Introduction: Conceptualizing Populism, Democracy, and Truth

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Abstract The rise of populist politics raises pressing questions both about the nature of populism, and about relationships between populism and democratic institutions. For example, is populism a monolithic phenomenon, or does the label cover multiple kinds of political movements which share some common elements, perhaps only superficially? Is populism an essential element of democracies, even sometimes a virtue of such governments, or does its invocation of a monolithic demos (‘the people’) signify a fundamentally anti-democratic worldview? And what about the interaction between truth, democracy, and journalistic integrity in the context of populist politics? While the history of anti-democratic advocacy (famously illustrated by Plato) has often highlighted the tendency of democratic politics to prioritize popularity over truth, the development of social media—and evolving norms of journalistic communication and public political discourse—raise these worries in new forms. Are democracies even any more effective than other forms of government at revealing truth or effectively addressing its implications through policies? Or if they are somewhat inimical to truth, particularly in their more populist forms, could they be improved through modification? Finally, are elements of populism particularly distinctive of some allegedly democratic political cultures more than others?

It is common to describe many of today’s most energizing politicians and political movements as populist. Populist leaders arise both on the right (e.g., Donald Trump in the U.S., Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage in the U.K., Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsanaro in Brasil, Marine Le Pen in France), and, perhaps somewhat less frequently, on the left (e.g., Evo Morales in

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Bolivia, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in the U.S., and the recently deceased populist leaders Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Michael Sata in Zambia). Whether on the right or the left, populist leaders are distinguished by their ability to articulate, or perhaps channel, or at least claim to channel, the wishes of ‘the people’, a group that populist leaders claim a unique ability to understand and govern, especially with regard to voter dissatisfaction with ruling elites. Populists decry corruption (although not always sincerely), and they sometimes identify more mainstream politicians, career government bureaucrats, and even the press as ‘enemies of the people’. With these movements once again on the rise in contemporary global politics, this seems to us an appropriate moment to pause and reflect on what populism is—if the concept can even be coherently sketched—and what kind of implications it has for political cultures.

1 The Challenge of Defining Populism

Populism proves notoriously difficult to define. The varied discussions of that idea offered by this volume’s contributors provide evidence of the wide disagreements and uncertainty surrounding that concept’s meaning. Populism certainly encompasses reactionary and autocratic political leaders who claim to represent the true interests of the people, even while their supposed social reforms enact authoritarian and inegalitarian governmental policies. But populism also encompasses progressive political figures and movements which advocate greater economic democracy, civil rights equality, voter equality, or all three. And populist movements can be sustained, for a time at least, without any recognized leaders. Here in the U.S., that has recently been true of the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements, and may be emerging in a grassroots feminist movement targeting not just Donald Trump’s misogyny, but the misogynistic social policies that have long been advocated by Republican Party leaders. Ironically, Trump, with his brand of populism, has become the visible unifying face of patriarchal social policies previously conceived as disjointed efforts, but now being viewed as a unified attack on the civil rights of women. In this case, one brand of populism gives rise to another brand of populism.

Perhaps, then, the only features which can safely be attributed to populism are attributes of its rhetoric: the claims to represent the true wishes of the people, as contrasted with those of political elites, and to uniquely know what the people want. But several of this volume’s contributors offer more expansive accounts of populism. Paul Warren and Steven Lee, for example, each distinguish two varieties of populism, one of which is fundamentally anti-democratic, and another of which is consistent with, and may occasionally even increase the functionality of democratic institutions of government and egalitarian social goals. But they draw their distinctions differently.

In his chapter, “Two Concepts of Populism”, Paul Warren counsels that we should resist simple accounts of whether populism is good or bad for democracy.
According to Warren, one concept of populism—characterized by tribalistic anti-pluralism—is inconsistent with democracy. Its xenophobic and racist impulses are at odds with efforts to promote social and political equality among diverse populations. But another common concept of populism, expressing an aspiration for greater economic democracy, is consistent with democracy, since it critiques inequality that results from concentrations of economic and political power in the hands of the few. Warren draws the line between tribalistic and anti-pluralist populism (exhibited, for example, by Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric in the U.S, and the Brexit campaign in the U.K.), and egalitarian economic and political populism. Warren argues that it is a mistake to try to reduce the idea of populism to only one of the two concepts he introduces, because both identify central features of populist phenomena.

In “Democracy and Populism” Lee draws the distinction along more traditional lines, between right-wing and left-wing populism, arguing that contemporary right-wing populism is inconsistent with both aggregative democracy and deliberative democracy. Proponents of aggregative democracy hold that democracy’s chief justification is that it efficiently satisfies the preferences of the members of a political community through majoritarian procedures for resolving political debates. However, if right-wing anti-pluralist populism is popular enough, then a society might best maximize the preference satisfaction of citizens in ways that violate the political liberties of members of minority groups. Hence, aggregative democracy combined with widespread right-wing populism yields an illiberal political system.

Lee argues for something similar in the case of deliberative democracy, under which advocates hold that democracy is justified not because it aggregates preferences, but because it involves citizens in the giving and taking of reasons for political policies, with the promise that a policy can be justified only on terms that all can accept. But this kind of system is only feasible if a sufficiently large share of the population is committed to justifying their policies in terms of public reasons: claims that can be recognized as reasons by all members of society. Lee argues that advocates of right-wing populism are not committed to offering such justifications. Rather, they want to make their own (unreasonable) comprehensive doctrines the sole basis of politics.

It is of course difficult to avoid being overly influenced by our own political experience in the kinds of categorizations we develop in any account of populism. And those of us who contributed to this volume have familiarity primarily with the political cultures of the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Thinking about Lee’s classificatory scheme, did Hugo Chávez’s brand of left-wing populism, for example, ultimately prove to be any more democratic than right-wing populism in Venezuela might have been? And thinking about Warren’s account, how should we characterize the kind of economic left-of-center populism pursued by Evo Morales (until his forced resignation following a rigged 2019 election to a fourth term), who arguably combined movement toward greater economic democracy with a form of tribalism that embraces hitherto politically neglected indigenous peoples? Again, we are faced with the possibility that populism may defy systematic definition.
The political influence of populism is real, and often profound, so we should do what we can to capture reasonably comprehensive accounts of what is involved in populist politics. Or failing that, we might contemplate ways to reframe the language of populism in more socially constructive channels. Along these lines, Robert Boatright and Molly McGrath, in their chapter, “Corruption, Populism, and Sloth”, argue that populists should consider modifying populist rhetoric to target real-world political vices. Claims about political corruption in particular, a staple of populist rhetoric, are often overly simplistic and potentially dangerous diagnoses of a society’s political problems. The idea is that one’s political opponents are corrupt, or that certain classes of people are corrupt or corrupting, and populist policies will cleanse that corruption. But if something or someone is corrupt, then they are irredeemable; they cannot be reasoned with or tolerated and must be eliminated. Boatright and McGrath argue that populists should recast claims about corruption in ways that avoid the xenophobia and/or racism of the “we/they” talk that so often haunts their appeals. In particular, populists would do well to moderate their invocations of corruption by reformulating them as worries about the vice of sloth. Someone is slothful if they willfully forget their duty. And the appropriate response to sloth is correction or reminder, not banishment or elimination. By avoiding the simplistic and potentially dangerous aspects of more conventional corruption-focused populist appeals, populist politics might be good for democracy in another way—more constructive, more reformist, less polarizing.

2 Populism and the Priority of the Popular vs. the True

Plato worried that democratic movements will prioritize what is popular over what is true. On his view, democratic leaders must curry favor with the hoi polloi—by telling them what they want to hear—even when they do not want to hear the truth. This has always been a worry about populist movements in particular, whether on the left or on the right. Conversely, populist leadership becomes unstable when it loses sufficient popular support. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised to exit the EU by the end of October 2019, regardless of the presence or absence of a negotiated arrangement with respect to the details. He coupled that declaration with an assurance that he would sort out the details later. That was presumably based on a political calculation that the popular will was to leave the EU no matter what. Such a vague promise appeared initially to be a bad political miscalculation, both about where popular sentiment lay, and about Johnson’s own reputation for credibility. Nonetheless, his political party secured an even stronger political endorsement during the impasse following the postponement of the October deadline, but at the expense of looking still less like the “general will”, in what proved to be an even more polarizing December 2019 national Parliamentary election, with nationalists in the ascendancy for the first time in Northern Ireland, and winning overwhelmingly in Scotland.
But populist leaders do more than respond to popular sentiment. They also shape at least a portion of it, as Johnson has done in England, while simultaneously alienating voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Consider, too, how Donald Trump’s supporters in the U.S. have remained remarkably faithful to him in the face of more than 3 years of profound incompetence, corruption, and mean-spirited inhumanity. They continued to be loyal despite the deterioration of Trump’s image during the Fall 2019 House impeachment and Senate trial proceedings. (For a partial diagnosis of that sustained voter commitment, see Jonathan Schonsheck’s contribution in his chapter, “The Lethal Synergy Corroding American Democracy: Who Are the “GINs” – and Why Is It That They Can’t “Quit Trump”?.”) But even the Trump faithful’s faith will surely be tested by his transparent incompetence during the U.S. onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in progress as this introduction was being revised.

### 2.1 Populism, Truth, and the Press

An important element of populism’s conflict with the truth has been its conflicts with, and attempts to co-opt, the news media. Donald Trump’s propaganda war against the U.S. press corps is a case in point. Some version of such rhetoric is a frequent feature of populist movements, although not always this vitriolic. While there are good reasons to criticize Trump’s efforts, populist conflicts with media may sometimes be commendable. Populist political attacks on the media may be appropriate when the press is committed to efforts to prop up anti-democratic elites rather than speaking truth to power. But as the allegiance of Trump voters illustrates, distinguishing between cases of legitimate demands for reform of a corrupt press, and cynically opportunistic populist targeting of a genuinely free press, may not be easy for disaffected voters who have at least temporarily signed on to a populist movement.

Indeed, the inverse is also the case: confronted with the excesses of populist rhetoric, members of a free press may find themselves at odds with their own professional code of truth-seeking, in a misplaced attempt at “balanced” reporting in response to an irrational anti-press propaganda war. Here in the U.S., an exchange on the MSNBC program *Morning Joe*, five days before Trump’s election, was an interesting case in point. On Friday, Nov. 4, 2016, during the 6:00–7:00 a.m. EST news hour, regular guest commentator Donnie Deutsch raised the issue of Trump’s character and unsuitability for high office. Deutsch is a former New York advertising executive who, in recent years, has been a frequent presence on talking heads TV, and a regular on *Morning Joe* every Friday. As a commercial spin doctor himself during his years as an advertising executive, and as a New York TV personality in more recent years, with even a stint as a judge on Trump’s former reality TV show, *The Apprentice*, he knows Trump fairly well. Given his personal familiarity with Trump, he had some things to get off his chest, during his last public opportunity to do so before the election. It was both refreshing and moving to witness his
on-camera honesty and genuine anguish. Watching the responses of show hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski, on the other hand, was rather horrifying.

Deutsch began by simultaneously stating his case against Trump and acknowledging his possible encroachment on putative journalistic integrity:

Here’s the one thing I want to remind ourselves of. This is probably going to be the last time I’m on this show before the election... This is a bad guy! This is a nasty bully. We’ve always elected a decent human being. I don’t care where the politics are. And Hillary is tremendously flawed. Here’s a man who makes fun of disabled people, something you wouldn’t let a nine-year-old do! ...I don’t care, you guys are all professionals and you’re not going to say it on the air, but you all agree with me. This is a dangerous, scary guy. This is a guy who...I can’t even believe this is happening to this country.

Instead of conceding the unvarnished truth of what Deutsch was saying, Scarborough and Brzezinski opted for the strategy of equating Deutsch’s judgment of Trump, informed by personal knowledge, to that of ideologically motivated anti-Clinton voters. After Scarborough opened by asking why victory might be within Trump’s grasp, and Deutsch replied that “you know the reason. Because there are a lot of angry disenfranchised people out there,” Scarborough responded as follows:

Do you believe that there are millions of people who feel the same way about Hillary...that she’s as dangerous as she can be?

Donny Deutsch: I don’t think you can compare them. Donald at his core is a bad guy... Joe Scarborough (talking [loudly] over Donny Deutsch): You see, this is a problem that Manhattan elites like us have.

Donny Deutsch: Oh no—don’t give me this elite stuff!

Joe Scarborough: I am. People like us, like people in Georgetown. They can see how evil Donald Trump is, but because of their worldview, they can’t imagine that people in Middle America feel just as strongly about Hillary Clinton...think she should be indicted, think she and her husband got away with everything over the past thirty or forty years, think that there’s really not that much of a difference between the two, so why not vote for change. I’m just saying that when you give your sermon, I could find someone in Manhattan Kansas sitting right next to you give just as compelling an argument as to why they can’t believe people like you would vote for Hillary.

Scarborough continued in this vein periodically during the hour, seconded by Brzezinski, presumably in the name of journalistic neutrality. Deutsch, torn by the implied charge that he was being journalistically unprofessional, mostly just acquiesced until he simply became too disgusted at one point:

Obviously it’s completely open at this point. We’re burying the lead. You all know it. We’re five days away from potentially electing a dangerous man as the head of this country. This is not funny. This is not score keeping. You all know it. You’re all parents. This is not funny anymore.

Mika Brzezinski: It’s not just score keeping.

Joe Scarborough: Why are you talking to us? I don’t understand.

Donny Deutsch: I’m talking to everybody, I’m talking to the world.

What came through, even more clearly in the original broadcast, was Deutsch’s sincerity. It was, in his view, time to set aside the veneer of journalistic neutrality and
speak from the heart. Matters were just too serious for that professional “indulgence”. At the same time, he is torn about the scolding that he’s getting from Scarborough and Brzezinski, who are industriously setting about the business of reestablishing the hegemony of what they perceive to be journalistic neutrality, by invoking the specter of the Manhattan, Kansas voter who loathes all things Clinton, and does so, most importantly, with equal justice.

But of course matters were not equal. Hillary Clinton, as a candidate for the Presidency, may have exuded as much of a sense of entitlement as Donald Trump, and even done it with more confidence. Voters so disposed also felt they had enough material to be suspicious of her integrity—guilt by association with her husband. And there’s always the issue, for each candidate, of political positions distasteful to many voters. But Clinton was clearly not incompetent, narcissistic, ignorant, impetuous, or, as best one could tell, mean—traits which Trump regularly exhibited on the campaign trail, and has continued to do so in office. The difference between the two with respect to qualification for office was dramatic, and Deutsch felt some social responsibility to say so. Scarborough and Brzezinski, on the other hand, thought of themselves as bound by the strictures of journalistic integrity to pretend the opposite was true, even though they clearly didn’t believe it. Indeed, at one point in the ongoing discussion Scarborough attempted to absolve himself of his own rhetoric with the comment: “I don’t want you to think three minutes from now that anybody here is rooting for Donald Trump.” And yet when Deutsch later asserts that “this is not scorekeeping,” Scarborough responds with blank incomprehension.

Invoking the hypothetical Manhattan, Kansas voter who loathes Hillary Clinton was of course score keeping. Scarborough felt obliged to do it to countermand Deutsch’s confessional mode. The net effect though, of this misdirected application of the principle of journalistic neutrality, and countless other instances of similar reportage in mainstream media, was to elevate Trump to the status of serious candidate in the eyes of many voters, even though he was in fact a charlatan engaged in a publicity stunt gone badly awry, a view of Trump of which Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski have, somewhat ironically, become quite vocal and articulate defenders since Trump took office. They may have loathed Trump, along with many other players in news media, but their behavior, of the sort illustrated in this exchange, aided and abetted his candidacy on a daily basis. In what sense did that count as journalistic neutrality?

Several of our contributors take on challenges in this thicket, reflecting on the delicate balance between reportorial integrity, allegiance to truth, and calibrating an appropriate measure of respect for political messaging designed sometimes to inform or inspire the masses, and other times simply to inflame them. How should members of the press handle these potentially conflicting interests? And social media has now become a partial substitute for professional press coverage of political discourse and behavior. More than a third of our authors contribute in one way or another to this broad set of worries about public discourse in democratic polities.

A measure of respect in the press for competing policy disputes is surely an important part of journalistic integrity, in aid of the potential epistemic value of democratic electoral discourse, a subject which John Capps explores in...
his chapter, “Democracy, Truth, and Understanding: An Epistemic Argument for Democracy”. He examines the contested assumption that democracy is actually better at revealing truth and cultivating knowledge than other forms of government. (Note that, in order to be achieved effectively, this outcome must be facilitated by implementation of something like the First Amendment protections in the U.S. Constitution, and honest dissemination of political discourse through the institution of a free press.)

Capps begins by observing that, while it is common to defend democracy on moral grounds, these efforts have sometimes been thought to provide merely contingent support for democracy. After all, moral values that are not ultimately embraced by a democratic process cannot offer support for that democratic process. In contrast, epistemic arguments for democracy defend democracy on the ground that this system does a better job than other political systems of discovering or creating truth, knowledge, and justification. However, epistemic arguments for democracy may suffer their own weaknesses: perhaps democracy is epistemically good, but is technocracy even better? Or might explicitly anti-democratic efforts, e.g. suppressing false speech, best promote epistemic goals? Capps argues that a better epistemic argument for democracy will emphasize its ability to produce and protect understanding among the various epistemic goals that democracy fosters. Understanding, unlike truth or knowledge, comes in degrees and is not factive, because it is possible for one to have a solid understanding of a topic even if one’s beliefs about the topic are not entirely true. Capps argues that democracy is especially effective at cultivating understanding, since it is a natural goal of the kind of political deliberation that democracy fosters. Furthermore, Capps argues that epistemic arguments for democracy would better support that political system if they did not rely so heavily on conventional conceptions of truth. Capps argues that truth should be understood as subject-independence, not as correspondence or temporally-independent indefeasibility. If we adopt this conception of truth, then it is legitimate and attainable for democracy to promote truth. In light of his reflections, we might contemplate how such a modification might better inform the social responsibilities of the press as well as candidates.

Joan McGregor’s and Lisa Fuller’s paired chapters examine the role of universities as potential models of civil discourse, in internal university press publications of course, but also in the oral discourse of visiting speakers and various campus discussion fora, which we might then strive to emulate in the larger public political sphere. In “Free Speech, Universities, and the Development of Civic Discourse” McGregor argues that it should be part of the core mission of colleges and universities to teach the skills of civil discourse. What is the proper reach of those skills, though? Members of the political right advocate for increased protections for conservative speech on campus.

While McGregor adopts a Millian account of the value of free speech, she worries that some conservative free speech advocates support measures that would stifle speech that is critical of conservative ideas. Members of the political left—including some students, staff, and faculty—have called for limits on campus speech that they find disrespectful, hateful, or bullying, for example, by ‘no-platforming’ speakers
whose views they find abhorrent. McGregor rejects this response to offensive speech for being inconsistent with the epistemic ideals of higher education, and she is similarly critical of efforts to keep students ‘safe’ from ideas that might offend them. But she also argues that we must distinguish offensive speech from threats or harassment. The latter harms are not protected speech, and higher education institutions have a responsibility to protect their students, staff, and faculty.

McGregor suggests that in the larger public sphere, members of the political right and left are often unable to engage in civil discourse. They are unprepared for criticism of their views or for exposure to views they find offensive. McGregor argues that this is a dangerous threat to democracy in a pluralistic society, and that colleges and universities have a responsibility to model and to teach the practices of civil discourse.

In “Harm, ‘No-Platforming’ and the Mission of the University” Lisa Fuller embraces McGregor’s call for colleges and universities to promote and teach the skills of civil discourse. Fuller agrees that being exposed to diverse ideas helps students prepare for democratic citizenship. But she argues that McGregor seems to tolerate too much harmful speech. While McGregor draws the line at speech that harasses or threatens, Fuller also thinks colleges and universities have a responsibility to exclude speech that disseminates deliberate misinformation or is hateful. Exposing students to this kind of speech does not accomplish the mission of promoting civic discourse. It harms students instead, simply by giving an academic platform to speakers of the political right who spread falsehoods or engage in hate speech. The act of doing so, on its own, validates to some degree their anti-intellectual sentiments. In practice, Fuller suggests that colleges and universities should only rarely prevent people from speaking on campus, but such occasions do arise. As a preventive countermeasure, colleges and universities can fulfill their responsibilities to their students by enacting policies that hold speakers to standards of discourse that prevail in academic debate. This may include prior review of speakers’ presentations and well as institutional means for critical feedback and discussion.

Despite McGregor’s and Fuller’s agreement on holding up campuses as potential models of civil discourse, there is a larger question to contemplate: to what extent does the modeling of acceptable open discourse on campus provide a useful aspirational ideal for more public discourse? For good or ill, we don’t exhibit quite the same worries about maintaining civility in the larger arena of public political discourse, in part because of our concerns for keeping respect for First Amendment principles robust.

Finally in this section, Pierre Le Morvan’s “Journalistic Balance, Unintended Pyrrhonism, and Political Polarization” addresses the social impact of the role of the press in public discourse more directly, especially where polarizing populist rhetoric is at issue. Le Morvan explores the relationship between the ideal of ‘balanced reporting’ and the potentially damaging, or beneficial, elements of skepticism which may thereby be induced among consumers of such reporting. A common criticism of contemporary non-editorial (‘balanced’) journalism is that it leaves citizens unsure what to believe. Interestingly, Le Morvan contends that the opposite of this Pyrrhonian worry about ‘balanced’ news reporting may be the deeper problem. He
notes that recent psychological research provides empirical evidence for concluding instead that, when you expose people to news reporting that avoids taking sides, and aims instead to provide a balanced treatment of pros and cons, you can cause people to become more committed to their existing beliefs. Perhaps journalists should attempt to prevent their work from hardening people’s existing views by moving away from artificially ‘balanced’ news reporting. Instead, they should identify the weight of evidence for each side of an issue, and they should rely on authority figures or experts when reporting on scientific controversies. Although he doesn’t address the topic directly, the Morning Joe example sketched out above might be a usefully concrete illustration for thinking about issues which Le Morvan explores in his chapter, as a path toward devising a less naïve, more nuanced conception of the aspirational ideal of journalistic neutrality.

2.2 Populism, Truth, and the Emergence of Social Media

The traditional hostility which many populist movements have exhibited toward the fourth estate is compounded today by the sheer scale of twenty-first century communication technology, and by the phenomenal growth of social media in a single generation. Several of our contributors focus on how combining social media and populist political rhetoric has severely exacerbated all the worries discussed in the previous section. In addition to creating new lines of instant public communication, this technology has also created unprecedented challenges to democratic institutions of public discourse, encouraging, among other ills, the proliferation of wild conspiracy theories tailored to every political sensibility. Social media also contributes heavily to political polarization and tribalism even in polities with longstanding democratic institutions of government, such as the U.S. and the U.K., that used to have at least something of a reputation for tolerance of divergent viewpoints.

Thus, in “Reflections on the Root Causes of Outrage Discourse on Social Media” Patrick O’Callaghan examines the increasing salience of outrage discourse, which he attributes in part to pernicious effects of social media, and in part to increasingly severe social and economic inequalities in the U.K. and the U.S. in particular. O’Callaghan characterizes outrage discourse as a monological form of speech that aims to provoke strong emotional responses. This can be a destructive kind of discourse, because it can manipulate people into accepting falsehoods, undermine social capital, and distract attention from more pressing political problems. O’Callaghan surveys the empirical literature to identify four features of online speech that contribute to the prevalence of outrage discourse: online disinhibition effect, the desire to be noticed, the tendency towards righteousness, and peer pressure. On socio-economic inequalities which contribute to outrage discourse, O’Callaghan identifies five relevant aspects of contemporary displacement: changes in employment and incomes, changes in demographics of communities, independence and social distance, diminishing educational opportunities, and intergenerational injustice.
In “Identifying Political Participants on Social Media: Conflicts of Epistemic Justice” John and Leslie Francis also spend time examining some of the adverse effects of social media. Their focus is on epistemic injustices fostered by social media hate speech, which can amplify and suppress different voices. They rightly point out that different political cultures might address similar problems of social media discourse differently, but they then argue that two existing legal approaches that have predominated in debates about how best to respond to social media epistemic injustices are both significantly suboptimal from the point of view of epistemic injustice. First, the German regulatory approach involves prohibition of speech that debases groups based on their ethnicity or religion. Accordingly, Germany has recently enacted a law that requires social media firms with more than two million subscribers to take responsibility for hateful content in either of these areas. Francis and Francis criticize this content-based regulatory approach on the grounds that its scope may be both over-inclusive and under-inclusive, it may drive hate speech underground, and it places too much power in the hands of private firms. A second approach, the American free speech model, refrains altogether from restricting speech, so long as it is (only) speech, and not (also) obscenity or a threat of immediate violence. Francis and Francis worry that the American model is too tolerant of painful expressions and patterns of speech that reinforce structural injustices, e.g. by reminding members of disadvantaged groups of their marginalization and unwelcomeness. They suggest an intermediately intrusive alternative, a ‘transparency model’ for regulating social media speech that may promote epistemic justice: the default practice should be to identify participants in social media speech. In this way, social media authors can be held accountable for their speech in much the same ways as the authors of letters to the editor can be. Francis and Francis anticipate some possible exceptions to this practice when a social media author can document that revealing their identify would put them at significant risk of serious economic or physical harm.

Finally, Wade Robison’s contribution, “#ConstitutionalStability”, deserves mention in this section, as it fits with equal ease in Section 3 or Section 5. Robison examines the extent to which social media has the capacity to expand on populist conspiracy theories and deliver them more effectively to a (sometimes gullible) public audience. Robison argues that common psychological dispositions then magnify the destructive potential of impassioned populist appeals. Their exciting or frightful messages are often more attractive—and spread more quickly—than dispirited political analysis. Human beings are also attracted to conspiracy narratives, and populists often tells stories about the nefarious conduct of evil elites who seek to harm the common people. Robison argues that social media can magnify the destructive impact of human tendencies to be persuaded by passion and to embrace conspiracy theories. (Enlightenment scholars like Hume and Madison were not prepared for Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.) He also observes that members of the media often risk making things worse when they neutrally report on the falsehoods and conspiracy narratives offered by populists, because that kind of reporting lends credence to what is reported about. He thus brings us back around to the implications of the Morning Joe example that we introduced in the previous section.
(again, not Robison’s example either, but it does seem apposite). To address the effects of “neutral” reporting of populist rhetorical excesses, Robison suggests what Lakoff calls “truth sandwiches” as an antidote which is still journalistically neutral (countervailing reports of “unvarnished” factual claims).

3 Democratic Antidotes to Extremist Populism

Various chapters in this volume are devoted in some degree to possible democratic responses to extreme forms of populism. Robison’s paper just discussed is a case in point, which is why we chose to include it in Section 5 rather than Section 3. But four chapters in Sects. 4 and 5 take on more directly the challenge of proposing, or perhaps rather partially proposing, possible democratic solutions to the extremist forms of populist rhetoric that have lately emerged and been compounded by the effects of social media.

In Section 4, Richard Nunan’s and Alasdair Macleod’s papers are both devoted to the proposition that first-past-the-post (FPTP) single member district electoral systems need to be jettisoned in favor of ranked choice voting systems coupled with multi-member districts, and that this would help moderate some of the political disaffection that contributes to voter attachment to extremist populist rhetoric, by giving currently disaffected minority voting blocks more of a stake in their political representation. The authors’ respective emphasis is different. Nunan is focusing on the political and legal difficulties inherent in serious electoral reform by examining the State of Maine’s recent efforts in that direction, while Macleod is focused more on the very nature of the disaffection—the various aspects of the ‘wasted vote’ phenomenon in FPTP systems.

In “As Maine Goes, So Goes the Nation?” Nunan considers whether the recent legislative history of Maine’s path toward Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), sometimes called instant-runoff voting, may serve as a template for a similar system nationally. RCV invites voters to select not only their preferred candidate, but also their second-most preferred, and so on, in an ordinally-ranked ballot. If no candidate wins an absolute majority of most-preferred votes in the first round of ballot counting, the lowest vote recipients are eliminated and their votes are redistributed to the candidates who were ranked next highest on the relevant ballots. This process continues until a candidate wins a majority. Nunan explains that RCV has a moderating influence, because less ideological voters are more likely to record multiple choices than extremists will record, and because extremist first choices are eventually likely to be overwhelmed by progressively less extreme second, third, and fourth choices, even among extremist voters. Furthermore, under RCV, candidates themselves have an incentive to be more civil to their competitors, because supporters of rivals might offer them their second- or third-place preference votes. Nunan argues that resistance to RCV in Maine, mostly from Republican politicians, may have been motivated less by worries about the constitutionality of RCV (which was the official complaint), than by politicians’ worries that RCV would jeopardize their chances for future electoral success. (Nunan argues that the contemporary Republican Party could not
survive widespread use of RCV in national elections.) According to Nunan, while RCV is an improvement over the electoral system it replaced, a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system would be better. This kind of system combines the ordinally-ranked ballots and vote transfers of RCV with a shift from single-member representational districts to multi-member districts, in order to foster more proportional representation.

In “Voting without Voice: How Votes Can Be Counted Without Counting” Macleod argues that a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system is inconsistent with democratic ideals in two ways. First, a candidate can win with only a plurality of the vote. Second, a political party can have a plurality (or even majority) of seats in the national legislature, even if its candidates did not win a plurality of the votes in the nation. Macleod’s chief focus is a series of objections to the way that FPTP electoral systems ‘waste’ citizens’ votes by gratuitously limiting the impact of a person’s vote to small local electoral districts, even though the collective distribution of voter sentiment across broader electoral regions might be quite different from local outcomes. The potential contrast between the distribution of Parliamentary seats and Province-wide or national voter sentiment in Canada, and the even more severe contrast between partisan gerrymandering of Congressional districts and state-wide political sensibilities in the U.S., are nice illustrations. FPTP also wastes votes by unfairly distributing the opportunity to contribute to political decision-making. Simple plurality single-member districts mean that minority voting blocks, those constituencies which lose elections, effectively have no representation in the relevant legislative assembly. Representation is for winners. In politically lopsided districts, it’s just a canard that office holders represent all the people. They are free to ignore minority voting blocks, and usually do. Votes of such individuals are nothing more than registration of their disaffection from the process. In response to FPTP electoral systems’ inability to be sufficiently representative, Macleod too recommends a system with “ranked ballots” with multi-member districts.

In Section 5, we have a series of non-electoral partial solutions to the problems posed by contemporary populism, starting with Wade Robison’s contribution, already discussed in some detail in 2.2 above. While Robison concludes by questioning whether any form of government can withstand the stress populist rhetoric creates, he does offer some hope in reliance on aspects of the U.S. culture of democracy, in particular the “truth sandwiches” that are sometimes implemented to good effect through the institution of the free press.

The late Ken Henley, a long time contributor to the scholarly community from which this volume evolved, who shall be sorely missed there, argues in “Populism, American Nationalism and Representative Democracy” that President Donald Trump’s political rhetoric is a paradigm of populism. His speeches and rallies have succeeded in unifying an array of diverse complaints including opposition to immigration; a sense of being displaced by others of different race, ethnicity, religion, values, or culture; a sense of economic insecurity for which inside elites and others are to blame (especially other countries or immigrants); and a sense that in general elites and the establishment have abandoned them. This is an example of what the political theorist Ernesto Laclau has described as the populist’s construction
of a unitary people out of a set of grievances. Henley also argues that Trump has succeeded in constructing enemies of the people, to motivate his followers, which the theorist Carl Schmitt argues is necessary to have a populist politics. Henley argues that the rise of Trump is not out of place in US politics. Rather, he is well within a strain of American white nationalism that is rooted deeply in American history.

Henley expresses hope that the political parties—Democrats and Republicans—can modify their nominations processes to ensure better “refinement” in candidate selection. While this clearly did not happen in the Republican Party in 2016, and the US electoral process has proven in turn to be unable to prevent populist leaders from being elected, Henley hopes the parties might in the future devise measures that function more effectively as screening mechanisms to eliminate demonstrably unsuitable candidates for high office. Of course, Henley’s very example raises a concern about how effective such measures might be, when a political party has itself become as insular and perhaps unprincipled as the candidate who emerges from its selection mechanisms. In light of Republican behavior on the national stage in recent decades, it is not much of a stretch to argue that Donald Trump may have been no accidental candidate.

In “An Antidote to Populism” Richard Barron Parker recommends a radical economic policy change as a more effective solution than any form of tinkering, even indirectly, with the electoral system. In one respect, his approach is like Macleod’s: eliminate, or at least reduce, the disaffection of voters, and you will reduce the breeding ground that welcomes extremist populist rhetoric. But Parker focuses on economic disaffection rather than voter disenfranchisement. His solution anticipates, in some respects, the signature proposal of one of the 2020 Democratic Party’s U.S. Presidential nomination candidates before any of us had heard of him: Andrew Yang’s proposal for a basic minimum income. What Parker calls The New Plan has four parts: eliminate the federal corporate income tax; raise the personal income tax; provide minimum Social Security payments for every man, woman, and child; and eliminate all other federal welfare programs. The third part of this plan guarantees every man, woman, and child in the United States a basic income of $800 a month after federal income tax, which Parker believes will go a long way towards both promoting economic security among the poorest Americans, and resisting economic inequality across the entire population. And it does so through what Parker regards as a promising rhetorical device for cultivating buy-in: delivering this partial wealth redistribution scheme through an expansion of the U.S. Social Security system.

Jonathan Schonsheck’s Chapter (“The Lethal Synergy Corroding American Democracy,” referenced earlier at the beginning of Section 2 above) is, in a sense, of a piece with Parker’s. He’s not offering a solution however, but rather a diagnosis. Basically, Schonsheck is offering a detailed analysis of how economically (and also politically) disenfranchised voters could come to love and identify with Donald Trump, even though he is clearly pretty contemptuous of this particular subset of his followers. Schonsheck argues that Trump’s pathologies have encouraged the development of a group of vicious citizens, and that this group will continue to be a
problem after Trump has left the scene. Schonsheck introduces us to the GINs: they are gullible, ignorant, and noncritical. These people make up the core of Trump’s supporters. They have the vices of bad citizens, and Trump uses tactics that appeal to and encourage them: lying, bull-shitting, and denying expertise. In contrast to the GINs, Schonsheck also introduces the SERTs, who are skeptical educated rational thinkers. These people have the virtues of good citizens, even though some of them, too, may be Trump voters. Schonsheck concludes by considering why GINs cannot quit Trump, and why Trump needs the GINs. It is because each relies upon the other for self-esteem, for self-importance, for social status. In effect, Schonsheck is making the disaffection which worries Parker, Macleod and, less directly, Nunan, a bit more real through a concrete historical example.

All of these proposals are, of course, partial sketches of possible solutions. But they do at least point us in some possible directions to think about for the future of democracy under the current conditions we face, not just in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., but internationally.

4 International and Historical Perspectives

Unfortunately, owing in part to the areas of expertise of our contributors, and in part to the limitations of space, we don’t devote enough time to considering the effects of populist movements on democratic discourse and truth internationally or historically. But we do have some elements of each. Ken Henley’s chapter (discussed in the previous section) is in part a historical survey of populism going back to the history of nineteenth century white racism in the U.S., discussed comparatively with some European history on populist movements there, and with regard to the Enlightenment backdrop to modern democracies on both sides of the Atlantic.

Eric Smaw’s chapter, “Something’s Afoot: Conservative Populist Oppositionalism”, is also historically oriented, with an international twist. Smaw argues, by way of a historical illustration, that progressive politicians can avoid or reduce conservative populist backlash by choosing pragmatic means for pursuing their goals. His illustration is a nineteenth century episode in an English colony, and a philosopher’s anti-populist response to the injustice perpetrated. The incident in question was a massacre of black Jamaicans at Morant’s Bay, in 1865, an attempt to suppress unrest owing to political disenfranchisement and economically debilitating circumstances. John Stuart Mill, a member of Parliament at the time, advocated, as a matter of basic justice, the punishment of the perpetrators of the summary executions of several hundred black Jamaicans. Those in the dock would include, most notably, the colony’s governor, Edward John Ayre, who authorized most of the extra-judicial murders in the first place. Smaw’s concern, recall, is the challenge of preventing right-wing populist backlash, which is exactly what happened in England in this case. Smaw thinks that development followed in no small part because of Mill’s uncompromising stance, a failure to be sufficiently pragmatic in pursuit of his goal of seeking justice for the victims. Smaw argues that the British people would have been
sympathetic with public efforts to provide economic compensation to the family members of the victims. Mill’s decision to pursue criminal charges instead was a failure, because the British people were unwilling to send a white governor to jail for his mistreatment of black people. Smaw argues that President Obama made a similar mistake when he decided to pursue health care reform in the middle of an economic downturn. Smaw argues that Obama should, instead, have pushed for federal infrastructure projects, and required the federal contractors provide health insurance to workers. But Obama’s focus on health insurance, rather than jobs, encouraged the development of right-wing populist resistance to his administration. Smaw argues that the message from both cases is that progressives should not attempt to overplay their hands, but should seek compromise policies, lest their ambitious policy proposals generate destructive forms of populist backlash. We should be careful about reaping what we sow, and history can sometimes provide us with useful lessons.

Nikki Souris’s chapter, “African Challenges to the International Criminal Court: An Example of Populism?”, is our only genuinely international entry on the role of populist rhetoric outside the sphere of the Anglo-American political arena. It’s a fascinating excursion into the use of populist rhetoric by some African leaders seeking to reduce the impact of the International Criminal Court on their own political and private activities, but the rhetoric is missing the substance of actual populist movements. Souris observes that African countries have been among the earliest and strongest supporters of the ICC, and that the ICC continues to be popular (and gain additional member states) in Africa. So, what are we to make of the fact that some African leaders have invoked populist rhetoric in the context of their criticisms of the ICC? Souris argues that, if we can accurately describe anti-ICC African movements as populist, it is only a thin populism of an imagined constituency, rather than the voice of a majoritarian movement. Furthermore, Souris notes that most of this criticism comes from member states of the ICC, such that their criticism (and their threats to leave the ICC) may speak more to their desire to influence the ICC than to marginalize or undermine it. Souris is introducing, in one sense at least, the idea of fake populism built on the excessive rhetoric of real populism. But as Souris also observes, there is a genuine possibility that the currently fake populism could eventually become real, directed specifically at the ICC, and perhaps at other international institutions affecting domestic politics in African nations, precisely because the corrosive effects of such populist rhetoric might become reified in the minds of a relatively broad swath of a nation’s citizenry. In this way, African nations could become laboratories for the birth of new forms of extremist populism, not unlike what has already transpired in a number of western nations—a depressing prospect to contemplate.

Both Souris’s contribution and Smaw’s bring to mind the last question of our abstract for this chapter: do particular sorts of democratic regimes, or particular forms of political behavior within democratic regimes, give rise to populist extremism more readily than other forms of government or political cultures? Henley’s examination of the white nationalist historical backdrop of U.S. political culture does the same. Are we more prone specifically to right wing populist movements here in the U.S. because of the distinctive history of our political culture? Are similar
problems likely to arise in other loosely democratic political cultures chiefly when they, too, possess some kind of racist history? These chapters, and others, only hint at that possibility. More systematic study of this last group of questions will have to await another day.

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