

Maria Paula Saffon (Institute for Legal Studies, National Autonomous University of Mexico)
Nadia Urbinati (Department of Political Science, Columbia University)

Populism and Party Democracy: Partisanship Without a Party System?

“Parties, Partisans and Movements”
International Conference for the Study of Political Thought
May 10-11, 2019

Populism keeps bugging the minds of democratic theorists because of its ambiguous—even paradoxical—relationship with democracy. Populists play the democratic game, worship it and depend on its legitimacy even more than other types of democrats, and they do not intend to nor fully (or always) abolish elections. So it is not plausible to portray populism as anti-democratic. And yet, as many have pointed out, populism seems to corrode democracy from within, to hollow it out while claiming to be deepening democracy.

One of the aspects that highlights populism’s democratic ambiguity is its relationship to parties and the party system. While in the opposition, populist movements practice competitive and adversarial politics; yet their partisan animosity is in the view of forming a government that promises to represent the “true” people and their interests, beyond partisan divisions and compromises. Once in power, hence, populism is post-partisan, even anti-partisan. It sharply criticizes and dwarfs opposition parties; on some occasions, it even persecutes them, depicting them as anathema to the project of serving the interests of the many. Yet, populism in power does not altogether get rid of parties. Rather, it often operates through a party that claims to be the only-party-of-the-people, and that cultivates the ambition to incorporate the largest number of individuals and sectors of the population. Party incorporation and endorsement become key sources of legitimacy when—as they often are under populism—indirect institutions of representation are criticized, shattered or reformed.

Therefore, as Nancy Rosenblum suggests, antiparty-ism does not hinder but rather encourage partisanship, though only of one form of party. Now, that form of party and the partisanship it demands do not only defeat other parties; they challenge party democracy as a whole, and thereby likely endanger electoral competition and alternation. However, to a big extent, populist continuity in power still depends on electoral support and partisan endorsement. An important issue of this broad problem – namely, what kind of democracy a populist democracy is – pertains to the character of populist parties. Relying upon some exemplary cases, in our paper we would like to focus on the populist party, its loose or even anti-hierarchical organization, its personalism or identification with the leader, and its aim of becoming one thing with the people – a populist party is like a hyper-party that neutralizes party pluralism hegemonically, if not by coercive means.