

CSES Module 5

Democracy Divided?

People, Politicians and the Politics of Populism

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I. Background

This report is the result of the work of the CSES Planning Committee (PC) to develop the 5th Module of CSES, with extensive input from plenary meetings and wider user community.

This process began in 2014 with an open call to the user community for ideas on themes for Module 5 of the CSES. The PC received 20 proposals, covering a wide array of topics. The proposals were presented and discussed during the plenary meeting that took place in Berlin in October 2014. No single proposal was selected at the plenary, but common topics of interest were identified and discussed during the PC meeting that took place in Taipei in March 2015. On the basis of the discussions in the plenary and PC meetings, a sub-committee identified that key themes to be explored in CSES Module 5: populism, perceptions on elites, corruption and attitudes towards representative democracy. These themes were also central to eight of the proposals submitted as a part of the open call, and inspired the proposed content of Module 5. A first draft of stimulus paper was circulated by June 2015 and circulated among the PC members. The proposal was to focus Module 5 on *citizens' perceptions of political elites and 'out-groups', and the implications for electoral democracy*. The report and questionnaire was discussed and revised in the PC meeting that took place in Seattle in October 2016. Subsequently the draft module questionnaire has been pre-tested in South Korea, Taiwan, Sweden, Switzerland, Ireland, and Greece. The final questionnaire was agreed in the CSES Plenary Meeting in September 2016 in Philadelphia.

II. Motivation

The political class has become a matter of contention
(Mair, 2013:19)

Electoral democracies across the world are facing the challenge of a widening gap between citizens and their elected representatives. A number of indicators point not only to a withdrawal of citizens from conventional politics with declining turnout in elections, but also to the increasing disregard among citizens for traditional political elites. The major parties of the left and the right that have dominated politics for decades are losing ground in most democracies, to the extent that some argue that the “age of party democracy” has

passed (e.g. Mair, 2007, 2013; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Electoral volatility is rising, there are falling levels of party identification and a steep drop in party membership numbers (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011). In parallel to the decline of established political parties and an overall erosion of the “old politics”, we are witnessing another trend, namely the rise of populist parties on both the left and the right of the political spectrum with examples all over the world including Europe (see for instance Mudde 2007, Kriesi and Pappas 2015), Latin America (e.g. Connif et al. 2012, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012), and Asia (Mizuno and Phongpaichit 2009). Such populist parties campaign on anti-establishment issues and often in opposition to out-groups not perceived to belong to “the people”. They appeal to voters who are discontented with the political establishment and who may feel marginalised or unrepresented by the mainstream (Kriesi et al. 2008; Mudde 2007; Hino 2012).

Numerous studies have examined the changing role of parties in contemporary democracies and citizens’ political apathy and indifference has also been widely analyzed in political and electoral surveys. There is also a large and growing literature on populist parties and movements, especially those on the radical right (Kitschelt 1997; Givens 2005; Mudde 2007; Norris 2005; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). However, we know far less about how citizens’ attitudes towards political elites have changed and how they shape electoral behavior. Implications of this conflict between citizens and the elite for electoral behavior and for the wider functioning of democratic polities needs further research.

The core objective of CSES Module 5 is therefore to examine *citizens’ attitudes towards political elites, majority rule and out-groups in representative democracy*. This module will allow researchers to account for variation in the contestation of political elites and ‘populist’ attitudes across democracies, to examine how such perceptions shape citizens electoral behavior (e.g. turnout, vote for populist parties, political apathy etc.), and to explore the relationship between the rise of populist parties and the distribution of populist attitudes cross-nationally.

Both the causes and the consequences of such attitudes are likely to be conditioned by the institutional and electoral context (the presence of populist parties in the party system, variation in electoral systems, the presence of significant minority groups, etc.). One

dominant explanation in the literature for the tension between citizens and elites is that parties increasingly fail to fulfill their role to articulate the popular dimension of democracy, remain in their institutional role (government), but give up the representative one (Mair, 2013; Kriesi 2014). There seems to be a growing acceptance of depoliticized or non-political modes of decision-making as more and more decisions are taken outside the realm of politics and elections (be it in the courts, so-called independent institutions or international organizations). One consequence may be that elections are perceived as having less practical effects, and decision-makers are perceived to be beyond citizens' control (Mair 2013).

Although negative attitudes towards political elites do not necessarily equate with populist attitudes, the belief that political elites and the people have contrasting and incompatible interests is at the heart of populism. Populism also encompasses a rejection of pluralism and opposition to the protection of minorities (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Taken to the extreme, the contestation of the elite may result in a rejection of representation. It is noteworthy that this rejection and sometimes hostility towards the political elite and conventional elements of representative democracy comes together with a growing interest in democratic innovation and with an increasing demand for (direct) citizen participation in decision making. According to some this may be a way for democracy to come to terms with a situation where there is precisely limited popular sovereignty (Mair 2013). However, it may also be that a rejection of the elite brings about opportunities for strengthening of democratic quality and opportunities for enlarging citizen participation (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Alternatively, hostility towards the elite may be channeled in a plebiscitary, leader-centered way, with citizens' participation being only episodic and directed to provide support for the leader (Barr 2009).

Exploring these developments, and testing contrasting propositions, calls for cross-national post-electoral surveys, such as the CSES. Explaining electoral behavior in a context of declining turnout, increasing volatility, large vote shares for anti-establishment parties, and a widening gap between the citizens and representatives requires information on the elements previously discussed: to what extent the political class is a matter of contention and to what extent popular majority decision-making should be given priority over other considerations (minority rights, constitutional limitations, representation). Popular

perceptions of the elite and of democratic processes have been found to matter, not only as a predictor of support for populist parties (see for instance Hetherington 1999, Akkerman et al 2014, Hooghe and Dassoneville 2014, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Hence, a Module that taps into people's attitudes towards elites and core aspects of representative democracy has an interest of its own and offers important insights into voting behavior (e.g. lower electoral turnout, higher volatility, higher party system fragmentation, new political parties or growing protest/anti-establishment/populist parties).

III. Operationalization

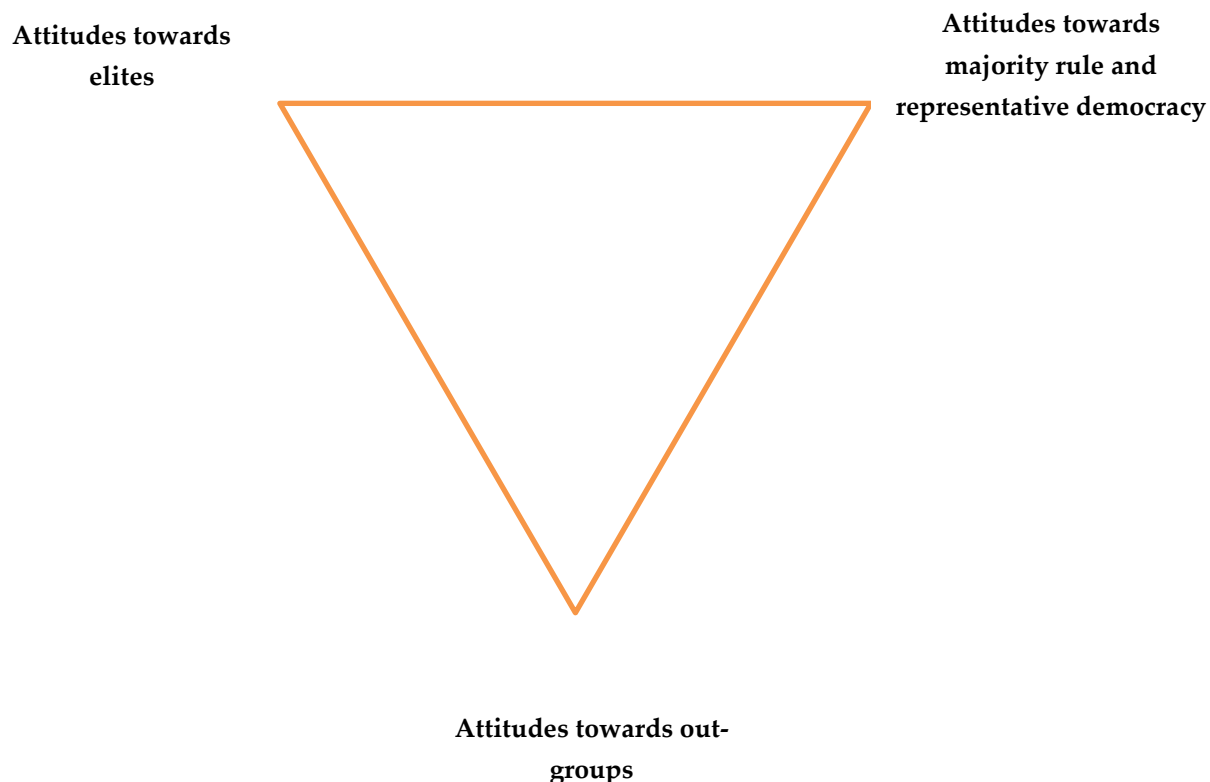
At the core of this module is thus the examination of so-called "populist attitudes" in the population and how they shape electoral behavior. Populism can be defined as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2007: 23). While the glorification of "the people" and anti-elitism are at the heart of populism, the extant literature has put forward different ways of defining and operationalizing populist attitudes. Here we focus on the measurement of three core themes:

1. Attitudes towards political elites
2. Attitudes towards representative democracy and majority rule
3. Attitudes towards out-groups

1. Attitudes towards political elites

The core aspect of populism is the notion of a clear distinction between the (good) people and the (evil) elite (Pappas 2012; Woods 2014). The antagonism between elites and the people is at the heart of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2014). Hence, the first set of questions examines the perception of the political elite.

Figure 1: Democracy Divided? Components of populist attitudes



Populist discourses present the supposed gap between the political class and the people as a fundamental problem and a main political cleavage in a country. The political elite is accused of not acknowledging, understanding or caring about the needs people have and as a consequence of not being able to deliver the public goods people want. The political elite is therefore the enemy of the people.

Question items Q4 (b, c, d) and Q7¹ measure such different aspects of negative attitudes towards the elite: The feeling that the political elite is different, ignorant and corrupt and the Manichaeian attitude that the elite is the 'problem' whereas the people are the virtuous 'solution'. In this first set of questions, the elite is presented as one homogenous block in line with the dominant strand of populism that contrasts the "political class" with "us", "the

¹ Q7 was already asked in CSES module 2.

people". Also, leftwing populists in particular often portray the elite as representative of the rich, the economically advantaged, and large financial corporations in opposition to the ordinary economically and socially disadvantaged people (captured in items Q4g).

2. Challenges to representative democracy

Populism is often associated with an "institutional crisis of representation" (Woods 2014, p. 27); a symptom that existing representative system is not functioning well and "the elite" is not representing "the people" adequately (Rooduijn et al. 2014). Two frequently voiced alternatives to the "corrupted" representative system are the introduction of a charismatic leader and the more direct involvement of "the people" in direct decision making. These are captured by items Q4e and Q4f. Although those two proposals may seem to be two incongruous, for populist movements they easily go together. Kriesi (2014, 363) argues that the "the populist vision of democracy [is] to provide such a direct linkage between the people and those who govern is to introduce a charismatic leader (or a political organization)." In this version, populism may be seen as linked to an authoritarian ideal of a strong, charismatic leader capable of implementing the 'general will'. In addition, populism tends to give priority to majority rule as a means to reach decisions, therefore leaving minority rights in a secondary place. This is captured in question Q5b. Both the emphasis on strong leadership and on majority rule eventually renders unnecessary the typically pluralist processes of elite bargaining and compromise. This is captured in item Q4a.

Q4 Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree with the following statements?

- a. What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out one's principles.
- b. Most politicians do not care about the people.
- c. Most politicians are trustworthy
- d. Politicians are the main problem in [COUNTRY]

e. Having a strong leader in government is good for [COUNTRY] even if the leader bends the rules to get things done.

f. The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.

g. Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.

Q5 Now thinking about minorities. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree with the following statements?

a. It is better for society if minorities maintain their distinct customs and traditions.

b. The will of the majority should always prevail even over the rights of minorities.

Q7 How widespread do you think corruption, such as bribe taking, is amongst politicians in [COUNTRY]: very widespread, quite widespread, not very widespread, it hardly happens at all?

3. Attitudes towards out-groups

Populism is based on the assumption that “the people” exists. Its homogeneity and coherence is at the heart of the claim of the disintermediation of the political process. It is however well known that nations and collective identities are still largely “imagined” (Anderson 1991). To foster community-building, designation of out-groups is key in numerous situations. These out-groups can be enemies, scapegoats, or simply help by representing the other.

Out-groups may differ from one country to the other, depending on national history and social structures. Yet, in contemporary politics, ethnic minorities and immigrants are among the most visible and contested out-groups. They are often viewed as those not belonging to the nation. Right-wing populism has thus particularly emphasized immigrants as out-group, compared to the “the people” who belong to the national community, narrowly defined based on a shared national heritage, culture and/or ethnicity (Zaslove 2008).

Attitudes towards out-groups go beyond a distinction between cosmopolitan and republican ideals. They also allow us to measure concepts such as chauvinism, multiculturalism, nationalism and xenophobia. Such attitudes have been shown to be strong predictor of electoral behavior. Including them in the CSES will allow us to examine how the political and economic context moderates these relationships.

Questions 5a and 5c include the anti-immigrant attitudes, attitudes driven by economic competition (immigrant as a threat to nationals' employment) and by culture (immigrants as a threat to cultural identity) and concerns about law and order (O'Rourke and Sinnott 2006).

Note that these questions are often embedded in national electoral surveys or cross-country projects such as the European social survey or ISSP and are proven to be of relevance for many research questions relating to electoral democracy, party competitions and political behavior.

Praise of "the people" is a primary characteristic in any definition of populism. However, what precisely signifies "the people" can differ. The definition of who belongs to this "people" is one of the essential points differentiating different kinds of populism. Typically, populism on the right has an understanding of "the people" that is rooted in nationalism and nativist definition of who belongs to the nation, whereas that is less prevalent in left-wing populism. Hence, the final dimension of this proposal seeks to capture how respondents view the people and the defining elements of what it means to be part of the "people". The delineation of who belongs to "the nation" is a key distinguishing feature of right wing populism, which tends to adopt a more exclusive and nativist definition of the nation, based on religion or ancestry (or even ethnicity). This nativist conception is intended to be measured by the battery of questions Q6a to d.

Q5 And now thinking specifically about immigrants. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements?

- c. Immigrants are generally good for [COUNTRY]'s economy.
- d. [COUNTRY's] culture is generally harmed by immigrants.
- e. Immigrants increase crime

Q6 Now changing the topic... How important do you think the following is for being truly [NATIONALITY]... very important, fairly important, not very important, or not important at all?

- a. To have been born in [COUNTRY].
- b. To have [NATIONALITY] ancestry.
- c. To be able to speak [COUNTRY NATIONAL LANGUAGES].
- d. To follow [COUNTRY] customs and traditions.

IV. Advantages of this proposal

Module 5 of CSES will allow researchers to address questions of broad interest to the academic and policy-making communities. Specifically, the module will enable researchers to account for variation in the contestation of political elites and ‘populist’ attitudes across democracies and to examine how such perceptions shape citizens electoral behavior. The module builds in large part on proposals that were submitted by scholars in the CSES community to the CSES Planning Committee, including proposals on populist attitudes, corruption, social precariousness, and electoral integrity. However, rather than just adopting a single one of these proposals, the aim with this module has been to integrate the core aspects in a way that allow a wide range of researchers to make use of the survey to examine a variety of questions and propositions.

The module has also been designed in a way that takes into account the unique nature of the CSES. The questions are ideally suited to be analyzed in a multi-level framework that incorporates macro-level factors (e.g. party system characteristics and electoral systems). The CSES is concerned with assessing the quality and performance of democracy, and this module would clearly help contribute to this objective. More specifically, the CSES deals with questions of whether and to what degree elections serve the purpose of popular control

of the elite and under which circumstances elections serve this purpose best. Again, this module presents a new and innovative way of addressing this question, by focusing on populist attitudes.

V. Other questions to be introduced in the Module

There are also several questions in the “core” of CSES that allow us to examine people’s perceptions of representation and democracy, which have been retained in CSES Module 5 :

- **Q10** Would you say that any of the parties in [country] represents your views reasonably well? (CSES M2 Q16 CSES M3 Q7). Which party represents your views best?
- **Q21** On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]? (CSES M1 Q1, CSES M3 Q20, CSES M3 Q15)
- **Q14a** Some people say that it doesn't make any difference who is in power. Others say that it makes a big difference who is in power. Using the scale on this card, where would you place yourself? (CSES M1 Q14, CSES M2 Q9 CSES M3 Q5 CSES M4 Q8)
- **Q14b** Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can make a big difference to what happens. Using the scale on this card, where would you place yourself? (CSES M1 Q14, CSES M2 Q9 CSES M3 Q5 CSES M4 Q8)

Because CSES is used by scholars working on very different topics, we Module also contains other variables that are important for the explanation of electoral behavior. These questions are listed here. The wording can be seen in the full questionnaire.

Q1 Political interest

Q2 Politics in the media

Q3 Internal efficacy

Q8 Attitudes towards redistribution

Q9 Government performance

Q11 State of the economy

Q12 Vote choice

Q13 Vote choice previous election

Q15 Like dislike scale parties

Q16 Like dislike scale leaders

Q17 Left right parties

Q18 Left right self

Q19 Alternative scale parties

Q20 Alternative scale self

Q22 Party closeness

Moreover, the following question will be asked of country experts in the **CSES country reports** to provide a measure of populism at the party level:

POPULISM OF PARTIES

“Please indicate the degree to which each of the parties can be characterized as a populist party.

Populism can be defined as a thin-centred ideology that pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice.

The emphasis on anti-elite/ anti-establishment rhetoric and the contrast between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” are thus indications of the degree to which a party is populist. Populist parties may be found across the left-right ideological spectrum.

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is “not at all populist” and 10 is “very populist”, where would you place each of the parties?”

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