

National Populism and Immediate Democracy

El nacionalpopulismo y la democracia inmediata

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Key words

Social Acceleration

- Democracy
- Modernity
- National Populism
- Populism

Palabras clave

Aceleración social

- Democracia
- Modernidad
- Nacionalpopulismo
- Populismo

Abstract

Populism is a key actor in liberal societies, posing a challenge of adaptation for democratic systems, which, by definition, are driven by continuous innovation and redefinition to preserve their normative domain. This article examines the underlying long-term factors that explain the electoral, social, and cultural success of a specific variant of populism: right-wing populism, or national populism. The framework for understanding its rise must be situated in recent precipitating and amplifying conditions, such as economic and migration crises, but above all, in the transformations of high-speed societies and the capacity of right-wing populism to offer seemingly effective political responses to citizens' demands.

Resumen

El populismo se ha consolidado como un actor clave en las sociedades liberales. Ello plantea un desafío de adaptación a sistemas como la democracia que, por definición, está impelida a la innovación y redefinición permanentes para preservar su espacio normativo. En este artículo abordo las razones de largo aliento subyacentes que ayudan a comprender el éxito electoral, social y cultural de una variante del populismo: el populismo de derecha o nacionalpopulismo. El marco para entender su auge hay que rastrearlo en factores precipitantes y multiplicadores recientes, como las crisis económica y migratoria, pero sobre todo en las transformaciones de las sociedades de alta velocidad y en la capacidad que muestra el populismo de derecha para ofrecer respuestas políticas en apariencia diligentes a las demandas de la ciudadanía.

Citation

Casquete, Jesús (2026). "National Populism and Immediate Democracy". *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 196: 79-96. (doi: 10.5477/cis/reis.196.79-96)

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INTRODUCTION

What lies behind the rise of populism in general, and of right-wing populism or national populism in particular, in the current historical conjuncture? This article argues that an explanatory framework is not possible without taking late modernity into account, and, in particular, a concomitant process: the acceleration of temporal rhythms.

In terms of representation and influence, populism has become a relevant actor in the Western geopolitical context. This poses a challenge of adaptation for democracy, a system which, by definition, is compelled toward continuous innovation and redefinition in order to preserve its systemic boundaries and guarantee the rights and freedoms of those under its jurisdiction.

This article is divided into distinct sections. The first situates the rise of populism within hypermodernity, from the mid-1970s onward. A central feature of the most recent phase of modern societies is acceleration, which constitutes the focus of the second section. The third section discusses the response offered by national populism in this new conjuncture. This response has proven to be a key element of its appeal and success: shortening decision-making timeframes in democratic politics, an activity that is, by definition, slow.

THE “LONG ARC” OF MODERNITY AND THE RISE OF POPULISM

Populism is a political style based on the friend-enemy dichotomy. At one pole, there stands a virtuous, authentic *people*, understood in monolithic terms as a homogenous and morally unified body. At the other pole stands a corrupt plutocracy

of privileged actors (the elite, the establishment, the “caste”, “those at the top”) which turns its back on the people. This divide between the elite and the people is the lowest common denominator of all varieties of populism, past and present.

Over recent decades, populism has experienced a remarkable rise in liberal democracies. In Western Europe, its average share of the vote in elections for lower houses of parliament in the 1960s was 5.4 % (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 9)¹. Half a century later, in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, the migration crisis that peaked in 2015, and the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, approximately one in five voters in the European Union cast their vote for this type of party (Meyer and Wagner, 2020; Danieli *et al.*, 2022).

Some expressions of populism are situated on the ideological left. In terms of both number and representation, they are a minority and are referred to as social-populist parties. Some of the most notable examples are Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, La France Insoumise in France, and more recently, the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) in Germany.

On the other hand, certain populist parties exclude or discriminate against a so-called “other” defined in ethnic, national, or religious terms. Among the most prominent are Rassemblement National (RN, since 2018; successor to the Front National, founded in 1972) in France, Fratelli d’Italia in Italy, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in the Netherlands, Fidesz in Hungary, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs

¹ This article focuses on populism, particularly its national-populist variant, in contemporary liberal democracies. It does not address its most notable historical antecedents, such as the Russian *narodniki* or the American People’s Party, nor does it examine populism in other regions, particularly Latin America.

(FPÖ) in Austria, and Vox in Spain. Some of these parties, such as those in Hungary, Poland, and Italy, have led or are currently leading national governments. Others, such as RN, FPÖ, PVV, or AfD (in the latter case, in the eastern part of the country), have been or are the most voted party in recent national or European elections. However, democratic safeguarding measures —the so-called firewalls or *cordons sanitaires*— have limited or prevented their access to power. These are national-populist parties insofar as they rely on a political style that polarizes between the people and the elite. They also display a form of nationalism (which their proponents like to describe as “patriotism”) that revolves around suspicion of the ethnic and cultural “other” with Muslims being the main target of this xenophobia. Ultrnationalism is their explanatory variable, the core of the programs and political praxis of these formations. For them, the homeland acquires a sacred value. Those with this outlook tend to approach politics through a form of sectarianism that holds that any agreement with the “enemy” inevitably results in a “rotten compromise” (Margalit, 2010). From their perspective, this willingness to compromise underpinning politics in liberal democracies is tantamount to a betrayal of the purity of the cause, that is, of the homeland.

A common explanation for the success of populism focuses on the socioeconomic tensions generated by globalism in the integration of society. These tensions tend to affect sectors of the population (often those with lower social and cultural capital) that are strongly exposed to the impact of economic offshoring, downward social mobility, and labor precariousness. These sectors are also affected by competition from immigrants for access to welfare state resources. Right-wing populist parties exploit these tensions by link-

ing economic and security problems to the presence of foreign ethnic groups.

Without disregarding the triggering and amplifying economic, social, and cultural factors that help explain the growing electoral support for right-wing populism, this article focuses on a political explanation. Pierre-André Taguieff wrote that “All reflections on contemporary political populism lead us to the question of democracy” (2012: 34). Explanations that highlight recent economic and migration crises, without a doubt, are essential to understanding the morphology and degree of penetration of populism in the West. However, they may be overly short-term in scope. When addressing the crisis currently affecting liberal democracy, it is necessary to broaden the scope and attend to the “long arc” of modernity. The thesis advanced here is that the new configurations of modernity provide the breeding ground for populism in general, and right-wing populism in particular, to consolidate itself as a central actor in liberal democracies. This has been achieved in two ways: first, by interpreting the changes brought about by high-speed society; and second, by offering alternatives that resonate with a significant segment of the population.

Populism has identified key tensions running through late modernity and has provided its own response to them. One of these tensions relates to loss. Recent social theory has pointed to loss as a generalized feeling in late modernity since the last quarter of the twentieth century. From this perspective, there would be an intrinsic tension between, on the one hand, the Enlightenment and classical modernity’s promises of progress and, on the other hand, the experiences of loss among individuals and social groups. Andreas Reckwitz, the sociologist who has drawn considerable attention to this vector, argues that “we can speak of loss when in-

dividuals, groups, institutions, or entire societies negatively evaluate that something significant has been lost” (2024: 47-48 and 162). The so-called “paradox of loss” in Western modernity is that it, on the one hand, restrains loss and promises its reduction, but, on the other hand, increases it. In any case, these are always “experiences of loss” of something that is considered essential, or at least significant in subjective or collective terms for individual or group identity. This may range from the life of a loved one to a cherished object, and extends to social status, the past, control over one’s life, and favorable expectations for the future (Reckwitz, 2024: 19 and 52). One might also add nostalgia for an analog world (cash payments, for example) in the era of digitalization². According to Reckwitz, populism ultimately constitutes a “political enterprise of loss” (2024: 12 and 391). Its social base — those making up its ranks of members and voters — consists of individuals who perceive themselves as victims of deindustrialization, “population replacement”, environmental policies, preferential treatment of foreigners, affirmative action in favor of women, or the privileging of urban centers over rural areas. It promises to restore previously prevailing conditions.

At a lower level of abstraction, it may be argued that a key to the success of right-wing populism lies in its offer to synchronize the political subsystem with other subsystems (cultural, economic and scientific-technical) in “high-speed societies” (Rosa and Scheurmann, 2009). Ultimately, the sense of loss increases with the speed at which changes occur.

² In its program for the February 2025 Bundestag elections, the AfD stated: “We demand the right to an analog, unmonitored, and free life” (“Zeit für Deutschland. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 21. Deutschen Bundestag”) (2025: 68).

ACCELERATION AND HIGH-SPEED SOCIETIES

Modernity is a historical dynamic that manifests itself in a series of interconnected and simultaneous processes, including the break with tradition, the secularization of values, and the gradual and formal dismantling of boundaries between social groups. Its unfolding has been accompanied by a new experience of time. With inexorable rhythm, fashions, products, values or established practices become volatile and ephemeral at a dizzying speed. We eat *fast food*, wear *fast fashion*, engage in *speed-dating* or *date-stacking*, listen to audio notes and podcasts on our mobile phones at 1.5 times normal speed, and read the top stories in “express” online newspaper editions; all while dealing with the demands of multitasking. Eating, staying informed, getting dressed, engaging in affective or sexual encounters, working... regardless of the domain or activity considered, everything in our lives unfolds at a relentless pace. “Modernity is speed” (Eriksen, 2001: 159; emphasis in original).

The acceleration of temporal rhythm has altered the economic, cultural, and scientific-technical subsystems. And in politics, one may ask: how does social acceleration affect liberal democracy? The social sciences assume that the pace of the formation of democratic will and decision-making was easily synchronized with the pace of social change. In classic modernity, politics has a certain room to maneuver to activate the deliberative mechanisms needed to adopt binding decisions and thus keep pace with the rate of social change in a relatively rapid, flexible, and socially responsive way. Today, there is a growing sense among citizens that politicians are far from being the pilots of ships that sail steadily towards a predetermined destination, as Plato envisioned with the philosopher-king. Instead,

these politicians merely surf the waves breaking upon the shore. This perception constitutes a key explanatory factor in the crisis, regression, degeneration, or deconsolidation that currently affects liberal democracy (Foa and Mounk, 2016; Przeworski, 2019; Schäfer and Zürn, 2021; Calhoun, Gaonkar and Taylor, 2022; Stokes, 2025).

The modern political subsystem is subject to growing decision-making pressure to accelerate the process of adopting and implementing decisions. At the same time, it is falling out of step with markets, culture, science and technology. In a globalized capitalism of social networks and commercial and financial transactions carried out at the click of a button, of journeys from one end of the globe to the other in even shorter periods of time, and of an artificial intelligence whose horizons and consequences have yet to be fully defined, politics faces increasing difficulties in shaping society as a whole. The dizzying pace of change in these subsystems contrasts with the slowness inherent in the tasks of deliberation, aggregation, articulation, and implementation of decisions that underpin democratic politics, which by definition, is slow and time-intensive. In high-speed society, politics gradually loses its ability to set the rules of the game and to proactively intervene in shaping society (Rosa, 2005; Rosa and Scheuerman, 2009). Democratic politics “reacts” but is less likely to “act” to shape the contours of tomorrow’s social order. Timeframes are greatly extended from the moment a social or political actor promotes a reform or regulatory initiative in society to the point at which it finally passes through the decision-making bodies of politics and is implemented. This does not include the time required for problem identification (by social movements or citizen initiatives, for example), delibera-

tive exchange (including expert reports), and, subsequently, judicial review, as applicable.

NATIONAL POPULISM AND SHORTCUTS TO REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The dilemma faced by liberal democracies in today’s hyper-accelerated modernity may be summarized as follows: How can politics narrow the gap of desynchronization with the economic, cultural, and scientific-technical subsystems? Right-wing populism offers a response to this challenge which may be the key explanatory factor in its rise in liberal democracies. Its proposal for counteracting desynchronization involves accelerating responsiveness in societies facing a growing demand for instantaneity by citizens who, since the participatory revolution of the 1960s, have increasingly demanded regulatory frameworks addressing increasingly diverse issues (Bell, 1975). This form of populism preserves the democratic element of the people as the sole constituent power, while simultaneously undermining liberal checks and balances—such as the separation of powers—and even their enabling foundations. In particular, it undermines the open, plural, and public discourse within representative forums and the public sphere.

The key to the success of national populism lies within this attempt at synchronization. Proposals of this populism offer expeditious and seemingly simple solutions: the problem of immigration can be solved by building walls or “externalizing” migrants to countries having more permissive standards of rights protection, or even by forcing the “re-migration” of these migrants who are deemed “non-integrated”. The deterioration of public safety

may be alleviated by expelling undocumented immigrants. Femicide and gender-based violence against women are downplayed or even denied (since what does not exist is not a problem and does not require public resources to address it). In Spain, the challenge posed by peripheral nationalism to state unity would be resolved, according to Vox, by banning Basque and Catalan “secessionist” parties. In the US, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump promised, in his 2024 campaign, to resolve the war in Ukraine within twenty-four hours.

If right-wing populism is successful, it is, in part, because its offer of decisional agility resonates with a segment of the population. Or perhaps these parties emphasize urgency because there is already a demand for speed within the electorate, and through their acceleration-oriented offer, they fulfil an underserved niche in the electoral market. Transnational survey research, such as the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Values Survey (EVS), and the European Social Survey (ESS), reveal that an increasing number of citizens around the world and in Europe approve of hav-

ing “a strong leader who does not bother with parliament or elections”. This authoritarian disposition is not evenly distributed across the electorate. Nationalist populist parties are the main beneficiaries of the support of those who prioritize speed in decision-making at the expense of weaker constraints on those in government (Donovan, 2021). Thus, in response to the question of whether “having a strong leader who does not have to worry about elections” would be desirable for “running this country”, the 2017-2018 wave of the EVS (the most recent available one) shows that right-wing populist party voters stand out significantly in their degree of approval compared to voters for other parties. The pattern is repeated in countries such as France with the FN/RN, Germany with the AfD, Hungary with Fidesz and the Netherlands with the PVV (see Tables 1-4). In all cases, voters with authoritarian tendencies, measured by their responses to this question, significantly favor this party family.

Young people are the age cohort most marked by disenchantment with and detachment from democracy. Shaped by social media and new communication

TABLE 1. *Support for a strong leader and party vote in France*

Party	Very good	Quite good	Quite bad	Very bad
La France insoumise (LFI)	3.9 %	11.7 %	18.4 %	66.0 %
Parti communiste français (PCF)	2.5 %	15.0 %	22.5 %	60.0 %
Parti socialiste (PS)	3.0 %	15.7 %	30.0 %	51.3 %
Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV)	5.3 %	14.9 %	31.9 %	47.9 %
La République en marche (LREM)	6.1 %	17.6 %	32.2 %	44.1 %
Mouvement démocrate (MoDe)	2.3 %	11.6 %	41.9 %	44.2 %
Les Républicains (LR)	4.9 %	18.9 %	42.7 %	33.6 %
Front national (FN)	9.0 %	31.3 %	35.1 %	24.6 %
Total	5.1 %	18.8 %	32.3 %	43.9 %

Source: European Values Study (EVS), 2017-2018.

TABLE 2. *Support for a strong leader and party vote in Germany*

Party	Very good	Quite good	Quite bad	Very bad
Christlich Demokratische Union / Christlich-Soziale Union (CDU/CSU)	3.5 %	14.1 %	27.2 %	55.1 %
Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)	3.8 %	19.0 %	26.8 %	50.5 %
Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP)	0.9 %	17.7 %	19.5 %	61.9 %
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	0.4 %	7.3 %	25.7 %	66.7 %
Die Linke	1.4 %	14.3 %	25.0 %	59.3 %
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	10.8 %	28.4 %	26.5 %	34.3 %
Total	3.1 %	15.5 %	26.1 %	55.4 %

Source: European Values Study (EVS), 2017-2018.

TABLE 3. *Support for a strong leader and party vote in Hungary*

Party	Very good	Quite good	Quite bad	Very bad
Magyar Szocialista Párt (MSZP)	3.0 %	13.4 %	32.8 %	50.7 %
Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (Fidesz)	6.9 %	26.2 %	33.5 %	33.3 %
Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP)	2.4 %	14.6 %	34.1 %	48.8 %
Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Jobbik)	1.6 %	17.6 %	35.2 %	45.6 %
Lehet Más a Politika (LMP)	1.8 %	7.0 %	35.1 %	56.1 %
Demokratikus Koalíció (DK)	1.9 %	7.5 %	20.8 %	69.8 %
Total	4.7 %	19.8 %	32.9 %	42.5 %

Source: European Values Study (EVS), 2017-2018.

TABLE 4. *Support for a strong leader and party vote in the Netherlands*

Party	Very good	Quite good	Quite bad	Very bad
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)	4.8 %	32.5 %	35.9 %	26.9 %
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	11.7 %	43.5 %	27.9 %	16.9 %
Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA)	5.8 %	30.0 %	31.3 %	32.9 %
Democraten 66 (D66)	4.1 %	17.8 %	33.5 %	44.6 %
GroenLinks (GL)	1.3 %	16.9 %	28.8 %	53.0 %
Socialistische Partij (SP)	6.2 %	28.7 %	33.7 %	31.5 %
Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)	5.6 %	24.0 %	28.1 %	42.3 %
Total	5.4 %	27.4 %	31.9 %	35.3 %

Source: European Values Study (EVS), 2017-2018.

technologies, the temporal structures associated with this stage of life emerge as an explanatory factor for their impatience and affinity for national populist parties. The WVS and EVS suggest that the percentage of young people born in the 1980s (“millennials”) who consider it “essential [...] to live in a country governed democratically” ranged between 30 and 40 % in consolidated democracies such as Australia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States, in sharp contrast to the average level of support of 70 % among those born before the Second World War (Foa and Mounk, 2016: 6). One explanatory factor underlying this is disenchantment with democracy’s promises of prosperity. Generations born prior to the war —the same generations that experienced substantial improvements in living and working conditions alongside democracy— show strong support for this form of political organization. By contrast, a substantial segment of the generations born since the 1980s has ceased to perceive a connection between economic progress and well-being, on the one hand, and the regime of rights and freedoms fostered by democracy, on the other. For this group of young people, politics cannot improve their prospects for the future. Over recent years, across different countries, right-wing populist parties have repeatedly emerged as the leading option among voters aged eighteen to twenty-five. One of the main explanations for their disaffection and increasingly polarized voting behavior lies in these unfulfilled promises of democracy. In the wake of new social movements emerging after May ’68, such as environmentalism, feminism, and pacifism, Western societies have undergone a major shift from materialistic values, such as economic and physical security, toward postmaterialist values centered on self-realization, partic-

ipation, and individual freedom (Inglehart, 1977, 1990). The generational change beginning in the 1960s —from older generations raised in material scarcity during and after the two world wars to new generations socialized in material affluence— produced a so-called “silent revolution” in values that was also a participatory revolution. Today, from the point of view of the lack of enthusiasm that democracy elicits in a large segment of young people, we would be witnessing another silent revolution, albeit in the opposite direction. For these young people, the issue is no longer so much about improving the quality and depth of civic participation, but rather, about making concessions and leaving decision-making in the hands of a strong leader.

Faced with the challenge of acceleration and desynchronization, liberal democracies have created formulas for more expeditious decision-making than those passing through deliberative forums. These formulas share a shift of decision-making authority toward institutions other than those envisaged within the classical liberal framework of the separation of powers. While liberalism clung to the doctrine of *laissez faire* and limited the state’s role in economic and social life, the challenge of desynchronization remained under relative control. With the emergence and expansion of the welfare state since the late nineteenth century, and especially its post-World War II expansion, these problems have become increasingly pressing. A growing number of issues are met with rising demands for solutions from increasingly fragmented populations.

The sociologist who has devoted the greatest attention to acceleration as a vector of modernity, Hartmut Rosa, has identified three responses to the challenge of political synchronization (2005: 415). The first consists of transferring the

adoption of controversial decisions to the courts; this is the well-known judicialization of politics. Another response is to place trust in the self-regulating capacity of the economy and the markets. This is where neoliberal deregulation enters into play. Its proposals for a minimal state entail an “ideology of the hollowing out of politics”, presenting state “debureaucratization” and “deregulation” as a pathway towards accelerated decision-making. The third response involves transferring the responsibility for one’s own decision to the individual; this is the so-called privatization of ethics, the idea that individuals themselves ultimately should decide on moral issues, within the general framework provided by the state. These three options, identified by Rosa, remain confined to the national framework of action. Furthermore, given that those making decisions have not been elected by citizens, decisions at an international level are negotiated by groups of experts and interest groups through procedures that suffer from deficits of democratic legitimacy. The European Union is the paradigmatic example of this technocratic solution.

An additional acceleration-oriented response, still incipient but bound to reconfigure the adoption and implementation of decisions in the near future in ways that remain uncertain, is related to artificial intelligence algorithms, and big data. Within the judicial system, “risk scores” are already used to make decisions regarding bail, sentencing, and parole. “Predictive policing” helps direct police resources toward specific geographic areas or individuals considered “at risk”, whether as perpetrators or victims. Similar algorithms are being used with children at risk of abuse or individuals at risk of suicide. Big data also has been used to detect crimes such as corruption or tax evasion. In any case, this “algorithmic government” (Brubaker, 2023) requires vast amounts

of data, ubiquitous surveillance systems, sophisticated algorithms, and generative artificial intelligence —the most recent and revolutionary qualitative leap— both to create such systems and, given their class, age, gender, or racial biases, to refine them as well. This is a path filled with challenges for democracy as we have known it until now. Unlike the judicial system, state agencies, or expert panels that make their recommendations public with (relative) transparency, algorithms are difficult to control through democratic means. They are invisible, opaque, and operate in a “granular” manner. They are linked to specific aspects, and their oversight requires expert knowledge to critique and uncover their underlying logic and mechanisms of operation (Brubaker, 2023: 143-153). “Algorithmic democracy” (García Marzá and Calvo, 2022; Wagner, 2023) bypasses this human factor and replaces processes of deliberation and decision-making with artificial intelligence tools in expert hands. One of its consequences would be the acceleration of decision-making. Here we refer to liberal democracies, since in some authoritarian systems such as China —with the algorithmic colonization of society— this form of decision-making is no longer a future aspiration but part of the present.

None of these five responses to political desynchronization —judicialization, economic deregulation, moral privatization, regulatory transfer to supranational bodies, and algorithmic government— has a necessary relationship to national populism. They respond to the social, political, and economic dynamics of hypermodernity and, to that extent, are not linked to any particular ideological current. In contrast, there are two other ways of shortening decision-making times in democracies that are linked to right-wing populism. Both make sense within the framework of lessons drawn from the ex-

perience of democratic systems, which political scientist Larry M. Bartels summarizes as follows: “citizens care much more about outcomes than about procedures” (2023: 220). When the population perceives that problems are entrenched because there are “too many” controls, veto players, and administrative and political procedures demanding compromises, a segment of the population may be willing to bypass or weaken these controls if it satisfies their expectations. In such situations, citizens may prioritize output over the normative demands of input.

The first formula associated with right-wing populism for addressing delays and accelerating decision-making is linked to the growing prominence of the executive branch, where it governs, at the expense of the legislature in the adoption of regulatory frameworks. This is the path of executive decrees or of presidential decrees. The second formula refers to the promise of implementing mechanisms of direct democracy. This latter option constitutes a *specificum* of national populism.

The executive and its “prerogatives”

Driven by globalization and transnational construction processes such as European integration and reinforced by the urgent need to address recent crises such as the economic and financial crises, the migration crisis, and the one triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, the classic balance of power has undergone major changes. The “denationalization” of politics (Zürn, 1998) has mainly benefited the executive branch, thereby redefining the classical framework of the separation and balance of powers. In reality, this is not a dynamic induced by right-wing populism when it comes to power, but rather, a resource available to governments regardless of

their ideological orientation. In classical liberal theory, the judiciary, with its retrospective mode of decision-making, is oriented toward the past. By contrast, the legislature is prospective: through the enactment of legal frameworks, it aspires to shape, anticipate, and guide the future by transforming the (legitimate) cacophony of societal demands for state action into a single voice. Finally, executive power operates in the present, relying on expeditious decision-making in response to crises and unforeseen events that leave insufficient time for legislative deliberation and oversight through ordinary procedures. If we accept that high-speed societies favor high-speed political institutions (Scheuerman, 2004: 26), then the executive branch emerges as the main beneficiary of the accelerating dynamic. In a “presentist” condition (Hartog, 2012), the executive is the best-positioned branch to dominate the landscape of liberal democracies, and also the most likely to lead an authoritarian drift.

By presenting itself and being perceived as the best equipped branch to respond to the imperatives of speed, liberal democracies are witnessing the growing prominence of the executive. A sense of urgency is the driving principle of its preeminence, regardless of the ideological orientation of the government in question. In Spain, the approval of decree-laws by the executive was a common practice under the conservative governments of José María Aznar (especially during his first term, between 1996 and 2000) and Mariano Rajoy (also particularly during his first term, between 2011 and 2016). It has also been the case under the socialist government of Pedro Sánchez, who set all-time records during his second term between 2019 and 2023, largely due to the coronavirus pandemic. National populism is no stranger to this trend. Italy, under the

government led by Giorgia Meloni, serves as an illustrative example of the intensification of this dynamic. According to the Openpolis Foundation, and despite enjoying a parliamentary majority, Meloni's coalition government had broken records for the use of executive decrees by 2023³. In the US, on the day of his inauguration as president on January 20, 2025, Donald Trump signed twenty-six executive orders on issues including immigration, healthcare, and environmental protection, more than any of his predecessors in history.

In late modernity, a discretionary instrument such as the decree-law, which in liberal systems is reserved for cases of necessity and urgency, has become a routine procedure. The result is a shortening of regulatory timeframes at the expense of deliberative capacity —that is, of parliamentary richness— with the corresponding costs in terms of democratic quality.

With its “strong leaders” (generally men, but not necessarily, as illustrated by Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen), right-wing populism can be interpreted as a proposal to shorten decision-making times. In complex societies characterized by a value pluralism and requiring arduous efforts at conciliation to reach compromises and thereby channel social conflict, the national-populist solution acts as an escape from the legitimate pressure exerted by society on decision-making. If “democracy risks succumbing to the push of speed”, as Rosa (2005: 454) argues, then the decisionist appeal of right-wing populism may be seen as an attempt to synchronize politics with the

accelerated social change characteristic of global capitalism.

A referendum-based democracy

Representative democracy, as previously emphasized, is a slow decision-making process. A common denominator of national populism (or populism in general) is the claim that the people express themselves directly, without the mediation of political parties (Casquete, 2023a). It is based on the axiom that “the people must be allowed to decide”, thereby shaking off the yoke of elites. It advances an immediate form of democracy that advocates for the unmediated articulation of the popular will as the highest means of giving voice to the people and realizing the “general will”, while also serving as a brake on the globalist impulse that allegedly deprives the people of their sovereignty.

Against this backdrop, political groups within this ideological sphere advocate the implementation of direct-democracy mechanisms in the form of referendums and popular legislative initiatives to access the “authentic” will of the people. Trust in the people is counterbalanced by distrust of political parties and counter-majoritarian or tutelary institutions, such as constitutional courts and central banks, which, in liberal democracies, serve as a counterweight to the popular will. From a national-populist perspective, representative democracy and political parties short-circuit the popular will. Their ideal model assigns a central role to referendum-based democracy.

A shadow of suspicion hangs over right-wing populism and its loyalty to the liberal democratic project, which is based on the recognition and safeguarding of civil and political rights, freedom of expression and assembly, the separation of powers, and popular sovereignty. Insofar as these parties formally respect the mechanisms

3 “Con il governo Meloni sempre più decreti e meno leggi ordinarie”, 20 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.openpolis.it/con-il-governo-meloni-sempre-piu-decreti-e-meno-leggi-ordinarie/>

for attaining power in representative democracy —whether through electoral victory or by forming coalition governments with other parties— they cannot be labelled as anti-democratic. If anything, they are anti-institutional. National populism distrusts a model of democracy that grants autonomy to political parties and their representatives, while simultaneously advocating greater power for the sole constituent authority: the people. These proposals, in themselves, do not call the popular will into question, but rather the way in which it is expressed. Except in the case of binding referendums, which are generally exceptional in Western constitutional systems, representative democracy does not provide the possibility of producing collective decisions directly sanctioned by the electorate.

The participatory revolution of national populism

A key question in political theory concerns the best way to make collective decisions that are binding on the community. It is the classic foundational problem of “deciding how to decide” which renders democracy a political system in a perpetual process of learning and improvement.

Direct democracy responds to the problem of decision-making. It is a form of government in which the constitution of the political community and relevant political decisions are, in principle, made directly (without intermediaries or representation) by eligible voters in a state, region, or municipality. Direct democracy revolves around citizens’ votes on specific proposals, not for candidates as in representative democracy. It opens the political system to the citizenry. At the same time, by linking decisions to the majority will expressed at the ballot box,

reduces the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis society.

A key mechanism of direct democracy is the referendum. It allows citizens to express their views on issues relevant to the community. In terms of speed, the referendum as a decision-making mechanism occupies an intermediate position between, on the one hand, the will dictated by an omnipotent and omniscient dictator or philosopher-king and, on the other hand, a decision-making process based on deliberation and aimed at unanimity. The referendum is a more expeditious decision-making mechanism than majority rule in representative democracy, which is typically preceded by extensive public debate. In addition to the referendum —and now turning to the second mechanism of direct democracy— the popular legislative initiative allows citizens to place their demands on the political agenda. These two instruments, the referendum and the popular initiative, operate according to different logics and produce distinct effects. The referendum comes into play at the end of the decision-making process. It does not empower citizens to pass laws, but rather serves as a veto, allowing a majority of the population (or of the cantons in the case of Switzerland, a model highly-estimated in right-wing populist circles / by right-wing populism) to block policies proposed by the authorities. By contrast, popular initiatives come into play at the beginning of the political process. Ultimately, citizen action brings a legislative proposal to a vote.

The referendum is an option fraught with risks. Its dichotomous structure (“yes” or “no”) overlooks a range of intermediate solutions that can be reached through forms of political communication based on deliberation and negotiation. The referendum prioritizes passions over the rational consideration of interests, an activity oriented toward persuasion

through argumentative exchange. Another danger is that immersion in a referendum dynamic may lead to an endless chain of consultations, repeatedly putting an issue to a vote until the result is deemed “correct”. While majority rule incorporates an element of periodicity (elections, by definition, produce only temporary governments; Linz, 1998), referendums are presented as “final” solutions. Minorities are not guaranteed another opportunity to prevail at the ballot box. The *nouvelle droite* or “new right” school of thought has fueled the participatory enthusiasm of national populism. Intellectuals within this current have proposed direct democracy as a routine mechanism of decision-making. France’s most influential theorist, Alain de Benoist, deserves special mention. In a manifesto co-authored with Charles Champetier, De Benoist proposed enriching party democracy with direct democracy in an amalgamation intended to enhance the role of the people:

Renewing the democratic spirit means not settling for mere representative democracy, but seeking to put into practice, at all levels, a genuine participatory democracy (“what affects everyone must be a matter for everyone”). The aim is to destabilize politics by recreating grassroots civic spaces: every citizen must be an actor of the general interest, and every common good must be designed and defended as such from the perspective of a concrete political order. The consumer-client, the passive spectator, and the holder of private rights will only be overcome through a radically decentralized form of grassroots democracy that assigns each individual a role in shaping and governing their own destiny. The referendum mechanism could likewise be reactivated through popular initiative (1999: 21).

French sovereigntists of the *nouvelle droite* find concrete expression in the programmatic proposals of right-wing populist parties. Illustrating the centrality that this expedited decision-making mechanism acquires within their ranks, one of the political groups in the Euro-

pean Parliament during its eighth legislature was the Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (2014-2017), later renamed Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (2017-2019). Throughout its existence, the group included the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the AfD, and the Italian Five Star Movement.

Referendums, to decide what?

Since the mid-19th century, and driven by the labor movement, social justice and wealth redistribution emerged as the dominant axis of conflict in Western Europe. This is no longer the case. Alongside the left-right divide, other “arenas of inequality” have progressively emerged, overshadowing the central conflict of classical modernity and displacing it from its former dominant position. Sociologists Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser (2023) have identified four such arenas: 1) the classic conflict over redistribution issues, which they call “inequalities between above and below”; 2) controversies over migration, access and integration within a territory, the “inequalities between inside and outside”; 3) identity and recognition conflicts, the “inequalities between us and them”, a category in which Mau and collaborators include gender and which, from the Spanish context, could also encompass the national identities articulated by peripheral sovereignties; and 4) conflicts over environmental issues, the “inequalities between today and tomorrow”.

Since the 1990s, the classic left-right conflict axis —the above-below dimension— has progressively lost weight in favor of sociocultural and identity-based issues. This is known as the polarization between the GAL (Green-Alternative-Libertarian) and TAN (Tradition-Authoritarianism-Nationalism) dimensions. There is no co-

herent pattern in how national-populist actors position themselves on issues of social justice, which have structured political conflict in the context of the expansion (or containment) of the welfare state. Some right-wing populist parties, such as *Rassemblement Nationale* (RN) in France champion redistributive measures. Their “welfare chauvinism” underpins a strong welfare state for the “French”. The programmatic diversity on economic matters among these parties is such that it is difficult to identify a common denominator among them (Greilinger and Mudde, 2024). In contrast, the populist right addresses the other three axes of conflict identified by Mau and his collaborators — migration (including security and public order), gender, and the environment — with greater determination and in a more convergent manner. These are “trigger points” in the “new” post-industrial societies, that is, “critical points that activate particularly complex conflicts” (Mau, Lux and Westheuser, 2023: 27).

It is precisely around these three arenas that the programmatic proposals of national populism and its offers of citizen consultations are articulated. France illustrates the centrality of direct democracy in this political space. Since the mid-1980s, the National Front has made the idea of “giving the people a voice” and achieving a “broadening of democracy” one of its defining characteristics, according to its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen (Rosanvallon, 2020: 40). Despite the “de-demonizing” shift since assuming party leadership in 2011, his daughter has remained loyal to him regarding direct democracy. In a book published in the context of the 2012 presidential elections, her first as a candidate, Marine Le Pen proposed holding referendums, particularly on issues related to sovereignty, identity, education, and public services. She also advocated for holding referendums to “bring down the ivory

towers in which our leaders are confined” (2012: 180). In the subsequent presidential election, in 2017, Marine Le Pen campaigned on a platform that championed “democratic proximity”, meaning that “decisions should be made as close as possible to citizens and should be directly controlled by them”. The proposal was based, for example, on the implementation of a “genuine citizen’s initiative referendum”, beginning with one that would put France’s membership in the European Union to a vote⁴. Expanding on her earlier proposal of “democratic proximity”, two of the twenty-two measures included in Le Pen’s 2022 presidential program were closely related to direct democracy. The program’s opening measure advocated “stopping uncontrolled immigration” through a referendum, while another proposed “establishing citizen-initiated referendums”⁵. Marine Le Pen indicated that, if she were to become president, she planned to hold a “major referendum every year”⁶.

A post-election study following the first round of the 2022 presidential elections revealed the importance that the FN/RN electorate places on the plebiscitary model. The level of approval for what the study termed the “democratic expectation” linked to direct democracy was one of the variables that most clearly distinguished Le Pen’s electorate (68 % approval) from those of the other candidates, with the exception of the social-populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon of *La France Insoumise*, whose electorate showed slightly lower support (66 %). Direct democracy is operationalized through three propositions

⁴ “144 engagements présidentiels. Marine 2017”, Preface and Measure no. 1.

⁵ “M La France. 22 mesures pour 2022”, Measures no. 1 and 11.

⁶ Marc Bassets: “Marine Le Pen: ‘If Russia wins the war, it is catastrophic; if Ukraine wins, World War III will have to be unleashed’”. *El País*, 13 April 2023.

which respondents were invited to react: 1) “The people and not the political leaders, must make the most important political decisions”; 2) “The political differences between ordinary citizens and elites are greater than the differences among citizens themselves”; and 3) “I prefer to be represented by an ordinary citizen rather than by a professional politician” (Rouban, 2022: 19 and 131).

The AfD also champions direct democracy. In its first run in the 2013 Bundestag elections, immediately after its founding, the party campaigned for a referendum on leaving the euro. The opening chapter of its *Program for Germany* (2016) is entitled “Referendums on the Swiss Model”. Within a populist framework that pits the people against the elite, the AfD argues that the Swiss experience rests on the premise that “citizens behave in a way that is more oriented toward the public good than professional politicians”. For the AfD, this approach is not a matter for negotiation in hypothetical coalitions, even in the unlikely event that any other party is willing to collaborate with them (as of now, the “fire-wall” holds)⁷. To complete this overview, the Austrian FPÖ also advocates promoting direct democracy: “It is necessary to offer citizens the possibility of deciding, according to the Swiss model, on strategic options for the future, beyond the inertia of the political establishment”. This, it argues, is “the best way to regain people’s trust and to advance measures that are blocked by self-appointed elites”⁸.

⁷ *Programm für Deutschland. Das Grundsatzprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland*, Stuttgart, 2016: pp. 16-17.

⁸ See: *Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)*, Graz, 18 June 2011: 7; *Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik. Ein Leitfaden für Führungsfunktionäre und Mandatsträger der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs* (4th ed.), Vienna, FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut, 2013: 89-94, 178; quotation on p. 90; “Festung Österreich, Festung der Freiheit. Wahlprogramm für die Nationalratswahl 2024”, p. 6.

So, what is Vox’s position on direct democracy in Spain? Its comparable parties embraced the idea of direct democracy long ago and incorporated it into their platforms, but until very recently, the Spanish version of national populism has been an anomaly in the European landscape in this respect. This seems to explain their silence. Since the restoration of democracy, the referendum as a decision-making method has been consistently advocated by Basque and Catalan nationalisms. Had Vox championed direct democracy, it would have been a double-edged sword, potentially emboldening separatist demands for self-determination in the name of the Basque and Catalan peoples. Even so, and although its programs did not yet include any proposals on direct democracy, Vox took it upon itself to establish its limits: its strongman argued that not even a national referendum could call national unity into question (Abascal, 2015: 144-145). Vox’s anomaly ceased to be one in 2022. Coinciding with the Viva 22 event in Madrid, “The History We Made Together”, Vox presented its manifesto, “Spain Decides”. The document was, in reality, a particular interpretation of Spain’s contributions to world history and was intended to serve as its new political program (Casquete, 2023b). This represented an update to the Spanish pro-independence party’s stance on referendum democracy. This shift aimed to “recover our democracy from the party system [...] which has betrayed the people and parliamentarianism”. Although the document does not contain the term “referendum”, its authors are clearly referring to this when they call for public consultations, invoking Article 92 of the Constitution, which allows for consultative referendums (the Spanish Constitution does not permit binding referendums) on matters of particular importance. The issues

that Vox intends to put to a vote include immigration, education, gender-violence legislation, the banning of pro-independence parties, the processing and storage of personal data outside Spain by major technology companies, a national water plan, the energy model, and subsidies for political parties (regarding which they claim “real change comes from ending the party for the powerful”), as well as for trade unions, and employers’ associations. Ultimately, they maintain that it is about Spain deciding and reclaiming its sovereignty⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

The economic, migratory, and public health crises of the past two decades have propelled right-wing populism. As a result, liberal democracy as we have known it is compelled to rethink, redefine, and demonstrate its resilience. To account for the rise of this party family, a sociological and political science perspective has been adopted. The long arc of modernity has entailed an acceleration of temporal rhythms in society, the economy, and culture, leaving politics increasingly behind. Democracy is inherently slow and turbulent, and it exhibits synchronization problems with other subsystems in responding to citizens’ problems and concerns. Right-wing populist parties offer a response to this problem by

addressing decision-making pressure through the acceleration of both decision-making and implementation processes. The referendum is a mechanism that serves this purpose and is exclusively defended by this party family. By adapting its methods and decision-making to the tyranny of the immediate, right-wing populism risks sacrificing the constitutive values of liberal democratic systems: moral equality, minority rights, and the separation of powers.

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⁹ “Spain decides”, available at: <https://www.vox-espana.es/noticias/espana-decide-20221009>; “What is Spain decides? More and better democracy”, available at: <https://www.voxespana.es/actualidad/santiago-abascal-el-viva-22-que-es-espana-decide-mas-y-mejor-democracia-20221009>; Speech by Abascal at “Viva 22. The History We Made Together”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdoWPfwEoAo&t=22s>, especially from 12:30”; “Vox. A Program for What Matters. Electoral Program for the 23 July 2023 General Elections”, pp. 10-11, 16, 32, 80, 83, 100, 109 and 120.

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RECEPTION: March 19, 2025

REVIEW: January 30, 2026

ACCEPTANCE: March 13, 2026

