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**Populism and Liberal Democracy:
Ideological Tensions, Democratic
Erosion, and the Role of Securitization**

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Introduction

Since World War II, democratic regimes have been growing in number and liberal democracies have established themselves as the dominant forms of government, even beyond Europe and the United States. This dominance was not only political and institutional, but also, and especially, ideologically normative. Liberal democracies, particularly after WWII, have been considered normatively superior to all other regimes. As Winston Churchill famously stated in 1947: “*Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*”¹ This is because it is precisely these types of regimes that are able to guarantee the protection of individual and minority rights, while at the same time assuring freedom to their citizens. Liberal democracies are civil systems based on solid values and principles, which are fundamentally opposed to the authoritarian regimes that led to the atrocities of the World Wars. This is why, after the complete devastation that Europe and the rest of the world faced in the first half of the 20th century, liberal democracies gradually established themselves as the hegemonic forms of government. This hegemony of ideas reached its peak after 1991, with the collapse of the USSR. To truly understand the normative superiority that was attributed to liberal democracies after 1991, it is perhaps useful to refer to the work of Francis Fukuyama, who famously defined this historical period as “The End of History.”² As Fukuyama viewed history as an evolutionary process, by referring to “the end of history,” he did not mean to indicate the end of events, but rather, the end of the evolutionary process. In this perspective, the ideological defeat of all other forms of government ultimately established liberal democracy as the “end point of mankind's ideological evolution” and the “final form of human government.”³

The expansion of democratic governance, however, “has now stalled and it is even reversing.”⁴ While the number of countries deemed democratic increased in the past decades, the quality of democracy has been progressively eroded across many western

¹ “The Worst Form of Government,” *International Churchill Society*, accessed May 23, 2025, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>.

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

³ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴ Shawn W. Rosenberg, “Democracy’s Final Act?” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 15 (Winter 2020): 34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48573636>.

counties, not to mention other regions⁵. As Shawn W. Rosenberg states, “Momentum appears to be with populist—particularly right-wing populist—alternatives to democratic governance.⁶” This clearly raises serious concerns about the present state of liberal democracy and more importantly about the long-term consequences of populism on liberal democratic systems⁷.

This thesis therefore aims to analyse the populist phenomenon and its relationship with democracy, and more precisely liberal democracy. While it will present and analyse both the critical and the supportive perspectives on populism, it will ultimately argue that this growing phenomenon seriously threatens liberal democracy. Moreover, an additional aspect that is explored in this thesis is the role of securitization and of the populist instrumentalization of fear and crisis narratives to mobilise voters.

This dissertation hence seeks to answer these core questions, providing both empirical examples and normative arguments:

- What is populism?
- What is democracy, and more precisely, its modern conception as liberal democracy?
- What is securitization theory, and how does it relate to the populist rhetoric?
- What is the relationship between populism and democracy?

The central argument that this thesis is putting forward is that populism is a thin-centred ideology, which is based on a moral dichotomy that renders it ultimately incompatible with liberal democracy. Moreover, especially in a historical period characterized by wars, insecurity, and crises, this thesis also argues that one aspect to be taken into consideration while assessing how and to what extent populism threatens liberal democracy is securitization. It is through this process that populists are able to perpetuate a sense of crisis and urgency, which allows them to mobilise voters.

This thesis is structured into two parts: the first one is entirely dedicated to the analysis of populism, while the second one investigates the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, other than populist securitization and the use of crisis narratives. More specifically, Part 1 starts by exploring the debate around the various definitions attributed

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

to populism, while ultimately affirming the adoption of the ideational definition as the core theoretical framework of this dissertation, which is mainly proposed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Subsequently, it comprehensively analyses the central elements of the populist ideology, namely the “pure people,” the “corrupt elite,” and the “general will.” Moreover, it provides an analysis of the populist leader as *vox populi*, which is the central figure of the populist ideology. Lastly, a brief section is also dedicated to the distinction between right-wing and left-wing populism. It ultimately affirms that, while the content of the “pure people” and of the “corrupt elite” varies across the political spectrum, both right-wing and left-wing populism fit into the minimal definition of populism proposed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, which is based on a Manichean dichotomy⁸.

Part 2, in contrast, begins with a section that focuses on democracy and liberal democracy, outlining its main values and principles, as well as the key differences between the original conception of democracy and its modern liberal form. Afterwards, a section is dedicated to the analysis of the alleged corrective potential of populism. Section 2.2 indeed presents and discusses the main scholarly opinions that understand populism as a revitalizing force of democracy and as a powerful corrective to the shortcomings of liberal democratic regimes. However, in this thesis, I assume a critical position toward populism, and more specifically toward its relationship with liberal democracy, which explains the use of the term “alleged” in the title of section 2.2. Then, the following section explores the role of securitization theory. Starting from the original conception proposed by the Copenhagen School and moving to its more contemporary revisitation, securitization theory is here adopted as a useful theoretical framework for understanding the populist use of fear and crisis narratives, as well as the construction of enemies, typical of the populist ideology. Lastly, section 2.4 is dedicated to the final discussion of the negative effects of populism on liberal democratic regimes. It is indeed argued that the populist ideology, because of intrinsic and inherent features, is incompatible with the values and principles of liberal democracy. Therefore, as it systematically undermines liberal democratic ideals and institutions, it can never act as a positive force for liberal democracy.

⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

PART 1 - POPULISM

1. Defining Populism: Conceptual Foundations

This first chapter is dedicated to the very difficult task of defining populism: the academic debate around this complex and elusive concept is still very much alive, and no universal definition of the term has been widely accepted yet. As Jan-Werner Müller writes in his book *What is Populism?*, when we refer to this term “it is far from obvious that we know what we are talking about.”⁹ It is thus generally acknowledged that populism is one of the so-called essentially contested concepts, defined by W.B Gallie as “concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users.”¹⁰ Indeed, populism is undoubtedly an essentially contested concept, as the discussion around the notion concerns “not just what it is, but whether it even exists”¹¹. The complexity behind this task is also well captured by Mansbridge and Macedo, who introduce their work *Populism and Democratic Theory* by writing “In this article we attempt the impossible. We give populism a definition that we hope will stick.”¹²

1.1 The Ideational Definition: Populism as a “Thin-centred” Ideology

In the book “*Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*” Mudde and Kaltwasser outline the complexities behind a definition of populism. By reporting the main historical manifestation of this phenomenon before the 1980s, they show how this term has historically been used to identify several very different experiences. Indeed, the origins of the concept of populism are associated with the birth of the People’s Party, also known as the Populist Party, in the United States of America at the end of the nineteenth century¹³. This type of populism was agrarian in nature, it appealed to the working class, as “neither Democratic nor Republican

⁹ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁰ W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956), 169.

¹¹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

¹² Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo, “Populism and Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (2019), 60.

¹³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3. See also Marc F. Plattner, “Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010), 87.

lawmakers seemed willing to take up labour and agrarian movements' demands for reform¹⁴." Similarly, at the end of the nineteenth century, another agrarian populist movement took place, this time in Russia. The *narodniki* were intellectuals who believed in peasantry and in the agrarian model as the future of Russia's political system; they also put great emphasis on appeals to "the people". As both movements were labelled as populist and both were connected to agrarianism, the two notions were believed to be strictly correlated¹⁵. However, over time and across various regions of the world, the perception of populism changed.

Subsequent populist leaders and movements, especially in Latin America after the Great Depression of the 1930s, stopped referring to the working class and started to appeal to "the people", a concept that will be further discussed in the next sections. By referring to "the people," leaders like Juan Doming Perón in Argentina and Getulio Vargas in Brazil, were able to include a larger part of the population within their electorate, which consequently allowed them to "build multiclass coalitions and mobilize lower-class groups¹⁶." The experience of populism in Western Europe began only at the end of the twentieth century, with few earlier exceptions such as Poujadism in 1950s in France. By contrast, between the 1930s and 1970s, populism had already emerged and spread in both Canada and the United States—through the Social Credit movement in the former, and through figures like Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and George Wallace in the latter¹⁷.

While it is clear that these early instances of populism around the world were very different from one another, we can confidently say that most of today's movements labelled as populist are more closely related to anti-establishment, anti-immigration and nationalist or socialist rhetoric. It is therefore evident that the term "populism" has been and still is used to refer to a very wide range of phenomena, sometimes appropriately, while other times less so.

Indeed, while attempting to define the elusive yet crucial concept of populism, it is essential to begin with a reflection on why a precise and operational definition is both

¹⁴ Populist Party, "Populist Party Platform, July 4, 1892," *National Constitution Center*, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/populist-party-platform-july-4-1892-in-a-populist-reader-selections-from-the-works-of-american-populist-leaders-9096>.

¹⁵ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 18.

¹⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

necessary and urgent. Over the past few decades, and particularly in recent years, the term “populism” has been widely used both by academics and by the medias to describe an extraordinary broad spectrum of political expressions including political actors, movements, and ideologies¹⁸. It has been used to refer to both far-right leaders in Europe and to left-wing leaders in Latin America, but also to nationalist and anti-immigration figures across the globe, often without relying on a clear definition of the term, let alone a reflection on the implications of the latter. Moreover, Mudde and Kaltwasser note that such “broad usage also creates confusions and frustration¹⁹.” An interesting aspect that the authors also underline, is that perhaps part of this confusion derives from the fact that populism, generally speaking, is not something that actors and organizations claim about themselves, but it is rather a label with a negative connotation that is attributed to them by others²⁰. The phenomenon we have been experiencing in recent times is what I would call a semantic inflation of the term: this excessive and sometimes inappropriate usage of the term contributed to the dilution of its analytical value, which in turn makes it less and less useful for accurately describing the phenomenon.

The approach I support the most is the so-called “ideational approach,” which sees populism as a thin-centred ideology. While they have not reached consensus, ideational definitions of populism are getting more and more popular, and they have been successfully used by a variety of scholars both in Europe and the Americas²¹. However, before delving deeper into this approach, I believe it is crucial to briefly mention other types of definition of populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser²² identify three main categories, aside the ideational approach: the first conceives populism as a political movement, the second as a political style, and the third as a discourse. While this list is far from being exhaustive, it is useful both to grasp the complexities behind a definition of populism, as well as to highlight the strengths of the framework proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser.

The first approach sees the rise of populism as comparable to the rise of other political movements, like fascism for instance. The main similarity between the two is actually

¹⁹Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² Ibid., 5-7.

mass mobilization, which however is not a characteristic limited to populism, rather it is a key feature of mass politics.

The second approach sees populism as a political style, where a populist leader is able to establish a special kind of tie with the electorate by appealing to “the people”, with the final strategic aim of securing political power. The authors here criticise the approach for a similar reason as for the first approach: the opportunistic and demagogic rhetoric frequently adopted by populist leaders is not a defining characteristic of populism itself, but it is rather a very common practice performed by a wide range of political actors, especially before the elections.

The third approach derives from Ernesto Laclau (and was further developed also together with Chantal Mouffe²³) and conceives populism as a “discursive strategy of political elites²⁴” used to gain the largest number of supporters. In this perspective, Laclau refers to the logic of articulation²⁵, which is a process by which populist (hegemonic) leaders are able to combine heterogeneous political demands in a collective identity. The most distinctive element of Laclau’s perspective regards the notion of “the people” which he sees as “empty signifiers²⁶” – which will be further explored in the next section. This view of “the people” is what other authors criticised about this approach²⁷: it has been described as being too abstract and indefinite, perhaps ignoring the fact that the notion of the people has a long, historically specific meaning.

As I have now briefly reported some of the definitions attributed to the term “populism” together with some of their flaws, defining the “ideational approach”, as well as its strengths, is necessary. Mudde and Kaltwasser conceptualize populism as:

“a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus

²³ See both: Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005). And Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

²⁴ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 40.

²⁵ Samir Gandesha, “Understanding Right and Left Populism,” in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018), 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hvtcf.7>

²⁶ Samir Gandesha, “Understanding Right and Left Populism,” in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018), 49–70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hvtcf.7>

²⁷ Ibid.

“the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.²⁸”

The three core elements that characterise populism, namely the pure people, the corrupt elite, and the volonté générale will be further addressed in the next sections.

This type of definition is described as minimal, a concept that derives from Sartori’s dilemma that regards the intension and extension of a concept²⁹. Minimal definitions prove to be very useful, especially in comparative politics: by balancing the intension and extension of a concept, they allow for conceptual clarity and prevent problems related to conceptual stretching and travelling³⁰.

By defining it as a thin-centred ideology, populism is understood as a set of ideas, which is limited compared to the one of thick-centred (of full) ideologies like socialism, and liberalism, but still clearly visible and identifiable³¹. In the case of populism, these core ideas are represented by “the pure people”, “the corrupt elite”, and the “general will”. Populism, as a thin-centred ideology “exhibit[s] a thin-centred morphology, with a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts.³²” Thus, unlike thick ideologies, thin-centred ideologies are not able to provide a full set of answers to the complex socio-political issues of our time³³. Indeed, the most distinctive feature of these types of ideologies is that they are not self-sufficient: as a matter of fact, populism always appears to be attached to other ideologies, which can be even very different. This helps explain why populism can take the form of both far-right nationalist populism and left-wing socialist populism. Thus, this definition allows to grasp the malleability of the concept, while recognising its ideological structure. Mudde identifies four main strengths

²⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

²⁹ Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1033–1053, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1958356>.

³⁰ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

³¹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

³² Michael Freeden, “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?” *Political Studies* 46, no. 4 (1998): 750, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00165>.

³³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

of the ideational approach: distinguishability, categorizability, travelability, and versatility³⁴.

The first refers to the fact that this definition allows to distinguish between populism and non-populism³⁵. Indeed, there are at least two obvious antitheses of populism, which are elitism and pluralism (further discussed in the next sections).

The second strength, namely categorizability, implies that the ideational approach allows to construct typologies of populism and logical taxonomies. By using populism as the core concept instead of as an adjective, it is possible to develop categories of populism (subtypes) which are “ideally mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive³⁶.”

The third strength is travelability, which means that this definition is both general and specific enough to make it applicable across different regions and historical periods, which is in turn very useful when talking about comparative politics.

The last key strength of the ideational definition provided by Mudde and Kaltwasser refers to its versatility: it allows to take into account both the supply and the demand side of populism³⁷. This means that it does not focus merely on the strategies and techniques used by populist leaders, but also on what brings the masses to support them.

I believe that this definition provides a valuable analytical tool to grasp the flexibility and elasticity of the notion of populism, which is an essential aspect to consider when addressing such a complex, multifaceted, and heterogeneous phenomenon. The minimal definition reported above helps to understand the various forms that populism takes depending on the economic, social, and cultural environment in which it emerges, with the underlying assumption that populism is essentially a form of moral politics,³⁸ meaning that “the ‘people’ [are] in a moral battle against ‘elites.’³⁹”

³⁴ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 34-39.

³⁵ The criterion of distinguishability highlights a key flaw in Laclau and Mouffe’s approach, as the latter lacks the conceptual clarity needed to clearly separate populist from non-populist phenomena.

³⁶ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 37.

³⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

³⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8.

³⁹ Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo, “Populism and Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (2019): 60.

However, as populism is an essentially contested concept, not all scholars agree with the definition provided by Mudde and Kaltwasser. For instance, Kim Lane Scheppele⁴⁰ argues that populism should not be understood as a coherent ideology, but rather as a set of political opportunistic strategies, aimed at gaining power. From this perspective, populism is seen as a means through which populist leaders are able to gain public support, secure political power, and ultimately undermine constitutional liberalism. A similar definition was proposed by Kurt Weyland: “populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.”⁴¹

Other scholars’ definition of populism, like William Galston’s one, are more closely related to the ideational approach. Galston indeed rejects the idea that populism is merely limited to a successful use of rhetoric and strategy, capable of appealing to the masses. Galston indeed states that “Even if it lacks the kind of formal theoretical underpinnings or canonical texts that defined the great “isms” of the twentieth century, populism nonetheless has a coherent structure.”⁴²

On the same line, Tjitske Akkerman believes that populism does not possess the comprehensive theoretical framework necessary to be identified as an ideology. At the same time, by also referring to scholars like Canovan and Taggart, Akkerman affirms that it is possible to recognize a specific morphology of populism, which makes it part of an ideological family⁴³.

In conclusion, despite being the most minimal, the ideational definition proves to be the most comprehensive. It successfully encompasses the majority of experiences commonly referred to as populist, while at the same time allowing for a clear distinction between populist and non-populist phenomena. For all the reasons mentioned above, this

⁴⁰ Kim Lane Scheppele, “The Opportunism of Populists and the Defense of Constitutional Liberalism,” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 3 (2019): 314–331, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.25>.

⁴¹ Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (October 2001): 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>. See also Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 48–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.2>.

⁴² William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0020>.

⁴³ Tjitske Akkerman, “Populism and Democracy: Challenge or Pathology?” *Acta Politica* 38 (2003): 147–159, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500021>.

thesis adopts the ideational definition of populism as its primary analytical lens, while still acknowledging the value of alternative perspectives in capturing the complex nature of this phenomenon.

1.2 Core Elements: the “Pure People,” the “Corrupt Elite,” and the “General Will”

As highlighted by the ideational definition provided by Mudde and Kaltwasser, the three core elements of populism are represented by the pure people, the corrupt elite, and the general will (*volonté générale*). This section is indeed dedicated to the explanation of these central ideas.

1.2.1 The “Pure People”

As the term also suggests, the very foundational concept of populism is “the people” and more specifically the “pure” people: while the ideational definition of populism requires three elements, the “corrupt elite” and the “general will” are subordinated to the definition that populists give to “the people”. Indeed, the elite is defined as the opposite of what “the pure people” is; on the same line, the “general will” depends on the content of the “pure people”, as it is its expression⁴⁴.

Mansbridge and Macedo follow the same logic that Mudde and Kaltwasser included in their ideational approach and define populism as “the people in a moral battle against the elites.”⁴⁵ What Mansbridge and Macedo underline, is that their minimal definition of populism sees the people as the common people, or better as the common citizens.

Along the same line, Müller defines populism as a “a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified— but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional— people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.”⁴⁶ One aspect that Müller also stresses is that this opposition is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a movement to be

⁴⁴ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31.

⁴⁵ Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo, “Populism and Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (2019), 60.

⁴⁶ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 19-20.

defined as populist. The reason of this, clearly resides in the fact that otherwise, any political actor that contests and challenges the establishment would be identified as a populist. Another key element, other than anti-elitism, that must be present in the logic for it to be classified as populist is anti-pluralism, which however will be further explored in the Part 2.

What is generally agreed upon is that “the people” is a construction: the content of this notion is not as easy and straightforward as it might seem. Indeed, the problem of identifying who is included in “the people” or in the *demos* is historical: who gets to be part of the collective entity that comprises the people in a democratic society, from which democratic legitimacy stems? As Paulina Ochoa Espejo also notes, the debate around the role of the people in a democracy, upon which the concept of populism depends, “has gone hand in hand with democracy and democratic theory since antiquity.”⁴⁷ Indeed, democratic inclusion lies at the heart of contemporary political philosophy and still shapes discussions on the nature of democracy and the principles that guide its functioning. Political philosophers thus have long been discussing the “boundary problem” namely the question of how to determine the legitimate boundaries of the political community. This implies also a reflection on who should establish these boundaries, which in turn leads to several logical paradoxes, as there is no democratic way to determine them. As Ochoa Espejo very simply explains, “[w]e would need a people to determine who are the people, to determine who are the people and so on, ad infinitum.”⁴⁸ The problem of who is included in the people has recently shifted more towards the question of who counts as a citizen: contemporary democratic theory now focuses more on the criteria of inclusion, as citizenship is increasingly perceived as the main indicator of “membership” in the people, and therefore in the political community.

While the problem of the people is a universal challenge for any form of government that requires democratic legitimacy, in the case of populism it takes a peculiar and specific form: it is not a mere demographic problem nor a legal matter regarding citizenship eligibility criteria. Rather, “the people” is a deeply moral and symbolic construct. The dividing line between who gets to be part of the people and, on the other side, who is part

⁴⁷ Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the Idea of the People,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 607–628. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.30>.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 610.

of the elite (or establishment) is indeed moral. The relationship between the two is antagonistic and irreconcilable: in the words of William A. Galston “The people have one set of interests and values, the elite has another, and these two sets are not only different but fundamentally opposed.⁴⁹” Here, there is clearly a right and a wrong side to the story: the people and the elite are not heterogeneous and equal competitors with opposing interests. Rather, the people are pure and virtuous, while the elite (or the establishment) is corrupt, self-serving, and is actively preventing the will of the people from being realized.

The people are indeed depicted by populists as unified, homogeneous, and virtuous: they are pure segments of the population whose will is being suppressed by the elites and the establishment. Homogeneous and unified indicate that the people share the same identity: in the words of Laclau⁵⁰, as “the people” is a construction, it is defined as an “empty signifier.” This allows populist leaders to construct the content of the people by merging together different interests from various social groups in society, who are marginalized by the establishment. Thanks to this process of articulation of heterogeneous political demands,⁵¹ populist leaders are able to generate a shared identity that will allow them to unify different instances of dissatisfaction into a common cause, thus enabling them to secure support and political power.

Another perspective suggests that populists rely on a historical account of the people, as opposed to the hypothetical one, which is instead supported by liberals.⁵² According to Ochoa Espejo, liberals believe that the notion of the people should be understood as an ideal for guiding legislation: the people is not a clearly defined group of individuals, but rather “an abstract construction, which grounds the legitimacy of the democratic state through a constitution.⁵³” In this perspective, the people act as a guarantee of individual and minority rights.

⁴⁹ William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018), 12.

⁵⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

⁵¹ Samir Gandesha, “Understanding Right and Left Populism,” in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018), 57.

⁵² Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the Idea of the People,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 607–628. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.30>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 612.

On the other hand, populists prefer a historical view of “the people,” which means that the term does not refer to an ideal that guarantees legitimacy, but rather to an active political force that emerges through real struggles. In this view, the content of the people is to be found in history: they “can be reconstructed retrospectively from the history of political struggles.”⁵⁴ As a consequence, in this historical approach, the people become real: the term refers to individuals that share the same tradition and identity. This perspective however poses a risk: if populists’ notion of the people is strictly connected to a specific identity and tradition to be found retrospectively, which is determined by ethnic, religious and cultural elements, then there is a constant danger that the populist appeals to the people escalate into “xenophobia and violent political exclusion.”⁵⁵

Following this reasoning, Akkerman underlines how populists rely on a cultural notion of the people, which sees the latter as “*ethnos* rather than *demos*.” This means that the people are generally identified based on criteria as culture, ethnicity, race, and blood. As a logical consequence, populists believe that a cultural community should come before a political one⁵⁶.

Paul Taggart explains the content of the people through the concept of “the heartland.” In his view, the heartland is a “territory of imagination” which is resorted to by populists to create consensus. The heartland in this perspective represents the qualities and values that are worth protecting in the populist view, and in this sense, it is used to justify the exclusion of what is seen as the enemy. This concept was also remarked by Akkerman, who affirmed that the heartland is “an ideal society of the past and of the heart.”⁵⁷ Moreover, “the heartland” implies a singularity in its population, which explains why populists depict the people as homogeneous⁵⁸.

However, Mansbridge and Macedo interestingly note that the opposition of the people to the elites, in theory, does not require either side to be unified and homogeneous. This relates also to a concept outlined by Laclau and Mouffe⁵⁹, who affirm that frequently, “the

⁵⁴ Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the Idea of the People,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 613. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.30>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 614.

⁵⁶ Tjitske Akkerman, “Populism and Democracy: Challenge or Pathology?” *Acta Politica* 38 (2003), 151.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 95-96.

⁵⁹ In Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo, “Populism and Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (2019), 61.

people” need to be constructed, as they do not really possess a shared identity (until they are mobilized) but rather they are composed of several different marginalised portions of the population. This, indeed, does not entail that the marginalised are homogenous: what it implies is just that they are not rightfully represented by major parties and institutions, namely the “power bloc.” A clear implication of this is that what needs to be clearly defined is the enemy, namely the elites, rather than the people, which are, in this definition, simply whoever is in opposition to the former.

However, I argue that most of today’s populist movements, both on the right and on the left, actually require the people to be united and homogenous: populists necessitate to construct a shared identity of the “pure people” in order to make their appeals effective, and consequently secure political power. Populist leaders thus need to know to whom they are speaking, and because their appeal is usually very simplistic, oversimplified, and generally speaking monodimensional, the content of the people needs to be clear. This process of homogenisation of the people completely undermines pluralism, impedes disagreement, and hinders (or even blocks) the process of deliberation, posing a real threat to liberal democracy, as it will be further outlined in Part 2.

It is now clear that populism tends to oversimplify the nature of “the people”: as a consequence, the same generalization is applied also to the political demands of the people, by treating them as homogenous, straightforward, and undifferentiated. Moreover, this process of populist oversimplification occurs also over the challenges and failures of the establishment. Populists indeed tend to deliberately ignore the complexities of certain political and social issues, disregarding the fact that some difficulties that the establishment faces in answering people’s demands is not necessarily the result of its unwillingness to enforce to the people’s will. Rather, they might stem from the inherent complexities related to national, or even international, governance.

Clearly, this myth of a unified, homogenous, and pure people rests on a counterfactual assumption: that society is not plural. Especially in recent decades, this assumption becomes even more untenable, as the process of globalization radically changed the nature of the nation-state. Globalization has indeed made modern societies anything but homogenous. Political and social demands are increasingly diverse, just as the groups that constitute modern societies, which are progressively fragmented. As noted by Francis

Fukuyama⁶⁰, the rise of identity politics has further contributed to the fragmentation of modern societies, where the idea of national identity and tradition is being replaced by a more heterogeneous composition of social and political demands. Indeed, “plurality, not homogeneity, characterizes most peoples, most of the time.”⁶¹

As Müller highlights through two very illustrative examples, in the populist view, “only some of the people are really the people.”⁶² This is evident in the case of Nigel Farage, who defined the Brexit vote as a “victory of the real people”, thus implying that 48% of the British electorate was not part of the real people. The other compelling example regards Donald Trump’s statement at a campaign rally: “the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything.”⁶³

I believe it also useful to highlight some concepts outlined by Mudde and Kaltwasser regarding the people. They argue that the notion of the people is usually associated to three meanings: the people as sovereign, as the common people, and as the nation⁶⁴.

The notion of the people as sovereign refers to the idea that the people are the ultimate source of political authority and are entitled to govern themselves. Therefore, when the people do not feel represented, they might mobilize and revolt. In this case, what distinguishes the people from the elite is political power⁶⁵.

The idea of the common people does not merely refer to a class concept, but rather it is used as a critique of the dominant culture, as it also refers to cultural tradition and popular values. In this sense, populists refer to the common people as to defend the dignity of those segments of the population which are being marginalized because of their socioeconomic and sociocultural status. Populist leaders frequently appeal to “the common people,” as they try to unify a heterogeneous majority that is discontent and dissatisfied, with the aim of mobilising it against the enemy, namely the establishment. This is a clear anti-elitist trait which lies at the core of populism, because it is very useful for criticising the establishment and the institutions, and therefore it further emphasises

⁶⁰ Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018), 90-115.

⁶¹ William A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018), 12.

⁶² Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 21.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁴ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9-11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the dichotomy between the people and the elite. In this case, what distinguishes the people from the elite is indeed the socioeconomic status⁶⁶.

The notion of the people as the nation is used to refer to the national community, which is defined either in civic or in ethnic terms. In this case, what distinguishes the people from the elite is nationality: the “natives” of a country are the real people of that country⁶⁷.

To sum up, the people in the populist view are depicted as homogenous, virtuous, and unified, and their identity is frequently determined by cultural, ethnic, and historical elements. The simplification of this complex concept is useful for populist leaders to mobilize a heterogenous electorate towards a common cause.

1.2.2 The “Corrupt Elite”

Once I have explained the concept of the people, it seems easier to define the concept of the elite. This is because the elite is usually conceived as “the anti-thesis” of the people: once we know who the people is, the rest is the enemy, namely the elite. This conception led many scholars to define the elite simply *ex negativo*⁶⁸.

However, as many scholars relied on this way of defining the elite, the content of this notion is again not as clear and straightforward as it seems. Indeed, the criteria to determine who is part of the elite can vary significantly.

Quite evidently, they are defined on the basis of power: the elite generally include those in leading positions in politics, the economy, the media, and the arts⁶⁹. An interesting aspect, however, is that whenever populist occupy these positions, they are not considered part of the elite. A clear example of these can be found during campaign rallies: populist leaders, although candidates for important position in the political field, are not part of the political elite. Rather, in their logic, they are simply trying to give back power to the people, they stand on their side, unlike all other politicians. By listening to the people’s (unified and homogenous) will, populist leaders simply follow the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33.

⁶⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

“mandate⁷⁰” that the people conferred to them: they are the only true representatives of the people, and they are the “only legitimate force in society.”⁷¹ This is also true in the case of the media: for instance, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) has regularly critiqued all media for defending the elite, but an exception to this clearly existed. The media that supported the party and its leaders, namely *Die Kronen Zeitung*, was considered a true voice of the people, rather than part of the elite⁷². Similarly, in the case of Donald Trump, Fox News was not seen as part of the media establishment, but rather as a legitimate amplifier of the people’s voice, standing against the liberal elite⁷³.

The fundamental aspect that needs to be stressed while addressing the distinction between the people and the elite is without any doubt the role played by morality. What distinguishes populism from other types of political movements is not that it pits one part of the population against another. This indeed is very common for mostly every revolutionary movement. For instance, Marxism opposes the working class to the bourgeoisie, but the distinction is made on the basis of economic exploitation and class struggle. In this opposition, mainly based on economic factors, the working class suffers from economic deprivation, and the bourgeoisie is seen as the perpetrator of economic inequality, which becomes structural. The dichotomy here is strong and it is deeply felt, but it’s not based on morality: rather it is a materialist analysis of historical and economic relations. On the same line, national movements frequently oppose the native people to the foreigners, and the distinction is generally based on cultural or ethnic grounds. While I recognise that this opposition can sometimes degenerate into xenophobia and racism, the distinction between the two is generally grounded on ethnic or cultural identity, rather than on morality.

⁷⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 31.

⁷¹ William A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018), 12.

⁷² Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 12; see also Charlott Gebauer and Patrick Müller, "Austria and the Global Compact on Migration: The 'Populist Securitization' of Foreign Policy," *Comparative European Politics* 19, (2021): 760–778, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00260-7>.

⁷³ A.J. Bauer, Anthony Nadler, and Jacob L. Nelson, "What Is Fox News? Partisan Journalism, Misinformation, and the Problem of Classification," *Electronic News* 16, no. 1 (2022): 18–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19312431211060426>.

Conversely, populist opposition between the people and the elite is neither based on economic factors, nor on political or cultural elements. Rather, it is based on morality⁷⁴: the people are portrayed as homogenous and unified, but more importantly as “pure.” They are on the right side of the story, and their interests and will is not only ignored by the elite, but even actively neglected or hindered by the latter. The elite on the other side, is corrupt and malevolent: it only serves its own interests, and as they generally do not coincide with the ones of the people, they deliberately hinder the efforts of the people to make their voice heard.

It is crucial to grasp this very foundational trait of populism: the distinction between the people and the elite is “moral and not situational.”⁷⁵ This explains why, in the logic of populists, it is not contradictory to perpetuate the antiestablishment rhetoric, even when they are in power and should therefore be considered part of the elite. This refers to the fact that, if the antiestablishment rhetoric makes much sense when populists are part of the opposition, theoretically, it should not make sense when populists are in power, because who holds power represents the establishment and the elite. However, as already introduced above, even when populists occupy positions in society that are generally associated with the elite, they are not considered part of the latter. This is indeed because the distinction between the people and the elite is grounded on morality, and it’s not situational.

This persistent moral division has significant implications for the populists' behaviour even once they are in power: it helps explain how they are able to maintain the same narrative both in opposition and when in government. In order to explain this concept, Mudde and Kaltwasser referred to “the paranoid style of politics:” many populist leaders are able to perpetuate their anti-establishment logic even when in power, because they argue that the real power is not in the hands of the democratically elected leaders, namely

⁷⁴ See Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9-16 and Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 32-34.

See also Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the Idea of the People,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 607–628.

See also Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo, “Populism and Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (2019), 59-77.

See also Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁷⁵ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

the populists. Rather, in their view, it is held by some “shadowy forces” that continue to hinder the expression of popular will⁷⁶.

In my opinion, the interesting aspect of the paranoid style of politics is that it provides populist governments with an easy justification for their failures. Indeed, if they can keep their anti-establishment position because, even once elected, some obscure forces prevent them from exercising real power, then they can easily justify themselves when they fail by claiming that they lack the actual authority to govern effectively. In this perspective, when populist governments cannot fulfil the promises they make, it is never their fault: rather, they supposedly lack the real power that would enable them to achieve their goals, and this is because of the elite. This seems to me a convenient narrative, which prevents populist governments from being held accountable, therefore allowing them to avoid taking full responsibility of their actions.

Another aspect that is worth noting, is that the elite can be defined in economic terms⁷⁷: this occurs both in right-wing and left-wing populist movements. In the first case, the explanation is that, usually, left-wing populism is supported by some forms of socialism. In the second case, the elite are seen as holding economic power, which allows them to prioritise their interest over the will of the people. The causes of this lack of power are indeed attributed to the elite, who actively sabotage the people and their will. This rhetoric was highly supported by several leftist populist leaders, including Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Alexis Tsipras in Greece, Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia. Many European populist leaders, who on the other side are definitely more right-leaning, tend to see the European Union as the elite institution that prioritises its interests over the ones of the people. These include Matteo Salvini in Italy⁷⁸, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and clearly Nigel Farage in UK.

The crucial aspect is that, in the populist logic, the elite are not only self-serving, but they are also betraying the “real” people. They are indeed portrayed as the enemy of the

⁷⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

⁷⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13.

⁷⁸ Matteo Salvini, interview on *RTL 102.5 Rewind*, broadcast August 11, 2016, <https://play.rtl.it/rtl-1025-rewind/1/matteo-salvini-l-unione-europea-e-il-peggio-delle-istituzioni-che-ci-hanno-rifilato-il-segretario-della-lega-ospite-di-rtl-1025-ha-parlato-di-unione-europea-giovedi-27-gennaio-2022/>.

people, because they actively hinder the democratic process which, in the populist logic, is supposed to reflect exclusively the will of the “true” people. As many scholars underline, populists very frequently adopt this “enemy narrative” with regard to the elite. This is a consequence of defining the people as homogenous and unified: whoever disagrees with the people is automatically considered excluded from this unitary group. It becomes part of the corrupt elite which, once again, represents the enemy.

However, this rejection of pluralism, namely the assumption that the people are homogenous, is both conceptually flawed and factually inaccurate. This is because modern societies are inherently diverse, composed of competing interests, multiple identities and perspectives, and also various ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

In this sense, populism poses a real risk for democracy⁷⁹: the rejection of pluralism has severe consequences on society. As William A. Galston observes: “it leads first to denial and then to suppression.” He further analyses the typical populist reaction to disagreement: “populism responds with anathemas: the dissenters are self-interested, power-hungry elites who aren’t part of the virtuous and united people. They are rather the enemies of the people and deserve to be treated as such.”⁸⁰

Another interesting point that Mudde and Kaltwasser underline is that, while the main criterion for identifying the elite is morality, the concept remains flexible and capable of adapting to the populist rhetoric. Indeed, it is common for populist leaders to rely also on secondary criteria for identifying the elite. In turn, the people and the elite might not always be defined by the same criteria. This is the case for example for nationalist xenophobic populist leaders, who define the people in ethnic terms, but do not believe nor affirm that the elite is part of a different ethnic group. For instance, while Marine Le Pen depicts Muslims and immigrants as a threat to the French people, the national elites are still portrayed as ethnically French. In this narrative, the elite is not composed of Muslims and immigrants themselves, but rather of the national (and European) elite who favour the interests of minorities over those of the “real” French people⁸¹.

⁷⁹ Further explained in Part 2

⁸⁰ William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 5.

⁸¹ Daniel Stockemer and Mauro Barisione, “The ‘New’ Discourse of the Front National under Marine Le Pen: A Slight Change with a Big Impact,” *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 2 (2017): 100-115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116680132>.

To sum up, the elite is not always a clearly defined group of individuals: rather, it is often defined *ex negativo*, meaning that it represents what's not part of the people, what does not belong to the real people. While the concept remains flexible so that populist leaders can secure political power more easily, the fundamental aspect of the distinction between the people and the elite is morality. As a result, the elite is not merely a political (and social) adversary, but it becomes the enemy of the people. As will be further analysed in the next chapters, this "enemy narrative" proves to be extremely useful within the populist logic, because when a clear enemy is identified, even heterogenous people can become unified in a common cause: combating the elite.

1.2.3 The "General Will"

The concept of the "general will," or *volonté générale*, is one of the key pillars of populism, and as already mentioned above, it is strictly connected to the definition that populists give to "the people." In this regard, as the people are homogenous and unitary, their will must follow the same logic: the pure and virtuous people share the very same interests and preferences, which are fundamentally opposed to the ones of the elite⁸².

To explain the populist conception of the general will, Mudde defines it as "kind of a vulgar Rousseauian argument⁸³". However, this definition does not really explain what the concept precisely refers to. Indeed, as scholars have argued, Rousseau's understanding of the general will has been characterised by significant ambiguities and also interpretative uncertainties. As a result, three main interpretations of the concept have been put forward by scholars, all of which have found some support in Rousseau's writings⁸⁴. The first is a democratic conception: it views the general will simply as the result of citizens' decision in a sovereign assembly. The second takes the form of a transcendental conception: in this perspective, the general will is not tangible and concrete, rather it is an abstract representation of the common interest, which is

⁸² William A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018), 12.

⁸³ Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33. Later also in Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16.

⁸⁴ Christopher Bertram, "The Idea of the General Will," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer 2024 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/#IdeaGeneWill>.

independent of individual preferences and desires⁸⁵. The third interpretation understands the *volonté générale* as each citizen's will directed towards the common good⁸⁶.

As Mudde and Kaltwasser underline, Rousseau distinguishes between the general will (*volonté générale*) and the will of all (*volonté de tous*). While the latter simply refers to the aggregation of particular preferences in a specific moment in time, the *volonté générale* refers to “the capacity of the people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest.”⁸⁷ As populism is grounded on the moral distinction between the people and the elite, and sees these two opposing groups as homogeneous, this understanding of the general will is reinforced. If the people are unitary and homogenous, so is their will: this account of the people makes the idea of a general (unitary) will more plausible⁸⁸.

Populists strongly believe that politics should simply follow the general will of the people. As previously noted in the ideational definition proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism “argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” In this perspective, populist leaders become simply the amplifier of the people’s voice: they are the only true representatives of the people.

What’s interesting to note is that in this light, the job of politicians appears relatively uncomplicated. In the end, they simply need to enact the mandate that stems from the people’s will. Once again, populists tend to oversimplify: as the idea of homogenous people rests on a counterfactual assumption, so does the idea of a general will which is unitary and clear. The task of politicians in the populist logic is very well captured also by Margaret Canovan, who affirms that politicians should be “enlightened enough to see what the general will is, and charismatic enough to form individual citizens into a cohesive community that can be counted on to will it.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Christopher Bertram, “Rousseau’s Legacy in Two Conceptions of the General Will: Democratic and Transcendent,” *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 403–419, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23263382>.

⁸⁶ Jason S. Canon, “Three General Wills in Rousseau,” *The Review of Politics* 84, no. 3 (2022): 350–371, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670522000328>.

⁸⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16.

⁸⁸ This quite evidently contradicts Laclau’s logic of articulation: the general will is not understood as composed of various different interests, but rather as unitary, because it stems from homogeneous and unitary people. See Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 33.

⁸⁹ In Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16.

The “general will” according to Mudde is linked to two key concepts: the first is common sense, while the second is special interests. Common sense again stems from the populist understanding of the people, as the only true people are the common people. This concept is related to the general will because populists typically affirm that their policies are rooted in common sense, which Mudde defines as “the result of the honest and logical priorities of the (common) people.”⁹⁰ This concept also relates to the process of (over)simplification⁹¹, which, as we have seen, is very typical of the populist discourse. By claiming that they govern with common sense, populists tend to oversimplify the challenges that governments face by proposing simple “common sense solutions.” The implication of this claim is that while the populists’ policy proposals are grounded in common sense, the elite does the opposite. Indeed, populist frequently claim that their proposals are honest and logical, and that they respond to the priorities of the common people. In doing so, populists imply that the elite themselves are complicating things, and that the elite keep themselves detached from the people⁹². By emphasising the opposition between the people and the elite, populist leaders are able to portray themselves as the *vox populi*, namely voice of the people.

The second concept, namely “special interests,” emerges in opposition to common sense politics. While on the one hand populists create solutions based on common sense, the elite create solutions by taking into account only their “special interests.” This implies that while populists follow the general will of the people, the elite are corrupt, self-serving, deceitful, and out-of-touch. Mudde here stresses this aspect: any policy that does not address the will of the people, as defined in populist terms, is automatically classified as “special interests politics” with a strongly negative connotation. However, sometimes this type of politics is not employed to favour some people over others, as populist frequently claim, but rather to reduce already existing inequalities⁹³.

The concept of “out-of-touch” is in my opinion especially significant. I argue that it is imperative to grasp this particular aspect of the logic of populism in order to

⁹⁰ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33.

⁹¹ See section 1.2.1 “the pure people”

⁹² Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

understand and explain the rapid global expansion of the phenomenon. The concept of the distance between the people and the elite is not only central to the populist definition of the general will, but represents a fundamental feature of the broader populist phenomenon. Indeed, I argue that much of the appeal of populism stems from the moral and emotional distinction between the people and the elite, that populist leaders always emphasise. Indeed, the greater the perceived gap between these two antagonistic groups in society, the greater the sense of deprivation felt by the people. In turn, the higher the likelihood that charismatic populist leaders will successfully mobilise the people⁹⁴. By firstly emphasising the distance between the people and the elite, and by portraying the elite as “out-of-touch,” populist leaders propose common sense solution to common people’s problem, which is exactly what the elite are not doing. It is therefore quite clear that it is precisely within this moral distinction and greatly perceived gap that populism thrives. This divide is very useful for populist leaders, as by perpetuating their anti-elitist rhetoric they are able to strengthen the identity of “the people:” they are able to connect the people through a shared sense of disadvantage. For as long as the elite (establishment) is perceived as “looking down its nose” at ordinary citizens, sentiments of anger and frustration in the people will keep growing. This distance is however not merely social or economic but is moral and ideological.

This dynamic, however, is not only relevant to understand the populist conception of society, where the people and the elite are perceived as distant: it also carries some significant implications. Indeed, the populist account of the general will as homogenous and unitary can be dangerous: as Ochoa Espejo notes, there is no way to invoke the general will without “undermining the rights of individual and minorities.”⁹⁵ This idea of the general will, thus poses a real risk for democracy: just as the enemy narratives and the depiction of the people as homogeneous, the general will presented as a unitary and

⁹⁴ Linda Bos et al., "The Effects of Populism as a Social Identity Frame on Persuasion and Mobilisation: Evidence from a 15-Country Experiment," *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 1 (2020): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12334>; see also Nick Turnbull, Judi Atkins, and Shaun Wilson, "Populist by a Distance: A Relational Framework for Unifying Ideology, Rhetoric, and Leadership Style in Populism Studies," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, (published online April 25, 2024): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2024.2346200>.

⁹⁵ Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the Idea of the People,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 608. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.30>.

universal voice undermines pluralism. The rejection of pluralism, in turn, can lead to authoritarian tendencies, which stand in opposition to the very foundations of democracy.

To sum up, the concept of the general will derives from the definition that populists give to “the people”. As they are framed as homogenous and unitary, so is the general will. This concept has a dual nature: it is a very powerful tool of both inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, it is frequently adopted by populists to create a shared identity within the people (inclusive) which is fundamentally opposed to the elite (exclusive). Moreover, by claiming to govern according to common sense, populists tend to oversimplify complex and multifaceted problems, offering deceptively straightforward solutions to challenges that are, in the reality of modern societies, deeply intricate and nuanced.

1.3 The Populist Leader: Personalisation, Charisma, and Direct Representation

As Mudde and Kaltwasser introduce in “*Populism: a very short introduction*”, populism is a thin ideology, a set of ideas, which therefore does not foresee a very delineated image of the typical leader. However, both in academic discourse and in popular perception, “the presence of a strong personalistic leader has almost always been considered an essential feature of populism.”⁹⁶ Indeed, in many manifestations of populism, a very strong and charismatic leader has been the central figure, who represented the *vox populi* and was able to mobilise voters. For instance, this was the case for Juan Domingo Perón, Hugo Chavez, but also Jörg Haider, and Donald Trump.

Populism is indeed very frequently associated with personalistic leadership: this concept refers to the fact the populist leaders’ authority does not derive from the fact that he/she adheres to institutional procedures or that he/she is able to advance through party hierarchies. Rather, the leader's authority stems from the followers' belief in their exceptional qualities⁹⁷. This is very much the case for leaders like Chávez, Berlusconi,

⁹⁶ María Esperanza Casullo, "How to Become a Leader: Identifying Global Repertoires for Populist Leadership," in *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*, ed. Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald, and Dirk Nabers (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 55, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04621-7_3.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

and Trump, who's authority indeed derived more on their personal connection with the people rather than on traditional political background.

As Maria Esperanza Casullo notes in the chapter "*How to become a leader: identifying global repertoires for populist leadership*", Weber's concept of charismatic authority is very relevant when discussing the figure of the populist leader. Casullo underlines how this particular trait of populism lies at the core of many definitions of populism given by scholars⁹⁸. This is the case for example for Kurt Weyland and Paul Taggart: they define populism as a political strategy and thin-centred ideology, respectively.

While not all populist leaders are represented by a charismatic strongman, all of them share the belief that they are the only true representative of the people's voice. Interestingly, this implies that they are both political outsiders, meaning that they are not part of the elite, and also that they are "authentic representatives of the common people."⁹⁹ The common characteristic of all populist leaders is indeed that they represent the *vox populi*: as populism rests on the opposition between the people and the elite, populist leaders must embody the will of the people and act as its enforcers. The concept of *vox populi* therefore is composed of two processes: populist leaders separate themselves from the elite, while at the same time they are connect with the people¹⁰⁰.

Focusing on the description as charismatic strongman, the populist leader is depicted as a man of action: the leader is ready to take quick and difficult decisions, even when it means defying expert advice¹⁰¹. As a consequence, the charismatic strongman is often associated with a very strong virility: a fitting example here is the figure of Silvio Berlusconi and the *bunga bunga* scandals, which have been exploited by the latter to gain even more consensus.¹⁰² Another important trait of the charismatic strongman is also the use of a very simple, popular language: this proves to be very useful for these leaders as they appear to be part of the common people.

⁹⁸ María Esperanza Casullo, "How to Become a Leader: Identifying Global Repertoires for Populist Leadership," in *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*, ed. Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald, and Dirk Nabers (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 55–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04621-7_3.

⁹⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62-63.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰² Ibid., 64.

One important clarification must be made: when speaking about charismatic strongman, the term does not apply exclusively to men but rather regards women populist figures as well. For instance, this is the case for Eva Perón, Marine Le Pen, Yingluck Shinawatra, Pauline Hanson, and also Sarah Palin¹⁰³. I argue that more contemporary examples include also figures as Giorgia Meloni from Italy, Alice Weidel from Germany, and Riikka Purra from Finland.

Populist figures can also be associated with entrepreneurs: in this case, the separation with the political elite is quite easy to make, as they are political outsiders. At the same time, it might seem more difficult for them to connect with the common people because of the differences in their socio-economic status. However, through other strategies as antiestablishment rhetoric, or usage of vulgar language, entrepreneurs can become successful populist leaders: key examples include Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump.

Another type of populist leader is the ethnic one: especially in Latin America, ethnopopulism refers to mobilisation by indigenous people. A clear example of populist ethnic leader is Evo Morales in Bolivia, who used his ethnicity as a tool to both distance himself from the elite and to connect with common people¹⁰⁴.

The last category of populist leaders identified by Mudde and Kaltwasser regards insiders-outsiders. While it is essential for populist leaders to be separated from the elite, true outsiders are very rare. Indeed, most of them are actually insiders-outsiders: they are not part of the political elite but still have connections to it. This was the case for leaders like Jörg Haider, Sarah Palin, but also Corneliu Vadim Tudor¹⁰⁵.

To sum up, while the populist leader can take different forms, the common trait is their central claim: they are the only true representatives of the people, and they embody the vox populi. Indeed, regardless of their background or characteristics, populist leaders rely on the construction of their image as authentic representatives of the will of the people.

¹⁰³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 68-69.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 75.

1.4 Distinguishing Right-Wing and Left-Wing Populism

This last section of the first part is dedicated to a very brief analysis of the classical distinction that applies to all political movements, including populist too: the division between the right and the left. Indeed, populist movements can be both right-wing and left-wing, and this distinction can include extremist tendencies too.

It is however unusual for an ideology to develop simultaneously both on the left and on the right sides of the political spectrum. Think for example of socialism and liberalism: although both can incorporate elements from other ideologies (including from each other), there is no such thing as a truly left-wing liberal movement, or a right-wing socialist one. However, as populism is a thin-centred ideology, it needs to rely on thicker ideologies in order to stand. Therefore, depending on the thick ideology it relies on, populism can take the form of both a right-wing movement and a left-wing one. Quite evidently, this particular characteristic of thin-centred ideologies allows to significantly broaden the range of phenomena and movements that are classified as populist. This is possible thanks to the minimal definition of populism discussed by Mudde and Kaltwasser. Indeed, many very different, and sometimes even opposing movements can fit in the same definition, because the core idea of this ideational approach is the opposition of two antagonistic blocs: the pure people and the corrupt elite, where politics must implement the *volonté générale*.

Both right-wing and left-wing populist movements share this key opposition: the difference lies in how they fill the content of these two opposing blocs. As a matter of fact, what right-wing and left-wing populist parties perceive as “the people” is different. As already explained in the previous sections, from the definition of “the people” also stem the definitions of both “the elite” and the “general will.” As a consequence, if the people are defined differently on the opposing sides of the political spectrum, so will the elite and the *volonté générale*. Thus, this difference leads populist movements at the opposite sides of the political landscape to identify different enemies. What remains crucial is the opposition between the people and the elite: between pure and corrupt, virtuous and malevolent.

While the rise of modern populism is often attributed to neoliberal globalisation, which caused both economic insecurity and cultural anxiety, right-wing and left-wing populism responds to these issues differently. Indeed, right-wing populism usually

defines the enemy in personalised terms, whereas left-wing populism tends to define the enemy in terms of “bearers of socio-economic structures and rarely as particular groups.”¹⁰⁶

In this perspective, right-wing populism tends to define “the people” in ethnic and cultural terms. Consequently, the enemy is usually an external one, which poses a threat to the real people within the nation. These enemies usually include immigrants, refugees, Islamic terrorism, European institutions, and also international organisations¹⁰⁷. It is therefore clear that right-wing populism defines the enemy in personalised terms: it transforms “the social stranger into the political enemy.”¹⁰⁸ This form of populism is often associated with nativism, authoritarianism, and a desire to protect traditional cultural values (nationalism).

Left-wing populism, in contrast, defines “the people” in relation to social structures and institutions that “thwart their aspirations for self-determination.”¹⁰⁹ While left-wing populism can also become authoritarian, it generally defines the enemy in terms of socio-economic structures rather than specific groups. It seeks to address economic insecurity and inequality caused by the dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of precarious labour conditions.

The key differences are two: the first is that right-wing populism tends to identify the enemy in personalised terms, while left-wing populism sees social and economic structures as the real enemy. The second difference, which clearly stems from the first, is that for right-wing populists, the enemy is external, while for left-wing populists, the enemy is typically internal. However, even in right-wing populism, the enemy can become internal: this happens for example when the national elite are favouring the interests of the external enemies.

Interestingly, populism in Europe tends to be exclusionary (right-wing), while in Latin America it tends to be inclusionary (left-wing)¹¹⁰. The causes of this regional

¹⁰⁶ Samir Gandesha, “Understanding Right and Left Populism,” in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018), 49–70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hvtcf.7>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 63.

¹¹⁰ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,” *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147–174, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11>.

distinction are generally associated with differing socio-economic contexts and structures.

Indeed, as Europe is a consolidated post-material society, it is more stable economically speaking. Therefore, the main concern of populist parties in Europe is not economic needs, but rather cultural identity preservation. It is in this perspective that populism in the region becomes exclusionary: it focuses on excluding certain groups from the “real” native people because they are seen as cultural threats. Welfare chauvinism¹¹¹ is indeed typical of populist parties in Europe: it refers to the idea that welfare benefits and social services should be reserved exclusively for native citizens, while immigrants and minority groups are portrayed as undeserving outsiders. Key examples of populist right-wing parties in Europe include the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the French National Front (FN). Both parties portray immigrants, cultural minorities, political elites, and supranational institutions like the European Union as key threats to the identity, security, and sovereignty of the native people¹¹².

On the other hand, as Latin America is still struggling with great inequality and high levels of poverty, populist movements in the region focus more on socio-economic grievances. Therefore, populism in Latin America becomes inclusionary as it seeks to incorporate marginalised groups in “the people.” Populist leaders in this region tend to define the people in socio-economic, rather than cultural or ethnic terms. Consequently, “the people” are identified as the oppressed masses confronting a corrupt elite and also foreign economic interests. Primary instances of inclusionary populism in Latin America include Bolivian President Evo Morales and the Movement for Socialism (MAS), as well as Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)¹¹³. Both these populist leaders, as noted by Mudde and Kaltwasser, sought to empower historically marginalised groups politically, economically, and also symbolically. They both adopted redistributive social policies, participatory democratic reforms, and an anti-imperialist rhetoric related to *Americanismo*¹¹⁴.

To sum up, both right-wing and left-wing populism rely on the same fundamental opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elite. However, their definition of the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 160.

¹¹² Ibid., 147–174

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 162.

two opposing blocs varies. As a consequence, the main difference is that the former focuses on excluding perceived external threats, whereas the latter seeks to include marginalized groups by confronting internal socio-economic structures. Despite their differences, these different instances of populism show how the same core logic can adapt flexibly to different ideological and regional contexts.

PART 2 – POPULISM, LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, AND SECURITY

2. Populism, Crisis Narratives, and the Struggle for Liberal Democracy

In the first part of this thesis, I have attempted to clarify the conceptual foundations of populism, as well as to shed light on the main philosophical challenges surrounding this very complex and multifaceted phenomenon. While the discussion is not entirely exhaustive, Part 1 was dedicated to building the theoretical foundation necessary for addressing this second part, which indeed constitutes the core of the thesis. Here, I attempt to critically analyse the impact of populism on democracy, and in particular on liberal democracy. The relationship between populism and democracy is quite complex and highly discussed. However, the analysis will not be limited to this general assessment: after an initial overview of the populist challenges to liberal democracy, it will focus more specifically on the role of security. In this regard, it will indeed be explored how populist rhetoric shapes citizens' perception of security (or better, insecurity), which in turn acts as a driver of mobilisation. It will be argued that populist leaders, through (in)security rhetoric, are able to generate political consensus and secure political power. Subsequently, I will conclude by evaluating the impact of this specific populist rhetoric on the functioning and integrity of liberal democracy.

2.1 Democracy and Liberal Democracy

The relationship between populism and democracy is both intimate and paradoxical. Indeed, these two phenomena share some central elements, which are not only common, but also constitutive of both concepts. Yet, this closeness is also a source of tension: in both academic discourse and political practice, their interaction has often been described as problematic. In this section, I will examine how populism can be seen as part of democracy, and even as a potential corrective to some of its shortcomings. In section 2.4, by contrast, I will explore the opposing perspective, which portrays populism as a threat to liberal democracy and its institutions.

The first key element that populism and democracy have in common is undoubtedly the notion of the people. They both place “the people” as the main source of political legitimacy, but as already addressed in section 1.2.1, they have contrasting ideas

about what the term actually refers to. Indeed, while liberals usually use “the people” to refer to the ideal that guides legislation and that serves as legitimacy force, populists tend to view it in a more specific and concrete way: they usually refer to specific groups in society. Stemming from this concept, populism and democracy share indeed the central role of popular sovereignty, but they interpret it differently. As Duncan Kelly argues, populism is “part of the mainstream structural history of popular sovereignty.”¹¹⁵ However, while democracy conceives sovereignty as mediated through representative institutions and pluralistic deliberation, populism tends to simplify and personalise it, presenting “the people” as a unified and morally pure subject in direct opposition to a corrupt elite. This flattening and rejection of pluralism allows populist actors to claim exclusive legitimacy in the name of the people, often bypassing the procedural norms that define democratic governance¹¹⁶. On the same line, both populism and democracy rely on the concept of majority rule, but populism adopts a more absolutist approach. As Nadia Urbinati notes, while liberal democracy treats majority rule as a procedural tool within a pluralistic system, populism tends to transform it into a plebiscitary mandate for unrestrained power. Urbinati also refers to the concept of “extreme majoritarianism” to explain the consequences of the populist’s view of the majority: when it is equated to the entirety of the people, it leads to the weakening of protections for minorities and the dismantling of institutional checks¹¹⁷.

To explain why populism is part of democracy, it is first necessary to briefly outline the concept of democracy. Although, at popular level, the definition of “democracy” may seem obvious or even self-evident, in reality this concept evolved over time, taking very different forms and nuances. It is clear that the form of democracy that emerged in the city-states of ancient Greece differs considerably from the more liberal models that began to emerge after the eighteenth century, and even more so from the forms of democracy we know today. At the same time, depending on the context in which it developed, democracy has taken on different forms: the model adopted in Western

¹¹⁵ Duncan Kelly, “Populism and the History of Popular Sovereignty,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 511. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.25>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 511-534.

¹¹⁷ Nadia Urbinati, “Populism and the Principle of Majority,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 571–589, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.31>

Europe, for instance, is not the same as that found in other regions, such as Eastern Europe, Latin America, or parts of Asia and Africa, where historical, cultural, and institutional conditions have shaped distinct democratic trajectories.

As for the term “populism,” also for “democracy” there exist both minimal and more technical definitions, but what is generally agreed on is that both concepts are essentially contested, and no single definition of either is universally accepted. The term “democracy” is, in fact, often considered vague, allowing for a range of interpretations that may even diverge significantly from the fundamental values of democracy itself. Indeed, the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* defines democracy as a “method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process.”¹¹⁸ *Britannica* more simply defines it as “literally, rule by the people”¹¹⁹ which is not very useful to grasp what democracy really is, especially after the earlier discussion about how difficult it is to define who the people actually are, and what constitutes the *demos*. *Cambridge dictionary* defines it as “a system of government in which power is held by elected representatives who are freely voted for by the people, or held directly by the people themselves.”¹²⁰

While these definitions may offer a general idea of what is meant by democracy today, it is essential to understand where the modern conception of the term actually comes from. Indeed, with the rise of liberal thought in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly during the Enlightenment and the age of revolutions, modern societies gradually began to use the term *liberal democracy* as a synonym for *democracy*¹²¹. When democracy encountered the liberal thought, a complex and gradual process began, ultimately leading to the merging of the two concepts, which radically and profoundly transformed the very meaning of the term democracy. The difference is indeed substantial: this transition marked a shift from a conception of democracy that

¹¹⁸ Tom Christiano and Sameer Bajaj, “Democracy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/#DemoDefi>.

¹¹⁹ “Democracy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last updated May 19, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>.

¹²⁰ “Democracy,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/democracy>.

¹²¹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.002>.

was inherently anti-liberal being it premodern,¹²² to a liberal one. In ancient democratic systems, the focus was on substantive equality and on giving voice to the poorer segments of society, often without any real concern for individual liberties. Following this transition, however, liberal democracy took on a radically different character: its core became the balance between individual freedoms and the protection of fundamental rights for all¹²³.

William Galston defines liberal democracy as a “*political order [that] rests on the republican principle, takes constitutional form, and incorporates the civic egalitarianism and majoritarian principles of democracy.*”¹²⁴ This definition thus relies on four main concepts: the republican principle, democracy, constitutionalism, and liberalism. The first concept is based on the idea that the people are the sole source of legitimacy of government. The second concept, democracy, entails equality of all citizens, broadly inclusive citizenship and majority rule. Galston here stresses that this very basic conception of democracy does not limit majority rule, even when it hinders individual rights. Constitutionalism instead refers to “a basic, enduring¹²⁵ structure of formal institutional power¹²⁶” which is typically written down in the form of a constitution, but not necessarily. This legal framework organises public life, and at the same time establishes the limits within which institutions can exercise their power, which notably can be both vertical as for federalism, and horizontal, as the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances. Lastly, liberalism rests on a core idea, which is the recognition and protection of a “sphere beyond the rightful reach of government in which individuals can enjoy independence and privacy¹²⁷.” Therefore, the liberal principle holds that the legitimate scope of public power is limited, which in turn entails that the majority

¹²² Premodern democracy was not “illiberal” in the sense of being hostile to liberty or suppressive of freedoms; rather, it was “anti-liberal” in a more neutral, historical sense: it simply developed before the emergence of liberal political thought, and therefore could not contain any substantially liberal component. See Alessandro Mulieri, *Contro la democrazia illiberale: Storia e critica di un’idea populista* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2024). See also Marc F. Plattner, “Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 84.

¹²³ Alessandro Mulieri, *Contro la democrazia illiberale: Storia e critica di un’idea populista* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2024).

¹²⁴ William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018): 10.

¹²⁵ “Enduring” here means that typically, the constitution is harder to amend, replace or repeal compared to ordinary legislation

¹²⁶ William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018): 9.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

rule is limited too. Thus, in liberal democracies, there is a protected domain of rights and liberties that even majority rule cannot override, and as we will see in section 2.3, this very concept is in conflict with populism.

A different perspective is offered by one of the most eminent political scientists of the twentieth century, Robert A. Dahl. In *Democracy and Its Critics*, Dahl outlines four criteria that define a democratic process: *effective participation*, which means that all citizens must have equal opportunities to express their preferences; *voting equality at the decisive stage*, which ensures that every vote counts equally; *enlightened understanding*, which requires that citizens have equal and sufficient opportunities in order to become fully informed about policy options, results, and potential consequences; and *control of the agenda*, meaning that the people must have the power to influence and determine which matters are brought forward for political debate and decision-making¹²⁸. Democracy, according to Dahl, is therefore much more than just “government by the people.” It is in this perspective that he developed the influential concept of “polyarchy” to describe the institutional features of existing, real-world democracies¹²⁹. The “polyarchy” can be basically seen as an analytical model of how democracies work in practice, as an expression of liberal democracies. Rather than treating democracy as an ideal type, Dahl offers a more practical and empirical definition of the concept. Dahl disagrees with rational choice theorists in that democracy is not a mere mechanism for aggregating individual preferences into a collective decision¹³⁰. In his opinion, it is rather the way in which “popular participation and control of politicians by citizens ensure the material conditions that allow the effective protection of the interests of competing groups¹³¹” (*own translation*). The polyarchy is based on two main dimensions: public participation and opposition (contestation). Participation refers to the broad and equal inclusion of citizens in the political process, while opposition ensures the presence of free competition among different political alternatives and to the possibility of opposing the

¹²⁸ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 108–114.

¹²⁹ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971)

¹³⁰ Sebastiano Maffettone, “Democrazia: natura, crisi e nuove opportunità,” in *Politica: Idee per un mondo che cambia* (Milano: Mondadori Education, 2019), 48–49.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

government¹³². One key element of Dahl's perspective is without any doubt pluralism¹³³. However, pluralism here plays a major role: it is not merely seen as the coexistence of various groups and ideas, but rather as an active force and mechanism. Thus, from this concept stems the idea of institutional checks and balances of a social nature: institutional guarantees should be replaced by an open society which is capable of balancing effectively various competing interests. Consequently, in Dahl's view, minorities do not need extensive institutional protection but rather should be supported by an open society that can effectively balance various competing interests¹³⁴.

The definition of democracy therefore must extend beyond the mere framework of institutional systems that encompass elections and voting processes. Such a limited perspective risks reducing democracy to an illusion of power in the hands of the people, which is potentially subject to instrumentalization and manipulation. Within the context of Dahl's polyarchy, the essence of political power is not solely rooted in the act of voting or the election of representatives. Rather, it entails the capacity to engage in deliberation, discussion, and to actually influence and determine decision-making.

To conclude, I believe it is necessary to stress that in modern (constitutional) democracies, it is impossible to separate the liberal and the democratic elements of liberal democracy. This is because the liberal component is intrinsic, therefore necessary, to the very functioning of democratic institutions. As Mulieri also states, "a certain degree of liberalism must necessarily be presupposed if we want democracy to function as a regime that guarantees fundamental freedoms¹³⁵" (*own translation*). This view is supported by Dahl too, who argues that the polyarchy's survival depends also on constitutional checks and balances and principles that limit the majority rule, which are the very expression of the liberal dimension of liberal democracy¹³⁶.

¹³² Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.002>.

¹³³ Sebastiano Maffettone, "Democrazia: natura, crisi e nuove opportunità," in *Politica: Idee per un mondo che cambia* (Milano: Mondadori Education, 2019), 48.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Alessandro Mulieri, *Contro la democrazia illiberale: Storia e critica di un'idea populista* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2024), 11.

¹³⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.002>.

While it is far from exhaustive, this brief theoretical understanding of democracy and liberal democracy serves as the necessary ground for analysing the role of populism within it.

2.2 Populism as Part of Democracy and its Alleged Corrective Potential

Now that both democracy and liberal democracy have been introduced, it is relevant to explain why populism can be described as being part of democracy and also to stress the positive potential of populism in democratic systems. This last task is focused mainly on Laclau's perspective, who sees populism as a corrective to democracy.

Populism can be described as part of the democratic system, a view supported also by Mudde and Kaltwasser, who claim that "populism emerges partly as a product of the very existence of democracy."¹³⁷ Indeed, it frequently develops in this type of settings: it appears to be deeply rooted in democracies. For instance, I think I can argue with enough certainty that Europe is a democratic continent: it was, together with the United States, the cradle of liberal democracy. Indeed, the Enlightenment, as well as the revolutions that laid the foundations of modern democratic systems, originated in these regions. And yet, both in Europe and in the U.S., populism is increasingly present. As already discussed, populist figures have become more and more visible and successful in recent decades. In the United States, leaders such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, although from opposite ends of the political spectrum, have drawn on populist rhetoric and mobilization. In Europe, various shades of populism that confirm its growing presence in democratic systems are represented by figures like Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen, Beppe Grillo, Jörg Haider, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders, among others. This widespread emergence of populist leaders in democratic settings shows that populism is not external to democracy, but rather it is profoundly embedded within it. I argue that populism is often highly successful in democratic regimes precisely because these systems protect pluralism, which in turn allows space also for anti-democratic and anti-establishment ideas. For instance, scholars claim that democracy, by providing for

¹³⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.002>.

periodic free and fair elections, cyclically offers the people an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with, and therefore challenge, the political establishment¹³⁸. Arguably, the anti-establishment alternatives emerging in democratic settings frequently tend to be populist, which explains quite clearly why populism seems to be deeply rooted in democratic systems. In line with this, but more specifically, I believe that the key element that allows for the expansion of populism in democratic systems is that they not only provide the institutional, but also the media arenas through which such movements can gain visibility and consensus. This entails, for instance, that through democratic institutions such as open parliaments, populist movements have the chance to voice their ideas and directly challenge the political establishment. Furthermore, it is especially through access to television programmes, newspapers, public rallies, and increasingly through social media that populist leaders are able to advance their populist narrative and rhetoric. These platforms not only amplify their messages but also help them to shape public discourse, create emotional connections with the people, and reinforce their identity as anti-elite outsiders. However, this does not mean that populism can only develop in democratic settings. In fact, populism historically manifested itself also in hybrid regimes, where democratic and authoritarian elements coexist. In these settings, populist leaders are usually able to exploit the partial openness of political institutions as the elections, to present themselves as the *vox populi*, the only true representatives of the pure people against a corrupt elite. As, typically, in these types of regimes the common people are highly dissatisfied with the governance of the establishment, populist movements might be very successful, and historically this has frequently been the case. However, in these settings, populist leaders tend to be more authoritarian, often justifying the centralization of power, the weakening of opposition forces, and the erosion of judicial independence as necessary measures. As a result, populism in hybrid regimes frequently acts not just as a challenge to elites, but as a tool for consolidating personalistic, often illiberal, rule. Examples include Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Alberto Fujimori in Peru.

As populism is an essentially contested concept, it has been subject of extensive scholarly debate regarding its impact on democracy, and particularly on liberal

¹³⁸ Ibid.

democracy. Some scholars believe that populism serves as a necessary corrective to the deficiencies within democratic systems, whereas others view it as a significant threat to liberal democratic principles. One of the main proponents of populism as a corrective is Ernesto Laclau, who essentially sees it as a “democratisation of democracy¹³⁹” (*own translation*). Scholars¹⁴⁰ have found four main aspects that make populism a potential corrective for democracy, but they all stem from the first and most widely accepted factor. Indeed, firstly, it can act as an inclusionary force for marginalized and excluded groups. In this sense, populism is able to mobilise those who are ignored by elites, those whose grievances and concerns are not taken into consideration, or at least not enough. This is one of Laclau’s¹⁴¹ main arguments: by creating a shared identity between different social groups, populism can act as an emancipatory force that is able to integrate the excluded segments of society into the political system. This is clearly related to the first point regarding political participation, and again to how populist leaders and movements depict themselves. If they are the true representatives of the people and embody the *vox populi*, then it is precisely by strategically exploiting the concerns of those who feel unseen, unheard, and unrepresented that they are able to secure consensus. This is especially true in Latin America, where populist leaders have historically sought (and frequently succeeded) to mobilise marginalised groups by constructing new conceptions of the political community¹⁴². One clear example is the regime of Juan Domingo Perón and his strong and successful appeals to the “*descamisados*” and “*cabecitas negras*”, who were the marginalised working-class and whose grievances were disregarded by the establishment¹⁴³. In this sense, Perón’s approach can be an example of what Laclau claimed: namely, that populism can act as an emancipatory force by creating a shared

¹³⁹ Sebastiano Maffettone, “Democrazia: natura, crisi e nuove opportunità,” in *Politica: Idee per un mondo che cambia* (Milano: Mondadori Education, 2019), 76.

¹⁴⁰ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rafał Riedel, “Populism and Its Democratic, Non-Democratic, and Anti-Democratic Potential,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 199 (2017): 287–298, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26383076>; Josh Pacewicz, “When Is Populism Good for Liberal Democracy?” *Sociological Theory* 41, no. 2 (2023): 129–153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07352751231167389>

¹⁴¹ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); see also Rafał Riedel, “Populism and Its Democratic, Non-Democratic, and Anti-Democratic Potential,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 199 (2017): 295, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26383076>.

¹⁴² Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10–11.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

identity between diverse and excluded social groups, by integrating them into the political process and finally by challenging the establishment.

Second, populist parties can, and often do, shed light on genuine concerns of ordinary citizens, of the common people, and might elevate them in the political agenda. As Mudde and Kaltwasser explicitly underline, “populism in opposition can have a positive effect on the quality of democracy since it helps to give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment.”¹⁴⁴ When populists are in power, they generally tend to be more dangerous, as they can more easily pass and amend laws that hinder democratic values, like undermining institutional check and balances. However, when they are in opposition, they can act as democratic correctives by putting forward in the political agenda the grievances and concern of the common people. In this perspective, populism can help to fill the gap between the elite (establishment) and the people, and can increase democratic accountability. Connected to this, populism can improve the responsiveness of the political system by fostering the implementation of policies which are preferred by excluded sectors of society¹⁴⁵.

Third, populism can strengthen political participation. It can do so, as previously discussed, by giving voice to the people: some segments of society that feel disenfranchised might be more encouraged to participate in political life when populist leaders claim to represent their interests, and strategically shape their discourse to resonate with their expectations and grievances. However, and perhaps more interestingly, populism can strengthen political participation by promoting institutional mechanisms for direct democracy and representation. Indeed, populist leaders frequently claim that institutions and institutional mechanisms widen the gap between the common people and the government. Consequently, they tend to push for referenda, plebiscitary

¹⁴⁴ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism: Corrective and Threat to Democracy," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 209. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.011>; See also Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.002>.

¹⁴⁵ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 83; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.002>.

processes, and in some cases also for the direct elections of executive figures¹⁴⁶. As the populist leader represents the *vox populi* and their task is simply to enforce the mandate conferred upon them by the people¹⁴⁷, direct representation becomes one of their prime objectives. One clear example of this tendency is the so-called “Piattaforma Rousseau”, a digital platform created by the Italian Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) in 2016 to enable direct participation of its members in the party’s decision-making processes. It was indeed named after Jean-Jacques Rousseau to evoke the idea of popular sovereignty. The platform allowed members not only to propose laws and vote on candidates, but also to participate in internal consultations and deliberations on key political issues, embodying the populist goal of bypassing traditional representative institutions and strengthening the immediate and unmediated link between people and power. However, participation rates remained relatively low compared to the party’s electoral base, raising questions about the platform’s effectiveness in achieving genuine mass involvement. Moreover, due to internal conflicts and growing tensions between the party leadership and the Rousseau Association, the platform failed as an effective instrument of direct democracy.¹⁴⁸ Yet, despite these efforts in promoting direct democracy, scholars have pointed out that populist movements do not necessarily aim to empower citizens. As Urbinati notes, populism “does not seek to restore political autonomy to citizens but seeks to construct a direct relation between the representative and the represented.”¹⁴⁹ Following this reasoning, and combining it with Weyland’s definition of populism as a political strategy¹⁵⁰, I argue that behind the promotion of direct representation there is a broader strategy aimed at consolidating power. By eliminating the institutional mechanisms between the government and the people, populist parties can

¹⁴⁶ This is the case for instance in Italy, where Giorgia Meloni will attempt to pass a constitutional reform introducing the direct election of the prime minister, which would then be submitted to a popular referendum by 2028. See Emilia Patta, “Meloni: Politiche Anticipate a Giugno 2027 e Referendum sul Premierato nel 2028,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, February 7, 2025, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/meloni-politiche-anticipate-giugno-2027-e-referendum-premierato-2028-AGE58tkC>.

¹⁴⁷ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 31.

¹⁴⁸ “Che cos’è Rousseau, la piattaforma del Movimento 5 Stelle,” *Sky TG24*, February 8, 2021, <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/approfondimenti/piattaforma-rousseau-cosa-e>; “Tutti i voti su Rousseau. Ecco che cos’è la piattaforma del M5S,” *la Repubblica*, February 10, 2021, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2021/02/10/news/rousseau-piattaforma-che-cosa-e_-286870028/.

¹⁴⁹ Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 162.

¹⁵⁰ Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/422412>

bypass other parties' contestation and opposition, can manipulate public opinion more easily, and can also undermine instruments designed to check political authority.

Fourth, populism can act as a revitaliser of democratic institutions. An interesting interpretation of populism is given by Arditì: populism can be seen as a way of participating in politics that ignores the formal rules and polite behaviour usually expected in political settings. Indeed, Arditì claims that the supporters of populism are comparable to excited football fans, who show little concern for the usual rituals and manners of public life¹⁵¹. Furthermore, Arditì continues by stating that populism “has the potential to both disturb and renew the political process without necessarily stepping outside the institutional settings of democracy.”¹⁵² Following this metaphor and reasoning, Mudde and Kaltwasser compare populism to a “drunken guest at a dinner party.”¹⁵³ In this perspective, while populism usually “does not respect the rules of public contestation, it spells out painful but real problems of the existing political order¹⁵⁴.” As a consequence, although often through crude and vulgar means, populism can help improve democracy and its institutions by forcing the establishment to confront uncomfortable realities. However, this metaphor also highlights the ambivalent nature of populism: on the one hand, it can serve to expose and shed light on real and often neglected (or at least not adequately addressed) problems. On the other hand, it can destabilize democratic institutions when it fails to respect the basic rules of political contestation, becoming therefore very dangerous for democracy. It is especially this last aspect that will be more deeply discussed in section 2.4.

2.3 Populism, Fear, and Crisis Narratives

As the aim of this second part of my thesis is to critically assess the impact of populism on democracy with a particular focus on the role played by security, it is therefore imperative to introduce securitization theory and its main concepts.

¹⁵¹ Benjamín Arditì, "Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan," *Political Studies* 52, no. 1 (2004): 135 – 143, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2004.00468.x>

¹⁵² Ibid., 142.

¹⁵³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism: Corrective and Threat to Democracy," in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 209, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.011>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Furthermore, this section discusses the notions of fear and crisis narratives, as well as the populist construction of enemies.

Security studies have traditionally identified the state as the main referent object of security, meaning that threats were primarily understood as challenges to territorial sovereignty and integrity. As a consequence, the field of security was generally limited to military power. However, this tradition began to shift in the 1990s with the emergence of the so-called Copenhagen School, which expanded this narrow understanding of security beyond the state-centric view¹⁵⁵. The most important revolution introduced by the Copenhagen School thus lies in abandoning the notion of security as an objective condition. In fact, the main theorists of securitization, namely Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, began to conceptualise security as a speech act and overcame the classical view which understood security solely in military terms¹⁵⁶. By defining securitization through the speech act approach, the Copenhagen School applied the idea of performativity of language, developed by John L. Austin and John Searle, to the concept of security¹⁵⁷, marking a significant shift in this field of study. In *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, the main theorists of the Copenhagen School analysed this field through a sectoral approach. Indeed, as they claimed that security is not limited to the military realm, they have discussed this notion in other areas too, namely the environmental, economic, societal, and political sectors¹⁵⁸. This multisectoral approach clearly requires a revolution: the referent object of the securitization process cannot be just the state. Rather, several different referent objects are identified in the various sectors: these include, other than the state in the military sector, also the principle of sovereignty in the political sector, religions in the societal sector, the survival of individual species in the environmental sector, and firms or national economies in the economic sector¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁵ Thorsten Wojczewski, "'Enemies of the People': Populism and the Politics of (In)Security," *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 1 (2020): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.23>.

¹⁵⁶ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

¹⁵⁷ Maciej Stepka, "The Copenhagen School and Beyond: A Closer Look at Securitisation Theory," in *Identifying Security Logics in the EU Policy Discourse: The "Migration Crisis" and the EU*, IMISCOE Research Series (Cham: Springer, 2022), 19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93035-6>.

¹⁵⁸ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde claimed that securitization takes place when “a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is ‘normal politics’¹⁶⁰.” The key condition for securitization is therefore clear: security must be understood in existential terms. However, the process defined above is actually only a *securitizing move*¹⁶¹: indeed, a successful securitization happens only when a further step is taken. As Buzan et al., explicitly state, an “issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such.¹⁶²” Therefore, the relationship between the securitizing actor and the audience becomes central in this analysis. The former is defined as “someone, or a group, who performs the security speech act” and it is generally identified with political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, and pressure groups¹⁶³. The Copenhagen School has however been deeply criticised for not clearly defining who the audience really is. As Thierry Balzacq pointed out, “although the CS [Copenhagen School] appeals to an audience, its framework ignores that audience.¹⁶⁴” Although the boundaries of the audience are not always clearly defined, the relationship between the latter and the securitizing actor remains central. This is why, for the purpose of my thesis, this theoretical framework is not only interesting but also extremely relevant for understanding the populist construction of enemies and how it is perceived by the people.

The implication of this securitization process is the legitimization of emergency measures: once an issue is securitized, which thus means that it has become an existential threat recognised and accepted by an audience, then the breaking of the rules is allowed and legitimate. As will be further discussed, this poses a very serious threat to liberal democracy, its values, and its institutions.

However, it is also relevant to note that, since the initial conception of the Copenhagen School, securitization theory has evolved. In this respect, Thierry Balzacq’s work is particularly significant. In *Securitization Revisited: Theory and Cases*¹⁶⁵, Balzacq

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶² Ibid., 25.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶⁴ Thierry Balzacq, “The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052960>.

¹⁶⁵ Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard, and Jan Ruzicka, “‘Securitization’ Revisited: Theory and Cases,” *International Relations* 30, no. 4 (2016): 494–531, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815596590>.

reaffirmed the centrality of the initial conception of the Copenhagen School. Indeed, the author discussed how security threats are universally perceived, and he analysed how the latter are not objective, but rather constructed by a securitizing actor capable of inducing an audience to believe they are dangerous and require immediate intervention. However, Balzacq proposed a more pragmatic framework compared to the original one: he partially abandoned the speech act approach and shifted the focus on institutional settings, audience acceptance, and the broader sociopolitical context as main drivers of successful securitization¹⁶⁶. This more practical revisitation of the original theory is particularly useful in the study of populism. This is because populism emerges and operates within real social and political settings, and it is capable of strategically constructing threats and a sense of fear and crisis that resonates within those contexts. Therefore, Balzacq's approach is particularly useful to understand how populist securitization does not only exploit language, but also mobilizes practices, institutions, and contextual conditions to produce and legitimize security narratives¹⁶⁷.

The theoretical lenses of securitization theory therefore provide an extremely useful framework for understanding the strategic role of fear, crises, and enemies in the populist discourse. Notably, the key idea is that security is not observed, rather, it is declared¹⁶⁸: it only becomes effective when the construction of threat resonates with public perception, therefore when it is accepted by the audience. In this perspective, I argue that the populist discourse can be nothing but strategic, and potentially very dangerous.

This performative logic of securitization clearly strongly resonates with how populist actors engage with the concept of crisis: rather than merely responding to external crises, populists actively construct and dramatize them as urgent threats to "the people," thereby justifying their claims to power, delegitimising opponents, and proposing (over)simplified solutions.

It is within this context that Moffitt's analysis of the performance of crisis becomes particularly relevant. In the academic literature, scholars who discuss the relationship

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Maciej Stepka, "The Copenhagen School and Beyond: A Closer Look at Securitisation Theory," in *Identifying Security Logics in the EU Policy Discourse: The "Migration Crisis" and the EU*, IMISCOE Research Series (Cham: Springer, 2022), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93035-6>.

between populism and crisis can be divided into three main groups. Some see a clear causal link between crisis and populism, some acknowledge the role of the first in “setting the scene” for the latter but are unsure about the causal element, while few believe that there is no link between the two¹⁶⁹.

As Benjamin Moffitt notes, the leading proponent of the first approach is Ernesto Laclau: according to him, crisis is a necessary condition for populism to take place and gain support. More directly, Moffitt explicitly states that according to Laclau “populism simply cannot emerge without a crisis¹⁷⁰,” an opinion that is also shared by Chantal Mouffe and other scholars influenced by the two. Moreover, this view finds further confirmation through several empirical examples in Latin America and in its literature on populism: in this region, many populist leaders have been able to secure political power thanks to a widespread crisis. Examples include Carlos Menem in Argentina, Fernando Collor in Brazil, and also Alberto Fujimori in Peru. Authors such as Kurt Weyland, Kenneth Roberts, Steven Levitsky, and James Loxton argue that the crisis is a “necessary (or at least extremely conducive) precondition for the emergence of populism.¹⁷¹”

The second strand of thinking about the relationship between crisis and populism is more closely associated with the supporters of the minimal ideological approach to populism, namely Mudde and Kaltwasser. While both recognise that the presence of crisis makes the soil more fertile for populism to grow, they are not really sure about the nature of the link: they do not believe that this relationship is necessarily causal¹⁷².

The third, although smaller, group of thinkers argues that there is no link between crisis and populism. Authors like Alan Knights and Benjamin Arditi, while they recognise that there is a relationship between the two, they believe it is more of a historical tendency, than a real causal link. In this sense, they acknowledge that populism often arises in moments of perceived crisis, but they reject any strict causal relationship¹⁷³. For these authors, the link between crisis and populism is more contextual and rhetorical rather than structural or deterministic.

¹⁶⁹ Benjamin Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 189–217, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 191.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 192.

¹⁷² Ibid., 193–194.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 194.

I believe that the key and most compelling aspect of Moffitt's work is that he notably identifies a common trait across these different approaches along the same spectrum: they all see the crisis as external to populism. Instead, Moffitt proposes a different perspective, one with which I very much agree: the performance of a crisis is an internal feature of populism. The reasons behind this approach derive from two critiques that Moffitt raises against the classical view, which sees crisis as external to populism. The first is that the notion of crisis is rather vague: it is a quite contested concept that lacks clear and defined boundaries. Therefore, arguing that crisis is external to populism presupposes that crisis is something clear and easy to identify, which is however far from the truth. The second critique of the classical view is indeed that crisis is not something neutral or objective: "crisis is very much what we make of it."¹⁷⁴ Therefore, because the concept of crisis is so vague and unstable, Moffitt suggests that we should move away from the idea that it is an objective, external event. Instead, we should understand crisis as something that only exists when it is actively performed and mediated. In this perspective, crisis is understood as a core element of populism itself. As a consequence, Moffitt claims that "populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis."¹⁷⁵

Interestingly, even some scholars who adopt the classical view, namely that crisis is external to populism, in fact indirectly support the idea that it is actually an internal and core feature of populism. For instance, while Paul Taggart sees crisis as an external trigger for populism, and thus disagrees with Moffitt's perspective, he nevertheless acknowledges the centrality of a perceived crisis within populist discourse. As he notes, "populists use that sense [of crisis] to inject an urgency and an importance to their message"¹⁷⁶, which in some ways reinforces Moffitt's claim that the performance of crisis is an integral part of populism, a core constitutive element of this phenomenon.

While Moffitt notes that Mudde and Kaltwasser, the main proponents of ideational approach, take on an intermediate position in this debate by acknowledging a link between crisis and populism without asserting a clear causal relationship, I argue that this populist performance of crisis is actually fully compatible with the minimal definition of

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 194-195.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 195.

¹⁷⁶ Paul Taggart, "Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263528>.

populism adopted in this thesis. Indeed, this perspective helps explain how populist actors are able to sustain their rhetoric and deepen the moral (other than socioeconomic) divide between “the people” and “the elite.” Moreover, it is through this same performance that the populist leader can emerge as the defender of the people’s will, gaining consensus and securing political power. As will be further discussed later, it also allows populist actors to justify violations of institutional checks and balances or to bypass established democratic procedures.

To fully understand how this populist performance works, it is first essential to grasp the meaning of the concept of crisis. As already mentioned, it is a rather vague and contested concept, and scholars have long debated over the issue of defining what a crisis really is. The key idea is that this term refers to no universal or objective condition: it is based on perception, which in turn relies on notions of normality and stability. These concepts are nothing objective: they are actually culturally and socially constructed. It is therefore in this sense that “a crisis only becomes a crisis when it is perceived as a crisis.”¹⁷⁷ This idea is also clearly supported by the historical evolution of the term: the notion of crisis was shaped and transformed throughout time. In its Greek origins, this term referred to a decisive moment, a turning point, while overtime it evolved acquiring a temporal dimension too. This means that, eventually, the term crisis also referred to end of an era, or an epoch. In this perspective, crisis became not only the moment of decision, but the situation that requires a vital decision¹⁷⁸. However, in contemporary times, the term crisis is often used to indicate a failure, which can be of economic, political, and social nature. Therefore, when speaking of crisis, we also automatically refer to an “impetus to act”¹⁷⁹ in order to solve the problem and correct the failure. This is precisely what makes crisis so useful to the populist leader: the *vox populi* can exploit the sense of crisis to gain consensus and secure political power by offering (over)simplified solutions to remedy the failures of the establishment. Again, this explains why crisis is a necessary condition for populism to emerge. However, it is not the presence of an external trigger

¹⁷⁷ Benjamin Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

¹⁷⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 357–400, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30141882>.

¹⁷⁹ Benjamin Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

that empowers populism; rather, it is populism itself that performs and sustains a sense of crisis in order to legitimise its actions and reinforce its appeal. At this point, I believe it is worth emphasizing the difference between failure and crisis because, although in contemporary times they are often connected and sometimes even used as synonyms, there is still a crucial distinction between them. Indeed, failure does not inherently create an urgent call for immediate strong action. It is only with a crisis, namely when “the failure becomes culturally or politically mediated and gains an important temporal dimension,¹⁸⁰” that such a demand arises. Moffitt simply explains this through the use of this concept: “the spectacularization of failure,” which thus takes place when a crisis turns failure into a public, urgent, and dramatic event.

The populist performance of crisis, namely the “spectacularization of failure”, according to Moffitt entails six steps, which are observable in many instances of populism.

The first step is identifying a specific failure to spectacularize and turn into a crisis, which thus requires urgent action. To achieve this, it is therefore useful to choose a topic that is already at the centre of a political and social debate¹⁸¹. This helps explain why populists target immigrants so often.

The second step involves the practical elevation of the chosen failure to the level of crisis. Populists achieve this by actively linking the chosen failure to others, therefore they make it appear embedded into a broader narrative of systemic disfunction. The key element here is the active role of populists: failures do not automatically get linked to each other, rather they require an active action. Populists are able to elevate a specific failure to the level of crisis through mediated performance. It is within the media arenas (which are not only allowed but also structurally required in liberal democracies) that these actors are able to succeed in performing a crisis, whether through speeches, rallies, interviews, press releases, or other forms of communication. To increase feelings of urgency, populists also add a temporal dimension, claiming that actions must be taken now, or the consequences will be irreversible. The result is the sense of an existential threat that demands immediate resolution¹⁸².

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁸² Ibid., 199-201.

The third step entails the identification of the enemy: who is to blame for the crisis? Populists identify the enemy, those responsible for the crisis, and are therefore able to mobilize the “pure people” against the “dangerous other”. Usually, this “dangerous other”¹⁸³ is part of the elite and/or of social groups, including minorities, who are targeted, stigmatised, and attacked by populists. The identification of the enemy is strategic: it is especially useful to populist leaders in two ways. Firstly, it clearly helps to strengthen the dichotomy between the pure people and the corrupt elite, which ultimately serves to consolidate their political support. Secondly, and perhaps even more interestingly, it is precisely thanks to the performance of crisis that populist leaders are able to legitimise their political action against those seen as responsible for the crisis. In this perspective, populist leaders are legitimised to openly discriminate against the enemies, to bypass democratic processes and centralize power. Moreover, they promote simplified and often exclusionary solutions, using the crisis as an excuse to justify their actions and make them seem necessary and urgent¹⁸⁴.

The fourth step regards the strategic use of media to amplify the sense of crisis. Populist actors heavily rely on spectacular media performances, including interviews, provocative speeches, or public events, to ensure maximum visibility. Interestingly, Moffitt refers to a “convergence of goals” between the media and populism. Indeed, quite obviously, dramatic news is more appealing than neutral news. That’s why the media tend to focus on dramatic stories that amplify the sense of crisis. Populists, in turn, benefit from this media attention because, as already stated before, it increases their visibility and public support. Media attention indeed reinforces urgency, spreads fear, and boosts the populist’s image as the only one willing to speak the truth and confront the crisis¹⁸⁵. As

¹⁸³ See also the concept of “antagonistic Othering” in Thorsten Wojczewski, “‘Enemies of the People’: Populism and the Politics of (In)Security,” *European Journal of International Security* 5 (2020): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.23>.

¹⁸⁴ Benjamin Moffitt, “How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism,” *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 201–202, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>; See also Thorsten Wojczewski, “‘Enemies of the People’: Populism and the Politics of (In)Security,” *European Journal of International Security* 5 (2020): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.23>; Bohdana Kurylo, “The Discourse and Aesthetics of Populism as Securitisation Style,” *International Relations* 36, no. 1 (2022): 127–147, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820973071>; Donatella Bonansinga, “‘A Threat to Us’: The Interplay of Insecurity and Enmity Narratives in Left-Wing Populism,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2022): 511–525, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221078187>.

¹⁸⁵ Benjamin Moffitt, “How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism,” *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 202–204, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

Löfflmann noted, particularly in Chapter 5 of his book *The Politics of Antagonism: Populist Security Narratives and the Remaking of Political Identity*, the convergence between populist actors and sympathetic media platforms becomes especially strong in the U.S. context. Here, right-wing media, particularly Fox News, not only echo but also actively co-produce securitized narratives based on fear. This dynamic generates a feedback loop in which ideological alignment and commercial incentives intertwine, reinforcing the populist framing of crisis and existential threats, and ultimately legitimising their political agenda¹⁸⁶.

The fifth step focuses on simple solutions and strong leadership. Once the crisis is established and widely perceived, populist actors then propose straightforward and often drastic solutions that bypass traditional political processes. Indeed, procedural simplification is an inherent component of the populist ideology: populist actors propose oversimplified solutions to face crisis. However, also institutional simplification is a core feature of populism: populist actors criticise the establishment and attempt to simplify the political system by limiting institutional mechanisms that stand between them and the people¹⁸⁷.

The final step is to maintain the sense of crisis over time, which is not as easy as it might look. Since populism thrives on urgency and fear, it is crucial to either prolong the existing crisis or shift to a new one. This process can indeed involve expanding the scope of the original crisis or introducing new threats. Keeping the sense of crisis alive ensures continued political support, media visibility, and political justification for bypassing democratic institutions and mechanisms¹⁸⁸. Löfflmann here also highlights how populist narratives strategically sustain and prolong crisis by mobilizing ontological insecurity through emotionalized discourses based on fear. As a result, the perpetuation of fear and antagonism becomes a discursive strategy to legitimise political action and consolidate populist power¹⁸⁹. Similarly, also Kurylo emphasises how the populist

¹⁸⁶ Georg Löfflmann, "Fox and Friends: The Role of Right-Wing Media, Post-Truth Rhetoric, Conspiracy Theories, and Social Media in the Populist Security Imaginary," in *The Politics of Antagonism: Populist Security Narratives and the Remaking of Political Identity* (London: Routledge, 2024), 130–65, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003283072-5>.

¹⁸⁷ Benjamin Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 204–206, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 206–208.

¹⁸⁹ Georg Löfflmann, *The Politics of Antagonism: Populist Security Narratives and the Remaking of Political Identity* (London: Routledge, 2024).

ideology and its rhetoric require an “unceasing construction of new threats.¹⁹⁰” This is because the populist ideology is based on the fundamental dichotomy of the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”, where the former is endangered, while the latter is dangerous. This heroic struggle is indeed central to populism, and in terms of security it is especially focused on the societal dimension: the referent object of the populist securitization is the identity of the community¹⁹¹. Moreover, Kurylo also stresses the negative potential of populist securitization: it can justify “otherwise unacceptable measures to block [the referent subject],¹⁹²” namely the threat.

To sum up, the key element of Moffitt’s perspective is that crisis is an internal and core feature of populism and, especially, that its perpetuation is necessary for populist actors’ political survival. This understanding of crisis as internal to populism is also supported by other scholars. For instance, Löfflmann argues that the crisis should not be seen merely as an external trigger of populism, but rather as its “animating internal discursive feature.¹⁹³” According to him, populist actors construct security imaginaries around political, social, and cultural crises, mobilizing fear and urgency in order to demand radical change and justify exclusionary solutions¹⁹⁴. From a different and more empirical perspective, Bonansinga emphasised how populists perform “enemification” by portraying elites and establishments (either national, supranational, or international) as sources of insecurity. Bonansinga focuses specifically on Mélenchon and his party LFI and provides empirical examples of his construction of enemies through a language of insecurity. Moreover, the author concludes by stating that insecurity narratives are embedded in both left and right populism, and they are used strategically to delegitimise the establishment and promote their agenda, which focuses on popular sovereignty¹⁹⁵. However, as it will be further discussed later, the agenda that populists put forward can be very dangerous to liberal democracy and its values. Thus, I believe that this discussion

¹⁹⁰ Bohdana Kurylo, “The Discourse and Aesthetics of Populism as Securitisation Style,” *International Relations* 36, no. 1 (2022): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820973071>

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 129.

¹⁹² Ibid., 128.

¹⁹³ Georg Löfflmann, *The Politics of Antagonism: Populist Security Narratives and the Remaking of Political Identity* (London: Routledge, 2024), 27.

¹⁹⁴ Georg Löfflmann, *The Politics of Antagonism: Populist Security Narratives and the Remaking of Political Identity* (London: Routledge, 2024).

¹⁹⁵ Donatella Bonansinga, “‘A Threat to Us’: The Interplay of Insecurity and Enmity Narratives in Left-Wing Populism,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2022): 511–525, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221078187>.

is not only very interesting per se, namely in terms of understanding how populist actors strategically instrumentalise fear, insecurity, and crises to legitimise their authority and gain public support. It is also crucial to understand and explore the next step, which is the consequences of this legitimization of power. In particular, we must examine how such strategic moves may affect liberal democracy itself, potentially undermining its institutions and values. An interesting perspective about the relationship between populism and security is also put forward by Claire Hamilton, who focuses more on the affective appeal of radical right or “exclusionary populism”¹⁹⁶. Hamilton introduces the concept of “security populism” which sees populist narratives as a combination of securitization and emotional strategies, which is aimed at portraying the people as being under threat. Hamilton’s work is particularly useful in this section as it is based on a comparative empirical analysis of how populist radical right actors, in Ireland and France, responded to the murders of two women: Ashling Murphy and Lola Daviet. Hamilton showed how, in the radical right populist discourse, migrants have been portrayed as a threat, as the dangerous others, and the main emotions evoked in these contexts were fear, anger, shame, and humiliation. However, Hamilton also underlines the presence of hope and pride in the populist radical right parties discourses aimed at strategically mobilising support¹⁹⁷. Altogether, these scholars share the view that crisis is not merely external, therefore exploited by populists, but is continuously produced and performed as a strategic and existential necessity.

To conclude, the securitization theory, both in its original conception stemming from the Copenhagen School and in its pragmatic reinterpretation, offers highly valuable insights into how populist actors construct and perform crises as existential threats. At the core of this section lies the idea that this performance of crisis is not merely rhetorical: it has profound consequences on the people, and in turn, also on politics. As it will be argued in the following section, populist securitization and performance of crisis legitimise exceptional measures and the bypassing of democratic mechanisms. The central claim of this section is that these dynamics do not emerge by chance, or as a reaction to external triggers. Rather, they are actively constructed and perpetuated, and are key strategic

¹⁹⁶ Claire Hamilton, “Security, Emotions and Radical Right Populism: Beyond a ‘Flaunting of the Low’?” *The British Journal of Criminology* 64, no. 3 (2024): 761–780. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azad061>.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

components of the populist ideology, rhetoric, and political action. In the following section, I will explore how this strategic use of crisis contributes to the erosion of liberal democratic institutions and values.

2.4 Populism as Threat to Liberal Democracy

While in section 2.2 I have outlined the reasons why populism is frequently described as a phenomenon inherent to democratic systems, in this final section I will argue that populism and liberal democracy are, in fact, fundamentally incompatible. In section 2.2, I also presented the views of leading scholars, and I synthesised them by identifying four main aspects through which populism has been seen as a potential corrective to the shortcomings of democracy. Here instead, I take the opposite perspective: I argue that populism poses a very serious threat to liberal democracy. In this regard, populism should be understood as a symptom of the crisis of democracy, and precisely for this reason, it cannot be part of the solution. This section begins by examining the principal ways in which populism undermines liberal democratic principles, which include, among other aspects, its anti-pluralist and exclusionary character, as well as its empirical and historical tendency to undermine institutional checks and balances, enshrined in liberal democratic systems. Then, this section turns to the issue of securitization, which, although often underestimated or insufficiently addressed in the literature, represents a crucial mechanism through which populism threatens liberal democracy. As will be discussed, the danger lies in the populist tendency to evoke fear, exploit narratives of crisis, and, above all, generate a sense of urgency that legitimises the use of emergency politics, all of which have been thoroughly analysed and discussed in section 2.3. This securitization process thus carries a significant risk: it can lead to a high concentration of unchecked power in the hands of populist leaders who, as history has repeatedly shown, have often displayed authoritarian tendencies.

The first and main reason why populism is incompatible with liberal democracy is because the former is inherently anti-pluralist, because of the definition that it gives to

the *demos*¹⁹⁸. This anti-pluralism stems from the definition of populism I have adopted throughout the thesis, namely the ideational definition proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser. They describe populism as a thin-centred ideology based on a moral dichotomy between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite,” in which the populist leader is the only legitimate representative of the people, and his task is to simply implement the *volonté générale*. Populism sees the people and the elite as two blocks which, although antagonistic, are equally internally homogenous, unitary, and unified. However, this conception of the *demos* is incompatible with that of liberal democracies. Modern societies are undeniably pluralistic and characterized by deep diversity. There is no unified, homogeneous people speaking with a single voice, and there is no single corrupt and malevolent elite, or enemy. This flattening of the complexities of society is not only unrepresentative of reality, but can be also very dangerous. It poses a very serious threat to liberal democratic systems: it is not only a matter of political and institutional arrangements, but rather, what is at stake is the tolerance and the coexistence of different and competing interests in society. The risk is transforming modern democracies into systems that do not allow different and heterogeneous individuals to freely and peacefully coexist in society. Precisely because “populism conflates equality with homogeneity,¹⁹⁹” it tends to see differences, namely the intrinsic pluralism of society, as a threat rather than as a value. However, this perspective carries significant implications and consequences, one of them, being the marginalization of those who do not conform to the dominant cultural, ethnic, or ideological identity that populists claim to represent. This in turn can, and often does, result in racism and xenophobia. In the populist logic, those who disagree with the unified voice of the pure people are viewed as enemies. This is particularly dangerous, as history has shown that regimes which identify, accuse, and often construct enemies, tend to be anything but democratic. Rather than safeguarding individual freedoms and the rights of all, such regimes have become authoritarian and tyrannical systems, responsible for some of the worst atrocities in history.

¹⁹⁸ Stefan Rummens, “Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 554–570, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.27>.

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin L. McKean, “Is It Possible to Have Populism without Racism?” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/18/is-it-possible-to-have-populism-without-racism/>.

Moreover, populism is also inherently exclusionary, even in cases when it is labelled as “inclusionary populism”, namely when it relies on thicker ideologies on the left side of the political spectrum, like socialism. This is because its exclusionary character is not connected to the thick ideology on which populism relies, but rather it is rooted again in the very core of populism itself. Once again, as populism is an ideology which is based on a moral, even more than socioeconomic, dichotomy, it is therefore clearly exclusionary in nature. Its definition of the *demos* is based on the exclusion of the enemy, of who does not share the same cultural, and sometimes even ethnic, identity as the pure people. Once again, this is not compatible with the values and principles of liberal democracies, which are instead rooted in pluralism, individual rights, and on the recognition of free and equal citizens. In the case of left-wing populist parties, this exclusionary character is sometimes mitigated by the thicker ideology on which they rely. This is because left-wing populism is generally associated with socialism, as in Latin America, and it tends to focus on the most excluded and marginalized segments of society. In this sense, when discussing left-wing populism, scholars often refer to the inclusionary potential of populism, as already discussed in section 1.4. Instead of identifying the enemy in personalised terms, as it is often the case for right-wing populism, left-wing populism tends to identify the enemy with economic elites or supranational institutions. Therefore, its exclusionary nature is often masked by its attempt to include those marginalized by these very elites or institutions. Nevertheless, the fact that left-wing populism still falls within the minimal definition of populism adopted in this thesis, namely the one proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser, necessarily implies an exclusionary character. Moreover, as Mudde and Kaltwasser themselves point out, it is especially in Latin America that populism is associated with the so-called “ethnopoliticism,”²⁰⁰ which identifies both the people and the elite not only in moral, but also in ethnic terms. While this may appear weird and unusual, given that it is European populism that is generally associated with xenophobia and nationalist sentiments, it is also true that, in the populist imaginary, the European elite, independently from the specific sector taken into consideration, tends to be entirely native²⁰¹. A clear example of ethnopoliticism thus can be found in Latin America, more specifically in Bolivia under Evo Morales. As Mudde

²⁰⁰ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

and Kaltwasser point out, Bolivian President Evo Morales made a “distinction between the pure ‘mestizo’ people and the corrupt ‘European’ elites, playing directly at the racialised power balance in Bolivia.”²⁰² This shows that, regardless of whether populism relies on left-wing or right-wing ideologies, it is inherently and unavoidably exclusionary. This is because the minimal definition of populism is precisely based on a moral dichotomy between the pure people and the corrupt elite. Even though the latter, which is the personification of the enemy, may vary between right-wing and left-wing populism, the substance remains the same: there is a unitary will of the people, which is defended by the vox populi, namely the populist leader, against a corrupt, malevolent, and self-serving elite. This deeply rooted and constitutive character of the populist ideology is clearly at odds with liberal democracy, which instead seeks to balance the protection of individual freedoms with the safeguarding of everyone’s rights. While maintaining this equilibrium is not always easy, this does not mean it is undesirable, or that the liberal democratic model is not a normatively valid and legitimate regime: on the contrary, I argue it is precisely the opposite.

Another main reason why populism is generally perceived as threat to liberal democracy definitely resides in its systematic erosion of institutional checks and balances. Liberal democracy, also in line with its definition given by William Galston in section 2.1, is a regime that is generally associated with constitutional democracy. In contemporary political theory indeed, the terms liberal democracy and constitutional democracy are often used interchangeably. This is because, as scholars²⁰³ have argued, modern democracies cannot be understood merely as expressions of majoritarian will: this only captures a part of the story. Rather, they must be conceived as more complex regimes, that balance the democratic principles of majority rule and popular sovereignty with liberal safeguards aimed at protecting individual and minority rights. Moreover, modern democracies rely on a constitution, on a legal skeleton of the state, which imposes limits on power: through a system of checks and balances, they are able to ensure that power is exercised within the boundaries of the liberal democratic order. This view is

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Marc F. Plattner, “Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010); Alessandro Mulieri, *Contro la democrazia illiberale: Storia e critica di un’idea populista* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2024).

further elaborated by Viktor J. Vanberg, who distinguishes between *liberal constitutionalism*, which emphasizes institutional guarantees for individual liberty, and *constitutional liberalism*, which instead stresses the normative legitimacy of constitutional choice by sovereign individuals. According to Vanberg, both dimensions are essential for sustaining a democratic regime that does not collapse into authoritarianism²⁰⁴. What is clear is that at the heart of liberal democracy are constitutional safeguards, as well as institutional checks and balances. These are mechanisms and procedures that prevent the concentration of power in the hands of illiberal or undemocratic forces, and they make possible the preservation of an equilibrium between popular will and the protection of individual and minority rights. These structures are not mere procedural formalities, but rather they are the very foundations upon which the survival of democracy relies. In this respect, Vanberg also reports a very significant quote from F. A. Hayek, who strongly opposed the idea that these mechanisms hinder democracy:

“Only a demagogue can represent as ‘antidemocratic’ the limitations which long-term decisions and the general principles held by the people impose upon the power of the temporary majorities. These limitations are conceived to protect the people against those to whom they must give power, and they are the only means by which the people can determine the general character of the order under which they will live.”²⁰⁵

If Hayek defines demagogues in these terms, then I argue it is fair to say, almost with certainty, that populists fit perfectly into this category, in the Hayekian sense. This is because populist actors have a clear and systematic tendency to present checks and balances, like judicial review or constitutional limits, as illegitimate obstacles to the will of the people. As already seen in the previous sections, populism frequently advocates for a more direct form of representation: to achieve this, populist leaders fight for referenda, plebiscites, and they often push for forms of government like presidential systems. This is because in these types of settings, power is more concentrated in the executive, which is directly elected by the people, and in the case of populism, it represents the vox populi.

²⁰⁴ Viktor J. Vanberg, “Liberal Constitutionalism, Constitutional Liberalism and Democracy,” *Constitutional Political Economy* 22, no. 1 (2011): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10602-010-9090-8>

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 13.

In this way, populists frame core liberal and democratic mechanisms as enemies of democracy itself, as illegitimate interferences between the pure people and the vox populi. Yet, as Hayek claims, these very limitations are what empower citizens in the long term. The core idea here is that these mechanisms protect democracy from temporary majorities which could lead to irreversible decisions. This could be for instance granting power to populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies: if there were no constitutional constraints, checks and balances, and liberal safeguards, these political forces might irreversibly turn the liberal democratic order into a tyranny. While liberal democracies are far from being flawless regimes, it is precisely this system of safeguards embedded in modern democracies that ensures their stability. Populists, by rejecting these foundations, undermine the conditions that make democracy both viable and legitimate. What it is argued here is that when populist actors attempt to erode these foundations, they not only risk to destabilise the equilibrium between freedom and rights, but they also reveal a deeper and very dangerous ambition: the monopolisation of power. Unfortunately, my concern is grounded on empirical and historical evidence. Key examples of populists' attempt to centralise power by undermining institutional checks and balances were noted by Marc F. Plattner in *Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy*. Plattner indeed stresses that, while it is true that many populist leaders in Latin America have pushed for new constitutions, "their purpose has been largely to weaken the constraints on executive power embedded in existing constitutions."²⁰⁶ Thus, while the intent seems inclusionary, the real aim is to consolidate executive power. Plattner also continues by emphasising the majoritarian view of democracy typical of populism, which is clearly at odds with "liberalism's emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights."²⁰⁷ It is equally important to highlight that this phenomenon is not confined solely to the left side of the political spectrum: while Latin America serves a fitting example, similar instances of this tendency can be observed also within right populist parties. Indeed, a pivotal example of this similar pattern can be found in Hungary. After the election in spring 2010, Viktor Orbán's and its coalition's government have been implementing a

²⁰⁶ Marc F. Plattner, "Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 88.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

programme aimed at reconstructing the institutional framework of the state²⁰⁸. This transformative agenda ultimately led to the introduction of a new constitution, which formally came into effect on January 1, 2012. This constitutional reform significantly expanded the power of the executive, while at the same time it severely limited the powers of the Constitutional Court. Moreover, this reform also affected electoral laws, introducing changes that disproportionately benefit the party with the largest share of votes²⁰⁹. Clearly, this erodes liberal democratic safeguards, as it reduces electoral competitiveness, which acts one of the most essential checks on executive power: it ensures the possibility of alternation in office. Such a move confirms the initial concern: it is clearly consistent with the broader populist strategy of undermining institutional rules to monopolise power and eventually entrench political dominance. Arguably, Orbán's project represents a case of "constitutional deconstruction" where, apparently, legal constraints are respected, but actually, the substance of liberal democracy disappeared²¹⁰. As Kim Lane Scheppele sharply observes, "Illiberals often hide in liberal language, the way that wolves hide in sheep's clothing. The new populism marries an illiberal core with a liberal cover."²¹¹ In fact, the 2012 constitutional reform paved the way for the transformation of Hungary's political system into what is now commonly called an "illiberal democracy", a term Orbán himself proudly embraced and proclaimed²¹². Following the same line, Poland's PiS sought for a new constitution that would weaken liberal opponents and centralize power, which included amendments to civil service laws, allowing for clientelistic practices such as the appointment of high-ranked officials by the government²¹³.

The pattern is clear: populists systematically erode the mechanisms designed to prevent authoritarianism. Arguably, this erosion is not merely incidental but rather it is structural: it reveals that populist rhetoric about "the pure people" is often

²⁰⁸ Andrzej Sadecki, "Hungary under Orbán's Rule: The Constitutional Consolidation of Power," *OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies)*, January 4, 2012, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2012-01-04/hungary-under-orbans-rule-constitutional-consolidation-power>.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Opportunism of Populists and the Defense of Constitutional Liberalism," *German Law Journal* 20, no. 3 (2019): 314–331, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.25>.

²¹¹ Ibid., 325.

²¹² For a detailed discussion of Orbán's 2018 speeches in which he proudly claimed to be illiberal and articulated his vision for an illiberal state, see: Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Opportunism of Populists and the Defense of Constitutional Liberalism," *German Law Journal* 20, no. 3 (2019): 321–325.

²¹³ Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Poland's Path to Illiberalism," *Current History* 117, no. 797 (March 2018): 96–101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48614331>.

instrumentalised in a deceptive way, masking a deeper desire for unconstrained, unlimited and monopolised power.

Closely linked to the systematic erosion of institutional safeguards and checks and balances is another recurring tendency among populist parties: they deliberately target judicial independence, media freedom, and minority rights. Some of the most prominent examples regarding the independence of the judiciary are observable, without any doubt, in Hungary and Poland. In both these countries, under Fidesz and Law and Justice party (PiS) respectively, judges have been the target of many populist attacks. There have been several cases of deliberate attempts to undermine the independence of the judiciary. In Hungary, the main attacks stemmed from the adoption of the new constitution in 2012, which transformed the judiciary, included supermajority requirements, and also centralized control of judicial appointments. Moreover, the government forced early retirements²¹⁴ of judges and gave appointment powers to politically loyal figures, perpetuating corrupt practices and also significantly weakening judicial autonomy²¹⁵. Similarly, in Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) refused to seat judges nominated by its predecessor and implemented legal changes that brought courts under political control. PiS introduced supermajority and quorum requirements for Constitutional Tribunal decisions, reorganized the Supreme Court, and forced retirements to appoint judges loyal to the government²¹⁶. This carries a dramatic implication: judicial review represents one of the main instruments that democratic systems employ to protect the liberal democratic order itself, and if populists in government are able to control it, then they are able to destroy one of the most effective checks on executive power. As Anna Grzymala-Busse points out, all these attempts, or better, “these legalistic (if not always legal) maneuvers²¹⁷” in her words, to centralise power, stem from a broader perspective which is typical of populism. In the populist conception, formal democratic institutions are seen

²¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Wrong Direction on Rights: Assessing the Impact of Hungary's New Constitution and Laws*, May 16, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/05/16/wrong-direction-rights/assessing-impact-hungarys-new-constitution-and-laws>

²¹⁵ Anna Grzymala-Busse, “How Populists Rule: The Consequences for Democratic Governance,” *Polity* 51, no. 4 (2019): 709–711, <https://doi.org/10.1086/705570>.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 709.

as “the creatures of corrupt elite deals and exploitation, rather than as autonomous institutions of democratic accountability and legal constraint.”²¹⁸

All these actions perpetuated by populist parties, quite evidently aimed at dismantling judicial checks on the executive, while also undermining criticism, transparency, and accountability, with the final objective of concentrating power in the hands of the ruling party. Several instances of these practices confirm, however, that this dynamic is not confined to a specific case, but rather it is typical of the populist ideology.

The strategy of populists, however, is not only limited to attacking judicial independence: rather, these interferences very much regard media freedom and minority rights too. These deliberate efforts of populist forces, arguably, are part of a consistent strategy to dismantle liberal democratic constraints and ultimately secure centralised power. In this respect, a very interesting study demonstrated the negative effect of populism on press freedom. Through a quantitative analysis, it demonstrated that “populist rule is consistently associated with a decline in all measures of press freedom.”²¹⁹ The study further argues that this effect is not incidental nor occasional, but rather it is rooted in the organizational structure of populist parties. As Paul D. Kenny noted, populists parties exhibit a greater tendency to limit media freedom precisely because of their organizational structure. Kenny directly states that “controlling the media is thus a core objective of populists compared with other types of political leaders, who can rely on party membership, dense civil society organizations, or clientelistic linkages mediated by a network of party brokers to mobilize supporters.”²²⁰ Taking control over mass media is crucial for populist parties, because it is especially thanks to these platforms that populist actors are able to mobilize voters²²¹. As already anticipated in the previous sections, their rhetoric based on the moral distinction between the people and the elite works especially well on traditional media platforms, as well as on social media. In these arenas, populist actors are able to channel discomforts and grievances of the people using popular, everyday language and proposing oversimplified solutions to

²¹⁸ Ibid., 709.

²¹⁹ Paul D. Kenny, “The Enemy of the People: Populists and Press Freedom,” *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June 2020): 270, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45381387>.

²²⁰ Ibid., 262.

²²¹ Ibid., 262.

actually extremely complex challenges that modern democracies face. This clearly shows that populist parties have a great incentive to either control or neutralize independent media. Interestingly, the study also notes that this negative effect is somewhat moderated for right-leaning populist parties, as they may be more constrained by market-oriented ideologies.²²² While these efforts to undermine liberal democratic safeguards, mechanisms, and institutions are not limited to Hungary and Poland, both countries offer powerful examples. In Hungary, the government led by Fidesz systematically undermined media freedom through various legislative and institutional measures. These include the control of media regulatory bodies, the selective use of state advertising to favour sympathetic pro-government media and penalise critical outlets, and the creation of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which now controls over 470 media outlets²²³. The report also highlights how these actions have significantly reduced media pluralism and fostered a hostile environment for independent journalism, with many journalists reporting that they “can’t do [their] job” due to political pressure, intimidation, and the lack of independence²²⁴.

As a direct consequence to the very nature of the populist ideology based on the moral dichotomy, identifying the people automatically means also identifying the elite, namely the enemy. In the populist perspective, anyone who does not fit into the category of the “pure people,” that is, anyone who does not share the same identity as the pure people, immediately becomes the enemy. A logical outcome of this core dynamic of the populist ideology is that the various groups that fall within the category of the “enemy” are very much targeted by populist actors. Moreover, they are also accused by populists of being responsible for many grievances that, according to the latter, are disproportionately felt and suffered by the “pure people”. Among the most evident and recurrent examples are the various attacks against immigrants and members of the LGBTQ+ community perpetuated by populist leaders such as Trump and Le Pen, who identify these societal groups as the enemy. Especially in the case of immigration, the

²²² Ibid., 265.

²²³ Human Rights Watch, “I Can’t Do My Job as a Journalist: The Systematic Undermining of Media Freedom in Hungary,” February 13, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/13/i-cant-do-my-job-journalist/systematic-undermining-media-freedom-hungary>

²²⁴ Ibid.

rhetoric employed by these leaders frequently evolves into real securitization processes, thereby resulting in framing migration as an existential threat. This becomes very dangerous for at least two reasons: first, as discussed in section 2.3, securitization legitimises emergency politics and exceptional measures. Second, framing immigrants as existential threats can contribute to growing racism and xenophobia, which ultimately undermine minority rights. Other typical targets of populist rhetoric include also ethnic minorities, such as Roma, but also religious minorities within a given country. One fitting example is observable again in Hungary, where the constitutional reform of 2012 introduced also provisions discriminating against LGBTQ+ rights and limiting women's rights. Moreover, it attacked also religious groups and introduced laws that criminalise homelessness²²⁵. While Hungary serves as a good example, many minority rights all over the world are at risk when populism reaches government and political power. For instance, Trump's second mandate raises serious concern about human and minority rights: in its inauguration speech, Donald Trump affirmed that "as of today, it will henceforth be the official policy of the United States government that there are only two genders: male and female."²²⁶ While this does not represent a direct attack to the LGBTQ+ community, it definitely does not show much tolerance nor respect for its rights. Moreover, Trump's immigration policies are very controversial, and raise serious concern regarding the protection of migrants and refugees²²⁷.

For the purpose of this thesis, however, the focus is not on who happens to be the enemy at a given moment: whether they are immigrants, members of the LGBTQ+ community, or Muslim minorities in traditionally Christian countries, to mention some examples. The focus is on the consequences of populist rhetoric, strategies and political action on liberal democracy, its values, and its institutions. By undermining minority and individual rights, populism systematically dismantles liberal democratic principles.

²²⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Wrong Direction on Rights: Assessing the Impact of Hungary's New Constitution and Laws*, May 16, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/05/16/wrong-direction-rights/assessing-impact-hungarys-new-constitution-and-laws>

²²⁶ The White House, "The Inaugural Address," January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.

²²⁷ Bill Frelick, "Ten Harmful Trump Administration Immigration and Refugee Policies," *Human Rights Watch*, February 20, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/20/ten-harmful-trump-administration-immigration-and-refugee-policies>.

Finally, this section now turns to the issue of securitization, which is here presented as one of the crucial mechanisms through which populism threatens liberal democracy. As will be discussed, the danger lies in the populist tendency to evoke fear, exploit narratives of crisis, and, above all, generate a sense of urgency that legitimises the use of emergency politics, all of which have been thoroughly discussed in section 2.3. While the relationship between populism, securitization, and liberal democracy arguably remains very understudied and not adequately addressed in the literature, a central argument that this thesis is putting forward is that populist securitization is one of the ways in which populism seriously threatens liberal democracy. This section already explored the most significant reasons why populism is not compatible with liberal democracy, namely its anti-pluralist and exclusionary character, as well as its tendency to erode institutional check and balances, to attack judicial independence, and to undermine media freedom and minority rights. It was argued that the incompatible view that populism and liberal democracy have of the *demos*, as a consequence, renders incompatible also their understanding of the values and principle of democracy²²⁸. It is in this context that populism is dangerous for liberal democratic orders: it undermines its core values, such as the understanding of the people as pluralist, free and equal citizens, but also its principles and mechanisms, such as institutional checks and balances and judicial independence. However, alongside these very significant elements, this thesis argues that one additional factor that should be taken into consideration while discussing the threats that populism poses to liberal democracy is securitization. It is acknowledged that populist actors are not the only perpetrators of securitization, namely of framing a specific issue in existential terms, in a way in which the audience is induced to believe that it is dangerous and requires immediate intervention. Nevertheless, it was also argued and showed in section 2.3 that this process is not only typical of the populist rhetoric, but rather it is deeply rooted at the core of this ideology. Populism requires a persistent sense of crisis and of emergency: that is the most fertile soil for populist actors to gain consensus. It is precisely in times of crisis that the people tend to rely on saviour-leaders, a description that fits particularly well with the figure of the populist leader. Populist securitization of issues like immigration and terrorism, can thus become very dangerous

²²⁸ Stefan Rummens, "Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 554–570, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.27>.

for the liberal democratic order. This is because, as already explored in section 2.3, the main implication of the securitization process is the legitimization of emergency politics and of exceptional measures. This means that once populist actors successfully frame issues like immigration as existential threats in a way in which the audience is convinced that they are dangerous and require immediate intervention, exceptional measures that bypass traditional democratic mechanisms and institutions are legitimized. However, this becomes very problematic, especially if who is authorized to circumvent these liberal democratic safeguards exhibits authoritarian tendencies. This risk is clearly even higher when populist leaders have secured a majority: the equation of majority rule without liberal democratic safeguards when populists are in power, seriously risks turning a liberal democratic order into an authoritarian regime. Here, arguably, the concept of militant democracy can become very useful. Some scholars believe that democracy, being it a pluralist and tolerant system, must always respect the will of the majority, even when this can lead to the destruction of democracy itself in favour of an authoritarian leader. Conversely, others adopt the opposite perspective: “Instead of waiting to see what the intolerants can do once in power, militant democracy anticipates their potential arrival by limiting their manoeuvring room.”²²⁹ In this respect, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser defines militant democracy as “a type of liberal democratic regime that is characterised by the provision and employment of legal mechanisms that seek to protect the regime from challenges to its continued existence by curtailing the rights of those who allegedly aim to overturn democracy by using democratic procedures.”²³⁰ However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss whether democracy should protect itself from authoritarian forces. Rather, the aim of this thesis was to discuss the populist phenomenon, its relationship with democracy and liberal democracy, and lastly to explore its use of crisis narratives as strategic political tools, as well as their impact on liberal democratic systems.

To sum up, this section has argued that populism poses a very serious threat to liberal democracy for many reasons. The first one regards its inherent anti-pluralist and exclusionary character, which renders populism incompatible with the ethos of liberal

²²⁹ Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Militant Democracy Versus Populism,” in *Militant Democracy and Its Critics: Populism, Parties, Extremism*, ed. Anthoula Malkopoulou and Alexander S. Kirshner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 75.

²³⁰ Ibid.

democracy. Then, in more practical and empirical terms, it was discussed how populism systematically erodes institutional check and balances, which are mechanisms that have long ensured, and still do ensure, the longevity and durability of liberal democratic orders. Moreover, evidence was put forward to demonstrate the populist systematic and deliberate tendency to hinder judicial independence, interfere with media freedom, and limit minority rights. Finally, this section claimed that one additional element that shows how populism threatens liberal democracy resides in securitization. Through the populists construction of enemies, crisis narratives, and the perpetuation of fear, populist actors are able to successfully turn issues like immigration and terrorism into existential threats. In this way, they become legitimized by their electorate to adopt exceptional measures that allow them to override institutional mechanisms.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to answer four central questions, originally stated in the introduction. Thus, Part 1 was entirely dedicated to answering the first, namely what is populism, while Part 2 focused on answering the other three. Indeed, the second half of this dissertation discussed the core values of democracy and liberal democracy, as well as the relationship between these concepts and populism, and finally it explored securitization theory and the populist performance and exploitation of fear and crisis narratives.

A central claim of this thesis is that, while populism remains an essentially contested concept, the minimal definition proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser proves to be the most comprehensive theoretical framework. Indeed, in section 1.1, several different approaches were explored, but the definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology based on a dichotomic and Manichean vision of society was claimed to be the most appropriate one. It was defended on the basis that while it is able to include several different instances of populism, it also allows to distinguish populism from non-populism. Indeed, its main strengths have also been outlined: distinguishability, categorizability, travelability, and versatility. Then, section 1.2, was dedicated to the discussion of the three central elements of the ideational approach, namely the “pure people”, the “corrupt elite” and the “volonté générale.” Here, it was demonstrated how populism sees both antagonistic groups as respectively homogenous and unitary. However, while the people are pure and virtuous, the elite are self-serving and they actively betray the “true” people. In addition, it was argued that the elite is frequently defined *ex-negativo*, meaning that instead of possessing defined characteristics, it is often defined as the anti-people: whatever does not fit into the category of the “true” people, automatically becomes part of the elite, thus it embodies the enemy. However, it was also argued and demonstrated how useful it is, in the populist rhetoric, to identify a specific enemy. This “enemy narrative” indeed proves to be extremely powerful, because it is able to unify even very heterogenous people against a common cause. Thus, arguably, the homogenization of “the people” does not result from the identification of shared traits, as many scholars have argued, but rather it emerges through opposition to a perceived adversary. We are unified not by what we are, but by whom we are against. In other words, homogeneity is not presupposed, but it is rather constructed and achieved as a consequence of shared

antagonism. Afterwards, the concept of the general will was also discussed. In particular, its dual nature was highlighted: it can strategically function as a unifying force in the construction of the “pure people,” but at the same time it also possesses a very dangerous exclusionary character. By neglecting the plurality of demands and the existence of various competing groups in society, populism significantly threatens liberal democratic settings, a concept that is more thoroughly explored later at the end of the second part. Section 1.3 instead focused on the role of the populist leader. It was argued that while it can take different forms depending on both cultural and ideological elements, all kinds of populist leaders share a common assumption: they believe that they are the only true representatives of the people and that consequently they embody the *vox populi*. Lastly, part one ended with a section dedicated to a brief analysis of the common traits, as well as the key differences, between right-wing and left-wing populism. It was also demonstrated, with empirical evidence, how all populist phenomena across the political spectrum rely on the very same fundamental opposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite,” independently of how they “fill” these concepts.

In conclusion, this detailed and comprehensive analysis of populism developed in Part 1 served to adequately answer the first central question of this dissertation.

Subsequently, Part 2 started out by discussing the fundamental pillars of democracy and of liberal democracy, stressing how the latter goes beyond the core principles of majority-rule and popular sovereignty. Indeed, while populism and liberal democracy share these two central principles, liberal democratic systems are much more complex. They aim to balance individual freedoms with the protection of individual and minority rights, an equilibrium which is not always easily achievable. It is indeed precisely at this intersection that populist leaders frequently root their critique of liberal democratic systems: populists accuse modern democracies of limiting majority-rule and popular sovereignty through systems of institutional checks and balances. Populists indeed consider these safeguards as illegitimate limitations to democratic principles and the expression of the “general will.” However, as it is argued in the last section of this dissertation, it is precisely the existence of these constitutional constraints that has long guaranteed the survival of liberal democratic orders. Section 2.2 instead showed how the populist phenomenon is deeply embedded in the democratic system, and it also explored

and discussed the perspectives of those who understand populism as a corrective force to the shortcomings of liberal democracy. However, my critical perspective on populism is evident in this discussion: while I report the main ways in which populism appears to be a corrective for democracy, I also criticise these views. Section 2.3 focuses on securitization theory and on the populist performance of crisis. It firstly discussed the origins of securitization theory as developed by the Copenhagen School, while also including a brief analysis of a more contemporary revisitation of the initial conception. This theory argues that (in)security is not an objective condition, but rather it is constructed: it is a securitizing actor that, through the use of strategic rhetoric, is able to turn an issue into an existential threat. The role of the audience is however not marginal, but rather central: an issue is indeed securitized only if and when the audience recognises it as such. This first part of section 2.3 served as the theoretical framework to understand the populist performance of crisis. The revolutionary aspect of Moffitt's work, which was used as one of the main theoretical bases for the discussion about crisis narratives, is that it ceased to understand crisis as an external trigger for populism. Thus, the second part of this section explored the role of crisis in the populist rhetoric: it is strategically adopted with the aim of consolidating power. Finally, section 2.4 explored the main ways in which populism threatens liberal democracy. This last section already included the final discussion of this dissertation: here I stated and discussed the main claim of this thesis, which is that populism is ultimately incompatible with liberal democracy and that as such, it significantly and systematically threatens liberal democratic orders. The central idea is that this incompatibility is given by the irreconcilable views that populism and liberal democracy have of society. While liberal democracy understands the people as free and equal citizens, populism sees society as divided into two opposing and antagonistic blocs, a dichotomy which is grounded on morality. As a consequence, populism is thus inherently and profoundly anti-pluralist and it possesses an evident exclusionary character. Moreover, it was also demonstrated through empirical examples that populism exhibits a strong and systematic tendency to erode institutional check and balances. Strongly related to this, it was also illustrated, with supporting evidence, that populists frequently and deliberately attack judicial independence, media freedom, and also minority rights. Lastly, section 2.4 discussed about the role of securitization as a potential driver for democratic erosion. In this perspective, it was argued that the main implication

of securitization is the legitimization of exceptional measures and emergency politics. This, in turn, allows the executive to bypass liberal democratic safeguards, in the name of addressing the existential threat. However, this raises serious concerns about the consequences on liberal democratic regimes, especially when populism is able to successfully combine securitization processes with oversimplified solutions and authoritarian tendencies.

Part 2, therefore, addressed the three remaining questions. It started with the analysis of democracy and liberal democracy, then it moved to the exploration of the role of securitization, and ultimately to the final discussion of the negative consequences of populism on liberal democratic regimes.

This final part of the conclusion is dedicated to one last reflection. As already stated in section 2.4, populism requires a constant sense of crisis and of emergency to mobilise voters and secure political power. Moreover, as a consequence of the populist foundational anti-establishment rhetoric, populist leaders, especially during electoral campaigns, heavily rely on strong and direct critiques of the current governments. However, it is also very relevant to note that populism does not possess a concrete interest in changing the current political situation, as it represents the most fertile soil for it to exist. As populism is structurally based on a Manichean dichotomy, it generally heavily relies on its challenge toward the elite and the establishment. As a consequence, it exists precisely because of its opposition toward “the other”, being it an external or internal enemy. Furthermore, as already outlined before, populism also strongly depends on this type of rhetoric to actively construct a sense of shared identity, aimed at unifying the deemed homogenous – but actually very heterogenous – people that constitute its electorate. However, securing political power might mean that this enemy, namely the establishment, is defeated, and in this perspective, populism cannot survive anymore. This is because if populism is literally defined as a “*thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’[...]*”²³¹ when the corrupt elite does not exist anymore because it is substituted by the populists, populism loses its very foundations.

²³¹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

As populism is rooted in this moral dichotomy, when one of the two antagonistic blocs ceases to exist as such, populism itself loses its justification for existence. Notwithstanding the fact that populism revealed itself as a very successful strategy to win elections, as demonstrated by the significant growth of the populist phenomenon worldwide, it is not ideal to run a country. Populism is able to secure consensus by posing the correct questions: it frequently, although in a vulgar way, highlights real and concrete challenges that the people face through the use of strategic rhetoric. However, while it poses the correct questions, it offers the wrong answers. This is especially true when populist actors are able to securitize a specific issue to which they offer oversimplified solutions, which frequently undermine liberal democratic values and principles. Taking securitization of immigration as an example: populist leaders shed light on widespread popular dissatisfaction caused by immigration and by the alleged consequences of the latter, such as tensions related to the job market. Indeed, if their rhetoric is a winning strategy, as demonstrated by the results of the elections, it means that it strongly resonates with the people. Nevertheless, if the answer to the challenges and grievances stemming from immigration, in a globalized society, is the construction of walls and the closure of borders, it is clear that populism offers unfeasible, and arguably also undesirable answers. Moreover, this also raises serious concerns about the protection of minority rights and, in several instances, also about human rights.

To conclude, this thesis argues that populism is not, and can never be, the answer. It can function as an alarm that signals some flaws and weaknesses of liberal democratic systems, but it cannot be the solution to the latter. It indicates that liberal democracies are not perfect systems, which arguably is not particularly surprising. But the question is: what, if anything, does populism truly offer?

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