Populism and domestic/ international politics: theory and practice

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to contend that populism is damaging to both domestic and international politics; not only does it erode liberal democracy in established democracies but also fuels authoritarianism in despotic regimes and aggravates conflicts and crises in international system.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is divided into two main sections. First, it examines how populist mobilization affects liberal democracy, and refutes the claims that populism is beneficial and reinforcing to democracy. Second, it attempts to demonstrate how populism is damaging to domestic politics (by undermining liberal democracy and supporting authoritarianism) as well as international relations (by making interstate conflicts more likely to materialize). Theoretically, populism is assumed to be a strategy used by politicians to maximize their interest. Hence, populism is a strategy used by politicians to mobilize constituents using the main features of populist discourse.

Findings – The research argues that populism has detrimental consequences on both domestic and international politics; it undermines liberal democracy in democratic countries, upsurges authoritarianism in autocratic regimes and heightens the level of conflict and crises in international politics. Populism can lead to authoritarianism. There is one major undemocratic trait shared by all populist waves around the world, particularly democracies; that is anti-pluralism/anti-institutions. Populist leaders perceive foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics, because they consider themselves as the only true representatives of the people. Therefore, populist actors abandon any political opposition as necessarily illegitimate, with repercussions on foreign policy.

Originality/value – Some scholars argue that populism reinforces democracy by underpinning its ability to include marginalized sectors of the society and to decrease voter apathy, the research refuted these arguments. Populism is destructive to world democracy; populists are reluctant to embrace the idea of full integration with other nations. Populists reject the idea of open borders, and reckon it an apparent threat to their national security. The research concludes that populists consider maximizing their national interests on the international level by following confrontational policies instead of cooperative ones.

Keywords Politics, Democracy, Populism, Trump, Multilateralism, Foreign policy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Populism is not a new phenomenon; it came into scholarly attention in the 1960s and 1970s, as it rose and prevailed in the Latin American politics, and then came back into focus in the

1990s. Once again, and perhaps more vehemently than ever, populism is coming back to the fore of political analysis; largely due to the rise of a number of populist leaders worldwide. The most prominent characteristic of all the scholarly work done on populism is that it lacks a coherent, universal definition of the concept. There is an old-new debate going on in academic literature on how to approach such a phenomenon, and what can be described as being "populist" [1]. However, there is a set of certain themes and characteristics that are constantly ascribed to populism regardless of the approach through which the phenomenon is handled. Three core themes are usually underlying any populist rhetoric: the first theme has to do with the notion of the "people" – a term referring to a virtuous, homogenous, but often ambiguous majority – who share the same interests and desires. The enemies of the "people" (the "others") are trying to dismantle or destroy their interest with the help of their allies (the powerful and corrupt elites). The second core theme of any populist rhetoric is the depiction of the political game as a struggle of *us vs them* – of the "people" and their enemies who are usually a minority group that is portrayed as supported by the powerful and corrupt elite. The third running theme is populism's antiestablishment discourse and/or attitude; the idea of bringing profound changes to – or even destroying – the current establishment and putting forward a new, more virtuous one that manifests the good of the people (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).

Apart from those core themes, certain characteristics are to be found in the populist rhetoric at any time. First, populism is often directed towards marginalized sectors of the society, who are less well-off economically, and underprivileged socially, in an attempt to valorize them and hence gain their support. As populism is centered on such concepts as the "majority" and the "people", and is directed to the less well-off groups, the language used to deliver such message has to be comprehensible by the majority of the people. When in use, the populist rhetoric puts the blame of the main dilemmas faced by the majority on their enemies, while "the people" are good, virtuous, and do not deserve what is happening to them (Van Droogenboeck *et al.*, 2016).

In a literature review conducted by Weatherhead Center of Harvard University, populism was divided into three main approaches. The first approach considers populism as an ideology. In this sense, populism can be used to describe a certain party or a politician (whereupon an individual or a party can be called a populist). The second approach defines populism as a discursive style, in which case populism can be used to describe certain incidents, in which the populist rhetoric is employed, and not a person or a party. The third approach embraces populism as a political strategy used for policy choices, political organization and/or political mobilization. In this latter sense, populism can neither be a movement or party type, nor a regime type or a personal discursive style, but rather a set of political activities that include mobilization and discursive practices aiming at generating legitimacy and support by valorizing and mobilizing marginalized social sectors into public and visible political practice (Jansen, 2011a). In their quest to mobilize those marginalized sectors, populists use a direct, simplistic language that implicates the other two core themes of populism: placing a virtuous majority in conflict with corrupt elite, and the urge to alter the current establishment (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). This research embraces the third approach: populism as a political strategy used by politicians worldwide to maximize their political gains in pursuit of power and influence.

The essential characteristic of the contemporary wave of populism is that in many cases it has right-wing nationalistic ideas. With the increasing yielding of power to supranational institutions, the hitting global economic crises, and the unceasing influx of immigrants and refugees from the developing to the developed world, far-right politics is becoming more and more popular (Kazin, 2016). However, this is not always the case – the current Greek ruling

elite employed a populist mobilization strategy to get to power even though the coalition has leftist views. Populist mobilization is no longer confined to developing countries, the most prominent historical case being Latin America, but has increasingly become more and more popular in developed liberal democratic states, and is proliferating among the world's oldest and most consolidated democracies (Van Droogenboeck *et al.*, 2016).

Research question

This research argues that populism has detrimental consequences on both domestic and international politics; it undermines liberal democracy in democratic countries, upsurges authoritarianism in autocratic regimes, and heightens the level of conflict and crises in international politics. As for domestic politics, the question which looms among the academic circles is: how does the use of populist rhetoric for mobilization fit in the context of a liberal democracy? This is one of the most debated topics among scholars of populism. Scholars such as Kaltwasser, Mudde and Postel regard populism as a phenomenon that reinforces democracy and democratic values. Given the declining mobilization and public participation rates on the one hand, and the widening scope of social marginalization in the democratic world, with the representation gap and democratic deficit it produces, on the other hand, the aforesaid scholars maintain that the core idea of democracy – understood in terms of popular sovereignty – is being lost. To put it differently, they argue that populist mobilization bridges the representation gap, and reinstates the very essence of democracy: the rule of the people. Besides, they argue, it is a tool to translated the majority's will into political reality. The current wave of populism, thus viewed, is understood as a tool for the revival of direct democracy – a trend of thought that has been growing during the past decade among the exponents of populism (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016).

On the other side of the spectrum, there are scholars such as Bartloni, Levitsky and Loxton who present the counter argument that populism is damaging to liberal democracy. From this standpoint, liberal democracy is centered on liberal principles (significance of the individual, civil liberties, etc.) inasmuch as it is centered on the core democratic notion of the rule of the majority. It follows that populism could be seen to blemish the liberal aspect of democracy by attaching the foremost significance to "the people" rather than the individual, and by creating the idea of the enemy – often a sector of the society whose civil liberties become, more often than not, susceptible to denial or infringement, at least verbally, by the populists. Such infringement is highly destructive to the liberal aspect in any state embracing liberal democracy. The populist claim of giving voice to "the people" and the marginalized silent majority could arguably turn into – or even serve as a euphemism for – tyranny of the majority, as civil liberties and rights of the minority are crushed. In certain cases, the populist practices have amounted to an un-ambivalent attack on liberal democratic institutions and not only the elites. This, however, is rare, and none of such cases has succeeded in consolidated democracies. On the international level of analysis, populism is destructive to world democracy, as populists are against the idea of full integration with other nations. As seen by populists, integration is a threat to the national culture and identity. In addition, populists reject the idea of open borders, on the ground that it poses an obvious threat to their national security (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016).

The argument embraced by this study runs as follows: although populism is being depicted as supportive to democracy and the democratic essence, the consequences of such a phenomenon could be very dangerous, especially on the long run. As opposed to the argument made by some scholars that populism may succeed in mobilizing the marginalized sectors, and in filling the representation gap that is lethal to democracy, this study argues that the central themes of populism create an anti-democratic atmosphere that

puts the society in a state of constant conflict between those who are "virtuous" and those who are "corrupt", with the "virtuous" empowered to transgress or infringe the rights and liberties of the "corrupt". One can't but wonder if liberal democracy can survive in such an atmosphere; over time, leads to the decay of the liberal democratic values in both civil and state institutions. Populism also leads to buttressing authoritarianism in autocratic regimes. This research attempts to provide pieces of evidence meant to refute the argument that populism reinforces democracy, as well as to prove that it has destructive ramifications on domestic politics (most notably undermining liberal democracy, and increasing authoritarianism), and the international politics as well. Therefore, the key question of the study is: Why is populism destructive to domestic and international politics, despite the fact that it is often being portrayed to be reinforcing and reviving the true essence of democracy?

This research maintains that populism infringes civil liberties through limiting or attempting to effectively limit the freedoms of political opposition, transgress individual liberties, encroach on press freedom, as well as tightening censorship on several levels. Populism also affects the transparency and competitiveness of elections, and attempts to concentrate power in the hands of executive branch of government, hence restraining the constitutional separation of powers. Against this backdrop, the research is divided into two main sections. First, it examines how populist mobilization affects liberal democracy, and refutes the claims that populism is beneficial and reinforcing to democracy. Second, it attempts to demonstrate how populism is damaging to domestic politics (by undermining liberal democracy and supporting authoritarianism) as well as international relations (by making interstate conflicts more likely to materialize).

The research is based on a theoretical perspective in which populism is assumed to be a strategy used by politicians to maximize their interest. Hence, populism is strategy used by politicians at a specific period of time to mobilize constituents using the main features of populist discourse: an appeal to the "people" (a "good", unified and sovereign body with a common interest and a general will), an appeal to the corrupt elite who are conspiring against the "people", an antagonistic relation between the "people" and the elite, exclusion of a certain group or groups (the "others"), claiming that the "others" are allied with the corrupt elite, and the desire of the populists to replace the current "corrupt" order with a new one representing the "people" (Hanspeter and Pappas, 2015).

Populism and domestic politics: theoretical perspective
Populism as a political strategy is made up of a set of ideas, partially making it an ideology. Those ideas manifest themselves in a discursive style which is used within a strategy to mobilize supporters and constituents (Jansen, 2011b). The liberal democratic state has a duty to protect individual rights from any infringements or transgressions, whether by a third party or the state itself. The four foundations on which a liberal democratic state is based are universal suffrage, allowing for competitive and fair elections based on a pluralist conception of politics; rule of law, protecting against the violation of individuals' rights by state and non-state actors; definition and division governance roles between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government; and the scope and freedoms enjoyed by individuals and the civil society. The role of civil society is vital to liberal democracy; as it encourages participation and acts as a sphere that connects individuals to state actors and vice versa (Galston, 2018).

Although populism decreases the representation gap [2], and increases participation in the short-run, its long-term effects are bound to undermine the liberal element in a liberal democratic state. To start with, populist rhetoric is premised upon "the people" – a notion which implies a collectivity as the basis of society, as opposed to liberalism's emphasis on

individualism. Collective and group discourse destroys individualism, and hence, the foundational idea of populism (the collectivity of an implied majority – "the people") contradicts the core concept of liberalism (the individual).

There are three illiberal consequences associated with populism. First, it rejects the checks and balances that are essential in any liberal democratic state. In other words, it is inconsistent with the constitutionalist dimension of democracy. As the populist leader is envisioned as the embodiment of the collective will of the majority, his/her supporters are often willing to tolerate the concentration of power in his/her hands, as opposed to the constitutional checks and balances implicated by liberal democracy. Second, it rejects any intermediaries between the people and the decision-makers, including political parties and other forms of civil-society organizations. Third, its view of the will of the people as predetermined and unanimous denies any room for pluralism, which is the driving force behind any liberal democracy (Hanspeter and Pappas, 2015).

In addition to the foregoing, the main breach of the constitutionalist dimension of democracy occurs through the concentration of power in the executive branch, and often in the figure of the leader. Populists are most effective when in power, and affecting the democratic institutions often takes time and multiple terms in office. Re-election often shows popular approval, which allows for the implementation of more controversial polices. The actor using a populist strategy often looks for a pretext to consolidate his/her authority and popularity that enables him/her to alter democratic institutions, causing them to emphasize polarization and conflict between the "people" and the "others". Furthermore, the concentration of power in the executive branch is further exacerbated when the populist actor is a political outsider. In that case, the outsider populist often lacks the linkages and connections with other parties and established politicians that would ease the negotiation process with political opponents. As a result, they choose the easier route of "circumventing" the other branches of government, and running directly through the executive.

Moreover, populists seem to conceptualize the political game in terms of a moral struggle between a virtuous body of people whose wills are embodied by the populist leader on the one hand, and corrupt elite that assist an amoral sector of the society and act in this minority's interest while ignoring the interest of the majority. From the populist's perspective, the corrupt elite have lost their right to be part of the political scene, because they abused their roles by acting against the common good. Therefore, the elite and their minority of supporters should be persistently scrutinized and monitored. Such demoralization (or even demonization) justifies the use of undemocratic procedures when dealing with the opposition, including the violation of the individual civil liberties of those who belong to the demoralized minority. Civil rights infringements include encroaching on the freedom of the political opposition by restricting the freedom of assembly and association, and increasing censorship while constraining the freedom of press. Indicators such as increased media censorship and high rates of imprisoned journalists are key signs of the countries where populists have long been in power (Freyburg et al., 2019).

Scholars who assert that populism strengthens or corrects democracy frequently adopt the following main arguments to support their claim. First, they argue that populism includes previously excluded sectors of the society, whether such exclusion is on an economic, political or a social/cultural basis. Second, they argue that populism is able to "heal" democracy that has been deteriorating due to the decrease in voter turnout and political apathy. Populism, hence, revives people's interest in politics, increasing mobilization of constituents and, hence, the voter turnout. Third, they argue that populism reinforces democracy when they include substantial sectors of the society in the political

process, and voter turnout increases, all of which leads to enhanced representation in the democratic institutions (Freyburg *et al.*, 2019).

These claims about the positive effects of populism on constituent mobilization and inclusion can be refuted as follows: first, although populism does succeed in including marginalized sectors of the society into the political game, thereby deepening democracy in these countries and broadening the effect of different social groups on the policies implemented, such inclusion, in many cases, proves to be counter-productive; it may lead to a deficiency in public contestation, as it demoralizes other groups, and curbs the plurality deemed to be essential for a functioning democracy. Even in Latin America, where populism succeeded in including previously excluded sectors of the society, almost all Latin American populist leaders share the habit of viewing political competition as a fully fledged war between "the people" and their enemies. For instance, before winning the presidential elections in Bolivia, President Evo Morales said, "The elections are going to be an arm wrestling between consciousness and money" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), endowing his followers with virtue, and dismissing his opponents as dishonest. In other words, the moral categorization of the people to mobilize them in the face an immoral, demonized enemy creates a public discourse that divides people into two main groups (the "good" versus the "evil"). This logic, thus viewed, undermines pluralism that is essential for the quality and survival of democracy, and diminishes respect for the rules of the democratic game at large (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

Second, populism is seen as related to political apathy. In this purview, populism emerges during times of widespread political apathy and is able to "heal" this apathy by mobilizing those who were feeling apathetic. However, the two claims made in this sentence are negated by empirical evidence. The first claim is that populism emerges during times of widespread political apathy. In reality, the right-wing populist parties in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway) were able to gain increasing support in elections during the past decade even though those countries do not suffer from political apathy; as voter turnout is high in those countries, and voters believe that their voices will be heard.

The second claim is that populism increases mobilization and decreases political apathy. Although political participation is not limited to voting in elections, the latter is still a key factor in measuring how apathetic the masses are. However, empirical evidence does not necessarily support this claim. Populism may create an incentive to vote for individuals who would not have voted otherwise and now explicitly vote for parties/individuals with anti-liberal, anti-democratic and anti-pluralist ideas. The most resonant populist success nowadays is that of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential elections. Donald Trump employed what is an inarguably populist rhetoric in a country which has been suffering from a declining trend in voter turnout. As opposed to the assertion that populism enhances mobilization and is a remedy to political apathy, the 2016 American presidential election estimates show that 57.9% of eligible voters participated in the elections, down from 58.6% in 2012 and 61.6% in 2008. If nothing else, the estimates prove that populist mobilization does not necessarily entail increased mobilization. In addition, the latest French election witnessed the success of Marine Le Pen into the second round but did not witness her success. Even in the French case, the populist mobilization employed by Le Pen did not increase turnout rates, as the turnout was the lowest over the past 40 years at 66% (The Guardian, 2017).

When discussing the effect of populism on democracy, one of the most critical issues that arise is the prominence of "the leader" in populist mobilization. Trump, Le Pen, Erdogan, Orban, and many more populist leaders serve as the focal point of their campaigns and

electorates. Such extreme personalization of politics can be dangerous if the populist leader opts to subjugate the people to his/her views. Nevertheless, the real threat is the expansion of a party's or a figure's political strategy into a whole political regime. Populist actors tend to be oppressive to democracy when they become institutionalized in a regime, owing to the inherent propensity of populism to undermine law and personalize of politics. This becomes even more dangerous once institutionalized, even if such a regime is advocated by the majority of the people. The most notable example of such a phenomenon is Nazi Germany, where the populist leader enjoyed vast advocacy. The danger of populism turning into a regime is not a thing of the past; the trajectory that the Turkish president Erdogan is moving on is quite alarming (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2020).

The problem with the argument for the benefit of populist mobilization with regard to democracy is that it often rests on theoretical and normative speculation, rather than empirical observation, especially when it comes to established democracies, as is the case in Western European countries or the USA. Most of these scholars' arguments are empirically tested and found successful in Latin America only, and this means that the positive effect of populism on democracy is not universal, but specified to specific social, economic, historical and political circumstances, and namely newborn democracies.

Populism as detrimental to liberal democracy: Donald Trump's example

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential elections in the USA has given a fresh momentum to populism. Although the usage of populism as a mobilization strategy has been on the rise for years now, its success to win the highest position in the world's most powerful country signified a new era to liberal democracy – an era in which populism has become a major contender. Ever since Trump started to get into politics, and up till now, he has constantly been using populist strategies and rhetoric to attract and mobilize supporters. Trump constantly refers to the "people" in his speeches, and presents himself as the savior of the nation. In his inauguration speech, he is famously quoted as saying:

> Today's ceremony, however, 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 DC and giving it back to you, the people.

"January 20, 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again." In addition, Trump also attacked the "establishment" in the very same speech: "The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country" (Winters, 2017).

Trump also included in his speeches exclusionary phrases. The two social groups most targeted by his exclusionary speech were Muslims and Latinos. Examples of the latter case include his statement reported by CNN: "When Mexico is sending its people, they're not sending their best [. . .] they're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (June 16, 2015).

In December 2015, Trump said that, in case he won, he would establish a "total and complete" ban on Muslims from entering the USA. Donald Trump put this statement, albeit partially, into practice when, in January 2017, the White House announced executive order no. 13769, placing a ban on the citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, in addition to Sudan – and specifically the Muslims – from entering the USA for 90 days. It also indefinitely suspended the entry of a large number of Syrian refugees. In what amounted to a policy of un-ambivalent segregation and exclusion, that order banned the entry into the USA on purely religious grounds. This is fundamentally inconsistent with the American liberalism that was enshrined in the First Amendment that clearly sets forth the necessity of

freedom of belief and strongly opposes any form of religious segregation (ACLU Washington, 2019).

Thus, the executive order 13769, dubbed "Trump's Muslim Ban", clearly violates the individual liberty and the liberal value of freedom of belief which was vital throughout the American history. However, there was a counter-argument, this time presented by the US Supreme Court in a 5–4 opinion written by Chief Justice, John Roberts, who found that Trump's travel restriction fell "squarely" within the president's authority. The court rejected claims that the ban was motivated by religious hostility, arguing that the order "is expressly premised on legitimate purposes: preventing entry of nationals who cannot be adequately vetted and inducing other nations to improve their practices" (Williams, 2018). After the lapse of this order's 90 days, Trump issued executive order 13780 on March 16, 2017. The new order responded to the previous attacks and lessened the prohibitions on Muslims *per se*, but rather prohibited the entry of certain nationalities regardless of their religion. Nevertheless, the countries mentioned are Muslim-majority countries, and given Trump's tradition of anti-Muslim rhetoric, and the history of his policy proposal, the targeting of Muslims in these executive orders is still obvious. This executive order has also brought about legal contestation and a conflict with the judiciary (ACLU Washington, 2019).

Moreover, Donald Trump's campaign calls for mass deportation of undocumented people within the US borders were put into practice, as can be inferred from the two memos signed by new Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly that were leaked to the media. These memos confirm that deporting undocumented people will become much easier under Trump and will enable arresting those who are in schools or hospitals or are seeking sanctuary in churches. This is likely to lead to mass deportation, which, again, might lead to the infringement of American liberal values and the rights of these immigrants as human beings (Domonoske and Rose, 2017). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) argues that such enforcement would erode civil liberties of the undocumented people as it would lead to "a systematic reliance on racial profiling and illegal detentions". Mass deportation would entail interrogations and arrests without suspicion; unjustified traffic stops, warrantless searches of private places, and crackdowns on immigrant neighborhoods – all on the basis of race or color. In other words, Trump has flipped U.S. immigration policy on its head, and the fate of millions of people is at stake. In a striking move, on September 27, 2019, a federal judge rejected a plan by the Trump administration to keep migrant families in custody indefinitely while their court cases get resolved. If enacted, the government's plan would have overturned a decades-old federal court settlement that caps at 20 days the period child migrants can be held in detention. Such arbitrary actions are not condoned by liberal standards: not only does the Universal Declaration of human rights reject such arbitrary measures, but the American constitution – the reflection of liberalism – has prohibited such measures unless supported by a cause to suspect (Garcia, 2019).

As human rights are in their essence are a liberal ideal, a liberal democratic state should be set about to protect and defend human rights and not violate them. However, during his campaign, Donald Trump's demonstrated his approval of torture methods to get information or punish a terrorist. He condoned the use of waterboarding when he said that he "love[s] waterboarding" and that he "would absolutely authorize something beyond waterboarding." Waterboarding and other forms of torture are both internationally and domestically (in the USA) banned, and are dismissed as against human rights (Johnson, 2016). In addition, US Ambassador to the U.N., Nikki Haley, announced in June 2018 that the USA was leaving the U.N. Human Rights Council. The USA is the first nation to ever withdraw from the council, and one of only four nations in the world that does not participate in its proceedings (Finoh, 2018). This has led some scholars to argue that human

rights have never been a top priority on Trump's agenda. He has let leaders like Kim Jong Un off easy when it comes to human rights abuses. Now, he's willing to send migrants elsewhere, even if their human rights and safety will be endangered. He also seems willing to countenance human rights abuses in the USA, as long as he can blame someone else (Vinograd, 2019). To wrap up, Donald Trump seems to be insisting on transgressing or bypassing the liberal values upon which his country has not only been based but also been claiming to spread for decades now all around the world.

As the USA is a world leading country, so far as freedoms are concerned, the effect of populism and populist rhetoric will not be as transient or limited as was the case in Turkey and even in Hungary. Nevertheless, Freedom House indicators have shown a decline in two indicators in press freedom in the USA, a decline which was assigned as due to the political environment. In a country that has a history of respect for the media, its transparency, and its influence, Trump's attacks on important media outlets such as The Washington Post and New York Times, and his accusation of the media as "illegitimate," "disgusting," "slime," "absolute scum," and "the enemy of the American people" are directed at limiting popular trust in the media and undermining its credibility as a watchdog, and this can be seen as an alteration of the rules on which the American media has functioned for quite a long time. Consequently, Trump's advocates adopted a perception of media similar to Trump's, and faced the journalists with harsh attacks and harassment on the social media with threatening and anti-Semitic remarks. The media outlets slandered by Trump responded mainly in the same attitude, creating a conflict between the government and most of the media outlets (media outlets are not acting as mere watchdogs anymore, but rather as enemies), the latter of which lost their objectivity and became more partisan. Hence, Trump's populist strategies are transforming the positive role that media has been playing for a long time in the USA (Freedom House, 2017; Grynbaum, 2017).

Additionally, although the exclusion of journalists from events and/or White House briefings is not common in American politics, major media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, Reuters, the Los Angeles Times, and even Politico were excluded from an off-camera briefing held by the White House Secretary Sean Spicer. While the CNN announced that this is "an unacceptable development by the Trump White House," and considered this to be a response to the reporting of "facts they don't like," Spicer said that the White House plans to fight against "unfair coverage" (Alpert, 2019). Therefore, the Trump administration is clearly altering the rules of the game in the USA, and is creating a new, severe form of conflict between the press and the government, a conflict the consequences of which on press freedom are yet to unfold. Although it will not be realistic to argue that press freedom will diminish in the USA, nor that censorship will prevail, it can be said that if the Trump administration continues this anti-media approach, a new type of triangular relationship between the media, the people and the government will be formed, which might put an end to the media's role as a watchdog, and affect press freedom (Freedom House, 2017; Grynbaum, 2017).

Two incidents can be cited to signify Trump's propensity to breach the rules of the American political game, and concentrate power in his hands. Before so, however, it is important to note that Trump's experience and attitude are unprecedented in American political history: the only President whose actions are comparable to those of Nixon, whose transgression of the constitutional limits occurred only after his reelection, and not in the first months of his first term. Donald Trump signed what came to be known as the travel ban only 10 days after his election, and stirred waves of criticism and attacks that put him in the face of the judiciary institutions as the Federal Judges of both Hawaii and Maryland revoked major parts of his executive orders, and dismissed them as unconstitutional on the

ground of targeting Muslims. Although none of the two executive orders explicitly mentions banning Muslims, if they are put in the context of Trump's campaign statements, in which he clearly called for "a total and complete shutdown entering the United States [. . .]", and in light of their geographic scope, they can be easily understood as discriminatory against Muslims – which is a limit on religious freedom, something that was explicitly forbidden by the First Amendment (Watson and Mcdole, 2018).

The clear concentration of power in the executive's hands is evident in the cases of the dismissal of Sally Yates and James Comey. Yates, the former attorney journal, was dismissed by Trump from her position due to her stance against Trump's first travel ban. Yates wrote to the lawyers of the Department of Justice and invited them to take a stance against Trump's order. Trump's administration considered this move an act of betrayal, "relieved" Yates of her job, and assigned Jeff Sessions, a strong Trump ally, in her place. This move by Trump and his administration not only highlights Donald Trump's desire to take control, personally, of the immigration issue, but also his desire to fill the important and powerful posts in the governmental sector with his allies and advocates, so that he can ensure the loyalty of these positions to him, by means of proliferating his power and influence throughout the branches of government.

The unblemished case of Trump's executive authoritativeness is his dismissal of the FBI director James Comey, who led the investigations of the claims about links between the president's associates and the Russians. Appointed Sessions claimed that the termination of Comey was due to his handling of Clinton's use of a private email server for classified information. Generally speaking, FBI directors are insulated from politics by being hired for 10 years in office; for an FBI director to be dismissed is highly unlikely. The last FBI director to be fired was William Sessions, who was fired by President Clinton, but on the ground of misconduct charges, and alleged abuse of office (Shear and Apuzzo, 2017).

However, Trump's firing of Comey led to a wave of comparison between him and President Richard Nixon, who fired the independent special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who was investigating the Watergate scandal. Similar to Nixon and not to Clinton, Comey's termination comes during a time when Trump and his Administration are endangered by Comey's investigation that may uncover a truth that they are trying to hide, lest it should turn into a scandal. The night before Comey's dismissal, the CNN reported that the grand jury issued summons for the investigation of Trumps associates' connections to the Russian government, which signified the going forward with this investigation and the endangerment of Trump's administration. For Trump, this made for a good reason to fire Comey. This incident signifies that the Trump administration is trying to hide and cover up its breaches on one the hand. On the other hand, it exemplifies Trump's excessive use of his executive power to undermine the checks and balances – one of the foundations of the American political system (Rosa Inocencio, 2017). In 2019, Trump grew to dislike the chief of staff John Kelly's attempt to restrain his worst instincts, so he replaced him with Mick Mulvaney, whose primary qualification appears to have been his promise not to try to rein in the president (Rotner, 2019).

Here again, Donald Trump cannot transform the quality of elections in one of the world's oldest and most established democracies, but he can afflict an adverse effect. Trump had attacked the presidential elections that eventually led to his overall victory (even though he did not win the majority of the votes). In the November of his election, Trump tweeted that he would have won the popular votes if it were not for the millions of undocumented immigrants who voted against him, and he claimed that voter fraud took place in the states of California, Virginia and New Hampshire.

President Trump, however, did not ask for a recount or initiate any legal case to support his claim. After Trump's claims, The Washington Post researched Trump's claims after reviewing the turnouts and voter identification used in New Hampshire, found no evidence to support them. Trump's claims of large numbers of voters brought from Massachusetts to New Hampshire would entail both a surge in voter turnout and in the number of New Hampshire voters who used Massachusetts forms of voter identification (such as driver licenses). However, according to research done by The Washington Post, voter turnouts saw no surge when compared to the 2012 elections and no large clusters of New Hampshire voters who used Massachusetts forms of voter identification. Although Trump's claims do not directly affect the quality of the past presidential elections, it certainly affects the way his supporters view the electoral process in their country and its fairness, especially when Trump did win the elections and is not blaming a loss or failure on of fraud, which gives his allegations validity (Seelye, 2019). With those claims, Trump was able to shake the belief of at least some of his followers in American elections, and made challenging future elections on the grounds of fraud more likely to happen.

Populism as a buttress to authoritarianism: pieces of evidence

There is one major undemocratic trait shared by all populist waves around the world, particularly democracies; that is anti-pluralism/anti-institutions. More often than not, the populist invokes the principle of popular sovereignty to rebuke and undermine the independent democratic institutions, under the pretext of protecting fundamental rights, though populist may adopt democratic procedures like elections (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Besides, populism can use the notion and praxis of majority rule to violate minority rights. Strong charismatic leaders are often preferred over democratic institutions in a populist atmosphere, and that leader can represent the people against the antagonistic camp, as Muller (2016) put it: "populists cannot tolerate the idea of constitutive differences of opinion" (Bang and Marsh, 2018).

Authoritarian regime is defined as a regime governed by small group or dictator, opposing individual freedoms in favor of the commands, viewing society as a hierarchical organization under the leadership of one leader. Nevertheless, democratic institutions may exist with minor function. The core concept of authoritarian regimes show consistency with the populist practices; which is why we can expect that adopting populist policies depending upon anti-pluralism, and role of charismatic leaders, may cause liberal democracies to slip down into a frame of authoritarian role (Roskin *et al.*, 2008). Practically, in Poland, the Polish populist Law and Justice Party (PIS) has been in power since 2015 till now, with an agenda driven by far-right populism and nationalism, depending mainly on nativism and Euroscepticism. The Polish Government is slipping down towards authoritarianism, with a strong populist stance against, for example, the Constitutional Court and the Office of the Ombudsman. For many years, these institutions have played a very important role in Polish politics. This role is only now being strongly contested the Populist Party in power. The government ignored several rulings of Poland's Constitutional Court. One of the rulings invalidated the government's attempt to replace five judges.

The populist wave in Poland is blaming all difficulties, as well as social, political and economic frustrations on the former unpunished communists. The conspiracy theory is always deployed to cover up any political or economic failure, rather than the principles of accountability and transparency (Martinelli, 2016). The Polish ruling party (Law and Justice) has made up stories of Poland's post-communist leaders, accusing them of acting as a clan that wishes take the country back to a totalitarian communist order, using antagonistic rhetoric against ex-communists and using the "wolf-at-the-door" tactic (Bergmann, 2018).

Populism can lead to authoritarianism. There is no better illustration of that statement than Viktor Orban of Hungary. Orban presents us with an ideal example of contemporary European populism. The populist PM always rebukes liberalism. For instance, he announced a vague program called "illiberal democracy." A lot of authoritarian acts had been adopted depending upon populist rhetoric. Hungary's most prominent opposition newspaper, Nepszabadsag, was shut down suddenly in 2016. In the Corruption Perceptions Index 2017, Hungary ranked 66th, down from 46th in 2009 (Chhor, 2018). The same holds true in Venezuela, "We must confront the privileged elite who have destroyed a large part of the world." Hugo Chavez came to power following years of political and economic unrest. He came to power with promises of equality among the poor and working classes, economic welfare supported by masses, depending on emotional enticement of people. When in government, he concentrated power in the president's hands, allowed corruption to spread, and used state resources for propaganda purposes. During his time in office, Chávez also suppressed the freedom of the press and passed laws that would allow him to fine and shut down broadcasters (Chhor, 2018).

Populism and international politics: conflict is the landmark

Populists conceive politics as being profoundly organized by the opposition between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite." As such, they reject political pluralism and generally regard policymaking as a consistent application of common will. This logic spills over to foreign policy; populist parties' ideas in international politics are often vague and heterogeneous, not least because populism finds itself attached to antagonistic political ideologies. Populist leaders perceive foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics, because they consider themselves as the only true representatives of the people. Therefore, populist actors abandon any political opposition as necessarily illegitimate, with repercussions on foreign policy. Taking the opposite course of their predecessors seems, for instance, a key reference point in setting the agenda of their foreign policy. This is perhaps best illustrated by Donald Trump's obsession with unbundling Barack Obama's diplomatic initiatives. Populism is already affecting the core values of the European Foreign Policy worldwide. The EU has anchored its foreign policies in preaching for the norms and values of democratic governance. Some member states, such as Hungary and Poland, put these norms and standards into question domestically, and risk weakening the EU's legitimacy in exporting them. In addition, by overprioritizing domestic politics (which means that they care only about their selfish, narrow interests and not considering the collective interests of the European member states), and showing a tendency for "undiplomatic" diplomacy (being very tough in their rejection to any common European policy, such as migration), as well as conspiracy theories (claiming that they are fighting all the time against hidden enemies, both at home and abroad), governing populist parties risk undermining the EU member states' capability of acting collectively (Cadier, 2019).

Populism is damaging to "democratic globalization," a social movement towards an institutional system of global democracy that bypasses nation-states, ideological NGOs, cults and mafias, because it focuses on the restoration of the nation state's sovereignty from the domination of the corrupt elite and supranational institutions worldwide. The populists are reluctant to embrace the idea of full integration with other nations, because any kind of integration implies that a state might give up some parts of its sovereignty, which is definitely against the grains of populists' rhetoric that is unified by a fundamental claim: the "true people" are locked into conflict with outsiders; and nothing should constrain the will of the true people of a country (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). This means that the rise of populism is a real threat to the unity of Europe, that had been anchored in the European member

states' willingness to give up some parts of their sovereignty to the supranational institutions in return for acquiring more economic and political gains in the future. That issue might further exacerbate if the populists succeed to take the union itself down, as their national attribute might prompt Europe and the world toward more conflicts and wars. Generally, countries integrate economically and politically to achieve higher rates of economic growth, stability within their markets, as well as preserving their national security. Several attempts have been gradually adopted by Europe before reaching the current stage of economic union (Niblett, 2016). For example, Europe abolished all kinds of limitations on trade and permitted factor mobility; which means labor can move from one country to another one freely. According to the British populists, factor mobility worsened their rates of unemployment, as labor from other European countries invaded the British market, and took the jobs supposed to be filled by the British. That exactly was one argument adopted by the Brexiteers (Nelson, 2017).

In addition, populists reject the idea of open borders, and reckon it an obvious threat to their national security. And as economic integration requires free movement of labor, capital and other factor production, and as the Schengen accord allows Europeans to move freely between countries, European populists demand a renegotiation over the Schengen agreement, and call for closing their borders and imposing a severe surveillance on it. The claim of populists to have closed borders is solidified by the increasing number of terrorist attacks in Europe over the past few years. And as the terrorists are able to move freely from one country to another, and as they are able to plan for attacks in one country and execute in another country, populists demand having a closed-border policy. Paris attacks, in 2015, stand out as an obvious example: the terrorists drew up their plans on the Belgium lands, and got them done on the French territory (Niblett, 2016).

Moreover, some populists conceive integration as undermining the national sovereignty of their countries. For them, it imposes internal and external obligations that must be fulfilled. A question must be raised here: what will happen if an institution of an integrated area adopted a decision against the will of some of its members? The answer is clear: if the decision passed is labeled as obligatory, then it must be adopted by all member states. Again, that point was exploited by the British populists to get the UK out of the European Union, after they proclaimed that the European Union was occupying the UK (Mazarr, 2017).

Furthermore, populists conceive the integration as a tool used against them for letting a supranational authority residing outside their borders to intervene in their internal affairs. A clear example of that is what happened in Italy when the EU placed an excessive pressure on the former Italian Government, then led by Berlusconi, and coerced him to resign and hand the power over to Mario Monte in 2011, before an election was held in 2013 that the populist Five Star Movement gained a majority of 25.6%, ahead of the Democratic Party that gained 25.4%. Another clear example is the refugee relocation policies in Europe, which were rejected by many member states, including Italy. Germany sought to return the refugees to their first place of registry, in an attempt by Merkel to contain the anger growing up within her ruling coalition (Toygur, 2018). As most refugees entered Europe though Greece and Italy, both countries would have to receive more refugees than they could handle. Some other states, like Poland and hungry, refused to receive refugees considering that issue to be a potential threat to their national security, and seen as an attempt by the European Union to encroach on the national sovereignty of the member states (Henley, 2018).

The populist National Front of France conceives the European Union itself as an entity that confiscates the French citizens's wills, and it defines the Union as an integration functioning in contrast to the citizens' interests. Furthermore, the Front refuses the

European citizenship, and insists on refusing the current form of cooperation with some European institutions, on issues like security and immigration. Over and above, it suggested reconsideration the European Union treaties to make them more compatible with the sovereign states. Similar stances have been adopted by the Sweden Democrats Party that demands a renegotiation of the European Union treaties, hinting at leaving the Union if their demands are not fulfilled. But what would happen if the populists managed to take the European Union down? The euro currency would be abolished and the old national currencies would be back once again. The nationalisms would come into being, and the conflicts are likely to be severer and more obvious (Bonikowski, 2016).

Populists consider maximizing their national interests on the international level by following confrontational policies instead of cooperative ones. As President Trump came to power in the USA in 2016, he has made up a good deal of instability in the USA relations with the European allies over their financial contribution to the NATO. The USA president proclaimed that the western allies are taking benefits from the NATO's protection, while the USA is holding the entire burden, before demanding them to increase their share in the NATO through increasing their military expenditures to 2% of their GDP (Pothier and Vershbow, 2017).

The demand made by President Trump to increase the military expenditure of the European members within NATO represented an endeavor to replace the currently in-place norms with new ones that function in favor of the USA, without taking into consideration the adverse consequences on the European NATO members. Some countries do not have big armies able to absorb that amount of spending; Iceland is a good example of that (Macaskill and Crerar, 2018). Also, that request proves that populists are ready to form new alliances and break the old ones to achieve their national targets. Furthermore, the American withdrawal from Paris Agreement on climate change that was signed in 2015 (Zhang *et al.*, 2017), let alone the economic war waged by President Trump on China, through imposing high tariffs on the Chinese products entering the US market (Ward, 2018). The sanctions imposed on Turkey stand out as another obvious example of Trump's populist external policies (Watson *et al.*, 2019).

To wrap up, the spread of populism has already led to dwindling the existing multilateral institutions; increasing failures in global public goods provision in crucial fields, from climate change mitigation to poverty reduction; a proliferation of international disputes due to an aggressive approach to international politics; and an increasing unpredictability in world politics due to the populist leader's erratic leadership style. In other words, populism leads to more conflicts in bilateral relations; weakening of global governance and its institutions; and a higher degree of centralization and personalization in foreign policymaking (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019).

Conclusion

Although a group of scholars argue that populism reinforces democracy by underpinning its ability to include marginalized sectors of the society and to decrease voter apathy, the research provides pieces of evidence to refute these arguments. Firstly, although populists do succeed in including previously excluded sectors of the society into the political game, they exclude other previously included sectors from their discourse. For example, the Latin American populist Morales in Bolivia was able to include and represent the previously excluded poor sectors, but he also excluded the capitalists and businessmen from his definition of the Bolivian "people". Secondly, statistics do not support the allegation that populist mobilization decreases voter apathy. When voter turnout is used as an indicator of voter apathy, statistics showed a decreasing (rather than increasing) voter turnout during

the past few years, including the elections where populist actors fared well; such as in France and Italy. Overall, the scholars who asserted that populism is beneficial to democracy did not present sound normative arguments, and even the arguments they hold often fail to stand the empirical test.

Populism has led to the deterioration of liberal democratic values in the USA. Populism is found to have a negative effect on individual and civil liberties as well as the freedom of opposition. In addition, press freedom was found to be limited under the rule of populists. Moreover, populists are found to be trying to destabilize the constitutional aspect of liberal democracy (more particularly, the principle of separation of powers), by struggling to take powers away from the judiciary and legislature and put them in the executive's (their) hands. Lastly, the democratic competition in elections and referendums are found to be negatively influenced by populist mobilization, as the latter hampers their transparency, competitiveness and fairness. Two factors are found to affect the extent to which the populist actor is able to affect liberal democracy: the amount of time spent in office, and the context in which the populist is operating. This research argues that the more the time a populist spends in office, the greater is his ability to consolidate his authority; due to the longer time in office, as well as the popular affirmation that he gets through his reelection. Furthermore, the context in which the populist actor is operating is reflected in his ability to influence liberal democracy.

Populism is destructive to world democracy; populists are reluctant to embrace the idea of full integration with other nations – which means that the rise of populism is a real threat to the unity of Europe. Populists reject the idea of open borders, and reckon it an apparent threat to their national security. And as economic integration requires free movement of labor, capital, goods and services, and as the Schengen accord allows Europeans to move freely among countries, European populists demanded reconsideration the Schengen Agreement, and called for closing and imposing a severe surveillance on their borders. Therefore, the research concludes that populists consider maximizing their national interests on the international level by following confrontational policies instead of cooperative ones; which lays down conflict as a landmark of the international relations as viewed from the populist perspective.

Notes

1. Some scholars define populism as an ideology; others claim it is a discursive style, still others, including the author, hold that it is a political strategy used by politicians to maximize their power.

2. Democracy relies on effective representation – responsive political leaders who can craft policy solutions for their societies. Yet, in numerous democratic countries, many citizens question whether traditional political parties can handle current challenges and crises, and this has increased apathy and distrust among voters. It has also encouraged many to support alternative paths of political action (extreme populists).

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