions to the pervasive problems of society but rather uses them for its own political gain.

Crucially, the creative part does not necessarily come from the populist rhetoric but from society as a whole. **Populism serves the purpose of illuminating illnesses which conventional parties had lost in their obsession with managerial politics.**

The key issue is not to create a division based on ethnic lines which cannot be re-arranged but to put forward ideas which divide society along the lines of social, economic and moral issues. **As long as populism creates a division which is centred round a set of issues which the political elite has systematically overlooked, populists have utility for democratic politics.** In other words, once populists accept the *Popperian condition*, they can propel a realignment of the *corpus politicum* in a new consensus. This will always be a collective effort for all those involved in politics, but it is can be the populists that initiate the first step towards this re-alignment of people by breaking political taboos and driving the debate forward.

Democracies work best when they are underpinned by a strong set of norms as to how society should be governed. These norms often stagnate, and people become disillusioned with politics. In such scenarios, populist leaders can enter the scene and cause the realignment of society among a new consensus by illuminating the issues with the current one.

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Conclusion

This scientific article has shown how populism is a reinvigorating force for established democracies. The *Urbinatean criticism of populism* equates populism with an authoritarian verticalization of consent which was ultimately a pathology of democracy. It only understands populism from the supply side and therefore fails to recognize that populists do not completely manufacture their consent, but rather invoke issues which are often of wide importance in society. As such, her critique of populism becomes *teleological*. Therefore, it is a defence of the *status quo* which does not treat the future as open-ended but views each political development outside an established view as a dangerous retrogression on the path to progress. Instead, we should think of populism as a form of creative destruction. It can destroy political consensus by shifting the debate towards issues and policies which were left unattended for extended periods of time. Ultimately, this can yield a new reunification of the people conditional on populists accepting the *Popperian condition of tolerance*.

In Western democracies, political parties which side with populists are often described as making a Faustian pact with the devil. Yet, such critics must remind themselves of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous quote that "there is strong shadow where there is much light". Democracies are never the finished product precisely because they are meant to be responsive to the changes in society. When they fail to respond to such changes in society and address issues which are of major concern, populism emerges as a means of shining light where the shadow of progress has settled. In conclusion, the illiberal elements of populism should not be seen solely as a threat to democracy – perhaps they should also be seen as a challenge to democracy.



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