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## **Introduction: Analyzing the Nexus Between Populism and International Relations**

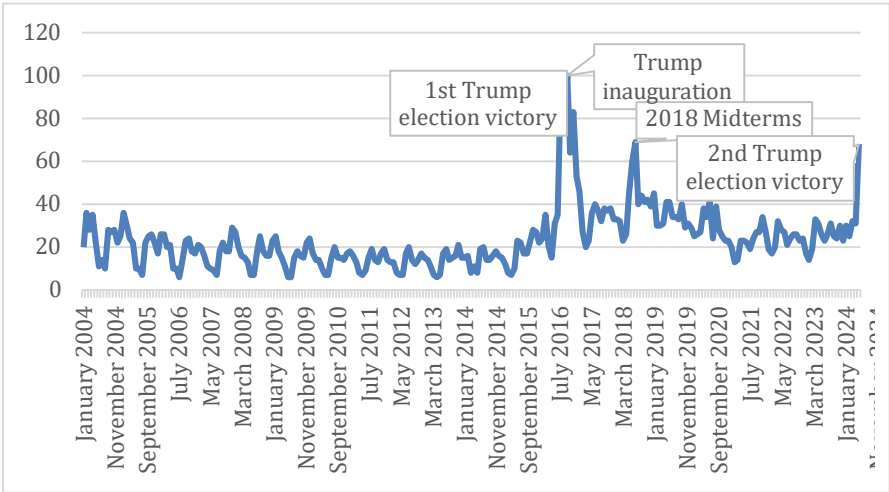
*Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers*

**Abstract:** Although populism has been a prominent topic in the social sciences, until very recently little attention has been paid to its inter- and transnational dimensions. While populism researchers have mainly focused on theoretical and methodological issues, or studied individual cases (whether in single case studies or in a comparative fashion), International Relations scholars have until recently largely ignored the phenomenon. At the latest with the return of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency, the need for research on the nexus between populism and world politics has become a pressing issue. This introduction (1) provides a critical overview of the burgeoning IR literature on populism, (2) makes the case for a more systematic engagement between the IR and populism research outside the discipline, (3) provides an overview of the chapters of the volume and situates their individual contributions within the larger framework of the populism-world politics nexus.

**Keywords:** Populism, foreign policy, world politics, world order, LIO, far right

A populist wave is sweeping across many countries worldwide, becoming one of the most important topics in current political and social science debates. Moreover, former U.S. President Donald J. Trump’s return to the White House in January 2025 demonstrates that “populism” is not going away any time soon. The topic continues to inflame the spirits. Many on the right herald populism as an improved and more direct form of democracy, which seeks to upend decades of social disintegration, promising action against political and economic elites in favor of a long-suffering “silent majority”. The center and some on the left of the political spectrum often present populism as a threat to democracy and civil society and the harbinger of authoritarian rule, threatening to overturn the rule of law and the modern human rights movement (Roth 2017; Kagan 2016). One side denounces identity politics, political correctness or “wokeness” and the expansion of the welfare state, while the other side fears a return to the European-style fascism of the 1930s (Faulkner 2017; Connolly 2017; Tomasky 2024). Not surprisingly, given the stakes involved in the “global rise of populism” (Moffitt 2016), attention devoted to the phenomenon has skyrocketed over the past couple of years. As Fig. 1 below shows, public interest in populism spiked markedly after Trump’s 2016 election victory and 2017 inauguration and again following his second victory in 2024.

**Fig. 1** “Populism” in Google Trends, 2004-2024



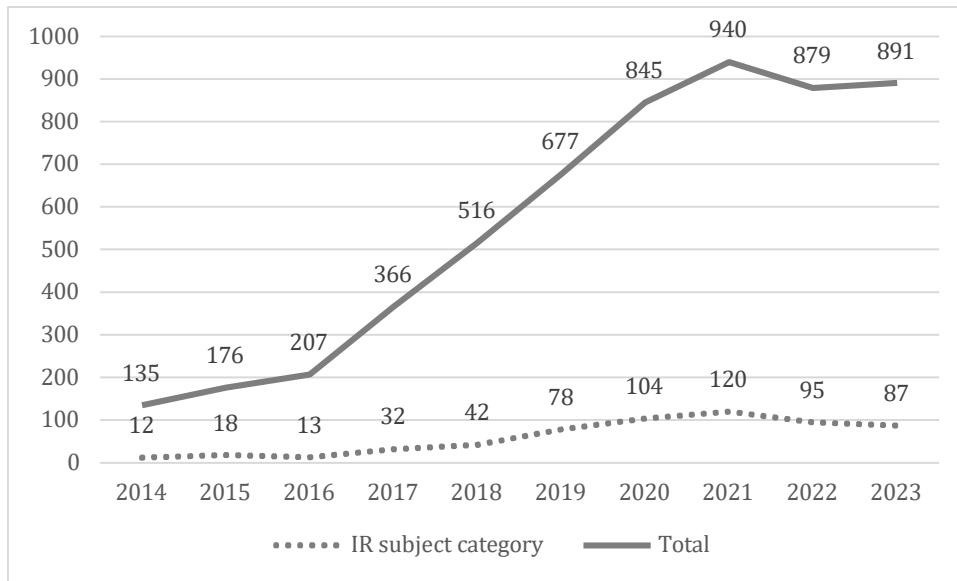
Although the topic of populism has been discussed in the social sciences, at least since the 1960s, academic attention to the phenomenon has increased significantly following the twofold blow of the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) and Trump's election victory in the United States in 2016, in addition to a string of electoral victories for populist parties across Europe (Ionescu & Gellner 1969). Between 2014 and 2021, the number of journal articles listed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) on the topic of populism increased almost seven-fold, from 135 to 940, with a sharp increase in 2016 (see Fig. 2 below).

On both sides of the Atlantic, populist leaders from what we might see as the left and right of the traditional political spectrum have either become the government (through promising significant change) or have entered legislatures as vocal opposition to politics as usual. The COVID-19 pandemic has only contributed to this trend, with COVID-19 restrictions provoking resentment and fueling conspiracy narratives. In particular, the populist radical right used COVID-19 to mobilize against the government (Brubaker 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart 2024; Zulianello & Guasti 2023). Although so-called populist actors do not, aside from a broadly anti-elitist stance and the claim to speak for "the people" share a common ideology (Canovan 1981, 1999; Mudde 2007; Laclau 2005) a significant portion of these anti-mainstream actors (in particular on the far right) have combined anti-elite rhetoric with broader attacks on democratic norms and institutions, sparking fears of a "populist danger" or "populist threat" to liberal democracy and the rule of law (e.g., Galston 2018; Müller 2018; Weyland 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=populism&hl=en>; accessed: November 22, 2024. Note that Google Trends is continuously updated, which means that the underlying data can change on a daily basis. As a consequence, the figure should only be taken as a very rough indicator of trends.

**Fig. 2** Articles on populism in the SSCI, 2014-2023



*Source: authors' illustration based on Web of Science<sup>2</sup>*

Although scholars continue to debate whether populism is the most apt descriptor for these illiberal and/or authoritarian actors (especially because only some but not all populists are illiberal and anti-democratic) (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2017), what is clear is that leaders and parties like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or the Alternative for Germany have more or less openly attacked democratic norms and institutions. Trump is a case in point. In addition to an onslaught of racist, misogynist and blatantly false statements (claiming, for instance, that immigrants were “poisoning the blood of our country” (Trump 2023),<sup>3</sup> Trump has encouraged violence, called for political opponents to be imprisoned and for the Constitution to be terminated, and tried to overturn the 2020 election fraudulently. When that did not work, he encouraged his armed supporters to “fight like hell” (Trump 2021) and sent them to the U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> We searched in the SSCI for “populis\*” (topic) and included all citable items (articles and review articles) published from 2014 until 2023, for (1) all included journals and (2) all journals included in the WoS category International Relations.

<sup>3</sup> This echoes Adolf Hitler’s rhetoric who claimed the Jews were “poisoning the blood of the Aryan masses” (Blain 1988, 268)

Capitol (see Ntontis et al. 2024). As a result, an armed mob stormed the building to stop the certification of Joe Biden's election victory and hang Vice President Mike Pence (Nabers & Stengel 2024). Moreover, since taking office for his second term, Trump has begun dismantling democratic institutions, relying on loyalists like Attorney General Pam Bondi and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency.

Because populists' central claim is that political elites have become detached from the will of the people, their critique also often targets aspects of international politics and foreign policy. Populism is highly likely to have an impact on both foreign policy – understood as “the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually but not exclusively a state) in international relations” (Hill 2016, 4) – and world politics, the larger totality of different actors' interactions that take place across national boundaries (Waltz 1996). For instance, several right-wing populist leaders and parties have opposed immigration and voiced strong criticism of multinational cooperation and international organizations, which according to them unduly curbs national sovereignty and passes over the will of the (national) people. Again, Trump is a perfect example here. From the beginning of his first campaign in 2015, Trump has claimed that due to elites' incompetence and lack of leadership, the U.S. was getting “ripped off by everybody” and had become the “dumbing grounds for everybody else's problems” (Trump 2015). Trump's solution was, and continues to be, a policy that put “America First”, curbing immigration, canceling unfavorable international treaties, renegotiating trade deals and even making alliance solidarity conditional on whether NATO members pay their fair share (e.g., de la Torre 2024; Löffmann 2024). Given the potentially far-reaching consequences such policy shifts would have not just for alliances but also for regional security, multinational cooperation (crucial for tackling global problems such as climate change) and indeed the liberal international order (LIO) as such, clearly, IR cannot afford to ignore populism. While in 2019, in the introduction to the first edition of this volume, we still lamented the relative “neglect of

populism's global dimension by both IR and populism research", IR scholars have devoted significant attention to the phenomenon in the years since, leading some observers to speak of a "populist turn" (Stengel et al. 2019, 5; Wajner & Giurlando 2024, 2; see e.g. Chryssogelos et al. 2023). As Fig. 2 above shows, the number of articles in IR journals listed in the SSCI has increased ten-fold between 2014 (12) and 2021 (120). In addition, since 2016, multiple special issues on populism and IR have been published (see Chryssogelos et al. 2023; Destradi et al. 2021; Löfflmann 2022; Steele & Homolar 2019; Wajner & Destradi 2024; see also the edited volume by Lacatus et al. 2023). However, while IR has begun to take the phenomenon seriously, there is still significant variance within IR populism research regarding the degree of conceptual systematicity, and serious shortcomings persist among a substantial portion of the literature.

### **Populism Research and IR: Progress and Remaining Limitations**

As far as the emergent IR literature on populism is concerned, we can broadly distinguish between two generations of studies (Eklundh et al. 2024). The first generation of IR populism research, which emerged primarily in reaction to Brexit and Trump, consisted primarily of policy-oriented publications that tried to provide an early assessment of how (at least some) populists' rather radical policy proposals might alter individual countries' foreign policies as well as the potential for international conflict and cooperation. These early studies correctly pointed to the potential dangers associated with at least some of the actors commonly labeled populist, such as Trump or Hungary's Viktor Orbán. However, they also had significant shortcomings, primarily due to their limited engagement with the quite substantial body of conceptual research on populism outside IR. These early studies treated populism either as "a blanket descriptor for radical or 'insurgent' politics of all persuasions" (Maignushca 2019, 769), or as a synonym for the far right failing to differentiate between different types of populism such as inclusionary/exclusionary, left- and right-wing or moderate and extremist forms of

populism (Hawkins 2009; March 2017; Mudde 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Stengel 2019; Zürn 2022).

As a consequence of this conceptual ambiguity, the first generation of IR populism research listed a vastly heterogeneous group of parties, movements and individuals as examples of populism, ranging from the right-wing extremist French *Front National* to the radical leftist Syriza in Greece, from moderate social democrat Bernie Sanders to illiberal but democratically elected leaders like Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczynski to authoritarian rulers like Vladimir Putin and Philippine president and Hitler aficionado Rodrigo Duterte.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, these early studies at times made sweeping statements regarding populism's effects. For instance, Fareed Zakaria lists Trump, Bernie Sanders, Syriza and the Front National as examples of populism just to proclaim that “the West is in trouble”, as if Sanders and Trump were equivalent (Zakaria 2016). Clearly, the attack on the US Capitol has proven otherwise. Like Zakaria, Jeff Colgan and Robert O. Keohane claim that populism is marked by the “belief that each country has an authentic ‘people’ who are held back by the collusion of foreign forces and self-serving elites at home” (Colgan & Keohane 2017, 36). Seemingly substituting “populism” for what is more aptly described as the Populist Radical Right (PRR) or “authoritarian populism” (Mudde 2007; Zürn 2022), they continue that a populist leader “seeks to weaken or destroy institutions such as legislatures, judiciaries, and the press and to cast off external restraints in defense of national sovereignty” (Colgan & Keohane 2017, 36).

This undifferentiated view stands in stark contrast to populism researchers working outside IR who have gone to great lengths to precisely define populism and to differentiate it from related phenomena like demoticism (a closeness to ordinary people) (March 2017), anti-elitism,

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<sup>4</sup> Duterte once said that he would “slaughter” millions of drug users just like Hitler “massacred millions of Jews (Rauhala 2016).

nationalism, nativism, or socialism (see for instance Canovan 1999; Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004, 2007; Weyland 2001). Although scholars continue to debate how best to define populism, what its constitutive elements are and what kind of a ‘thing’ it is (an ideology, a discourse, a political style, a style of communication or a political strategy) (see Block & Negrine 2017; Canovan 1981; Diehl & Bargetz 2024; Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Taggart 2000; Weyland 2024), most scholars advocate for a narrow understanding of populism, limiting it to only two elements: anti-elitism and people-centrism (Canovan 1981; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Because of this relative lack of substance, populism does not appear in reality by itself but – to draw on Cas Mudde’s influential definition of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde 2007, 23) for illustrative purposes – combined with other, more substantive, “host ideologies” (March 2017, 283) like socialism, nationalism or fascism (Taggart 2000). These host ideologies are often more influential in terms of determining the policy positions of a particular party or leader, which is why many populism scholars have been reluctant to make sweeping declarations of populism being *per se* dangerous.<sup>5</sup> Hostility to, for instance, democracy or the LIO might well be more a function of the context-specific ideological ‘flesh’ that is put on the populist ‘skeleton’. Anti-elitism and the demand for a restoration of the people’s influence on politics can be an expression of both, justified criticism of an insufficiently democratic system and (illegitimate) anti-democratic demagoguery.<sup>6</sup> Contra those who claim that populism as such is a danger to democracy or the LIO, populism research seems to suggest that its effect depends on the specific ideological makeup of a given populist

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<sup>5</sup> Mudde himself has argued that populism represents “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018, 1670).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there is a debate in political theory about whether Western democracies are still democratic or whether democracy is under threat not by populism but neoliberal capitalism (Crouch 2004; Brown 2015). Clearly, a significant portion of at least the American electorate seems to doubt that democracy is working for them (Jones 2024).

movement or party (Taggart & Rovira Kaltwasser 2016). Authoritarian populism certainly is a danger to pluralist democracy, but other forms might not be (Huber & Schimpf 2017; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014; Zürn 2022). Equally, it makes sense to assume that not all populisms are a danger to the LIO or European integration but primarily those that combine populist demands with, say, hyper-nationalism or protectionism (Staufer 2021; Stavrakakis 2015; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Mudde himself has framed his discussion of the Trumpist threat in terms of the far right, not populism, pointing to the importance of disentangling the two conceptually (Mudde 2022).<sup>7</sup>

Treating populism as a catch-all term for any party or movement that criticizes political elites (or the far right) makes it impossible to separate populism from other phenomena, and as a result any analysis unavoidably suffers (Wonka 2007). If populism cannot be meaningfully distinguished from non-populism, any attempt to theorize its relationship to international phenomena such as foreign policy or world order is futile. Moreover, presuming that some of the movements currently labeled ‘populist’ are, in fact, opposed to liberal democracy, the European Union, the transatlantic alliance, or the LIO (and there is good reason to do so) (Boyle 2016; Buzogány 2017; Stengel 2023), Western democracies do face the challenge of having to deal with them. Here, insufficient concept specification can stand in the way of effective political action. After all, any political action requires the ability to distinguish dangerous from harmless phenomena. The way populism is used in much of the literature, in particular in IR, any analysis of the potential danger of “populism” for democracy, the European Union, the West or the world order will unavoidably end up either exaggerating (e.g., Sanders) or playing

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<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted, however, that Mudde (2017, 4) has described Trump as (also) populist and explicitly rejected the label as an apt description for other actors often labelled populist, such as Bernie Sanders.

down (Trump) the dangers posed by them individually. As a consequence, debating populism based on vague terminology is more misleading than helpful.

Faced with these problems, during recent years, a second generation of IR populism researchers has emerged that draws on the conceptual literature outside of IR to gain a more systematic understanding of what exactly populism is, how it can be distinguished from related phenomena, and how it affects, and is affected by, international phenomena such as foreign policy, the LIO and globalization (see in particular Chryssogelos 2017; Verbeek & Zaslove 2017; Wajner et al. 2024). While there are multiple competing definitions of populism in the broader literature, IR scholars have mainly relied on two conceptions: Mudde's ideational approach and Ernesto Laclau's discursive perspective.

The overwhelming majority of IR populism studies draws on Mudde's understanding of populism as a thin-centered ideology that combines "some kind of appeal to 'the people'" with "a denunciation of 'the elite'" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 5). Given the often nationalist, isolationist, anti-immigration, illiberal and anti-democratic rhetoric of many so-called populists in particular on the right, also second-generation scholars have been concerned with the effects of "populism" on foreign policy as well as various international phenomena such as international organizations, conflict and cooperation, and global governance (Chryssogelos et al. 2023; Destradi et al. 2021; Löfflmann 2022; Wajner & Destradi 2024). As noted above, the conceptual thinness of populism poses a challenge for such an analysis insofar as it requires the analytical separation of populism from the host ideology it is combined with. In the case of the PRR, for instance, populism appears in combination with nativism (the belief that states should be inhabited only by members of their respective nation) and authoritarianism (the "belief in a strictly ordered society" (Mudde 2007, 23) and the demand to punish infringements), and it is important not to attribute, for example, effects of nativism to populism (see also Patman (this volume)).

To tackle this problem, many second-generation IR populism scholars have drawn on Mudde to clearly separate populism from different host ideologies (Chryssogelos 2017, 2024; Plagemann & Destradi 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove 2017), with the aim of formulating predictions for a “populist foreign policy” (Wajner & Giurlando 2024). Based on Mudde’s framework, IR scholars have predicted that populist governments would be opposed to the LIO, pursue a more confrontational foreign policy, be more skeptical towards international organizations, multinational cooperation, public goods provision, and prefer protectionist and anti-immigration policies (Chryssogelos 2020; Chryssogelos et al. 2023; Destradi et al. 2021; Jenne 2021; Löfflmann 2022; Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Söderbaum et al. 2021; Steele & Homolar 2019). Recent empirical studies have put these predictions to the test, painting a much more differentiated picture and significantly complicating the expectation of a (more or less uniform) populist foreign policy. Not all populists do, in fact, pursue more confrontational foreign policy, oppose multilateralism, or are hostile to immigration (Henke & Maher 2021; Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Varga & Buzogány 2021; van der Meer & Meibauer 2024). As Wehner and Thies sum up, there is not much that all “populists” universally agree upon, leading them to conclude that there is “not just one type of populist foreign policy” (Wehner & Thies 2020, 332; see also Lacatus 2023). This seems to bear out Verbeek and Zaslove’s early prediction that the influence of host ideologies would likely outsize that of populism (Verbeek & Zaslove 2017).

A second, smaller group of second-generation studies has employed Laclau’s discursive approach to make sense of populism’s inter- and transnational dimensions (see Cadier & Szulecki 2020; Chryssogelos 2020; Eklundh et al. 2024; Jenne 2021; Wojczewski 2020, 2023, 2024). Laclau conceptualizes populism not as an ideology with a specific content but as a “political logic” (Laclau 2005, 117), i.e., specific “way of articulating” (Glynos & Howarth 2007, 141) or framing certain themes or issues (in IR, see most recently Eklundh et al. 2024;

Meislová & Chryssogelos 2024; Wojczewski 2023). Such a conception of populism shifts our attention away from trying to determine the effects certain political ideas have on foreign policy and towards the process by which certain policy goals (political demands in Laclau's terminology) are legitimized for specific audiences. The central argument here is that framing specific policy goals as the people's goals (instead of the interests of particular groups) makes them appear more legitimate for democratic audiences. Who the people are and who belongs to that category or is excluded is a contingent product of ongoing discursive struggles. Advocates of the discursive approach argue that because of populism's relative lack of content, the quest for a populist foreign policy is futile. IR researchers should either abandon the search for populism's effects in favor of analyzing specific host ideologies (most notably the ideologies of different far-right actors) or shift their attention to analyzing how specific goals are legitimized by an appeal to the people (Eklundh et al. 2024; Wojczewski 2023). However, while this approach might help avoid the risk of a creeping host ideology, it does so at the price of altogether abandoning any analysis of populism's effects – a price that not all researchers might be willing to pay.

### **IR and Populism Research: Deepening and Widening the Engagement**

For most foreign policy and IR theorists, it matters who is in power. A significant body of research highlights the importance of individual leaders and advisors for the making of foreign policy (inter alia Byman & Pollack 2001; Hermann et al. 2001). Whether driven by their core beliefs (George 1969; Schafer & Walker 2006; Walker and Schafer 2010), leadership styles (Greenstein 2005; Kaarbo & Hermann 1998), personality traits, or their advisors, leadership over military and foreign policymaking does matter a great deal. This is especially so if someone with views radically different from his or her predecessor enters office. Similarly, constructivists and “critical” scholars have long promoted ideational factors in foreign policy

formulation. In their analyses, they include, for instance, ideologies (Bell 2002; Goldstein & Keohane 1993; Maull 2000; as well as discourse Hansen 2006; Larsen 1997; Nabers 2015; Stengel 2020) or racialized and/or gender constructions (Athanassiou 2012; Barder 2021; Managhan 2012; Poloni-Staudinger & Ortvals 2014; Sjoberg & Tickner 2013). Whether we see populism as an ideology, discourse or worldview, there are good reasons to assume that once in power, so-called populists may differ from more conventional leaders. However, as noted above, it is crucial to differentiate between different forms of populism (Destradi et al. 2021, 664). As noted above, while IR scholars have made significant progress in drawing on populism research to more systematically explore the international effects of different populisms, the discipline still needs to widen and broaden that engagement.

First, as Destradi et al. observe, IR scholars have so far been rather selective in their engagement with the conceptual literature on populism (Destradi et al. 2021, 664). As noted above, the majority of studies draw either on Mudde's ideational or Laclau's discursive conception,<sup>8</sup> and this stands in contrast to the much broader conceptual literature on populism outside of IR. For instance, IR scholars have yet to explore populism as a political strategy (Weyland 2001) or political style, at least to our knowledge (Moffitt 2016). Also, in this second respect, IR scholars need to broaden their engagement with populism research.

Second, while IR's engagement with populism research overall has improved notably since the publication of the first edition of this volume, there is significant variation between individual studies. A significant portion of IR research continues to rely on a vague conception of populism, using the term without any definition at all, taking the classification of certain parties as "populist" for granted (treating populism as a monolith) or failing to differentiate

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<sup>8</sup> But see Cadier's (2024) recent attempt to narrow different approaches down to a common denominator.

between populism and the PRR (see recently for instance Chandam 2024; Silva 2024; Storer & Torre 2024). To pick but one among a range of examples, a recent article in a leading IR journal claimed that “[p]opulism is characterized by nativist, authoritarian ideologies” (Meyerrose 2024, 316). This statement conflates the PRR with populism. While the PRR can be described as (also) populist, its specific ideological makeup also includes nativism and authoritarianism *in addition to* being populist (see Mudde 2007).<sup>9</sup> Saying that all populists are nativists and authoritarian *de facto* means folding nativism and authoritarianism into populism, which not only means going back on Mudde’s careful work but also risks misattributing causal effects.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, IR scholarship as a whole still needs to catch up to the conceptual headway made by the second generation of IR populism studies.

Third, even those second-generation studies that do draw on insights from populism research do not necessarily follow through in terms of conceptual clarity. For instance, in an otherwise insightful article that draws on Mudde, Henke and Maher study six populist parties’ positions on European defense – five parties that fall into the party family of the PRR and the 5 Star Movement, which is not clearly locatable on the left-right spectrum (Pirro 2018) – to find out “how and why populism may either constrain or contribute to cooperation in this policy area” (Henke & Maher 2021, 390). Their analysis finds that all parties except the 5 Star Movement “largely reject ‘civilian’ or ‘normative’ solutions to security problems” (*ibid.*, 401). But instead of drawing the obvious conclusion that party positions might have been influenced more by the

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<sup>9</sup> Mudde’s work is cited in the article, which makes the conflation of the PRR with populism even less comprehensible.

<sup>10</sup> To be fair, one could argue, like Müller (2016), that populism is *per se* anti-pluralist. However, that creates the new problem of then having to relabel a significant number of actors that, while commonly considered populist in both media and academic discourse, cannot legitimately be described as anti-pluralist. For instance, even if one does not agree with Bernie Sanders’s policies, one would be hard-pressed to produce evidence for him being anti-pluralist. Müller himself has acknowledged this problem, arguing that some so-called populists are in fact (harmless) social democrats (Müller, 2019, 19 n. 1). Since Müller does not provide clear empirical examples, he does little to counter the misconception that all actors commonly considered populist are (equally) dangerous, thus muddying the waters instead of providing clarity.

far-right host ideology of five of the six parties, the authors conclude that “rising populist parties in Europe may [...] contribute to a newfound focus across European capitals on the use of military means to achieve strategic objectives” (ibid.). By using the term “populism” to describe their object of analysis instead of, for instance, the PRR, also these studies arguably risk collapsing populism and host ideology into one, thus ultimately undermining their own ability to draw any inferences about populism as such.<sup>11</sup> That arguably makes it more difficult to discern whether populism or far-right ideologies present a challenge to European defense. Similarly, as Eklundh *et al.* point out, second-generation studies still struggle formulating hypotheses without “contamination” by the respective host ideology (Eklundh et al. 2024, 1901). They show, for instance, that left-populists like Bernie Sanders or Podemos do not advocate for anti-immigration policies, which suggests that this might not so much be an effect of populism than of a nativist host ideology.

Similarly, studies that draw on the discursive approach have not necessarily followed through on Laclau’s formal conception of populism as a political logic. For instance, in an article on populism and nationalism, Jenne draws on Laclau but defines populism as a form of “sovereignism”, understood as “a political ideology or doctrine that calls for the acquisition of or increase in the political independence of a territorially defined community such as a region or state” (Jenne 2021, 325-326, italics removed). Here, Jenne combines Laclau’s purely formal emphasis on the elite/people antagonism and the conception of the people as an “empty signifier” that can be filled with different content with the argument that populism always includes the demands of a “territorially defined community” (Laclau 1996). In claiming that

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Pacciardi et al. (2024) study two right-wing populist governments (Orbán and Trump) with the aim of making inferences about “populist governments” in general. While the study does make a significant contribution to our understanding of the foreign policies of the PRR, its case selection precludes any meaningful inferences about populism as such. For all we know, the disengagement from international institutions might not be “populist” at all but a matter of a radical right host ideology. See the critique in Wojczewski (2023).

the people have to refer to a territorially defined community, however, Jenne somewhat undercuts Laclau's formal conception, blurring the distinction between populism and nationalism (de Cleen & Stavrakakis 2020). Framing populism this way also precludes a transnational conception of the people that is not territorially bound (de Cleen et al. 2019), Zeemann (this volume)). More broadly, critics have pointed out that the goal of discerning specific effects of populism is at odds with Laclau's formal conception that rejects the very idea of populist content (Eklundh et al. 2024; Wojczewski 2023). In sum, populism's relative lack of content continues to pose difficulties even for the more conceptually sophisticated studies. Here, work remains to be done.

All in all, while significant progress has been made, IR scholars can still benefit from the work of populism researchers. In this context, in particular studies on left- and right-wing (Priester 2012; March 2017) and inclusive and exclusive (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013) populism can help counter simplistic assumptions of populism being either universally positive or negative for alliance building, trade, globalization, security communities, or world order. Populism researchers have long ago understood that thick ideologies matter a great deal to the "thin-centered" ideological skeleton that is populism (Mudde 2007, 2016). Criticizing elites and calling for the general will to be realized in and of itself does not necessarily tell us much about a party's position on the United Nations or NATO, which is precisely why empirical findings tend to draw a complicated picture.

Similarly, populism researchers can profit from increased engagement with IR research, which can contribute to a better understanding of populist successes and failures. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser observe, "surprisingly few established theories about the success (and failure) of populist forces exist" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 97). IR can contribute to theory-building in that field, as there is good reason to assume that international developments might contribute to populist successes and failures (also Verbeek & Zaslove 2017). Two aspects

in particular are relevant here: the denationalization of political rule, combined with the politicization of international authority, and the transnational interaction between populists.

First, researchers point to globalization and global governance, and a perceived decline in domestic political control over these processes, as factors contributing to the rising appeal of populism. Recent studies on the legitimacy of international organizations and other global governance arrangements point to increased politicization of international authority, at least in part due to their non-majoritarian nature (Seibel 2015; Zürn 2004, 2014, 2016, 2022; Zürn et al. 2012; with respect to populism specifically Chryssogelos, 2017; van der Veer & Meibauer, 2024). The argument goes as follows: the growing involvement of international institutions in virtually all areas of domestic policymaking, in combination with the declining legitimacy of domestic political institutions leads to increased politicization of the electorate. Debates between proponents and opponents of regional and/or international integration have become a central focus of political attention in many Western countries. Read in this context, populism primarily emerges as a reaction to the simultaneous increase in authority and depoliticization of global governance (Zürn 2004; Zürn et al. 2012). That is, international developments play an important role in explaining populist parties' current election successes.

Second, the success of “populist” parties and movements depends on transnational interaction, that is, how various national parties and movements are connected to each other through information sharing, repertoires of contention, discourse, ideology, learning, and norm diffusion. Different parties often draw on similar intellectual resources or adopt ideas introduced in other countries. For example, Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos are linked through common intellectual roots, both drawing on the work of the late Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau (McKean 2016; see Laclau 2005). Similarly, recent research on party politics has provided evidence that parties learn from their successful counterparts in other countries (Böhmelt et al. 2016). In addition, populist parties are often embedded in transnational

networks. For instance, a number of European right-wing parties are supported by the Kremlin (Mudde 2016), populist discourses spread via social media (Boucher et al. 2024), and in a recent study, Wojczewski has shown how populist logic helps the far right forge transnational coalitions (Wojczewski 2024). Finally, the ways traditional mainstream parties have been obliged to play within a new populist framework are of importance. Center left parties in Europe have seen their electoral support greatly reduced, while center right parties have promoted populist anti-immigrant discourses to regain lost voters (Bayerlein 2021).

In order to understand the success of populist movements and parties, we need to pay attention to their international aspects. Here, research in IR and related fields on globalization, global governance and state transformation (Held & McGrew 2007; Leibfried et al. 2015; Rhodes 2007; Rosenau & Czempiel 1992; Sørensen 2004; Zürn 2013), norm dynamics (Engelkamp & Glaab 2015; Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; March & Olsen 1998; Panke & Petersohn 2011; Rosert 2012), diffusion (Gilardi 2013), learning (Levy 1994), transnational advocacy coalitions (Bloodgood 2011; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Pierce & Hicks 2017), and transnational networks more generally (Madsen & Christensen 2016; Slaughter 2004), the differential production of identities (Campbell 1998; Diez 2004; Hansen 2006; Neumann 1999) and the emergence of discursive orders (Diez 2013; Herschinger 2011; Nabers 2015; Stengel 2020) can provide a helpful starting point. However, these aspects require more systematic, theoretically-oriented and comparative research to be assessed reliably.

### **Plan of the Book**

The chapters of the volume are situated within the larger framework of the populism-world politics nexus. The contributions are grouped into three parts:

Part 1 introduces theoretical approaches to the study of populism and global politics. In his opening chapter, **Jan Zeemann** explores the potential of a global populist project. While

populism is commonly seen to be intertwined with nationalism, he asks whether the concept of the nation is a mandatory part of populist articulations. He posits that a focus on form over content enables us to imagine populism beyond the confines of the nation-state. A global populist movement, he concludes, might be part of the solution to contemporary challenges like climate change or economic crises. From a different theoretical perspective, **María Esperanza Casullo** analyses the role of populist leadership, and argues that various socially available discursive scripts exist that can mediate between the social and the individual levels. Populist leaders present themselves as *patriotic military men*, *social movement leaders*, or selfless *businessmen*. Her chapter concludes that the global diffusion of these scripts generates different possibilities for popular projects. Finally, **Precious Chatterje-Doodly and Rhys Crilley** analyze the nexus between populism and the global media, devising an alternative model for looking at populism as a “transnational communication logic”. After developing their model, they apply it to three empirical cases: legacy media, opposition political movements, and international broadcasting.

Part 2 shifts the focus to populist foreign policies with a range of case studies and theoretical reflections. First, **Georg Löffmann** explores the role of security narratives in the processes of populist mobilization. He argues that populist security narratives draw on collective narcissism, blame attribution and emotionalization to form an “affective bond” between populist leaders and the people. In doing so, Löffmann directs our attention to the crucial role emotions play in populist mobilization. **Dirk Nabers and Frank Stengel** examine Donald Trump’s campaign speeches with respect to change and continuity in American foreign policy. They draw on the theoretical notion of sedimented practices in the discourse to argue that while Trump departed from established traditions in American foreign policy, his campaign statements also portray a significant degree of continuity, lending credibility to his foreign policy proposals. In contrast, **Brian Budd** sheds light on how contemporary manifestations of populism in Canada are co-

constructed through normative performances of gender. He focuses specifically on the failed leadership campaign of Conservative MP Kellie Leitch, who attempted to deploy anti-immigrant nativist forms of populism to court her party's voters. Theoretically, Budd notes that this form of discourse failed in Canada even though it had considerable success in the United States, suggesting that the diffusion of populism from one country to the next is contingent on distinct political cultures.

In his chapter, **Grant Burrier** offers a systematized study of populism and Latin American foreign policies. He focuses on defense and trade policy to ascertain whether there are substantive consequences to populist presidencies, using an innovative longitudinal cohort comparison from contemporary Latin America. Also focusing on Latin American cases, **Daniel Wajner** investigates possible patterns in the formulation and implementation of foreign policies among populist regimes during the periods known as "classic populism" (1930s–50s), "neoliberal neopopulism" (1980s–90s), and "progressive neopopulism" (2000s onwards). Analyzing variance in time and space, Wajner distinguishes a tendency among Latin-American populist regimes to support regionalist and globalist policies by empowering identity-based solidarities.

**David MacDonald's** chapter offers a critique of the misleading either/or comparisons often made between populism and pluralism. He uses the case of the New Zealand First political party and its leader, Winston Peters, to demonstrate that electorally successful and relevant parties often approach populism as a style that can be either deployed or downplayed as the situation requires. This chapter focuses on a unique case of populism, promoted by an Indigenous Maori leader and Indigenous-led caucus. Finally, **Thorsten Wojczewski** draws on a poststructuralist, discourse theoretical framework to analyze how the Indian Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) and its leader, Narendra Modi, used foreign policy as a site for the construction and maintenance of a populist electoral coalition. In contrast to common

understandings of ideology as a ‘distortion of reality’, Wojczewski argues that the ideological dimension of populism lies in masking the discursive character of what we view as social reality, and the resulting impossibility of a fully constituted subject such as ‘the people’.

Part 3 of the volume focuses on the global and international dimensions of the rise of populism. **Robert Patman’s** contribution assesses how the liberal order has proven to be more resilient to the pressures of the PRR than many observers imagined. Far from ending globalization, Patman maintains, the major impact of post-truth populism may be to intensify liberal efforts to address its downsides, including spiraling civil conflicts, environmental decline, and growing inequality. In a somewhat different approach, **Shane Markowitz** examines the rise of populism as a socio-material phenomenon. He employs insights from the discourse around genetically modified organisms in the European Union. The chapter explores the ways in which the emergence of populist discourses on the issue has not only been constituted by rhetoric in the context of regional and national elections, but also importantly by an array of material, natural, and technological entities and forces.

Finally, **Amy Skonieczny and Kayla N. Carlson** look at the nexus between populism and global trade by scrutinizing the debates on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and US trade with China and Mexico. The chapter examines the role of emotions in populist, anti-trade narratives to develop an understanding of how and why populism is emotionally powerful and what drives this particular narrative to combine with anti-trade protectionism. The conclusion by **MacDonald, Nabers, and Stengel** draws together the different arguments found throughout this edited collection, and provides a preliminary agenda for further research on populism and world politics.

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