

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 10, Issue 4 (2014)

Research Article

The Populist Conception of Democracy beyond Popular Sovereignty

Pepijn Corduwener *Utrecht University*

Citation

Corduwener, P. (2014). 'The Populist Conception of Democracy beyond Popular Sovereignty', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. 10 (4), pp. 423-437.

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

With populist parties making electoral progress across the European continent, the question of what their electoral success means for contemporary democratic systems has gained increasing significance. This article investigates how two populist radical right parties, the Austrian FPÖ and the Dutch PVV, conceptualise democracy, based on a wide range of party documents released over recent decades. It builds upon recent academic consensus that the relationship between populism and democracy is best understood from a 'minimalist' perspective, seeing populism not as antagonistic to democracy, but as an ideology that conceptualises democracy primarily in terms of popular sovereignty. The article adds to the existing literature by demonstrating that we can extend this understanding of the populist conception of democracy in three aspects: the populist emphasis on state neutrality; a two-fold notion of equality; and the extension of the political sphere in society. Based upon these three issues, the article concludes by exploring how the populist conception of democracy relates to the most dominant form of democracy practised nowadays, liberal democracy, and to what extent it reflects changes in our democratic political culture.

Keywords

Democracy; Western Europe; Populism

Right wing populist parties have continued to score electoral success across the European continent of late. The most recent instances of their success include electoral gains at the latest elections for the European parliament, the first ever-elected senators for the French *Front National*, and the electoral breakthrough of the Sweden Democrats at the general election there in 2014. Many of the populist parties making headway across Europe have been around for more than a decade and are referred to as being part of the "new populism", which emerged in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Taggart 2000: 74). With their persistent presence and continuing electoral appeal, the question of how the relationship between right wing populist parties and the liberal democratic systems in which they come to fruition can be understood has gained increasing significance in both public and scholarly debates. This article aims to contribute to an enhanced understanding of this relationship by taking an internal perspective to this topic. It investigates how the populist radical right conceptualises "democracy" by looking at the criticisms it formulates on the functioning of contemporary democracy and the solutions it presents to solve the ostensible democratic crisis.

The article therefore assumes that this conceptual approach, studying how political actors conceptualise key political concepts and map these in an ideological field (Freeden 1998), can provide new insights into the relationship between radical right-wing populism and democracy. The article is consequently grounded in an advanced discourse analysis of party documents and publications from two parties in particular: the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Freedom Party, hereafter PVV) and the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (Freedom Party Austria, hereafter FPÖ). Both parties classify under what Cas Mudde has labelled the 'populist radical right' (Mudde 2007).¹ Following Mudde, this populist radical right can be perceived as the current dominant form of the radical right that is captured by the populist *Zeitgeist* in which the notion that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* of the people has gained prevalence in the political system at large (Mudde 2004). This in turn points to the two major attributes of this populist radical right, both of which are highly relevant for the topic of this article: these parties are nationalist and, as opposed to the extreme right,

these parties are '(nominally) democratic, even if they oppose some fundamental values of *liberal democracy*' (Mudde 2007: 31).

This raises the question of how populist radical right parties conceptualise democracy. Although this study is based on only two case studies, the striking similarities between the PVV and the FPÖ suggest that a more encompassing understanding of the populist radical right conception of democracy is possible. In order to demonstrate this, this article proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the populist conception of democracy based on the academic literature on this topic, which posits that right wing populism conceptualises democracy primarily in terms of popular sovereignty. In concurrence with this literature, it argues that a minimalist definition of populism serves best to ensure a perspective on populism that is both objective and fruitful for further empirical study. In the second part, the article builds upon the insights in academic literature on the topic, and seeks to expand our understanding of a populist democracy beyond an emphasis on "the people". Based upon the party documents circulated by the PVV and FPÖ, it studies both criticisms of the functioning of contemporary democracy and the solutions these parties propose. In this way, it highlights three features of the way these radical right populist parties conceptualise democracy: state neutrality; a two-fold notion of equality; and the extension of the political sphere in society. The article concludes by stating how this radical right populist conception of democracy can be characterised, both by defining it more precisely in relation to liberal democracy, and contextualising it historically within the framework of recent transformations visible in Western democracies.

THE POPULIST CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY AS POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

Populism, such is the broad agreement, is what Ernesto Laclau called an "elusive" concept in which the notion of the people features prominently. Laclau argues that modern society is characterised by an enormous heterogeneity and populism makes an effort to search for and express shared identities. A special role in the quest for homogeneity is assigned to "the people", which Laclau therefore principally perceives as a political category (Laclau, 2005). This identification with "the people" is indeed most often cited as the prime characteristic of populism in general and of the populist radical right in particular. While for Laclau, populism is an intrinsic part of politics, most scholars concerned with the populist conception of democracy focus on right wing populism, since this is in many Western European countries the dominant form of populism. For Taggart, populism 'mobilises itself in the name of the people', in order to defend the imagined "heartland" which is allegedly threatened by elitist politicians detached from the ordinary citizen (Taggart 2000: 97). The "heartland" is an imagined historical and demographic space that lies at the core of the people's community, which populists claim to defend. Along the same line of reasoning, Cas Mudde argues that populism is a 'thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous groups [the 'pure' people versus the 'corrupt' elite]' and which, as has been noted, argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* of the people (Mudde 2007: 23). For populists, the will of the people is by nature benign and it should consequently be leading in determining the outcome of political decisions. It is for this reason that this concept has been studied by those who focus on populist discourse and highlighted as the core of populist ideology (Canovan 2002). Margaret Canovan follows the take of Michael Freeden, studying which concepts in populist discourse constitute populist ideology. These are, apart from the "people", "democracy", "sovereignty" and "majority rule", which makes her state that for populists 'democracy is understood as government by the sovereign people, *not* as government by politicians, bureaucrats or judges' (Canovan 2002: 33).

Since also liberal representative democracies are underpinned by the notion that the ultimate source of political power lies with the people (Dunn, 2005: 79), it is not surprising that this populist understanding of democracy is 'deeply entrenched in the political culture of most established democracies' (Canovan 2002: 38). Canovan therefore states that democracy is in a sense already

populist. Democracy is made up of two core elements, which she labels “redemptive” and “pragmatic”. The “redemptive” element in our democracy is the *vox populi*: the voice of the sovereign people, whereas the “pragmatic” element is a form of government with representative institutions. She posits that belief in redemption through action of the sovereign people is vital for the functioning of the “pragmatic” democracy and ‘if it is not present within the mainstream political system it may well reassert itself in the form of a populist challenge’ (Canovan 1999).

This understanding of populist ideology as the primacy of popular sovereignty suggests that populism is simultaneously an intrinsic component of and a challenge to contemporary democracies. This can be explained by the fact that the populist distinction between the “benign” people and the “corrupt” elite, if studied from a political perspective, relates to the distinction between rulers and ruled institutionalised in and crucial to modern liberal democracies. These liberal democracies were after World War II often deliberately elitist, excluding the people from the decision-making process and distrusting means of direct democracy or popular involvement (Conway 2002). In his major study of political thought, Jan-Werner Müller even baptised Western European liberal democracies, ‘democracies with a distrust of popular sovereignty’ (Müller 2011a: 128). In order to avoid a radicalisation of the popular will, they were built upon a notion of democracy most eloquently put forward by Joseph Schumpeter, for whom democracy equalled a competition among political elites for the popular vote (Schumpeter 1981 [1944]). This understanding of democracy has been challenged, but remains highly influential and is what we usually refer to as “liberal democracy”: a form of democracy concerned with the securing of individual and minority rights, a clear demarcation between state and civil society, personal freedoms, the rule of law and limited possibilities of popular participation (see for instance: Held 2006, in particular chapter 3).

By emphasising that democracy denotes the rule of the people, it is clear that populism potentially stands in contrast to liberal democracy – even though, as has been noted, populist ideology is not necessarily antidemocratic as such. Many scholars imply that right wing populism can in this way be seen as a European feature of what Fareed Zakaria has called “illiberal democracy” (1997; see also Habermas 1994), in which democracy is perceived solely in terms of popular sovereignty rather than as an equilibrium between the will of the people and constitutional freedoms and rights. As has been shown in the cases of Greece and Hungary, where populist parties are so prominent in the political scene that these countries constitute “populist democracies”, their presence ‘contaminated formerly liberal political and party systems’ with polarising and unstable politics (Pappas 2014: 18).

Yves Mény and Yves Surel follow this distinction between the two ideological pillars of democracy, in which populist parties aim to alter the balance in favour of the idea that the demos is sovereign (Mény and Surel 2001). Mark Plattner argues that the rise of right wing populism can lead to “democratic disorder”, because populism is only ‘democratic in a majoritarian sense’ (2010: 88). Similarly, Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens state that ‘populism can only survive if it becomes authoritarian and despotic’, since populist politicians diminish the importance of individual rights in a democracy; they conclude that populism has a thin-centred ideology in which the people as a homogeneous unity occupy a pivotal position (2007: 421). Similar views can be found with Nadia Urbinati, who connects populism to despotism and argues that its differences with liberal democracy lie with the lack of respect for deliberation and the ritualistic meaning of elections (Urbinati 2003).

Mudde conceives the question of the distinctive features a populist conception of democracy comprises somewhat broader (Mudde 2007). According to him, the populist radical right, to which his study is limited, conceives of democracy in three ways. The first is that democracy often equals plebiscitary politics in which people are involved into political decision-making by means of referendums with democracy as such. Additionally, populists advocate a personalisation of power in which the power of the main political figure in the political system is reinforced. Finally, for populists, the will of the people should not be limited by anything: other institutions of representative democracy ought consequently to be made subordinate to the *volonté general*. It is important to

notice that these three features are underpinned by what Mudde calls a “nativist” understanding of democracy, in which “natives” and “non-natives” of the land are juxtaposed. The populist radical right therefore aims for a monocultural state in which the “native” ethnic culture is leading. Put differently, the populist radical right aims to establish an “ethnocracy” (Mudde 2007: 142).

This so-called minimalist perspective on populism, which is sensitive to various connotations of democracy, is valuable, since it situates populism in a long debate on what constitutes democratic government (Kaltwasser 2011: 195). Populism has from this perspective been perceived as ‘a mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself, warts and all, and find out what it is about and what it is lacking’ (Panizza 2005: 30). The distinction between liberal and populist democracy and the concurrent populist emphasis on plebiscitary elements to “recapture” democratic government out of the hands of a detached elite and return it to a culturally defined people are key elements of radical right populist democratic ideology. This article does not question the importance of “popular sovereignty” and anti-elitism for the way in which populist radical right parties conceptualise democracy. Right wing populism is in this way often seen as a corrective to the liberal interpretation of democracy dominant today (see for instance: Mouffe 2005) but explores how its understanding of democracy can be expanded beyond the notion of “the people”.

THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY BEYOND SOVEREIGNTY

Before the discussion of the FPÖ and the PVV’s conceptualisation of democracy, it is valuable to reflect briefly on these two parties and the political contexts in which they operate. The FPÖ was founded in 1956 and was for decades the third force in the Austrian party system dominated by Christian democrats and social democrats. The party’s character underwent significant change under the leadership of Jörg Haider, who ruled the party from 1986 until 2000 and brought the FPÖ large electoral successes and a stint in government after its election victory in 1999. This election victory was a sign of the crumbling of the decade-old Austrian *Proporzdemokratie* in which the main political parties coincided with “hermetically sealed” national subcultures (Ritter 1999: 275). This system ensured that the main political parties cooperated at the top in order to bridge societal differences, fostering a culture of consensus making and the sharing of influence over state institutions (Rathkolb 2005).

This dominant role of political parties in a divided society is a feature which Austria and the Netherlands have in common. Both qualify as “consociational democracies” characterised by proportionality of interests and coalition making among the major parties in plural societies (Lijphart 1977). In the Dutch case, the cultural and socioeconomic cleavages ran through the country’s socialist, protestant and Catholic subcultures, and as a result, the social democrats and the confessional parties divided key positions in the state media, labour unions and government agencies. This consensual system created social stability, but also bred latent discontents with a closed political system unable to keep up with the pace of a quickly changing society. In the case of the Netherlands these tensions erupted in the early 2000s with the electoral surge of Pim Fortuyn. After his assassination, various politicians have tried to fill the populist void, with the PVV being by far the most successful one so far (Vossen 2010). The party gave back bench support to the centre-right minority government in office until 2012 and has now returned to opposition. The same counts for the FPÖ, which came third in the general election of 2013 with 20 per cent of the vote and is now the largest opposition force. The fact that both parties operate in comparable party systems, have carried governmental responsibility in the past and can be situated on the same side of the political continuum, at the populist radical right, makes rightly these two parties suitable for a comparison between their party ideology in order to generate a more encompassing understanding of the populist conception of democracy.

According to populist politicians, Western European democracies face a deep crisis. Geert Wilders, the PVV's leader, announced that Dutch democracy is in 'its biggest crisis since the days of Thorbecke' [the liberal who designed the current-day Dutch constitution in 1848] (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2010: 17). Austria, in its turn, is not truly democratic, but 'late-Absolutist', according to the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich 2002: 25). A major cause of this crisis is the alleged bias of state institutions within liberal democracies. As has been noted above, the impartiality of the state is an important aspect of liberal democracy. According to liberal democratic theory, state, or state funded, institutions such as the education system, state media and the judiciary are not supposed to reflect politically biased messages. However, the current reality of this ideal has come under scrutiny by the populist radical right. While state neutrality is an ideal that is in theory cherished both by liberal democracy and populist ideology, the latter claims that current liberal democracies no longer live up to their promises and have created politically coloured state institutions. The first of the three conceptions of a populist democracy therefore concerns state neutrality, ensuring that one of the objectives of populism is to reclaim the state and "neutralise" it.

This perceived lack of neutrality of the state is blamed on the position of the "traditional" political parties in modern democracies. As is well known, these parties are the prime target of populist parties, because the elite exert their influence largely through them. Peter Mair even claimed that 'populist democracy may be understood as *popular democracy without parties*' (Mair 2002: 91). Whereas the traditional parties are convinced that they embody democratic values and even claim to protect democracy against the threat of populism, the PVV and FPÖ, on the other hand, argue that the decade-long dominance of these "traditional" parties has led to an undemocratic political constellation. The distinction between elite and the people is thus mirrored in the antithesis between those old parties which dominate state institutions and political newcomers: 'the real battle is between the political parties that make up the existing system and the ones that want to reform this system'. As a result, populists argue that the contemporary system is not so much a democracy, but a *partitocrazia*, a "partyocratic oligarchy" or a system of *Parteienallmacht* (Wilders 2006b; Freiheitliche Partei Österreich 2005: 7). From the perspective of populist democratic ideology, there are several problems with the decade-long dominance of the same political parties. Most obviously, this system allegedly does not allow room for dissent views. Populist parties are ostensibly held for antidemocratic radicals, whilst they claim merely to represent views that are not considered favourable by the traditional parties. The political parties are allegedly so institutionalised that the political debate is determined by power politics of political parties instead of original ideas.

More fundamentally, however, in the populist view the deeper-rooted problem regarding the *partitocrazia* is the allegation that the neutrality of the state is jeopardised by the dominance of political parties. The PVV and FPÖ maintain that all institutions that are state-funded should carry a neutral message and be liable to democratic, meaning public, control. Even when state institutions reflect the dominant political discourse, i.e. that of the "traditional" parties, this can in populist ideology not be equated to neutrality, because these state institutions in that case still carry a political agenda. This causes populists to doubt the neutrality of state institutions and to argue that popular control over these institutions should be reinstated. These allegations of the lack of state neutrality embrace spheres usually not considered strictly political – a theme to which shall be returned below. For instance, the *Centraal Plan Bureau*, the main economic think tank of the Dutch government, is allegedly politically biased, because it was led by a member of the social democrats, and because it collaborates with an environmental think tank that adopts theories of climate change in its calculations, by Wilders referred to as 'some environmental club that adopts the ideas of the charlatan Al Gore'. Likewise, the FPÖ asserts that traditional parties exert a disproportionate and undemocratic influence over society, since many important positions, from headmasters of schools to leading positions at the Central Bank, are divided between the parties on the condition of party membership: the *Proporzdemokratie* (Haider 1993: 126-131). The FPÖ fears in particular for the independence of

the *Finanzsenat*, which controls government spending, since it is staffed with party members of the traditional parties (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich n/d: 17).

Similarly, the objectivity and neutrality of the judiciary is questioned. Even before Wilders faced trial on accusation of hate speech and discrimination, his movement accused the judiciary of a jaundiced and left-wing agenda. He believes that his process was politically motivated, which is not surprising since one of his party's arguments is that the independence and objectivity of the judiciary is questionable. Wilders argues that the feelings of natural justice of the average citizen and the judgements of the judiciary are two worlds apart – an argument that can also be found with his Austrian counterparts. The gap between elite and people in the political arena is thus mirrored in judicial rulings. This state institution is no longer neutral, but allegedly reflects the outlook of the elite. Magistrates are therefore referred to as 'progressive liberals in togas' who deliver overly lenient punishments. Based on the assumption of a politically biased judiciary, the FPÖ pleads for more "objective" procedures for the appointment of members of the Supreme Court. The PVV goes even further and stresses the importance of elected judges and police officers and proposed parliament should control whether judges enforce sufficiently harsh sentences.

Another ostensibly partisan state institution is the Dutch monarchy. It is not merely because Wilders favours direct election of state representatives that the PVV is sceptical towards the monarchy. Again, the ostensible lack of state neutrality is a main reason for criticism on the House of Orange, since the PVV accuses the royalty of being part of the left-wing intelligentsia. Wilders came into conflict with the former Head of State, Queen Beatrix, on numerous occasions, most famously in 2009, when the Queen in her annual Christmas speech made an appeal on people to be tolerant towards cultural differences. Wilders perceived this as a personal attack and stated that the Queen had chosen the side of the "multicultural idealists". In other words: while the monarchy should be part of a neutral state, it allegedly advocates politically coloured messages for which it cannot be held up to democratic control.

A final case of a state institution that is not neutral but purportedly reflects the values of the establishment is the state media. Traditionally in Western Europe, the state has exerted influence over state broadcasting services and interfered with the media. According to the PVV and the FPÖ this involvement has, again, not had a neutral character. Both the PVV and the FPÖ argue that the state broadcasting service is staffed according to the *Proporz*-ideal and that citizens get biased information from an institution which is paid for by the tax payer and thus supposed to be neutral. The establishment allegedly utilises state media to propagate its world views to ordinary citizens. Haider was particularly worried about the "repressive tolerance" purportedly propagated on state television, because according to him 'Democracy is about debate, the one who does not want a debate, is no democrat' (Haider 1993: 75). The PVV also argues that state broadcasting is far from neutral. The state media are accordingly accused that they 'excel in warning against the PVV. Every night left wing people are invited by left wing associations to share their politically correct views – all on the cost of the tax payer' (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2010: 33).

In short, while populists and traditional parties nominally share the ideal of a neutral state and neutral state institutions, current liberal democratic practices deviate sharply from that norm according to populist ideology. The prominence of political parties has allegedly led to biased state institutions which propagate and advocate a certain liberal progressive world view through the state media, government think tanks and the judiciary. PVV and the FPÖ thereby dispute a central claim of liberal democracy: that party democracy and state neutrality are compatible. Political parties have allegedly occupied the formerly liberal state, which has subsequently come to reflect the discourse dominant in these parties. The breaking of the power of elites and the aversion against traditional means of political representation, the political party, are thus indeed important aspects of a populist vision on democracy, but these stand in relationship to another objective: the neutrality of the state and the reconquering of that neutrality in the name of the people. In this sense, populist democratic ideology

does not thus stand so much in opposition to liberal democracy, but it can rather be juxtaposed with party democracy characterised by discussion and electoral competition among political parties (Manin 1997: 205-218).

The aspiration to “neutralise” state institutions and establish popular control of – or rather *over* – all state-funded institutions reveals another element of populist the populist conception of democracy. It demonstrates that accountability is an essential concept for understanding the populist vision on this form of government. This emphasis on accountability implies that equality rather than liberty is first and foremost the way in which democracy is conceived. In liberal democracy, as has been noted, protection of individual rights is one of the prime objectives and European democracies are characterised by their emphasis on a negative liberty protecting personal freedoms (Conway 2002). It is this liberty, or “freedom”, which populist parties often claim to protect. Yet, a closer look at their programmes suggests that a populist democracy is instead built upon two distinct, yet connected, notions of equality: a radical political conception of equality and an exclusive cultural notion of equality.

First, the political and radical notion of equality entails that citizens should have the ability and the right to hold every representative of the state up to “democratic”, meaning popular, control. Hereby it intends to narrow the gap between rulers and ruled. It reveals that a populist democracy is not merely one, which emphasises the importance of direct democracy to extend the influence of the “common man” (Mudde 2007). It instead ventures to overcome unequal political power relations intrinsic to liberal democracy based upon representative institutions. These unequal power relations are in the view of the populist radical right exploited by political elites. The necessary distance between elected and electors, in a liberal democracy, leads to public apathy towards politics, which is considered an obstacle to true democratic government. This apathy is partly attributed to the extensive institutionalisation of democracy and the complexity of the *Rechtsstaat*. Haider claimed that democratic states tend to develop so many rules that the accessibility of citizens to their rights is compromised. Wilders acknowledged that liberal democracy is necessarily characterised by a gap between the political class and citizens, but claimed that public indifference is attributed to a deliberate strategy of the elite.

Populist ideology, on the other hand, displays faith in the capabilities of people to make political decisions. The gap between elite and people should be narrowed, and this can only be achieved by improving the possibilities that citizens have to control state functionaries and subject them to popular control – either direct or via parliament. Mudde in this regard pointed to plebiscitary elements of populist ideology and the personalisation of political power in the hands of the prime figure in the political system, and also Paul Taggart noted the preference for means of direct democracy that populist parties embody (Mudde 2007; Taggart 2002). However, the objective to enforce equality and narrow the ostensible gap between elite and people, does not inevitably take an anti-institutional direction. The national parliament, as embodiment of the popular will, is considered an important instrument to increase accountability and the perfect platform to express the *volonté general*. The concentration of powers in the hands of the parliament works in different ways, but most notably, populist parties fulminate against other political institutions of representative democracy that prevent the popular will from being heard, such as the Senate. In Austria, the Senate should become a true representation of the different *Länder* and thus strengthen the federal character of the state. The parliament’s role should be enhanced in order to increase democratic control over government functionaries. For instance, the members of parliament should receive the right to elect ministers and impeach government members. In the Netherlands, the Senate, which traditionally has the role of a *chambre de réflexion*, should be abolished. This would automatically strengthen the position of the Second Chamber and ensure a more direct articulation of the popular will.

However, the discourse of the PVV and the FPÖ suggests that this aspect of their conception of democracy stretches further than the emboldening of parliament and seeks to achieve a more radical

notion of political equality. Representatives currently enjoy certain privileges that are considered normal in liberal democracies, but are considered inherently undemocratic in a populist democracy. By carrying such a deep-rooted faith in the people and resentment towards many institutions of representative democracy, it seems sensible to let the people have more to say and promote self-government: 'Commitment to political processes will lead to more responsibility for the outcome of those processes' (Wilders 2006b: 5).

This conception of political equality in which the gap between citizens and their representatives is narrowed, logically leads to the conclusion that all positions in the democratic system should be subjected to increased popular control and scrutiny. This view is epitomised by the statement 'in the new free republic, the election principle takes prevalence over the appointment principle' (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich 2008: 14. If ultimate sovereignty lies with the people, the people should be allowed to increase democratic, meaning popular, control over government, MPs and civil servants. The FPÖ, for instance, advocates the introduction of a system according to which all elected representatives can be impeached after a referendum. These ideas on democracy stand into contrast to liberal democratic notions of the benefits of a system in which representatives enjoy a certain protection against unremitting electoral scrutiny. However, populist ideology is in this respect also reflective of a trend in modern democracies towards something John Keane has baptised "monitor democracy" in which politicians come under intense and continuous control of the electorate by mechanisms beyond traditional representative institutions (Keane 2009).

Secondly, the radical right populist notion of equality is exclusive. It has been noted that populist parties conceive of the "people" as the common people in relation to the elite, but while this also counts for left wing populism (Decker 2008), the populist radical right also conceives of the people as "the whole people", the *Volks* (Mudde 2007: 138-145). Populist radical right parties conceptualise democracy in terms of political equality not merely because it sees unequal political power relations as elitist and therefore undemocratic, but also because equality fosters national cohesion. The PVV and FPÖ share a mono-cultural conception of the people and it is fundamental to the democratic outlook of populist parties that this cultural nation is the only possible source of democratic government. Democracy according to the radical right parties studied here is grounded upon the supposed ultimate expression of this equality: the cultural ties that supposedly connect citizens and thereby constitute a "people". It is thus a cultural equality, which is by nature exclusive in character. This stance also explains the populist aversion towards European Integration and multiculturalism. When the FPÖ states that 'the freedom and independence of Austria are under threat', it first of all means that a loss of national sovereignty leads to less democratic control, since democratic control can only be enforced by culturally homogeneous people. When the FPÖ states that the Grand Coalition 'has sold the *Heimat* to a corrupt bureaucracy in Brussels', (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich n/d: 20; see also Partij voor de Vrijheid 2010), this "sale" in their eyes seriously restricts the democratic opportunities of citizens to decide over their own destiny and run their own affairs – since Europeans do not constitute a homogeneous cultural nation.

This understanding of equality stands in close relationship to what is arguably the most notable element of the way in which the populist radical right conceptualises democracy: the extension of the political sphere in society. Francisco Panizza has argued that populists cancel the public-private divide, but has focussed there on the way in which populists 'brings into the political realm both individual and collective desires that previously had no place in public life' (2005: 24). However, this cancellation of the line between political and private also works the other way around, by politicising ever-greater parts of society. This feature of populism relates to the two elements discussed before. The extension of the political sphere is concomitant to the politicisation of state institutions that are ostensibly no longer neutral, whereas the believed necessity of a shared worldview relates to the populist conception of equality. It stands in obvious contrast to the liberal democratic objective of limiting the political sphere in society and protecting individual freedoms.

The populist objective to neutralise state institutions already demonstrated that the FPÖ and PVV have an all-embracing conception of the political sphere that is uncommon to liberal democracies. Institutions of the state such as the judiciary and state media are suspected of being influenced by the outlook of political parties. In a populist democracy the political domain consequently extends into spheres not considered 'political' in a liberal democracy: media, judiciary, culture, the economy and education are allegedly no longer largely impartial and non-political institutions, but all spheres which are political and over which "the people" consequently should be able to exert influence. To illustrate this point, the FPÖ argued that corporate structures in which government, employers and labour unions meet should be held up to popular control: if it acts like a support of the government it should also be susceptible to the same electoral process as the regular government. The FPÖ therefore calls for the general election by universal suffrage of the trade union bosses and leaders of employers' organisations who make up the social partnership (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich 2002: 26). This is illustrative of the way populist radical right parties want to politicise every public institution. Based on the assumption that these all carry a political agenda, the parties believe that every institution should be "democratised".

The extension of the political sphere does not stop with trade unions, judiciary and media. It connects to the wish to increase both political and cultural equality in society. According to the FPÖ and the PVV, schooling is critical in this respect and both parties advocate an increased political influence over school programmes and curricula. Through education, society should advocate the common values on which this society is based upon. The "defence of democracy" allegedly commences at primary schools where 'the heroic history of our fatherland should get more attention' (Wilders 2006a: 2). Like the PVV, the FPÖ values the role of education highly in the process of building a common cultural values as well as a "democratic" worldview. Much more energy should therefore be devoted to political *Bildung*. Austrian schools should place emphasis on Austrian culture and history. The ultimate goal of youth politics is to have 'enlightened and independent citizens', not affected by the "propaganda" of the current political constellation Freiheitliche Partei Österreich 2008: 12).

Apart from education, the arts are loaded with political significance to establish a collective moral framework in society. The populists hold that art should be popular, national art and that this is currently endangered. National culture should be strengthened and utilised to bolster political and cultural equality. Art should in the populist view thus not be considered an independent way of expressing emotions or societal critique, but as a political institution. It should consequently display political messages as articulated by the "people". Artists, who often depend on state subsidies, are alleged to be influenced by the political views of the traditional parties and thus only create 'subversionist art with a socialist outlook'. Haider quotes Jürgen Habermas to lend credence to his claim that modern art is merely critique of society and that culture and society are increasingly disjointed, with a high brow, government funded, art telling conservative people they are backward (Haider 1993: 54). Along the same line of politicising the arts, Wilders proposed the scrapping of art subsidies, since art was merely a "left wing hobby".

The extension of the political sphere in society to the media, education and art, is ostensibly aimed at "democratising" these autonomous spheres. It serves to demonstrate that, while populist parties generally list freedom of speech as the single most important democratic right, and criticise the traditional consensus model embodied by political parties on one hand, they simultaneously conceptualise democracy in terms of the necessity of a shared worldview. This points back to their understanding that the existence of a culturally homogenous people is crucial for the functioning of democracy, since it is only from a culturally homogenous people that a democracy draws its legitimacy. They blame the ostensible current lack of a shared belief system that should underpin cultural homogeneity on the elite and traditional parties and their cultural relativism and "dictatorship of tolerance".

Both Wilders and Haider stated that May 1968 was the advent of a new age in which cultural relativism and a lack of respect for authorities destroyed community bonds. Particularly Haider had an elaborate vision on this topic. He stated that modern man faces a paradoxical situation. Although he is able to reap the fruits of all the freedoms and liberties that society has to offer, he does not know what to do with all those freedoms. Society lacks an ultimate goal as a binding element and is thus likely to fall apart. The *Toleranzdiktatur* that is currently propagated by the traditional parties leads to anarchy and should be abandoned, since it does not lead to a commonly accepted and shared worldview (Haider 1993). Similarly, Wilders quotes philosophers such as Peter Sloterdijk and Pierre Manent to assert that the abundance of liberties in modern societies assures we take these liberties for granted (Wilders 2006b). Wilders argues that the balance in modern societies is tipped too much towards negative freedoms and that we should attempt to define a positive conception of freedom as well – which again signifies a contrast with liberal democracy, albeit this counts more in liberal democratic theory than in practice. Wilders consequently posits that constitutional rights should only be admitted to those who pledge to adhere to the values that are embodied in the democratic constitution, because ‘history shows that plurality of opinions can only exist if it is confined within mutual trust in shared norms and values’ (Wilders 2006a: 5).

Based on the assertion that constitutional grants should only be granted to those who pledge allegiance to this constitution, the parties are in favour of a forced adoption of “Western” values by migrants. Populist radical right parties consequently advocate letting immigrants sign a contract, in which they pledge to respect the culture of the respective countries. The FPÖ additionally proposed to let immigrants take a “democracy test” in which they could prove their adherence to democratic Austrian procedures. It is finally relevant to note that these parties, which are usually situated on the conservative side of the political continuum, increasingly claim the progressive agenda when it comes to defining democracy. The parties claim to be staunch defenders of women’s rights and the PVV also stands up for the rights of homosexuals: ‘It is therefore time to choose for the defence of core components of our culture: the freedom of homosexuals and the equal rights of men and women’ (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2010: 33). In this way, individual and minority rights return at the core of the populist conceptualisation of democracy, but with the aim of fostering the existence of a shared world view and cultural values among the people – and challenging the tolerance for different customs and opinions customary in liberal democratic practices in Western Europe.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes by answering three questions. The first one addresses how populist radical right parties conceptualise democracy and seeks to develop an enhanced definition of populist right wing ideology. The second question subsequently aims to understand to what extent populism can be contrasted with liberal democracy and to what extent their understandings of democracy are compatible. The final question briefly addresses the question to what extent the populist conception of democracy epitomises recent changes in the way contemporary democracy functions.

To start, it may be noteworthy to recall that populist movements not merely consider themselves deeply democratic, but even state that whilst they are democratic, the existing political order fails to uphold democratic values and norms. In this sense, populist ideology stands in a long debate in which various conceptions of democracy strive for supremacy, especially in a time when democracy has become the sole legitimation of government in the West (Müller 2011b). Based upon the study of the discourse of epitomes of populist radical right parties in Western Europe, such as the PVV and the FPÖ, this article has demonstrated that the populist conception of democracy stretches beyond an emphasis on popular sovereignty of a culturally homogenous people, as is the consensus in the current academic literature. The manifestos, programmes and publications of the main Austrian and Dutch populist parties imply that a more extensive notion of the populist conception of democracy is possible.

The main traits of a populist democracy also embrace commitment to the neutrality of state institutions, a radical notion of political equality within the framework of a culturally defined nation and the extension of the political sphere in society to foster a common worldview ostensibly indispensable for the functioning of democracy.

This right wing populist commitment to equality therefore shows a more politically radical side to it, since a radical right populist democracy asserts that in order to close the gap between the elites and people, the division between rulers and ruled should be cancelled – or at least made as small as possible. Accordingly, control over political representatives and institutions should be significantly enhanced, including means of direct democracy, better instruments to enforce accountability, and a strengthening of parliament. A populist democracy is thus not merely an anti-elitist democracy, but a democracy in which everyone belonging to the culturally defined people can hold everyone else up to popular control. Simultaneously, populism, as has been argued here, has a culturally exclusive notion of equality. This is of importance, since it stands in close relation to its conception of democracy in which popular sovereignty is the *sine qua non* of democracy. The fact that the people are conceived of in this way entails that in the populist conception of democracy much emphasis is placed on the importance of a shared value system among the population. Populist parties see themselves as crucial actors in addressing the alleged lack of a common order in an individualised society. Concurrently, it extends the political sphere to parts of society that liberal democracy has left unpoliticised, examples of which include education, the arts and the judiciary.

The politicisation of these institutions signifies therefore a major aspect of the populist radical right conception of democracy. It criticises the promise of state neutrality that liberal democracies allegedly fail to fulfil. The FPÖ and the PVV are convinced that the dominance of traditional political parties has led to a political constellation in which the dividing line between nature biased political parties and the supposedly neutral state has become blurred. The pervasion of these institutions by the “traditional” political parties and their – allegedly elitist and, often, left wing – values, has ostensibly led to diminished opportunities for citizens to make well-informed decisions independently. By addressing the alleged politicisation of state (sponsored) institutions such as state broadcasting associations, the judiciary, social partnerships and the education system, populism questions their democratic legitimacy and accuses them of spreading biased and elitist messages. The only way to realise the democratic ideal of state neutrality is therefore to break the power of the traditional parties by increasing the means of popular control over state representatives and institutions. This points back to increased political equality – which demonstrates that the three aspects of a populist democracy are closely intertwined. The populist radical right therefore conceptualises democracy as the popular sovereignty of a culturally homogeneous people with a shared collective worldview and almost horizontal political power relations that are articulated in a heavily politicised civil society not clearly separated from the state.

Hence, how does this particular conception of democracy relate to the liberal conception of democracy dominant in Austria and the Netherlands and wider Western Europe at large? Notwithstanding the gap between liberal democratic theory and practice, this article has shown that these two conceptions of democracy cannot always easily be juxtaposed, although they do show some remarkable differences. An obvious difference is of course the populist emphasis on popular sovereignty, while liberal democracy is committed to a set of representative institutions and the protection of constitutionally enshrined individual rights. This implies also that the distance between representatives and represented which is positively valued in liberal democracies is questioned by populist parties. Finally, also the extension of the political sphere in society and the definition of the people in terms of culture, rather than citizenship, stand at odds with liberal democratic theory and practice. However, the emphasis lays closer on liberal democratic ideals, if not practice. State neutrality is an element both populist and liberal democracy claim to endorse, but populist parties accuse other, “traditional” parties of jeopardising this ideal in practice. Also, equally relevant, populist

parties claim to protect individual and minority rights, when they feel that these are threatened by those who do not belong to “the people”. In this way, they claim the agenda of liberal democracy, as can be seen with the PVV’s defence of the rights of homosexuals or in the latest election campaign of the FPÖ, when the party claimed to defend the freedom of women while the social democrats allegedly defended the compulsory veil.

Finally, one could question to what extent the conception of democracy put forward by the PVV and FPÖ reflects changes in our democratic political culture at large. Mudde already suggested that not only the radical right, but also the populist *Zeitgeist* captured the political system at large, in which the glorification of the people becomes more common (Mudde 2004). The lack of ideology and the leadership cult often attributed to populism seems also to reflect a trend in democracy in general, rather than being an exclusive trait of populism itself. Bernard Manin (1997) argued that we are currently witnessing the rise of an “audience democracy”. Its main feature is the passive reaction of voters to issues raised by politicians. It is thus not party ideology that counts in election time, but the way politicians are able to let public opinion split to their advantage (Manin 1997: 218-238). Populist radical right parties clearly conform to this trend. From the same perspective, the importance of a continuous scrutiny and accountability of political representatives underscored by populist ideology resembles recent developments in which classic representative institutions play a smaller role in the accountability of politicians, but where the constant accountability of politicians as such gains more significance (Keane 2009). From this perspective, populism can even be understood as a specific feature of what Pierre Rosanvallon named “counter democracy”: a form of organised distrust in politicians with the objective of controlling them and keeping politicians to their promises (Rosanvallon 2008).

Since this article is based on only two prominent Western European examples of the populist radical right, its findings suggest that more research into the populist conception of democracy is required to deepen our understanding of the additional traits of the populist conception of democracy beyond the notion of popular sovereignty and to extend it to more cases. This research could then further explore the possible tensions with liberal democracy, but also assess to what extent populist and liberal democracy are on similar historical trajectories, both influencing and being influenced by the changing modes of conducting politics and conceiving of democracy that we witness nowadays.

Correspondence address

Pepijn Corduwener, Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, Drift 6, 3512 BS Utrecht, The Netherlands [p.corduwener@uu.nl]

¹ At the time of the publication of Mudde’s book in 2007, the PVV was only a nascent party and thus not included in Mudde’s data set. However, Mudde did label the PVV as populist radical right later, see for instance: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/09/13/dutch-elections>, visited on 14 October 2014.

REFERENCES

- Abts, K. and Rummens, S. (2007). Populism versus Democracy. *Political Studies*, 55(2): 405-424.
- Canovan, M. (2002). 'Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy', in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds.) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 25-44.
- Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the People? Populism and the two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1): 2-16.
- Conway, M. (2002). Democracy in Postwar Europe. The Triumph of a Political Model'. *European History Quarterly*, 32(1): 59-84.
- Decker, F. (2008). 'Germany: Right-wing populist failures and Left-wing successes', in D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnel (eds.), *Twenty-first Century Populism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 119-134.
- Dunn, J. (2005). *Setting the People Free. The Story of Democracy*. London: Atlantic.
- Freeden, M. (1998). *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (2008). *Wahlprogramm FPÖ 2008 'Wir für Euch'*. (Election campaign manifesto). Vienna
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (2006). *Wahlprogramm FPÖ 2006*. (Election campaign manifesto). Vienna.
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (2005). *Das Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreich* (party programme, Vienna 2005).
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (2002). *Wahlprogramm FPÖ 2002: Wir gestalten Österreich mit Sicherheit* (2002). (Election campaign manifesto). Vienna.
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (n/d). *Handbuch freiheitlichen Politik, 2. Auflage. Ein Leitfaden für Führungsfunktionare und Mandatsträger der Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (party programme). Vienna.
- Habermas, J. (1996). 'Three Normative Models of Democracy', in S. Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference. Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 19-30.
- Haider, J. (1993). *Die Freiheit die ich meine. Das Ende des Proporzstaates. Plädoyer für die Dritte Republik*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kaltwasser, C. R. (2011). The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy. *Democratization*, 19(2): 184-208.
- Keane, J. (2009). *The Life and Death of Democracy*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Lijphart, A. (1997). *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mair, P. (2002). 'Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy', in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds.) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 81-98.
- Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mény, Y. and Surel, Y. (2002). 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism', in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds.) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 1-17.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). 'The "End of Politics" and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism', in F. Panizza (ed.) *Populism as the Mirror of Democracy*. London: Verso: 50-71.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4): 542-563.
- Müller, J-W. (2011). *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Müller, J.W. (2011). European Intellectual History as Contemporary History. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46(3): 574-590.
- Partij voor de Vrijheid (2010). *Partij voor de Vrijheid. De Agenda van hoop en optimisme. Een tijd om te kiezen. Verkiezingsprogramma Partij voor de Vrijheid 2010-2015* (Election campaign manifesto parliamentary elections). The Hague .
- Partij voor de Vrijheid (2006). *Partij voor de Vrijheid. Verkiezingspamflet* (Election campaign manifesto parliamentary elections). The Hague.
- Panizza, F. (2005). 'Introduction: Populism as the Mirror of Democracy', in F. Panizza (ed.) *Populism as the Mirror of Democracy*. London: Verso: 1-31.
- Pappas, T. S. (2014). Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary. *Government and Opposition*, 49(1): 1-23.
- Plattner, M.F. (2010) Populism, Pluralism and Liberal Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*. 21(1): 83-90.
- Rathkolb, O. (2005). *The Paradoxical Republic. Austria 1945-2005*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2008). *Counter Democracy. Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schumpeter, J. (1981). *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*. London: Allen and Ulwin.
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Taggart, P. (2002). 'Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics', in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds). *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 62-80.
- Urbinati, N. (2003). Democracy and Populism. *Constellations*, 5(1): 110-124.
- Vossen, K. (2010). Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn: Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders Compared. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 11(2): 22-38.
- Wilders, G. (2005). *Groep Wilders. Onafhankelijkheidsverklaring*. The Hague.
- Wilders, G. (2006a). *Een Nieuw-realistische visie. Modern onbehagen*. The Hague.
- Wilders, G. (2006b). *Klare Wijn*. The Hague.
- Wilders, G. (2006c). *Plan voor een nieuwe gouden eeuw. Lagere belastingen, kleinere overheid, forse inkomensverbetering voor middeninkomens*. The Hague.
- Wilders, G. (2010). *Presentatie Agenda van hoop en optimisme*. (Speech, presentation of the election campaign manifesto). The Hague.
- Zakaria, F. (1997). The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6): pp. 22-43.