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POPULISTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MELANIE SIACOTOS

Over the last twenty years populist parties, particularly right-wing ones, have been increasing in number around the globe. Concurrently, the world has globalized, and neoliberal practices of *laissez faire* economics have led to economic inequality in global and local spheres.^{1 2 3} Power that once sat in the hands of local elites now lies with global ones.⁴ Discontented by the broken promises of modernity, liberalization, and economic prosperity, populists have risen as an expression of anger against the current system, but also hope for change. Within populism, this division is described as left and right populism. Populists like Bernie Sanders in the United States, and movements like Podemos in Spain, coexist with far-right actors from Hungary and Poland to India, Turkey, and the Philippines.^{5 6} Because domestic political regimes impact international behavior, the way we understand populism will change how we analyze populists in the international system. Therefore, an actor-centered approach to international behavior will be necessary to understanding state behavior, particularly that of populist states.

The goals of this paper are to provide a definition of populism, identify some key characteristics, and introduce a key controversy within populist literature. To achieve this, I outline the dominant understanding of populists in international relations as it relates to concepts in IR theory. I then analyze what this understanding of populism means for this characterization of populist states. Finally, I provide a brief outline of the issues plaguing the future of the liberal world order, and how this understanding of populist state behavior may interact with such issues.

I conclude that populism is a constantly shifting term and while the left/right distinction remains valuable, we need a definition of populism that allows us to incorporate an individual state's context into analysis of state behavior. Populist states do not inherently want to radically change the international system, but usually maintain centralized and personalized leadership.⁷ Understanding populist leaders and their movements will lead to a better understanding of their behavior in the international system. Considering the COVID-19 crisis and the impending power transition likely to take place between China and the United States, populism in the international system is likely to have destabilizing effects, though in some cases populists in power may see preservation of the existing system as being in their best interest.

There are two broad theories of international relations: realism and liberalism. It is generally accepted that the international system — made up of states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations — is anarchic, meaning that there is no actor that polices the system.⁸ Theories vary on which of these concepts matter in studying international relations, but for the most part, these are accepted elements of the study of international relations as a whole. As theories, both realism and liberalism agree that the state is the primary actor in the international system. For realists, the state acts primarily to ensure their own security by pursuing power relative to other states, usually through military or material strength. This type of action is often characterized as rational and brutal.^{9 10} Contrary to realists, liberals emphasize the importance of diplomacy, and believe that using international institutions can produce harmonious multilateral cooperation.¹¹ The important element to note is that realists emphasize that state behavior can be explained rationally through the perpetual pursuit of security.¹² Furthermore, realists maintain that states more likely to distrust and minimize reliance on other states, because it is difficult and usually costly to overcome communication barriers and cooperate.¹³ Liberals believe that states can overcome this distrust of other states and cooperate through intermediaries like the United Nations (UN). Many explanations of populists in international relations argue that their general behavior is consistent with how we characterize realist states.¹⁴ However, understanding populism more broadly will show that, while there are some trends in the general behavior of populist states, their actual policies have little pattern.

Also present in the liberal approach is the importance of domestic characteristics; in other words, the type of government a state has affects that state's international behavior. While this is debated, the theory of a 'democratic peace' is widely accepted. This theory holds that democracies rarely fight each other, and it is often assumed that this is because of the political culture of democracies and their ability to recognize a common nature.¹⁵ In a democratic system, civil society is able to hold their government accountable to international commitments and express their will on international decisions. However, the need to appeal to civil society isn't necessarily restricted to democracies. More generally, states at the international level are constrained by domestic constituencies.¹⁶ Behavior in the international system can impact domestic behavior "by strengthening and weakening domestic groups or providing credibility at the domestic level."¹⁷ Based on this assumption, a populist regime type likely has an impact on international behavior.

The last concept to understand is the difference between *revisionist* and *status quo* states, as populist states are often assumed to be inherently revisionist. Status quo states are expected to adhere to current norms while

revisionist states work to change the system in some radical way. Revisionist states are usually lesser powers rising in strength which suggests that there is a link between emerging powers and revisionist behavior (though this is not always the case). For example, the United States could interpret China's recent behavior as revisionist. China is a rising power and likely to rival the United States politically soon. Alternatively, the US likely sees the United Kingdom as a status quo state, and therefore does not view the UK as a challenge to its hegemony.¹⁸

How states interpret the system is important for understanding their reactions to other states' behavior. Regime types are a huge element of this calculation. Therefore, while populist states are often interpreted through a realist lens, looking at their regime type and interactions in international organizations reveals a more nuanced picture.

WHAT IS POPULISM?

Now that we have outlined some general concepts in IR theory relevant to this paper, I will cover some prominent theories of populism and outline a basic definition. There are five prominent theories surrounding populism, all of which emphasize certain characteristics or tactics of populism. The three that are important for this analysis are Mudde, Mouffe, and Muller. This trio of scholars is not comprehensive, but they do represent three main strains of thought within the populism scholarship. While populism today is highly contextual, which leads to these many approaches, there are common elements across all these theories.¹⁹ ²⁰ As populism is vague and wide-reaching, in order to critique theories of populism in IR I will lay down a baseline definition based on these approaches. We will accept Margaret Canovan's conclusion that populism consists of a dynamic between the people and the elites.²¹ We will also accept that the discourse of populists pits the people against elites and, debatably, against an "other."²² Populists organize around a single unifying leader that claims to represent the true will of the people.²³ Populists are disenchanting with the status quo, which they see as corrupt. This usually coalesces around a grievance, which is typically economic in nature.²⁴ Populists blame elites for this grievance. Today's economic problems are blamed on technocratic elites and "experts," who populists believe have become disconnected, corrupt, and ultimately unable to carry out the will of the people.²⁵ ²⁶ Populists form coalitions by using rhetorical tools and the public arena.²⁷ ²⁸ Therefore, the primary tool of populists and populist leaders is discursive.²⁹

There are several approaches to populism that highlight specific aspects as more important than others. So, while most theories of populism share concepts (like the antagonization of the elite), it is important to explain the three specific definitions that contribute significantly to the debates had about populism, especially in the international system. These are the ideological, logical, and discursive approaches.³⁰ First, the ideological approach focuses

on the ability of the political scientist to measure populism. Adherents to the ideological approach claim that measuring populism is difficult, because populism never exists in a pure form or by itself.³¹ This gives rise to the 'thin-centered ideology,' which allows scholars to identify the core attributes of populism across different contexts. Second, the logical approach looks at populism's ontological status.³² Adherents to this approach, like post-Marxist scholars Laclau and Mouffe, look at populism to analyze its core values and how they influence democratic political life. This view is useful because it imagines populism as a way of thinking about democracy as opposed to a specific antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites. Therefore, populism can have a democratic or an authoritarian bend. Third, the discursive approach focuses on the discourse of populists, and the underlying dynamic between "the people" and "the elite."³³ This dynamic produces "an anti status-quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the underdogs) and its 'other'."³⁴ This approach (the Muller approach) considers populism to be inherently antagonistic and right wing. These different approaches change how we analyze the performance of populists domestically and internationally.

I expand on all these approaches to illustrate that populism is a dynamic concept. So, while I present a succinct definition at the outset, there are complexities within populism that manifest in scholarship and at the international level. While many characteristics remain the same across populist movements, the language used and the formation of the populist group varies. For example, in the United States, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are both populists. However, their rhetoric is different; they blame different corners of society for their grievances, and they use different rhetorical tactics to emphasize different ideals for society. This point is crucial for understanding the internal inconsistencies of populism. Populism does not directly lead to specific policy outcomes, but is instead a way of doing politics. This context-specific approach leads to radically different outcomes at the international level.

The main debate within populism literature now is the existence of a left and right populism.³⁵ Mouffe argues that a left populism has the potential to reinvigorate agonistic democracy, a democratic style that emphasizes healthy contestation of ideas, whereas right populism pursues an antagonistic democracy, where debate is more like a fight to the death.³⁶ Adherents of Muller, on the other hand, assert that populism is at its core a rejection of pluralism.³⁷ ³⁸ Based on this distinction, populism can either be an authoritarian degradation of democratic institutions or a powerful democratic surge flowing from the people upwards into government.³⁹ But is there room for a left version of populism in international relations?

POPULISM AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Populists are typically painted as revisionist or regressive. Populist

behavior also seems to fall in line with realism, prioritizing state security in their international behavior. However, a 'liberal' lens reveals that the decisions that populist states make are more nuanced than simply 'security above all else.' At the international level, populist states are assumed to eschew norms of cooperation, because under populist rhetoric those practices service the global technocratic elites and free riders (racial minorities) that oppress the authentic demos (the only legitimate 'people' in a democracy).^{40 41} According to this logic, populist leaders cannot be seen to be in agreement with elites, because to agree is to forfeit the will of the people back into the hands of corruption.^{42 43 44} Therefore, even when it seems illogical to outsiders, populist leaders must assert their will above all else. At the international level, this means viewing international organizations and relationships as tools to achieve national goals instead of parts of a normative system of cooperation.⁴⁵

Populists in the international system impact international law by changing the atmosphere in which existing laws are interpreted and the environment in which new laws are created.⁴⁶ One tactic is the threat of leaving international organizations or agreements. This type of threat is traditionally taboo, but populist states (most notably the United States under Trump) can more comfortably use this tool.⁴⁷ This changes the stakes, and therefore the environment, of the construction and interpretation of international law. If the biggest donor can abandon an agreement with few consequences, there is a serious threat to the integrity of the international legal regime. Populists are also characterized by disintegration from international trade agreements,^{48 49 50} and will also favor bilateral agreements and organizations over multilateral ones, though this is contested.^{51 52} The reasoning is that populist leaders see international agreements as constraints to achieving national goals.⁵³ Therefore, some assert that populists are more likely to create their own institutions, but this behavior has less robust evidence.^{54 55 56 57} These behaviors, though not unique to populists, are claimed to be common among them.

The behavior of populist states in the international legal regime shows that populist states do not typically view international cooperation through institutions as beneficial. Tactics of recontextualization and disintegration are evidence of populist states reimagining the system as a tool for national goals as opposed to an established normative system of cooperation.⁵⁸ In this way, we can see how cooperation and noncooperation are used as coercive tools. The decision to engage in legal institutions in this way is evidence of a foreign policy oriented around the state, its security concerns and domestic agendas, as opposed to the maintenance of established norms and institutions of cooperation. We can see this in the American approach to foreign relations under the Trump administration. The "America First" rhetoric prioritized American interests above all and deprioritized many collective benefits that could have been gained through a higher commitment to cooperation.

Additionally, populist leaders seem to securitize economic issues.⁵⁹ To securitize an issue is to describe it as a threat to the security of a country. To securitize the economy increases the government's role in ensuring the health and stability of the economy. By securitizing the economy, populist leaders allow themselves to centralize power and portray often normal economic interactions as existential threats. For example, the trade war between the United States and China is seen as a threat not only to economic stability but to the very social fabric of the United States.⁶⁰ In other words, the external threat, China, is not only a threat to the American economy, but to the very core of what it means to be an American. This existential threat enhances the populist leader's domestic support, and lends them credibility.⁶¹ The level of threat also helps legitimate the populist government's consolidation of power. Together, it is assumed that populists reimagine the international system, legal institutions, and economic issues, as domestic political tools, and security threats. This feeds into the idea that populist states are authoritarian, reactionary, and revisionist.

ANALYSIS

However, much of populist literature restricts itself to the "right-wing," antagonistic perspective. This has huge implications for state behavior. The way we define populism changes our prognosis for the future of the international system. The definitions that allow for variation and context within populism domestically have more complex expectations for populist foreign policy and behavior. Allowing for the left/right distinction within our understanding of populism, and even challenging this categorization, will help us better interpret the future of the liberal world order.

To discuss this point I will compare three articles by authors Heike Krieger; Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann; and Özgür Özdamar and Erdem Ceydilek. Both Destradi and Plagemann and Krieger use Muller's definition of populism, emphasizing anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. However, Destradi and Plagemann also emphasize the ideological approach, and Özdamar and Ceydilek advocate for it with their research. While Krieger recognizes the value of an actor-centered approach like Mudde's, she is more concerned with finding behavior general to all populists. So, while Krieger's findings are valuable, they are inherently generalized. For the sake of the following analysis, the ideological approach and the actor-centered approach are largely the same. However, the concept of an actor-centered approach captures more, understanding a populist state's behavior within its broader international and domestic context rather than just through ideology.

All three papers also look at different areas of international relations and of the world. Krieger tries to capture all populist governments in an international legal context, while Destradi and Plagemann focus explicitly on the global south for a more general look at foreign policy behavior. Özdamar

and Ceydilek look exclusively at European Populist Radical Right (EPRR) leaders for trends in international policy. Highlighting their different disciplinary focuses matters because doing so highlights the elements all three papers have in common.

Each paper comes to different conclusions around the attitude and consequences of populism in IR. Krieger concludes that populism is a fundamental challenge to the status quo. By changing international law through non-compliance, withdrawal, and legal cherry-picking, populists tend to be revisionist states out to achieve their own agendas. On the other hand, Destradi and Plagemann conclude that populist states are restricted from being as radically revisionist, belligerent, or reticent as they are commonly believed to be. Destradi and Plagemann argue that state status seeking⁶² and embeddedness⁶³ in international institutions restrict rapid unilateral action. Instead, populist states tend to centralize and personalize their decision making while mostly reinforcing existing norms.⁶⁴ Özdamar and Ceydilek corroborate this last point. EPRR leaders lack a common policymaking pattern but tend to have slightly more conflictual world views. Therefore, the authors suggest that “agent oriented models of beliefs to capture the micro foundations of strategic interactions between states is more appropriate to analyze populist state behavior.”⁶⁵ So, while Krieger finds that populists are revisionists and Destradi and Plagemann find that they are constrained by their system and functional status quo, Özdamar and Ceydilek find that populist behavior depends largely on the state itself.

While these papers come to different conclusions, they all highlight two important themes. First, they highlight the personalized, centralized, and influential nature that domestic politics, specifically populism, can have in the IR system. Their findings suggest that analyzing populism at the individual level – that is, the leader/leader group – may be more beneficial to look at when it comes to understanding populist policies. International politics is shifting, and it is likely to be more unpredictable than we generally think.

Second, populism is contextual. Krieger sees populism as a structured way of thinking; Destradi and Plagemann see it as a thin centered ideology; Özdamar and Ceydilek conclude that an “agent-oriented model” is important in order to better understand populist state behavior.⁶⁶ While this level of macroanalysis using micro foundations (the actor-centered approach) may seem infeasible, earlier work by Özdamar could be an answer. Combining an expected utility model and international relations data, Özdamar retroactively forecasted Iran’s international bargaining regarding its nuclear program in 2005, 2006, and 2007.⁶⁷ Because this model evaluates the strategic decision making of specific actors and how they interact with each other, context specific assumptions could be introduced into the model. Therefore, researchers could generate profiles and analyze state specific behavior at an international level. This method is not all-knowing, and it does have its

weaknesses, but it is a good place to start analyzing populist international behavior and how it compares (and even competes) with that of non-populist states.

THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER

A lot of anxiety surrounds the recent global rise in populism, which has increased research into the topic. Most refer to populism as a gateway to authoritarianism through heightened levels of nationalism. Therefore, a populist movement is usually seen as evidence of backsliding, or an abandonment of the road to democracy and the international liberal order. However, populism is not inherently right-wing, xenophobic, and divisive. Even within right-wing populism actual policy decisions are inconsistent. These inconsistencies make the impact of populists at the international level hard to evaluate and predict.

Even more uncertain is the rise of China and the potential power conflict between the United States and China. The economic rise of Asia as a whole over the last century, and the specific rise of China in the last thirty years, has been shocking to Western leaders. It has made the Western elite anxious about the continued existence of the postwar international order, which was established by the Allied powers and dominated by the United States’ hegemony. However, it appears that the United States’ hegemony is fading, perhaps by its own hand, as seen with the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and Bernie Sanders’ populist campaigns in 2016 and 2020. The two are often used to illustrate the range of populism and democratic deterioration in the United States. China has surpassed the United States in GDP, but has yet to become as culturally dominant as the United States is.⁶⁸ Exacerbated by the United States’ ‘pivot to Asia’ in 2011 and the more recent trade war initiated by former-President Trump, relations between China and the United States have become even more tense. The global community is anticipating a massive power transition away from the “Western World,” which has dominated the international system since the turn of the 19th century.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic is a global problem that will once again alter the potential influence populist states have on the international system. Times of crisis usually increase state capacity and autonomy; this is likely to compound on the already centralizing and personalizing effect populists have on state behavior and further increase populist state power.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ This could be a boon for more right-wing populists, because conservatives already have an affinity for authoritarian behavior. Right-wing populist rhetoric is malleable and generally feeds off a national crisis narrative.⁷¹ It is also likely that the pandemic has pushed populist discourses online, making physical appearances, like rallies, more powerful.⁷² Most articles about COVID-19 and populist governments has focused on their failures in dealing with the crisis, especially because the centralization of power and the repudiation of technocratic and scientific know-how has been essential to

combating the pandemic.⁷³ Some claim that the populist left's failure to successfully address the pandemic has spelled its end, while others point out that left populists can still embrace technology and environmentalism as a source of democratization (like in Taiwan).⁷⁴ In other words, the aspirations for a left populism have been thrown into doubt by this crisis. However, there is hope that COVID-19 could also serve as an opening for left populists to incorporate right populists into the democratic movement by providing sympathetic narratives of protection and a common goal.

How populism, and democracy more generally, will fare in this changing environment is difficult to predict. Many populists seek change, but they also prioritize the protection of their own state. In this way, populist states generally act more like realists than liberals, but a liberalist perspective is essential for understanding their behavior. They are not necessarily revisionist, and are instead self-preserving, protecting themselves against the neoliberal system that has wrought rapid change, instability, and inequality. States have responded to globalization and the rise of neoliberalism differently, so the actor-centered approach to analyzing state behavior is important in not overgeneralizing the effects of a neoliberal globalized economy. The current political moment is marked by uncertainty, as the global community faces both an impending power transition between China and the United States and an unprecedented, unpredictable global health crisis. More than ever, an actor-centered approach that considers domestic elements is necessary to understand not only the potential patterns of behavior for individual states, but the policies that will shape an international system that has, at its core, remained largely unchanged for almost eighty years.

CONCLUSION

The global community has seen the resurgence of populism all over the globe. The faults of the neoliberal global economic system have generated inequality at all levels. Compounded by political stress and economic shocks like the 2008 housing crisis, this inequality has festered and surged to the fore as a global rise in populism. Most of the discourse around populism has been centered on right-wing populism. I have argued that it is important to understand populism as a system, logic, or "thin-centered ideology" that dynamically interacts with local ideologies and histories.

If we take a more dynamic perspective, populists in power are more concerned with self-preservation and tend to centralize and personalize their international behavior. This leads to variable policy outcomes; some states may reinforce existing norms while others may seek to radically change the system. Understanding and analyzing this behavior requires the use of an actor-centered approach, rather than a generalized approach. Game theoretic research by Özgür Özdamar could help scholars understand and model state behavior by looking at the "microfoundations" of foreign policy, or regime types, historical context, and even populist organizations within states.⁷⁵ This

way of understanding state behavior still leads to uncertainties in international relations. Economic and political shocks, like the COVID-19 crisis, have the potential to become moments of paradigm shift. Populist states will be essential to understanding what this new paradigm will look like, but their impact will not be as uniform as many scholars suggest. Instead, their impact will depend on whether populist leaders see the existing system as beneficial, regard China as a threat or an ally, and whether they are able to successfully hold onto and exercise the power generated by the COVID-19 crisis. This paper should inform the reader of some international concepts and trends so that they may easier navigate the uncertainties of the near future.

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END NOTES (CONTINUED)

- 68 Though the rise of Tik Tok, K-Pop, Aljazeera and other non-US sources of cultural influence could be indicative of a shift away from US cultural products.
- 69 Eric Taylor Woods, Robert Schertz, Liah Greenfeld, Chris Hughes, and Cynthia Miller-Iddris. "COVID-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange." *Nations and Nationalism* 26, 4 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12644>.
- 70 State capacity refers to the resources a state has like the number of military personnel. State autonomy is the ability of states to utilize these resources. For example, democracies tend to have moderate state capacity and relatively low autonomy while authoritarian regimes like China have high capacity and high autonomy (though this dynamic is not universal, it is common).
- 71 Magcamit 2017
- 72 Ulrike M. Vieten. "The 'New Normal' and 'Pandemic Populism': The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right." *Social Sciences* 9, 9 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.3390/SOCSCI9090165>.
- 73 Anthony Painter. "How Covid Is Exposing Populism," October 19, 2020. <https://www.thersa.org/blog/2020/10/populism-governing-covid>.
- 74 Mouffe, 2020
- 75 Özdamar and Ceydilek, 2020

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