

Scholars should not just assume that populism is bad for democracy, but should instead concentrate on explaining populism's positive and negative effects.

by Blog Admin

With the rise of technocratic government in the wake of the eurocrisis, many now argue that populism is bad for democracy. [Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser](#) argues that this view is wrong-headed, and that there is no cross-regional research into the impacts of populism on democracy. Academics now need to focus on further empirical investigations into populism and its effects on liberal democracies, which may be positive or negative.



Is populism good or bad for democracy? This question has received increasing attention in the last years. Most recently, Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti [called](#) for a meeting of European heads of state to discuss the growing negative influence of populist forces in Europe. Similar warnings have been issued not only in the United States due to the rise of the Tea Party movement, but also in Latin America because of the electoral triumph of leftist populist presidents such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Despite this increasing worry about the emergence of populist leaders and parties, there is almost no *cross-regional* research on the impact of populism on democracy. While it is true that the amount of studies on one singular case (e.g. Evo Morales in Bolivia) or a set of similar cases in a particular region (e.g. [populist radical right parties in Europe](#)) has been growing in the last decade, there is a scarcity of works that try to develop a broad comparative perspective to grasp the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy.

To fill part of this research gap, my colleague [Cas Mudde](#) and I edited the book, *[Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?](#)*, published earlier this year. It includes contributions on eight countries in Europe and the Americas: Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Mexico, Peru, Slovakia and Venezuela. In consonance with much of the existing scholarship, populism is defined in this book as a thin-centred ideology, which is based not only on a dualist distinction between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', but also on the defence of popular sovereignty at any cost. Our book offers two novelties to those who are interested in studying the impact of populism on democracy.

Populism: threat *and* corrective for democracy

Academics and pundits alike are prone to assume that populism is bad for democracy. However, some scholars and commentators do argue that populism can help increasing the quality of the democratic regime. This debate between foes and friends of populism is related to the fact that we normally have the liberal democratic model in our mind. Liberal democracy is characterised by the coexistence of popular sovereignty and majority rule with constitutional courts, and other institutional bodies that are neither elected nor directly controlled by 'we, the people'. Accordingly, the liberal democratic model relies on two different pillars that maintain anything but a harmonious relationship. Given that populist forces endorse popular sovereignty at any cost, it is true that populism can have a negative impact on the liberal democratic regime, particularly when it comes to defending minority rights and independent constitutional bodies. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that populism can also have a positive impact on the liberal democratic regime, because it can help to integrate the ideas and interests of marginalised sections of the electorate into the political agenda.

This ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy is summarized in the following table, which offers a schematic view of the positive and negative effects of populism on the liberal democratic regime that are identified in the theoretical framework of the book. The point to be made about this table is that it not only disentangles many arguments that are present in the academic and public debate, but also offers

a set of propositions that can be tested empirically to analyse whether populism works as a threat or a corrective for democracy. Otherwise stated, instead of producing studies that take for granted that populism is good or bad for democracy, scholarly efforts should focus on demonstrating empirically where, why and how populism has positive or negative effects on liberal democracy.

Table 1 – Positive and negative effects that populism can have on liberal democratic regimes	
Positive effects	Negative effects
Populism can give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites, by putting topics relevant to the ‘silent majority’	Populism can use the notion and praxis of popular sovereignty to contravene the ‘check and balances’
Populism can mobilise excluded sections of society, improving their political integration	Populism can use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent minority rights
Populism can represent excluded sections of society by implementing policies that they prefer	Populism can promote the establishment of a new political cleavage, which impedes the formation of stable political coalitions
Populism can provide an ideological bridge that supports the building of important social and political coalitions, often across class lines	Populism can lead to a moralisation of politics, making consensus extremely difficult (if not impossible)
Populism can increase democratic accountability, by making issues and policies part of the political realm	Populism can foster a plebiscitary transformation of politics, which undermines the legitimacy of political institutions and unelected bodies
Populism can bring back the conflictive dimension of politics (‘democratisation of democracy’)	Ironically, by advocating an opening up of political life to non-elites, populism can easily promote a shrinkage of ‘the political’

Dealing with populism

Another aspect that has received increasing academic and public attention is the question about the existence of different strategies to deal with populist forces. Can we learn lessons from current manifestations of populism in Europe and the Americas, particularly in terms of the ‘toolkit’ that liberal democracies have to cope with this phenomenon? While the case studies of the book offer interesting answers to this question, I would like to focus here on the concluding chapter, in which four general strategies to deal with populist forces are identified: confrontation, isolation, adaptation and socialisation.

Those who promote confrontation take for granted that populism is a democratic disease that needs to be attacked and eradicated. Ironically, this way of thinking tends to replicate the populist worldview: given that certain actors are dangerous, they should be censored and confronted. There is no better example of this than the support of sections of the Venezuelan (former) elites and the U.S. government of President George W. Bush to the military coup against Hugo Chávez in 2002. The strategy of isolation is less radical, but is also based on the argument that populism is a democratic pathology that has to be kept in quarantine. The idea behind this medical metaphor is that the claims made by populist leaders are not legitimate. As a consequence, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’: on the one hand, there are the (self-proclaimed) ‘good democrats’, and on the other hand, there are the ‘evil populist forces’. The reaction of the European Union to the formation of a government coalition in Austria between Schüssel’s Christian Democratic Party and Haider’s populist radical right party is a good example of this.

In contrast to the strategy of isolation and confrontation, adaptation does not rely on a moralisation of politics. In fact, those who adhere to the logic of adaptation either implicitly or explicitly accept that populism can function as a democratic corrective, since it may well direct the attention of the establishment to topics that they have not previously considered. Take, for instance, the role that Evo Morales’ ethnopopulism has played in putting the problem of racial discrimination and oppression at the centre of the political agenda in contemporary Bolivia. Finally, the strategy of socialisation can be seen as

complementary to adaptation, and it refers to short-term and long-term tactics that aim to include the populist forces in the political establishment. This implies a sort of de-radicalisation of the populist actors, particularly in terms of making policy compromises and accepting the rules of public contestation that are inherent to liberal democracy. To a certain extent, some of the European populist radical right parties that have been able to participate in a coalition government have experienced this process of socialisation (for more details about this, see the recent article of Tjitske Akkerman and Sarah L. de Lange about 'Radical Right Parties in Office' published in the journal *Government and Opposition*).

On Thursday, 18 October, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser will be launching the new book [Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?](#) at an event hosted by [Counterpoint in London](#). [More details](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser is a Research Fellow at the School of Law, Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex. He is the recipient of the Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship for a two-year research project on populism in Europe and Latin America. One of the outcomes of this project is the Cambridge University Press book "[Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?](#)" that he has edited with Cas Mudde. He is also working on an edited volume on the right in contemporary Latin America. Recently he has obtained a British Academy International Partnership and Mobility (IPM) grant to undertake a three-year project on "Populism in Europe and Latin America: A Cross-Regional Perspective".

