



**POPULISM IN POWER: A CASE STUDY OF LEFT- AND RIGHT-
WING POPULIST APPROACHES TO POLICY**

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ABSTRACT

Populism is growing at an unprecedented rate, transforming itself in relation to the political arena and democratic landscape it finds itself in. On the other hand, democracy, with which populism is often in conflict, is said to be in a recession. The last two decades have given political analysts the opportunity to observe and analyse populist policies, particularly as people are becoming less interested in traditional politics. These factors are having a substantial effect on the way public policy is conducted, as policymakers risk abandoning their designated responsibilities, to accommodate popular trends. This study focuses on populism and its effect on democratic policies and policymaking, as charismatic leaders from both the left and the right side of the political spectrum take centre stage in their quest for power. This dissertation considers populist politicians when in power, not when in opposition, when criticising the establishment is easier. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, focusing on direct quotations from politicians of two major European populist parties during their time in power. Through thematic analysis, it identifies recurring patterns and themes in their rhetoric. Using Nadia Urbinati's theory on populism as its theoretical framework, this dissertation analyses populists' approaches to public policy, when they are policymakers. The study focuses on populism, not as an ideology, but as a tool employed by politicians within democratic politics, to consider how this form of politics approaches policymaking and the broader pillars of democratic politics within which it occurs.

Keywords: charismatic leadership, elite class, Fidesz, left populism, liberal democracy, Podemos, populism, public policy, right-wing ideologies, Urbinati.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	vii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Populism.....	1
1.2 Research Objectives	2
1.3 Research Problem and Research Questions	3
1.4 Significance and Motivation of the Study	4
1.5 Dissertation Structure.....	5
1.6 Concluding Remarks	6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2.1 The Populist Moment.....	7
2.2 Populism Across Ideological Spectrums.....	9
2.3 Navigating Through Charisma and Sentiments.....	15
2.4 Populism, Policymaking and Implementation	20
2.5 Theoretical Framework – Nadia Urbinati’s Political Theory of Populism.....	23
2.6 Concluding Insights	28
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS	29
3.1 Introduction to Research Methods	29

3.2 Research Philosophy	30
3.3 Research Approaches.....	32
3.4 Research Questions	33
3.5 Research Strategy.....	34
3.6 Data Collection	34
3.7 Data Analysis	36
3.8 Reliability of the Study	38
3.9 Ethical Considerations.....	39
3.10 Limitations of the Study	39
3.11 Conclusion.....	40
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	42
4.1 Introduction to Results and Analysis	42
4.2 The Case Studies	42
4.2.1 <i>Left-Wing Populism: Podemos in Spain</i>	43
4.2.2 <i>Right-Wing Populism: Fidesz in Hungary</i>	46
4.3 Research Findings	51
4.3.1 <i>Theme 1 – ‘Us and Them’ Rhetoric</i>	52
4.3.2 <i>Theme 2 – Attitudes Towards Liberal Democracy</i>	57
4.3.3 <i>Theme 3 – Identification of Political Opponents</i>	59
4.3.4 <i>Theme 4 – Views on Minority Groups</i>	62
4.4 Comparative Analysis.....	65
4.4.1 <i>Urbinati’s Framework</i>	65

<i>4.4.2 Comparing the Themes with Urbinati's Framework</i>	66
<i>4.4.3 The Themes Beyond Urbinati's Framework</i>	70
4.5 Concluding Observations	71
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	73
5.1 Introduction	73
5.2 Analysing the Research Questions	73
5.3 Interpretation of Findings	75
5.4 Recommendations for Future Research	76
5.5 Conclusion	77
REFERENCES	78
APPENDIX A: PRIMARY DATA SOURCES	93

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Primary Data Sources

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EPP	European People's Party
ERTE	Cases of Temporary Regulation of Employment
EU	European Union
ICO	Spanish National Insurance Institute
KDNP	Christian Democratic People's Party of Hungary
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PP	Spanish People's Party
PSOE	Spanish Socialists Workers' Party

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Populism

Populism is an enigmatic and ever-present political subject that is highly debated. It takes various forms and is discussed through different theoretical and empirical approaches. It shapes conflictual opinions through its sentimental discourse, and although it has been constantly researched, there is no agreement in the academic field nor in political discussions on what it exactly entails. The phenomenon of populism is still to this day, a complex and complicated subject. Its definition may vary from one scholar to the other. Democracies cannot ignore populism, as there is enough empirical evidence that shows its growing influence (Funke, Schularick and Trebesch, 2023), especially in the European continent, where it “threatens the European Union” (Galston, 2018, p. 7).

Some scholars argue that populism is not an ideology, as it does not follow a set of principles or rules for its followers to adhere to (Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019, p. 61), and define it “as the people in moral battle against elites” (Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019, p. 60). Populism is not a threat, but a challenge democracy faces as institutions falter. Other scholars, like Holcombe (2021), do not agree with this rationale, and stress that populism is indeed an ideology as it represents the people versus the elites, and throughout the years, populist movements when not in power, have forced governments across the globe to implement policies. Mudde writes that populism is “a thin-centred ideology”, that can blend with other ideologies like socialism or nationalism (2004, p. 544); “an ideological feature, and not merely as a political style”. Like most researchers in the field, Mudde describes populism with the premise that society is divided into two homogeneous groups: the people versus the elite (2007, p. 23). The former is perceived consistently as

the honest group, the hard-working individuals who pay taxes and struggle to make ends meet, while the latter is the small, “hopelessly corrupt” (Galston, 2018, p. 12) group, made up of few elites who will desperately implement policies that serve their own interest to maintain power. This same argument dates to 19th century philosophers such as Marx and Engels in their book ‘*Manifesto of the Communist Party*’, explaining how the ruling class had transformed itself to oppress the masses and divide society “into two great classes directly facing each other, bourgeoisie and proletariat” (1847, p. 3).

Although the class concept of ‘us and them’ can be traced back centuries since the beginning of political debate, the late 19th century is regarded as the time when populism as a political phrase started to take shape with the emergence of the Populist Party in the United States (Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019, p. 61). During its existence, instead of progressing theoretically, populism has been fragmented “into different approaches” (Oswald, Schafer and Broda, 2022, p. 22), thus more research on the forms populism takes when in opposition and when in power, is required.

Populism in power is accused of undermining “liberal institutions”, relying on charismatic leaders, creating a polarised political climate, and “impose an illiberal constitution” (Pappas, 2019, p. 71). This study will aim to determine the validity of these notions through its research objectives.

1.2 Research Objectives

This dissertation has five research objectives to achieve that should “define the specific aims” and help in “determining the power of the study” (Farrugia *et al.*, 2010, p. 281). Through a theoretical framework based on Nadia Urbinati’s theory on populism (2019)

discussed in the Literature Review chapter, the study investigates different conceptions of populist politics and policies. It also analyses the historical factors and political climate leading to the rise of left-wing and right-wing populist leaders in two European Union member states. The third objective of the study is to analyse the difference between policy proposals put forward by the left-wing and right-wing populist leaders of these two movements respectively. This study employs a thematic analysis to analyse their populist rhetoric, and finally the study aims to investigate the impact of their populist politics on policymaking and policy implementation.

1.3 Research Problem and Research Questions

Urbinati (2019, p. 5) states that populism “is ambiguous and is difficult to define in a sharp and uncontested way. This is because it is not an ideology or a specific political regime”. Despite its growing presence and association with numerous political ideologies, populism is still controversially debated and sometimes misunderstood by politicians and their followers alike through political discourse and argumentation. This runs the risk of turning such an important topic into a dangerous political tool for misconceptions, false narratives, and baseless solutions to complicated matters. Thus, this research has the aim of understanding better the phenomenon of populism, its implications on policymaking, and “build upon the lessons that the existing academic literature offers” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1668), with the research questions as the basis of this study.

Good research questions are a way by which researchers reveal “their interest in a problem or phenomenon” (Boudah, 2020, p. 22). To examine the phenomenon of populism, the researcher developed three research questions, which will then be answered and discussed in the concluding chapter of this study:

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of left and right populism in power with regard to the 21st century European context?

Research Question 2: What views do populists in power express with regard to policymaking processes and procedures?

Research Question 3: What similarities and differences are there between populists in power with regard to public policies?

1.4 Significance and Motivation of the Study

It took Hitler a couple of months to dismantle democracy and dissolve the Weimar Republic in March of 1933 (Conway, 1965, p. 400). A decade after the Russian Communist revolution of 1917, Stalin managed to eradicate any type of opposition, induce terror, oppress those with different ideological beliefs and create “a massive cult of personality” (Isaac, 2017, p. 318). This period led to the Cold War and the collapse of most extreme ideologies, as liberal democracy prevailed (Isaac, 2017, p. 319). This study investigates the implications of populism on public policy and politics in general. It is significant as populism has been on the surge across Europe for years (Zhao, 2022). It is also relevant due to the fact that the rise in populist leaders in Europe in the last two decades bear resemblance to the political climate during the rise of Nazism, Fascism and Communism. The researcher is motivated by the fact that the political scenario is not the only similarity between historical facts of the 1930s and the last two decades (Bromhead and O’Rourke, 2024). It goes beyond with a Global Financial Recession in 2008 similar to the Great Depression of the 1930s, with scholars suggesting that with “policy intervention during the Great Recession might have avoided a second Great Depression”

(Bianchi, 2015), and a global pandemic in 2019 resembling the Spanish flu that ravaged Europe and the world in 1918 (Liang, Liang and Rosen, 2021).

The researcher is curious to explore to what extent these similarities influence the rise of populism and its effect on policy. Are today's democracies resilient enough to prevent the detrimental aspects of populism while exploiting its benefits, so mistakes of the past are not repeated?

1.5 Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. This first chapter provided a brief explanation of the subject and its historical context, while introducing the reader to the main objectives of the study, the research problem and the research questions. In the second chapter the researcher discusses scholarly literature on the phenomenon of populism. Populism is analysed according to charismatic leadership, populist approaches to policy, and the differences between the main ideologies of left and right sides of the political spectrum. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the theory on populism by Nadia Urbinati (2019) which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The third chapter explains the methodology used to conduct the research. In the fourth chapter the historical context of the two populist movements used as case studies is provided, followed by a thematic analysis and a comparative analysis of their approach to policymaking. This analysis is informed by Nadia Urbinati's theory of populism. In the final concluding chapter, the research questions are answered, while a summary of the findings and recommendations for future research are provided.

1.6 Concluding Remarks

At the time of the study, populism is growing in its influence on policymaking, as traditional political norms face significant evolving challenges (Galston, 2018). Hopefully, this study contributes constructively to the current political climate. The following chapter presents a Literature Review chapter where the phenomenon of populism is discussed through scholarly literature written by academics, researchers and political analysts.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Populist Moment

When in opposition, populist parties can be beneficial to democracy as their proposed policies and arguments put pressure on governments to take difficult decisions on issues that for one reason or another had been forgotten. Contrarily, history has shown that when in power, populist governments find it difficult to govern (Jungkunz, Fahey and Hino, 2021), once they become the decision makers, having an “uneasy” relationship with institutions and are “often thought of as an epitome of contradiction” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 3). Decisions are still taken by the selected few, thus becoming the same as the elites they replaced and sometimes despised, as it is very difficult to implement policy by involving thousands of people in the policy process. As Urbinati perfectly stresses, “populism in power is doomed either to be unbalanced or to become a new regime” (2019, p. 12).

Scholars agree that the rise in populist leaders in the last two decades, after the financial crisis of 2008, is unprecedented. The post-Marxist political theorist Mouffe describes it as “the populist moment” that can lead to politics of both a more authoritarian or more democratic nature (2019, p. 79). In the last two centuries, as monarchies became obsolete, empires collapsed, ideologies lost relevance as Europe’s borders and geography changed, while international institutions kept some sort of order (Lawson, 2020). A lot of democracies have become immune to ideological beliefs, as elections resemble a sentimental voting exercise with a low turnout (EU, 2024), where a centre right party in opposition replaces a centre left party in government or vice versa, while coalitions to form governments are on the increase resulting in difficulty to implement policies

(Bergman *et al.*, 2024). Democracy has been transformed into a boring and outdated model to which the majority is disinterested, with several regions experiencing a “wave of democratic erosion” (Carothers and Hartnett, 2024, p. 24).

Populism can be viewed as a threat to traditional parties functioning in a democracy, “as populist governments tend to erode the levels of electoral, liberal and deliberative democracy”, and fail to improve the “egalitarian and participatory aspects of democracy”, as they promised before being elected to power (Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, 2023, p. 692). Any policy constructed by decision makers is questioned and doubted by populists, deeming this action as a way for the elites to keep the status quo rather than to solve problems. From climate change to global warming, during conflicts and a pandemic, in immigration or in times of economic turmoil, both left, and right leaning populists are suspicious of the opinion of experts and believe that common people have better solutions (Jylha *et al.*, 2022, pp. 153-154). The populist is a sceptic untrusting of the privileged elite (Wiesehomeier and Ruth-Lovell, 2024, p. 2).

How does populism thrive? Urbinati is convinced that “the stronger and more resistant the institutions and parties, the less likely populism is to thrive in the first place” (2022, p. 1110). Laclau (2005) states that populism finds fertile ground as groups of people have new demographic, social or economic demands that remain unanswered, and such “demands become more simplified because they remain unaddressed” (Karavasilis, 2024, p. 6). In populist discourse, society is divided between two camps showcasing “a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other” (Laclau, 2005, p. 86). As frustration grows, their anger increases as they start to perceive their problems not only their own, as they identify themselves with a group. Without such ‘popular demands’, populism will be non-existent (Laclau, 2005, p. 74). Their anger is directed towards the supposedly problem solvers, the

elite; be it the church, liberals, financial institutions, academics or any other privileged group that hold some form of power.

Can populism be eliminated? Can humans live in a world where populism is not needed, while competent politicians focus on specific policies that matter? It would be immature to view populism as a negative influence damaging society due to its exploitation by demagogues, but rather it is of utmost importance to understand it through research and observation, while reaping its benefits. Laclau (2005, p. 116) expresses this reasoning and states that, “if a society managed to achieve an institutional order of such a nature that all demands were satisfied within its own immanent mechanisms, there would be no populism but, for obvious reasons, there would be no politics either”. The politically motivated and oppressed individuals that coined the term populist and united black and white farmers in a coalition against elitists landowners in the 1890s American Midwest (Borriello and Jager, 2023, pp. 27-28), could not foresee the evolution of the word during the next century.

2.2 Populism Across Ideological Spectrums

Left-wing populism in Europe in the last two decades, has not received the “same analysis” as populism on the right side (Karavasilis, 2024, p. 1), albeit its electoral gains. According to post-Marxist political analyst Mouffe (2019), Europe is not just experiencing ‘the populist moment’ but a ‘post democracy’ phase in which neoliberal hegemony is in a crisis, as parties who served democracy well, cannot cope with “the populist moment and to face the challenge that it represents” (2019, p. 21).

Left-wing movements have the responsibility to offer better alternatives to the current democratic model in place to safeguard democracy from extreme ideologies. This cannot be done by condemning right-wing policies, but rather “recognise the democratic nucleus at the origin of many of their demands” (Mouffe, 2019, p. 22).

On the other hand, right-wing populist demands cannot restore democracy, as they exclude different groups such as immigrants that form part of an egalitarian society and tend to speak “in the name of recovering democracy, in fact drastically restrict it”. Mouffe believes that left-wing and right-wing populists agree on the description of unsatisfied demands that lead to populism but differ on who forms part of the ‘us and them’ groups (2019, p. 24).

For post-Marxist scholars, the elites are the capitalists exploiting the proletariat, but since the financial crisis of 2008 the “academic left have begun to fundamentally reconsider the coordinates of their political strategies and visions” (Petersen and Hecker, 2022, p. 85). To right-wing populist parties, the elites are leaders or movements too weak to take decisions and solve controversial issues like illegal immigration (Oswald and Betz, 2022, p. 116). Due to the surge by right-wing populist parties in Europe in the last decade (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), left leaning populist parties might be viewed as a threat to the status quo and European stability. Mouffe (2013, p. 87) believes that the success by right-wing populists after the financial crisis has been due to their ability to address concerns by the working class who felt abandoned by the populists on the left, as they shifted their concentration to the middle class. The emergence of left-wing populist parties in Europe after 2008 were mainly the result of hostility towards austerity measures implemented by the European Union on countries like Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014, p. 125), where SYRIZA became the first “beneficiary” of the ‘populist moment’ (Borriello and Jager, 2023, p. 92). Its leader Alexis Tsipras has been

met with condemnation being labelled “a dangerous ideologue threatening to drag his country out of the euro and bring drachmageddon” (Kakissis, 2012). Austerity measures created movements that view themselves as the underdogs against the Brussels establishment. Populist movements made up of people who must pay for debt and deficit incurred by incompetent elites who designed failed policies (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014, p. 130). Populist leaders like Jean-Luc Melenchon in France, who promised to “reclaim popular sovereignty from oligarchic captures”, after the damage inflicted to the left during the Francois Hollande years (Borriello and Jager, 2023, pp. 111-112).

The ‘populist moment’ of the left after the financial crisis of 2008 has been short lived, as was the case with Podemos in Spain, starting with high expectations after being elected to power, followed with a “period of institutionalisation marked by public scandals and internal tensions, and relative failure leading to the downscaling of initial ambitions” (Borriello and Jager, 2023, p. 84). Both left-wing and right-wing populism can be a tool by which citizens detached from mainstream politics and fed up with the status quo “vent their anger” and radically change institutions in a liberal democracy, “and not reject them”. A political environment that promotes agonistic debate where people from all sides of the political spectrum feel they have a voice (Mouffe, 2013, p. 85). Left-wing populist parties tend to agree on the inclusion and integration of minority groups into society, while right-wing populists have the tendency to attack such cohorts (Venizelos, 2023, p. 134). Does this make left-wing populism the politics of inclusion as it “incorporates inclusivity and egalitarianism” (Karavasilis, 2024, p. 4), and the latter more inclined to exclusion due to recent increase of violence on minority groups (Pauwels, 2021) by the far right?

Scholarly literature on right-wing populism has in recent years increased at an “exponential rate” (Oswald and Betz, 2022, p. 115). When researching populism, it is important to focus on the elements that make a movement or a politician a populist and not get confused in the process. Populism is a “fragmented” subject lacking “consistency” (Oswald, Schafer and Broda, 2022, p. 4), thus rendering it difficult to research. Right-wing populists’ rise to power is a challenge to the establishment’s status quo and to the “core values of liberal internationalism” (Lacatus and Meibauer, 2022, p. 437). The historical timing could not have been better, as this was the same time Britain voted for Brexit in a referendum, creating a political bewilderment and misinterpretation that Brexit was in fact a right-wing populist moment. Brexit was an “unpolitical” moment (Taggart, 2024, p. 4) in the form of a protest activated by British eurosceptics from all fronts of the political spectrum with a small dose of populism. It was also a “plural phenomenon: two sides of an argument with real differences within them as well as between them” (Taggart, 2024, p. 5). Brexit occurred during the ‘populist moment’ but cannot be defined as one.

Are populism and nationalism the same thing? Moffitt (2020) argues that this misinterpretation is done quite often due to the similarities between the two and the identical discourse applied in both political fields. Populism and nationalism are not the same, although they “often make good bedfellows” (Moffitt, 2020, p. 30). Populism does not need nationalism to function but rather it can exist on its own as long as there is an ideology that fits into its framework or, as Moffitt states, that “populism always combines with other ideological content” (2020, p. 40). The ‘people’ in right-wing populism are those considered ethnically similar and exclude minorities that form part of the population. Right-wing populists merge nativism with populism in their struggle against the elites and those who are ethnically different. Although not anti-democratic, right-wing populists expect that “nonnatives are to be treated with hostility” (Mudde, 2007, p. 138),

and view liberal democracy as weak and consider the ‘people’ as politically naive. To right-wing populists like Viktor Orban, liberal democracy is nearly obsolete as he advocates for “illiberal democracy” and believes that countries forming part of international institutions as the European Union, are at a disadvantage in today’s global scenario (Rosenthal, 2020, p. 115).

Mudde (2007, pp. 138-141) elaborates a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of nativism that goes back to Europe’s history in the last centuries that resulted in borders shifting and diaspora due to social and economic changes, taking with them their culture and ethnicity. Right-wing populists view multiculturalism as a threat to their country and the survival of their state. Majority of right-wing populist parties have slogans specifically stating that their country comes first, while anything alien is not part of the native family, and “are generally sceptical about European integration” (Bergmann, Keijzer and Hackenesch, 2024, p. 3). This approach has been highly present after the fall of Communism in eastern Europe and in the former Yugoslavia, where the “most grandiose territorial ambitions” (Mudde, 2007, p. 140) by populist radical right parties is significant. Hostility by right-wing populists has shifted from one that distinguishes between different groups on the basis of skin colour to cultural traits or religions that are alien to the region’s social norms, such as Islam, which is viewed as a threat to liberal democracy (Mudde, 2007, p. 145), and “that a clash of civilizations is inevitable” (Galston, 2018, p. 16).

Due to the popularity of right-wing populists in the last decade, approaches to populism have by mistake created a “nearly exclusive association with nationalism”, and ignoring “progressive populist phenomena on the political left” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 24). This has created uncertainty to individuals not familiar with the study of populism, as nationalism is just one aspect from a plethora of subjects attached to the phenomenon of populism.

The success by right-wing populist parties has been mostly due to “the result of their ability to exploit a range of negative emotions provoked by secular socioeconomic, sociostructural, and sociocultural processes” (Oswald and Betz, 2022, p. 134). Nationalism is not the only factor linked with right-wing populism, as emotions play an important role in communities with a sense of deprivation due to the changes happening by the fast development of technology in a more globalised world in a multicultural society (2022, p. 125). Scholars have “credited emotions for the electoral success of populists” (Caiani and Di Cocco, 2023, p. 351), with nostalgia providing “a positive sense of reassurance and comfort for those profoundly troubled by these developments” (Oswald and Betz, 2022, p. 126), as it looks “into the past with rose-coloured glasses” (2022, p. 123). People who believe that they are left behind, not only feel outpaced as they financially compare with others in their community, but are convinced that they are losing their identity, “with the sense of having become strangers in their own land” (2022, p. 126). This is where right-wing populists are popular as they “promote themselves as the ultimate defenders of cultural identity” (2022, p. 135).

Populism and democracy have a complex relationship. Studies show that especially in the European continent, populism “may be either a threat or a corrective for democracy”, and its effects on democracy tend “to focus on negatives”, as do expectations (Venizelos, 2023, p. 205). How can the relationship between the two improve? How can democracy adapt to the demands of populism as both combine and take part in policymaking, while keeping strong institutions in the process?

Due to the belief that there is “no alternative to neo-liberal globalization”, left-wing and right-wing ideologies have centralised their political philosophies and accepted the rules of capitalism, resulting in weakened institutions and minimising the ability of the people to construct policy, while citizens are finding it difficult to form part of a democratic

political party. The debate and analysis of what both ideologies stand for, is now “blurred due to the reduction of democracy to its liberal dimension”. Although to left-wing advocates, populist right-wing politics might look extreme or anti-democratic, denouncing them can make the situation worse as such strategy “reinforces the anti-establishment feelings of the popular classes”. Liberal democracy must analyse the demands of both sides of the political spectrum and construct them in a progressive way for the benefit of European democracy (Mouffe, 2016).

2.3 Navigating Through Charisma and Sentiments

Populism can be exploited by authoritarian leaders both on the left and right side of the political spectrum; “a way for new elites to acquire power quickly” (Urbinati, 2013, p. 153), as their discourse evokes nostalgic (Oswald and Betz, 2022, p. 123) and nationalistic sentiments on how things were better in bygone days, until the elites took power from the people. Populism has never been so relevant as traditional political parties across the globe are at crossroads, and party democracy has been in decline for decades (Jager, 2022, p. 33), undecided on the route forward manipulated and threatened by charismatic personalities that are shaking the pillars of democracy.

It is a misconception to label populism anti-democratic as most populist movements are chosen by the people through elections (Rosenthal, 2020, p. 115). Yet, this does not eliminate a conflict between populists and liberal democracy since, in a functioning liberal democracy there is separation of powers between government and other pillars such as the judiciary and the police, as “democratic institutions must be self-enforcing” (Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland, 2019, p. 1251). Checks and balances are in place to keep the highest level of transparency and politicians are held accountable to keep their

promises of implementing policies once in power. This can be a challenge for populist regimes as they concentrate their power on “charismatic leaders” (Kestler and Latouche, 2022, p. 513), and their leaders’ rhetoric attacks such systematic methods and institutions where the opponent is not a political rival that believes in a right or left leaning philosophy, but rather an elite class that obstructs the people from taking power. “Populism often goes hand in hand with charismatic leadership” (Kestler and Latouche, 2022, p. 513), and people following populist movements need to have a sense of belongingness with the leader (Barber, 2019, p. 129), with the hope of satisfying their social and economic demands, while promising to address their concerns, “without having to negotiate the decision through constitutional structures” (Barber, 2019, p. 130), and weakening these structures in the process (Barber, 2019, p. 132). This is a conundrum for liberals, as they trust democratic processes, and democracy based on political principles, not on an ‘us and them’ mentality. Canovan (1999, p. 14) like Kestler and Latouche (2022, p. 513), believes that populist movements have usually charismatic leaders and that liberals “who fear populism are visited by nightmarish vision of demagogues inciting lynch mobs to direct action, or popular tyrants sweeping aside legal formalities”. This creates a dilemma for liberals who are perplexed and associate charismatic populist leaders with tyrants or dictators.

Historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt (1962) describes Stalin and Hitler as populist leaders who, although they took sides in the political spectrum, created enemies of the people to share a popular belief with their followers. Populist charismatic leaders of the 1930s acted as “mob leaders” who promised the masses that every individual had the opportunity to be part of something if they joined a movement (Arendt, 1962, p. 249), a movement with a shared common enemy. Arendt does not exhibit a positive attitude towards populist charismatic leaders and is critical of the people working in large groups

that share the same vision with the leader they follow blindly. According to Arendt, this extreme sense of belongingness made it easier for demagogues of the era “to organise the masses into a collective unit to back up their lies with impressive magnificence” (Arendt, 1962, p. 333), creating fake stories such as that there was “a secret alliance between the Jewish capitalist and the Jewish socialist” (Arendt, 1962, p. 77). Arendt is not the only scholar to express contempt towards populism. Borriello and Jager agree that populism was a tool used by Fascism and Nationalism to commit the most heinous crimes, yet “not all populists have been nationalists, and not all nationalists have been populists” (2023, p. 24). Arendt’s rationalist approach to politics is understandable, as the negative experiences are what shaped her writings, and the way she looked at the leaders of her time. Similarities between the era Arendt lived in and the emergence of populist leaders in the last two decades are hard to ignore, and deserve more scholarly literature so that the same mistakes are not repeated.

The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 sent shockwaves throughout the world as European countries implemented unpopular austerity measures to tackle the crisis. The recession generation had to make sacrifices for past mistakes to build a better future. During this period and for the next decade, different populist movements with populist leaders started to emerge globally. Leftists like Morales in Bolivia and Chavez in Venezuela, Sanders and Corbyn in the United States and Britain respectively, SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain (Borriello and Jager, 2023, pp. 41-50), while Duterte, Orban, Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini and Le Pen, brought back memories of the 1930s with their far-right rhetoric as they resemble “vivid individuals who can make politics personal and immediate, instead of being remote and bureaucratic” (Canovan, 1999, p. 14). But not all movements during this period resulted in the rise of a charismatic populist leader. Populist

movements in the Arab world toppled regimes with effective protests, with a common denominator of leaderless resistances (Elharathi, 2016, p. 90).

Such instances call into question the role of charismatic leaders in populist movements and raise the issue that “not all populist movements and parties do have a charismatic leader” (Oswald, Schafer and Broda, 2022, p. 18). Although charisma is a luxury for any leader, it is not the ultimate characteristic of a populist leader, as authority and the ability to condemn current decision makers in a representative democracy is what transforms a leader into a larger-than-life persona. No matter the history of the individual leading a populist movement, if the establishment is condemned, the followers will always deem the populist leader as a political outsider and is held in high esteem. The people are made to believe that there is no alternative to the current chaos created by the establishment (Urbinati, 2019, p. 123), and the leader is the only person capable of a solution not due to the policies recommended or the competence of proposed economic solutions, but rather due to the leader’s ability to denounce and attack the current government and institutions. Followers do not expect populist leaders “to be pure like saints, because they themselves were not” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 119). In their eyes, long term planning, the ability to debate or discuss evidence-based arguments are set aside, if the leader is resilient in the fight against the status quo. In populism, charismatic leaders govern with “unmediated support from their followers” (Weyland, 2017, cited in Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018. p. 1672). Thus, charisma becomes irrelevant, dissidents are crushed and the myth within a cult is created.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) give a more in-depth explanation on the role charisma plays in the formation of populist leaders. Kestler and Latouch (2022, p. 513), like Canovan (1999, p. 14), believe that a lot of populist leaders are charismatic, yet charisma is not indispensable, and it is just one characteristic in a pool of attributes that make a

populist leader successful. The image of a strongman is what makes or breaks a populist leader as they spend years manoeuvring their way up the political ladder eliminating traits that may perceive them as weak, constructing a depiction of being strong enough to replace the elite, an elite class they “were part of” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 119). This varies from one country to another as cultural perceptions are pivotal on what is considered weak and strong, as “charisma and its individual features are culturally determined” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 66-67).

In his last speech of the 2024 presidential campaign, Donald Trump stated that he could have had an easy and comfortable life, instead he was running for president to save the economy from “obliteration” (Bose and Oliphant, 2024). During the ‘us versus them’ process to take power, populist leaders build an image “based on a plethora of characteristics and does not always reflect reality” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 63). Urbinati believes that populism cannot take power unless it has a leader that embodies a unifying “narrative” with the people it represents (2019, p. 113). It is important for the leader to look like a political outsider in the eyes of the followers, although most of the time, “populist leaders are very much part of the national elite” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 73), and spend their careers in business or political contact with the same elite class they are denouncing, before officially launching their political career. Instead of questioning why they are supporting an individual with a similar background to the elite they loathe, the followers take pride in the leader’s past personal success as if it was their own, while “populist leaders are still, in fact, part of the elite” (Warby and Bailey, 2025, p. 4). Populist leaders must in return convince their followers that they are doing a sacrifice to save the country from the selfish elites and not for personal glory, and “promise sweeping economic reforms” (Warby and Bailey, 2025, p. 3).

2.4 Populism, Policymaking and Implementation

In liberal democracy, protagonists and decision makers are judged by their actions and the consequences of such actions on the people. “Populism is at odds with liberal democracy rather than with democracy per se” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1670). While in a liberal democracy, policy and its impact on the populace is fundamental to satisfy the people’s newly created demands, populist movements tend to focus more on their image in the eye of the voter, depicting “themselves as men of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1678). Their legacy, once in power, rests on portraying a depiction that they are still part of the people, risking irking the followers, as “public policy will always be designed by an elite few” (Holcombe, 2021, p. 27). When in power, populist movements are constantly reminding the people that the battle versus the elites is still ongoing, highlighting the decisions taken, sometimes exaggerating their achievements, and the competence of their policies (Wajner, Destradi and Zurn, 2024, p. 1828). The longer the populist stays in power, the harder it becomes to keep such momentum with the only option left is to silence critics, thus resembling a new elite in the form of a regime, and it is expected “to promote democratic backsliding and to have the potential to transform into authoritarianism over time” (Wajner, Destradi and Zurn, 2024, p. 1823).

What effects such behaviour and rhetoric by populist leaders can have on public policy? “Populist political leaders tend to be hostile towards technocratic expertise”, thus creating a different type of relationship between the traditional politicians and the policymakers in a liberal democracy (Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 2020, p. 74). Once in power, do populist parties remain vociferous in their struggle to implement policies that serve the people who elected them, as when they were in opposition? Do they still play the ‘outsiders’

notion? According to Caiani and Graziano (2022, p. 573), scholarly literature on the effect of populism on policy is more focused “on the extent to which populist parties are successful in implementing policies derived from their ideology”. Faxton (2022, p. 633) expects that when in government, right-wing populist parties follow policies related to their ideology focusing mainly on “immigration, security and institutional reform”, due to their mantra when in opposition of being on the side of the people versus the elites. For the voter, it is a right to be involved in the decision-making stage of a policy process, as everyone feels entitled to an opinion on subjects deemed enigmatic in the past. According to Mudde (2004, p. 554), a “better educated and more emancipated” public is a reason people have become more “receptive to populism”, and the opinion by experts is not only doubted, but rather an elite class that thinks for the people, is unacceptable. But can populism be blamed for failed policy implementation once in power? Venizelos (2023, p. 21) disagrees, and states that populism and its competence once in power cannot be judged by its ability to design policies as there are other factors that determine whether governments are successful in implementing policy or not. The stance of judging populism through its ability to keep promises and implement policy “regrettably offers little” in understanding it, and “above all, populist politicians are not alone in failing to deliver on their promises”.

The populist leader plays the role of the voice of the people and is combined into one component as policy is designed. Successful policy is celebrated as a common victory while failure is blamed on the establishment, that although “has been dethroned, the people representing it are always there, even if, of course, they are not part of the true people” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 133). When designing policy in a populist government, the leader acts as if the whole population is part of the implementation process, although it is obvious that this is not true. Chavez asserts that he sees himself “incarnated in the people”,

and that he is not Chavez because “we are all Chavez” (Urbinati, 2013, p. 127). When policy clearly fails, contrary to a leader elected on a liberal manifesto, the populist leader is exempt from total responsibility and expects not to be judged by the people. It is very difficult to judge the populist leader for policy failure, when the leader is the “direct embodiment of the people” (Oudenampsen, 2024, p. 1376). The blame rests with a scapegoat, and the favourite scapegoat of populists is the establishment. For populist movements, shifting the blame on an elite group is easy, not becoming one when elected is the hardest part.

Populist leaders are not accountable for any of their failed policies as “accountability is a currency that has no circulation in populism” (Urbinati, 2013, p. 128). In populism, loyalty to the leader is what matters. Accountability is not appreciated, because populism “claims that to have a beloved and populist leader is condition enough for trust” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 122). Also, according to Paxton (2022, p. 650), “the consequences of populism in power cannot be assumed to be consistent across the polity”. As long as the leader is not responsible when policy implementation fails, and there are still elitists around to blame, the leader avoids condemnation from the people. Populists hold elites “accountable for causing the deprivation of the people’s in-group” (Hameleers, Van der Meer and Boumans, 2023, p. 590). When a populist movement elevates itself to a policymaking authority, it builds a notion of a win or lose mentality as a collective unit with the people, at the expense of the country. To them, the survival of the country depends on the establishment remaining powerless, not on effective policy.

Effective policy is designed by chosen experts, as it is very difficult to involve thousands of people in the policy process, for the obvious reason of avoiding confusion. Populist governments exhibit an antagonistic approach to experts as they deem them as part of the elite class. Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (Pompeo, 2019) is a

classic case of a populist jeopardising policy implementation and the public's well-being for the sake of challenging science for financial and popular purpose. Viktor Orban's stance of supporting oligarchs puts him in direct confrontation with the European Union and has been threatened with budget cuts, turning Hungary on the verge of a non-democratic state (Scheppelle, 2022, p. 59), while expressing "obstructive behaviour" towards European policy (Bergmann, Keijzer and Hackenesch, 2024, p. 2).

Although "policy contents advocated by right-wing and left-wing populists may differ fundamentally", these two main actors of the political spectrum tend to have similar "features of populist policies" (Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 2020, p. 74), thus more scholarly research for a better analysis of both ideologies in relation to populism is required.

2.5 Theoretical Framework – Nadia Urbinati's Political Theory of Populism

In research, theory helps in guiding researchers to focus on what is relevant or not and what are the priorities for the benefit of the study being conducted. Theory "provides an elegant solution", and answers specific questions that data cannot. Data collected in a study has a limit on the questions it answers depending on the sampling presented. Theory goes beyond data (Levine and Markowitz, 2024, p. 159), and helps in the understanding of a phenomenon, while the "theoretical framework is a reflection of the work the researcher engages in to use a theory in a given study", as it evolves from a theory or more (Varpio *et al.*, 2020, p. 990). "Theoretical frameworks are systematically created and interconnected collections of concepts and assertions that are derived from theories" (Brydges and Batt, 2023, p. 90), and can "keep researchers grounded by setting parameters within which the empirical world can be interpreted" (Hiebert *et al.*, 2023, p. 58).

Research and its scope, without a good theoretical framework, are undefined (Grant and Osanloo, 2016, p. 13). A theoretical framework sets the groundwork for all sections of a particular study, delivers a better understanding of the phenomenon researched, aligns clearly with the literature review, corresponds with both the research methods and analysis, and “adds meaning” to the findings (Luft *et al.*, 2022, p. 5).

The *‘Political Theory of Populism’* by Nadia Urbinati (2019) has been chosen by the researcher and is used as the theoretical framework in this study. Theories on populism tend to focus mainly on “two main directions: achieving a minimalist theory and devising a maximal theory” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 116), while Urbinati discusses the different aspects and forms of populism with their effects on democracy. A specific focus is given to populism in power and how it transforms itself once elected, its approach to elections, and behaviour towards political opponents.

For years, scholars have placed the concept of the struggle between people and the elites, at the centre of the phenomenon of populism (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). Urbinati believes that there is more to populism than an ‘us and them’ antagonism between the people against the elite, and although this is correct, it is just “the tip of the iceberg” (2019, p. 122). To understand populism, scholars must look beyond this notion, as Urbinati does in her theory, elaborating a detailed analysis on “the way populism interprets, uses, and changes representative democracy, its main target in contemporary experience”. Populism is not just a form of protest; thus it is important that “a political theory of populism has to focus on populism in power” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 113).

In a democracy, the majority governs, but the minority still feels as a part of the democratic process. Populism cannot be defined as anti-democratic or a form of regime, as contrary to fascism, it supports elections (Urbinati, 2019, p. 115). But once in power,

populism is not a straightforward representative democracy where the majority rules, but goes beyond, as populists feel a divine right to govern on their own with “extreme majoritarianism”, thus transforming “the fundamentals of democracy” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 113). For populists, an election is not just a path to power, or a democratic process between political movements, so the majority can decide who will take the country forward, but it is a show of force to take the country back from those who stole it from the people. The winner is not a temporary winner until the next election is held, but the “right winner” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 120), and the saviour of the people. Once in power, populism does not abandon democratic principles, but rather conducts a shift from democratic norms, in what Urbinati calls the “transmutation of democratic principles” (2019, p. 118).

Arato and Cohen agree with Urbinati on how populism in power performs, adding that it implements a hybrid government system keeping democratic norms with an “authoritarian logic” that undermines the principles of democracy. They stress that populism in power revises constitutions and institutions while elections are kept, although they are designed to be difficult to lose. Maintaining the hybrid government system is difficult, as the longer populism stays in power, the more it is resisted and contested by oppositions, with the most plausible outcome being, to turn a democratic elected government into a dictatorship (2021, pp. 107-109). Although institutions are kept, they are rarely, if ever, consulted, as populism creates an “ideological construct that depicts only one part of the people as legitimate”, the people who took their stolen country back, leading to an unfounded conclusion that the previous majorities by other governments are irrelevant, and this is the first time that a government is actually representing the people (Urbinati, 2019, p. 120).

This sense of entitlement to govern undisputedly creates a movement that does not accept losing elections, as populism in power believes that the voice of the ‘right people’ is more important than election results (Urbinati, 2019, p. 120). Like Urbinati, Arato and Cohen stress on the obstructive approach by populists to electoral mechanisms and emphasise that in the populist world electoral results are accepted as long as the populists are on the winning side, ridiculing their opponents’ electoral achievements, and labelling any election lost as ‘rigged’. Electoral campaign periods are tense, as “elections in the populist symbolic universe are about acclaim and blind deference to the populist leader”, and not a democratic transition of power (2021, pp. 139-141). This was evident in Trump’s loss in the 2020 Presidential election, claiming it has been stolen without any evidence to back the claim, “spreading mistrust of elections and further undermining democratic legitimacy” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 206). Studies show that 75% of Republican voters were convinced that the election was rigged and repeated the claims uttered by their leader, relying only on “hearsay” (Eggers, Garro and Grimmer, 2021). Populists believe that they cannot be wrong, cannot lose, and losing an election is a “flagrant injustice” (Espejo, 2017, p. 94, cited in Urbinati, 2019, p. 122).

The majority and the status quo must be kept and reinforced by using the method of “audience democracy”, where the propaganda machine constantly perfects the image of the movement to strengthen the people’s unquestionable faith in the leader, with “massive presence in the media and frequent recourses to formal appeals to the people” (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 121-122). The battle with the establishment is maintained, thus “populism in power is recognisable as a permanent electoral campaign” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 58, cited in Urbinati, 2019, p. 122), and “is endogenously precarious”, with the risk of “becoming a dictatorship” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 191).

During this period, the populist regime leads in the name of the people, as if the majority are the only thing that matters, using “polarising rhetoric, irony attempts to humiliate enemies by uncovering their scandals” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 190), and make use of “transgressive style, vulgar language and penchant for individuated insult” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 191). Populists feel the need to mistreat opponents and are “tempted and ready to operate at the expense of the rights and legitimacy of the disliked minorities”. The opposition is a minority; thus it is permissible for the populist regime to shame it. Constant attacks and the humiliation of political opponents are intentional to make any opponent “powerless to challenge the existing majority” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 120).

In her theory, although highly critical and aware of the consequences the exploitation of populism by demagogues might lead to, Urbinati does not express a total negative attitude towards populism and admits that there is a lack of “awareness of the historicity and context specificity of what we call liberal democracy”. Urbinati states that populism is “not the product of some malevolent force”, but rather the product of democracy that was successful in “burying totalitarianism and favouring economic growth for several decades”. Viewing democracy only from the liberal approach makes it difficult to understand different forms of logic, and to counter arguments from “political adversaries of democracy”. To understand populism, one must “assume democracy in its representative and party form” and viewing democracy as an ideology restrains the “critical understanding of its forms and achievements” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 124).

Urbinati’s theory will be applied in the comparative section of Chapter 4 and is suitable for this study as it focuses on populism when in power.

2.6 Concluding Insights

Currently there is no formulated strategy to challenge populism and its effects on democracy. Its growing presence and influence are expected to stay, and its factors “are likely to persist”. Instead of avoiding populism, as if it was an ambiguous subject for common people to understand, political parties should explain to the public “their goals and means”, and “identify areas of policy that are causing dissatisfaction or concern among the public” (Schafer and Hartleb, 2022, pp. 679-680). An informed public is important for democracy as during social and economic turmoil, people “lose their common grip on reality” (Canovan, 2002, p. 409), as fiction and conspiracy theories are having a field day (Hameleers, Van der Meer and Boumans, 2023, p. 593).

Populism is a fundamental part of democracy as without populism, democracy “would become a pure institutional procedure” (Biglieri and Perello, 2019, p. 331). Populism will remain a significant fixture in politics and since recent literature has focused mainly on right-wing populism, “further research is needed that considers the various societal effects of left-wing populism on societies” (Schafer and Hartleb, 2022, p. 679).

The next chapter outlines the methodology applied to analyse existing primary data from two recent political parties in power, portraying the left-wing and right-wing of the political spectrum in the European Union.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Introduction to Research Methods

According to Walliman (2011, cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 4), the term ‘research’ is used frequently, sometimes confusing its definition as not everyone understands “the true meaning of the word”. The word ‘research’ is used wrongly when collecting information without a clear “purpose” or to attract attention, and is commonly used by politicians, newspapers and in everyday debates, but in the academic world ‘research’ has different characteristics. Thus, scholars define “research as a process that is undertaken in a systematic way with a clear purpose, to find things out”, and where data are systematically collected and interpreted. Good research must “involve an explanation of the method or methods used to collect the data”, debate the meaning of the results and describe their limitations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, pp. 4-5).

Due to the complex meaning of populism, its “relationship with democracy”, and “its negative connotation in Europe” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 205), the researcher tried to adhere to the principles of research during the data collection and analysis. Populism was and remains a notable feature of the political climate at the time of the study. Scholarly literature stresses how populism is sometimes misunderstood, is ambiguous, and is wrongly associated with nationalism, and how left-wing and right-wing populists are shaping the way policy is conducted.

This research uses Urbinati’s theory on populism as it applies to this study due to its focus on populism in power. Urbinati also states that “populism in power is doomed either to be unbalanced or to become a new regime” (2019, p. 12). Is this true? Scholars referenced in the Literature Review stress how populist leaders in power combine with their

followers when policy is implemented and celebrate once it is successful. Yet, they still blame the establishment for failure. The researcher decided to focus more on populism in power, as populist governments find it difficult to govern (Jungkunz, Fahey and Hino, 2021) and have an “uneasy” relationship with institutions (Venizelos, 2023, p. 3). The rise in left- and right-wing governments in Europe, in the past decade, provides a unique opportunity to investigate populism while it shapes policymaking.

Scholars confirm that more reliable research is required to analyse these effects on democracy and to understand populism due to its popularity in the last decades. These arguments, discussed by the researcher in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, helped in constructing the conclusions and recommendations in the last part of this study after the completion of the fourth chapter, where the data collected was analysed.

3.2 Research Philosophy

When conducting research, researchers improve their knowledge on a specific subject and unknowingly embark on a mission, as they make new assumptions on the field studied. Scholars define research philosophy as “a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 130), and divide research assumptions in three philosophical fields: ontology, epistemology and axiology (2019, p. 133).

In qualitative research, research philosophy helps in creating debate and yields “the groundwork for needed conversations” (Dennis, Carspecken and Carspecken, 2013, p. ix). Research philosophies “provide theories about the nature of the reality that is being

investigated” (Mauthner, 2020, p. 76), and are “embedded within disciplines, theories, methodologies and methods” (Mauthner, 2020, p. 85).

In this study, the researcher opted to make use of interpretivist and constructivist philosophies. Interpretivism studies meaning developed by humans (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 140), that “may result in lessons learned, information to compare with literature” (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 330), with the aim “to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts”. Human beings are different and exhibit various characteristics depending on the environment they operate in. Under these circumstances, “interpretivists are critical of the positivist attempts to discover definite, universal ‘laws’ that apply to everybody” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 140).

Constructivism as a philosophy is a qualitative method in which the researcher studies a phenomenon from experiences, and “evaluates what is said to ascertain the real facts” (Adom, Yeboah and Ankrah, 2016, p. 5), with the notion that humans “construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (Honebein, 1996, cited in Adom, Yeboah and Ankrah, 2016, p. 2). Constructivism plays an important role in discourse as it helps human beings in focusing on “personal and social experiences”, and “interpreting” the world they live in (Pujante, 2017, p. 50). In constructivist rhetoric, “discourse [makes] reality social” and helps in understanding “events” happening in the world they live in (Pujante, 2017, p. 61).

The researcher adopted interpretivism and constructivism to better understand the phenomenon of populism through these two paradigms by analysing their political beliefs

through official documents with the aim to reach the objectives of the study listed in the first chapter.

3.3 Research Approaches

Deciding which research methods to apply in a study consists of different decision-making stages thought through by the researcher in a systematic and organised manner, starting from assumptions of a given subject all the way to the “data collection, analysis, and interpretation”. The research approach by the researcher depends on the research problem presented, the knowledge of the researcher on the subject through experience, and the “audiences”, as the ultimate benefactors of the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 40). In this study, the researcher chose a deductive approach which “can start from any theoretical base” (Woiceshyn and Daellenbach, 2018, p. 186), utilising the theory on populism by Nadia Urbinati as the theoretical framework, which was then applied in the analysis. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods are the three main approaches to research. Qualitative research involves “data typically collected in the participant’s setting”, with the researcher interpreting the results from the data collected. Quantitative research tests “objective theories by examining the relationship among variables”, while the mixed methods approach make use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches with the aim that data collection mixing both approaches, “yields additional insight” on a particular subject researched (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 41).

Research questions in a quantitative study “inquire about the relationships among variables being investigated” (Barroga and Matanguihan, 2022, p. 3), while research questions in qualitative research “are usually continuously reviewed and reformulated”

(Barroga and Matanguihan, 2022, p. 4). A “hypothesis is an educated statement of an expected outcome” and relies on “reasoning to predict a theory-based outcome” (Barroga and Matanguihan, 2022, p. 2). Research questions and hypotheses “are prerequisites to defining the main research purpose and specific objectives of a study” (Barroga and Matanguihan, 2022, p. 1), and if applied correctly result in reliable studies. By identifying gaps in research, researchers can “develop better” research questions (Snyder, 2019, p. 339).

3.4 Research Questions

Complicated research questions could “lead to a confused research process”. They must be specific, simple, and “should have scope to be investigated” (Ratan, Anand and Ratan, 2018, p. 17). In this study, the researcher developed three research questions after reading scholarly literature on the phenomenon of populism and identifying it as an interesting subject to public policy that deserves investigation:

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of left and right populism in power with regard to the 21st century European context?

Research Question 2: What views do populists in power express with regard to policymaking processes and procedures?

Research Question 3: What similarities and differences are there between populists in power with regard to public policies?

3.5 Research Strategy

The study consisted in analysing how two populist parties affect policymaking through their behaviour while in power, their attitudes towards electoral processes, and their treatment of political opponents. The researcher decided to investigate the phenomenon of populism through a case study as it is “an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue” (Crowe *et al.*, 2011, p. 1), and an interpretivist philosophical method which makes it easier to understand “the social world by meaningful interpretations of the world [inhabited] by people” (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 436). The researcher conducted a comparative analysis in the research and analysis chapter; thus, a case study approach fits this study as it is a method to “document direct observations of the events and actions as they actually occur” (Yin, 2013, p. 322), and “collected data can be analysed by comparing the empirical findings with the initially stipulated theoretical relationships” (Yin, 2013, p. 324).

3.6 Data Collection

The case studies in this dissertation focus on two European political parties, with Spanish populist party Podemos representing the left-wing of the political spectrum, and Fidesz from Hungary representing the right. Case studies are an “opportunity to investigate issues deeply and descriptively” and are an “empirical investigation that can study different phenomena in a real-life context” (Taherdoost, 2021, p. 27). The researcher made an analysis of both case studies by collecting primary data from various sources including their political manifestos, policy documents, discourses by their leaders and

other party members, interviews, parliamentary debates, press conferences, key legislation, media coverage and social media activity (see Appendix A).

In the last two decades, various populist parties emerged in the European continent. The researcher opted for Podemos as few political parties “have represented such an explicit application of left populism” (Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022, p. 289) as they have. Their tenure in power from 2020 to 2023 is recent, and their prompt rise to power deserves investigation to understand their success. Their period in government was also turbulent (Hedgecoe, 2021) and short lived. Spain is an excellent country to study left-wing populism as it is one of the rare nations where right-wing populism failed to prevail (Sanders, Hurtado and Zoragastua, 2017, p. 556).

Fidesz is an interesting political party to study due to their charismatic leader Viktor Orban, his solid grip on power spanning nearly two decades, and his scepticism and conflicting relationship with the European Union (Agoston, 2023). The party has implemented various institutional and constitutional changes, winning consecutive elections by a “landslide” (Gomez and Leunig, 2022, p. 155).

During the analysis, the researcher thematically analysed these documents “to uncover themes pertinent to a phenomenon”, in this case study, populism. Scholarly literature read by the researcher and discussed in Chapter 2, together with Urbinati’s theory of populism as the theoretical framework for this study, helped the researcher in remaining grounded and focused during the data collection and analysis process. Researchers suggest that while investigating a phenomenon, a researcher should not “simply ‘lift’ words” from a document. Although documents are an important source of primary data, researchers “should establish the meaning of the document and its contribution to the issues being explored” (Bowen, 2009, p. 33).

The data collection phase provided a solid structure from which the researcher conducted the analysis section, before proceeding to the concluding chapter of the study.

3.7 Data Analysis

In the first part of Chapter 4, the researcher gave a detailed description of both populist parties used as case studies, including the socio-historical context of their emergence, together with an analysis of their policies and political beliefs. The next part of the data analysis consisted of a thematic analysis of their political manifestos, interviews and political speeches, and by finding themes and patterns in their policies. The study then moved on to the comparative analysis, where both populist parties were compared with each other according to the themes analysed, focusing mostly on how they acted once in power, their behaviour in relation to their political opponents, and their attitudes towards elections. In this part of the analysis, the theory on populism by Urbinati was used as a theoretical framework.

The researcher made sure not to base the results solely on Urbinati's theory as that would have resulted in a study restricted only to one scholar. The researcher made use of different sources to obtain better results.

When analysing primary data, the researcher makes "sense of the collected data to answer research questions" (Kim and Liu, 2017, p. 1318). Primary data "is considered more accurate" and has the advantage of being more "specific to the study question" (Dhudasia, Grundmeier and Mukhopadhyay, 2023), as it is taken directly from the primary source. The aim of this research is to study the effect of left-wing and right-wing populism on policy in the European political climate of the last decade.

The researcher decided that gathering data using a quantitative method through questionnaires would not have benefitted the study as the feedback or opinions of individuals were irrelevant to complete this study and to answer the research questions. On the other hand, opting for a qualitative approach in the form of interviews was not considered a viable option as although the opinion of experts matters, the study focuses on the rhetoric and behaviour of populist movements on both sides of the political spectrum, and how their approach affects policymaking. The researcher decided that analysing their documents and contrasting their rhetoric through a thematic analysis, is the most effective way to understand the effect of populism on policymaking and democracy in general.

Thematic analysis “is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis” (Muir-Cochrane and Fereday, 2006, p. 82), and “is designed to search for common or shared meanings” (Kiger and Varpio, 2020, p. 847). The researcher decided to make use of thematic analysis to investigate the phenomenon of populism due to its “flexibility”, and as it is “seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis”. It gives researchers a solid background and is suggested by scholars as “the first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should learn” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

This study is considered as primary research, as in thematic analysis the researcher explores qualitative data sets, “to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86) directly from sources.

3.8 Reliability of the Study

Validity is not “a companion to reliability” and in qualitative research it is the steps taken by the researcher to establish “the accuracy of the findings”, while reliability in qualitative research shows the consistency by the researcher compared with other studies (Gibbs, 2007, cited in Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 274). In this study, the researcher took steps to ensure the validity and reliability of primary data analysis taken from two populist parties in power through their political documents. Political discourses are important as they have the ability “to marginalise or even exclude others” (Cheek, 2004, p. 1143).

The researcher made sure that the information gathered from sources is reliable and was taken directly from the official documents used by the politicians of both populist movements investigated. The documents researched were double checked for spelling mistakes or inaccuracies in historical dates listed.

The study compares two political ideologies, thus their objectivity on the issue analysed is irrelevant as the aim is to study how these political movements treat opponents, elections and democracy once in power, and their approach to policymaking. The scholarly literature read by the researcher and discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, helped in minimising bias and remaining objective in the discussion, as researchers “must have a broad knowledge base and be up to date regarding the state of the science in their area of interest to identify important research questions” (Wickham, 2019, p. 396).

Historical timing is important when comparing two political parties. The political parties used in the case study were investigated while being in power simultaneously between 2020 and 2023. Also, both political parties are still active in European politics and still make use of populist rhetoric. The researcher made use of different texts and documents,

and did not rely on just one manifesto. Some texts and documents were originally written in Spanish or Hungarian and lacked English translation. To address this, the researcher used Google Translate to interpret sentences from these documents. The study was based on a recent political theory by Urbinati (2019), which was the theoretical framework discussed in the Literature Review.

Finally, the researcher cross-examined the documents and cross-referenced the sources with other scholars to make sure that the information provided is historically correct.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

In this study, the researcher analysed primary data from political manifestos, interviews and political speeches of two main European political parties. The documents analysed are available in the public domain. Although no interviews or questionnaires involving participants were required in this study, the researcher still ensured compliance with ethical considerations, as “ethics refer to the norms and values that guide decisions regarding the collection of data and analysis of said data”, and deal “with moral problems related to the practice of research” (Mirza, Bellalem and Mirza 2023, p. 442).

3.10 Limitations of the Study

In this study, the researcher opted for a qualitative approach and made an analysis of primary data in the form of political manifestos, interviews and political speeches of two elected populist parties in the European Union. This method created some difficulties as

when using political documents, a researcher might not find the right specific data needed for the study.

Documents might be incomplete and sometimes inaccurate, putting the researcher in a difficult situation. There was also the risk of incorrect translations from the original language of the document being analysed, as in analysis, “language operates differently in different contexts” (Wodak, 2006, p. 603).

Populism is open to more than one interpretation, as it is “ambiguous” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 5), thus inaccurate data, added obstacles to an already complicated subject. Also, due to the case study methodology used, only two political parties were studied, therefore findings cannot be generalised.

In research, bias can play a major role in the outcome of the results. Researchers must do their utmost to diminish or eliminate its influence. When analysing political documents, “prior knowledge of the data increases risk of bias” (Baldwin *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). Researchers are not expected to be neutral on the subject being investigated and their knowledge and opinion might evolve as they read more scholarly literature.

The researcher had to stay focused on the analysis of the case study chosen and not get lost in nonessential resources, that although reliable, are not in line with the research questions, research problems and objectives of the study.

3.11 Conclusion

The dissertation consists of a thematic analysis of primary data collected, and a comparative analysis of two main populist parties that are considered as examples of a left-wing and a right-wing populist political party in power. The researcher made use of

an interpretivist and constructivist philosophical approach, while analysing already existing literature on populism. This analysis was guided by a theoretical framework, which was the foundation to explain the findings.

The study now proceeds to Chapter 4, where the researcher provides a historical and social contextualization of the parties examined. The researcher also discusses and analyses the results and data collected.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction to Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the researcher provides a historical perspective on the populist parties chosen as case studies, conducts a thematic analysis through four themes of the data collected using direct quotations, and interprets the results through Urbinati's theory on populism, as well as other literature. This chapter aims to use and interpret the data collected to answer the research questions and reach the objectives of the study.

Sections 4.2 presents the political parties investigated and describes their socio-historical context. A descriptive analysis of their policy positions is also given in these sections. Section 4.3 then illustrates the analysis conducted by presenting direct quotations and excerpts from their published material that reflect their position on policies and political beliefs.

Subsequently, Section 4.4 conducts a comparative analysis of the political outlooks and policies of both parties coming from the left-wing and right-wing of the political spectrum. Also, in this section, the researcher uses Urbinati's theory on populism as the theoretical framework and investigates how these political parties approach policy when in power, their treatment of political opponents and their attitudes towards elections.

4.2 The Case Studies

In the next two sub-sections, an explanation of the parties examined as case studies is provided, including their formation and historical context leading to their rise to power.

4.2.1 Left-Wing Populism: Podemos in Spain

Podemos openly make use of populism as a strategy to gather support and challenge the status quo, while “there is broad scholarly consensus that Podemos is a populist actor”. Founded in 2014 by political scientist and leader Pablo Iglesias Turrión with a manifesto titled: “*Moving the counter: converting indignation into political change*” (Cervera-Marzal, 2021, p. 2), the party succeeded in progressing within the political class of Spanish society, acquiring significant influence following the financial crisis of 2008 (Custodi, 2021, pp. 706-708). The populist strategy of Podemos was designed to implement left-wing nationalism with “an idea of nationality that challenges the dominant (right-wing) one on its own terrain”. This strategy was adopted after a national survey by Carolina Bescansa was conducted to understand people’s political perceptions on issues such as national identity (Custodi, 2021, pp. 711-712). Until the emergence of VOX in 2018, Spain remained a rare case in Europe where conservative right-wing movements did not make any progress (Kuppers, 2024).

During the first few months of 2014, Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, became “the symbolic representation of and voice for the victims of the financial crisis in Spain”, with continuous media appearances to prepare for the upcoming European Parliament elections of May 2014 (Sanders, Hurtado and Zoragastua, 2017, p. 554). Different to other populist parties in Europe mostly coming from the right, Podemos did not blame minorities for the country’s financial woes but still made use of an exclusionary political strategy by excluding and blaming the corrupt elites (Sanders, Hurtado and Zoragastua, 2017, p. 554). Podemos managed to fill the gap abandoned by the traditional left in Spain, with constant TV appearances representing the victims of austerity measures.

Not everyone in Spain recognised Podemos and its force, but their leader, “the guy with the ponytail” or “the ponytailed professor”, became a symbol for the frustration generated by the crisis (Iglesias, 2015, p. 17). Contrary to other radical left movements, Podemos offered an “easy-to-grasp popular identity” to the electorate, instead of focusing on specific demands by different struggling groups traditionally addressed by the radical left (Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022, p. 289).

Podemos entered the Spanish national parliament for the first time on the 20th of December 2015 (Orriols and Leon, 2020, p. 359), and its success materialised from the “indignados (‘the outraged’) movement”, amassing 1.2 million votes and five seats in the European Parliament elections of 2014, and obtaining an excellent result of 20.66% in the 2016 general election. Now named Unidas Podemos in a coalition with United Left, Podemos became the third largest movement in Spain, behind the 22% secured by the Socialists (Sanders, Hurtado and Zoragastua 2017, p. 556).

Between 2015 and 2019 Podemos and PSOE (Spanish Socialists Workers’ Party) found it difficult to form a leftist coalition due to “electoral competition, changes in the ideological leaning of the parties and the upsurge of the centre-periphery conflict” (Orriols and Leon, 2020, p. 355). Affective polarisation “focuses on the emotional responses of voters towards other parties and their electorates” (Orriols and Leon, 2020, p. 353), and is widespread in Spanish politics, not only between parties coming from different political spectrums, but is highly present also in the most prominent left-wing movements of Pedro Sanchez’s Socialist Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos. Finally, PSOE and Unidas Podemos started to politically collaborate to “overthrow” the Popular Party (PP) in government during the year 2018, and in 2020 the “ideological polarisation on the left gradually decreased”. After snap elections in November 2019, the UP and PSOE started negotiations but failed “to form a government” (Orriols and Leon, 2020,

pp. 369-370), but succeeded in January 2020, closing a “turbulent” six-year period in Spanish political history (Orriols and Leon, 2020, p. 372).

Once elected to power in 2020, Podemos experienced a significant loss in popularity as it sustained internal divisions, “and largely abandoned the initial left populist strategy” (Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022, p. 285), with scholars observing that this situation demonstrates how left populism in power finds it difficult to keep and improve “its electoral momentum” (Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022, p. 286). The parliamentary system in Spain made it more difficult for Podemos to govern, contrary to the presidential system in Latin America, where left-wing populism found it easier to “command” (Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022, pp. 294-295).

As soon as it started to operate its designated ministries of Social Rights, Labour, Consumer Affairs, Equality and Universities, Unidas Podemos in government faced the COVID-19 pandemic, with Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz transforming herself into a competent politician during the crisis implementing the ERTE (short-time work arrangements) policies, avoiding large scale unemployment (Cancela and Rey-Araujo, 2022, p. 17), and managed to “stabilise unemployment rates by allowing workers to remain with their employers in highly affected sectors” (Diaz *et al.*, 2023, p. 3).

The coalition had its fair share of trouble while in government, with Deputy Prime Minister Iglesias resigning in 2021 after losing “a regional election in Madrid” (Cancela and Rey-Araujo, 2022, p. 1), and was then replaced as Podemos leader by Social Rights Minister Ione Bellara (Smith-Meyer, 2021). Cracks started to appear as both parties in power could not come to an agreement on a housing law, with Podemos expecting the government to intervene in rental prices (Hedgecoe, 2021). Despite these differences, the coalition managed to improve LGBTQ rights, successfully passing the ‘trans law’. The

law, put forward by Podemos Equality Minister Irene Montero, banned conversion therapy and made it permissible for trans people “to change their legal gender without the need for a medical certificate” (Turnbull-Dugarte, Cordero and Duenas, 2024, p. 37).

On international policy, the coalition’s biggest challenge has been the war in Ukraine, with both parties agreeing on aiding Ukraine, but disagreeing on the method. PSOE has been supportive in sending weapons, signing a one-billion-dollar agreement with Ukrainian President Zelensky (Carreno, 2024). Podemos have opposed the provision of military assistance, yet are in favour of humanitarian aid, with Minister of Social Rights, Ione Belarra and the Minister of Equality, Irene Montero both openly expressing their opposition to military aid (Correyero-Ruiz, Baladron-Pazos and Manchado-Perez, 2023, p. 161). Podemos parliamentary spokesman Pablo Echenique emphasised on the need for diplomacy in the conflict, with the party taking a pacifist stance on the issue (Collado, 2022).

In December 2023 after three years in a government coalition, Podemos split from new coalition partner Sumar, after months of tensions between both parties (Heller, 2023). Podemos joined “independent politicians” in parliament but promised that it would still support Sanchez’s government with its five allocated seats in parliament (McMurtry, 2023). Podemos leader Bellera declared in October 2024 that her party support for the government will be “negotiated from time to time” (Bortoletto, 2024).

4.2.2 Right-Wing Populism: Fidesz in Hungary

Fidesz was founded on the 30th of March 1988 as a youth organisation by a group of students. It officially became a political party in October 1989, as Communism was collapsing across eastern Europe (Metz and Varnagy, 2021). The leader that transformed

himself into the undisputed face of Fidesz, Viktor Orban, emerged on the Hungarian political scene in a speech he gave as a 26-year-old in front of thousands of Hungarians in Heroes Square Budapest on the 16th of June 1989 (Szilagyi and Bozoki, 2015, p. 153), demanding “the communist dictatorship to an end”, free elections, and the retreat of Soviet troops from Hungary (Szilagyi and Bozoki, 2015, p. 155).

Fidesz was elected in parliament on the opposition side in 1990, and Viktor Orban was elected as president of Fidesz in 1993 (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 319), at the young age of 32. The party experienced electoral loss in the general elections of 1994 (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 324), as former communists and the democratic left still enjoyed the support of the public and were elected to government. This was a turning point in Fidesz and in its shifting towards the conservative right, which will define it for the next decades. In the next four years, rampant corruption and economic hardship resulted in Fidesz winning the 1998 general elections (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 319), as Orban was elected Prime Minister for the first time.

Although suffering electoral defeat in the 2002 general elections (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 319), Orban enabled Hungary to join NATO in 1999 (Blinken, 1999) and initiated the process for the country to join the European Union in 2004 (2023). The party lost again the 2006 elections (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 317), but the new government was short lived with the ‘lie speech’ scandal, where in a leaked recording, the Prime Minister Gyurcsany was heard admitting to lying to the electorate (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 318). After a turbulent political period of protests following the ‘lie speech’ scandal, Fidesz managed to get elected with a huge majority in the 2010 elections (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 317), forming a coalition with KDNP for the next two and a half decades, in what has been described as a “slide toward autocracy”, and the creation of “an illiberal democracy” (Tkach and Burmaka, 2024, p. 93).

The new government enacted a new constitution titled *'The Fundamental Law'* in 2011, rejecting the communist era constitution of 1949. In the new constitution, Hungary declared its commitment to the common values of the European Union and the role of "Christianity in preserving nationhood" (2011). During the second legislature lasting until 2014, Fidesz in power "tended towards a new kind of authoritarian rule as the elected autocracy", by appointing party loyalists to top positions in every institution (Agh, 2015, p. 17). In 2014 Fidesz were elected to government with a two thirds majority in parliament, granting it almost absolute and near dictatorial powers, as the left became "weakened and fragmented". This was achieved by implementing changes to the "rules of elections" during the second term in government (Agh, 2015, p. 18).

By time, Fidesz became "more populist in its politics" (Metz and Varnagy, 2021, p. 318), and in the following years, progressed on a collision course with the European Union for undermining the rule of law with "an illiberal turn, and a return to authoritarianism" (Mos, 2020, p. 270). In response to all this criticism, Orban asserted that he was in fact a defender of Europe, a "pro-European and norm-abiding statesman" (Mos, 2020, p. 277), and a "true guardian of European Union values" (Mos, 2020, p. 279).

Between 2011 and 2017, the European Union enacted seven "rule of law resolutions" on Hungary and in 2018, Article 7 was triggered by the European Parliament, "which allows the suspension of treaty rights for member states that systematically violate EU values" (Hanelt, 2024, p. 1). In 2019 Fidesz was suspended from the European Parliament by the union's largest party, the European People's Party (EPP) (Mos, 2020, p. 268), due to its anti-immigrant rhetoric and attacks on Jewish billionaire philanthropist George Soros (Economist, 2019), who is "demonised by extreme-right politicians" with conspiracy theories (Santini, Salles and Barros, 2022, p. 984). Fidesz's negative stance on immigration goes back to an invalid referendum in 2004 "due to a low turnout" (Bocskor,

2018, p. 554), culminating in an anti-immigration campaign in 2015 in which immigration was labelled by the Hungarian government as ‘terrorism’ (Bocskor, 2018, p. 552). In its national campaign against Soros, the Hungarian government accused him of planning to “flood” Europe with African immigrants, and change the values of Europe (Berend, 2022, p. 216). In 2019 the Hungarian government pressured Central European University, which was founded by Soros, to move to Vienna (Loudon, 2021). Ironically, Soros paid for Orban to study at the University of Oxford during his youth (Byrne, 2017).

African immigrants are not the only minority at the centre of Orban’s policies, as Roma people face discrimination from right-wing groups once aligned with Fidesz such as Jobbik, labelling them as “gypsies” (Zemandl, 2018, p. 21), stating that they are “irresponsible, and inactive” (Zemandl, 2018, p. 22). In 2016 the “European Commission launched an infringement procedure” against the Hungarian government for its treatment of Roma children in segregated schools (Rorke, 2021, p. 96). Scholars believe that the decline in popularity of Fidesz in 2019 resulted in the party scapegoating and “[reviving] an older hatred and [weaponising] antigypsyism”. In 2019 the state was ordered by a court to pay compensation to Roma families in the city of Gyongyospata, as their children were put in segregated school classes between 2004 and 2014 (Rorke, 2021, p. 94). Orban, angered by the court’s decision, stated that it was unacceptable that members of an ethnic minority received payment “without doing any work” (Bayer, 2020). The government’s hard stance against “abortion and contraception” and poor “living conditions for Romani women” affect “early pregnancies, and early child births” (European Parliament, 2013, p. 33). Forced sterilisation is present, domestic violence high and, in most cases, goes unreported due to “police surveillance and harassment” (European Parliament, 2013, p. 34). In 2006 the Hungarian government was ordered to pay financial compensation to a Roma woman for forced sterilisation that occurred in 2001 (CEDAW, 2006).

Due to the difficult relationship with the European Union, funds from the bloc became unpredictable and not guaranteed, with the financial situation becoming worse during the years of the pandemic, as Fidesz risked losing the 2022 elections. (Adam and Csaba, 2022, p. 279). Contrary to other far-right movements, Fidesz did not follow an anti-vaccine campaign, but “advertised vaccination at full gear” (Adam and Csaba, 2022, p. 281). As common with totalitarian regimes, the Hungarian government turned the pandemic emergency into an opportunity to rule by decree as it implemented several “emergency regimes”, and changes to the constitution (Adam and Csaba, 2022, p. 283). Despite the challenging times, Orban managed to win the 2022 election and maintain power, as total control of the Hungarian media made it very difficult for opposing parties to have a balanced electoral campaign. While the leader of the opposition had just five minutes on public broadcasting during off-peak viewing time, Fidesz “spent ten times more on political ads than did the combined opposition” (Scheppelle, 2022, p. 48).

A year before the election of 2022, the Hungarian parliament enacted a law that banned the “distribution of information about sexual orientation and gender identity to minors”. The law is similar to a law passed in Russia in 2013 (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024, p. 59). The western liberal approach to LGBTQ policies has been weaponised by Putin in his propaganda speeches to justify the invasion of Ukraine, blaming liberal democracies on how they influence “children and sets them on a path of rampant sexual behaviour” (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024, p. 67).

During the last few weeks of the Hungarian election campaign of 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine (Schmidt and Glied, 2024, p. 250). Orban first took a cautious approach advocating for peace in Europe, condemning the invasion by Russia and supporting EU sanctions, but took a neutral position on Ukraine becoming an EU member (Schmidt and Glied, 2024, p. 251). Since then, Orban has expressed contradictory behaviour and

approach to the conflict, blaming Ukraine for the “prolongation of the war and its economic consequences” (Schmidt and Glied, 2024, p. 258), taking a “biased” position when it came to Russia (Schmidt and Glied, 2024, p. 252), and blackmailing the EU with a veto in numerous occasions (Schmidt and Glied, 2024, p. 256).

The next section presents an analysis of direct quotations from political manifestos, interviews and political speeches of Podemos and Fidesz while in power between 2020 and 2023, to find themes and patterns in their policies by conducting a thematic analysis.

4.3 Research Findings

This section analyses populism in power and the approach to policymaking by Podemos and Fidesz as case studies, representing left- and right-wing populism respectively. Four themes emerged from the analysis conducted on their political manifestos, interviews and political speeches, which concentrated on the two political movements’ tenure in power between 2020 and 2023. The themes that emerged from the analysis were:

- Theme 1 – ‘Us and Them’ Rhetoric
- Theme 2 – Attitudes Towards Liberal Democracy
- Theme 3 – Identification of Political Opponents
- Theme 4 – Views on Minority Groups

4.3.1 Theme 1 – ‘Us and Them’ Rhetoric

The political world of populists is partly based on an antagonistic view of society where they position themselves against a rival or an enemy, which they believe to be the establishment or an elite class. Both left- and right-wing populists exhibit this notion but differ on who, or what, they perceive as a threat in their quest to maintain power, once elected.

Although in government and thus the policymaker, in his first year in power, Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Iglesias still spoke as if his party Podemos, was still in the opposition, stating that:

“we are in the government and achieved the existence, in Spain, of the very government which the economic elite and their media power have spent the last four or five years trying to avoid”.

Leader Iglesias goes on to say that their:

“presence in government inspires fear among the country’s elites”.

(Podemos interview 1).

Populists are convinced that citizens representing the ‘us’ group have been forgotten by past governments who were elected to serve the elite class. After enacting the first housing law on the 27th of April 2023, with the aim of curbing speculation and help the working class, Minister for Social Rights Iona Belarra, stated that the law was being introduced as:

“the housing market in Spain has been the law of the jungle. It has been the law of the strongest, always siding with those who have the most, with the large landlords, the vulture funds, the banks, and never in favour of the people”.

(Podemos Parliamentary debate 1).

The ‘people’ in the left-wing populist playbook are the workers. When discussing policies affecting citizens’ income, Podemos Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz, declared that:

“we need to raise all wages of working people”.

(Podemos interview 2).

Workers in the discourse by Podemos, are low-income workers, not the rich and the privileged. For Podemos, the establishment is not some imaginary group. When mentioning the elite class, they group their right-wing political opponents, the rich, and anyone that does not fit in the left-wing populist mindset. Although Podemos were in power, they continued to perceive their political adversaries as influential and powerful, as if they were the ones implementing policies. According to leader Iglesias they are a threat to democracy and:

“there is no situation of complete political and democratic normality in Spain when the leaders of the two parties that govern Catalonia, one is in prison and the other in Brussels”.

(Podemos interview 3).

Podemos are presented by leader Iglesias as being on the side of the people, prohibiting:

“evictions, and you voted against it because you are against Spanish families and against Spain”.

(Podemos in Parliamentary debate 2).

The 2019 Electoral Manifesto by Podemos demonstrates the theme of ‘us and them’. It promised to implement policies that are in favour of all Spaniards, no matter where they reside and:

“maintain universal health coverage for Spanish emigrants. Our country’s elites have not only expelled hundreds of thousands of our fellow countrymen but have also collaborated in their loss of rights while abroad, as is the case with the health coverage to which all Spanish women are entitled, regardless of where they live, because Spanish citizenship does not end at its borders. To make this effective, we will work to eliminate health exclusion agreements and to incorporate emigrants into the health systems of the host country”.

(Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 1).

This shows that, when speaking for the people in the ‘us’ rhetoric, Podemos are not only speaking for the Spanish living in Spain, but also for Spanish living abroad, forgotten by past conservative governments.

Fidesz, on the other hand, also employs the ‘us and them’ language that fosters an exclusionary rhetoric. Language with nationalistic sentiments addressed to accommodate natives in the ‘us’ group, while excluding those deemed as aliens. As the Hungarian economy boomed with the country struggling to find workers for the jobs created, Orban insisted against policies that promote the hiring of foreign workers:

“Hungary belongs to the Hungarians, the jobs belong primarily to the Hungarians, and the Hungarian economy must primarily provide work for Hungarian people, only after that can everyone else come. Here we must avoid a trap, a Western European trap”.

(Fidesz speech 1).

For Fidesz, minorities and those advocating for them, are part of the establishment. In power for the last two decades, Fidesz still argues as if there is an organised establishment, threatening the nation. Opponents in the ‘them’ group, according to Viktor Orban, are not just political parties at home, and an electoral victory is not against the opposition party, but a victory:

“to remember, maybe even for the rest of our lives, because we had the biggest range of opponents to overpower. The left at home, the international left, the bureaucrats in Brussels, the money of the Soros empire, the international media and even the Ukrainian president in the end”.

(Fidesz speech 2).

For populist Orban, an electoral victory is not just against the Hungarian opposition, but a victory against the Brussels establishment. He started the victory speech after the 2022 election by claiming that:

“we’ve won a huge victory. We’ve won a victory that’s big enough to be seen from the moon, and certainly from Brussels. The work was fun, and not for the faint hearted”.

(Fidesz speech 3).

Contrary to Podemos, who view the rich or bankers as the elites, House Speaker Laszlo Kover views the elite class as those who are not involved in financially exploiting the country, but rather the politicians in the European Union, and believes that the country has:

“reached a point where the community we were once so eager to join poses as much a threat to our sovereignty, our culture, our very survival, as historical

empires did in the past, be it the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, the Habsburg or the Ottoman empires”, and is the “gravedigger of European values”.

(Fidesz interview 1).

Despite Fidesz’s strong majority to govern, in 2023, Orban’s government enacted the ‘*Sovereignty Protection Act*’ to have more control on the country’s democratic system, blaming foreign powers with interfering in Hungarian elections, as they tried to:

“influence the 2022 parliamentary election campaign by money received directly from abroad as confirmed by the national security investigation that revealed support received by the united left-wing opposition”.

(Fidesz Legal document 1).

This was not the first time that Orban blamed those he deems as ‘the elites’ in the ‘them’ group for trying to influence democratic processes in Hungary, having claimed that:

“Brussels tried to bleed the treasury dry, while Uncle George (Soros) and his associates rolled here forints to the tune of four billion dollars from America to supply their comrades with ammunition”.

(Fidesz speech 4).

To Orban; Soros, the United States with the Democratic party in power, and the European Union, are all part of the establishment from the left, working against the state of Hungary.

4.3.2 Theme 2 – Attitudes Towards Liberal Democracy

Both Podemos and Fidesz won democratic elections to attain power, and their respective countries are members of the European Union. Fidesz are not in a conflict with democracy but rather challenge the concept of liberal democracy as understood in Western society.

Leader Orban argues that:

“liberal originally meant freedom. But now, in Europe, liberal means being an enemy of freedom”.

(Fidesz interview 2).

Orban advocates for ‘illiberal democracy’ and asserts that:

“there is no such thing as liberal democracy today, only liberal non-democracy; there is liberalism in it, but no democracy”.

(Fidesz interview 3).

His ideology is shaped both by illiberal and Christian democracy and declares that:

“the rebellion against liberal intellectual oppression is not only widening but also deepening”, and that “the doctrine that democracy can only be liberal, that golden calf, that monumental fetish has been toppled”.

(Fidesz political essay 1).

To Fidesz, democracy is accepted if it fits their nationalistic illiberal democratic rhetoric.

Minister Gergely Gulyas declared on the 8th of January 2020, that:

“if liberalism means supporting immigration and persecuting Christian values, or if, at the very least, it does not wish for the primacy of Christian culture in Europe,

or forgets that people are born men and women, then we stand in opposition to this liberalism”.

(Fidesz interview 4).

Once in power in a liberal democracy, according to Podemos Head of Organisation Lilith Verstrynge, populists face the reality of implementing policies, rather than protesting the government from the opposition and must implement:

“concrete policies that will have a positive impact on people’s lives” yet keeping the populist rhetoric and “combine more populist forms of leadership, which aim to confront power”.

(Podemos interview 4).

Podemos are more receptive to liberal democracy and demonstrate a greater openness to liberal democratic principles. Their 2019 Electoral Manifesto promises policies to implement changes in electoral mechanisms to make it easier to vote and:

“repeal the requested vote to guarantee the right to vote for those abroad. We will urgently reform the electoral law to eliminate the obstacle course for voting that was imposed in 2011 against our compatriots abroad and that the PP, PSOE, and Ciudadanos (Cs) have refused to do away with. This has caused the vote of people residing outside our country to fall from 31% before the 2011 reform to figures of 4% and 6% in the last general elections”.

(Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 2).

Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto promises to:

“reform the electoral law to comply with the “one person, one vote” principle and increase the proportionality of the system. With this change in the electoral law,

we will reduce the gap between the percentage of votes and the percentage of seats obtained by each party and, therefore, reduce inequalities in the value of votes and representation”.

(Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 3).

Podemos proposed a policy to ban:

“political parties from financing their election campaigns through bank loans or the ICO (Spanish National Insurance Institute)”.

(Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 4).

In the same proposal, Podemos announced that they believe that the rich should pay more taxes and banks should not finance and:

“command” political parties.

(Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 5).

4.3.3 Theme 3 – Identification of Political Opponents

Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias believes that the Spanish right-wing are anti-democratic and should not take credit for the success of democracy in Spain since the collapse of Fascism as they:

“were never in favour of democracy and that, by increasingly hiding behind the figure of the monarch, you weaken the position of the monarchy, because if the monarchy was successful in this country, it was precisely because it distanced itself from people like you”.

In the same speech, leader Iglesias insisted that contrary to the left, which fought Fascism, the right:

“are a group of prominent surnames and little shame, falsifying titles to practice without being able to do so, having no homeland other than your money. You, sir, are not even fascists, you are simply parasites”.

(Podemos Parliamentary debate 3).

Like other Podemos politicians, Minister for Social Rights Iona Bellara views the right-wing in Spain as a threat to democracy, due to their extreme policies not in line with liberal democratic values, stating that:

“we have to face these national challenges in a context of normalisation and promotion of the extreme right which is torpedoing the foundations of our democracy”.

(Podemos speech 1).

Right-wing movement VOX are viewed by Podemos as part of the establishment due to their silence on corruption by a few elites, and for not siding with the people. Leader Iglesias condemns them for not being:

“a Spanish party; you are an anti-Spanish, anti-patriotic party that represents the interests of those corrupt individuals and vulture funds”.

(Podemos Parliamentary debate 4).

As an ultra-right-wing conservative, Orban clearly expresses his contempt towards left-wing ideology and equates socialism with Communism. He quotes Marx to explain his personal experience living in a socialist society and claims that:

“Marx wrote a whole library on how to achieve Communism. But he never wrote a single sentence about what life would be like under Communism”.

(Fidesz interview 5).

During the 2022 parliamentary election, Orban said that:

“the left would stumble into the war, and they would send Hungarian soldiers and weapons there”.

Orban also humiliated political opponent Peter Marki-Zay, describing him as a:

“candidate, previously thought to be a comet, is actually a cooled stone that has hit the ground. The whole shebang on the left is stuck in the ground”.

(Fidesz speech 5).

When referring to Fidesz’s political opponents, Speaker of the National Assembly Laszlo Kover claims:

“that the greatest national security risk Hungary faces lies within its political elite”, as it “operates in a tradition of a self-sacrificial statehood and self-destructive nation politics”.

He compared the opposition with the political class of the early 20th century, as in:

“the Hungarian political elite of the period, there was no fundamental agreement on the interpretation of state and nation, and there was no independent, effective Hungarian force which served national security”.

To Kover:

“the Hungarian leftwing liberal opposition is part of a globalist, anti-national network” and not different from the Hungarian Stalinist regime of the 1950s.

(Fidesz speech 6).

4.3.4 Theme 4 – Views on Minority Groups

For years, Fidesz has been in a conflict with liberal democracy in the European Union due to its treatment of minorities. According to House Speaker and one of the founding members of Fidesz, Laszlo Kover, the European Union should not implement policies of integration of immigrants, but the:

“emphasis should instead be placed on fostering policies that encourage the natural growth of indigenous European populations. European institutions have taken a forefront role in promoting ideologies such as wokeism, cancel culture, or gender madness”.

(Fidesz interview 6).

Inclusion, to Fidesz and its leader Orban, is acceptable if it involves people with the same ethnicity as Hungarians and its region, as they:

“firmly believe in the shared future of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin. We can achieve it, and we will achieve it”.

(Fidesz speech 7).

When Roma people won compensation, as segregation was deemed illegal by a court, Orban lashed out at the victims by stating that they are the:

“aggressors against the majority”.

(Fidesz speech 8).

Just three days before an LGBTQ Pride event in Budapest, Orban announced that a referendum will be held to protect children from LGBTQ members visiting schools and indoctrinate children with sexual education. Fidesz pressured citizens to vote ‘No’ to the questions on the ballot which included questions such as:

“Do you support minors being shown, without any restriction, media content of a sexual nature that is capable of influencing their development?”

Fidesz’s spokesman Zoltan Kovacs said that this was another battle against Brussels and that:

“the Prime Minister asked Hungarians to say no to these questions, just as they did five years ago when we stopped Brussels from forcing migrants on us”.

Orban reinforced this statement by saying that:

“the future of our children is at stake, so we cannot let Brussels have its way”.

This goes against the values of the European Union with EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen condemning these actions and stating that she:

“will use all the legal powers of the EU Commission to ensure that the rights of all EU citizens are guaranteed”.

(Fidesz speech 9).

Orban believes that foreign institutions have no right to take decisions on policies at local level, and sees Brussels’ liberal LGBTQ laws as an attack on Hungarian values, as:

“in the past weeks, Brussels has clearly attacked Hungary over its child protection law. Hungarian laws do not permit sexual propaganda in kindergartens, schools, on television and in advertisements”.

(Fidesz speech 10).

Contrary to Fidesz, Podemos's policies exhibit an inclusionary behaviour towards minority groups. A European Court of Human Rights ruling in favour of deporting immigrants, resulted in a rift between the Podemos and PSOE government coalition, as Podemos insisted that:

“migrant deportations breach coalition pact”.

Podemos spokesman Rafa Mayoral called the ruling:

“a disgrace”, that goes against the agreement between both parties in power signed by party leader Iglesias.

(Podemos speech 2).

During the pandemic, Podemos and party delegate Pablo Echenique pressured the coalition to legally recognise 600,000 undocumented migrants, while granting citizenship to immigrants who contributed to the country through their profession.

(Podemos Congress proposal 1).

Equality Minister Irene Montero was responsible for introducing the '*Trans Law*' in February 2023, allowing anyone over 16 years old to change their gender. In her speech in parliament, she declared that the new law:

“recognises trans people's right to freely decide their gender identity. It stops trans realities being treated as abnormalities. Trans people aren't sick people; they're people, full stop. They are who they are, full stop. Trans women are women, full stop. From today, the state recognises that”.

(Podemos Parliamentary debate 5).

The next section conducts a comparative analysis of the political outlooks and policies of both parties. Urbinati's theory on populism is used as the theoretical framework. As per Urbinati's core areas of focus, it investigates how these political parties act when in power, their treatment of political opponents and their attitudes towards elections.

4.4 Comparative Analysis

Mello (2021) defines comparative analysis in qualitative methodology as “a case-based comparative research method that is ideally suited to capture causal complexity” (2021, p. 2), with a specific emphasis on how populism aligns in this context, emerging due to “the result of a combination of several factors” as a social phenomenon (2021, p. 1). The purpose of this section is to compare the four themes identified in the findings in Section 4.3 with Urbinati's (2019) theory on populism. Furthermore, the four themes are also compared with literature beyond Urbinati's theory.

4.4.1 Urbinati's Framework

Urbinati is convinced that “a political theory of populism has to focus on populism in power”, as when in power populism is a form of “extreme majoritarianism” that can “disfigure” democracy (2019, p. 113). To achieve this aim, populists in power treat elections as a “ritual that celebrates the authentic people, treating the opposition as not fully legitimate” (2019, p. 119), humiliating it in the process (2019, p. 120).

Urbinati's theory is particularly relevant to this study's concern with the relation between populism and policymaking, as policy must be implemented by those in power. Urbinati

states that “populism is structurally marked by a radical partiality in interpreting the people and the majority”, regardless of whether it aligns with left or right ideological context (2019, p. 112). The theory also addresses and debates all four themes analysed by the researcher in the research findings section, and in the way they approach policymaking. It considers how Fidesz in power uses propaganda to scapegoat minorities and political opponents (2019, p. 121). Urbinati stresses the need for more literature on populism in its “awareness of the historicity and context specificity” to liberal democracy and argues about the ‘us and them’ rhetoric, where the ‘establishment’ is positioned against the ‘people’, “and without which populism cannot exist” (2019, p. 112).

4.4.2 Comparing the Themes with Urbinati’s Framework

Both Podemos and Fidesz make use of the ‘us and them’ rhetoric and speak as if they were the only option to save the people from the establishment, by winning elections and remaining in power. Both movements are convinced that their policies on issues such as immigration and the economy are the only solution, and that anything different is a hindrance to the salvation of the nation. They insist that policy implementation is crucial, because people have been forgotten by past establishments that are still influential (Podemos Parliamentary debate 1) in influencing who designs and implements policy. Elections are won to save the population from the greed of external powers, such as the Brussels establishment (Fidesz speech 2). This is in line with Urbinati’s theory where she states that “populism wants to fill that gap and make its people the measure of political justice and legitimacy, because it claims that this is the only strategy to respect the sovereign power of the nation against its internal and external enemies” (2019, p. 113).

For Podemos the establishment is internal, consisting of bankers and capitalists, exploiting the workers (Podemos Parliamentary debate 1), while for Fidesz the establishment is the international institutions like the EU, in tandem with local Hungarian leftists (Fidesz speech 3). But according to Urbinati, it is wrong to classify populism “as an ideology of the people”, but rather populism is a tool employed by populist leaders “in order to ask the people to identify with them” (2019, p. 120), with the aim of winning elections. The tool used by Podemos unifies them with the workers (Podemos interview 2) against the exploiters, while Fidesz sees unity with ethnic Hungarians in their fight to preserve the national identity (Fidesz interview 1).

In her theory Urbinati explicitly addresses Fidesz and its attitudes towards liberal democracy when implementing policy. According to her, the constitutional changes implemented by Fidesz on March 11, 2013, were a coordinated strategy by the populist party to “limit free speech and freedom of political association”, with the aim “to freeze the existing majority into a permanent one”, while using propaganda to justify such measures (2019, p. 121). Urbinati’s analysis complements this study’s findings on Fidesz’s tension with democratic politics, as both leader Orban and Minister Gulyas confirm in their speeches, that they are against democracy. For Orban “there is no such thing as liberal democracy today, only liberal non-democracy” (Fidesz interview 3), while Minister Gulyas asserts that he is only receptive of democracy if policy is designed to fight immigration and not accommodate ‘aliens’, while safeguarding Christian values, stating that “if liberalism means supporting immigration and persecuting Christian values, or if, at the very least, it does not wish for the primacy of Christian culture in Europe, or forgets that people are born men and women, then we stand in opposition to this liberalism” (Fidesz interview 4). Fidesz believe that public policy should align with their extreme nationalistic beliefs and not compromise them.

Urbinati addresses both left and right ideologies in their approach to public policy, as if they have identical attitudes towards liberal democracy. According to her, Venezuelan left-wing populist Chavez, like Orban, implemented constitutional changes, suggesting that both leaders “want to stay in power as long as possible” through elections, and both leaders “fit this trajectory almost perfectly”, in their illiberal attitude towards liberal democracy (Urbinati, 2019, p. 121). The findings of this study do not confirm this notion, as leftists Podemos were seen to adopt a more liberal approach towards democracy in their policy implementation methods, promising to make it easier to vote in elections (Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 2), while attacking the “extreme right which is torpedoing the foundations” of liberal democracy (Podemos speech 1). For Podemos, public policy must be designed in the structure of liberal democracy.

Although Podemos exhibit an inclusionary approach to policymaking aligned with liberal democratic values, the same cannot be said in their treatment of political opponents or institutions that oppose their left-wing policies and political beliefs. Leader Iglesias has used the term “parasites” (Podemos Parliamentary debate 3) to describe right-wing opponents, as if “the opposition does not belong to the same people” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 123). He believes that they are an “anti-patriotic party that represents the interests of those corrupt individuals and vulture funds” (Podemos Parliamentary debate 4). The rhetoric used by Podemos towards their political opponents goes against the principles of liberal democracy and is very similar to Fidesz’s illiberal narrative, confirming Urbinati’s claim that after winning an election, populists “makes majority the ruling force of that part against the other part” and glorifying just “one part” of the people (2019, p. 123). Thus, according to the populist, the opposition did not merely lose an election but rather lost a future opportunity to reclaim power since it no longer represents the people.

From the four themes analysed in this study, Podemos and Fidesz find common ground in their treatment of political opponents, with both expressing offensive or derogatory words and attitudes intended to humiliate them. Orban called his political opponent Peter Marki-Zay “a cooled stone that has hit the ground” (Fidesz speech 5), while Speaker of the National Assembly Laszlo Kover compared left-wing politicians to the “Stalinist regime” (Fidesz speech 6). These findings are in line with Urbinati’s theory, which claims that the illiberal treatment of political opponents by populists in power is “recognizable by the way it humiliates the political opposition” (2019, p. 120). Other scholars like Venizelos agree with Urbinati’s analysis stating that populists use “polarising rhetoric, irony attempts to humiliate enemies by uncovering their scandals” (2023, p. 190), and make use of “transgressive style, vulgar language and penchant for individuated insult” (2023, p. 191).

In her theory, Urbinati does not make a difference between leftists’ positions on various policies and uses Chavez as an example of left-wing ideology. Data collected show that left-wing Podemos showcase a progressive approach towards minority groups in line with liberal democratic values. On the other hand, Fidesz represent a stance that is the total opposite, as they want a country built only for natives, “fostering policies that encourage the natural growth of indigenous European populations”, considering anything different as “wokeism” and “madness” (Fidesz interview 6), initiating a fight against liberal gender laws (Fidesz speech 10), and opening an attack against Roma people (Fidesz speech 8).

Podemos go the other extreme by proposing to grant citizenship to 600,000 foreigners (Podemos Congress proposal 1), trying to stop the deportation of immigrants (Podemos speech 2), and having a position on immigration similar to that of other left-wing populist movements in Europe, such as SYRIZA, which is “based on the premise that ‘no migrant is illegal’, SYRIZA made it clear that its left-radical government was a pro-immigration

government” (Nestoras, 2015). Podemos also make their position clear on gender policy, going as far as enacting a law that recognises “trans people’s right to freely decide their gender identity” (Podemos Parliamentary debate 5).

Urbinati’s theory aims to analyse populism in power but lacks clarity on the difference in the positions of both ideologies, evident in the data analysed in this study. In her argument, both ideologies are viewed as being populist, thus they have the same populist approach to policy when in power. Data collected by the researcher shows that left-wing Podemos contrast with Fidesz in their ‘us and them’ rhetoric, attitudes towards liberal democracy and their treatment of minority groups.

4.4.3 The Themes Beyond Urbinati’s Framework

Urbinati is not the only scholar who examines the traits of populism in power, and how it can undermine “institutions, rule of law, and division of powers that comprise constitutional democracy. In effect, it can stretch constitutional democracy toward its extreme borders and open the door to authoritarian solutions and even dictatorship” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 112). Other studies focus on the effects that populism has on policy, both domestic and foreign, and agree with Urbinati that its “implications are mostly negative: populist regimes tend to erode institutional and legal constraints on executive authority” (Houle and Kenny, 2018, p. 256). These studies “consistently link populism in government to the erosion of horizontal-accountability mechanisms as well as the rule of law” (Houle and Kenny 2018, cited in Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier, 2025, p. 88). This aligns with the data gathered on Fidesz in this research and its illiberal approach to policymaking.

Caiani and Graziano (2022, p. 574) also support this research on how Fidesz while in power, with their exclusionary approach, affected “social policy through their welfare chauvinism agenda, aiming at restrictions in provisions for immigrants and minority groups” and “where populists in power have begun to dismantle the very core of liberal democracy” (Mauk, 2020, p. 45).

Although Wajner (2025, p. 3) partly agrees with Urbinati and writes about how populism “increasingly intersects with illiberal, authoritarian, and revisionist trends worldwide”, his study makes a specific reference to Podemos and their liberal approach to policy once in power and how they democratically worked on “socio-political issues such as migration, human rights, and the environment” (2025, p. 13). Wajner’s research once again aligns with this research on how Podemos struggled in power stating that their “weak composition of their political coalitions also plays a role in limiting their impact” (2025, p. 15).

This argument is also supported by Meny and Surel (2002, cited in Venizelos, 2023, p. 18), who assert that “populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government”, and that they either disappear “or remain permanently in opposition”.

4.5 Concluding Observations

This chapter gave the researcher the opportunity to analyse the phenomenon of populism in power and to observe patterns in themes through outcomes, as “qualitative researchers tend to report findings rather than results” (Sutton and Austin, 2015, p. 229). Although “policy contents advocated by right-wing and left-wing populists may differ fundamentally”, these two main actors of the political spectrum tend to have similar

“features of populist policies” (Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 2020, p. 74), thus more scholarly research for a better analysis of both ideologies in relation to populism is required. The study now moves to the concluding chapter, where the researcher answers the research questions, interprets the findings and makes recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In the next sections, populism and its effect on policymaking is discussed through the lens of the researcher and the knowledge acquired throughout the course of this study. The researcher answers the research questions, interprets the findings and makes recommendations for future studies.

5.2 Analysing the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of left and right populism in power with regard to the 21st century European context?

European values that were fundamental to the success of the European Union are at crossroads, as traditional parties are shifting away from their political beliefs to accommodate the rules of capitalism, while extremes triumph. Left-wing Podemos found it difficult to govern and continue with their mandate due to the instability of coalitions that are becoming the rule in various democracies. To the contrary, right-wing Fidesz showcases a more solid grip on power due to their ability to eliminate competition from opposition, which can dangerously seem like the more viable option, sending the message that illiberal democracy is acceptable if it provides political stability, something liberal democracy is struggling to offer. Podemos demonstrate characteristics that are in line with those embodied in liberal democracy while Fidesz exhibit opposing characteristics, as they openly declare that they reject liberal democracy.

Research Question 2: What views do populists in power express with regard to policymaking processes and procedures?

Both populists used as case study exhibit a motivation to implement policies promised when they were in opposition. They tried to find a balance between implementing their policies, while keeping followers involved in the process with continuous updates, as populists in power must make sure not to be viewed as the establishment. This was very difficult to do, as Podemos formed part of a coalition, and after some months in power their position became untenable. Podemos, in power with other left-wing parties, tried to implement policies that align with left-wing ideological beliefs. They were successful in implementing policies related to gender and housing but failed to find agreement on the Ukrainian conflict. Fidesz need to constantly attack the EU, as after two decades in power it is becoming very difficult to convince the people that they are not the establishment. Fidesz are focusing on policies that evoke nationalistic sentiments, as this is the most effective way to maintain close connection with the public.

Research Question 3: What similarities and differences are there between populists in power with regard to public policies?

Although Podemos and Fidesz sit on opposite ends of ideological beliefs, these movements exhibit similar economic policies. Both expressed the same approach to the pandemic, where both supported vaccination efforts, as they understood that a healthy public was essential for economic growth and recovery. Social policies are where their political divide is made evident. Podemos believe in the integration of minorities, promote social justice and welfare, and seek to reduce inequality in a secular society. Fidesz are promoters of nationalism and a harsh adversary of diversity, with Christianity and family

values as the roots of their ultra conservative stance on public policy. Fidesz use propaganda to control the media and indoctrinate youths for a Hungary built on their image. Podemos, on the other hand, envision a multicultural and egalitarian society in a western liberal context.

5.3 Interpretation of Findings

The data collected by the researcher showed that although both movements involved in the case studies are populists, Fidesz exhibit features of an authoritarian populist government. This has been possible due to their ability of winning elections by a landslide, giving them the ability to abolish the old constitution. Although Hungary is a member of the EU, their conflict with liberal democracy is clear. As an ultra-conservative party Fidesz views left ideology as an extreme form of Socialism, comparing it to the worst days of Communism. To Fidesz, any individual or organisation that supports and practices liberal democratic values is a left-wing extremist and is an enemy of nationalism. Their rhetoric allows no room for debate on how the country can benefit from both ideologies. They frame politics as a struggle between right-wing conservatives as the saviours of the country, against the left, which is a threat to democracy.

To Podemos, bankers and financial institutions are what Brussels and minorities are to right-wing populists. Although they can be described as a radical left-wing populist party, they embrace principles of liberal democracy as practiced in western democracies. They are harsh critics of the far right and describe it as a threat to democracy, but contrary to Fidesz, their political discourse shows that they can distinguish between various factions within right-wing ideology. Compared to Fidesz, Podemos's tenure in power was very short, thus it is very difficult to analyse completely their political views while in power

and to confirm that in power, left-wing populism has more tendency to evolve into an authoritarian regime.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Studies show that “populism in power goes hand in hand with the weakening of democratic institutions” (Wajner, Destradi and Zurn, 2024, p. 1822). Although researchers should keep investigating the phenomenon of populism, more scholarly literature is required to understand the causes that are eradicating institutions, rather than the symptoms. Populism is here to stay. Thus, scholarly literature must analyse how to turn populism into an advantage, as a mechanism to shake the status quo when democracy becomes stagnate, while keeping checks and balances in place to strengthen democratic institutions.

Future studies need to focus on how public policy can benefit from populism, as it pressures the few individuals involved in the policymaking process to implement the needed policies. Policymakers should not view populism from ideological perspectives, as this risks missing an opportunity to build up on the benefits that populism offers, getting lost in trivial conflicts.

Although representative democracy involves the representation of different political parties in parliament, more research is required to investigate why the traditional two-party system is becoming weaker across Europe and what can be done to revive it. Traditional strong democracies are ending up with traditional dominant parties in need of a coalition to govern. As in the case of Podemos, a multi-party system, although a symptom of a healthy democratic representation, is impeding political movements to

govern and implement their electoral mandate. Democracies with a near authoritarian system like Hungary, appear as a more stable system when compared to liberal democracies like France or Germany, due to the fact that their traditional two-party system has been fragmented in several small parties in government in search for a coalition partner to govern.

Democracy needs a period of stability with a two-party system in place, where politicians of the same ideological beliefs, change a traditional left- or right-wing party from within and not create a separate party with a similar ideology to negotiate a coalition. A fragmented two-party system is benefiting politicians with an authoritarian mindset like Orbán, while they take advantage of populist rhetoric to take power and then turn the country into a near one-party state. Populism can perhaps improve democracy in a balanced two-party political system.

5.5 Conclusion

Public policy needs populism as “populism is democracy at its best, because the will of the people is constructed through the people’s direct mobilization and consent” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 117). Condemning populism benefits demagogues. Instead, the focus should be on strengthening institutions and the pillars of democracy, as this is when authoritarian populism struggles to perform, while liberal democracy finds fertile grounds to flourish.

Populism is not a threat nor a substitute to democracy, but rather a temporary political phenomenon that features when democracy is in a crisis. The longer the crisis, the greater risk of populism in power becoming a dictatorship.

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APPENDIX A: PRIMARY DATA SOURCES

Podemos
<p>Podemos interview 1</p> <p>Leader Pablo Iglesias interviewed by Eoghan Gilmartin from Jacobin.com, on the 21st of October 2021.</p> <p>https://jacobin.com/2020/10/pablo-iglesias-interview-podemos-psoe-spain</p>
<p>Podemos interview 2</p> <p>Labor Minister Yolanda Diaz interviewed by Vicente Rubio-Pueyo from Jacobin on the 24th of August 2022.</p> <p>https://jacobin.com/2022/08/spain-yolanda-diaz-psoe-dystopia-hope-neoliberalism-sumar</p>
<p>Podemos interview 3</p> <p>Leader Pablo Iglesias in an interview with Ara newspaper on the 8th of February 2021.</p> <p>https://elpais.com/espana/2021-02-08/pablo-iglesias-no-hay-una-situacion-de-plena-normalidad-politica-y-democratica-en-espana.html</p>
<p>Podemos interview 4</p> <p>Podemos Head of Organisation Lilith Verstryngne, in an interview with Eoghan Gilmartin from Tribune on the 6th of February 2022.</p> <p>https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/02/spain-unidas-podemos-psoe-coalition-yolanda-diaz</p>
<p>Podemos Parliamentary debate 1</p> <p>The Minister for Social Rights and the 2030 Agenda, Iona Belarra in Congress of Deputies, Plenary and Permanent Deputies, No. 265, 27th April 2023, pp. 34-35.</p> <p>https://www.congreso.es/es/busqueda-de-publicaciones?p_p_id=publicaciones&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_publicaciones_mode=mostrarTextoIntegro&_publicaciones_legislatura=XIV&_publicaciones_id_texto=(DSCD-14-PL-265.CODI.)#(P%C3%A1gina33), pp. 34-35</p>

<p>Podemos Parliamentary debate 2</p> <p>Leader Pablo Iglesias in Congress of Deputies, Plenary and Permanent Deputies, No. 20, 29th April 2020, p. 37.</p> <p>https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-20.PDF, p. 37</p>
<p>Podemos Parliamentary debate 3</p> <p>Leader Pablo Iglesias in Congress of Deputies, Plenary and Permanent Deputies, No. 20, 29th April 2020, p. 37.</p> <p>https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-20.PDF, p. 37</p>
<p>Podemos Parliamentary debate 4</p> <p>Leader Pablo Iglesias in Congress of Deputies, Plenary and Permanent Deputies, No. 20, 29th April 2020, p. 36.</p> <p>https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-20.PDF, p. 36</p>
<p>Podemos Parliamentary debate 5</p> <p>Equality Minister Irene Montero in her parliament speech after passing the ‘Trans Law’ in February 2023.</p> <p>https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/16/spain-passes-law-allowing-anyone-over-16-to-change-registered-gender</p>
<p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 1</p> <p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto, p. 165, para. 151.</p> <p>https://podemos.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Podemos_programa_generales_10N.pdf, p. 165, para. 151</p>
<p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 2</p> <p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto, p. 60, para. 129.</p> <p>https://podemos.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Podemos_programa_generales_10N.pdf, p. 60, para. 129</p>
<p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 3</p> <p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto, p. 59, para. 126.</p>

<p>https://podemos.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Podemos_programa_generales_10N.pdf p. 59, para. 126</p>
<p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 4</p> <p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto, p. 54, para. 111.</p> <p>https://podemos.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Podemos_programa_generales_10N.pdf p. 54, para. 111</p>
<p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto 5</p> <p>Podemos 2019 Electoral Manifesto, p. 54, para. 111.</p> <p>https://podemos.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Podemos_programa_generales_10N.pdf p. 54, para. 111</p>
<p>Podemos speech 1</p> <p>Ione Belarra, Minister for Social Rights, succeeded Pablo Iglesias as the Secretary General of Podemos upon her election, in her speech on The Corner 14th June 2021.</p> <p>https://thecorner.eu/news-spain/spanish-politics/ione-belarra-wins-podemos-successionbulgarian-style/96694/</p>
<p>Podemos speech 2</p> <p>Podemos condemnation of ECHR ruling on immigrants.</p> <p>https://progressivespain.com/2020/02/20/podemos-migrant-deportations-breach-coalition-pact/</p>
<p>Podemos Congress proposal 1</p> <p>Podemos party pushes to regularise undocumented migrants during the pandemic.</p> <p>https://english.elpais.com/politics/2020-07-09/spains-unidas-podemos-party-pushes-for-sweeping-migrant-regularization.html</p>

Fidesz

Fidesz speech 1

Leader Viktor Orban with his speech on the economy in the Chamber of Commerce, on the 9th of March 2023.

<https://kormany.hu/beszedekek-interjuk/miniszterelnok/orban-viktor-beszede-a-magyar-kereskedelmi-es-iparkamara-gazdasagi-evnyito-esemenyen-2023030>

Fidesz speech 2

Leader Viktor Orban after winning the election in 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/viktor-orban-expected-to-win-big-majority-in-hungarian-general-election>

Fidesz speech 3

Leader Viktor Orban on the Election 2022 victory speech attacking the Brussels establishment, on the 3rd of April 2022.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-the-election-victory-of-fidesz-kdnp>

Fidesz speech 4

Leader Viktor Orban in the State of the Union Address of 2023.

<https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address/>

Fidesz speech 5

Dall Szabolcs in his article on Telex on the 16th of March 2022.

<https://telex.hu/english/2022/03/16/orban-compared-marki-zay-to-a-cooled-stone-while-marki-zay-identified-orban-as-a-weary-face>

Fidesz speech 6

Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament Laszlo Kover's speech to Hungary's national security in February 2020. Speech was leaked and published by investigative news outlet Direkt36.

<https://www.direkt36.hu/en/kover-laszlo-arrol-beszelt-titkosszolgalati-vezetoknek-hogy-az-ellenzek-jelenti-a-legnagyobb-nemzetbiztonsagi-veszelyt/>

Fidesz speech 7

<p>Leader Viktor Orban speaking in Budapest after being sworn in as Prime Minister in 2022.</p> <p>https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-given-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-swearing-his-prime-ministerial-oath</p>
<p>Fidesz speech 8</p> <p>Roma people in Gyongyospata segregation court case.</p> <p>https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/17/european-leaders-silence-over-orban-s-anti-roma-rhetoric-shames-the-eu-view</p>
<p>Fidesz speech 9</p> <p>Leader Viktor Orban and his spokesperson Zoltan Kovacs with their comments during the referendum on child protection, in a Shaun Walker article on The Guardian on the 21st of July 2021.</p> <p>https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/21/hungarys-viktor-orban-will-hold-referendum-on-anti-lbgt-law</p>
<p>Fidesz speech 10</p> <p>Leader Viktor Orban attacking the Brussels establishment in a Reuters article on the 21st of July 2021.</p> <p>https://www.reuters.com/world/hungarys-pm-call-referendum-child-protection-issues-2021-07-21/</p>
<p>Fidesz interview 1</p> <p>House Speaker and one of the founding members of Fidesz Laszlo Kover, in an interview with The Hungarian Conservative on the 26th of November 2023.</p> <p>https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/interview/sovereignty_parliament_hungary_eu_values_conservatism_laszlo_kover/</p>
<p>Fidesz interview 2</p> <p>Leader Viktor Orban interviewed by Tucker Carlsons on the 29th of August 2023.</p> <p>https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/tucker-carlsons-interview-mit-ministerprasideint-viktor-orban/</p>
<p>Fidesz interview 3</p> <p>Leader Viktor Orban in an interview with Slovakian portal Postoj.sk, 6th May 2021.</p>

<p>https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/viktor-orban-there-is-no-such-thing-as-liberal-democracy-only-liberal-non-democracy</p>
<p>Fidesz interview 4</p> <p>Gergely Gulyas, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, in year-end interview on the 8th of January 2020.</p> <p>https://rmx.news/article/year-end-interview-gergely-gulyas-on-orban-and-the-soul-of-the-people-losing-budapest-and-the-future-of-the-european-peoples-party/</p>
<p>Fidesz interview 5</p> <p>Leader Viktor Orban interviewed by Swiss weekly Weltwoche on the 2nd of March 2023.</p> <p>https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/interview-with-viktor-orban-in-the-swiss-weekly-weltwoche/</p>
<p>Fidesz interview 6</p> <p>House Speaker and one of the founding members of Fidesz Laszlo Kover, in an interview with The Hungarian Conservative on the 26th of November 2023.</p> <p>https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/interview/sovereignty_parliament_hungary_eu_values_conservatism_laszlo_kover/</p>
<p>Fidesz Legal document 1</p> <p>Act LXXXVIII of 2023 on the protection of national sovereignty, 21st December 2023.</p> <p>https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/en/2023-88-00-00</p>
<p>Fidesz political essay 1</p> <p>Political essay by Leader Viktor Orban on conservative newspaper Magyar Nemzet, published by Politico on the 24th of September 2020. Article written by Lili Bayer.</p> <p>https://www.politico.eu/article/how-viktor-orban-broke-the-eu-and-got-away-with-it-hungary-rule-of-law/</p>