

# Revisiting the Populist Challenge

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## Abstract

This essay makes another attempt to clarify the concept of populism and to discuss its causes and consequences. It argues that, at its core, the concept of populism refers to an 'ideology,' i.e. a set of beliefs about how democracy works and how it ought to work. It links this core concept to other, related notions of populism, which it considers complementary rather than competing. Given its intimate links to the promises of democracy, populism thrives in times of political and economic crises. In addition, it is facilitated by the way the media operate in contemporary democracies. The political crisis provides an opportunity for populists to point to the broken promises of democracy and to mobilize in the name of 'the people' who have gone unrepresented by the mainstream political forces. Finally, the electoral mobilization by populists may have a corrective democratic effect, and populists in power do not seem to put democracy in danger as long as they have to cooperate in coalition governments with mainstream parties which are electorally more important. It is in (quasi) majoritarian systems where populists gain power as the dominant force that they pose a threat to liberal democracy.

*Keywords:* populism; concepts; crisis of representation; mediatization; populists in power; ideology; political strategy; communication strategy

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## 1. Introduction

We are living in a time when the term 'populism' has become a buzzword that is used by almost everyone in almost every conceivable situation. The concept has never been known for its exceptional clarity and academics have rather characterized it as 'slippery,' 'chameleonic' or worse. But today, the populist *Zeitgeist* (Mudde 2004) has become omnipresent, and the concept of populism has not only become extremely popular in academia, it is also generously used by journalists, public intellectuals and observers of everyday politics – authors of fiction and non-fiction and all sorts of armchair reasoners. Even politicians are increasingly resorting to the term – mainly to characterize their adversaries and to pronounce some dark warnings about the dangers involved by what they see as an increasingly widespread phenomenon. Facing the omnipresence and overuse of the concept of populism, it is tempting to abandon it altogether.

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I do not think that we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. We should continue to use the concept of populism not only in public discourse, but also in academic work. The concept of 'populism' is important because it taps into a major political phenomenon which is reflected in the public's preoccupation with the term. In this essay, I shall make another attempt to clarify the notion of populism and to discuss its causes and consequences. Following the dominant trend among scholars of populism to define it in 'ideational' terms, I argue that, at its core, the concept refers to a set of beliefs about how democratic politics works and how it ought to work. I link this core to other, related notions of populism, which I consider complementary to, rather than competing with, the 'ideological' notion of the term. I hope to contribute to the spread of the 'ideational' conception of populism.

Having conceptualized populism in 'ideational' terms, I shall revisit the conditions under which populism (properly defined) arises, and briefly discuss its consequences. The literature provides long lists of factors that are linked to the rise of populism, but the proximate precondition for its rise, I shall argue, is a political crisis, more specifically, a crisis of representation in the party system. In addition, the way the media operate today constitutes an important facilitating condition. Concerning the consequences of populism, I shall argue that it may serve as a democratic corrective, but that it can also become a real threat to democracy when populists obtain political power in a majoritarian democracy without being checked by institutions or related political forces.

## 2. The concept of populism revisited

My reading of the literature has led me to distinguish between no less than four distinct but related concepts of populism – populism as an 'ideology', as a political strategy, as a project of political renewal, and as a political communication strategy. These are, however, not all equally important. There is an increasing consensus in the academic literature that populism as an 'ideology' or a set of distinct political beliefs, constitutes the indispensable core of the concept, to which other conceptual components may be added as complements. Together with the ideological core, the other elements may be viewed as jointly sufficient to define populism. Independently of this core, however, these same elements define the concept only at the risk of conceptual overstretching.

### 2.1. Populism as an 'ideology'

At the core of the concept of populism is the notion of populism as an 'ideology', i.e. a set of beliefs about how democratic politics works and how it ought to work. I put 'ideology' between quotation marks for reasons that will become clear in a moment. Populism as a set of beliefs conceives of society as split into two internally homogenous and antagonistic camps – the virtuous people and the corrupt elite, and argues that politics should be an unrestricted expression of the sovereignty of the people (see, for example, Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008: 8; Canovan 1999: 3; Mudde 2004: 543; Stanley 2008; Urbinati 2014: 131, 151).

In other words, this ‘ideology’ puts an emphasis on the fundamental role of the people in politics, claims that the people have been betrayed by the elites in charge who are abusing their positions of power, and demands that the sovereignty of the people must be restored (Mény, Surel 2002: 11f.). It can be summarized by three key notions:

- People-centrism: exaltation of the virtuous people
- Anti-elitism: condemnation of the corrupt elite
- Unrestricted popular sovereignty: claim for (the restoration of) popular sovereignty

Populists share a *monolithic* conception of the people. For them, ‘the people’ is a homogenous and morally unified body. Canovan (2002: 34), for example, suggests that populists always conceive of the people as a homogenous category, a unity, a corporate body capable of having common interests and a common will. Populists assume that ‘the people’ can speak with one voice. Moreover, for populists, the popular will is always good. As Ivarsflaten (2016) argues, for populists this is not an empirical matter, but a matter of doctrine or instinct. And she adds that from ‘the premise that the popular will is good, it follows that the purpose of institutions and leaders should be to find out what this will is and to put it into practice’.

While the will of ‘the people’ is good, the will of the elite is evil. This Manichean world view is essential for the populist belief system, and it explains why populist thinking is prone to conspiracy theories – the idea of ‘a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life’ (Hofstadter 1955). As in the ‘paranoid style’ of American politics analyzed by Hofstadter (1996: 29), what is at stake is a conflict between the absolute good and absolute evil, The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman. He is sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. Hofstadter (1955: 70) identified a conspiratorial view of history in the American Populist movement as a dominant theme of its ideology, and he also saw such a view as the key element of the ‘paranoid style’ in American politics, of which for him the populist movement was only one example.

As to the third element, the claim for popular sovereignty, populists seek to restore the redemptive capacity of democracy. Their ‘professed aim is to cash in democracy’s promise of power to the people’ (Canovan 1999: 2).<sup>1</sup> As Canovan (1999) has argued, democracy as a secular redemptive vision promises a better world through the action by the sovereign people – ‘salvation through politics’ – and she has pointed out that it is this promise which creates the tension with the pragmatic face of democracy and with liberalism. Populism is a ‘politics of hope’ (Akkerman et al. 2017: 380) that ‘yearns for a more direct an unmediated relationship between citizens and their political representatives’. It is important to add that democracy’s redemptive promise crucially provides legitimacy to the democratic regime. Where the citizens believe in the redemptive character of democracy, the acts of the government are seen by the citizens as the expression of their will. By contrast, where the citizens have doubts about whether the acts of the government express their will, the government will lose democratic legitimacy. If the belief in the redemptive capacity of democracy is undermined, populists get their chance.

Donald Trump’s inaugural speech (Trump 2017) may serve as an illustration of this set of key beliefs. He started his speech by invoking the mythical organic unity of ‘the people’: ‘What truly matters,’ he asserted, ‘is not which party controls our government, but whether

our government is controlled by the people.' And he went on to claim that, in the past, 'the people' have been betrayed by the elites in Washington:

For too long a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs. And while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.

But this shall not go on for much longer. Trump has come to redress the elites' mischief and to restore the sovereignty of the people. He promises that 'the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.' In even stronger terms he tells the audience:

Today's ceremony (...) has very special meaning because today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the people

And he concludes his speech promising salvation through politics:

So to all Americans in every city near and far, small and large, from mountain to mountain, from ocean to ocean, hear these words: You will never be ignored again. Your voice, your hopes, and your dreams will define our American destiny. And your courage and goodness and love will forever guide us along the way.

The downside of populism as 'ideology' is that its vision of democracy tends to be an *illiberal* one. We can identify at least three illiberal components of the populist vision of democracy, which correspond to the three key notions of populism. First, the core problem is that populism's monolithic 'people' is a fictional unit that does not exist in reality. Müller (2016a: 28) calls the notion of 'the people' a 'metapolitical illusion.' In reality, 'the people' is made up of many components with conflicting preferences which cannot be all reduced to a single common denominator. Populists choose to ignore or wish away the existing pluralism of contemporary society (Müller 2016b: 62). Populism is illiberal because it takes the part for the whole (Sloterdijk 2017)<sup>2</sup> and excludes those who do not belong to its proffered definition of 'the people', mythical as it is. It leaves no room for pluralism. We should add that it is also illiberal because it views the common will as predetermined, which leaves no room for deliberation. (Mastropaolo 2008: 34f.; Urbinati 2014: 132ff.). Second, populism's anti-elitism implies that it is hostile to intermediaries between the people and the decision-makers, especially to political parties (Pasquino 2008: 21). This is a consequence of its plea for a more direct linkage of masses to elites (Taggart 2002: 67). Third, populism's insistence on the unrestricted sovereignty of the people means that it takes 'government by the people' literally and rejects liberal checks and balances (the 'constitutionalist dimension of democracy' in the terms used by Mény and Surel 2002). As Urbinati (2014) formulates it, populism transforms majority rule (a procedure for making decisions) into the rule of the

majority (the rule by the hegemonic unity). Urbinati (2014: 150) concludes that '[p]opulism may actually be described as a recurrent attempt within democratic societies to disassociate democracy from liberalism'.

Müller (2016a: 50ff.) has argued that the term 'illiberal democracy' is 'deeply misleading and in fact undermines attempts to rein in populist actors.' For him, 'illiberal democracy' is a contradiction in terms, because liberal rights such as freedom of speech and assembly, media pluralism, and the protection of minorities are constitutive of democracy as such (Müller 2016a: 55). You cannot have democracy without an open process of opinion formation. While this is certainly true, I would still side with Ash (2017: 26) and continue to use the term 'illiberal democracy'. We need a term to describe the specific populist vision of democracy as well as the developments that occur when populists come to power through free and fair elections and start demolishing the foundations of liberal democracy without erecting (yet) an authoritarian regime. As Ash argues, 'hybrid regime' sounds too unspecific.

It has been pointed out that the conceptual core of populism is distinct, but 'thin' or 'thin-centred' (see Stanley 2008; Mudde 2004), in the sense established by Freedon (1998: 750). In other words, populism is an ideology unable 'to provide a reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate'. Populism's 'thinness' is a product of the vagueness and plasticity of its core concepts, which allows it to be combined with a variety of 'thick' ideologies, such as conservatism or socialism, that add more specific content to it. In a recent contribution to the conceptual debate, Freedon (2017), the original author of the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ideologies, has taken issue with the application of his concept of 'thin-centrism' to populism. In his view, populism is simply too truncated, ideologically too scrawny to even be thin (Freedon 2017: 3)! While a thin-centred ideology (like nationalism, feminism or green political thought) has the potential to become more than the centre, Freedon (2017: 3) suggests that 'the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential centre for something broader or more inclusive. It is emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred'. In a similar vein, Hawkins (2009: 1045) maintains that populism is a *latent* set of ideas – latent in the sense that it lacks significant exposition and 'contrast' with other sets of ideas and is low on policy specifics.

This is, however, no reason to abandon the notion of populism as a set of beliefs. Let us just call it a rudimentary ideology, or an 'ideology'. Even if the core of populism is 'emaciatedly thin' and cannot serve as the potential centre for something broader, it still holds that it can be combined with other, 'thicker' ideologies, precisely because of its rudimentary core beliefs. And it remains important that populism is dependent on 'host' ideologies that 'project a more detailed set of answers to key political questions' (Stanley, Učeň 2008: 8). Importantly, this also implies that the 'host' ideologies might, in the long-term, prevail over populist beliefs and marginalize them in the political and communication strategies of originally populist parties.

## 2.2. Populism as a political strategy

From populism as an 'ideology' or a set of political beliefs, we should distinguish populism as a *political strategy*. Some authors, most notably authors writing about Latin America,

conceptualize populism as a specific way of competing for and exercising political power. Thus, Weyland (2001: 14) argues that populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a *personalistic leader* (my emphasis) seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. According to this definition, the connection between the people and the leader is mostly based on direct quasi-personal contact, not on organized intermediation.

The personalistic leader does not belong to the established political elites, but is an outsider (a new challenger), who incarnates the demands of 'the people'. Such a leader is most often, although not always, male (see Marine LePen, Pia Kjaersgaard or Siv Jensen) and has direct, unmediated access to the people's grievances, and acts as *the* spokesperson of the vox populi (Abts 2011: 930). The leader as the spokesperson of the vox populi is, in fact, one with the people whose deepest feelings he (or she) articulates. This is illustrated by the slogan of the Austrian right populist leader Heinz Strache – 'ER will was WIR wollen' ('HE wants what WE want'). For Müller (2016a: 20) it is crucial that the leader is the only one who can represent the people. All political competitors are seen as part of the immoral, corrupt elite.

The connection of the personalistic leader to his/her followers corresponds to the 'charismatic linkage' in Kitschelt's (2000) typology of democratic linkages. Contrary to programmatic or clientelistic linkages, the allegiance to the charismatic leader is rooted in personal qualities. It involves asymmetry between leaders and followers, but also directness and great passion. The followers identify with the leader who speaks in their name. This kind of linkage corresponds to the rudimentary core beliefs of populism as an 'ideology', which gives short shrift to programmatic elements. The direct, populist form of representation by a personalistic leader promises to make politics transparent by offering, as Canovan (2002: 34) has pointed out, 'a short-cut that bypasses philosophical disputes and institutional niceties'. Populist leaders may promise anything in substantive terms precisely because the populist core beliefs may be combined with very different substantive demands.

In spite of their critique of intermediary organizations and in spite of their reliance on charismatic linkages, populist leaders need some organizational vehicles to mobilize in the name of 'the people'. In line with the overall characteristics of the charismatic linkage mechanism, they create 'movement-parties', which tend to be 'personal parties', i.e. parties which are the product of the leader rather than the leader the product of the party (McDonnell 2013: 5f.).<sup>3</sup> As McDonnell (2013) suggests, in such parties, party communications are focused on the leader and the leader dominates the party, the party's expected lifespan is seen as dependent on the political lifespan of its founder-leader and organization at the local level is neither constantly manifest nor permanent. Berlusconi's Forza Italia is a case in point, as are the parties led by Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand. However, not all populist leaders have created their own personal parties. In the European context, some of these populist parties (e.g. the Lega or the SVP) are not personal, but rather 'personalized' parties – parties, where the leader plays an important role, but which are also highly organized at the grassroots level. Even allowing for such less-than-pure cases of a populist strategy – cases, where the charisma of the leader has already been partly routinized (Lega Nord), or where the charismatic leader took over an already routinized party organization (SVP) – personalistic leadership is typical of movement parties from the right.

The monolithic conception of the leader (there is only one) and of the leader's hierarchically structured and centralized political organization (if there is one) corresponds to the populists' monolithic conception of 'the people'. In this very specific sense, populism as an 'ideology' and populism as a political strategy are complementary, and tend to go together. Urbinati (2014: 156) has also underlined the elective affinity between populism as an 'ideology' and populism as a political strategy. As she suggests, personalization of politics is *not* an accident in populism (understood as a set of beliefs), but rather its destiny: populism's appeal to the people is bound to lead to Caesarism or Bonapartism (Urbinati 2014: 153), i.e. to the direct and personal rule by a charismatic strongman that is based on a cult of personality.

But it is important to note that the converse does not hold: personalistic leadership does not presuppose populism as an 'ideology'. There may be personalistic leaders, i.e. leaders who become the personification of a party or regime (Eatwell 2006: 153), who do not adopt populism as an 'ideology'. Tony Blair is a case in point. New Labor may have been, as Marquand (2008: 364) characterized it, 'less a party than a costly and, for many years, astonishingly successful vehicle of plebiscitary personal rule';<sup>4</sup> Marquand (2008: 364) used the term 'managed populism' for New Labour and Mair (2002: 91) called it an example of 'populist democracy', i.e. of popular democracy without parties or of 'partyless democracy'. But, this use of the term populism is stretching the concept too far. New Labor was never subscribing to the core populist beliefs, nor was it using them in an opportunistic way. We should only use the concept of populism for personalistic leaders who, at the same time, are also articulating the full set of populism's core beliefs. The personalistic leader's political strategy may facilitate the expansion of populist beliefs, but it is not a pre-requisite for the prevalence of these core beliefs.

### 2.3. Populism as a project of political renewal

While the reduction of populism to the political strategy of a personalistic leader implies an overstretching of the concept, we arrive at a more restrictive definition of populism by combining populism as an 'ideology' with populism as a political strategy. This is what Urbinati (2014) proposes with her notion of '*populism as a project of political renewal*'. For her, populism as an 'ideology' is a necessary, but not sufficient element to define the phenomenon. According to her, populism needs both, an 'organic polarizing ideology' and a leader who mobilizes the masses in order to govern in the name of 'the people'. Combined, the two elements amount to a project of political renewal that 'wants to redress democracy by taking it back to its 'natural' roots' (Urbinati 2014: 151). Although it starts as a phenomenon of mass discontent and participation, populism is at the same time also 'strategic politics of elite transformation and authority creation' (Urbinati 2014: 157). The populist leader uses polarization between 'the people' and the elite in order to create the unity of the people that is at the core of populist beliefs and in order to implement the specific populist, i.e. illiberal, vision of democracy. In a time when we increasingly witness populists in power, this more restricted view of the concept looks rather promising. But it may be too restrictive, because there are populist movements, i.e. movements with a populist ideology, that

do not have a unique personalistic leader. The agrarian populists of 19th century America would be a case in point (Betz 2017). Making personalistic leaders part of the populist core would exclude major historical examples of populism from the phenomenon we are trying to conceptualize.

## 2.4. Populism as a communication strategy

Both populism as a *set of beliefs* and populism as a political *strategy* manifest themselves in specific communication strategies. Populism as a set of beliefs is expressed in specific *discursive patterns* for identifying foes and solidifying the community of friends. Laclau (2005a; 2005b), Jagers and Walgrave (2007), Hawkins (2009), Aslanidis (2016), Wodak (2015) and Brubaker (2017) among others have introduced the conception of populism as a *discursive pattern*, a *discursive and stylistic repertoire*, or as a *political communication strategy*. Populism as discourse is closely related to populism as 'ideology'. Thus, for Hawkins (2009: 1045), a discourse is something that combines elements of both ideology and rhetoric. Similarly, Wodak (2015: 3) underlines that the political communication of right-wing populists always 'combines and integrates form and content' by providing 'a dynamic mix of substance and style'.

The close relationship between ideology and discourse has been used to operationalize populism as an '*ideology*'. Populist beliefs become visible in the political communication strategies or discursive patterns of populist actors. Several authors have usefully proposed indices to operationalize the populist beliefs based on an analysis of the discursive pattern of political texts (such as party manifestos, speeches or press releases) (see Aslanidis 2015; Jagers, Walgrave 2007; March 2012; Rooduijn et al. 2012; Rooduijn, Pauwels 2011; Pauwels 2011). Note, however, that in the analysis of discursive patterns, the danger of overstretching the concept of populism looms large again. As Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 323) have observed, appealing to the people is a conventional communication style adopted by all kinds of politicians from all times. It is simply a strategy of mobilizing popular support. Jagers and Walgrave call appeals to the people an 'empty shell definition of populism'.<sup>5</sup> The difficult task is to translate the three key concepts of populist 'ideology' into empirically measurable discursive elements. Wirth et al. (2016: 47–52) provide a detailed proposal of how to proceed.

Not only populism as an ideology, but also populism as a *political strategy* may manifest itself in specific political communication patterns, i.e. in specific ways of reaching out to the public. From this perspective, the populist communication strategy is connected to the possibility of 'going public', i.e. of establishing a direct relationship between the personalistic leader and the citizen audience. In Mancini's (2015: 84–90) conception of populism as a communication strategy, it is always linked to the personalistic leader who reaches out to the people (is 'going public') and who becomes the symbol of public identification. Moreover, for Mancini, 'going public' inevitably means 'going popular', i.e. for him the personalistic leader reaching out to the public uses a specifically populist communication style. This style is characterized by elements such as dramatization (emergency rhetoric), emotionalization, assertive/absolutist and colloquial language, and references to common sense (see



Wettstein, Büchel 2017). Mancini puts the accent on the use of undifferentiated, de-ideologized language that is both simplistic and immediate, ‘the language of the bar.’ In this case, too, the danger of overstretching the concept looms large, given that all kinds of politicians reach out to the public and attempt to ‘go popular.’

Wettstein and Büchel (2017) have made an attempt to pin down populist content and populist style based on a systematic content analysis of the press coverage of immigration and labor market policies in 10 European countries and the US. They show that, in the press of these countries, populist content and populist style tend to go together. Moreover, they are able to show that statements by (pre-defined) populist actors in the press are more frequently using elements of populist ideology and populist style than statements by other actors.

Given the fact that, on the supply-side, populism as a political phenomenon can be empirically located only within political discourse, Aslanidis (2016: 98) suggests that we abandon the notion of populism as an ‘ideology’ and replace it by the core concept of ‘populism as a discursive frame.’ Since we cannot look inside of the populists’ head and discover the ulterior motives of their communicative behaviour, he argues, we are not able to prove whether populists really believe what they say or whether they are just acting strategically. Following Laclau (2005a; 2005b), he insists on the exclusively formal aspect of populist discourse. Laclau’s key contribution, he argues, has been the displacement of the conceptualization of populism from content to form: The formal populist logic pits a certain ‘people’ against a certain ‘power bloc’, both terms being ‘empty signifiers’ to be filled with specific content in a given context. As Aslanidis suggests, these formal discursive elements of the populist logic are implicit in the ideological definition of populism.

While it is, of course, true that we cannot look into the head of the political actors who use populist communication strategies, we do not need to do so to defend the concept of populism as an ‘ideology’. Whether political actors who use populist ideas in their discourse believe in these ideas or not is a secondary issue. Crucial is that they effectively use the populist ideas to interpret the world in an attempt to mobilise ‘the people’ (Stanley 2008: 98). Populism is a belief system, even if a rudimentary one, ‘according to which individuals navigate and orient themselves in the sea of politics’ (Sartori 1969: 63). The populist leaders may not believe in what they say, but some of the people they try to mobilize certainly do. Some of these people even feel strongly and dogmatically about the populist beliefs, which, according to Sartori, is the distinguishing feature of *ideological* belief systems. In short, while political leaders may rely on the populist discursive logic for purely opportunistic reasons – Trump, for example, may not have believed a word of what he said in his inaugural speech, the citizen public may take the ‘broken promises of democracy’ and the promise of ‘salvation through politics’ seriously and they may strongly and dogmatically believe in them.

What the attempt to reduce populism to its formal discursive elements tends to overlook is the demand-side of politics – the citizen public. The debates on the conceptualization of populism tend to focus on the political elites and their discursive use of its formal logic, but we should keep in mind that populism as a discourse falls on fertile ground precisely because the beliefs of the populist ‘ideology’ are firmly held by large portions of the citizen public. As pointed out by Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017: 529), one of the key advantages of the ideational approach is that it allows for the combined study of the supply side and

the demand side of populism. More recently, several attempts have been made to study populism on the demand side, i.e. to identify populist attitudes in the general public and to relate them to the support for populist parties and movements (Akkerman et al. 2017; Akkerman et al. 2014; Hawkins et al 2012, Hawkins, Kaltwasser 2014; Schulz et al. 2017; van Hauwaert, van Kessel 2017). Thus, in a sophisticated attempt to operationalize the concept of populist attitudes among the Swiss population, Schulz et al. (2017) found a three-dimensional structure of populist attitudes that corresponds to the three key components of the populist 'ideology' – people-centrism, anti-elitism and a strong belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty. For the Netherlands, it has also been shown that individuals with pronounced populist attitudes are more likely to vote for populist parties (PVV and SP) (Akkerman et al. 2014; 2017). Finally, in a cross-national study, van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2017) confirm that populist attitudes complement policy preferences in shaping the vote for parties from the populist left and right.

### 3. Conditions for the rise of populism

#### 3.1. A crisis of political representation

Populism as conceptualized here is intrinsically linked to democracy, i.e. it is possible only in democratic regimes. More specifically, populism is intrinsically linked to a perceived crisis of democracy. For Laclau (1977; 2005a; 2005b), populism cannot emerge without crisis. It has been pointed out that crisis is not only a precondition for populism to rise, but 'populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis' (Moffitt 2015: 195). There are different types of crises, however: economic, cultural, and political crises. While all of them may contribute to the rise of populism in one way or another, and while there certainly are contingent elements involved in the current rise of populism in Europe and the United States (Brubaker 2017), it is important to stress that this rise can be linked to the broken promises of democracy. In my view, it is a *political* crisis which is at the root of any populist mobilization. More specifically, the crisis that drives the rise of populism is a *crisis of political representation*, given that contemporary democracies are representative democracies, where political parties act as the main agents of representation. In other words, the crisis of representation is a crisis of party government. This crisis may interact and be reinforced by economic crises, but in the final analysis, it is the political component of the joint crises that is decisive for the rise of populism.

This diagnosis is rather abstract, however, and we need to characterize the crisis of political representation more in detail. At the most general level, there are two possible interpretations of this crisis: a functionalist one that argues for the general decline of party government, and a structuralist one that sees it ultimately rooted in the changing conflict structure of society. The *functionalist* interpretation is mainly associated with the work of Peter Mair (2013) and his followers, who have argued that political parties have become less and less able to mobilize the voters: indicators are declining party membership and party identification, declining voter turnout, increasing volatility of the vote and declining shares of voters who choose the mainstream parties. Parties have become less able to struc-

ture political conflict as a result of a process of increasing de-alignment between parties and voters. This interpretation stresses the transformation of parties into catch-all parties which recruit their voters from all walks of life, the withdrawal of the leadership of the mainstream (cartel-) parties into the government institutions, and the de-politicization and convergence of mainstream parties on the major policy issues. Mair attributed this erosion of the mainstream parties' representation function to the increasing tension between 'responsibility' and 'responsiveness', i.e. the tension between the parties' role as representatives of the national citizen publics, and their role as governments being responsible to a wide range of domestic, inter- and supranational stakeholders. Mair (2002: 88) has laid a direct link between these developments and the rise of populism:

As party leaderships become increasingly remote from the wider society, and as they also appear increasingly similar to one another in ideological or policy terms, it simply becomes that much easier for populist protestors to rally against the supposed privileges of an undifferentiated political class. As party democracy weakens, therefore, the opportunities for populist protest clearly increase.

More recently, Caramani (2017) has more systematically dealt with the trade-off between responsibility and responsiveness by examining the populist and technocratic critique of representative party government. In line with the functionalist interpretation of the crisis of representation, he views populism as an alternative form of representation to party government.

The *structuralist* interpretation of the crisis of representation does not take issue with the overall trends described by Mair, but it broadens the analytical perspective beyond the proximate preconditions in the party system to the societal changes that shape the changes in the party system. Moreover, by stressing the structural rather than the organizational roots of the mainstream parties' decline, it does take issue with the implicit pessimism about the future of political parties. Instead of insisting on the decline of mainstream parties, the structuralist interpretation puts into evidence the rise of new challenger parties which are articulating the structurally created political potentials in society that have been neglected by the declining mainstream parties. According to this interpretation, the lack of responsiveness of the mainstream parties to specific new demands arising from structural change in society provides new challengers with the opportunity to mobilize successfully these unrepresented demands. Thus, processes of increasing economic, cultural and political competition linked to globalization created latent structural potentials of globalization 'losers' in Western Europe, which are being successfully mobilized by parties of the radical populist right. In other words, the lack of responsiveness of mainstream parties to the plight of the 'globalization losers' provided a chance for their mobilization by the new populist right parties. In the process of mobilizing the 'globalization losers', these parties have been contributing to the emergence of a new cleavage, a cleavage that has alternatively been called a 'transnational cleavage' (Hooghe, Marks 2018), an 'integration-demarcation' cleavage (Kriesi et al. 2006; 2008; 2012), or a 'universalism-particularism' cleavage (Bornschier 2010a; 2010b). The new populist right parties articulate the nationalist pole of this new cleavage, i.e. in their case, the populist core beliefs are linked to the 'host' ideology of nationalism.

If the structuralist interpretation is correct, i.e. if the new populist right parties are articulating an emerging fundamental societal conflict, these parties are here to stay and the overarching trend is not one of de-alignment and a general decline of parties, but rather one of a re-alignment in the space of party competition with the new populist right parties becoming a permanent component of national party systems – the nationalist pole of the conflict between nationalists and cosmopolitans. According to this interpretation, the populism of the challenger parties may be a temporary phenomenon that does not foreshadow any new form of representation, but is a feature of the re-alignment in the party system that will fade away as the new challengers institutionalize and become a permanent feature of the party system.

It is important to add that the character of the crisis of political representation varies regionally, with varying implications for the kind of populism that has benefited from it.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on Europe in particular, the parties of a new radical right have been the main populist protagonists in Northwestern Europe over the past four decades, while they have been less conspicuous in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. As a result of the particular combination of party systems lacking institutionalization with generally poor political performance, Central and Eastern Europe saw the rise of new ‘unorthodox’ (Pop-Eleches 2010) or ‘centrist’ anti-establishment parties (Engler 2017) or ‘centrist’ populist parties – a ‘pure’ version of populism that is reduced to an anti-establishment posture without any other ideological element (Učeň 2007: 54). In Southern Europe, populism was rather a phenomenon on the left, with the exception of Italy, where two populist parties on the radical and centre-right (Lega Nord and Forza Italia) rose out of the economic and political crisis of the early 1990s. The Great Recession saw the rise of a new populist left in Greece, Spain and Portugal, benefiting from the problems of centre-left governments which had to implement the austerity measures imposed by international pressure. Italy is a case apart again, because the populist party that rose in the Great Recession in this country is generally viewed by observers as neither from the left nor from the right.

While the recent rise of left-wing populism in Southern Europe can clearly be linked to the combination of a political crisis with the economic crisis of the Great Recession (Hutter et al. 2018), this is not generally the case. A review of the impact of the Great Recession on the development of populism in Europe has shown that the economic crisis has not facilitated the rise of populism outside of the European South (Kriesi, Pappas 2015). Thus, the rise of UKIP in the UK, of the AfD in Germany, and of the Sweden Democrats in Sweden that occurred during the Great Recession rather represents the belated manifestation of long-term trends, which have had a hard time imposing themselves in these countries because of a generally inauspicious opportunity structure (Pappas, Kriesi 2015). The rise of the True Finns is the exception that confirms the rule. In this case, the Eurozone crisis proved to be decisive with the True Finns exploiting the international conflict between creditor and debtor countries to their own advantage (Salo 2017; Ylä-Anttila, Ylä-Anttila 2015.).

Let me add that, from the structuralist perspective, it is the underlying structural conflicts that define the new cleavage(s) and not the populist mobilization of these conflicts. From such a perspective, it is deeply misleading to talk about a newly emerging ‘people/elite cleavage’ (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2017: 394), because it is the ‘host’ ideology that defines the cleavage, while the populist ‘ideology’ provides the fuel for its articulation. As long as

the populist ‘ideology’ prevails over any ‘host’ ideology, as seems to be the case in several Central and Eastern European countries or in Italy with the rise of the Five Star Movement (see Ivaldi et al. 2017), de-alignment prevails over re-alignment and we cannot identify any restructuring of the party system in terms of structural conflicts.

### 3.2. Facilitating condition: the role of the media

In the ‘audience democracy’ (Manin 1997), political communication is no longer party-dominated as it was in the ‘golden age of parties’ (Blumler, Kavanagh 1999). The means of mass communication (first of all television, more recently also internet-based channels) allow the political leaders to directly reach out to their constituencies without the mediation by party activists. In the case of the classic news media, the leader has to do so under conditions imposed by the ‘media logic’. As a result of their professionalization, commercialization and of technological change, the news media operate according to their own ‘production logic’ in selecting, presenting, and interpreting the political news (Esser 2013: 166–174; Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999; Mazzoleni 2008b). By highlighting the role of personalities, the media undermine the organizational structure of the political parties and enhance the focus on party leaders and chief executives. Moreover, as Manin (1997) has been pointing out, television privileges a particular type of leader – the one who masters the communication techniques better than his competitors.

The parties have adapted to these new conditions. The choices of Blair above Brown and Schroeder above Lafontaine clearly illustrate this trend (Mair 2008: 227) as does the choice of Renzi in the primaries of the Italian Partito Democratico (PDI) in late 2013 and in spring 2017 (Mancini 2015: 108). But parties and politicians also try to regain the initiative: they devote increasing attention to what Esser (2013) calls the ‘self-mediatization of politics’, i.e. the self-initiated stage-management of politics by means of strategic communication in an effort to master the new rules that govern access to the public sphere. Politicians, parties and governments professionalize their internal and external communication and devote more of their resources to communication (Esser, Matthes 2013). Professional communication specialists at the service of party leaders and governments are replacing party militants.

At first sight, this trend reminds us of Max Weber’s (1992: 44–49) vision of a ‘*plebiscitary democracy*’ and Fishkin (1991: 46), indeed, linked it to the ‘plebiscitary model of leadership and representation’. However, for Max Weber, who built on his observation of democratic politics in the early twenties, the party leader was something of a ‘plebiscitary dictator’ because he was able to mobilize the masses by using the party apparatus (the ‘party machine’, including the foot soldiers of the regular party members). The contemporary party leader, by contrast, is able to mobilize the masses largely without the party apparatus, i.e. today’s ‘going public’ is contributing to Mair’s ‘partyless democracy’.<sup>7</sup>

While the ‘media logic’ imposes itself on all political actors and reinforces the leaders of all parties, populist or not, the claim is that it favors populist challengers in particular. Thus, Mazzoleni (2008a) writes of an unintended complicity between populist actors who seek media attention and tabloid media. Not only do they enhance the charismatic linkage between the political leader and his or her constituency by allowing the political leaders

to reach out directly to the people, but they also provide a fertile ground for the populist communication style by giving short shrift to programmatic debates and by focusing instead on conflict and scandal, by dramatizing, emotionalizing, polarizing, and stereotyping the presentation, as well as by emphasizing the 'common sense' of ordinary citizens over elite discourse and party representatives. Moreover, populism has high news value, as was illustrated by the Trump campaign in the 2016 presidential elections, during which Trump got an enormous amount of unpaid media attention. Note, however, that the assumed congruence between media logic and populism is stylistic rather than ideological (Esser et al. 2017: 369). Note also that this media-specific facilitation of populism may be largely unintentional, and is expected to occur even if the journalists may be opposed to populist parties and their leaders.

As Esser et al. (2017) point out, in addition to the unintended complicity of the news media with populists, the media can actively engage in their own kind of populism and they may open the gates to populist messages of audience members – usually in the form of reader comments on their websites. As to the media's own kind of populism, it derives from the press's self-conception as the 'fourth estate' acting as a control on the political elites and may be expressed in a general political cynicism that serves to fuel the anti-elitism of the public (Esser et al. 2017: 368).

A recent volume on populist communication covering no less than 24 European countries provides a wealth of information on populism and the media in the different countries (Aalberg et al. 2017), even if time and again we are told that very little systematic research exists on populist actors as communicators, on the relationship between the media and populism, and on the effects of populist political communication on citizens. With respect to the coverage of populist parties in the media, the pattern that emerges from these country studies runs counter to Mazzoleni's 'complicity' hypothesis: populist parties seem to receive less coverage than other parties as a result of other parties jointly installing something like a cordon sanitaire (Esser et al. 2017: 366). This is also what emerges from our own data on electoral campaigns in six Western European countries – Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK. The other parties and the media tend to ignore the populist challengers. The extreme case is Germany, where the AfD was virtually shut out of campaign coverage in 2013. The cordon sanitaire by the other parties appears very pronounced in the countries where the radical right has been electorally most successful so far – Austria, France and Switzerland. The one exception is the Netherlands. A more detailed analysis reveals that it is the two campaigns of 2002 and 2003, which involved the Lijst Pim Fortuyn, where the radical populist right got relatively high standing. The flamboyant Fortuyn was clearly very newsworthy, and his assassination during the election campaign 2002 no doubt reinforced his newsworthiness. In the subsequent campaign in 2003, the LPF was still very much in the news because it had caused the downfall of the previous, short-lived cabinet. By contrast, Geert Wilders and the PVV did not get any overexposure.

Empirical research on the effects of mediated populism on the audience is at its initial stage, but there is now a comparative study of the media's impact on public populist attitudes using a real-life setting (Müller et al. 2017). This study is also based on media coverage of migration and labor market policies. Only part of the respondents' media diet was object of the study, namely print newspapers and news magazines. Most importantly, the

study finds a conditional effect of unopposed populist media messages on populist attitudes in three out of four European cities (in Berlin, Paris and Zurich, but not in London), an effect which depends on prior populist convictions. A higher dose of populist communications enhances both strong prior agreement and disagreement with populism in Zurich and strong prior disagreement, but not prior agreement, in Berlin and Paris. This remarkable result suggests that the spread of populist messages in the news media may contribute to the polarization of society: the more populist messages are one-sidedly spread by the media the more likely it seems that opinion camps on both ends of the populist attitude scale become more extreme. This polarizing effect is precisely the effect that Urbinati (2014) attributes to the populist ideology.

#### 4. The consequences of populism: populists in power

The consequences of populism for democracy are ambivalent. While populism develops in the shadow of democracy, it has a mixed relationship with democracy. As Kaltwasser (2012) has argued,<sup>8</sup> populism may work both as a *democratic corrective* and as a *threat* to democracy. Populists may develop a corrective force, especially when they represent demands and claims of structurally important groups which have been neglected or ‘depoliticized’ by the established mainstream parties, i.e. if they hold out the promise of ‘salvation through politics’ for unrepresented sectors of society. The first piece of evidence for populism’s corrective force refers to turnout. Thus, in the German regional elections in March 2016, the AfD (‘Alternative für Deutschland’), the newly founded German version of a radical populist right challenger, participated for the first time, obtaining between 12.6 and 24.3 percent of the vote. With this extension of the partisan supply, the participation rate rose by 4.2 percent in Baden-Württemberg, 8.6 percent in Rheinland-Pfalz and 9.9 percent in Sachsen-Anhalt. In other words, the mobilization by populist challengers may bring sectors of society back into the electoral process which had abandoned it for lack of appropriate partisan supply. Similarly, referenda about highly salient issues that preoccupy the public may bring citizens into politics who normally do not care about it, because they perceive the issue-specific vote as an opportunity to have a voice. This regularly occurs in Swiss referendum votes, where participation is often higher than the dismal 48.4 percent (2015) in national elections. But it also happened in the UK, where 72.2 percent of the voters participated in the Brexit vote, compared to only 66.1 percent in the 2015 national elections. The second, more systematic piece of evidence comes from a recent cross-national study of more than 200 European elections between 1990 and 2014, which finds that populist parties from the right have a positive effect on the equality of participation across income and education groups, while populist parties from the left have a positive effect on the ideological congruence between voters and their representatives (Huber, Ruth 2017).

More often, however, populism is perceived not as a corrective force, but as a *threat to democracy*. Empirical tests of the effects of populism on democracy mostly focused on its negative effects on horizontal checks and balances, the rule of law and the freedom and fairness of elections (Huber, Ruth 2017: 464). Arguably, the threat posed by populists to democracy

stems from the implications of their illiberal view of democracy, their tendency to replace 'majority rule' by the 'rule of the majority.' This is especially the case when populists come to power. Until recently, this threat was not very conspicuous in Europe. To be sure, in several European countries, radical right populists have already come to power. The FPÖ entered the Schüssel government as a coalition partner of the ÖVP in Austria in 2000 and in 2017 it again became a coalition partner of Kurz's ÖVP. The Swiss People's Party has been part of a grand coalition ever since its radical transformation in the late 1980s and in Italy the Lega Nord has governed together with Berlusconi's party for many years. The Dutch PVV and the Danish People's Party have supported minority centre-right governments and the Norwegian Progress Party entered Erna Solberg's government in 2013 while the True Finns became a coalition partner of the centre-right government in 2015. Left-wing populists have also governed for many years in Greece – PASOK first (see Pappas, Aslanidis 2015), Syriza later on. Importantly, however, with the exception of Berlusconi's governments, in all these instances, the populists were the minority partner of one or several mainstream parties which constrained their power.

Under such conditions, populists tend to experience a great tension between their anti-elitist profile and their government responsibilities – with possibly dire consequences for their future electoral success. Thus, when the Austrian FPÖ entered the government dominated by Wolfgang Schüssel's ÖVP in 2000, it was seriously weakened by the experience. Its cabinet members adopted more moderate positions, which led to the collapse of the party's vote share and to an eventual split between the moderates and the radicals with the moderates creating a new party, the BZÖ (Luther 2015: 143–145, Heinisch, Fallend 2016). Similarly, the Swiss SVP moderated its populist discourse once its leader was coopted into the government in 2003 (Bernhard et al. 2015). The coalition partners nevertheless ousted him from the government four years later and replaced him with a more moderate member of his party, which also led to a split of the party and to a resumption of the populist opposition by the SVP. Rooduijn et al. (2014) show that, after an electoral success, populist parties generally become less populist in their party programs. The long-term Swiss experience confirms this conclusion: a study covering the period from World War II up to the present shows that new parties (and there were many new parties which entered the electoral competition in this highly fragmented party system during the period covered) generally tend to be populist when they enter the party competition, but they tend to moderate their discourse as they age (Weber 2017).

What distinguishes these European cases from the US and Latin America is the institutional context. While the consensus-democratic or proportional systems in these European cases have tended to constrain the power of electorally successful populists, the presidential system in the US and Latin America facilitates the access of populists to undivided power. In presidential systems, but also in semi-presidential systems like France or Poland, and in (quasi-) majoritarian parliamentary systems like the UK, Hungary or Greece, populists have the possibility to either govern alone or to govern as the dominant political force in a coalition with minority partners. In such cases, the populist leaders face lesser or no constraints by coalition partners and can attempt to implement their illiberal vision of democracy unencumbered by the need to compromise with a more moderate political force.



Whether, under such more favorable circumstances, the populists' attempts to implement their project of power are successful or not depends on at least two factors – the institutional constraints of a system of checks and balances and the strategies of their own and related parties. In the US, Donald Trump has already been checked by the courts and by Congress. The institutional arrangements in the US and in the majoritarian democracies of Western Europe are likely to inhibit the more extreme forms of populist autocracies that we know from the presidential systems of Latin America (Roberts 2017). In the less established democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, however, populists in power meet with less institutional resistance and use their power to implement illiberal institutional reforms, as is illustrated by the Polish and Hungarian populists (Batory 2016) in power. The same applies to Berlusconi's governments in Italy, which have often adopted illiberal measures regarding the checks and balances of Italian democracy (such as media freedom, the judiciary, the constitution, and the president of the republic) (Bobba, McDonnell 2015).

In such more favorable institutional circumstances, the strategies of the populists' own parties and of related parties in their own camp become particularly important. In this respect it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of Linz's (1978) analysis of the breakdown of democracy in the interwar period: he distinguished between loyal, semi-loyal and disloyal oppositions in democratic regimes. Fascists and communists were the disloyal oppositions, but interesting from the contemporary point of view are the semi-loyal opponents from less radical parties: Linz characterized them as willing to encourage, tolerate, cover up, treat leniently, excuse, or justify actions of other participants in the political process that go beyond the limits of peaceful, legitimate patterns of politics in democracy. Ultimately, he identified semi-loyalty by its greater affinity for radicals on its own side of the political spectrum than for the supporters of the democratic principles. Thus, in the Weimar Republic, the semi-loyal opposition contributed to the breakdown of the system by seeking the support of the disloyal opposition and by helping it into power. Building on Linz's analysis, it is possible to suggest that the politicians of the populist leaders' own party and of related parties in their own camp become critical for his or her maneuvering space. To the extent that they condone the excesses of the maverick in power, they crucially contribute to the danger he or she poses for democracy.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have made an attempt to clarify the concept of populism by reaffirming the definition of the concept in 'ideological' terms, and by relating this definition to alternative ways of defining the phenomenon in question. As I have argued, these alternative ways of conceptualizing populism – defining it as a political strategy, a communication strategy or a project of power – are best viewed as complementary to the core 'ideological' notion of populism. They cannot define the term independently of the core 'ideological' notion without overstressing it. Populist 'ideology' and strategy often go together, but they need not necessarily do so. As I have argued, there are also personalistic leaders who do not subscribe to a populist set of beliefs, and there are populist movements without a unique personalistic

leader. Both populist ideology and populist strategy cannot be reduced to communication strategies, but they are expressed in communication strategies – populist discourse and populist style, which can be used to operationalize the real thing.

I also briefly addressed the preconditions and the consequences of populism. My main argument is that populism thrives in times of political (and economic) crises and that it is facilitated by the way the media work in contemporary democracies. The political crisis provides an opportunity for populists to point to the broken promises of democracy and to mobilize in the name of ‘the people’ who have gone unrepresented by the mainstream political forces. Given that the sections of society which are being left out by the mainstream parties have specific grievances which the populists have to address, their populism is likely to be linked to more elaborate ideological components. If these grievances are part of a fundamental structural conflict, like the grievances of the nationalists which are articulated by the radical populist right in the Northwest of Europe, the populist parties are not likely to be a temporary phenomenon, but it is possible that their populism will be temporary and will gradually vanish as they become an institutionalized component of the partisan space in a given polity.

In the contemporary audience democracy, the media generally facilitates the direct contact of the personalistic leaders with the public and it also facilitates the spread of populist discursive patterns in some – although not in all – countries. Moreover, the populist media content appears to have a polarizing effect on the public. However, there is no indication of a general ‘complicity’ of the media with populists during election campaigns. On the contrary, during election campaigns the populists rather seem to suffer from a cordon sanitaire – at least in the European cases for which we have corresponding data.

Finally, the electoral mobilization by populists may have a corrective democratic effect, as is illustrated by the increasing participation in German regional elections as a result of the mobilization by the radical populist right or by the Brexit referendum. Populists in power do not seem to pose a threat to democracy as long as they have to cooperate in coalition governments with mainstream parties which are electorally more important. However, in (quasi-) majoritarian systems, where the populists gain power as the dominant force, it is possible that they succeed in implementing (parts of) their illiberal vision of democracy. Whether this is going to happen is likely to depend above all on institutional checks and balances and on the strategies of related political forces, and, in the final analysis also on the voters who will provide the ultimate check on the populists – as long as they do not succeed in transforming the illiberal democracy into an outright authoritarian regime.

## Footnotes:

1. Müller (2016a: 76) similarly suggests that the success of populism builds on the broken promises of democracy.
2. In a recent interview, Peter Sloterdijk (2017) described ‘the elementary algorithm of populism: the part is the whole, and the few are actually all’ (‘Der elementare Algorithmus jedes Populismus lautet seit je: Der Teil ist das Ganze, und die wenigen sind in Wahrheit alle.’).
3. The term ‘movement-parties’ was coined by Kitschelt (2006). Note that it not only refers to populist parties, which tend to focus on a leader, but also to parties such as the Greens, which have grown out of social movements.

4. 'Like a Renaissance prince', Marquand (2008: 364) writes, 'Blair presided over a court, in which underlings great and small jostled for the ruler's ear, while favourites rose and fell'.
5. They also characterize this use of populist rhetoric as a 'thin' version of populist discourse, which they distinguish from a 'thick' version which also includes anti-elitist rhetoric and exclusionary rhetoric. I think using the terms 'thin' and 'thick' in this way is highly confusing, because it applies Freedman's terms in an even looser way than when they are applied to the whole set of populist beliefs. Moreover, to include exclusionary rhetoric among the elements that characterize populist discourse in general is quite misplaced, since this kind of rhetoric only applies to right-wing populism.
6. This is something that seems to escape Brubaker (2017).
7. Referring to the same trend, Poguntke and Webb (2005) introduce the notion of the 'presidentialization of politics in democratic societies' and Mény and Surel's (2000: 11) that of 'de-parlementarization' of parties.
8. See also Taggart and Kaltwasser (2016: 346) and Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017: 531).

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