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Do Populists Represent? Theoretical Considerations on How Populist Parties (Might) Enact their Representative Function

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ABSTRACT

Are populist parties bad for representative democracy or are they filling a representative gap? While it has been broadly established that the emergence and success of populist parties is not merely a sign of protest, there is still a sparsity of empirical investigations into whether these parties represent hitherto under- or unrepresented social groups or whether they offer a policy profile that was in demand but not present. Using Pitkin's concepts of symbolic, descriptive and substantive representation, this article opens up the dimensions in which populist parties might challenge or aid democratic representation. It then places the articles in the Special Issue 'Populist Representation of, by and for the People?' along these dimensions and highlights their specific contributions.

KEYWORDS

Populism; representation; democracy; political parties

Introduction

Populist parties, both on the right and the left, have emerged and become institutionalised in many established democracies during the last decades (e.g., Mudde, 2007). The recent elections in Austria, Brazil, France, Germany, or Greece, to name a few, have seen strong contention by populist parties. Donald Trump's successful presidential campaign and the result of the Brexit vote provide other examples of how important populism or populist campaigns have become for contemporary democracies. While a lot of scholarly work has focused on explaining the advent of populist parties (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Bornschier, 2010; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Harteveld, 2016; Ivarsson, 2005), this Special Issue is dedicated to investigating the representation that populist parties provide.

When discussing the relevance of populist parties, many scholars and commentators point to the potential harm of these parties to especially liberal representative democracy (e.g., Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Rupnik, 2007). Without a doubt, they have a valid point and populism constitutes, at least, a profound challenge to representative politics (Taggart, 2004). At the same time, it could be argued that these parties close a representational gap for citizen groups that other parties fail or failed to represent. In contrast to early discussions of the phenomenon, especially in the media, it seems that the electoral success of populist actors is not a mere consequence of protest against established parties and the elite. Due to societal and party system

changes, certain groups are no longer represented by established parties or, at least, do no longer feel represented and are looking for electoral alternatives for reasons beyond protest (e.g., Van Der Brug, Meindert, & Tillie, 2000; Zhirkov, 2014).

These citizens might be underrepresented groups as, for instance, the self-identified losers of globalisation as well as citizens with non-mainstream attitudes. While anti-establishment attitudes and critique of representative democracy in its current form were always present in societies, quite often there was no or only limited offer on the supply side of parties (e.g., Art, 2011; Meguid, 2005). Hence, populist parties might simply be the answer to a representational gap caused by a divide between the ruling elite and the citizens in the sense that the elite has become detached from the citizenry and its characteristics. Or, they might be the answer to a gap linked to up to then unmet demand-side preferences – either in regard to shortcomings of the democratic system and its core actors or in regard to substantive policy preferences.

Such representation might manifest in two ways: populist parties might represent hitherto un- or underrepresented societal groups descriptively in terms of their own personnel, electoral candidates, and MPs. Or, they might close a substantive gap in their programmatic offering, agenda-setting, and parliamentary decision-making. Whether populist parties indeed represent the twofold ‘forgotten’ groups and individuals is, however, still largely unclear as existing evidence predates the advent of populist parties in recent years (e.g., Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014; Schain, 2006; van Spanje, 2010).

The following will first lay out the basic factors underlying populism relevant for representation. Using these central populist characteristics, the next section will highlight whether these factors challenge or fit the democratic representation process and how a contribution to representation by populists might be assessed. Finally, we will place the articles in this special issue within the frame of populist representation and conclude.

Populism and Representation

Although the literature has stressed the difficulty of agreeing on a clear definition of populism (Canovan, 1981; Taggart, 2000), it is possible to identify a certain substantive convergence in the recent scholarship (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Panizza, 2005). Whether populism is seen as a (thin) ideology, discourse or strategy, a distinct ‘centre of gravity’ has emerged based around the following components: (a) a vision of society as divided in two groups, the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elites’; and (b) the internal homogeneity of the two groups. The ideational approach adds furthermore (c) the antagonistic relationship between the two groups; and (d) understanding the ‘pure people’ as the only legitimate source of the ‘general will’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populist claims are often ambivalent as the key components of populism are purposefully vague. This is particularly apparent in the use of ‘the people’, who are depicted as a homogeneous and amorphous group generally without differences of interest, class or other dividing features (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017; Taggart, 2000). This means that apart from those clearly defined as ‘the others’, any citizen can choose to define themselves as part of the ‘good people’. At the same time, populist parties can adapt their definition of ‘the people’ as well.

Looking at this from the angle of representation, it becomes of central importance to investigate the nature of 'the people' in such a conceptualisation as they constitute the democratic sovereign mistreated and misunderstood by the corrupt elite. Typically, 'the people' have been conceptualised through the notion of 'the common man'. This is a nearly empty signifier into which most people who considered themselves 'decent' or possessing 'common sense' could fit (Laclau, 2005). These apolitical and hardworking people are said to be 'fed up' up with the currently existing exclusion from political representation (Stanley, 2008, p. 104); or, are else afraid of being robbed of their social status and security by the actions of out of touch elites or threatening outsiders (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 192). In other accounts, the common man is possessed of distinctive ethnic, cultural, or class identity which is framed as the natural and desirable defining identity for the nation (Mény & Surel, 2002, pp. 173–96). Central to these understandings of the people, however, is that they are the 'rightful sovereign' of the country, threatened to lose their sovereignty (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007, p. 5).

As populists of all ideological types present themselves as the sole true defenders of a sole true people, Müller (2016, p. 20) argues, that 'populists are always anti-pluralist: populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people'. At the same time, it is the populist movement itself that 'authentically identifies and represents this real or true people' (Müller, 2016, pp. 22–23). Having established 'the people' and its enemies, populists cast themselves as being on a mission to return the usurped sovereignty to its true owner, the people (see Kriesi, 2014, p. 363). Populists therefore 'speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people' (Mény & Surel, 2002, p. 9). In this way, they exploit the gap between what the ideal of democracy promises and what liberal democracies actually deliver as well as value the democratic principle of inclusiveness over both contestation and constitutionalism (see Canovan, 1981; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

Although the above conceptions of 'the people' and some conception of the 'corrupt elites' are common to populist leaders, movements and parties, the contestation between people and elites does not automatically specify a clear set of policy. Thus, there are different variations of host ideologies that get entwined with populism (Freeden, 1998; Stanley, 2008). In other words, while a party may be 'left-wing populist', 'nationalist populist', 'regionalist populist', 'right-wing populist' and so on, it will never be just 'populist'. The most common variations, however, are radical right- and, to a lesser degree, left-wing populist parties.

Most notably for (radical) right-wing populists, 'the people' are not only posited as being oppressed by political, cultural, media, bank and other elites, but they are also threatened by the presence of 'others' within society who do not share the values of 'the people' (and, according to populists, are favoured by the elites over the people). In recent decades, the main 'others' for right-wing populists in Western democracies have been immigrants (especially Muslims after 9/11), but they can also be homosexuals, 'undeserving' welfare recipients, Communist sympathisers or any group within society whose ethnic identity, religious/political beliefs or behaviour may be construed in a way that places them outside 'the people' and, therefore, in an antagonistic relationship to them. Right-wing populists consequently tend to favour authoritarian policies designed to establish order in society and diminish perceived threats to the people stemming from these dangerous others (Mudde, 2007).

Left-wing populists, on the other hand, combine populism with a left-wing economic ideology which consists of (a) the rejection of the underlying socio-economic structures, values and practices of contemporary capitalism, (b) pushing for a complete transformation of capitalism that disempowers the existing political and economic elites and, (c) economic inequality as the basis of existing political and social structures that need to be changed (March & Rommerskirchen, 2015, p. 41). Thus, key proposed policies revolve around income distribution and state control of vital economic sectors in order to move economic, social and political power from the 'bad' elites to the 'good' people (see also Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). In a nutshell, their ideological platform is very similar to parties following the ideals of democratic socialism or moderate socialists not challenging democracy as the preferred political system. However, they add the distinct populist characterisation of the relationship between the people, the elite and the party.

Populist Parties in the Process of Democratic Representation

If populism is based on a central but vague notion of the 'good people', how can populist parties act out their representative function? To answer this question, it is helpful to go back to the basic model of democratic representation through elections (Thomassen, 1994) as well as the three types of representation conceptualised by Pitkin (1967).

The representative process is at the heart of modern democratic systems. Within the theoretical literature on modern representative democracies, one ideal has been established as foundational: through elections, voters and their representatives (usually parties) enter a relationship in which citizens exchange their vote for policy outcomes (Downs, 1957; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994; Powell, 2000; Schedler, 1998). Principal to this relationship is that voters will elect the party with the policy programme which best aligns with their own preferences, expecting that this party will enact the policy programme once in power; thus, parties are understood as transmission belts for the conversion of popular desires into public policy (Converse & Pierce, 1986, pp. 499–501, 706). Parties and politicians, in reverse, often claim a mandate to carry out their election platforms (Grossback, Peterson, & Stimson, 2005), and at the same time, voters control democratic policy making through their choices on election day, establishing a benchmark against which to judge their representatives come next election (Royed, 1996; Thomson, 2001).

This model of representative democracy is based on a few fundamental assumptions. It assumes that voters make decision on basis of policy programmes that is close to their own interests and that they are interested in seeing them fulfilled as closely as possible (Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999). There has been some discussion about the foundations of this assumption that questions both voters' ability to make such decision (e.g., Miller, 1999) and their fundamental interest in the representative process working this way (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Werner, 2019). Furthermore, the assumptions of how parties behave has also come under scrutiny. While much of the empirical research into whether parties fulfil their electoral programmes have come to positive results (Naurin, 2011; Thomson et al., 2018), there is more debate about the nature of the party supply. It has been questioned whether parties offer distinct policy programmes (Dalton, Farrell, & Mcallister, 2012; Mair, 2006) and whether they are programmatic, or 'ideological', at all (Benoit & Laver, 2006; Mair, 2008).

The question from the representation literature about whether there are gaps in the supply of parties, which in turn hinder the representation of the whole citizenry, is the first avenue to investigate whether populist parties indeed contribute to the representative process. There is some evidence that populist parties might fill a gap in terms of symbolic representation, meaning a pure standing for something and making it present (see Pitkin, 1967, p. 92ff.). As populists give voice to disaffection with the existing party and representative system, they express the grievance of those voters with anti-establishment identities (e.g., Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In these terms, simply having a party voicing the grievances of these groups might be all the representative function these voters are after.¹

However, this type of gap-filling through symbolic representation is not at the basis of the democratic representation model described above. In fact, as it is not focused on policy outcomes and their congruence to the citizenry's policy preferences, symbolic representation might decrease the representational quality in such a model. As the electoral process is, at the core, meant to bring the policy preferences of the voters into the state decision making process, the focus is more on substantive representation. Substantive representation is conceived of as 'the nature of the activity itself, what goes on during representing, the substance or content of acting for others, as distinct from its external and formal trappings' (Pitkin, 1967, p. 114). It refers to the representative bringing the specific interests and positions of the represented into the political process translating them into policies. Thus, one question to investigate regarding populist representation is whether they take up substantive policy preferences that were not or no longer present in the supply of party offerings before.

Such demands could come from, at least in most democratic countries, systematically underrepresented groups in society, for instance 'losers of globalisation', individuals with strong nationalist attitudes threatened by Europeanization or the economically disadvantaged. For instance, regarding the latter, earlier analyses show that the representation by established parties leaves the economically and socially disadvantaged groups of society systematically underrepresented (e.g., Giger, Rosset, & Bernauer, 2012). With a more specific focus on populist actors, previous research has investigated the populist appeal to those affected by the transition to a knowledge economy and the globalising forces of contemporary capitalism (Hadiz & Chrysosgelos, 2017), those opposed to growing cosmopolitan and socially liberal values resulting in anti-immigration sentiment (Rooduijn, 2015), voters identifying with working class cultural conservatism (Bornschier & Kriesi, 2013) and those supporting economic nationalism (Zaslove, 2011, pp. 196–7). However, whether this demand did not have any corresponding offer or whether the populist party simply made a better or clearer offer is much less certain. Further, demand for new representative supply could arise from new or rapidly changing policy areas, for instance conflicts regarding the co-existence of religions or the relationship between religions and the state. In other words, we know that populist parties cater to specific groups of society – with variation of which groups they cater to between countries and time points – but we do not really know whether this is closing an actual representational gap.

A second central component to the electoral representative process is the idea that there is a fit between the policy programmes of parties and the policy preferences of their voters. This election-focused representative mechanism is part and parcel of many democratic representation models, including the so-called Responsible Party Model (e.g., Schmitt &

Thomassen, 1999). In this approach to representative democracy, the fit between parties and voters is meant to be created by parties through offering programmes in line with citizens' demands and by voters choosing the party closest to them (Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999; Thomassen & van Ham, 2014). The main strategy to evaluate whether this is actually the case focuses on the congruence between party positions and voter preferences, defined as the positional correspondence between the represented and the representative agents (Belchior, 2013; Golder & Stramski, 2010; Lefkofridi & Casado-Asensio, 2012). Higher congruence, then, is usually seen as a sign that representatives take up the interests and demands of their voters in their programmatic positioning and attempt to carry them into the political decision-making process, thus it demonstrates good political representation (Andeweg, 2011, p. 33; Wlezien & Soroka, 2007). Of course, part of producing such congruence is also that voters vote for the party closest to their preferences, assuming that voters make their choices based on policy issues and that they know their own and the parties' policy interests (Pierce, 1999). Congruence, from this perspective, is also a function of voters making 'smart' choices. At the same time, parties can facilitate such choices with, for instance, a high degree of programmatic clarity (Giebler, Lacewell, Regel, & Werner, 2018).

Decisive for the evaluation of this congruence is the level of abstraction. This refers to the idea that, similar to political competition, congruence can be about everything between encompassing, overarching dimensions of political conflict and very specific policy issues. The most common approach in congruence studies is to follow a strategy of high abstraction by comparing the left-right positions of parties and voters (e.g., Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999). However, the centrality of the left-right ideological dimension is disputed in general (Thomassen, 2012) – as are other approaches aiming to reduce political competition to a single dimension of whatever substantive nature (Kitschelt, 1995). Such approaches seem even more insufficient with a view to populist parties and their voters in particular (however, authors like Huber & Ruth, 2017 disagree). Given that the core of the populist appeal is neither economic nor a clear social value and given that 'the' populist voter does not exist (Rooduijn, 2018), a more nuanced approach is necessary. Two factors outlined above also speak against the validity of a one-dimensional conceptualisation: the fact that populism as such is neither left nor right and that host ideologies, which are rooted in different dimensions of societal conflict, play such an important role.

One possible solution is to identify policies that should logically be closely connected to the populist message. For instance, one of the central claims of populist parties is to hand back political sovereignty to their specific version of the people, usually through means of widening the options for direct democratic decision making. Thus, congruence with regards to preferences regarding direct democracy would be a possible analytical dimension (Bowler, Denemark, Donovan, & McDonnell, 2017). In other analytical approaches, congruence on substantial policy issues might be hindered or helped by populist appeals and might be of different importance to populist vs non-populist voters.

The third main component of the election-based representative mechanism is that the parties are supposed to (try to) implement their policy programme once they enter parliament and especially government. The argument is that only then does the representative mechanism become meaningful because the voting decisions get translated into policy decisions (Schedler, 1998). The dominant way to directly test

whether parties act accordingly is to compare party programmes with government behaviour (e.g., Thomson et al., 2018). Given that populist parties are increasingly entering governments, this line of enquiry will become more available beyond the existing single case studies (e.g., Heinisch, 2003). However, given that populism is not directly connected with a large number of specific policies, this approach has only limited capacity to evaluate the effect of *populist* parties on representation. One clear exception is the focus on direct democratic instruments as discussed above, as it should be possible to ascertain whether populists in power strive to change political institutions in order to fulfilling the populist promise.

However, there is another, non-substantial way of populists fulfilling their populist promises: through descriptive representation. Pitkin (1967, p. 61) shows that descriptive representation refers to the link between citizens and their representatives based on resemblance. This mechanism of mirroring the represented is central to populism because of the claimed symbiosis between 'the people' and the populist actor. This becomes particularly clear if we consider the populist leader. Given that the people-centred conception of representation seems to be a core concept of voter support for populists (Akkerman, Zaslove, & Spruyt, 2017), the leader of any populist party is one crucial aspect for the relationship between these parties and their voters. Thus, aspects of the leaders' rhetoric, behaviour and general populist performance that often pursue the goal of presenting the leader as being one with 'the people', of the people and speaking for the people have been focus those studying the discourse and performance of populism (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mouffe, 2005).

At the same time, the idea of the populist mirroring 'the people' is also applicable to parties and their parliamentary factions. Instead of a leader embodying the people in him- or herself, the idea is that the populist parties, meaning in their electoral candidates or MPs, should be a mirror of the people. This can be deduced directly from the antagonistic group definitions inherent to populist ideology: the corrupt elite does not only differ from the people due to its lack of virtue or due to different preferences but also due to a lack of resemblance. The definition of the people to be represented is arguably based on the understanding of the populists themselves, especially in terms of ethnic (right-wing populists) or class (left-wing populists) composition. Beyond such specification, for instance in terms of gender, age and education, resemblance should likely follow the general population. Alternatively, populist parties, like any parties, could be tasked to mirror their voters or specific voter groups that might seek representation from them in their set of candidates or MPs.

In sum, approaching the role of populist parties for representation from the classical election-based model of democracy allows us to treat and evaluate populists as regular political actors newly entering or increasingly establishing themselves as legitimate actors the electoral arena. At the same time, the specific nature of populism – the struggle between the people and the elites dominating the existing political and social systems – allows for unique ways of political representation. Within the nexus of challenges and opportunities posed by populist parties in the democratic representation process, the contributions in this special issue are covering crucial aspects of whether these parties fill a gap in the representation supply and whether they are connected to their voters.

The Articles in this Issue

In their article 'Populist Radical Right Party-Voter Policy Representation in Western Europe', Backlund and Jungar (2019) begin the line of investigating populist parties' representational qualities by analysing whether radical-right populist parties in Europe filled a representation gap in terms of nativism, populism and authoritarianism. Backlund and Jungar find that these parties indeed filled a void in the political supply with regards to anti-EU and anti-immigration policies; policy preferences which had not been widely present in the party supply before. Moreover, populist parties show a high congruence regarding these policy areas with their voters. This is, however, not the case for authoritarian values. In general, this study gives a first indication that populist parties might have indeed filled a representation gap and potentially continue to do so.

In their article 'Who Represents the Poor? The Corrective Potential of Populism in Spain', Scantamburlo (2019) also tackles the question whether populist parties fill a representation gap. Instead of focusing on broad policies like anti-immigration, however, this is the first of three articles that investigated very specific policies and social groups. Building on studies that have shown that the economically most vulnerable parts of society are systematically underrepresented by established parties, Scantamburlo investigates whether the newly emerged populist parties in Spain indeed fill this gap. The article does not only find that these parties bring the interests of the poor into the political process but also that – within the context of the Great Recession after 2008 – the established parties adapted their policy profiles accordingly. Thus, this article is another indication that populist parties serve as vehicles for underrepresented groups to be included into the political process.

Similarly, Kortmann, Stecker and Weiß' article 'Filling a representation gap? How populist and mainstream parties address Muslim immigration and the role of Islam' (2019) focuses on the question whether the populist radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) filled a gap in the German party supply. Looking at the role of Islam in German society, this article combines both demand- and supply-side perspectives. Using the survey data, Kortmann, Stecker and Weiß first investigate whether there was a demand among the German voters to have positions regarding Islam represented in the political competition. They find a rising skepticism towards Islam in the German population and that the AfD gives this skepticism a political home. In a second analytical step, Kortmann, Stecker and Weiß analyse the party manifestos of both the AfD and the other German parties to investigate how the parties framed Islam and which positions they took over time. They find that German parties indeed did not discuss Islam in their manifestos until the so-called refugee crisis and the advent of the AfD. A notable exception to this finding, however, is the Green party that already in the 1990s started discussing the dangers of Islamophobia. Thus, the AfD closed a representational gap insofar that it gave a home to the increasingly Islam-skeptic part of the German electorate. At the same time, the antipode of this political conflict had already been established in the Green party which means that the populist competitor was not the first or even the only party discussing this issue.

Lodders and Weldon (2019) also turn their attention to the relationship between radical-right populist parties and underrepresented groups in 'Why do women vote radical right? Benevolent sexism, representation and inclusion in four countries', with special focus on those groups with anti-feminist attitudes. Starting from the observation

that men and women differ little in their attitudes towards radical-right populist attitudes like anti-immigration but differ substantially in their support for radical-right populist parties, Lodders and Weldon investigate whether the lower support by females can be traced back to the anti-feminism displayed by these parties. Indeed, looking at their voters in Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Norway, they find that radical-right populist parties are especially attractive to men with sexist attitudes and preferences for outdated gender roles who would have a hard time finding representation through other parties. However, this mechanism does not seem to apply to women, even though there are women who hold similar attitudes towards gender roles, and they are not affected by the role women play in the respective national parliaments. Furthermore, even for men the role of sexism seems tightly connected to the rejection of other outgroups. Thus, while populist-radical right parties also seem to close a representation gap in terms of traditional gender roles, this specific gap appears to be small to be begin with, linked to exclusionary attitudes towards other groups and its closing highly contingent.

Heinisch and Werner (2019) cast their net wider and do not pre-define which societal groups might be represented through populist parties in their article 'Who do populist radical right parties stand for? Representative claims, claim acceptance and descriptive representation in the Austrian FPÖ and German AfD'. Instead, Heinisch and Werner investigate which representative claims the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) actually bring forward themselves. They, first, find that populist parties differ in their understanding of 'the people', especially whether 'the people' are constituted as potent (AfD) or vulnerable (FPÖ). From these understandings come different consequences in terms of policies and important implications for the representation by populist parties. While Heinisch and Werner find a general focus on 'the people' when it comes to representation, 'the people' become disaggregated into distinct categories that matter to populist actors. Constituting the people as potent or vulnerable leads the parties to focus their representational efforts on different societal groups. Central to the populist narrative in both countries is the claim to represent retired people, presumably because they are a large group and ostensibly most affected by the purported negative changes of society. However, Heinisch and Werner find that these claims are not borne out and that particularly in the case of the AfD, the claim of representing pensioners is rejected by the targeted group. Thus, while the populist claim of representation is strong and backed up by descriptive representation in their parliamentary factions, actual representation is not in evidence.

Turning to the interplay between substantive representation and populist attitudes, in their article 'Between Thin- and Host-Ideologies: How Populist Attitudes Interact with Policy Preferences in Shaping Voting Behaviour' Loew and Faas (2019) show that populist attitudes only matter for those radical right and radical left voters that do have moderate, meaning not radical, policy preferences. Thus, populist parties indeed fill a representative gap but not necessarily one that we can understand in terms of substantive, policy-related representation. Instead, these parties represent non-policy attitudes and interests, which can be captured more in terms of symbolic representation. This, however, is not part of the established models of political representation in democracies. These findings raise the questions about how to reconcile the assumption that democracy and elections are about balancing out policy interests. Instead, for some citizens, they provide the forum to negotiate support and general grievances regarding the political system itself.

Finally, Plescia, Kritzinger and De Sio (2019) investigate in 'Filling the Void? Political Responsiveness of Populist Parties' whether left- and right-wing populist parties are more responsive to their voters in their election campaign communication than mainstream parties. If they were indeed more responsive, these parties could help improving the representation system. Focusing on a range of policy issues in Austria, Germany and Italy, Plescia, Kritzinger and De Sio find that parties are generally responsive, yet this mechanism is indeed stronger for right-wing populist parties, which increase their Twitter discussion of typical right-wing populist issues with increasing salience of these issues among citizens. While left-wing populist parties are not significantly more responsive on 'their' policy issues like economic equality, Plescia, Kritzinger and De Sio also find that they as well as mainstream parties are highly responsive on right-wing issues like cultural diversity. This not only confirms that right-wing populist parties have a strong impact on party competition in general, it also has strong implications for which issues parties chose to represent voters on. With an increase in the role of identity politics comes a diminished role of socioeconomic issues and, thus, a fundamental shift in who gets represented for what. This might be a fundamental re-alignment of the connection between voters and parties, and thus an increase in representativeness, or indeed the opposite development. However, the impact of right-wing populist parties on increasing the quality of representation is still only indirect and limited, as all parties seem to be more responsive in regard to these more salient issues.

Concluding Remarks

This special issue presents novel and innovative research on the effects of the populist party surge on representation in contemporary democracies. This introduction developed some guidelines on how to conceptualise and analyse this relationship. From different angles and based on different methodological approaches, it seems that populist parties indeed have some positive effects for representation – especially along the lines of closing a gap opened by societal and party system developments. However, more often than not, these effects are small, are more related to the host ideological than the populist core of these parties, or come with certain costs for open, plural democracies. In total, as it is often the case, the contributions collected in this special issue do neither support the claim that populist parties are a true and fundamental remedy to central problems of representative democracy nor that they do not at all differ in their role for representation when compared to other nonpopulist parties. It has to be seen whether this conclusion stays valid in the future as we are witnessing not only more populist participation in government but also more general changes of party systems to the electoral advantage of originally smaller parties (e.g., the Greens). This goes hand in hand with further societal change and increased salience of issues like climate change, power shifts in international relations or increasing levels of social inequality. As a result, we already are and will further witness substantive developments regarding the relationship of represented and representors which might redefine the role of populist parties or, at least, populist politics and its consequences for representative democracy.

Note

1. Unfortunately, this aspect is not covered by the articles in this Special Issue. However, we think it is an important aspect within theories of political representation and a fruitful avenue for more research.

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