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**Crisis State:
Locating Populism's Conceptual Core**

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*A Capstone Project
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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is two-fold. The first is to put forth a method for analyzing how populism functions as a discursive practice. I seek to formulate an understanding of populism that highlights the phenomenon's three essential discursive features. I refer to these features as "the people", "the elite", and "the crisis". The second aim of this paper is to expand on the contingent and socially constructed nature of "crisis". I intend to show how populism is inextricably linked to the construction of "crisis" and how populists use crisis narratives to justify their undemocratic tactics and consolidations of power.

Writing this paper in 2020, it is rather uncontentious to argue that we are living in the midst of a populist wave. The election of Donald Trump in 2016, the culmination of Brexit, and the increasing popularity of right-wing populism in Europe are all signs of populism's growing presence in the world today. Consequently, since 2016, "populism" has become a mainstream term, emerging in popular discourses and media outlets across the world and being applied to a wide array of political actors and movements. Despite becoming widely used, mainstream understandings of populism do not reflect the conceptual nuances of the term. Often, the term is used to categorize unusual or unfamiliar political phenomena that appear extremist. In these instances, populism is typically conflated with what are in fact nationalist, nativist, or far-right stances, none of which are essential or unique to populism. Mainstream depictions of populism, particularly on the left, are based on normative assessments, with the term often being used pejoratively to label some sort of political movement or political leader as a threat to the existing democratic order.

Negative portrayals of populism may not be totally unfounded - there are perhaps reasons to be wary of populism's growing appeal - but they reduce populism's significance and conceal the fact that it is one of the most salient political movement in the world today. In some sense, populism can be compared to previous sociopolitical movements like the civil rights movement, the women's suffrage movement, or the gay right's movement. As with these sociopolitical movements, populism as a discourse seeks to mobilize a mass of people to challenge a particular status quo. Specifically, populism's challenge is aimed at existing democratic power structures, which populists claim are manipulated by corrupt, self-serving political elites who intentionally marginalize the voice of the people. In some sense then, populism can be thought of as a radical democratic discourse that attempts to give a voice to the voiceless.

Though populism has existed for more than 100 years, it bobs up in unusual places and in unexpected times, raising the logical question: why are we seeing populism now? History tells us that the emergence of sociopolitical movements and counter discourses is almost always unexpected. There were for example, long periods in history where it was seen as logical for women to be forbidden from voting, or for gay people to be prohibited from marrying. Such dominant narratives therefore went unchallenged for a very long time. There is then something peculiar about the ways in which social movements emerge and the timing of their coalescence.

It is very important that we try to understand why and how sociopolitical movements materialize and how they become successful when they have previously been unsuccessful.

This is a question with which post-structuralist political theorists are particularly concerned. To post-structuralists, social change is never deterministic. The rise and success of social movements is not inevitable, rather, their success lies in individual actors' ability to create discourses that compel large numbers of people to mobilize and join a movement. In order to mount a credible challenge against a dominant discourse, a new discourse must be constructed in such a way that it appeals to the masses and unites a plurality of people under a single umbrella. This is the only way that counter discourses can seek to replace dominant ones. Two post-structuralist scholars have been particularly influential in this area of study: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe argue that narratives seeking to affect social change can only be effective when they incorporate three essential mechanisms of discourse. First, the discourse must present society in an antagonistic way, meaning it divides society into two antagonistic groups: the oppressed and the oppressor. Second, this antagonism must highlight a clear power inequality between the oppressed and the oppressor and signal the moral unjustness of this inequality. Third, the discourse must present this power struggle as part of a larger, longer-lasting struggle. Laclau and Mouffe argue that these three discursive mechanisms are present in all successful sociopolitical movements, and therefore, no movement can be successful without them (Laclau and Mouffe 1990).

Populism has without a doubt been successful. Populist parties have appeared in democracies across the world, mobilizing millions of supporters, and in some countries, where populists have been elected to the highest offices of power, they have carried out - or are currently carrying out - radical institutional changes in the name of the people. Laclau, Mouffe, and other post-structuralists would argue that populism's success is a result of populist figures' ability to construct compelling narratives that convince people to join their movement against an oppressive democratic establishment. By this logic, the populist narrative has been successful because it has employed the basic discursive mechanisms that Laclau and Mouffe outline in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. If we are to understand populism and understand how it has become a successful counter discourse, it is essential that we understand how it functions at a discursive level and what its central discursive features are. This is the central aim of this paper.

More than fifty years ago, two academics studying populism wrote, "There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is clear just what it is...It bobs up everywhere but in many and contradictory shapes. Does it have any underlying unity, or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?" (Ionescu and Gellner 1970). As this quote serves to illustrate, the concept of populism has frustrated and eluded political scientists for decades. Bobbing" up everywhere, in a variety of historical and political contexts, there is a certain "impalpability" and "awkward conceptual slipperiness" (Taggart, 2000) to the phenomenon. Though today, more than fifty years ago, there is some growing consensus among academics about what populism *is*, the concept remains hotly contested and debated.

In my efforts to uncover populism's central discursive features, I turn to the rich academic literature on the subject in order to conduct a sort of critical literature review. This is the task to which the first section of this paper is dedicated. I will discuss some of the most relevant literature on populism in order to highlight both the vast differences in how populism had been conceptualized but also, and more importantly, the commonalities that appear across the literature. In my opinion, academics stand on far more common ground than perhaps they realize, with many scholars agreeing on populism's central features but still finding ways to debate one another. Therefore, those features that appear most often across the literature should be synthesized into one concise definition.

As I see it, populist narratives are founded on three central discursive features, which satisfy the essential discursive criteria spelled out by Laclau and Mouffe. The features are: (1) an appeal to 'the people', (2) an attack against "the elite", (3) and the construction of a "crisis. Together, these discursive features create an antagonistic frontier between 'the people' (oppressed) and 'the elite' (oppressor) and then link this antagonism to a larger systemic struggle through the construction of 'the crisis'. The literature review section will conclude with an analysis of each of these features, demonstrating why they have such wide-reaching appeal, how they justify the radical change that populists call for, and how they position the populist as the leader of this movement. Understanding what these discursive features *are* will enable future researchers to identify populism as it emerges. Researchers can do so by looking to the discourses and language of political actors. Understanding how these discursive features *function* will provide a better understanding of why populism is successful and under what conditions it emerges.

What separates populist movements from other sociopolitical movements is that they are led by a single individual, an individual who is vying for political power and seeking to change the political status quo. Anytime that a political figure seeks to make substantial changes to political institutions it is important to interrogate how these changes will benefit the people, but also how these changes may be in the interests of the individual. For this reason, it is important to approach an analysis of populism with some cynicism, for it is not unreasonable to consider that populists may be acting in their own self-interest, rather than in the interests of the collective they claim to represent. It is in the second section of this paper that I apply a more cynical analysis of populism, its leaders, and the discourses they construct. My approach will incorporate elements of constructivism and post-structuralism, for both schools of thought are uniquely concerned with the socially contingent nature of political discourses and the power relations between political actors and citizens.

One of post-structuralism's central tenets is that our sense of reality - what is "objective" - is contingent upon the dominant socially constructed narratives that we subscribe to. For a post-structuralist, meaning is never fixed, all phenomena and all events that occur can sustain multiple, contradictory interpretations simultaneously. Crudely speaking, everything is subjective. But post-structuralists are *not* relativists for they recognize that at any given time there are dominant cultural and political narratives to which massive numbers of people

subscribe. *These* then become the point of study. It is the dominant narratives that shape our understandings of what is good, what is bad, what is truth, and what is real, therefore it becomes vital to investigate the conditions under which dominant narratives take hold. Post-structuralists are then also interested in looking at how counter-narratives and counter-discourses (like populism) gain support and launch a credible challenge against dominant narratives.

It is here that I think post-structuralism and constructivism coalesce. For if post-structuralism is concerned with the role of discourse and narratives in establishing our collective reality, constructivism is concerned with the individuals who create these discourses and narratives, and who are therefore in positions of immense power. Though constructivism is found predominantly in the field of international relations, I see no reason why its theoretical framework cannot be applied to other levels of political interaction. In international relations, while liberals and realists tend to focus on how states interact, constructivists sharpen their unit of analysis to the individuals who are in positions of power. Constructivists argue that the best way to understand how states behave is to look at the individuals who govern those states, for their unique identities and interests are essential to understanding their policy decisions. The norms and procedures of international relations are better understood not as institutionalized imperatives but as the products of individuals' interactions with one another. In short, they are socially constructed because they are constituted through the social relations of individuals, outside of which they could not exist. And if these relations were different, then the norms and procedures would also be different. To a constructivist then, there are no institutions that are more powerful than the individuals in power, because these individuals are the ones who shape how institutions and systems operate. Therefore, individuals are powerful precisely because they are in a position to construct the dominant narratives that govern our collective reality. They are in a position to determine what gets said, what gets left out, and what gets done (Hay, 2016) The principal task of the constructivist is to emphasize that our collective reality is contingent upon the reality that the individuals in power construct for us, thus it is essential to interrogate the existence of material facts and bring into question the intentions of individuals in power.

So how do these theories fit into a study of populism? Post-structuralism reveals that our world is grounded in the dominant socially constructed narratives of the time, while constructivism reveals that existing institutions are constructed by individuals in power. When wedded together, a new conceptual framework emerges that concentrates on the way dominant narratives and counternarratives are constructed by individuals in positions of power. If we conceive of populism as a counternarrative that challenges dominant democratic narratives, we must look to the individuals who are constructing these counternarratives because these counternarratives are a product of this individual's interests and biases. Anytime an individual is calling for the radical restructuring of political institutions, it is vital to interrogate their interests in doing so. It is not unreasonable to suspect that these individuals may restructure a system in their favor and position themselves at the helm of a new dominant narrative that they can control.

The first section of this paper can be thought of as a post-structuralist analysis of populism. I seek to locate the discursive features that underscore populism and that have made it an effective counternarrative. The second section takes a more constructivist approach as I seek to look through populist discourses to the individuals who construct them. With a focus on the functional role of ‘crisis’, I intend to show that the discursive features of populism are socially constructed by the populist. Therefore, the discursive techniques that all populists rely on cannot be thought of as “true”, they are simply the best way for populists to justify their radical and often corrupt political project. In countries where populists have ascended to the highest political office and populism has become a dominant political narrative, we see that these discursive features are used to justify corruption and the consolidation of personal power. It is then essential that we be able to recognize these discursive features as they emerge because they provide the populist with immense political leverage.

Part I: Literature Review

The study of populism has been marked by three central tendencies. Despite being the most conceptually frail, the first tendency has been the most successful in permeating mainstream discourse. Here, the tendency is to use the word populism to categorize unusual and unfamiliar political phenomena with no regard for the conceptual complexity of the term. Most often the term “populism” is used pejoratively to denote some sort of political movement or political leader who is seen as a threat to the democratic order. In these instances, populism serves as a convenient catch-all to describe the far-right political leaders who have risen to prominence in Europe and the United States in the last decade. As a result of these assumptions, populism has often been conflated with what are in fact nationalist, nativist, or radical right stances. An essential aim of the academic literature on populism has been to disentangle populism from these widespread associations with nationalism, nativism, and the far right. One need only spend a short while with the literature to realize that populism exists just as prominently on the left, with figures like Hugo Chavez, Juan Peron, Bernie Sanders, and countless others. To focus on the policies of European or American populists is to ignore the fact that populism emerges in a variety of different forms. It is precisely because of the universality of populism - across continents and across the political spectrum - that the phenomenon cannot be defined along strictly ideological lines. Rather, a definition must include the more fundamental features of populism, the features that are shared by all populists.

The second tendency in the literature has been to construct a definition of populism that reduces the phenomenon to a singular term. In other words, these are attempts to place populism into a specific category. This approach has been employed by some of the field’s most renowned scholars and has provided some of the most important conceptual foundations for the study of populism but it has not yet achieved its goal of unifying populism under a single term.

Populism as a Political Ideology

Cas Mudde's research has been hailed as groundbreaking for having provided a minimal definition for the elusive concept of populism. Mudde has defined populism as a "thin centered ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Here, the thin-centered ideology of populism exists in contrast to "thicker" ideologies like socialism and liberalism which aim to redefine entire political concepts and prescribe overarching theories about human societies. He argues that because of its limited scope, populism can only arise in conjunction with thicker ideologies. Mudde argues that populism as a thin ideology is limited to a set of core principles and ideas that divides society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde 2004, 2007).

Mudde's most important insight is that populists routinely create an antagonistic frontier between a discursively constructed 'people' and their oppressors, the 'corrupt elite'. This discursive mechanism is what Laclau and Mouffe have identified as an essential aspect of successful social movements. Mudde agrees, seeing it as one of populism's core principles. Where Mudde's approach fails, however is in his labeling of populism. The very nature of the distinction between "thick" and "thin" is vague, resisting empirical measurement. Who is to say where the thin-ideology of populism ends and the thick-ideology that it is coupled with begins? It also raises the question of how "thin" an ideology can be before it loses all conceptual value (Moffitt, 2016). In addition, there is little precedent in the field of political science for the term "thin-centered ideology". In his efforts to resolve the ambiguity of populism, Mudde relies on another ambiguous term, thus his conceptualization

Populism as a Political Strategy

Kurt Weyland's understanding of populism is rooted in the same underlying "people vs the elite" dynamic as Mudde's. In his article "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics", Weyland writes, "a charismatic leader wins broad support...by "representing" people who feel excluded or marginalized from national political life and by promising to rescue them from crises, threats, and enemies. The leader appeals to the people for help in his heroic effort to regenerate the nation, combat the privileged groups and their special interests, and transform the "corrupt" established institutions" (Weyland 2001). Again, for Weyland, this relationship between the 'people' and the 'elite' is central to a populist's constructed narrative of reality. The populist mobilizes support by claiming to represent the downtrodden and marginalized 'people' in a revolt against the established political elite. Yet, while Weyland emphasizes the fundamental importance of this dynamic, his definition of populism excludes any mention of it.

Instead, Weyland goes on to define populism as "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland,

2001). In order to justify his claim that populism is a political strategy, he must focus on how populists engage with their supporters. Yet, his definition of populism betrays a regionally-specific view of populism, with direct, unmediated, and noninstitutionalized support only being used by Latin American populists. He does not therefore create a definition that can be applied transnationally, as these conditions are not true for European or American populists who have risen to prominence in multi-party systems. Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly National Front) and Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement would have been impotent had they not formalized as a party and ran for political office. In addition, though Donald Trump may have used anti-establishment rhetoric, he did not hail from some third-way populist party. He was only able to win the 2016 election because he was tied to an established political party. In multiparty systems, all politicians - including populist ones - must form or align with established parties to wield political influence, therefore they become inherently institutionalized, contrary to Weyland's argument.

Populism as a Political Logic

Any discussion of the literature on populism must include mention of the work of Ernesto Laclau, who is held up as a sort of godfather of conceptual populist theory. Laclau, an Argentine scholar, developed a discourse-theoretical approach to populism that has had a profound impact on the field of study. Laclau conceives of populism as a political logic that rests on three principle elements, the leader, the people, and the discourse linking the two. To him, populism was the "nature and logics of the formation of collective identity" (Laclau 2005). Crudely speaking Laclau believes that populist logic is a discourse that creates a collective identity around a particular political project. It is a discourse carried out by a political figure to build a coalition and challenge for political office. Though highly abstract, Laclau's work has provided a detailed map of the linguistic and rhetorical devices that undergird populist discourse. To Laclau then, populism is something that is done intentionally, it is a way of constructing reality and constructing collective identities that rests on several central and recurring ideas.

To Laclau, populism cannot exist without a leader, for it is this leader that does the populism, thus his focus is on the leaders and the way that they construct reality through discourse. This discourse then is the point of study and makes up what populism is.

Laclau introduces the discursive idea of nodal points. All signifiers in a discourse acquire meaning through their relation to the nodal point and it is the nodal point that allows a manifold of people to enter into an equivalent political project with one another. It is the central point around which all other ideas revolve. For example, in liberalism, the signifier "liberty" serves as the nodal point. All other tenets of liberalism, the "state", the "individual", and the "society" acquire meaning in relation to the nodal point "liberty". This implies that at the core of all liberal discourse exists a collective identity constructed in a particularly liberal way. The same dynamic is at play in populist discourse, though in this case, the nodal point is the people. Populists construct a collective identity around a 'people' and claim to speak for the 'people'. The 'people'

are a sovereign and morally pure group who have the right to political power. Populists claim that the people have been forcefully oppressed by the existing political establishment. Laclau refers to the existing establishment as “the elite”. The people are therefore defined by their antagonistic relationship to this “elite”, who are said to have exploited the good “people” and undermined democratic institutions. Populism, as a discourse, then provides a constructed version of reality that divides society into two camps: a good and an evil. The populist’s project is based on the idea that he/she represents the good people and that there is an urgent need to overthrow the “elite” in charge, for the elite are responsible for all of the people’s misfortunes and can no longer be considered legitimate. The issues then are not over specific policies but the system and the institutions as a whole, which is why populists call for a revolutionary overhaul of the current system with themselves at the helm.

In line with post-structuralist thinking, Laclau argues that the signifier ‘the people’ is not positively defined, meaning it does not correspond with existing socioeconomic markers like the poor, the middle-class, coal workers, Latinos, Christians, etc. Rather, signifiers are defined differentially, by what they are ‘not’. In the case of ‘the people’, the only feature of their identity is that they are not ‘the elite’. This has two effects. First, it leaves ‘the people’ entirely open-ended, so anyone who self-identifies as not ‘the elite’ can be part of ‘the people’. Second, it creates a “chain of equivalence” out of difference. People who are entirely different, with vastly different material interests, concerns, and positions in society can become part of the same collective identity, purely on the basis that they have been negatively defined in relation to ‘the elite’. A frontier is then created between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and it finds its expression through the leader’s articulation of ‘the people’. Laclau sees the process of creating equivalence through difference as essential to the success of populism, as it can provide a populist leader with a large, emboldened, and diverse support base, all of which are necessary if the populist is to validate their claim to represent “the people” as a whole.

Laclau’s work on populism has been some of the most influential in the field and has greatly informed my own understanding of populism. He was one of the first academics to look at how populism functions at a discursive level and how populists construct meaning and a collective reality through their uniquely populist discourse. If one is to discuss the sufficient conditions for identifying populism, Laclau’s “people” and “elite” must be included. That being said, many other academics have used Laclau’s foundational ideas as justification for why populism should be placed in categories other than “political logic”. In many cases, there are no substantial differences between the term “political logic” and the ones formulated by other academics. Because of the lack of substantial differences it becomes unclear why one should privilege “logic” over any of the other terms, for they are neither mutually exclusive nor substantially different. I look to Moffitt’s formulation of populism as a “political style” as evidence of this phenomenon.

Populism as a Political Style

Benjamin Moffitt's work builds on Laclau's conceptualization of populism. Moffitt treats populism as a discourse that divides society into a 'people' and an 'elite' but he also sees populism as having important non-linguistic features. Attempting to bridge the gap between the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of populism, Moffitt suggests an understanding of populism as a political style. Defining style, as "a repertoire of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power" (Moffitt 2016), Moffitt stresses the performative aspects of populism. While Moffitt insists that his conceptualization of populism differs from Laclau's, it's important to note that Laclau already highlighted the relationship between populism and performance. Laclau writes, "our approach to the question of popular identities is grounded precisely in the performative dimension of naming... and that populism tries to operate performatively within a social reality" (Laclau 2005). There appears then to be no substantial difference between Moffitt's political style approach and Laclau's political logic/discourse approach.

Herein lies the problem with this approach to defining populism. Scholars, eager to set their definition of populism apart from their colleagues', have become preoccupied with reducing populism to a unique label. Their work then becomes more concerned with validating their choice of label than it does with understanding the nature of populism. This preoccupation with labeling, clouds the fact that these scholars stand on far more common ground than perhaps they realize, or would care to admit. In essence, academics agree about populism's essential ingredients. What you find in Mudde's, Weyland's, Laclau's, and Moffitt's writing about populism are recurring mentions of "the people", "the elite", and "the crisis". All of these academics are interested in understanding populism at a discursive level but are also interested in separating *their* definition of populism from *previous* definitions. Rather than put forth an entirely new definition of populism, it is my idea that the discursive features identified by these academics should serve as the basis for a new conception of populism. One that does not define or classify populism but highlights its discursive content.

The Taxonomical Approach

The third tendency in the scholarly literature arose in opposition to the minimal definition approach. This set of scholars resisted the urge to unify populism under a single definition, arguing that applying a broad definitional term reduced populism to conceptual vagueness. Their approach has therefore been to take the concept of populism and subdivide it, in an attempt to systematize all of populism's various permutations and forms. While the goal was to tidy up what was an already jumbled field of definitions and classifications, this approach has only contributed more noise to the cacophony.

Margaret Canovan's work within this methodology has been the most widely acknowledged. To Canovan, populism arises in two distinct forms: agrarian populism and political populism (Canovan 1981). She sees these two forms of populism as being linked by a common theme of appeals to a "people" and a distrust of "elites". She associates agrarian

populism with the German, American, and Russian political movements of the 1870s and 1890s that arose in opposition to banking elites and urban centers and who called for a better representation of farmers in government. She then identifies “political” populism as the kind of populism that arose in Latin American governments in the 1960s and 70s. She breaks down “political populism” into four further subcategories: populist democracy, populist dictatorship, reactionary populism, and politicians populism. What emerges then, is a rather convoluted seven-fold taxonomy, in which “politician’s populism” is deemed a subcategory of “political populism”, and which offers little to no conceptual clarity. Indeed, Canovan herself expressed a disappointment with her typology in 1982, admitting that it “remained frustratingly unsystematic” (Canovan 1982).

Other examples within this approach include classifications of “neopopulism” and “classical populism” (Gherghina et. al 2013), Barry Canon’s “left-wing populism” and “right wing populism” (Canon 2018), Mudde and Kaltwasser’s “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) and Samuel Handlin’s “polarizing populism” and “non-polarizing” populism (Handlin 2018). These systematic approaches to classifying populism have proven, as Canovan noted in 1982, “frustratingly unsystematic” (Canovan 1982)

In attempting to subdivide populism, academics operating within this approach have avoided mentioning what populism’s unifying features are. This methodology also has the tendency to produce more and more subcategories as populism emerges in new political contexts. When a populist figure emerges who does not fit into the existing schema, a new subcategory must be created. This has the effect of making the entire systematization more complicated and less succinct.

Conclusion

In conducting a critical review of the literature on populism, I have tried to show that populism is a contested concept that has been subjected to a variety of definitions and methodologies. While I have emphasized some of the key differences in populism’s conceptualizations, I have also tried to point to some of the key similarities. Though most of the scholars in the field disagree on how best to define populism, a synthesis of the literature reveals that there is some broad consensus on the common features of populism, namely the antagonistic construction of a “people” and an “elite”. I argue that these broadly agreed-upon features should serve as the foundation for a new approach. It is to this new approach that I now turn.

The goal of scholars, regardless of their methodology, has been to construct a universally applicable definition of populism so that the phenomenon can be more accurately identified, observed, and applied to comparative research. This is ultimately my goal as well. Since defining and classifying populism has proven a stubborn task, I propose a new approach to identifying the phenomenon. By concentrating primarily on the common features of populism and observing how populism manifests itself, rather than trying to pigeonhole into a particular category, we will be able to draw valuable insight that will still allow us to recognize populism when we see it.

Drawing on the scholarly literature that I have already discussed, I will reduce populism to its three essential features so as to provide a framework with which to identify the phenomenon. These features are in large part based on the discursive understanding of populism laid out by Ernesto Laclau and Benjamin Moffitt.

1. The People

Populists will always claim to represent a homogenous ‘people’. As Laclau notes, this ‘people’ is never positively defined, it is only negatively defined by its relationship to ‘the elite’. In this way, ‘the people’, as a term, is an empty vessel, from which no societal groups are explicitly excluded or included. For example, Marine Le Pen has said, “I have come to liberate the French from the arrogant people who wish to dictate their behavior to them because I am the candidate of the people” (Le Pen 2017). Hugo Chavez has claimed to speak for *el pueblo*, saying, “I am not an individual, I am the people” (AFP 2010). The implication of such claims are that ‘the people’ are portrayed as the rightfully sovereign, as the only legitimate source of power in a representative democracy. The populist, in claiming to represent the will of ‘the people’ is then implying that he or she is the only legitimate representative of ‘the people’ and that all who oppose the populist are ‘anti-people’ and therefore cannot be legitimate. While these may sound like rather innocuous claims, they have far-reaching implications that run contrary to the liberal democratic value of pluralism. These statements imply that all other contenders for power are illegitimate because they do not serve or represent ‘the people’. Simultaneously, any member of the general population who does not identify with their version of ‘the people’, cannot be trusted and poses a potential threat to ‘the people’. Populists, are then in essence, anti-pluralists because they insist that democracies should be governed by a singular majority, rather than a plurality of minorities.

Since populists must reject pluralism in order to legitimate their own authority, they must denounce the legitimacy of institutions, democratic procedures, or other sources of authority. Take elections for example. Populists rely on elections in order to justify themselves as the only, true voice of ‘the people’. Yet, as the only true voice of ‘the people’, populists cannot concede electoral defeats. Since no other political candidate is a more credible representative of ‘the people’, populists must reject the results of those elections where they suffer defeats. Viktor Orban questioned the legitimacy of the 2002 and 2006 Hungarian parliamentary election results, which he lost (Adam 2019). And Donald Trump, prior to the 2016 election said, “I’m afraid the elections are going to be rigged, I have to be honest” (Trump 2016a). He then declared that he would not concede defeat if his opponent won (Adam 2019).

Democracy emphasizes the eternal sanctity of its own procedures and electoral rules. The results of elections must be accepted regardless of the outcome because to denounce the results is to denounce the democratic system as a whole. Even in suspicious cases of electoral success, candidates will concede defeat. This is perhaps no more apparent than in Al Gore’s concession to George Bush in the United States presidential election of 2000, following weeks of legal battles

that challenged the legitimacy of the results. On the one hand, populist's must always respect electoral legitimation, for how else could they become elected? But on the other hand, populists must take any opportunity they can to challenge existing democratic procedures and norms because this is how they legitimize their own anti-status quo campaign. Populists will always find ways to denounce the rules of the system while also opening up possibilities for these rules to be changed. Electoral results and democratic institutions are presented as subordinate to the will of 'the people' and the will of the populist.

Donald Trump has frequently denounced other sources of authority as well. In 2017, Trump lashed out at a federal judge who blocked his executive order restricting Muslim immigration. Trump tweeted, ""The opinion of this so-called judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned!" (@realDonaldTrump February 4, 2017) In using the phrase "so-called judge", Trump questions the legitimacy of the judicial branch of the United States government, implying that the institutions as a whole are corrupt. Trump, who claims to speak on behalf of 'the people', is then further implying that these federal institutions are working against the will of 'the people'. He uses similar strategies in his labeling of "fake media", arguing that those media outlets that oppose him are part of a conspiratorial plot to conceal the truth and manipulate the good 'people'. Such depictions are common for populists. They do not merely attack the legitimacy of other politicians, but bring into question the legitimacy of democratic institutions as a whole. These institutions, like the media or the judicial system, are painted as oppressive and illegitimate systems that marginalize 'the people' and therefore must be torn down and reconstructed.

A populist project gets its appeal from the radical institutional change that it promises. It seeks to "change the terms of political discourse, articulate new social relations, redefine political frontiers, and constitute new identities" (Panizza 2005). By supporting a populist, one becomes part of a new collective, one whose identity is revolutionary by nature. One feels as if one is throwing off one's oppressive shackles and becoming a protagonist in a larger revolutionary movement. The importance of this feeling should not be downplayed, for ultimately, all of us yearn to be a part of a movement that affects political change. In short, a populist's invocation of 'the people' opens up broad new forms of collective identification, a necessary precursor to political mobilization.

As the articulator of this new form of identification, the name of the leader becomes inextricably linked to the collective identity itself. This is part of the reflexive process through which the populist names 'the people' and then naturally becomes the embodiment of 'the people'. Panizza writes, "if populism can be redefined as a process of naming... the name that best fills the symbolic void through which the identification takes place is that of the leader himself" (Panizza 2005). This process is apparent in the legacy of Juan Domingo Peron, the former President of Argentina, a populist whose name has proven a durable mode of identification for decades.

Juan Domingo Peron created the longest lasting populist project in history. The former President of Argentina served three terms and created a brand of populism that continues to

thrive to this day. The success of Peronism can be explained by Peron's ability to create an ever-expanding and evolving collective identity, an identity that has outlived the man by more than fifty years. Peron stands as a testament to the power of populist identification and the centrality of the populist leader's name in the construction of that collective identity.

Peron's political platform was quintessentially populist. He called for the overthrow of Argentina's political establishment, which he identified as being dominated by the bourgeoisie and oligarchs. He promised to remove these "enemies of the people" (Beasley-Murray 1998) from power and vowed to rid the government of corruption, thus he came to embody anti-establishment, anti-corruption, and revolutionary values. His platform proved incredibly effective in attracting support from a variety of historically disparate social groups, namely the Catholic Church, urban workers, rural workers, industrialists, and the labor unions (Conniff 2012). Peron was able to forge this cross-class and cross-cultural alliance by convincing these groups that they faced a common enemy. Though each of these groups faced different challenges, Peron was able to blame their suffering on a singular entity: the political elites. Thus, by constructing an antagonistic adversary, Peron was able to create a "chain of equivalences" that could unite a plurality of social groups under one movement.

In his book *Pensamiento Político de Peron*, Peron writes, "For a Peronist there should be nothing better than another Peronist" (Murray 1998). Here, Peronism becomes more than just a political movement, it becomes a unifying mode of identification. His name becomes the empty signifier to which a plurality of people and demands can be linked. People no longer identify in terms of "poor", "working class", "middle class", etc, rather they identify as Peronists. And to be a Peronist is to be part of 'the people'. In forging a collective identity out of his own name, Peron created a powerful and politically legitimate coalition that could challenge the established political elite. Ultimately, this is what all populists attempt to do. In societies where political disillusionment is high, populists offer up a new and radical political identity that challenges the system and guarantees change in the name of 'the people' and with the name of the leader.

Peron's populist project was a success, leveraging popular support to victory in the 1946 elections. In 1956, following his two terms in office, Peron was ousted by a military coup and exiled. However, despite being removed from power, Peron's importance as a figurehead endured, and Peronism thrived in Argentina. Here the importance of the leader to populism becomes quite clear. Even in his absence, Peron remained a symbol of upward mobility and resistance to corruption. His name remained an empty signifier, to which a whole host of demands and frustrations could be attached, and on which a collective identity could still be based. His followers remained loyal and Peron was restored to power in 1973

Since Peron's death in 1974, Peronism has proven a durable mode of identification, and to this day remains etched into Argentine politics. Notable leaders like Eduardo Duhalde, Nestor de Kirchner, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, and current president Alberto Fernandez have all represented the popular Peronist party, Partido Justicialista. Peron's remains an important symbol to Argentines, who still associate the party with his values. The lasting legacy of Peronism is indicative of two things. First, that populist modes of identification can be so

attractive and powerful that they have the ability to last for decades. This would suggest that contemporary populists may forge constituencies that will continue to affect politics for a long time. For example, future politicians in the United States, recognizing the salience of the Make America Great Again movement may choose to associate themselves with Donald Trump as a means of garnering support. The second point is that while these populists remain important modes of identification, signifiers like Peronism, become increasingly empty and subject to redefinition. In Argentina, the Partido Justicialista has undergone countless ideological changes as politicians have sought to create new chains of equivalence around the signifier of Peron. Peronism has remained a durable mode of identification in name, but beyond this name the signifier remains up for reinterpretation. Such modes of identification remain important in their name but can be infinitely reworked to suit new chains of equivalence by politicians wishing to position themselves in power.

2. The Elite

Another essential discursive feature of populism is the construction of ‘the elite’. As has already been discussed, populists construct an over-simplified version of society that is divided into the good ‘people’ and the corrupt ‘elite’. This divide has been widely acknowledged across the academic literature on populism. Who ‘the elite’ are varies across each political context, with Latin American populists often attacking the bourgeoisie and upper class rulers, European populists criticizing the European Union, and in the case of Donald Trump the ‘elite’ are portrayed as a kind of shadowy, corrupt, and self-interested leftist political ‘elite’. Populists may also speak against particular ‘Others’ - particularly minorities, immigrants, or refugees - but these ‘Others’ will always be linked back to an established ‘elite’ (Moffitt 2016). For example, in the case of Viktor Orban, it was argued that the EU were responsible for the influx of refugees to Hungary in 2015, and were therefore unconcerned with the safety and security of the Hungarian people. Orban was then able to justify his criticism of the EU by portraying them as an antagonistic ‘Other’.

Though who the ‘elite’ *are* varies from populist to populist, the distinction between them and ‘the people’ is always a moral one. Rather than confront their opponents - real or not - in a rational and logical way, populists label their opponents as fundamentally evil, reinforcing a kind of Manichean view of the world (Hawkins 2009). Hugo Chavez said that “we are in the times of the Apocalypse. You can no longer be on the side of the evil and the side of God” (Moffitt 2016). He also speaks of confronting “the Devil himself” and labeling his opposition as “frijolitos (pipsqueaks)” who are “not just incompetent” but “irresponsible, liars, un-patriots, without any sense of honor or responsibility” (Hawkins 2009). This is what separates populism from other forms of politics. While it is common for politicians to speak for an ‘American people’ or a ‘French people’, these claims are not coupled with claims that other sources of power are essentially evil and illegitimate. Most politicians do not bring into the question the moral standing

or legitimacy of their opponents. Nor do they attack the existing institutions in the ways that populists do. Moral distinctions like these serve to legitimize the populists claim that ‘the people’ are the only source of legitimate power, and therefore the populist, as the embodiment of ‘the people’ is the only source of legitimate power. In essence, by demonizing another portion of the population, this helps ‘the people’ constitute its own cohesion and legitimize itself (Brading 2012). This is because every pole in a binary acquires its meaning through its relation to the opposite pole. The creation of a collective “We” requires the creation of a “Them” in order to define the “We”.

Once populists get into positions of power, their policies must make good on their promises to improve the lives of ‘the people’ but they must also make good on their promises to weaken or overthrow ‘the elite’. As a result, populists can justify policies that disenfranchise or marginalize those they see as the opposition. Usually these policies take shape in the form of new constitutions, new rule-making laws, and institutional changes. Hugo Chavez, for example, was successful in writing a new Bolivarian Constitution that abolished the presidential term limit, removed his opposition from their public posts, replacing them his loyalists, and then created a new unicameral legislature that he stacked in his favor (Weyland 2013). He was able to justify such radical policies on the basis that those who opposed him were corrupt and illegitimate and needed to be marginalized. There is a palpable irony to this. In order to justify his own corrupt methods of consolidating power, Chavez argued that he was ridding the system of corruption, essentially manufacturing the very problems that he promised to fix. Since populists cannot cooperate with the evil ‘elite’, policies must be designed to direct existing power away from ‘the elite’ and into the hands of the populist. In this sense, hegemony becomes the only solution to the problem of the evil ‘elite’.

To summarize, populism is inherently antagonistic, for it is antagonism that defines who ‘the people’ are and who their enemies are. On the one hand, this is not an inherently dangerous philosophy, it can be seen as just another way of mobilizing support and catalyzing political change. That being said, we must recognize, that historically, populists have enacted policies that have concentrated power in their own hands. This is because, populism, with its antagonistic worldview is not merely concerned with *locating* the enemy but also *defeating* them. Cooperation with ‘the elite’ is seen as impossible. The only way to defeat ‘the elite’, even if they do not exist in a material sense, is to rewrite the rules of the system so that power remains firmly in the hands of the populist. What allows them to carry out these hegemonic policies is their symbolic association with the morally pure ‘people’. By claiming to represent ‘the people’ the populist can argue that he or she is consolidating power in the name of the people, and that even institutional forms must be restructured so that ‘the people’ can be liberated from oppression.

There is something of a paradox at the heart of democracy, and it is within the folds of this paradox that populism is born and thrives. The founding principle of every democracy is that sovereignty resides in the people. A democracy’s constitution represents an attempt to organize and protect the people, in this sense a constitution is written for the people, and symbolically by the people. Maurice Duverger wrote, “It is the constitution that derives its authority from the

constituent power and not the constituent power that derives its authority from the constitution” (Duverger 1948) Governments and institutions acquire their juridical authority only through this constitution, therefore, the people can be seen to have ultimate authority over the government. And the constituent power of the people is their greatest power. In a democracy, the will of the people is always legal, therefore, the people may change constitutions and adjust rules whenever and however they please. “This is a right of which no positive institution can ever deprive them” (Wilson 1787). To take this right away would be to oppress the will of the people. In short, the rules themselves should never prevent the people from being able to change the rules if they so please.

But how does one define the will of the people? Representative democracy cannot guarantee unmediated political action *by* ‘the people’, it is a form of political organization through which individuals are viewed as representatives *of* ‘the people’. This is a strange idea. The most sovereign body in a democracy can never exist in a material sense, nor can it speak for itself or constitute itself. To be constituted, ‘the people’ requires mediation and representation on the part of an individual. Most representatives are pluralists, meaning they do not claim to speak for ‘the people’ as a collective, merely a portion of the population. However, it is possible for an individual to make the claim that he or she represents the sovereign people in their totality. And these claims can gain some credibility when this individual is supported by the majority of the electorate. At the point where this individual wins an election with some majority of support, the claim that he or she represents ‘the people’ becomes even more credible.

Here, we get to the nature of this democratic paradox. Any person who is “seen” by ‘the people’ to be the representative of ‘the people’, can justify their actions as the will of ‘the people’. However, because the will of the people can never exist materially, it is replaced by the will of the representative, as the two become one and the same. Since constitutions are subordinate to the will of the people, then previous constitutions, if they are deemed undesirable by the “will of the people” must be replaced with a new constitution that reflects their new will. This is the sovereign right of the people. A new constitution can be written that codifies the writer of the constitution as the legitimate supreme authority in the new republic and designates themselves as the constituent power (Kalyvas 2005). Paradoxically, democracy, by giving ultimate sovereign power to the will of the people, gives individuals who claim to represent the people, the sovereign power to act undemocratically.

To speak in the name of the people is to speak the language of power (Näsström 2007) because in a democracy ultimate power resides in the people. The existence of a stable democracy is founded on the assumption that it is logically impossible for the people, and their will, to crystallize as one. Populism shows that there are holes in this assumption and awakens in ‘the people’ the realization that they have a right to impose their will on the system. However, their will cannot be divorced from the will of the populist. Individuals are capable of generating the will of the people in order to foster new claims for legitimacy. When this individual receives support, then in some sense they become rightfully sovereign and legitimate in the eyes of ‘people’ who are the ultimate legitimating force. Existing laws and institutions can then become

illegitimate and can be subordinated to the will of the individual. This is how populists are able to justify the writing of new constitutions and the restructuring of entire democracies. Hannah Arendt, warned of the dangerous fiction that the people could be ever represented as one. She denounced the idea of the people's sovereignty, arguing that it had the totalitarian effect of destroying the plurality of the public space (Kalyvas 2005). Populism, with its anti-pluralist and sovereign claims, stands then as a very real challenge to existing democratic structures, particularly in countries where checks and balances are tenuous and where citizens feel as if their demands are not being heard.

3. The Crisis

The "Us vs Them" relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite' is widely acknowledged in the academic literature, A feature of populism that is far less emphasized though, is crisis. We can think of crisis as a necessary and logical consequence of populist discourse. Anyone who subscribes to the idea that the nation is governed by an evil "elite" who are oppressing the good 'people' must logically conclude that they are in the midst of a political crisis (Rooduijn 2014) Here, it becomes clear how these three discursive mechanisms interact with one another and reinforce one another. "The people" cannot be divorced from 'the elite' but the people cannot be mobilized without a crisis. The remainder of this paper is devoted to the concept of crisis and populism's inextricable relationship to crisis. In a populist's narrative, the construction of 'the people' and 'the elite' can be seen as creating the cast of characters. However, on their own, the characters in a narrative are static, they require some sort of catalyst, a plot device, to spur them to action. This is the role that crisis plays, and any discursive analysis of populism must include mention of the leader's construction and perpetuation of crisis.

So what do we mean when we talk about crisis? Reinhart Koselleck has provided a valuable conception of crisis that is rooted in the term's Greek etymological and historical usage. He sees crisis as a rather ambiguous term, that expresses a new sense of time which both indicates and intensifies the end of an epoch (Koselleck and Richter 2006). In this way, crises are decisive and unique moments in history, that precipitate "a transition towards something better or worse or towards something altogether different" (Koselleck and Richter 2006). Crises then, are situations that necessitate immediate action, radical change, and typically come with a challenge to some established authority. If there is no action, the future will descend into something much worse or, at the very least, something very different. In contemporary usage, crisis is constructed out of some sort of systemic failure - either economic, social, or political - and the impetus to act comes from the need to correct these failures (Moffitt 2016).

A populist's political project is always centered around some systemic failure or failures. To name a few, Geert Wilders has focused on the failure of Muslim immigration in the Netherlands. Viktor Orban and Marine Le Pen have addressed the EU's failure to deal with the influx of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Hugo Chavez attacked the failures of the ruling elite to help the poor and working classes in Venezuela. But *failure* is not enough to

necessitate the radical change that populists call for, it is not sufficient for signaling the end of an epoch and depicting the present as a decisive moment in history. No, populists must instead elevate these failures to something more severe, a *crisis*. The failure to deal with immigrants is elevated to a crisis of safety and security. The failure to help the poor is escalated to a crisis of corruption and illegitimacy. These crises, of corruption, legitimacy, or security have a kind of homogenizing effect, in that they can encompass any and all of ‘the people’s’ grievances. You can’t find a job? You can’t afford to pay for healthcare to cover your medical bills? You don’t feel as if your political representatives are listening to you? It’s because the system is corrupt. In this way, broad systemic crises can be used to explain a whole host of disparate failures. People will then find it very easy to identify with a populist’s crisis and accept its existence as material fact because it offers an oversimplified explanation for their frustrations.

The existence of crisis also serves to strengthen the populist’s dichotomization of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, in that it assigns these two groups the roles of ‘victim’ and ‘culprit’. ‘The elite’ are naturally the ones responsible for the crisis and the ones least affected by its existence. The ruling elite are presented as the ones who have designed the institutions to marginalize ‘the people’ and benefit themselves. This is indicative of populist’s general refusal to deal with great complexity, rather they prefer to reduce problems to the fault of a singular adversary. Such an oversimplified problem then only requires an oversimplified solution, namely the removal of the enemy and the restructuring of their poisonous institutions by ‘the people’. Term limits and systems of checks and balances can be presented as part of the democratic crisis, thus the crisis can offer a seemingly objective rationale for removing ‘the elites’ from their positions of power and restructuring the democratic institutions in their entirety.

If the nation was in a state of equilibrium, or it was at least seen to be in equilibrium by the general public, it would be difficult for a populist to justify their radical democratic changes. Take the rewriting of a constitution for example. It seems unlikely that the general public would be interested in a new or modified constitution if there were no impending threats or dangerous external circumstances. A country must then feel as if its back is against the wall for such drastic institutional change to be considered a viable option. Populists, with their radical attacks against the establishment and calls to rewrite the constitution, must then find a way to justify such claims. Crisis, then, becomes the best way to galvanize the support of the people. For claiming that the entire system is in peril is the best way to justify changing the entire system. John Elster has shown empirically that most new constitutions are written in the “wake of a crisis or exceptional circumstance of some sort” (Elster 1995). He points out that paradoxically “the task of constitution-making generally emerges in conditions that are likely to work against good constitution-making” (Elster 1995). Elster remarks that while the demand for a new constitution generally emerges during turbulent times and new constitutions are then written in these turbulent times, constitutions *ought* to be written in times of social and political calm.

For a populist to be successful it is absolutely necessary that they depict the present as a decisive moment in history, where the fate of the nation and democracy hang in the balance. In the words of Koselleck, populists must present their own campaign as the dawn of a new epoch,

the birth of a new regime because tearing down the old establishment cannot be justified unless it is deemed to be absolutely necessary. Once again this kind of Manichean view of the world is presented, one in which a cosmic struggle between the good ‘people’ and the bad ‘elite’ has culminated at a singular point in history.

Part II: Constructing the Crisis

Constructivism

In the following sections I will incorporate constructivism into my analysis of populism, hoping that it will shed more light on the contingency of its central discursive features. Constructivism is a school of political thought that is uniquely concerned with the power relations between political actors and the general public (or plebs as they have been historically referred to in political theory). The central tenet of constructivism is that we, the plebs reach our understanding of the political through the political actors that we subscribe to, therefore our conception of political “realities” cannot be divorced from the information that is given to us by those actors. The consequence of this insight is that our sense of what is *objective* is a product of what political actors tell us is *objective*, thus our objective realities are fundamentally *subjective* in that they are contingent upon the narratives that these actors construct for us. It is the job of the constructivist to emphasize the contingency on which our reality is based and to question the intentions and interests of political actors.

To a constructivist, power is “the capacity to resolve interpretive ambiguity authoritatively” (Hay 2016). This means an individual is powerful if they are in a position to shape how others view reality. To give an example, the individuals who write textbooks are powerful in the sense that they have the capacity to resolve the ambiguity of history in a seemingly *objective* way. To present their subjective interpretation as objective reality is what makes them powerful for they are shaping what others will accept as fact. To give a contemporary political example, the Bush Administration's decision to invade Iraq in the wake of 9/11, was contingent upon the subjective narrative that Saddam Hussein was harboring weapons of mass destruction. In their ability to depict this narrative as objective fact, the Administration was able to justify a decision that had massive global consequences. A constructivist would argue, that the Bush Administration was not powerful in a realist sense, meaning they had a powerful military at their disposal, but that they were powerful because they were able to shape what got said and what got done. The constructivist would then also interrogate *why* the Bush Administration portrayed reality in this way with the intention of revealing more about the broader interests of these actors.

In the same way that textbook authors stitch together *narratives* about the past, or that the Bush Administration promulgated a *narrative* about Saddam Hussein’s WMDs, populists create *narratives* about the state of a democracy. As I have shown, this populist narrative is founded upon three essential discursive elements: ‘the people’, ‘the elite’, and ‘the crisis’. Constructivism

reveals to us that, as elements of an individual's subjective narrative, these features cannot be *objectively* true. 'The people' and 'the elite' do not exist outside of a populist's articulation, and by extension, the crisis that necessitates the 'the people' to rise up against 'the elite' cannot be regarded as objective fact. Rather, these elements are part of a subjective narrative that claims to represent reality objectively. These three elements are social constructions but this doesn't mean they cannot be subjectively true. They are "true" inasmuch as people believe them to be "true". Therefore, what makes a populist successful- or any political actor for that matter - is their ability to construct a narrative that is compelling, credible, and relatable. To support a populist, one must accept their narrative of reality, and its discursive constructions as objective fact.

Since the discursive features of populism are part of a narrative that condemns the political establishment and promises profound political change it is important to interrogate how this narrative may suit the larger interests of the populists themselves. Constructivism separates the narratives that political actors give us from objective fact and emphasizes the inherent subjectivity of such narratives. Therefore, the question emerges *why* does the populist create such an antagonistic and anti-status quo narrative. How do the constructions of 'the people', 'the elite', and 'the crisis' serve their own personal interests?

In the following section I will dive more deeply into the concept of crisis with the intention of revealing its socially-contingent and constructed nature. I intend to show that crises do not exist in any real sense, rather crises are the products of narratives that are inherently subjective and constructed. I intend to show that populism is inextricably linked to crisis and that it is in the populist's best interest to perpetuate the existence of crisis once they get into office. For it is the existence of crises that justifies their radical efforts to consolidate power. What emerges then is a state in which crisis is normalized and perpetual and from which 'the people' cannot escape.

The Subjectivity of Crisis

It has long been alleged in the literature on populism that crises, be that economic, social, or political are essential for the emergence of populism. Academics have often argued this point, identifying a causal relationship between crisis and populism in which crises act as "a kind of trigger or a necessary precondition of populism" (Moffitt 2016). Kirk Hawkins writes, "Populist parties and leaders are almost always present in every country, but they typically rise to prominence in moments of crisis" (Hawkins 2009) Laclau argues that populism could not emerge without the preexistence of a crisis, as he sees crises as providing the only opportunity for populists to challenge existing institutions and change the terms of political discourse (Laclau 2005).

Scholars who subscribe to this point of view might explain populism's recent success in Europe by pointing to the ongoing "refugee crisis." They might argue that the massive influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa is evidence of a sociopolitical crisis, that has, in turn, triggered the rise of populist politicians. To interrogate this point, it's worth questioning if the

“refugee crisis” - as it’s been referred to in popular discourse - is objectively a crisis in the first place. Yes, there has been a considerable influx of refugees coming into Europe in recent years - with more a million arriving just in 2015 alone - this is a material fact, but are these numbers really indicative of a crisis? To the 35% of Germans, 39% of French, and 29% of Brits who feel that immigrants are “a burden on their country”, these numbers may indeed justify the existence of a crisis, either a political, economic, or social one. But, to the 59% of Germans, 56% of French, and 62% of Brits (Gonzalez-Barrera and Philip 2020) who see immigrants as “making our country stronger” the material fact that more than a million refugees have arrived in Europe is likely not perceived as crisis. Clearly then, if the majority of the population do not believe that the crisis exists then the existence of the crisis cannot be treated as objective fact and cannot be considered a necessary precondition for populism. As it does not make sense to make causal arguments about things that cannot be empirically measured and whose very existence can be brought into question.

What this reveals is that crises are not objective phenomena, rather they are post hoc narratives that seek to explain the occurrence of events as symptomatic of larger systemic problems. One person may take the objective fact that there have been more than a million refugees arriving in Europe and explain this fact by pointing to the incompetence of European governments to deal with these refugees. Another person may explain this influx as a logical consequence of globalization, multiculturalism, and the increasing prevalence of civil wars in the Middle East and Africa. Both people have then constructed their own subjective explanations for the “refugee crisis”, building a post hoc narrative that suits their understanding of causality. We can do little to question the validity of each of these subjective claims, in some sense they are as equally valid as they are invalid, as reality can sustain multiple contradictory versions simultaneously.

One would think that certain kinds of events, by their very nature, limit the credibility of crisis narratives. Environmental disasters are a good example because their existence *is* objective, therefore to deny their existence or to deny the extent of their damage would not make for a particularly credible narrative. That being said, the way such disasters unfold can be incorporated into narratives that point to larger systemic problems. Such an instance unfolded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, where the federal government and New Orleans officials came under fire for their response to the emergency. Leaders of the African American community spoke out against what they perceived to be a systemic unwillingness by the federal government to evacuate poor African Americans from New Orleans. The narrative quickly took hold, with an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll showing that 7 out of 10 African American respondents felt the Bush Administration would have responded with more urgency in New Orleans if the victims had been in white suburbs rather than a predominantly black inner city (Sandalow 2005). Now, nearly 15 years later, the lasting narrative from Hurricane Katrina is one of institutionalized racism. What this shows is that even events like natural disasters can be folded in larger crisis narratives.

It is vital that we interrogate the notion of crisis from a constructivist approach. As I have said, crises are constructions, narratives that resolve the ambiguity surrounding a series of events by linking them to a singular crisis. This construction, explaining how and why things came to be, is integral to how a “crisis” is lived and experienced by the people subscribing to it. The ability to affect how reality is experienced thus constitutes an immense amount of power as it sets the conditions for what is said, what is left unsaid, and what is to be done (Hay 2016). By constructing a crisis as a particular kind of crisis, political actors are opening doors to solutions that may suit their own agenda and closing doors to solutions that may not be in their interests. They are in a position to establish the terms and conditions for discourse. We must recognize that the construction of crisis may tell us more about the interests of the political actors involved in that construction than it does about the actual existence of the crisis.

Populism, more than any other political phenomenon, is inextricably linked to crisis. Contrary to what Laclau, Hawkins and other scholars have argued though, populists do not simply react to crisis, rather they actively construct crises and perpetuate a sense of crisis to serve their own interests. This is a common feature of all populist movements. In the previous section, I discussed the role that crisis plays in reinforcing the dichotomization of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ and justifying a populist’s claim to power. In this way, crisis can serve the interests of the populist during their political campaigns. This point appears occasionally in the academic literature. A point that is understudied, however, is the way that populists perpetuate crises once they get into office. While one might expect that it is in the interests of the populist to *resolve* the crisis they campaigned on, in fact, the opposite is true. Populists remain deeply committed to their crisis and once they achieve political power, the construction of crisis becomes more pronounced. I intend to explain this phenomenon by demonstrating that the perpetuation of crisis narratives is precisely what allows the populist to subvert the system and consolidate their own power.

Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution

Let us turn us first turn to a paradigmatic populist: Hugo Chavez. The antagonistic rhetoric of Chavez’s 1998 election campaign was aimed at the Punto Fijo institutional structure. In 1958, the framework for Venezuela’s democracy was established in the “Punto Fijo” pact, an agreement that spelled out a power sharing agreement between the three primary political parties, Accion Democratica(AD), COPEI, and Union Republicana Democratica (URD). This agreement to share power was explicitly codified in the 1961 Venezuelan constitution. However, in 1968, the URD lost its influence by a narrow margin and henceforth, a bipartite political system emerged in which COPEI and AD controlled all of Venezuela’s political institutions. In 1992, Hugo Chavez began his crusade against the Punto Fijo institutional order. He pointed to the Punto Fijo bipartite system as the enemy of the people, calling it corrupt and evil and blaming it for Venezuela’s economic plight. He said in a speech,

‘To constitute a new assembly is a must...it is vital for the country; precisely because, in the last forty years the political system in Venezuela lost the democratic essence, legitimacy...And it doesn’t have the framework to drive the nation to act accordingly with critical issues...Peacefully and democratically ‘We’ shall do it - not because any caudillo, autocrat, or elite sector want to but the sovereign ‘Venezuelan People’” (Brading 2012).

In this excerpt, the essential features of populism are spelled out quite clearly. There is an appeal to and construction of a “Venezuelan People”, a labelling of the enemy ‘ - the caudillos - and the construction of a crisis of legitimacy and democracy. Chavez’s crisis then was not simply one of representation, it was a crisis of the system as a whole. He constructed a radical political project that “campaigns for the displacement of discredited institutional structure and the formation of a popular institutional framework” (Brading 2012). It was through this construction of crisis that Chavez was able to justify his calls for a new constitution and the birth of a new regime. Without the existence of a crisis such claims would have sounded preposterous.

Since he first emerged as a political candidate, Hugo Chavez’s crisis narrative was constructed around the idea of a democratic system in peril, one that had been poisoned by corruption. He then positioned his campaign as part of a decisive moment in Venezuelan history, a last chance to overhaul the corrupt system. For him, a new constitution, and other fundamental changes to the system were necessary for eradicating corruption. After Chavez’s victory in the election - which he won with 56% of the vote (Brading 2012) - he immediately set about dismantling the Punto Fijo institutions and replacing them with his own so-called “Bolivarian Republic” (Brading 2012). Between 1999 and 2000, Chavez established a Constituent Assembly and was successful in getting approval for a new constitution via a public referendum. These policies were both intended to increase popular participation and give a political voice to the poor, working, and middle classes. However, such progressive policies were limited and Chavez quickly turned to consolidating his own power.

The new constitutional framework that was established explicitly removed Punto Fijo representatives from their public posts and replaced them with Chavez loyalists. He quickly closed the bicameral Congress, where his opposition held the majority of seats. Then, thanks to a reengineered electoral system and more referendums, created a new unicameral national legislature that was dominated by his loyal followers. With a stacked legislature, he then passed a law that eliminated the ban on consecutive terms and gave himself presidential authorization to decree laws in six key areas without parliamentary support: the economy, transport, service infrastructure, science and technology, reorganization of government ministries, and crime. By 2000, only two years after his election, Chavez had successfully seized control of all branches of government, eliminated his opposition, and guaranteed his own indefinite reelection (Weyland 2013).

Ironically, while Chavez consolidated his own power through corruption, he continued to argue that there were a network of corrupt elites conspiring against him. He continued to

perpetuate the crisis of corruption because it afforded him the opportunity to further consolidate his own power. He called them “alcoholics, demagogues, corrupters, tyrants, repressors, murderers, and all those who sucked on that tit” and therefore justified the further consolidation of his own power to resist their nefarious ways. He went on to say, “this is a government with no compromise that doesn’t subordinate to any faction regardless of its weight” (Brading 2012). When he’d exhausted this conspiracy theory, he broadened his scope, arguing that the United States were colluding with his opposition and undermining the sovereignty of the Bolivarian Republic. Following an attempted coup d’etat against him, he said “George Bush has changed orders to his pawns...They have started a new plot. I don’t blame the dogs but the owners of the dogs, the American government... this conspiracy of the Empire” (Brading 2012).

Chavez’s approach to consolidating power rested on two principles, both of which were linked to the populist narrative he had always espoused. First, he relied heavily on plebiscitary mass support, in the form of referendums, to transform Venezuela’s institutions. In doing so, he could argue that the institutional changes were in the name of *el pueblo* and part of the general will of ‘the people’. Second, no matter how much power he concentrated in his own hands, he continued to argue that the system was in crisis, insisting that corrupt elites were still conspiring against him. This had the effect of justifying further consolidations of power, under the guise of progressive policies, while simultaneously reinforcing his construction of the “enemy”. This is an essential point. Even when populist get into the highest positions of power, they continue to perpetuate crisis narratives, either using the same ones or generating new ones. These are not then temporary crises with quick solutions, they are presented as deep-rooted crises that will take years to fix, thus justifying indefinite reelection. The crises are initially presented as transitional or temporary during elections, but once in power, they are revealed to be far more complicated and entrenched.

The crisis-driven model that Chavez relied on became the blueprint for Latin American populists. In Bolivia, President Evo Morales and his Movement Towards used trumped-up charges of corruption and administrative irregularities against opposition politicians, imprisoning some and driving many others out of the country. In doing so, Morales has been able to stack the judicial branch in his favor. Argentina’s President, Carlos Menem used “emergency decrees” to bend constitutional rules, pack Argentina’s Supreme Court with his supporters, protecting his consolidation of power. A similar situation unfolded in Nicaragua, where Daniel Ortega publicly extracted concessions from an opposition leader in order to prove to the public that corrupt politicians still had a grasp on the political institutions. He used this confession as justification for packing the judicial branch in his favor and having his appointees exempt him from the constitution’s ban on reelection (Weyland 2013).

Latin American populists are not the only ones who continue to perpetuate crises when they get into positions of power. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is the best example of a European populist who has deployed crisis narratives as a means of consolidating his power and establishing a new political regime, similar to Chavez’s Bolivarian Republic. In the following section I will address the three crisis narratives that Orbán has been most successful in

dramatizing and exploiting for personal gain: the 2006 Hungarian corruption crisis, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2015 immigration crisis.

Viktor Orban

Viktor Orban's first term as Prime Minister (1998-2002) showed early traces of populism and narratives of crisis. Coming to power in the wake of the 1998 post-communist transition, Orban frequently blamed the Hungarian establishment for failing to depose the communist 'nomenklatura' elite and often characterized his politics as a fight against the prevailing communist system. Orban attempted to centralize his own power during his first term, pointing to the need to neutralize the nefarious elite as justification, but he was largely unsuccessful in restructuring the Hungarian institutional order.

Following a political scandal in 2006, in which the Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany publicly admitted to lying during his electoral campaign and confessed to government corruption, Orban seized the opportunity to run again for political office. Orban and his party Fidesz-KDNP, perpetuated a narrative of a democratic system in crisis, calling for the removal of Hungary's elite from office and the need for a regime change (Illés et al. 2018) He integrated the 2006 corruption scandal into a wider discourse of crisis, raising questions about the legitimacy of the existing constitution and calling for the codification of a new one. The campaign was an unprecedented success, with Orban and Fidesz winning a two-thirds majority in parliament in the 2010 elections, having discursively identified themselves as the party of the people. With a supermajority in parliament, Hungarian law permitted the rewriting of the constitution. An opportunity Orban could not pass up. To him, the rewriting of the constitution signaled the genesis of a new regime and a new political order for the Hungarian people. Following his electoral victory Orban addressed the nation saying, "Today in Hungary we learned a historical lesson...that is the lesson of the regime change, and that is as follows: it is impossible to change a regime, a regime can only be brought down and overthrown, overthrown and replaced by a new one" (Szilágyi and Bozóki 2015.).

The rewriting of the constitution was not only symbolic, it was immensely practical as it provided Orban with an opportunity to weaken and delegitimize the established political elite by centralizing power in his own hands. Perhaps the most significant changes brought on by this constitutional reform were changes that Orban made to Hungary's parliament. Orban gave the majority party - his own party - the ability to pass any legislation without the need for a coalition partner, as was law under the previous regime. In practice, this turned Orban's popular majority into an unchallengeable absolute majority (Illés et al. 2018) Here we see that by identifying the 2006 corruption scandal as symptomatic of a larger institutional crisis, Viktor Orban justified the writing of new constitution, which in turn, allowed him to strengthen the power of the Prime Minister, limit the power of the opposition, and construct a new regime based on hyper-centralization of state power.

Viktor Orban has also been effective in creating post hoc narratives about the 2008 financial crisis that linked the financial anomaly to larger political failures, both within Hungary and outside. He used the global financial crisis as evidence of a failing economic model, ‘the fall of scientific capitalism’ (Illés et al. 2018) as he called it, for which the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the Hungarian National bank were all complicit in and responsible for. In making these claims, he justified domestic economic reform that would protect Hungary against the nefarious supranational entities that were responsible for the economic struggles of his “people”. First, he introduced “crisis taxes” on several sectors including banking, energy, telecommunications, and advertising. These ‘crisis taxes’ were merely a convenient way for Orban to bring in new money for his regime and reduce his budget deficit, they were not the methods of economic stabilization that he claimed them to be. To defend against the supranational forces of evil and their economic meddling, Orban has also justified putting key sectors under state control. In 2017 he said, “A country the size of Hungary...can only be strong if there is robust majority national ownership in the strategic industries which determine its fate” (Orban 2017). Of these industries, none is more ‘strategic’ than the telecommunications and media industry, which has become increasingly nationalized and put under Orban’s control. Countless media outlets have been transferred to a central holding company ran by Orban loyalists, giving the regime power to regulate media competition and content (Howard 2014). Though Hungary was relatively unaffected by the 2008 financial crisis, Orban has dramatized the scope of the crisis in order to generate more capital for his regime, expand state power, and silence his opposition through control of the media.

Orban’s third crisis narrative capitalized on the “refugee crisis” of 2015. Initially, Orban linked the migration crisis to the rise of organized crime and terrorism, arguing that immigrants posed a threat to the economy, culture, and security of Hungary. To signal the imminence of the crisis and the gravity of the situation, he raised the terror threat level in March of 2016. Then, as the situation progressed, Orban’s narrative shifted to an assault on the EU’s response to the influx of migrants and refugees, denouncing the supranational body as useless and undemocratic. In 2016 Orban said,

“If we want to stop this mass migration, we must first of all curb Brussels. The main danger to Europe’s future does not come from those who want to come here, but from Brussels’ fanatics of internationalism. We cannot allow Brussels to place itself above the law. We shall not allow it to force upon us the bitter fruit of its cosmopolitan immigration policy. We shall not import to Hungary crime, terrorism, homophobia, and synagogue-burnning anti-Semitism. There shall be no urban districts beyond the reach of the law, there shall be no mass disorder or immigrant riots here and there shall be no gangs hunting down our women and daughters”
(Orban March 15, 2016)

Orban’s policy responses to the crisis were vastly disproportionate to the number of migrants who sought asylum in Hungary but the policies he enacted served to legitimize his

crisis narrative and stoke fear in Hungarians. He initiated legal action against the EU's migrant resettlement quota plan, constructing a fence along its Serbian border and closing its Croatian border, tightened the legal requirements for asylum seekers, and approved increased emergency powers for the federal government in the case of a terrorist attack. Ultimately, though these policies were arguably excessive, Orban was successful in swaying public opinion on the issue. Studies show that in autumn of 2016, 68% of Hungarians felt that migration was the single most important issue facing the EU (European Commission 2015) and xenophobia increased (Simonovits et al. 2016). It is clear then that crisis narratives like the ones constructed by Orban can have a profound impact on public opinion and can influence electoral decisions.

Orban's dramatization of the immigration crisis justified increasing both his power vis-a-vis Hungary and his power vis-a-vis Europe. First, his rejection of immigrants served to strengthen the collective identity of his constituency. The perpetuation of the "us-vs-them" ("us" being both immigrants and Europeans) reinforced his identification with a distinctly white, Christian and Hungarian national identity. The idea that Hungary is strictly for Hungarians. Second, his assault on European political elites served to justify his larger goals of expanding the status and power of the nation state vis-a-vis the European Union. Orban stands as a par excellence European populist.

Donald Trump

If there was any event that brought populism into the mainstream it was the election of Donald Trump in 2016. The result of the election came as a shock to the entire world with many questioning how a candidate like Trump could become President of the United States. I contend that Trump, now the world's most powerful populist, was successful because of the populist discourse that he espoused and crisis narratives that he constructed during his campaign. His "us vs. them" rhetoric and construction of an America in crisis served to instill anxiety in the American population, an anxiety that he claimed he alone could solve.

Trump's campaign was founded on the same anti-pluralist, anti-elite, and crisis sentiments as the other populists included in this paper. Statements such as "I used to be establishment...when I decided to run, I became very anti-establishment" (Blake 2016) set Trump apart from the self-serving and corrupt political elite who he claimed were responsible for America's decline. He made it abundantly clear that "the problems we face now...will last only as long as we continue relying on the same politicians who created them in the first place...No longer can we rely on those elites in media, and politics, who will say anything to keep a rigged system in place." (Trump 2016b). Hillary Clinton, Trump's opponent in the 2016 election, became the synecdochical stand-in for Washington's political elite, with Trump saying that she embodied "the failed status quo" (Homolar and Scholz 2019) and that while his problem was that "I can be too honest... Hillary Clinton was the exact opposite: she never tells the truth" (Homolar and Scholz 2019). Trump's smear-campaign of Hillary Clinton was profoundly successful in fostering dislike for her, with his supporters often chanting "Lock her up!" at rallies,

wearing t-shirts that read ‘Trump that Bitch’, and the emergence of the nickname ‘crooked Hillary’ in conservative discourse. Trump relied on similar name-calling to interrogate the morality and competence of his other established political opponents: ‘Low Energy Jeb’, ‘Little Marco’, ‘Lyin Ted’, and ‘Pocahontas’. What this shows is that Trump’s ‘us vs. them’ discourse gained traction among his supporters and served to position Trump as a political outsider who was the only hope of saving an America in ‘serious trouble’ (Homolar and Scholz 2019).

Trump’s attacks against the political establishment have only become more pronounced since coming into office. One need only spend several minutes on Trump’s twitter to see evidence of such conspiratorial narratives, which point to the liberal establishment as having orchestrated his impeachment, the indictment of General Michael Flynn, “Obamagate”, the “Russia hoax”, and widespread election tampering. He has also followed in the strategic footsteps of Hugo Chavez, expanding the scope of the conspiracy against him to outside America’s borders. He tweeted, “China is on a massive disinformation campaign because they are desperate to have Sleepy Joe Biden win the presidential race so they can continue to rip-off the United States, as they have done for decades, until I came along” (@realDonaldTrump, May 20, 2020). Such claims serve to create a narrative of shadowy political elites who are seeking to undermine his political success and stifle the will of the ‘people’, eroding voters’ confidence in their democratic institutions.

Trump was also effective in identifying immigrants as symptomatic of wider political and economic crises. His depiction of immigrants was distinctly antagonistic, referring to them as ‘criminals’, ‘rapists’, ‘killers’, ‘snakes’, and ‘terrorists’ who like ‘chopping off heads’ (Homolar and Scholz 2019). This depiction served to stoke fear and anger in his constituency, by pointing to immigrants as responsible for America’s deteriorating economy and a threat to Americans’ security. As with Viktor Orban in Hungary, this antagonistic portrayal of immigrants was also used as evidence of a failing political establishment, the ones who allowed such immigrants into their country, and who therefore do not have Americans’ security in mind. This then further justifies a radical campaign against the system that vows to overhaul the existing establishment in the name of the good ‘people’. Trump was able to “forge a rhetorical bond with Americans over worries that the country was disintegrating and radically changing, the economy was deteriorating, and ferocious enemies and minorities were growing emboldened” (Homolar and Scholz 2019).

Since the 2016 election, Donald Trump has attacked and condemned American media outlets in order to shield himself from criticism, attack dissenters, and to perpetuate a sense that the press is in a state of crisis. Popularizing the term “fake news”, Trump has been successful in linking the press, particularly liberal media outlets, to the corrupt political establishment who he insists are eager to undermine him and manipulate the ‘people’. Once in office, he tweeted “The LameStream Media has gone totally CRAZY!...They are only looking for the kill. They are now beyond Fake, they are Corrupt.” (@realDonaldTrump September 2, 2019). Later that day, he turned to Twitter again to say “Our real opponent is not the Democrats, or the dwindling number of Republicans that lost their way and got left behind, our primary opponent is the Fake News

Media. In the history of our Country they have never been so bad” (@realDonaldTrump September 2, 2019). These attacks against the media serve Trump’s interests in that they bring about a sense that even the truth is in crisis. This narrative can be used against anyone who opposes him and it positions his voice as the only voice of reason and the only one that can be trusted.

Conclusion:

In the preceding account I have sought to bring some conceptual clarity to the complicated and hotly contested topic of populism, a phenomenon that is emerging in democracies across the world and may prove to have lasting effects on democratic institutions. My intention has not been to define what populism *is* or how it should be categorized, but to locate its conceptual core. I have sought to achieve this by developing an understanding of the discursive features that appear in all populists’ discourses.

The first section of this paper was structured as a critical literature review and was my attempt to synthesize the work of academics operating in the field of populism. I have immense respect for the work of these academics and their theories have informed my entire understanding of populism. However, I have intended to show in this paper that the debates between academics are somewhat misguided. There exists a broad consensus about the nature of populism and what makes it a unique political phenomenon, yet academics, eager to set their own work apart from their colleagues’ have insisted on arguing about the minutiae of populism’s definition. Assuming populism’s presence in the world will continue to grow, populist scholars must come to an agreement about the necessary and sufficient conditions for populism. They can no longer be embroiled in debates about the definition of populism, they must expand their scope of analysis to new areas of study. In this paper, I have proposed a method for applying a discursive analysis of cases that appear to be populist. Populist discourses rely on three central features (1) ‘the people’, (2) ‘the elite’, (3) ‘the crisis’. Therefore, if a political figure’s discourse satisfies these criteria, that individual can be identified as populist. In short, I propose these three discursive features as sufficient conditions for identifying populism.

Additionally, I have sought to develop an understanding of how these discursive features operate and how they contribute to the success of populism as a sociopolitical movement and counter-discourse. Populists’ ability to amass millions of supporters is made possible by the antagonistic frontier they create between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. The only way that populists can build support for their radical cause is by creating a political narrative that can encompass the manifold of demands and interests that exist in democratic societies. To create equivalence out of such a diversity of differences and to constitute a collective will, populists must clearly define an antagonistic and oppressive adversary. They must present an “Other” that negatively constitutes the “We”. In the case of populism the “Other” is ‘the elite’, the morally corrupt oppressors who are responsible for the marginalization of ‘the people’. In creating a single culprit, responsible for all of society’s ills, populists create a narrative that can explain a wide

array of systemic failures and can encompass the demands of a whole host of disparate social groups.

Since populists challenge dominant narratives and propose radical changes to political institutions, they must find a way to justify these policies, since typically such actions would be seen as unacceptable or outside the realm of possibility. The construction of ‘the people’ becomes an essential part of their justification. In democracies, the will of ‘the people’ is sacrosanct, there is no institution more powerful or more legitimate. Even a constitution cannot constrain the will of ‘the people’. Therefore, in claiming to represent ‘the people’ a populist positions themselves above the existing constitution and all other institutions which acquire their legitimacy through the constitution. If the will of ‘the people’ - as articulated by the populist - is to rewrite the constitution and centralize power in the hands of the executive, then existing institutions cannot constrain this demand. Populism is then extremely volatile because it exploits a paradox that exists at the heart of all democracies.

In a democracy, the only body that may legitimately act in an authoritarian way are ‘the people’. This is because only ‘the people’ have the sovereign right to impose their will on the system, regardless of how undemocratic that will may be. Populists claim to represent ‘the people’ and the will of ‘the people’, although ‘the people’ could not exist prior to the articulation of them and imputation of a will to them by the populist. In this way, populists can argue that everything they do is in line with the will of ‘the people’ – and thus legitimate. They may then freely transform a democracy into an authoritarian state while insisting they are carrying out the will of ‘the people’. Not only is such an action legitimate, as it is in accordance with democratic values and procedures, populists can argue that such an action *enhances* the democratic process because it gives a voice back to the people whose voice had been taken away by ‘the elites’. In short, claiming to speak for ‘the people’ is far from innocuous, it is in fact the most formidable claim that a political representative can make because it can enable political actors to legitimately act undemocratically.

The second section of this paper developed an understanding of the socially contingent nature of crisis and its central role in populist counter-narratives. In order to mount a credible challenge against the dominant political narratives, populists must depict the present as a decisive moment in history, a moment that necessitates the emergence of a radical counter-narrative to replace a failing one. Populists identify a variety of political failings as symptomatic of a larger crisis, bringing into question the competence and legitimacy of the ruling ‘elite’. I have emphasized that these crises cannot be thought of as material or objective fact, rather crises are socially constructed and contingent upon the narratives that bring them into existence. The populist *instrumentalizes* crisis, bringing crises to life in an effort to legitimize their unprecedented assault on the existing democratic system.

What makes crisis narratives so effective is that they remove the sense of stability from our lives and bring into question the security of our futures. These feelings of instability and uncertainty force us to seek resolution, so that we may re-establish a secure sense of self as quickly as possible. In times like these, we gravitate towards those people who revealed the crisis

to us in the first place, as they appear to be the only source of stability in an unstable world. In this way, crisis narratives function both as a threat and a reassurance. They offer what appears to be an objective view on the present conjuncture, they identify the actors responsible for this state of affairs, dividing the populations into culprits and victims, and then they provide an abstract route out of the present conjuncture that is contingent upon their election. Crisis settings, therefore, can have a profound impact on electoral decisions and can explain the electoral success of populists. People who may typically be risk-averse in their electoral decision-making, become more inclined to support unestablished politicians when they feel that the established politicians are the ones responsible for some sort of crisis. In this way, by creating a crisis setting, populists open up the possibility for a counter-narrative to take hold. Without the crisis narrative, populists would be unable to justify their radical anti-establishment claims or justify the solutions that they profess to have.

Though the topic of crisis emerges in the academic literature on populism, little attention is paid to how populists instrumentalize crisis once they get into office. While there is some consensus in the scholarship as to how crises *launch* populists to power, I have tried to illustrate how crises enable populists to *remain* in power. Since crisis is *constructed* by the populist, it is the populist alone who has the power to resolve the crisis. What many populists in power come to realize is that crises are better left unresolved, because to resolve them, would only be to remove the political leverage that they afford. Populists present crises initially as something that they can solve, they present them as transitional periods, a state of exception. However, once in power, the crisis narratives in fact become more pronounced, more entrenched, and more conspiratorial. They are constructed as deep-rooted problems that will take years to solve, thus justifying the populist's indefinite reelection and serving as a convenient explanation for all those failures they are unable to address.

What we must realize about populism is that it is founded upon elements that are entirely socially constructed. 'The people', 'the elite', and 'the crisis' are not things that exist objectively, they are rhetorical tools that populists construct and employ to justify their extreme political platform. Without these elements - and the feelings of anger, fear, and antagonism that they awaken in 'the people' - populism would likely be relegated to the periphery of the political spectrum, be labeled "extremist", and would probably only be supported by a minority. Instead, these discursive elements create a compelling version of reality that mobilizes massive populations of people against a vague enemy under the pretense of some crisis. However, since populism cannot exist without fear and antagonism, populists in power must continue to depict reality in this way. They manufacture the problems that they vow to solve and it these problems that grant them legitimacy. Consequently, they cannot ever solve these problems and must continue to depict reality in antagonistic ways. What we must realize about populism is that it can appear as an extremely attractive discourse that promises a better future. However, this promising future can never be achieved because populists will always perpetuate anger and fear about the present.

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