

Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Conceptual Tension

A Comparative Philosophical Analysis of Mudde, Müller, and Laclau

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Chapter 1 - Introduction:

Populism in Contemporary Political Discourse

In contemporary political discourse, few terms are as contested and politically charged as populism. The term is commonly used to describe a style of politics or platform in which leaders engage in confrontational, anti-establishment rhetoric aimed at displacing the governing elites of liberal representative democracies, along with the institutions that sustain them (Mueller 2019, 1026-1028). At the same time, populists present themselves as the true voice of the people, pledging to restore democratic power to ordinary citizens and reassert popular sovereignty against distant or corrupt elites. Populists often arise within liberal democracies and, although claiming to defend a democratic order, they appear to criticise or undermine the very principles of a liberal democracy.

Democracy and Liberal Democracy: A Necessary Distinction

It is important to recognise and highlight the difference between ‘democracy’ and ‘liberal’ democracy. While the concepts are related, they have vastly different implications for any analysis of populism, as each frames its consequences in a distinct way. Democracy refers to the rule of people, etymologically derived from the ancient Greek words of ‘demos’ (the people) and ‘krein’ (to rule) (Bollen 1993, 1208). At its most basic level, it requires the equality of all citizens and broadly inclusive citizenship, combined with majority rule as the key pillar for democratic governance (Galston 2018, 9). Liberal democracy is a specific interpretation of democracy — which can be understood as a political system characterised by both political liberties and democratic rule.

Liberal democracy combines the ideas of popular sovereignty, democracy, constitutionalism, and liberalism (Galston 2018, 10). The principle of popular sovereignty aligns with the idea that ‘the people’ are the sole source of legitimacy who can authorise forms of government. Democracy refers to the idea described above, meaning that public decisions are made by popular majorities of citizens whose votes all count equally — corresponding to an idea of protecting pluralism. Constitutionalism denotes a basic structure of institutional power, typically providing the basis for the conduct of public life — as well as including some mechanisms focused on preserving its structure. Liberalism concerns the idea of recognizing and protecting a sphere beyond the rightful reach of government in which individuals can enjoy independence and privacy. These principles combined form a political order of liberal democracy. Where it takes a constitutional form, incorporates civic egalitarianism and majoritarian rules, while at the same time accepting the liberal principle that the legitimate scope of public power is limited, which entails some constraints on majoritarian decision making (Galston 2018, 9-10). Populist often appeal to, sometimes even without limitations, the majority rule. Liberal democracy, however, is not just about the procedure of voting, but also about the constitutional protections that safeguard the rights of minorities and individuals from the tyranny of the majority — thereby also advocating for pluralism.

Research Question and Conceptual Approach

This raises a fundamental question: does populism remain within the normative boundaries of liberal democracy, or do its promises ultimately erode liberal democracies foundational principles? More specifically, it leads to the research question; is populism inherently at odds with liberal democracy — or does it represent that democracy in its most radical, perhaps even purer, form?

Scholars of populism share the idea that it is a modern phenomenon. Populism emerged in the late 19th century in Russia and the United States, closely linked to the rise of democratic societies all over the world. Today populism is present in almost all continents and political regimes yet being the most prevalent in democracies of Europe and North- and South America. (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 35-57). While being most prevalent in democracies, populism can be implemented into a variety of strategies and a variety of political convictions. It is not bound to, for instance, right-wing politics. Its emergence is found back in different areas of the world, representing different political views. Therefore, it is needed to investigate what is common about the different emergences of populism —independent of the specific circumstances. Populism and its relationship to the liberal democracy will be judged on the basis of what is inherent to it conceptually, not on the basis of how it contingently turned out in a political situation. The approach will thus be philosophical and conceptual, rather than empirical. This conceptual approach makes it possible to move beyond the empirical and often contingent political outcomes, allowing to grasp the core of this issue.

Theoretical Framework: Mudde, Müller, and Laclau

The theoretical framework for addressing this question will be developed by contrasting the views of Cas Mudde, Jan-Werner Müller, and Ernesto Laclau, supplemented by insights from other thinkers. These theoretical perspectives will provide insights into different sides of the debate, thereby allowing for a well-founded assessment. Mudde writes from a political scientific point of view, being specialised in extremism and populism, adopting an ideational approach to populism. He investigates populism mainly on an empirical basis. Müller writes from a liberal democratic point of view. The key question for him is how the rule of the people is possible while guaranteeing pluralism. For Müller, liberal democracy is a historical achievement which is better than populism, with populism being essentially anti-democratic for him. Laclau writes from a post-Marxist point of view. Laclau seeks to uncover the discursive structures through which political events and collective identities are constituted. He sees populism as the vehicle for radical democracy, as it constructs ‘the people’ in opposition to power structures and articulates excluded demands into a unified political project. In order to critically evaluate and contextualise these theoretical perspectives, the populist rhetorics and strategy of Dutch politician Geert Wilders and his political party will serve as a case study. This case study will also contribute to answering the research question by serving as an illustration of how these theories come into practice.

Thesis Statement

The thesis that will be defended is that populism — although being democratic — should ultimately be regarded as incompatible with the principles of liberal democracy. Its logic and practices essentially run counter to the principles of a liberal democracy. Semantically, it would be inappropriate to characterise populism as outright ‘anti-democratic’.

Populism emerges within democratic systems, positioning itself as a response to perceived political exclusion and democratic shortcomings. Possibly, it can even have revitalizing effects by highlighting neglected issues, contributing positively to democratic renewal. Nevertheless, it will ultimately come into conflict with liberal democratic principles: it tends towards anti-pluralism, delegitimizing the opposition and concentrating power in such a way that undermines the principles and processes essential to a liberal democracy. This conclusion will be reached through a conceptual comparative analysis of the theoretical frameworks provided by the philosophers mentioned earlier.

Chapter 2 - Mudde's Ideational Approach to Populism:

Populism as a thin-centred ideology

Cas Mudde, a leading scholar of political extremism, has significantly shaped contemporary understandings of populism. Mudde is a Dutch political scientist, known for his expertise on political extremism, populism and right-wing politics in Europe and North America. His research focuses on how liberal democracies try to defend themselves against political challenges without compromising core values. Mudde's aim is to clarify and depoliticise the concept of populism, offering a precise framework that helps to understand populism, unbound to any specific political time. Although recognizing that there are multiple interpretations of populism, he maintains that it is first and foremost a Manichean worldview or ideology that assumes that society is characterised by a distinction between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2014, 377-378).

More specifically, Mudde adopts an ideational approach that defines populism as a: 'thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic¹ 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' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6). A thin-centred ideology, meaning that it has a limited set of core ideas and cannot stand alone as a full political worldview. Unlike more comprehensive ideologies like liberalism or socialism, populism lacks a detailed vision of society and must therefore attach itself to other, more developed, ideologies, to become politically viable. Because of this, populism is highly flexible and can take on different forms depending on the ideological context it is combined with. Rather than being a coherent tradition, it should be seen as a framework — a mental lens — through which populist politics should be interpreted, often blending with diverse beliefs (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6,33). Mudde asserts that with this approach, he has developed a theoretical framework that captures the conceptual clarity of the concept, as well as being empirically applicable.

Constructing 'the People': Sovereign, Common People, and the Nation

In his definition of populism, Mudde articulates three core concepts: 'the people', 'the elite', and 'the general will'. As will become clear, 'the people' is a core concept which returns in every theory of populism — although its meaning varies significantly. Mudde acknowledges these differences, however stating that 'virtually everyone agrees that "the people" is a construction, at best referring to a specific interpretation (and simplification) of reality' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 9). He asserts that 'the people' is most often used in a combination of the following three meanings: 'the people' as (1) sovereign, as (2) the common people, and (3) as the nation.

¹ Antagonistic refers to an active opposition or conflict between groups, positions or ideas that are perceived as mutually exclusive or irreconcilable. It often (as well as in this case) refers to a binary structure that shapes how identities and struggles are framed.

These three meanings represent distinct dimensions through which populist discourse constructs the notion of the people. The concept of ‘the people as sovereign’ is rooted in the modern democratic idea that positions ‘the people’, not only as the ultimate source of political authority, but also as those who hold power. This is linked to the idea that, if ‘the people’ feel dissatisfied with the political establishment, they have the power to rebel against this establishment. This can pave the way for a populist party to jump in and ‘return power to the people’. In this way, the concept of ‘the people as sovereign’ reappears across different populist movements, highlighting that in a democracy, political authority is fundamentally derived from the collective will of the people. The idea of the ‘common people’ aligns with representing those who are excluded from power due to their socioeconomic and cultural status. This concept challenges elitist views that look down on the values and tastes of ordinary citizens. Populist leaders often embrace cultural symbols seen as inferior by elites to affirm the dignity of marginalised groups. Lastly, there is the concept of ‘the people as the nation’. Hereby a reference is made to the national community, defined either in civic or in ethnic terms (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 9-11). Defining the people in this way frequently entails the exclusion of particular groups, as it overlooks the inherent pluralism of most modern democratic societies.

The Role of ‘the Elite’ and the Limits of Definition

As stated by Mudde, populists divide the society into two homogeneous camps of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. He consistently grounds his theoretical analysis in real-world examples, continually seeking to align his conceptual framework with empirical cases, demonstrating how his concepts manifest in current political contexts. He keeps his theoretical writing, therefore, in a sense very practical. This tendency is also apparent in his attempt to define who ‘the elite’ really are. He acknowledges, in line with arguments of Müller, that the distinction is essentially moral since it is between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’. As will become evident later, Müller focuses completely on the moral aspect of this distinction. Mudde stresses the point that, although a crucial aspect being morality, it does not say much about who the elite really are’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 11). This linking of theory back to the practice, is one of the strengths of Mudde. While it would have been possible for Mudde to limit his definition of ‘the elite’ to a moral distinction — thus maintaining a more conceptually streamlined account — he instead chooses to delve deeper and pose a more challenging question: who, in concrete terms, are the elites that populists are criticizing?

There might not be a satisfactory answer to it, because it essentially might boil down to the conclusion that populist logic (in some respects) lacks a cohesive substance. It may be that vagueness turns out to be an essential part of its logic — especially regarding the elusive identity of ‘the elite’. On the part of ‘the elite’ that they criticise, that there is nothing causal to be said about who this ‘elite’ is. That similar to what Müller argues, all there is to be said is that they distinguish ‘the elite’ from ‘the people’ on a moral basis, but the specifics of how that is done in practice differs every time, leaving no possibility to distinguish more specific criteria for this problem. To clearly identify who or what ‘the elite’ is might not be possible, due to the fact that populists themselves remain vague about the answer. Essentially, it is also not necessary for a populist to have an ‘a-priori’ set of criteria for who this elite is. While the populist seeks to construct a narrative of ‘the elite’ to challenge, the actual identity of this ‘elite’ is entirely irrelevant to them. The most important thing for the populist is to suggest that there is such a thing as ‘the elite’ which can be used as a scapegoat, a means of creating a narrative for their own gain.

The General Will and Populist Moralism

Populists advocate for a political agenda that aligns with what they perceive as ‘the general will of the people’. This specific notion of the general will relates back to Rousseau’s political philosophy and how his theory shaped the concept. Rousseau distinguished between the general will (*volonté générale*) and the will of all (*volonté de tous*). The will of all denotes the sum of all individual interests. The general will refers to an idea that aligns with the collective interest, something which can be different from the sum of the individual wills. It also refers to the capacity of people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce this collective interest. Populism’s monist and moral distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite reinforces the idea that a general will exists (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 16). It is, after all, assumed that the general will is easily identifiable, as the people are viewed as a unified and homogeneous body with shared interests and values.

Populism and Liberal Democracy: An Unstable Relationship

The next question is how this particular definition relates to the concept of democracy. Mudde argues that ‘populism is essentially democratic, but at odds with liberal democracy, the dominant model in the contemporary world’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 81). The main reason for why it is at odds with the concept of liberal democracy, is that populism holds that nothing should constrain ‘the will of the pure people’. It also fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the institutional guarantees that should protect them. Populism exploits the tensions that are inherent to liberal democracy, which tries to find a harmonious equilibrium between majority rule and minority rights (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 82).

Although being ultimately at odds with liberal democracy, populism can have both revitalizing and destabilizing effects on democracy. On the one hand, populism may enhance democratic legitimacy by giving a voice to groups that feel excluded by the political elite and by bringing neglected issues into public debate. In doing so, it can increase political responsiveness and foster the inclusion of marginalised sectors of society. On the other hand, populism can also pose significant risks. By invoking an unbounded general will, it may sideline minority rights and erode institutional safeguards meant to protect fundamental liberties. It seems that populists want to take the sovereignty of the people in such a radical way, that it can lead to an unliberal democracy. Mudde argues that populism does not impact all phases of democratization — the process of a political system becoming more democratic — in the same way. He argues that populism often contributes positively to the establishment of a minimal or electoral democracy but has a negative role when it comes to fostering the development of a full-fledged liberal democratic regime (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 95-96)

Mudde distinguishes between electoral and liberal democracy — the latter thereby regarded as the ‘more developed’ version of democracy. Electoral democracy refers primarily to the holding of regular elections in which opposition parties can potentially win, but it often lacks strong institutional safeguards. In contrast, liberal democracy complements electoral procedures with independent institutions and rule-of-law protections, offering citizens more robust mechanisms to hold authorities accountable (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 88). Populists are theoretically at odds with democratic deepening — the process of democratization towards a liberal democracy — which involves strengthening institutions that protect fundamental rights and support liberal democracy.

They reject unelected bodies, viewing them as illegitimate defenders of elite interests rather than the true will of the people, which aligns with their interpretation of democracy based on an unconstrained popular will (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 90).

This raises the question how democratic populism truly is, when it seems to only contribute positively to immature versions of democracy.

If the democratic system becomes stable, populists will continue to challenge any limitations on majority rule, and when they become strong enough, they can cause a process of democratic erosion. However, it is unlikely that they will threaten the existence of the democratic system to the point of producing its breakdown, as they will experience strong resistance from multiple actors and institutions that defend the existence of independent bodies specialised in the protection of fundamental rights (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 96).

Populism as a Self-Undermining Democratic Force

Although Mudde acknowledges that populism can have a positive effect on the process of democratization, the long-term risks he outlines suggest a more radical conclusion involving a normative judgement about the relationship between populism and democracy. Following his own words, the unlikeliness for populism causing a complete total democratic breakdown, is not due to any kind of subtleness of populism, but due to the strong anchoring of liberal democracy itself. Populism merely has positive effect on the earlier, less-developed, stages of democracy. It tends to inherently challenge the furthest developed — and therefore most desirable — version of democracy: liberal democracy. The question this raises is what the worth of something is, in this case populism, if it ultimately ends up having a negative effect on that very thing (once fully developed) that is seen as positive and worth striving for: a liberal democratic order. It seems that Mudde does not take the implications of his arguments far enough. However, it follows from him that populism, taken in its full account, works in a way as a self-undermining principle — by ultimately having a negative effect on the very thing that it is enhancing positively at the beginning.

Chapter 3 - Müller's Normative Critique of Populism:

Populism and the Threat to Pluralism

Another contemporary thinker who follows similar lines of arguments as Mudde, although providing a more radical critique of populism, is Jan-Werner Müller. Müller is a German political thinker and professor at Princeton University, whose work is situated within the broader tradition of liberal democratic theory. Specialised in both philosophy and political science, his analyses are rooted in a normative commitment to liberal democracy, pluralism, and constitutionalism, with a strong emphasis on the role of institutions. The key question for Müller is how the rule of people is possible while guaranteeing pluralism. His thinking on populism emerges from a concern for the health and resilience of liberal democracies in the 21st century, particularly in response to the rise of populist parties around the globe. For him, liberal democracy is a historical achievement which is to be seen as superior to populism (Thomassen 2022, 994-996).

Therefore, it is important to note that Müller's writing on populism is always a critique of populism. For liberal democracy requires pluralism and populists are always antipluralists (Müller 2017, 3). For Müller, the 'people' are the subject of democracy, understood to how political agents represent them, as well as the liberal constitutional order in terms of a notion of emptiness that he takes from Claude Lefort. Appropriating Lefort, Müller argues that we should think of democracy as a process where different representations of the 'people' – put forward by competing political parties, vie to occupy the empty place of power (Thomassen 2022, 996-998). Put differently, Müller's conception of democracy is rooted in pluralism and the recognition of citizens as free, equal, and diverse.

The Moral Claim of Exclusive Representation

This framework of democracy based on pluralistic representation directly explains Müller's critique of populism. Müller contends that the problem with populism is its refusal to acknowledge a separation between the constitutional system and any one conception of the people. Populists claim exclusive authority by insisting they alone speak for the 'real people'. In a healthy democracy, there is an understanding that a single group or party can never fully embody 'the people' and that power should be mediated through pluralism, institutions, and procedural norms. By contrast, populists claim to represent the entire people exclusively. Although there are multiple political parties competing, the populist will insist that they have the only legitimate claim to speak for 'the people'. This exclusivist stance enables them to treat any opposition as illegitimate.

In this context, Müller defines populism as 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior' (Müller 2017, 19–20). Criticism of elites is for Müller a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for populism — otherwise, anyone opposing the status quo could be considered a populist. What defines populism, according to Müller, is not just anti-elitism, but the moral binary it introduces between 'the people' and 'the elite'. This moral division forms the basis for the claim to exclusive representation and the delegitimisation of political opponents.

Exclusion from Within: Fictional Construction of the People

One of the core claims connected to this vision of populism is that only some of the people are really the people (Müller 2017, 21). To give an example, fighting for the interest of the common people is not populism. Nevertheless, saying that only the common people (as opposed to other classes in society) belong to the whole people and only a specific political actor accurately represents this people, is populism. In this way, they oppose a morally pure and unified people to small minorities which are put outside of this morally pure people. Therefore, ‘the people’ is not what empirically comes to mind when one thinks of the population of a society. It is a certain part that the populists deem to be morally superior. Another way Müller formulates this, building again on Lefort, is by stating that ‘the people must first be extracted from within the people’ (Müller 2014, 485). ‘The people’ is not synonymous with the entire society but constitutes a specific political subset that must be separated from within the broader social body.

However, this is ultimately a fictional construct — the populists claim to represent a ‘real’ people that cannot actually be verified. In contrast, Müller argues that in a liberal democracy, all individuals should have the opportunity to express their voice. By appealing to a people that exists outside the constitutional framework, populists reject the democratic stage as a shared space in which they are simply one political actor among many. Since their idea of the people cannot be tested or validated through democratic institutions, it undermines the legitimacy of the constitutional order by introducing an external, alternative source of authority (Thomassen 2022, 996-998).

Populism versus Legitimate Opposition

Taking the stance that they, and only they, represent ‘the real people’ — the moral claim of exclusive representation — has damaging consequences for democracy. One of them is that populists declare all other contenders for power to be fundamentally illegitimate, so that political disagreement is no longer just about policies or even about values; it is about the defenders of the people versus the enemies of the people. The reason for this is that ‘in the populist imagination, there is only the people on the one hand and, on the other hand, the illegitimate intruders into our politics’ (Müller 2014, 487). What the populists combine with ‘only one real people’ is one proper common good that can be discerned from it (Müller 2017, 36). If this is the case, any approach differing from the populist is worthless for them. Legitimate opposition, however, is one of the key features of a liberal democracy.

The difference between populist actors and other political actors that is stressed by Müller is that populists deny the legitimacy of their opponents — as opposed to merely stating that some policies are misguided for example (Müller 2014, 487). Once again, significant emphasis is placed on the moral dimension of the populist claim. What sets democratic politicians apart from populists is that their claims to represent the people are essentially provisional and open to challenge. These claims function like hypotheses that can be assessed — and potentially falsified — through institutional processes such as elections. Populists, in contrast, treat their representative claims as morally and symbolically grounded, not empirically verifiable. As a result, they maintain these claims regardless of institutional outcomes. When faced with results that contradict their narrative, especially while in opposition, populists are likely to question or undermine the legitimacy of the institutions involved (Müller 2017, 39). In a certain way they are willing to call into question the trustworthiness of the procedures of a representative democracy by not acknowledging any opposition to their views.

Symbolic Boundaries of the People

Another consequence is that populists suggest that everyone who does not fit their ultimately symbolic construction of the ‘real people’, or anybody who disagrees with the populist lead, might not truly belong to the ‘real people’ at all. Therefore, not all citizens are automatically part of ‘the people’. As mentioned earlier, the supposed people that populists are referring to, must first be extracted from within the people — it has to be extracted from the sum total of actual citizens. This also implies that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people to begin with (Müller 2017, 20). Thus, the populist leaves no room for anyone outside their scope of ‘the people’. Following the arguments of Müller, it should be evident that this moral exclusion of a part of the population should be firmly rejected. If only for the straightforward reason that the populist construction of ‘the people’ is ultimately a fictional entity.

Populist Representation and the Common Good

These consequences closely align with the populist’s idea of representation within a democracy. Populism is the shadow of a representative democracy (Müller 2017, 20). However, populists have a different conception of representation than the usual one in a representative democracy. Populism is not against the principle of representation, but its account of representation is a peculiar one, that is ultimately not compatible with representation based on actual input and continuous influence by citizens divided amongst themselves. This has to do with the fact that populism relies on the notion that there is a distinct common good², which ‘the people’ can discern and which can be correctly implemented into policies by the (populist) party (Müller 2014, 486). Populism accepts the idea of representation but rejects the democratic process of it. It claims to represent a unified people, ignoring the reality that societies are diverse and full of differing voices that should all be part of the political conversation. The populist will always fall back on this common good that is willed by ‘the people’. Populists then do not have a problem with representation, as long as they are the representatives (Müller 2017, 30).

The suggestion that there is a common good and pretending that there is one thing that is willed by the people also weakens democratic accountability. Populists operate on the belief that ‘the people’ speak with a single voice and can give politicians a binding mandate, instructing them precisely what to do, as opposed to, a free mandate, according to which representatives have to use their own judgement (Müller 2017, 31). This weakens democratic accountability, because the populist can always point its finger back to ‘the people’ in the case of complications or discontent. Müller argues that within a liberal democracy, every individual as a member of the people has the right to be heard. Populists, however, invoke a concept of the people that exists outside the constitutional framework, rejecting the constitutional order as a common arena where they are merely one competitor among many for political power. The symbolic people cannot be tested within the liberal democratic institutions, and this challenges the legitimacy of the constitutional order by positing an extraconstitutional source of legitimacy (Thomassen 2022, 997)

² This closely aligns with Mudde’s use of the general will. While Mudde emphasises that politics should be an expression of the general will, Müller lays its focus on the unity of the common good which can be directly discerned. Nevertheless, both reflect the notion of a common unity that is articulated as the unified will or opinion of the people.

The Value and Limits of Müller's Theory

In short, Müller sees populism as a fundamental threat to democracy, because it places 'the people' as a homogeneous whole against the pluralism of individual citizens. Critics of Müller accuse him of adopting an overly narrow approach to the range of political projects covered by the term populism, as well as that he fails to give full credit to the role that different versions of populism can play in revitalizing liberal democracy (Isaac 2017, 170-174). Where Mudde allows for potentially positive aspects of populism on democracy, Müller does indeed leave no space for this in his theory. Although this can be seen as a potential criticism of Müller, one could also argue that it is precisely this uncompromising stance that constitutes one of his strengths — being the one who dares to confront populism in its most dangerous and exclusionary form.

Müller's account of populism remains highly valuable, especially for its clear articulation of the populist logic of exclusive representation. His observation that populists claim to represent 'the real people' alone, and thereby denying the legitimacy of political opponents, is particularly insightful. Such a rhetorical move of the populists may appear unproblematic at first glance — after all, a first instinct could be that many democratic politicians try to win over 'the people' — but Müller draws attention to the deeper implications of such language. As pointed out, when examined closely, it has severe undermining consequences for liberal democracy. His theory exposes a rigidity within populist reasoning that resists compromise and institutional restraint. While criticism might be that it makes Müller's framework too narrow, it is precisely this normative judgement that makes his theory so useful. It highlights tendencies within populism that are often overlooked and thus serves as an essential tool for understanding its potentially corrosive effects on liberal democratic practice.

This overview of Müller covered the most important aspects of his liberal democratic critique on populism. Müller's theory is compelling in that it thoroughly considers not only how populism manifests in practice, but also the broader implications of its internal logic. Rather than offering a purely descriptive account, he traces the normative consequences of populist claims—particularly the moral exclusivity and anti-pluralism at their core. This enables him to demonstrate why populism is not merely a challenge within liberal democracy, but fundamentally incompatible with it.

Chapter 4 – Laclau’s Discursive Theory of Populism:

Populism as a Political Logic

A thinker who is to be placed on the opposite side of the debate, taken in contrast to Müller, is Ernesto Laclau. Laclau’s philosophical work challenges the notion that populism is inherently anti-democratic, seeing it as a democratic logic articulating collective demands. Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014) was an Argentine political theorist and philosopher whose work has left a significant mark on contemporary political and philosophical discourse, particularly through his works on hegemony³ and populism. Laclau aims at grasping the social constructs in which political events are being formed. Rather than offering a normative or institutional model of politics, Laclau — writing from a post-Marxist perspective — sought to uncover the underlying discursive mechanisms by which societies constitute collective political subjects. His work stands at the crossroads of political philosophy, critical theory, and psychoanalysis, reflecting influences from thinkers such as Gramsci, Lacan and Derrida.

Laclau presents a model of politics that does not define populism by fixed characteristics but instead focuses on the dynamics through which political identities are formed in relation to conflict and exclusion. Rather than making normative judgments, he describes the mechanisms by which political meaning is constructed, leaving open how such mechanisms might be used. He offers an ‘empty’ model of populism, rather than a normative one, describing populism as a political logic. The minimal unit of analysis for populism is the category of ‘social demand’. The term can refer to both a request and a claim. It is in the transition from a request to a claim that one finds one of the defining features of populism (Laclau 2005, 73). This transition occurs when a demand, initially formulated as a specific request, is not met, and begins to express a more general discontent with the institutional order.

From Democratic to Popular Demands

This relates to Laclau’s distinction between intra- and anti-systemic demands, or those that can be accommodated within the existing order and those that challenge it. The former are called democratic demands and are fulfilled when absorbed and positioned as differences within the institutional ensemble, whereas the latter are popular demands or demands that remain unfulfilled (Arditi 2010, 489). A democratic demand is a demand which remains isolated. It presupposes a non-antagonistic⁴ relation to the system — these demands are internal to the logic of differential incorporation: meaning that they can be absorbed individually by the existing institutional order without challenging its structural foundations. Popular demands arise when multiple democratic demands remain unfulfilled: when institutional mechanisms fail to accommodate them — when they are not inscribed in a differential totality.

³ In Laclau’s framework, hegemony refers to the contingent and constructed nature of political unity, where diverse social demands are articulated into a common political project through symbolic practices (Thomassen 2016, 165). Rather than reflecting a pre-given social order, hegemony involves the struggle to define the meaning of collective identity.

⁴ In Laclau’s theory, ‘antagonistic’ refers to a structural limit within the social field, arising when two forces cannot be reconciled or coexist within the same system because their identities are mutually exclusive. For Laclau, identities are always formed through exclusion. Therefore, this conflict enables the formation of collective political identities through the drawing of oppositional boundaries

These demands become popular when they are articulated through a chain of equivalence, unified by a common antagonism towards the existing power structure, constituting a broader social subjectivity.

The Chain of Equivalence and the Empty Signifier

A chain of equivalence is established when a situation occurs where unsatisfied demands remain like that for a longer period of time, leading to an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from another) (Laclau 2005, 73). Although each demand is particular — rooted in individual, independent concerns — they become linked through a shared opposition to a perceived antagonistic force. As long as demands are met, they remain differential. When they are not met, they begin to see the system as their common obstacle. Their mutual exclusion from the dominant order creates a sense of solidarity among them, leading to the creation of a chain of equivalence. This, however, does not mean that the equivalence eliminates differences. If the particularity of the demands disappears, there is no ground for equivalence either. So, difference continues to operate within equivalence, both as its ground and in relation of tension with it (Laclau 2005, 79).

A chain of equivalence is solidified by the presence of an empty signifier: a term that unifies the diverse demands by standing in for the whole. An empty signifier is needed because the identities in question (demands) are purely differential. The empty signifier is essential for articulating the totality of the differential ensemble, unifying an otherwise incoherent or unintelligible structure. In practice, they allow diverse and often unrelated demands to unite under a common banner. Laclau gives the example of coining empty terms such as ‘justice’ or ‘freedom’ to name a universality that transcends the particular contents of the demands (Laclau 2005, 97).

Constructing the People Through Antagonism

This chain of equivalence, articulated around an empty signifier, also involves an antagonistic frontier. This is because this chain of equivalence depends on the creation of an antagonistic frontier that defines the chain in opposition to an external identity like ‘the establishment’. The elements within the chain of equivalence are rendered equivalent by their shared opposition to a common enemy (Thomassen 2016, 168). The antagonistic frontier can be seen as a symbolic boundary that separates the ‘us’ from ‘them’ or ‘the people’ from ‘the elite’, and other similar distinctions. It draws a clear line between those included in the collective identity, and those excluded or portrayed as the enemy. This frontier does not exist naturally, but is constructed through political discourse, simplifying a complex social field into two opposing camps. This is also what happens in the case of populism: ‘a frontier of exclusion divides society into two camps’ (Laclau 2005, 81).

The above described process becomes political effective by constructing a collective political subject of ‘the people’ through popular identification. This process of popular identification — in Laclau’s theory of populism — constructs the people as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of demanding regime change (Arditi 2010, 489). It is the process of constructing the people as a political subject. ‘The people’ is the name given to the collective subject produced by the process of popular identification: a particular group in society that has been constructed, which however, aspires to be the whole.

‘The people, in that case, is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality’ (Laclau 2005, 81). Laclau refers back to ‘traditional terminology’ to underscore his point, stating that ‘the people’ can be conceived as *populus*: the body of all citizens, or as *plebs*: the underprivileged. For the creation of ‘the people’ of populism, a *plebs* who claims to be the only legitimate *populus* — a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community — is necessary (Laclau 2005, 81). The people emerge as a historical political actor when multiple diverse demands are linked together through equivalence to such an extent that they generate widespread mobilization opposing the entire institutional system (Laclau 2006, 656).

How Populism Shapes Collective Identity

In short, Laclau structures his theory around the following six steps:

‘(1) When a series of social demands cannot be absorbed differentially by institutional channels, they become (2) unsatisfied demands that enter into a relationship of solidarity or equivalence with one another and (3) crystallise around common symbols that (4) can be capitalised by leaders who interpellate the frustrated masses and thus begin to incarnate a process of popular identification that (5) constructs ‘the people’ as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of (6) demanding regime change. This narrative is governed by the claim that politics-as-populism divides the social scene into two camps and produces a frontier or antagonistic relations among them’ (Arditi 2010, 489).

In practice, populism begins when diverse social groups experience their demands as structurally ignored by institutions. The frustration that comes with this, although initially unconnected, gradually becomes articulated as part of a shared feeling of exclusion (the formation of a chain of equivalence). The main unifying factor is not so much the similarity of their grievances, but rather a common perception that the political system is indifferent to their grievances. This chain is symbolically condensed around an empty signifier — a slogan, a figure, a term, or idea that stands for the whole without reducing it to an individual demand. Through political discourse (and often the intervention of a charismatic leader) the signifier comes to embody ‘the people’ as a unified political subject, having created something that is significantly more than the mere summation of individual grievances. An antagonistic frontier emerges, separating this constructed people from the perceived enemy — whether it be ‘the elite’ ‘the establishment’, or another oppositional force. In this way, Laclau’s populist logic describes how scattered frustrations are turned into a collective identity capable of confronting the status quo.

Populism is Politics

From this perspective, populism is not simply one political strategy among many, but the very logic through which the political becomes possible. Laclau states explicitly that ‘the political becomes synonymous with populism’, insofar as populism involves the construction of the people — a political act par excellence that breaks with mere administration and stable institutional routines (Laclau 2005, 154). What defines the political, for Laclau, is the drawing of antagonistic frontiers and the creation of new collective subjects of social change. This requires the articulation of heterogeneous social demands into an equivalential chain — a process made possible by the use of empty signifiers that unify diverse grievances. These are precisely the mechanisms of populist politics.

Therefore, every political intervention is populist to some degree, depending on how far it extends this chain of equivalence. Laclau's theory reframes populism as the formal condition of politics itself: wherever antagonism arises and 'the people' are constituted against a dominant power, the logic of populism is at work.

Democracy and the Dependency of Populism

Laclau does not consider populism as anti-democratic, but rather as intrinsic to its functioning. 'Democracy is grounded only on the existence of a democratic subject, whose emergence depends on the horizontal articulation between equivalential demands. So, the very possibility of democracy depends on the constitution of a democratic people' (Laclau 2005, 171). Democracy, for Laclau, is a political process that requires the formation of a collective will: a subject capable of acting democratically. Populism is the political logic that enables this process of subject-formation, allowing for democratic action. By articulating heterogeneous demands into a shared identity opposed to a common adversary, populism gives shape to the democratic subject. In doing so, it allows previously excluded or fragmented groups to enter the political arena and contest the existing order.

What Laclau effectively highlights is that populists depend on a plurality of grievances; their success relies on the aggregation of diverse and often disparate discontents, which they strategically unify into a coherent political demand. In a way, this is comparable with Mudde calling populism a 'thin-centred ideology). While Mudde meant that populism cannot stand alone as a political worldview, and Laclau emphasises the fact that it relies on a multiplicity of unsatisfied demands, both views hint at that populism inherently relies on factors beyond itself. Without multiple unsatisfied demands — without multiple things 'going wrong' in society — populism cannot gain any ground. As well as that populism needs another ideology to hold on to in order to become a full worldview. This suggests that populism cannot stand independently without a multitude of grievances, rendering it a potentially fragile or contingent political strategy.

Chapter 5 - A Conceptual Comparative Analysis:

Foundational Common Ground

This chapter presents a comparative conceptual analysis of the three theoretical frameworks discussed in the preceding chapters: Cas Mudde's ideational approach, Jan-Werner Müller's normative critique, and Ernesto Laclau's discursive perspective. The aim is to evaluate the explanatory power, normative implications, and analytical scope of each account of populism, particularly in relation to the broader question of its impact on democratic politics.

Although each theory differs in approach and explanation, a most basic common ground seems to involve: (1) a conception of 'the people'; (2) in opposition to 'the elite' or another establishment; (3) creating a division of society into two camps; and (4) some kind of symbolic unity which can be willed by 'the people'.

For Mudde, the people (as portrayed in the eyes of the populist), is a homogeneous group. He considers it 'a construction, at best referring to a specific interpretation (and simplification) of reality' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 9). He explains three meanings in which the people are most often used: as (1) sovereign, as (2) the common people, and (3) as the nation. Therefore, his focus is more normative — focussing on what the populist believes 'the people' ought to be. Müller views 'the people' as the subject of democracy. His focus, however, is on a critique of the populist's notion of a unified people — thereby insisting on a pluralistic notion of the people. 'The people' are not discovered, but invoked, in a moralised and exclusionary way; to delegitimise alternative voices and institutions. For Laclau, 'the people' are constructed through political articulation, and every political act involves the construction of a people. The people are formed through the articulation of demands and identification with a unifying symbol, not through essential characteristics. His focus lies on the underlying constructions that realise the people, not so much on a normative judgement on the people.

All three authors include a division of society into two camps in their theory of populism. For Mudde and Müller, it is clear that this division separates society into the camps of 'the elite' and 'the people'. Laclau does not restrict himself to an elite opposing the people, more writing about anti-establishment sentiment in a wider sense — permitting broader interpretations of who constitutes this establishment.

Paired with this is some kind of unity which can be willed by 'the people'. Mudde describes this as 'the general will of the people' in a 'Rousseauian' sense. Considering the people as a unified block, helps the populists with this idea of a general will — as it is then seen as a homogeneous body with shared interests and values. Müller writes about 'the common good' which can be discerned by the people. He links this with the corresponding idea of representation of the populist. For, pretending that there is such a common good, weakens democratic accountability, providing the option for the populist to always blame the people for any complications. Laclau does not address such terminology directly, however, his account of empty signifiers, needed for articulating the totality of a differential ensemble — unifying an otherwise incoherent structure — is comparable to it. It can be seen as a symbolic construction of something similar to a 'common good' or a 'general will of the people' — one that functions as a placeholder for a plurality of unfulfilled desires.

Populism's Origin versus Populism's Consequences

Despite sharing these foundational cores, they also brought about considerable differences in their theories. What mainly distinguishes Müller is his emphasis on the aspect of morality: viewing populism as a specific moralistic imagination of politics. He identifies the main reason for how populism is at odds with liberal democratic norms (something which Mudde also stated), by showing how populists moralise political conflict. His contribution is particularly valuable in that he showcases the consequences of the populist's representation of 'the people'. Populists saying that they, and they alone, represent the people; their moral claim of exclusive representation, leads them to view all the opposition as illegitimate. However, another severe consequence of formulating a 'people' the way populists do, is the exclusion of a big part of society from the political playing field. By constructing a people, populists inherently exclude certain groups from this 'people', since not everyone is excluded. Therefore, the populists exclude certain groups from political discourse, based on their fictional creation of 'the people'.

While Müller focuses primarily on the consequences of populism, Laclau concentrates on the conditions that make populism possible — i.e., the process through which individual grievances are not addressed within the existing system and become linked in a chain of equivalence, forming a broader populist demand. In addition, he offers an understanding as to how populism is democratic. Laclau is conceptually extremely rich, offering arguably the most conceptually well-extended theory of populism. In a sense, this description of the 'early' stages of how populism comes about is what is lacking in Mudde and Müller — with especially Müller not regarding any potential positive democratic consequences of populism. Their focus lies rather on the structure and features on when populism is already formed, where Laclau could be used to fill this void. However, this conceptual richness also reveals a limitation in Laclau's approach: his focus on the formative conditions of populism comes at the expense of a thorough engagement with its political consequences — Laclau does not engage into depth what these are. It should be noted that this was also never Laclau's primary aim. He sought to uncover the underlying structures and logic that gives rise to populism — hence the apt title of his work 'On Populist Reason'.

Towards a Synthesis: Populism's Internal Tension

However, Müller's analysis highlights a certain dynamic that appears to be structurally embedded within the populist logic itself. Excluding a group from political discourse and an exclusive claim to moral representation is — populism taken in this account — inevitable. This comes close to what was meant with populism becoming a self-undermining principle when following the arguments of Mudde. The internal logic of populism makes it bound to be at odds with liberal democracy.

Taking the research question into account, it follows that the most comprehensive account of populism emerges from synthesizing Müller's normative insights with Laclau's conceptual framework — thereby arriving at an accurate description of Mudde's position but enriched by greater conceptual depth. The conclusion that will be reached is that populism is essentially democratic, but inherently at odds with liberal democracy. A position that Mudde also defends (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 81), however lacking explanatory depth and offering a static framework. By combining Laclau's account of the origin and formation of populism with Müller's normative analysis of the moralisation of politics, a theoretical framework is established that allows for a more comprehensive analysis of populism — one that addresses all of its aspects.

Chapter 6 – Case Study: Geert Wilders and the PVV:

Constructing ‘the Real Dutch Person’

Having showcased three different theories on populism, it is appropriate to present a case study of an actual political party — judging if, and how, these theories are found back in practice. This will be done by analysing a part of the populist rhetoric and tactics of Dutch politician Geert Wilders and his ‘Partij voor de Vrijheid’⁵ (PVV). The PVV was founded by Geert Wilders in 2004, taking part in the Dutch elections for the House of Representatives for the first time in 2006. In 2023, the party led by Geert Wilders managed to secure the highest number of votes during that election, obtaining a total of thirty-seven (out of 150) seats in the Dutch House of Representatives. Although Wilders never explicitly labelled himself as a populist — which arguably no populist might ever do — him and the PVV are frequently described so in media and academic discourse.

The populism of Geert Wilders and the PVV is not limited to sporadic public speeches or media appearances, but is also embedded in their 2023 election program, indicating that populist themes are an integral part of their broader political strategy. A close examination of the election program reveals the populist rhetoric clearly. It serves as a clear example of how the PVV is constructing a people — something which is an essential factor for any populist manifestation, for ‘the people’ being a returning factor in all the theories touched upon. The title of the election program, which also became their slogan for the campaign is: ‘the Dutch back at number one’ (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2023). Throughout the election program, a particular image of ‘the Dutch person’⁶ is constructed — one that reflects the PVV’s specific interpretation rather than a universally shared notion. The Dutch person is portrayed as the native, hard-working, right-wing oriented Dutch citizen. The term ‘hard-working’ is coined left and right and it is being said that this hard-working person has been abandoned by the ruling class. It also states that ‘native Dutch persons do not get protected’ (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2023, 29). Furthermore, it is written that democracy is failing, since a specific group of people are getting in their way — namely; the highly educated people of the Netherlands that are overwhelmingly left-oriented liberals (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2023, 29).

Moral and Cultural Exclusion from Within

It becomes clear that the creation of a people coincides with the exclusion of a part of society that does not belong to this people. For in this instance, a part of the Dutch citizens is excluded from this group that is supposedly going to become the number one priority again. It is even justified to say this group even forms a threat to this particular ‘Dutch person’ that is on the agenda of the PVV — because, if it would not have been for the highly educated, left-oriented liberals, the ‘Dutch person’ would have gotten their way already. It is this creation of the people by excluding another part of society which Müller called ‘extracting a people from within the people’ (Müller 2014, 485). A distinction is made between the ‘real people’ (those who support the populist movement and the other group of the population who are implicitly or explicitly excluded from the political community).

⁵ Literal translation: Party for the Freedom

⁶ In the election program in Dutch is stated: ‘*de Nederlander*’. To avoid any confusion about gender or meaning, the translation of ‘*the Dutch person*’ is chosen.

In Opposition to the Elite

This creation of a people is done in opposition to ‘the elite’ — leading to a division of society — something that has also been present in the foregoing authors. As it is indeed ‘the elite’ that is condemned by the PVV for the wrongdoings to the real ‘Dutch person’. In the election program it is written that ‘the elite is ruling’, as well as that it is time for a government that ‘is there for its citizens, not just for those that belong to the left-liberal elite’ (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2023, 29). Although the program alludes to some criteria by which ‘the elite’ is distinguished (such as leftist or liberal), it remains deliberately vague who they exactly mean to be part of ‘the elite’ — never offering a precise definition.

Equivalence and Unification of Grievances

These are merely some examples of how rhetorics about ‘the elite’ versus ‘the people’ is literally found in the election program of the PVV. This, however, fits into the broader framework of the populist politics of Geert Wilders. Beyond the program itself, Wilders has consistently employed populist tactics in his broader political communication. The language that is present in the election program, is also present in his speeches, interviews, and debates, often framing political issues in terms of a struggle between the ordinary Dutch citizen and a detached, self-serving elite. He combines this with a form of nativism, blaming immigrants for a variety of things. They are held responsible for housing shortages, pressure on the welfare system, taking jobs of ‘real Dutch people’, and the perceived erosion of the Dutch cultural identity. By blaming ‘the immigrants’ for these different things, Wilders is able to form an equivalential chain between differential entities. In doing so, he transforms fragmented discontent into a unified populist narrative, constructing a political frontier within society.

Confrontational Populism in Practice

Wilders does not stop at recent or unregistered migrants, also aiming himself at persons that have had a Dutch citizenship for a long period of time, yet a non-western migration background. Perhaps the most striking example of this dates back to 2014. It was during the result night of the municipal elections in March 2014, where Wilders addressed a café full of PVV supporters and asked them whether they wanted more or fewer Moroccans (hinting at Dutch citizens with a Moroccan background). The audience chanted ‘less’, to which Wilders replied: ‘well, then we will arrange that’. This instance not only exemplifies Wilders’ confrontational style but also demonstrates how this populist rhetoric is deeply intertwined with a nativist discourse that identifies both an internal and an external enemy. The division between the ‘people’ and ‘the elite’ is reinforced by simultaneously drawing a cultural and ethnic boundary around who truly belongs to ‘the people’.

This case study of Geert Wilders and the PVV illustrates how key theoretical elements of populism — as identified by Müller, Mudde, and Laclau — are not only present in abstract terms, but actively visible in real-world political discourse and strategy. The construction of a morally pure ‘people’ opposed to a corrupt ‘elite’, the exclusion of internal adversaries from the political community, and the linking of disparate social grievances into a singular unity through the creation of equivalential chains, all find concrete expression in the rhetoric and actions of Wilders. Although this being a constricted number of examples, it shows how the theories discussed earlier offer valuable analytical tools for understanding how populism operates in contemporary politics.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion:

This thesis has examined the question of whether populism is inherently at odds with liberal democracy, or whether it represents that democracy perhaps in a more radical form. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Cas Mudde, Jan-Werner Müller, and Ernesto Laclau, it has been demonstrated that while populism is democratic, its internal logic stands ultimately in tension with liberal democracy.

Cas Mudde's ideational approach defines populism as a thin-centred ideology rooted in a moral distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite. Although Mudde acknowledges that populism can have revitalising effects on political participation — particularly in the early stages of democratization — his analysis reveals that populism tends to undermine the institutional and pluralistic safeguards essential to liberal democracy. Jan-Werner Müller offers a more normative critique, identifying populism's claim to exclusive moral representation as a direct threat to pluralism and institutional legitimacy. In contrast, Ernesto Laclau presents populism as a discursive logic through which political subjects are formed. His account highlights the constructive potential of populism in articulating social demands and enabling political mobilisation.

A comparative analysis of these approaches reveals that populism — while being democratic in form — exhibits internal dynamics that will erode a liberal democratic order. Laclau's framework provides conceptual insight into how populist movements emerge and gain momentum. However, it fails to address the exclusionary and delegitimising tendencies highlighted by Mudde and Müller. The moral exclusivism and symbolic construction of the 'people' undermines liberal democracy.

It has been further illustrated how these theories come into practice by the case of Geert Wilders and the PVV. Their political discourse embodies key elements of populist logic: the construction of a homogeneous and morally superior people, the exclusion of internal adversaries, and the invocation of a corrupt elite. These populist tendencies reveal how populism becomes an internal part of their political strategy.

In conclusion, populism can be characterised as democratic, but inherently anti liberal democratic. It harnesses democratic rhetoric to contest political exclusion and restoring sovereignty, yet in doing so, it challenges the pluralism, institutional restraint, and rights protections that define liberal democracy. Although it is wrong to state that populism is anti-democratic, the incompatibility between populism and liberal democracy is not incidental but intrinsic. Recognising this structural tension is essential for understanding the limits and potential consequences of populist politics within contemporary democratic societies.

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