
Original Article

Populism, the ‘people’ and the illusion of democracy – The Front National and UKIP in a comparative context

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Abstract The 2014 European elections confirmed the prominence in the media of what is commonly called the far right. While parties such as the Front National and UKIP were successful in the elections, their performance has since been exaggerated and they have benefited from a disproportionate coverage. Aiding their apparently ‘irresistible rise’, their normalisation was greatly facilitated by their description as ‘populist’ parties. However, while this term ‘populism’ has been almost universally accepted in the media, it remains a hotly debated concept on the academic circuit, and its careless use could in fact prove counterproductive in the assessment of the current state of democracy in Europe. Instead of focusing on the reasons behind the rise of these parties, similarities and differences already widely covered in the literature, this article hypothesises that a skewed and disproportionate coverage of the European elections in particular, and the ‘rise’ of ‘right-wing populism’ in general, have prevented a thorough democratic discussion from taking place and impeded the possibility of other political alternatives.

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Casting a blank vote is your irrevocable right, and no one will ever deny you that right, but, just as we tell children not to play with matches, so we warn whole peoples of the dangers of playing with dynamite. (Saramago, 2006, pp. 83–86)

Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds. (Rancière, 1995, p. 67)

Media coverage of populist nativist parties (PNPs) is on the rise across Europe. While they have witnessed various levels of support, their impact on European politics in the early twenty-first century is undeniable. In the recent European elections, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, the French *Front National* (FN), the *Dansk Folkeparti* and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) performed particularly well, with

the latter three winning in their respective countries. In contrast, in The Netherlands, Geert Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* and in Belgium the *Vlaams Belang* suffered unexpected setbacks (Figure 1).

While some PNPs have improved their electoral performances, their 'rise' is further nuanced when the entire voting population is taken into account. Overall, apart from the *Dansk Folkeparti*, PNPs failed to attract more than 1 out of 10 voters in 2014 in a very favourable context (Figure 2).

Despite their mixed fortune, the media was quick to talk about democratic 'earthquakes' and 'tsunamis', with the *New York Times* headlining 'Populists' Rise in Europe Vote Shakes Leaders' (Higgins, 2014). While the term 'populism' has been almost universally accepted in the media to describe parties such as the FN and UKIP, and even more extreme cases such as Greece's *Chrysí Avgí* and Hungary's *Jobbik*, it remains a hotly debated concept within academic circles. While opposition to immigration has always been considered an essential feature of extreme right parties (Hainsworth, 2008, pp. 70–77), their populist characteristic has led to much discussion and misinterpretation, be it conscious or unconscious. It is such (mis)

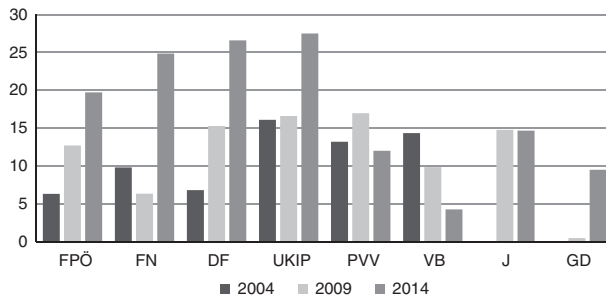


Figure 1: PNP results in per cent of vote in European elections.

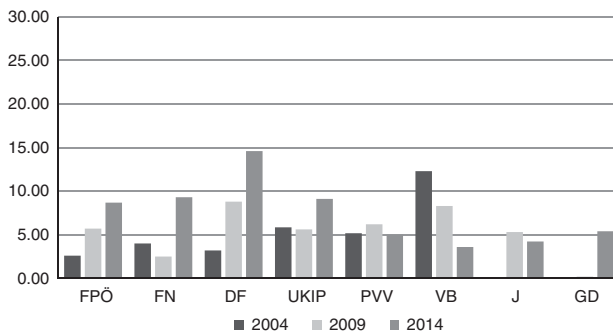


Figure 2: PNP results in per cent of registered voters in European elections.



characterisations that this article will discuss rather than the reasons behind the rise of these parties, already widely covered in the literature. The primary aim of this article is to explore the specious nature of PNPs' relationship to 'the people'. By studying the manipulation of this myth within elite discourse, this article will highlight various ways in which this process serves to undermine democracy. This article presents an overview of a wider debate and underlines the significance of the relationship between misconceptions of populism and a wider democratic malaise. The hypotheses tested here are part of a broader research project relying on mixed research methods; in particular on discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), critical discourse analysis and content analysis of elite discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2001); as well as secondary poll analysis. This article provides the context and theoretical underpinning for the project and highlights the questions key to a radically new understanding of liberal democracy in Europe; it is therefore based primarily on the analysis of secondary sources. Ultimately, the aim of this research is to examine the reaction the rise of PNPs has triggered within mainstream elite circles (the media, academia and the political class). Its main hypothesis will sustain that a skewed and disproportionate coverage of the European elections, and the 'rise' of 'right-wing populism' in general, have prevented a thorough democratic debate from taking place.

While this article discusses the impact of PNPs across western Europe, examples to illustrate the theory will be drawn from France and the United Kingdom. This choice was carefully weighed and uncovers some valuable findings. These countries were selected because of the prominence of parties with populist nativist agendas, who each 'won' the European elections despite their rejection by mainstream opponents, but also because of the different trajectories taken by these parties to achieve such prominence. The FN was born out of a neo-fascist alliance in the 1970s, and has strived to gain legitimacy since then, achieving its most convincing results once its leadership was polished; UKIP took the opposite path, moving away from its conservative, academic and elitist origins, to a more populist, traditional radical right platform and discourse.¹ The study of the conceptualisation of both parties provides useful insights into the impact the rise of populism has had on liberal democracies, and the democratic debate in general.

Essential for a study of this type, the article first outlines a clear and precise definition of PNPs. The second part deals with the 'rise' of PNPs and its mediatisation, while the final part broadens the field of research to evaluate whether PNPs may only be one of the symptoms of a deeper malaise currently affecting established liberal democracies.

Populist Nativist Parties

Panizza (2005, p. 1) declared that 'it has become almost a cliché to start writing on populism by lamenting the lack of clarity about the concept and casting doubts about

its usefulness for political analysis'. In 2005, Mudde (2007, p. 12) counted over 23 different names to describe such parties. Ten years on, the debate is still open, and while some classifications are more popular than others, their usefulness and accuracy are often limited, or at best debatable. Such a definitional mess is key to understanding the impact of parties like the FN and UKIP. For the purpose of the present research, the term 'populist nativist parties' has been deemed most appropriate for reasons which will become clearer as the argument develops. This is not to say that other terms such as 'radical right' or 'extreme right' cannot be applied to the parties discussed in this article, but their vagueness or current polemical nature would have distracted from the crux of the matter. To this end, to avoid any form of misunderstanding, only the two essential criteria for the theory being drawn here are highlighted in their name. Their meaning will be as follows.

The basis on which to understand nativism here is 'the desire to return to, or restore, indigenous practices, beliefs, and cultural forms inhibited, destroyed, or outlawed by a colonizing power' (Buchanan, 2010). The parties discussed here are not simply anti-immigration, but opposed to the immigrant as a symbol of loss of sovereignty and/or identity, and the agent of an invasive stratagem aimed at the displacement and/or replacement of the autochthonous population by either a new culture/civilisation or a multicultural mix whereby the original population would be defiled or destroyed. Such parties usually rely on a Manichean and demagogic type of discourse (often confused with populism) within which the immigrant's presence is rendered anxiogenic, leading to a loss of traditional 'comfort', be it in employment, social benefits, culture or identity. Their value to society is either omitted or downplayed, while their negative impact is exaggerated and essentialised: immigrants represent an alien mass, rendered faceless, to prevent any form of sympathy which would be natural to most. Their background, personality and/or aptitudes are replaced by a deformed, unidentifiable and united threat. They are dehumanised – they hold no individual names, no personal history, no subjective attributes. In most contemporary cases, nativist rhetoric is based on a sophisticated form of exclusion referred to as new or neo-racism, cultural racism or cultural differentialism (Barker, 1982; Taguieff, 1994; Balibar, 1997). No longer are differences based on altogether rejected biological superiority or inferiority. Instead, they are couched in the vocabulary of difference and the necessity of cultures to be kept separate if they are to thrive, and indeed survive.

As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014, pp. 120–121) have highlighted, a study of parties such as Greece's SYRIZA, but also the FN and UKIP, 'cannot be adequately discussed and no consistent "verdict" can be reached without a clear formulation of criteria, without, that is to say, a rigorous theory of populism'. Contrary to the argument of scholars such as Taggart (2000), Laclau (2005) and the so-called 'Essex school' have argued that populism cannot be considered as an ideology, as this would 'involve differentiating the [populist] attribute from other characterizations at the same defining level, such as "fascist", "liberal", "communist", etc'. Finding a 'pure'



populist ideology is thus almost impossible as it would in most cases be linked to other ideologies.² Instead, populism is to be found 'in a particular *mode of articulation* of whatever social, political or ideological contents' (Laclau, 2005, p. 34). For Surel (2003, p. 127), populism is 'a dimension of the discursive and normative register adopted by political actors', 'a set of resources available to a plurality of actors, in a more or less systematic way'. Populism as a category or as an ideology, be it a 'thin' one (Mudde, 2007), is therefore problematic, something this article hopes to render clearer as it seeks to render visible the misinterpretations of the term and their consequences. Here, populism is understood as a tool akin to a political synecdoche: the populist creates the people from his or her understanding of what 'the people' should be, want and/or represent. Therefore, the only element common to all populists is the creation of a democratic phoenix rising from its ashes: the 'people'.

In what has been termed the 'post-democratic' context (Mair, 2006), populism has proved a valuable tool to many ideologies. In post-modern technocratic and globally interconnected societies, the concept of the 'people' has seen its relevance fade as a driver within the decision-making process. With the political powerlessness of the utmost symbol of democracy, be it perceived or real, the right-wing populist is allowed to gain ground and offer their electorate a simplistic answer, a voice, a return to fantasised and glorified 'good old days' where popular sovereignty prevailed. However, it is crucial to restate that no ideological precondition is required to exploit and occupy this democratic gap. All that is needed is a convincing account of what the 'people' represent, attached to whatever ideology the populist is faithful to. The 'people' can therefore be defined in totally opposite and contradictory ways: all that matters is the creation of the group with vaguely defined, and often fluid, borders, allowing for the inclusion and exclusion of groups considered simplistically, although not necessarily wrongly, noxious to democracy. In this case, populism's value to democracy or society is not fixed, and can be both negative and positive.

Crises, PNPs and the Media Effect: A Perfect Storm?

In the current political, social and historical context, it has been widely argued in the media and elite discourse that right-wing parties outside of the mainstream are benefiting from near optimum conditions leading to so-called 'populist waves' washing over every corner of Europe. However, such claims have been vastly exaggerated and the disproportionate coverage of the impending disaster might have led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. In their appeal to those most anxious within our societies, these parties have been greatly aided by constant and severely unbalanced media coverage. As Kallis (2013, p. 236) has noted, 'the social and political influence of populist ideas on immigration and Islam in contemporary Europe is strikingly disproportionate to the actual levels of the far-right parties' electoral support'. While the media is rarely sympathetic to the cause of what we call here populist

nativist parties,³ their excessive coverage reinforces their status as both legitimate and the ‘real’ alternative to the *status quo*, the ‘outsider’ in opposition to the elite (Ellinas, 2010; Ansari and Hafez, 2012). Bos *et al*’s (2011, p. 197) study confirmed the importance of the media for PNPs, noting that ‘when party leaders receive a large amount of attention, their party and its message are taken seriously [...] Hence, if voters want to influence the political game, voting for these parties is rational and will not lead to a lost vote’. This kind of coverage and legitimisation have been particularly striking in France and the United Kingdom, where Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage have become regular features on prime time television and front pages. In France, the coverage of the 2014 local elections commonly referred to the ‘shock’ caused by the Front National’s performance, with the media being accused of playing the FN’s game (Kissane, 2014). This continuous and hyperbolic coverage was in spite of some relatively ordinary results compared with previous elections, which demonstrated, if anything, the inability of the FN to grow convincingly in a favourable context (Figure 3).

This contrasted the much-advertised ‘normalisation’ of the party under Marine Le Pen’s leadership leading to its ‘irresistible’ rise. The coverage of the elections also rarely took into account that the FN was unable to put forward more candidates and win more seats, despite careful targeting, demonstrating further the limits of the party’s reach. Similarly, Nigel Farage and UKIP have attracted ‘historically unprecedented levels of coverage for a minor party’ (Goodwin and Ford, 2013), and the exaggerated reaction to council election results in particular suggested a different story than a cold-headed analysis suggests.

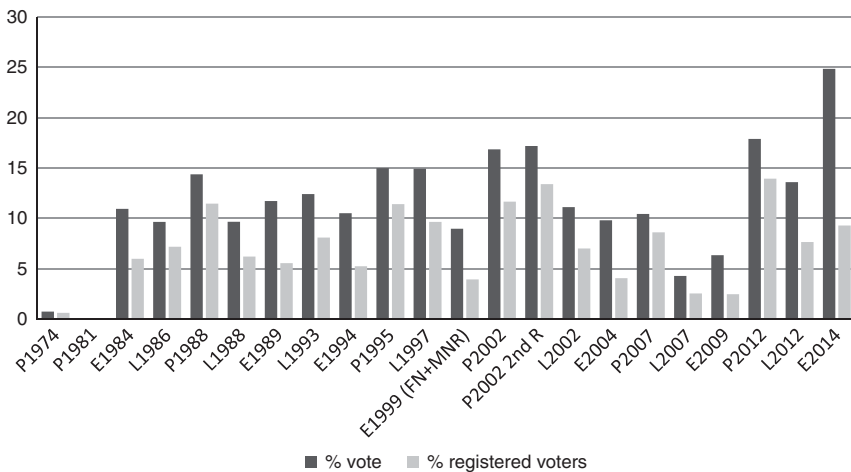


Figure 3: The evolution of the FN vote in major elections (P: Presidential (first round except 2002); E: European; L: Legislative; MNR: Mouvement National Républicain).



The role of the media in the making and unmaking of PNPs is not new in either country, or in Europe in general. In France, the misguided opportunism of the *Parti Socialiste* in 1984 played a part in the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN (Faux *et al*, 1994). In the United Kingdom, the coverage of the BNP's media stunts and the essentialisation of the Other – be it asylum seekers or Muslims – by the tabloid press in particular facilitated the rise of the party and the acceptance of nativist ideas (Renton, 2005, pp. 28, 36; Matthews and Brown, 2012). While the coverage of both Jean-Marie Le Pen and Nick Griffin was hostile, this offered the leaders of parties whose platform had been marginalised the opportunity to stand as the outsiders, vocal opponents of the establishment – in contrast to other alternatives given little or no coverage (Akkerman, 2011; Johnson and Goodman, 2013). This in turn paved the way for a more amenable reception of leaders whose persona and discourse appeared more moderate. The coverage of Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage has thus been much more favourable, even though it remains mostly disapproving.⁴ In contrast to the extremism of their populist nativist predecessors and competitors on the extreme right side of politics, both were able to claim they incarnate a new form of 'patriotic' politics. This was in turn greatly aided by the lack of historical or theoretical analysis of their (and their parties') ideological trajectories in much prominent public commentary, as analysis has relied increasingly on survey analysis.

Partly through this mediatisation, PNPs have benefited from the normalisation of much of their discourse and rhetoric in the twenty-first century: what would have been considered racist and unacceptable at the elite discourse level 20 years ago has now become political 'common sense' (Mondon, 2013). Immigration has been used by government parties and opposition alike to explain the levels of dissatisfaction of the 'people' with politics, and both sides of the political spectrum have attempted to outdo each other in anti-immigration rhetoric, policies and politics. The results of the Eurobarometer survey in Autumn 2013 (European Commission, 2013) clearly highlight the impact of the hype around immigration issues and PNPs more broadly (Figure 4).

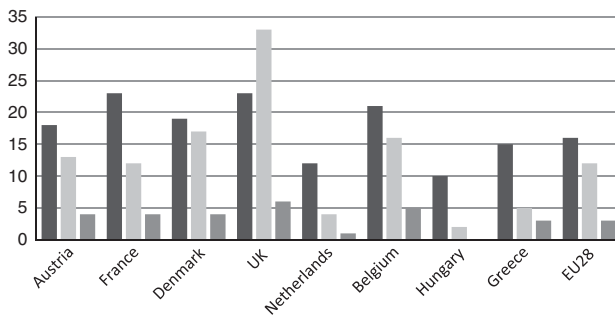


Figure 4: Eurobarometer (Autumn 2013): Two most important issues facing (____) at the moment (QA4a): Immigration.

When asked what the two most important issues facing the EU were, 16 per cent answered immigration, which was the 4th most cited issue on average. When asked the same question about their own country, immigration as a central issue fell in most cases, with the notable exception of the United Kingdom (12 per cent on average, 6th out of 13 issues). When asked the two most important issues they were facing personally, the contrast is staggering, with immigration falling to 3 per cent on average, to the 12th ‘most important’ issue. The more European citizens considered their daily lives, the less immigration seemed prominent as an issue in comparison with inflation, unemployment, the economic situation of their country, taxation and so on. Similarly, when asked what the EU meant to them personally, ‘not enough control at external borders’ came 10th and ‘loss of our cultural identity’ 13th. While an overwhelming majority of the European ‘people’ (above 80 per cent) can be argued in view of this poll to not want what PNPs primarily offer (even in the more negative United Kingdom, where 23 per cent think immigration is one of the top two issues), the actions of their representatives and the media have implied that this is what should preoccupy them. While politicians, commentators and the media will not tell people what to think, they will influence what they think about, thereby potentially imposing what they should feel is most important (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).⁵ For Wodak (2013, p. 26), the pattern is clear:

Currently, in all European countries, there is considerable evidence of a normalisation of – even explicit – ‘othering’ in political discourse in the public sphere, and there is much to indicate that this is occurring at all levels of society, ranging from the media, political parties and institutions to everyday life interactions.

Yet the media’s skewed coverage and the process of normalisation could seem justified by the context in which recent elections have taken place in Europe. At first sight, it does appear that many conditions have united to create fertile soil for populist nativist alternatives to thrive across Europe. Among others, the economic situation has often been considered a favourable element for PNPs as mainstream parties on both the left and right embrace painful austerity measures (Eatwell, 2003, pp. 56–57; Hainsworth, 2008, pp. 85–89; Perrineau, 2014, pp. 107–114). While there are signs of recovery, many countries are still suffering from the aftermath of the economic crisis, and mid- to long-term forecasts are no cause for optimism. In late 2013, in contrast to early signs of economic recovery publicised by governments, 50 per cent of respondents in the Eurobarometer survey felt that the worst was still to come, and 68 per cent that the current situation in their country was bad, as many failed to see a bettering of their economic condition (European Commission, 2013). In such a context, an exclusionary nationalistic alternative would logically appeal to some of those anxious about their present situation. However, as pointed out by Mudde (2013), ‘despite all the talk of the rise of the far right as a consequence of the Great Recession, the sober fact is that far right parties have gained support in only eleven of



the twenty-eight EU member states, and increased their support substantially in a mere five'. While it is too early to assess the precise impact of the crisis on public opinion and whether there has been a move towards more authoritarian forms of politics, Mudde's assessment is an important caveat against an all too common assessment of the situation.

Another popular reason to explain the rise of PNPs has been the democratic crisis or crisis of representation, as the demand for alternative parties is considered as particularly potent in times of deep political distrust (Eatwell, 2003, pp. 51–52; Hainsworth, 2008, pp. 24–28; Perrineau, 2014, pp. 159–171). According to the May 2014 Eurobarometer report (European Commission, 2014), Europe continues to experience high levels of disillusionment with only 17 per cent of Europeans declaring they trust their political parties. While regional and local authorities fare better, the levels of trust remain low and often below 50 per cent. This disconnect, even at the local level, was exemplified in the 2014 French local elections which logged a record level of abstention. Therefore, it would not be illogical for parties usually marginalised and/or kept out of power to fare well in such circumstances – particularly thanks to their populist discourse pitting them against the loathed elite. This is usually exacerbated in second-order elections where the Eurosceptic side, whether opportunistic or ideological (Startin and Krouwel, 2013), is able to run 'easy' negative campaigns, attacking institutions that are poorly known by the general public, and generate little interest one way or another as they seem removed from most people's day-to-day lives.

In short, the convergence of potentially favourable factors such as disproportionate media coverage, the apparent combination of an economic and political crisis and the ongoing process of normalisation of their discourse should lead in all logic to the rise of PNPs, as is predicted by much of the media and pundits. However, while their electoral results have to be taken seriously, and in some cases have pointed to disquieting trends, the overall picture suggests that on the whole they have failed to become *the* alternative to a much-loathed system (see Figure 2). In fact, we could argue that they are very much included in the distrusted options that are presented to the 'people', who prefer instead to find refuge in abstention. The question therefore is not whether PNPs are the solution to the democratic deficit, but instead whether they are 'merely' one of the symptoms of a broader and deeper democratic malaise.

PNPs as a Symptom of a Deeper Malaise

Canovan's early take on the rise of populism in the late twentieth century has been extremely influential in the study of PNPs (Canovan, 1981; Canovan, 1999). In line with the argument drawn here, Canovan described 'populism' as a style and a 'mood' rather than an ideology. The populist style refers to the 'simplicity', 'directness' and 'honesty' of the discourse employed by the populist, in contrast with the

'bureaucratic jargon' of a conspiratorial elite, giving the former an aura of democratic ordinariness and righteousness. Emotions, often expressed through the words of a charismatic leader, are another inherent part of populism. However, this style alone is not enough to sway the 'people'; to be effective, a populist push must take place in a precise political context. For Canovan, populism only thrives when democracy can no longer sustain the innate tension between its redemptive and pragmatic sides. It is these 'opposed' yet 'interdependent' faces which create the opening within which populism is allowed to appear. Populism will then arise whenever the technocratic side (institutions, rules, laws) and the ideal side (direct, popular sovereignty) of democracy have become too far apart and the cold pragmatic side of democracy no longer satisfies the romantic redemptive side. The gap between the 'grubby business of politics' and haloed democracy has allowed for populists to move into the vacant territory and to offer the dream of purer democracy. Wishing for a pragmatic democracy, as the 'post-Marxists' or 'post-modernists' have done, is useless as the redemptive part of democracy is vital to its existence. For Canovan, this redemptive characteristic has condemned democracy to having populism as its inseparable companion. For Betz (2004, p. 166), the vote for the 'populist right' represents a vote of protest against and warning to the 'established parties which have to either evolve in the desired direction or take the risk of losing more votes to the radical right'. This situation has arisen because 'it is commonly known that hostility towards external groups is very pronounced in parts of society with a low level of education', but also because of 'the identification to the nation, authoritarianism and political disaffection' present in these groups (Betz, 2004, p. 166). While Canovan's and Betz's frameworks have played a major part in improving our understanding of populism and the populist right, they fail in their own ways to take into account the limits of liberal democracy and the protest that has taken place within and without, against what has increasingly uncovered a deepening crisis in the liberal democratic model itself – in its economic workings, but more importantly here in its political and democratic legitimacy. In the post-democratic context, it is therefore crucial not to misinterpret or simplify the populist push: the rise of PNPs should not be viewed as positive, 'constructive' or 'corrective', but as an indication of the state of western democracies at the beginning of the third millennium.

Adding to this skewed diagnosis of populism, the hype around right-wing populism in Europe has played a key part in a dual legitimisation and delegitimisation process, which has had a dramatic impact on politics (Figure 5).

With the rise of PNPs, right-wing populism has become increasingly portrayed as the true wish of the 'people', that irrational mass which turns to authoritarian solutions in times of crisis (be it political, civilisational, economic, real or perceived). This understanding is in fact reminiscent of Le Bon's (1963) theories on the crowd, and Bernays' (2007) political use of propaganda as a necessary tool for democratic subjugation. As a logical yet perverse development, PNPs have acquired a legitimacy which they had been denied since the end of the Second World War when classified

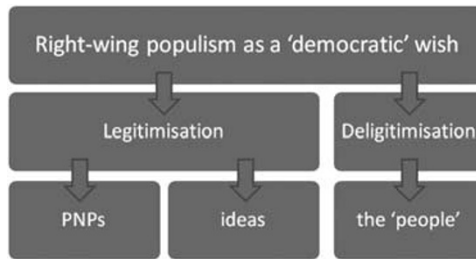


Figure 5: Right-wing populism as a legitimiser and delimitiser.

under the terms 'extreme right', 'radical right' or 'far right'. As Collovald (2004) highlighted, the populist classification is not only 'blurrier, but also less stigmatizing than the ones it is meant to replace, such as fascism or extreme right'. While their electoral and popular support actually remains marginal, the discursive link created between the 'people' and PNPs through the term 'populist' has helped transform the themes they defend into popular demands. This has in turn legitimised their nativist and exclusionary ideals, as they become so-called popular and democratic demands through the skewed interpretation of the rise of the populist right.

Along with the process of legitimisation of the parties and their ideas, a concurrent process of delegitimisation has occurred with regard to the concept of the 'people'. Beyond its potential as a legitimiser of PNPs, populism has been used by the social and political elite to imply the ungovernability of democracies (Ranci re, 2005). The rise of PNPs has become the perfect excuse to explain the inability of mainstream parties to gather consequent and consistent support during elections: the 'people' and their irrational and irresponsible behaviour are to blame for the rise of 'extreme' parties. While the use of populism to describe PNPs has lessened the stigma that had marginalised them for decades, the creation of a link – albeit a semantic one – between such parties and the 'people' has forced blame for the situation onto the latter. What appears as menacing in PNPs is not their ideas *per se*, but their role as 'the voice of the people'. The link between the irrational and shameful vote for PNPs and the people in general, through the term 'populism', has allowed the governing elite to feel more secure in their endeavour: 'if the people have become more authoritarian and reactionary, it is because of their own ignorance and naivety' (Collovald, 2004, pp. 74–75), not because those who are meant to represent the people have failed in their task. In turn, this has justified that the sole purpose of elections is increasingly seen as the transfer of approval to those who are judged – or judge themselves – qualified to lead the people, leaving the *demos* with no choice *or* power (*cratos*).

This understanding of the populist vote strengthens a tendency towards democratic repression when alternatives are sought outside of the current hegemonic order, be it on the left or right. For Mouffe (2005, p. 51), it is 'the lack of an effective democratic

debate about possible alternatives that has led in many countries to the success of political parties claiming to be the “voice of the people”. What is criticised here is the apparent unanimity in the state of politics, elsewhere described as the ‘politics of consensus’ (Rancière, 2005). Popular sovereignty – the democratic symbol *par excellence* – has now been superseded by the values of the market and is ‘usually seen as an obsolete idea, often perceived as an obstacle to the implementation of human rights’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 52). In western democracies, human rights have been commonly used to claim that the ‘democratic’ system works for the general good, beyond partisan factions: with human rights as the product of liberalism, the system is above all suspicion (Meister, 2011).⁶ This absence of antagonism in politics nowadays and the rejection of this so-called final stage of history by a vast portion of the population have been central to the appearance of right-wing populism, but also to other alternatives to the mainstream. For Rancière (2005, p. 88), the term populism becomes the weapon against all the ‘forms of secession from the dominating consensus’ whether they are democratic, racially or religiously fanatic:

Populism is the convenient name under which is hidden the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and savant legitimacy, the difficulty of the government of science to accommodate the manifestation of democracy and even the mixed form of its representative system. [Populism] hides and reveals at the same time the great wish of oligarchy: to govern without people, which is to say without a divided people; to govern without politics.

Rethinking the Democratic Crisis – Abstention and ‘the part which has no part’

Yet populist outbursts only represent part of the democratic crisis. The lack of choice and the absence of a voice for those who do not feel heard in the current system – ‘the part which has no part’ (Rancière, 1995) – have also led to many switching off from the liberal democratic process. While the reasons behind abstention are many and it is impossible to generalise its meaning, its current record level and the widespread dissatisfaction with the workings of liberal democracy point to the possibility of a political voice within the growing ranks of abstainers; one that has appeared mostly muted in the current political debate.⁷ In March 2014, when asked whether ‘on the whole’, they are ‘very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [their country]’, 49 per cent of Eurobarometer respondents expressed a degree of dissatisfaction (European Commission, 2014). While such results fluctuate between countries, and while dissatisfaction rests on various elements and degrees (electoral system or deeper resentment), this response demonstrates that despite the hegemonic understanding of democracy and the



apparent impossibility of alternatives to the current system, a consequent part of the population refrains from joining the fold.

Those most likely to be distrustful of representative democracy and abstain are to be found in the lower classes of society, often denounced in the media as the main pool of PNP voters.⁸ While a large part of the vote for PNPs indeed comes from the working class (broadly defined), the extent to which it has revealed a shift from the left to the far right has often been exaggerated or simplified (see among others Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Perrineau, 2014). Describing PNPs as 'workers' parties' rests on the dual ignorance of the history of the working class and the contemporary form of abstention. First, the working class in both France and the United Kingdom has never been monolithic, and a large part has always been attracted to the right – at its most, 'only' 70 per cent of the working class voted for the left in France (Gougou, 2014; see also Mayer, 2014). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, between 1974 and 2010, polls have suggested that between a quarter and a third of unskilled workers sided with the Conservatives (Ipsos Mori, 2010). This historically right-wing element of the working class has been ignored by the media, which has at the same time downplayed the rise in abstention in the same sectors of society. While this legitimised PNPs further, it obscured the withdrawal of the traditionally left-wing working class who have suffered what Miquet-Marty (2011, p. 24) has called a 'feeling of democratic exclusion'. While those who grew up in the post-democratic era were more likely to turn to PNPs, this feeling has led for the most part to abstention. In the 2009 European elections, manual workers (64.1 per cent), the unemployed (72 per cent) and those who positioned themselves the lowest on the social ladder (66.8 per cent) were most likely to have abstained – something which was left out in much of the media's coverage of the 'rise' of PNPs in the working-class vote (European Parliament, 2012).

The aim here is not to 'count' abstention and label it a righteous 'majority' against PNPs, nor is it to imply that it necessarily carries a message. Yet, as Hirschbein notes in the US case, while it is difficult to find a single reason behind abstention, what is clear is that, increasingly, 'voting is no longer an effective placebo for democratic self-governance' (Hirschbein, 1999, p. 2; see also Norris, 2011). This disconnect with the electoral process by those in most need of change demonstrates their real or perceived powerlessness in what is commonly referred to as the democratic process. Further, the negative manner in which abstention is treated today is a potent symbol of the illusion of democracy commonly accepted as natural and immovable.⁹ Even though abstention is less stigmatised than in the past, its study in the media and academia remains couched in negative terms (Barbet, 2007). For Rancière (1995, p. 34), elections are simply not a synonym for democracy; something that is reinforced by Mair's (2006, p. 25) assessment that 'even semi-sovereignty appears to be slipping away, and the citizens are becoming effectively *non-sovereign*'. In this illusion of democracy, PNPs are thus masquerading and masqueraded as the 'voice of the people', the sham embodiment of the part of those who have no part. This illusion

of politics in the existence of a much reviled alternative allows the hegemonic elite to reject the possibility of a political or democratic discussion as it ‘confirms’ the irrationality of the masses.

Notes

- 1 For definitions of terms such as extreme right and radical right see Mondon (2013).
- 2 The exceptions to this may be the short-lived *Narodnichestvo* movement that emerged in Russia in the late nineteenth century and the American populist movement of the same period. However, they were hardly coherent movements, and their ideological distinctiveness, particularly in the American case, is often difficult to sustain (see Kazin, 1995; Venturi, 2001).
- 3 For example, *Libération*'s front page after the first round of the local elections carried the headline ‘fear over our towns’ (peur sur les villes).
- 4 However, negative coverage can be positive in the long run and can in fact participate in the normalisation of the party if the negative element targeted is referred to as ‘an accident’, as is commonly the case with racist comments from party members. Often, such ‘incidents’ are twisted to benefit the far right as the focus is quickly moved from the shocking comment or event (often an overtly racist one), to the reaction of party leaders – be it the denunciation of the incident or the minimisation of the impact – instead of a scrutiny of the damage done. For two examples among many, see *Le Monde* and AFP (2014) and Mason (2013). In both cases, the parties are allowed to give their own account of the event and deflect the seriousness of the ‘accusations’, rather than face external scrutiny. On many other occasions, the ‘perpetrators’ themselves are given ample media opportunities to defend themselves and claim that they are not racist/sexist/homophobic, leaving analysis in the background.
- 5 For Dunaway *et al* (2010), ‘even when an issue is not a daily and immediate concern, constant media attention primes issue awareness by making it more accessible in the mind or by increasing the issue’s perceived importance’.
- 6 Surel and Mény have also noted that the ‘constitutionalist dimension of democracy [has become] so developed that some believe it jeopardises the very existence of democracy itself – that is people’s democracy’ (Mény and Surel, 2002).
- 7 Muxel (2007) stresses rightly that abstention is not mere apathy as it regroups both those who, by opting out of voting, opt out of politics as whole, and those who opt out of voting as a political act.
- 8 For Muxel (2007), they are part of the first group of abstainers who accept their exclusion from politics and the political, because of their individual situation, but also for a feeling of incompetence. However, they hold a deeper resentment towards society as it is.
- 9 Abstainers are often considered as lazy, bad citizens, disrespectful of the rights so painfully gained by our ancestors and so on. In 2002, Norris described voting as ‘the lifeblood of representative democracy’, insinuating thereby that abstention would risk the death of democracy.

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