

Reading Group, autumn 2021

Masaryk University, Faculty of Law

*“Any understanding of contemporary politics that wants to be taken seriously must find a way to deal with populism.” (Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People*)*

*“Populists have no problem with representation as long as they are the representatives.” (Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*)*

- Lecturers:** Jaroslav Benák & Zuzana Vikarská
patecek@law.muni.cz, MS Teams (**dav250r**)
- Format:** 13 x 90-minute seminars (in person, if possible)
+ self-study of about 40-50 pages per week
- Timetable:** Monday evenings 18:00 – 19:40, room No. 214
(or online in MS Teams, depending on the regulations)
- Annotation:** This course aims to inspire PhD students, as well as highly motivated undergraduates, to read recent works in the field of constitutional law and political science, to think about matters presented therein, and to discuss them in a small group with an interactive setting. Active class participation is expected from all students.

In the autumn of 2021, we will explore the concept of populism. This seems rather fitting for a period when the Czech Republic will hold its general parliamentary elections. We will combine two books: Jan-Werner Müller’s *What Is Populism?* (Penn 2016) and Nadia Urbinati’s *Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (HUP 2019). More references will be provided to those interested in further readings.

Every class will be moderated by one of the students. Three days before our meeting (i.e. the previous Friday by 18.00), the moderator shall submit a one-pager with some reflection questions to our virtual classroom in MS Teams. All students are welcome to respond to this one-pager already before class and add further questions.

Week 1: Monday 20 September 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Müller, Introduction (1-6) + What Populists Say (7-40)

Before reading the text, try to answer the key question: **What is populism?** Can you think of anyone whom you would label a *populist*? What makes them a populist? Then, read the two introductory chapters by J-W Müller. How is his definition similar/different from yours?

Do the elites represent the people in your country? Do the people feel represented? Is populism linked to any

part of the political spectrum, i.e. right or left, conservative or liberal? What is the role of emotions in populism? What makes populism *moralistic*? What is the relationship between populism and nationalism? Between populism and pluralism?

Do you agree with Müller's ideas? Why (not)?

Week 2:

Monday 27 September 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Müller, What Populists Do (41-74)

This chapter does exactly what it promises: it zooms in on the actions of populists. We will discuss polarisation, media democracy, and three populist techniques for governing: occupying the state, mass clientelism, and repression of civil society. Furthermore, we will wonder why populists don't go "all the way" to authoritarianism and why they cherish (illiberal / defective) democracy. Examples from Poland and Hungary are used; and the notion of *populist constitutionalism* enters the stage.

Week 3:

Monday 4 October 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Müller, How To Deal with Populists (75-103)

This is our third and last week with Müller's short book. The author's ambition is vast: to suggest solutions, i.e. to find a way of engaging in a dialogue with populists. Again, try to answer the following questions before reading the chapter, and then reflect on them again after you have read Müller's arguments.

Why is populism so appealing, after all? What are the common responses to populism? Do populist claims deserve a response? How can we include the citizens who feel excluded and/or unrepresented?

Week 4:

Monday 11 October 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Urbinati, Introduction (1-39)

Urbinati's opening chapter also looks for a definition of *populism*. Does she address the same issues as Müller? How is her definition similar and/or different from his? Why does Urbinati claim that the notion of populism is *polemical*, rather than *analytical*?

Do you agree with the distinction between populism as a movement of opinion/protest vs. 'populism in power'? How does the author define 'direct representation' and why does it matter for the thesis of her book?

Week 5:**Monday 18 October 2021, 18:00 – 19:40****Urbinati, From Antiestablishment to Antipolitics (40-59)**

Populism develops essentially in the negative: it takes advantage of negative politics and counterdemocracy. The first chapter looks into 'antiestablishment' as the spirit of populist rhetoric. The first part of the chapter introduces the 'factionalist' argument, i.e. the move from 'party politics' to 'faction politics'.

Week 6:**Monday 25 October 2021, 18:00 – 19:40****Urbinati, From Antiestablishment to Antipolitics (59-76)**

This week's reading opens with the famous claim, 'power corrupts', and looks into the history of political thought on the notion of power. Does populism truly introduce 'a politics of antipolitics'?

Week 7:**Monday 1 November 2021, 18:00 – 19:40****Urbinati, The True People And Its Majority (77-95)**

'Populism in power' transforms the two fundamentals of democracy: the people and the majority. In the next two weeks, we will explore these notions and think about how populism has transformed their meaning. The first part of the chapter focuses on 'the people'...

Week 8:**Monday 8 November 2021, 18:00 – 19:40****Urbinati, The True People And Its Majority (95-112)**

...while the second part of the chapter zooms in on the notion of 'majority' (and 'majoritarianism'). Do you now understand better Urbinati's conclusion that a populist society is not 'partyless' but 'factional'?

Week 9:**Monday 15 November 2021, 18:00 – 19:40****Urbinati, The Leader Beyond Parties (113-134)**

What makes a great populist leader? How does one not just convince the people of a thing, but also hold them to that conviction? The third chapter is 'Machiavellian' in that it examines the nature of populist leaders, their charisma and their role. Does a populist leader bear a resemblance to a prophet of God?

Week 10:**Monday 22 November 2021, 18:00 – 19:40****Urbinati, The Leader Beyond Parties (134-157)**

Why is populism distrustful towards political parties? How does it then resolve 'the problem of partiality'?

Week 11: Monday 29 November 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Urbinati, Direct Representation (158-176)

Is populism a form of direct democracy? We will explore referenda and plebiscites as examples of direct democracy, and contrast them with representative democracy, focusing on the concept of legitimacy.

Week 12: Monday 6 December 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Urbinati, Direct Representation (177-189)

In populism, any intermediation between the people and the leaders is portrayed as something negative. New technologies have also helped populists get rid of intermediary bodies and strengthen the so-called 'net democracy'. Against this background, we will explore the notion of 'digital populism'.

Week 13: Monday 13 December 2021, 18:00 – 19:40

Urbinati, Epilogue (190-208)

At the end of her book, Urbinati sums up her most important claims and paints the full picture which she calls 'the phenomenology of populism'. She points out that many of the problems of today's society are not created but rather magnified by populism. Who creates the problems, then? Is constitutional democracy destined to fade away?

Literature:

- Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Penn 2016)
- Nadia Urbinati, *Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (HUP 2019)
- Ivan Kratsev & Stephen Homes, *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy* (Pegasus 2019)
- Fruzsina Gárdos-Orosz & Zoltán Szente (eds.), *Populist Challenges to Constitutional Interpretation in Europe and Beyond* (Routledge 2021)
- András Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating: Governance in Illiberal Democracy* (CUP 2021)