RESEARCH

research note: integrating contemporary populism with the history of democracy in Western Europe

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Abstract

Populism has become a resilient political phenomenon. Much of the normative political science on this topic is concerned with the relationship between democracy and populism. At the same time, the characterisation of post-war democracy has emerged as a key focal point in recent contributions to political history. This research note explores how both these developments and their disciplines might benefit from closer collaboration. It highlights, therefore, some of the distinctive features of populism's relationship with democracy and shows how these might be accounted for by incorporating insights from history. At the same time, it argues that historiography has largely ignored the populist question in the history of post-war democracy and makes some suggestions as to how the history of populism might be included in this research.

Keywords   democracy; Europe; history; politics; populism

Populism has been a dominant feature of European democracy for at least two decades now, but somehow the phenomenon is still without history. In empirical political science, the historical roots of populist success are studied when it comes to the socioeconomic, demographic and technological changes which contributed to the populist breakthrough. However, in normative political science, the relationship between populism and democracy often lacks a historical dimension to contextualise populism within the broader developments of democracy's modern history. The historical roots of the populist conception of

democracy, and the relationship between populism and the historical form of democracy dominant in contemporary Europe, are rarely studied. However, paradoxically, whereas populism seems without history in this field of political science, it is also curiously absent from history – at least in the historiography of democracy in Europe from an international comparative perspective (for national examples, see, for instance Fieschi, 2004; Orsina, 2014). This is even more remarkable given the fact that the development of democracy in Europe since 1945 has emerged as one of the main scholarly concerns over the last decade or so (Conway, 2002; Müller, 2011; Stone, 2014).

Consequently, this research note tentatively explores how the study of the relationship between populism and democracy in Europe could benefit from recent insights gained by historians of the post-war development of democracy, and, conversely, how historians could include understandings of populism put forward by political scientists in research on the history of post-war democracy. Scholars remain deeply divided over the question whether populism is harmful or beneficial for democracy (Plattner, 2010; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Urbinati, 2003; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013a; Pasquino, 2007) but it does not lie within the scope of this article to address this issue here. What is of crucial importance in this regard is that scholars largely agree that the core of populism's conception of politics consists of the juxtaposition of a 'corrupt elite' with a 'benign people' (Taggart, 2000) and that this contrast should be the focus of studies of the relationship between populism and democracy.

The clash between the opinions and interests of elites and the people comes to the surface on a range of political topics, from European integration, to immigration and the welfare state. On a

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more fundamental level, populism therefore questions the way in which political elites are able to make decisions without, allegedly, taking the will of the people into account. It contends that contemporary representative institutions and arrangements are ideally suited, or even designed, to promote the interests of elites. This rejection of the principles that underpin contemporary representative democracy has rendered the relationship between populism and democracy of major scholarly and political concern (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013a). With a sweeping generalisation, it could be argued that populism aims to overcome what we usually denote as 'liberal democracy'. In 'liberal democracy', the protection of individual liberties by intermediate institutions such as parliaments and parties, and also judges and international agreements, takes priority over the direct expression of the popular will (Canovan, 1999; Canovan, 2002; see Held, 2006, for an overview, and Holmes, 1995, for a defence of liberal democracy). In other words, what populists aim for is to overcome the 'civilian democratic administrative statehood' (Müller, 2009: 222) of European democracies, with its emphasis on the rule of law, and to replace it with a form of democracy that centres on popular sovereignty.

These recent insights into the relationship between contemporary democracy and populism can be deconstructed in two different ways, to connect populism to the history of post-war European democracy. First, this research note dwells upon

recent literature on populism to highlight how populist politicians question four key features of contemporary liberal-democratic arrangements. Subsequently, this contribution proceeds by focusing on these four constitutive elements of the dominant model of democracy in Europe that are under populist attack. It explores how these have been historically formed and how, according to recent historiography, this occurred precisely to minimise the risk of such a populist challenge. By showing exactly how and why the key and distinctive elements of this post-war model of democracy are now under attack by populists, this paper argues that populism should be integrated into the history of democracy. The article concludes by listing three possible directions for future research which would further this aim.

At least four features of the relationship between populism and democracy that are broadly accepted in political science debates on populism seem to be important from a historical perspective. First, as noted, populism is often considered to be in opposition to the liberal and representative nature of contemporary democracy (Mény and Surel, 2002; Canovan, 1999; Canovan, 2002). As populism is based upon a glorification of the 'heartland' (Taggart, 2000), it argues that the people's voice is consistently overruled by representative institutions. It is therefore in favour of a majoritarian conception of democracy, in which the will of the majority, ascertained, for instance, by means of referenda, takes priority over the protection of individual liberties (Mudde, 2007), and it proposes the introduction of instruments of direct democracy to counter the influence of the representative institutions of liberal democracy. It targets both the growing influence of courts and other unelected bodies and the position of parliament as the embodiment of the *representative*, rather than the direct, expression of popular sovereignty.

Second, this rejection of the institutions of representative democracy is perhaps most clearly visible in the denunciation of political parties. Arguably, this rejection of party politics does not account for all populist movements, as some populist parties, such as Italy's Northern League, even have an active membership base reminiscent of mass parties (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010). However, many others, such as the Dutch Freedom Party and Forza Italia, have no regular party model at all but are rather organised around a single leader (Raniolo, 2006; Vossen, 2011). In any case, populist politicians generally denounce parties as instruments controlled by political elites, which, given the small membership base of political parties, are able to exert an uneven influence on the political process. Populism is, in this perspective, not only the consequence of the erosion of the societal base of political parties (Mastropaolo, 2007) but also specifically motivated by the aspiration to establish unmediated relationships between government and people, or, in the words of Peter Mair, a 'partyless democracy' (Mair, 2002: 89).

Third, and somewhat more tentatively, populism is also increasingly seen as a force which questions the effects of globalisation and capitalism on the functioning of democracy. This is most obviously the case for the populist parties on the Left, most notably those in the crisis-hit Mediterranean area (Stavrakis, 2015; Matthias, 2014), but also in Germany (Decker, 2007). For right-wing populism, this rejection of capitalism is less obvious, as it is often supportive of small businesses and entrepreneurs. Instead, the Right's critique of capitalism primarily focuses on the way in which the globalisation supported by political and economic elites affects cultural homogeneity. According to this 'welfare chauvinism', globalisation and open borders jeopardise the accessibility of national social-security arrangements, which should be limited to 'native' citizens of the 'heartland' (Kitseldt, 1997; Mudde, 2007).

The protectionist economics advocated by populist politicians, and their juxtaposition of cosmopolitan business–political elites against honest people, questions the interrelationship between individual liberties, globalised capitalism, open borders and democracy that is advocated by elites. In other words, even if populist parties do not necessarily question capitalism in principle, they reject many of its consequences, because global capitalism in a global society without borders prevents culturally homogeneous people from asserting its sovereignty.

Fourth, and finally, populism's reservations about representative institutions, capitalism and parties culminate in the populist resistance against European integration. Indeed, this resistance against 'Brussels' connects the demand of direct popular influence with the populist aversion to open borders and global capitalism. European integration is considered exemplary of elitist aspirations to exclude the ordinary people from decision making. Needless to say, this rejection of 'Brussels' is often cited as a characteristic of the nationalism of the populist right (Mudde, 2007). Yet, it also has implications for the populist relationship to contemporary democracy, as national institutions such as courts, parties and parliaments that are already mistrusted by populists now have supranational equivalents. Euroscepticism is therefore a key feature of the populist notion of politics, as the European project impedes the direct expression of popular sovereignty which populists cherish (Harmsen, 2010; Harmsen and Spiering, eds, 2004).

It might stretch the argument too far to argue that the specific way in which populism criticises the distinguishing features of contemporary democracy in Europe forms a distinct populist ideology. However, jointly, these four features constitute a distinct populist conception of politics that poses an alternative to the way in which political elites of what might be conveniently labelled 'traditional' political parties have jointly shaped democracy in Europe since the end of World War II. Indeed, historians increasingly concur that there was a distinctive post-war 'model' of democracy with certain distinguishing features. Although they have not structurally linked these features to the rise of populism, this post-war model of democracy not only contains the four features of democracy that populists denounce nowadays but was also explicitly designed to prevent a populist entrance into the political arena.

In recent publications on twentieth-century Europe, the historiographical focus increasingly shifts from the question of totalitarianism to the issue of Western Europe's remarkable recovery in the second half of the century (Judt, 2005; Lowe, 2012; Jarausch, 2015). In this perspective, the post-1945 democratic arrangements partially resolved the major political question of the twentieth century, namely how parliamentary regimes could integrate the masses. European states had failed to provide an answer to this question in the first decades of the century. After the failed experiments with mass democracy in the inter-war era and the experience of fascist regimes, which did mobilise the masses, democracy emerged 'transformed' at the end of the 1940s with a certain distrust of these masses (Mazower, 1998: 287–291). The main characteristic of democracy's post-war transformation was a deliberate limitation of direct popular influence on decision making. This does not negate the importance of the extension of suffrage, most notably to women, but it rather denotes a conception of democracy in which direct democracy and the political involvement of the masses were distrusted.

Post-war democracy has therefore, in the words of Jan-Werner Müller, been characterised as 'restrained' democracy with 'a distrust of popular sovereignty' (Müller, 2011: 128). There are several

examples of this distrust. Constitutional courts were set up to protect current democratic arrangements; parliaments were empowered to strengthen the exclusively representative character of democracy; and political parties witnessed their finest hour as instruments of political emancipation and selection. Also, these democratic regimes were pre-occupied with guaranteeing individual liberties and had a negative conception of liberty. European integration could, according to some historians, also be seen as an attempt to construct this democracy with a 'distrust of popular sovereignty'. This specific kind of democracy was, therefore, the result of deliberate institutional design by political elites in the aftermath of the War, who aimed to shield liberal-democratic arrangements from the potentially destabilising effects of direct popular involvement, based on the traumatic experiences of mass politics in the inter-war era (Müller, 2009; Conway, 2004; Conway and Depkat, 2010; Stone, 2014).

The question whether this 'post-war model of democracy' began to decline from the 1970s onwards is a prominent issue in historiography (Kaelbe, 2009). Often, the 'decline' of this post-war model is equated with the loss of the Keynesian consensus that underpinned the socioeconomic 'trente glorieuses' and ended with the 1973 oil crisis (Hanagan, 2003; Conway, 2004; Stone, 2014; Unwin, 1997; Sassoon, 2001). If we look at political developments, however, it is evident that the consensus among political elites on the post-war principles of democracy actually emerged strengthened from the 1970s and that the decade actually saw the emboldening of the institutions that populist politicians target. It is obvious, for instance, that despite the questioning of representative institutions by the 1968 generation, parliaments and parties survived the challenge to their political importance largely unscathed. The same counts for the emphasis on individual liberties and their protection by courts. The influence of courts over the democratic process is generally believed to have grown since the 1970s, thereby strengthening the power of unelected institutions over the political process (Rosanvallon, 2008). Also, the collapse of Keynesianism as *lingua franca* of political elites from 1973 on might have terminated the 'social-democratic moment' of post-war European history (Judt, 2005: Chapter 11); but this does not equate to the end of consensus *per se*. Indeed, it is easy to see that the former elite consensus on democratic principles on was replaced by a consensus conceptualising democracy less in terms of social equality and more in terms of the 'decongestion of the state' and 'individual liberty'. Not only conservatives and liberals but also, especially from the 1980s onwards, social democrats supported this shift (Eley, 2002; Sassoon, 2010; Berger, 2002). Finally, the economic decline of the 1970s ushered in an era of increased globalisation and re-ignited the process of European integration. Indeed, the turns to 'modernisation' and 'Europe' were increasingly linked, culminating in the direct election of the European Parliament, the Single European Act and, finally, the Maastricht Treaty (Ludlow, 2013).

So, seen from the perspective of political historiography, the history of democracy in Western Europe in the post-1945 era was the progressive entrenchment of a consensus among political elites about the rules and principles of the democratic game. The key features of this post-war model were a distrust of popular influence, the importance of political parties, the emphasis on representative institutions and constitutional courts, and European integration based on open borders and a capitalist economy. By seeing the post-war history of democracy as the progressive establishment of this

consensus, the specific critique made by populist parties of this democratic arrangement gains another dimension. Leaving aside the normative assertion of the democratic credentials of populism, populism can be seen not merely as the 'spectre' or 'mirror' of democracy but as a reaction against the specific form of democracy that was developed historically in Europe precisely with the intention of minimising the risk of populism. This, in turn, provides also three new directions of research on the relationship between populism and democracy from both a historical and a political science perspective.

First of all, even if a historical perspective might engender a new perspective on the relationship between the historical formation of our contemporary model of democracy and current populist party prominence, this still leaves the question of the historical roots, similarities and equivalents of the populist conception of politics *itself* unanswered. Some have argued that this 'populist' conception of democracy has deep historical roots as an 'alternative' conception of politics, possibly even of democracy. This implies that in addition to the connection between liberalism and democracy, which has dominated politics in Europe since 1945, there existed a distinct political undercurrent that contradicted the emphasis on individual freedom, representation and intermediate institutions such as parties that was a characteristic of liberal democracy. This distinct historical populist tradition has most notably come to the surface in France and Italy, such as in the Poujadist movement of the 1950s and in the Italian populist movement Common Man's Front right after the Second World War (Tarchi, 2015; Souillac, 2007). In France, populism has also been traced back to the Bonapartism of the mid-nineteenth century, which featured direct links between the emperor and the French people, whether or not by means

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of plebiscites. There were continuities in the twentieth century in the person of Charles de Gaulle (Hazareesingh, 2004; Berstein, 2003). In Italy, this tradition was less visible in the post-war era, but it has recently been argued that the country knew a similar populist current that contradicted post-war, liberal, party democracy. The political crisis of the 1990s, which saw the emergence of a broad variety of populist movements but most notably the persistent success of Silvio Berlusconi, in this view revealed a distinct tradition that contradicted parliamentary party democracy in Italy but was unable to assert itself, thanks to the dominance of anti-fascism and anti-communism in the post-war republic (Orsina, 2014).

Such research into the historical ideological roots of contemporary populism is a fertile ground for new perspectives on contemporary populism but it has, unfortunately, been mainly limited to national case studies. Yet, as historians increasingly agree that Western Europe displayed a certain homogeneity in its model of post-war democracy, these national studies raise the question of the possibility of more widespread resistance against the 'restrained democracy' than

has so far been recognised. Obviously, not all kinds of resistance were precursors of modern populism and caution is required in comparing such movements and in linking these to populism. The most notable instances of resistance against the 'restrained democracy' are, arguably, the 1968 protests and the calls for a more participatory form of democracy in the 1980s, which found resonance in various civic collectives and social movements. However, it was, plausibly, also visible in intellectual and resistance circles in the aftermath of the Second World War, exactly at the time when the post-war arrangement took shape. Given the fact that advocates of an alternative conception of democracy advocating more popular participation were even vocal in Germany, possibly the epitome of a 'restrained democracy', this topic could be a fruitful trajectory for further research (see, most notably, Forner, 2014). Again, it should be emphasised that these various movements are very heterogeneous and display a broad variety when it comes to their conceptions of democracy. They also took shape in different national contexts and in different timeframes and they certainly cannot simply be seen as precursors to populism. Yet, the frequent occurrence of movements which spoke out in the name of popular sovereignty against the power of courts, parties and parliaments underlines the necessity of a complementary account of post-war European history, comparing the expression of alternatives to the model of 'restrained democracy' currently under attack.

Secondly, the rise of populism, if seen from a historical perspective, challenges scholars to reconsider the commonplace periodisation of post-war history. As mentioned above, the 1970s, and 1973 in particular, are usually considered the principal caesura in post-war Western European history. The decline of the post-war consensus is therefore mainly studied from a socioeconomic perspective, which distinguished the politically stable post-war decades before 1973 from the era of polarisation that followed (Stone, 2014; Conway, 2004; Jarausch, 2015). Yet, the persistent presence of populism as a challenge to the conception of democracy put forward by political elites requires historians to reconsider this stark pre- and post-1973 division. Instead, as the examples of the Poujadists and the Common Man's Front have already demonstrated, there have been various electoral surges for parties which questioned the political consensus throughout the post-1945 era. Apart from protest parties such as the Dutch Farmer's Party in the 1960s and various Scandinavian anti-tax parties in the 1970s, the Front National, the rebranded Austrian Freedom Party under Jörg Haider and the various Northern Leagues in Italy also saw their first electoral successes in the 1980s.

However, it was only after 1989 that populism consistently emerged as a political force. This raises the questions not only of how populism's surge relates to previous signs of dissatisfaction with the way political elites defined democracy but also of why populist parties broke through roughly simultaneously across the continent at this specific historical moment. In other words, if, indeed, resistance against 'restrained democracy' was a continuous feature of post-1945 European politics, why did resistance against 'restrained democracy' suddenly, and so massively and structurally, materialise when it did, namely, after 1989?

The resilience of populism over the last two decades therefore compels scholars to look again at the domestic effects of the end of the Cold War and their relationship to challenges to the post-war consensus model. First, because this would recognise the deep and resilient consensus among political elites throughout the 1970s and 1980s – and beyond –

on core aspects of the post-war model of democracy, such as the limitation of popular influence, capitalism and European integration: these aspects were not affected by the 1973 crisis and its aftermath. Second, because it was the disappearance of communism as a counter-pole – domestically or abroad – rather than the 1973 crisis that 'unblocked' political party systems and thereby created room for the rise of populist parties. This is most evident in the case of France, Italy, Belgium and Austria, where, notwithstanding populist electoral gains in the 1980s, the major breakthrough of the Austrian Freedom Party, the Northern League, Forza Italia, the Front National and the Flemish Block only occurred in the early 1990s. Finally, seeing 1989 as the main caesura for Western as well as Eastern Europe allows the integration of Eastern and Western European history. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, both Europes saw the persistent emergence of types of populism whose features are ever more frequently studied in conjunction (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013b; Wodak *et al*, 2013). This new take on post-war history becomes ever the more convincing once it is recognised that Eastern European countries largely adopted the Western European model of democracy, based on the features outlined above, after 1989 (Müller, 2011).

A third, and final, issue that should be on the agenda of future research concerns the position of political elites, most notably those of the so-called traditional political parties, and their relationship to the rise of populism. Most political science studies conceive these elites as reactive to the 'populist challenge', as they focus on the effects which populist parties have on the way democracy functions and how political elites operate. As a consequence of the rise of populism, these elites have even adapted their political style and substance in a populist *Zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004). However, in this perspective,

'... *New insights into the development of post-1945 European democracy could contribute to an enhanced understanding of populism in the field of political science'.*

populism seems merely a challenge to a somewhat anonymous, or 'neutral', model of democracy, to which political elites are merely reactive. Drawing on recent studies of Europe's post-1945 political history, however, the role of political elites in the formation of the model of democracy that populism questions becomes more evident. Political elites are far from being just the embodiments of a 'neutral' model of democracy that are only reactive to populism. Instead, the specific way in which political elites have jointly shaped democracy in Europe actually emerges as an overlooked feature of the rise of populism, particularly because these elites designed post-war Europe with the fear of populist resurgence in mind. This is not, of course, a normative judgement that entails that those political elites are somehow to 'blame' for populism, nor does it imply that this is the only direct and causal relationship that might account for the electoral surge of populism nowadays. It does, however, suggest that the sharing of insights between political science and history might reveal the agency of political elites as a new area of research in the explanation for the relationship between populism and democracy.

To conclude, it is therefore at these three points that both disciplines might profit from each other. New insights on the development of post-1945 European democracy could contribute to an enhanced understanding of populism in

the field of political science, just as insights from political science on the interpretation of populism as a rejection of the dominant model of democracy in contemporary Europe could enhance historiographical perspectives on the development of the post-war model of democracy. This might prove challenging, not least because populism develops and evolves continuously. Unlike most other topics with which they engage, historians do not know how populism 'ends'.

Acknowledgements

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