

The Logic of Populism

Dr. Julian F. Müller

Universität Hamburg
Institute of Philosophy
University of Hamburg
Überseering 35
22297 Hamburg, Room 02025
Tel: +49 (0) 40 42838 1739
julian.mueller@uni-hamburg

14 February 2020

Abstract

The rise of populism is one of the most significant incidents in recent political history. However, on a theoretical level populism remains an elusive and contested concept. The goal of this paper is to lay the foundation for a new theory of populism. Building on Karl Popper's early inroads into political epistemology, I want to argue that populism is best understood as a political doctrine that is captured by three commitments: *moral realism*, the view that political proposals are either morally right or wrong; *epistemic optimism*, the view that the truth in political matters is manifest; and the *conspiracy theory of disagreement*, the view that pervasive political disagreement is caused by corruption or malignance. The account is defended on the grounds that it has unprecedented explanatory power, is theoretically fruitful, and provides normative guidance.

Keywords

theory of populism, populism, epistemic democracy, democratic theory, truth is manifest, Karl Popper

Acknowledgements

The Logic of Populism

Dr. Julian F. Müller

1. Section

Populism – in its different varieties – is on the rise. In the past decade, this has led to an unprecedented surge in academic interest. Political scientists have produced various comparative studies of populist movements, economists and sociologists have focused on explaining its sudden uptake, and the various disciplines concerned with language and communication have studied populist forms of agitation. Nevertheless, the concept of populism has proven to be quite elusive. Theorists have claimed that populism is, at its core, a political communication style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), a specific form of political mass mobilization (Jansen 2011), an ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), or a strategy to gain or maintain political power (Barr 2009).

One of the reasons why the concept is so hard to pin down is that populism is marked by contradictions: (a) On a political level, populism transcends the classical political divisions of left and right. (b) Populism also sits uneasily with regard to the standard distinction between bottom-up democratic processes and top-down political decision-making. Moreover, populist movements are associated with being anti-establishment, but populist leaders - especially when in power - have strong authoritarian affinities. (c) Connected to this, populism is viewed as the purest expression of the ideal of democracy by some (Laclau 2018), while others (Müller 2017) view the rise of populism as a great danger to democracy. (d) Finally, populists understand themselves as speaking truth to power, whereas critics of populism associate the political phenomenon with fake news and alternative facts.

In the face of its contradictory nature and the plethora of definitions, some argue that the term populism is vacuous and should be abandoned altogether. Perhaps the critics are right, and populism is a mere *Kampfbegriff*.¹ However, I believe we should not give up that easily. It is important to point out that the existence of a number of characterizations and definitions of populism by itself neither proves that theoretical engagement with the phenomenon of populism is futile, nor that giving characterization or definitions of populism is somehow an arbitrary business.

There are multiple reasons that explain and justify the co-existence of various notions of populism. Various disciplines, such as political science, sociology, economics, and philosophy, study the phenomenon of populism with their own explanatory goals. The different characterizations and definitions of populism might thus simply reflect the different explanatory goals of these disciplines. Of

¹ Compare the discussion by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017).

course, another explanation for these different takes on populism might be that we have not yet found a satisfying account.

A satisfactory theory of populism should give us an answer to the question of the nature of populism. Is populism a mere political strategy, an ideology, or perhaps a certain attitude? Putting it differently, a theory of populism needs to give a characterization of the term populism. To count as satisfactory, the characterization given by the theory should be evaluated against a set of criteria. First of all, on an explanatory level, an account of populism should explain how the various features associated with populism – such as its anti-elitism, its scepticism of mediating institutions, its Manichean element, etc. – are logically related. In principle, it might be the case that the listed features are necessary conditions of populism, but it might also turn out to be the case that some of these features are more basic than others. Secondly, on a theoretical level, the characterization should help us to identify what inherent, rather than accidental, commitment sets democrats and populists apart. Thus, the theory needs to give an account of what feature of populism explains that populist movements are widely viewed as a (potential) threat to democracy.² Finally, the characterization of populism should provide normative guidance. A theory should give a clear demarcation of who is and who is not a populist that coheres broadly with our pre-theoretical judgments. Moreover, it counts in favour of a theory of populism if it generates new insights in how to combat (the dangerous aspects of) populism. The goal of the paper is then to give a novel account of populism that satisfies these criteria.

On a methodological level the paper builds therefore on the comprehensive account of explication developed by Georg Brun (2016; 2017). According to Brun (2016, 1211), explication is best understood as “a method of re-engineering concepts with the aim of advancing theory: a concept is replaced by an explicitly characterized ‘new’ concept which can be used in place of the ‘old’ concept in relevant contexts but proves advantageous in [some] respects”, such as simplicity, precision, explanatory power, theoretical fruitfulness or normative guidance. The paper aims to explicate the term ‘populism’ against the backdrop of democratic theory, especially epistemic conceptions of democracy.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In the second part, I will give a characterization of populism inspired by Karl Popper’s (2014) taxonomy of epistemic stances in political theory. I will argue that populism is best understood as a political doctrine characterized by three commitments: moral realism, the view that political proposals are either morally right or wrong in an emphatic sense; epistemic optimism, the view that the truth in political matters is manifest; and the conspiracy theory of disagreement, the view that pervasive political disagreement is best explained by malignance and corruption rather than, say, the inherent

² Even the accounts that express sympathy for the ideals of populism are aware of its potential dangers to democracy.

difficulty of political problems. In the third part, I will argue in favour of the explanatory power of this new account of populism. Specifically, I will argue that the three claims constituting the definition of populism are explanatory fundamental. The fourth part is about demonstrating the theoretical fruitfulness of the account. To this end, I will inquire what inherent property of populism explains that populist movements are viewed as a (potential) threat to democracy by theorists. I will argue that, while current accounts point in the right direction, their analyses have failed to identify the feature within populism that makes it incompatible with democratic theory. Here, the juxtaposition of epistemic theories of democracy and populism will prove to be particularly illuminating. The final part of the paper points out some further practical advantages of the account and finally concludes by deriving some practical proposals on how to deal with (the potential dangers of) populism.

2. The Nature of Populism

The view that I wish to defend is that populism should be understood as a political doctrine consisting of three commitments. The first issue that deserves attention then is the nature of populism. Is populism best understood as a political doctrine? Rather than directly discussing whether populism is best understood as a political doctrine, a type of political movement, or a strategy to gain power, I want to lay out the key concepts of the epistemic theory of populism defended. Whether populism is best understood as a political doctrine thus, in my view, depends on the question of whether the epistemic theory of populism developed in this paper as a whole is convincing.

The epistemic theory of populism that I wish to lay out and defend is based on a characterization of the term populism that consists of three commitments: moral realism, epistemic optimism, and the conspiracy theory of disagreement. The goal of this section is to introduce, explore, and defend the latter two claims in depth. The reason why I will not discuss the first commitment in any detail is simply that the second commitment, epistemic optimism, already presupposes some form of moral realism. However, I will comment on the first commitment *en passant* while developing the epistemic theory of populism.

The main goal of this section is then to develop the two latter commitments. I will develop both by drawing on Karl Popper's discussion of the epistemological underpinnings of political theorizing in, "On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance", the first chapter of his seminal book *Conjectures and Refutations*. In particular, I will draw on his discussion of "epistemological optimism." The discussion of epistemological optimism by Popper is part of a wider reflection on the impact of empiricism and rationalism on the development of political liberalism during the enlightenment. However, for the purposes of this article, I will remain agnostic towards Popper's comprehensive take on these matters.

I want to start my discussion, then, by explicating the term epistemic optimism. Epistemic optimism is the view that normal human beings have the capacity to discern the veracity of political statements and arguments because the truth of politically relevant propositions is “manifest” (Popper 2014, 4).

Epistemic Optimism: The truth is manifest

- The truth of propositions pertaining to political issues are manifest.

The claim that the truth in political matters is manifest means that, “once the naked truth stands revealed before our eyes, we have the power to see it, to distinguish it from falsehood, and to know that it is truth” (Popper, 7). In other words, if one is committed to epistemic optimism, one is committed to the view that political truths are self-evident.³ The claim that the truth is manifest or self-evident does not entail that people have a priori knowledge of all politically-relevant truth. The view entails that people have the capacity to recognize true political propositions, or sound political arguments as such, if these claims or arguments are put in front of them. Once a true proposition or sound argument has been brought to the attention of a citizen, they have the capacity to discern its veracity.

Now, there are doubtlessly many problems with this view. To pick out just one salient issue: A lot of political arguments draw directly or indirectly on scientific expertise. Take, for instance, political questions surrounding the issue of climate change. In order for political claims or arguments about climate change to be self-evident, it seems propositions about scientific fact pertaining to climate change would also need to be self-evident.⁴ However, the goal here is not to defend epistemic optimism but to elucidate it. Moreover, to say that populists are committed to the three claims enshrined in the definition of populism should not be understood as the claim that populists consciously identify with these views. Indeed, it might be a safe bet that most populists have never heard of, say, epistemology to begin with. To say that populists are committed to these three claims means that the political views, behaviours, and speech acts commonly ascribed to populists taken together entail these commitments. For now, I will just give some paradigmatic examples to give some initial support for the view that populists are indeed committed to the view that the truth is manifest. The first example, often cited in literature on populism, is a quote by the right-wing Prime Minister of Hungary, Victor Orbán:

No policy-specific debates are needed now, the alternatives in front of us are obvious [...] I am sure you have seen what happens

³ To my knowledge, few have drawn on Popper’s take on political epistemology; Friedman (2005) is a notable exception.

⁴ Moreover, there are deep philosophical questions about the concept of self-evidence. For a current discussion: Audi (2019).

when a tree falls over a road and many people gather around it. Here you always have two kinds of people. Those who have great ideas about how to remove the tree. [...] Others realise that the best is to start pulling the tree from the road. ... [W]e need to understand that for rebuilding the economy it is not theories that are needed but [...] thirty robust lads who start working and implement *what we all know needs to be done*.⁵

The quote exemplifies various features commonly associated with populism. What I want to draw attention to here is that Orbán claims that what needs to be done with regard to building the economy is self-evident. Hence, any debate about restoring the economy is nothing more than a waste of time.⁶

Moreover, a host of literature on populism affirms that populists are committed to such an optimistic epistemic stance. Yascha Mounk (2018, 7), for instance, writes that populists believe, “that the great mass of ordinary people instinctively knows what to do”; they believe that the, “major political problems of the day [...] can easily be solved” by “common sense.” (41) Recounting his view on populism in seven theses, Jan-Werner Mueller (101) notes that one of the core features of populism is a belief in the infallibility of the true people. Populists are committed, according to Mueller, to the view that the true people “cannot err” in political matters.

The third commitment is logically connected to the first one. Let us assume for a moment that populist epistemology is correct; assume that ordinary people have the capacity to discern true political propositions from false one. What do populists then make of the fact that political disagreement is so pervasive? With pervasive political disagreement, I simply mean any political disagreement that survives sustained deliberation. Given that ordinary people have the capacity to recognize the truth, it initially seems hard to explain such disagreement. We might be able to explain episodic disagreement. For instance, one might imagine that Bettina believes that policy Z is approximately right. Of course, Bettina cannot believe that Z is right, because if it were right, she would know. But, since she does not know what the right policy is, she holds that something approximating Z must be right. Now, assume that Linnea knows that policy A, which is very different from Z, is correct. Formally, we might want to say that there is a disagreement between Linnea

⁵ Emphasis added. Quoted in: Enyedi (2015, 233–34).

⁶ It is sometimes believed that populists have a rather instrumental relationship to their political agenda. The thought is that populists are, at best, bullshitters in the technical sense. Experience shows that this cannot be the case in general. As research on South American populists shows, populists have implemented a range of terrible economic policies against the advice of experts in the field simply because they trusted their own economic intuition more than academic expertise (Edwards 2010).

and Bettina. However, such disagreements on the populist epistemology can hardly be stable over time, since all it would take to for Linnea to convince Bettina is to explain policy Z in such a way that Bettina understands the proposal, which cannot be too hard, since the truth of the proposal is manifest. Hence, under normal circumstances – that is, given the right of freedom of speech is protected and everybody has access to public debates in the media – *mere ignorance cannot explain pervasive disagreement*. However, it is not clear then how, on the populist epistemology, pervasive rather than merely episodic disagreement on policy matters can be explained.

How can we then, on a populist epistemology, explain pervasive political disagreement? Given that, under normal circumstances, ignorance cannot explain pervasive disagreement, the only explanation for political disagreement is that one side of a long-standing disagreement is either malignant or corrupted. A party to a political disagreement is malignant when it is arguing for a position against their better knowledge for ulterior motives. On the contrary, a party is corrupt if they simply cannot see the truth even if they are presented with it. To explain actual, rather than pleaded, disagreement on a populist epistemology then, one needs to put forward the claim that some evil force, e.g. ‘the elites’ and ‘the corrupted media’, have successfully brainwashed some of the people (and perhaps parts of the elite itself), such that they no longer have a reliable capacity to discern the veracity of political claims. The explanation of political disagreement thus (almost) inevitably needs to revert back to some kind of a conspiracy theory. For this reason, I want to call the third commitment the conspiracy theory of disagreement.⁷

Conspiracy theory of disagreement

- Pervasive political disagreement is explained by corruption or malevolence.

Note that, in standard accounts of epistemology, what needs to be explained is knowledge. However, in a populist epistemology what needs to be explained is ignorance and, hence, disagreement. Now, to reiterate, I do not believe that populists are necessarily aware of their own epistemological commitments. However, if populists indeed subscribe to the conspiracy theory of disagreement, one would expect that this commitment surfaces in how populists – both as political agents and voters – behave and speak about political disagreement. If populists indeed implicitly subscribe to the third tenet, we would expect that they chalk up dissenting voices by the media, experts, or politicians to the latter being corrupted or malignant. Now, as it is well-documented, populists indeed dismiss interventions by the media in this fashion. To cite just two examples here: One of the most prominent figureheads of the Italian right-wing populist party MoVimento 5 Stelle,

⁷ In his own discussion of the drawbacks of the optimistic epistemology, Popper (2014, 3; 4; 9) speaks of the “conspiracy theory of ignorance” rather than of disagreement.

Luigi di Maio, recently explained the dire situation of Italy like this: “The true plague of this country is the majority of the media, intellectually and morally corrupt, which is waging war against the government, trying to make it fall.”⁸ Of course, the 45th President of the United States is also known for his contempt of the media. To cite just one out of many similar outbursts: “The Corrupt News Media is totally out of control – they have given up and don’t even care anymore. Mainstream Media has ZERO CREDIBILITY – TOTAL LOSERS!”⁹ Even though research of populism generally acknowledges populist’s disdain of the media [...], only few have commented explicitly on the logical relation between populist’s commitment to epistemic optimism and their disdain for the media. One exception is Mounk (2018, 39) who, in his recent book *The People vs. Democracy*, comments, “if the solutions to the world’s problems are as obvious as [the populists] claim, then political elites must be failing to implement them for one of two reasons: either they are corrupt, or they are secretly working on behalf of outside interests.” However, even Mounk does not go any further in analysing and carving out the logical relationship he touches upon here.¹⁰

3. The Coherence of Populism

The goal of this section is to show that this novel characterization of populism has unprecedented explanatory power. In the ensuing sections 4 and 5, I will comment on two further advantages of the account; its theoretical fruitfulness and its ability to provide normative guidance.

There is considerable debate about what a successful explanation consists of. For the present purposes, I will rely on Kitcher’s (1989) unification model of explanation. In a nutshell, this model states, “that explanations are deductive arguments that provide understanding by fitting the particular facts and events within a general theoretical framework” (Mantzavinos 2016, 5). The intuitive idea behind this model is that a successful explanation consists of, “providing a unified account of a range of different phenomena” (Woodward 2017).

The goal of this section is then to show that the provided definition of populism helps us to explain a wide range of characteristics that are generally associated with contemporary populism. To that end, I want to demonstrate that the definition of populism provided is consistent with the characteristics of populism. This means,

⁸ Cited after Lusi (2018).

⁹ Emphasis in the original. Trump (15.06.19).

¹⁰ It should be noted that the committal of real people (both as citizens and politicians) to the claims enshrined in the definition of populism will come in degrees and might vary with regard to issue spaces. Thus, a politician might be a populist with regard to one issue and a more thoughtful democrat with regard to another issue. Especially in relation to politics, for reasons that I cannot go into here, people seldom have a stable, fully coherent belief set.

roughly, that there is no contradiction in believing the three tenets of populism and behaving and speaking like populists usually do. Thus, a populist who holds the three tenets is able to act and speak like a populist without cognitive dissonance. However, I wish to defend an even stronger claim. The claim I wish to defend here is that the definition of populism provided is not only consistent, but coherent with how populists usually behave, think, and speak. This means that the propositions enshrined in the definition of populism, if adopted as beliefs by an agent, logically support and thus justify a wide range of behaviors and speech acts typically associated with populism. Hence, if an agent adopts the three tenets, it becomes rational for her to hold the beliefs and engage in the behaviors and speech acts that are commonly associated with populism. If this can be shown, this speaks in favor of the hypothesis established in the beginning; that the identified tenets of populism are fundamental and thus explanatorily prior to the features that are usually mentioned in the characterizations of populism. For purposes of demonstration, I am going to derive seven features that are commonly associated with populism and feature prominently in rival definitions: (a) the contention that the political elite is corrupted or malignant, (b) the contention that the media is corrupted or malignant, (c) populism's claim to sole representation, (d) its disapproval of intermediate forums of deliberation, (e) its approval of direct democracy, (f) populist's readiness to vilify the political opponent, and (g) the latent autocratic tendencies of populism.

I am going to deductively derive these conclusions by utilizing the main propositions defining populism and some auxiliary hypotheses.

1. If an agent is uncorrupted and minimally informed, then the agent knows the correct set of policies P to solve social problem S. (*Truth is manifest.*)
2. If the political elite knows the correct policies and is benevolent, then it will enact the right policies P to solve social problems S.
3. The right policies were not enacted.

From this it follows:

4. The political elite is either ignorant, corrupted, or malignant (= not benevolent). (From 1-3.)
5. The elite is minimally informed (= not ignorant).

From these points, the first major conclusion can be derived:

6. The elite is either corrupted or malignant. (From 4, 5.)

In a similar fashion we can derive that much of the media disagreeing with populist politicians need to be malignant or corrupted based on the view that the truth is manifest:

7. If an agent knows the correct policy and they are benevolent, then they will propose the right policies P to solve social problems S.
8. The media does not propose the right policies.
9. Thus: The media is either ignorant, corrupted, or malignant. (From 1, 7-8).

10. The media is minimally informed (= not ignorant).

From these premises, we can then derive our next important conclusion:

11. The media is either corrupted or malignant. (From 9-10)

Next, we want to derive the conspiracy theory of disagreement from the first premise.

12. If the truth in a certain issue space is manifest, then there can be no reasonable disagreement in that issue space.

The content of conspiracy theory of disagreement follows straightforwardly:

13. There can be no reasonable disagreement about political matters. (*Conspiracy Theory of Disagreement*). (From 1, 12).

In the next step, we will see that (c) populism's claim to sole representation, (d) its disapproval of intermediate forums of deliberation, and (e) its approval of direct democracy, can be derived in a similar fashion.

14. Only if there is reasonable disagreement, then a plurality of reasonable factions needs to be represented in parliament and then a public market for ideas needs to be maintained and then there is sufficient epistemic value in deliberation to justify parliamentary forms of democracy.

15. Thus: There is no need for plural representation, there is no need for a public market for ideas, and there is no justification for parliamentary forms of democracy. (From 13, 14).

Note that 15 ex negativo explains the support of direct forms of democracy as well.¹¹ Next, we will aim to derive the well-known fact that populists have the unique tendency to vilify their political opponents (f).

16. If someone is malignant or corrupted (and in virtue of that a threat to justice), then it is appropriate to vilify them.

17. Thus: It is appropriate to vilify the media and the political elite. (From 6, 11, 16).

Interestingly enough, given the epistemological priors of populists, their vilification of the political opponent and the parts of the media is intelligible and would be justified if their political epistemology were defensible. Finally, I want to explain the logical relation that explains why populists have a tendency towards authoritarianism when in office.

18. A populist leader is minimally informed, uncorrupted, and benevolent.

¹¹ However, the support for direct democracy does not follow straightforwardly. Disapproval of representative democracy is also compatible with authoritarianism among other forms of government.

19. Thus: If a populist leader is in power, he will enact the right kind of policy. (From 1, 2, 18.)
20. If the right policies are enacted and the social problems persist over time, then the policies were sabotaged by the corrupted and malignant.
21. If policies are persistently sabotaged by the corrupted and malignant, then employing autocratic means is justified.
22. The populist leader is in power and the social problems persist.
23. Thus: Employing autocratic means against the corrupted and malignant is justified. (From 19 – 23).

The last argument is supposed to capture the following thought. On a standard fallibilist epistemology underwriting all of democratic theory¹², assuming no unforeseen external events occurred, if a policy does not show the desired effects then this counts against the efficacy of the socio-economic policy and, perhaps, even against the theory from which the policy was derived. On the contrary, on a populist epistemology, the efficacy of policy cannot be doubted since its rightness is self-evident or manifest. Hence, the only reason why a policy does not show the correct results are malevolent external influences.

It bears emphasis that every major conclusion (a-g) in the argument logically depends on the premise that the truth in political matters is manifest.¹³ It should be further noted that these are not the only features of populism that can be derived in a similar fashion. I believe that how the Manichean division between the true people and the elite could be derived is now salient enough. Indeed, propositions 6 and 11 together already establish such a division within society. The same goes for the fact that populists do not hold intellectual and academic inquiries pertaining to political questions in high regard, since everything that one needs to know is manifest to everyone. Furthermore, it has often been pointed out that populists are prone to invoke conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2018; Mounk 2018; Müller 2017). This feature can be accounted for in the present theory, as well as since pervasive political disagreement within the populist political epistemology can *only* be explained by conspiracies.¹⁴ On a populist epistemology, there is virtually no other way to explain pervasive political disagreement. What about the fact that populists are known to appeal to *the people* and their claim to sole representation? First, note that my account is fully consistent with appeals by populists to the people. What sets my account apart from other accounts is not that I deny the empirical claim that (most) populists appeal to the people. Actually, since politics is about collective

¹² I will have to say more about the relationship of democratic vis-à-vis populist epistemology in the next section.

¹³ The ontological premise of populism is entailed by the epistemological one and, thus, for reasons of readability, was not included in the derivation.

¹⁴ An interesting analytical point that I cannot explore here is this: There should be an inverse relationship between the effectiveness of the conspiracy and the size of the true people.

choice, we should expect appeals to some kind of collective. What I am denying is that an appeal to the people is a necessary feature of the definition of populism. We can thus imagine a populist movement that does not *expressis verbis* appeal to the “people”, but that nevertheless can be clearly identified as populist.¹⁵

4. Why Populism is a threat to Democracy

Most theorists working on populism agree that populism poses at least a potential danger to democracy (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017). However, it is often not quite clear in these treatments what the exact problem with populism is supposed to be. To be more specific: If we assume a standard argument in favour of populism, it is not quite clear which premise is in conflict with democratic theory. At face value, as various theorists have pointed out, populism seems to be compatible with democratic theory. Populists affirm democratic elections and believe that, in some form or another, democratic decision-making should reflect the will of the people. Moreover, populists are – like advocates of deliberative democracy and critical theory – sceptical of technocratic forms of government and advocate more direct forms of democracy.

What is the problem with populist ideology, then, from a democratic perspective? The two most recent treatments of populism by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Mueller (2017) both argue that populism is anti-pluralist, while contemporary forms of democracy affirm pluralism. Mudde and Kaltwasser do not give a definition of anti-pluralism, but at least offer a characterization of pluralism which they take to be incompatible with populism. They write (7-8): “Pluralism is the direct opposite of the dualist perspective of (...) populism (...) holding that society is divided into a broad variety of partly overlapping social groups with different ideas and interests. [...]. Pluralists believe that a society should have many centers of power and that politics, through compromise and consensus, should reflect the interests and values of as many different groups as possible.” Mueller agrees insofar that he believes that anti-pluralism is a constitutive feature of populist ideology. He writes, “populists are always antipluralist: populist claim that they, and only they, represent the people.”¹⁶ (20) Populists, he explains, claim that they are the ones that truly represent the people and do not recognize, “anything like a legitimate opposition.” (ibid) “The core claim” Mueller continues, “is thus a moralized form of antipluralism”. (ibid) There are at least two ways of reading the charge of anti-pluralism here. The first reading simply is that populism amounts to

¹⁵ For instance, the German right-wing populist party AfD doesn’t mention the term “Volk” (the people) more often on their website than the other big German parties, except for the Green party.

¹⁶ Emphasis suppressed.

crude majoritarianism and thus does not necessarily respects minority rights. Insofar as populists do not respect minority rights, the argument goes, populism is incompatible with liberal democracy, i.e. a constitutional democracy that enshrines those very rights.

However, understanding populism as crude majoritarianism seems unconvincing for a host of reasons:

- Populists are known to not accept defeat in democratic elections and thus are not committed to the democratic majoritarianism rule, as such.¹⁷
- Populists often claim that the ruling government is illegitimate even though they won the majority vote.
- Populists (especially left-wing forms) are not necessarily against minority rights.

According to the second reading, what is wrong with populism is that it affirms moral realism. For instance, according to Mueller (25), populists suggest that, “there is a singular common good, that the people can discern and will it, and that a politician or a party (...) can unambiguously implement it as policy.”¹⁸ What is the exact conflict, then, between populism and (liberal) democracy on the second reading? It is fair to say that moral realism does not have the best reputation in political theory and philosophy. It is often thought that any account of moral realism opens the door to autocracy. The reasoning, roughly, is that given there is a moral truth and one knows about it, why should one then pay any heed to democratic institutions and decision-making? If moral realism, however, invites autocracy, then – so the argument goes – one should abandon moral realism in favour of some form of moral relativism or constructivism. One way to construct the conflict between populism, understood as a political doctrine, and democratic theory might go like this. Mudde and Kaltwasser, as well as Mueller, seem at various points to portray liberal democracy as a *modus vivendi* arrangement. According to the *modus vivendi* view of liberal democracy, democratic institutions are valuable insofar as they produce peaceful cooperation by facilitating bargaining processes between a plurality of interests, viewpoints, and ethnicities (Wendt 2016). However, as both point out, populists are known for abhorring compromise.¹⁹ Instead, populists on the second reading demand that the true common good is implemented, even against the will of the majority. As Mueller (97) notes, for populists there is, “only one correct policy solution and only one authentic popular will”. For populists there is simply, as was highlighted in our analysis as well, “no real room for disagreement.”

¹⁷ Compare Mueller (2017, 39).

¹⁸ Note that Mueller writes that, according to populists, the people are good at discerning the common good. This gives further evidence to the claim that populists are not only moral realists, but objectivists.

¹⁹ Compare also: Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014).

(97). This reading also captures that populists, according to many theorists subscribe, to a “Manichean division between ‘good’ and ‘evil.’” (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014, 1331)

The second reading, even though promising, runs into a separate problem. Even though many theorists, especially outside political philosophy, have strong reservations against moral realism, many reasonable political philosophers defend moral realism. Indeed, in the last decades moral realism has made a comeback in political philosophy. Theorists in the post-Rawlsian era have become increasingly sceptical of whether political liberalism can be coherently defended on a free standing conception, as Rawls envisioned it (Enoch 2013; Estlund 2009; Larmore 2008; Raz 1990). In the recent decade, even democratic theorists have become more and more convinced that a defence of democracy must be based (at least in parts) on realist assumptions (Estlund 1997; 2009; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2013).²⁰ Given that both epistemic democratic theory and populism are built on broadly realist foundations, it might be interesting to compare both approaches to democracy in order to gain a better understanding of where epistemic democrats and populists depart.

4.1 *Democratic Theory and Truth*

Even though epistemic theories of democracy have gained prominence within the last decade, the locus classicus is certainly Joshua Cohen’s (1986) paper *An Epistemic Conception of Democracy*. In the paper, Cohen mounts a first preliminary defense of, what he called at the time following the terminology of Riker (1988), “populist conceptions of democracy” against liberal conceptions. The guiding idea of his paper is not to give a full defense of epistemic democracy, but merely to argue that such a conception can be defended in good faith.

Epistemic democrats are moral realists in virtue of their belief that independent standards of justice or the common good exists. These standards are independent in the sense that their existence does not depend on the actual (or idealized) approval of human beings. In Cohen’s (34) epistemic populism, this independent standard gets interpreted as the general will. Now, for the epistemic conception of populism to get off the ground, an independent standard must not only exist in the abstract but must also be affirmed by the relevant group. If the group affirms the independent standard of justice, it can be said that the group “has” a general will (34). As Cohen points out, an agreement on general principles is, “compatible with disagreements about the institutions and policies that are best suited to these principles and their continued satisfaction over time.” (ibid). In the epistemic

²⁰ Modus vivendi conceptions of democracy, on the other hand, have many critics, the most prominent being John Rawls.

conception of populism, voting is interpreted as an imperfect mechanism to generate evidence about what the correct policies and institutions are in order to satisfy the requirements of justice (i.e. the general will).

However, for voting to be truth-tracking, a number of quite ambitious conditions must be fulfilled. First, people have to vote with their beliefs about what the general will requires rather than with their preferences. Second, the voters must be competent such that, on average, the voters are more likely than not to get the right answer. Especially with regard to complex social, environmental, and economic issues, this requires a lot of effort on the side of the voters to get informed. On this conception, the voters need to constantly adjust their beliefs, “in light of the evidence about the correct answer” (34). However, as Cohen remarks, “the epistemic populist cannot simply assume that judgmental competences are fixed and high, and that individuals vote their judgments. Instead, the populist must be attentive to the way that rules and the collective choice institutions in which they operate shape the competence and motivations of voters.” (35) Thus, according to Cohen, we should only expect that voting is truth-tracking if an adequate epistemic basic structure (Kurtulmus and Irzik 2017) is in place that ensures that voters, on average, are motivated and competent to evaluate the evidence correctly and adjust their beliefs in accordance with shifting evidence.

What the discussion of epistemic populism points to is that the assumptions of a general will, moral realism being true and democratic majority decisions being truth-tracking are compatible with a reasonable conception of democracy. Thus, neither of the features is sufficient to explain what is morally troublesome in populism. Moreover, neither of these assumptions is incompatible with a defensible democratic theory.

If we want to get a better grasp on what is objectionable about populism, it might prove illuminating to look at what features set epistemic populism apart from political populism. Certainly, a crucial difference comes down to the content of the will; in Cohen’s characterization the content of the will is given by Rawls’s two principles of justice, while the content of the general will in real-world populism is often dehumanizing. However, theorists converge in their assessment that populism is not pegged to any specific normative doctrine. What sets epistemic and political populism apart, then, is their epistemology. Cohen emphasizes, as epistemic democrats do in general, that there is no reason to believe that the intuitions of citizens – understood as immediate judgments – about policy matters are reliable. On the contrary, Cohen argues that popular judgments count only as reliable evidence if the citizens, through the right kind of education, have developed the capacity to form sound judgements. Moreover, citizens are required to base their judgments on evidence and to adjust their judgments as the body of evidences is shifting.

This is very different from populist epistemology. According to populist epistemology, the judgment of the people is reliable by default. The truth in political matters is salient, thus even an untrained mind should be able to discern the veracity of political claims without much effort. Whereas Cohen's epistemic populism urges the citizen to make up their mind by consulting various accounts, the run-of-the-mill populist believes that there is nothing to be gained by consulting different opinions. Indeed, consulting different opinions is dangerous insofar as it might lead to corruption. The difference is thus, fundamentally, one about political epistemology. While epistemic democrats subscribe to fallibilism, political populists subscribe to some crude form of intuitionism.

In conclusion: What is objectionable about populism, from the perspective of epistemic democracy, is not that it assumes that there is a general will, or that democracy might be a good way to advance the general will, but its political epistemology.

4.2 *Why populism is anti-democratic*

In the last section, we have worked out what premise sets epistemic democracy and populism apart. The question that I want to pursue in this section is whether the result can be generalized. Indeed, I want to argue that one difference between democratic theories *tout court* and populism is that the former rejects the view that the truth is manifest.

I want to argue the point from two sides: First, I want to give some context to the truth is manifest view and show why the view is suspect on epistemological grounds. Secondly, I want to show that democratic theory in general builds on the implicit rejection of the view that truth is manifest.

4.2.1 Truth is manifest and intuitionism

In general terms, the truth is manifest view should be understood as a specific view in metaethics. In metaethics, usually four different fields are distinguished: metaethical ontology, epistemology, semantics, and the theory of action. The truth is manifest view falls into metaethical epistemology. The view that the truth about ethical and political matters is manifest can be best understood as a form of intuitionism. We have defined the view that the truth is manifest as a specific form of intuitionism that applies to the realm of politics and, hence, to both empirical and genuinely normative policy issues. The political epistemology of populists, I want to argue, is indefensible with regard to both empirical and normative claims. This is easy to see with regard to policy matters. To see this, we can simply check whether the policies favored by populists on intuitive grounds have been successful on their own terms. The economic failures of countries led by populist leaders, for instance Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, speak a clear language (Edwards 2010). More importantly, the view that truth is manifest in policy matters stands in clear

contradiction to the scientific method as it applies to empirical matters. That leads us to the question of whether intuitionism in moral matters is a defensible and, ergo, reasonable view. To approach this topic, it is sensible to distinguish between brute intuitionism and sophisticated intuitionism. Brute intuitionism is the view that human beings have infallible access to moral truth. Sophisticated intuitionists share with brute intuitionists that human agents may have (i) direct access to some moral truth and (ii) “*at most that some moral truths are self-evident*”²¹ (Huemer 2008, 106) in the sense that we have infallible access to them. However, what sets brute and sophisticated intuitionists apart is that the latter think that, “moral beliefs are rendered prima facie justified by intuitions.” (106). The difference between brute and sophisticated intuitionism thus once more comes down to the issue that sophisticated intuitionists accept fallibilism with regard to intuitions. Intuitions give us prima facie reason to believe. That means that moral intuitions are fallible and open to error. Indeed, sophisticated intuitionists argue that moral judgments based on intuitions are more or less susceptible to the same sources of error as most other judgments (Huemer, 137-9).

4.2.2 Democratic Theory and Fallibilism

Political theory and philosophy have produced a number of reasonable conceptions of democracy. The family of democratic reason, I want to argue, has in common that they accept some sort of fallibilism and, in that, reject the political epistemology of populism. For reasons of space I cannot go here through every member in the family of democratic reason to show how each of the conceptions affirms some form of fallibilism. Instead, I want to argue that all democratic theories accept three theses which each individually presuppose a fallibilist epistemology. All democratic theorists, I submit, hold that the core function of democratic processes are: 1) to weed out errors in public deliberation, 2) to come up with synergistic policy solutions according, and 3) to test policies in a trial-and-error fashion. All of these functions presuppose that fallibilism is correct and that our moral and political judgements are subject to error. Democratic processes are thus defended (at least in parts) by all democratic theories as a mechanism that secures imperfect procedural justice. Democratic theories differ among other things on how potent they believe these processes to be. Modus vivendi theories of democracy, for instance, have in common that they do not have high expectations for what this mechanism can achieve under real world conditions. They thus tend to deemphasize the truth tracking mechanism of democracy even with regard to empirical issues, such as the effectiveness of particular policies. Other democratic theories – especially epistemic and deliberative conceptions – on the contrary, put much faith in democratic mechanisms. Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse (2014,

²¹ Emphasis in original.

369) echo an important undercurrent in these more emphatic strands of democratic theory when they connect epistemology and democracy in the following way: “We [...] contend that the social-epistemic environment requisite for proper believing is best secured under democracy.” The idea here seems to be that the core rights secured in democracy, “free speech, free association, freedom of conscience, as well as various protections for dissent, disagreement, and protest” (368-9), are necessary preconditions for arriving at proper beliefs on the individual level and proper political decisions on the collective level.

Given that this analysis is correct, what makes populism anti-democratic is its political epistemology; its adherence to the view that the truth in political matters is manifest. Indeed, democrats are committed to the polar opposite view. As Popper (2000, 202) put in *Search for a better World*: “We must be clear in our own minds that we need other people to discover and correct our mistakes (as they need us); especially those people who have grown up with different ideas in a different environment.”²² What sets populism and democratic theory apart is, then, that democratic theory in all its stripes and colors is built on a commitment to fallibilism.²³ Populism denies fallibilism and is thus anti-democratic. What differentiates populism and democratic theory is then, surprisingly, not a moral commitment, but a deeper commitment - namely the epistemic attitude towards the sphere of the political.

Moreover, looking from the present vantage point at democratic theory brings out some interesting presuppositions of the latter and, thus, further underwrites the theoretical fruitfulness of the conception defended. Here, I want to comment on four of these.

1) We learn something important about epistemic conceptions of democracy through the study of populism. Populism is the view that political questions have a correct solution and that these correct solutions are relatively easy to come by. On the contrary, conceptions of epistemic democracy are wedded to the belief that correct solutions exist, but are often hard to come by. This juxtaposition of populism and democratic theory dovetails nicely with the common admonition that populists tend to oversimplify issues in an inadmissible way. Indeed, the fundamentally different outlook of democratic theory and populism explains why populists are commonly charged with oversimplifying issues.

2) Margeret Canovan (1999, 6–7) in her seminal paper on populism poses the question: Why are populists not acknowledged as “the true democrats”? Canovan’s answer is that populists are democrats, but not liberal democrats. As it is common, she takes the predicate liberal to denote a certain set of constitutional guarantees. However, this answer, in my view, does not probe deeply enough. The liberal

²² Emphasis suppressed.

²³ Compare also: Mueller (2017, 36; 39; 77). In his account, however, the criterion of fallibility does not take center stage for explaining populism.

commitment is not just a commitment to constitutional rights simpliciter. The commitment itself reflects, in part, the deep insight of liberals – starting with Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Stuart Mill – in the epistemic circumstance of political decision-making. Namely that we need these rights in order to solve hard political problems. The epithet liberal thus reflects the acknowledgment of democrats that political problems are hard and reasonable disagreement is to be expected.

3) The theory of populism presented brings into focus a feature of democratic processes that has not been appreciated sufficiently. Theorists have recently begun to study the ability of democratic processes to track the truth. However, a more fundamental feature of the democratic process seems to be that it is essential to establish what the set of reasonable disagreement is in the first place. Reasonable disagreements can be either shallow or deep. Shallow disagreements are disagreements that exist because the evidence is inconclusive and, thus, can be solved in principle by adding to our knowledge stock. Deep disagreements in principle cannot be resolved. The democratic function of determining the set of reasonable disagreements is essential because it allows us to establish which set of premises in a certain debate is under contention. This is, in turn, important for coordinating research efforts within democracy to overcome these shallow disagreements where possible.

4) A final advantage is this: Especially in the European context, there is an increasing tendency to call any extreme right-wing position ‘populist’. The advanced theory allows us to disambiguate extreme right-wingers from right-wing populists, as we should. An extreme right-wing position is morally reprehensible because it denies fundamental rights; an extreme right-wing populist position is reprehensible because it denies fundamental rights and, in addition, violates the norms of rationality by subscribing to an untenable political epistemology.

5. Normative Guidance:

Walter Lippman (1997/1922, 82) notes that as political engaged citizens, we all have a tendency to view those who hold different political views as “perverse, alien, [and] dangerous.” These words have a very contemporary ring, even though they were written a century ago. As the political scientists Falk, Stötzer, and Walter (2019, 3) write, “many studies show that we increasingly view people outside our own echo chamber as being selfish, unintelligent and malicious”. It is thus not surprising that, in the last decade, people have become increasingly unwilling to engage with opposing arguments (*ibid*). This is an important development because it shows that quasi-populist attitudes, the attitude that somehow one’s own beliefs and arguments are manifestly right, have gained ground.

Based on the present proposal, I want to end this paper by sketching some ideas on how to combat populist attitudes: Political communication in a democracy –

whenever possible – should reflect the fact of reasonable disagreement and the fallibility of political judgments. This is hard, especially because there is a demand side to populism, as many theorists have pointed out. Mounk (2018, 38) summarizes this point excellently when he writes that voters neither, “like to think that the world is complicated” nor do they “like to be told that there is no immediate answer to their problems.” Politicians and pundits in a democracy need to fight this urge for certainty on the side of the citizens tooth and nail. For this reason, politicians should be especially cautious as branding their proposals as being without alternative.²⁴

Moreover, starting from these considerations, one might also begin to think about what political attitudes should be taught at school. Without being able to go into much detail here, consider this familiar quip: “A hundred-dollar bill is lying on the ground. An economist walks past it. A friend asks: ‘Didn't you see the money there?’ The economist replies: ‘I thought I saw something, but I must've imagined it. If there had been \$100 on the ground, someone would've picked it up.’”²⁵ The joke tries to capture the important insight of economics that there is nothing like a free lunch. As a rule, we should expect that there is no trivial way to turn a huge profit. It might be good to establish a similar rule for the realm of politics. If a policy suggestion in a democracy seems to be manifestly right, but has not been implemented yet, the case for the policy probably is not that clear to begin with. To put it differently, the epistemic theory of populism suggests that, in democratic education, the virtue of epistemic humility needs to be emphasized a bit more. Learning to develop one's own view is important, but so is to understand the “burdens of judgment” (Rawls 1993).

Finally, the philosopher and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan famously coined the phrase that, “the medium is the message.” Without going into the details of his account here, I want to point out that from the vantage point of democratic (vis-à-vis populist) political epistemology, the political usage of new media for political purposes is somewhat troubling. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, by their very format, force political communicators to condense their message. Hence, they heavily incentivize political communicators to suppress expressions that remind the receiver that the views, proposals, and judgments of the sender are more often than not contestable. To put it even more strongly, these new forms of communication seem antithetical to the needs of democratic communication to reflect the fact of reasonable disagreement and the fallibility of judgment.

²⁴ Germany's Chancellor Merkel, usually the paragon of reasonableness, for instance branded her proposal to the financial crises of 2015 as one without alternative (“alternativlos”).

²⁵ Quoted from *The Economist* (2017).

6. (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017)References

- Akkerman, Agnes, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove. 2014. "How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters." *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (9): 1324–53.
- Audi, Robert. 2019. "Understanding, Self-Evidence, and Justification." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 99 (2): 358–81.
- Barr, Robert R. 2009. "Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics." *Party Politics* 15 (1): 29–48.
- Bergmann, Eirikur. 2018. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Brun, Georg. 2016. "Explication as a Method of Conceptual Re-engineering." *Erkenntnis* 81 (6): 1211–41.
- . 2017. "Conceptual re-engineering: from explication to reflective equilibrium." *Synthese*.
- Canovan, Margaret. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47 (1): 2–16.
- Cohen, Joshua. 1986. "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy." *Ethics* 97 (1): 26–38.
- Edwards, Sebastian. 2010. *Left behind: Latin America and the false promise of populism*. Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Enoch, David. 2013. "The Disorder of Public Reason." *Ethics* 124 (1): 141–76.
- Enyedi, Zsolt. 2015. "Plebeians, Citoyens and Aristocrats or Where is the Bottom of Bottom-up? The Case of Hungary." In *European populism in the shadow of the great recession. Studies in European political science / ECPR*, eds. Hanspeter Kriesi and Takēs S. Pappas. Colchester: ECPR Press, 229–44.
- Estlund, David. 1997. "Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority." In *Deliberative democracy: Essays on reason and politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 173–204.
- . 2009. *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Falk, Armin, Lasse Stötzer, and Sven Walter. 2019. "Technical Report: Evaluation Deutschland Spricht." Briq Institute on Behavior & Inequality. https://news.briq-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Technical_Report_Deutschland_Spricht.pdf (October 3, 2019).
- Friedman, Jeffrey. 2005. "Popper, Weber, and Hayek: The epistemology and politics of ignorance." *Critical Review* 17 (1-2): 1–58.
- Goodin, Robert E., and Kai Spiekermann. 2018. *An epistemic theory of democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huemer, Michael. 2008. *Ethical intuitionism*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Jagers, Jan, and Stefaan Walgrave. 2007. "Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium." *European Journal of Political Research* 46 (3): 319–45.
- Jansen, Robert S. 2011. "Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism." *Sociological Theory* 29 (2): 75–96.
- Kitcher, Philip, ed. 1989. *Scientific explanation*. Vol. 13 of *Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Kurtulmus, Faik, and Gürol Irzik. 2017. "Justice in the distribution of knowledge." *Episteme* 14 (02): 129–46.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 2018. *On populist reason*. London: Verso.
- Landemore, H el ene. 2013. *Democratic reason: Politics, collective intelligence, and the rule of the many*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Larmore, Charles. 2008. "The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism." In *The autonomy of morality*, ed. Charles E. Larmore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 139–67.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1997. *Public opinion*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks.
- Lusi, Domenico. 2018. *Rome mayor cleared in trial to the relief of her 5-Star party*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-rome-mayor/rome-mayor-cleared-in-trial-to-the-relief-of-her-5-star-party-idUSKCN1NF0IN>: Reuters.
- Mantzavinos, Chrysostomos. 2016. *Explanatory pluralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Misak, Cheryl, and Robert B. Talisse. 2014. "Debate: Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22 (3): 366–76.
- Mounk, Yascha. 2018. *The people vs. democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Mudde, Cas, and Crist obal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A very short introduction* [eng]. Vol. 510 of *Very short introductions*. Oxford, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- M uller, Jan-Werner. 2017. *What Is populism?* London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Popper, Karl. 2014. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. 2nd ed. *Routledge classics*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Popper, Karl R. 2000. *In search of a better world: Lectures and essays from thirty years*. London: Routledge.
- Rawls, John. 1993. *Political liberalism*. no.4 of *The John Dewey essays in philosophy*. New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. 1990. "Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19 (1): 3–46.
- Riker, William H. 1988. *Liberalism against populism: A confrontation between the theory of democracy and the theory of social choice*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press.

- The Economist. 2017. "A world of free movement would be \$78 trillion richer." *The Economist*, July 13. <https://www.economist.com/the-world-if/2017/07/13/a-world-of-free-movement-would-be-78-trillion-richer>.
- Wendt, Fabian. 2016. *Compromise, peace and public justification: Political morality beyond justice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woodward, James. 2017. "Scientific Explanation Edward." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/scientific-explanation/>.