Over the past two decades, the ideational approach has emerged as one of the most popular cross-regional approaches to the study of populism. As its name suggests, the ideational approach explains the causes and consequences of populism in terms of populist ideas – the belief that the political world reflects a Manichean struggle between the good will of the common people and an evil, conspiring elite. These ideas are familiar to anyone following populist political campaigns and movements around the world. For example, in the Netherlands, PVV’s Geert Wilders opposes the Dutch political system, saying that a ruling parliamentarian elite disregards the will of the people, while often invoking the fictitious Henk and Ingrid, a “typical” Dutch couple that are the “heart” of Dutch society. In Bolivia, long-term president Evo Morales rails against national and international forces. In a 2005 speech typical of his style, he declared, “I believe only in the power of the people” and “We must serve the social and popular movements rather than the transnational corporations” (Morales 2005). These ideas explain populism’s most pernicious and beneficial outcomes, and they are one of the main reasons why citizens and activists mobilize in support of populist politicians, parties and movements. Populist ideas are not the only ones that matter in politics; they compete with other discourses and must combine with more traditional political ideologies to generate their appeal. They must also interact with material factors – populist ideas are carried by real people who are constrained by the hard facts of institutions and resources. But most of the features we associate with populism can be linked back to these ideas, and they provide the key to explaining populism’s persistent appeal (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Like the Essex school, the ideational approach gives center stage to the role of ideas in defining and explaining populism; indeed, it is strongly inspired by the work of Laclau. But in contrast to the Essex school, and like the strategic approach, it takes a positivist approach to explaining populism’s causes and consequences, trying to understand these objectively by using an array of tools from mainstream political science. Indeed, the ideational approach borrows heavily from traditional behavioralist strains of social science research, which envision causality in mechanical terms of variables and causal processes, and which seek to aggregate polity-level theories from individual-level decisions (Dahl 1961). This does not mean that ideationally oriented scholars ignore normative theorizing – some of the foundational work here is normatively theoretical – but empirical research is an emphasis of the approach.
Because the approach is fairly new, some of its key features have not yet been outlined. The very term “ideational” is a recent invention, designed to smooth over differences among competing scholars (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Ideational scholars have only just begun to create distinct causal arguments – what I refer to here as an ideational theory, without the “normative” qualifier – and to outline the methodological implications of a positivist focus on ideas. Furthermore, they have not always been conscious of the contributions made by other approaches.

However, a surprising amount of progress has been made in bringing these loose strands together into a coherent argument. In this chapter, I argue that the ideational approach is becoming an approach in the broadest sense of the word, that of a scientific research program combining concepts, theories and method. Furthermore, it is a productive program that studies populism at multiple levels of analysis. After providing a brief history of its origins, I summarize its basic definition; sketch the ideational theory that synthesizes current arguments into a larger causal framework; outline some of the methodological features of this program; and describe some of the current areas of research. I then compare the ideational approach to the other two discussed in this volume, the Essex school and the strategic approach. I conclude with a discussion of the approach’s strengths and weaknesses, giving particular attention to the lessons it must still learn from other approaches.

Origins

The ideational approach represents the coincidence of multiple strands of research with independent origins. The principal strand comes from scholars studying the rise of radical right parties in Western Europe and was strongly influenced by mainstream political theory, especially the work of Margaret Canovan. Canovan and other normative theorists (Canovan 1981, 1999; Urbinati 1998) viewed populism as a set of ideas rooted in democratic culture, especially the belief in popular sovereignty. They defined populism as a belief that politics should be seen in redemptive terms – as the struggle between the people and the elite – rather than in pragmatic terms as the adjudication of multiple, valid interests through liberal institutions. Importantly, for Canovan and other theorists this set of ideas was rooted in the belief in popular sovereignty and tightly linked to the inception of mass democracy – it was, in other words, inherent to democracy. But these ideas were in tension with liberal democracy’s emphasis on protecting minority rights and preventing tyranny, and the results for liberal democracy could be devastating (Abts and Rummens 2007; Arditi 2004).

Empiricists studying radical right parties in Europe picked up on these arguments, not just because they came from familiar normative theorists, but because they captured a prominent feature of radical right parties: their populist ideas, embodied in polarizing, incendiary language. The populist label connected these parties with what had previously been seen as a largely left-wing phenomenon of populism in the developing world (Mudde 2007; van Kessel 2015), and it helped explain these parties’ appeal among voters. Empiricists had struggled to understand how European voters could come to support parties connected to a tainted and vilified fascist past. To be clear, most of these newer parties were not violent and did not openly question electoral democracy, as did extremist-nationalist or neo-Nazi parties. But they clearly challenged traditional parties and liberal institutions, and they drew from a vaguely nationalist notion of a lost heartland that needed defending or reclaiming, as expressed in anti-immigrant and anti-EU positions. The concept of populism offered a solution to this puzzle, suggesting that many of these parties should be seen not only as a new, radical right distinct from extremist and traditional conservative parties, but as a populist radical right because of...
how these parties framed their positions: as a struggle of the people against a conspiring liberal elite. The distinction provided causal insight by suggesting that there was a “moral” dimension to the radical right’s appeal that went beyond economic voting or social dislocation. The party’s success could only be understood with reference to their populist ideas.

A second, smaller strand of research came from Latin Americanists and was a positivist response to the Essex school. Scholars in this group were trying to understand the wave of radical left populism that started in the late 1990s with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and accelerated in the 2000s with the emergence of Evo Morales, Rafael Correa and others. While journalists initially lumped these leaders together with other leftists under the label “pink tide” (Rohter 2005), it became apparent that these radical leftists were different (Castañeda 2006). A cottage industry emerged around the attempt to identify the nature of this radicalism. Most efforts hewed to familiar materialist approaches (either rational-choice or Marxist) that emphasized economic grievances without much attention to the rhetoric of these leaders (Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Weyland, Madrid and Hunter 2010). However, several country specialists were struck by these leaders’ fiery, outlandish style and found Laclau’s notion of populism to do a better job of capturing what made these leaders distinct (de la Torre 2000; Hawkins 2003; Panizza 2005). While most of these specialists stayed firmly in the camp of the Essex school, a few went on to measure these ideas and see if it was possible to integrate their data into mainstream techniques of statistical modeling (Hawkins 2010).

Smaller strands appeared as well, such as the work of historian Michael Kazin in the US (1998), which built on the much earlier work of Richard Hofstadter (1965) that saw populism in terms of mental or rhetorical frameworks. But in the late 2000s, all of these strands began coming together as scholars from these different regions, especially the empiricists, began collaborating and citing each other’s work. Important breakthroughs came with the studies of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, which combined case studies from Europe and the Americas to study the types and consequences of populism for liberal democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 2013). Their work was useful in its own right, suggesting that populism had powerful, if mixed effects on liberal democracy in whatever country it came to power – it could be a corrective, by bringing issues and voters into politics, but also a threat to liberal institutions if it won control of government. But their work and that of other comparative social scientists (see for example the 2016 special issue in Democratization) began highlighting the differences and similarities among populist forces across regions. These were differences not only in terms of issue stances (radical right versus radical left), but organization (parties versus movements) and levels of electoral success (minoritarian versus majoritarian). And there were similarities, including their impact on democratic institutions and the international and domestic factors that mitigated that impact. Above all, these studies reaffirmed the initial insight of ideational scholars by showing that populist ideas characterized parties and movements across all of these different regions, providing a common thread binding them together.

**Content of the approach**

Because of this growing collaboration among ideationally oriented scholars, it now seems possible to talk about an emerging ideational research program. The ideational program is fairly united in its definition of populism, and somewhat less so in its causal arguments. Although the program incorporates normative insights about the nature and consequences of populism, it distinguishes itself with its positivist, empirical bent, one that embraces a wide variety of methods and gives special emphasis to causal theory and testing at the individual level.
In terms of conceptualization, where agreement is clearest, scholars using the ideational approach define populism as a thin-centered ideology or a discursive frame in which individuals see politics as the struggle between a reified will of the common people and an evil, conspiring elite (Aslanidis 2016; Mudde 2004; Hawkins 2009). Borrowing from the framework of discourse suggested by Dryzek and Berejikian (1993), we can say that populism has a cosmology that is Manichaean rather than pluralist, seeing politics in dualistic and teleological terms as a cosmic struggle between a knowing good and a knowing evil. And in terms of its ontology, populism’s principal actors are defined in democratic terms, as the mass of ordinary citizens and the ruling elite. Populism sees this virtuous people as having been subjected to the will of the elite, but believes that a climax has been reached in their struggle, one that will restore the people as the rightful sovereign.

Although ideationally oriented scholars all see populism as a set of ideas, they generally agree that populism represents a qualitatively different type or dimension of ideas from classical ideologies such as conservatism, liberalism, or socialism. Unlike a traditional ideology, populism is not consciously articulated and lacks programmatic scope; it must be filled with other ideas to speak to real political issues. Hence, populism combines with traditional ideologies to produce subtypes, such as left/inclusionary and right/exclusionary (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Making this distinction between populist ideas and traditional ideologies helps clarify much of the confusion over why populist look or act differently – for example, how we can say that both Chávez and Donald Trump were populist. For ideationally oriented scholars, the task is to identify ways in which their common populist ideas enhance their electoral appeal and reshape political institutions, while also explaining the circumstances that give rise to their different ideological flavors and how populism radicalizes what might otherwise be traditional ideological perspectives.

Because scholars using the ideational approach think of populism inhabiting a different conceptual space, they have made modest efforts to suggest a typology of discourses. The most commonly mentioned are pluralism (which believes in popular sovereignty but frames problems in impersonal terms that value differences of opinion) and elitism (which can be Manichaean but reverses the moral positions of the people and the elite) (Hawkins 2009; Mudde 2004; Ochoa Espejo 2011; Plattner 2010). Other possibilities include patriotism, which portrays the state or the polity as the key political actor; and nationalism, which celebrates an identity-based community based more on shared language, religion, or ethnicity (O’Donnell 1979). Furthermore, Canovan’s original work points to other, pragmatic discourses that avoid redemptive claims, such as technocratic speech.

One lingering question among ideational scholars is what exactly to call the genus that populism belongs to. Scholars using the ideational approach employ a variety of terms, including discourse, thin-centered ideology and mentality. The debate over these terms can be contentious, and there are strong arguments in favor of each. For example, ideational scholars initially gravitated toward calling populism a “thin-centered ideology,” a term borrowed from the work of Michael Freeden on nascent ideologies such as feminism, greenism and nationalism. They argued that the term captured populism’s limited programmatic scope while focusing scholarly attention on its consistent ideational elements (Stanley 2008). But subsequent scholars (including Freeden himself) argued that populist ideas are qualitatively different from ideologies, because they do not reflect a process of conscious articulation and are not geared toward producing intellectually coherent approaches to politics. Hence, terms such as “discourse” or “discursive frame” might be more appropriate (Aslanidis 2016; Freeden 2017).

This debate over labels has implications for causal theorizing and measurement. For example, if populist ideas are not consciously articulated or adopted, the process of how they...
are learned (i.e., political socialization) is likely to be subtle, and the ideas may not be active in the minds of most citizens and politicians. Likewise, researchers will probably not be able to gauge voters’ populist attitudes by asking “on a scale of 1–5, how populist are you?”, nor will they be able to measure populism through automated textual analyses that look for references to overt issues or topics (Aslanidis 2016; Hawkins 2009). I draw out some of these implications in subsequent sections. However, most ideational scholars use these labels somewhat interchangeably, and in deference to them I do so in this chapter as well.

Another lingering question among ideationally oriented scholars is how to bring in the performative elements of populist discourse, which some scholars refer to as style. In theory, a focus on performance is compatible with the ideational definition, which does not stipulate the medium through which ideas are communicated; populists presumably use every means at their disposal to spread their message. However, some scholars who focus on style limit the content of populist performance to its pro-people aspects, omitting any mention of an anti-establishment message. Ideationally oriented scholars see this as “thin populism” or demoticism, and are reluctant to include it in the same category as populism (March forthcoming; Salaj and Grbesa forthcoming). Likewise, some scholars referring to fuller notions of populist style combine this with organizational elements such as personalistic leadership; these straddle the boundary between ideational and strategic approaches (Moffitt and Tormey 2013; Ostiguy 2009).

Theory

The claim that populism is a different type of ideas, one that is less consciously articulated or programmatically comprehensive than a traditional ideology, provides important insights into how voters come to support populist parties and movements (what I will hereafter refer to as populist forces). Scholars using the ideational approach tend to see populism as something rooted in the minds of individuals (both politicians and voters) in interaction with their environments. Specifically, the emergence of successful populist forces is thought of as being driven by a combination of context, framing and organization. These terms will be familiar to scholars of social movements (Tarrow 1994), of which populist forces are often an example.

To begin with, the ideational approach treats populism as a set of ideas that exists in the mind of voters and politicians – a set of populist attitudes. Because populism derives from a belief in popular sovereignty, populist attitudes are thought to be widespread in any democracy, especially countries that have experienced a process of mass incorporation. In fact, studies using public opinion surveys show high levels of these attitudes across different countries in different regions (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and Andreadis 2016; Hawkins, Riding and Mudde 2012; Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroek 2016), although they vary within any population in terms of demographics such as age and education. Importantly, in all countries we find populist attitudes among citizens situated on both the left and right of the ideological spectrum.

What explains the success of populist forces is not the creation of these attitudes, but their activation. Populism requires the right context to make it sensible. Here, it helps to bring in some terminology from framing theory in psychology, which sees discursive frames (such as populism) requiring a context that can make the ideas applicable (Chong and Druckman 2007; Nelson, Oxley and Clawson 1997). Taking the substance of populism at face value, we can argue that populist attitudes become applicable when there is an environment of severe policy failure that can be blamed on elite misconduct. Of course, a number of theories on the emergence of radical right parties focus on factors such as economic and cultural globalization (Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2012; Inglehart and Norris 2016), and popular
understandings of populism often blame economic downturns. But the ideational approach points us toward the normative implications of these problems, arguing that policy failures have the most punch when they can be seen as the result of intentional elite decisions. When elites willfully ignore the wishes of their citizens, policy failures become violations of democratic norms of citizenship and equality before the law (O’Donnell 2001).

However, activating populist attitudes among citizens requires more than just the right material context; it also requires rhetoric that connects the context to the populist argument. There must be an interpretive move (in social movement theory, a frame of action) to convince voters that their circumstances are the result of elite conspiracies constituting a larger struggle. This interpretive move is something that citizens may eventually do on their own – populist grassroots movements are common – but politicians play an important role in catalyzing this process. Understanding these mechanisms of populist rhetoric, and especially the cognitive process by which individual citizens respond to this rhetoric, is one of the chief concerns of communications scholars (Aalberg et al. 2016).

Third and finally, getting voters to support populist forces requires an organizational vehicle, including leadership, that enables activated citizens to combine their efforts and mobilize for action. Although the ideational approach studies the roots of populist attitudes and voters’ cognitive processes, it sees voters and politicians as rational in a thin sense, calculating their chances of success and carefully deploying scarce resources. Successfully mobilizing these politicians and voters requires a collective effort that confronts potential collective action problems. On the one hand, populist attitudes provide a powerful motivation for action that overcomes the individual tendencies toward free riding; but on the other hand, would-be participants in populist parties and movements may be unwilling to join these efforts unless they think they stand a chance of success, especially if they believe that powerful elite forces are arrayed against them. This problem of coordination is aggravated by the populist belief that each citizen should be directly engaged in politics without the interference of professional intermediaries. The lack of hierarchy or full-time personnel makes collective action challenging.

One way that populist forces overcome these challenges is through charismatic leadership. Charisma here means more than a telegenic leader, but someone whom followers see as the bearer of quasi-divine attributes (Weber 1946, 295). Ideationally oriented scholars generally do not see charismatic leadership as definitional (Hawkins 2010; Mudde 2004). There are many examples of populist social movements that emerge from the grassroots without adopting a charismatic leader as their standard-bearer; prominent recent examples in the United States are the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street (Calhoun 2013; Formisano 2012). However, ideational scholars see the presence of charismatic leadership as instrumental in ensuring the electoral success of populist forces. As followers of the Essex school argue (and here we clearly agree), charismatic leaders stand as “empty signifiers,” or objects into which populist followers can read their individual wills (Laclau 2005). Such a leader is able to overcome the problems of populist coordination. Citizens can still feel fulfilled – by maintaining their direct connection to the leader – but are organized into an effective electoral force. In contrast, the fate of most populist movements that lack this kind of leadership is to fizzle and fade without winning control of government.

**Method**

Ideationally oriented scholars focus a great deal of energy on identifying and quantifying populist ideas. Much of this work is based on textual analysis, which is probably the most direct and accurate approach for getting at the discourse of party leaders and chief executives.
A wide variety of techniques have been employed to study various genres of text. For example, a recent study by Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017) uses human coders to analyze party manifestos in five European countries across roughly two decades; a computer-automated study uses a dictionary of keywords to track populism in 50 years of US presidential campaign speeches (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016); and a study by a group at the University of Zurich has used human coders to analyze several decades of reporting on populist parties in Western Europe (Manucci and Weber 2018). The results are illuminating, allowing us not only to identify with some precision how populist certain politicians and parties are, but whether there are populists on the ideological left and right (there are), whether populists tend to be outsider candidates (they do), and whether the media play a role in fostering a populist Zeitgeist (less than we think). Perhaps most importantly, these studies find that politicians and other public figures across widely different regions and historical periods employ similar populist discursive frames, and that most of the leaders and parties we think of as populist in fact utilize this rhetoric (Hawkins 2009).

While textual analysis remains the predominant technique for analyzing elite populist discourse, ideational scholars have begun to branch out and apply other techniques routinely used to identify more traditional ideological positions. One of these is expert surveys, which systematically poll the scholarly community to see how they rank parties and leaders along a range of dimensions, such as how much these politicians demonize their opponents or use an informal style. Studies in Latin America find that these measures correlate predictably with parties’ leftist economic positions and anti-Americanism (Wiesehomeier forthcoming). Likewise, scholars have begun using surveys of politicians to measure their populist attitudes directly. These find that members of parties we think of as populist in fact agree with core populist ideas such as the virtues of the people and the Manichaean nature of politics, although perhaps not surprisingly these surveys also find that populist politicians in office tend to have more positive views of political elites like themselves (Andreadis and Ruth forthcoming).

Ideationally oriented scholars are also interested in measuring the populist attitudes of citizens, especially through survey research. Although there is still debate about which item inventories work best across countries and regions (Van Hauwaert, Schimpf and Azevedo forthcoming), scholars have been effective at showing the existence of populist attitudes and their impact on voting for populist parties. As already mentioned, they find that most citizens in most democracies, even across widely different regions and levels of economic development, have fairly high levels of populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding and Mudde 2012; Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroek 2016). Furthermore, populist attitudes turn out to be good predictors of voting for populist parties (van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018).

Ideationally oriented scholars not only measure populist ideas, but use these datasets to test their causal arguments. These scholars here have been willing to employ a surprisingly wide array of methodological approaches. These include quantitative methods, such as regression analyses of country-level data or survey data (Hawkins 2010); but also qualitative methods, in the form of case studies using historical process tracing and elite interviews (Art 2011); and experimental techniques in surveys, the lab and the field (Bos, Van Der Brug and De Vreese 2013). Such methodological breadth reflects the willingness of ideationally oriented scholars to draw from the earlier work of normative theorists, many of whom did not have a strong stake in any empirical method and were often hostile to econometrics. But it also stems from the ideational approach’s emphasis on causal mechanisms and individual-level theorizing, with its ties to political psychology and political communication. A number of ideationally oriented
scholars come from subfields that are keen on measuring individual attitudes in action. Their theories suggest causal mechanisms – such as emotional reasoning, blame attribution or framing – that can be identified more readily through surveys and experiments. Thus, the variety of methodological approaches among ideationally oriented scholars reflects an equally rich variety of ideational hypotheses.

**Current research**

Although ideationally oriented scholars are still laboring to build cross-national datasets and test basic arguments, current research is advancing on several fronts. Many of these are at the level of individual behavior using models of political psychology.

One of these research fronts is the identification of populism’s rhetorical mechanisms. Although experimental research demonstrates that populist rhetoric has a significant effect on behavior and other attitudes (Bos, Van Der Brug and De Vreese 2013; Rooduijn, van der Brug and de Lange 2016), scholars are only just beginning to identify the components of that rhetoric and how they work: what makes rhetoric sound populist, why those components are appealing, and what effect they have on the minds of listeners, including their emotions, political identities and attitudes toward opponents. For example, one experiment my co-authors and I conducted finds that discussing social problems in impersonal terms – a hallmark of pluralist discourse – facilitates deliberation without arousing populist attitudes, while discussing those same problems in terms of culpable agents activates those attitudes (Busby et al. forthcoming). Understanding these rhetorical devices could provide guidelines for both proponents and opponents of populist forces. It is especially important to study not only populist rhetoric, but how alternatives such as pluralism and pragmatism operate, if we hope to come up with responses to populist forces.

A second front involves explaining the origins of populist attitudes and how they are connected to other bundles of attitudes and personality traits. If populism exists as a set of attitudes in the minds of citizens and politicians, it may be influenced by other traits or attitudes such as dogmatism, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, conspiratorial thinking or agreeableness (Bakker, Rooduijn and Schumacher 2016). Identifying connections between populism and these commonly studied traits and attitudes would help us determine if populism is really a distinct set of ideas with its own origin. If populist attitudes do in fact exist independently, then scholars can begin to determine where and how they are acquired: through one’s parents and other family members in childhood, for example, through peers in adolescence, or through later experiences in adulthood. Identifying these mechanisms of socialization will probably require longitudinal study – a major effort that has not yet been attempted. But it would help us determine whether populist ideas are in fact innate to a belief in democracy that is acquired at a young age, or, as the Essex school suggests, if they are strongly shaped through ongoing political conversations.

A third front is to identify the aspects of political context, especially policy failures, that matter most for the activation of populist attitudes. Political psychologists often use the concept of threat – the perception that something in our environment is not only going wrong, but could harm us – as a way to categorize the concerns that motivate risky political behavior (Enos 2015; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Jost et al. 2007). But what types of threat correspond to failures of democratic representation – and indeed if there is anything objective at all about these threats – is only just being studied. Some research suggests that populism embodies a particular kind of normative threat, or a threat to our deepest values rather than just our physical existence (Busby et al. forthcoming). If true, this serves as a reminder that
democratic citizens have concerns that go well beyond the ability of the state to provide for material needs. Identifying these types of threats would not only help us forestall the sorts of crises that give rise to radical populist forces, but would also allow us to reflect on the nature and quality of our democracies.

The ideational approach vs. the others

The ideational approach significantly overlaps both the Essex school and the strategic approach; in fact, the three approaches discussed in this volume are probably more similar to each other than they are to other traditional approaches to populism studies, such as the economic or structuralist ones. But while the ideational approach agrees with many aspects of the Essex school and the strategic approach, it differs in some key assumptions and causal arguments.

The Essex school

The ideational approach overlaps with the Essex school in its conceptualization of populism and its understanding of some of its key causes. Both approaches situate populism almost entirely in the realm of ideas and use similar terms to identify its content (with, for example, some ideational scholars going so far as to refer to populism as a discourse or discursive frame). Both of them identify charismatic leadership as important for successful populist mobilization. And both of them see populist ideas playing a similar causal role, acting as a force that reshapes political identities and fosters polarization and conflict. For both of these approaches, populist ideas have an independent causal effect on individual behavior and democratic institutions, and hence should be taken seriously.

That said, there are roughly three differences between the two. To begin with, the Essex school is more normative than the ideational approach and more often regards populism as beneficial for democracy. Scholars in the Essex school see populism as the most practical means of achieving the subjective transformation of workers into a unified social class, arguing that it reflects a healthier, “agonistic” form of democratic politics that facilitates the institutional transformation demanded by the radical project (Mouffe 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2004). Furthermore, as is true with many other radical scholars of the left (and right), followers of the Essex school are often critical of social science as an objective enterprise, and are more likely to embrace an activist model of scholarship. Their stances contrast with the ideational approach, which not only takes a clinical approach to the study of populism, but is more inclined to see populism as an antagonistic force leading just as often to the violation of liberal democratic principles.

Second, there is a subtle difference between the two approaches in their actual object of study and how they think it operates. While both the ideational approach and the Essex school see populism as a type of ideas that is different from an ideology, in that it is not consciously elaborated, the ideational approach borrows from a traditional, positivist view treating ideas as something exogenous or given; the process of their creation or reproduction is not seen as especially mysterious or problematic. In contrast, the Essex school borrows from an Althusserian approach that sees these ideas as part of a larger matrix of culture that shapes our social roles and evolves in contact with other ideas and our material environment. Hence, the Essex school focuses less on the content of populist ideas and more on how they play out (“discourse” in the sense of an unfolding conversation, not merely the content of a speech). In this perspective, populist ideas do not exist fully-fledged in the minds of citizens and activists,
but are created by political leaders and the conversation they foster. To the degree that scholars in the Essex school do empirical research there is a strong focus on qualitative data showing the creation and interplay of populist frames in mass and elite language. An example of this perspective in action is the effort by the founders of the Podemos party in Spain. Inspired by their study of Laclau, this group of Marxist intellectuals consciously created and adopted a set of populist terms (“la gente,” “la casta”) that they felt could unite a broad array of citizens around their leftist project by redrawing their political identities (Llamazares and Gómez-Reino forthcoming). Their effort highlights not only the normative, activist focus of many scholars in the Essex school, but their view that the most important function of populist rhetoric is facilitate collective action by reshaping the mentalities of citizens.

Finally, because of these previous differences, scholars in the Essex school tend to be more restrictive in what historical movements or parties they label as populist. Where ideationally oriented scholars are equally willing to apply the term to forces of the left and right, including niche parties and failed movements, scholars in the Essex school often restrict the label to forces that embody the radical leftist program and are actually successful at reorienting mass identities and gaining political control. Hence, the Essex school is loath to label radical right parties as true populists, seeing them not only as minoritarian forces, but as deceptive and undemocratic (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; but for a critique of left-populists in Latin America, see Stavrakakis et al. 2016). In this sense, the Essex school echoes older critiques by Latin American scholars of the left, who saw populist movements from the mid-twentieth century as distractions from the real revolutionary experience that Latin American modernization required (Ianni 1975; Weffort 1978).

The strategic approach

The ideational approach shares the strategic approach’s positivist outlook, one that pursues social science through objective, data-driven analyses focused on generalizable explanations. Furthermore, both approaches see populism as more of a threat to liberal democracy (although the ideational approach treats it also as a potential corrective). And to the degree that the strategic approach acknowledges a role for ideas, there is a fair amount of overlap in their conceptualization, with both approaches conceiving of populist ideas as an anti-establishment, pro-people rhetoric.

However, the most important difference between these approaches is still their definitions. Because the strategic approach questions the impact of ideas, it is less willing to consider populist ideas in isolation from actual, mobilized people. The result is a definition with higher intension (more conditions, including charismatic, outsider leadership and the presence of large numbers of followers in a movement organization) and lower extension (it counts fewer instances of populism). Hence, much like the Essex school, the strategic approach overlooks smaller, institutionalized forms of populism, especially niche parties of the radical right. These kinds of parties only count as highly populist if they shed their bureaucratic layers and submit themselves to personalistic, outsider leadership.

Because the strategic approach questions the impact of populist ideas, it also explains populism’s consequences and causes very differently from the ideational approach. The strategic approach draws from a rationalist perspective that privileges the impact of interests and institutions. This rationalist logic is clearest in the case of populism’s negative consequences for democracy. The strategic approach sees populist ideas as cheap talk, at least at the level of elites (Levitsky and Loxton 2013). The masses of citizens may want to believe they are the embodiment of democratic virtue and that their problems are caused by a conspiring
elite, but populist politicians, like any others, are driven by the need to maximize votes and office. Hence, what matters more for the playing out of populism is the fact that these politicians are charismatic outsiders at the head of large movements of followers. Supporters of populists are willing to delegate tremendous power to their leaders and seek a direct connection to the leader without intermediaries (hence, a plebiscitarian feel to the movement; see Barr’s chapter in this volume). This undermines the strength of liberal democratic institutions such as the separation of powers, even as it serves the aims of the populist leader. Furthermore, because many populists are political outsiders, they face higher costs in trying to connect with traditional politicians, media actors and other elites, and they have a stronger incentive to circumvent or even eliminate those institutions.

In contrast, the ideational approach sees populism’s negative (and positive) consequences flowing fairly directly from populist ideas (Abts and Rummens 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Muller 2016). These include the belief in a uniquely knowable popular will, the demonization of opponents, and its teleological, conspiratorial worldview. Because populists value elections for their expressive function and believe their opponents are both powerful and willing to use any means at their disposal, they are less concerned about ensuring democratic contestation or preserving minority rights, and they are more willing to concentrate government power in the hands of the executive branch.

Because of differing assumptions about the causal impact of ideas, the strategic approach also gives less attention to voter decision-making at the individual level. While ideationally oriented scholars are practically obsessed with the psychological and especially communicative mechanisms of the populist appeal, most scholars using the strategic approach do little explicit theorizing about voter preferences or rationality. Their model of decision-making at the grassroots level is fairly uncomplicated, one in which crisis creates a preference for radical change and strong leadership; there is little talk about collective action problems, biases, or bounded rationality. The one exception is the work of Weyland, who has suggested that the rise of populists and other radicals can be explained through prospect theory, an application of Kahneman and Tversky’s findings on framing effects (Weyland 1998; Tversky and Kahneman 1981). This does not mean that the strategic approach is opposed to working out these mechanisms, only that the ideational approach is ahead of this game.

**Conclusion: critical reflections and future work**

Especially for empirically oriented scholars, the ideational approach has great strengths. It offers a bold, minimal definition, argues that this definition can be connected to a comprehensive theory that works across countries and time, and tests this theory on multiple levels of analysis. It blends many of the Essex school’s ideas with a positivist approach, and tries to offer causal mechanisms that can compete with those of the strategic approach. The result is a research program offering multiple opportunities for causal theorizing and empirical work at all levels of analysis.

For all its strengths, however, the ideational approach has a tendency to overlook or discard the insights of alternative approaches, including traditional ones such as the economic or structuralist approaches. Perhaps because ideational scholars are anxious to prove the unique impact of populist ideas, they see less need for analyzing the work of scholars using older approaches, especially those from Latin America where the traditional approaches were developed. This is an unfortunate oversight. Whatever we think about alternative approaches, each has been designed to explain recurring features of populist movements, such as regional patterns of populist organization or the tendency of populist discourse to polarize politics. By
ignoring these empirical patterns, ideational scholars leave gaps in the explanatory power of their theory.

One of these gaps is highlighted by the traditional economic approach. Scholars from all three of the current approaches (Essex school, strategic and ideational) tend to discard the economic approach because of its claim that populism is limited to a certain set of short-sighted macroeconomic policies. According to critics, the connection between economic policy and populism is moderated by other aspects of the socioeconomic environment, such as the amount of poverty or the number of citizens being excluded from the formal economy; economic policy should not be part of the definition. But the economic approach points us to another aspect of populism that ideational scholars, as well as those of the Essex school and strategic approach, should be studying more closely. This is the argument that populist citizens and politicians are behaving irrationally. By calling economic populism “an approach to economic policy” (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), economists are suggesting that there is more than just a nasty collective action problem misaligning private with public interests, but a consistent misunderstanding of how politics and the economy work. Citizens under the throes of populism are not grasping or responding to the full costs and benefits of their decisions.

Scholars using the ideational approach have not fully understood the implications of this economic argument. Many of them study the individual-level cognitive processes underlying populist mobilization, but they do so without making any broader claims about rationality. If the economists are right, then whole swaths of citizens may be violating core assumptions of liberal democratic theory, which stipulates that citizens are capable of accurately processing information (Dahl 1991). Ideational scholars should set their sights higher than identifying cognitive oddities and try to determine when and if citizens motivated by populist ideas really violate these assumptions of rationality. Making this determination probably requires a more sustained conversation between empiricists and normative theorists.

Another neglected area is how populist forces organize to win office. Here the ideational approach can learn from the strategic approach, which makes organizational features a definitional attribute. To be fair, the strategic approach takes a narrow view of what attributes count as populist, but it is true that there are regional patterns in terms of how populist forces organize. While charismatic movements are common in Southern Europe and Latin America – and tend to be more electorally successful – smaller institutionalized parties seem to be the norm in Western Europe. The causes of these patterns are still unclear. They may reflect prevailing modes of representation (programmatic versus clientelistic; see Houle and Kenny (2016)), the type of executive institution, or electoral rules (Carter 2005). There really is not very much theoretical work, let alone any kind of empirical analysis of these different organizational modes. Explaining these patterns could possibly reconcile the ideational and strategic approaches.

Finally, an important area of study that the ideational approach has left largely untouched is how populist ideas are communicated. This refers to more than just a single transmission of an idea (such as one finds in recent framing experiments) or media effects (a popular topic among many populism scholars), but a larger, longer process of conversation that unfolds across a community through multiple iterations. This, of course, is the domain of the Essex school, with its idea of populist discourse in action is difficult to capture with current empirical techniques. In fact, political psychologists who study framing are aware that framing models must become more complicated in order to mirror reality, where competing messages are received and then transmitted to others (Klar 2013), but this insight has yet to be explored by ideational theories of populism. Understanding this dynamic is essential for explaining how societies become polarized, and it may help us understand how already divided societies become reconciled.
The ideational approach

References


