
The Prospects of Populism

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The term *populism* has become a pejorative. In the United States, supporters of Donald Trump are often referred to as populists. Those same supporters labeled Bernie Sanders a populist. It is clear that neither use is intended to be a compliment. It is less clear what is meant by this now derogatory epithet.

The negative connotation tied to the word *populism* predates contemporary American politics. Although not the first such use, populism appears as the antagonist of William Riker’s influential work *Liberalism against Populism* ([1982] 1988). Riker leaves no doubt that populism is the enemy of liberalism, but there is doubt about precisely who or, better yet, *what* this enemy is. The first task of this paper is to perform a conceptual analysis of populism. To know whether populism is antithetical to liberalism requires knowing what populism is.¹

After gaining additional conceptual clarity, the second task of the paper is to assess Riker’s contention that liberalism and populism are at odds. Riker’s project was not one of conceptual analysis but one of investigating the implications social choice theory has for democratic theory. Although not the first to arrive at this conclusion, I contend that Riker’s criticism of populism is not as damning as he suggests.

The final task of the paper is to discuss how James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s (1962) consensus model of justification is actually a promising possibility for a “populist” means of satisfying the justificatory conditions defended by Riker. What we might call *ideal populism*—which employs a unanimity rule—circumvents criticisms raised by Riker. But is ideal populism *actually* populism? The answer, perhaps

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1. For an excellent piece of conceptual analysis, see Urbinati 2019b.

unsurprisingly, depends on what conception of populism one employs. If one employs the account put forth at the outset of the paper, then the answer seems to be no.

What Is Populism?

A Google search for the definition of the term *populism* produces the following result: “a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elites.” Although vague, this preliminary definition is helpful in that it emphasizes an important aspect of populism: antielitism. Jan-Werner Müller suggests in a book that shares its name with the title of this section that the heterogenous uses of the term *populism* actually have a common core, which can be more precisely stated as two necessary conditions—one of which is antielitism.

Antielitism: X is populist only if X is critical of elites. (Müller 2016, 2)

Antipluralism: X is populist only if X identifies an out-group or set of out-groups that are not part of “the people,” properly understood, and claims made by out-groups are illegitimate. (Müller 2016, 3)

The antipluralism condition is what Müller takes to be his contribution to understanding what populism is. Both supporters of Trump and supporters of Sanders are antielitist in some sense, but that alone does not make either a populist. To be a populist requires also being opposed to pluralism. Populists recognize a “people” as well as some group or groups that are not properly part of the “people” whose claims lack legitimacy.

Müller’s addition of antipluralism helps make the notion of populism more determinate. However, I believe these two necessary conditions alone leave populism underspecified. A third necessary condition is required.

Antitolerance: X is populist only if X maintains that out-groups cannot consistently hold that their position, p^* , is true if it is not the position, p , identified by “the people.”

To be clear, populists need not be antitolerance in the sense that they permit violence toward the out-groups. Rather, populists are committed to antitolerance at the level of beliefs. For example, let p be the position that national borders ought to be closed, and let p^* be the position that national borders ought to be open. A populist would say that an out-group is making a logical mistake by believing that the opening of national borders is justified given that “the people” settled that national borders should be closed.

Antitolerance is a furtherance of antipluralism. Whereas antipluralism holds that the claims of out-groups lack standing, antitolerance goes further to say that political truths are settled by “the people” and that one is being epistemically irresponsible by not

internalizing the conclusions arrived at by “the people.” The former is a negative claim about which claims do not matter, whereas the latter is a claim about political truth.

One could accept Müller’s antipluralism condition without accepting anti-toleration. Take an out-group such as anarchists. If one accepts only antipluralism, the challenge to state authority by anarchists lacks standing insofar as “the people” conclude that the state has authority. But anarchists could still coherently maintain that the state lacks authority. When the anarchists make their case that the state is unauthoritative, though, there is no need to hear it out.²

However, if one accepts antitoleration, too, then anarchists are believing something false when they assert that the state lacks authority. The practical implication of a commitment to antitoleration is that out-groups are not justified in living on their own terms, even when those terms fail to interfere with the lives of parties that compose “the people” because the out-groups’ position has been determined to be false. This means that a commitment to antitoleration rules out something like the utopian vision spelled out by Robert Nozick in part 3 of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (2013; see also Kukathas 2003).

It seems to me that actual examples of populism are committed to antitoleration. The populist credo would not be that “the people” are right and if you disagree, you are *irrelevant*, but rather that you are *wrong*. Populists do not want the out-group to be either cast out or allowed to leave; they want the out-group to be shown the light or, in some more extreme cases, to be forced to act in accordance with the truth. Indeed, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau says in *On the Social Contract* (1762), “Whoever refuses to obey the general will . . . will be forced to be free” (Rousseau 1987, book 1, chap. 7).

Although short of an explicit definition, which may not be surprising given, as Chantal Mouffe says, that populism “is not an ideology or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content” (2016), these three necessary conditions seem to form its conceptual core.

Riker on Liberalism or Populism

In *Liberalism against Populism* ([1982] 1988), Riker looks at democracy through the lens of social choice theory. For Riker, democracy is fundamentally a way of making decisions by way of the vote. Voting is a way of making social choices. Thus, studying democracy from a social choice perspective is appropriate.

Democracy is a special kind of social choice mechanism because of its commitment to the ideals of liberty, participation, and equality. Liberty involves being able to vote, participation regards doing so, and equality requires that each vote count the same. These ideals give way to a special set of constraints on collective decision-procedures. In order for a decision-procedure to be justified, it must be *moral* and *meaningful*.³

2. This holds regardless of how sophisticated the anarchists’ case is. See, for instance, Simmons 1981 and Huemer 2013.

3. This elaborates on a point made in Coleman and Ferejohn 1986, 10.

Moral: A decision-procedure, D , must be both *fair* in the sense that it permits participation from all and *autonomy compliant* in the sense that each agent ultimately complies with social rules of his or her own choosing.

Meaningful: A decision-procedure, D , must generate outcomes that are indicative of the general will and fully explicable in terms of voters' inputs.

Can democracy satisfy the moral and meaningful conditions? Given that the justification of democracy appeals to the ideals of equality, liberty, and participation, it should be able to satisfy the pair of constraints that follow from them. But can it?

As Jules Coleman and John Ferejohn say, the problem social choice theory poses to democracy theory “is that any democratic voting procedure that is fair in the appropriate sense will be normatively defensible but not meaningful, that is, its outcomes will be arbitrary” (1986, 11). Put differently, using democratic voting as the decision-procedure must be moral and meaningful, but Riker concludes that no procedure can actually be both because the decision-procedure's outputs are prone to being either *paradoxical* or *rule contingent*. An example of an output that is paradoxical is an ordering that violates transitivity: $A > B > C > A$. An example of a rule-contingent output is one that keeps the preference profiles constant, modifies features of the decision-procedure, and arrives at a different output.

It is worth stating the underlying logic behind why it might be problematic for a decision-procedure to produce outputs that are paradoxical or rule contingent. A paradoxical output is problematic for a given D because it means that D is open to producing *incoherent* results. If D takes coherent individual inputs and produces an output that is incoherent, then one may take incoherence to be generated by the particular features of D . A rule-contingent output is problematic for D because it means that D is subject to yielding an *arbitrary* result.⁴ If one holds the inputs constant, changes the features of D , and arrives at a different output, the arbitrariness appears to be a product of the changes to D .

Riker concludes that if a given D produces an output that is either paradoxical or rule contingent, then it can be said to be “meaningless” ([1982] 1988, 136–37). Though I find the use of the term *meaningless* less than illuminating, the idea seems to be that an output that is either paradoxical or rule contingent lacks justification. But why would the fact that an output is paradoxical or rule contingent *entail* that it lacks justification?

If an output is paradoxical and, ultimately, incoherent as a result of cycling, then I can see why that output would lack justification. However, in order for this to be a substantial challenge, there must be evidence of cycling occurring with regularity in

4. Interestingly, John Rawls was also concerned with giving a nonarbitrary justification for his two principles of justice. It is the basis on which his theory is built because it provides the justification for the original position thought-experiment. See Rawls 1999.

practice. If cycles are not present in practice, one may wonder about how much trouble this actually poses (Mackie 2003).

An output that is rule contingent does not seem to have a straightforward explanation as to why arbitrariness entails the absence of a justification. That different decision-procedures yield different outputs from the same set of inputs is not obviously problematic. Indeed, one may prefer a certain decision-procedure for a *reason*. Perhaps the most apparent reason is that a certain procedure may yield better *consequences* than other procedures. D_1 may be justified on the basis that it produces better (which could be cashed out in different ways: more accurate? truer? more utility maximizing?) results than D_2 . Hence, it does not follow from the fact that different procedures produce different results from the same set of inputs that any particular procedure lacks justification.

This is why it would be better if Riker did not assert that an output is meaningless if it is either paradoxical or rule contingent. Lumping the respective strands together under the “meaningless” umbrella unnecessarily muddles the conceptual terrain. Having separated out Riker’s argument, one could respond that the paradoxical strand lacks relevance (as Gerry Mackie [2003] does) and that the rule-contingent strand actually does not undermine the justification of a decision-procedure (responding so would require showing that a given D is not employed for some principled reason).

If that is right, Riker’s argument is confused in important ways. Nonetheless, Riker could maintain that although outputs being paradoxical and rule contingent is not as worrying as initially believed, it still has not been demonstrated that any D could be both moral and meaningful in the relevant senses. That is, it might not be a problem that an output is rule contingent, but it would be a problem that the reason for the decision-procedure (e.g., it does well on consequentialist grounds) is not a means of satisfying the meaningful condition, which requires the outcome be an expression of the general will.

At this point, one may simply want to rebuff the meaningful condition. Why believe that an output must be “meaningful,” understood as being an expression of the general will? This is what Riker’s *liberal* does. What he calls the “liberal” or “Madisonian” interpretation of voting maintains that “the function of voting is to control officials, *and nothing more*” ([1982] 1988, 9, emphasis in original). The liberal does not assume that the output of an election is truth tracking or general will tracking. The liberal just wants to “be able to vote the bastards out.”

But Riker’s *populist* wants to retain the meaningful condition. What Riker calls the “populist” or “Rousseauistic” interpretation of voting sees voting as the “way to discover the general will, which is the objectively correct common interest of the incorporated citizens” and understands that this “computation will be accurate if each citizen, when giving an opinion or vote, considers and chooses only the common interest, not a personal or private interest” ([1982] 1988, 11). It is worth noting that it is a bit misleading to label Riker’s conception of populism “Rousseauistic” because Rousseau is explicit that an electoral output is not necessarily the general will. In book II, chapter 3 of *On the Social Contract* (Rousseau 1987), Rousseau says that there “is

often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will.” The general will is the output of a suitably idealized electoral process. It is *that* electoral output that the nonideal electoral output must be identical to in order to be meaningful.

I make this qualification not to dwell on exegesis but because Riker’s populist holds an even more ambitious position than Rousseau because the populist has an implicit “moral certainty” as “the opinions of the majority *must* be right and *must* be respected because the will of the people is the liberty of the people” (Riker [1982] 1988, 14, emphasis in original). For Riker, the populist holds that majority opinion is necessarily the general will, whereas Rousseau admits that the two may come apart. Both views are in contrast to the liberal interpretation of voting, in which “there is no such magical identification” between majority opinion and truth, and the “outcome of voting is just a decision and has no special moral character” (Riker [1982] 1988, 14). This returns us to the previously discussed issue of conceptual analysis as Riker’s move beyond Rousseau is, in essence, a justification for what I have proposed calling the “antitoleration condition.”

To summarize, the populist is wedded to the meaningful condition, but the general will, on Riker’s rendering, in the condition is just whatever the electoral output is. So understood, the meaningful condition actually becomes trivially satisfied because the general will *just is* the electoral output. This is clearly not the conclusion Riker desired. It seems that Riker’s argument relies on an equivocation in the notion of the general will. On the one hand, he needs the general will to be something over and beyond the electoral output in order to criticize populist decision-procedures for failing to be meaningful. On the other hand, he characterizes the populist interpretation of voting as identifying the electoral output with the general will.

The question Riker owes an answer to is: Is the general will something over and above the electoral output? That is, can an electoral output not be an expression of the general will? But Riker is not the only one with a looming question. The question populists owe an answer to is: Can a decision-procedure be both moral and meaningful? If so, then populists also owe an account of how it needs to be designed.

Ideal Populism

Ultimately, I am unsure whether an actual, nonideal decision-procedure can simultaneously satisfy the moral and meaningful conditions. The conditions may simply be too demanding. Yet the fact that they go unsatisfied may not give anyone reason to stay up at night worrying.

Nevertheless, there is a looming question whether they can be jointly satisfied at a more abstract level. The type of proposal that has the potential to be both moral and meaningful has roots in James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s *The Calculus of Consent* (1962). Although Buchanan and Tullock are explicit that they are “not attempting to write an ‘ideal’ political constitution for society” (vi), suppose we skip the preface and decide not to take them at their word. Could an ideal form of populism be both moral and meaningful?

To ask that a decision-procedure be moral and meaningful is to ask that it be fair and autonomy compliant and that it indicate a general will of the citizenry. Suppose we adopt the deflationary conception of the general will articulated by Riker, then the substantive question is what kind of decision-procedure can be both fair—in the sense that it permits participation from all—and autonomy compliant—in the sense that each agent ultimately complies with social rules of his or her own choosing.

To my ears, a fair and autonomy-compliant decision-procedure is a procedure that employs a *unanimity rule* (Buchanan and Tullock 1962, 85–96). It is fair in that consensus is required, which means all are at liberty to participate. It is autonomy compliant in that each agent is at liberty to veto a decision if she or he chooses. Of course, a unanimity rule is not a realistic alternative at present. But let us bracket that challenge in order to explore the theoretical potential of the position.

Would the adoption of a unanimity rule succumb to the problems raised by Riker? Recall that the worries are that a decision-procedure will produce either paradoxical outputs that are problematic because they are incoherent or rule-contingent outputs that are problematic because they are arbitrary. First, a unanimity rule would prevent paradoxical outputs. Discussing the voting paradox, Riker writes that “[a]lthough individuals can arrive at a unique choice, in this case society cannot even choose. What makes all this so democratically unpalatable is that, apparently, the only way to make ‘society’ choose coherently is to impose a dictator” ([1982] 1988, 18). Instead of appointing *a* dictator, Buchanan and Tullock ensure coherency by making *everyone* a dictator, so to speak. All have decisive veto power. The possibility of an output being incoherent is thereby ruled out. Second, enacting a unanimity rule would avoid the charge of rule-contingent outputs being arbitrary because all the inputs are the same, so the order in which they are taken up is otiose. It seems that a form of ideal populism that employs a unanimity rule as the decision-procedure is not prone to producing the problematic types of outputs about which Riker worried.

Although the type of ideal populism under discussion invokes the unanimity rule found in Buchanan and Tullock’s work, the position articulated in *The Calculus of Consent* is not claimed to be a version of ideal populism. To be populist requires being antielitist, antipluralist, and antitoleration. Ideal populism seems to satisfy antielitism, albeit in a slightly different sense, in that elites do not have extra authority because all have decisive veto power. However, Buchanan and Tullock, despite what might be found in more polemical and less scholarly books (e.g., MacLean 2017), are not antipluralist and antitoleration.

The upshot and relevance of this discussion is that although ideal populism may be able to satisfy the moral and meaningfulness conditions, it may not actually be a form of populism at all. The conceptual core of populism is said to involve antipluralism and antitoleration. However, identifying an illegitimate out-group does not seem possible in the presence of ideal populism’s unanimity rule because all have veto power. If an illegitimate out-group cannot be identified, then whatever we are talking about is not really populist in the full sense. Put differently, there is a tension between the extensive

idealization required to necessarily satisfy the moral and meaningfulness conditions and the nonideal conceptual core of populism.

I close by considering whether ideal populism is antithetical to liberalism. Near the end of his book, Riker ruminates on the consistency of populism and liberalism:

The main threat to democracy from populism is not, however, the exceptional temptation to subvert elections but the exceptional ability to do so. Populist institutions depend on the elimination of constitutional restraints, and the populist interpretation of voting justifies this elimination. With the restraints removed, it is easy to change electoral arrangements, which is why populist democracies so often revert to autocracies. Perhaps the leaders of some future populism will be so thoroughly imbued with liberal ideals that they will never meddle with free elections. But since even in Britain, where liberal ideals originated, the populist elimination of constitutional limitations has begun to produce attacks on the integrity of elections, it seems unlikely that the liberal sanction can survive populist institutions. Indeed this empirical regularity suggests to me that there is a profound theoretical reason that populism induces rulers to ensconce themselves in office. At any rate, on the practical level at least, the answer is clearly negative to the main question of this section: Is liberal rejectability compatible with populist incorporability? No: because the constitutional restraints practically associated with liberalism must be destroyed to achieve populism. ([1982] 1988, 249)

In short, liberalism and populism are not compatible because liberalism requires constitutional protections and populism requires the absence of or the active removal of such constraints.

I admit that I find this passage quite vexing. Why does populism depend on eliminating constitutional restraints? The answer seems to be that populists want to be able to meddle with electoral outcomes and grab power when possible. Here populists seem to be acting not in accordance with anything like the general will but rather out of self-interest and the pursuit of power. But why characterize populists in this nonideal way?

The comparison Riker seems to be making is between nonideal populists and ideal liberals. There is a sort of methodological asymmetry here.⁵ The liberal ideal of rejecting candidates “who have offended so many voters that they cannot win an election” is presented as readily achievable because it is “a negative ideal” and less demanding because it “does not require that voting produce a clear, consistent, meaningful statement of the popular will” (Riker [1982] 1988, 242). Of course, though, there are many ways liberals can fail to “vote the bastards out.” Voters may be subject to similar biases that lead them systematically to cast the “wrong” vote—whatever that may mean (Caplan 2008; but see also Lomasky 2008).

5. For more on specifically behavioral asymmetry, see Brennan and Buchanan [1985] 2000.

Ultimately, when Riker asks if liberal rejectability is compatible with populist incorporability and maintains the answer is no because populism requires destroying the constitutional restraints familiar from liberalism, his rationale is almost backward. For populism and liberalism to be compossible requires not the eradication of constitutional restraints, but rather that constitutional restraints be construed as approaching their logical (and highly idealistic) limit in which a unanimity rule is in place.

Conclusion

The problem with populism at the most fundamental level is not one of social choices being “meaningless.” This formal objection has logical and empirical limits. The discussion of ideal populism suggests that, as a conceptual matter, there is a form of populism that is meaningful. The more substantive question, I believe, is whether ideal populism actually counts as populism at all. And that is a normative query. Future criticisms of populism will be more fruitful if they attend to (and, perhaps, are directed at) the normative, with special emphasis on the conceptual, dimensions of populism.⁶

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6. For a work in this spirit, see Urbinati 2019a.

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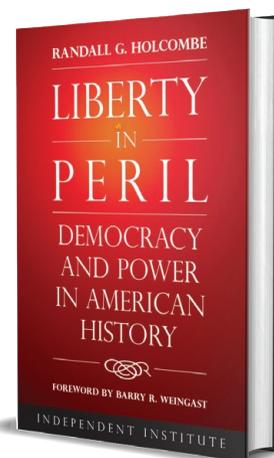
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