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## POPULISM AND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY: THE EFFECTS OF CONSUMERISM ON POLITICAL CULTURE

**Abstract.** *This study considers how today's growing consumer culture affects political trends in representative democracies. In recent years, a significant populist upsurge has been seen around the world. While political approaches are vital, to properly understand populism it is also necessary to take sociological perspectives into account. The questions considered in the study are therefore examined from both political and sociological perspectives. The results of the study show that today's increasing consumer culture is paving the way for the rise of populism in representative democracies. Should the consumer culture experience a significant crisis, populism is likely to become stronger through the support provided by abstaining, blank and pragmatist voters.*

**Keywords:** *Populism, democracy, consumer society, consumerism, politics*

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### Introduction

*Around the world today, the democratic revolution is gathering new strength... From Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than thirty years to establish their legitimacy. But none –not one regime– has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root. We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings. (Reagan in Simms, 2014: 458)*

In the above statement by former US president Ronald Reagan made in June 1982, he argued that the whole world would embrace liberal democracy as the most ideal form of government because there would be no other alternative challenging it in the long run. In the wake of the Cold War, liberal democracy declared victory. Still, some authors remained sceptical of

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this alleged triumph of liberalism (Fukuyama, 1992; Huntington, 1993). One of these was Francis Fukuyama (1992) who argued that liberal democracy would stagnate and not regenerate itself due to it lacking any opponents, although it would continue to remain the most viable option for a long time. Further, the end of history had not arrived à la Hegel or Marx.

This argument has proved to be correct as liberal democracies are going through difficult times. Populism as an alternative option has become a reality in the last decade. Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump in the USA have caused grave concerns among liberal circles. In addition, populist parties in Europe relying on anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric have seen their votes more than triple in the last 20 years (Barr et al., 2018). One should bear in mind that the majority of representative democracies are currently witnessing populist temptations. Many populist political parties and politicians have thus already firmly established themselves in national parliaments. In various countries, they have even managed to become the most powerful political force. This points to the importance of observations that we are seeing “growing social and economic inequality within democratic societies even though citizens do have equal political rights” (Flügel-Martinsen and Martinsen, 2019: 66). This rising inequality means that more and more people have little interest in mainstream politics and are looking for alternatives.

In the literature scholarship, the nexus between the rise of populism and the consumer society is under-emphasised. Many authors primarily focus on questions within contemporary political theory (Mudde, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Moffit, 2016). Although political reasons are essential for clarifying the populist zeitgeist of today, it is also necessary to consider sociological developments. In recent years, however, some authors have written about the connection between populism and socioeconomic factors. For example, David Goodhart (2017) divides contemporary societies into *anywheres* and *somewheres*, i.e., some people (students, professors, business people etc.) favour cosmopolitan policies, while others (people who cannot see the benefit of globalisation) tend to support populism. Inglehart and Norris (2019) also concentrated on economic factors to clarify the populist temptations observed these days. Accordingly, white workers in particular (who cannot truly benefit from globalisation) in the USA contributed considerably to the victory of Donald Trump. While these works are crucial and helpful, in this article a different and broader approach is taken. On one hand, populism is an intrinsic part of representative democracies while, on the other, the rise of populism (mostly nationalist populism) seen today should be viewed as the outcome of the growing consumer culture found among industrial democracies. It is also noted that one can speak of a consumer society only in industrial states.

In the last decade, industrial societies have undergone major changes. One could even say that industrial societies have transformed into consumer societies. A consumer society basically means a society in which consumption takes precedence over other notions becoming the key activity for most citizens (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). As such, people spend their earnings for their own pleasure and happiness in the hope of providing them with socio-economic identity in society. Many people do not just focus on their necessities, but also purchase objects or participate in activities with a view to them giving status and prestige. One could argue the transformation of industrial societies into consumer ones marks the beginning of a new era in politics, noting that the rise of (nationalist) populism is observed in countries where the consumer culture prevails. This means, it is useful to connect two phenomena (populism and consumer society) to ensure a better understanding of the rise of populism.

In this article, the rise of populism in democratic consumer societies is explained. As mentioned, for this it is useful to combine political and sociological factors. It is necessary to particularly emphasise the under-emphasised link between the rise of populism and the growing consumer culture. First, the meaning of populism is explained to facilitate the analysis below as it remains uncertain what is meant by the concept of populism. It is then considered within a theoretical framework how the growing consumerism affects the electorate and is paving the way for a populist upsurge in representative democracies.

### What is Populism?

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way- in short the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Dickens, 1859/1988: 7)*

The above passage was written to describe the atmosphere of the era when the French Revolution was shaking the very structures of multinational dynasties, empires and city-states. However, the description also fits perfectly within a delineation of contemporary populism. Certainly, one of the universally accepted hallmarks of populism is anti-elitism. Populism also divides society into good and virtuous people versus adverse elites

who betray the rights of good citizens. Accordingly, politics always occurs between these two antagonistic groups.

Populist logic is also seen in romantic novels (e.g., *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo) in which the good are always benevolent, caring and helpful, while the bad are malicious characters acting only in their own interest even at the expense of other people's happiness. For romantics, the heart takes precedence over the mind, and thus emotions replace rationality. Populism adheres to the values of romantics through its rejection of realist approaches.

In the literature, one finds various definitions and interpretations of populism. Defining populism is a formidable task owing to the ambiguity and vagueness of the term (Brentin and Pavasović Trošt, 2016). In fact, populism resists "generalisations" as it may take on religious, nationalist or secular characteristics (Urbinati, 2018: 17). Moreover, it is inconceivable to speak of a single type of populism since it can fall under different headings (Revelli, 2019). In this case, one may speak of three types of populism: populism such as the socio-political movements in the nineteenth century, populism as an ideological substitute in the twentieth century peculiar to Latin American politics, and contemporary populism as a political strategy taking on global significance.

First, the populism that emerged in the nineteenth century involved protest movements against the political establishment. When a significant number of people had felt their voices were not heard, i.e., their government and dissident politicians did not take account of their demands, they started to protest. One could mainly observe this in the USA. For instance, the radical right Know Nothing movement was opposed to immigration to the United States from other countries. It was a people's movement claiming that the people's interests were being betrayed by their government and opposition parties. Despite their rapid and temporary success, the movement lost significance when the American Civil War commenced.

In addition, the left-leaning populist American People's Party emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. It started as a protest movement in response to economic troubles as they complained about the power held by major corporations and banks. Once their demands were adopted by the Democratic Party, the People's Party vanished from the political scene as well. In this case, populism in the nineteenth century entailed ephemeral protest movements only giving voice to ignored socio-political demands. Seen in this light, they were democratic protests made by groups on both the right and left. Nevertheless, these movements cannot be completely associated with contemporary populism as the socio-political and economic structures of the time were different to those today.

After the devastating world wars, populism reappeared in Latin America albeit in a different form. Juan Peron and Getulio Vargas were considered

to be populist leaders in their countries. For Peron, populism is the most exceptional ideology that justified the legitimacy of political ascendancy over other opponents. Peron stated that “We are not sectarian. If there is something in communism that we can take, we take it, names do not scare us. If fascism, anarchism or communism have something good, we take it” (Finchelstein, 2017: 151). Populism thus re-emerged as a new ideology that functioned as a reaction to all the other ideologies, ranging from liberalism to communism. One could say that populism then operated like remedy against all the maladies of the world caused by the other ideologies.

Yet, for other representative democracies populism did not become such a mighty force, leaving populism to be regarded as a concept peculiar to Latin America. However, the situation has changed. In the last 10 years, populism has become a pressing issue in many representative democracies. The success of populism in countries with a longer tradition with democracy has sent shockwaves around the world. It signalled that populism was no longer local phenomenon. Basically, the populism of today has different characteristics than its predecessors and has assumed global significance.

Hence, it is important to detect features of contemporary populism to identify populist actors. Since various scholars refer to similar characteristics of populism, it is useful to summarise its most crucial properties. Drawing and building on previous studies, (Germani, 1978; Moffit, 2016; Finchelstein, 2017) the main features of populism may be summarised as follows:

1. Appeal to the people as a single unit
2. A Manichean outlook that divides people into good virtuous people versus corrupt elites (anti-elitism)
3. A sense of acute crisis
4. An apocalyptic vision of politics based on antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite
5. Dislike for the neoliberal cosmopolitan order across the globe

It is necessary to elaborate on these five aspects. Populism appeals directly to the people who are perceived as virtuous and good. Politicians try to convince themselves that they are one of the good people, and there is no reason for bifurcations within the same political ideological camp. Populist strategy aims to unify people who share the same ideological concerns. Conservative populism endeavours to unite conservative people, while nationalist populism desires to gather all nationalists together. Thus, there would be no need for several conservative or nationalist parties. Moreover, the crucial point is that they would like to include those who avoid participating in political life.

One can divide potential voter groups into four: ideological, pragmatist, protest (blank), and abstaining voters. People who abstain from voting

are mostly underemphasised in political theory (Lagasnerie, 2021), but for populist politics they account for the most important group that should be included in politics. The aim of populism is to include as many citizens as possible. This is one of the most effective strategies because it is easier to convince those who have not yet made up their mind. People adhering to a specific political party/ideology do not tend to change their minds. Following the Cold War, voter turnouts and political participation beyond elections have decreased in many states (Leggewie, 2017: 69). In some countries voter turnouts have even fallen below 50%. For instance, voter turnout in the French parliamentary election in 2017 was lower than 50% (Worley, 2017) while the Romanian parliamentary election in 2020 was around 30% (Barberá, 2020). This shows that there is a huge number of people whose votes can still be tapped. One should note the fact that abstaining and pragmatist voters play a key role in the outcome of national elections.

The question is: Why do citizens abstain from voting? It is not because citizens' great dissatisfaction with politics leads them to not pay particular attention to politics – that would be a misinterpretation of the situation. On the contrary, it is because abstaining voters are not satisfied with the current socio-political order and do not trust the established political parties. Marginalised citizens are looking for political alternatives. Populist politicians see this gap and wish to include those who do not vote, even though they are entitled to do so. To this end, they introduce the nativist demands of marginalised groups in the realm of politics. In this case, while populism is inclusive, it also excludes others like immigrants, foreigners and radical dissidents.

Apart from abstaining voters, pragmatist voters need to be taken into account to understand the rise of populism. Pragmatist voters are those who vote non-ideologically, which means they cast their ballots for candidates and parties that seem to be more beneficial for their own interests. These interests are related to pecuniary factors in the first place. Pragmatist voters may support a socialist party in one election and then vote for a nationalist party in the next national elections. They basically have no ideological attachments. Politics is a matter of convincing the electorate, and populist politicians have the upper hand to persuade pragmatist voters with their populist promises. Although it is difficult to measure their share as a percentage within the electorate, they play a decisive role in the outcomes of national elections. One could also argue that serious crises lead to an increase in the number of pragmatist voters.

Populism mainly occurs as a result of serious crisis. Namely, populism would not rise provided there is widespread content with the socio-political order within the state. The ignoring of socio-political demands by government and opposition alike transform the people as a political subject

holding political significance when the people find individuals advocating their needs in the realm of politics. Their solution to crises is in effect anti-corruption politics. Populist parties must therefore follow anti-corruption politics in the first place. Corruption has two meanings in this setting. First, it means corruption in the emphatic sense of the word, i.e., many corruption scandals have occurred over the last few decades in many representative democracies. Not only have advances in information technology proven effective for exposing incidents of corruption to the general public but rising education levels have made many citizens in democracies responsive to such irregularities. Given that all citizens are taxpayers, they do not like it when their hard-earned money is usurped by politicians for their own gain. Second, taxes can be invested in projects and activities that seem unnecessary to the general public. Accordingly, one may argue that the mismanagement of taxes can cause considerable resentment among the general populace. It is here that politicians appear as a fresh force to criticise the establishment due to serious corruption on the political level and to take sides with the general public.

Moreover, populism thrives on an apocalyptic vision of politics. In populist logic, politics takes place between the virtuous people and elites harbouring adverse and cynical intentions. The success of populism arises from the unification of people who come from similar ideological camps and convincing those who have not yet become attached to any ideological group. Further, pragmatist voters are more easily convinced in times of crisis. It is important to mention the crisis factor which implies that all populist parties become appealing during a socio-political and economic crisis. Social demands are the smallest unit for the emergence of populism (Laclau, 2005). Modern societies consist of different people who have different demands and expectations from their states. As long as these demands are met, there is no basis for populism.

However, when the government does not respond to the demands of a particular group of people, the accumulation of these unresolved demands turns into a more serious situation that leads to the bringing together of various demands under a single banner, which is referred to as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005). Populism manages to produce the people as a single political subject by bypassing the ideological differences among the people as it subtly convinces people that the ideology of the political party and the people are the same. Here one must note that although one cannot change the *Weltanschauung* of people, what they attempt to achieve is to unite people adhering to right ideologies (left ideologies for left populism) and convince others who cannot yet decide who to elect.

Nonetheless, the success of populism is not limited to its capability to produce the people as the political subject. It is also important to understand

which sociological factors have impact on the rise of populism. Indeed, while populism is a political concept its rise is due to current sociological developments like the growing demands for consumption, which is the most important factor in this context. Thus, in what follows, how consumerism affects political trends in representative democracies is explained.

## The Arrival of the Consumer Society

### *What is the consumer society?*

Populism is a more political concept, yet its success today rests on sociological grounds. The concept of the consumer society can be particularly helpful for clarifying the rise of populism. It is important to ask what is meant by the consumer society or consumerism? It is natural that people need to consume, as has been always the case. Still, that would amount to reductionism here because the theoretical conceptualisation of the consumer society dates back to the twentieth century. Jean Baudrillard was a leading author who wrote on the subject. He argued that we had arrived at a point in history where consumption holds priority over production (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). The question thus arises as to why many people attach greater importance to consumption today? The growing consumer culture is mainly due to four factors: (1) consumerism as an indicator of success and happiness; (2) the internal dynamics of capitalism; (3) psychological and generational differences; and; (4) advance in technology. These factors are discussed below.

As concerns the first factor, it is quite obvious that people feel content and satisfied if they can afford to purchase objects since purchasing power is considered to be a personal achievement. In this case, it is an achievement that makes individuals happy. “Personal achievement is indeed an obligation haunting the modern consumer in the context of the forced mobility” (Baudrillard, 1968: 152). “Objects carry functional imperative, because objects decide our status in terms of social advancements” (Baudrillard, 1968/1996: 158). It is irrefutable that a range of factors define our identities in societies in today’s world. Consumer goods hold a symbolic power that define our status in society, how we dress, whether we have a car, and how we spend our holidays (Deutschmann, 2012: 517).

It is natural that many people wish to be successful in this world, yet being successful requires more wealth and effort in contemporary industrial societies. There are countless products and services that can be purchased. Many people would like to purchase a house/flat in a classy neighbourhood, buy cars, stylish clothes and smartphones, go on a vacation several times a year. It is also necessary to replace products occasionally



with newer models. Investing in oneself (education, courses, travel etc.) is also desirable. All of the above is definitely a lifestyle that could not be followed in previous centuries. Some people attempt to stay away from the consumer culture, albeit with little success, because the consumer culture forces individuals to buy and keep up with the latest trends. Objects are bought that are actually not needed just to keep one's social status intact or even boost it.

There is no doubt that having more objects and greater luxury does not necessarily make a person wealthy. A wealthy individual is one who can purchase the objects they desire. Today people desire many more things than they can actually acquire. In pre-modern societies, consumption did not hold a crucial role in their lives as they could be satisfied with what they possessed (De Botton, 2005). Of course, industrial society led to a major transformation in the socio-economic sense. Although production started to take place on an interminable scale, there was still a limited number of products that could be purchased. There were no smart phones, cars or exotic holidays. The space for luxury was reserved for wealthier citizens. The situation has now changed, which does not imply that all people necessarily want a luxury lifestyle. Instead, individuals tend to spend as they can. Consumption is not an activity of the upper classes anymore, and it is currently possible to speak of the democratisation of the consumer culture (Dal, 2017).

For most medieval societies, life was important so long as people could fulfil their religious obligations. Industrial society redefined social life by putting a strong emphasis on production and the accumulation of wealth. Working and frugality were the most valuable characteristics of a human life. Yet, frugality is becoming less and less important in this consumer age. The most important difference between the industrial and consumer societies lies in the fact that the former sought prosperity through production, frugality and altruism, while the latter rejects frugal and altruistic attitudes.

Those who could produce and accumulate wealth were certainly regarded as the most successful people in industrial society. Further, an altruistic worldview must be underscored here in order to comprehend their lifestyle. Not only production on a larger scale stemming from the technological advances, but also a frugal and altruistic lifestyle brought prosperity to industrial states. Nonetheless, frugality and altruism do not have a crucial place in consumer societies today. The modern consumer society focuses on consumption in the first place. Basically, many people consume to feel successful and become happy. Happiness is defined ever more through success, and success comes from the power of consumption based on general perceptions.

Regarding the second factor, individuals need to buy in order to ensure the economy keeps growing. There is a huge number of people who sell

their products or services to earn a livelihood, and one feels compelled to buy their products or services. In other words, we do not have the complete luxury to stay away from the consumer culture as that would negatively affect many people in our surroundings. If people were to start saving money and spending their money only for their basic needs, a grave economic crisis would be sure to follow because the capitalist mode of economy functions in accordance with constant growth. This then makes it very important to sell products also to those who do not need them. The most successful companies are those that succeed in selling their products/services to those who do not actually need them. Advertisements, discounts and special offers in particular whet people's appetite for consumption.

In relation to the third factor, people compete with each other on the personal level just like states do on the international stage. Certainly, this was not the case before. Previously, "objects were acquired in the full sense for they were the material expression of work done" (Baudrillard, 1968/1996: 158). In our age, "consumption precedes the production as we purchase the objects and services provided that we keep paying for them over and over again" and we must "replace them" in order to catch up with the rest of the people (Baudrillard, 1968/1996: 158). One can easily find myriads of objects and services that can be purchased in the market. Most people, particularly younger generations, are not interested in saving money like their grandparents did, but intend to spend as much as they can. Older generations tended to save money or invest in real estate as they were subconsciously afraid of any calamity scenario such as another world war. Psychological effects set the scene for the arrival of consumer culture. Given that calamity scenarios like another world war or the threat of famine have lost significance for many societies, especially younger generations are inclined to spending their earnings to enjoy life and create a social status for themselves.

Since this fear dropped in significance, more people have been inclined to spend their earnings with a view to creating a social identity and status for themselves. The aim is to produce a social space in which one may feel happy, successful and associate with people of a similar status. It is not so important to consume excessively, but to keep up with the latest trends (Sinemoğlu, 2017; Bauman, 1998). New cars, smartphones, laptops, and clothes all function as boosters of social mobility. One can reasonably argue that the *raison d'être* of the modern age has become consumption in the first place.

With regard to the fourth factor, the Industrial Revolution did not lead to the consumer society directly, but the advances in informational technology produced credit cards and other facilities for payment methods, thereby paving the way for the consumer culture to grow. Credit cards and other payment facilities are effective for regulating and administering the

capitalist world since capitalism might have come to an end without such payment method possibilities. Advances in technology and science also made the consumer society possible.

### *Populism and the consumer society*

In the literature, the nexus between the consumer society and populism has not been studied carefully. So long as people consume and keep their social space intact, there would be no rise of populism at least for economic reasons. One could argue that people are afraid of any possible downward mobility (Inglehart and Norris, 2019). This makes it possible to speak of status anxiety posing a threat to democracy (Delhey and Steckermeier, 2019: 108; Miller, 1999). When social equality is threatened, one may observe an upsurge in populist discourse. If the number of people affected by a crisis increases, populism tends to become more powerful. Particularly the global financial crisis in 2008 led to huge economic troubles for many states and people. Rising prices, stagnant wages, unemployment and rampant corruption (genuine or perceived) are catalysts for populism.

The 2008 global economic crisis put neoliberal economic policies in jeopardy because a considerable number of citizens started to question the reliability of technocratic politicians and experts (Runciman, 2014). Major street protests (e.g., Occupy Wall Street) revealed such discontent. Trust in professional politicians has since started to lose ground especially in countries where consumption practices are interrupted due to crisis. Therefore, populist logic accuses politicians of corruption that basically implies mismanagement of taxes. Populists believe that their taxes are spent for neoliberal and cosmopolitan policies that bring no benefit to the general population in their country. This means these policies serve the interests of elites, immigrants and foreigners. The primary populist demand is that the state should focus on its own citizens and spend the taxes collected solely for their interests. This would entail a rise in wages, greater financial assistance in education and health services and the like. Especially nationalist politicians promise to implement these populist policies and garner support from politically marginalised citizens. Since the demands of citizens are increasing and wages are remaining stagnant, a political crisis is emerging. Further, in times of crisis the ego comes into existence. As a result, international cooperation and solidarity face a serious challenge, as more and more people start to concentrate solely on their own issues.

Once consumption is interrupted, people would start to put the blame on politicians, which would also lead to the rise of populism. Consumption practices can be interrupted for various reasons such as a huge economic crisis or stronger demand for consumption. What were once luxuries have

become necessities for many contemporary citizens. The average citizen needs to produce and earn more to keep up with the people surrounding them. Otherwise, a dissatisfactory situation would emerge for people unable to keep up with their circles. This is because this situation is interpreted as some sort of failure, which leads to resentment. As such, citizens (faced with the threat of downward mobility) resort to politics and pay special attention to populist politicians who seem to be changing the situation to their advantage.

In addition, a significant number of people migrate to more developed countries in the hope of becoming successful and wealthier (excluding those who fleeing wars and extreme poverty). Whereas a number of average citizens are not content with their situation, since they believe that their state is not paying attention to their problems and their taxes are being spent for the benefit of elites, immigrants and foreigners. This means, they tend to resort to nationalist populism because populist promises seem to them the only plausible remedy for the position they find themselves in.

The question remains: Why does politics need to express itself in a populist manner? Green politics addresses similar problems, and yet its solutions to major problems require long periods of time. However, national elections take place in a relatively shorter time period that compels populist politicians to focus on short-term policies. They do this because most people wish to hear about what will occur in a few years rather than a decade or more. As mentioned, a sense of acute crisis is a feature of populism, and populist politicians have the upper hand in societies dealing with a serious crisis given that populism offers simple solutions to socio-economic problems that combine cosmopolitan policies and major socio-political issues such as injustice, poverty, unemployment, insecurity and alienation (Kaya, 2020). Populism namely considers non-native people and ideas as a threat to the state and their well-being (Aknur, 2020). Here, a threat chiefly refers to an economic threat. What people demand from politics is not their direct participation but the protection of their freedom (Comtesse, Flügel-Martinsen, Martinsen and Nonhoff, 2019). This freedom also entails economic protection. In other words, protection of the welfare state is becoming the top priority for populist actors. They differ from other non-populist citizens in that they are afraid of the outcomes of cosmopolitan policies, i.e., a huge number of immigrants and providing economic help to other countries could lead to the end of their welfare state. They also demand greater welfare assistance for themselves. Populist politicians thus question the relevance of cosmopolitanism and globalisation within contemporary politics, thereby rejecting the neoliberal cosmopolitan order.

Accordingly, they are against mass immigration to their country particularly if the immigrants do not bring economic benefits to the state. For

populist politicians, immigration causes a loss of employment, increasing rents and decreasing welfare benefits for native citizens since the state must pay for the basic needs of immigrants and integration courses. Many populist parties undermine international/supranational organisations, aiming to reduce international aid and cooperation especially in the area of the economy. They hold the view that they should not concentrate on the maladies and problems of the world if they do not concern them. Populist reasoning asserts that the priority of the state should be to economically protect the native citizens vis-à-vis alterity. We can see such logic in the Brexit campaign claiming that the United Kingdom should stop paying the European Union, with the state instead being able to fund the National Health Service to ensure the citizens have better healthcare (Stone, 2018). This is fundamentally important because this indicates that a significant number of people do not wish to share their wealth with others, and focus solely on the pursuit of their happiness through consumption.

We can observe the rise of populism in societies where the majority of citizens takes part in consumer practices. There would namely be no rise of populism in societies in which consumerism does not play a key role. Certainly, advanced industrialism and capitalism are one of the factors that are leading to the consumer society. It is critical to note that we are merely witnessing the rise of right-wing populism (especially nationalist populism) rather than its left variant. Yet, the question arises as to why left populism cannot influence politics, given that consumerism is the main driver of the rise of populism.

There are two main answers to the above question: first, left populism accuses banks and major companies (the wealthiest 1%) as being the source of maladies within society, whereas right-wing populism is against international/supranational organisations and immigrants that have no or little say in national politics. Namely, their promises are easier to implement. Banks and major companies are the ones that generate wealth in society in the first place. This then makes it more difficult to challenge them.

Second, over the last few decades left and liberal policies have made great inroads in international politics. Economies have been liberalised and societies have largely been secularised leading to resentment and anger among right-wing supporters. Even centre-right parties have become liberal in many ways, which means their conservatism is considered insufficient especially in the eyes of populists. Therefore, the rise of populism is associated with right-wing political actors as a reaction to the recent liberal and centre-left success. Particularly nationalist populism (Brexit, Trump, Le Pen, Zemmour etc.) is on the ascent in several democracies. Conservative populism is mostly the result of cultural factors, whereas nationalist populism is mainly becoming assertive due to the consumer society.

The aim of populism is to unite the citizens in the name of the people. An important point here is to draw support from those who vote pragmatically and abstain from voting. Securing votes from these groups is a game-changer. It is highly likely that they may opt for populist parties if they suffer from the economic consequences where economic consequences refer to any interruption in consumer practices. Populism provides hope by offering basic solutions through effective discourse. In doing so, they may convince such people that the party and its ideology are the best option for them. The growing consumer culture naturally causes greater expenses. As such, a significant number of citizens are unable to realise their life goals and also connect their personal troubles with politics since democracy allows them this possibility. In other words, they demand/accept nativist approaches and solutions from politicians.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have tried to explain the original meaning of populism and how the growing consumerism has been doing the groundwork that supports the rise of right-wing populism in democracies. Populism should be understood as a political strategy because populism takes on significance when politicians bring populist resentments and demands into the political sphere. Populism is as an effective strategy for politicians in this regard when they give a voice to the ignored demands of a considerable number of citizens. Populism appeals directly to the people by thriving from the conflict between the people and the elites. The ruling elites are accused of betraying the rights of the people.

Especially in times of crisis, populism becomes stronger as people look for alternatives. While it is possible to consider populism from various perspectives, in this study, the rise of populism was linked to the theory of the consumer society. It is crucial to acknowledge the transformation from industrial societies to consumer ones. The consumer society refers to today's societies where consumption is becoming the most crucial activity that decides the status of individuals in society. The industrial societies were different as they emphasised the importance of producing and accumulating wealth. Although production is still important, our contemporary societies differ from the industrial ones in that they do not attach importance to frugality. For industrial societies, a frugal lifestyle was crucial since people were afraid of grave calamities like famines and wars. In the last few decades, this fear has lost its significance given that such disaster scenarios seem unrealistic for many people. Therefore, more people are deciding to spend their earnings rather than accumulating wealth. People feel it is necessary to buy objects to keep up with the latest trends, thereby protecting

their social status among their circles. It is also necessary to purchase constantly due to the dynamics of the capitalist economy. The increasing availability of consumer goods and payment method facilities have paved the way for the growth of the consumer society.

For various reasons, this consumption activity could be interrupted such as due to global/national economic crises or growing demands. It is here that politics comes into play. Populist politicians take advantage of the crisis and offer hope to the masses. They do so through by unifying the people. For populism, the point is to secure the votes of all who share the same ideological concerns with the party. Still, the established parties also seek to achieve this. Populist politicians differ from them, as they aim to include those people who abstain from voting, even though they are entitled to vote. They also wish to include pragmatist and blank voters. Since these people are estranged from mainstream politics, the established parties have difficulty convincing them. Populism (especially nationalist populism) introduces alternative politics, utopias, and basic nativist solutions to major socio-economic problems. In this way, it succeeds in receiving votes from these stigmatised masses in society.

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