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Transnational Populism, Democracy, and Representation: Pitfalls and Potentialities

Abstract: Current work on populism stresses its relationship to nationalism. However, populists increasingly make claims to represent 'the people' across beyond national borders. This advent of 'transnational populism' has implications for work on cosmopolitan democracy and global justice. In this paper, we advance and substantiate three claims. First, we stress populism's performative and claim-making nature. Second, we argue that transnational populism is both theoretically possible and empirically evident in the contemporary global political landscape. Finally, we link these points to debates on democracy beyond the state. We argue that, due to the a) performative nature of populism, b) complex interdependencies of peoples, and c) need for populists to gain and maintain support, individuals in one state will potentially have their preferences, interests, and wants altered by transnational populists' representative claims. We unpack what is normatively problematic in terms of democratic legitimacy about this and discuss institutional and non-institutional remedies.

Keywords: populism; transnationalism; global democracy; transnational populism; representation.

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Introduction

Populism and nationalism are often thought to be comfortable bedfellows. They are, however, distinct, both in theory and in practice. While both may entail claims to speak for 'the people,' who 'the people' are in their characterisations are different. For nationalists, the culture held by a collective becomes the undergirding rationale for why 'the people' stands as a collective capable and worthy of self-rule. Because culture is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down, it is often traced genealogically. Some nationalists go so far as to claim that a specific ethnic group sharing cultural traits are the only legitimate collective of 'the people' deserving of political representation within the nation-state (Abizadeh, 2012; Anderson, 1991). Populists, on the other hand, seek to speak for a democratically-constructed, majoritarian view of 'the people,' who are subjected to the will of some 'corrupt elite' who suppress their legitimate demands (Brubaker, 2020; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017).

According to this view, populist claims on behalf of 'the people' are democratically bound through subjection to elite rule, but not necessarily bound by ethno-cultural lines in the way that nationalist claims are. As globalization continues to permeate national borders, nationalists and populists have

different responses: while nationalists seek to reassert the primacy of those borders, populists seek to reaffirm the primacy of 'the people' against elite power – a 'people' that can even potentially spill over these borders. Indeed, this phenomenon, still in its infancy, results in a form of what has been termed 'transnational populism.' While some literature has begun noticing the empirical salience of this extension of populism (see De Cleen, 2017; De Cleen et al., 2020; McDonnell and Werner, 2019; Moffitt, 2017), normative work has lagged behind. Specifically, the democratic legitimacy of claiming to speak for 'the people' against 'the elite' beyond nation-state borders has been under-discussed and, therefore, the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of this practice has been neglected.

In this article, we have several goals which unfold over the following five sections. First, we define populism, link its core features to constructivist views of representative claim-making and mobilization, and then contrast this against approaches grounded in nationalism. Second, we define populism beyond the nation-state in theoretical terms, drawing on the extant literature that distinguishes between international and transnational variants, and we focus on the latter. Third, we show that transnational populism is already occurring empirically, and demonstrate its claim-making features on behalf of a transnational 'people' by examining several illustrative cases. Fourth, we discuss the normative complications of transnational populist claim-making. We argue that a focus on the constitutive nature of representative claim-making throws the democratic legitimacy of transnational populism into sharp relief. We then ask how both state and non-state actors who engage in transnational populism can be democratically legitimated (or not) by discussing potential institutional and non-institutional mechanisms. Finally, we conclude by suggesting that normative work should continue to study the emergence and implication of transnational populism.

Populism and its features: Or, how populism and nationalism come apart

Defining Populism

There are almost as many definitions of populism as there are actors seeking to define the concept. However, in recent years, two central definitional camps have coalesced. The first, the 'ideational approach' to populism, sees the phenomenon as a particular ideology, worldview, or set of attitudes to be compared and contrasted with other central political 'isms' such as liberalism or socialism. This body of literature, associated primarily with the work of authors such as Mudde (2007), Müller (2016), Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), tends to see populism as a particular *attribute* of political actors – that is, part

of a belief system that actors *hold* about the world. This is typified in Mudde's definition of populism as,

> a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: "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, 2004: 543).

The second, the discursive-performative approach to populism, instead views populism as a particular discursive or performative *practice* rather than an attitude or view held by political actors. Populism is therefore something that politicians *do*. Primarily associated with the work of Laclau (2005), and extended by authors such as Mouffe (2018), Panizza (2005), Moffitt (2016, 2020), Ostiguy (2017), and Stavrarakis and Katsambekis (2014), these authors argue that populism is primarily about the discursive and performative construction of 'the people' against an out-group of 'the elite.' In other words, while both camps agree that populism centres on the divide between 'the people' and 'the elite,' the former sees this distinction as revolving around a set of beliefs, whereas the latter sees this as a discursive-performative practice that actively constitutes the categories of 'the people' and 'the elite' themselves.[1]

Here, we adopt the discursive-performative definition of populism. We do this because, both theoretically and empirically, this elaboration of populism foregrounds the representative claim-making nature of populism: it is a particular discourse or performative style that must be enacted and re-enacted over time. Indeed, some authors in this tradition specifically define populism in the language of claim-making (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). While populists make claims to represent 'the people' against a (corrupt) elite on both accounts, as will become clear, the discursive-performative approach is better suited for understanding transnational populist efforts. This is because 'representative claims' to stand for 'the people' help us understand how populists seek to construct and mobilize followers – those linked to, or who identify with, such characterisations of 'the people.' We therefore argue that the recent constructivist turn in political theory can shed light on the conceptual underpinnings and empirical instantiations of populism (Saward, 2010) by

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[1]   There is also a third central approach to the phenomenon, the 'strategic approach' to populism, which sees populism as 'as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers' (Weyland, 2001: 14). This approach has been most influential in the literature on Latin American populism, rather than political theory, where the divide between the ideational and discursive-performative approaches are most central (see Moffitt, 2020 for a comparison of the three approaches). Given this article is primarily focused on political theoretical issues, we have thus chosen to focus on comparing these two approaches for the purposes of relevance and clarity.

placing this representative claim-making at the heart of understanding the phenomenon.[2]

The constructivist turn has come to occupy a central place in studies of political representation over the past fifteen years or so (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019; Disch, 2011). This endeavour has two core features. First, representation is conceived as an iterative process of performative claim-making in which representatives put forward claims that constituencies and audiences accept or reject (Saward, 2010).[3] The acceptance or rejection by constituencies enables claim-makers to gain or lose their legitimate mandate for action. Second, through this claim-making, representation constitutes (on some level) popular power by helping to form, coalesce, and even bring into being those constituencies (Näsström, 2015). Through a continual process of discursive claim-making, constituencies and audiences are mobilized by representatives who identify, call forth, organize, and shape latent interests.

This constructivist turn opens up space to conceive of representation as a dialectic practice, accessible to a variety of actors. While representation has traditionally been thought of in terms of electoral principal-agent bonds of authorization and accountability, representative claim-making illuminates the process through which myriad actors make representative claims, the acceptance/rejection of these claims by various constituencies and audiences, and the ongoing relationship between these actors. This allows us to understand how electoral actors can claim to speak for actors outside their formal constituencies. Moreover, it also enables us to see how non-electoral actors (perhaps unelected populists seeking office and influence, or spokespeople for populist movements) can claim to speak for a raft of different actors, pursuing support from those they claim to represent, and sourcing wider legitimation from audiences that view those claims.

This constructivist turn is relevant for our focus on populism for at least three reasons. First, it helps us to conceptually detach populism from nationalism. Given that populists and nationalists make representative claims on behalf of distinct constituencies, this step foregrounds our claim that transnational populism can, and indeed does, exist. Second, populism – as we have defined it – is a discourse or political style with clear performative elements in terms of its focus on making representative claims on behalf of 'the people.' This provides a neat conceptual link to the constructivist turn's emphasis on claim-

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2   For an explicit engagement between Saward's work and a discursive-performative view of populism, see Moffitt (2016: 95-112) and Diehl (2019).

3   To be specific, a constituency comprises those being 'spoken for' (i.e. the object of the claim), whereas an audience comprises those actors who see claims being made. We engage further with this distinction, considering how and why it matters normatively, in the second half of the paper.

making. Finally, populists claim to speak for 'the people' and often this group is amorphous, shifting, and only recognizable with respect to those representative claims. Indeed, in democratic life there is arguably no more powerful and essential a process than the construction of 'the people' (Laclau, 2005), and the imaginary through which this happens remains fundamentally important to the practice of democracy itself. Yet this process opens up the possibility that transnational populists are constructing constituencies, shaping the preferences and wants of those people within and (especially) beyond their state, without adequate democratic accountability. From the constructivist angle, then, we can explore whether transnational populism exacerbates or lessens democratic deficits beyond the state and suggest how the relationship between transnational populists and 'the people' might be made more democratically legitimate.

Separating populism and nationalism

How can we conceptually separate populism and nationalism? Until recently, this question has not received much attention. This is due, in large part, because the terms had often been conflated with one another. For instance, research abounds on 'national populism' (Germani, 1978; Učeň, 2010), 'nationalist populism' (Carpenter, 1997), 'populist nationalism' (Blokker, 2005), and other terminological amalgamations.

Yet, as we have discussed above, this seemingly easy alliance belies some fundamental differences between populism and nationalism. On a conceptual level, this difference emerges when considering who constitutes 'the people' for whom populists claim to speak. On a nationalist conception, 'the people' is a cultural or ethnic group which inhabits a nation-state. The nation in *nation*-state takes primacy, and nationalists seek to propel the nation (or a nationally-defined 'people') as the rightful source of legitimacy in deciding how state politics should be determined. But nationalist claims made on behalf of 'the people' jar with empirical reality because nation-states are often infused with a variety of different cultural and ethnic groups, and these groups can often cut across the more-or-less stable borders of nation-states. As such, understanding cultural-ethnic groups as 'the people' requires a form of (often exclusionary) imagined community, along the lines of that proffered by nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson (1991).

While there are certainly many populists who share nationalist affinities, on a formal level, cultural-ethnic claims of personhood are better understood as the terrain of nationalists. Populists, on the other hand, tend to claim to speak for 'the people' as a constructed group downtrodden by 'the elite.' It is therefore not nationhood (or cultural-ethnic) membership that generates who 'the people' are, but rather subjection to the will of 'corrupt' elites that creates that

grouping. Moreover, populists and nationalists interpret the 'other' in different ways. For nationalists, the 'other' are non-citizens or potentially non-residents of the nation, along with those who do not share the 'correct' ethno-cultural background or national values. For populists, the 'other' are 'the elite,' as well as groups who are perceived to be affiliated with or benefit from the actions of 'the elite,' such as minority groups. To put this slightly differently, nationalists seek to understand 'the people' as a horizontal, membership-based collective (with membership premised on an in/out logic between nations). Alternately, populists construct 'the people' vertically, in opposition to sites of domination and power occupied by 'the elite,' with membership premised on an up/down logic that relies on this power imbalance (see De Cleen et al., 2020 for a detailed discussion of this schema).

In the real world, political actors often blur these claims (Brubaker, 2020). Donald Trump, for example, oscillates between talking about America as a shared cultural-ethnic group in his racist tirades against Mexicans and other members of 'shithole countries,' while also claiming that only he is capable of 'draining the swamp' and freeing Americans from the tyranny of established, corrupt elites in Washington. Because this same actor makes claims for, and seeks to mobilize, 'the people' in different ways, it is conceptually necessary to separate between nationalism and populism. Just because two representative claims can be articulated within the same political project does not make them the same thing, nor does it mean that a political actor like Trump is exclusively a nationalist *or* a populist.

Populism beyond the state

Decoupling populism from nationalism, and honing in on its performative nature, enables us to think about how populism can spread beyond borders. This can occur in two distinct ways: what has been labelled in the populism studies literature as international populism and transnational populism (De Cleen, 2017; Moffitt, 2017). International populism occurs when populist actors in one nation-state, claiming to represent 'the people' of their state, seek to construct alliances, allegiances, and affinities with populists in other nation-states (and/or those populists' constituencies and audiences), without *claiming to represent* 'the people' of those other states. For instance, when European populist radical right actors rebuke Brussels and the elite control of the European Union (EU), they individually aim to represent 'the people' bound within their nation-state. But, in doing so, they often reach out to populists in other nation-states in order to garner support for their position and build coalitions against shared enemies of 'the people.' As such, the shared 'antipathy towards Brussels is thus not one of a European-wide 'people,' but rather nationally-sovereign 'peoples' who share a

common enemy' (Moffitt, 2017: 411).[4]

The second variant of populism beyond the state is a transnational one. In this mode, populists make representative claims on behalf of 'the people' that explicitly stretch *beyond* the borders of a single nation-state. In this way, 'the people' who are characterized as being dominated or subjected by an elite in ways that cross national boundaries. So, while international populists seek alliances with other groupings of 'the people' – that is, they seek a *plural* grouping of 'peoples' from different nation-states – transnational populists try to construct their own constituency *beyond* national lines that constitute 'the people' in the *singular*.

International and transnational populism in practice

Having established how international and transnational populism are conceptualized in the extant literature, we now turn toward how they take shape in practice. Drawing on De Cleen (2017) and Moffitt (2017), this section provides some illustrative examples of both. As we shall see, neither international nor transnational populism necessarily exist in ideal-typical form: however, the examples offered indicate the diversity and spread of these efforts.

First, we discuss two examples mentioned by De Cleen (2017) in his work on international populism – Occupy and the Indignados. While 'the people' on whose behalf representative claims were made by these movements were initially local in their characterisation, they also had a transnational character, given the extension of a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005) between local occupations or demonstrations. For example, Occupy Wall Street shared a common frame and claim in the name of 'the people' with Occupy London, Occupy Melbourne, Occupy Portland, and others. However, the national or local character of 'the people' spoken for remained central in the various Occupy and Indignados outposts' messaging, something that was made clear by Gerbaudo in his ethnography of these protest movements. As he notes, these movements,

> tried to root protest action in the political structures of their respective countries, through targeting either national enemies, such as prominent politicians and bankers, or global foes framed as 'enemies of the nation,' and by trying to exploit the political opportunities that presented themselves in their national space […] In so doing, they have claimed the nation, rather than global space, as the central battleground. (Gerbaudo, 2017: 125)

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4   This practice resembles Keck and Sikkink's (1998) 'boomerang model' of transnational activist networks. This model shows how actors, blocked at political change domestically, use networks to form coalitions with actors in other states who lobby their own domestic government to put pressure on the initially impervious state. As explained later, our argument is limited to transnational populism, not social movements in general (though the logic of mobilization is similar).

In contrast to the global focus of the alter-globalisation movement of the early 2000s, the Occupy and Indignados movements explicitly stressed the sovereignty and autonomy of the local camps, occupations, or demonstrations. In some ways this was operationally built into the movements, given their focus on horizontalism and consensus-based decision making (which tended to highlight the particularities of the different occupations rather than the universality of the broader movements). Other examples of international populism include explicit cooperation between populist right leaders in the EU Parliament, such as in the cases of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group, the Europe of Nations and Freedom group, and the Identity and Democracy group (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). These cases show how national-level representative claims for 'the people' against 'the elite' remain bound within those nation-states as they simultaneously strive to make connections with similarly positioned populist representative claims in other bounded nation-states.

But what about transnational populism? Here we discuss four quite different cases from across the globe. It is important to note that we are not claiming that these populist figures are explicitly *transnationalists* per se: that is, they are not cosmopolitans in any substantive sense, nor have they expressed any particular desire to undo national sovereignty. Instead, we merely make the observation that these populist figures have all made *transnational representative claims* that are worth paying attention to, that they have spoken on behalf of and characterized 'the people' (versus 'the elite') in ways that go beyond the usual purview of national borders, and that this warrants analysis.

The first case is Hugo Chávez, who made some efforts in his later years to not only act as the spokesperson of 'the people' of Venezuela, but of the Latin American region (Burges, 2007; Gott, 2008). His efforts to bring about an integrationist 'post-liberal regional order' (Chodor and McCarthy-Jones, 2013: 211) in Latin America was reflected in the establishment of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA). Sometimes Chávez went even further than Venezuela or Latin America, and made representative claims on behalf of 'the people' of the entire Global South. These representative claims on behalf of a transnational 'people' were clear in his infamous 2006 speech at the United Nations in which he referred to George W. Bush as 'the Devil.' In this speech, Chávez claimed that 'I know what is in the soul of the peoples of the South, the oppressed peoples [...] the peoples of the world' and argued that giving Venezuela a non-permanent seat on the Security Council would allow the country to 'make not only its voice but that of the Third World and all peoples heard throughout the world' (United Nations, 2006: 11-12).

The second example is a populist on the other side of the ideological spectrum: Geert Wilders. While Wilders usually presents himself as the voice of the Dutch 'people,' Wilders has also, to some extent, made representative claims on behalf of 'the people' of Western countries across the globe who are allegedly under attack by radical Islam and the multiculturalist elites who are allowing their 'shared Western culture' to be denigrated. He has travelled to a number of countries on speaking tours to warn the West of the 'dangers' of Islamisation, and even inspired and launched an unsuccessful anti-Islam political party in Australia in 2015, the Australian Liberty Alliance (later rebranded as Yellow Vest Australia). His international talks are also peppered with references to 'our Western freedoms and our Judeo-Christian civilization' and 'our mission as patriots to protect our nations' from Islam (Wilders, 2016). For a populist figure often labelled a nationalist, Wilders also seems to harbour curiously transnational ambitions, with a zeal for making representative claims on behalf of a transnational 'people' who are scattered across the globe.

The third example is that of former Trump Chief Strategist and executive chairman of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon. Bannon has spent much of his time and efforts after leaving the White House trying to set up a transnational populist movement, claiming that 'all I'm trying to be is the infrastructure, globally, for the global populist movement' (in Horowitz, 2018); a transnational organisation he has named, simply, 'The Movement.' However, The Movement has failed on a strategic level, largely because electoral laws in many countries bar or restrict Bannon and his organisation from campaigning or interfering with national politics, and also because many populist right parties and leaders he has approached appear to want nothing to do with him (see Lewis, 2018). Nonetheless, Bannon has made representative claims on a transnational level, portraying himself as a fighter on behalf of 'the people' of Western nations, and arguing that 'we are the platform for the voice of [...] the working men and women of Europe and Asia and the United States and Latin America,' whom he opposes to 'the party of Davos' and 'the elites' (in Lester Feder, 2016).

The fourth and most clearly articulated case of transnational populism to have emerged in recent years is DiEM25, the 'Democracy in Europe Movement 2025' led by former Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis (see De Cleen et al., 2020; Fanoulis and Guerra, 2020). Launched in early 2016, DiEM25 set out to 'democratise Europe' to save it from disintegration. The movement claims to speak for '[w]e, the peoples of Europe,' who 'have a duty to regain control over our Europe from unaccountable 'technocrats,' complicit politicians and shadowy institutions' (DiEM25, 2016a: 7). It makes representative claims on behalf of 'Europe's peoples' against 'the Powers of Europe,' who, amongst

others, include 'the Brussels bureaucracy,' lobbyists, the Troika, the Eurogroup, 'bailed out bankers,' ideologically bankrupt political parties, austerity imposing governments, 'media moguls' and 'corporations in cahoots with secretive public agencies' (DiEM25, 2016a: 2).

Unlike the cases of international populism mentioned earlier, Varoufakis has stressed that DiEM25 is 'not in the business of becoming a confederacy of existing nation-state parties' (Varoufakis, 2016b). Instead, DiEM25 explicitly put forth its transnational ambitions, presenting itself as 'a cross-border pan-European movement' that seeks not to build up from the nation-state level but to 'start at the European level to try to find consensus and then move downwards' (Varoufakis, 2016a: 33). This was reflected in the movement's embrace of transnational candidate lists in the 2019 European Parliament elections. While DiEM25's representative claims did not prove particularly resonant in the 2019 elections, garnering a low number of votes, they have since found some success (somewhat ironically, only on a national level), with their Greek wing, MeRA25, winning 9 seats in the Greek Parliament in the same year.

While these empirical examples of transnational populism vary considerably – they span the globe and the ideological spectrum, they include individual political actors as well as movements and parties, and they seemingly have varying levels of commitment to establishing a transnational 'people' in practice – they each share a wider view of 'the people' than is usually associated with nationally-bound populist claims. However, what is perhaps problematic is that despite presenting themselves as having the authority to speak on behalf of 'the people' beyond national borders who are under attack from 'the elite,' none of these cases (other than DiEM25), have actually been subjected to institutional contestation in international settings. We now turn to consider this and other normative issues which relate to transnational populism.

The democratic promises and pitfalls of transnational populism, and how we should respond

Promises and Pitfalls

What normative issues, specifically pertaining to democratic legitimacy, does transnational populism raise, and how should we respond to these, if at all? On one hand, efforts to represent a transnational 'people' against 'the elite' can be seen as a response to democratic shortcomings that characterize the modern world (particularly in regards to transnational democratic deficits). On the other, they come with democratic complications surrounding how efforts to mobilize 'the people' across national lines occur and, more fundamentally, expose issues with the constructivist nature of political representation itself. We discuss both points in turn.

Many theorists today are quick to note that domestic politics suffers from a democratic deficit. Essentially, this occurs due to a mismatch between 'the people' (*demos*) who should exercise power, and the sites of power (*kratos*) which regulate their lives. Increasingly, government policy is directed by decisions in international organizations (IOs). These IOs, established to help manage global interconnectedness and reassert sovereignty in a changing world, come with an ironic loss of democratic legitimacy, as delegation and pooling undermines national autonomy (Hooghe and Marks, 2015). Ultimately, this means that individuals – subjected to rules and policies determined beyond the nation-state – are not able to collectively determine the shape and content of that power.[5] So while democracy demands that 'the people' can collectively self-rule, power exercised beyond the state undermines this ideal.

The problem of democratic deficits has animated a series of debates on how to curtail forms of political power that escape the nation-state. These include – amongst others – work on cosmopolitan, republican, and deliberative democracy (Bohman, 2010; Dryzek, 1999; Held and Koenig-Archibugi, 2005). A common thread between these positions is that when power migrates beyond national contexts, democratic curbing of that power should follow. In this sense, transnational populists can enact democratic goods by identifying elites from both within and beyond the state who constrain the lives of individuals beyond national lines. Calling forth, helping to solidify, and ultimately constructing constituencies of 'the people' against 'the elite' can help track the emergence of identities constrained by political power. This process can be expressed in progressive terms, such as DiEM25's call for a more democratic, responsive, and transparent EU, or in conservative terms, such as Bannon's attacks on transnational bodies as democratically illegitimate.

All is not smooth sailing, however. While transnational populists can help *identify* agents impacted by the exercise of power that cross national lines, democratic legitimacy demands something stronger: it necessitates that those impacted by public power can *shape* the content of that power. This means (roughly speaking) that 'the people' should be able to determine freely, fairly, and equally the content of law and public policy. Again, this is something that populists often champion, with calls for plebiscitary mechanisms, referenda, and other forms of so-called 'direct democracy' as a way of giving 'the people' a more meaningful say in their political destiny (Canovan, 1999).

However, the constructivist turn in studies of political representation presents complications for the traditional ways of thinking about democratic legitimacy

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5   While states can, in theory, exit international organizations, this is typically difficult in practice. Moreover, many IOs and international treaties have sunset clauses which lock-in the commitment for set periods of time.

of representatives in this regard. On the 'standard account,' derived from Hanna Pitkin (1967), representatives gain mandates from their constituency and are accountable to them in periodic elections. This principal-agent model allows the represented to sanction their representatives for their actions and inactions. This standard account certainly captures much of the formal nature of electoral representation, thus going some way towards explaining the fortunes and dynamics of many populist actors operating on the national (or even the EU) electoral level. But the insights provided by the constructivist literature on political representation reveal two problems here for transnational populism. First, transnational populists are speaking for 'the people' outside of their nation-state who will have little democratic recourse to push back against claims with which they disagree. Second, the process of claim-making is bidirectional and constitutive. That is, representatives are not simply accountable to those they represent. Instead, the representative-represented relationship is dyadic: representatives, through their claim-making, are able to contribute to shaping the wants, interests, and preferences of the represented in foundational ways.

This means that we need to (re)think whether claims to represent 'the people' – especially in transnational contexts where electoral mechanisms are often lacking – can be democratically legitimated. Although democratic legitimacy can be conceptualised in several different ways, we draw on current literature and suggest two mechanisms for thinking about how representative claims can be evaluated (Kuyper, 2016; Saward, 2010). First, we ask whether those being spoken for – the constituency, in Saward's (2010) account – accept or reject the representative claim. Second, given that the constructivist turn focuses on *how* representatives shape the preferences and interests of their constituency, we suggest that a key element of legitimating representative claims in democratic settings involves an ability to contest and challenge those claims with counter-claims.[6] While the first criterion derives from a direct view of democratic legitimacy, the second follows from liberal and deliberative impulses foregrounding the importance of ideological and discursive contestation.[7]

In practice, we can see these issues play out with respect to transnational populist claim-making. For instance, transnational populists can help align

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6 While audiences might also have their preferences and interests swayed by viewing populist claim-making, they are not necessarily amongst 'the people' being represented in the relationship, and therefore not entitled to democratic representation. Audiences might be important for gaining support, testing claims, or other reasons, but the happenstance of seeing a claim does not trigger a democratic demand of inclusion in the same way that being 'spoken for' does (Kuyper, 2016).

7 While we are sceptical *ex ante* of stipulating how precisely this discursive contestation should play out, we suggest that exposing claims to a variety of counter-claims provides several democratic goods. First, it enables the validity of claims to be probed (Dryzek, 2004). Second, it reduces the framing effects of claims (Druckman, 2004). And finally, it proves a good litmus test of whether the conditions under which representative claim-making occurs are free and open (White and Ypi, 2016).

'the people' with the sources of power that constrain their lives. Chávez's representative claims – when speaking on behalf of 'the people' of Latin America, and more broadly, the global South – may indeed have helped some citizens of these countries become aware of the pernicious effect that elite collusion has had on their countries, and to seek ways of challenging, resisting or even altering this by identifying with his characterisation of 'the people.' But this process also means that 'the people' can be constructed in ways that those spoken for would reject. To use the same example, there may also be numerous citizens in these countries spoken for by Chávez who do not identify with and may even vociferously reject his claims or political project, but do not have a channel to express that rejection. For instance, those being spoken for outside of Venezuela have little to no recourse for contesting Chavez's claims in the absence of electoral avenues or other institutional channels for contestation. This can lead, in extreme cases, to those being spoken for having their preferences ignored or even altered without a process of contestation around how those views are formed.

In other words, if transnational populists claim to represent a set of actors ('the people') within and outside of national boundaries, those represented typically have little means to deny or counteract these claims.[8] While electoral representatives within nation-states try to construct their constituency in different ways, electoral mechanisms and the wider constitutional framework provide democratic ways to legitimate these claim-making efforts. Electoral mechanisms afford means for the represented to push back against claims they disagree with, while constitutional mechanisms delimit the kinds of claims that populists can make. At the transnational level, 'the people' are not embedded in the same nation-state system, making the rejection/contestation of claims more difficult.

Overall, transnational populists spark interesting debates for those who think about the connections between populism and democratic legitimacy. While it is good news that transnational populists can speak for 'the people' who are subjected to elite power beyond national lines – in this sense, projects such as DiEM25's transnational populist call for greater transparency and a more democratic EU are positive – we also have to ask how they speak for them,

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8   One might wonder or question at this stage why we limit this normative issue – and our response – to cases of transnational populism narrowly, and not to all forms of transnational social movements. We make this move because populism, as we understand it, is *fundamentally* about representative claim-making on behalf of 'the people' as per the work of Laclau (2005), which of course can impact the preferences and beliefs of constituents. Transnational social movements *may* engage in similar processes of claim-making, and then our normative framework would apply, although we would contend that there is perhaps something unique about the majoritarian nature of populist claims on behalf of 'the people' against 'the elite' as opposed to other activist claims to 'some set of people' or particular group. However, not all social movements entail explicit representative claims (see Tormey, 2015), and therefore fall outside our scope.

how they can be rendered democratically legitimate, and through which mechanisms. We argue that there are two modes for democratically legitimating transnational populist claim-making. First, 'the people' being spoken for need to be able to accept or reject claims made on their behalf (Saward, 2010). Second, the claims of transnational populists need to be exposed to counter-claims (De Wilde, 2013). This can include counter-claims of representation with which 'the people' might agree, or can mean simply demanding further justification (Saward, 2010). These modes can occur through institutional and non-institutional mechanisms. We will now outline these two modes and two mechanisms empirically and then typologize them schematically.

Institutional and non-institutional mechanisms

We firstly consider institutional mechanisms. These arise through regional (or global) institutions that can enable 'the people' to accept or reject claims and allow for counter-claims to be formulated in that institutional space. Despite the rather systemic failings of the EU and the European Parliament (EP) over the last three decades, this institution remains an indicative case. The EP has been able to gain power over the years – for instance, the EP now has budgetary powers against the Council and has veto power over international trade agreements amongst other formalized authorities. Yet, these gains in terms of authority have not been matched by democratic legitimacy: MEPs constantly demand more transparency for how Commission and Council decisions are taken, and voter turn-out for the EP has, by and large, steadily declined.

While these institutional mechanisms are important, we need to specify why they are important for transnational populists and their democratic legitimacy. Institutional fora, such as the EP provide an avenue for representatives to formally seek authorization from the transnational people they claim to represent (as in the case of DiEM25). In an obvious way, then, these institutions help test whether those beyond national borders – who are being spoken for – identify with the claims of transnational populists. In this regard, it is no wonder that the most successful and prominent cases of both international and transnational populism have been in the European context: there is an institutional environment for populists to test their claims *for* constituencies *against* other actors. Populists in Europe do not need to 'set the stage,' so the speak, on which their transnational claims play out; it is already set up for them, taking much of the confusion and labour out of the process of making representative claims and gauging the responsivity of constituencies. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything like DiEM25 emerging anywhere outside of the European context, since its transnational ambition and promise of action is premised upon the institutional framework of the EU.

Moreover, mechanisms such as the EP provide an institutional and discursive space in which transnational populists can discuss and debate their positions with other representatives. Transnational populists can then be questioned by others, potentially frustrated at EU elections, and ultimately held to some form of account for their views. This was indeed the case for DiEM25 in the 2019 European Parliament elections: while they made claims to speak for 'the people of Europe,' the people of Europe were not particularly enamoured by their message or representative claims, as results at the ballot box attest. This space then provides the means for counter-claims to be aired and justifications to follow. It is this pressure for further justification that helps legitimate representative claims and thus check the foundation of mobilization efforts. As individuals are exposed to multiple claims from different sides of the political spectrum, different views and arguments can be trialled against one another. This, in turn, encourages individuals to think in cross-cutting manners, to abrogate self-serving interests, and can more broadly undermine motivated reasoning (Druckman, 2004). This helps render representative claim-making democratic, even under a constructivist interpretation in which acceptability of claims may not always be sufficient for democratic legitimation.

Alternately, we need to think about how non-institutional mechanisms can help render transnational populists – who perhaps avoid entering formal institutions beyond the state, whether by choice (as formal institutions may invite too much scrutiny) or by default (as there is no formal transnational institution to enter) – democratically accountable to those they claim to represent. On this point, we are on somewhat shakier ground. We suggest that in such a situation, it is perhaps media – both traditional media and social media – which is pivotal. Different forms of media are able to disseminate views of transnational populists to those they claim to represent. In turn, individuals can use (particularly social) media to accept, probe, or reject claims of representation on their behalf. Indeed, Moffitt has argued that in,

> the absence of other obvious mediating channels for the construction of transnational populist identities – clientist networks and national electoral channels, for example – media becomes vital in broadcasting, amplifying, covering, and reproducing representative claims to potential constituencies and wider audiences alike (Moffitt, 2017: 419).

Again, this can be examined in terms of acceptability and the exposure to counter-claims. For instance, social media offers a rough gauge of whether certain transnational representative claims are accepted or rejected by target constituencies. Social media cuts across national borders and theoretically

offers a back-and-forth participatory dynamic. For example, turning again to the case of DiEM25, the organization has had some success mobilizing support (and therefore acceptance) from some constituencies in their online endeavours. The party has utilized Facebook to create what it calls 'DiEM25 Spontaneous Collectives' in multiple European countries, aiming to link 'physical meetings at Town Halls (where Coordinating Committees eventually emerge) with digital 'platoons' of DiEM25 members doing their bit to promote our Manifesto's goal' (DiEM25, 2016b).

More generally, the interactive nature of online media can allow users a voice: a chance to engage with, comment on, and speak 'directly' to their alleged representatives who claim to speak on their behalf. Gerbaudo has noted that in the case of what he calls 'populism 2.0':

> Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook acquire the role of an informal voting system, operating on the principle of "one like, one vote," in which liking, sharing or retweeting assumes the nature of a vote of confidence on a certain message or proposal […] These metrics, of which Web 2.0 abounds, come to indicate the extent to which a certain message or proposal is really backed up by bottom-up enthusiasm, a decisive factor in order to secure its ultimate success (Gerbaudo, 2014: 83).

In this context, metrics such as likes, retweets, comments, or numbers of followers can be used as an (admittedly very) imperfect gauge of the representativeness (acceptability) of transnational populist claim-making. This should not be read as a panacea, however. It is widely understood that Twitter is populated by automated bots and sock-puppet accounts, that followers can be bought very easily, and that 'click farms' are used to increase such metrics. In such an environment, the appearance of 'engagement' is easily gamed, becoming a weapon in the reputational artillery of transnational populists.

Moreover, social media also often has a siloing and 'echo chamber' effect in which users very rarely reach across ideological or discursive divides (Flaxman et al., 2016). As such, claims by transnational populists (and others) are often not tested against counter-claims in a substantive manner. It is therefore important to think of other mechanisms which help fulfil this criterion. Historically, traditional media has provided space for representatives to make claims to mass publics, with different claims being expressed in the same publications *and* across different outlets and such ideological balance seen as serving the 'public interest' (McQuail, 1992; Mutz, 2001). Indeed, a number of countries mandate that different sides of a story be presented in journalistic

articles and news stories, such as the (now-revoked) fairness doctrine of the US Federal Communications Commission. This has the effect of providing a non-institutional space for different claims – including representative claims – to be trialled against one another in the public eye.

As with new media, however, this mechanism has pitfalls. Seemingly, today traditional media is also increasingly siloed (Levendusky, 2013). With this siloing, there is less need or aptitude to test claims against one another. When it comes to transnational populism, we can think here of the fawning media attention given to Steve Bannon by traditional media outlets: despite the clear lack of evidence that his 'Movement' has any real momentum or has even really gotten off the ground, Bannon's transnational populist claims on behalf of a Judeo-Christian 'people' of the West beat down by globalist 'elites' have received an inordinate amount of oft-uncritical coverage, not only from the 'usual suspects' of ideologically-aligned partisan media such as Fox News, but legacy media such as *The New York Times* and *The Economist* as well. This lack of critical exposure thus contributes to the *appearance* of the legitimacy of his claims. Given that old or traditional media do not offer much in the way of a chance for audiences to participate or 'answer' representative claims made in their name (as social media potentially can), contestation of viewpoints becomes all the more democratically important. However, as we see in the Bannon case, in the absence of institutional tests of such representative claims, media – especially well-regarded outlets – add reputational weight to his representative claims. This lack of contestation has a consequent effect on perceived acceptability too, because in such situations, media hype problematically stands in as a proxy for constituencies and audiences 'answering' representative claims. This shows that acceptability and exposure to counter-claims likely work together in producing democratically desirable outcomes.

Drawing these threads together, we can construct a typology of how to democratically legitimate representative claims (especially in transnational settings) in the case of transnational populism. On one hand, we can think about whether claims are accepted or rejected as well as whether said claims are open to contestation. On the other, we can think about the space – institutional or non-institutional – in which these two criteria can be discharged. These are illustrated in the table below.

	REPRESENTED ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION	EXPOSURE TO COUNTER-CLAIMS
INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS	EU Parliamentary voting	EU Parliament as discursive space
NON-INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS	New media/social media	Old/traditional media

Table 1: A typology of representative claims and spaces

Overall, we then need to think about how institutional spaces (such as parliamentary structures) provide for mechanisms of acceptability/rejection while helping to showcase and trial different views against one another. Alternately, non-institutional mechanisms of social media should enable the represented constituency to accept or reject claims made on their behalf in a more dynamic capacity, while old media should help trial different standpoints against one another in the public sphere. Insofar as transnational representative claims can survive these different tests, we can begin unpacking the democratic legitimacy of individual transnational populist claims.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we make three points. First, we have argued that populism and nationalism are not coterminous enterprises. Nationalists seek to speak on behalf of an ethno- or socio-cultural grouping who constitute a given territory and thus represent the rightful democratic agents of the nation-state. Populists, alternately, speak on behalf of 'the people' downtrodden by 'the elite.' Importantly, populist claims to representation through mobilization can – and increasingly do – go beyond national boundaries. This opens up ways to think about transnational populism.

Second, we have elucidated what this can look like in theory and practice. We have identified the differences between international populism and transnational populism: the former revolving around the alliances between individual populist actors speaking on behalf of (nationally) sovereign peoples in the plural against 'the elite'; and the latter revolving around explicit claims made on behalf of a 'transnational' people in the singular against 'the elite.' We have illustrated empirical examples of both international and transnational populism, with a focus on the latter.

Finally, we have undertaken an analysis – evaluative and prescriptive – of this phenomenon. We have suggested that transnational populism is normatively ambiguous. While this practice can help remedy democratic deficits by (re-) connecting 'the people' to sites of political power, it comes with complications.

Most notably from a constructivist viewpoint, we must ask whether transnational populist claims are democratically legitimate.

In asking this question, we have suggested focusing on two features: whether the claims are accepted or rejected by the target constituency, and whether the claims are trialled against other claims. This led us to an evaluation of how different transnational populists can be accepted or rejected by 'the people' they claim to speak for, and how this is manifest in different institutional and non-institutional spaces. We have shown how this works in different spaces such as the EU Parliament and media outlets, and highlighted some problems in rendering representative claims democratically legitimate. For instance, we have shown that – in the absence of active efforts to contest representative claims – constituency acceptability is often a weak measure of democratic legitimacy. This shows that the criteria we have laid out oftentimes work symbiotically rather than in tension with one another.

Ultimately, we contend that democratically legitimate transnational populist claims require both acceptance (at some level) and scrutiny by alternate views (at some level) in institutional and non-institutional spaces. We have typologized these different alternative spaces, building inductively from our examples. Future research should build upon our findings and focus on developing normative analyses of transnational populism. On one hand, it should examine the relationship between transnational populism and global justice (such as whether transnational populism leads to new distributive practices and/or creates patterns of domination). On the other hand, studying the reality of representative claim-making and the normative desirability of these efforts as they emerge can provide insights into how different modes and spaces of claim-making can help render emergent forms of transnational populism democratically legitimate.[9]

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