

The Dangerous Myth of Populism as a Thin Ideology

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Abstract

The idea that populism is a ‘thin ideology’—unlike other full-bodied ‘thick’ ideologies like conservatism or socialism—has come close to being an orthodoxy among populism scholars. This paper challenges that view and argues that it is at best an open question whether populism meets the criteria of a thick ideology, which should be whether it offers a comprehensive program of political change and whether it has staying power. This argument will be made by reference to three countries, the United States, Sweden and India, all of which have recently seen a populist turn. The paper first summarizes debates about populism, ideology and social change. Then it provides a brief account of populism in the three country cases and argues that their populist turns may be a coherent and lasting new departure. The paper concludes with reflections about the broader ramifications of populism as ‘thick’ versus ‘thin’.

Keywords

ideology – political beliefs – populism – United States – India – Sweden

1 A ‘Thin’ Ideology?

The idea that populism is a ‘thin ideology’ has become commonly accepted among scholars; indeed, it has become something of an orthodoxy.¹ There is still considerable debate over the definition of populism, but many scholars now follow Mudde who sees populism as pitting a homogeneous virtuous

¹ Stanley, B. “The Thin Ideology of Populism”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1) (2008), 95–110.

people against a corrupt or self-interested elite, combined with the idea that politics should allow greater scope for expression of the 'general will' of the people.² There are three core elements to Mudde's definition; elites, 'the people', and who should be included and excluded in 'the people'. It is on the last point where different left and right-wing versions of populism can be distinguished: Right-wing versions often seek to exclude immigrants, for example, whereas left-wing versions seek to defend against the globalizing economic threats that undercut workers' rights. Mudde and others also make the left/right distinction, but they also argue that populism is a 'thin' ideology because, apart from the Manichean opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite', populism has little by way of its own political program to offer, and so it is reliant on or piggybacks onto other more substantive political ideologies.

Since Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, research on populism has exploded, though there had already been a sizable body of research on the topic that goes back several decades.³ Going further into the definitional debates will be left to one side here; suffice it to say that the standard definition used by Mudde and others will be adhered to in what follows. The paper will also adopt the baseline definition of the highly contested term 'ideology' supplied by Freeden, who is responsible for the notion of 'thin': He says that a 'political ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions and values that 1. exhibit a recurring pattern, 2. are held by significant groups, 3. compete over providing and controlling plans for public policy, 4. do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community'.⁴ Where this paper departs from recent scholarship is in the widespread view that populism is a 'thin ideology', which entails that 'it is unable to stand alone as a practical political ideology: it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution of crucial political questions'.⁵ But whereas the definition of populism has been widely discussed, the notion of a 'thin ideology' is perhaps less familiar, so it is worth going into the background of this idea in more detail.

'Thin ideology' is a term coined by Freeden in his conceptual analysis of ideologies. He applies the term to ideologies like 'feminism' and 'nationalism'.⁶

2 Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser, C.R. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3 Ionescu, G., and Gellner, E. (eds.) *Populism. Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 1969).

4 Freeden, M., *Ideology: A very short introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32.

5 Stanley, "Thin Ideology", op. cit. p. 95.

6 Freeden, *Ideology*, op. cit., pp. 98–100.

A 'thin ideology' is defined as 'one that, like mainstream ones, has an identifiable morphology but, unlike mainstream ones, a restricted one'.⁷ There are analytical and substantive reasons why he makes this distinction: the analytical one is that other approaches to understanding ideology, such as Marxists and post-structuralists, think that there has been ideological fragmentation, so that very many beliefs can count as ideologies apart from mainstream ones that are thick and comprehensive and coherent. In fact, for Freeden, some 'thin ideologies' may simply be social movements such as the ideologies of the 'environmental' and 'gender' movements.⁸ In any case, Marxists and poststructuralists, according to Freeden, see too many ideologies everywhere. The substantive reason for the distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' is that restricted ideologies such as 'nationalism' assert the primacy of nationalism but 'little else. It certainly does not produce a scheme for the distribution of scarce and vital goods',⁹ which is a key feature of a thick ideology.

Now it may be true that nationalism and environmentalism and feminism do not have such schemes, but populism, as we shall see, does: in the case of right-wing populism, it is that scarce and vital resources should be distributed according to the principle that certain people, those within an ethnic group or other criterion of deservingness that excludes others, should be prioritized in allocating resources. In the case of left-wing populism, resources should be re-allocated away from economic elites or companies and foreign workers that benefit from globalization—and towards those who would benefit from stronger borders that protect the rights pertaining to economic distribution. Freeden himself sometimes has an understanding of populism whereby it is focused on single issues like 'Brexit' which he understands primarily in terms of nationalism.¹⁰ But ideologies morph, and populism outside of the United Kingdom has become far more than exit from the EU, as those who apply the notion of 'thin ideology' but define populism in terms quite different from Freeden recognize. (It can be noted as an aside that Brexit may indeed have

7 Freeden, *Ideology*, op. cit., pp. 98–100. Freeden also develops criteria for the 'maturity' of an ideology, which are their uniqueness or distinctiveness, responsiveness to a broad range of issues, and adaptability ("decontestation"), Freeden, M. (1996). *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), esp. pp. 485–87. These will be useful in assessing 'thickness' below.

8 As an aside, it can be mentioned here that in several recent national and regional elections in German-speaking countries, Green parties have gained more support than socialist (left) parties, perhaps another sign that thick ideologies are declining at the expense of formerly 'thin' ones.

9 Freeden, *Ideology*, op. cit., p. 98.

10 Freeden, M. "After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22(1), 2017, 1–11.

been 'thin', but it will leave its mark on British politics even if exiting the EU is reversed, for in that case, the distrust of those who voted for Brexit in the referendum and continue to push for it will remain entrenched in British politics. If Brexit does take place on the other hand, Britain's political direction will also have been altered profoundly.)

In any event, Freeden could be right to argue that it is not clear if populism will achieve the same strength and coherence as socialism, liberalism and conservatism, which are among his examples of 'thick' ideologies. But by designating populism as 'thin', and arguing that it is parasitic on other, 'thicker' ideologies, Freeden and those who use this designation make two mistakes. The first is to imply that populism is a transient, minor or weak phenomenon on its own. It is true that populism does not yet have as much historical force or tradition as socialism or liberalism.¹¹ But the absence of a long historical tradition was also characteristic of fascism and communism, both of which certainly had strong, if relatively brief, efflorescences. Or again, there are few parties that directly invoke populism in their party names, but this is sometimes also true of parties that pursue thick ideologies. Moreover, even if it is still too early to identify the social forces that give rise to a phenomenon which has, in much of the world, gained strength (or been revived) only in recent decades or even years, it would be a mistake not to try to do so.

A concrete example of where this mistake can lead will be useful before we return to broader issues: Mudde, who is generally regarded as one of the foremost scholars of populism, frequently comments on current events and argues that journalists and academics often cry wolf and exaggerate an alleged crisis of populism in order to seek attention. Yet Mudde's position, which sees this 'thin' ideology as waxing and waning, may also underestimate the strength and freestanding nature of this phenomenon. One concrete instance is that Mudde regards Trump as a Republican who represents the radical right of his party.¹² In other words, Mudde thinks of Trump as not having a distinctive ideology, but rather as taking the Republican's right-wing ideology further to the right, the 'far right'. Yet this ignores that Trump's populism is beyond left and right, promoting a protectionist economic nationalism and an isolationist foreign policy that depart significantly from recent Republican orthodoxy and that have in the past (at least in the case of economic protectionism, but also of welfare chauvinism and a more isolationist foreign policy) been associated

11 See, for example, Wuthnow, R. *Communities of discourse: Ideology and social structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European socialism*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

12 Mudde, C. *The Far Right in America*. (London: Routledge, 2017).

with the Democratic party.¹³ And whether the direction that Trump has taken, and the many especially American politicians he has taken along with him, is long-lasting, is not yet clear (as Mudde acknowledges). And again, the jury is out on the extent to which Trump has changed the Republican party, or if there will continue to be substantial left-wing populist challengers (like Bernie Sanders in 2016).

These points indicate that there are problems with the notion of populism as 'thin'. The more important point, however, is to make a constructive case for populism as a 'thick' ideology. Before this constructive argument is put forward, it is important to mention two ideas that are closely related to the notion of populism as a 'thin ideology', both of which seemingly lend support for populism as a transient or parasitic phenomenon. In fact, they are separate from the 'thin' argument. The first is that populism is a creation of digital media disinformation or its filter bubbles or echo chambers, and the second that populism is part of a growing polarization.¹⁴ The implication of the first, propounded in the media, is that if people had not been misled by digital media, they would not have been misled into voting for populists. Snyder, for example, says: 'America lost a cyberwar to Russia in 2016, the result of which was the election of Trump'.¹⁵ This larger debate about disinformation cannot be reviewed here; suffice it to say that the most comprehensive analysis of the American presidential election, where this argument is most often made, finds no support for this idea.¹⁶ The implication of the second is that the emergence of an extreme right-wing is tied to the emergence of a similar extreme position on the left (again, a split perhaps exacerbated by the media). Again, this extensive debate cannot be reviewed here, but it can be mentioned that the main instance where 'polarization' has been extensively studied, likewise, is the United States, and despite many studies going back decades, this debate,

13 Ivaldi, G. and Mazzoleni, O., "Economic Populism and Producerism: European Right-Wing Populist Parties in a Transatlantic Perspective", *Populism*, 2, 2019, 1–28; Smith, D. "Populism, Nationalism, and U.S. Foreign Policy", in M. Golder and S. Golder (eds.), *Comparative Politics Newsletter: The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association*, 26(2), 2016, 101–6.

14 Benkler, Y., Faris, R. and Roberts, H., *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

15 Snyder, T. "America lost a cyberwar to Russia in 2016. When will we have truth?", *The Guardian*, February 12, 2018. Retrieved 17.12, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/12/america-cyberwar-russia-2016-memo-truth>).

16 Sides, J., Tesler, M. and Vavreck, L. *Identity crisis: The 2016 presidential campaign and the battle for the meaning of America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

revived in the light of the role of the internet during the 2016 election, has been inconclusive.¹⁷

It can be added that polarization and similar ideas make sense for the US with its two party system. For Sweden and India, it is less evident that polarization is occurring since both countries have multi-party systems (added to which there are regional parties in India). In any event, polarization and disinformation are separate ideas but they also dovetail with each other, and both lend weight to the notion that populism is not a substantial ideological option insofar populism is simply an ephemeral part of this polarization or of disinformation campaigns. But apart from the arguments against ephemerality that will be made below, it is worth noting already that polarization and disinformation have mainly been foregrounded recently because of Brexit and the election of Trump. At the same time, populism has a history that reaches back at least into the late 19th century in the United States¹⁸ and beyond¹⁹ and in Europe into the 1990s or earlier;²⁰ so clearly polarization and disinformation are not uniquely related to populism. With this, we can briefly turn to our three examples.

2 Populism in Sweden, the United States and India

There are, of course, many examples of successful populists. Here three have been chosen to reflect a range among democracies, including two countries that are typically seen as extremes on the continuum among Western political

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- 17 Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J.M. "Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(40), 2017, 10612–10617.
 - 18 Kazin, M. *The populist persuasion: An American history*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
 - 19 Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, op. cit., pp. 21–41; Betz, H.G. "Populist Mobilization across Time and Space", in Hawkins, K., Carlin, R., Littvay, L., and Kaltwasser, C.R. (eds). *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 181–201.
 - 20 Mudde, C. *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Brubaker, R. (2017). "Why Populism", *Theory and Society*, 46: 357–385; for the role of the media, Moffitt, B. (2017). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press).

systems²¹ and one that, however imperfect its democracy,²² is seen as a model among developing countries. All three have seen strong recent successes of populist politics.

The Sweden Democrats had their roots in the Swedish neo-Nazi and anti-tax movements of the 1980s and 90s, but they only entered parliament after the general election in 2010 having secured 5.7% of the vote, which has since risen to 9.7% in the 2014 election and 17.6% in the 2018 election. After the last two elections, their support put them in a 'kingmaker' position between the main right and left parties which were forced, after long periods of instability, to form alliance governments instead. The main support for the Sweden Democrats is due to their anti-immigrant stance, so they belong to the family of European radical right anti-immigrant parties.²³ Yet they also champion the welfare state, putting them squarely into the main social-democratic tradition that has dominated Sweden throughout the 20th century; the creation of a peoples' home (or 'Folkhem'). This part of the Sweden Democrat's platform is populist since welfare provision for immigrants should be curtailed; only 'true Swedes' deserve more generous welfare benefits. The Sweden Democrats therefore also belong in the populist camp; against immigrants and 'foreign cultures' and especially Islam, against 'multicultural' and established political elites and also against the 'mainstream' media. Debates about whether their support comes mainly from those who previously supported the other two main parties, the conservative party (Moderaterna) or the Social Democrats, continues. What is clear is that their support has broadened and comes from a wide socio-demographic range rather than a particular fringe.²⁴ It is also clear that they have had an impact on the policies of the coalition governments, though how far this impact goes beyond a tightening of immigration laws is hard to say—since they have not formed part of the coalition government because other parties refuse to work with them; a 'cordon sanitaire'.

In the United States, there has been a long-standing tradition of populism going back into the late 19th century.²⁵ In recent decades, going back to the 1950s, support for populist ideology among the public has waxed and waned, though it has been overlooked because surveys typically only look at support

21 Pontusson, J. *Inequality and Prosperity: Social Europe vs. Liberal America*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

22 Varshney, A. *Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy*. (London: Penguin, 2013).

23 Mudde, *Populist radical right parties*, op. cit.

24 Sannerstedt, A. "Sverigedemokraternas sympatisörer: fler än nagon sin", in J. Ohlsson, H. Oscarsson & M. Solevid (eds.) *Ekvilibrum*, Gothenburg: Gothenburg University: SOM Institute, 2016: pp. 161–78.

25 Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, op. cit.

for the two dominant Republican and Democratic or right and left ideologies. If, instead of grouping the American public into right and left poles, the preferences of Americans are clustered into five ideological groups—Liberals, Conservatives, Populists, Libertarians, and Moderates—then, according to Clagett, Engle and Shafer²⁶—all five of these positions have had the support of a substantial and potentially winning percentage of voters in recent decades. Trump was able to exploit this support in the 2016 election to become president, appealing to a wide swathe of the electorate.²⁷ The media, and especially digital media and Twitter in particular, played a central role in his victory.²⁸ In any event, there is now a substantial body of academic literature that regards Trump's politics as populist,²⁹ and, as discussed, Trump's political positions, foreign and domestic, are populist: his constant appeals to 'the people' and its enemies, especially immigrants, and against 'the elites', including the Washington 'swamp' and the hostile media, and 'America first policies' in trade and defense—all these clearly bear the hallmarks of populism. And, as discussed earlier, it is misleading to regard Trump as 'radical right' rather than as 'populist': his policies also have strong left-wing populist elements.

Narendra Modi became prime minister of India when his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the national election in 2014 with 31.3% of the vote and this share increased to 37.4% in the 2019 election. Like Trump, his party was wary of putting him forward as a prime ministerial candidate in 2014, regarding him as too extreme.³⁰ And again like Trump, Modi used digital media, and Twitter in particular, to circumvent traditional media, challenge his own party establishment and overcome the main opposition Congress Party. His leadership has been marked by a Hindu nationalist stance domestically and an 'India first' foreign policy.³¹ The main thrust of his ideology is to restore the greatness of India's Hindu's civilization, but this has entailed an antagonistic stance towards Muslims and against established elites, including the media (often

26 Clagett, W., Engle, P.J. and Shafer, B. "The Evolution of Mass Ideologies in Modern American Politics", *The Forum*, 12(2), 2014, 223–256.

27 Sides, Vavreck and Tesler, *Identity Crisis*, op. cit.

28 Schroeder, R. *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology and Globalization*. (London: UCL Press, 2018), 76–80.

29 For example, Pappas, T. *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Theoretical and Comparative Analysis*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

30 Price, L. *The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's campaign to transform India*. (London: Hodder. 2016, 2nd ed).

31 Jaffrelot, C. "The Modi-centric BJP 2014 election campaign: new techniques and old tactics", *Contemporary South Asia*, 23(2): 2015. 155–61; Jaffrelot, C, and Tillin, L. "Populism in India", in Kaltwasser, C.R. et al. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.7.

labelled 'presstitutes' by his supporters) and secularists ('sickularists'). Modi also constantly denigrates his political opponents, and especially the Congress party. Yet he also has a strong 'developmental' agenda, which includes expanding infrastructure, 'patriotic consumption'³² and expanding welfare benefits. But again, these benefits should favour Hindus, and this exclusionary policy has been most evident in education where he has promoted Hindu culture in schools and universities. A further example is the current drive to exclude 'foreigners' from the Indian state of Assam by means of citizenship tests, clearly aimed against Muslims. Modi's brand of populism therefore similarly does not align neatly with a left/right divide.

It can be seen that all three populist cases have a political program and, when in power, policies that go beyond being 'thin': Trump, Modi and the Sweden Democrats promote distinctive ideologies concerning the redistribution of resources (more generous welfare, but mainly for 'the people', defined in exclusionary terms). At a minimum, the populist ideology in the three cases discussed, in addition to Mudde's definition, consists of welfare chauvinism, 'exclusionism' towards 'outsiders', and a 'my country first' foreign and trade policy. The details of these ideologies may be different, but they belong to the same family of—populist—ideology. They can be labelled right-wing populists, but only if we mean by this that they seek to restrict rights for some and enhance them (a traditionally left-wing stance) for others. And although 'the people' and the 'elites' have a somewhat different coloration in each case, these populist leaders and the programs of their parties—in two cases to a large extent foisted on their parties—fit well within the commonly accepted definition of populism and the definition of ideology cited earlier—except that they are not thin in the sense that they have gained strength and show no sign of waning.

Still, it is worth spelling out what the position that would deny the importance or 'thickness' of populism might argue for the cases discussed here. First, that Trump falls squarely within the traditional Republican or right-wing mode, perhaps taking it to a new extreme. Similarly the Sweden Democrats could be seen simply as right wing extremists. Likewise Modi, with the twist whereby India's religious tensions are exploited to an unusual degree. But these arguments against 'thickness' overlook a number of points: It is true that among Trump's economic policies there was a tax cut for the rich, but his policies are disliked by the economic elite because he is putting up trade barriers and aims to bolster manufacturing and thus to favour 'the people' even when

32 Hansen, T. (1999). *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 223–34.

these anti-globalization policies don't appeal to free market economists.³³ Further, many conservatives and businesspeople are quite happy with open borders for foreign labour to drive down wages. Likewise with Trump's foreign policy, which goes against America's traditional right-wing interventionism. The Sweden Democrats aim to strengthen the welfare state, which is not a traditional right-wing policy (the fact that they have not been able to do so is because they have not been part of the governing coalition, but populists in Norway and Denmark, who have, provide good analogies). Mr. Modi's Hindu nationalism has become stronger even as he has also portrayed himself as a champion of social development for all rather than of upper caste groups, with which the BJP was associated in its earlier days. Most importantly perhaps, the evidence in all three countries does not point to a dilution of support for populists and their policies; Modi's party and the Sweden Democrats and Trump have generally held steady in polls amidst some fluctuation. But these developments may yet be reversed, and once Trump and Modi and the Sweden Democrats lose the next election, things may return to the status quo ante with normal left-right divisions and the 'thin' view will be vindicated.

All this can be put differently: the argument is inconclusive in so far as it is not known if populism in the three cases discussed (and beyond) has staying power, and whether, for example, there is a fundamental re-alignment of left and right.³⁴ As mentioned, Trump's policies are in many ways traditionally left-wing ones; protectionism for workers and certain industries, plus pulling American forces out of foreign conflicts. But in the next election, he may be replaced by a conventional Republican or Democrat. Similarly, the Sweden Democrats have gained votes as an anti-immigration party and made it more difficult than hitherto to form a left- or right-wing coalition or a majority government. They have also claimed the mantle of the 'folkhem' or peoples' home, the traditionally socialist Swedish idea of providing benefits such as health and education for all citizens. But although the Sweden Democrats have contributed to shifting the agenda to the right on immigration, they may fade unless they can also deliver on their welfare chauvinist promises (on the other hand, an argument that weighs against their singular focus on immigration and ephemerality in this sense is that the Sweden Democrats were in parliament before the 'migrant crisis' of 2015). Modi is the only case here (though there are

33 For a penetrating analysis of the anti-globalization message of Trump's speeches, see Steger, M. and James, P. (2019). *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 199–208.

34 On this point, see now also Przeworski, A. (2019). *Crises of Democracy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 87–100.

others elsewhere³⁵) of a populist who has been reelected after completing a term in office.

3 Ideology and Thickness

The suggestion put forward here is more troubling than that populism is a thick ideology; which is that the three instances of populism that have been examined eclipse left and right, fusing them in a new ideological program that takes some ingredients from the left, such as more extensive citizenship and welfare rights (though only for some), plus a highly nationalist economic and foreign policy, combined with others from the right, such as restricting immigration and more law and order and the denigration of a progressive ('politically correct') cultural or media agenda. Note that this fusion consists of economic and cultural elements, but these elements could equally be construed in political terms since only the state—and not changes to market inequalities or cultural beliefs about identity per se—is responsible for implementing citizenship rights (if, for example, we conceive of these in Marshall's terms as civil, political or social citizenship rights³⁶).

For left-wing versions of populism, the virtuous people are the economically disadvantaged majority that is opposed to the 'globalization' that benefits economic elites who promote ever more open markets to increase profits. In several European cases of populism, this opposition was aimed against the EU's austerity policies after the 2008 financial crash. Left-wing populism here is also exclusionary in the sense that the peoples' welfare should be prioritized over the interests of the wealthy and over the forces that undermine citizens' socio-economic rights, which are domestic in the case of threats to economic benefits and external in relation to global finance.³⁷ But it is not clear whether the staying power of left-wing populism will outlast the after-effects of the economic crisis, and perhaps left-wing populist support in Western democracies is declining.³⁸ That may be because as long as economic conditions improve, economic resources can resolve the underlying problem addressed by

35 Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy*, op. cit.

36 Turner, B. *Citizenship and Capitalism*. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

37 Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, "Economic Populism", op. cit.

38 This is a good point to mention that Kyle and Mounk have shown that populist leaders last longer than democratically elected non-populist leaders, see Kyle, J. and Mounk, Y. "The Populist Harm to Democracy: An Empirical Assessment", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2018), <http://institute.global/insight/renewing-centre/populist-harm-democracy> (last accessed 26.10.2019).

left-wing populism: if those economically left behind are provided with more jobs and more welfare, and the economic privilege and unfair advantages of elites are therefore mitigated, the grounds for supporting left populism fade. In short, worsening economic conditions can be 'bought off' to restore the legitimacy of governments.

It is different for the right-wing version or elements of populism since it is difficult to see how an exclusionism based on binary criteria for citizenship could be similarly accommodated, for example by forcing immigrants to leave the country or forcing them to assimilate, as some right-wing populists demand in all three of the cases discussed. In this case, changes to laws, including across borders, must be implemented. In other words, left-wing populism can be counteracted with diffuse measures while right-wing populism requires coercion. Or again, whereas left-wing populism requires economic resources that the state can redistribute, right-wing populism requires legal enforcement; or left-wing populism can be dampened by incremental change while it is not clear if the demands of right-wing populism can be accommodated as easily and if they will de-escalate or harden over time.

In relation to left-wing populism, it is useful to distinguish the argument made here from a prominent idea about populism on the left: It has been argued by Chantal Mouffe that populism is not a thin ideology but in fact a useful corrective to current democracy.³⁹ For Mouffe, populism can strengthen the voice of 'the people' whose inputs are otherwise all-too-excluded. On this Marxist view, populism is not 'thin' but rather a constant left-wing struggle against the hegemony of exploitative elites. Thus populism is a desirable state of democratic politics which challenges the undemocratic consensus that favors capitalists and excludes the voice of the people. Mouffe therefore sees support for populists as potentially bringing together anti-capitalist forces such as workers who resist economic globalization with progressive social movements such as feminists, gay rights and environmental groups or parties. The affinity between this argument and the one here is that both see populism as playing a substantial role in contemporary politics. But the argument here is not normative but rather sociological, and there is a key difference: the argument here is that populists are realigning the left and right, with no implication, as on Mouffe's view, that populism is progressive. In fact, in the sense that populism seeks to curtail or restrict the drive for the broadening and deepening of citizenship rights—which can be seen as one of the main patterns of 20th century social change—it is regressive.

39 Mouffe, C. *For a Left Populism*. (London: Verso, 2018).

To be sure, the intellectual lineages of the three cases of populism discussed here are different, despite current similarities.⁴⁰ But for the argument made here, the test of the staying power of an ideology should not just be intellectual lineage or the history of ideas, which forms one basis for the 'thin' idea. Instead, weight should also be given to the social forces that sustain the lasting impact of leaders, movements or parties, as points 1 and 2 of Freedman's definition of ideology cited above also stipulate. So, for example, the Modi government has been in power for five years (and the BJP was in power earlier) and was recently reelected for another five years. Modi's policies have shifted the direction of politics, and in addition to maintaining and intensifying the BJP's Hindu nationalist stance, he has also pursued a strong developmentalist agenda, expanding infrastructure and services, which harks back to the statist nationalism of the Congress party. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats have already shifted the immigration policy of the government in a way that had hitherto not been entertained by the government and at the same time they have promoted welfare chauvinism and sought to expand the welfare state (as mentioned). The same holds for Trump's policies, which are bound to leave a legacy even if the pendulum swings back into the more familiar or traditional split between Democrats and Republicans.

Another counterargument to the one presented here is based on the idea that populism, with its aim of a more direct connection between 'the people' and political leadership, is simply the product of a crisis of democracy or of representation. One way to approach this interpretation of populism is via Caramani's argument that technocracy and populism are both alternatives to representative party government because they both rest on a 'unitary, non-pluralist, unmediated and unaccountable vision of society's general interest'.⁴¹ Where the two differ, for Caramani, is that technocracy favours the rule of experts who transcend views that are based on peoples' inputs whereas populism hypostatizes the will of the people which is seen as directly embodied in certain leaders. Caramani is not the only one making this argument; Mounk has also shown how populism is opposed to technocracy in the sense of

40 For example, for the US, Kazin, *Populist persuasion*, op. cit.; for Sweden, see Tamas, G. *Det Svenska Hatet*. (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2016); for India, Jaffrelot, C. "The Hindu nationalist strategy of stigmatisation and emulation of 'threatening Others': an Indian style fascism?", in Koenig, L. and Chaudhuri, B. (eds), *Politics of the 'Other' in India and China. Western Concepts in Non-Western Contexts*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 17–30.

41 Caramani, D. "Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government", *American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 2017, 54–67, p. 54.

expert—elite—rule.⁴² Yet Caramani's argument can also be seen in a different light: unlike populists, technocrats can leave governing to representatives and they do not necessarily need to short-circuit independent rules and institutions in favor of scientific expertise: technocracy can generate rules and work with or serve different institutions and representatives, as long as they are guided by technically optimized knowledge. Populists, although they may oppose technocracy, can similarly govern while relying on the technocratic or institutional and representative apparatus for doing so; but clearly, they seek an overall change of political direction and not just governing by means of technically optimized knowledge.

The question of technocracy raises the more fundamental and related issue of the distinction between ideology and science. Technocracy is said to be non-ideological insofar as it is based on science, and it is true that unlike ideology, science must, epistemologically and in a way that this is institutionally anchored, be 'open'.⁴³ In this sense, technocracy and science are non-political. That is a contrast with ideology which provides a more or less coherent—and in this sense 'closed'—'package' of policies and ideas, which is not say that 'closed' ideologies do not morph. Habermas famously argued that technoscientific knowledge is ideological, but this is so only in the sense that technoscientific knowledge is imposed upon society.⁴⁴ But again, technocracy is not an ideology insofar as science does not lead to a coherent worldview about social change—except for the 'sacralization' of science itself (which is obviously not a scientific notion⁴⁵). One reason why technocracy is therefore helpful in illuminating the 'thick' ideological nature of populism is that, for technocracy, there are no 'package deals' outside of specific scientifically optimized policies. In other words, technocracy aims to optimize society in accordance with expert scientific knowledge without being a closed 'package'; instead, it is based on or open to new evidence.

In a related vein, populism has been regarded as a symptom of a larger a 'crisis of party democracy'.⁴⁶ This view makes sense inasmuch as populists seek to transcend the party system by means of claiming exclusive representation of

42 Mounk, Y. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

43 Gellner, E. *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

44 Habermas, J. "Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'", (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), 49–103.

45 Gellner, E. "Notes towards a theory of ideology", in his *Spectacles and Predicaments: Essays in Social Theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 117–32.

46 Bickerton, C., & Accetti, C.I. "Populism and technocracy: opposites or complements?", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20(2), 2017, 186–206.

the people. Yet while populists sometimes prefer the 'outsider' or 'challenger' position, they have also governed and made policy together with other parties. In Sweden, other parties have refused to work with the Sweden Democrats, but as mentioned, there are examples of populists working with other parties among their neighbors in Denmark and Norway. Bickerton and Accetti argue that technocracy and populism both oppose the 'procedural legitimacy and political mediation' that are a central part of 'party democracy'.⁴⁷ But the populist idea of a 'pure will of the people' that implies rule without rule-bound representation is a contradiction in terms, and contradictions in ideologies are not unique to populism (the 'classless' society, for example).

The jury may thus still be out on whether the recent or revived version of populism is a lasting ideology, but ruling this out a priori would not serve an open (and in this sense liberalism supporting) science which depends on evidence instead of a conceptual history of ideas that is somehow closed off against evidence on the grounds of a justification based in political philosophy or political theory. Freedman's approach to ideologies is liberal in the sense that it focuses on language and sees ideologies as in constant competition to define themselves against others and to define their own core against rival interpretations of this core. The essence of such a liberal account of ideology is that there is an open-ended pluralist contest of ideas, which is compatible with the account here. But it could equally be argued that 'thick' ideologies are those that garner a lot of support and are viable competitors in a crowded space where only a few ideologies dominate and shape policy, which does not rule out populism being 'thick'.

4 Through Thick and Thin to a Realistic Assessment

One criticism needs to be addressed in conclusion: it is sometimes remarked that populism is rather elastic; it can fit everything and nothing. However, that criticism is less trenchant upon reflection: could not the same be said about other major ideologies such as socialism, liberalism and conservatism (except that they obviously do not have such starkly contrasting right- and left-wing versions)? Another counterargument might be: why not just call populism as presented here nationalism, since it seems to be highly nationalist? But nationalism has been compatible with many ideologies and forms of society, and nationalism is not necessarily anti-elite as, for example, with populism.

⁴⁷ Bickerton & Accetti, "Populism and technocracy", op. cit., p. 189.

This paper agrees with Freedden in seeing ideologies as being in constant competition, and so rejecting the notion that ideologies constitute false consciousness or the idea that ideologies are ‘masking something true’⁴⁸ or that they systematically distort reality. They cohere and rest on the strength of the social forces that support them. Populism is still consolidating in the three cases described here (and beyond). Whether populism’s right and left versions will converge is unclear. But populism has distinctive elements in all three cases presented here, which include welfare chauvinism and exclusionism, economic nationalism and a ‘my nation first’ foreign and trade policy—in addition to the elements of Mudde’s definition. It is an ideological alternative and not ephemeral. If the ‘thin’ idea, whereby populism is only piggybacking on other more substantive and lasting ideologies, were merely a question of concepts and definitions at the level of ideas, it might be fine to leave academic debates to one side. But this academic debate has consequences: if researchers continue to treat populism as ‘thin’, wondering which ‘thick’ ideology it attaches itself to, they are bound to miss the main thrust of populism as an independent force, including its causes and how it sustains itself.

Put differently, by treating populism as ‘thin’, there is a risk of overlooking a new set of beliefs that has influenced the political direction in several countries. But emergent political change should not be confused with no fundamental change, although it may be that the parallels with populism elsewhere, such as in Latin America, may not necessarily offer a good guide to contemporary political changes. To be clear: arguing for the substantiveness of populism as an ideology in no way implies endorsing it. Indeed, forces can be identified that can counteract populism—such as aiming for a more universal broadening and deepening of rights within states, and championing more open and well-regulated borders. There are many ideological alternatives to populism, including the ideologies that Freedden and others describe as thick. But to recognize these alternatives as such and to marshal them requires identifying populism as more than just piggybacking on them.

48 Freedden, M. *The Morphological Analysis of Ideology*. In Stears, M., & Freedden, M. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 118. Retrieved 21 Jun. 2019, from <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199585977.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199585977-e-034>.