

Paradoxes of populism in the pandemic and beyond: A commentary on Rogers Brubaker's essay*

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1. Introduction

In a thoughtful essay, Rogers Brubaker points to the paradoxes of populism unveiled by the pandemic: populists' difficult relationship with expertise; their challenge of facing a crisis which was not created by them; and their new anti-protectionist feelings that were generated by the alleged overprotectedness of government measures. I certainly agree with him that the pandemic effectively challenged populism, and this is probably the main reason why the COVID-19 crisis, as Brubaker put it, 'has not generated a coherent or large-scale populist response' – which could have been expected. After all, populists are supposed to capitalize on crises and, being mostly in opposition, they can easily criticize mainstream politics. Although we cannot say that the pandemic would have swept away populism, it is certainly true that the popularity of populist parties is not soaring. Therefore, I believe Brubaker's point is valid and the pandemic posed a real challenge to populists.

In the following, I will not argue against Brubaker, but try to add nuance to his arguments. Rather than depicting populists as caught in paradoxical stances vis-à-vis the COVID-19 crisis, I would underline the ambiguity and lack of coherence in their reactions. Since Brubaker mostly focuses on American populism, I will bring in some evidence and examples from Europe. In the second part of this essay, I will use populism's pandemic-related paradoxes as a stepping stone to remind the reader of the essentially paradoxical nature of populism. Although the term has been in use in political science for several decades now, it is still debated whether the label populist is analytically clear, and whether it makes sense at all. Without wishing to review the already huge and ever-growing populism literature and revisit the arguments for and against the usage of the term, I will point to those paradoxical features of populism which certainly contribute to its perceived ambiguity.

2. Populisms and the pandemic

'The pandemic has not generated a coherent or large-scale populist response. But the lockdowns have created a reservoir of popular anger, and they have fostered the emergence of a populist mood among substantial parts of the population. They have heightened distrust of

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expertise, exacerbated antipathy to intrusive government regulation, and amplified skepticism toward elite overprotectiveness' – argues Brubaker. I will come back to the first sentence of the quote later. Let us now have a look at the second part of it: how populist sentiments have been spurred by the pandemic. Since the COVID-19 crisis has, understandably, created a number of uncertainties and questions concerning the origins, the nature and consequences of the illness, and the measures required to combat it, health experts have found themselves at the very focus of public interest and debate. One would have expected a populist backlash against the advent of expert-centered discussions and policy making. And to some extent this indeed happened: anti-mask, anti-lockdown protests have been organized across both the US and Europe; anti-vaccination messages and claims casting doubt on the severity of the disease spread fast on social media. Eberl et al. (2020) found a statistically significant – although rather weak – positive association between faith in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and populist attitudes.

However, these are the voices of a minority, although a not negligible minority. International polls show that the coronavirus is the most important concern of people around the globe, more so than unemployment and poverty.¹ True, discontent with how governments are handling the crisis has grown in many countries, and trust in international health organizations has also shrunk; but this is not the sign of a general anti-elite sentiment, since public confidence in doctors and healthcare workers has increased over the past year.² Even the supporters of populist parties acknowledge the related scientific and medical expertise (Michel, 2021).

Therefore, it is indeed difficult to say that we are witnessing a general surge in populist sentiment. On the contrary: Schraff (2020) argues that the collective angst caused by the pandemic generated a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect and increased diffuse support for political institutions. This is not to deny the existence of COVID-related populist sentiment: again, non-negligible parts of society have developed radical attitudes and beliefs about the pandemic, some of which have culminated in conspiracy theories, and these opinions are not harmless. They inform the behavior of people (Stecula & Pickup, 2021) and certainly contribute to uncertainty and hesitation concerning vaccines. International surveys demonstrate that, although the majority of respondents are favorably inclined towards anti-COVID-19 vaccinations, and only a small minority are against vaccines in general, many people are still worried about side effects and are therefore hesitant to be vaccinated. Also, one in three people say they have seen or heard messages discouraging the public from getting a COVID-19 vaccine.³ Even if only a fraction of the population uphold the craziest conspiracy theories about vaccines, the latter create the ground for more subtly formulated doubts, uncertainties, and perceptions of risk surrounding the rapidly developed new vaccines, and these doubts affect many more people than the members of the hardcore sects.

Interestingly, data show that general populist attitudes are not necessarily incompatible with taking the pandemic seriously. In an international online survey,⁴ we inquired into people's attitudes and emotions concerning the pandemic, and our analysis (in progress) suggests that elements of the populism scale show different types of association with compliance-related attitudes concerning COVID-related measures. For instance, a belief in general

1 <https://www.ipsos.com/en/what-worries-world-january-2021>

2 <https://www.ipsos.com/en/covid-19-one-year-global-public-loses-confidence-institutions>

3 <https://www.ipsos.com/en/attitudes-covid-19-vaccines>

4 The survey was developed by Agneta Fischer and David Abadi (University of Amsterdam) for the DEMOS project. The survey was executed in May 2020 in Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK.

conspiracy theories is negatively associated with compliance only in Germany – and has no effect in the remaining countries. More interestingly, populist attitudes have a positive effect on compliance attitudes in each of the studied countries. Populist scales have been in use for more than a decade now, and although different versions exist (see Castanho Silva et al. 2020) they all seek to operationalize populism as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ (Mudde, 2004) and to capture attitudes of people-centeredness, anti-elitism, and a Manichean outlook on social conflict. Our data show that those who agree more with statements like ‘Politicians have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job,’ ‘I think politicians usually do not reveal their true motives,’ or ‘You can tell if someone is a good or a bad person if you know their political views,’ more strongly uphold measures about social distancing, mask wearing, etc.

Similarly, studying the compliance attitudes of supporters of populist parties in five European countries, Michel (2020) also found that the attitudes of populist voters concerning compliance with health measures, while otherwise more critical and distrustful of the government, are just as strong as those of the rest of the population. All these results are further illustrations that support Brubaker’s point: populism has not generated a coherent response to the pandemic. The populist attitudes of the general public – at least in Europe – do not predict a rejection of safety measures, and some of the related attitudes even seem to have a positive effect on compliance.

In this sense, we should rather talk about populisms in the plural than about populism. While some segments of the population have developed populist sentiments consisting of distrust of the government, anti-elitism, and even hard-core conspiracy thinking, people with stronger-than-average populist attitudes do not necessarily downplay the severity of the crisis and may even be among the most compliant citizens, according to our data.

The same applies to populist actors. A volume edited by Bobba and Hubé (2021) presents the different strategies of European populist parties and politicians as they reacted to, and tried to capitalize on, the pandemic. The conclusion is that these strategies varied between countries and changed over time. Some of these variations and changes were dictated by the nature of the situation: populists in power obviously faced different challenges than those in opposition; the first phase of the pandemic created everywhere a need for national unity, thus populist parties in opposition also voted for necessary measures, but later they tried to come up with their own messages and criticisms of the government. These variations and changes are easy to understand and seem logical: the actual political situation and the actual context of the pandemic obviously generate different answers across countries.

However, other variations and changes seem to be more contingent and show that, instead of being frozen in a paradoxical relationship with expertise, the nature of the crisis, and protectionism, European populist parties and politicians conveyed ambiguous and contradictory messages about these issues.

For instance, some populist politicians even criticized their governments for not being strict enough and not taking experts’ warning seriously enough: this was the case, for instance, with Geert Wilders and the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, and Marine Le Pen of the National Rally in France.⁵ Wilders even cited WHO experts – allying oneself with supra-national expert organizations is quite an unusual move from a populist. In Greece the left-populist Syriza, despite being in opposition, publicly endorsed the government’s expert, Prof. Tsiodras. Some incumbent populists took strict lockdown measures in the initial phase of the

5 The source of this and the following information on populist politicians’ reactions is the written and on-line press.

pandemic, like Orbán in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, and the PiS in Poland. These discourses and measures nicely illustrate the populist expert-paradox put forth by Brubaker: the fact that the pandemic forced populists to give up their anti-elitism, at least vis-à-vis medical experts.

However, the paradox did not prevail consistently, as some populists did not sustain their anti-expertise positions: e.g. in France, Jean-Luc Mélançon, leader of the populist party Rebellious France, criticized on several occasions the ‘omniscience of experts.’ Mélançon, together with Marine Le Pen, also supported a French doctor who first started to advertise chloroquine as a cure, portraying him as a victim of the mainstream medical elite. In Hungary, although experts seem to have informed governmental measures, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, politics became increasingly reluctant to respect expertise. This critical attitude manifested itself both in decisions (e.g. the use of the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm was authorized by the Foreign Minister, not the drug administration authority), and in political communication. PM Orbán himself has been actively communicating, and from the fall of 2020 he started to distance himself from medical experts. People in uniform were always present at the regular press conferences of the operative body, symbolizing the militarization of the crisis. True, the press conferences were led by Cecilia Müller, Chief Medical Officer, but she does not look like the normal caricature of an expert figure; her appearance and communication style resemble that of a stereotypical grandmother. Her colloquial communication style and the vernacular expressions she used earned both sympathy and mockery in public, and she became the subject of many internet memes. Whether she was successful at reaching the population is another question – my point is simply that she fitted into the pandemic-related symbolism employed by the Hungarian government in which expertise did not play a prominent role.

All in all, populist politicians have manifested varied, changing, and sometime clearly paradoxical attitudes towards expertise in Europe too.

Concerning the nature of the crisis, Brubaker argues that populists were surprised by the pandemic as a crisis which had not been created or dominated by them. Therefore, although they usually build on and thrive in times of crises, populists downplayed the medical crisis. Later, they tried to capitalize on the social crisis caused not so much by the illness, but by poor governmental decision-making.

Again the picture is a bit more blurred in Europe. Populists in power, like Orbán or Erdogan, refrained from overemphasizing the crisis, but this was not a coherent pattern: in Spain Podemos, instead of downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic, used it as an opportunity to advance its health policy agenda. As shown above, populists in opposition often took up a strict stance regarding the pandemic, criticizing their governments for not taking it seriously enough. A common technique used by several right-wing populists (such as Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini) was to try to aggrandize the crisis, presenting it as a dangerous manifestation and consequence of immigration and neoliberal globalization. In this interpretive frame, the pandemic appears as the first horseman of the coming Apocalypse, fueled by liberalism, globalization, and the free movement of people.

At the same time, Brubaker is right in stressing that populists tried to capitalize on the social crisis unfolding from the enduring lockdowns. At some point, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands changed position, and instead of criticizing the government for the inadequacy of its health measures complained about the disastrous consequences of social restrictions. In a similar vein, Salvini in Italy has been vacillating between criticizing the government for too many and not enough lockdowns.

Finally, let us look at the problem of protectionism. Brubaker points to the paradox of the usually overprotective populists becoming libertarian when faced with government restrictions on individual freedom. Similar reactions occurred in Europe as well: in France, Mélançon warned against ‘the lockdown of democracy’; in the Netherlands, Wilders and Baudet switched to a more liberal approach as early as in April 2020 and started to criticize the government for the ‘unnecessary’ lockdown measures. In Spain, the right-wing populist party Vox raised similar concerns, and in Germany AfD attacked the government for being authoritarian.

However, anti-protectionism was selective and focused mostly on internal lockdown regulations. Right-wing populists, like the French National Rally and the German AfD, stressed the need to protect people and the nation; used the pandemic to advance their anti-globalization and anti-Europe arguments; and embraced enthusiastically the closure of borders as a measure they had been advocating for a long time. On the left, and in power, Podemos advanced the nationalization of private hospitals, which can also be interpreted as a protectionist governmental measure.

To sum up: the paradoxes of populism identified by Brubaker in the American context have been present in Europe as well, but perhaps in a more ambiguous way. The anti-expertise stance of populists manifested itself, but it has not become a dominant discourse; populist politicians repeatedly downplayed the severity of the medical crisis and indeed focused more on the social crisis, but we cannot say that they denied the sheer existence of the pandemic; populists have increasingly voiced anti-protectionist opinions, but in other areas they maintained and even stressed their protectionist attitudes. The pandemic did indeed pose a challenge to populism because it is difficult to interpret it in a populist frame – unless one dives deep into lunatic conspiracy theories, which are by definition anti-elite, thus essentially populist.

3. The paradoxical nature of populism

However, it is worth recalling that the populist phenomenon is full of paradoxes, ambiguity, and contingencies in any case. The approach most generally used to conceptualize populism – the ideational one – defines it as a “thin-centered ideology” without a clear ideological and programmatic core that expresses a moralizing Manichean worldview and considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and essentially antagonistic groups (‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’), and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people (Mudde, 2004). That is, populism is a kind of ideology which cannot be located on the widely used map of ideologies, as it can be oriented towards the left or the right. This is why, in Spain, both Podemos and Vox are generally defined as populist parties, despite the fact that their ideologies, policy proposals, and communication styles differ substantially. It is easy to understand why some wonder whether the label is meaningful at all, and why others propose that the term should be used with more caution (e.g. DeCleen & Gylos, 2021).

But the paradoxes and ambiguities of populism do not stop at its uncertain ideological profile. Populism speaks on behalf of the people and criticizes the elite; however, populist movements and parties are typically organized around an influential leader with undisputed authority – as many examples, from Juan Domingo Perón, Charles de Gaulle, to Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump, and Viktor Orbán, illustrate. Moreover, these leaders are generally part of the economic, political, or cultural elite – the very same elite about which they raise criticism, play the victim of, or both.

Populism also has an ambiguous relationship with democracy. Some argue that populism is a deeply democratic phenomenon because it speaks on behalf of the 'common people' and expresses dissatisfaction with the ruling establishment, norms, and politics. For instance, Canovan (1999) argues that populism is a necessary 'redemptive' face of democracy, and that the 'legitimacy of democracy as a pragmatic system [...] always leaves room for populism that accompanies democracy like a shadow' (Canovan, 1999, p. 16). The democratic potential of populism is more than a theoretical claim, as some populist movements – for instance, in Latin America – have indeed strengthened democracy through filling an existing representation gap, while others promote more participative decision-making models, as the Italian Five Stars Movement does. Based on these examples and similar evidence, Mudde and Rowira Kaltwasser (2013) assign some positive democratic effects to populism, chiefly in terms of filling the representation gap, reinvigorating popular rule, and politically mobilizing people.

At the same time, although they criticize representative democracy and generally uphold the case of direct democracy, an analysis of democratic reforms across countries found that populist radical-right parties have not played a leading role in these – to the contrary (Bedock, 2021). Such parties have not achieved – and seldom did they even try – reform of the system of party funding and the institutions of democratic decision making. Conversely, populists in power often support illiberal reforms which erode basic democratic norms, like those of free and fair elections, the division of powers, or media freedom. In fact, it is generally accepted that populism has an antagonistic relationship with the institutional and normative complexity of liberal democracy. First, populism is antithetical to pluralism: while the latter allows or even expects different interests and ideologies to be present in society and politics, the former posits a homogenous people (Mudde, 2004). Therefore, populist politics has a tendency to become exclusionary and intolerant, rejecting any compromise. Second, populist politics is generally based on the direct relationship of the leader with their followers, as well as the direct translation of popular will into decisions. This runs counter to the logic of liberal democracy with its complex institutional machinery (Bartha et al., 2020). Third, the protection of human rights and minority interests clashes with the idea of supreme popular sovereignty advanced by populism (Alston, 2017).

That is, populism has a paradoxical and ambiguous relationship to democracy, and this is reflected in both the political practice of populist political actors and the attitudes of their supporters. While some studies argue that populist voters have stronger authoritarian attitudes (e.g. Dunn, 2015), other studies have found that although people with populist attitudes are dissatisfied with existing democratic practices, they support democracy in general – or at least they do not support it less than the general population does (Zaslave & Meijers, 2021). True, they are also less supportive of some liberal institutions and causes (courts controlling governments, and minority rights), as well as political parties than the rest – however, they uphold very strongly the need for media freedom and direct democracy (referenda).

Finally, let me point to another paradox of populism concerning socio-political polarization. The paradox stems from the contradiction between the populist discourse concerning the unified and homogenous people on one hand, and the polarizing potential of populism on the other.

The roots of populism are manifold, but it seems that social division is among them: there is overwhelming evidence of the role of socio-economic problems, like marginalization, joblessness and inequality, in fueling populist sentiment. Burgoon et al. (2018) argue that positional deprivation and inequality increase support for radical-right populist parties. In the

DEMOS project⁶ we found that a lack of activation policies and the exclusion of a significant proportion of young people from the labor market clearly feed populist attitudes. That is, populism often recommends itself as solution for social division – at least voters perceive it this way. However, there is no systemic evidence that populism can reduce social inequalities; on the contrary, right-wing populism leads to growing income gaps in society (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020). A dramatic illustration of this point is that during the 2016 US presidential election Donald Trump ‘over-performed’ most in counties associated with poor health conditions and the highest drug, alcohol, and suicide-related mortality rates – factors strongly linked to economic distress, while his own political program and pledges offered little to those in need.⁷

While populism feeds on social division and talks about a unified and homogenous people, in reality it often increases not only socio-economic but political divides as well, being one of the forces behind polarization (Schulze et al., 2020; Somer et al., 2020). The populist concept of the homogenous people is contrasted with the enemies of the latter: first and foremost, elite groups like old political elites (the ‘Washington swamp’), banks, and financial institutions, or the European Union. But supposed internal allies might also be easily targeted by populist politics, conducive to the effective division and polarization of the polity. Venezuela is a clear example of this, where the populism of Chavez caused the extreme political division of the country and led it to the verge of a civil war – and total economic breakdown.

To sum up, the populist phenomenon exhibits a number of paradoxes and ambiguities, including the prominent role of leaders versus its declared people-centrism; its malleable, diverse and blurred ideological profile; its controversial stance vis-à-vis democracy; and its paradoxical relationship with social division and polarization. The paradoxes of populism concerning the pandemic observed and identified by Brubaker are maybe nothing more than the actual and context-related manifestations of populism’s inherent controversies and ambiguities. The conclusion might be that we can expect further paradoxes and ambiguities every time populism – with its diverse and ambivalent nature – is confronted with new social problems and challenges. If Mudde (2004) is right, and we are living in a ‘populist Zeitgeist,’ we can expect populism to be around for a while and to offer frames and discourses for the interpretation of new challenges; but we can also expect these frames and discourses to remain just as controversial and paradoxical as they have been so far.

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⁶ See at <https://demos-h2020.eu/en/>

⁷ <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2016/11/19/illness-as-indicator> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm_term=.8639211d5cf4

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