

Mosler, Hannes B. (Ed.)

Working Paper

Populism in the liberal democracies of East Asia: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan

Working Papers on East Asian Studies, No. 137

Provided in Cooperation with:

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Suggested Citation: Mosler, Hannes B. (Ed.) (2023) : Populism in the liberal democracies of East Asia: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, Working Papers on East Asian Studies, No. 137, University of Duisburg-Essen, Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST), Duisburg

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/277730>

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INSTITUTE OF
EAST ASIAN STUDIES

**HANNES B. MOSLER
(ED.)**

**Populism in the Liberal
Democracies of East Asia:
South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan**

NO. 137

WORKING PAPERS

**WORKING PAPERS
ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES**

SEPTEMBER 2023

UNIVERSITÄT
**DUISBURG
ESSEN**

Offen im Denken

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Funded by



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ISSN: 1865-8571 (Printed version) / 1865-858X (Internet version)

Download: https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news/green_series.php

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MOSLER (ED.): Populism in the Liberal Democracies of East Asia: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan

HANNES B. MOSLER (ED.)

Populism in the Liberal Democracies of East Asia: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan

WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES, NO. 137, DUISBURG 2023

INTRODUCTION: POPULISM IN THE LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES OF EAST ASIA

Hannes B. Mosler *IN-EAST, University of Duisburg-Essen*

In recent decades, the surge of populist movements and leaders has captivated the attention of scholars, policymakers, and the general public around the world. The rise of populism and populists has prompted a profound reevaluation of the dynamics within democratic societies and the complex interplay between political, social, and economic forces. As this phenomenon continues to evolve, it has ignited intense academic debates, sparking a quest to understand its manifestations, causes, and implications across diverse socio-political contexts.

This collection of working papers embarks on a hitherto unique journey, focusing its analytical lens on the enigmatic landscape of the potentialities of populism within the East Asian liberal democracies of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.¹ Each paper in this collection engages with specific cases, delving into the intricate web of the political, cultural, and social nuances that shape the trajectory of populism within these countries. However, these papers do not merely stand as isolated studies; they are embedded within a larger academic discourse, contributing to and enriching the broader dialogue on the nature and implications of populism.

At the heart of these working papers lies a fundamental premise, one that challenges conven-

tional wisdom and sparks thought-provoking discussion: the contention that populist currents have not gained substantial footholds within the fabric of East Asian liberal democracies. This departure from prevailing assumptions is indeed bold, especially considering the global proliferation of populism as a subject of concern. Nevertheless, the authors of these papers meticulously peel layers of complexity to reveal a more nuanced reality, one that invites readers to reconsider the applicability of the populism label within the East Asian context.

The selection of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan as the focal points of this collection stems from a thoughtful consideration of their unique positions as established liberal democracies within the East Asian region. These countries have not only demonstrated a steadfast commitment to democratic values but also navigated complex historical, social, and economic trajectories that have shaped their political landscapes in distinctive ways. By examining populism within these East Asian liberal democracies, this collection seeks to shed light on how the confluence of cultural heritage, historical memory, and contemporary challenges molds the contours of political discourse. Furthermore, these countries have been magnets for global attention owing to their economic prowess, technological innovation, and regional influence, making them ideal case studies for unraveling the intricate dynamics between populism and established democratic norms.

Although these papers are rooted in the specific cases of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, their scope extends beyond mere geographical boundaries. In investigating populism within these three liberal democracies, we delve into

¹ A first version of the working papers was presented at the international workshop on *Populism in South Korea and East Asia* on July 7–8, 2023, at the Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST) of the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF). This workshop is one of the several academic events organized in the realm of the research project Populism in East Asian Democracies (PinEAD) at IN-EAST (www.uni-due.de/in-east/research/pinead.php).

the heart of what it means to sustain democratic principles in an era of shifting political tides, ultimately contributing to the broader conversation on the universality and adaptability of democratic governance. In addition, an overarching theme that weaves through each contribution is the intricate process of understanding populism itself. The papers also engage in a thoughtful exploration of how the term “populism” is understood, translated, and transliterated within East Asian languages and cultures. This linguistic and conceptual exploration is a testament to the depth of analysis contained within this collection, revealing the extent to which nuanced translations can influence the interpretation and perception of political phenomena.

By dissecting the intricate linkages between populist currents, political culture, and societal values, these working papers invite readers to contemplate a range of essential questions: Why is there no “real” populism in the liberal democracies of East Asia, or what is it like? How can we best understand and use the term populism in scholarship? How is populism conceptualized in the local scholarship? In this way, the collection of working papers aim to contribute to the broader political science discourse on the important—yet significantly understudied—topic of understanding populism and its manifestations in the region of East Asia still largely neglected in academic research.

In presenting this collection of working papers, we seek to offer both scholars and practitioners a preliminary but pointed exploration of the contours of populism in East Asian liberal democracies. Through the presented case studies and critical observations, the readers are encouraged to challenge their assumptions, broaden their horizons, and engage in a nuanced dialogue about the complex interplay between populism, democracy, and culture. This collection contributes to the ever-evolving discourse on populism, reminding us that although political currents may appear similar on the surface, their true nature often defies simplistic categorization.

The collection begins with **Chulki Hong**’s essay *From Populism to P’op’yullijūm: A Conceptual History of Populism in South Korea*, in which he delves into the complicated realm of translation and transliteration by considering the challenges of rendering the concept of populism from English into languages like Korean. The translation/transliteration process necessitates maintaining a delicate balance between preserving the original meaning and ensuring coherence in the target language. The notion of translation fidelity, particularly in the context of the elusive and multifaceted concept of populism, becomes a focal point of inquiry. By examining the hypothetical scenario of translating populism and the ensuing complexities, the paper engages in a thought-provoking exploration of the nuances involved. It contemplates whether a faithful translation should encapsulate the myriad challenges faced by populism studies in comprehensively defining the concept. Furthermore, the paper probes the boundaries of translation fidelity, addressing questions about whether to preserve the inherent pejorative connotations and political biases linked to populism or strive for an objective and value-neutral representation. The study underscores the inseparable link between the translatability of populism and its definability. Drawing from these considerations, the paper offers insights into the intricacies of translating and understanding populism and uses the case of South Korea to contextualize the broader discourse on the challenges of cross-cultural conceptual translation.

Joohyung Kim, in his paper *Populism or Democracy? Toward a Democratic Political Subjectivation of the People*, shifts the linguistic-conceptual focus from transliteration and translation to the level of concept application, arguing that the indirect theorization of the concept of “the people” within these broader debates limits a comprehensive understanding of its significance as a foundational element of political subjectivity. By dissecting the nuanced complexities of “the people,” this essay seeks to unveil its implicit role in shaping political subjectivation and its broader

implications for democratic practice. The paper engages in a critical analysis of the multifaceted dimensions that constitute “the people,” offering pathways to remedy the deficiency of direct and systematic study. Despite its historical complexities and ambiguities, “the people” remains an unparalleled concept to signify a cohesive collective capable of concerted action. The concept embodies the inherent tension between unity and diversity, making it adept at encapsulating both societal visions and individual plurality. Moreover, “the people” stands as a fitting descriptor for political subjects who transcend institutional confines while nurturing the foundations of public discourse. Beyond semantics, unraveling the potential conditions for this form of political subjectivation holds significance in addressing contemporary political challenges. Thus, through this exploration, the paper endeavors to enrich democratic theory by fostering a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the intricate dynamics underlying the concept of “the people” in contemporary politics—not least in populism.

Turning to the first case study, **Hannes B. Mosler** in his essay *South Korea—No Country for Populism?* addresses the prevailing (academic) discourse on populism in South Korea, asserting that the phenomena described and analyzed do not align with a stringent definition of populism. Although the conditions for populism’s emergence seemingly exist in South Korea—marked by socio-economic challenges, weak political institutions, and a digitally mediated public sphere—this paper questions why populism has not taken root in the country. Divided into four sections, the paper first outlines a working definition of populism, followed by an evaluation of existing literature and an exploration of the dual factors influencing the absence of populism: insufficient inducing factors and enduring repelling factors. The conclusion offers implications and highlights the potential for future populism in the face of accumulating inducing factors and Korean unification; it also suggests a paradox in which political pathologies inoculate against populism but improved formal democracy can

induce it. Only the ideal of the development of substantive democracy can have lasting effects in preventing the emergence and flourishing of populism. This study contributes to the discourse on the nuanced dynamics of populism and enriches our understanding of its complex interplay with socio-political contexts, particularly in South Korea.

Similarly, **Chang Rhyong Oh** in his paper *Anti-Populism in South Korea: Focusing on the Influence of Anticommunism on Populist Mobilization* explains the absence of populism in South Korea. To this end, he delves into the complexity of South Korea’s unique socio-political landscape to unravel the factors that have shielded the nation from the populist surge witnessed elsewhere. Drawing on insights from existing literature and theoretical frameworks, the study highlights the interplay of historical, cultural, and political elements that have contributed to the enduring absence of populism in South Korea. Exploring the historical roots of anticommunism at the time of President Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) as well as the continuous rightist conservatism afterward, the paper investigates the nuanced relationship between populism and anticommunist sentiment. Contrary to studies proposing conventional explanations that solely focus on the absence of immigrant-related and other issues typical for populism in other regions of the world, this research offers a perspective on multifaceted factors that thwart the rise of populist movements in South Korea. Through this exploration, the paper enriches the discourse on anti-populism and illuminates the distinctive contours of the South Korean political landscape, inviting further research into the complexities of this intriguing phenomenon.

Regarding the case of Japan, **Willy Jou** in his essay *No Populism in Japan? Or Mismatch Between Populist Supply and Demand?* presents an insightful exploration of populism in the context of Japan, encompassing a literature review, an empirical analysis, and nuanced considerations of the relationship between populist sentiments

and political dynamics. Focusing on the core elements of populism, the study delves into the applicability of this concept within the Japanese framework. Utilizing surveys from the early 2020s, the study probes populist attitudes and distinguishes between popular sovereignty and anti-elite views. The analysis reveals intriguing patterns, indicating that political dissatisfaction and higher political interest are linked to populist tendencies. Socio-demographic variables, such as age, education, and gender, are examined within a multi-variate regression framework, offering insights into populism's unique contours in Japan. In addition, the paper investigates the alignment between populist sentiments and political party support, revealing a paradox where populists, despite being less enthusiastic about the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), are still more inclined to support it over alternatives. Progressive opposition parties—notably the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), Japanese Communist Party (JCP), and Reiwa Shinsengumi—fare better among populist voters. The paper concludes that owing to the comprehensive socio-political exploration and limited societal changes, the Japanese political system is less susceptible to the populist surges observed in other democracies; the findings thus deepen our comprehension of populism's intricate dynamics within the Japanese political landscape.

Axel Klein, too, in his paper *Populism in Japan. How to Look For and Measure It* addresses the complex landscape of populism in Japan, uncovering a multifaceted understanding that diverges from conventional political science concepts. Although some sources assert Japan's immunity to populism, a substantial body of literature identifies populist tendencies among Japanese actors, bridging both academic and journalistic realms. A distinct feature emerges in Japan's public discourse and political arena, characterized by a labeling of individuals as populists based on criteria such as confrontational approaches to opponents, use of simplistic language, and the delivery of "irresponsible" prom-

ises to constituents through theatrical communication. He scrutinizes the nuances of this localized understanding, questioning the role of "the people" in Japan's populist discourse. Contrary to conventional populist indicators such as polarization, performance, and partial popularity, Japanese perceptions of populism challenge the normative framework. Through an exploration of prominent figures such as Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, this study examines the applicability of dominant populist paradigms and their alignment with Japanese political dynamics. The analysis reveals the incongruence between Koizumi's leadership style and established populist criteria, despite Koizumi's often-labeled populist tendencies, thus highlighting the complexity of populism's manifestation within the Japanese context. Accordingly, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding populism's multifaceted nature, encouraging a reevaluation of conventional frameworks within distinct socio-political environments.

Turning to the third case of East Asian liberal democracies, **Frédéric Krumbein** in his essay *Populism in Taiwan—Real or Imagined? The Example of Han Kuo-yu* analyzes the classification and discussion of Han Kuo-yu as a populist in Taiwanese media. Han was a prominent 2020 Kuomintang (KMT) presidential candidate embodying populist traits; his case is thus intriguing. Employing various populism dimensions, including political-strategic, socio-cultural, and ideational aspects, this research explores how populist narratives resonate in Taiwan's political milieu. The study probes why populism faces challenges in Taiwan, attributing these to the two-party electoral system and the intricate "China factor." The KMT's weakened state offers openings for populist and third-party influence. The study enhances our comprehension of populist dynamics amidst socio-economic disparities and political polarization, thus enriching the discourse on East Asian liberal democracies. Whereas Han Kuo-yu exemplifies Taiwanese political populism, this paper examines the impediments to the emergence of populism. The study

posits two pivotal factors: Taiwan's two-party electoral system favors the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and KMT, hindering populism's rise. KMT's selection of Han Kuo-yu amidst its weakened position offers openings for third-party influence. The "China factor," central to cross-strait relations, poses challenges, akin to South Korea's anticommunism. Moreover, populist constraints in Taiwan stem from the absence of a significant immigrant minority, high educational standards, and citizens' political expectations. Socio-economic inequalities and political dissatisfaction, however, present populist potential.

Although this collection is still a work in progress, initial findings and results that raise new questions can certainly be identified. Populism

is a vast field of study; however, regarding the region of East Asia, the question of whether this phenomenon exists at all is far from settled. The question we have asked here is whether the phenomenon of populism also exists in East Asian liberal democracies (South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan) and, if so, how populism manifests itself here. If, as the papers collected here suggest, no populism in the strict sense exists in East Asian democracies, the intriguing question is why this is so. This is followed by further questions, such as what positive or negative effects do the causes of the absence of populism have on democracy, under what conditions can populism arise here as well, and what conditions are needed to ensure the quality of democracy in these countries and elsewhere.

FROM POPULISM TO *P'OP'YULLIJŬM*: A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF POPULISM IN SOUTH KOREA

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INTRODUCTION

If Friedrich Nietzsche was right about his proposition that “only something which has no history can be defined,” then the concept of populism may be one of the most intriguing examples of the zero-sum relationship between definability and historicity (Nietzsche 2006, 53). Since populism became a matter of scholarly investigation and debate, not of political and social movement slogans, what has always questioned its certainty has been its history, particularly its history of conceptualizations. Especially regarding Jan-Werner Müller’s problematic decision to exclude the original American Populist movement from his definition of populism, which owes its name to the history he found irrelevant, intellectual historian Anton Jäger has recently attributed the populism concept’s definability problem to global populism studies’ and debates’ “inability to include and account for the original, self-declared populist movement in world history” (Jäger 2023, 153; Müller 2016). However, as Jäger concludes, the inability to historicize the populism concept neither puts “any pressure to banish the term [populism] from our vocabulary” nor does it “detract from the quality of the work on populism produced since the 1990s” (Jäger 2023, 193). Thus, the assumption of a zero-sum relationship between the definition of populism and its history must be questioned and reconsidered.

This paper seeks to overcome the definability problem by tracing the conceptual history of populism in South Korea. Literature suggests that since the 1990s, the agendas of right-wing media outlets and politicians have heavily influenced and biased the meaning of the populism concept in Korean contexts (Hong 2004; 2006;

Jin 2017; Kim 2018; Chang 2020). However, two central issues have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature in the Korean language. First, the Cold War origins of the pejorative and derogatory concept of populism, which predate the birth of the Korean anti-populist discourse by nearly half a century, have not been sufficiently acknowledged. Second, the local prehistory of populism before and around the emergence of conservative anti-populism has not been thoroughly reexamined. By revisiting the local conceptual and reception histories, this paper aims to bridge the gap between the Cold War history of global or North Atlantic anti-populism, primarily examined by scholars including Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) and Jäger (2023), and its post-democratization emergence in South Korea.

THE POPULISM CONCEPT’S DEFINABILITY AND TRANSLATABILITY

Imagine you are a translator seeking a suitable word in a language other than English, such as Korean, to translate populism. What would be your top priorities—keeping the original meaning or making sense in the target language? Choosing between the source and target languages begs the question of what it means to be faithful or to make sense. This is especially true when translating a concept as notoriously vague, ambiguous, and contested as populism. To be faithful to the original meaning, must you identify a single translation word that captures all the challenges populism studies face in defining the concept? Or is it necessary to set a limit to translation fidelity that will allow us to comfortably conclude that populism’s conceptual “Cinderella complex” has been resolved for good? Where should we then draw the line between the included and the excluded from the

plethora of meanings ascribed to populism? Do we have to preserve, for example, the populism concept's inherently pejorative and derogative meaning for the translation? Or must we suppress or neutralize the political motivations or biases associated with the concept to remain as objective and value-neutral as possible about the phenomenon referred to as populism?

These questions are hypothetical and rhetorical. Only an ideal translator may face these either-or choices between "semantic transparency" and translational impossibility or untranslatability (Howland 2001). In reality, translators make do with whatever they have. Moreover, the translatability of populism, more than any other concept, is always linked to its definability.

Among all the participants at the 1967 LSE conference "To Define Populism," Peter Worsley alone raised the issue of the translatability of populism and its proximity to the concept's definability. He noted that even populism was a translation compromise, as it was the English term for a nineteenth-century Russian movement. He wrote, "The translation of the Russian *narodnichetvo* has been rendered as 'populist,' but this very act of translation is itself an imputation, not a 'neutral' simple equivalence (which translation can never be since it has to use categories available in language)." He added, "It may well be, then, that to speak of populism as a genus is to assume what needs to be demonstrated[.] (...) If such a term is to be used, we need to specify just what these crucial attributes are, and not simply assume that the arbitrary bandying about a word implies any resemblances at all, sociologically speaking, between the activities to which it has become attached" (Worsley 1969, 219).

TRANSLATING OR transliterating POPULISM?

In reality, translators not only make compromises but also engage in competition. If translating populism is a way of "talking about

populism," then, as Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) pointed out, "this little word, 'talking,' should not be left unnoticed" because "language is never innocent" and "does not merely reflect an objective truth but dynamically constructs our (social) reality." He adds, "And this construction never takes place in a vacuum" (Stavrakakis 2017, 1). Translators of the term populism never work in a void because of the existing translations or other contenders in the target language. In addition, the academics, journalists, and politicians who "talk about" populism in a language other than English do so in a way that translators do, even when they are unaware of how translation works. They imitate and repeat the processes, practices, and choices of translators, often without realizing that what they are doing is translating. Our hypothetical questions serve as a springboard for the subsequent non-hypothetical questions I address in this paper. How did the transliteration *p'op'yullijŭm* of the term populism prevail over the existing and other contending translations, such as *minjungjuŭi* (民衆主義, populism) and (*taejung*-[大衆] or *in'gi*-[人氣]) *yŏnghapchuŭi* (迎合主義, mass- or popularity-opportunism) in the Korean language?

Hong Yun-gi, a philosopher and public intellectual, was among those who, in as early as 2003, raised the issue of the translatability of populism into Korean and questioned the contemporary preference for the transliteration *p'op'yullijŭm* over the existing and possible translations. He argued against the transliteration of populism because the rapid spread of the word *p'op'yullijŭm*, primarily led by the right-wing politicians and media at the time, only revealed their "confusion" and "duplicity"—the former because they mistranslated or "arbitrarily selected a fraction of meaning" from the entire semantic spectrum of the word populism as "*taejung in'gi yŏnghapchuŭi*" or mass-popularity opportunism, and the latter because the transliteration gave the impression that the thought behind the mistranslated word was the "systematic political ideas or codes of conduct," say, originated from and re-

fined by Western academia, which was not the case (Hong 2004, 285).

Although it is neither fully developed nor elaborated, Hong's contribution is significant from a methodological standpoint because it identifies the key issues involved in translating into Korean not only populism in particular but also political concepts of foreign origin in general.

The first issue concerns the difference between translation and substituting translation with transliteration. Hong opposed populism with democracy. Whereas populism transliterates, or mistranslates, as *p'op'yullijŭm*, democracy translates as *minjujuŭi* (民主主義 or "ism of the people as master"). Although he incorrectly assumed that the translation *minjujuŭi* "perfectly matches" democracy semantically, he rightly argued that the adaptation of transliteration as translation requires special scholarly attention (Hong 2004, 289).

Another issue he raises is that the specific act of translation must be verified by retranslating it into the original language. Although his survey of the original meanings of populism in English puts excessive confidence in dictionaries, he clarifies that "while the term *populism* [English in original] is extremely polysemy, '*p'op'yullijŭm*' in Korean is not" and that the arbitrary monosemy of *p'op'yullijŭm* is the result of the confused and duplicitous identification of the populism concept with only *yŏnghapchuŭi*, which retranslates not as populism but as opportunism or "popularism" (Hong 2004, 292; 2006, 16).

"P'OP'YULLIJŬM OPPRESSES POPULISM"

The last issue Hong raises concerns the political dimension of transliterating populism and its theoretical consequences and implications. His last word on transliteration is "*p'op'yullijŭm* oppresses populism" (Hong 2004, 317). He summarizes at least three observations in his somewhat psychoanalytic-style diagnosis.

- 1 *P'op'yullijŭm* is only asymmetrically used; almost ten years after its introduction to South Korean vocabulary, there have been no "political parties or politicians who claimed to be" *p'op'yullisŭt'ŭ* or populists, and there is no "single scholar who investigates their ideology" (Hong 2004, 321). In other words, there are only those who refer to their opponents by the transliteration of populism but none who refer to themselves in this manner. This observation is consistent with Margaret Canovan's description of the original populism concept's lack or loss of "self-description," which can lead to the arbitrary labeling or stigmatization of "any movement or outlook that does not fit into an established category" as "populist" (Canovan 1981, 5–6).
- 2 Its asymmetry has targeted very particular opponents. *P'op'yullijŭm* was not for everyone to stigmatize their political opponent. It became a derogatory catchphrase for the right-wing media's political campaign against "all efforts to encourage grassroots participation and all political activities performed by civil society associations" (Hong 2004, 314). Here, terms such as "participation" (*ch'amyŏ*, 參與) and "civil society associations" (*simin tanch'e*, 市民團體) must be understood within the context of post-democratization South Korean politics. These unquestionably referred to the liberal governments of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), their supporters, and their allies in civil society.
- 3 The transliteration *p'op'yullijŭm* severed the tie between the original populism concept and its existing translations, such as "*minjungjuŭi*" and "*inminjuŭi* (人民主義)," representing the historical instances of political and social movements categorized as populism (Hong 2004, 316). Thus, within the South Korean context, *p'op'yullijŭm* was intended to not only replace the term *minjungjuŭi* as an existing translation for populism but also invert the value of the historical movement that the term has been associated with.

THE TWO WAVES OF THE *MINJUNG* MOVEMENT

In his 1984 article, Ro Jai-bong, a conservative political scientist, made a very unusual but significant observation regarding *minjungjuŭi*, a pejorative name he gave to the ideology of the anti-military-dictatorship movement led by those who claimed to be the advocates of *minjung*, the oppressed common people. Notable is his characterization of the democratization movement's ideology as a descendant of the Russian *narod-nichestvo* of the nineteenth century. As a reactionary critic of the democratization movement, he recognized the key characteristic that populism and the *minjung* ideology shared in common: their conceptual vagueness. He observed that his contemporary attempts to define *minjung* in general had failed to recognize and overcome the "ambiguities and difficulties in conceptualization." He also argued that its indefinability led to *minjungjuŭi* being identified with populism (Ro 1984, 199). Thus, he took Russian populism as an archetype of Korean *minjungjuŭi* because they share the commonality of being "nationalistic ideologies or movements led by the intellectual class who pose not the class but the broad mass as their collective subject of both the resistance to capitalistic development and the synthesis between tradition and modernity on an indigenous basis" (Ro 1984, 200). He argued that the so-called *pŭnarotŭ undong* or *v narod* ("into the people") movement in the early 1930s under Japanese colonial rule made the *minjung* movement of his time "the second wave" of Korean populism (Ro 1984, 199). Based on the comparison of the *minjung* ideology with its alleged Russian predecessor, he concluded that "anti-political thinking," typical of populist-utopian ideologies, "may result in combination with oppressive political power." This meant that the anti-dictatorship movement of the time could not avoid the self-contradiction of the "democratic-revolutionary" defense of "anti-democratic and anti-liberal despotism" (Ro 1984, 209), which would have replaced the then-military dictatorship if the movement had succeeded. Although he maintained the English

spelling of the word populism without translating it into Korean because he was uncertain whether an appropriate Korean word corresponded to it, his article was one of the earliest documents that attempted to contest the *minjung* movement and its ideology by associating it with populism, testing the feasibility of populism's transliteration.

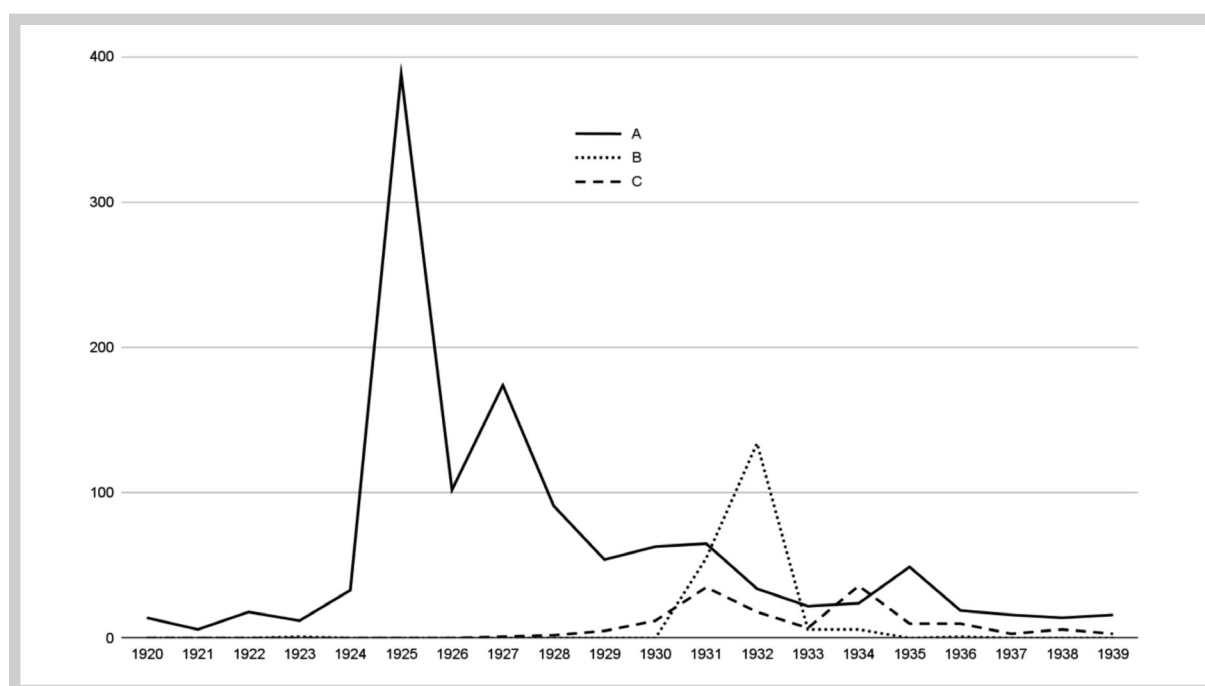
In as early as 1924, possibly for the first time in Korean language publications, *minjung* was recognized as "an idiom with an extremely hazy definition," which was suffering "abuses and misunderstandings" (Chosun Ilbo 1924; Dong-a Ilbo 1924a). In the early 1920s, *minjung* was already politicized as a buzzword in colonial Chosŏn. After the March First Movement in 1919, independent movement activists and intellectuals were convinced that organizing and mobilizing the common people was crucial for national self-determination against Japanese colonial rule. Even the time was declared "the age of *minjung*" (Dong-a Ilbo 1924b). Initially, *minjung* (subject/people as mass) was interchangeable not only with *minjok* (民族, nation) but also with *minju* (democratic sovereign) before the internationalist optimism immediately after the end of World War I, whose victory was declared in the name of democracy, suddenly declined. Historian and anarcho-nationalist activist Sin Chaeho's *Chosŏn Hyŏngmyŏng Sŏnŏn*, or *Declaration of the Korean Revolution* of 1923, marked the break of *minjung* from *minju*. Written in a distinct syndicalist language, the declaration made clear that national self-determination and survival could be achieved not through the means of movements for the "independence of domestic administration, suffrage, or self-government" but through *minjung*'s "direct revolution" (Sin 1923).

However, it immediately became evident that, unlike *minjok* or *minju*, *minjung* must be clearly defined so that activists and intellectuals can faithfully represent them. Without a distinct understanding of the common people, the *minjung* movement was doomed to fail due to internal conflict and usurpation. Thus, discovering "the undiscovered *minjung*" was declared to be the

primary task of the *minjung* movement. The same author suggested that *minjung* had to be defined in negative and positive or political and socio-logical ways. Negatively and politically, the common people were those who were not officials or elite classes of minorities, such as “the rich” and “the educated.” Positively and sociologically, they were those who were the majority of the population, such as “the agrarian, fishing, and working classes,” among which the farming element constituted an absolute majority in colonial Chosŏn. Nonetheless, the author believed it was inevitable that those leading *minjung* had to be the educated few and that only those who could overcome this paradox of representation wisely were entitled to truly guide *minjung* (Dong-a Ilbo 1924a).

Despite the meteoric rise in the popularity and politicization of the term *minjung*, the would-be *minjung* movement of the 1920s was rapidly in decline. In the 1930s, a movement that was significantly less radical eclipsed it (see Figure 1). The movement in the name of *minjung* at the time was not aiming for a revolutionary break with Japanese colonialism. The two main nationalist newspapers, Dong-a Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo, led it as a much more moderate educational movement that focused on fighting illiteracy in rural areas. It was generally called *munja bogŭp undong* or the illiteracy eradication movement. Dong-a Ilbo’s branch was particularly named *pŭnarotŭ* after the Russian populist slogan *v narod* (into the people).

Figure 1: Annual frequency of the terms *minjung undong*, *pŭnarotŭ*, and *munja bogŭp undong* in the press based on the number of articles from 1920 to 1939



Data obtained from the search results through NAVER News Library (<https://newslibrary.naver.com/>).

A: *minjung undong*, **B:** *pŭnarotŭ*, **C:** *munja bogŭp undong*

If the interwar age of *minjung* was the first wave of the movements, then the second wave resurfaced in Korean history during the 1970s and 1980s. According to historian Lee Nam-hee, “During this period, the *minjung* movement was prominent in South Korean politics and social life, and by the late 1980s it became the driving force

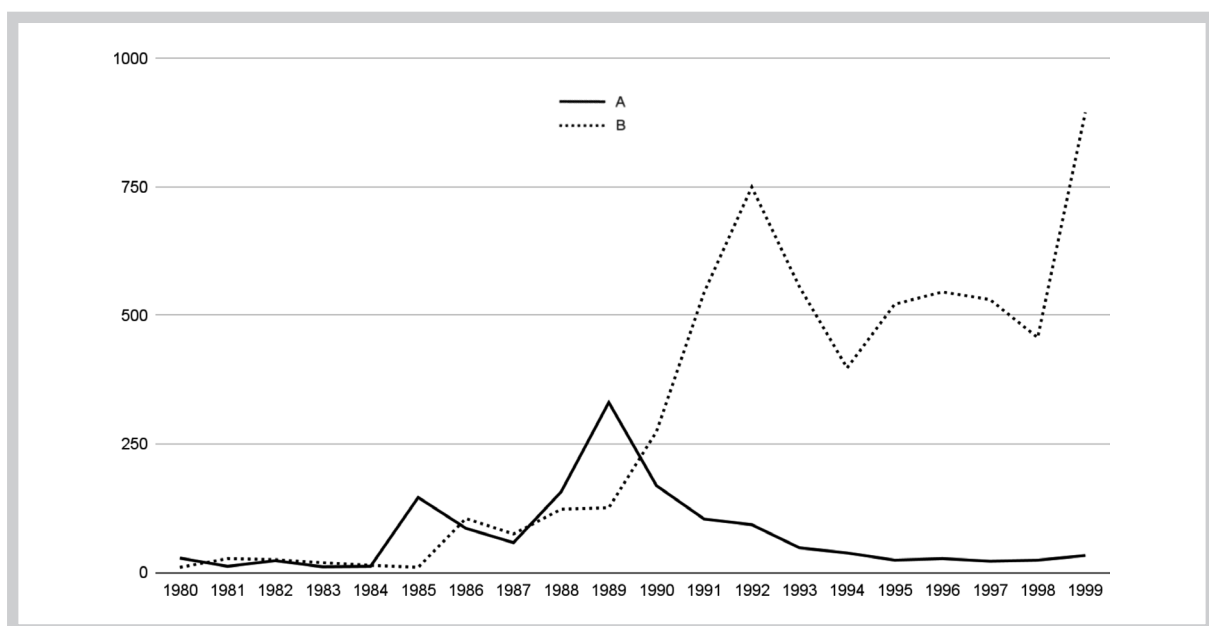
for the country’s transition from the authoritarian military regime to a parliamentary democracy” (Lee 2007, 1). In this second wave, the intellectuals and university students who strongly shared an “anxiety (...) that modern Korean history was a history of failure, that the Korean people were not the subjects of their own history,” were the

ones who claimed to represent *minjung* or the oppressed common people “as opposed to elites and leaders or even the educated or cultured” (Lee 2007, 2, 5). For the *minjung* movement leaders and activists, who were highly educated but who self-deprecatingly identified themselves, “minjung came to signify those who are oppressed in the sociopolitical system but who are capable of rising up against” their oppressors. Although the first and second waves of the *minjung* movement belonged to very different contexts, the difficulties of defining and representing the oppressed common people were central to both. Therefore, for the second wave, “[t]he very abstraction and elasticity of the term required a constant shoring up of the counterimage of the forces considered

to be inimical to minjung,” and these were “the military dictatorship, corporate conglomerates, and foreign power” (Lee 2007, 5–6).

In this regard, the democratization of 1987 may have significantly diluted the sense of animosity shared by the former activists toward *minjung*’s oppressors. As a result, shortly after the immediate post-democratization period, the slogan *minjung undong* significantly lost its power. Eventually, it became the name exclusively reserved for the radical wing of the social movement. As an alternative, *simin undong* (the “citizen movement” or “civil society movement”) prevailed among the moderate mainstream successors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Annual frequency of the terms *minjung undong* and *simin undong* in the press based on the number of articles from 1980 to 1999



Data obtained from the search results through NAVER News Library (<https://newslibrary.naver.com/>).

A: *minjung undong*, B: *simin undong*

POST-1987 RISE OF P'OP'YULLIJŬM AS OPPORTUNISM

Before the democratization of 1987, neither *p'op'yullijŭm* nor *yŏnghapchuŭi* were used in the press or academic writings as synonyms for populism. Although *yŏnghapchuŭi* was used before it became associated with populism, it meant complacency and not opportunism.

In a 1988 article by political scientist Suh Byung-hoon, one of the first notable occurrences of the transliteration *p'op'yullijŭm* and the opportunistic definition of populism appeared. Suh used the transliteration rather than any translation of populism throughout his article because the term populism was “not easy to translate into Korean” and, more importantly, because populism’s constitutive concept, the people, had to

be translated as “*kungmin*” (國民) or “*taejung*” (大衆) rather than “*inmin*” (人民) or “*minjung*” for the latter group’s subjectified and active, rather than objectified and passive, nuances and their association with the narrowly defined conception of class, whether it be socialist or communist. In his view, populists’ people were not true subjects, as claimed, but were mere objects that only served as foils for the populist leaders. Therefore, he distinguished between “South American” populism and “classical” populism, including the Russian and North American populisms of the nineteenth century as examples of the latter. Classical populism was excluded from his discussion, as he considered that agrarian populism did not have much room for politicians and political leaders. He believed that populism primarily consisted of the problematic relationship between populist politicians, not intellectuals, and the people they claimed to represent (Suh 1988, 46). Thus, Suh considered two traits as essential when defining populism: an anti-establishment “appeal to the people” and the “opportunism” of the leadership (Suh 1988, 43).

Here, he referred to “opportunism” not as *yŏnghapchuŭi* but as *kihoejuŭi* (機會主義). At least theoretically, he sought to distinguish his criticism of political opportunism from an indiscriminate rejection of any ordinary and routine effort to win majority votes, and he was well aware that such a rejection would unquestionably be anti-democratic. Despite his academic ventriloquism, in which he made no direct reference to the Korean situation and instead cited only Anglophone studies on Latin American populists, he clearly intended to discuss his deep skepticism about Korean post-democratization politics. He saw it as merely promising “participation” and “reform,” with no specifics as to how it would steer clear of the populist and opportunist path that conservatives have criticized as “irresponsible demagoguery” and radicals have called “egoistic adventurism” in Latin American cases (Suh 1988, 43, 64–65). Suh’s article demonstrated the common tendencies or patterns of Korean populism discourse in the following decades.

First, his article trailblazed the substitution of the existing translations of populism, such as *minjung undong* or *minjungjuŭi*, with the transliteration *p’op’yullijŭm*.

Second, despite the original author’s cautionary stance and refusal to simplistically identify populism with opportunism, the article marked a major conceptual change or semantic shift of the concept from the intellectually led social movement toward political opportunism, which ultimately resulted in the synonymy of *p’op’yullijŭm* with *yŏnghapchuŭi* (see Figure 3).

Third, it advanced a redefinition of the populism concept in the context of twentieth-century Latin American social and political movements aimed at mobilizing the urban population rather than nineteenth-century intellectual and agrarian movements. *P’op’yullijŭm* soon became almost synonymous with images of Latin American societies characterized by pervasive political instability and economic failure. The subsequent decades witnessed the expansion of the list of countries associated with *p’op’yullijŭm*, with Greece being a notable new addition during and after the debt crisis.

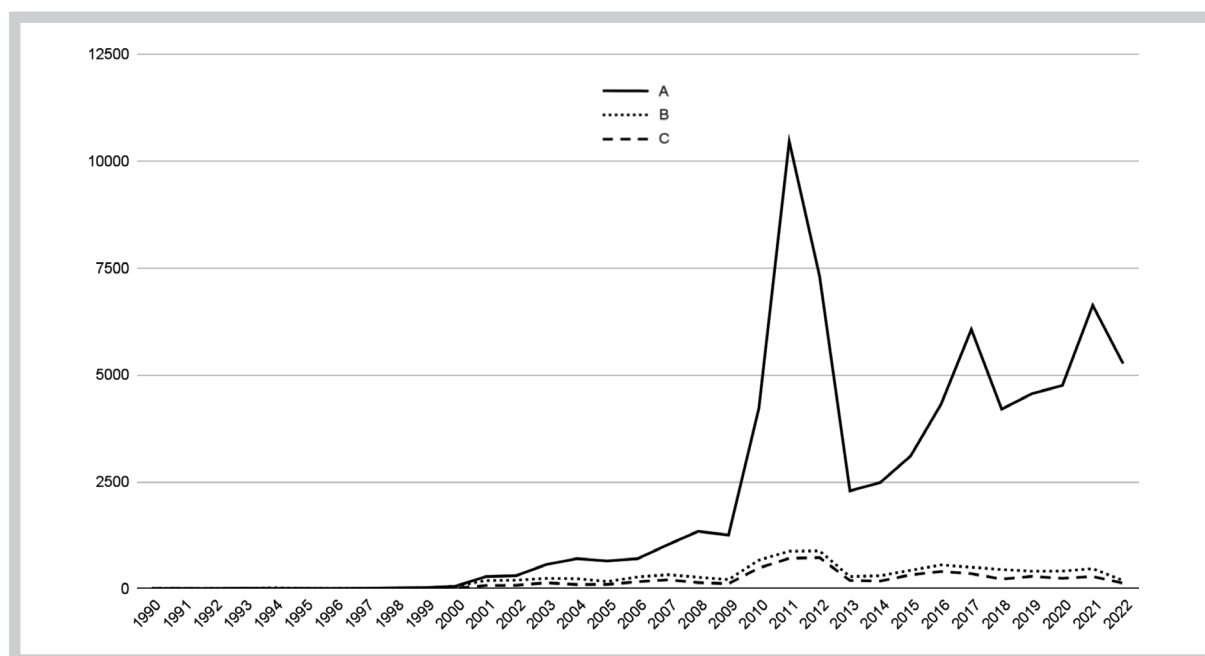
Fourth, through the author’s implicit overlapping of the democratization movement’s political future with populist opportunism, the article anticipated the contestation of the legacy and legitimacy of the movement by associating it with or simply naming it *p’op’yullijŭm*. However, the debate remains on whether *p’op’yullijŭm* is a purely partisan stigma without any theoretical basis or, in itself, a focus of ideological contestation concerning democracy, social policy, market regulation, and even diplomacy, as suggested by political scientist Chang Whi’s research on conservative anti-populist discourse and progressive counterdiscourse from 2000 to 2019 (Chang 2020).

Finally, academic and even journalistic ventriloquies, in which the act of introducing a foreign study or reporting news from abroad regarding

populism without ever referencing Korean domestic politics constitutes an indirect or ambiguous political commentary, have effectively

strengthened the stigmatizing power of the term *p'op'yullijŭm*.

Figure 3: Annual frequency of the terms *p'op'yullijŭm* and *yŏnghapchuŭi* in the press based on the number of articles from 1990 to 2022



Data obtained from the search results through BIG KINDS (<https://www.bigkinds.or.kr/>).

A: *p'op'yullijŭm*, B: *yŏnghapchuŭi*, C: *p'op'yullijŭm* and *yŏnghapchuŭi*

CONCLUSION

In South Korea, populism is referred to with a loanword, *p'op'yullijŭm*. The term has also been largely equated with *yŏnghapchuŭi*. By examining the process before and after democratization that led to the adoption of *p'op'yullijŭm*, this study demonstrates that *p'op'yullijŭm* is not only a stigma aimed at certain political groups but also intended to revalue the *minjung* movement—political and social movements that existed before the introduction of the transliteration and even have distant origins in the colonial period of the interwar age—which claimed to be populist. In this context, *p'op'yullijŭm*, the pejorative concept of populism, won over the previous positive translation, *minjung undong*, and English-speaking studies of Latin American populism appear to have provided a theoretical foundation for the semantic shift in the concept of populism, particularly the transition from intellectually

led peasant movements to the opportunism of politicians who sought to mobilize urban populations. Accordingly, populism appears to be a term associated with theoretical resources in global English-speaking academia and a crucial component of contesting local democratization movements and their legacies.

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POPULISM OR DEMOCRACY? TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION OF THE PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

In one of the footnotes in his important book *Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community*, Bernard Yack (2012, 102) noted that “the idea of the people has received nothing like the scholarly attention social and political theorists have devoted to the nation.” At first glance, this statement seems unwarranted. “The people,” after all, remains safely ensconced in the list of master vocabulary of modern politics, and there is no dearth of democratic theorists and practitioners who constantly invoke, utilize, or analyze this protean concept. On the other hand, Yack’s remark does not seem to be that arbitrary. Although political theory, and democratic theory in particular, can hardly do without the idea of “the people,” compiling a list of works that devote full attention to an extended analysis of the concept is not easy. In other words, “the people” seems to be only indirectly or insufficiently theorized, even though the concept is widely acknowledged to lie at the center of the practice and theory of democratic politics. “The people” makes an appearance here and there in the literature, but only, one might say, *en route* to the more substantive political issues of the day—populism, revolutions, constituent power, popular sovereignty, European integration, and global governance, to name but a few salient debates in democratic theory in recent years. This essay aims to show why I think this lack of a more direct and systematic study of “the people” is problematic and to sketch some of the ways to overcome it.

“THE PEOPLE” IN THE POPULISM DEBATE

A useful starting point for the discussion is to observe how the idea of “the people” is handled

in the ongoing debate on populism. Here, saying that liberals (or liberal democrats) such as Jan-Werner Müller, Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, William Galston, Paul Taagart, and Nadia Urbinati exercise a kind of hegemony in the discursive field may not be much of an exaggeration. Their views are widely circulated beyond the academic circle, critically shaping discourses in the media and the larger civil society in many parts of the world. In brief, liberal critics of populism exhibit a certain uneasiness about the very category of the people that has dramatically come to surface in the current political conjuncture. Although they acknowledge the intricate relations between democracy, the people, and popular sovereignty, they also posit that the role of the people as collective political agency has been *already* exhausted in exceptional moments of revolution or the democratization movement of the past. The dramatic resurgence and spread of populism today only escalate their suspicion on the political ills the people might inflict, and their worries about the “excesses of democracy” reinforce their previous convictions about standard values and institutions of liberal democracy, with constitutional constraints, rule of law, and representative government, among others, at the center. Their preference for “the citizens” to “the people” is thus not an accident (e.g., Urbinati 2014, 133); they intend to dissolve the latter into well-managed procedures of representative politics. This in effect amounts to a call for discarding the people as collective political agency altogether.

In fact, numerous critics and skeptics have argued from antiquity that the emergence of the people not properly tamed by leadership, institutions, religion, or morality can be a lethal threat in any polity. This, they point out, is why democ-

racy has an inherent tendency to deteriorate into an impulsive rule of the number or the “tyranny of the majority.” If democracy is an unavoidable condition history has left us with, as Tocqueville once observed with his characteristic ambivalence, then the safety valve to rescue democracy from self-destruction should be sought outside of it. In this same spirit, liberals in the debate on populism go to great lengths in trying to establish that terms such as “the people,” “the voice of the people,” “common good,” and “general will” that populists habitually invoke are dangerous “illusions” or political “myths” (Galston 2018, 11–13; Müller 2017, 25–32; Urbinati 2019, 44). To invoke “the people” in a well-established democracy is no more than a vulgar rhetoric deployed to gain cheap political points—or worse, an ominous advance with an intention to eventually subvert pluralist social order.

Left populists, however, turn the liberal diagnosis on its head and argue that the key to the revitalization of democracy lies precisely in the construction of the collective identity of the people. Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2018), who unequivocally designate populism as the “political logic” *par excellence*, of course remain the primary theoretical reference in this endeavor. Whereas liberals tend to jettison the idea of the people, left populism is making an important contribution in exploring ways to rehabilitate this category. At the same time, however, left populism’s formal political logic, with its almost exclusive focus on building equivalential chains between multiple demands, proves radically insufficient in probing the possibilities of a *democratic* form of political subjectivation.

One of the recurring criticisms of Laclau’s political theory is that he equates politics, or the political, with the hegemonic project itself, thereby producing a tendentious equation of “the political = populism = democracy” (Arditi 2007). Here, “hegemony, a form of politics, morphs into politics proper: hegemony becomes the universal form of the political or at least of democratic politics” (Arditi 2007, 208). This criticism has im-

portant implications for the kind of political subjectivation populism envisions, suggesting that populism reduces politics to hegemonic struggle and therefore all political acts and subject positions to potential materials for hegemonic articulation. This reductionism is precisely what renders the theory of left populism, sophisticated as it is, inadequate in thinking about the problem of the *democratic* political subjectivation of the people. As it stands, its narrow focus on the hegemonic project based on equivalential logic does not offer much in the way of political empowerment of the people or for preventing variegated popular demands from being sucked into the whirlpool of exclusionary and oftentimes authoritarian mottos.

REHABILITATING THE PEOPLE

The discussion thus far briefly showed how the problem of political subjectivation of the people has been handled (or mishandled) in the current debate on populism. The argument was that liberals tend to prematurely discard the category of the people as collective political agency altogether, whereas left populists place their hopes in a direct presence of the undifferentiated people, which renders their political logic vulnerable to exclusionary and authoritarian propensities. How, then, can one move beyond the theoretical and practical difficulties this controversy exhibits?

The task here is to find ways to overcome the rather constricted view of the people we inherited from the political and intellectual history of western modernity. For “the people” to possess and exercise political power, it must be “unitary” (in the sense of being monolithic as an undifferentiated entity), which is different from saying “united” (which allows for internal diversity and contestation), around one will. The underlying idea here seems to be the notion of sovereignty, which according to the prevalent understanding, must be “one and indivisible” to be politically meaningful at all. When these two elements are combined, a familiar idea of popular sovereignty is derived that is embodied by a unitary collec-

tive agent—the people. Although his preferred term was “the nation” rather than “the people,” Sieyès (2003, 134) gave a highly consequential formulation of this idea: “Power resides solely in the whole. A community has to have a common will. Without this unity of will, it would not be able to make itself a willing and acting whole.”

As is well-documented in modern history, this idea of the people as a collectivity that acts as a single agent with one will has spawned a fierce debate with enormous political consequences. On the one hand, liberals have been consistent in their effort to contain the explosive and often destructive power of the people that the principle of popular sovereignty summons into being. Radicals of various sorts, on the other hand, have heroically attempted to cash in the emancipatory promise of popular sovereignty. They believed that making good of the unitary will of the people and turning it into a political project was the key to proving wrong the age-old denigration of the people as a “many-headed monster.” However, it is no secret of modern history that much of these projects tragically ended up in a clumsy, but often horrific, attempt at social engineering with grave human and social consequences.

Note that these bifurcated, and often diametrically opposed, reactions are based on the same image of the people as a collectivity with one will—or “the-people-as-one,” as Claude Lefort (1988, 13) once put. This underlying logic of identity is what makes liberals flinch and radicals excited. This familiar pattern of reaction is also reflected in the populism debate briefly reviewed above. Whereas the intellectual energy of liberals in this controversy is devoted to taming the unruly propensities of the people, left populists try to resuscitate its unitary form with the language of “hegemony.” What one might call “the Jacobin hangover” still seems to cast a long shadow on both camps, and I argued that it is precisely this simplified image of the people that needs to be overcome. The key, then, would be to find ways to effectively challenge it, which is no different from investigating the different modes of political sub-

jectivation or the variegated modalities in which the people is activated both in extraordinary and in more mundane political moments. One would also have to analyze the different ways the people’s claim-making interacts with established institutional arrangements of a given polity.

One prominent historical example of such democratic political subjectivation of the people comes, perhaps ironically, from the populist movement in nineteenth-century America. Jason Frank (2017) is one of the few democratic theorists keen on drawing out the political implications of this historical case where the term “populism” was a badge of honor for participants. This “populism” was organized around Farmers’ Alliance to combat the economic exploitation and social and cultural dislocations exacted by the “crop-lien system” in the context of the deepening inequalities in a rapidly industrializing agriculture. Importantly, Frank’s account staged multiple dimensions of countermovement by actively organizing a sprawling network of cooperatives, alternative media outlets, and study groups. These inventions and experiments became invaluable sources of political education for participants of all levels in imagining and sensing democratic citizenship. This, in other words, was “first and most centrally, a cooperative movement that imparted a sense of self-worth to individual people and that provided them with the instruments of self-education about the world they live in” (Goodwyn 1976, 196). The moral of this narrative is how the people with the ability to imagine and sense its own political capacity in the face of trenchant social and economic hardships was gradually formed through multi-pronged, reflexive political practices on the ground. Impressively, this was not a politics that just makes demands on or reactively resist oligarchic power but a politics where the people exercises empowering practices onto itself so as to create and maintain the conditions for its collective political agency. Again, this politics of empowerment, or the process of democratic subjectivation, is precisely what the current forms of left populism are unable to explain and guide.

Note also that even when these movements do not sustain themselves over the long term or fail to attain their immediate goals, the experience itself often endures in the political imagination of the participants and observers and enjoys “material afterlife” (Arditi 2015; Canovan 2002). In a recent essay, Olson (2016a) captures this peculiar reflexivity with the concept of “imaginary sovereignty.” “One of the most potent effects of collective action,” he says, “is to performatively create the imaginary bases of popular politics. By acting together, we build a normative basis of ideas about what it means to be a people” (Olson 2016a, 130). In this way, the experience of collective action serves as an indispensable dimension of political subjectivation, where the undifferentiated population with a nebulous set of grievances finally gets to imagine and sense themselves as the people with political agency.

WAYS FORWARD

The remainder of this essay discusses a different yet related question: What kind of an approach in research is most suitable for tracing, interpreting, and reconstructing different modes of being and acting of the people? The following two monographs seem particularly exemplary and inspiring in this regard.

The first is Jason Frank’s *Constituent Moments*. The book is extremely effective in unsettling the hold of the still prevalent unitary image of the people. Frank’s narrative explicitly rejects the more familiar (and quite Habermasian in important respects) account of American political history that focuses on how a set of universal principles constitutionally authorized during the founding era has animated, and has been refurbished by, the historical struggle for rights. His focus in surveying post-revolutionary American politics is therefore not on moments of constitutional lawmaking or constitutional realignment (as Bruce Ackerman’s would be) but on what he calls “constituent moments” where “under-authorized but felicitous claims to speak in the people’s name” were made (Frank 2010, 238).

The people, of course, is a central authorizing function in democratic politics, but as numerous recent contributions to the topic of “the legitimacy of the people” or “the boundary problem” attest, determining who constitutes the people is perhaps a democratically unanswerable dilemma. In this sense, the authorizing power of the people is always “underauthorized,” and its act, at least to a certain degree, is “self-authorization.” However, this does not hinder productive claim-makings in the name of the people. To the contrary, the indeterminacy of the political reality on the ground is the crucial condition of possibility for the “enactment” of the people. The people so enacted forms what Frank (2010, 6) calls “constituent moments, when the underauthorized—imposters, radicals, self-created entities—seize the mantle of authorization, changing the inherited rules of authorization in the process.” Moreover, “out of these enactments a new democratic subject emerges” (Frank 2010, 6). In the book, Frank excavates several cases of what he calls “small dramas of self-authorization” in post-revolutionary America, with special attention to the relatively informal contexts of crowd protests, self-created societies, novels, poetry, and political oratory (Frank 2010, 33).

Frank’s book vividly shows how the people is constantly in the making through the practice of democratic claim-making itself. Again, the focus here is on historically specific struggles themselves and not on the universalist moral principles or the logic of constitutional development that are often thought to subsume them. Moreover, just as the historical contexts of these struggles were variegated, the people in whose name they were carried out was also imagined in diverse and contingent ways. The drama is that of a never-ending competition for appropriating the past and the law in specific places and at specific times (for example, does the promise of equal rights to the “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the *Declaration of Independence* also apply to those other than white male property owners?), conducted with a view to imagining and calling into being the people as the pres-

ent and future subject of democratic politics. With this peculiar futurity in mind, Frank speaks of “the democratic productivity of a people never at one with itself.” The “authorizing people remains forever a people that is not ... yet” (Frank 2010, 238). By carefully documenting these fecund moments of democratic claim-making, Frank’s book quite successfully problematizes the political category of the people and shows its indeterminate, polymorphous, and contingent character. The people in all this drama of enactments is neither a “many-headed monster” nor a monolithic collectivity with a single will. Moreover, it does not have a pre-existing coherent collective identity, which is rather constituted as the effects of political struggle.

Kevin Olson’s book *Imagined Sovereignities* importantly expands the scope and methodological tools for research on the modes of political subjectivation of the people. If Frank’s focus remains on the aesthetics of the people—in that his narrative records the intermittent moments when the people is “enacted”—Olson’s work is broader in its reach. He sets out to trace how the controversial idea of “the power of the people,” or popular sovereignty, has historically formed and come to be received as the core principle of modern politics. In other words, the book purports to “examine the *longue durée* in which [these] imaginaries are performatively created” (Olson 2016b, 177). By thus problematizing the normative force of popular sovereignty, the book seeks to help better understand the origins and permutations of this powerful political imaginary. The majority of Olson’s book does this by tracing the multi-pronged debates and practices in two places in the eighteenth century, France and Haiti.

Here, properly conveying in brief the acute sense of historicity Olson provides in his rich analysis of the two select cases is impossible. However, the general thrust seems clear—the normativity of popular sovereignty in modern politics must be understood as “products of long cultural and historical processes within a broader field of practice” that cannot be reduced to the

level of philosophical debates or to intentions of individual actors (Olson 2016b, 15). This might sound almost banal, but Olson is eloquent in documenting the multiple tensions in the idea of popular sovereignty that were never satisfactorily resolved during the formative debates and in showing how these tensions paradoxically spawned a great deal of discourse and other activity, paving the way for the gradual acceptance and institutionalization of the idea. For example, years of heated constitutional debates ensuing the French Revolution were replete with serious confusions about central questions such as what it means to say that the nation, or sometimes the people, is sovereign, and whether this sovereignty can be represented at all. In other words, no coherent answers were provided on who is this collectivity that is supposed to have the impressive normative power called sovereignty and even on what it means for the collectivity to “have” sovereignty. Part of the confusion stemmed precisely from the plasticity of the significations of the people at the time, sometimes referring to a sociological category such as “the destitute” but other times referring to an exalted marker of political unity and universality. These tensions and instabilities, however, did not stop the protean idea of popular sovereignty from having serious political effects. Over the course of time, the confusions were not resolved but rather gradually paved over and made to recede into the background amid political struggles and efforts at institutionalization. This sense of incompleteness, contradictions, and ambiguities is also vividly delivered in Olson’s treatment of the Haitian political history, where the conditions of slavery, colonialism, and anticolonial revolution created an even more complicated unfolding of the imaginary of the people and its sovereignty.

Although Olson’s book is not about the people per se but about the evolution of the normativity of popular sovereignty, his approach as well as the theoretical resources marshalled in the book can be productively applied to the problem of political subjectivation this essay raises. Especially valuable in this regard is his detailed

exposition of methodological points, which suggests a mode of theorizing different from that with which political theory usually operates. Olson's central insight here is on the importance of paying greater attention to the material dimensions of political practice going beyond the usual forms of engagement at the level of discourse and theory. He thus combines a careful analysis of foundational texts (such as Rousseau's) not only with other texts forming their immediate intellectual context (such as controversies in assemblies, debating societies, newspapers, and pamphlets) but also with symbols and communications in other, more mundane practices (such as festivals, dress codes, and art works). The result is what he calls "hybrid genealogy, one that combines focused historical investigation and theoretical argumentation" and traces "the changing mosaic of ideas and practices at work" (Olson 2016b, 15, 53).

How successful Olson's central chapters are in delivering this methodological injunction is irrelevant here, although they do seem quite effective in portraying the complex dynamics and permutations of contending sovereign imaginaries. What matters more for the purpose of this essay is that the book suggests a promising line of research as one sets out to explore different modes of political subjectivation of the people. With bifocal attention to discursive *and* material dimensions, one could productively investigate the different ways the people is called upon, imagined, enacted, and acted in a particular period of time at a particular place—for example, the degree to which the problem of political empowerment and the problem of the contradictions within the people are dealt with—rather than narrowly focus on what kind of propositions were made by whom or who won the argument and how cogent the output was.

Overall, the research Frank and Olson inspire can be described as a historically situated democratic theory with special attention to the conjunctions (and often tensions) between discursivity and materiality, norms and practices, and

ideas and institutions. "Historical" here does not necessarily mean having the past as the primary subject of study; it rather suggests a form of theorizing sufficiently informed and guided by reflections on the conjunctions and tensions mentioned. We currently do not see more of such research on the people partially due to political theorists' strong tendency to focus on the "who" or "what" question, for which the recent debates on "the boundary problem" offer a prime example. By doing so, democratic theorists often find themselves perplexed at identifying the paradox of self-authorization of the people, for whose illustration Rousseau's famous chicken or the egg problem between good law and virtuous people is often summoned. The suggestion here is to more carefully observe how these supposed dilemmas and aporias unfold themselves over time in concrete political struggles and not devote our intellectual energy entirely to resolving them philosophically (or to "circling the square," in Rousseau's own words). In short, we need to perhaps shift the analytical focus from the "who" or "what" question to the "how" question in the study of the people. The result would be a political theory of the people that is more political and historically sensitive.¹ In this sense, this essay emphasized the importance of studying different modes of political subjectivation of the people in democratic politics.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

"The people," this essay argues, is neither just an illusory term invoked to obscure political realities (although it is often invoked this way) nor an unambiguous carrier of secular redemption (although it is often put into action this way). It also suggests that our political imagination tends to oscillate between these two extremes perhaps because of the hold the monolithic image of the

1 The animating spirit here is close to what Balibar (2013, 17) said about the study of democratic citizenship: "This is why it is important to think about it dialectically, in terms of process, and not metaphysically, in terms of event or foundation."

people with a single will still has on us. The ongoing controversy on populism seems to be yet another instance where this prevalent imaginary is circulated and reinforced across ideological spectrum. Therefore, the essay argues that studying different modes of political subjectivation will perhaps help us move beyond this constricted vision of the people.

Although I did not broach this issue at all in this essay, part of what drives my interest toward the problem of the people is the poignant political history of modern Korea. This is not the place to go into any details, so before concluding the discussion, let me note one interesting semantic permutation of the concept of the people that took place in Korea.

"The people" has become a word quite difficult to translate into Korean language, but interestingly, this is only the case in South Korea. By the time the fierce regime competition between the two Koreas began in the 1950s, the people indeed had a stable translation—"인민(人民)." This Korean word is a combination of two Chinese characters, "인(人)" which roughly means "human being," and "민(民)" which is somewhat politically charged and denotes something like "the ruled" as opposed to "the ruling." Therefore, these two components put together, "인민(人民)," in my view is a term that well captures the inherent ambiguity and tension between the whole (*populus*) and the part (*plebs*) embedded in the historical usages of the concept of "the people" in the west.

However, it was the communist leaders and regimes who most staunchly adhered to this word, as terms such as "people's democracy" or "people's liberation army" demonstrate. Thus, "인민(人民)" continued to serve as a standard rendition of "the people" in North Korea, whereas South Koreans gradually developed an aversion to this word and what it represents. (The official country name of North Korea is *Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (DPRK) with "인민(人民)" right in the middle, whereas South Korea's official name is *Republic of Korea* (ROK).) In this

way, the people almost became an embarrassing, and often dangerous, word in South Korea. During the military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, people were incarcerated for simply carrying a book with "인민(人民)" in the title, the obvious (but obviously fallacious) inference being that you must be a communist to carry such a book. "인민(人民)" as a translation of "the people" in South Korea was gradually replaced by "국민(國民)." This is a combination of "국(國)," which means "the state" or "the country," and "민(民)," which means "the ruled." Accordingly, when Korean people talk about "Korean people," they say "한국국민(韓國國民)" (and not "한국인민(韓國人民)"), which literally means "Korea(한국)" plus "people as nation (국민; Staatsbürger)."

Since the democratization in 1987, another term "시민(市民)," which has been a well-settled rendition of "citizen" in East Asia, gained much traction and began to be widely used for referring to political actors in democratic settings, such as in elections and protests. Thus, democratization did not bring about the revival of the word "인민(人民)," but there is no mystery here when the continuing hostility between the two Koreas ever since is taken into consideration. What is fascinating is that even for the most radical protests and uprisings that took place in democratized South Korea, the participants themselves (and not just observers or government officials) would continue to name themselves "국민(國民)" or "시민(市民)" and almost never "인민(人民)." The situation during the massive candlelight protests in 2016–2017, which led to the impeachment of the corrupt president, was no different.

The point I want to make is that the eclipse of the term "인민(人民)" cannot be just a semantic issue. Moreover, its replacement by "국민(國民)" and "시민(市民)" must both be a reflection of and have major implications on the way South Koreans think of themselves politically. For example, the people participating in the candlelight protests, who named themselves "국민(國民)" and "시민(市民)," were obsessed with not overstepping the police line even by a bit out of fear that

doing so would taint the integrity of their message with charges of “illegality.” In this sense, this protest was most certainly not a case of civil disobedience, as there was no law-breaking in the first place and the matter was resolved through procedures clearly laid out in the constitution. Importantly, all of this happened while the demands by the workers (who in fact were crucial in organizing the early phases of the protests) and LGBTQ communities were quickly sidelined in the “hegemonic” message of “setting the state back on the right course.” This is not to say that Koreans are docile (they are not) but to point out that their political imaginaries are inscribed in a particular way, whose promises and perils should be carefully studied.

Despite all the abuses and ambiguities that have accompanied the concept of the people throughout history, finding a better concept to signify a collective agent with a capacity for action-in-concert is difficult. The constitutive tension between the whole and the part embedded in this historical term is also what makes it uniquely suitable for inscribing both a collective vision for the entire society and its inner diversity and plurality. Finally, the people is also a better term (perhaps than “citizens”) to invoke political subjects who are capable of operating beyond the confines of juridical and institutional formality while remaining attentive to the need for creating and maintaining the grammars of public space. Again, these are not just, or not even primarily, a semantic problem such as the question of which term is better to name what. Rather, studying the conditions of possibility for such a mode of political subjectivation is one of the most urgent political tasks of our time.

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SOUTH KOREA – NO COUNTRY FOR POPULISM?

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, public discourse on populism in South Korea has dramatically grown, as reflected in the rapidly increasing frequency of related news coverage. Further, although academic literature on populism in South Korea is still scarce, it is gradually increasing as well. A closer look, however, reveals that the phenomena described and analyzed in the press and in research are not populism as strictly defined. At least that is what I am going to argue in this essay. At first glance, this may seem surprising, as the conditions for the emergence of populism in South Korea are favorable: like many other highly industrialized countries, South Korea faces enormous socio-economic challenges; its “weak” political institutions struggle to address people’s grievances; and the highly digitalized environment of public discourse, in addition to its potentials, has its pitfalls for healthy political participation. Against this backdrop, this essay addresses the question of why populism does not exist in South Korea despite the necessary conditions being in place. The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections, beginning with a brief introduction of a working definition of populism. This is followed by a cursory assessment of the existing literature on populism in South Korea and a discussion of the reasons for the obsolescence of populism in the country. The conclusion summarizes the discussion and its (possible) implications.

HOW POPULISM C/SHOULD BE DEFINED

Two types of definitions of populism are generally found in dictionaries. One refers to popular movements at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, mostly by farmers; na-

tionalist movements in Russia leading up to the October Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century; and popular movements in Latin America during the twentieth century (see below). What all these movements generally involve is ordinary people from the disadvantaged lower classes who do not feel represented by the institutions of the state or government or by intermediary entities such as political parties; they therefore themselves take to the streets and elsewhere to fill what they perceive as a void of representation. Although such phenomena can be referred to as populism, terms such as (new) social movement, people’s movement, or popular movement are usually widely used in the academic literature.¹ Other related terms include mass demonstrations, unconventional forms of political participation, or civil unrest. All of these concepts are already highly theorized and thus provide the necessary analytical toolbox for assessing the meanings and implications of these phenomena.

- *the political philosophy of the People’s Party*
(Dictionary.com 2023)
- *a member of a political party claiming to represent the common people*
especially, often capitalized: *a member of a U.S. political party formed in 1891 primarily to represent agrarian interests and to advocate the free coinage of silver and government control of monopolies*
- *a believer in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people*
(Merriam-Webster 2023)

¹ Other variations include protest, liberation, and reform or mass movement.

- *relating to or representing ordinary people, rather than rich or very highly educated people*
(Longman 2023)

- *grass-roots democracy; working-class activism; egalitarianism*
(Collins 2023)

The other refers to populism as individuals or small groups who mobilize the masses through various means such as manipulative propaganda, deception, and fearmongering (see below). Here, charismatic leaders appeal to the people by appealing to their desires and prejudices rather than using rational argument—the appeal can be about rhetoric, political style, and emotions. Further, it often involves politicians promising unrealistic, irresponsible policies or making exaggerated promises that they cannot keep. Extant academic literature already allows these particular phenomena to be addressed quite effectively with concepts such as demagoguery, mass opportunism, or “populism” (대중(인기)영합주의 / 大衆(人氣)契合主義). These existing concepts are based on already well-established theory and research that allow for an adequate analysis of the phenomena in question.

- *political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want*

(Cambridge 2023)

- *a political strategy based on a calculated appeal to the interests or prejudices of ordinary people*
- *any of various, often antiestablishment or anti-intellectual political movements or philosophies that offer unorthodox solutions or policies and appeal to the common person rather than according with traditional party or partisan ideologies*

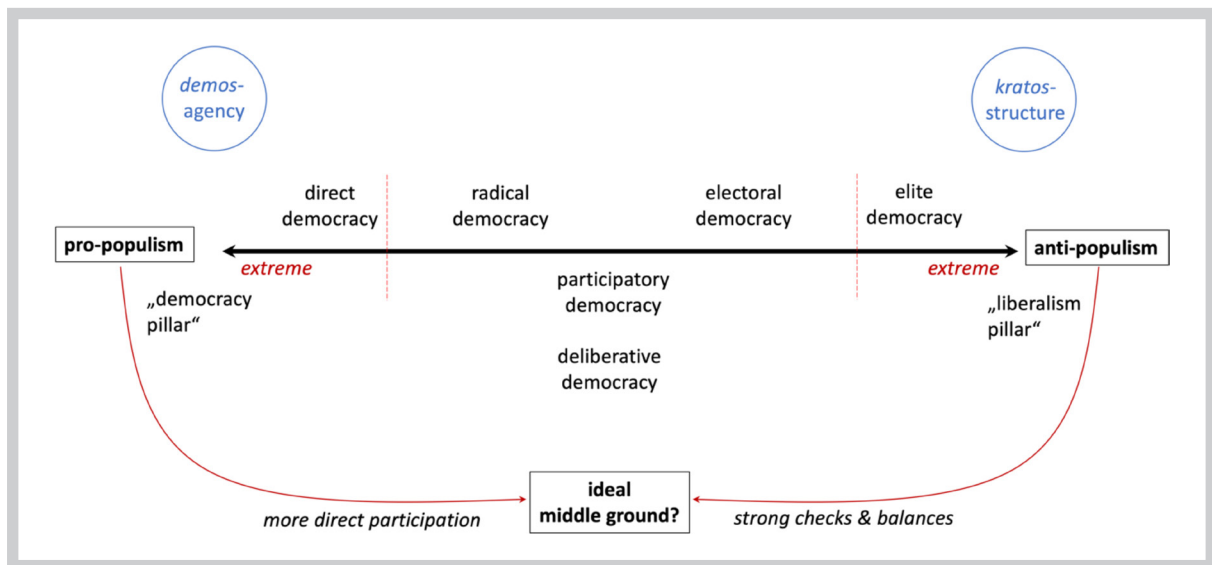
(Collins 2023)

- *representation or extolling of the common person, the working class, the underdog, etc.*

(Merriam-Webster 2023)

In this essay, and largely following Müller (2016) and Rummens (2017), I propose a clear definition of populism. Here, populism cannot have either positive or negative effects, but it is by definition always anti-democratic because it ultimately runs counter to core liberal democratic principles as values such as pluralism, liberalism, diversity, tolerance, and civic responsibility and participation (ibid.). To briefly summarize the definition, we can conceptualize populism as consisting of three main defining elements that must be present to speak of populism as proposed for this essay. The first is the so-called Manichean dichotomy, which claims the existence of good/pure (“us”) versus bad/corrupt (“them”) through the construction of socio-political antagonism (as opposed to agonism) via othering. The second is the claim that there exists only one homogeneous will of the (“real”) people, which is comprehensible but only to “us” (leader; group). The third is the claim that because only “we” are in the know, only “we” can represent (i.e., speak for) the people and that everyone who does not concur does not belong to the “right” people, thus making pluralistic political institutions unnecessary or even harmful.

This definition of populism, or its intended implications, should not be confused with anti-populism (Howse 2019; Moffit 2018) in the sense of an elitist, formalist, and minimalist conception of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, a brief discussion of anti-populism is helpful—it allows for critical reflection on the fact that not all critiques of populism as a threat to democracy should be equated with an elitist democratic position (see illustration). The figure below is a cursory attempt to map the characteristics of the positions on populism in the literature; although it is not so much about empirical “populism,” similar perspectives may be shared by those on the ground. Simply put, pro-populists see populism as beneficial for increasing “democracy” in the sense of (much) greater participation of the demos. Meanwhile, anti-populists consider populism as a threat to the “liberal” because it destabilizes the liberal-democratic equilibrium in

Figure: Populism spectrum conceptualization

terms of structures of checks and balances and a professionalized class in charge of the complex tasks of state affairs. However, this is not a simple divide but rather a continuum between pro-populism and anti-populism. In other words, pro-populism encompasses the left side of the populism spectrum, which begins with extremist (maximum) democracy on the far left, includes direct democracy, and continues with radical democracy before reaching the center of the spectrum. Meanwhile, anti-populism starts on the far right of the spectrum with extremist (minimal/elite) democracy, moves to elite democracy, and continues with electoral democracy before reaching the center of the spectrum. Thus, the left of the continuum emphasizes agency and dynamism, whereas the right of the continuum emphasizes structure and stability. Democratic innovations can help mitigate the unbridgeable gap between the two extremes by complementing deliberative and participatory elements that could ultimately facilitate a shift of democracy from two-dimensionality to another dimension that provides for more direct and popular democracy. However, this does not mean that either of the two extreme forms are combined with these innovations; rather, it means that the more one departs from the ideal (?) middle, the more extreme and thus the more problematic the conception of political interaction becomes.

Although this depiction provides a helpful overview of the debate, it can be misleading: the relationship between “liberal” and “democracy” is not a zero-sum game, as in a pillar model, where more of one leads to less of the other and where “populism” can be a corrective in the case of insufficient “democracy.” Rather, the relationship between the two is one of mutually presupposing dimensions. In other words, less “liberal” means less “democratic” and vice versa (Rummen 2019, 2ff.).

RESEARCH ON POPULISM IN SOUTH KOREA

A cursory search of academic databases shows that existing research on populism in South Korea is scarce but has been growing over the past twenty years at least in the Korean-language literature (e.g., Chae 2019; Do 2021; Ha 2018; Jung and Do 2021; Lee and Lim 2022; Yi 2006; 2007; 2015). Three basic approaches to populism can be discerned: (1) populism from above, which typically deals with populist leaders or groups; (2) populism from below, which usually refers to popular movements or demonstrations; and (3) the populist potential of society, which refers to the collective dispositions of the population and its susceptibility to populism from above or below, usually analyzed on the basis of aggregate

survey data. However, in the already scarce literature, studies that convincingly analyze populist phenomena in South Korea are difficult to find, and their conclusions vary to the point of contradiction. Even in English-language literature, the term populism is mostly used in a cursory and often non-academic, more political way. In addition, owing to language-related challenges, authors often rely on secondary literature only. One such case led to an analysis that codes former President Roh Moo-hyun as a “right-wing populist” and places him in the same group as Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, and Erdoğan (Funke et al. 2021).

Even Korean scholars’ work on populism in South Korea is still rather inconclusive. For example, Han (2019), in a novel attempt, analyzes the “genealogical traces of populism” in Korea over the past 130 years, taking the perspective from below by focusing on the “dynamic role of citizens” (30). He begins with “peasant populism” at the end of the nineteenth century, usually referred to as the Donghak Reform Movement or the Donghak Peasant Revolution; he then turns to “nationalist populism,” more commonly known as the Independence Movement since around the 1910s, and speaks of “minjoong populism” in the 1980s, usually referred to in the literature as the democratization movement or the minjung movement. Similarly, he labels what happened under the military dictatorship in the 1960s–80s and what would conventionally be studied under the rubric of anticommunist indoctrination or mass mobilization as “anti-communist hatred populism.” The recent liberal candlelight demonstrations and right-wing conservative national flag marches in 2016–2017 and 2020, which his study refers to as “candlelight populism” and “national flag populism,” respectively, are more commonly understood and studied as protests or unconventional forms of political participation. However, Han argues that these recent movements share the characteristic of being strongly intertwined with the means of the Internet and new social media, which is why he identifies them as forms of “digital populism” (Han 2019, 48).

Similarly, Kim (2008, 5; 2015) found that the candlelight demonstrations of 2008 showed “strong elements of what can be termed digital populism, namely a new type of political behavior marked by the use of the Internet as both a form of direct political participation and an instrument of social mobilization.” Although the author is generally positive about the potential of e-governance, she sees digital populism, particularly phenomena such as “the riots associated with candlelight vigils and the acrimony that has accompanied online debates,” as a challenge to democracy (Kim 2008, 6). In a later study, Kim (2021) analyzed the use of the Internet by feminist activists to challenge widespread misogyny in South Korea as a form of “digital populism.” Again, she maintained her conceptualization of digital populism as the “political use of the Internet as both a form of political participation and a tool of mobilization” (101). These two examples are among the rare instances of serious engagement with populism in South Korea and are thus highly valuable for their important contribution to the debate; however, they also share some of the general characteristics of the overall literature on populism in South Korea. Definitions of the term populism often remain ambiguous, the application of concepts is cursory only, measuring methods are often unsatisfactory, and the presented results of existing populism tend to be inconclusive.

REASONS FOR THE ABSENCE OF POPULISM IN SOUTH KOREA

Why is there no populism in South Korea? Although future research is called upon to provide the basis for a thorough explanation, at this point, the answer may be approached by making two—potentially overlapping and/or mutually constituting—assumptions about the reasons for the absence of populism. First, the conditions for inducing populism are not yet sufficiently present; second, certain phenomena prevent the emergence of populism, for example, because there are more effective/efficient means to achieve the same outcome (i.e., popular mobilization).

(YET) INSUFFICIENT INDUCING FACTORS

Regarding the sufficiency of populism-inducing conditions (absence of sufficient inducing factors) with respect to *socioeconomic* hardships, in South Korea, the situation is already quite severe, and there are no signs of an easy, quick solution. In other words, the potential for populism here is given, although no universally applicable standard allows for accurately determining at what exact point populism would emerge. The same is true of *sociocultural* grievances, such as the challenges posed by immigration. Compared with general socioeconomic hardships, however, immigration and sociocultural challenges are less severe, even though the topic of the increasing influx of people from different cultural contexts over the past two decades has surfaced and become part of an ongoing public debate. (Conversely, this means that populism may potentially emerge when sociocultural challenges cross a certain threshold.) Finally, the dysfunctionality of South Korea's *political institutions* has reached alarming levels. The system of government, the electoral system, and the political parties have consistently demonstrated a low capacity to sustain a liberal representative democracy. These shortcomings have been mitigated to some extent by civil society organizations that function as proxies or prostheses, but they cannot fully compensate for the dysfunctionality of the core political institutions (Mosler 2020; 2023).

(STILL) SUFFICIENT REPELLING FACTORS

Although the (sufficient) absence of inducing factors somewhat explains why populism has not yet emerged in South Korea, we can begin to understand why South Korea is immune to populism only when we consider the (significant) presence of preventive factors. The most obvious is that the postcolonial national division of the Korean peninsula and the Korean War had two major effects that are important in this regard. One is the real threat potential from North Korea, which is directly related to the second: the anticommunist dictatorship in South Korea.

Anticommunism became state doctrine, and the South Korean people came to internalize the ideology accordingly. Today, almost eight decades later, this is still in the minds and hearts of many because of the lingering effects of the division and the potential threat (see sections by Oh and Krumbein) and because the conservative forces have preserved this dogma so well. The most representative illustration of the resilience of this institutionalized anticommunism is the fact that the infamous National Security Law, enacted in 1948, is still in force today. There is no majority to abolish it—neither among the citizens nor among the politicians (Yang 21; I 2023).

This leads to the second factor at play: a double cartelization of politics (or two-level cartel) that emerged in the early 1990s. As is well known, the crucial developments leading up to the transition to democracy in 1987 were dominated by civil society (mass movement / demonstrations), but the formal implementation of democracy was exclusively in the hands of a small group of elite politicians from the regime party and the main opposition party. The result was “democratization by pact” (Shin 2012) or what Huntington (1991) calls “transplacement”—that is, regime change negotiated among elites, resulting in only the major interests of the political elite being considered and implemented in particular (non-)changes of political institutions. This cartel of major parties, which constituted most of the political spectrum, is still intact today and prevents fundamental reforms. This is because certain changes to political institutions are not in their interest as major parties, regardless of their ideological position.

The other, more familiar dimension of political cartelization is fueled by the mobilization of regional sentiments (regionalism). Whereas the former regime forces, now conservatives, have their strongholds in the southeastern region of Yeongnam, the former opposition forces have their strongholds in the southwestern region of Honam. The regionalist cartel acts as a bulwark against the other major camp. Regionalism is

generally seen as a negative phenomenon because it tends to lead voters to base their decisions less on their opinion and more on where one's hometown is located. In practice, this means that destiny (one's place of birth) rather than political will dictates voting decisions. As a result, regionalism significantly promotes and sustains political polarization between the conservative and liberal camps. This political polarization is further fostered by political parallelism (cf. Hallin and Mancini 2004, 21), where some parts of the press are aligned with the conservative camp and other parts are aligned with the liberal camp in their views on ideological, political, and cultural issues. In addition to traditional mass media, communication through the Internet, particularly the social networking service (SNS), plays an increasingly important role in this regard, as the so-called echo chamber effect reinforces political polarization.

Thus, these pathological features of South Korean politics prevent populism for two reasons. First, they do not sufficiently allow for the typical divisive mobilization issues because this discursive space is already occupied by intersectional issues such as anticommunism and regionalism. Second, the existing lines of conflict are sufficiently effective in mobilizing the population to a satisfactory degree and there is no urgent need to resort to alternative means.

CONCLUSION

If one agrees with the rigorous definition of populism proposed in this essay, it is safe to assume that populism is still absent in South Korea. The scarcity of literature on populism in South Korea is already an indirect indication of its absence. Even the studies arguing that populism exists in South Korea seem to confirm this assumption. A closer look at this research reveals a general insufficiency of a clear definition of populism, a weakness in the thorough measurement methodology, and overall meager results. All of this seems to indicate that not much populism is to be found in South Korea; otherwise, it would

be reflected in a quantitatively and qualitatively much stronger literature.

The reasons for the absence of populism are twofold: yet insufficient inducing factors (challenging socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions as well as institutional dysfunctionality) and still sufficient repelling factors (anticommunism, cartelization, and polarization). Three implications can be drawn from this cursory discussion. First, the conditions that potentially induce populism are likely to accumulate; thus, the possibility of populism emerging in South Korea is likely to increase rather than decrease. Second, and relatedly, besides various other possible causes of such conditions, unification of the Koreas might lead to socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges facilitative to the emergence of populism. Finally, the weakening of South Korea's political pathologies, and thus the improvement of formal democracy, may ironically foster conditions for the emergence of populism, whereas the advancement of substantial democracy may prevent populism from emerging.

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ANTI-POPULISM IN SOUTH KOREA: FOCUSING ON THE INFLUENCE OF ANTICOMMUNISM ON POPULIST MOBILIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Populism has gained significant attention in recent years. In Western society, far-right populists are rallying around socio-cultural issues such as immigration, foreign workers, and refugees, and in this context, welfare chauvinism has gained salience. Moreover, as Cas Mudde (2019) points out, today, no country is immune to far-right politics. The rise of right-wing populism and hate speech has been observed even in Asian countries (Kitayama 2018; Zhang 2019). However, despite the global trend, populist parties or political movements have not yet emerged in South Korea. Furthermore, the absence of charismatic far-right leaders and the limited support from the lower-middle-class workers sets the South Korean context apart from other Western cases of populism. Therefore, this paper raises the question of why South Korea is still immune to populist mobilization.

Interestingly, South Korea has seen considerable far-right mobilizations following the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye in 2017. These mobilizations, known as national flag rallies, have witnessed massive participation from the “silver patriots,” representing the older generation’s strong anticommunist sentiment and patriotism. However, the spread of far-right nationalism in South Korea has been distinct from typical populist movements and lacks prominent populist elements. This raises the question of whether the absence of far-right populism and the enduring anticommunist sentiment are related.

A commonly proposed explanation for the absence of populism in South Korea is the lack of immigrants as primary targets for populist at-

tacks, unlike in Europe and the United States. However, this explanation only considers a partial aspect of Western populist discourse. This paper aims to explore the unique factors within South Korean society that impede the rise of populist mobilization. By analyzing extant literature and theoretical frameworks, this research seeks to illuminate the distinct characteristics of anti-populism in the Korean context. Although concrete evidence substantiating the actual impact of anti-populism remains elusive, further research will contribute to the academic debate on anti-populism and provide insights into the specificities of the South Korean political landscape.

EXPLORING POPULISM IN SOUTH KOREA

According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), populism can be minimally defined as the belief that society is divided into two opposing groups—the pure people and the corrupt elite—and that political decisions should reflect the general will of the people. The authors also argue that this anti-elitism can serve as a “thin-centered ideology” that can easily coexist with any other ideology. However, this simplistic definition fails to capture the multifaceted nature of populism. Previous research has emphasized different characteristics of populism. Roccato et al. (2020) contend that negative perceptions, such as increasing political distrust and hostility from economic losers, are essential elements of populism. Conversely, Moffitt (2016) and Ostiguy and Moffit (2017) argue that populism should be examined as a “political style” or “performance,” as previous attempts to define it as an ideology, strategy, discourse, or political logic have been incomplete. Some studies also highlight “sover-

eignism” as a shared characteristic of populism in Europe, noting that populist parties emphasize national sovereignty and oppose European integration.

Existing research thus suggests that identifying a common denominator that fully explains the diverse nature and evolution of Western populism is challenging. However, the dark side of neoliberalism, such as intensified competition and the emergence of social losers, has clearly played a significant role in the mainstreaming of populist parties. Consequently, populist parties have employed welfarism as a crucial strategy to secure the support of lower-class voters. Note that previous studies have not considered “support for welfarism” as a defining factor of populism because populist parties have previously endorsed neoliberalism and some populist parties have currently abandoned welfarechauvinism and re-adopted neoliberalism. Nonetheless, the mainstreaming of far-right populism in Western societies may be attributable to the potent combination of anger and animosity toward the Other (such as immigrants) coupled with promises of improved living conditions (welfarism).

Unlike Western countries that experienced the rise of populism, South Korea has not experienced the emergence of a populist party or leader. Considering the negative implications of populism, South Korea may find solace in its immunity to this phenomenon. Existing studies of populism in South Korea have consistently recognized the lack of populist parties and thus focus on the populist attitudes of voters. Interestingly, these studies concur that South Korean voters generally exhibit strong populist inclinations. However, the existing research is inconsistent in describing the specific socio-economic variables that are associated with these populist attitudes.

Ha (2016) measured the extent of populist tendencies among South Koreans by assessing individuals’ agreement with a set of statements, which focused on the concepts of “peoplecen-

trism” and “antipathy toward established politicians.” The analysis results revealed that populism is more prevalent among the older generation than among the younger generation. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of political literacy exhibited stronger populist inclinations. Populist voters in South Korea exhibited opposition to the policies implemented during the Park Geun-hye administration and simultaneously expressed support for welfarism initiatives, including the taxation of the wealthy, an increase in the minimum wage, and the implementation of a basic income system.

Jung and Do (2021) explored the attitudes of Korean voters toward populism, focusing on perceptions of the political order (acceptance of representative politics) and perceptions of the people (acceptance of individualism). The findings indicated that individuals in their 40s and 50s, along with the working class, play a pivotal role in shaping populism within the South Korean context. Moreover, the study revealed that populism garners substantial support from contract workers and those with low incomes. The research also highlighted the strong inclination of South Korean populists toward expanding social welfare programs and exerting control over inflation. Furthermore, the authors determined that during the 21st general election in 2020, populist voters expressed their support in the following order: the Democratic Party (liberal), the People Power Party (conservative), and the Justice Party (progressive).

Hur (2022) examined the populist attitudes in South Korea by analyzing a pre-election poll preceding the 2022 presidential election. The study focused on three key dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and binary worldview. The findings indicated a pronounced inclination toward populism among South Korean voters. Furthermore, individuals with higher populist orientation tended to favor referendums over government or parliamentary decisions and advocated for the increased influence of experts. The author argued that the existing party politics

in South Korea has consistently prioritized populist mobilization as its primary strategy, thereby leaving limited space for the emergence of new populist parties.

Although previous studies have claimed a clear presence of populism among South Koreans, the correlations between populism and factors such as age, class, and ideological orientation vary across surveys. Populist attitudes often align with anti-ruling party sentiments and pro-opposition stances, possibly because anti-elitism is perceived as opposition to the ruling party rather than opposition to established politics as a whole. However, contradictorily, voters with strong populist attitudes were found to support established parties. Note also that certain major parties have utilized populist discourse during elections. The People's Power (conservative) has employed misogynistic and xenophobic rhetoric, whereas the Democratic Party (liberal) has advocated for welfare policies targeting the underprivileged, such as basic income. However, based on these limited characteristics, categorizing the major parties in South Korea as strictly populist is challenging; no new parties that strongly embody populist traits have currently emerged.

THE IMPACT OF ANTICOMMUNISM ON ANTI-POPULISM IN SOUTH KOREA

The prevalence of populism may be barely evident in South Korea, but anti-populism remains a significant aspect of everyday political discourse. In line with the observations made by Stavrakakis et al. (2017) regarding anti-populism in Western societies, anti-populism in South Korea operates as a discursive framework carrying various negative connotations; it is associated with notions of irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism. In the South Korean context, conservatives initially employed anti-populist discourse as a means to criticize the ruling party during the Kim Dae-jung administration (1988–2003), when the Democratic Party (lib-

eral) first came into power. The concept of anti-populism was fundamentally intertwined with the ideology of anticommunism and was frequently employed to criticize the expansion of welfare policies.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

After the 1945 War ended, anticommunism became deeply ingrained in South Korean society primarily owing to the political dominance established by the first president, Syngman Rhee, and his right-wing party (Shin 2019). In addition, under the military dictatorship, anticommunism evolved into a formidable tool for state control. Following the military coup in 1961, Park Chung-hee established his authoritarian rule that lasted until 1979, and under Park's regime, the consolidation of anticommunism became a prominent feature of the political landscape. The regime prioritized government-led economic development, resulting in remarkable achievements. Anticommunism, coupled with developmentalism, aimed to maximize efficiency and seek political stability through military-style mobilization.

Within the overarching framework of anticommunism, the perceived threat from communism justified the curtailment of certain freedoms and the suppression of democratic practices (Kim 2013). The intertwining of anticommunism and authoritarian rule during the 1960s and 1970s laid the foundation for the subsequent political landscape in South Korea. Accordingly, this era witnessed the consolidation of anticommunism as a dominant ideology, shaping various aspects of society and influencing the attitudes and practices of Korean politics (Kim 2013).

The post-democratization era in South Korea has seen the interplay between democratic reforms and the persistence of anticommunist sentiments. The democratization process in 1987 entailed the revision of the Constitution and the introduction of democratic elections, paving the way for a more participatory and representative political system. However, despite these democratic reforms, certain elements of anticommun-

nism remained intact, particularly the National Security Law (NSL). The NSL continued to be enforced in the post-democratization period, albeit with varying degrees of controversy. One notable incident that brought attention to the NSL occurred when Song Doo-ryul, a Korean-German professor at Münster University, was indicted for violating the law and subsequently sentenced to seven years in prison. This case reignited the debates surrounding the NSL and its implications for the freedom of expression in South Korean society (Seo 2007).

In 2012, South Korea witnessed the election of President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former President Park Chung-hee, re-establishing the significance of anticommunism in Korean society. As the heir to Park Chung-hee's conservative political legacy, President Park Geun-hye represented the continuation of this tradition closely tied to anticommunism. Notably, she became the first democratically elected president in South Korea's history to face impeachment.¹ The fall of Park Geun-hye not only underscored the intricate link between anticommunism and political leadership but also revealed the broader challenges and complexities within South Korean democracy. Conservative factions opposing her imprisonment organized large-scale protests, known as national flag rallies, which sparked a widespread grassroots mobilization centered around anticommunism.

The enduring presence of anticommunism can undoubtedly be attributed to the inter-Korean context of confrontation. In South Korea, the North Korean regime and the conservative political party have a longstanding and complex relationship. This relationship has often resulted in a hostile symbiosis, where both entities benefit from the perpetuation of an antagonistic narrative. The actions of North Korea, such as sporadic military provocations and nuclear bomb

tests, have had a significant impact on South Korean politics by providing an opportunity for conservative parties to capitalize on concerns about national security. This has allowed them to present themselves as strong and resolute in response to the threats posed by North Korea (Ryoo 2005).

ANTICOMMUNISM TRANSFORMED INTO ANTI-POPULISM

The concept of populism, with its pejorative connotations, has been used particularly often in the context of criticizing the leadership of former presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) of the Democratic Party of Korea. Although neither of these presidents had a support base that could be called populist, at the time, populism came to mean a political group that gained power by inciting the masses, similar to communism, and the group was criticized for introducing policies that catered to irrational and impulsive sentiments. Lee (2015) noted that anti-populism operated in close association with anticommunism, as conservative political forces maintained their hegemony by constantly reminding the South Korean society of the anticommunist discipline while characterizing the opposition as populist.

In South Korea, conservative politicians have been vocal in expressing their concerns about populist policies and their potential impact on the country's democratic institutions and fiscal stability. Chang (2020) provided insights into conservative discourse on anti-populism in South Korea. Critics of populism contend that it poses a threat to South Korean democracy, as it enables political parties to exploit institutions for their own political agendas. They further express concern that populist policies may be implemented without adequate deliberation of their long-term consequences or financial viability. In particular, conservatives argue that certain populist measures could potentially result in the economic bankruptcy or downfall of South Korea. For instance, the introduction of policies such as free school meals and free medical care

1 Following her impeachment, she received a 24-year prison sentence on charges of corruption and abuse of power.

has been equated to the situation in Greece, where excessive welfare policies allegedly contributed to economic instability.

Conservatives have also expressed concerns about the expansion of civil servant employment, cautioning that it could lead to wasteful spending on unnecessary positions, often referred to as “ghost civil servants.” Likewise, reducing the military service period has been framed as a populist move aimed at securing youth votes rather than considering national security interests. Furthermore, populism has been characterized as a pathological phenomenon. The *Chosun Ilbo*, a prominent conservative newspaper, has highlighted that individuals in lower socio-economic positions have become accustomed to the allure of receiving free benefits. These points collectively indicate that populism erodes the fundamental principles of representative democracy. Overall, the argument asserts that populism burdens future generations with unsustainable welfare policies, fosters corruption by endorsing entitlement to free welfare, disrupts equitable opportunities in education, discourages students from pursuing higher education, weakens the stable alliance between the United States and South Korea, and diminishes vigilance regarding North Korea.

The practice of labeling and criticizing political opponents as populist is not limited to conservative political forces alone. Populism has been employed by numerous major political parties as a strategy to discredit their opponents. The Democratic Party has also actively utilized this concept to criticize conservative parties. The policies implemented during the administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), such as support for lower-income groups, college tuition assistance, and housing subsidies, faced criticism and were labeled as populist. Moreover, the number of political actors employing the term populist to label their opposition has increased, and the range of subjects and targets of these attacks has diversified. During the administrations of

Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the discourse against populism was primarily generated by conservative political parties and conservative media. However, gradually, local governments, civil organizations, and ordinary citizens also adopted the concept of populism as a rhetorical tool for criticism. Do and Jin (2020) highlighted that this proliferation of anti-populism has hindered the objective evaluation of specific policies and has fostered an escalation of cynical criticism.

In 2023, the Nursing Act and the Grain Management Act, proposed by the opposition, the Democratic Party, and successfully passed with majority in the National Assembly, were vetoed by President Yoon. President Yoon had expressed criticism toward both bills, labeling them as populist measures that could potentially harm the healthcare industry and agriculture. However, the two bills clearly aimed to safeguard the interests of nurses and farmers, respectively, and there is no logical basis to consider them as populist policies. These instances exemplify how populism is currently employed in South Korea as a means of criticizing political opponents without genuinely reflecting any notion of people.

DISCUSSION: NO POPULISM, ONLY ANTI-POPULISM?

This study aims to develop a tentative argument suggesting that the combination of anti-populism, anticommunism, and anti-welfarism poses challenges to the emergence of populist political parties in South Korea. In other words, the prevalence of anti-populism in South Korea has effectively hindered the formation of a widespread mobilization against neoliberalism. This anti-populism, particularly in the South Korean context, elucidates the scarcity of comparable examples found in Europe and the United States, where far-right populism has successfully utilized rhetoric to incite workers and low-income individuals, regardless of the feasibility of welfare policies.

Numerous existing studies have examined populism from two distinct perspectives: the demand side, which focuses on the populist attitudes of voters, and the supply side, which pertains to populist parties. Within the specific context of South Korea, prior research has consistently argued that although the demand for populism is high, populist parties remain absent. In this regard, this study posits that the concepts of supply and demand do not adequately capture the intricacies of the relationship between political parties and voters. Paradoxically, despite possessing strong populist attitudes, voters in South Korea continue to support mainstream parties that criticize populism. A more comprehensive analysis is imperative to thoroughly understand the contextual factors contributing to this distinctive configuration.

The rapid surge of right-wing parties in the West can be attributed to their successful mobilization of the discontent of the marginalized individuals in an intensely competitive society, where only a select few emerge as winners. The populist discourse employed by these parties encompasses a vision of improving the welfare of ordinary citizens and promising a brighter future that surpasses their present circumstances. The absence of supply-side populism in South Korea can be attributed to the fact that no political party has actively pursued this strategy. From the demand perspective, the presence of anti-populism appears to have hindered the formation of a coherent anti-elitist sentiment among voters. Anti-populism has been wielded as a tool to foster political polarization and to prevent the perception of the established political forces as unified, corrupt, and inept elite.

If a political party, including a conservative one, strategically employs welfarism to appeal to the socially disadvantaged, who are likely to hold discontent toward the prevailing system, the party would acquire substantial influence in South Korea. Not surprisingly, the discourse of far-right populist parties in the West often revolves around superficial objectives that can easily be

associated with hateful sentiments rather than around concrete policies. However, even at the level of rhetoric, in Korean society, political discourse that addresses the discontent and suffering of the underprivileged is not being effectively utilized as a means for widespread mobilization.

Only few political parties or political leaders in South Korea openly identify themselves as representing the interests of ordinary people against the established order. In relation to this phenomenon, this study offers a tentative argument that the rise of anti-populism has constrained parties from adopting populist strategies. Anti-populism has thus prevented right-wing political forces from utilizing welfarism as a feasible option. However, presenting definitive evidence that the impact of anti-populism as a discourse has effectively curbed the emergence of populist parties and political leaders is still challenging. In particular, conducting empirical research through surveys or interviews focused on anti-populism appears to pose significant methodological difficulties.

Therefore, a more thorough examination of the impact of anti-populism in the South Korean society is essential. Precise conceptualizations of populism and anti-populism within the context of South Korea need to be established. In addition, other factors that might have hindered the rise of populist parties should be taken into consideration. For instance, the media's promotion of admiration for the rich and privileged instead of their criticism of social inequality might have inhibited the full expression of populist attitudes within the electorate. Moreover, South Korea's electoral system, in which winning seats is challenging for small parties, could have impeded the emergence of new populist parties and leaders. Alongside these factors, a comprehensive examination of the mechanisms through which anti-populism operates in South Korea is crucial. Such analysis will contribute to the ongoing research on anti-populism in general and provide a deeper understanding of this unique political phenomenon in South Korea.

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NO POPULISM IN JAPAN? OR MISMATCH BETWEEN POPULIST SUPPLY AND DEMAND?

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CONCEPTUALIZING POPULISM

With populist political parties and leaders becoming increasingly prominent in many parts of the globe in recent years, much literature on populism has emerged. Debates surrounding the conceptualization of populism have continued (e.g., Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Hawkins 2009; Mudde 2004; Weyland 2001). Some scholars define populism as an approach or style toward democracy. Akkerman et al. (2014) list the core aspects of populism: 1) emphasizing popular sovereignty; 2) distrusting elites; and 3) seeing the world in terms of good vs. evil and rejecting compromise.

Although populism has been referred to as a style of communication (Jagers and Walgrave 2007) or a political strategy (Weyland 2001), I follow Hawkins (2010, 5) in conceptualizing it as a “set of political ideas” about how political power should be structured and allocated. An often-cited definition of populism posits that it is a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2007, 23).

Few would dispute that popular sovereignty is a central aspect of democracy, but the populist understanding thereof contains an additional key element that “the people” are inherently good and pure.¹ This is often accompanied by an assumption about the homogeneity of “the people,”

which distinguishes them from outsiders. According to populists, the virtuous majority of “the people” underpins any society (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004; Zaslove 2008), but they are exploited by corrupt elites.

Particularly germane to this study is the relationship between populism and left-right ideology. Mudde (2004, 544) argues that populism is a “thin-centred ideology” that can be deployed in the service of either rightist or leftist ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). In other words, populism itself does not occupy a distinct position along the left-right spectrum; instead, it is “an empty box waiting to be filled with programmatic substance” (Hawkins et al. 2012). Furthermore, Akkerman et al. (2014) describe two types of populism: a more exclusive right-wing populism mobilizing support based on identity and a more inclusive left-wing populism that makes economic appeals. A similar distinction is made by Hellman (2017) when discussing populism in Asia—a distinction between one type focusing on socio-economic issues and another rooted in xenophobia.

(NO) POPULISM IN JAPAN

Given that most literature on populism is theoretically and empirically based on Western European and South American experiences, one may ask whether the same explanatory framework applies to Asian cases. Although some Asian leaders have been labeled as populists, many of them do not fit all the characteristics listed in the previous section. Hellmann (2017) points out that populist leaders in Asia tend to target specific institutions or actors rather than the political system as a whole, in part because some of these leaders themselves have an establishment background. Moreover, owing to the absence of a salient class

1 Please refer to the contribution by Joohyung Kim for further discussions about how scholars have used—and misused—the concept of “the people.”

cleavage and the historical weakness of the left in most Asian societies (often suppressed by former right-wing authoritarian regimes), a criticism of wealthy elite is less politically potent in Asian societies than in Europe and Latin America.

Many Western authoritarian populist parties and leaders claim to defend traditional values, often framed in ethno-nationalist or religious terms, to mobilize previously dominant segments of the population that have experienced, or at least feel threatened by, a relative decline in status. Those with authoritarian mindsets tend to look askance at gender equality, secularization, and minority rights. However, these changes have not progressed as far in Asia as in the West; for instance, even in the economically developed Japan and South Korea, the gender wage gap remains far larger than in most fellow OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; a group comprising developed economies) members. The persistence of traditional values across much of Asia obviates the need to defend them and deprives authoritarian populists of a potential rallying cry.

Although religion is far less salient a factor in Japan than in Western Europe and Latin America, Lind (2018) applies the above argument to explain the absence of successful populist parties or leaders by pointing to Japan's "strikingly illiberal" policies on both trade and immigration. By deterring foreign competition, these policies ensure job security for workers in agriculture and manufacturing, which in other advanced countries have become economically vulnerable and susceptible to populist backlash. Highly restrictive immigration and refugee policies have resulted in a low proportion of foreigners, which in turn mitigates the fear of and resistance to multiculturalism as a means of authoritarian populist mobilization.²

2 However, this has not stopped the vilification of minorities, especially ethnic Koreans (*zainichi*), as well as the opposition to enfranchising permanent residents for local elections.

Another trigger of populist backlash, socio-economic inequality, may also be less salient in Japan. Japan is not immune to the global trend of a widening wealth gap. As the assets of the wealthy and compensation for high-level executives increased during the past decade, real wages stagnated. Nevertheless, these objective conditions, seemingly ripe for populist mobilization, did not generate widespread dissatisfaction or electorally hurt the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). One explanation here lies in the subjective assessments: 50 % of the respondents to a 1965 Cabinet Office survey identified themselves as middle class, whereas the equivalent figures are 53.7 % in 1985, 54.2 % in 2005, and 56.6 % in 2014.³ In short, the hollowing out of the middle class has not been extensively *felt* by the citizenry. Among the G7 countries, Japan had the smallest percentage of citizens in 2018 who believed they are worse off than twenty years ago.

In sum, the absence of conspicuous economic and cultural disparities constricts the possibilities of a populist backlash in Japan. The effects of low immigration and low (perceived) inequality are accompanied by limited liberal social changes. For example, among the G7 countries, only Japan denies legal recognition to same-sex couples. Furthermore, whereas populism thrives on polarization, only few issues in Japanese politics are persistently polarizing. Antagonism toward China or South Korea pervades certain far-right niches, but these views neither directly nurture nationalism (Kuwamura and Iwabuchi 2022) nor constitute a salient political cleavage. This is reinforced by the print media not covering or sensationalizing news in a way that populists can leverage (Steel and Kohama 2022).

3 During this half-century span, the percentage of the population that self-identified as upper/upper-middle class rose from 7.9 % to 13.6 %, whereas the proportion of lower/lower-middle class people declined from 37.6 % to 28.7 %.

POPULIST LEADERS IN JAPAN

Having discussed the demand-side factors influencing the potential for populism in Japan, I now turn to the supply side—that is, political actors. One feature that distinguishes populism in Japan from its European manifestation is the centrality of individual leaders. Lindgren (2015) posits that populists in Japan should be classified at the level of politicians rather than parties and cites the cases of Koizumi Junichiro, Ishihara Shintaro, and Hashimoto Toru as examples of “a wave of populists” since the 2000s. Yoshida (2020) adds Tanaka Yasuo, Kawamura Takashi, and Koike Yuriko to the list. Importantly, as noted in Axel Klein’s contribution to this volume, politicians have been labeled as populist based on randomly selected statements rather than systematic analysis, and no standard exists with which one can measure who qualifies as populist.

Note that most of these politicians have achieved their most prominent offices (1) as independent candidates rather than party nominees, even though some have long had party affiliations, and (2) at the sub-national level, even though some have served or would subsequently serve as Diet members. Indeed, Yoshida (2020) elucidates the latter point by detailing the structural conflicts between prefectural governors and assemblies, which do not exist at the central level; further, Hieda et al. (2021) posit that local politics offers more fertile ground for anti-establishment sentiments.

One early study on populism in Japan enumerates the following defining characteristics: (1) being a political outsider, (2) espousing a good vs. evil rhetoric, and (3) appealing to the public in theatrical style (Otake 2003). Note that the second characteristic on this list overlaps with the general definition given by Mudde, who also proposed the first point as a secondary quality of populism. Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals that the label of political outsider does not fit some of the best-known populists. For ex-

ample, Koizumi, Ishihara, and Koike served as cabinet ministers before achieving top national or prefectural executive positions. Each spent decades as part of the political establishment before taking a populist turn. The most obvious difference from populists in Europe—though similar to many in Latin America—lies in the fact that the Japanese examples listed here all successfully attained power.

Each of these leaders identified an enemy and campaigned against it—for example, Koizumi against LDP factional bosses and later the publicly owned postal service, Tanaka against public development projects (especially dams), and Hashimoto against the bureaucracy, including public sector unions. Whereas claiming to speak for the ordinary people against a powerful and self-interested elite is characteristic of populists, these examples show a pattern of targeting specific actors or institutions rather than the political system as a whole (Lindgren 2015). Indeed, persistently targeting a specific political or institutional “enemy” appears to qualify a politician as populist. The “theatrical style” can be compared with the charismatic leadership of populist parties noted in several European studies; however, with the notable exception of Koizumi, all of the aforementioned populists won sub-national executive office as nominal independents rather than party leaders (some went on to found their own parties). This reinforces the focus of scholars examining populism in Japan on individual actors rather than parties.

Another feature common to political actors identified as populist in Japan lies in their economic philosophy. Whether and how populist radical right parties in Europe adapted to a more pro-welfare—i.e., leftist—economic stance has been a topic of scholarly debate (Enggist and Pinggera 2022; Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022; Rovny and Polk 2020). By contrast, Yoshida (2020) draws attention to the pro-business orientation of populists in Japan, as exemplified by Koizumi’s drive to privatize postal services. Hashimoto famously battled public servants in

Osaka, and Kawamura heads a “tax reduction party” in Nagoya. This neoliberal proclivity appears all the more surprising given that there has never been a leftist national government that would present a ready target for right-wing populist criticism; nor is Japan’s level of public spending high compared with most other developed economies.

The pro-business platform advocated by Japanese populists naturally affects the type of voters they attract. Literature on authoritarian populist parties in Europe profiles typical supporters as losers of globalization and economic modernization (Kitschelt 1995; Kriesi et al. 2006) who are aggrieved by growing income inequality. Studies have also consistently revealed a significant negative relationship between education and voting for authoritarian populist parties. Unlike those of their European counterparts, however, the neoliberal messages of populist leaders in Japan resonate more with the economic interests of wealthy and well-educated voters. One can thus expect the socio-demographic correlates of populist attitudes in Japan to differ from those identified in the literature.

Yoshida (2020) asserts that Japan has only seen neoliberal populism and not the culturally authoritarian variety. Populist leaders have denounced waste and corruption and have championed a smaller, leaner state. At the same time, some of their most controversial acts do not involve economic policy. Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where Class A war criminals are enshrined, Hashimoto’s statements downplaying the wartime comfort women issue, Koike’s refusal to send an eulogy commemorating the killing of ethnic Koreans during the 1923 Kanto earthquake, Kawamura’s denial of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, and Ishihara’s decision to purchase the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, long disputed between China and Japan, all suggest sympathy with the historical revisionism associated with the extreme right. Here, one can detect parallels with (ethnic) nationalist rhetoric utilized by radical right parties in Europe.

POPULIST PARTIES IN JAPAN

An instructive study by Hieda et al. (2021) investigates voting behavior in the 2017 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election, in which recently elected governor Koike, who won office through the good vs. evil rhetoric, fielded candidates from a party she established called Tokyoites First. Surprisingly, the authors’ survey analysis reveals that populist attitudes did not predict support for this party. On the popular sovereignty dimension, Tokyoites First voters did not significantly differ from the backers of several other parties as well as abstainers; on the anti-elite dimension, Tokyoite First voters scored higher than those who voted for the LDP but lower than Japanese Communist Party (JCP) supporters. Consequently, the authors assert that populist attitudes are not related to support for populist parties in East Asia.

If true, this conclusion begs the question of whether the indices used to measure populist attitudes are universally valid, a point also discussed in Axel Klein’s contribution. Jungkunz et al. (2021) posit that “it is questionable whether populism can be measured in an invariant manner across cultures.” The absent link between the demand and supply sides of populism may be attributable more to the latter than to the former. In other words, although beliefs about popular sovereignty and an intrinsic elite-mass conflict are shared across different parts of the world, the aggregation of such beliefs by political actors/entrepreneurs follows divergent channels, as the nature of party competition and the design of electoral rules augment or limit opportunities for the mobilization of populist sentiments.

Although numerous populist politicians have emerged from within the LDP, the party itself tries to make broad appeals to the electorate, which necessarily entail policy compromises and shades of gray incompatible with populists’ Manichean worldview. Moreover, the LDP’s continuous hold on the reins of power endows it

with an elite status (Fahey et al. 2020), rendering it more likely to be the target rather than the source of populist criticism. The factionalized nature of and stress on seniority within the party present high barriers for populist politicians to rise to the leadership. With the singular exception of Koizumi, no LDP leader has been identified as populist in the party's nearly seven-decade history.⁴ Applying the populist stamp on Abe Shinzo is a misnomer, as he was the epitome of the political establishment and did not present himself as an outsider.

Among the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and its current successors, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), and the Democratic Party for the People, none have presented themselves as populists. Although the DPJ pledged in the 2009 lower house election to vest decision-making authority in elected politicians rather than unelected bureaucrats, and was seen as attacking the civil service, this was aimed at improving representative democracy rather than supplementing or substituting it with direct popular sovereignty. Thus, it was a defender, not challenger, of democratic checks and balances (Fahey et al. 2020). The DPJ had long attempted to project an image of being compatible with, and sufficiently competent to operate, the existing political system instead of seeking to replace any fundamental pillars thereof. Descriptions of the DPJ as populist, often by its opponents, have focused on criticisms of its redistribution proposals, including agricultural subsidies and the partial abolition of expressway tolls, which were unrelated to popular sovereignty or anti-elite attitudes.

Ishin no kai (Japan Innovation Party) seems to come closest to being a populist party—as a brainchild of the maverick Hashimoto, who wrested the Osaka mayor's seat from an incumbent backed by both the LDP and DPJ. While ini-

tially riding on the coattails of its founder, Ishin no kai has continued to grow since Hashimoto's retirement. The party has campaigned as a "third pole" competing against the two major parties (and the DPJ's successors), and its promises to streamline bureaucracy and drastically reduce the size of the Diet give its platform an anti-elite character. Referendums on the party's signature "Osaka Metropolitan Plan" in 2015 and 2020, while narrowly failing both times, signaled Ishin no kai's commitment to popular sovereignty. However, the party has only won executive positions (governor, mayor) and single-member constituencies in the Kansai region, and it remains to be seen how much it can appeal to populist-minded voters in the rest of the country.

For decades, the mantle of anti-establishment, and anti-system, standard-bearer has belonged to the JCP, the most consistent and vociferous critic of the long-ruling LDP. As mentioned above, JCP supporters score highly on popular sovereignty and anti-elite measures. Although this finding was from the 2017 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election, such beliefs are likely characteristic of JCP supporters across the country. However, neither the party's platform nor its supporters' attitudes suggest a Manichean outlook; in fact, they lean toward greater respect for pluralism. Moreover, JCP's organizational structure resembles the mass party model, and the fact that it has been a fixture on the political scene since the end of World War II⁵ has deprived it of both a fresh image and claims to outsider status.

Note a few minor parties that have been labeled as populist, such as the NHK party⁶ and Reiwa

4 Otake (2003) labeled former LDP Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei an "interest-led populist," but he would be better described as a pork-barrel politician *par excellence*.

5 The JCP was established in 1922 but was forced to operate underground before the war.

6 NHK stands for Nippon Hoso Kyokai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). The NHK Party, campaigning against license fees for the NHK, has changed its name repeatedly. It was officially registered as the NHK Party for the most recent nationwide election, the 2022 upper house election.

Shinsengumi. The platforms of these parties and the anti-establishment rhetoric of their leaders arguably match the definition of populism better than the larger parties discussed above, but neither has garnered more than 5 % of the vote in national elections. The same can be said of the latest minor force to gain a parliamentary foothold—the “Do It Yourself” party (Sanseito), whose anti-globalization and anti-immigrant platforms align with those of authoritarian populist parties in Europe.

ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC OPINION

To investigate populist attitudes among the Japanese public, I utilize two surveys designed and administered by a team led by Dr. Airo Hino on the occasions of the two most recent nationwide polls, namely the October 2021 House of Representatives and the July 2022 House of Councilors elections.⁷ They include an identical battery of thirteen questions, derived from those used in previous works examining populism, and are one of the first attempts to systematically measure populist sentiments in Japan. The questions are as follows:

- 1 Members of Parliament should follow the will of ordinary people
- 2 The most important policies should be decided by ordinary people rather than politicians
- 3 The difference in thinking between politicians and ordinary people is larger than the differences in thinking among people
- 4 I want my voice represented by ordinary citizens rather than politicians
- 5 Elected representatives are all talk, no action
- 6 What is called “compromise” in politics is really betraying one’s principles

- 7 Newspapers and television stations are biased, and they do not convey the truth that people should know
- 8 Scholars and experts isolated from the people and do not know what is going on in the country
- 9 Bureaucrats only pay attention to the vested interests of certain groups; they do not work for the people’s benefit
- 10 Corporate leaders cannot be trusted because they lack concern for their employees and customers
- 11 The country is divided between ordinary people and the elites who exploit the people
- 12 No matter how many votes politicians win, it is not good for them to exercise power in any way they like
- 13 Political leaders only represent the popular will, and it is undemocratic to restrict the implementation of the popular will

Factor analysis reveals two distinct components on which responses to the above questions load. The first four items reflect the idea of popular sovereignty, or a preference for direct rather than representative democracy, as political representatives are perceived as being distant from the daily lives and concerns of ordinary citizens. Items 5–13 capture the distrust toward elites, including not only politicians but also civil servants, business leaders, and academic experts, whose interests are seen as divergent from, and even antithetical to, those of ordinary citizens. From this viewpoint, elites inherently seek to exploit the people, so their power must be constrained. These two components correspond to what has been theorized in the literature and are labeled “popular sovereignty” and “anti-elite,” respectively. While correlated and often overlapping, they constitute analytically distinct concepts and will be discussed separately below using indices that are standardized on a five-point scale, with higher scores denoting stronger populist beliefs.

7 I am grateful to Dr. Hino for kindly making the data available for my use. Any errors are my sole responsibility.

The socio-demographic correlates of populist attitudes reveal clear differences between the two aforementioned components. Whereas younger respondents are significantly more inclined to emphasize popular sovereignty, distrust of elites increases with age. Women are more likely to embrace popular sovereignty. Less educated respondents are more likely to espouse anti-elite sentiments, and higher earnings are negatively correlated with anti-elite views.

One counter-intuitive finding is that respondents reporting greater political interest are significantly more populist. This is accounted for by the curvilinear nature of the relationship: respondents reporting the greatest and least level of political interest are characterized by markedly higher scores on both populist components. Further, the respondents saying they are “very interested” in politics far outnumber those who are “not interested at all.”

Not surprisingly, low political satisfaction and negative evaluations of incumbent governments (referring to the Abe and Suga administrations in the 2021 survey and the Kishida administration in 2022) have higher populist scores. The correlation is more substantive on anti-elite views than on popular sovereignty and was stronger in 2022 than in 2021. The association with populism is somewhat weaker with respect to respondents’ assessment on their quality of life compared with one year ago: those who feel their life has become worse score higher on the anti-elite scale, probably driven by perceptions that while elites continue to prosper, the rest of society is increasingly lagging behind. The correlations between quality of life and popular sovereignty are modest.

Two items in the survey questionnaire try to locate respondents within the political space: one is the right vs. left scale (in Japan, the words “conservative” and “liberal” are used), and the other presents a spectrum between emphases on social protection and the market. The correlation between conventional ideological

self-placements and populist attitudes became stronger between 2021 and 2022 and that between economic self-placements and populist attitudes was consistently significant. In line with the literature on populist leaders’ appeals in Latin America, and the shift in the economic positions of authoritarian populist parties in Europe, respondents placing greater emphasis on social protection score higher on both components. Intriguingly, populists are inclined to the left, or liberal, side of the spectrum, in contrast to findings from several advanced democracies where populism is associated with right-leaning voters.

The questionnaire does not contain any items on nationalism, but other surveys in Japan show that, similar to other countries, national pride is linked to rightist orientations. We can thus deduce that the nationalist, even xenophobic, element that marks populists in Europe does not appear as characteristic of their Japanese counterparts, at least with respect to domestic politics, as immigration is not a salient issue owing to the relatively small presence of foreigners in Japan and the country’s strict policy toward outsiders. However, this conjecture awaits empirical confirmation.

The association between populist attitudes and preferences for the left and welfare policies is particularly noteworthy in view of the preceding descriptions of populist leaders in Japan, as they all advocate a reduced state role in the economy and most of them originated from the conservative side of politics. This points to a striking incompatibility between populist leaders promoting a free-market, right-wing (sometimes explicitly nationalist) agenda and a populist segment of the electorate harboring liberal, pro-welfare sentiments.

Confirming this leftist inclination are significant correlations between scores on the popular sovereignty dimension and a perception of the ideological and economic positions of most political parties as right-leaning. For example, the

more respondents espouse populist attitudes, the further they place not only the LDP and its long-time coalition partner Komeito but also the opposition CDP and the communists toward the conservative and pro-market ends of the spectra. That is, the adherents of popular sovereignty in Japan tend to see the entire party system as skewed toward the right.

By contrast, we observe considerable variation in the relationship between scores on the anti-elite component and perceived party positions. Although high scorers on this dimension are more likely to place the LDP and Komeito toward the conservative and pro-market pole, and (correctly) see *Ishin no kai* as favorable to the free market, there is often no consistently significant relationship with regard to the perceived positions of other parties, such as the CDP and the People's Party. Respondents embracing anti-elite views are more likely to identify the JCP as leftist and/or more pro-welfare, although the effect is mostly found only in the 2022 survey.

To further explore this issue, I classify respondents with a score of 4 and above on the five-point scales as populists. Compared with the remainder of the sample, the respondents in this group (comprising slightly over one-third of the respondents in both surveys) place themselves further to the liberal and pro-welfare ends of the ideological and economic spectra. Furthermore, the gap between the populist and non-populist groups on both dimensions widened from 2021 to 2022—not because the latter moved to the right but because of a notable leftward shift among the former.

This brings us back to the question of the supply side of politics—namely, which parties (if any) serve as a receptacle for populist attitudes. Instead of relying on questions probing respondents' actual voting behaviors, I use generic questions asking their likelihood of voting for each party in the future. This allows us to discern views on the parties in general rather than

on specific politicians or issues salient only in the short term. Based on the aforementioned liberal, pro-welfare inclinations characterizing populist voters, one would predict that they are more likely to cast their ballots for parties seen as leftist. Some evidence does suggest this, but the most important finding is that on both components and in both survey years, the LDP emerges as the most preferred party. Populists have a significantly lower propensity to back the LDP than non-populists, but they are still more likely to support it than any of its competitors. Thus, even though populists are far from keen on the LDP, none of the other parties have successfully tapped into populist sentiments.

Another striking finding is the distinction between the two populist components. Whereas populists on the popular sovereignty component are distinguished from the rest of the sample with regard to the likelihood of supporting almost every party, such differences are much smaller and rarely significant between the high and low scorers on the anti-elite component. Note, however, that those who distrust elites the most are significantly less prepared to support the LDP and Komeito. By contrast, in both 2021 and 2022, those who emphasize decision-making by ordinary citizens instead of politicians are more inclined to vote for the CDP, JCP, or *Reiwa Shinsengumi*. *Ishin no kai* is indeed held in somewhat higher regard among respondents with high scores on the popular sovereignty component, but the difference is relatively small.

The popular sovereignty component is shown to be more imbued with partisanship, with divergent opinions toward almost all political parties between high and low scorers, than the anti-elite component. One can consider the individual trees when comparing the likelihood of populists and non-populists voting for each party, but a wider view of the entire forest leads to a conclusion: a politically viable force that resonates with the segment of the electorate embracing populist beliefs has yet to emerge, leaving the LDP as a default option that many populists con-

tinue—albeit far from enthusiastically—to write on their ballot papers. *Ishin no kai* has become a force to be reckoned with not only in the Kansai region but also on the national stage, facilitated by its outsider appeal and anti-establishment rhetoric, but I find little evidence that its national success has primarily been built on mobilizing populist sentiments.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This paper has attempted to provide a brief review of the vast literature on populism and then discuss its applicability in the Japanese context. I summarized several arguments on why populism has played a less prominent role in Japan, such as the limited extent of societal changes (e.g., immigration, gender equality) that have triggered a backlash in other advanced democracies. This is followed by descriptions of recent populist political leaders and appraisals of how various parties fit (or do not fit) the populist label. I then utilized two surveys from the early 2020s to probe the characteristics of citizens holding populist attitudes, organized around two empirically distinct components of populism: popular sovereignty and anti-elite views. After exploring the socio-demographic and ideological correlates of populist voters, I tested their patterns of partisan support.

Similar to the results reported in other countries, populist sentiments in Japan are more prevalent among survey respondents expressing low levels of political satisfaction. However, greater interest in politics is associated with higher populist scores on both the popular sovereignty and anti-elite components (though a curvilinear pattern exists). Both of these effects remain consistently significant in multi-variate regression tests. The regression results also reveal that negative assessments of the incumbent government drove both components of populism in 2021 but only the anti-elite component in 2022.

With respect to socio-demographic variables, multi-variate regression tests reveal that

younger respondents prefer decision-making by ordinary citizens rather than politicians, although age makes no difference on distrust of elites. In marked contrast to findings from other countries, females score higher than males on both components of populism, particularly on popular sovereignty. The negative relationship between education and populist views is only significant on the anti-elite component. Controlling for other factors, household income becomes insignificant, suggesting that populism in Japan is not predicated on economic or class cleavages.

One central conclusion from this preliminary study is the paradox that although the survey respondents with high populist scores are less enamored of the LDP than the rest of the sample, they nevertheless are more willing to back this long-ruling party than any of the alternatives. Several opposition parties, particularly the CDP, JCP, and Reiwa Shinsengumi, attract populist voters, but foreseeing the circumstances under which any of these parties (or a coalition between them) could ride a wave of populism to power is difficult.

Nevertheless, these opposition parties can be categorized as belonging to a progressive camp. Citizens with higher populist scores are found to hold liberal and (especially) pro-welfare preferences, whereas political actors who have been labeled populist have almost invariably hailed from the conservative, pro-market side of the spectrum. This apparent mismatch between the demand and supply sides may offer one explanation on why populist citizens do not vote for populist parties (Hieda et al. 2021) and why populism has so far “missed” Japan (Lind 2018). In view of this incongruence, and taking into account the limited extent of liberal changes in Japanese society compared with other advanced industrialized countries, one can predict that the populist backlash that has posed a challenge to many democracies in recent years is unlikely to confront the Japanese political system.

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POPULISM IN JAPAN. HOW TO LOOK FOR AND MEASURE IT

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INTRODUCTION

Japan, like the other two East Asian democracies South Korea and Taiwan, has not been in the focus of international populism research. This may seem odd given that the country is Asia's oldest democracy and is economically very successful. This paper does not aim to speculate about the reasons for this academic neglect, but a few publications suggest that it may be because there is nothing to see here, that Japan is generally "populist-free," or that it has erected a "firewall against populism" (Burrett 2018; Buruma 2019; Lind 2018).

However, a larger part of the pertinent academic literature has indeed identified populist actors in the country (e.g., Arima 2017; Eder-Ramsauer 2022; Hieda et al. 2019; Hijino and Vogt 2019; Matsutani 2022; Mizushima 2016; Ōtake 2003; Weathers 2014; Yakushiin 2017; Yoshida 2019). Moreover, not only scholars but also journalists have made this positive diagnosis. The liberal daily *Asahi* (Nov. 19, 2019), for example, referred to the then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō as a populist because "he kept referring to the years of the former Democratic Party of Japan administration as a 'nightmare'" and because he "ignored government's traditional interpretation of the Constitution in pushing his controversial national security legislation."

This paper takes a brief look at how populism is understood in the public and political domain in Japan and what characterizes (alleged) Japanese populists (Koizumi, Yamamoto, Hashimoto, and Koike). Finally, it presents a rough sketch of a new approach to searching for and identifying populist phenomena. Key to this approach is the systematic collection of data with a "fishing net" woven out of the three dominant populism con-

cepts (ideational, political-strategic, socio-cultural) and a measurement that takes local political culture and standards as its baseline.

IS THERE POPULISM IN JAPAN?

Like in most liberal democracies, in Japan, the public understanding of populism differs from concepts developed in political science. In general, the discourse in Japan's public and among politicians sees the label "populist" attached to actors who confront opponents as enemies (敵づくり, *teki zukuri*), use simple language, and, most of all, make "irresponsible" promises to voters and communicate in a "theatrical" way. The former of the last two characteristics is reflected in one of the Japanese translations of populism: 大衆迎合主義 (*taishū geigō shugi*, "pandering to the masses"). Any election promise of lower taxes, higher subsidies or wages, etc., can be criticized as populist.¹ The same is true for any form of political communication that deviates from standard practice. Politicians who talk differently during campaigns or press conferences are quickly labeled as populist if they attract attention and gain popularity with their communication style.

Given this public understanding of populism, one may ask: Where are "the people"? Of course, they are the target group of campaign promises and political communication; however, that in itself is not populism but a consequence of democratic logic. At this point, "the people" may be summarized as not being one of the three "p"s journalists, politicians, and consequently the public use

1 The Republican's claim of "fiscal irresponsibility" is a US-relative of this criticism.

as indicators for populist actors in Japan: polarization, performance, and popularity.

One example is Koizumi Jun'ichirō, who was prime minister from 2001 to 2006. Most of the literature, both journalistic and academic, has labeled him as populist because of his different leadership style, him being media savvy, his struggle against the conservative mainstream of his own Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and his reform project: postal privatization. The last point may make readers wonder why privatizing postal services would be a major political project of a populist. I suggest that the policy itself paled in comparison to the ensuing fight between Koizumi and his LDP opponents, a fight which by itself attracted the populist label. In addition, the "divergence" from standard political culture seems to be what in the eyes of many singled Koizumi out as a populist (cf. Ōtake 2006).

An attempt to apply one of the dominant populism concepts from political science, however, suggests that "populist" may not be an appropriate (academic) label for Koizumi. The political-strategic approach, for example, would require Koizumi to identify with the people, to rhetorically empower them, and to use the "populist twist."² However, finding sufficient positive evidence for any of these three criteria from any analysis of Koizumi would be difficult. The same is true for the "ideational approach": no radical antagonism between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite, no anti-pluralism, no illiberalism (Müller 2016), and no enemies of the people.

In the last few years, Yamamoto Tarō has occasionally been referred to as a left populist. The former actor turned politician after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant. After being

elected to the Upper House as an independent, he founded the party Reiwa Shinsengumi (RSG) in 2019.³ Over the last years, RSG has appealed to the public as the "sovereign of Japan" and particularly addressed those people who feel neglected or even pushed out by mainstream society and the state. One of the many claims of the party promises a "country in which money and love is not lacking." Another one quotes Yamamoto as saying, "I want to build a country in which you do not need to worry about anything."

Again, Yamamoto's unique style of communication, his media- and stage-savvy speeches, and his "mass opportunism" provoked the question: "Is populism finally coming to Japan?" (Minami 2019). But some key elements of academic concepts are missing: very little content complains about corrupt elite, "the people" are not homogeneous or virtuous, and middle-income households and better-off parts of society are not included in Yamamoto's rhetoric. He does not stage-manage himself as a populist leader, and there is no trace of illiberalism or anti-pluralism.⁴

Before Yamamoto founded RSG, two politicians from the prefectural level were occasionally identified as populists. Hashimoto Toru made a name for himself as a legal expert on TV before he successfully ran for mayor of Ōsaka city and later became governor of Ōsaka prefecture. His rhetorical style differed from the mainstream; he was clearly naming the institutions and people he considered to be slowing his reform projects down or were the cause of structural problems

2 Weyland explained the populist twist: "The typical populist move is to identify 'the people' with this leader – and then vest in the leader the power emanating from the people" (2019, 54).

3 *Reiwa* refers to the imperial era name of Emperor Naruhito (2019–). Shinsengumi (新選組) is a Kanji pun on a group of Samurai (新撰組) active in the late Edo period (1603–1868) (cf. Klein 2019).

4 Looking at Yamamoto through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's "discursive populism," the diagnosis turns positive (cf. Eder-Ramsauer 2022). This concept of populism, however, takes a very different perspective on social movements and considers populism as positive for democratic systems.

in the first place (labor unions, bureaucrats, the LDP, etc.). In comparison to the standard behavior of politicians, he would sometimes be perceived as aggressive in his criticism, and some of his remarks were categorized as nationalist both by journalists and academics. This resulted in him and his party “Reformation Alliance” (*Ishin no kai*) being labeled as “right-wing populists,” although the party program was not nationalist but neoliberal.

Like in the case of Koizumi, Hashimoto’s biggest reform project was put forward as evidence for his populist quality, and the fight over the administrative fusion of Ōsaka city and Ōsaka prefecture seemed to draw much more attention than the policy itself. Nevertheless, Hashimoto’s project would have turned Osaka into a similar administrative unit as Tokyo and as such can be understood as a form of “regional populism,” where the people of Osaka are facing the elite in Tokyo. When Hashimoto’s project failed and he resigned, the alleged populist character of the party disappeared. That, however, did not stop some observers from continuing to apply the populist label to the Reformation Alliance (Toda 2022).

The second politician to be labeled as populist on the prefectural level was Tokyo’s governor, Koike Yuriko. Koike had been a member of the LDP but left the party when she could not agree with her colleagues on who should be nominated for governor of Tokyo. After successfully running as an independent candidate, Koike founded the party “Tokyoites First” (*tomin fāsuto*) in 2016. Hieda et al. (2019) equate her criticism of the LDP with anti-elitism and interpret the party name as clear evidence of Koike’s populist appeal to “the people,” thus fulfilling key criteria of the ideational approach to populism. Referring to the strategic-political approach developed on the basis of cases in Latin America, Hieda et al. (2019, 5) also assess Koike’s attempt to “gain support from un-institutionalized and unorganized followers who were dismayed by the successive scandals of LDP politicians” as populist.

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND MEASURE POPULISM

The brief overview presented so far highlights the importance of a key component of populism research that is often overlooked not only in studies on East Asian democracies but also in general. Populist phenomena are implicitly identified based on their deviation from local political culture and standards. As these standards vary between world regions, the attempts to identify populism also produce diverging results. What is categorized as aggressive rhetoric by Japanese authors in Japan is very different from what American scholars see as aggressive rhetoric in their home country. The same is true for the line academics draw between political competition and radical antagonism, between appeals to voters and appeals to “the people,” and between the criticism of decision-makers and the fight against morally corrupt elite. Consequently, politicians such as Koizumi or Koike may be understood as populists by Japanese in Japan but hardly by American or European scholars working on their home regions.

The implicit baseline applied to the identification and labeling of potential populists adds to the creation of a phenomenon I call PINO or populist in name only. As long as the *degree* to which definitional elements of populism need to be present in the behavior and rhetoric of political actors remains unclear, miscategorization and “false positives” will continue to emerge (cf. Weyland 2017, 48, 53). The populism radar of scholars from the region under scrutiny should be ideally equipped to identify deviations from standards of political culture, but without explicitly explaining these standards, findings may be misunderstood by colleagues from other regions.

To better integrate the research on Japanese populism (and that on South Korean and Taiwanese populism) into international political science, I suggest explicitly using the local political culture as baseline and measuring deviations from there. I justify this proposal by pointing at the

respective populations of the political systems, who are “the people” populists would appeal to and whose assessment decides whether someone is considered populist. For Japanese voters, understanding what counts as aggressive somewhere else on this planet is irrelevant. This is also true for the public understanding of populism, even if this understanding does not match the concepts from political science. If the three “p”s that define the public understanding of populism in Japan are given, and if a politician is generally referred to as “populist,” this judgement turns into a fact regardless of what the academic literature suggests (cf. Hong in this publication).

One final point about research on the supply side of Japan’s potential populism is the use of eclectic data. Rarely do authors elaborate on the texts they analyzed. Rather, they seem to unsystematically select individual comments by political actors without much regard to a particular time-frame. Reports by the mass media often seem to “pre-identify” populists who are then studied by academics. I believe that there is some room for improvement and suggest to lay out not only which period is being looked at but also what kind of texts are being used. Campaign speeches seem to be a promising source along with party platforms and press conferences. As always, a systematic and transparent approach to collecting data should produce more reliable results.

I also emphasize that populism is no binary phenomenon that exists or is absent. It mostly moves in the gray zones between the clear cut, pure type of populism and its negative. Therefore, it should be measured, as Weyland (2017) and Hawkins and Castanho Silva (2019) have already suggested. However, measurements can be tricky and are not as precise as in physics; they only need to provide information on which area of the gray zone a politician is active in.

A final point addresses the theoretical concept for these measurements. To avoid further discussion about which of the three dominant concepts of populism (ideational, socio-cultural,

political-strategic) is “best,” I suggest combining the key elements of these three concepts to forge a net of ten “wanted” phenomena with which academics can go fishing for populist phenomena. These phenomena include the following:

- 1 “Antagonistic struggle” between the
- 2 “virtuous people” and the
- 3 “corrupt elite”
- 4 “anti-pluralism”
- 5 “personalistic leader(s)”
- 6 “direct communication” with the
- 7 “unorganized voters,”
- 8 “folkloric performances” to appeal to the masses,
- 9 “transgressive demeanor” and the self-description as
- 10 “savior” who authentically represents and speaks on behalf of the true people

All these factors need to be identified and measured against the baselines of local standards of political culture. The search for these baselines can start at the respective opposites of the ten elements. Reports in the traditional mass media on politicians and political parties can provide evidence for categorization and measurement and can help to clarify these political standards. The individual results for each of the ten elements should not be fused into a single additive index but be kept separate, thus allowing for more precise comparison and, if desired, a re-focusing on one of the dominant populism concepts mentioned above. Illustrations can take the form of a radar chart.

CONCLUSION

This paper sketches the difficulties of research on populism in Japan and how these difficulties could be addressed with a new methodological toolbox. The approach suggested here could also help to better integrate research on populism

in East Asian democracies into international political science and open East Asian cases to our efforts to better understand the theoretical side of the global phenomenon of populism. The proposed measurements would result in a sophisticated snapshot of the populist characteristics of political actors. At the same time, this approach would avoid debates on how to conceptualize populism but allow to focus the analysis on any of the three dominant concepts. It would also facilitate comparison between countries based not on a vague global standard of populism but on deviations from local standards.

Future applications of this approach will produce more precise insights into how to fine-tune measurements and data collection. The perspective and assessments of the local electorate, however, remain central to this approach. After all, if the people are at the core of populism, they must also be at the core of academic engagement with populist phenomena.

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POPULISM IN TAIWAN – REAL OR IMAGINED? THE EXAMPLE OF HAN KUO-YU¹

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INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this paper is to analyze whether and how Han Kuo-yu is classified and discussed as a populist in Taiwanese media discourses. Han was the Kuomintang (KMT) candidate in the 2020 presidential election and is the most clear-cut example of a populist in Taiwan in recent years, if not since Taiwan's democratization in the 1990s.

Populism can be defined as a political-strategic approach in which a populist leader seeks direct and unmediated support from the masses (Weyland 2017, 48); as a socio-cultural approach in which populism is a particular form of political style to mobilize the people, such as the dissemination of alternative truth narratives, a folkloric performance, or a transgressive behavior (Ostiguy 2017); or as an ideational approach that sees society as divided into two antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," in which the people are homogenous, morally pure, and represent the general will (Mudde 2017).

The definition based on the political-strategic approach originates from the empirical experience of Latin American politics, where a number of populists have won elections. It "emphasizes personalistic leadership based on direct, unmediated, and uninstitutionalized support from large masses of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland 2017, 48). Because the heterogeneity

of "the people" prevents populist leaders from following a strict, ideological line but instead forces them to make opportunistic decisions, proponents of this approach argue that "it does not seem useful to define populism in terms of ideology" (Weyland 2017, 54).

The socio-cultural approach considers populism as a particular form of political style to mobilize the people (Ostiguy 2017). Political leaders and parties use folkloric performances to appeal to the masses by maximizing media attention—for example, the dissemination of alternative truth narratives. Populist leaders claim the existence of a silent majority whose interests are swept under the carpet. The narrative identifies actors such as the elites, or the powerful, as responsible for the imminent threat that leads to the alienation of the people. The populist leader or political party styles itself as the savior who represents the true people (Ostiguy 2017).

One of the main proponents of the ideational approach, Cas Mudde (2004, 543), defines populism as "an ideology that sees society as ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." The people and the elite are defined in moral terms—the people are morally pure and have similar interests and preferences, often called common sense, whereas the elite is corrupt. Populism is a thin-centered ideology that can incorporate different sets of ideas (Mudde 2017, 30). Accordingly, who is part of the people and who is part of the elite can vary between right-wing, left-wing, and other types of populism (Mudde 2017).

1 For more information on the case of Han Kuo-yu and Taiwanese media discourses on him, please see: Krumbein, Frédéric. 2023. "Populist Discourses in Taiwan and the Case of Han Kuo-yu." *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* (online).

HAN KUO-YU: TAIWAN'S BEST EXAMPLE OF A POPULIST

This section examines the case of Han Kuo-yu as Taiwan's most recent and probably most clear-cut example of a populist, particularly his rise and fall as a politician and the reasons for both developments. Han experienced a rapid rise in his career as a politician from 2018 to 2020. In November 2018, he was elected mayor of Kaohsiung, which is traditionally a stronghold of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Han's rise as a populist politician was remarkable because he was not an outstanding politician, or businessman, before he appeared on the political stage in 2018. He was a rather unremarkable KMT legislator from 1993 to 2001. Later, he served as the director of the Taipei Agricultural Products Marketing Corporation. In 2017, he ran for KMT party chair but only finished fourth with 6 % of the vote. In 2018, he wanted to run for mayor of Taipei, but the KMT only selected him to become a candidate in Kaohsiung's local election because they did not think that he could win the race. The KMT had not won Kaohsiung in the past 20 years, and the city is a stronghold of the DPP. Nevertheless, Han unexpectedly became a media star and created the so-called Han Wave that led to him winning a decisive victory with 54 % of the vote. After his victory, he was immediately considered a potential candidate for the presidency. He decided to become a presidential candidate for the KMT and was selected by the party for the 2020 presidential election (Batto 2021a, 48; 2021b).

Han's electoral campaign and his initial success were built on four themes that he constantly reiterated. First, he said that Taiwan was once prosperous but had slid into decline, particularly compared with the three other "Asian tigers": Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore. Second, he said that all presidents since Taiwan's democratization in the 1990s did not put sufficient efforts into developing Taiwan's economy. Third, Han claimed that the "common people"

just wanted to make money. As such, Taiwanese politicians should not concern themselves with complicated questions of international politics or cross-strait relations. Finally, Han reiterated that voters could trust him because he was a "simple commoner" himself who constantly worked for the benefit of "the people" (Batto 2021a, 55–64; 2021b).

Ho Jeng-sheng (2020) identifies four factors of Han's discourse and style as populist. First, Han's "left-leaning romanticism" with special emphasis on farmers, fishermen, small business owners, and night market vendors—that is, the "common people" in general—is considered to be populist. Second is his direct and simple language that imitates "common people's language" and his simple slogans that center solely on economic development. He also communicated with the voters directly, often through social media and mass rallies. Third, his working-man style of dress—his blue shirt is his personal brand—and modest living style—saying he only needs one bowl of braised pork and a bottle of mineral water a day—are also populist characteristics. Fourth, he was also an outsider in the KMT. His rise reflected the poor situation of the KMT, as he captured the party's candidacy in the general election but was not part of the KMT establishment (Ho 2020, 104–108).

Hu and Chiang (2020) also describe Han as a populist during the 2020 presidential election on the basis of three criteria: (1) anti-elitism and the use of conspiracy theories, (2) distrust of the media, and (3) an anti-expert discourse. However, other criteria for populists, such as authoritarianism, anti-pluralism, and discriminatory discourses, were not strongly evident in his case (Hu and Chiang 2020, 175). Furthermore, his personal anti-elite discourse was limited to the DPP, but his supporters attacked the entire Taiwanese elite and used the dichotomy of "the people" and "the elite." His supporters were also more anti-pluralist than he was (Hu and Chiang 2020, 176). Nathan Batto (2021a; 2021b) identifies largely similar criteria as those of Ho (2020)

and Hu and Chiang (2020) for characterizing Han as a populist: his anti-elite discourse and his use of the style and language of a “common man” and “political outsider.”

Initially, many Taiwanese liked that Han styled himself as an outsider and a “common man” and that he had a fresh style. Furthermore, during the 2018 Taiwanese local elections, the Tsai government faced widespread dissatisfaction owing to a comparatively low economic growth rate during her first term, the enactment of controversial pension and labor reforms and same-sex marriage legislation, and strained cross-strait relations (Ho 2020, 103–105).

Presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Taiwan on January 11, 2020. In the presidential elections, President Tsai Ing-wen received 57.1 % of the vote, Han Kuo-yu 38.6 %, and the third candidate, James Soong from the People First Party, 4.3 %. Finally, the incumbent Tsai Ing-wen won by a landslide against Han. In June 2020, Han was even recalled as mayor of Kaohsiung (Batto 2021b; Krumbein 2020).

Several factors explain Han Kuo-yu’s ultimate failure in the presidential election. First, he often seemed incompetent and chaotic in his management of municipal affairs and could not keep his promises to stimulate economic growth. Second, trust in his character eroded during the electoral campaign. He had broken his promise to the people of Kaohsiung that he would not run for president. In addition, he was involved in scandals, such as speculation in luxury real estate, which undermined his populist brand as a “common and simple man” (Batto 2021b; Krumbein 2020).

Third, internal conflicts within the KMT and the “blue camp” or “pan-blue coalition” (consisting of the KMT and smaller parties closely aligned with it) also contributed to his poor election results. In contrast, the “green camp” around Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP was not only united but also able to mobilize its electorate, including the

younger generation. Voter turnout in the presidential election was 74.9 %, significantly higher than the 66.3 % turnout four years earlier (Krumbein 2020).

Finally, although Han’s stance against ideology—that is, largely ignoring cross-strait relations—worked in a local election in Kaohsiung, national elections in Taiwan generally tend to be dominated by the “China factor.” This was particularly true for the 2020 election. On January 2, 2019, PRC President Xi Jinping reaffirmed in a keynote address on Taiwan that a union of the mainland with Taiwan was inevitable, by force if necessary, and that it should be conducted under the “one country, two systems” formula (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of the PRC, 2019). The already widely unpopular “one country, two systems” formula lost further credibility owing to the protest movement in Hong Kong, which reached its climax in 2019. Tsai Ing-wen has stressed in several speeches and statements that Taiwan’s democracy is non-negotiable and that “one country, two systems” is not an acceptable solution.

MEDIA ANALYSIS: POPULISM IN TAIWAN

This section analyzes the narratives in three leading Taiwanese newspapers—the *China Times*, the *Liberty Times*, and the *United Daily News*—during the period from July 15, 2019, to January 31, 2020. All articles, 63 in total, containing the terms “Han Kuo-yu” (韓國瑜) and “populist” (民粹) were selected. This time period was selected because Han was chosen as KMT’s presidential candidate on July 15, 2019, and the Taiwanese presidential and parliamentary elections in which he was the candidate took place on January 11, 2020. The three newspapers are among the most widely read newspapers in Taiwan. The *China Times* and the *United Daily News* are considered to be pro-KMT. The *Liberty Times* is viewed as a pro-DPP newspaper. Three broad narratives can be found in the three newspapers.

Table 1: Political orientation of the Taiwanese newspapers and their discourses on populism

Newspaper	Political orientation	Discourses on populism
<i>China Times</i>	pro-KMT	Han Kuo-yu as a populist (positive/negative) Tsai Ing-wen as a populist
<i>Liberty Times</i>	pro-DPP	Han Kuo-yu as a populist (negative)
<i>United Daily News</i>	pro-KMT	Han Kuo-yu as a populist (negative/positive) Tsai Ing-wen as a populist

According to the first narrative, populism is a general problem in Taiwanese politics. Populism is associated with directly appealing to the people's likes and dislikes but neglecting deliberation. Taiwan is seen as a populist polity because it lacks checks and balances and the proper supervision of government (Chen 2019).

The two main parties, the DPP and KMT, are seen as populist parties. One reason for this classification is that the two presidential candidates in 2020, Tsai and Han, made too many promises to increase spending (Lin 2019).

In the second narrative, Han Kuo-yu is portrayed in all three newspapers as a populist, particularly with regard to his political style (Huang 2019). However, in the *China Times*, Han's populism is sometimes seen positively, or is downplayed as being necessary, because either it is a general trend in Taiwanese politics or President Tsai is also a populist. Han thus has no choice but to adapt to this overall populist trend in Taiwanese politics and/or Tsai's populism. Today's populist zeitgeist obliges politicians to use direct and politically incorrect language like that of Han Kuo-yu to connect with people's hearts (Qiu 2019).

However, some articles in the *China Times* and the *United Daily News* also criticize Han's populism for causing him to lose support during the electoral campaign; after the election, they criticized him for ultimately losing because of his populism and his personal scandals.

Whereas Han's populism is seen ambiguously in the *China Times* and the *United Daily News*, the *Liberty Times* views Han's populism as unequivocally negative. After Han is selected as KMT's

presidential candidate, the newspaper reports that several international media have characterized him as a populist.

Several articles mention different factors and reasons why Han Kuo-yu can be classified as a populist: his anti-establishment and anti-elite discourse; his simple and direct language and empty slogans; his self-proclaimed status as a political outsider, styling of himself as a "common man," and savvy use of social media; his attacks on political opponents; and a lack of rational discussions about policies.

In the *China Times* and the *United Daily News*, another narrative about populism exists—a counter-narrative that paints President Tsai and the DPP as populist (Zhang 2019). For example, Tsai is described as a "populist president" (民粹總統, *mincui zongtong*) (Huang 2019). Two reasons are cited several times for why President Tsai and the DPP are populist: their "anti-China" stance and the government's alleged authoritarianism. First, a frequently repeated point is that Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP stir up cross-strait tensions to gain popular support (Editorial 2019). Second, the DPP government is portrayed as an authoritarian government. However, concrete examples of Tsai's alleged authoritarian rule are largely missing.

DISCUSSION

First, among the analyzed newspapers, the *China Times* and the *United Daily News* characterize President Tsai and the DPP as populist in some articles owing to her and her party's cross-strait positions and policies. To oppose closer cross-strait relations is often portrayed as irrational.

However, “irrational” here usually means to advocate political positions that are not shared by the authors of the articles. This hardly qualifies as populism. Populism in general is not about political content but about a Manichean conflict between the elite and the masses, anti-pluralism, political style and methods, and the role of the populist leader. A pro-China stance is not considered to be a characteristic of populism. Han Kuo-yu is often viewed as a populist but not because of his stance toward the mainland. This relation between populism and a skeptical view toward mainland China is probably influenced by the mainland itself. For example, the Chinese Communist Party and its proxies have helped Han Kuo-yu during his campaign. The mainland Chinese media also uniformly cast politicians from the “green camp” in a negative light, and their discourse is often echoed by “pan-blue” media in Taiwan.

In addition, a good indicator for the classification of a politician as a populist by a newspaper seems to be the political standpoint of the journalist or commentator. Part of the media debate about populism is clearly politicized and uses the term populism to discredit politicians or parties from the opposite political group, often actors that promote Taiwan’s identity and/or critically view mainland China’s influence. At worst, these definitions are nonsense, akin to viewing Tsai Ing-wen as an authoritarian leader. At best, they may point out that the identity politics of some politicians can foster political tensions, hatred, and the exclusion of parts of the population, which could conform to the ideational approach. However, the authors often fail to identify where the boundary lies between, on one side, the legitimate promotion of a Taiwanese identity and understandable skepticism toward mainland China’s authoritarian threat and, on the other side, the incitement of hatred toward mainland China and a Chinese identity. They also overlook the fact that the KMT did engage in identity politics and did—often ferociously—impose a uniform Chinese identity on Taiwan, which neglected Taiwan’s indigenous and local traditions. All three

newspapers seem to be influenced by biases and the political orientations of their editors and/or owners. The *China Times* seems to be the most partisan, followed by the *United Daily News* and the *Liberty Times*. The partisan orientation of the newspapers was to be expected, as the Taiwanese media has a reputation for being strongly politicized and not necessarily having high standards of journalistic ethics.

Finally, Han Kuo-yu is uniformly categorized as a populist. The recurrent factors for his classification as a populist in media debates are as follows: Han’s “anti-elitist” and “anti-expert” discourse, his simple and direct language and his simple slogans, his direct connection with voters through social media and mass rallies, his self-styling as a “common man” and political outsider, and his negative views on Taiwan’s democracy and positive views on Taiwan’s authoritarian past. The media thus largely echo global and Taiwanese academic debates in their classification of Han Kuo-yu as a populist. His discourse conforms to the divide between “pure people,” which he claims to represent and to be a part of, and “corrupt elite.” He also uses the language of the “common man” and tries in every aspect to style himself as such a person. Han establishes direct communication with his supporters through social media and mass rallies as well, but he has still relied on the party establishment and has not captured or dominated the KMT. Although he has praised Taiwan’s authoritarian past and criticized the DPP elite, anti-pluralism is not a hallmark of his discourse. Following the ideational and socio-cultural approaches, we can classify Han Kuo-yu as a populist because he has an anti-elitist discourse (limited to the DPP elite) and views himself as part of the people, who are characterized as homogenous and morally pure. His rhetoric—styling himself as a common man and using simple language—fits the socio-cultural approach. The political-strategic approach seems less well-suited for labeling Han as a populist because he was the candidate of the KMT, a non-populist party, and most of his support came from the mem-

bers and followers of the KMT. In contrast, President Tsai Ing-wen does not tick any of the boxes from the three concepts of populism.

CONCLUSION

Han Kuo-yu is probably the best example of a populist in Taiwanese politics, although other potential cases of populism are also discussed in Taiwan. Why does populism seem to have a hard time in Taiwan? This paper cannot answer the question; however, I present here some of my ideas and thoughts related to this question. None of these ideas are based on empirical research, so further research is needed to test these preliminary ideas. Two reasons seem to be crucial: (1) Taiwan's political system and its party system and (2) the "China factor."

First, Taiwan's electoral system favors a two-party structure because the president and most of the members of Taiwan's parliament are elected by simple majority.

The two-party structure, in the case of Taiwan with the DPP and KMT as the two major parties, makes it difficult for a third party to be successful. However, populists can still capture a mainstream party, as Han Kuo-yu did (or Donald Trump in the United States). The KMT is in a weak political position in Taiwan because of its pro-China stance, which is a minority position on the island; the party chose Han Kuo-yu as a candidate because it thought he could win the election. Most of the party establishment did not favor him. The KMT's weak political position also makes it possible for a third party to potentially gain more votes in national elections than the KMT. In the 2024 presidential election, the former mayor of Taipei and leader of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), Ko Wen-je, may possibly gain more votes than the KMT candidate. The KMT may also be replaced as one of Taiwan's two major parties by the TPP or another party. However, when this will happen cannot be determined yet. Taiwan's political and party system thus makes it difficult for populists to emerge, but the KMT's

weak position creates an opening for either populists taking over the party or for a third, maybe populist, party to potentially replace the KMT.

Second, the "China factor" puts populists in a difficult position as well. Any candidate for a national election in Taiwan needs to have a clear and balanced position on this issue in order to be elected. This topic is difficult for a populist to address because the majority of the Taiwanese prefer the status quo and stability in cross-strait relations. Any candidate that proposes a more radical solution, either independence or unification, will have difficulties in being elected. Similarly, a candidate who ignores the topic altogether or does seem to lack the competence to handle the delicate relationship with mainland China will also face skepticism or rejection by the Taiwanese electorate. These two points bear certain similarities with the case of South Korea, where anticommunism (akin to the "China factor" in Taiwan) and the political and party system hinder the emergence of populist politicians and parties (see the sections by Mosler and by Oh).

Other factors on why populism has a difficult stance in Taiwan might play a role too. Taiwan's society does not have a large number of immigrants (and populism is often nativist and directed against immigrants), the level of education is high, and citizens have high standards regarding the conduct of politicians and their competence. However, socio-economic inequality—such as high housing costs and low salaries for in particular young people—and the widespread frustration with the polarization of Taiwanese politics, embodied by the two main parties, DPP and KMT, also create potential opportunities for populist politicians and parties.

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