

# Does direct democracy facilitate or inhibit populism?

## Introduction

In the following essay we will argue that institutions of direct democracy<sup>1</sup> can inhibit populism if they are established in the context of a liberal democratic system, whereas using such tools could facilitate populism in unconsolidated or developing democratic systems. We will structure our argument along the following lines. In the first section we outline the relationship between direct democracy and the populist phenomenon and investigate the different contexts of populist protest. In the second section, we connect these insights to possible outcomes of using direct democratic institutions under different circumstances, arguing that the preexisting quality of democratic institutions is crucial for assessing the impact of such tools.

## Direct Democracy and Populism

We begin our analysis by examining the relationship between direct democracy and populism. As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) highlight, one could reasonably argue that populism forms a considerable challenge to contemporary liberal democracies, however, this does not mean populism is anti-democratic per se. On the contrary, if we consider its underlying philosophical origins and basic propositions, the essence of populism is deeply connected with fundamental democratic doctrines such as the idea of rule by the people through the legitimizing power of *volonté générale*. Under contemporary circumstances, one of the main populist critiques towards liberal democracy can be seen as a disapproval of its representative character, which is understood as an aristocratic manifestation of politics where the people's voice is constrained and filtered by the elites for no good reason. The populist reasoning is such that, since the people are unitary and pure, any attempt to limit their unmediated majoritarian will through checks and balances or any external circumstance that places boundaries on the expression of such a will is, in principal, intolerable. The connection between the aforementioned populist critique and the relationship with institutions of direct democracy becomes clearer if we approach it through the analytical lenses of

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<sup>1</sup> Including all political procedures that fall under "direct democracy" would not be possible for the scope of this essay. In line with the literature, we intent to focus on direct democratic institutions in the context of contemporary representative democracies.

Canovan (1999). The author underlines that contemporary democracies have overwhelmingly moved towards the “politics of skepticism” and she recognizes the populist challenge as a reaction to that unbalance. If, as the author claims, the populist demand is to restore a sense of balance and move towards “politics of faith”, then direct democratic procedures such as referenda and popular initiatives are the ultimate rituals of democratic renewal. There is absolutely no certainty for the success of such direct democratic endeavors in terms of improving the quality of democracy, stimulating mass political participation and, perhaps even more so, producing good policies for “the people”. However, it is important to realize that the demand side is consistent across the board. Empirically, the demand for establishing institutions of direct democracy can be seen all across the diverse spectrum of populist politics. From anti-austerity movements in Greece and Spain, to exclusionary populist parties in western Europe, all the way to inclusionary populist actors in Latin America, demands for institutions that would allow the direct expression of “the people” are always present. It should also be noted that these demands are themselves used as political arguments to increase support for the populist actors and can provide opportunities for mobilization. Given these points, we maintain that despite the inherently versatile conceptual nature of populism, its desire for direct democratic procedures is held constant throughout very different contexts and that it provides opportunities for recruitment and mobilization. Be that as it may, would it be reasonable to argue that utilizing institutions of direct democracy would inhibit or facilitate the phenomenon, just because some type of plebiscitary expression is paramount for the populist agenda?

### **Contexts of Populist Protest**

Inasmuch as populism itself is a notoriously chameleonic and context-bound concept, it is only logical that an assessment of the circumstances it arises in is essential for understanding how instruments of direct democracy would influence the phenomenon. More specifically, we expect the interaction between institutions of direct democracy and populism to depend on the setting where the latter develops in. A good starting point for addressing the issue is through Kriesi’s approach (2014) on the contemporary crises of representation and the subsequent rise of populist actors in different political systems. The author reassesses the influential thesis of Peter Mair on the causes behind the rise of populist protest in western Europe and extends the theory to include more cases. In summary, the influential thesis holds that the mass political parties were progressively transformed into cartel parties, which ultimately became closer to the state instead

of their own constituency, resulting to the wearing down of their representative function. This development, accompanied by the mediatization of politics, the impact of globalization and the contemporary financial crisis are central elements behind the emergence of the populist challenge. Expanding on that logic, Kriesi underlines that the argument cuts both ways. Just as consolidated western democracies suffered from overwhelming institutionalized political systems, where cartel parties struggled to adequately represent their constituency under external stress, newly established or unconsolidated democratic political systems also faced considerable populist protest, but for very different reasons. For the case of unconsolidated or developing democracies the problem is not the erosion of established functions of liberal democracy, but the fact that these political systems came to face contemporary challenges without democratic institutions that were as developed as the corresponding in Western Europe. Such a development can account for the rise of populist actors outside Western Europe, explaining political developments in Latin America as well as Central and Eastern Europe. It is also true that in these systems the populist challenge is, if anything, more disruptive because it introduces populist protest which is not just directed against the elements of the party system, but radically reject political institutions and eventually liberal democracy as such. Having established these two ideal typical cases for the development of populist protest, we will examine how institutions of direct democracy can produce different effects, were they to be implemented in diverse frameworks.

### **The impact of Direct Democracy**

As we mention in the introduction we will argue that institutions of direct democracy can constrain populism in consolidated democracies, while possibly having the opposite effect in a different environment. Unfortunately, contemporary cases of direct democracy are scarce, therefore we should tread carefully and avoid any naïve generalizations when using the few examples at our disposal. With this in mind, we can still use the empirical reality of direct democracy in order to extract some theoretical propositions with a certain level of abstraction. For this purpose, we turn to Papadopoulos (1995) whose contribution sheds light on the functions and dysfunctions of direct democratic institutions. The author alludes to a certain contradiction between theory and practice of direct democracy. In summary, he points out that from a theoretical standpoint, one could argue the prospect of initiating referenda through popular initiatives would empower citizens and social movements to challenge the ruling elites and the status quo, jeopardizing stability. Papadopoulos disputes this narrative, claiming that the empirical reality of

direct democracy suggests its effect might be very different from what one would expect. Drawing primarily from the Swiss experience, the author analyses how the complex system of negotiations that comes along with systematizing procedures of direct legislation has the effect of creating a consensual model of democracy rather than a confrontational one. By the same token, it seems to be the case that there is a conservative bias at work, which tends to “absorb” opposition and social protest as well as circuitously suppress the majoritarian effects of direct democracy. This is not to say that direct democracy does not introduce a certain level of “uncertainty” into the system or that it always ends up serving the elite. The main idea here is that in an institutionalized liberal democratic setting, where the “polytheism of ideas” is dominant and where many conflicting interests are at work, institutions of direct democracy that complement the system end up producing moderate results.

In the context of our argument, we hold that this institutional environment would be hostile to populism, as it forces actors to confront the reality of their demand for frequent manifestations of the general will, which are usually far less unitary and far more complicated than what the populist mentality envisions. In a sense, meeting their constant demand for institutions of direct democracy gives the populist “a taste of their own medicine”. Empirically, we should also acknowledge that despite the fact populist right-wing parties have had a strong and persistent presence in Switzerland, they have also been exceptionally integrated into the political system. Unlike other countries, the political system of Switzerland has managed to incorporate the populist protest and expose its “limits” in the workings of sophisticated mechanisms combining elite negotiations and popular participation. If we were to expand these political configurations to other representative liberal democracies, we would also generally expect populist actors to become far less “challenging” for democratic institutions and to place themselves in the political arena just like any other political party would. Even though the mechanisms described would not eliminate the populist protest – doing so would be blatantly undemocratic after all – they would certainly manage to inhibit its development and to “normalize” it. Furthermore, even in the case a populist actor entered the executive, its ability to move the political system away from liberal democracy through the demand of direct representation, would be immensely limited in view of the framework we describe.

But what would happen if the above mentioned mechanisms were not in place? What would be the outcome of direct democracy outside the framework of a consolidated liberal

democracy? As we have suggested above, populism in the political systems outside Western Europe develops under very different circumstances from populism in consolidated liberal democracies and therefore has to confront a different political reality than the one described by Papadopoulos. Therefore, without having to deal with already established political procedures, deep rooted democratic institutions and, perhaps more importantly, highly legitimized political systems, we argue that the possibility of direct democratic institutions such as the popular initiative would greatly facilitate populism. Unrestricted by the limitations of liberal representative democracy, the populist actors would indeed have the opportunity to jeopardize stability in the political system by either blocking governability, or by managing to introduce legislation that would undermine the democratic character of the political system. In this case, a rather classic criticism of direct democracy comes to mind. Viewed from the elitist perception of Plato, or the more democratic approach of Madison, unconstrained and unmediated democracy certainly invites demagoguery and can in turn lead to tyranny. Looking at examples of populist protest in Latin America, like Venezuela or Bolivia, we can begin to understand how instruments of direct democracy can be used by populists to advance their agenda and bypass institutional checks and balances. Even though in these cases direct democracy comes as part of the political strategy of an already established populist government and not as the outcome of popular initiatives, they can help us understand the effect of such tools outside the institutional setting of liberal democracy.

### **Concluding remarks**

To summarize, we have illustrated how institutions of direct democracy can inhibit populism in consolidated liberal democracies, while applying the same tools in a different setting might facilitate the phenomenon. Even though the demand for direct democratic procedures is persistent throughout different shades of the thin populist ideology, meeting this demand is as context-bound as the concept of populism itself. Before we close this essay it is important to discuss some limitations of our analysis. As we briefly mentioned above, examples of extensive use of direct democracy in contemporary politics are rare. Hence, we should keep in mind that any inferences we draw from the few cases we address, could in fact be influenced by their idiosyncratic character or other unobserved mechanisms that we have not uncovered yet. In any case, as the challenge of populism becomes increasingly salient for some political systems, a concrete understanding of its interaction with direct democracy becomes significantly relevant and should be complemented with further research. If we consider the evidence presented above,

institutions of direct democracy could provide a viable response to the populist challenge in the framework of consolidated liberal democracies.

### **References**

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