

**Bipolar Disorders:
Varieties of Capitalism and Populist Out-Flanking on the Left and Right**

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Although populist leaders, movements, and parties are found in a bewildering variety of forms, they share in common a strident critique of mainstream parties and national political establishments—what many populists colorfully label *la casta política* (political caste). Where populist challengers succeed in mobilizing widespread electoral support, therefore, it is a strong indicator of a crisis of democratic representation, or at least a sure sign that mainstream parties have lost their hold over a sizable bloc of the electorate. Failures of political representation, however, can take a number of different forms, which helps explain why populist movements vary so dramatically across countries and regions. Indeed, populism can emerge on either the left or the right flank of mainstream party systems, and even, potentially, on both flanks at the same time (as the recent U.S. experience arguably suggests).

What types of representational failures, then, are conducive to these different forms of populist outflanking? And why are some countries or regions seemingly prone to one subtype of populism rather than the other? Influential work by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) has located left-wing, “inclusionary” populism in Latin America and right-wing, “exclusionary” populism in Europe (see also Filc 2015). The recent rise of left populisms in Southern Europe, however, with strong parallels to the Latin American experience, casts doubt on any notion of strict geographic determinism. It calls, instead, for a more systematic assessment of how representational failures and populist responses to them may be embedded in different structural conditions—that is, different “varieties of capitalism” and the labor market and welfare state institutions associated with them (Hall and Soskice 2001; Beremendi et al. 2015). Such structural foundations sharply differentiate Northern and Central Europe from Southern Europe and Latin America, and they may well condition the ways in which populist contenders politicize the “poles” on economic and cultural axes of democratic competition. Outflanking along these distinct poles produces left and right-wing subtypes of populism, respectively, corresponding to radically different conceptions of national integration and exclusion. So conceived, the rise of contemporary populisms reflects the “bipolar disorders” of representational failures or crises along distinct economic and cultural axes of democratic competition.

Populism and the Axes of Democratic Competition

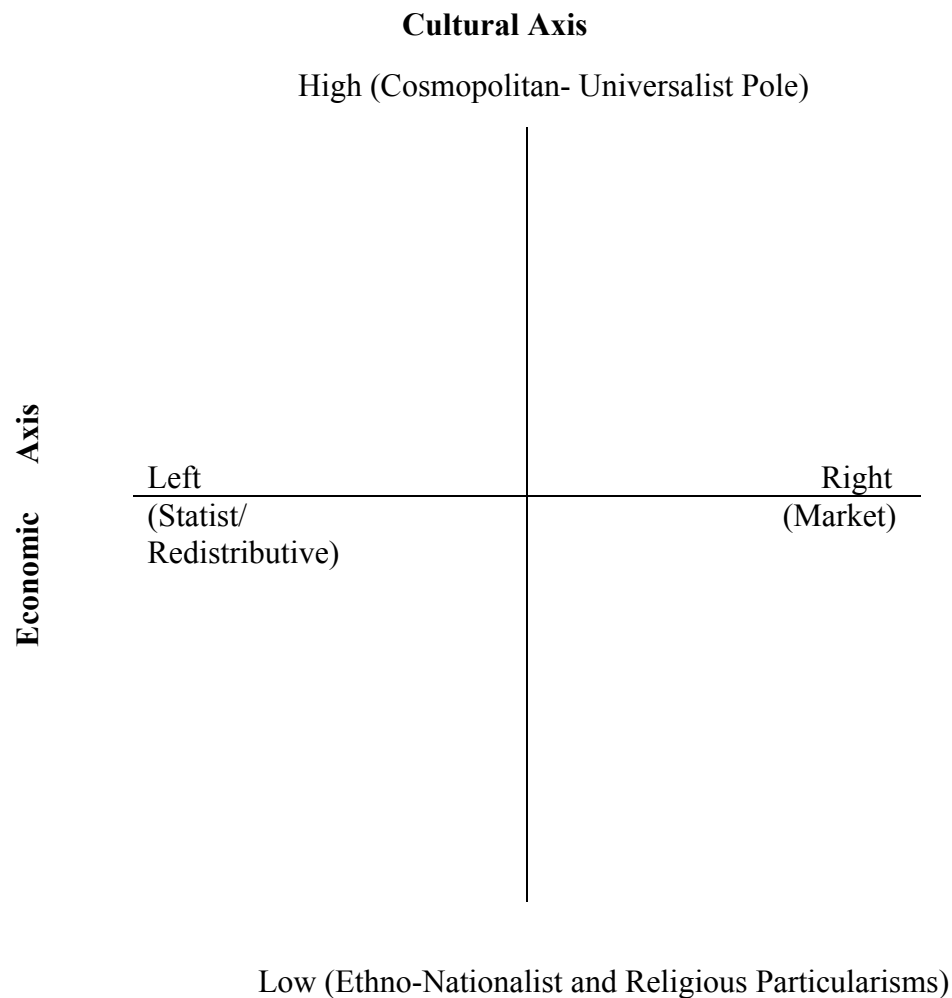
Although scholars continue to debate whether populism is best defined in terms of its ideology, discourse, political style, or leadership patterns, a broad consensus has emerged that populism’s essential political logic is best understood as an antagonistic divide between “the

people,” however conceived, and some sort of elite or establishment (also however conceived).¹ Different conceptions of “the people” and the elite lie at the heart of the distinctions between left and right-wing expressions of populism, as well as the policy or programmatic orientations associated with them. It is important to note, however, that not all populisms can be spatially or programmatically located on the left or the right; some may simply draw a sharp distinction between “the people” and the elite or establishment, or political insiders and outsiders, while adopting policy positions from across the political spectrum. Italy’s contemporary Five Star Movement is a case in point, as it has adopted an ideologically eclectic mix of policy positions and has not clearly located itself on either the left or the right flank of the party system. Instead, it is defined largely in terms of its staunch opposition to the political establishment and its use of social media to encourage new forms of civic engagement in the democratic arena. Historically, Argentine Peronism was the archetypal example of ideologically diffuse or eclectic populism; in drawing an antagonistic divide between “the people” and “the oligarchy,” it literally spanned the entire ideological spectrum from the quasi-fascist and nationalist right to the quasi-Marxist and revolutionary left (as did anti-Peronism).

Most contemporary expressions of populism, however, are readily located in left or right political space along either an economic or cultural axis of contestation. Simply put, they politicize a pole along one of these axes that mainstream parties have neglected or left vacant. Properly conceived, these axes are orthogonal to each other, rather than parallel; if the economic axis runs horizontally, as traditionally conceived, from the statist and redistributive left to the pro-market right, the cultural axis is vertically configured from a universalist and cosmopolitan “high” to a more particularistic “low,” defined in terms of ethno-nationalist and/or religious particularisms (see Kriesi 2008; Bornschier 2010; Ostiguy, forthcoming). Populisms of the left, therefore, politicize the statist and redistributive pole on the horizontal axis of economic competition. Populisms of the right, such as the Tea Party Movement in the U.S., may thus in principle politicize the anti-state, anti-taxation, and pro-market right pole on this economic axis. More typically, however, populisms of the right—confusingly labeled, perhaps—politicize the lower, particularistic pole on the vertical axis of cultural contestation, in which case they are not located on the polar end of the same competitive axis as left populism (see Figure 1). Indeed, ethno-nationalist expressions of populism have increasingly supported trade protectionism and forms of “welfare chauvinism” that defend national welfare states against the alleged costs of covering immigrant populations, stands that may well place them to the left of center on the economic axis (i.e., in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 1).

¹ This essential political logic is distinct from many traditional approaches which associated populism with a given set of economic policies, typically statist or redistributive in form. When conceived in political terms, populism is compatible with diverse range of economic policy orientations.

Figure 1: Economic and Cultural Axes of Competition



For the latter forms of populism, “the people” constitute an ethno-national community that is conceived largely in terms of cultural identities and political autonomy. This ethno-national community and its “heartland” values and identities (see Taggart 2000) are understood to be threatened by alien or multicultural influences to which established political elites are beholden. Established elites betray “the people” when they support or tolerate an influx of immigrants and outsiders from other cultural traditions that do not belong to “the heartland”—all the more so when they expend scarce national resources to help settle and sustain allegedly “undeserving” outsiders. Likewise, betrayal occurs when established elites transfer portions of national sovereignty to transnational actors and institutions that are remote from, and largely unaccountable to, the heartland and its interests (see Mudde 2007; Bornschier 2010; Art 2011; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Indeed, in established elites are understood to belong to a transversal, cosmopolitan ruling caste with a globalizing agenda that is antithetical to the cultural values and identities of common people from the heartland. The “exclusionary” character of such populism is thus attributable to its relatively narrow drawing of the boundaries for full or “authentic”

membership in a relatively homogeneous ethno-national community. Those boundaries may fully or partially exclude a wide range of “others,” from cosmopolitan elites to subaltern racial or ethnic minorities (such as the Roma in Europe or African-Americans in the U.S.) and immigrant or immigrant-descendent populations.

By contrast, populisms of the left contest a socio-economic dimension of conflict rather than a cultural one. The dividing line between “the people” and “the other” is determined by social and economic stratification and its transformation into political insider or outsider status. The “people” are not conceived in terms of a class subject—the point of demarcation between leftist populism and traditional forms of socialism—but rather in terms of non-elite economic status and political marginalization. Left-wing populism thus entails a critique of political establishments and institutions that protect economic privilege and neglect the interests of broad popular majorities—the “ninety-nine percent,” in the discourse of recent “Occupy” movements. Its inclusionary character reflects an explicit appeal to the material interests and political empowerment of groups located on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Aslinidis 2016).

These alternative subtypes of populism reflect radically different ways of structuring politics along an antagonistic divide between the people and an establishment elite. What, then, determines which of these subtypes of populism is most likely to thrive in a particular country or region at a given moment of time? It is to this question that I now turn.

Comparing Subtypes of Populism: The Search for Explanations

Although Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) broke new ground in conceptualizing the distinctions between inclusive and exclusionary forms of populism, they did not attempt to develop a theoretical explanation to account for cross-regional patterns of variation in the emergence of these distinct subtypes. Subsequent research sought to extend their arguments by exploring how regionally-differentiated subtypes of populism have been shaped by historical legacies of colonial conquest and subjugation. According to Filc (2015: 269), exclusionary ethno-nationalist populism in modern Europe builds off colonial understandings of natural racial hierarchies and their “exclusionary notions of people, nation, political community, sovereignty and citizenship.” By contrast, inclusive left-wing populism in Latin America reflects the broad, anti-elite forms of struggle found in post-colonial settings where “the category ‘people’ is synonymous with the colonial subaltern” (Filc 2015: 270). Such legacies of colonialism, however, would not appear to explain why a form of left-wing populism (Podemos in Spain) and more established radical left parties (Portugal) have recently strengthened in former colonial powers during the European economic crisis, as opposed to the more exclusionary forms of right-wing populism that are on the ascendance in northern and central Europe. Indeed, Spain and Portugal appear strikingly similar to their former Latin American colonies in their political fallout from recent economic crises, rather than following divergent populist trajectories.

These parallels to Latin America, and the broader differentiation between populist patterns in southern and northern Europe, raise a number of intriguing puzzles for comparative analysis. It is possible, for example, that the appeal of exclusionary nationalist populism in southern Europe has been limited by memories of right-wing authoritarian rule that lasted until

the mid-1970s in Greece, Spain, and Portugal. David Art's (2011) comparative research, however, suggests that strong authoritarian-nationalist political subcultures with roots in prior historical periods are conducive to subsequent forms of right-wing populist mobilization. It is not clear, then, why southern Europe would be immune from this larger pattern. Similarly, southern Europe may be partially insulated from right-wing nationalist populism because citizens in the sub-region are more favorable toward the European Union, which traditionally provided support for democratization, economic modernization, and development funding. Given the role of EU institutions in the imposition of harsh austerity and adjustment measures on southern European debtors during the post-2008 financial crisis, however—and their staunch defense of the interests of creditors—the continuation of pro-EU attitudes was hardly inevitable. And with the exception, perhaps, of Portugal, southern Europe has been heavily exposed to the waves of immigrants and refugees fleeing their troubled homelands, making it hard to attribute divergent populisms to different levels of migration.

Cross-regional comparisons to the Latin American experience shed light on a number of other potential explanatory factors for intra-European populist variation. First, inclusive, left-leaning populism is *not* an inevitable by-product of peripheral or semi-peripheral status in regional or global capitalist economies. Neither is it a simple function of severe economic crises, harsh austerity and structural adjustment measures, or the political backlash of debtors against creditors. These variables were shared to greater or lesser degrees by all Latin American countries in the 1980s and 90s, and they do little to differentiate those cases that did or did not turn to the left or elect an anti-establishment populist outsider at the turn of the century. Instead, the rise of inclusive leftist populism was more politically contingent, as it depended on the configuration of established parties around the process of neoliberal reform. Left populism did not flourish where conservative actors led the process of neoliberal reform and a major, institutionalized party of the left was available to channel societal opposition to market orthodoxy—a configuration that served to programmatically align and stabilize party systems in countries like Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay. Left populism only arose where traditional labor-based and center-left parties took the lead in the process of neoliberal reform, a configuration found in countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina. Such bait-and-switch patterns of reform caused party systems to converge around variants of market orthodoxy that programmatically de-aligned partisan competition, channeled societal opposition into extra-systemic forms of social and electoral protest, and opened vacant political space for populist outsiders on the left flank of mainstream parties (Roberts 2014).

This latter, de-aligning pattern was clearly the norm in southern Europe, where traditional Socialist parties played a major role in the initial adoption of market-based austerity and structural adjustment policies after 2009 in Greece, Spain, and Portugal, while the main center-left party supported a technocratic government that adopted austerity measures in Italy (della Porta et al. 2017). As in Latin America, the convergence of mainstream parties around variants of neoliberal orthodoxy set the stage for cycles of mass social protest starting in 2011 and, subsequently, the rise or electoral strengthening of diverse populist (Five Star in Italy) or radical left (*Podemos* in Spain, *SYRIZA* in Greece, and *Bloco de Esquerda* in Portugal) alternatives, with the latter often employing at least some form of populist discourse. In contrast to northern Europe, exclusionary forms of ethno-nationalist populism made little headway during this period of upheaval on the south of the continent.

It is doubtful, however, that these different expressions of populism were preordained by the convergence of mainstream parties in the south around neoliberal formulas and the attendant opening of vacant political space on their left flank. Although less dramatic, perhaps, similar convergence processes had long been underway in central and northern Europe as well (Mair 2013), but they did not spawn the rise of inclusionary populism on the left flank of traditional social democracy. Instead, they encouraged a subtle but important shift in the programmatic stance of ethno-national populist parties in much (though not all) of the region. In their origins in the 1980s and 1990s, these parties often coupled their cultural nativism with anti-taxation, pro-market planks that reflected their antipathy for large, activist state institutions. The convergence of mainstream parties around pro-market positions, however, loosened social democracy's hold on blue collar and less educated workers who often felt threatened by the forces of globalization (Kriesi 2008). In such a context, ethno-nationalist parties could make electoral gains by shedding their neoliberal mantle, appealing to protectionist sentiments, and defending social programs against the high costs of covering immigrant populations. Such forms of welfare chauvinism provided an economic complement to these parties' cultural nativism, and at least partially filled the political void created by social democracy's pro-market drift.

What must be asked, then, is whether these divergent expressions of populism have deeper, more structural roots in the varieties of capitalism themselves that differentiate northern and southern Europe. Some preliminary theoretical reflections on these structural roots and how they might condition the populist construction of elite-popular divides are outlined below.

Varieties of Capitalism and the Populist Construction of “The People”

In a recent paper comparing left-wing, anti-neoliberal populisms in Latin America and Southern Europe, Enrico Padoan (2016) drew attention to the political effects of highly dualized labor markets in both regions. Delayed, inward-oriented industrialization and capitalist development in both regions provided for a very partial incorporation of the labor force into formal sector employment and the forms of social protection that were attached to it (see Rueda, Wibbels, and Altamirano 2015). Workers in the formal sector of the economy—the so-called labor market “insiders”—enjoyed union representation, greater employment security, and more generous social programs, whereas labor market “outsiders” working on temporary contracts or in informal economic activities suffered from a lack of organization, precarious employment, and more limited access to social assistance. According to Padoan (2016), such labor market dualization was conducive to the rise of left-leaning populist movements that supported the political and economic inclusion of outsider groups. This was especially the case during periods of economic crisis, since insiders could use their organizational strength and political leverage to insulate themselves from the worst effects of the crisis, thus forcing outsiders to shoulder a disproportionate share of the social and economic costs of adjustment (Rueda, Wibbels, and Altamirano 2015).

Indeed, a broader comparative perspective suggests that the populist framing of “the people” and the “other” may well be conditioned by labor market and welfare state institutions under different varieties of capitalism. These structural and institutional attributes of distinct capitalist formations not only influence levels of social stratification, or inequality; more

important for an understanding of populism, perhaps, they influence the degrees of social integration, cohesion, and segmentation. In Southern Europe or the extreme example of Latin America's dependent and "hierarchical" capitalism (Ross Schneider 2013), dualistic labor markets and porous welfare state institutions segment the social landscape—that is, they create basic distinctions between citizens who are included and those who are largely or partially excluded from secure employment and all but the most basic forms of social services. Although political preferences or cleavages do not necessarily map onto these social distinctions, the de facto exclusion of a large percentage of the national community—a segment that clearly belongs to "the people"—may well create an elective affinity for leftist, inclusionary forms of populist mobilization under conditions of economic crisis or ineffectual partisan representation. Such forms of populism aim at a more thorough integration of the national community—that is, overcoming patterns of segmentation and dualization that preclude "the people" from being whole. The "other," then, for this type of populism, refers to political and economic elites whose privileged insider status is predicated on the exclusion of other sectors of the national community.

The "people" and the "other" may be framed quite differently where national labor markets are relatively unified and welfare states provide a broad range of universalistic benefits, as in most of northern and central Europe. Although less educated, blue-collar workers may be potential "losers" in the process of globalization, they are not typically labor market or welfare state outsiders still seeking inclusion within the national community. They are more likely to be integrated members of "the people" trying to protect what they have from external pressures to open up, enlarge, and diversify the national community. Populist mobilization, then, is not primarily an effort to incorporate marginalized groups or integrate different sectors of "the people." It is, instead, an effort to demarcate "the people"—that is, to separate those who authentically "belong" and are "worthy" of inclusion from those "others" who are "different" and deemed legitimately excludable. Such demarcation is readily apparent in the welfare chauvinism of ethno-national populist parties, and its political logic is the polar opposite of the social integration pursued by leftist variants of populism.

The paradox, then, is that exclusionary forms of populism may find their most fertile soil where capitalist labor markets and welfare states are more inclusive, egalitarian, and integrative, whereas inclusive forms of populism may thrive where capitalism is most exclusionary, segmented, and dualistic. So conceived, alternative subtypes of populism would appear to have structural and institutional foundations in distinct patterns of capitalist development that differentiate northern and southern Europe, and leave the latter approximating the Latin American experience.

Although these two subtypes of populism are politicizing distinct economic and political poles of contestation, they both emerge in political space that has been largely vacated by traditional parties of the left. As these parties moved toward the center and right on the economic axis in Figure 1 and upward on the vertical cultural axis, they vacated much of the left-hand side of the figure and, in particular, the lower-left quadrant, where ethno-national populist parties increasingly compete for support. The Trump phenomenon in the U.S. demonstrates the formidable potential of such ethno-national populisms—even where capitalism is less egalitarian and integrative-- in contexts where the national community is racially stratified and subject to

significant immigration pressures. Indeed, the simultaneous rise of Trump on the right flank and Bernie Sanders on the left flank of the U.S. party system demonstrates the possibility of politicizing both the economic and cultural poles in true bipolar fashion. A similar pattern could also be seen in the recent French election with Marine Le Pen on the right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the left flank of mainstream parties. Such cases clearly demonstrate the relationship between populism and representational deficiencies in traditional party systems.

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